



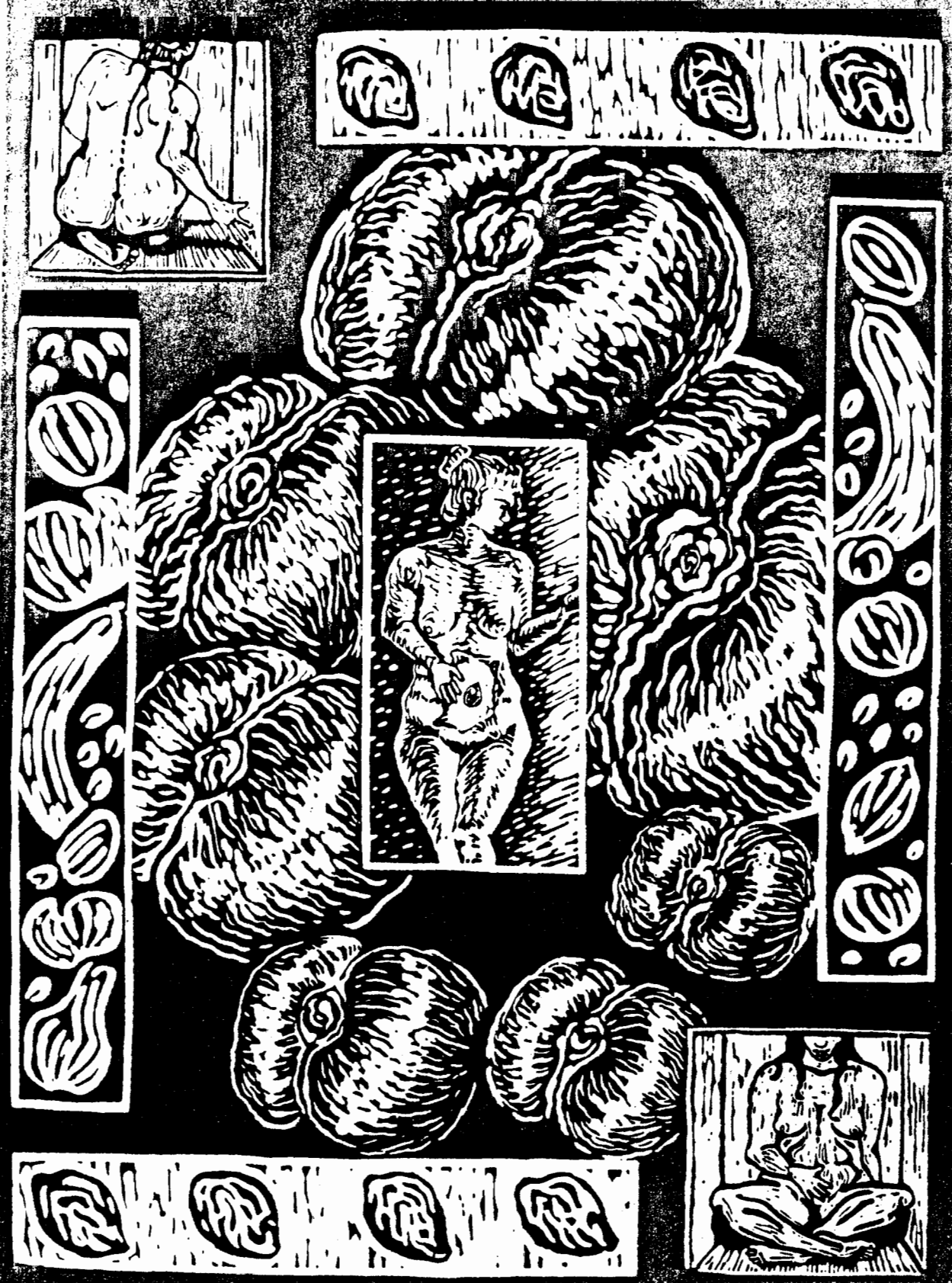
# Women:én

writing  
culture



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University of  
California  
Press  
Berkeley  
Los Angeles  
London



# 12

## The Gender of Theory

HOW DOES gender play into the formation of the canons of anthropology? One central way is through the designation of particular works as theoretical and the masculinizing of theory. In this essay I ask how that process has worked and explore its implications for the reception of women's writing and feminist theory, with particular reference to anthropology.<sup>1</sup>

Why does the topic matter, given world events of the last several years? When the oil-blackened corpses of soldiers by the tens of thousands lie buried in the deserts in and around Iraq, a focus on how academics behave may simply be self-indulgent or imperial myopia. While I recognize the fact that the anthropological canon is crucial to what is taught in the university and so establishes authoritative discourse for the educated classes in this society, I believe that it is also important to look at the flaming cultural responses to Hillary Rodham Clinton, the wimp-baiting of George Bush during his tenure, and Anita Hill's televised shaming during the confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas. The public debate over Hill and Thomas focused on whether the African American woman lied, whether her painful discourse was a fantasy. As Carole Boyce Davies asked in a talk afterward, When is a black woman given respectful attention? Not often throughout the last several centuries: certainly not as a slave, with testimony to give, but also not even when



Catherine Lutz

she is Yale-educated, a lawyer, conservatively dressed, politically conservative, comparatively wealthy, religious, and a professor.<sup>2</sup> Anita Hill's words did take center stage, but they were spotlighted with sex and race hatred.

Thus questions about gender and the anthropological canon have renewed meaning. The masculine bias of the canon exemplifies a wider process by which hegemonic discourses—especially on gender and race—are established; how “uncomfortable information” is erased from public view; how subaltern groups and their ideas are erroneously said to have achieved hegemony (often through some kind of “affirmative action”) or are locked in rooms of their own. These are the processes by which the definition of such things as “the need to go to war” or “who is credible” are retained by the powerful. They have a direct bearing on how feminism(s) can be most effective, or on how the suppressing, ignoring, or “managing” of feminism in the academy and society at large can be countered.

I raise several queries about the anthropological canon and gender, each of them organized around the general question, How does a piece of anthropological writing become established as more or less valuable, and what does gender have to do with it? The explanation most to hand for the limp reception of women's writing is somewhat distinct from that for interpreting the reception of feminism(s). For at least a partial explanation of the erasure of women's writing in general, one can point to two decades of feminist research indicating that women's words, work, and selves in U.S. society have been undervalued, judged less competent, less rational, and more emotional.<sup>3</sup> Even when a traditional division of labor is destabilized, as it has been to some degree since World War II (as, for example, with college teaching), the perceived value, distribution, and compensation for a particular job depends more on the sex, race, and age of the worker than on the intrinsic characteristics of the job itself.<sup>4</sup> In domains of high culture, the process of devaluation has been well documented. Deborah Bright describes how it is overwhelmingly men who have been canonized as the geniuses of landscape photography—both the heroes of its practice and the leaders of its theorization—and she shows the effects of this masculinization on the discourse of photographic criticism. Gaye Tuchman describes the expulsion of nineteenth-century British women from the novel writing they dominated before 1840.<sup>5</sup> That process involved not only edging women out of possibilities for publishing their writing, but reevaluating the novel: when women wrote them, they were low-prestige cultural items. Once men dominated the field, the novel was lauded as high art.

In anthropology the same process has been identified through an examination of the canonical fate of the writing of individual women, from Ruth Benedict to Zora Neale Hurston to Elsie Clews Parson, and through general observations about the construction and marginalization of a woman's tradition of ethnographic writing.<sup>6</sup> Deborah Gordon has provided insights into one way the canon is formed, in anthropology as elsewhere: that is, through the creation of a distinction between art that experiments with and comments on its own form and all other types of art; the formation of a hierarchy of these two types; and the masculinization of the former,

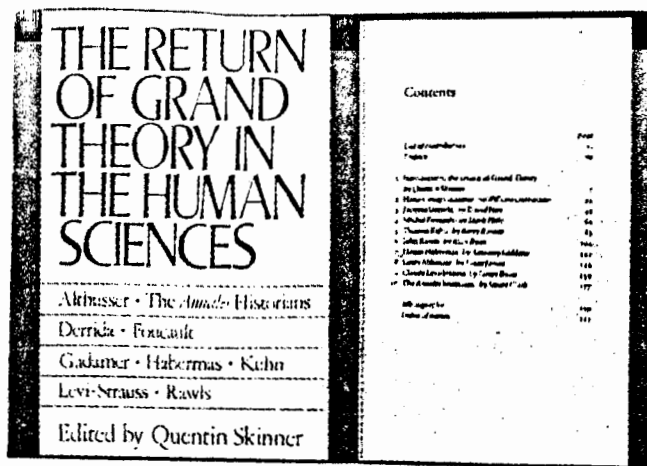
more valorized avant-garde.<sup>7</sup> Women's writing in general is less cited and feminist work is marginalized, as when the *Annual Review of Anthropology* from its inception through the late 1980s failed to include more than a single review of the large corpus of critical anthropological work on gender.<sup>8</sup>

Feminism is obviously not simply or uniformly excluded from all academic arenas beyond women's studies. The situation in literary fields is quite different from that in political science, for example. In some fields there is still complete or nearly complete erasure;<sup>9</sup> in others, nodding or relativistic tolerance (with all of relativism's friendly hostility played out); and in others, anxious reworking and deflation of feminism's claims, as in the relations between feminism and postmodernism. Growing markets for feminist literature have certainly had an effect on valorizing some feminist work, as one can see in looking at recent revisions at some universities of general-education college curricula to include feminist and antiracist scholarship. The dynamics of such incorporation are complex, however. An example is the required undergraduate introductory course in social science at the University of Chicago, in which the central works presented in the “theory” semester in 1990–1991 were by Freud, Weber, Marx, Woolf, and Baldwin. The ultimately most important question is what students make of this mix of thinkers—two of whom they will soon find are not “really” social scientists, even if important intellectuals.

In general, however, the exclusion of feminism from the central canon can be explained by its identification of the politics in scholarship. It directly challenges nonfeminist scholarship rather than defining itself as simply another specialty working alongside colleagues in a neatly partitioned division of labor over the social body. For those who are committed to a view of feminism as offering more adequate accounts of the world than do prefeminist accounts, the exclusion continually surprises and has little redeeming value. From another perspective, the exclusion of feminism is predictable and perhaps necessary—required as proof of the challenge feminism can pose to business as usual in the academy and elsewhere and to retain a marginal position from which to view the center.<sup>10</sup>

The feminist margins have their own margins, however, with white feminism privileged over Third World feminism within the academy. When theory is gendered, then, it is simultaneously raced and classed.<sup>11</sup> There are historical processes by which subordinate groups are allowed access to writing and through which the general or theoretical value of their writing is assessed. Writing by white women or by women of privileged class backgrounds is no doubt read more positively by much of its audience, though particularly by people of their own race and class. What can be said about the process of theory gendering below, then, can be seen as an unstable matrix that can be used by or on behalf of white women in containing the challenge of scholarship by women of color.

Theory has acquired a gender insofar as it is more frequently associated with male writing, with women's writing more often seen as description, data, case, personal, or, as in the case of feminism, “merely” setting the record straight. To document the existence of the process of theory gendering, one can begin with a group of



The cover and table of contents of Quentin Skinner's *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*. (Photograph reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press)

books published in the past decade. Quentin Skinner's *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* produces a kind of "Top Nine" list which is exclusively male and nonfeminist. There is also the hyper-hierarchical title (and unself-conscious subtitle) of *Metatheory in Social Science: Pluralisms and Subjectivities*, edited by Donald Fiske and Richard A. Shweder. While the editors claim to be examining a broad range of theoretical issues in the philosophy of science and producing a book "intended for conceptualizers in social science," eighteen of the nineteen chapters are written by men, and none of them deals with feminism or antiracist scholarship. Take *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*, by Jeffrey Alexander and Steven Seidman, a book whose Cambridge University Press blurb says "brings together *the* major statements by *the* leading contemporary scholars of cultural analysis on the relation between [*the* two major concepts of social science] culture and society" (emphasis added). These statements run from Adorno and Bellah through Thompson and Willis to include, in the end, twenty-six men and three women. Nineteen of the contemporary theorists whose names appear in the chapter titles of Jonathan Turner's influential fifth edition of *The Structure of Sociological Theory* are men, and feminism is missing in action. Robert Ulin's book *Understanding Cultures: Perspectives in Anthropology and Social Theory*, takes on very general questions of "epistemological problems related to understanding other cultures." In surveying work that contributes to this, Ulin comes up with a 211-item citation list, eleven of which are by women (and only two of whom appear to be feminist).<sup>12</sup> One might also look at syllabi in graduate orientation seminars on social theory in anthropology or in any of the social sciences for evidence of this same process.

So, what is theory? Something called "theory" is intentionally or unintentionally signaled to and consciously or unconsciously picked up by readers *as* theory. The first way this is done is through straightforward self-labeling, as in Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.<sup>13</sup> This can have an immediate impact on how weighty a work is taken to be, as exemplified by the academic psychologist who told me that she noticed her work received much more serious attention from her peers after she inserted the word "theory" in an article title, even though that article simply continued arguments she had made in earlier papers.

Roslyn Chast's cartoon "Ed Flanders, Deconstruction Worker," *The New Yorker*. (Drawing by R. Chast; © 1987 *The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.*)



The second signal is the one that allows readers to imagine that the writing describes a wide variety of instances rather than a single case. As Dorothy Smith pointed out nearly twenty years ago, theory can also be identified as a process in which statements are denuded of their origin in a writer and his or her experience or are stripped of their reference to a concrete phenomenal world of specific contexts and history.<sup>14</sup> Theory is generally and informally seen as consisting of more rather than less abstract statements, widely relevant or universalistic or "deeper" statements of more ultimate or timeless value than others,<sup>15</sup> and as statements that require more rather than less substantial intellectual "gifts" to compose. This quality enhances the authority of the speaker while, conversely, the "perception of authority diminishes in direct proportion to the speaker's proximity."<sup>16</sup> Thus the move to theory is involved in historical struggles over the authority of women and of minorities of both sexes to speak:<sup>17</sup> the seeming antihistorical character of theory is a politically conservative move, and so one more likely to be produced by or perceived in the powerful.<sup>18</sup>

These signals also include more abstract language, and often more academic jargon. Trinh Minh-ha notes that this kind of writing "to many men's ears . . . is synonymous with 'profound,' 'serious,' 'substantial,' 'scientific,' 'consequential,' 'thoughtful,' or 'thought-engaging.'" Theory is often seen as more difficult reading than ethnography, although difficulty is an ideological notion, as has been

pointed out:<sup>20</sup> my husband thinks childcare is difficult when he does it, easy when I do it; the work of electricians or nurses is treated as less difficult than that of administrators or doctors. The subtly critical humor in a Roslyn Chast cartoon depends on play with that notion. But the argument is also sometimes made that theory's difficulty is inevitable if it articulates thoughts not spoken before, taken for granted, or hegemonic. Theory becomes almost synonymous with the idea, the original thought. Difficult theory can have the effect—intended or unintended—of saying to some readers: "This is not for you," so it sorts readers into the privileged and the low-brow. Through a kind of halo effect, the persevering reader of theory is elevated as she or he is shown to have the "right stuff" to understand what is being said.

One could argue that the difficulty of theory is a simple outcome of growth in the division of labor, a process that produces the specialized, technical languages of many groups of workers, including the mental workers in ever more specialized intellectual niches. Even if this were all that was at work, however, theory's maleness would still draw certain terms into the theoretical corral and make their specialized nature more imposing, difficult, and hyperrational. The difficulty of hegemony or intertextuality comes from the gendered and raced history of their users; without rejecting those terms we can nonetheless note how their masculinization as theory gives them more social force than does specialized language such as "participant observation" or "womanist," whose writers or purposes are usually seen as not theoretically oriented.

Theory's abstractness requires or creates a more active reader. Like poetry, it allows for imagination. Like a Rorschach, it allows for projection. Theoretical writing requires a reader who will take the abstract skeleton or the opaque jargon of its prose and fill it in with his/her own understanding and cases. Stated more negatively, theoretical writing is like a capitalist enterprise: it exploits or appropriates the labor of readers, who are made to do the work of instantiating, of making "real" sense of the theoretical prose. A reader may often imagine that the writer has written or said or implied all of the ideas that her or his reading has actually provided. Like the worker who does not recognize the source of the commodity's value, the reader then fetishizes the theoretical writer.<sup>21</sup>

Another signal for theory appears to be certain styles of citation to others' work. Theorists cite other theorists and appear to tend to cite more deeply into the academic past and to cite even more males than does the average piece of academic writing (as in the Ulin example above). Theoretical writing often has fewer citations, this dearth being a sign of the work's originality, its creativity. It can also be a sign of a patriline in the making or, rather, of the text's claim to motherless origins. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe the more general psychodynamic process involved in masculinity and writing:

*In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pen's power, like his penis's power, is not*

*just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim . . . as the author of an enduring text the writer engages the attention of the future in exactly the same way that a king (or father) "owns" the homage of the present.<sup>22</sup>*

Theoretical writing seems to involve issues of anxious paternity even more sharply than does writing in general. Not only does the absent citation stand as a symptom, but those theories spawn patrilineal offspring that are then posited to belong more to their father theory than to their mother data.

Finally, the signal of theory is sometimes given not so much by these more or less formal devices but via a text's positioning itself at a "choke" or origin point for a biological, social, or developmental process. As Margaret Conkey and Sarah Williams have so clearly described for human evolution stories, the person who specifies the nature of the beginning point of this process provides the limits and/or the skeleton for all accounts by others of later points in the process.<sup>23</sup> So, too, in psychology, researchers on infancy have competed to narrate the baby's capacities at earlier and earlier points in development.<sup>24</sup> That field and its canon are predominantly male (in contrast with research at later stages of child development) and are high-status fields within psychology.<sup>25</sup> The general relevance that this kind of work is thought to have, then, gives a kind of theoretical patina to it even if, on other grounds, it might be seen as more straightforwardly descriptive or interpretive.

How is theory evaluated relative to other kinds of writing, beyond the factors already alluded to? While there are certainly differences by academic discipline,<sup>26</sup> one can say generally that theory, like great art, builds on "the ideal of the artist, the narrative of genius, the cult of celebrity,"<sup>27</sup> all of which have been masculinized in this culture, particularly since the Romantic period.<sup>28</sup> Like art, theory draws from the world but is not of the world. Just as the pen and the paintbrush have been taken throughout Western history to stand for the phallus,<sup>29</sup> writing theory is celebrated as an art (as opposed to the craft of ethnography) and coded masculine.

To illustrate the connections between gender and genius, we can take the example of *Structures of Social Life*, by Alan Fiske. Its Free Press flyer included the following phenomenal recommendations from other academics: "he has synthesized almost everything worth synthesizing in social theory"; "comparable in scope to Marx and Freud"; "one of the most important scholarly books to be published in this decade"; "breathtaking in its comparative reach."<sup>30</sup> While the book may in fact represent a very important effort, the blurbs' evocation of genius is the same as that found in the notion of "grand" theory as well as in the identification of theories by the individual who wrote them, not by the movement or social context that spawned them or the subject on which they focus (see figure p. 252).

The association of genius with release from social strictures—with social license—also helps to determine the masculinity of theory. While the license allowed the professor/theoretician seems not to be of the same order as that allocated to the artist, there are the legends of Louis Althusser's criminality and of Erving Goff-

man's social eccentricity. If genius requires such rule-breaking, women will rarely be geniuses in a world abounding with narratives of the goodness of the domesticated (and thereby) conventional woman and of the culpability of the victims of battering, rape, or sexual harassment, women whose blame is often accomplished by portraying them as unconventional, most notably through promiscuity or failure to achieve middle-class, heterosexual, or white status. The converse of the genius of the theoretician is the silencing of the nontheoretician—the use of this linguistic convention to establish rules of listening.<sup>31</sup>

Theory can confront, however, cultural mythologizing of direct experience, something that plays out in anthropology through the valorization of fieldwork.<sup>32</sup> Among other things, that experience is seen as resistant to the dehumanization of bureaucratic, scientific, and academic routinizations to which the office worker/theoretician is more prone. The resulting tension between the demands and value of experience and abstraction/reflection can reverberate with the tension of gender politics. The relationship between data and theory can shift as needed, Judith Okely pointed out two decades ago, and in the following way: "Where the specific is described as 'hard', scientific and objective fact, its opposite is 'airy fairy' speculation, emotional and soft—woman's domain. In another context where fact is equated with 'vulgar empiricism' and its opposite is theory, women are seen to be the fact gatherers and men the theoreticians. . . . Whatever 'female thought' may be, it is the one which is undervalued."<sup>33</sup> When the question of theory is not at issue, fieldwork can be coded masculine, heroic, adventurous.<sup>34</sup>

Joan Gero has laid this out in archeology, called the "cowboy science" when a masculine tackling of experience is the focus. Women who do fieldwork are more often described as having done a good job of meticulously collecting material and as having tolerance for repetitive, boring work that someone else would process into theory.<sup>35</sup> So, too, ethnography contrasted with theory becomes descriptive science, and the plodding labor of fieldwork is necessary, even crucial. It often appears, however, that this labor is acknowledged in the same way that childcare is acknowledged—as crucial for the reproduction of society but not as particularly challenging. Even where the data/theory distinction is questioned, a hierarchy is often preserved in which concrete, specific ideas are "led" or more constrained by larger, more abstract ones.<sup>36</sup>

Theory can also acquire a gender through the relationship between its contents and the contexts of its production and consumption.<sup>37</sup> An example is found in some forms of postmodern cultural analysis. Some of the main contrasts between modernism and postmodernism as historical ideal types correspond to ideologies of gender differences (see Table 1). The association of postmodernism with consumer culture, for example, is paralleled by the popular culture assignment of the task of shopping to women (as well as its denigration, as when Blondie, Lucy, and the "Shop Till You Drop" T-shirt wearer announce their shopping behavior's comic-shameful character). Several feminist observers have noted the implicit association drawn between mass culture and the feminine, with the two linked through the

TABLE 1—*Postmodernity and gender ideologies*

Modernity	Postmodernity
<i>Gender as Usual</i>	
Production (man as breadwinner)	Consumption (woman as shopper)
Sharp self-other distinction (man as individualist)	Absence of self (woman as lacking ego boundaries)
Depth models (man as deep thinker, inner directed)	Surface as all there is (woman as appearance, fashion oriented, outer directed, shallow)
Universalistic (man as operating with universal principles of market)	Particularistic (woman as operating with particularis- tic criteria of family)
Heyday of positive science (man as objective)	Critique of science, use of reflexivity (woman as subjective)
Some wholeness (man as whole person)	Fragments (woman as a face, a breast, a womb)
Cultural hierarchy maintained (men as involved in dominance displays, competition, power brokering) (gender hierarchy intact)	Cultural hierarchy collapsed (women as noncompetitive, not inter- ested in power) (gender hierarchy erased; equality achieved, affirmative action no longer needed)
<i>Gender Reversals</i>	
Mood of alienation and angst (woman as emotional)	Absence of feeling (man as emotionless, stoic)
Neurosis as model (woman's emotional disease)	Schizophrenia as model (man's cognitive disease)
Essentialism tolerated (woman as nature/born)	Essentialism rejected (man as culture/constructed)

ascription to both of passivity, emotionality, and mystifying qualities.<sup>38</sup> These analogies between postmodernism and the female and between modernism and the male are so numerous that one might say that postmodernism is a woman. However, given the dominance of men among its explicit or canonized practitioners, this would have to be amended to say that the postmodern is a man in woman's clothing.

In fact, the problem looks like one analyzed elsewhere in which a masculine identification with the feminine is an underlying psychocultural dynamic producing a discourse. Tania Modleski posits it in Alfred Hitchcock's films, in which men are often both threatened and fascinated by the notion of their own and women's bisexuality.<sup>39</sup> The violence done or threatened to women in these films—from Janet

Leigh in the *Psycho* shower scene to Grace Kelly in *Rear Window*—is the price women pay for this male ambivalence. Modleski finds in Hitchcock's movies "an oscillation between attraction to the feminine and a corresponding need to erect, sometimes brutally, a barrier to the femininity which is perceived as all-absorbing."<sup>40</sup> Andreas Huyssen has identified the same process in the modern novel, as when Flaubert says of his most famous heroine, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." This identification is likely in the novelist who is situated in the "increasingly marginal position of literature and the arts in a society in which masculinity is identified with action, enterprise, and progress."<sup>41</sup>

So, too, with postmodernism in anthropology, a movement which, in its association with literary criticism and its antiscience reputation, is itself associated with the female. This is in contrast with the thoroughgoing masculine self-presentation of someone like Napoleon Chagnon, intrepid scientist among "the fierce people," whose account of fieldwork stresses his exploits in heroic, dangerous pursuit of the facts.<sup>42</sup> What Huyssen says of the novelist can also apply here, namely, that "the imaginary femininity of male authors, which often grounds their oppositional stance vis-à-vis bourgeois society, can easily go hand in hand with the exclusion of real women from the [literary] enterprise."<sup>43</sup> While the feminine attributes of the postmodern may appear to be simply a function of the way the postmodern, as oppositional practice, is peripheralized, one has to question why postmodernist male writers have not taken feminist writing seriously or acknowledged its role in the rise of postpositivist ethnography and theory.<sup>44</sup>

An example of this process is a layout in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1991. An article on the Modern Language Association conference, it includes photographs of several participants, including someone most people would identify as a postmodernist—Andrew Ross—and someone clearly identified as a feminist—Catharine Stimpson. Ross's photo, outsized and colorful (he wears an orange jacket), contrasts with the small, serious black-and-white rendition of Stimpson. Attention is drawn both in the photographs and in the text to his clothes and style, not to hers. The covertly feminine male looms large here, as he does in more academic journals.

Another theory with a special relationship to gender is, of course, feminism. Feminist theory is valued and conceptualized in different ways by its writers and main audiences. Much feminist reflection on theory has shown a skepticism about its roles, a willingness to continually press against the dualism of theory and practice, a long commitment to the notion of the intimate connection of the personal and the political, the local and the abstract, and a questioning of the universal voice behind the bird's-eye view of theory.<sup>45</sup> In some quarters there is a fundamental suspicion of theory and its potential effects, even as theory is seen as allowing for the imagination of connections between aspects of the world otherwise ideologically invisible.<sup>46</sup> Its negative effects have included the appropriation by the more privileged of theoretical contributions by lesbians and women of color and the reassignment of the latter to the job of writing "experience."<sup>47</sup> Katie King has concluded

that these exclusionary effects in feminism are associated with theory's increasing restriction to the "rationalist essay," the reification of theorizing (that is, all of the processes of knowledge production) into the product called theory, and the contribution of marketing pressures in feminist academic publishing. The result, according to King, is that "this term 'theory' has to be bracketed in feminist thinking now, used ironically and proudly, shamefacedly and shrewdly, gloriously and preposterously, if it is really to convey anything like what feminists are doing, in the academy and elsewhere."<sup>48</sup>

Outside feminist circles, feminist theory is often represented as a marked and peripheral form of the genre rather than as theory itself, much less grand theory. Judith Goldstein has made the telling point that feminism is seen—in the wider context of academia—as at best a kind of middle or middling art, taking a place in a hierarchy of cultural objects analogous to that of photography in relation to oil painting on the upper hand and velvet paintings on the lower. In Goldstein's words: "It is a middle theory, lacking the virile authenticity of the low and the aristocratic cachet of the high [whose ground in the academy she notes much postmodernism has resolutely taken up]. It is, therefore, unforgivably middlebrow, a theory associated with women, and (often) with the practical concerns of political engagement."<sup>49</sup> Nancy Miller gives an example of feminism's effacement from the theoretical realm altogether: a recent ad for an academic job in literature asked for applications from a "feminist or a theorist."<sup>50</sup>

To the extent that women are seen as less intelligent, their writing will be seen as less theoretical, no matter how they write. Evidence for the existence of this phenomenon in all areas of sociocultural life is overwhelming. Women's discourse equals description (or complaint); male discourse equals theory, the covering law. The words of women do not have the same weight as the words of men, and theoretical words are especially heavy.

Men and women may also be more or less willing or able to write in a way that is self-consciously or conventionally recognizable as theoretical. Most graduate students learn early on that they must learn to speak the language of theory, to transform personal issues into theoretical forms, to erase authorship and context. Those who come into the institution defined as a special kind of person ("a woman"; "a minority student") rather than as a universal thinker may not either cozy up to or be invited to this style as quickly. The feminist critique of traditional ideologies of science has taken on this issue squarely: by definition, theory has traditionally allowed for the erasure of the subject—both the subject who writes and the human subjects who are written about. It allows the theorist to avoid the roots of statements in real-world encounters, to speak for or appear to speak for the whole, and to speak from a transcendental vantage point.<sup>51</sup> These potential differences in authorial intent are less a part of my concern here, however, than are the gender relations that organize both the writing and the reading of women's work. As Dorothy Smith suggests, "The text [can be] analyzed for its characteristically textual form of participation in social relations. . . . The text enters the laboratory, so to speak, carry

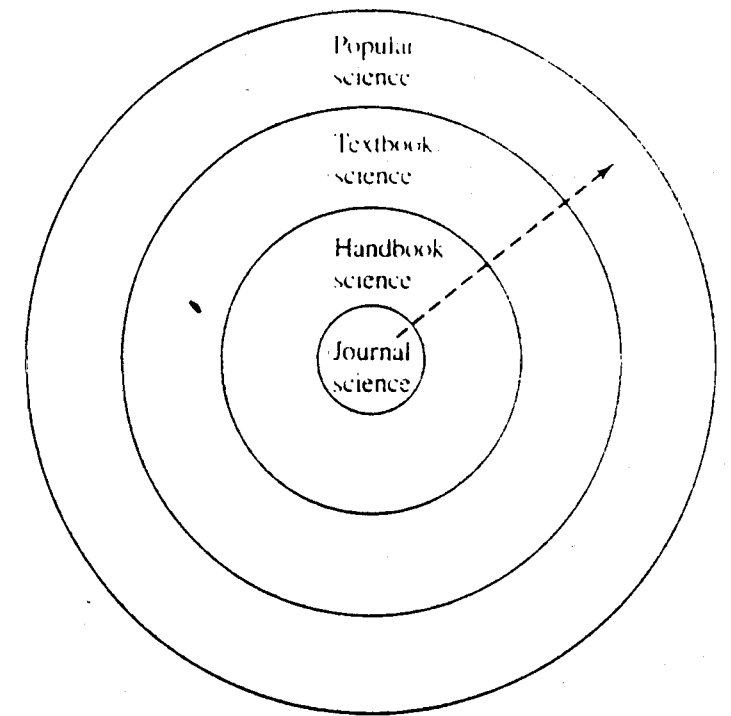
ing the threads and shreds of the relations it is organized by and organizes," rather than simply trailing the psychology of its writer.<sup>52</sup>

Differences in the kinds of experiences graduate students have include the problems women encounter with some professors and peers in having their writing taken as seriously as their breasts, as well as, in some cases, their skin color or their sexual orientation. The gender of theory can also be seen as resulting from the subsumption of women's writing to the cultural demands of American femininity, which include the injunction to be concerned with how we appear before others. Women may then experience pressure to have beautiful writing, if not beautiful bodies. Are we enjoined to work on our writing as we work on our bodies and our fashions? To see our style as deficient and to treat our thinking and writing as we treat our beauty secrets,<sup>53</sup> even as we defensively raise the issue of Ruth Benedict's lyricism and Zora Neale Hurston's avante-garde style? Even as I find liberation in writing precisely because I send a self out into the world without a body to be measured and assessed, I am accompanied to my keyboard by the patriarchal gaze. The underlying femininity of much postmodern discourse hinges on just this: the fashion styling of the new ethnographic text. Is the power of Clifford's infamous words in *Writing Culture* their suggestion that women ethnographers are, like women everywhere, not feminine enough? Like the editorial voice of a woman's magazine, he says, "Your (writing) style does not measure up." Women's dilemma is to see the contradiction of our choices (to work or not on narrative styling because or in spite of its evocation of this injunction) but to choose nonetheless while trying to imagine and enact other possibilities.

The control of theory by men has important implications for women's obtaining and keeping academic jobs. In a recent case at an elite university that echoed many others, a woman's very strong claim for tenure was denied. One member of the department that rejected her told me that her work was fantastic, wonderful, voluminous, but, he said, ventriloquizing to his colleagues, "Some people wondered if it were theoretical enough." The valorization of a particular genre of writing as the top layer in a hierarchy of kinds of discourse has also marginalized work by gay and minority scholars and jeopardized their tenure at universities.

The struggle over the nature and value of theory is just one example of the more general process of group struggle via the canons of taste in cultural objects.<sup>54</sup> While taste struggles between class factions in American history have been most extensively documented, African American writers have explored the historical processes by which their community's cultural productions have been misplaced.<sup>55</sup> Barbara Christian notes that "for an entire century Afro-American writers . . . have protested the literary hierarchy of dominance which declares . . . when literature is great." The theoretical insights often attributed to "New Western philosophers" have roots in this African American tradition but, she says, "since we are a discredited people . . . our creations are also discredited."<sup>56</sup> The dismissal of a variety of cultural objects through their feminization has also been traced in many institutions, as when a pundit in the 1880s wagged that the rapidly growing magazines

*Fleck's concentric model of the development and diffusion of a scientific "fact," from Angela M. O'Rand, "Scientific Thought Style and the Construction of Gender Inequality," in Jean F. O'Barr, ed., Women and a New Academy, © 1989. (Reprinted by permission of The University of Wisconsin Press)*



(appealing both to newly literate women and to a new middle class) were "ready to menstruate."

The influx of women into the academy and the perceived influx of men and women of color creates a space for the emergence of the middlebrow between the white male theorist and the uneducated masses who are his students. This is contested by the feminist and antiracist scholars whose work is placed in that category (and politically contained) by virtue of being posed as pragmatic/political/not (grand) theory. The changing demographics of the university and the publishing industry have been accompanied by a heightening of the debates and stakes involved in writing that is perceived as theoretical. One effect of the struggle for institutional space and respect may have been an inflation of theory's value even as questions are raised about the dualisms and individualism on which its existence is based.<sup>57</sup>

The importance and source of the masculinization of theory can be rooted in its ideological control function in society at large. This was suggested to me by the figure in Angela O'Rand's acute analysis of the role of scientific research on sex differences in cognitive abilities.<sup>58</sup> O'Rand shows how theoretical presuppositions, drawn from wider cultural ideologies, are continually reconfirmed through science and funneled back, with new authority, through the domains shown in the model. The central circle can be subdivided into theoretical and other academic literature, with theory at the core, or at the top of a hierarchy that extends "down to" schoolchildren's textbooks and to what Oprah Winfrey's and Phil Donahue's audiences say they believe. Theory is then clearly about the politics of all culture, not just academic culture.

Michele Wallace suggests that a central question ought not to be simply how a text signifies gender or race but what the impact of that text is, given its gendered and raced reading.<sup>59</sup> This means we need to know not only what floats up in a hier-

archy of writing to be canonized, but what floats out of the academy via undergraduates and via space allocated to certain scholars' ideas by the mass media. To better understand how women's writing and feminism are read by their several audiences is to begin to write and intervene more effectively in cultural discussions, including the one around Anita Hill's harassment and around the Gulf War, for which gender was a central point of home-front mobilization. How we theorize details such as these is important, and we have to figure out how to be heard doing it here and far beyond the rooms of academia where our papers began.

## Notes

I would like to thank Ruth Behar, Denise Coker, Carole Boyce Davies, Phoebe Ellsworth, Deborah Gordon, Faye Harrison, John MacAloon, and Marianna Torgovnick, as well as all of the participants in the "Women Writing Culture" conference, for help in thinking through gaps and problems in earlier drafts of this paper, some of which their good advice may not have erased.

- I understand *canon* to refer not just to published work that receives special treatment and recognition in other published work but to everyday speech acts (such as lectures to peers and students, workplace discussions, and so on) in which parallel processes of evaluation occur.
- See Nell Irvin Painter, "Hill, Thomas, and the Use of Racial Stereotype," in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon, 1992).
- For a summary, see Bernice Lott, "The Devaluation of Women's Competence," *Journal of Social Issues* 41, no. 4 (1985): 43-60. No one, female or male, transcends these cultural notions. There is, however, a more than casual interest in the culture at large with the question of women's prejudice against women (see Dale Spender, *The Writing or the Sex? or Why You Don't Have to Read Women's Writing to Know It's No Good* [New York: Pergamon Press, 1990], 13), which seems to arise more from a need to absolve men by finding women equally guilty than from a need to understand how systems of inequality are reproduced through the actions of individuals of both sexes.
- Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle, *Gender at Work* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1983).
- Deborah Bright, "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1990), 125-42; Gaye Tuchman with Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989). See also Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, *Etched in Memory: The Building and Survival of Artistic Reputation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), on the effect of gender on the reputations of three hundred British and American printmakers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- Barbara Babcock, "'Not in the Absolute Singular': Rereading Ruth Benedict," this volume; Deborah Gordon, "The Politics of Ethnographic Authority: Race and Writing in the Ethnography of Margaret Mead and Zora Neale Hurston," in *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text*, ed. Marc Manganaro (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990); Lila Abu-Lughod, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" *Women and Performance* 9, no. 1 (1990): 1-24; Kamala Visweswaran, "Defining Feminist Ethnography," *Inscriptions* 3/4 (1988): 29-57.
- Deborah Gordon, "Writing Culture, Writing Feminism: The Poetics and Politics of Experimental Ethnography," *Inscriptions* 3/4 (1988): 7-24.
- Catherine Lutz, "The Erasure of Women's Writing in Sociocultural Anthropology," *American Ethnologist* 17 (1990): 611-25. The erasure or marginality of feminism within the academy has been often noted and theorized: see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Sandra Morgen, "Gender and Anthropology: Introductory Essay," in her *Gender and Anthropology: Critical Reviews for Research and Teaching* (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1988); Kathryn B. Ward and Linda Grant, "The Feminist Critique and a Decade of Published Research in Sociology Journals," *Sociological Quarterly* 26 (1985): 139-57. The tensions between feminism and anthropology have also been usefully explored: see Marilyn Strathern, "An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology," *Signs* 12 (1987): 276-92; and Abu-Lughod, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?"
- This process occurs for women as well, according to Abu-Lughod ("Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?"), with their anxieties about the cultural associations of the female (as well as the risks they run of being ignored or discounted) leading to some avoidance of the "woman's tradition."
- bell hooks, *Yearning* (Boston: South End Press, 1990). In Spivak's more complex deconstructive formulation, "pointing attention to a feminist marginality [is an attempt], not to win the center for ourselves, but to point at the irreducibility of the margin in all explanations. That would not merely reverse but displace the distinction between margin and center" (*In Other Worlds*, 107).
- Norma Alarcon, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism," in *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation, 1990); Maxine Baca Zinn, Lynn Weber Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Bonnie Thornton Dill, "The Cost of Exclusionary Practices in Women's Studies," *Signs* 11 (1986): 296-303. See also Harrison, this volume.
- Quentin Skinner, *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Donald Fiske and Richard A. Shweder, eds., *Metatheory in Social Science: Pluralisms and Subjectivities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Jeffrey Alexander and Steven Seidman, *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Jonathan Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, 5th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1991); Robert C. Ulin, *Understanding Cultures: Perspectives in Anthropology and Social Theory* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), xi.
- Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- Dorothy Smith, "Theorizing as Ideology," in *Ethnomethodology: Selected Readings*, ed. Roy Turner (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1974).
- Nicolas Thomas, "Against Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 6 (1991): 306-22.
- Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 66.
- Chela Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," *Genders* 10 (1991).
- Richard Ohmann, *The Politics of Letters* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).
- Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 41. She makes the point that to other ears (which she, but not I, would characterize simply as female), this kind of writing sounds "'mascu-

53. See Wendy Chapkis's moving *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance* (Boston: South End Press, 1986).
54. Laurence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Janice Radway, "The Book-of-the-Month Club and the General Reader: On the Uses of 'Serious' Fiction," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1988): 516-38.
55. See especially Ohmann, *Politics of Letters*, on the class alliances of the theorists versus the composition teachers in English. On race, see Faye Harrison, "Introduction: An African Diaspora Perspective for Urban Anthropology," *Urban Anthropology* 17 (1988): 111-41; and Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990).
56. Christian, "Race for Theory," 54. See also Faye Harrison, "Anthropology as an Agent of Transformation: Introductory Comments and Queries," in her *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further toward an Anthropology for Liberation* (Washington D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1991); and Harrison, this volume.
57. Alarcon, "Theoretical Subject(s)"; Wallace, *Invisibility Blues*.
58. Angela M. O'Rand, "Scientific Thought Style and the Construction of Gender Inequality," in *Women and a New Academy: Gender and Cultural Contexts*, ed. Jean O'Barr (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).
59. Wallace, *Invisibility Blues*, 250.

13

Works and  
Wives: On  
the Sexual  
Division of  
Textual Labor

UNTIL RECENTLY it has been mainly women who have published experiential fieldwork materials. Where husband and wife worked in the same region, it was usually the woman who adopted the narrative mode and the man the expository one. Compare, for example, Daisy Dwyer's *Images and Self-Images: Male and Female in Morocco* with Kevin Dwyer's *Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question*. This sexual division of textual labor continues an older tradition that was established by the wives of anthropologists. Examples include D. Amaury Talbot's book on the Ibibio women of southeastern Nigeria, *Women's Mysteries of a Primitive People*; Ann Axtell Morris's two accounts of archaeological fieldwork with her husband, *Digging in Yucatan* and *Digging in the Southwest*; Mary Smith's life story of a Hausa woman, entitled *Baba of Karo*; Margery Wolf's family history, *The House of Lim*; and Elizabeth Fernea's three memoirs, *Guests of the Sheik*, *A View of the Nile*, and *A Street in Marrakech*. Why were these books, which were all published by trade houses rather than university presses, written, and how have they been received and read within anthropology?'

The archaeological writings of Ann Axtell Morris make up significant sections of her husband Earl H. Morris's technical site reports, but her best-known credited publications are her first-person accounts of fieldwork. Her first archaeo-



Barbara  
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