Rethinking Obligation
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Afterword: Democracy, 
Difference, and Deconstruction

A theory of feminist obligation requires us to attend to the political context for obligations, and that context requires participation, communication, and interpersonal relationship as the model for political community. I admit that this "conclusion" may seem somewhat inconclusive to many readers, not all of them traditional or mainstream. Describing the context for obligation may be interesting and useful, but it is still not the same as developing a theory of obligation such as consent theory. If obligation is given, what are those obligations to? What are my exact political obligations in any given situation? In any given relationship? In any given society? The short answer is that citizens are obligated to connections and relationship with their fellow citizens. Their obligation is one of participation, involvement, the conversation itself. But if that is the case, then feminism would seem to get us no further than consent theory, because it seems to beg rather than answer the questions of obligation and leaves wide open the idea of content. There is no formula for describing what any given community, regardless of its context, can require of its members when it engages obligation.

Individualism and consent theory have the advantage of being clear-cut; by focusing on procedure, liberal democratic theorists can point precisely to what one is obligated to do in a particular case and to how one became obligated. A possible problem with feminist theory is that it often seems unable to reach the kind of crisp, incisive conclusions that liberal theory does seem to achieve and which have set the standards for philosophy and political theory. In one sense, of course, this problem is a false construction of patriarchal epistemol-
ogy and a sexist academy. In other words, it can be argued that the valuation of incisiveness and the control it affords are part of the same pathology that produces the masculinism of liberalism. As Flax suggests, "Perhaps 'reality' can have 'a' structure only from the falsely universalizing perspective of the master. That is, only to the extent that one person or group can dominate the whole, will 'reality' appear to be governed by one set of rules or be constituted by one privileged set of social relations." Within such an epistemological structure the goals and conclusions of feminist theory become misunderstood not only by "malestream" theorists but also by feminists themselves trained in the disciplinary standards and expectations of their professions: "The complexity of our questions and the variety of the approaches to them are taken as signs of weakness or failure to meet the structures of preexisting theories rather than as symptoms of the permeability and pervasiveness of gender relations and the need for new sorts of theorizing." 2

But in another sense the problem is genuine and stems from the current state of feminist theory. Apparent inconclusiveness may be an unfortunate price that feminists must pay for attempting to argue for a new theory within the epistemological and conceptual framework of the old. Feminist theory often finds itself at the stage of laying groundwork; being beholden to their predecessors, feminists may feel intellectually uncomfortable about assuming a vision of people so vastly different from the dominant view. More significant, however, that dominant view exerts limits on the kinds of alternatives that can be conceived. Feminists work, after all, in a tradition with a language and must work within that language if they are to be understood. In this light, feminist theory, as much as women's experience, is in part shaped and defined by the dominant masculinist discourse. That may seem to slow down the process. Yet this method of analysis within existing frameworks seems an important tactic for feminist theory, even if it means that the theory appears to fail to measure up to standards established by the discourses it seeks to deconstruct.

This last term will lead many readers to question whether an exploration of postmodernism can help explain the apparent inconclusiveness that may seem to some to mar the previous chapter. As Harding argues, feminist theory is and should be opposed to complete and completed universal theories of explanation: "Feminist analytical categories should be unstable at this moment in history. We need to learn how to see our goal for the present moment as a kind of illuminating

2Flax (1990), p. 179.
'riffing' between and over the beats of the various patriarchal theories and our own transformations of them." She points out that "coherent theories in an obviously incoherent world are either silly and uninteresting or oppressive and problematic, depending upon the degree of hegemony they manage to achieve. Coherent theories in an apparently coherent world are even more dangerous, for the world is always more complex than such unfortunately hegemonic theories can grasp."4

It is in this embrace of complexity that feminist postmodernism has so much to offer. The attention to particularity and difference required by my earlier account of participatory democracy certainly requires that attention be paid to the body of theory most notably concerned with différence,5 namely postmodern theory. Such consideration is important for a more immediate reason as well: the postmodernist challenge, which asserts the dangers of positive (that unfortunate word) theory building, challenges the very legitimacy of the foregoing chapter, specifically the attempt to articulate a new, feminist concept of obligation to replace—or at least displace—the old patriarchal one. My repeated disclaimers throughout the book that I am not creating a new essentialism, that I do not seek a new hegemony to replace the old, that the story I create does not constitute a new totalizing fiction, the qualifications continually introduced into the theory about truth and centers and values, the conditions that are carefully crafted around this feminist theory to make it concrete and particular all fall on cynical postmodern ears as the rejoinder is formed: What you say belies what you do, and what you do is racist, classist, and as a result even sexist.

Elizabeth Spelman, for instance, would most likely maintain that my entire argument is illegitimate on these grounds. In talking about women, she holds, feminist scholars make race and class invisible by not explicitly recognizing and attending to it, and they pervert gender as a result. "Unless I know something more about two women than the fact that they are women, I can't say anything about what they might have in common."6 Feminists have argued that rape (or the fear thereof), menstruation, pregnancy, abortion as a personal issue (that is, one that potentially affects one's person directly in ways that male persons and bodies are not affected) are all things that any two women may have in common without our knowing anything else about them. Yet, Spelman might reply, either or both of them may be

3Harding (1986), p. 244.
4Ibid., p. 164.
5The term is from Derrida (1982), esp. pp. 1–27.
unable to conceive—one may lack ovaries and thus not menstruate, one may have been born without a vagina—and these are particularities that would make the two women different from each other. Or if one is poor and Chicanas, the other white and wealthy, certain matters such as abortion have very different meanings for the two because of likelihood, availability, necessity, and so forth.

Even the claim that the kind of positive feminist theory building that I attempt in Chapter 6 is necessary to transform political obligation theory—that it is a means to a larger end of gender equality and the transformation of patriarchy which all feminists, postmodern or not, share—falls short for many feminist postmodernists, who respond that their method of deconstruction and analysis already does in fact transform theory, that by decentering the subject of liberalism, by deconstructing its categories of analysis and conceptual vocabulary, it exerts a profound impact not only on actual bodies of theory but also on the way theory is thought about and written.

This last point is compelling. One intention of the present project has been precisely to deconstruct liberalism, to analyze the ways in which patriarchy pervades, informs, and creates liberalism's epistemological foundations, to reveal consent theory's structural sexism. It is my intellectual indebtedness to this enterprise, and to methods that may be seen by some as sympathetic to postmodernism, that leads to the present chapter, for I believe that postmodernism has much to offer feminist theorists. Postmodernism's attention to complexity, its rejection of "one true story" and its recognition of the ways in which exclusion, power, and knowledge interact are important strategies for feminists engaged in the effort to identify and empower their devalued and marginalized differences. Postmodernists' recognition of the dangers of reductively coherent theories that communicate one truth and their complementary sanctioning of a new method of theorizing that is partial, suggestive, and perhaps even tentative in its representation of complexity and particularity provide a model for feminist theory, and it is a method that has been adopted in at least the previous chapter, if it is not evident in other sections of the book.

Indeed, the importance of a postmodern understanding of political life to feminist theory is in a sense precisely the point of the previous chapter. If we are to take seriously the role of context, of concrete relationships and material conditions, if we are to recognize subjectivity and the ongoing particularity of individuals in community, then we can have no formula for obligation. It is here that the postmodern approach can provide a vital theoretical framework for a feminist politics, for it allows—even requires—that there can be no predetermined
or even predeterminable answer to the question, What am I obligated to do? In spite of the givenness of obligation, its mode of determination must be pragmatic, “ad hoc, contextual, and local.”

But then is it legitimate still to call this a theory? Is this really political theory anymore, which concerns itself with foundations and structures of states and of the ideals that states embody, or with principles, ideas, and values that guide and shape what we consider to be political? Or is this simply critical analysis, a contribution to the nihilistic tendencies of postmodernism to tear down and criticize without offering anything better? We are brought face to face with the dilemma that confronts the debate between modernism and postmodernism: What is theory? What is its role, its structure, form, and content? Or, even more provocatively (and perhaps disturbingly), as Glen Tinder asks, “What should political theory be now?”

I believe that any answer to that question today will have to include some reference to both feminism and postmodernism; but the precise character of their relationship to each other is a subject for debate that has potentially wide-ranging implications for contemporary political theory. I believe that a growing number of feminist theorists agree with me that postmodernism has a great deal to offer feminists. And almost all also agree that there are some serious problems with the relationship between the two. Thus the debate is not really between feminism and postmodernism as I see it, for such a formulation is itself totalizing, assuming from the start that the two approaches are opposed and contradictory as well as assuming a unity and totality within each school. Rather, the debate is between feminist postmoderns and postmodern feminists. It is my position that there can be a postmodern feminism; that is, in order to realize its goals of deconstructing patriarchy and bringing women’s excluded voices into being heard, feminist theory can and in fact must borrow from certain strategies, insights, and methods that postmodern theories have made accessible and available. But by the same token there cannot be

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9 Any number of anthologies support this claim. See Nicholson (1990), Bordo and Jaggar (1989), Diamond and Quinby (1988), Benhabib and Cornell (1987), Rhode (1990). See also Alcoff (1988), Flax (1990). Even those who claim to be opposed to postmodernism, or at least resolve the dilemma in favor of feminism, obviously draw from postmodern insights: see esp. de Lauretis (1989), Fuss (1989), Schor (1989), Hawksworth (1989), Balbus (1987). Nancy Hartsock is probably among the most strongly opposed, saying that “postmodernism represents a dangerous approach for any marginalized group to adopt.” Hartsock (1990), p. 16. Hartsock, however, would not disagree with the interpretation I give to her original feminist standpoint formulation; I have argued that I see that not as a postmodern idea per se but as one that definitely borrows from postmodern insights. Similarly, strong feminist postmoderns such as Susan Hekman (1990) recognize the sexism of Gadamer, Derrida, and others.
Afterword

a feminist postmodernism. The tenets of postmodern theory make the concept of woman, and hence feminism, impossible. Certainly there are significant differences among postmodern theories; for instance, the postmodernism of Jean Baudrillard offers helpful criticisms of a Foucauldian post-structuralism. But I use the term postmodernism in such a way as to link all kinds of postmodernism with post-structuralism because I believe that the perils of post-structuralism in a sense take over all postmodern projects, making a feminist postmodernism impossible. The order of the terms is not a quibble but is very important to this point, for the noun’s relation to its modifier indicates the relative priority and, more important, the limits of the terms. With feminism as the substantive and postmodern as the modifier, the strategies of the latter shape and influence the former but can never come to redefine it out of its own parameters. Thus a postmodern feminism will always have something to do with revaluing women, even when that term does not have an essential, natural, unified, or timeless meaning.

The crucial issue between postmodern feminism and feminist postmodernism focuses on different methodological approaches to the question of how to create new theories that recognize difference, particularity, and individuality in genuine ways that neither totalize nor slip over into relativist oblivion. Thus the debate is not between two opposed entities but between—or among—those who slide toward (but not necessarily all the way to) different orientations on a continuum. This image may still appear to utilize a dualistic typology, in that every continuum has two opposed extremes, but that may justly be due to the caricatured forms in which feminism and postmodernism have been articulated and constructed and which form the cultural-intellectual context for understanding and defining them. It is to be hoped that reconceptualizing the debate in this new way will lead to a further reformulation of both feminism and postmodernism as existing in a web—a web that comprises many co-identities and strong similarities as well as very weak or distant connections and distinct differences.

Notes toward a Postmodern Feminism

Postmodern theory certainly demonstrates considerable resonance with the political model I have described. A claim that context, concreteness, and particularity are crucial to a feminist understanding of politics locates feminism in postmodern methods. Although postmodern theories demonstrate many variances, all the different strains
of postmodern theory are "deconstructive; they seek to distance us from and make us skeptical about the ideas concerning truth, knowledge, power, history, self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimations for contemporary Western culture."10 This is obviously important to a variety of feminist enterprises dedicated to displaying the ways in which mainstream political theory is really "malestream." The chief effects of such deconstruction for the present work include the decentering of the liberal subject, the revelation that the universal "man" of liberal theory is a historically located subject with a particular race and class as well as gender. Postmodernism can help reveal that what has been claimed to be universal, timeless, and true is actually particular and temporal, if not downright false. It helps uncover the ways in which the timeless and universal images of modern political theory, particularly the social contract and political obligation, in fact describe particular people of a particular race, gender, class, historical period, and culture. Indeed, it seeks to "replace the search for and enunciation of truth . . . with the art of conversation or persuasive speech,"11 a redirection of theory and politics similar to what I have already suggested.

Along these lines, the recognition of gender as a social construction is another element common to postmodern theories which a feminist methodology finds valuable. The problem of attributing certain "natural" qualities to women—whether unrestrainable animal sexuality or modesty and shame, helpless weakness or maternal omnipotence, hopeless emotional irrationality or manipulative cunning, whether being guardians of virtue or the devil’s temptress—is something for which feminists criticize modern political theory. The argument that gender is socially constructed—whether through socialization and role learning, through the psychosexual effects of a socially created institution of mother-only child rearing, or through attitudes toward and treatment of pregnancy and sexuality—is a powerful feminist tool for establishing and understanding the ways in which women’s identities have been made for them by men. But postmodern theory goes beyond this sociological notion of construction to a more deeply theoretical level concerning the ways in which language determines knowledge and creates power to the extent that it is virtually impossible to see all the ways we are constructed. As Linda Alcoff describes it, "We are constructs—that is, our experience of our very subjectivity is a construct mediated by and/or grounded on a social discourse beyond (way beyond) individual control. As Foucault puts it, we are

10Flax (1990), p. 29.
11Ibid., p. 32.
bodies 'totally imprinted by history.'” Postmodernism thus uncovers the ways in which women's experiences and identities—including the standpoints of connection, context, and care—are shaped and defined not just by patriarchal practices and institutions but by patriarchal discourses as well.

Like the standpoint epistemology utilized in earlier chapters, postmodernism is also concerned with the problem of duality; it seeks to reveal how the world is structured in terms of opposed pairs (or "binary oppositions," to borrow from Derrida) and to recognize how these dualities are not only artificial but perverting. They create realities that discipline people into certain identities which are not only not of their own making but are oppressive as well. Thus Susan Hekman writes: "The strongest argument for a postmodern feminism is still that, unlike any other contemporary philosophical position, postmodernism attacks and seeks to overturn the polarities of western thought that have resulted in the inferior status of women. The postmodern position offers the only truly radical critique of that dichotomy. Instead of attempting to reverse it . . . the postmoderns attempt to transcend it."13

I believe Hekman is in fact a feminist postmodern rather than a postmodern feminist, because she is dedicated to the goals and not just the methods of postmodernist enterprises. Her embrace of Derrida in particular supports my belief, although Derrida himself offers methodological insights that are vital to a postmodern feminism. As Hekman argues, Derrida "supplies a reconceptualization of epistemology that is uniquely suited to the demands of contemporary feminism.”14 Most obviously, he provides the method of deconstruction, the negative approach utilized throughout this book. Particularly important is his attention to the deconstruction of the binary oppositions male-female, subject-object, self-other, in which the former is not only opposed but superior to the latter. Parallel to my own argument in Chapter 5, Derrida challenges not merely dominant epistemologies themselves but western conceptualizations of what can count as epistemology. For instance, my earlier argument that epistemology and ontology are linked in important ways can be seen as somewhat Derridean. Indeed, that discussion, in which I argued that epistemology and ontology may be viewed as neither opposed nor coextensive but as overlapping and occupying shared space, invokes Derrida's notion of "the in-between," which Mary Poovey points out comes from Derrida's concern with the deconstruction of binary op-

14Ibid., p. 4. See also Hekman (1990), chaps. 1 and 2.
positions. She argues that the notion of "the in-between" suggests that it is the opposition itself, and not merely the things that are opposed, that are social constructions.\textsuperscript{15} But I read this as further suggesting that the space between subject and object, self and other, male and female—between all the signifiers of paired oppositions—constitutes a separate meaning; and that meaning adheres not just to the words themselves but to the relationships the terms have to one another. Although this notion certainly coheres with the idea that the opposition of, say, male and female is itself a social construction, such a conception of meaning also challenges the ways in which we have previously looked for—and found—meaning, and thus radically alters not just how we think of what is represented by the term woman or man but how we think about our thinking about those terms.

Derrida’s approach to theory creates a “politics of resistance”\textsuperscript{16} that is useful to feminism. He has in mind particularly resistance to the totalizing fiction of a single, unified, and unitary truth that explains all peoples and cultures. As he writes in Spurs, “There is no such thing as a truth in itself. But only a surfeit of it. Even if it should be for me, about me, truth is plural.”\textsuperscript{17} “Hence the heterogeneity of the text.”\textsuperscript{18} The absence of unified truth means that texts, such as political theories, have multiple meanings; they contain complex layerings of representation, and narrate multiple and multifaceted stories. But Derrida also seeks to resist a Hegelian dialectical approach wherein the opposed pairs create a synthesis through what he calls “undecidables, that is, unities of simulacrum, ‘false’ verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics.”\textsuperscript{19}

Derrida’s resistance to the restrictive categorization of gender follows from this directly. In challenging the “will to truth,” Derrida is particularly concerned with issues of “the female.” Derrida introduces the notion of différence (spelled with an a) to indicate how in binary oppositions the two members of the pair, such as male-female, involve not just “difference” but also “deference,” that the dualism involves a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority, power and subjugation. “Neither simply active nor simply passive,” différence attempts to

\textsuperscript{15}Poovey (1988), p. 58.
\textsuperscript{17}Derrida (1978), p. 103.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 95.
\textsuperscript{19}Derrida (1972), p. 43.
communicate the ways in which such differences between nature and culture, subject and object, and particularly men and women are social constructions which we daily perpetuate and participate in and yet have little control over. In viewing women's historical social construction as "ambiguous" in western "logocentric" epistemologies and ontologies, Derrida highlights the ways in which "phallocentric" culture projects certain aspects of all humans, male and female, onto women alone. By then deconstructing "woman," we learn not only what men and women are not but what we are as well. So for instance, in the quoted passage from Positions in which Derrida rejects dialectics, he discusses by way of illustration what Gayatri Spivak calls his "hymeneal fable": "The hymen is neither confusion nor distinction, neither identity nor difference, neither consummation nor virginity, neither the veil nor the unveiling, neither the inside nor the outside." Linking problems of "representing the female" to truth, Derrida maintains: "There is no such thing as the truth of woman, but it is because of that abyssal divergence of the truth, because that un-truth is 'truth.' Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth."

Immediately it sounds as if Derrida echoes Freud in his equation of women with ambiguity. Women are so vague, so ambiguous, that men find it impossible to figure them out. Women are dehumanized through the idealization and abstraction of desire and experience. But Hekman, Poovey, and others maintain that Derrida adopts metaphors of the feminine not to perpetuate the dehumanized, ethereal, and idealized conceptions of women that have pervaded philosophy and political theory, but to highlight the ways in which what we have come to accept as reality or as natural is in fact not only artificial but the product of power. I find this argument persuasive.

Derrida goes on to explain: "The credulous and dogmatic philosopher who believes in the truth that is woman, who believes in truth just as he believes in woman, this philosopher has understood nothing. . . . Because, indeed, if woman is truth, she at least knows that there is no truth." Ironically, this passage invokes notions utilized by a feminist standpoint approach. Hartsock argues that women, by virtue of their oppressed status, are in a "superior" position to men because they have available to them not only their own vision as oppressed but also—because they are forced to engage in it—the vision of reality that the dominant ideology creates and promotes. For Derrida it would seem that because women are the victims, so to speak,

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23 Ibid., p. 53.
of being forced to represent and embody a falsely universalizing set of characteristics or principles which have been labeled true—victims of "essentializing fetishes"—they are in a superior position to understand that such truth does not exist, that what they are told they represent is not the reality that they live: "It rather is the 'man' who has decided to believe that his discourse on woman or truth might possibly be of any concern to her."  

Indeed, according to Hekman's reading, Derrida in fact embraces a strategy that sounds quite similar to one proposed by Harding, which I discussed in Chapter 4, that feminists should confront the "metaphysical presuppositions" of patriarchal political thought in a two-stage process: first to reverse them, to elevate previously neglected and denigrated aspects of women's lived experiences while pointing out the weaknesses and pathologies of the "male model"; and then second to explode them, so that we no longer have duality at all but multiplicity. As Derrida says in Positions:

In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with a peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition. Therefore one might proceed too quickly to a neutralization that in practice would leave the previous field untouched, leaving no hold on the previous opposition, thereby preventing any means of intervening in the field effectively. We know what always have been the practical (particularly political) effects of immediately jumping beyond oppositions, and of protests in the simple form of neither this nor that.  

This passage resonates considerably with my reading and use of a feminist standpoint approach. The goal of feminist obligation as I have developed it is not to replace a male-model rights orientation, or consent, with a female, care-centered notion of obligation simpliciter. Rather, it seeks to move beyond such oppositions. Where it perhaps falls short of Derrida's prescription is that my approach may in fact seek third terms from the socially constructed yet dialectical opposition of male and female, rights and care, freedom and obligation. It is true that I seek not a single third term but rather several; yet I believe that Derrida and postmodernism in general would reject this enter-

>24Ibid., p. 55.
>25Ibid., p. 63.
prise. (I discuss these disagreements with postmodernism in the following section.)

The rejection of overdetermined dualities as definitive of reality is a core concept for Foucault as well, who offers feminism valuable insights on the intersection of knowledge, discourse, and power, the social construction of sex as part of the construction of gender, the importance of recognizing and not repressing "difference," and the necessity to deal in "local" rather than "global" knowledge. In all this, "Foucault opens space for feminist questions that have been obscured" by Enlightenment liberalism and other mainstream discourses.27 Indeed, the notion of discourse, a term used broadly in feminist political theory and throughout this book, comes from Foucault’s concept of how "the production of truth" stems from the "manifold relations of power which . . . constitute the social body. . . . We cannot exercise power except through the production of truth."28 Power in this sense is not conceived of as one person or institution acting on another, unidirectionally—this Foucault calls "violence"—but rather is much more pervasive, diffuse, all-encompassing. It is not just the physical power of a master over a slave (although that is part of it) but the way in which the master creates reality for the slave, provides her not only with an identity but with language—discourses—that limits the terms the slave can use to define herself, limits which ensure that such definition will not only fall within the parameters of the discourse and hence the relationship of power but will advance and enlarge them. The relationship of power and knowledge is thus a totalizing one, for it creates reality itself (indeed, modern discourse has allowed or required me to conceptualize reality as an itself, a tangible and hence perhaps definable thing).

Although Foucault’s emphasis on the social construction of truths and the rejection of the idea of one final truth has opened him to criticism for extreme relativism—a charge I pursue in the next section29—Foucault dissociates himself from such a view. He holds that the "struggle" of the critical theorist—the archaeologist of knowledge, the genealogist—is not "a skeptical or relativistic refusal of all verified truth. What is questioned is the way in which knowledge circulates and functions, its relations to power. In short, the régime du savoir."

Foucault is interested not in examining which truth claims are "in fact false" but rather in understanding how and why certain beliefs get to

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be considered “truth” in the first place; what social relations and structures have existed in history and exist today that create conditions susceptible to particular constructions of human beings as individuals.

In this, Foucault’s most important insight for feminism is the methodological reforms, or perhaps revolution, he urges on theory. His approach engages in both archaeology—which is an analysis of “subjugated knowledge,” knowledge that is subverted and perverted by the claims and expressions of the dominant discourse(s)—and genealogy, which involves using the (formerly) subjugated knowledge to know in new ways. Archaeology is thus akin to what I have called the negative dimensions of feminist critique, whereas genealogy is like the positive. But its particular aptness for feminism is that it engages us in a different kind of positive theory building altogether, one that avoids (insofar as possible) the trap I have identified of trying to construct new theories within the framework of old and structurally biased epistemologies. In fact, Foucault’s method is not to build or construct per se but rather to facilitate the unfolding of new understandings. It is not theory as we normally understand the term so much as an “ongoing conceptualization . . . [which] implies critical thought—a constant checking.”31 Indeed, Foucault claims to create “neither a theory nor a methodology” but rather “a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects.”32 The focus on specificity—cultural, historical, geographical—is central to Foucault’s approach. Viewed as “a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges,” genealogy is “based on a reactivation of local knowledge.”33 So, for instance, a marxist interpretation of madness would provide a universalized concept of man’s dehumanization through the alienating labor relations of capitalism and a set of relations that subverts all to production and hence must deactivate nonproductive people. But Foucault says such broad theories dehumanize and disempower those who are mad. What is needed to understand madness is to examine the family, the local and particular institutions, relations, and how “mechanisms of power . . . become economically advantageous and socially useful.”34 But more than this, the contemporary institutions and conditions that create power must also be understood historically: “We need a historical awareness of our present circumstances.”35

31Ibid., p. 209.
32Ibid., p. 208.
34Ibid., p. 101.
Foucault seeks to alter radically the ways we think about, analyze, and create theory. His goal is to have us rethink the questions that we ask rather than the answers we come up with to the old questions. In his critique of the social science approach to the study of social and political institutions and practices, he asks, "What types of knowledge do you want to disqualify in the very instant of your demand: 'Is it a science?'" If we substitute the question, Is it gender and race neutral? we see that feminism is of course ostensibly not neutral. But we can also see (and indeed have seen in the preceding chapters) that the very method of disqualifying certain knowledges that "fail" the test of gender neutrality will then systematically obscure the fact that science, or liberal theory, or the other dominant discourses of the existing disciplines are not themselves gender or race neutral at all but reflect particular biases. Foucault does not critique existing discourses for their failure to realize the goal of neutrality or objectivity; he criticizes the goal itself, saying that the point is simply to recognize the ways in which theories are informed by their particularities, and to be aware of what effects follow.

The attention Foucault pays to sex has located him prominently in feminist critical theory; and applying his methodological insights to issues of sex and the body yield important loci for questions of gender. As Biddy Martin notes, for Foucault "the body does not give knowledge that is then merely transmitted by an essentially neutral language . . . discourse makes the body an object of knowledge and invests it with power. Our task, then, is not to search for the truth about sex, but to ask what is at stake in the historical question." This question of what is at stake parallels Foucault's comments about science in the passage just quoted. Earlier I argued that the turn to objectivity, central to the scientific turn in social and political analysis, is a historical phenomenon that is specifically gendered. Thus there is no surprise if Foucault's remarks about science reverberate directly with the feminist analysis engaged in this book.

The implications for politics and political theory are manifold, as the observations Foucault makes about the body cohere with those he makes about political structures. As Flax notes, Foucault offers us the insight that "the modern state . . . depends on the creation and widespread acceptance of a fictive but persuasive account of 'human nature' and on the emergence of a group of 'experts' whose story about [the relation between human nature and political order] . . . will be considered authoritative and final," an insight certainly pursued in

\[38\] Flax (1990), p. 40.
the foregoing chapters. Thus Foucault locates the concept of right, which allegedly underlies western legal and moral systems—the legitimacy of which is supposedly based in contemporary theory on its democratic nature—in the history of royal power; it derives from disciplinary systems (that is, law) that were erected for the "profit" of royal power and "to serve as its instrument or justification." 39 "When it comes to the general organization of the legal system in the West, it is essentially with the King, his rights, his power and its eventual limitations that one is dealing. . . . The essential role of the theory of right, from medieval times onward, was to fix the legitimacy of power." 40 This observation is certainly not at odds with Hobbes, at the least, and is also consistent with the reading of Locke offered in Chapter 1. As I have argued about consent, such an elitist, or structurally biased—in terms of class and gender obviously (though Foucault talks only of kings, not queens) but possibly race as well—foundation for rights calls into question not only the legitimacy of using rights as a basis for inclusive, participatory democratic vision of politics but its very possibility as well. Indeed, democracy itself is a potentially problematic idea if we pursue Foucault's suspicions. This analysis fits well with my earlier claims that rights are power claims, that a rights-based conceptual framework for obligation and freedom involve not autonomy in some abstract sense of freedom from external impediments but power as domination. Obligation, as defined by and within the social contract, is itself a relationship of power, a conclusion that challenges the very foundations of consent in the "natural freedom and equality" of all "men."

Yet Foucault's primary concern is not with power per se but rather with the subject. Power is considered an essential means to understanding the subject in the modern era. There are four notions of subject that Foucault at least tacitly incorporates into his various writings. The first is the sense in which I have used the term throughout this book: the subject as a self, as an entity with desires, needs, ideas, and expressions. The second involves the idea of subjects as citizens, political obedientes who are the "loyal subjects" of a monarch or government. The third is a related notion of social subjection, which involves the power of the "normal" over "deviants," particularly sexual deviants (including sexual "perverts" and prostitutes). The fourth sense lies in the modern notion of the object of study: the subjects in a psychology or medical experiment, the focus of analysis or discussion in a philosophical work (the subject of my book is political obli-

40 Ibid., p. 95.
Afterword

Although the third sense could perhaps most comfortably encompass the patriarchal subjection of women to men, I believe that all four meanings are not only intertwined for Foucault but interdependent in their meanings. In “The Subject and Power” Foucault does not make this argument explicitly; indeed, he holds that “there are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge.” The subject of a sovereign and of study would be encompassed by the former, the subject as self constitutes the latter. Foucault also says that “both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.”41 Thus the ways in which I am a subject of my queen informs my subjectivity, my self-identity; and the ways in which social scientists and philosophers analyze and interpret my self-definition and my relation to my ruler—treat me as the subject of their inquiry—in turn affects those relations themselves as well as my self.

This notion of how the different senses of subject intersect reveals the interconnections of knowledge, power, and identity. The modern state—that is, “since the eighteenth century,” thus already involving considerable overlap with the sovereign power discussed earlier—embodies “a new form of pastoral power,” a power that “implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it.” The pastoral power of the modern state is a “totalizing” power structure which determines not only how we may live—what we may and may not do with impunity, the limits to freedom, the obligations of obedience—but also who and what we are. It is a “sophisticated structure” which creates the individual, who is “shaped in a new form, and submitted to a set of very specific patterns.” Thus the liberal state, for all its emphasis on the negative liberty of individualism, in fact requires one very specific meaning of individualism, one particular kind of individual, and one kind alone; so we have not “government of and for the people”—of and for individuals—but rather the “government of individualization,” a totalizing structure that constructs the “objectivizing of the subject.” Thus the pastoral power of the modern state “is coextensive and continuous with life; it is linked with a production of truth—the truth of the individual himself.”42

For feminist political theorists interested in examining the questions of power and subjectivity Foucault raises, this means that rather than ask how philosophy is “able to fix limits to the rights of power,” we must ask instead, “what rules of right are implemented by the rela-

42Ibid., pp. 212–14.
tions of power in the production of discourses of truth?"\(^{43}\) Not only does his approach help theorists understand power in new ways—and hence affect the answers to the questions of power we have been asking all along—but it can help us redefine the questions themselves, to think of and about power in new and different ways, to see it located in contexts and situations where before it was invisible (at least to theorists), to reconceptualize the entire political theoretical enterprise. Thus philosophy, according to Foucault, must engage in modes of resistance and refusal. Its task is "not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are... to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of... the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries."\(^{44}\) It is precisely such resistance that lies at the heart of feminist politics, and precisely the quest for such new subjectivity that informs the feminist attempt to construct political theory from the feminine model of relational autonomy.

Consistent with my version of feminist standpoint theory, Foucault conceptualizes social relations, and particularly power, as a network or web: power "circulates"; it is "exercised through a net-like organization"; and individuals "are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation... the vehicles of power, not its points of application."\(^{45}\) I have emphasized only and also to illustrate the methodological intersection of standpoint epistemology with postmodernism. I have argued that the web imagery revealed by attention to women's and other marginalized voices describes many different (if not all) aspects of life, but the dominant discourses prevent us from seeing the interconnections and relationships among people, institutions, practices, and so forth. When we define the world in terms of a false model of linearity, power is hidden, obscured, and in the process made even more dangerous and oppressive. It is the refusal to recognize the web—a refusal achieved in part through the silencing of women—that has produced the problems of obligation, of liberalism, of "malestream" theory.

Yet, just as I have argued that feminist theory seeks not merely to embrace a care model, to act out women's experiences, but rather to theorize that experience critically in order to explore how care can shift the dynamics of understanding dominant discourses such as liberal obligation, so Foucault holds that seeing the webbed character of

\(^{43}\)Foucault (1980), p. 93.

\(^{44}\)Foucault (1982), p. 216.

\(^{45}\)Foucault (1980), p. 98; emphasis added.
power is not itself a solution, because the imposition of the “false” linear model of unidirectional power in turn structures the web. Its falseness creates its own “truth.” Like feminist standpoint epistemologists, Foucault does not advocate the simplistic idea that conceiving power as a web in itself means that power is “democratically distributed.” Power has a mode of exercise, and some people do more exercising than others. Furthermore, some are able consistently to exercise it over certain others. But this power is not only unidirectional: “The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle.” The slave has some power vis-à-vis the master, as does the worker vis-à-vis the capitalist and women vis-à-vis men. But although the masters, capitalists, and men have more opportunity and ability to exercise power over the slaves, workers, and women, and do so in far more obvious ways that define discourses that encode reality—indeed, that construct slaves, workers, and women—to ignore the power of the marginalized, to view them completely as victim, is not only to rob them of the essential Enlightenment feature of humanity—that is, agency—but also to misrepresent the dynamics of human relations between the (relatively) powerful and (relatively) powerless as static, unitary, and monolithic. It is their position on the margins of the web that creates the potential for their empowerment, just as standpoint epistemology holds that the oppressed are able to see less falsely than the oppressor.

Yet the comparison between marginality and oppression does not sit entirely comfortably, a point that may be made if we turn to another postmodern theorist. Ironically, in spite of his exhortations to “forget Foucault,” Jean Baudrillard provides a similar understanding of power. Reminding us of the “reversibility” of power, he creates a useful picture of power not as zero sum at all but rather, in an interesting variation on Hartsock’s argument, as constitutive of exchange. “Power seduces, but not in the vulgar sense of a complicit form of desire on the part of those who are dominated . . . [but] by that reversibility which haunts it, and upon which a minimal symbolic cycle is set up.” Viewing power in this way helps feminists become more aware of, and hence to be more critical of, the ways in which women’s apparent powerlessness and victimization are partly historical products of their own actions, and how their oppression and marginalization work together with their agency and power. Unfortunately, an example that borrows from modernist social mythology

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46 Ibid., pp. 98–99.
47 Baudrillard (1987), p. 44.
48 Ibid., pp. 43–44.
best illustrates this point: if a poor black man rapes a wealthy white woman, the duality of victim/victimizer is not clear or simple, nor should it be.\(^4\) The woman is not simply victim (of patriarchy, of misogyny), because the power structure within which she participates (as wealthy and white) contributes to the context that allows, causes, invites, and/or permits men to rape. But neither does she determine or control that context; as a woman, she is a victim of male domination. She thus participates in a power structure (of race and class) that seems to privilege her but also disempowers her as a woman. Nor is the poor black man merely victim (of racism, of classism, of poverty); the rape, while in part an act of patriarchal power, itself contributes to the context that disempowers the rapist as poor and black. It allows the rapist as male to participate structurally in his own (dis)empowering. So, even as we avoid blaming the victim, such a conception of power allows us to recognize the complex, multiple layers of power: power is not unitary or unidirectional. Such a conceptualization also allows feminists and others to be aware, and hence self-critical, of the ways in which women and other apparently disempowered groups participate in perpetuating their own apparent powerlessness by failing to see their location within networks of power.

Although Baudrillard’s version of postmodernism seems in some ways to back off from the extreme nihilistic possibilities of post-structuralism, his approach also requires the development of new methods of theory, methods that have applicability to feminism. Arguing that sexual discourse is invented through repression rather than repression being an effect of discourse, Baudrillard’s work sets forth a notion of theory very useful to feminism. “It is a good thing that terms lose their meaning at the limits of the text,” he writes. “This is what a theory should be at best, rather than a statement of some truth.”\(^5\) The role of marginalization with respect to truth—or to the ability to see false truth claims more fully—is one that feminism can draw on. Indeed, part (though not the totality) of standpoint logic suggests that feminists must be on the margins, or in the position of the oppressed, to be able to continue to see clearly the dynamics of relations between men and women, powerful and powerless. Postmodernism, by highlighting the liberation to be gained through marginalization, empowers women and other oppressed groups to excercise Kristeva’s nega-

\(^4\) Although rape most commonly occurs between men and women of the same race and class, it would be considerably more complex to illustrate my point through such examples, for they would ostensibly reduce questions of power to gender alone. The contrasting implications of the reverse scenario—say, a wealthy white man raping a poor woman of color—is presented in the next section.

tive function of critique, dissemination, and deconstruction. These activities cannot be adequately carried out from the center because then the critic or theorist is part of the very structure that she seeks to decompose; and her location within that structure will therefore prevent her from achieving her (erstwhile) goal.

Jean-François Lyotard goes even further than Baudrillard—and perhaps even Foucault and Derrida—in his emphasis on marginality and the reluctance to construct new theories which may produce new truths. Indeed, Lyotard posits the relationship between modernism and postmodernism as another Enlightenment duality between “two kinds of knowledge . . . the positivist kind . . . [and] the critical, reflexive, or hermeneutic kind.” He holds that much postmodern theory is merely reactive, and hence overly determined by the modernist methods and epistemology it seeks to critique. As a result, “this partition . . . attempts to resolve, but only reproduces” (p. 14) the duality of modernism. Thus theorists must continually work to operate from the margins, to resist the temptation to claim “a viewpoint that is in principle immune from [the] allure” of totality, answers, “truth” (p. 12).

Lyotard attempts to conduct new methods of theorizing that faithfully embody postmodern principles of resistance. Of particular note is his emphasis on the narrative as a mode of theory. As Fredric Jameson points out in his introduction, in Lyotard’s work the “narrative is affirmed, not merely as a significant new field of research, but well beyond that as a central instance of the human mind and a mode of thinking fully as legitimate as that of abstract logic” (p. xi). Lyotard goes so far as to say, “Lamenting the ‘loss of meaning’ in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative” (p. 26). It is not just the historical overemphasis on rationality but the focus on thinking and knowledge defined in very particular ways without any recognition of the fact that these ways are particular and not timeless or universal that is the danger of modernity. For humans become cut off from vital dimensions of their self-understanding; indeed, they come to understand themselves as selves without narration, without stories, and hence without histories. Lyotard thus seeks to restore narrative techniques to the status of legitimacy. Like the feminist literature drawn on in this book, narrative knowledge involves “speech acts . . . performed not only by the speaker, but also by the listener, as well as by the third party referred to” (p. 21). This communicative strategy seems to invoke feminist ideals of mutuality and intersubjectivity, wherein through the process of

51Lyotard (1979), p. 14. Subsequent references to this source will be cited in the text.
conversation others come to understand and develop themselves further as subjects. Lyotard argues that a community that practices narrative "finds the raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of the narratives it recounts, but also in the act of reciting them" (p. 22).

Like Foucault, Lyotard invokes images of a web or network of social relations; according to Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, for Lyotard "the social bond is a weave of crisscrossing threads of discursive practices, no single one of which runs continuously throughout the whole. Individuals are the nodes or posts where such practices intersect, and so they participate in many practices simultaneously. It follows that social identities are complex and heterogeneous."52 Indeed, it would be difficult to find another ready-made description of society any closer to the feminist political vision articulated in the previous chapter than that offered by Lyotard:

A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at "nodal points" of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent. (p. 15)

The approaches, methods, and ideas of Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard, and Lyotard are all helpful to the effort to give meaning to a feminist concept of obligation and to the notion of recognition through feminist conversation which lies at the heart of feminist participatory politics. I argued that one of the tasks of a feminist theory of obligation was to ask new questions; that the question, How does an obligation arise?—the central question of social contract theory—falls out of the picture, or at least to a secondary role, for this question is one of legitimation. Indeed, if all people are naturally free and equal, the central problem of modern political theory becomes precisely one of legitimation: Under what conditions can restrictions on my liberty be legitimate? The goal of consent theory is to answer that question, to develop a single unifying and universal principle that constitutes the legitimacy of limiting freedom through the expression of freedom. The legitimating metanarrative of the social contract creates a metadiscourse of human nature, natural rights, and the only possible political structure that can consistently represent those prem-

is es. And this justificatory representation is self-referential; that is, the dominant discourse’s credibility comes from its power. As Lyotard observes, “It has the means to become a reality, and that is all the proof it needs” (p. 12).

In contrast, as I argued in the previous chapter feminist obligation looks to the content of obligations and works out the problem of legitimacy—what obligations are to be met in what ways, what reasons for nonfulfillment are acceptable—through a mutualistic enterprise of communication and interaction. The idea that the process of conversation itself serves as legitimator hearkens to postmodern visions: “In the postmodern era legitimation becomes plural, local and immanent. In this era, there will necessarily be many discourses of legitimation dispersed among the plurality of first-order discursive practices. . . . Legitimation descends to the level of practice and becomes immanent in it.”53 An emphasis on practice, particularity, concreteness, and context is a central element that postmodernism and feminism share.

They also share the criticism of totality, homogeneity and unity. As Iris Young has pointed out, the idea of the civic public from ancient Greece through modern liberalism has given priority to concepts of unity as a precondition for political stability and hence political success. But this unity has always been a lie; it has relied on the “expulsion of persons from the civic public in order to maintain its unity.”54 So people of color, women, foreign nationals, laborers, the poor, the uneducated have all been excluded from political participation in the name of order and stability. The concept of a general will, even in its Lockean liberal formulation of a public good, “itself results in exclusion.”55 In particular, as I have argued throughout this book, women must be excluded from political participation, for their particularism, their irrationality (that is, their supposed inability to take a general point of view), and their sexuality threaten to “undermine public deliberation by fragmenting its unity.”56 “The distinction between public and private as it appears in modern political theory expresses a will for homogeneity that necessitates the exclusion of many persons and groups, particularly women and racialized groups culturally identified with the body, wildness and irrationality.”57 I have argued throughout that liberalism rests on a false unity that is derived from sexism as well as from classism and racism, that the exclusion of women, peo-

53Ibid., p. 23.
55Ibid., p. 66.
56Ibid.
57Ibid., p. 73.
ple of color, workers and the poor are necessary foundations for the success of its logic as a political model.

Thus a postmodern feminism is a powerful strategy for understanding the structural sexism of liberal theory. It can reveal that what appears by modernist standards as "fragmentation, lack of organization, absence of a coherent and encompassing theory, and the inability to mount a frontal attack may very well represent fundamentally more radical and effective responses to the deployment of power in our society than the centralization and abstraction" of "malestream" theory, including particularly liberal-democratic theories of political obligation. But postmodern feminism can also provide the tools for articulating a new vision of political life like the participatory democracy I have begun to outline. The replacement of discourse with conversation; the recognition of difference and multiplicity without a predetermined hierarchy of value; the ongoing awareness of the dangers of hegemony, totality, and unity and the complementary move toward being more self-critical, self-conscious, and self-reflexive in our theorizing; the recognition of the importance and power of marginality and the parallel requirement to listen to marginalized voices: all of these radically change the enterprise of theory itself, which I have argued feminism seeks to accomplish. Postmodern feminism can help feminist political theorists further develop their arguments on sexual difference and the need to attend to context and particularity; it can help articulate and bring about the theoretical turn to conversation I and others have advocated. Finally, postmodern feminism reveals (as Flax originally saw but later recanted)\(^\text{59}\) that feminist standpoint epistemology is itself a postmodern strategy, or at least a strategy that coheres with certain ideas crucial to postmodernism, suggesting even that object relations and gender psychology can, if used in ways that avoid reductive claims to universal truth, be effective tools of both deconstructive and reconstructive strategies.

\textit{The Impossibility of a Feminist Postmodernism}

These last claims will be the most problematic ones for postmodernists. Admittedly, these positive elements of postmodern feminism are


\(^{59}\)Flax (1986), p. 194. Flax says this not specifically about standpoint approaches, of which, as I have indicated, she is suspicious, but about feminist theory in general. Her description of what feminist theory is, however, prominently includes standpoint approaches, and particularly Hartsock's (see pp. 194–95, n. 1). This inconsistency is never acknowledged by Flax, who then goes on in \textit{Thinking Fragments} apparently to repudiate standpoint theory altogether, as well as to misrepresent it unfairly.
really extrapolations from postmodernism; they are not themselves postmodern principles per se. The rendition of postmodern theory offered here may, by some accounts, be a misrepresentation. In the act of using *postmodern* to modify *feminism*, the meaning of postmodernism itself is changed. For instance, I noted in Chapter 4 that although postmodern feminism considers itself intensely political, postmodernism itself may be postpolitical. Does this mean that postmodernist ideas cannot be taken beyond their authorial intent and applied to feminist political purposes? To be consistent with postmodernism, they must: deconstruction does not allow certain sets of meanings to be prima facie excluded or limited by an author’s supposed intent. In this, the strategy is very useful to my own project of deconstructing liberal obligation theory, rooting out the structural elements of gender bias that have founded politics on women’s exclusion, and attempting to salvage—and simultaneously redefine—certain dimensions of liberalism, such as agency and choice, that are important legacies of the historical turn away from divine right.

Yet obviously at the same time postmodernism cannot be used in this way. The project of empowering women that lies at the heart of feminist politics is antithetical to the entire post-structuralist enterprise. My account of postmodern insights has been pursued from the specific perspective of one who adopts a feminist standpoint epistemological approach. I read this theory “like a feminist” and look to the dimensions and elements of postmodern theory that can help feminist theory. But a strict postmodern theorist might argue that the four theorists I have just discussed would strongly object to my drawing connections between their theories and a feminist standpoint approach, arguing that the fact that I can draw such connections in and of itself suggests that I have misread their theories. Do these theories in fact make themselves inaccessible to feminist concerns? In the process of developing a postmodern feminism, a feminism that borrows from postmodern insights, is the “postmodern” part of the label distorted, turned into something else? And furthermore, can we reverse the order and have a feminist postmodernism, an approach that asks what feminism can contribute to the postmodern enterprise?

Lyotard is a particularly appropriate theorist of whom to ask these questions, because of all the postmodern theorists I have discussed, he seems the most willing to carry postmodern theory to its logical extreme. For even narratives, as Lyotard points out in *The Postmodern Condition*, have an inherent tendency toward power insofar as they “determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be
applied” (p. 23). Since we cannot “judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge” because “the relevant criteria are different” (p. 26), narratives “are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do” (p. 26). Thus Lyotard exposes a two-pronged dilemma. On the one hand, as in modernism, the concern of narratives with legitimacy is a question of power, and one that threatens to totalize: “It has the means to become a reality, and that is all the proof it needs” (p. 12). On the other hand, the theorist committed to postmodern principles cannot even compare narratives, or cultures, or language games, without drowning in a sea of relativism. As Charles Taylor argues (about Foucault, though the point applies to Lyotard and Derrida as well), “For all the connection, transitions are between incommensurables.”65 Hence Derrida holds that “dissemination,” which Flax describes as “a constant and open-ended disruption and displacement of a text’s authority through interventions that create an infinite stream of interpretations and meanings for it,”66 is the preferred task of theory, for it allows for the many contradictory readings that a text can give rise to and prevents any authoritative claim to the “correct” interpretation. Lyotard, perhaps going even further, concludes that “all we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species” (p. 26).

Lyotard himself may not like my claim that such a critic is “drowning.” He champions postmodernism’s dedication to marginality and uncertainty. But from a feminist perspective in particular, “gazing in wonderment” does little to address the very real, concrete political realities of women’s lives. As Flax notes, “It is questionable whether any of the spaces opened up by postmodernism would be comfortable to or inhabitable by those concerned with issues of gender and gender justice.”67 Indeed, she holds that “the absence or disappearance of concrete women and gender relations [from postmodern theory] suggests the possibility that postmodernism is not only or simply opposed to phallocentrism but may also be ‘its latest ruse.’”68 Indeed, from the perspective of object relations theory, where there is no self more threatening than a female self, Flax points out that postmodernism can be seen as another attempt “to evade, deny or repress the importance of early childhood experiences, especially mother-child relationships, in the constitution of the self and the culture more generally.”69

65Ibid., p. 232.
The problem with a feminist postmodernism is that postmodernism deconstructs itself because there is nothing for it to hold on to. In its efforts to decenter the subject, to recognize the ways in which no one—as woman, man, black, lesbian, white—creates his or her own identity but all are disciplined to be certain things and to live in certain ways, postmodernism, and post-structuralism in particular, “reject the possibility of defining women as such at all.” They also reject the possibility of feminist theory, which also makes feminist postmodernism such a problematic concept. As Lyotard’s theory most obviously demonstrates, postmodern approaches rule out “the sort of larger-scale, normative political theorizing” inherent in, say, a theory of participatory democracy such as the one articulated in the previous chapter. In “true” postmodern fashion, “there is no place in Lyotard’s universe . . . for critique of broad-based relations of dominance and subordination along lines like gender, race and class.”

The conversational participatory democracy outlined in the preceding chapter, then, in spite of the lengths to which I have gone to demonstrate how it depends on postmodern insights, might well be considered by Lyotard and other postmoderns as a leftover project of the Enlightenment.

Yet as Taylor and others observe, this strictly negative function of postmodernism—its deconstruction without a parallel reconstruction—threatens nihilism. Hekman, who offers some of the strongest resistance to this charge, admits that “the newness and radicalness of [Derrida’s] approach entails that exactly what this new way of talking . . . will be is as yet unclear. It also entails that the politics implicit in this approach are unspecified.” Feminist projects certainly are—and should be—largely sympathetic to the problems and challenges of constructing new political and social meanings to replace the old. For decades feminism has involved itself primarily in the deconstruction of patriarchy, of institutions that are sexist in their very structure, in the gender bias of our dominant epistemologies and ontologies. Yet, as the question with which I closed Chapter 5 indicates, we continually want to know what will come in place of what is torn down. This nature-abhors-a-(theoretical)-vacuum approach may well be a legacy

66 Fraser and Nicholson (1990), p. 23. In this it is significant—particularly given the debt that many postmodern feminist theorists writing on democracy owe to Habermas in their development of a feminist democratic politics (Love [1989], Fraser [1991], Young [1987, 1990])—that a large portion of The Postmodern Condition is dedicated to Lyotard’s rejection of Habermas’s communicative ethics as the foundation for a new kind of communitarian, democratic politics.
of the Enlightenment, a continued testimony to our misguided and self-destructive tendencies to create new hegemonies to replace the old; but from a feminist perspective, it is a vital move.

Fraser and Nicholson would seem to concur. While agreeing with the postmodern rejection of metadiscourse and critiquing much of feminist theory, including Chodorow and Gilligan, for falling prey to the sins of “quasi-metanarratives,” they also hold out hope for “large narratives.” I read their argument as being more consistent with the standpoints approach to theory I articulated earlier—that shared experiences and commonalities can provide the basis for shared stories that simultaneously preserve the differences contained in the commonality, and hence do not essentially reduce themselves to the common elements—than with postmodernism per se (hence they may be postmodern feminists). They point out that Lyotard “goes too quickly from the premise that Philosophy cannot ground social criticism to the conclusion that criticism itself must be local, ad hoc, and non-theoretical,” that is, that we could have no “feminist” theory—or any other kind, for that matter. Lyotard “throws out the baby of large historical narrative with the bathwater of philosophical metanarrative and the baby of social-theoretical analysis of large-scale inequalities with the bathwater of reductive Marxian class theory. Moreover, these allegedly illegitimate babies do not in fact remain excluded. They return like the repressed within the very genres of postmodern social criticism with which Lyotard intends to replace them.”

Even more significantly, however, Lyotard also slips in a very particularized and masculinist construction of reality when he places “agonistics” at the heart of social relations as they are defined and constituted in and through language games (p. 16). The “accepted language” is the “adversary” to the critical theorist (p. 10). As my earlier chapters made clear, such a construal of language and epistemology betrays at least in part a gendered orientation. This in itself does not necessarily trouble the postmodern, as we are all socially constructed into genders by our totalizing societies. But Lyotard presents this as if agonistics is inevitable, even natural. At the very least, Lyotard’s failure to be self-conscious and self-critical of the gendered dimensions of his position and argument means that he fails to respond to his own theoretical exhortations.

Derrida similarly slips over into sexism. He certainly is antifeminist: “They too are men, those women feminists so derided by Nietzsche. Feminism is nothing but the operation of a woman who aspires to be like a man. And in order to resemble the masculine dogmatic philos-

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70 Fraser and Nicholson (1990), pp. 27, 26, 25.
opher this woman lays claim—just as much claim as he—to truth, science and objectivity in all their castrated delusions of virility. Feminism too seeks to castrate. It wants a castrated woman."71 Derrida sees feminism reductively as the effort to replace an androcentric hegemony with a gynocentric one.

In his defense Hekman points out that Derrida "is attacking a particular form of feminism," namely one "that attempts to replace the unitary masculinist epistemology with an equally unitary feminist epistemology." Such a feminism will find itself locked into the very dualities that ensure women's inferiority. In stopping at the step of inverting dualities, and not moving on to their transcendence, this kind of feminism finds itself trapped in the same "logocentric closure" it seeks to end.72 Yet Hekman also seems to include most kinds of feminism in this category, indeed, any feminism that is not postmodern. Although she argues that there is a strong convergence between postmodernism and feminism, thus suggesting an equal and reciprocal relationship between the two, in fact the structure of her argument ensures that the former sets boundaries to her discourse while the latter merely influences that discourse. In adhering to a strict reading of postmodernism, she regards most feminists as resisting postmodernism, a move she sees as misguided and self-defeating. At the base of most feminist theory, she argues, is a desire to retain the Cartesian subject and other elements of modernist philosophy which have at their own base the subjection of women. She criticizes feminist standpoint theory in particular because, she says, it seeks to reverse dualities such as male-female rather than eliminate them. Reversing dualities, she points out, is impossible; it merely ensures the continued existence of the duality without truly challenging the foundational hierarchy. So, for instance, in asserting the importance of care, she would say, feminists perpetuate essentialist arguments about women's nature without at all disempowering the oppressive force of rights and rules.

But the circularity of such an argument is apparent. Hekman holds that feminist methods that do not start from postmodernism—that do not adopt the parameters set by postmodernism and bring feminism in only as a modifier—will inevitably revert to the phallocratic notions of subject and self of masculinist modernism that are premised on the inferiority of women. Such so-called feminism is automatically defined as self-defeating and hence antifeminist. Not only is this feminist postmodernism antithetical to the ideal of multiplicity and pluri-

vocality which postmodernism seeks to further but it is blind to the ways in which postmodern theory is itself premised on women’s inferiority. It presents a double bind for feminists, because postmodernism requires that we deconstruct woman; but because women are an oppressed class of people, the danger of invisibility is precisely the problem that feminism needs to address.

Indeed, Derrida proscribes a feminist postmodernism (as well as a postmodern feminism) by prohibiting women’s self-definition and self-identity. Even further, he implicitly assumes the task, even as he denies it, of defining women himself. Derrida may use feminine pronouns and metaphors “in order to break the binary oppositions of phallocratic thought,”73 but in the process he slips in a gender-biased picture of social relations, power, and text. For instance, his “hymeneal fable” can be seen as very much a masculinist account, not a feminist account certainly, and not even a multiple one. Derrida holds that the hymen as a location of ambiguity is “neither the inside nor the outside”;74 but this can make sense only from the perspective of the phallus. The hymen may be and has been constructed as a barrier—an “outside”—to the phallus’s penetration of the “inside,” that is, the female body. But to a woman the hymen is very much inside, not outside, as the example of rape makes clear. Viewing the hymen as Derrida suggests is thus excessively phallocentric, to use Derrida’s own terms; it can be seen once again as an attempt by a masculinist discourse to use women’s fragmented body parts—vagina, hymen, labia—as abstract metaphors to construct its own representation of reality. Certainly such a construction of the hymen also may challenge the “linear, unitary, phallocratic ‘will to truth’” with “a sign of fusion [that] . . . abolishes opposition and difference”;75 but it is a masculinist representation of such an endeavor.

Perhaps women represent, or even can represent, ambiguity for Derrida only because Derrida is male; for after all, if the ambiguity stems from social constructions of gender, are men really any less ambiguous? If the hymen is as much “outside” as “inside,” the phallus is as much “inside”—connected to and constitutive of the most intimate of self-conceptions—as “outside.” The alignment of women with ambiguity echoes Freud’s confusion about women, the patriarchal view of woman as mystery. Certainly, Derrida’s explicit recognition of this mysteriousness as social construction is an advance over Freud’s naturalistic puzzlement. Derrida is saying that what has historically been attributed to women embodies certain aspects of

73Ibid., p. 165.
74Derrida (1972), p. 43.
75Hekman (1990), pp. 165–66.
both men and women, making relevant the question why this has happened. If “truth, like woman, is plural,” then “what ‘woman’ represents . . . [is] consistent with [Derrida’s] effort to deconstruct the will to truth.”76 Yet the problem remains. For in order to empower women, or to enable women to realize the power that they already have to end their disciplining, feminists need to construct the category of woman and to search for identity, and this Derrida will not allow, except possibly, as I noted earlier, as a short-term political stage in reversing the male-female duality before then exploding it. But the problem with this short-term strategy is that it contradicts Derrida’s warnings about essentialism. Even a temporary claim to such a definition feeds the will to truth, for we may easily forget that this definition was intended to be a temporary strategy. Indeed, according to postmodern tenets, we will be compelled to forget by the logic of the discourse. Indeed, that is the whole point of feminist postmodernism’s rejection of standpoint approaches. At the same time, from a feminist perspective this two-part strategy would end up at a different point from that which Derrida asserts; that is, the “explosion” would mean not necessarily the end of the subject but rather a world in which subjects can see and define themselves in and through relationships.

Similarly, in Forget Foucault, the logic of Baudrillard’s argument may compel him to go too far for feminism when he says that the reversibility of power leads to the conclusion that “dominators and dominated exist no more than victims and executioners. (While exploiters and exploited do in fact exist, they are on different sides because there is no reversibility in production, which is precisely the point: nothing essential happens at that level.)”77 This notion would in fact trivialize the rape of the wealthy white woman by the poor black man. Furthermore, if a disabled Hispanic woman were raped or otherwise sexually harassed by her white male employer, or if a third world woman were killed in a snuff film produced by white men, it would be hard to see such power relationships as reversible. They appear one-sided after all, or at least lopsided enough to make talk about the woman’s “power” rather disingenuous. Furthermore, Baudrillard’s problematic views of female sexuality and pornography also force feminists to question the usefulness and applicability of his theory.78 So the danger of reduction, and the possibilities for structural sexism that this allows, pervades Baudrillard’s work as it does postmodern theory in general.

76Ibid., p. 168.
78See esp. ibid., pp. 56–57.
The most problematic postmodern, in my view, because potentially the most helpful as well, is Foucault. I would not go so far as to agree with Balbus that a "Foucauldian feminism is a contradiction in terms," primarily because I do not think that Balbus gives sufficient credit to the ways in which Foucault highlights gender as a social construction. But Balbus's point that Foucault rejects psychoanalysis as a totalizing discourse presents obvious problems for my earlier attempt to claim Foucauldian insights for my postmodern feminism. Like other postmodern theorists, in his challenge to the modern subject Foucault may go too far to sustain feminism. "Foucault 'dispenses' . . . with individual identity tout court" and indeed requires us to struggle against identity: "An attachment to an identity that one recognizes and is recognized by others is . . . the result of the form of interactions peculiar to the technologies of the self that proliferate in the contemporary disciplinary society. . . . 'Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men.'" The problem that Balbus identifies is that Foucault makes patriarchy an impossible target for feminism: "His ban on 'continuous history' would make it impossible for women even to speak of the historically universal misogyny from which they have suffered and against which they have struggled."

In short, for Foucault identity equals unfreedom, or totalizing discipline. Yet the challenge of claiming identity, I have argued, is part of the enterprise of feminism. The tension between Foucault and feminism, I believe, lies in the fact that the identity that Foucault rejects is object relations theory's male model of identity. By constituting autonomy as opposed to community and by defining the community as inevitably disciplining and totalizing, Foucault buys into the not-other conception of identity. Foucault produces an abstraction that replicates "the androcentric and fundamentally humanist universalizing 'I,' this time in the apparent form of the 'Not-I.'" He does not even consider a female model of identity, in which "community and autonomy are not only not inconsistent, but are, in fact, mutually constitutive."

Although this argument may display some psychoanalytic circularity and threatens a breakdown in communication between the kind of feminism developed in this book and Foucault's postmodernism, it

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80Ibid., p. 117.
81Ibid., pp. 117–18, quoting Foucault, Language, Countermemory, and Practice; emphasis added.
82Ibid., p. 120.
Afterword

also points to the same kinds of objections to other theorists that I identified earlier. Foucault operates from a highly gendered point of view even as he denies such a possibility. For instance, in his *History of Sexuality* he seeks to understand sexuality as constructed and disciplined by law and social institutions, and he advocates alteration of this situation to remove sexuality from the domain of law. Rape, then, would be punished not as a sex crime but as a crime of assault. Yet in taking the sex out of rape, Foucault denies the ways in which men and women are treated differently by society as having different sexual identities; and he thus denies the reality that such social constructions create. For even though rape is an assault (that is, an act of violence), it is also an act of sex, and women are raped by men far more commonly than men are raped by either men or women. Would changing the prosecution of rape lower its incidence? Make it more "democratic" among its victims and perpetrators? Foucault’s goal in desexualizing rape is to break down the power/knowledge monopoly of state authority, but such an abstraction of power ignores the concrete realities of rape.

In a similar vein, Linda Alcoff points out that Foucault’s deconstruction of the subject with an authentic core means that "there is no repression in the humanist sense."\(^{85}\) Although "subjective experiences are determined in some sense by macro forces,"\(^{86}\) and even though Foucault’s concept of power, like Baudrillard’s, entails a notion of reversibility, for Foucault we basically cannot and do not choose who we are. "As Derrida and Foucault like to remind us, individual motivation and intentions count for nil or almost nil in the scheme of social reality."\(^{87}\) The idea that humans are constructs of discourses beyond their control is a powerful insight to help feminists and other critical theorists understand and cut through the mythologizing claims to truth of liberalism and other schools of modern political theory; yet the parallel recognition that we also do choose must be made. As Taylor puts it, "There not only can be but must be something between total subjectivism on one hand . . . and the strange Schopenhauierianism-without-the-will in which Foucault leaves us."\(^{88}\) An important contribution of feminism has been to reveal the ways in which women have been denied opportunities to choose, to consent, even though it also urges us to redefine and reconceptualize such terms. That has involved the revelation of consent ideology as a totalizing fiction which mischaracterizes obligation and the nature of hu-

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\(^{86}\)Ibid., p. 416.

\(^{87}\)Ibid.

\(^{88}\)Taylor (1984), p. 171.
man relations. Worse, that mischaracterization in turn depends on the active as well as the larger-scale institutional, societal, discursive oppression and disciplining of women. To then deny women the tools of choice and means of consent by declaring them to be part of a discourse that oppresses us all, to claim that there is no "self" to do this choosing anyhow, goes beyond disingenuous to dangerous. The demand that women be provided more opportunities to make choices cannot be dismissed so easily without raising questions of whether masculinist hegemony is merely being perpetuated in a new guise.

These particular examples of postmodern sexism, however, stem not from individual theorists' failure to implement postmodern principles successfully but from the logic of postmodernism itself. The overriding problem with postmodernism, in my view, is that when we focus on difference and particularity to the exclusion of commonality and sharing, the concept of theory itself implodes. Because no two experiences are ever exactly alike, there can never be any sort of common ground for the development of theory; or rather, there are so many narratives that they can never form social wholes but only "social holes." As I argued earlier, the beauty of adopting feminist standpoints is that while recognizing difference, particularity, and context, we can also set certain limits on what can count as a feminist standpoint. This approach does not mean that there is some universal and timeless conception of feminism or femaleness, any more than it means there is "Truth." But it is immanently pragmatic in that it does provide certain grounds for a particular group of people—say, members of a participatory democracy—to make decisions and judgments about the kinds of views that it will allow to guide common action, that it will allow to (at least temporarily) occupy the center of the web called politics (inherently nonrecognizing views are antifeminist, for instance). Alcoff's and de Lauretis's parallel arguments that the notion of women constitutes positions rather than a unitary collection of attributes echo this notion of standpoints. Feminism constitutes certain perspectives and positions which are influenced not by timeless and universal characteristics but by temporal, material dynamics, which shape individuals' own assessments and understandings of their positions.89

The postmodern notion that "the category 'woman' is a fiction and that feminist efforts must be directed toward dismantling this fiction"90 is as problematic as it is helpful, suggesting the dangers of relativism that loom large for any kind of postmodernism, feminist or otherwise. As I noted earlier, writers such as Elizabeth Spelman chal-

lenge the idea that theorists can draw any conclusions about women without knowing a variety of details about the particular individuals involved; and in her article with Maria Lugones the challenge arises as to whether any theorist of a particular race, class, sexual orientation, cultural specificity, condition of physical ability, and so forth can ever actually know these other details without engaging in a dangerous imperialism.  

But is it accurate to say that women are entirely different from one another? Does not the wealthy white woman suffer emotionally from abortion as well as the poor Chicana? The fact that abortion is more difficult for the latter because wealth affords more protection, or that Hispanic religious and traditional culture present more social and perhaps psychological restrictions than, say, some sects of Protestantism and certainly than agnosticism: these factors create differences that feminists want to recognize. And perhaps such recognition will lead to the conclusion that the Chicana deserves more of society’s collective resources. But does that allow feminists to deny the pain felt by the former or to deny the shared qualities of the women’s experiences? And what about the woman without ovaries or a vagina, who will never even need an abortion; what is it that makes her call herself woman and allows others to do likewise? She at least shares a certain cultural treatment as woman; and although she may suffer psychological pain, fear, deprivation, ostracism, and doubt from such treatment (“I can’t conceive; am I a real woman?”) even as she may not be directly affected by abortion policy, there is also much to be shared. The fact that such differences exist within cultures that treat all women the same, that ignores those differences, does create a certain commonality of experience.

In other words, although recognition and conversation must—not merely morally but in the logic of the process—address, recognize, and include differences, it is just as faulty to overemphasize difference and forget the sharedness and similarity that is often a part of difference. Works like Spelman’s reduce the problems of sameness by holding it to be essentialist in the most extreme form. What she calls “plethoraphobia [is] a series of related questions: Is there a oneness in all this manyness? Is there something all women have in common despite (or maybe even because of) their differences? A thread running through all our accounts of our lives? An underlying identity as women? . . . A shared viewpoint?”  

I agree with her that “we’d have to have more than superficial knowledge about one another to answer these questions,” but we can also in some measure answer it right off

the bat: no, we do not have a oneness or an identity. Criticisms of the feminist standpoint reduce and misread the argument by claiming it holds that there is one single standpoint for all feminists, if not for all women; understanding it as allowing, even demanding, multiple feminist standpoints yields a reading of the theory that is not only more accurate but also much more useful to feminism than either a reductive essentialism or a totally decentered deconstruction. Like the notion of family resemblances which I argued is found in identity politics, the “thing called woman” embraces a multiplicity of experiences and yet is nevertheless identifiable. Not every woman—indeed, hardly any woman—demonstrates a one-to-one correlation with any other; but there are shared characteristics and experiences that link each woman directly to some other women, and through implementation of a web imagery indirectly to all. I may share the experience of being a poor black woman with other women, some of whom are also poor and black women, some of whom are poor and white, some of whom are black and middle class. The black middle-class woman may share some commonalities with white middle-class women, even as her commonalities with these other groups strongly differentiate her from the white bourgeoise. Can this middle-class black woman provide a certain link between the white bourgeoise and the poor black woman, particularly on shared but differently grounded issues such as child care, abortion, sexual violence, and comparable worth? If, as a Native American heterosexual welfare mother I am raped, I am likely to experience that quite differently from a Chicana lesbian attorney, not only because of differences in who we are but also in the experience of the rape itself: the age, race, class of the rapist, the violence and context of the rape, and so forth. But as rape crisis counselors will remind us, there is also much we share.

Postmodern approaches disempower women by preventing any discussion of these similarities, and by doing so they prevent women from creating theories that articulate that experience. As Robert Scholes argues, deconstruction “falters when faced with the need to take action in the ethico-political realm, because it cannot shake its ‘de’ in order to make constructive moves.” And as de Lauretis points out, any “essential difference” of women is “not a difference between woman and man, nor a difference inherent in ‘woman’s nature’ (in woman as nature), but a difference in the feminist conception of woman, women, and the world.”

It is what makes the thinking “feminist,” and what constitutes certain ways of thinking, certain practices of writing, reading, imagining, relat-

ing, acting, etc., into the historically diverse and culturally heterogeneous social movement which, qualifiers and distinctions not withstanding . . . we continue with good reasons to call feminism. Another way to say this is that the essential difference of feminism lies in its historical specificity—the particular conditions of its emergence and development . . . the absolute novelty of its radical challenge to social life itself. . . . The term [essentialism] serves less the purposes of effective criticism in the ongoing elaboration of feminist theory than those of convenience, conceptual simplification, or academic legitimation.”

It is intellectually unfair, not to mention disingenuous, to accuse any kind of feminist theory of the same degree of hegemony, racism, classism, and so forth as the white male western tradition “located at the center of power, at the intersection of three separate axes of privilege—race, class, and gender. . . . Feminist theory—even the work of white, upper-class women—is not located at the center of cultural power.” Such women as a group tend to have more power than women of color as a group, and that is something that feminist theory needs to acknowledge. But they are also, vis-à-vis men of all races and classes, and particularly upper-class white men, oppressed in particular ways related to the fact that they are (socially constructed as) women. Indeed, if my earlier arguments are correct, even white middle-class women should be much more attuned than masculinist post-Enlightenment theorists to claims that they have excluded others. It is not insignificant that the feminist movement as it was originally formulated as a white middle-class movement is readily embracing debates about inclusion and exclusion concerning race, class, age, sexual orientation, and so forth, while men’s leftist movements of the past several decades—black power, civil rights, antiwar, student protest, marxist, social democratic—rarely (if ever) accepted or even took seriously issues of gender and sex. Certainly feminism’s inclusiveness is far from complete, and feminism is vulnerable to all sorts of hidden biases; but compare this with a “mainstream” world, be it politics, academia, or business, where “even” upper-class, young, white, heterosexual women are having extreme difficulties in finding any sort of legitimacy as women. The rage that excluded groups have visited on feminism raises questions about the return of the repressed within feminism. Perhaps women feel safer venting their rage against one another than they do expressing it to the real purveyors of power.

The access of the excluded to dominant discourses is an advance that postmodernism has helped feminism realize. But we would be

95Bordo (1990), p. 141.
foolish not to recognize that the issue of difference raised by postmodern theory holds as many dangers for feminism as helpful insights. Too much emphasis on difference can produce "an Other who is an exotic alien, a breed apart,"\textsuperscript{96} a being with whom communication is absolutely impossible, almost in a return to the solipsism of Descartes's "cogito," and certainly echoing the oppositional difference of women to men in modern theory. At the same time, as Susan Bordo points out, feminist postmodernism advocates the "dogma that the only 'correct' perspective on race, class, and gender is the affirmation of difference; this dogma reveals itself in criticisms which attack gender generalizations as in principle essentialist or totalizing. Surely, such charges should require concrete examples of actual differences that are being submerged by any particular 'totality' in question."\textsuperscript{97} Feminist postmodernism fails in its own efforts in abstracting the notion of difference beyond the pale of politics and even of theory. Yet by focusing exclusively on the holy trinity of gender, race, and class, feminist postmodernism creates a "coercive, mechanical requirement" for feminist scholarship to be legitimate. What about age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, geography, even species? Certain postmodern feminists attempt to incorporate some of these, but not all by any means, because it is an impossible task. As Bordo asks, "How many axes can one include and still preserve analytical focus or argument?"\textsuperscript{98} That is the obverse of the difference dilemma: a focus on difference seems to deconstruct itself into the impossibility of writing theory.

Feminist postmodernism thus threatens to become post-theoretical, if not antitheoretical as well. Those that do attempt to incorporate a multiplicity of dimensions provide predominantly general and often vague criticisms of essentialism and exclusion and little by means of concrete suggestions as to how inclusion is to be carried out through theory. This may lead us to the conclusion that theory should be abandoned altogether, but I for one am not ready to accept that conclusion; nor, would it appear, are the writers of these criticisms.

Thus a feminist postmodernism evaporates before our eyes; but this is due more to the dynamics of postmodernism than to those of feminism. Postmodern theory cannot be as long as it is post modern rather than pre something else.\textsuperscript{99} And one of the something elses is feminism. By focusing exclusively on deconstructing the past, postmodernism provides no possibility for the future. As in reactive autonomy, the self that is constituted through reactions to others, through

\textsuperscript{96}Ibid., p. 140.
\textsuperscript{97}Ibid., pp. 139–40.
\textsuperscript{98}Ibid., p. 139.
\textsuperscript{99}I owe this phrasing to James Kurth.
being not-other, is fragile and unstable, failing its own definition of autonomy. The self needs a more positive, constructive conception of autonomy as relational, attending to the ways in which a self becomes a self through relationships with others. Feminism, with relationship and the interdependent self at its core, provides a means for constructing the new something elses that will emerge from the deconstructive rubble of the postmodern era.

A Feminist Method for Political Theory or a Political-Theoretical Method for Feminism?

As Mary Poovey argues, “If deconstruction took feminism seriously, it wouldn’t look like deconstruction anymore”; hence there can be no feminist postmodernism. But “if feminism took deconstruction at its word, we could begin to dismantle the system that assigns to all women a single identity and a marginal place” as we say yes to a postmodern feminism. But it should be clear from the foregoing remarks that postmodern feminism must be understood as something very different from feminist postmodernism and from “malestream” postmodern theory. For it must in a sense betray part of its name—the “postmodern” part—in the attempt to achieve goals that satisfactorily address both postmodern and feminist enterprises. In struggling to find the meaning of woman, feminists must embrace postmodern ideals of difference, heterogeneity, and multiplicity without letting go of the goal of constructing theory.

The primary such betrayal required to salvage postmodernism for feminist obligation is to reclaim the subject as a viable category of analysis. Liberalism is to some degree correct in its fundamental assertion that obligation requires agents and subjects, even if it defines those terms problematically. A participatory politics of mutual recognition wherein the content of obligations is worked out and negotiated similarly requires flesh-and-blood people who can converse, deliberate, provide recognition, help others articulate their views, make decisions, and act on them. A collective cannot exist if its constituent parts do not. But liberalism simultaneously denies that women are subjects. Similarly, the denial of subjectivity is probably the single characteristic of postmodernism that makes a feminist postmodernism impossible. Postmodernism’s key insight that the liberal, Enlightenment subject of natural man is an oppressive fiction helps empower feminism to demand inclusion in political theory. But “to deny the

unity and stability of identity is one thing. The epistemological fantasy of becoming multiplicity—the dream of limitless multiple embodiments, allowing one to dance from place to place and self to self—is another." Indeed, Flax argues that it is not only impossible but dangerous; "borderline syndrome," in which the self has no "core," is a serious pathology. "Those who celebrate or call for a 'decentered' self seem self-deceptively naive and unaware of the basic cohesion within themselves that makes the fragmentation of experiences something other than a terrifying slide into psychosis." The strength of applying object relations to political theory lies in its recognition of the self as socially constructed, and in its simultaneous search for "healthier" such constructions. It helps reveal that what makes fragmenting and volatile identities "sick" is not just the attitudes of modern society toward them nor the institutional responses to such people (though both may contribute to the problem) but the fragmentation itself. And to respond that of course the person feels tormented by the condition itself because language constructs the condition as illness and then determines this feeling and reaction is horrifically to deny such pain.

Although the notion of subjectivity utilized throughout my study is not a unified totality but one of multiple selves, these selves are not fragmented and fractured but rather synthesized in a concrete person. In liberal obligation theory our identities are fractured by the very fiction that defines us as unified, and by the denial of individual multiplicity. If I have only one central identity, that one must have different parts to accommodate my experiences: for instance, a public self and a private self. But if we embrace a notion of subjectivity as a gathering together within one person of a multiplicity of identities created and influenced by and through relations with a variety of other persons, each of whom has relations with a variety of still other persons in a web of interrelationship and identity, we get a concept of subjectivity that exists—that does not evaporate in a postmodern deconstruction of self—but is not falsely coherent or unified.

A feminist subjectivity, while allowing for core identities and varying degrees of authenticity, need not be reduced to the totally unified subject of the Enlightenment. Diana Fuss suggests that we can view "subjectivity as a nexus of possibilities" rather than an essentialized, unitary entity; not an "I/not I" but rather a continuum of existence. This notion is interesting and illuminating, for at once it allows the myriad possibilities that any individual person can be—if institutional structures such as patriarchy do not discipline her to be one particular

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101 Bordo (1990), pp. 144–45.
way—but at the same time recognizes that it is a flesh-and-blood person who has these possibilities. To say that this person is a subject is not to define her for eternity but precisely to recognize the ways in which she can change: partly through choice, partly through chance, and partly through response to external factors, which comprises both choice and nonchoice. This subject always has the potential for more change; but that does not mean that subjectivity evaporates. Just because someone I love may die next week, sending me into a tailspin depression that leads me to institutionalize myself; or just because a financial windfall allows me to quit my job and pursue a lifelong dream of moving to Paris and writing poetry; or just because reading Foucault or even a particularly intense visit with a psychotherapist may enable me to see how the meaning I have attributed to certain of my behaviors is really an illusion, thus causing me to recast my entire self-understanding; these possibilities do not mean that I cannot define myself as I am, here and now, with the conscious recognition that this description is neither timeless nor unchanging nor exhaustively complete. Nor is this new sense of self completely discontinuous with my former sense. Indeed, it can be fully understood and appreciated only in the context of my entire personal history.

Within this context of possibility, the concept of essentialism becomes transformed, more acceptable and even useful for postmodern feminism. As Gayatri Spivak points out, “When put into practice by the dispossessed themselves, essentialism can be powerfully displacing and disruptive.”104 De Lauretis similarly highlights the strategic and political importance of incorporating a notion of essentialism into postmodern feminism: “If feminist theory remains unwilling to take the risk of essentialism seriously while continuing to gesture toward it from a respectable distance, call it poststructuralist/deconstructionist or communist or simply anti-essentialist, it will remain unable to be both feminist and poststructuralist, both feminist and communist, or both feminist and radical at once. And the question is, in that case, can it remain feminist?”105 Postmodernism’s negative methodology is obviously extremely useful; but given the fact that we operate in our language and understand concepts through the dominant ontology and epistemology, even as we try to build them anew, then the tearing down can go only so far. Once we deconstruct to the limits of language, we are left with no means of communicating and even of formulating our ideas.106 Wittgenstein’s maxim that all meaning occurs

106Indeed, in Philosophical Investigations Wittgenstein derides philosophy as “the bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language” (p. 43).
in language does not mean that we cannot critique or pull apart existing structures of thought, nor does it mean that new concepts and words cannot be introduced and utilized effectively. But it does mean that our deconstruction can go only so far before it loses meaning; and that even if we decompose as far as we are able, we are still left with part of the old structure. This, however, is not bad, as the more radical feminist postmoderns might claim; it just is. Just as it is pointless to say that gravity limits my freedom to fly, so is it meaningless to say that language as such limits our expression. Language is constituent of our ability to express and communicate ideas and experience. To go beyond this and completely deconstruct language itself leaves us with only “an inarticulate sound.”

Or does it? Do I perhaps overstate the case? Although language is a constituent feature of our social being, it is also, unlike gravity, man-made, and hence can and does contain many sexist, racist, and classist elements which can be highly inhibitive of expression. So it both is and is not pointless to say that language limits us, inhibits our ability to formulate and express ideas. The entities or ideas that words express have meaning only insofar as those meanings can be expressed in language. But those meanings can be perverted by language as well, and we may try to achieve a truer expression of our meaning. For instance, mothering as a practice or as a language game contains a variety of meanings in daily actions and expression, and these meanings constitute themselves through language. But there is also a great deal of nonverbal communication between mother and infant, the meaning of which may be hidden from the observer and even from the practitioners themselves, because such meaning is actively obscured by the larger, dominant language game—patriarchal society—within which mothering takes place. That is, the dominant male nonmaternal discourse to a large degree controls and dominates the language of maternal practice, and this is because maternal practice, while supporting and making possible the dominant discourse, is in many ways at odds with it. According to object relations theory, mother-only child rearing creates men who need to dominate women, which in turn ensures that women will continue to mother children.

It is thus, we can argue, that part of the dominant language game depends on an obfuscation of maternal practice and a subversion of its meaning. Ruddick suggests that in a society in which morality is defined in terms of rights and separated individuals and values of connection and relationship are devalued, maternal thinking will likely be subverted into self-denigration with distastefully conflicting re-

107Ibid., p. 93.
sults. Values of “preservation” and “holding” within a society defined by competition, property, ownership, comparative value and the denial of self-creation to women except through their children will not surprisingly tend to degenerate into possessiveness or overprotectiveness, with growth stunted as a result. “Acceptability” can become an important or even a primary value in such a society, which will produce results antithetical to the practice, demanding conformity and crushing the creative spirit. It will also result in sons’ going to war, a practice in many ways diametrically opposed to maternal practice.108

Of course, maternal practice is not a “pure” thing that is merely talked about incorrectly; it is shaped by that language as well. Yet there would seem to be two conflicting meanings within one practice: the meaning of the dominant discourse and the meaning that women experience but cannot articulate because they lack a suitable language. That we tend to deny that such nonverbalized experience has meaning attests not only to the hegemony of masculinist discourse (could the primacy of language as a determinant of meaning be a reflection of empiricism?) but also to the difficulty of building theories within a hostile environment. If it seems in feminist enterprises that we run against the walls of our language, perhaps it is because our language expresses—and can only express—particular perspectives and ideas, particular kinds of theory and ways of developing theory. The challenge embodied in getting beyond this problem is one that needs to be faced, however, not only for the success of feminist theory but also to ensure the future viability of political theory in general.

I have argued that a key to meeting this challenge lies in a concept of plural feminist standpoints: an application of standpoint epistemology to the idea of multiplicity to allow for a variety of standpoints that reflect the variety of women’s and men’s experiences. By locating it within the modifier feminist, we curtail the relativism of postmodernism. Not just anything can count as a feminist standpoint. But for a complete picture—or at least a less partial one—other groups excluded and marginalized from the dominant discourses need to develop their stories as well.109 Various standpoints must be further ex-

108 Ruddick identifies preservation, growth, and acceptability as three central values of maternal practice; her article presents a deeper analysis of them. See Ruddick (1984b) and also Ruddick (1983).

109 Although this afterword was largely completed before I read sections of the manuscript of Harding (1991), her argument helped clarify several ideas I was struggling with. The arguments expressed here are largely in agreement with hers, particularly the idea that a feminist standpoint is compatible with, and even requires, multiplicity. Of course my entire book’s intellectual debt to and affinity with Harding’s earlier work as well should be obvious to most readers familiar with her oeuvre.
explored and articulated, even as feminism itself develops and evolves many standpoints of its own. Feminism may share insights and problems with the standpoint of Native Americans, or disabled people, or the urban underclass, but it cannot speak for such groups because their experiences are far from coextensive. Although feminists must be involved in the struggle to help others realize their subjectivity, such others must also articulate their own standpoints. I realize I run the risk of implying the belief that different groups are established entities with distinct characteristics, thus problematizing the positions of, say, black women (are they African-Americans or feminists?). I do not, however, intend to convey this meaning. As I argued in my brief description of caucus democracy, all of us, including white males, belong to varieties of groups because we have various standpoints reflecting different aspects of our experience. These aspects fragment us only in the context of a discourse that demands our identity to be unified; within a context of multiplicity these aspects allow for the individual to engage in an ongoing and continually shifting process of self-definition, self-understanding, and synthesis. Obviously some standpoints will seem to have more power for different people than others, and at different times in their lives. But the continued articulation of different standpoints is vital not only for empowering more groups and experiences and thus for strengthening the conversation but also for helping others realize the ways in which the identities they thought were not important to them really are.

This means that holders of various standpoints must themselves articulate those standpoints. For instance, women of any description (Muslim women, women of color, working-class women, and so forth) are better able than men to articulate a feminist standpoint. But it also means that others can and must help them realize their standpoints: men can and indeed should also be feminists. Although feminists cannot speak for others any more than others can speak for them, feminists can nevertheless listen and respond as they expect others to listen and respond to them. Through others' articulation, feminists of all sorts learn about one another and about themselves. That is, the articulation of, say, black feminism (which itself may leave out further subdivisions—a black heterosexual feminist may have different experiences from a black lesbian feminist and so forth) or of (a potentially broader and hence even more potentially essentializing) African-Americanism will teach white (and perhaps also middle-class or academic-professional or heterosexual) feminists about the experiences of black women and men; but it also provides a tool for understanding their own experiences as white feminists. That is, using a black feminist or African-American standpoint as a starting
point for theory can reveal things about white women's experiences that a white feminist standpoint cannot reveal, precisely because of the privilege that adheres to being white. At the same time, white women do experience oppression, and so it makes no sense to ignore the experiences of women simply because black women are more oppressed. By that logic we would have to ignore African-Americanism altogether because the category includes men. We would have to find the absolutely most oppressed person (who will most likely be a woman, among other things) and use her standpoint as the basis for a new true theory that tells the whole story. Even apart from the incommensurability of certain oppressions (are Chicanas more oppressed in the United States than blacks? Jews more than Muslims?), such a caricature of standpoint epistemology ignores the interdependence of different kinds of oppression and hence the need to articulate a variety of standpoints.

This variety and multiplicity of standpoints is absolutely crucial if we are to achieve the inclusiveness and mutual recognition of a feminist participatory democratic conversation and hence the determination of obligation. Yet pursuing multiplicity within a standpoints approach prevents the slide into relativism, for it provides collective means of evaluating and discriminating between various claims for a standpoint. In particular, it allows for discrimination between a standpoint and an ideology, which can be racist, misogynist, homophobic, classist, ageist, and so forth. For instance, men have insights to contribute to feminists, as do whites to African-Americans, heterosexuals to lesbians and homosexuals, perhaps even capitalists to workers. But this is different from saying that masculinism has something to offer feminism, or classism has something to offer the proletariat. The dangers and likelihood of masking ideology as standpoint is greater from the perspective of the more powerful in each of these pairs, because such ideologies will reinforce their preexisting claims to power.

The methodological advantage of standpoint epistemology lies in its notion that women will have more to say to men, African-Americans more to say to whites, lesbians and homosexuals more to say to heterosexuals, workers more to say to capitalists, because it considers the experience of the oppressed less partial and perverse than that of the more privileged. But the exchange of insights is not unidirectional, exclusively from the bottom up. The articulation of identity is a collaborative enterprise, which is what makes conversation and mutual recognition so crucial to its success. Mutuality, however, is not a principle of relativism. Rather, as a feminist principle it places certain limitations on what can count as a standpoint as opposed to an ideology. The articulation of such standpoints, within the parameters of
feminism, ensures that such experiences must be articulated from the perspective of women's or workers' or African-Americans' or lesbians' lives. As Harding points out, standpoint epistemology does not merely limit itself to passively including the standpoints of others; it requires that we begin from others' lives as the basis for theory. Thus, for instance, a liberal justification of rights would have to begin from the perspective of groups who have been excluded from and hurt by the liberal discourse of rights, and not just from the privileged white male perspective that created rights discourse. Such a shift of perspective, I have argued throughout this book, would require a profound shift in the discourse itself. So the invocation to theorize from others' perspectives does not apply just to feminists and other marginalized groups who most obviously have something to gain from such a mutualistic strategy. Those in traditionally privileged positions must also take responsibility for such theorizing, even though it may appear to disempower them, for in reality it empowers us all.

Accordingly, a feminist standpoints method cannot be content merely "adding and stirring" women of color, lesbian women, women factory workers to a basically white, economically privileged feminist standpoint, any more than it holds that political theorists can "add and stir" women to the theories of Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau. Theory must be developed that starts from all of these different historical experiences. The feminist postmodern call simply to listen to women's experience is a starting point for this process, but it cannot nourish or sustain feminist projects. Women's voices can be interpreted in sexist ways, and there can be non-self-conscious or non-self-critical representation even of one's own experience. The self-conscious dimensions of postmodernism require us to recognize how we may be wrong even as we point out how others may also be wrong: "'That's not it' and 'that's still not it.'" But ironically, perhaps, this is the advantage of a feminist standpoints method over feminist postmodernism: it helps keep postmodern goals from folding back on themselves and imploding. A standpoints approach reveals why the double-edged character of identity politics as critique of the oppressiveness of social construction and the liberation of empowering choices is so important to a feminist method for conceptualizing politics and political theory. It can help feminists figure out "how to enter struggles over the meaning(s) of woman in ways that do not repress pluralities, without losing sight of the political necessity for fiction and unity." Fictions are dangerous, but they are also helpful.

Although a feminist postmodernist might say, "Sure they're helpful—they've helped 'malestream' theorists for centuries," such a response fails to note the crucial distinction between these new unities and fictions and the old hegemonies they seek not to replace but to displace. For these new fictions are born of a recognition of the dangers of hegemony; they evolve out of a self-conscious rejection of sameness and unity; they emerge from an understanding of the importance of difference as the very soul of meaning. Identity politics can help "shift the terms of the struggle" and provide "the ability to see our position within existing structures but to respond from somewhere else."\(^{112}\) Such new approaches will always, by Enlightenment standards, appear partial, incomplete, even vague, while by postmodern standards they will simultaneously appear hegemonic and totalizing. But the apparent failure by the standards of both of these discourses can provide the most powerful revelation of feminism's strength. In a sense, as long as feminism can keep both of these kinds of masculinist discourses unhappy—even more, as long as it can keep both of them off base, struggling to defend and rearticulate themselves—feminists have to suspect that they are doing something right.

\(^{112}\)Ibid., p. 10.