

Procreation, Power, and Personal Autonomy: Feminist Reflections

Chapter 9

Are Women a Social Group?

In Chapter Three I recounted the viewpoint of a group of radical feminists who are committed to a universal women's culture and have insisted that new reproductive technologies harm the interests of women collectively. I cited other feminists who challenge their insistence that individual women must forego the use of these technologies for the sake of "women as a social group." The challengers detect dangers in any global judgments about how individual women should structure their lives so as not to endanger women's collective interests. Some critics see no warrant for sacrificing individual to group goals; others detect "totalizing impulses" in this particular formulation of the appeal to group interests. This debate, however, barely touches on such crucial questions as, whether it can be shown that fertility technologies harm women collectively or why women who take the technological route to maternity should be held responsible for the excesses of the fertility industry. It is not even clear in what sense *all* women can be said to constitute a collectivity. These problems are not limited to fertility issues or any specific topical issue at all but are bound up in any systematic analysis of gendered social structures, particularly where talk of women's common interests risks entanglement in essentialist or determinist commitments. As a result, one finds a range of disagreements among feminists in multiple contexts, about the significance of differences among women and difficulties in speaking about women as a collectivity.

Preliminary to shaping a conception of reproductive freedom that is more responsive to feminist concerns about equality and difference, it is necessary to sort out alternative ways of speaking collectively of women's situation. My aim here is to launch a more nuanced analysis of the respects in which we might think of women as constituting a group and a more sensitive appraisal of the relevance of difference to the achievement of an equality that would free women to fully use their powers. This will require coming to terms with another knotty problem: who can speak for women without displacing the authority of the women spoken for? For the very process of constructing a more comprehensive moral scheme inevitably risks treading on the present liberties of some individuals. I will accordingly revisit this controversy here even as I look to gender as a central analytic category for understanding present social structures and envisaging more equitable social arrangements.

The Problem: Do Women Constitute a Social Group?

Feminists averse to generalizing about the common interests of all women argue that subsuming women under a general identity obliterates the specificity of female diversity and women's experiences. Rayna Rapp, for instance, in discussing women's responses to prenatal diagnosis, emphasizes how

complexly class and cultural differences intersect individual reproductive and life histories. She cites a number of examples that can readily be extended beyond the context of prenatal diagnosis to a broader range of situations. Whether a woman carrying a fetus just diagnosed with a severely disabling condition is likely to continue her pregnancy or not may often be influenced by circumstances specific to her situation, such as her estimate of the chances of becoming pregnant again. Whether a woman with a principled opposition to abortion would opt for termination in a particular circumstance may depend on her concern for an older child who would be left after her own death with the responsibility of total care of the disabled sibling. "There is," she insists, "no simple 'feminist' response to the questions of whether amniocentesis (or any other piece of reproductive technology) is liberatory or socially controlling because it is always potentially both, depending on the weight various social and individual experiences hold in a particular woman's life."¹

Jean Grimshaw challenges the polarizing influence inherent in this penchant for generalization, particularly its tendency to partition women into two mutually exclusive camps, fully liberated autonomous women and those who "have not yet shaken the dust of patriarchal conditioning from their feet" (Grimshaw 1988, 197). In accounts that attribute a collective identity to women, the autonomous woman is constructed in *opposition* to the woman whose desires happen to correspond to traditional feminine assignments. The woman who desires children is cast as the "other" whose existence constitutes the background against which the "fully liberated" defines herself. Attributing these women's desires for children to masculinist ideology and socialization depreciates their ways of seeing the world, distorting and oversimplifying the complexity of their individual perspectives. The dynamics are at work within such objectivizing accounts are the same as those underlying traditional masculinist objectifications of women. The only difference is that the agents of objectification are purportedly feminist women!

Countering disparagement of the motivations of women who seek technical remedies for infertility, some critics claim that it is not even obvious that one woman's choice of IVF is *causally* linked to the choices of other women.² Conflating the strategies of a movement and the personal choices of particular women, these critics contend, disregards the primary sources of injustice and demonizes women who seek out medical remedies for infertility problems. For, they argue, it is not the comparatively few women who find their way into infertility clinics who are responsible for the injustices women suffer through the maldistribution of social resources. Those responsible for policy need to be called to account for neglecting causal factors that contribute to infertility, complacency about the dearth of alternative remedies, and inattention to abuses of medical power.

Yet despite the distorting effect of appeals to women as a social group, few feminists are willing to abandon the use of gender as a central analytic category. Feminist politics would lose its central focus and dissolve into a radical politics unless we can say women are a collective entity.³ Like the other discourses of oppressed groups, gender discourse is needed to expose the workings of power and

¹From Rayna Rapp's "Women's responses to prenatal diagnosis: A sociocultural perspective on diversity" in Rothenberg and Thomson (1994), p. 228.

²Note, for instance, Margaret Sandelowski's impassioned and insightful critique of feminist resistance to reproductive technologies in "Fault lines: Infertility and imperiled sisterhood," *Feminist Studies* 16, 1, 1990.

³Agreement about the indispensability of a gender-specific analysis extends to a broad spectrum of feminists including Iris Young, Elizabeth Spelman, and Judith Butler.

authority and envision a future freed of oppressive practices. In one vital respect, too, gender oppression is unlike other common oppressions. Racial and economic oppression are solely cultural artifacts. Economic classification rests on social arrangements that serve the interests of a dominant class. The distinguishing features that mark oppressed racial groups are arbitrary. But gender falls at the intersection where nature and culture meet. Feminists who acknowledge this distinguishing feature of gender have offered several alternative analyses. I will briefly characterize the principal approaches and point out some major shortcomings.

The cultural version of the radical feminist approach (discussed previously) essentializes the distinguishing attributes of women. All women together are assumed to constitute what Monique Wittig (1992) terms a "natural group" possessed of inborn biological or psychological attributes that are distinct from the cultural accretions that attach to them historically. Patriarchal oppression distorts the natural spontaneous expression of these attributes. This strategy preserves the uniqueness of gender oppression, but at a high cost. Some women are left out since the description of women's nature doesn't correspond to their experience.⁴ This approach also fails to recognize that the life stories of academic women who do most of the writing about gender are not so readily extendable to other women. Then too, Wittig points out, the assumption that women constitute a natural group is made to appear plausible only by disguising its political underpinnings: women have been "ideologically rebuilt" into a natural group by an *idea* of nature that is itself a product of women's oppression. The division, Wittig insists, is a social invention that re-creates women as the "other" through the mediation of a complex web of norms and practices that organize human activities around the axis of biology. These *mediating* institutions and practices reconstruct biological difference around politicized agendas. Since access to sexual difference depends on cultural constructions of it, any account of what women are will inevitably incorporate cultural norms.

A second related strategy is to theorize through cultural constructions by contrasting the culturally feminine with the masculine. Following Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*, a number of feminists have employed this approach. But others point out that it also leaves some women out. They point to the partiality of Chodorow's characterization of the development of the mothering propensity. Some question the universality she claims for her account and others deny its applicability to their own lives. (***) revise from here)

Such variants of essentialism have given way to more fragmented social constructivist accounts. There is an obvious strength in cultural feminist accounts insofar as they call attention to the centrality of material circumstances for *any* political stance. In her rebuttal of the effort of some post-structuralist feminists to read class out of politics, Barbara Epstein notes ironically: (***) find reference and add to reference file) "It is hard to imagine a situation in which a socialist program would be proposed by the capitalist class and opposed by the working class" (1995, 104)

This leads to a third strategy for preserving gender as a unifying theme of feminist discourse. But I will approach it obliquely for it emerges only in reaction to the stress on women's *differences* which I took up in the last chapter. First, overemphasis on difference generates problems of its own. One is a kind of infinite regress. No two people are ever positioned exactly the same. Race, economic and social class, ethnicities and other divisions crisscross one another. Each of us accordingly occupies a somewhat different matrix of positions. Second, exclusive emphasis on the differences dividing women from one

⁴Joan Scott in her article "Experience" (1992) offers some interesting contrasts between this approach and Foucault's historical method in his "genealogies."

another undercuts the use of gender as a category for interpreting the meanings of the biological. In so doing, it risks undermining any political strategy for countering biological reductionism, thereby lending strength to accounts that derive women's social roles *directly* from their biological capacities. Unless it is possible to identify some stabilities, the subject of feminist theorizing risks obliteration—along with the capacity to devise resistance strategies and engage in progressive social change. By recognizing that all differences among women do not have comparable *political* bearing it should be possible to isolate some commonalities in the conditions of groups of women without re-positing a universal moral subject. Though common affinities among women are often discursively constructed, under some circumstances they may be underlying realities. They need not be regarded as reducible to a set of characteristics, politics, ideologies, social structures, or natural phenomena.

An example of a strategy that relocates commonalities among women in a politically self-conscious way that dodges essentialist commitments is Rosalind Petchesky's response to the radical feminist position characterized by Rowland:

The view that “reproductive engineering” is imposed on “women as a class” rather than being sought by them as a means toward greater “choice” obscures the particular reality, not only of women with fertility problems and losses, but also of other groups. For lesbians who utilize sperm banks and artificial insemination to achieve biological pregnancy without heterosexual sex, such technologies are a critical tool of reproductive freedom. . . . The majority of poor and working class women in the United States and Britain still have no access to amniocentesis, IVF and the rest, although they (particularly women of colour) have the highest rates of infertility and foetal impairment. . . . Before attacking reproductive technology, we need to demand that all women have access to the knowledge and resources to judge its uses and to use it wisely, in keeping with their own particular needs. (1987, 77-79).

Note how Petchesky shifts the debate, how she de-centers the principle of reproductive freedom from its customary context and expands its scope to embed abortion rights in a common context that encompasses women desiring children as well as those seeking to free themselves of an unsought pregnancy. Acknowledging that for some political purposes women do constitute a social group, she redefines the range of this group to embrace women who have been shut out of the "technological revolution," from whom the option to use reproductive technologies has been withheld. But she contracts the group too. Unlike feminists who imply that there is some global sense in which women constitute a homogenous group by virtue of a shared womanhood, Petchesky's frame of reference is more narrowly specified. Her attention is focused on women's control of their reproductive capacities, and her insistence on keeping options open stems from a recognition of women's diversity.

Seeking Solutions/Specifying Commonalities

Though Petchesky's retort does speak directly to the radical feminists who put forth essentialist claims, in another respect, it begs the central question at issue here. The generalized biological capacity to reproduce (which does not extend to each woman individually) is not nearly so interesting or relevant to the main problem as are the ways in which women might count as members of a group in a socially significant sense, that is, by virtue of the socialization of reproductive activity. More intriguing still, perhaps a case can be made that commonalities extend beyond the externally imposed construction of sexual difference that constitutes women as the "other." For there are at least two senses in which women

might be understood to constitute a group: an attenuated sense in which women are related by virtue of a common positionality that reflects conditions impressed on them, and a stronger sense of group relatedness based on people's recognition of shared common interests. I shall refer to these as the attributed and avowed senses of group identification. Often these two senses overlap another pair of distinctions: between voluntary and involuntary groups.⁵

Neither of these sets of distinctions has clear-cut boundaries. Cultural norms exert their influence so pervasively that the distinction between avowed and attributed senses of group identity may be difficult to sustain. For people internalize the standards and values of their society as they learn its language and become integrated into its practices. So inevitably their subjective experience will reflect social norms. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) calls attention to the craftiness of the "controlling images" by which social groups are identified by outsiders and the multiple ways such images spread, often blighting the self-identities of those most oppressed by them. They may be so deeply etched into cultural norms and define people's social role so comprehensively that individual effort alone cannot shatter them. Popular rhetoric that emphasizes regard to each person on the basis of individual merit leaves these images untouched. They are created by social groups and only collective group struggles can displace them. (See Jean Baker Miller on this point too, p.11)

The possibility of erasing such controlling images at all, though, depends on the presence within the society of interlocking group identities. Otherwise only those outside the oppressed group would recognize these images and they would have the most to lose by upsetting the status quo. In a previous chapter I cited Collins's observations about the Black maid who understood the magnitude of her white employer's oppression more fully than the other woman herself. A coherent rationale for social change requires such a conception of group interconnections so that some can share with others the knowledge that their distinctive position affords. In an extended sense all who share a society's culture participate in a common social group by virtue of a shared language, common norms and practices. Wittgenstein captured this commonality in his expression: "forms of life." I take this to be Alison Jaggar's point (1989) in remarking that emotional experiences presuppose the existence of a social group.⁶ These generalized commonalities though may exert their influence so diffusely that their influence is barely recognized by those whose identities are most centrally affected--until others invoke them to rally collective support for social change. Even then, as in women's awakening to feminist consciousness, some may persistently deny their sources and reaffirm them as though they were their own invention.

The overlapping distinction between voluntary and involuntary groups may initially seem transparently clear, but it actually incorporates analogous ambiguities. For though family ties, say, are not of an individual's own making, they are nonetheless constitutive of one's identity. At the opposite pole, such seemingly voluntary attachments as friendships may be anchored by underlying psychological and social constraints. So attempts to distinguish voluntary from involuntary groups may not lend much clarity to the project. Rather than viewing such distinctions as dichotomous, I shall take them to exist in dynamic tension with one another. I will allude to the voluntary/involuntary distinction later and focus here on the more immediately relevant distinction between attributed and avowed groups.

⁵See Marilyn Friedman's work, for instance.

⁶Betrayal, for instance, as Jaggar points out, depends on norms of fidelity.

Often these categories overlap. Seldom are they stable over time. Even where group markings are stigmatizing, the attribution of a group identity by virtue of a shared position may not be inconsistent with the avowal of that identity by the group itself. Before initiating resistance and reclamation, people labeled by outsiders may seek to validate their impressed identity and erase stigmatizing associations by constructing their own narrative about a common past as a people with distinctive experiences and a fund of shared knowledge. Racial and ethnic group identities virtually always incorporate such inventions and rediscoveries. But their cohesiveness is perpetually in danger of coming undone. Ethnic identities actually crisscross multiple other identities. bell hooks speaks of her own experience as inhabiting multiple, diverse, and sometimes contradictory locations (1994, 207). She contests the notion of a unitary self who has a fixed identity and is wary of groups that flatten out subjectivity as a condition of acceptance. As members of an ethnic group come to such an understanding of their group relatedness, the assumption of group homogeneity gives way to a recognition of diversity. Then the distinction between the affirmed identity and the commonality impressed on the group by outside forces sharpens.

Grouping among women, however, is distinctive. Unlike many racial and ethnic groups (African Americans for instance), in many cultures women have historically lived apart from one other. However, since the abolition of slavery, African-Americans have had little option but to live together. This imposed arrangement has been advantageous in affording opportunities to unselfconsciously shape distinctive institutions (their own churches, philanthropic groups, and patterns of family organization and mutual support). But women lack the institutionalized cohesion that even the most loosely constituted of these communities manifests. Among women generally, there is little group consciousness; seldom, except in lesbian communities, are primary relationships confined to other women, and distinctive cultural traditions must be self-consciously configured.

Like most historically oppressed people, however, standards of conduct impressed on women collectively--sex marking and sex identifying characteristics--are almost invariably stigmatizing. Opportunities afforded by group-specific institutions to turn stigma to strength have seldom been extended to women unless they are also members of racial and ethnic groups. Male interests often predominate within these groups leaving debasing female stereotypes unchallenged. Gender is a major factor in susceptibility to violence, to poverty, to the significance that attaches to aging.⁷ Marilyn Frye speaks of the distinctive sexual division of labor that overrides other differences among women and relegates women of all races and classes to a common ghetto.

Whether in lower, middle or upper class homes or work situations, women's service work always includes personal service (the work of maids, butlers, cooks, personal secretaries), sexual service (including provision for his genital sexual needs and bearing his children, but also including "being nice," "being attractive to him," etc.) and ego service (encouragement, support, praise, attention). (Frye 1983, 9)

Despite the sweeping breadth of Frye's characterization, her sense of a common devaluation overriding differences of class and race cannot be discounted. So, in at least this pejorative sense women do share group-like commonalities. But since it is beyond the power of individuals to change debasing moral norms through individual effort alone, group action is essential. To challenge prevailing social determinations it is often strategic to point to commonalities that define women as a group within a particular context, say, to overcome exclusion of women from research trials for new drugs, to campaign

⁷A number of feminists have made similar observations. See also Meyers (1994, 58-61) and Young (1990, 153).

for more adequate prenatal care, to eliminate educational or vocational inequities, and to promote better ways of avoiding infertility.

For all these purposes it is important to consider how we can speak of women collectively without normalizing some particular conception of women that excludes nonconforming women.⁸ What is to prevent any reference to women compositely from yielding to the totalizing impulse for which essentialist strategies have been faulted? If we are to avoid recommending policies on the basis of false generalizations about women's nature, it is critical to clarify and isolate the senses in which it is meaningful and productive to speak of women as constituting a social group. And, indeed, some tactics have been attempted to advance this project.

In "Harming Women as a Group" Marilyn Friedman and Larry May specifically address this dimension of group collectivity.⁹ Their argument is directed primarily to the reductionist dimensions of compensatory programs, particularly insofar as they construe discrimination as harms only to specifiable individuals; but their analysis bears on the problem at hand too. They ferret out three senses in which we might speak of women as being harmed as a group, each of which is generalizable to the other groups I've already mentioned: harms experienced by individuals by virtue of group membership, harms directed to individuals that are pervasively distributed throughout the group, and collective harms which befall the group as an entity. They acknowledge that group characteristics such as I've alluded to are more limited for women than for ethnic groups, but they argue that they do pertain to women to a lesser degree (1985, 217). Through numerous examples they illustrate both exclusionary practices applied to all women and routes through which direct harm to one woman may indirectly affect other women's capacities to provide for their own wellbeing. Though the direct harms some women suffer, say by workforce participation, would not directly affect women who do not seek paid employment, these women may still suffer indirect harms if their choice to remain outside the workplace is influenced by knowledge of decreased opportunities (227). In a later paper May calls these "cumulative harms."¹⁰ Massive circulation of pornographic materials, for instance, is likely to contribute indirectly to the objectification of women whether or not they or their partners seek them out. The ubiquitous display of faceless body parts turned provocatively to the male gaze is bound to influence social attitudes toward all bearers of female bodies.

The degree to which such examples are extendable beyond such familiar situations will depend, they insist, on empirical evidence. Confirmation would need to be based either on observed interrelationships among group members that distribute the harms suffered by some to others or widespread negative stereotyping that biases educational or employment practices, for instance. So the claim that women constitute a group would be context dependent and the burden of proof would fall on those who put the claim forward. Arguments about the injustice women would suffer under certain types of health care rationing schemes seem to meet these requirements (see Chapter Four above). But, the claim of the radical feminist group I have considered, that women who do not personally seek out treatment for infertility are indirectly harmed by virtue of the fact that other women do, might be more difficult to demonstrate empirically.

8. LP: These questions are being raised in an urgent and fundamental way by increasing social and political prominence of transwomen.

⁹Marilyn Friedman and Larry May, Social Theory and Practice, 11, 2, 1985, 207-234.

¹⁰Read at the annual meeting of the North American Society for Social Philosophy, August 1996.

Friedman and May's analysis successfully circumvents the kinds of essentialist tendencies that cloud so much rhetoric about women as a group. But their inquiry focuses on only one dimension of the issue: the group as a target of negative treatment by others. It says little about self-consciously constructed group identities through which individuals might recognize themselves as members of a group or of overlapping groups and make common cause with others to advocate collectively. Nor does it address the situation of individual women who perceive their interests in a way that does not cohere with the recognized interests of the group which claims them. Also, beyond its scope are dimensions of groups as agents of social change. Friedman and May's strategy circumvents these issues, considering group identity only insofar as people might be subject to harms by virtue of their identification with a group, a matter decidable by empirical evidence. But this tactic skirts many difficult questions bound up with normative dimensions of group consciousness and group objectification.

Iris Young's account of the senses in which we might speak of women as constituting a social group address another dimension of the issue: differences between unities external to people and those based on common shared purposes. Like Friedman and May's account, it successfully sidesteps the essentialist pitfalls I alluded to in discussing pronatalist and anti-natalist accounts which appeal to common female characteristics or a common oppression universally experienced. Young derives her account from the conception of *seriality* that Sartre develops in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. In his scheme:

seriality is a characteristic of *unorganized* class existence that positions individuals in relations of production and consumption. For Young, the concept of seriality and its distinction from the concept of a group can help solve the conundrums about talking about women as a group in which feminist theory has recently found itself. *Woman* is a serial collective defined neither by any common identity nor by a common set of attributes that all the individuals in the series share, but, rather, it names a set of structural constraints and relations to practico-inert objects that condition action and its meaning. I am inclined to say that the series includes all female human beings in the world, and others of the past, but how and where we draw the historical lines is an open question. (Young 1994, 737)

Young's interpretation of seriality brings out certain continuities between the two senses of group identification referred to above and applies them to feminist analysis. Her strategy connects the attenuated sense in which women are related by virtue of a common position reflecting material conditions that affect them and the stronger sense based on recognition of a shared common interest. Insofar as seriality involves features of people's situation in general, individuals in a series are anonymous and interchangeable. Each is just a monad who by virtue of an imposed ordering principle stands in the same relation to everyone else. Membership in the series is indeterminate though those who are serialized may develop into a collective social unit which presupposes no common attributes other than a common plan. The plan may lead to exceptions or modifications of the series. The relevant commonality that defines such a serial grouping does not inhere in individuals per se by virtue of any common biological or psychological characteristics or a common subjugation. Instead, social position is the key factor. Young's account does not deny that there may be common details of people's lives that give them affinity and generate a common stock of knowledge, a common discourse, and interlocking practices. But these details--class, race, nation, neighborhood, religious affiliation--stem, she insists, from their position within a social ordering scheme.

Young provides several examples of situations in which people initially tied together only serially transform their relations into a self-conscious collectivity that selectively incorporates some features of

the members' social position. Sartre takes many others including a serialized interpretation of the French resistance movement during World War II. For purposes of illustration here, I shall draw on one of his most simple and obvious examples: people waiting in line for a bus.¹¹ They are there principally by virtue of the fact that the bus company has designated this location as a bus stop. They need have no commonality internal to their own purposes other than a collective interest in transport. But suppose the bus fails to show up at its scheduled time. As they wait in the queue, they might turn to one another grumbling about the deterioration in service, the consequent inconvenience to their plans, etc. Some might take the lead in forming a protest group, organizing an appeal to the bus company, petitioning city officials who regulate buses, or planning a Montgomery style boycott. All of these strategies reflect a shared interest in improving the efficiency of bus transport. Some may incorporate additional aims, more equitable treatment of specific groups of riders, for instance.

In Young's interpretation of this scheme, "women" becomes the name of a series of social objects united by a common history. It is material objects that make people women: bathroom doors, clothes, pronouns, and social facts like enforced heterosexuality and the sexual division of labor. All women have to deal with these structures but they define them in different ways. As some of them make common cause like Sartre's bus riders, they form self-conscious groups, but--and this is a crucial feature of Young's scheme--*all* women can never constitute a group that shares a common purpose. Such groups are inevitably *particular*. The first sense in which women constitute a group defines them in their generality; the second in their particularity.

Suggestive as this interpretation of group identity is in avoiding essentialist pitfalls, the notion of seriality does not adequately convey the sense of historicity that Young wants to incorporate into it. The term "seriality" calls attention to the ordering principle at work here and to this extent involves temporality. Sartre's bus riders are temporally related; their place in the bus queue is determined by their time of arrival at the bus stop. Women for Young are *temporally* connected by a common history. But they are also *spatially* related by virtue of their social positioning. Since my own interest here is principally to understand how we can address women's biologically linked reproductive potential without relying on essentialist assumptions, I will use the term "seriality" more sparingly, supplementing it with language that more fully captures the purposeful dimensions of women's connectivity, their creative responses to their historicity. This alteration also diminishes some of the weaknesses of Young's scheme which will become more apparent as I explore it further. An example will illustrate the difficulty and the need for this modification.¹²

In virtually any historic society, reproductive capacity is both a principal locus of social pressures on women and a major source of gratification and fulfillment for many. However, particular pressures and gratifications are bound to vary over both time and place depending on how they are integrated into a particular configuration of social practices. As we have seen in considering contemporary Western health care systems, a number of distinguishing features of female bodily functioning are not reflected in the prevailing organization and delivery of medical services. Feminist bioethicists stress the need for a policy

¹¹I draw here on his own account from *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* but I freely extend it to elucidate its implications for the problem at issue here.

12. See Young's recent article on menstruation (2005). Does it make any biological links?

that will tailor medical products and services specifically to women's bodily requirements.¹³ So if the metaphor of a series is to provide a useful device for conceptualizing respects in which women constitute a social group, it must somehow include biological groundings among the material conditions that constitute people as a series. Biological capacity, the social weight that particular circumstances attach to that capacity, and the psychological meanings that cling to it would intersect in different ways depending on social position. The commonality would then be stronger or weaker depending on the point where conditions converge.

To test the suitability of this framework for integrating biologically based capacities, I will take an illustration that touched my own life when I presented a paper at a conference in Buenos Aires. In the audience were several women who belonged to the much celebrated group known as "The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo." They invited me to march with them in the Plaza the next Thursday, their traditional demonstration day, and then took me to their headquarters where I met several of the group's founders. Moved by their struggle, I later read and reread their story.¹⁴

During the terror that dominated people's lives when the military Junta ruled Argentina in the 1970s, uncountable numbers mysteriously disappeared-- young men, pregnant women, and even small children. Fathers, mostly working class, could ill afford the time away from their jobs to seek out the lost ones. So mothers dropped their customary domestic routines to search for their sons and daughters, initially through the proper channels, making the rounds of police stations and the offices of municipal authorities. Inexperienced in the workings of bureaucracy, they seldom received more than a perfunctory response. But with growing determination they returned again and again. During interminable waits in the offices of officials, they passed the time chatting with other women in similar straits. They began to realize how much their experiences overlapped: their common frustration, grief, loss, and sense of desperation. Eventually, recognizing a common purpose their subjectively felt experiences led to a cohesive grouping that gradually reconfigured their personal identities as mothers. They met together, organized protests, and boldly demonstrated in front of government buildings. As their activities expanded and they made common cause with groups outside Argentina, they became more self-consciously political and acquired a group identity that differed from their particular individual situations.

But as their movement grew, internal conflicts erupted. Obsession with their personal struggles and losses divided them from one another. Preoccupation with each of their children did not provide a sufficient basis for group cohesiveness. In response to these conflicts, they transformed the sense of their common motherhood into a symbolic identity. One of the mothers tells this story:

¹³See Sherwin 1992, 132-136, Mahowald 1993, 62-63, 1992, 1994, Stanworth 1990, and F. Goldman: "Children of the Dirty War," *New Yorker* 03/19/2012, 54-65.

¹⁴Sally Ruddick had a similar experience which she draws upon in several of her works including her 1989 book. What's left out of this brief autobiographical retrospective is the wrenching emotional impact this experience had on me, a privileged western feminist born into a society ruled by law--however imperfect.

I have one sister and she has three children. Some time ago she asked me, "But why are you continuing this struggle if you know that your son is not coming back?" She thinks that I am only fighting for my son -- that nothing is going to happen to her children. So I told her, "I am fighting for your children and for other children also." "Why?" she countered. "My children are not going to be involved in anything." I feel sorry for her because she has not gone through the process I have gone through. She still lives only for *her* children, like all mothers, each mother for her own child. So I feel sorry for her because I have learned something. I have socialized my maternity (Bouvard 1994, 175 [emphasis added]).¹⁵

Symbolically each member of the group came to see herself as the mother of *all* the disappeared. They affirmed new powers as political advocates united in their resistance to a repressive political regime. Their convergence into a group was prompted by their shared personal losses and the sexual division of labor that configured their experiences. As their group bonds coalesced, their collective identity challenged both the received conception of motherhood in their society and the traditional division of labor imposed on women of their class. Through this process they refashioned their former identities and realized new powers as a collectivity. Their movement, constituted initially through historically given connection, eventually moved beyond resistance to a local regime and forged participatory alliances with peace groups across the globe. The associations they built incorporated a kind of serial reciprocity resembling on a different plane the reciprocity Eva Kittay calls for to reconstruct dependency relations in non-exploitive ways that respect the equality of carer and cared for (Kittay 1995, chapter 4 above). In both accounts reciprocity is a transitive relation responsive to a common vulnerability that potentially affects all humans--even the Argentinean woman I quoted whose children shrink from political engagement.

The *Madres* struggle is now well-known everywhere, kept alive by human rights groups that are continually discovering new material and reviving too long dormant cases of abuse.¹⁶ Similar "disappearances" have been reported in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Central America. Recently, fifty-nine grandchildren of the Argentinian *Madres* who were either kidnapped or born to mothers in captivity have been identified using mitochondrial DNA technology. (Dr. King?) However, some feminists do not see the Argentinian women's experiences as an adequate model for political protest since their movement draws on conventional stereotypes about women's traditional role. Chandra Mohanty notes that forms of resistance built on stereotypes about women's traditional roles are risky since they are vulnerable to powerful re-feminization strategies that can rebound against them (Mohanty 2002).

Of course, such risks need to be considered in adopting strategies that utilize powerful traditional symbols. However, such symbols are never immutably fixed but are subject to revision as surrounding conditions change. (See Ann Ferguson on this.) Admittedly, the usefulness of this model is limited to forms of resistance directed to arbitrary, fully visible, sites of power and would be ineffective where power is covert and internalized. Sara Ruddick sees the *Madres* deliberate invocation of the culture's symbols of femininity as an apt illustration of a women's politics of resistance (1989, 222). The reverence for mothers, so prevalent in their society, served as a powerful tool to disarm the opposition and advance the *Madres'* aims. Traditional conceptions of mothers as weak, emotional, and politically naive

¹⁵Attributed by Bouvard (1994) to María del Rosario de Cerruti.

¹⁶See, for instance, NY Times, 7/15/05, A3.

deflected the kind of overt opposition to their demonstrations that would have befallen more sophisticated political alliances. By drawing on their culture's norms and configuring their strategies from a perspective generated by their own experiences—their particular relations to the natural and social world—they were able to renounce common stereotypes of women's nature and function more effectively than if they had positioned themselves more self-consciously as an ideological group. (Foregoing section is too long, needs some reorganization.)

Their example does not offer a master model of either group identities or resistance strategies. It points instead to the need for diverse strategies. It lends itself readily to a conceptual framework based on a group's positionality and shows how people who envisage themselves initially in terms of a shared problem (as Sartre's bus riders) might constitute themselves self-consciously to resist a specific subset of cultural norms and practices. Ruddick's point applies specifically to women's positionality as mothers, but it is generalizable to any grouping that confers on people a social position with enough self-conscious resonance to generate a common standpoint.¹⁷

The *Madres* example illustrates how natural and social relations constitute key features of a shared social position and how repressive powers mediate between material conditions exterior to individuals and their own defining interests. It shows too how neither material conditions nor power relations need fully determine a particular situation. Conflicts among women, such as the one I quoted from Bouvard's book about the *Madres*, illustrate the subterranean paths that power may take, operating not only directly by repressive domination but also covertly, through practices that discipline people into conformity that makes obedience to authority appear voluntary and natural.¹⁸ From the viewpoint of the politically active sister, the apolitical sister's complacency—her trust in the reassuring illusion that her own children would never defy the ruling powers--strengthened the hand of the regime that endangered them all.

¹⁷Standpoint theory was initially derived from Marxian theory where it underscored the workers' perspective toward social conditions--what they knew by virtue of their social location. Feminists have borrowed its central insight: that social position defines relationships among groups; thus the dominant group describes the world from a viewpoint that supports its own interests. If suppressed groups are to change social conditions, they need to claim their own standpoint constructed out of their own lived experience. Nancy Hartsock (1983), Dorothy Smith (1987), Jane Flax (1990), and Sandra Harding (1991) have each elaborated feminist versions of standpoint theory. Feminists often emphasize specific dimensions of the theory and sometimes essentialize it in ways that Young's formulation avoids. Kathryn Addelson (1994, 14-25) appeals to it to press for a distinctive kind of collectivist moral theory. All of us are politically engaged, she insists, since we all occupy a position in the social order. Women by virtue of their position as outsiders constitute what she tags "a deviant group." Sara Ruddick has put the notion to an ingenious use in her book *Maternal Thinking* (1989) where she draws on the knowledge possessed by mothers to redescribe the reality of maternal thinking and experiencing. For her too standpoint theory is a comprehensive relation to the world. But she stresses its roots in people's primary relations as well as the other material conditions and activities that ground their knowledge of reality. Some other feminists including Mahowald (1993) and Wolf (1996, 109) have extended the notion of a standpoint to the subjective knowledge women acquire by virtue of their particular individual circumstances. This usage is more controversial. I limit my own to the more comprehensive relation.

¹⁸ In works such as *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Michel Foucault provides innumerable examples of such disciplinary practices. Many feminists, particularly those influenced by post-modernisms, have adopted his language. In an earlier chapter I cited Sandra Bartky's use of his key concepts (1990). Hers ranks among the most accessible interpretations.

The conflict between the politicized sister and the naive one illustrates the two senses in which Young understands women to constitute a group. The *Madres* never became self-consciously feminist in the overtly political sense. Unlike the activist feminists in developed countries, they did not identify with broader feminist goals that aim to change power relations that sustain arbitrary privilege. But the rifts that erupted between them and mothers outside their group strike a familiar chord. They have much in common with familiar divisions between feminists and women who do not take feminism to represent their interests. Taking seriality as a necessary prerequisite for connection calls attention to permeability of boundaries that divide those within the series. The apolitical sister might be won over. Then too, as happened in Argentina, some from the original group might drift away as the group's agenda shifts. So this conception of a social group allows for considerable elasticity. Since explicitly feminist groups, Young reasons, aim specifically at some marks of women's condition, they thereby refer implicitly to all other women not aligned with the group itself, women whose lives are conditioned by enforced sexuality and the sexual division of labor but who are not part of any feminist group (1994.738).

But feminism, itself, Young insists, does not name a grouping of women, for there are many feminisms. What makes them all feminist is their commitment to a common purpose: "to politicize gender and change the power relations between women and men in some respect" (737). But because every activist group is bound to be a partial subset of the undifferentiated whole with its own specific purposes and goals, no single group can claim to represent the whole adequately. For these reasons, Young concludes, "feminist politics must be a coalition politics" (737). There are always bound to be many feminisms.

This formulation offers a potentially powerful device for getting around some of the most glaring misunderstandings and conflicts now afflicting feminism. It is particularly useful for framing issues tied to women's reproductive potential which has so often been viewed as a mere biological given, detachable from all social meanings that adhere to it. Within this context a clearer sense can be given to what it means to attribute to women a common identity. Women's bodies work unlike men's in many ways, not only in matters of reproduction, but also with respect to many diseases that manifest themselves differently in women. So women potentially have a collective interest in research funding and therapeutic options for these diseases. If professional "experts" are not to have a monopoly in defining women's needs, there is good reason to recognize collective interests and make distinctive needs known. Mahowald, particularly (1993, 62-63), presses for a policy that is fully affirming of women's interests and focuses on the needs of all women who may be affected by our present decisions. But it is also important to remember that not all women's bodies work alike in every detail either. So to advance such a policy, women need to rally round the specific concerns of subsets of women whose particular needs would be overlooked by too global a focus on women as a monolithic social group.

In situations where biological groundings enter into the constitution of a group, the distinction between a common positionality that reflects impressed conditions and explicit recognition of a shared common interest can be highly informative. Consider, say, a clinical trial to learn about the effects of drug X on heart disease. For many years such trials excluded all women of childbearing potential. Advocacy groups with an interest in promoting women's health complained that neither the drugs prescribed to women nor their dosage levels were based on studies that included women of childbearing age. So those within this group who took the drugs therapeutically were, in effect, participating in an uncontrolled experiment. The pressures advocacy groups exerted led eventually to new test designs that modified the

groupings of potential recipients.¹⁹ The population of women subsequently selected for the research trials constituted a different subset than either the previous group of research subjects or the group of women who lobbied to change the design of the clinical trials. The latter is a particular subset of women who might potentially be affected. They are distinguished by a common goal which is partially built into the subsequent research design. This goal might be shared by some of the women who volunteer for the trials but not by others. The objectives of the reforms aim beyond the trial group to all women vulnerable to heart disease. The feminist bioethicists I cited above can be understood to be making both a general claim about women and a particular claim about the subset of women who share a common purpose. Viewed within this framework, Mahowald's call for a policy that considers the needs of all women affected by policy makers actions would reach beyond the subset that is the self-conscious advocacy group to all other women who might be benefitted or harmed by subsequent therapeutic use of this drug. Taking note of May and Friedman's point here, such effects would call for empirical confirmation. A tension persists, though, which may not be evident in the examples I've chosen. The relevant commonality among women, susceptibility to heart disease, is comparatively straight-forward, far less contaminated by the pervasive influence of social norms and pressures than many reproductive issues. Frances Price and Patricia King both offer examples that illustrate the complexity of such situations.

Price alludes to debate about specifying the optimal number of embryos to transfer following IVF. Should this be an individual decision or a matter of policy? (Price 1991, 148-9). Some countries (most notably Britain) have established rules mandating that no more than a specified number be transferred. This makes better sense in some situations than in others depending on whether they are the recipient's own ova or those of a donor, the ages of the women involved, and the reproductive history of the carrying mother. But allowing too much leeway for individual judgment is likely to jeopardize the wellbeing of the aggregate population of women under treatment for infertility. Patricia King, chair of the past U.S. President's Embryo Research Panel, withheld assent to approval of the practice of permitting women in treatment to donate ova that will be fertilized for research purposes.²⁰ Though women with infertility problems are likely to benefit *as a group*, the particular women who donate are not likely to benefit directly from the research and because of the vulnerability of women in treatment and the tinge of commercialism that influences clinical practice, their consent may be coerced.

Both the Price and King examples indicate that a regulatory policy clearly advantageous to the aggregate population of women who use these services might be contrary to the interests of some members of that population individually. The aggregate is constituted of a subset of women in their generality, but whether they constitute a group in more than a statistical sense would depend--certainly within Young's scheme--on whether they explicitly constituted themselves as a group. Within the more general common usage, it would alternatively depend on whether a group identity was attributed to them by others. Groups might be constituted in other ways too, hinging on additional conceptual and empirical

¹⁹The *National Institutes of Health Revitalization Act* passed by Congress in 1993 established "Guidelines Concerning the Inclusion of Women and Minorities in Clinical Research" (*Federal Register* 59, no. 59 (March 28, 1994). Though the guidelines are undoubtedly a major advance, they have been criticized for perpetuating the presumption that newly included subjects are solely passive participants who are merely objects of inquiry without voice in generating knowledge. On this and related points see Lisa A. Eckenwiler "Women and communities in clinical research: Questioning the influence of communitarian ideals," unpublished paper.

²⁰ U.S. President's Embryo Research Panel Report, 1994, A-4.

qualifications. Because of these ambiguities in the usage of "group," I will use the term "population" to indicate a collection of people whose group identity is indeterminate.

Public health programs also illustrate policies that may benefit an aggregate population but may harm specific individuals and even groups that fall within it—vaccination or genetic screening programs, for instance. As long as a critical mass is vaccinated, the entire geographical population is likely to benefit. But individuals with abnormal sensitivities may be severely harmed by the vaccine. Groups may be harmed by practices that would not count as wrongs to individuals one by one.²¹ The sickle cell screening program instituted in Black communities in the 1970s may have benefitted some affected individuals who subsequently received appropriate treatment, or carriers who reconsidered their reproductive plans on the basis of this knowledge, or those who had falsely assumed they were carriers. For carriers are not at risk of producing an affected child as long as they do not mate with other carriers. But because of widespread confusion between the population of carriers and those actually affected by the disease, trait status was used abusively by employers, the military, and health services. The resulting discrimination harmed Blacks as a group.²²

Analogously, exclusion of specific individuals from a program might not count as a harm in isolation, but could be regarded as a moral wrong if the group were considered.²³ A particular woman might not be able to justify a claim to participate in an experimental drug protocol, but past practice of excluding *all* women out of exaggerated (misguided) concern for the future well-being of potential offspring damages women's health collectively.²⁴

Some argue that trade-offs between individual and group interests are inevitable in public policy decision-making. In *Tragic Choices* (1978) Calabresi and Bobitt defend the use of a utilitarian calculus in making trade-offs between individual and group harms. Such criteria may suffice where both individual and group harms can be calculated and quantified (though conundrums abound if human lives are at stake or harms fall disproportionately on less well-off members of society). But in many situations, individual preferences are susceptible to manipulation (as King points out) or assessments of group interests incorporate controversial normative judgments (as critics of the FINRRAGE position emphasize). Here the close resemblance between King's way of putting the problem and my reworked version of Young's conception of a group might be useful. Let's consider all women with fertility problems. They are likely to

²¹This issue is comprehensively considered by Todd Sandler in his treatment of Mancur Olson's theory of collective action in economic systems: *Collective Action: Theory and Applications*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1992.

²²The resulting discrimination has been widely documented. See, for instance, the work of James E. Bowman, particularly "Genetic screening: Toward a new eugenics?" in *It Just Ain't Fair": The Ethics of Health Care for African Americans*, edited by Annette Dula and Sara Goering (Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 1994), 165-181.

²³I owe this example to Susan Wolf (1996, 17).

²⁴Drugs have been widely prescribed to women patients on the basis of research conducted exclusively with male subjects that had never been tested for such gender-specific differences as average weight, body fat distribution, or metabolic fluctuations. Recently, a number of interesting studies have been published documenting the extent of the exclusion of women from research protocols and the consequences of this exclusion. Even post-menopausal women were barred and a study of uterine cancer was carried out using solely male subjects! Merton's 1996 article includes extensive background material on this issue and recent federal efforts to redress this injustice.

have different responses to a policy that circumscribes options depending upon whether they take their individual interests to be paramount or identify with the group. Those who affirm group membership will, undoubtedly, see common affinities in their situations.

Those who influence policy may need to make difficult normative judgments involving the larger context in which options are framed, too. Mahowald's advocacy of a pro-women position that focuses on the needs of other women who are not actually involved in making certain decisions but may be affected by them calls attention to the responsibility of participants to represent those who have no opportunity to participate. Because trade-offs tend to incorporate norms and values favored by those empowered to make decisions, feminist groups tend to stress the importance of including in policy discussions representatives of all groups who will be affected by the policy--both those who can be expected to benefit most and those whose situation is least likely to be ameliorated. But here we have circled back to a central question implied at the outset: who can speak for those groups? Even genuinely representative democratic procedures are not likely to capture all of the considerations that count significantly for particular cultural and ethnic groups. In the next section I explore the deficiencies of representative strategies and consider alternative approaches that aim to incorporate the standpoints of participants.

Reconsidering the Claim to Speak for All Women

A growing number of both feminist and non-feminist scholars over the past decade have challenged the presumption that those in positions of privilege have the authority to speak for subordinated others, so that, for example, colonizers could speak for the colonized, or whites for Blacks, or gentiles for Jews. Young's reformulation of the senses in which women constitute a group demonstrates the incoherence of any group's claim to represent the voices of *all* women. For if social positionality is the defining mark of a group, then relations among group members will be external to them unless they self-consciously adopt a purpose as their own.

The controversy that erupted over Alice Walker's film "Warrior Marks" and her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*²⁵ illustrates several dimensions of this problem. Walker's efforts to rally support condemning the practices of African communities that participate in ritual circumcision of young girls has been criticized by African women as still another manifestation of Western imperialism. Her film, critics charge, portrays the African continent as a monolith and uses female genital mutilation as a gauge by which to measure moral distance between the West and the rest of humanity. Though critics do not defend the practice, they insist that the struggle is better left to those who understand the social conditions that perpetuate it and who can marshal forces to resist it in ways less likely to intensify the disadvantage of these women. For under prevailing conditions, others point out, they are not considered marriageable unless they submit to this practice.²⁶ A *New York Times* op ed piece by Seble Dawit and Salem Mekuria put it this way: "Genital mutilation does not exist in a vacuum but as part of a social fabric, stemming

²⁵Alice Walker's novel appeared in 1992 (New York, Harcourt Brace) and a work based on the film appeared the following year (Harcourt Brace). For a discussion of the issue from a public health perspective see N. Toubia "Female Circumcision as a Public Health Issue" in *New England Journal of Medicine*, 331, 11, 9/15/94.

²⁶This is a common explanation offered by observers, but it does not necessarily reflect the way participants understand the practice.

from the power imbalances in relations between the sexes, from the levels of education and the low economic and social status of most women. All eradication efforts must begin and proceed from these basic premises."²⁷ They urge the formation of partnerships with African women, using the power and resources available in the West to create space for them to speak out and to speak with us.

The radical feminist posture that claims to represent the reproductive interests of *all* women is analogous to Alice Walker's campaign--more so since they have extended their efforts into developing countries. Infertile women and their putative representatives have claimed that their own sexual and reproductive experiences cannot be rightly understood from the position of such differently situated women. I alluded to this problem in an earlier chapter. I take it up again from the perspective of this debate. For, Young's conception of the senses in which we might speak of women as constituting a group has implications here too. If social position is taken to be an all-pervasive feature of everyone's situation, no one can ever speak for anyone else. This needs further consideration in order to specify what counts as a social position (see Nancy Hartsock). From the viewer's perspective every individual monad's social position is fully determinative. From the perspective of self-conscious individuals, each group is a fully self-conscious voluntary association. With the modification I've noted, this scheme is able to reconstruct key features of the *Madres'* situation, but doesn't fit many other groups nearly so neatly.²⁸ Moreover, it seems to complicate conceiving of any circumstances under which one group of people could possibly adopt the viewpoint of others even imaginatively.

From the viewpoint of the group itself, actual relations tend to be more complex. To some degree they are already internally inscribed in individual identities and may be explicitly acknowledged even where people do not share common purposes. The examples used to illustrate seriality abstract from actual historical conditions in a way that dichotomizes the distinction between chance associations and voluntary ones.

This perspective goes part of the way toward providing a conceptual matrix within which to think of such groups as the *Madres* but stops short of grasping some key features of its cohesiveness: its origins in common shared experience, common political conditions, and a common cultural tradition which mystified and valorized motherhood. It is not clear how to modify a Sartrean-like framework to include instances where a policy that would benefit a specific population of women collectively might also risk compromising the autonomy or the wellbeing of some individual women within that population. For any given individual, actual affiliations extend to many overlapping groups. We are all members of families but are also bound to friends, social organizations, workplace relationships, etc. In speaking we talk out of these many locations and affiliations. Adrienne Rich's autobiographical account of the "discovery" of her own Jewishness illustrates a familiar dimension of this phenomenon. Since one of her parents was Jewish, in an attenuated sense she had always seen herself as a Jew, but this group identification was never inwardly meaningful to her until she went off to college and became friends with other women who practiced Judaism. Joining them and adopting their practices altered her relation to her own Jewishness. Her previous relation to other Jews was not an entirely involuntary, but it was not voluntary either in the sense it later became. Some way must be found to incorporate this dynamic tension in group relations if

²⁷NY Times, 12/7/93: A13.

²⁸A number of other examples of women's movements that might be explored to try out alternative frameworks for understanding group relations are included in the collection edited by Jill M. Bystydzienski: *Women Transforming Politics: Worldwide Strategies for Empowerment*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1992.

we are to explain how anyone can possibly enter into others' situations and speak in concert with others even if none can speak to all. Perhaps I can make the point clearer and bring out its political dimensions by drawing on an example from my own experience.

One of my own first ventures into the world of academic publishing coincided with the ascendancy of the cultural awareness movement that foreshadowed the multicultural movement and contributed to the tide of skepticism about the universal validity of value claims. I wrote a paper criticizing Richard Gilman's claim that he and all other white literary critics were bound by their culture and professional standards to a set of values that disqualified them from critical evaluation of writers such as Eldridge Cleaver and Malcolm X.²⁹ Their writing, Gilman claimed, was guided by non-aesthetic impulses; it did not address the universal human condition but solely the present condition of Blacks; and it could not be assimilated by non-black readers. Gilman contrasted the work of this aberrant group with certain other contemporary literary works which also speak of experiences alien to his own, the work of Doris Lessing or Jean Genet. Despite his unfamiliarity with experiences they describe, their work is still open to critical appraisal for, unlike black literature, this writing is "governed by aesthetic impulses." Writers such as Lessing and Genet employ their data aesthetically to invent imaginative constructions which work to overcome barriers that separate the personal world of the writer from that of the critic. They appeal to a common stock of Western cultural values which grow out of shared experiences--birth and love, pain and self and death. But contemporary Black literature is about people who have not been allowed to participate fully in these ways of valuing experiences. Such black writers do not just make use of their authors' experiences as *data* for their work, but the author appears within their works as *subject* too. So the critic who is bound to traditional values cannot "assimilate" them, Gilman concludes.

The alternative he proposes, silence, struck me as no more acceptable than speech. For the silence of a professional critic is meaningful in itself. It implies that an author's work is unworthy of mention by those with the authority to speak as literary "experts." In my initial response, I called attention to overlapping features of Gilman's experience that might connect his world with Cleaver's. Say, surely, as a child, himself, he had glimmers of what it was to see the world from an outsider's viewpoint, to know rejection and humiliation by those with power over him. Moreover, if a critic's professional competence were to be measured by his personal participation in a group with distinctive ways of valuing experience, then critical comment on many other works would fall outside the critic's competence too. But obviously critics often have very important things to say about the literature of a people whose patterns of living and valuing differ markedly from their own.

What caught my attention initially was Gilman's condescension and his penchant for rationalizing his resistance to critical judgment rather than confront his own responses directly. What held my interest was the admission that a critic's experiences do play a role in his judgments, that an aesthetic point of view is bound to be relative to the reviewer's perspective. But what eluded me at that time was his hierarchical ordering of experiences and his tacit assumption that the values others' brought to experience were culture bound in a way his own were not. He privileged the values he brought to the critical encounter over those of the work's author. Where he failed to comprehend another's values, these were

29."Need a Literary Critic's Competence Depend on His Own Experiences?" in *East-West Dialogue in Aesthetics* edited by Kenneth K. Inada, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1978, 117-125. Gilman's article first appeared in *The New Republic*, 9 March, 1968, 25-30 and his reply to his critics appeared in the April 13th issue. Both were subsequently reprinted in a volume of Gilman's pieces titled: *The Confusion of Realms*, New York, Random House, 1969.

particular; his own achieved *universality*. His claim to universality for the white critic invites the kind of speculation that provoked Elizabeth Spelman's incisive question: why must the white man be the standard for black men rather than taking black men as the standard for whites? Spelman proposes that white people think of their way of being as superior to Black people's way; thus all Black people want to be white but no whites want to be Black.

What has also become clearer to me in the light of subsequent feminist analysis is that difference inevitably enters into *all* judgment about another's experience--whether we are speaking about them or presuming to speak for them. Since each individual is located at a somewhat different intersection of material conditions, participates in a different constellation of relationships, and is connected to a different collection of groups, no two individuals occupy just the *same* position. So even if I were to reserve my inclination to speaking for underrepresented groups to those I participate in myself, the problem would still persist. To enumerate all of the groups with which I am affiliated--either by ascription or by shared purpose--would leave me finally as the *only* member at that intersection.³⁰ Then I could speak only for myself.

Young acknowledges this point. In fact, she criticizes the tendency in some feminist writing to talk about Black women as if they constituted a distinctive gender. For that strategy generates just this kind of infinite regress. Though every woman surely has a distinguishing identity, from a political perspective this is unimportant. Young insists that only positions that generate strategies for collective action count politically. But, as Linda Alcoff points out (1995), the infinite regress problem cannot be dismissed so readily. Its political implications extend to any attempt to coherently represent a group's situation. For the same conceptual difficulty arises whether I speak for myself or for others. In representing my own situation, I inevitably sift and winnow my subjective experience according to my assessment of the circumstances, the listener addressed, and the aims of our interchange. My speaking is never freed of the possibility that I am presenting myself as more single minded than I actually am or that I am misjudging the circumstances or misconstruing the context my listeners bring to the exchange. Second, my speaking is bound to affect others, often in unintended ways. Though the baggage inherited from the individualist tradition predisposes us to view our own individuality as fixed, immutable, and independent, the frequent incidence of miscommunication, misunderstanding, and inability to say only what we mean shows that speaker and hearer are more complexly joined. Lewis Carroll acknowledges this problem in his rejoinder to a reader seeking an explanation of his symbolism in *Through the Looking Glass*. He replies:

I am very much afraid I didn't mean anything but nonsense. But since words mean more than we mean to express when we use them... whatever good meanings are in the book I am glad to accept as the meaning of the book.³¹

These reflections on the vagaries of subjectivity and the limits of language bring several interesting observations to the foreground. First, as Linda Alcoff argues, if none of us can ever be sure we are accurately depicting even our own situation, then obviously the oppressed people for whom the privileged may hesitate to speak can never be sure that they are unfailingly representing even their *own* interests.

³⁰ This point and many related ones are articulated cogently by Linda Alcoff in her insightful article "The problem of speaking for others" reprinted in Alcoff 1991.

³¹ Quoted by Robert S. Phillips, ed. in *Aspects of Alice*, London, Gollancz, 1972, 58.

Since everyone's subjectivity is inevitably shaped through their social positioning, the dominant culture may imprint its norms on those it oppresses so pervasively that they may be unable to see how these cultural messages do them a disservice.³² Second, as Gilman's own case illustrates, silence may risk perpetuating or even exacerbating the oppression of those the privileged refuse to speak about, particularly within their recognized areas of expertise. Withdrawal from speech may effectively leave existing relations of power and authority undisturbed, thereby sustaining the hierarchical structures that such silence is meant to deflect. If it does, it is irresponsible.

Concluding remarks

So what alternatives remain? Some have proposed that those in situations of privilege should discipline themselves to remain listeners until they better understand the situation of an oppressed group. But this strategy leaves central problems unchallenged. The experiential reports of those they listen to may not be transparent to their own situation either. Speech from any particular location will inevitably be bound by specifics relative to that situation. So we are unlikely to learn the whole truth about another's situation by listening alone. But realization of the partiality of any perspective can be exploited for its advantages too. First, wherever people are differently positioned and occupy diverse locations, they have different discursive resources at their disposal. They come to know different things about both the social and natural world. They organize knowledge in different sorts of ways and produce different narratives and models. (This is a pivotal point of Sara Ruddick's guiding insight in her *Maternal Thinking*.) No single narrative or model need supersede all others. Second, position is not fully determining. Neither cultural imprinting nor material conditions are all-pervasive. The historical imprint of social reality is not totalizing. It is so complexly structured by location, material conditions, and discursive context that no one ever encounters either a fully determinate given that's been there all along waiting for discovery or a raw datum from which to wholly invent experience. We are inevitably drawn into the flow of newly emerging discursive constructions, developing traditions, and changing identities. So experience is continually in the process of invention and re-creation. Moreover, some of us are situated more advantageously than others to actively change the conditions that structure experience. They have better access to strategies that would affirm the rights of others to be equally placed with respect to resources that fulfill human potential and advance political goals.

If individuals are not necessarily so wholly immersed in material conditions and prevailing discourses that they cannot intervene to challenge their own conditions, then it should be possible for some to speak for others in a way that shifts the weight of power and authority. The crucial problem then is to locate and circumscribe situations where speaking for others is likely to ameliorate others oppression rather than intensifying them. Alcoff suggests two routes; I offer another.

First, to reconstitute such situations so that rather than merely speaking for or about others we also speak to them and with them non-hierarchically, directly where possible, otherwise, by entering empathetically into their situation. Gilman, for instance, might have come to understand Cleaver's circumstances in a

³² This point is well developed in Jaggar 1989 and Bartky 1990. See particularly Bartky's discussion of internalization, pp. 76-78. Note also Ian Hacking's "Making up people" in Heller, Sosna, and Wellbery, 1986, 222-236. Hacking includes a splendidly suggestive discussion of the social processes through which we formulate aspirations and "make up" our distinctive identities.

new way had he acknowledged just a few of the aspects of white privilege that Peggy McIntosh describes so cogently in her article "White Privilege and Male Privilege."³³ He might have asked why Cleaver did not maintain the traditionally hallowed aesthetic distance from his subject; why he chose to intrude himself so directly into his writing, why he bared his anger so openly.

Second, by nurturing and cultivating our capacities for empathetic identification with others whose experiences are alien to our own.³⁴ This capacity is obscured in the formulation of group identification Young borrows from Sartre in that it presupposes that all personal interconnections are merely circumstantial. Of course, for Young a principal strength of this conception is its capacity to bypass essentialist commitments. But by assuming that all group relations that are not voluntarily affirmed are external, her account is not able to accommodate two sorts of relationships, both of which enter into the capacity to speak, if not for others, then with them. First, relationships constitutive of our identities that include a mix of voluntary and nonvoluntary elements--family relations and to a lesser degree, relations among friends. Second, relations established through empathetic capacities. Our sympathy with women who fall victim to genital mutilation, for instance, is due in part to the ease of imagining similar invasions of our own body. Disciplined sympathetic interest and loving attention make it possible to bridge an alien social setting without attempting to leap over cultural differences. We might never be able to grasp the particular resonance of others' experience or share their beliefs, but we should be able to understand their world by suspending belief and disbelief in a way analogous to our capacity to enter aesthetically into another imagined world.³⁵

But can we ever? In her intriguing essay "Playfulness and world-traveling," Maria Lugones incorporates this point into a political context. Playfulness involves suspending the norms of one's own world. To understand what it is to be them is to be ourselves in their eyes (1987, 17). The genesis of Lugones's own reflections on travelling to others' psychic worlds was her estrangement from her mother--her earlier incapacity to view the world from her mother's perspective which she came to see as the source of crucial links between her own conception of herself and her mother's way of seeing the world. To know the other, she came to realize, we need to know the other's world, a point succinctly phrased in Wittgenstein's aphorism: if lions could speak we wouldn't understand them. Lugones distinguishes her conception of play from Huizinga's in his *Homo Ludens*. Hers resists the tendency to arrogance of those who seek to assimilate the world of play into one's own actual world. In hers no rules are sacred, "we are open to self-construction." In our "travels" we shift from being one person to another identity (11). Serious people, Lugones insists, lack the sense of multidimensional reality that play represents.³⁶ Her view shares commonalities with the Buddhist monk bell hooks refers to who points

³³ "White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies," No. 189 in Wellesley College Center for Research on Women Working Paper Series, 1988.

³⁴ I borrow the expression "empathetic identification" from Diana Meyers (1994). Robin West makes a similar point in her 1993 book.

35. AD queries here: "Where to put? Seyla Benhabib (1999) defends a modified version of Kantian autonomy that emphasizes the ability to adopt the standpoint of the other."

³⁶I take her to be suggesting a literalness that disregards the metaphorical dimensions of language and experience and the fluidity between literal language and dimensions that have their genesis in touch, color, smells, and sights (without which there would be no poetry). Psychotic people, for instance, often distort the boundaries between these dimensions in curious ways, say, by reifying metaphorical expressions like "he's yellow," and detaching the emotion of fear from feared people, reattaching it to yellow objects!

out that "understanding comes through our capacity to empty out the self and identify with that person we normally make the Other" (1994, 219).

This feat is in some ways far easier when the other's world is contemporaneous with our own. In the contemporary world, values are likely to be shared across cultural barriers of race and class difference, particularly within countries where mass media circulate freely and people enjoy considerable geographical mobility. Anita Allen offers a revealing example. Reacting against moral condemnation of childbearing HIV-infected women, she points out the many commonalities joining these women's moral values to the broader culture that transcend historical differences among racial and ethnic communities. Widely shared values such as maternalism, theistic religious belief, and family-centrism, she argues, explain and morally justify childbearing by HIV infected women who chose to do it. Those who counsel these women and inform them of the risks and benefits of alternative courses of action, she insists, "enjoy no platform of moral privilege." She cautions that "they must be prepared to reason with infected women against a background of complex norms that pit ideals and definitions of harm avoidance against ideals and definitions of responsible motherhood."³⁷ Her approach suggests a strategy for acknowledging differences in the experiences of groups that share overlapping moral values--in this case infected women and counselors--without submitting to the temptation to respond judgmentally and organize these differences into hierarchies such as those I referred to at the beginning of this chapter where I discussed the tendency to partition women into self-constituting and socially constituted subjects. It is critical to construe Allen's appeal to maternalist values as a *description* of values we can all understand rather than an *endorsement* of them.

But wariness is warranted lest we minimize the divide between Western women and those who do not share a common overarching culture. They need both our support and forbearance to define their needs in ways that reflect their distinctive beliefs and sustain their own interests, so they can effect change in a way that does not alienate them from their own culture. Nikki Jones writes about her experience in Nigeria as a Western feminist working for a Western donor organization. She emphasizes the need to work with local women supporting their own agenda for social change. It is possible, she insists, to lend support both to groups directly opposed to female genital surgery (FGS) and others who adopt a more indirect strategy that emphasizes the need for alternative rites of passage to initiate young girls into womanhood.³⁸

This takes me to my concluding point. I discussed earlier the unyielding character of the divide that separates maternalist from non-maternalist perspectives. Within the feminist vision advanced by the radical feminist group whose views I consider here, even lesbians who opt for motherhood are (at least within established social structures) viewed as betrayers of the feminist agenda. According to Janice Raymond, they exert "a reconseratizing influence on feminist politics."³⁹ Gena Corea speaks of the context of her own upbringing as "the cruel institution of motherhood" (1985, x). The message is clear:

³⁷From "Moral Multiculturalism, Childbearing, and AIDS" by Anita Allen in *HIV, AIDS and Childbearing*, Ruth Faden, ed., Oxford University Press, 1996, 367-407. The cited passage appears on p. 401.

³⁸Nikki Jones, "Culture and Reproductive Health: Challenges for Feminist Philanthropy" in Donchin and Purdy 1998.

³⁹ "The Spermatic Market." Reproductive and Genetic Engineering, 1988, I, 1, 73.

women should not have babies.⁴⁰ Not only are these anti-maternalist feminists reinforcing a dichotomy between self-constituting and socially constituted subjects, but they are also claiming a privileged judgmental position that is indifferent to understanding the others' point of view. Thereby others are effectively excluded from the community of those with the authority to make their own choices and set their own goals. The traditional individualistic model of personal autonomy that informs this anti-maternalist vision obscures their vision of the web of interlocking relationships in which we are all constituted.⁴¹

Needed is an alternative vision which includes relational model of autonomous subjects.... that supports a vision of women speaking and acting together in a manner that fully respects multiple differences. Were such a model the norm, hierarchies would be exposed as obstacles to understanding and recognition of equality amid difference. Then we might be able to recognize limitations in our authority to speak for women as a group. In that case, recognition of our different material conditions, social locations, and life experiences would not banish us to silence but call us to speak forth--sometimes in concert, other times in conflict--most often, holding elements of both concert and conflict together--in creative tension.

⁴⁰ I am indebted to Ruth Schwartz Cowan for these passages which she cites in "The Doctor and the Feminists: Multiple Perspectives on Prenatal Diagnosis" (unpublished paper). Raymond's stance here evokes the ghost of Shulamith Firestone--note her remarks on children's oppression in 1971, 117. See also Jeffner Allen's spirited defense of this thesis in her 1984 article "Motherhood: The annihilation of women" in *Trebilcot*.

41. AD comments: "Include Zadie Smith piece on Obama from NY Review 2/26/09 here and also Mackenzie and Scully 2007."