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'Back to the Rough Ground!'

Wittgenstein, Essentialism, and Feminist Methods

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May 1997

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy.

Contents

Abstract

This dissertation seeks to fill two lacunae in contemporary feminist discussions of essentialism: first, a lack of critical analysis of the term "essentialism" and its cognates, and second, a paucity of feminist work that aims to develop anti-essentialist methods rather than merely presenting anti-essentialist critiques of existing feminist theories. I propose a typology of feminist essentialisms, distinguishing metaphysical, biological, linguistic, and methodological variants. I argue that methodological essentialism — understood as the practice of making false generalisations about women based on the experiences and identities only of a particular group — is the most pressing political issue for feminists, and defend Elizabeth Spelman's anti-essentialist critique against its opponents. Anti-essentialism should not, however, be interpreted as disavowing the category "women" altogether, and I use Ludwig Wittgenstein's arguments in his *Philosophical Investigations* to articulate a form of feminist anti-essentialism that understands similarities between women as family resemblances. This approach enables feminists to make generalisations about women that neither obscure important differences nor diminish our political efficacy. This Wittgensteinian feminism rejects the *a priori* and urges us to "look and see" to justify generalisations about women. I interpret this as a call for a feminist anti-essentialism that is embedded in feminist practice, and ask what "look and see" might mean for feminist research and for feminist organising against sexual violence. In chapter four, I argue that Carol Gilligan's recent work on girls' psychology in the context of race and class differences successfully responds to long-standing charges that her research is essentialist. It does not, however, fully meet the methodological challenge of anti-essentialism as it fails to acknowledge power relations embedded in research processes, which in turn shape conclusions about female identity. In chapter five, I argue that Catharine MacKinnon's claim that we can avoid essentialism by grounding feminist theory in practice in fact begs the question of how power differences between women shape feminist practice, and under-determines the actual shape of feminist organising. The dissertation offers an anti-essentialist method that enables generalising feminist discourse, but insists on a particular kind of attention to the operations of power in constructing general claims about women.

Résumé

Cette thèse cherche à combler deux lacunes dans les discussions féministes contemporaines sur l'essentialisme: en premier lieu, une absence d'analyse critique du term «essentialisme» et de ses corollaires, et en second lieu, une insuffisance d'ouvrages féministes cherchant à développer des méthodes anti-essentialistes plutôt que de simplement critiquer les écrits féministes existants. Je propose une typologie des différents types d'essentialismes féministes en distinguant ses variantes métaphysiques, biologiques, linguistiques et méthodologiques. Je soutiens que l'essentialisme méthodologique, entendu comme la pratique de produire de fausses généralisations sur les femmes fondées sur les expériences et les identités d'un groupe particulier, est l'enjeu politique le plus urgent pour les féministes. Je supporte, à cet effet, la critique anti-essentialiste d'Elizabeth Spelman et en propose une défense contre ses opposantes. L'anti-essentialisme ne doit pas cependant être interprété comme un désaveu total de la catégorie «femmes». Dans cette optique, je m'appuis sur les arguments développés par Ludwig Wittgenstein dans ses *Investigations philosophiques* afin d'articuler une forme d'anti-essentialisme féministe saisissant les similarités entre les femmes en tant que «airs de famille». Cette approche permet aux féministes de faire des généralisations sur les femmes qui n'obscurcissent pas les différences importantes entre elles, ni ne réduisent leur efficacité politique. Ce féminisme wittgensteinien rejette l'a priori et nous recommande de «voir et regarder» afin de pouvoir justifier des généralisations sur les femmes. J'interprète ceci comme un appel en faveur d'un anti-essentialisme féministe incarné dans la pratique féministe. Je me demande ce que la formule «voir et regarder» peut signifier pour les recherches féministes et les groups féministes oeuvrant contre la violence sexuelle. Dans le chapitre quatre, je montre que les récents ouvrages de Carol Gilligan sur les filles, une psychologie prenant en compte les différences de classes et d'ethnicité, répondent de manière satisfaisante aux critiques lui reprochant d'être essentialiste. Cependant, cela ne résoud pas encore les problèmes méthodologiques posés par l'anti-essentialisme, dans le mesure où ne sont pas reconnues pleinement les relations de pouvoir émanant des processus de recherches; qui portant, en bout de parcours, façonnent les conclusions sur l'identité «féminine». Dans le chapitre cinq, je montre que la proposition de Catharine MacKinnon selon laquelle nous pouvons éviter l'essentialisme en essayant de baser la théorie féministe dans la pratique, évite la question principale, à savoir comment les différences de pouvoir entre les femmes façonnent la pratique féministe, et sous-détermine la forme concrete des organisations féministes. En somme, cette thèse offre une méthode anti-essentialiste permettant de généraliser le discours féministe tout en portant une attention particulière aux relations de pouvoir dans la construction d'énoncés généraux concernant les femmes.

Acknowledgments

During my degree, and especially during the last eighteen months of hard writing and job hunting, I have been fortunate to have help and advice from many friends. My first debt is to Marguerite Deslauriers and James Tully, my co-supervisors at McGill. Marguerite coupled her demand for careful, analytical philosophical writing with a political commitment to my slightly unorthodox project. Jim first introduced me to the study of Wittgenstein as a political philosopher and kept faith in his potential for feminist appropriation. I am deeply grateful to them both.

Vicky Spelman has been unstintingly generous in taking an unknown graduate student under her wing, reading and commenting on several parts of the dissertation; she is a wonderful interlocutor and friend.

David Kahane has been a stalwart intellectual and emotional supporter, offering insightful commentary on several versions of every chapter, often at short notice, and finally copy-editing and proof-reading the entire dissertation. His belief in the value of the project, and his insistence that "really, Cress, it's *good*" kept me going during the hardest times.

Sue Dwyer read and commented on the manuscript with humane rigour, and provided wonderfully practical advice on negotiating the job market and the year.

I have read parts of this dissertation at several conferences and colloquia and received generous and helpful comments; thank you to everyone, especially to the members of SOFPHIA for their extra support this year.

A version of chapter three is forthcoming in Naomi Scheman, ed., *Re-Reading the Canon: Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein*, and part of chapter four in *Hypatia* 12:3,

1997 (Special Third Wave Issue), edited by Jacquelyn Zita. Thanks to both editors for comments on these pieces.

Looking for a job while finishing one's dissertation is not a project lightly undertaken, and I owe thanks to everyone who sustained me through the former ordeal. Eric Lewis propelled me through the job search with energy and commitment. Thanks to Aristea Fotopoulos and Claudine Lefort for their organisational skills and their sanity.

This dissertation is about feminist theory and practice, and draws on my experience in the feminist communities in which I've worked. I owe a great deal to my co-workers at the Sexual Assault Centre — especially my colleagues on the co-ordinating committee, and those women who participated in our crisis intervention training program and volunteered at the Centre between 1994 and 1996.

I would like to thank the Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship Plan, who funded my doctorate, for their generous support, and the McGill Centre for Research and Teaching on Women for a Gillett Graduate Research Award in 1996.

Thanks are due to all my peers in the graduate program at McGill for their friendly good humour and ongoing interest in my work. In particular thanks to Dale Turner for kaffee klatsch on aboriginal sovereignty, feminist theory, and the vagaries of dissertation writing, to Natalie Oman and Rebecca Pates for sharp political debate, to Karen Bardsley and Elizabeth Ennen for tea and sympathy, and to France Emond, for translation services and much more.

I have been greatly influenced over the years by a personal community of women friends in the UK, US and Canada who often talk about feminism but, thankfully, not only about feminist philosophy. I've learned a lot from Zareen Ahmad, Judith Asher, Natalie Blitt, Stacy Chappel, Mandy Collins, Gill Colquhoun, Dierdre Harrington, Suzanne Higgs, Barb Jull, and Zita Zigan. Thanks to Sarah Gower for research assistance with chapter four.

My parents taught me that every political underdog needs a sharp bite. Thanks to them and to my brother Rod for being proud of me.

Finally, thanks to P. for her affection and constant company.

Montréal, April 29th 1997.

Introduction

Naomi Scheman begins her "Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground" with the following account:

> Terry Eagleton, in his script for Derek Jarman's film, *Wittgenstein*, takes up Wittgenstein's image of the "crystalline purity of logic" in contrast to the "rough ground" of what we actually say and do. A young man, we are told, dreams of "reducing the world to pure logic," a dream he succeeds in realizing in a world "purged of imperfection and indeterminacy, like countless acres of gleaming ice." That world, perfect as it is, is uninhabitable: "he had forgotten about friction." As an older man, he "came to understand that roughness and ambiguity and indeterminacy aren't imperfections — they're what make things work." He dug up the ice to uncover the rough ground, but, "homesick for the ice, where everything was radiant and absolute," he was unable to live on the rough ground, and he ended up "marooned between earth and ice, at home in neither."[1]

This dissertation stands at the confluence of several trends in feminist theory and my own experience of political organising and feminist practice. On first reading Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* I was struck, on the one hand, by how I had inadvertently been "held captive" by my philosophical education, and, on the other, by the

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[1] Naomi Scheman, "Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, eds., Hans Sluga and David G. Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 383.

ways I had never been trapped in the fly bottle at all. I could identify with Wittgenstein's depiction of philosophy as "the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language," and saw, particularly in his critique of essentialism, the rejection of a kind of seductive quest for purity that Western philosophy encourages and had encouraged in me. On the other hand, this very "seduction" has, I think, always been a more attractive prospect for men than for women philosophers. "Purity" is more obviously within reach for those men who participate in what has become an institutionalised profession. They are less often reminded of their earthly, imperfect, and fallible intellects and bodies, and are less likely to have political complaints about the *status quo* this philosophy supports. Somehow it seems that "reducing the world to pure logic" is a fantasy peculiar to (white? bourgeois? Western? Christian?) male philosophers. My response to Eagleton's older man's recognition that "roughness and ambiguity aren't imperfections — they're what make things work" is merely to affirm that that is what I have always known. Those for whom the ice is fundamentally unattainable — no matter how vainly we aspire to reach it — are more likely to feel at home on the rough ground, and to make the most of it.

This search for "the crystalline purity of logic" — for the ice — seems to me to be attractive to male philosophers because it is in part a disavowal of the messiness of the social worlds we move in and inhabit, and a form of psychological — pathological?— dissociation from the ethical and political complexities of these worlds. It's tempting to characterise this dissociation as the exclusive preserve of men. But not only does this claim conveniently ignore the struggles of some male philosophers — Wittgenstein among them — to get off the ice and back to the rough ground (and the possibility that some kinds of men never aspired to it), it also elides the ways feminist philosophy itself has often continued to use its inherited philosophical strategies to escape friction. Just as Wittgenstein is exasperated by his earlier attempts to disengage from the complexities of language, to find "super-concepts" that require no example-giving, so I was simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the phenomenon in feminist theory that I now call "methodological essentialism." On reading Elizabeth V. Spelman's book *Inessential Woman*, I realised that Spelman was talking about some of the same things as Wittgenstein, albeit in more political and accessible terms. Much feminist philosophy

seemed to me to be struggling with the desire for easier, less messy ways to capture the essence of "women," at the same time as it tried to remain true to its roots in feminist movements. We have sometimes tried to reduced complex phenomena to their simplest forms, eradicating their concreteness in favour of abstraction, and purifying them of specificity. Essentialism, then, for feminist theory, seemed to have something to do with the same "craving for generality" that erased the "particular case" that Wittgenstein identifies.

My initial goal when I started on this piece of philosophy was thus to bring together Wittgenstein's critique of essentialism with Spelman's. This was to be one original contribution of the dissertation: to construct an anti-essentialist Wittgensteinian feminism. But I wanted this work to be more than critique, to offer more than another soul-searching account by a white woman of exclusion in feminist theory. In particular, I wanted it to speak not only to my concerns as a "private" feminist philosopher, but also to my struggles as a "public" feminist activist. I wanted it to be action-guiding, pragmatic, and constructive. These desiderata were motivated by several sets of experiences: first, I was surprised by the ways that concerns about essentialism have filtered through to general discourse in and about feminism in the academy. Essentialism is not just an issue debated by feminist philosophers. As I discuss later, "essentialist" is usually a disapprobative adjective, intended to imply racism, ethnocentrism, or some form of exclusion. Sometimes feminists accuse other feminists of being "essentialist," and I analyse the content of these claims at some length in this dissertation. But sometimes these accusations are made by anti-feminists, or those ambivalent toward more radical feminist claims. For example, on several occasions when I was responding to a straightforward piece of sexism by making a claim featuring the term "women," a sly look in my opponent's eye preceded the trumping riposte, "Ah! But by talking about 'women' aren't you being an 'essentialist'?!" And the general move of pointing to differences between women as a way of dismissing feminist claims rather than nuancing them had also become a relatively familiar phenomenon. For example, an increasingly common rhetorical move on the part of anti-feminist interlocuters, in my experience, has been to attempt to cut the

ground from under my feet by pointing to racial difference as a decisive argument against the salience of gender in any given feminist analysis.

These phenomena do not imply that feminists should give up our worries about essentialism, racism, and exclusion. It seems to me an inevitable feature of oppositional discourses that our own self-criticism will be appropriated, distorted, and used against us by our political enemies. When my own position within the feminist milieux I know best has been one of power, it has doubtless contributed to a relative inattention to how my understanding of my own gender identity has shaped my perception of the oppression of women in general. And concomitantly, the ways in which I am marginalised (as a young woman in an aging male profession, as a woman coming from a different cultural background than most of my colleagues, or as a woman with strong political commitments that are at odds with the dominant belief systems in North America, for example) have given me added insight into how systems of oppression operate. The concerns about false generalisations about women that I discuss here under the rubric of essentialism are, I believe, very real political problems for feminists, reflecting both the inadequacies of white, heterosexual, middle-class women in responding to racism, heteronormativity, and class oppression within feminist movements, and a failure to recognise and respond to these omissions in our processes of theory-building. But nonetheless, I am disquieted by the shorthand deployment of "essentialist" as a strategy for dismissing controversial feminist claims *both* within and outside feminist discussion, rather than as a genuine entrée to discussion of how to improve feminist methods.

Finally, I wrote this dissertation concurrently with my involvement in feminism in more public domains, most notably as a counsellor and advocate for survivors of sexual violence, and a coordinator for volunteer recruitment and training in a sexual assault centre. Although I had always been very public about my feminism and was used to fighting the feminist corner against sexist opposition, when I took up this work I was quickly shocked and dismayed by the extent of sexualised violence against women and the ways that violence is condoned by and contiguous with gender socialisation in general. I had understood feminist analyses of sexual violence in simple theoretical terms for a long time (knowing that I was more likely to be raped by someone I know than by a stranger,

for example). But this activism brought a different kind of knowledge of aspects of this problem that are too often hidden — of the ways people in positions of power tried to evade responsibility for violence, and the ways people close to survivors of violence are too often complicitous in retraumatising them, for example. Most notably, I came to see gender as a horribly real and often absolutely overwhelming axis of difference in the context of sexual violence. I sometimes felt as if all men stood on one side of the line, and all women on the other, and that nothing more remained to be said.

At the same time, the organisation I worked in was struggling to improve its services; part of this effort focused on dynamics internal to the organisation around racism, ethnocentrism, heteronormativity, and the treatment of volunteers who identified as survivors of childhood sexual abuse by those who did not. Our struggles to improve our organisational strategies not only in our contact with our clientele, but also in our contact with each other, provided me with much more concrete understandings of the limitations of invoking "sisterhood" as the solution to our common oppression. They also convinced me that differences between women are the motor of feminist organising, not a barrier to its success, no matter how difficult they may be to negotiate. As Marilyn Frye says,

> All...formations of women (including those initially conceived as unified by specific differences such as sexuality or race), if persisted in for any length of time, have profoundly involved their participants in articulating, elaborating, appreciating, defining, exploring, recognizing, negotiating, consolidating, and traveling differences among women. This has been practically, politically, historically inevitable. If women were going to be together in women-focused, women-defined, and women-defining spaces and enterprises, women were going to engage in many varieties of what might be called "the practice of differences."[2]

But the necessity of working with difference, and our conflictual — albeit in many ways productive — internal struggles over differences, stood next to a frequent need to resist our opponents' oppressive characterisations of women and men in unequivocal terms. We often could not afford to be nuanced in our political strategy, and needed to

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[2] Marilyn Frye, "The Necessity of Differences: Constructing a Positive Category of Women," *Signs* 21:4, 1996.

construct perhaps interim notions of "women" that did not capture every important case. This presented us with a set of contradictions, and not enough of the feminist philosophy I knew seemed adequate to the task of providing signposts for a feminist practice that had to confront this paradox.

I wanted to begin by providing this more personal genealogy explaining how I came to write this dissertation as a way of explaining — if not justifying — the somewhat controversial direction of my work from theory to practice to theory. Many feminist philosophers, myself included, aspire to make our work "relevant" and to locate our more abstract musings on the rough ground of "activism." As I discuss toward the end of this dissertation, that distinction itself is problematic, as is the privileging of one or the other of "theory" and "practice" within any feminist discourse. Thus my goal is not to use examples from practice to adjust my theory, but rather to abandon a certain kind of theory altogether in favour of a discussion of "theoretical" issues that are deeply enmeshed with, and worked through with reference to, particular concrete examples. This has been a frustrating process, and I have often wished that the messy "rough ground" of practice were more susceptible to theorising of the neater, smoother kind. To paraphrase María Lugones, I have sometimes worried more passionately about the harm my practice did to my theorising, than about the harm my theorising did to my practice.[3] Too often my thoughts about feminist theory have taken off in one direction while my practice required a different kind of intellectual framework. This dissertation is thus an attempt to reconcile my own theory and practice without giving up either the circumspection and imagination of philosophy or the immediacy and pragmatism of political engagement.

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How do these questions fit with established debates in contemporary political philosophy? The essentialism controversies in feminist philosophy are not only central to

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[3] Lugones actually says, "White women theorists seem to have worried more passionately about the harm the claim [that some feminist generalisations are exclusionary] does to theorising than about the harm the theorising did to women of color." María Lugones, "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism," in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

contemporary feminist studies, but also speak to broader concerns about political identity. Using identities as the basis of political mobilisation, as in *some* sense all feminist, anti-racist, lesbian, gay and transgender activists do, raises quite different political questions than do appeals to ideology *simpliciter* as the basis of shared goals. Some of these questions are by now very familiar: Does invoking a shared identity necessarily conceal or destroy differences?[4] Is this a bad thing? Must we choose between "essentialising" our identities and disowning them? Is any subaltern political identity merely an artifact of oppression, and how should this concern shape our politics? How does one go about mobilising around identities one ultimately wants to change, undercut, or even destroy altogether? Do "pluralist" political theories — or the strategies they might imply — damage our ability effectively to resist structures of oppression? All of these questions have been widely debated by feminist, race and queer theorists. I have been especially interested in the answers to these questions in the context of feminist concerns about essentialism, but they play out in other discourses too. Essentialism is by no means a problem (if it is a problem) only for feminists.

I return to some of these broader questions in my conclusion, but here I want to describe the three specific lacunae in the existing feminist philosophical literature that motivate this work. The first is the evident confusion in contemporary feminist theory surrounding the use of the term "essentialism." If Wittgenstein is correct that the meaning of a word lies in its use, then feminists will find it hard to know what "essentialism" means. The term and its cognates are used indiscriminately to express disapproval of many different kinds. Some feminist theorists have already presented analyses of the state of the discipline of feminist philosophy which crucially identify both the conceptual vagueness and the regulatory effects of charges of essentialism, but which also ultimately sidestep the substantive issues at stake. These articles tend to be limited in scope, opinion pieces that express regret at the lack of critical analysis of essentialism, but which do not pretend to provide such analysis.[5] Thus I hope here to complement this literature and provide an

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[4] Allison Weir, *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[5] Examples of this genre include: Jane Roland Martin, "Methodological Essentialism, False Difference, and Other Dangerous Traps," in *Signs*, 19:3, 1994; Teresa de Lauretis, "Upping the Anti (sic) in Feminist

etiology of the feminist preoccupation with essentialism, as well as distinguishing different uses of the term and different pejorative imputations.

Many feminists have pointed to the putative tensions between generalising claims about women and demands for attention to difference.[6] This dichotomy has been described, reiterated and criticised in numerous ways. The tension itself seems to lie in different places. Is it a problem in language? Is it a metaphysical difficulty stemming from the ways we categorise different objects? Is it an empirical problem concerning what women have in common? Is it a political difficulty emerging from our organising strategies? However we characterise the tension, the dichotomy of overly general essentialism and hopeless particularity must be false. In keeping with Wittgenstein, I found that work in the discipline of philosophy in particular tended to reiterate this dichotomy, repeatedly presenting feminists with a specious choice between difference-denying generalisations and a hopeless fragmentation of gender categories. Thus my second motivation for this project was a sense of frustration with the way this false dichotomy was persistently offered up without either a philosophical escape route, or any recognition of the concrete feminist praxis that seemed successfully to evade it.

Thus finally, I was motivated by a desire to see the essentialism debates relate more explicitly to political practice. Several feminists have gestured toward potential routes for avoiding essentialism by stressing the empirical nature of the problem, as well as the fact that feminist practice seems to have been able to negotiate difference in ways not adequately captured by feminist philosophy.[7] While I found such approaches potentially useful, they always appeared at the end of an argument, as conclusions rather than as premises to be elaborated. I want to be specific about how particular identity claims actually do and might inflect feminist practice, to make a new contribution to

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Theory," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, eds. Marianna Hirsch and Evelyn Fox-Keller (New York: Routledge 1991); Elizabeth Grosz, "Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism," in *The Essential Difference*, eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[6] See Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," and Sandra Harding, "The Instability of the Categories of Feminist Theory," both in *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*, eds. Micheline Malson et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[7] I discuss Susan Moller Okin's attempt to develop the former strategy in chapter two. The latter approach is apparent in both Marilyn Frye, "The Necessity of Differences," and Allison Weir, *Sacrificial Logics*.

understanding how essentialism matters for feminist methods. The two areas I chose to explore — research methods and anti-sexual violence organising — reflect my own preoccupations and interests, and there are other contexts where the same kinds of analyses might usefully be applied. But I noticed that these were two fields where generalisations about women played a particularly important resistive role.

"Research" is one of the methods by which feminists have attempted to uncover the contours of women's lives hidden by patriarchy, and have pointed both to the exclusion of all women from many research projects, and to the sexism implicit in much empirical investigation that does purport to address or include women's concerns. Developing feminist methodologies has thus been a project central to much work in feminist sociology and theory of knowledge. But until recently, feminist research has too rarely addressed philosophical questions of identity and essentialism by working toward methods that address epistemologically and pragmatically the complexities of differences between women. Put simply, I saw a gap between the kinds of things I, wearing my feminist researcher hat, had to do or to assume in order to conduct empirical investigations and ground empirical claims about women, and the anti-essentialist philosophy that challenged aspects of this enterprise.

As an activist working against sexual violence in a small organisation, I found a similar discontinuity. The feminist discourse I argued for and within on most days made unequivocal claims about the significance of gender in shaping our clients' experiences of so-called domestic violence, for example. And when I argued with university administrators, male students, or hostile journalists about issues such as "date rape," my struggle of necessity focused on introducing gender (unmodified) as a relevant category of analysis in discussions overtly (and, to my mind, naively) dismissive of the significance of gender. At the same time, I knew that my practice had changed and continued to change in the light of, for example, my increased awareness of racial difference and racism in the context of sexual violence. But these changes did not seem to imply that gender was any *less* significant than I had first thought, only that it was *differently* significant. Thus there did not seem to be an irreducible conflict between the theoretical lessons of feminist anti-essentialism and the particular forms of feminist practice with which I was most familiar.

These factors, then, provided the motivation for this dissertation. To preview my argument: in chapters one and two I construct an etiology of the use of the term "essentialism" and its cognates in feminist theory. I identify four distinct uses of the term, with metaphysical, biological, linguistic and methodological connotations. I argue that neither metaphysical nor biological essentialisms are at stake in most contemporary feminist debates, and set aside these issues to focus on essentialism as a methodological problem within social constructionist discourses. I outline the putative tensions between feminist generalisations about women that risk under-estimating politically significant differences between us, and anti-essentialist approaches that seem to undermine feminist political analyses and goals. In chapter two I look at the political implications of methodological essentialism, defending Spelman's critique of essentialism against the replies of Natalie Stoljar and Susan Moller Okin. Like Stoljar and Okin, I have been disturbed by the ways feminist critiques of overly general claims about "women" in general have permitted gender to be treated as an illegitimate category of analysis *tout court*. One of the themes of the dissertation is thus my own scepticism about gender scepticism, or my "anti-anti-essentialism," as I call it in chapter two. Analyses that depict anti-essentialism only as a kind of relativism about gender, however, fail to see the importance of contextual theorising, or the more general potential for constructive strategies following on from anti-essentialist critique. Thus while I am sympathetic to the fears evoked by other anti-anti-essentialists, I argue that they miss the point: Spelman's analysis does not preclude the possibility of legitimate generalisations about women. It does, however, make critical commentary on essentialist feminist theory its main focus, and stops short of offering an alternative "anti-essentialist" method.

So what are the implications of feminist critiques of methodological essentialism for feminist philosophical method? In chapter three I turn to Wittgenstein's critique of essentialism, and his proposed alternative, to outline a feminist method that understands similarities between women as "family resemblances," and uses purposive boundary-drawing to ensure the political efficacy of feminist categories. Wittgenstein's therapy for philosophers, I argue, can also be useful for feminists: it encourages a healthy distrust of the discipline of "philosophy," while reconstituting our endeavours through the injunction

"look and see". These two aphorisms — "look and see," and "back to the rough ground!" — together motivate my own philosophical attention to feminist praxis. For those feminists who are "bewitched" by essentialism, a Wittgensteinian approach offers a methodological path between two extremes: on the one hand, asserting women's sameness in ways that minimise important differences, and on the other, insisting on an *a priori* segmentation of gender categories that undercuts important feminist ideologies and political objectives.

The essentialism debates have for too long remained at the level of metaphysical and epistemological questions about generality and "difference," sidestepping analyses of power that might show how homogeneity comes to be imposed, and when "strategic essentialism" might be most useful. We — especially the "we" who find our lives and concerns reflected in existing feminist approaches — are too willing to be excited by the *idea* of diversity rather than by the political struggles required to ensure just representation. One consequence of a Wittgensteinian analysis of the kind I recommend is the need to give specific and concrete examples of the contexts where feminists have to arbitrate between different claims about what women have in common. Without this specificity, it is not clear that there is very much at stake for feminist practitioners in the essentialism debates within feminist philosophy. It seems to me that to develop accounts of the implications of anti-essentialism for feminist practice is a significant but as yet untapped interdisciplinary project in feminist studies. We have failed to move on from the tropes of anti-essentialist critique to more carefully discriminating and praxis-oriented encounters with feminist political projects.

Thus in chapter four I ask what the injunction "look and see" actually implies, looking at one practical context feminists might rethink in light of the tension between essentialism and anti-essentialism. "Look and see" cannot be the conclusion of an argument, a wave of the philosopher's hand toward forms of inquiry that lie outside our ambit. Nor can we uncritically assume that women's lives are transparently accessible to feminists, when our own analyses have long revealed the epistemological and political complexities of methods of empirical inquiry, and the ways they have been shaped by our particularity and partiality. I attempt to redress, on the one hand, the lack of feminist

philosophical examination of specific attempts to justify empirically based generalisations about women; on the other hand, I show how much feminist social research is under-theorised and employs research methods that are insufficiently attuned to the epistemological and methodological issues raised by critiques of essentialism.

To develop this argument I present an extended case study of Carol Gilligan's recent work on girls' experiences of relationship at adolescence, in which she attempts to reconcile a feminist theoretical framework that emphasises relatively generic features of gendered psychology with more explicit recognition of the diverse race and class contexts in which gender is shaped. Feminist theorists have long treated Gilligan as an arch-essentialist; she has, I argue, been somewhat unjustly criticised for her tendency to make overly general claims about women and girls, men and boys. I interpret her most recent book — *Between Voice and Silence, Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* — as an attempt to respond to charges of methodological essentialism. I argue that Gilligan successfully evades the kinds of essentialism with which she had previously been charged, but that she continues to struggle with deeper issues of essentialism in her research method. She fails fully to recognise how relations of power in her methods of inquiry and processes of theory building shape the similarities and differences she is able to acknowledge. In trying to articulate how Gilligan might rectify this problem, I point toward forms of anti-essentialism that interrogate relations of power among women and how those relations shape political theories of identity. I argue for a particular research method that is sensitive to the influence of researchers' identities in shaping research outcomes, and that diffuses their power to construct the identities of their participants.

In the final chapter I turn to another locus of feminist practice, examining the essentialism debates in connection with feminist discourses around sexual violence — the quintessentially essentialist feminist issue. I take another alleged essentialist — Catharine MacKinnon — and review her response to critics who suggest that her feminist theory creates a monolithic account of womanhood that fails to understand the particular location of women of colour. MacKinnon claims that her theory is based in women's experience and the feminist practice that emerges from that experience, and thus that her theory is both empirically grounded and politically well-judged. I argue that merely to assert the

transparent reality of women's experiences and the primacy of practice, however, begs the question of how those experiences have been represented and how political practice has itself been constructed from particular locations. MacKinnon over-generalises diverse women's experiences in ways that my Wittgensteinian analysis precludes, and argues that feminist practice can be straightforwardly theorised merely if we "look and see" without recognising the complexity of this claim. Thus MacKinnon's arguments under-determine the shape of anti-essentialist feminist organising against sexual violence.

In the second half of the chapter I look at the challenges facing feminist organisations that do reshape their practice in the light of politically significant and power-laden differences between women, at the same time as they persist in understanding gender as a political category that is absolutely central to their work. Again, these case studies illustrate the overwhelming importance of feminist attention to how relations of power construct generalisations about women. But these relations cannot be cast as always pernicious: feminists need criteria for deciding whom to include and exclude from political identity categories and coalition formation — and when. Working through these conflicts redirects feminist attention to mechanisms of power and to the importance of ideology, suggesting that renouncing the very idea of a political theory with general ambitions — a position often associated with anti-essentialism in feminist philosophy — in fact *precludes* anti-essentialist feminist praxis.

* * *

In my conclusion, I point to some of the many other contexts where the essentialism debates might usefully be applied to rethinking political practice, including controversies about race and racism, the politics of sexuality, and challenges to the structures of feminist organisations. These particular concerns seem a long way from the discussion of Wittgenstein with which I began. Nevertheless, they are Wittgensteinian in spirit, moving my own discussion out into the world to "look and see" with a critical eye. They also reflect an ongoing dialectic between the hugely diverse philosophical tools that we have inherited from Western philosophy, and the political exigencies of concrete

feminist engagement, with its compromises, struggles, and rough ground. Like Wittgenstein, I am willing neither to renounce philosophy in favour of some kind of extra-philosophical pragmatism — even if I could make sense of this imperative — nor to accede to the allure of the frictionless ice and remove myself entirely from political engagement. But the resultant dialectic raises its own questions and contradictions; they are the substance of this dissertation.

1

Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Contemporary Feminist Theory

Sometimes an expression has to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning, — then it can be put back into circulation.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* [1]

The word "essentialism" and its cognates regularly appear in contemporary social and political theory, and particularly in theory addressing the politics of racial, sexual or gendered identities. Their meanings are generally taken for granted, and their force is generally disapprobative. Essentialism is presumed to be a negative aspect of feminism. Consider the following examples:

> One use of a theory of discourse for feminist politics, then, is in understanding social identities in their full socio-cultural complexity, thus in demystifying static, single variable, essentialist views of gender identity.[2]

> [T]o maintain that femininity predisposes women to certain (nurturing) jobs or (collaborative) styles of work is to naturalize complex economic and social processes and, once again, to obscure the differences that have characterized women's occupational histories. An insistence on differences

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980): 39.

[2] Nancy Fraser, "The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics," in *Critical Theory Now*, ed. Philip Wexler (London: Falmer Press, 1991): 99.

> undercuts the tendency to absolutist, and in the case of sexual difference, essentialist categories.[3]
>
> The critique of essentialism encouraged by postmodernist thought is useful for African-Americans concerned with reformulating outmoded notions of identity. We have too long had imposed upon us from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness. Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency.[4]
>
> Some theorists who have ceased looking for the causes of sexism still rely on essentialist categories such as gender identity. This is especially true of those scholars who have sought to develop gynocentric alternatives to mainstream androcentric perspectives but who have not fully abandoned the universalist pretensions of the latter.[5]

All of these examples, taken from articles with otherwise disparate theses, presume that "essentialism" is a way of conceiving of political identities, and that it renders them "static," "absolutist," "over-determined," and "universalist." This chapter and the next identify four types of essentialism — metaphysical, biological, linguistic and methodological — and argue that only one generates serious political challenges for contemporary feminist theory. The questions I am posing by way of this typology are first, is a given form of essentialism manifested in the work of any contemporary feminist theorists? and second, is it typically the object of feminist anti-essentialist critique? The answers to these questions will reveal that certain forms of gender essentialism can be easily discounted — no feminist author deploys them, or they are not the targets of feminist critics of essentialism. I argue that essence-talk in recent feminist thought is rarely concerned with metaphysical or biological essence, although "essentialism" has a philosophical history that is deeply embedded in strong claims about the true nature of

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[3] Joan Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, The Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 14:1, 1988: 47.

[4] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990): 28.

[5] Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson "Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990): 32.

things in the world, including women and men. Metaphysical and biological essentialisms, nonetheless, are premised on epistemological claims that are inimical to almost all contemporary feminist projects; there has been an important epistemological shift that tends to discount forms of essentialism resting on realist claims. Thus to write as if essentialism of the metaphysical or biological kind were at stake in feminist debates is to set up straw person arguments that do not reflect genuine disagreement among the vast majority of contemporary feminist theorists.

On the other hand, forms of essentialism occurring *within* social constructionist discourses have raised more challenging problems for recent feminist theory. Few feminists, however, explicitly recognise or discuss linguistic essentialism as a distinct type. In this chapter I articulate linguistic essentialism, and outline a feminist poststructuralist anti-essentialist critique. This critique offers a challenge both to realist claims about linguistic reference, and to the assumption that classes of objects are individuated in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions of membership; that is, that members of a class each exhibit properties possession of which makes them such members. As chapter three argues, the tacit acceptance or rejection of this latter claim among feminist theorists contributes to an impasse obstructing the construction of a politically viable anti-essentialist feminist method.

Finally, methodological essentialism pertains to the use of generalisations in feminist political-theoretical work. I take seriously the claim that feminism's need to use gender as a basic category of analysis, when set against the deep extant differences and divisions between women, represents an epistemological and political tension that frequently remains unresolved both in feminist theory and in feminist practice. On the one hand, some feminist theories and forms of feminist political organising have made overly general assumptions about "women," or deployed the term in exclusionary ways that presuppose a set of necessary and sufficient conditions of membership. On the other hand, some feminists have argued that essentialism inheres in the very use of general terms, and that, to be faithful to one emancipatory vision, feminists should retain a deep and persistent scepticism about gender, aiming to fragment and proliferate gender categories. Both of these extreme positions, and many in between, are represented in contemporary

feminist theory, if not by the entire oeuvre of any author, then at least by certain moments in her work. These first two chapters describe the tension between overly general assumptions about "women" and challenges to the category itself, before chapter three offers a Wittgensteinian solution.

The role of "essentialism" in feminist theory

Feminist theorists have presented "essentialism," perhaps rashly, as a term that can capture a range of widely debated and controversial themes in feminist thought, including illegitimate generalisations, ahistoricism, and certain understandings of "identity politics." No less vague and all-encompassing are those positions labelled "anti-essentialist," which consist in numerous overlapping theses, including the death of metaphysics, social constructionism in general, the death of the subject, the end of history, and descriptive and normative claims about personal and political identities.[6] Thus a feminist theorist's immunity from essentialism — real or alleged — in one sphere does not preclude its occurrence in another.

Essentialism in feminist theory, furthermore, is defined not by its alleged defenders but by "anti-essentialist" critics. Essentialism is presented as a *concern*, a feature of *bad* feminist theory, any one of a multitude of sins, "lingering" even where it is supposed to have been eradicated. Chantal Mouffe captures the tone of this general attack: reflecting in 1990 on ten years of feminist theory, she writes that "the struggle against essentialism is far from having been won."[7] Yet the pejorative use and broad interpretation of essentialism makes it difficult to make out what is to be avoided, or even if essentialism, in some form or another, can *ever* be avoided. Many feminist commentators use "essentialist" as one of a string of critical adjectives directed at other feminist work, yet in

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[6] Jane Roland Martin, "Methodological Essentialism"; Teresa de Lauretis, "Upping the Anti (sic) in Feminist Theory"; Elizabeth Grosz, "Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism."

[7] Chantal Mouffe, "The Legacy of m/f," in *The Woman in Question*, eds. Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990): 4.

order to make that accusation stick, they frequently attribute forms of essentialism to their opponents which are not obviously philosophically unjustified or politically dangerous.

My recognition of the limitations of the charge of "essentialism" is not a novel one, and I concur with those theorists who have emphasised the inhibiting consequences of using "essentialist" as a pejorative adjective rather than a substantive term of critical assessment.[8] Just as not all forms of essentialism are pernicious, certain forms of anti-essentialism are politically limiting for feminists. If essentialism were taken genuinely to encompass all the philosophical sins attributed to it, moreover, then its meaning would be so broad as to lack critical force. Unless we are clear about what essentialism is and is not, and what is wrong with it, the pejorative adjective "essentialist" simply wastes theoretical time and energy, and obscures a myriad of methodological and political issues within feminist theory that are worthy of more differentiated critique. Yet for all the varied usages and pitfalls of the term, "essentialism" remains a crucial issue in feminist theory and organising. Let me offer three examples.

It is by now a widely accepted claim within contemporary North American feminist theory that in naming and describing such things as "women's experience," middle-class white feminists have often carelessly taken their own experiences to be representative of all women's lives, because they are both sufficiently disconnected from the lives of other women, and relatively more powerful than women of colour and working-class women. Just this morning, in a radio discussion about generational differences, a group of four men and one woman, all in their late fifties and sixties, discussed their life paths. The men were all married professionals who talked about their workplace experiences and included their wives and children only as asides to the main business of their lives. The one woman quickly picked up on this and presented a "women's perspective," talking about her own life at home "not working" while raising children and volunteering in her community. She then added that her sanity had been saved by "having someone in once a week," enabling

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[8] See Martin "Methodological Essentialism"; Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, Nancy Miller, "Criticizing Feminist Criticism," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, eds. Hirsch and Fox-Keller; Teresa de Lauretis, "The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the US, and Britain," and "In A Word," interview by Ellen Rooney with Gayatri Spivak, both in *differences* 1:2, 1989; Natalie Stoljar, "Essence, Identity and the Concept of Woman," *Philosophical Topics*, Fall 1995.

her to leave the house for her volunteer job. This ungendered "someone" is, of course, another woman, and almost certainly a poor woman. Thus, at the same time as the speaker resists a patriarchal construction of "life for our generation" (one inattentive to differences between men, too), she offers a homogenised "women's perspective" that does not acknowledge the experiences of different women. bell hooks, in her familiar and incisive critique of Betty Friedan's classic *The Feminine Mystique*, offers a similar argument, showing how Friedan's presentation of "American women" in fact describes the oppression only of white middle-class women, while her feminist prescriptions for these women to "get out of the house and into the workplace" can be implemented, under the existing social structures, only given black women's continuing subordination.[9]

Second, Elizabeth Spelman argues that certain forms of exclusion, especially racism within feminist theory in the United States, derive from a philosophical imagination that fails to understand gender as a category whose meaning depends on context.[10] As chapter two explores in detail, her account offers a persuasive anti-essentialist critique of generalisations about women, based on the claim that certain ways of doing feminist theory (especially the method she labels "additive analysis") presuppose an "essential womanness" that all women share and around which feminists can unproblematically mobilise. Instead, Spelman suggests, feminists should conceptualise gender as always inflected by other differences between women. Critical responses to Spelman exemplify the apprehensions about anti-essentialism set out in my introduction: the kind of fragmentation of gender that Spelman's analysis seems to recommend generates fears of disabling relativism and contextualism.

Finally, chapter four presents an extended case study of a feminist theorist and practitioner who has, in a similar vein, been "accused" of essentialism. Carol Gilligan's research on women's moral and psychological development has frequently been criticised for essentialism in that her "subjects" have been, until recently, predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual women and girls in the United States. Thus in drawing general

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[9] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963); bell hooks, "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory," in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

[10] Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

conclusions about gendered differences in moral voice, for example, Gilligan seems to preclude the possibility that race, class or other differences between women will significantly affect their moral attitudes. Such objections again rest on claims about the nature and limitations of generalisations about women.

These, then, are examples of the kinds of debates explored in this dissertation. I will argue that generalising about gender can be implicated in a form of methodological essentialism that is philosophically and politically misguided. Avoiding this kind of essentialism does not mean giving up on generalising about women and men, but it does require a rethinking of the bases of general categories so as both to retain the critical political force of feminist analysis and remain sensitive to the ways power can render difference invisible.

Essence and truth: essentialism in metaphysics and nature

The feminist preoccupation with essentialism is rarely situated to illustrate any continuity with the problem in non-feminist Western philosophy. This dissertation necessarily sidesteps any historical work pertaining to specific figures (the literature on Aristotelian essences, Platonic Forms, or Locke's real versus nominal distinction, *inter alia*, is vast). And despite my later appropriation of Wittgenstein, I will not discuss his own essentialist targets (inter-war philosophy of language and logic). While these debates are interesting in their own right, they are tangential to the pragmatic concerns foregrounded by feminist anti-essentialism.[11]

Metaphysical and biological essentialisms are doctrines incorporating strong ontological and epistemological claims. Both make the metaphysical claim that essence inheres in objects in the world, as well as the epistemological argument that essentialist claims are true because they correspond to a reality existing independently of social construction. Neither of these types of essentialism are the object of criticism internal to

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[11] See David DeGrood, *Philosophies of Essence* (Amsterdam: B.R. Gruner, 1976); Baruch Brody, *Identity and Essence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). For an analysis of Wittgenstein's critique of essentialism in his own context, see Garth Hallett, *Essentialism: A Wittgensteinian Critique* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

contemporary feminist theory. Precisely because these two forms of essentialism do not understand their own claims to be socially constructed, they are at odds with otherwise diverse feminist understandings of gender.

Metaphysical essentialism

Metaphysical essentialism is a doctrine about the nature of things in the world. Formally understood, it is not manifested in the work of any contemporary feminist theorists, and is not at stake when feminists accuse each other of "essentialism." In fact, metaphysical essentialism has faded from sight in contemporary Western philosophy more generally. This leaves social theorists to debate the role of essentialism in the context of social constructionist debates about the extent of the similarities and differences between human beings, cultures, or various social groups. The insinuation that metaphysical essentialism is at stake nonetheless serves a rhetorical function within feminist theory, allowing the work of certain authors to be dismissed on the basis of more sweeping criticisms than should properly be allowed. Because metaphysical essentialism is an untenable position for almost all feminists with regard to gender, eliding the distinction between this form of essentialism and others gives false weight to charges of "essentialism," at the expense of analytical usefulness.

What is metaphysical essentialism in the context of the history of philosophy? Metaphysical essentialism consists in the claim that certain species or types of things (and there are different claims to be made about different sorts of categories) have an essence: namely, a certain quiddity or innate structure. As Locke describes his notion of real essence:

> Essence may be taken for the being of anything whereby it is what it is. And thus the real internal, but generally (in Substances) unknown, constitution of things, whereon their discoverable qualities depend, may be called their essence.[12]

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[12] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. John W. Yolton (London: Dent, 1961 [1690]), 3:3: 15.

It is not only material substances or natural phenomena that have essences, although the kinds of essence invoked for material objects may be of a different variety than the essence of other categories. Socrates is searching for essences with his insistent questions, "what is justice?," "what is piety?," to which he demands unequivocal answers that clearly cannot rest on physical properties allegedly picked out by concept terms, but rather on some otherwise metaphysical construal of their nature.[13] By what process can this metaphysical property of classes of objects be attributed?

One answer is that the metaphysical essence of particular things is indeed ineffable, and that while we may premise certain conclusions on its existence, this existence can never be demonstrated. The attribution of essences may be justified in terms of inference to the best explanation. A second alternative is to look to scientific theories to provide the material basis for essence claims. If we inquire into that "being of anything whereby it is what it is," then scientific investigation into the nature of the physical world seems to offer some possible answers, contending that essence can indeed be perceived. For example, we might argue that the essence of material substances is to be found in their atomic structures. However, this solution leaves unaddressed many kinds of essence claims that do not apply to straightforwardly material objects. Even if we can discover the inner constitutions of certain things or substances, this would not enable us to identify the essential structure that makes something a token of a particular type or kind.[14] What is the essence of a game (to use Wittgenstein's famous example)? The seeming futility of the search for metaphysical essences has been partly responsible for the increased emphasis, in modern Western philosophy, on essentialism as a feature of language rather than of things in themselves.

What does the above, seemingly rather arcane, philosophical problem have to do with feminism? Put briefly, it motivates the question, "could we find a metaphysical essence of gender?" Can we find an essential "womanness" by virtue of which women are

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[13] Plato, *Euthyphro*: esp. 5C-16A, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

[14] Margaret Atherton attributes this position to Locke in "The Inessentiality of Lockean Essences," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14:2, 1984.

women? Clearly, the history of Western social and political philosophy is riddled with attempts to offer an affirmative answer to that question, often using essentialist philosophy of gender to justify sexism. Metaphysical essentialism appears in one form as *a priorism*, as a total closure against the possibility that gender is a set of variable and mutable social constructs. This *a priorism* consists in the claim that women have souls of a particular kind, or that women necessarily possess certain forms of virtue but not others. Many misogynist theories in the history of political thought are based on such a Form of femininity that constitutes the essence of Woman, instantiated, according to some accounts, by real women. A belief in a pure and originary femininity outside the social realm is perhaps the most extreme kind of gender essentialist claim. Thus women are women by virtue of some ineffable essence that is definitive of femininity and is unchanging through history and culture. From this essence (which is generally construed as an indicator of weakness or inferiority), normative conclusions about women's social roles or abilities are then inferred. Thus the conclusion that women simply *are*, essentially, both different from and inferior to men is a familiar feminist target. [15]

Metaphysical essentialism is a central strategy, particular in a historical context, of sexist philosophies of gender that justify the oppression of women by appeal to a normatively negative ideal Woman. So can metaphysical essentialism ever be employed in the interests of feminist theory? If we accept the definitions of metaphysical essentialism I have just offered, it seems, *prima facie*, unlikely that feminists would gain from such arguments, however deployed. Certainly no modern feminist ever presents herself as a metaphysical essentialist in such straightforward terms. In Western feminist political theory most identifiable invocations of anything approximating metaphysical essence fall into two camps: they are either strong polemical claims made about women within radical feminist discourse that constitute a kind of "reverse essentialism," or are historically situated, oriented toward demonstrating the existence of certain traits universal to human

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[15] This dissertation does not explore these issues in the history of political thought. See Mary Briody Mahowald, ed., *Philosophy of Woman: An Anthology of Classic to Current Concepts* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 3rd edition 1994 [1978]).

beings from which particular political conclusions can be derived. Let me examine these two varieties in more detail.

First, few theorists invoke a metaphysical essence of Woman as part of a feminist politics — claiming that women possess "essential properties different from and superior to men's."[16] When feminists do make claims about women's superiority, they are much more likely to draw on accidental properties that women universally or generally possess, or on features of women's experiences that are clearly socially constructed. As Teresa de Lauretis says:

> [B]arring the case in which woman's essence is taken as absolute being or substance in the traditional metaphysical sense (and this may actually be the case for a few, truly fundamentalist thinkers to whom the term essentialist would properly apply), for the great majority of feminists the "essence" of woman is more like the essence of [Locke's] triangle than the essence of the thing-in-itself: it is the specific properties (e.g. a female-sexed body), qualities (a disposition to nurturance, a certain relation to the body etc.), or necessary attributes (e.g. the experience of femaleness, of living in the world as female) that women have developed or have been bound to historically, in their differently patriarchal sociocultural contexts, which make them women, and not men.[17]

The most plausible example in this near-empty "fundamentalist" category seems to me to be Mary Daly: in her writing I sometimes read a strongly spiritual thread, which could be interpreted as a curious mirroring of the intertwined nature of metaphysically essentialist arguments and religious doctrine.[18] Whatever we make of this interpretation of Daly's work, the arguments she makes that are most susceptible of anti-essentialist critique are not her more metaphysical claims. When her work is criticised, as it often is, for "essentialism," what is most often at stake is not an *a priori* form of metaphysical essentialism, but rather her overly generalising claims about women. For example, Audre Lorde's critique of *Gyn/Ecology* stresses both the exclusion of women of colour, and their depiction as "victims and preyers-upon each other": "To imply... that all women suffer the

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[16] This is pointed out by Martin, "Methodological Essentialism": 633.

[17] Lauretis, "The Essence of the Triangle": 5-6.

[18] See Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978): e.g. 315-320, 385-424.

same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other."[19] I will not explore this issue further here; it seems relatively uncontroversial that while some feminist work is methodologically problematic, forms of metaphysical essentialism that rely on *a priori* appeals are not the problem. While some work at the margins of feminist theory may flirt with this kind of metaphysical essentialism, no theorist has offered an articulated defence of it as a proper basis for feminist claims.

Second, the political strategy of invoking a universal human essence to argue against sexist determinism has a long and complex history. We find precursors to contemporary debates in feminist theory in attempts to reverse the focus of essentialism so as to claim that, instead of their essence confining women to established gender roles, it provides the basis for a critique of these roles. Such arguments are usually premised on the claim that a non-sexed human essence has more actual or potential political significance than any essential sexual difference. Thus, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft claims that both women and men are rational, and that this human "essence" — the potential for which is prior to education — is definitive of humanity.[20] Wollstonecraft argues that:

> Reason is, consequentially, the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth. Every individual is in this respect a world in itself. More or less may be conspicuous in one being than another; but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason? .... [C]onsidering woman as a whole, let it be what it will, instead of a part of man, the inquiry is whether she have reason or not. If she have, which, for a moment, I will take for granted, she was not created merely to be the solace of man, and the sexual should not destroy the human character.[21]

Thus reason is god-given, an essential quality bestowed upon human beings, and consists in the power to discern truth.

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[19] Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," in *Sister/Outsider* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1984): 67.

[20] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Penguin, 1992 [1792]).

[21] Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*: 142.

What has happened to this kind of essentialism in Western political theory? *Essentialism* as those defining qualities of human beings existing independently of any human experience (what Nussbaum calls "metaphysical-realist essentialism"[22]) has a long and complex history in political thought. Nonetheless, contemporary authors are unlikely to accept this type of appeal to a metaphysics that permits the unmediated perception of the real, or requires claims about the "ineffable," or that which is taken on faith. For example, Nussbaum's own "Aristotelian essentialism" is genealogically related to, yet still quite different from, Wollstonecraft's account. Nussbaum defends essentialism, which she defines as "the view that human life has certain central defining features." She argues that "the legitimate criticisms of essentialism still leave room for essentialism of a kind: for a historically sensitive account of the most basic human needs and human functions."[23] Listing certain conditions necessary for a form of life to count as human (ranging from mortality to practical reason to "separateness"), Nussbaum makes the case that her Aristotelian essentialism allows for the human values of compassion and respect, whereas the "anti-essentialism" of her opponents does not. By deploying deconstructive tactics and stressing thick cultural difference, Nussbaum claims, her opponents slide into a disabling relativism, on the basis of which they are unable to make moral judgments about poverty, inequality, development policy and global injustice. She makes clear that her view of humanity is not metaphysically *a priori*, and instead commits herself to a form of "historically grounded empirical essentialism," or to strong "internalist" universal claims, across time and culture, about the nature of human beings. Thus even she — a self-defined essentialist and certainly one of the theorists most wedded to universalising discourse writing about essentialism today — is careful to eliminate *a priorism* in favour of a more historically grounded account.

Nussbaum's retreat from metaphysically-realist essentialism is indicative of a more general and established scepticism about the possibility of any truths existing independently of human contexts. The broad rejection, by both feminist and non-feminist

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[22] Martha Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism," *Political Theory* 20:2, 1992: 206.

[23] Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice": 205.

political theorists, of an image of philosophy as "mirroring nature," radically independent of all human interpretation, has found a corollary in feminist theory: debates about essentialism, as all my examples suggest, are rarely carried out at this metaphysical level.[24] Seyla Benhabib, following Jane Flax's characterisation of postmodernism, points out a strong and weak version of the "death of metaphysics" as this relates to feminist theory.[25] The strong version suggests that the Western philosophical tradition has been dominated by a "metaphysics of presence" that has only recently faced a serious challenge in the form of deconstruction; Benhabib argues, I think rightly, that the strong thesis grossly over-simplifies and homogenises a diverse philosophical legacy. In its weak version, Benhabib argues, the Death of Metaphysics thesis is that philosophy cannot provide criteria of validity for other discourses, and thus must cease to be a meta-discourse of legitimation. She defines the feminist version of this thesis as "feminist skepticism toward the claims of transcendent reason." Rejecting the supposed search for the Real as a ground of Truth, Benhabib writes:

> If the subject of reason is not a supra-historical and context-transcendent being, but the theoretical and practical creations and activities of this subject bear in every instance the marks of the context out of which they emerge, then the subject of philosophy is inevitably embroiled with knowledge-governing interests which mark and direct its activities.[26]

The dialogue between Nussbaum or Benhabib and their respective opponents plays out a number of themes that will recur throughout this dissertation: generality versus specificity and sameness versus difference are the defining terms of essentialist/anti-essentialist debates, in whatever context they occur. The substantial debates surrounding their respective theses cannot be examined in more detail here. The implications of work such as Nussbaum's or Benhabib's for gender essentialism, however, lie in one central epistemological shift: the acceptance even by universalists that instead of looking for a

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[24] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[25] Seyla Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance," in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser, with introduction by Linda Nicholson, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[26] Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Feminist Contentions*, Benhabib et al.: 19.

truth about women existing independently of human interpretation, feminists need to look for commonalities and differences between them *from within* our own socially constructed frameworks of culturally specific understanding. Claims about gender must be empirical, not *a priori*, and must be clear about their own scope and legitimacy. The precise nature of "situated criticism," and the extent to which contextual analysis must be local and not generalised, is an issue that divides feminists. It is also the issue that is most central to feminist debates around essentialism.

Biological essentialism

Popular thinking about gender very often reflects widespread adherence to views that are biologically essentialist, and I in no way want to minimise the political significance of oppression originating in biologically essentialist views of women's functions or roles. Nonetheless, biological essentialism, in a way analogous to metaphysical essentialism, relies on truth-claims about persons that are not self-reflexive about their socially constructed nature. In what follows I first set out a form of biological essentialism that argues that women's capacities can be reduced to aspects of their biology. Feminist theorists accused of biological essentialism of this kind can be defended against the most obvious versions of the charge. The label "essentialist" is also used by feminist poststructuralists against their opponents when they argue that sex, as much as gender, is socially constructed. This questioning of the materiality and reality of sexed bodies considers itself "anti-essentialist." I will not pursue the debates surrounding this form of essentialism in any detail here, but use this example as an entrée to the increasingly untenable contrast between essentialism and social constructionism.

Biological essentialism is the claim that certain anatomical or physiological features of persons define their inclusion in a certain naturally occurring category, and often the very word "essentialism" is used as a convenient, if unclear, shorthand for such views. The fact that scientific and medical thinking about femininity has often used biologically essentialist arguments as a justification for the subordination of women is by now a feminist commonplace. As Grosz says:

> Biologism is a particular form of essentialism in which women's essence is defined in terms of women's biological capacities. Biologism is usually based on some form of reductionism: social and cultural factors are the effects of biologically given causes. In particular, biologism usually ties women closely to the functions of reproduction and nurturance, although it may also limit women's social possibilities through the use of evidence from neurology, neurophysiology, and endocrinology.[27]

Women are women, the argument runs, by virtue of their chromosomes, their hormones, their sexual organs, their brain size, their brain function, their smaller and weaker frames, and so on. From such claims are often inferred normative conclusions about gender roles ("biological determinism"), although such inferences do not necessarily follow. Simply because a certain biological feature is definitive of membership in a particular class does not mean that any normative conclusion about the inferiority of that class need ensue — unless, of course, normative claims are smuggled into the essence-talk itself, as is generally the case.[28]

Feminist objections both to biological essentialism and to the normative conclusions falsely inferred from it are well-established. Biologically essentialist claims conveniently ignore the many instances of inclusion in a class that do not in fact meet the criteria for membership, making universal claims where, at best, generalisations apply. The wealth of anthropological and sociological data on the variety of models of femininity also challenges the assumption of a universal and unchanging biological basis of both sex and gender. As with metaphysical essentialism, the feminist critique of biologism has centred on the sociology of the knowledge generated within scientific research programmes, and on the erasure of difference that biological essentialism both permits and requires.

Analogous views are put forward by essentialists with regard to sexuality: there is some "natural," authentic sexual drive that is repressed by the social; or people have some definitive sexual "orientation" that describes the way they "really are." Popular fascination with the question of "discovering" the "gay gene" perhaps best exemplifies an extreme biologically essentialist view of sexuality. Corresponding anti-essentialist criticisms

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[27] Grosz, "Sexual Difference": 84.

[28] Mahowald, ed., *Philosophy of Woman.*

pinpoint the fact that research usually centres on gay men (erasing the experience of lesbians even as it often purports to include it) and cast doubt on the "naturalness" of these claims: the question "what causes heterosexuality?" is not posed, the contrast between gay men and lesbians is not drawn out, and nor is variety in sexual behaviours. And much queer theory makes the point that essentialism with regard to sexual "orientation" fails to acknowledge the creation of "the homosexual" as a category of analysis only within a particular historical and cultural context, and prefers to elide differences in the social construction of homosexuality, basing "scientific" arguments instead on the supposed reality of an identifiable sub-group of people who are, by nature, inevitably sexually drawn only to members of the "same sex" and ineluctably different from the heterosexual majority.[29]

These claims are tangential to the methodological issues I want to explore. Anti-essentialist critique in feminist theory, while sometimes eliding different forms of essentialism, does not make its strongest and most controversial charges against this form of biological essentialism. While some feminist theorists have been accused of biological essentialism (and I examine this charge against Carol Gilligan in chapter four), these accusations are most often used to dismiss rather than to offer instructive critique. Thus some critics have tried to argue that certain forms of "cultural" or radical feminism are biologically essentialist by virtue of their appeal to aspects of women's bodily experiences as the basis of gender difference.[30]

For example, Sara Ruddick's maternal feminism argues that the experience of mothering, culturally associated with women, provides the foundation for a "politics of peace" or a certain ethical attitude toward relations with others.[31] But even the strongest versions of such theories step back from making biological difference *per se* the foundation of their claims, arguing instead that it is the social structuring of women's bodily experiences that constitutes a politically salient gender difference. Ruddick is

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[29] Steven Epstein, "Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism," *Socialist Review* 17:3, 1987; Jeffrey Escoffier, "Sexual Revolution and the Politics of Gay Identity," *Socialist Review* 15:4, 1985; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 (New York: Vintage, 1980).

[30] For example, Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983).

[31] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (New York: Ballantine, 1989).

anxious to stress that were men to engage more often and more seriously in the activity of mothering, they would learn the same kinds of ethical attitudes as women who currently mother; likewise, she construes "mothering" as an activity not necessarily linked to the physical state of pregnancy or to the act of childbirth — foster mothers, adoptive mothers, and so on, learn the same ethical attitudes as birth-mothers (and, indeed, birth mothers who do not go on to mother their children do *not* learn them).[32] Some cultural feminists may be unreflective about their inferences from sexed bodies to social constructionist claims, and risk naturalising claims about women and men that are intended to indicate learned or constructed aspects of human society. Furthermore, such feminists are often cavalier in their attitudes towards exceptions, and make overly generalising claims about men and women. However, their critics, I suggest, have been no less careless in attributing "biological essentialism" to arguments that in fact depict certain features of persons as accidental rather than essential properties.[33]

Biological essentialism, in this simple form, is not the target of feminist anti-essentialist critique. Indeed, feminists have devoted considerable time and energy to discrediting forms of biological essentialism that infer normative conclusions about women's subordination. We saw earlier how metaphysical essentialism is often manifested as *a priorism*, with an accompanying reluctance to engage with empirical evidence. This charge is not so straightforwardly levelled at biologically essentialist claims, which may invoke a scientific or medical empirical basis. However, the exact content of this "empiricist" claim needs to be unpacked. Merely invoking claims about the biological reality of gender difference does not allay anti-essentialist fears. What is wrong with biological essentialism is not that it fails to make empirical claims, but rather that it fails to understand these claims as themselves being shaped by specific social and political conditions. Thus the reason that both metaphysical and biological essentialisms are inimical to feminist debate is their mutual juxtaposition to social constructionism. Recent feminist anti-essentialist critique, however, has mainly been directed at essentialising moments within social constructionist discourses.

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[32] Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*: 28-57.

[33] For this point see Martin, "Methodological Essentialism": 634.

Biological essentialism is, on the one hand, the drawing of normative conclusions about women's inferiority (or, less often, men's superiority) from facts about our bodies, a move resisted by anti-essentialist feminists. "Essentialism" has been used in another sense, however, to describe any feminist position that posits a pre-social body or the reality of sexual dimorphism. This position could be defined by the view that the term "women" refers to a naturally occurring group of sexed individuals, described by reference to the fixed conditions of membership, that sexed bodies are pre-social, existing in original form "underneath" the social and overlaid by it, or that "women" exist as a natural kind before gender is imposed, rather than being produced in various ways through differing social practices. In other words, according to this essentialist claim, the members of categories must have some really existing qualities by virtue of which they are what they are. In the case of the category "women" this could be any set of qualities that reflects the "reality" of the division of humanity into two sexes, male and female. Thus this form of "essentialism" presupposes a natural kind to which the term "women" refers. It claims to construe reality in a certain way, to describe a particular state of affairs existing before, and causally related to, the designation "women." This kind of essentialism with regard to the category "women" again depends in part on the belief that human cognition operates to discern what is really there, that we can observe objects in the world independently of any social overlay. Thus, for example, we can perceive the "reality" of sexed bodies. This claim requires some qualification for almost all feminist theorists.

The assumption that the word "women" merely describes a category of sex was widespread in feminist theory before the emergence, in the late 1970s, of an alternative perspective, closely linked with postmodernism, which argued that "women" could not be said to exist independently of the organisation of their construction.[34] Anti-essentialist opposition here, then, is to a social constructionism that itself accepts a non-socially-constructed biology as counterpoint. This perspective represented a challenge to the sex/gender system itself as a feminist model for understanding the putative distinction

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[34] The history of this debate is discussed in *The Woman in Question*, eds. Adams and Cowie; Linda Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender," *Signs* 20:1, 1994.

between biological sex and social gender. No longer could natural sex be understood simply as prior to cultural gender.

Many feminists have claimed that our perception of male and female bodies is not "objective": we cannot simply say "this person is male" or "this person is female" without that claim having some socially constructed meaning. For example, Holly Devor cites a study in which men and women were shown line drawings of both naked and partially clothed human bodies with ambiguous gender *and sex* markers, and asked to identify them as male or female, giving their degree of certainty. The study showed that:

> even in situations of conflicting, confusing, or absent gender cues, people were willing, able, and likely to attribute gender. It also shows that when there is a doubt as to the gender of an individual, people have a pronounced tendency to see maleness... [M]aleness is readily seen whenever there are indicators of it, whereas femaleness is seen only when there are compelling female cues and an absence of male cues. This way of seeing corresponds closely to patriarchal gender schema notions of maleness as a positive force and femaleness as a negative force; of maleness as presence and femaleness as absence; of maleness as primary and femaleness as derivative.[35]

Much feminist work, furthermore, analyses ways in which sexual dimorphism is compelled through a nexus of disciplinary practices, many of which work on the body itself. For example, the socio-medical treatment of hermaphroditic infants and transsexuals, and the (self-)enforcement of female "beauty" regimens all strongly suggest that sexual conformity is not only a "secondary" issue, confined to the realm of "gender" as normally understood, but that bodies are constructed as sexed through inscriptions upon flesh itself such as cosmetic surgery, hormone treatments and dieting.[36]

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[35] Holly Devor, *Gender-Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989): 49.

[36] Herculine Barbin, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite*, with introduction by Michel Foucault (New York: Pantheon, 1980); Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Anne Fausto-Sterling, "The Five Sexes," *The Sciences* 33, 1993; Suzanne J. Kessler, "The Medical Construction of Gender: Case Management of Intersexed Infants," *Signs* 16:1, 1990; Henry Rubin, *Transformations: Emerging Female to Male Transsexual Identities*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, Brandeis University 1996.

Drawing on such feminist claims, as well as on the influence of non-feminist poststructuralist theories of language, "anti-essentialist" feminist discourses have grown up around these issues. Many feminists have claimed that conventional ideological approaches to feminist theory and politics have reified and been insufficiently critical of the categories they employ. Thus invoking the category "women," for example, cannot be justified if premised on the belief that women exist independently in the world, and that "women" describes a collection of people who are marked out by biological characteristics preceding language. Rather, the category of "women" is a discursive one, held in place, for example, by its relation to another category, "men." Just as "masters" only exist by virtue of there being "slaves," the categories "men" and "women" are dependent upon one another for their social meanings.

Judith Butler presents perhaps the most fully developed feminist anti-essentialist account in this genre. Most significantly, she argues in *Bodies That Matter* that sex does not describe a prior materiality but produces and regulates the intelligibility of the materiality of bodies:

> [T]his sex posited as prior to construction will, by virtue of being posited, become the effect of that very positing, the construction of construction. If gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this "sex" except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that "sex" becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access.[37]

Thus the very belief in the reality of sexual dimorphism has come to be labelled "essentialist." This is a considerably stronger claim than the opposition to biological essentialism described above. Instead of simply challenging the inference from physical sex to normative conclusion, this kind of anti-essentialism insists that "physical sex" is in fact normative to the core. Rather than being objectively real, sex is itself socially constructed. While this issue is bracketed in the argument that follows, this example reveals the appearance of the label "essentialism" within a discourse (feminist talk of the "sex/gender

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[37] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 5.

system") that is putatively social constructionist. This is the theoretical move I want to investigate in more detail in what follows.

Essence versus social construction: essentialism in language and method

Within social theory, both metaphysical and biological essentialisms are most often juxtaposed to social constructionism. Yet several recent analyses of the essentialist-constructionist dichotomy argue that it has outlived its usefulness as a way of understanding social and political identities. It is clear that while popular sexist and homophobic discourses still trade on strict forms of essentialism, only a few radical theoretical approaches are willing to contemplate them. Increasingly the dichotomy between essentialism and constructionism blurs as essentialising moments are identified within constructionist arguments (and *vice versa*). Thus when feminist theorists criticise "essentialism," they most often target perceived linguistic or methodological faults within feminist accounts that are avowedly and overtly constructionist. Let me spell out the content of this dichotomy, before offering an account of two further forms of essentialism emerging from within social constructionism.

Where essentialism understands social identities as fixed, immutable and universal, social constructionism emphasises contingency, context and cultural variation. As Diana Fuss puts it:

> Constructionism, articulated in opposition to essentialism and concerned with its philosophical refutation, insists that essence is itself a historical construction. Constructionists take the refusal of essence as the inaugural moment of their own projects and proceed to demonstrate the way previously assumed self-evident kinds (like "man" or "woman") are in fact the effects of complicated discursive practices. ... In short, constructionists are concerned above all with the *production* and *organization* of differences, and they therefore reject the idea that any essential or natural givens precede the processes of social determination.[38]

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[38] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989): 2-3.

In relation to feminism, any argument that posits that gender roles are learned, that sexed bodies do not necessarily correlate with gendered behaviour, or that the variation in understandings of femininity and masculinity across time and place can be explained only by examining local social structures and ethical attitudes, can be labelled "social constructionist." Differences between men and women are explained by social contexts rather than essential natures. Likewise, in relation to sexual identities,

> "Essentialists" treat sexuality as a biological force and consider sexual identities to be cognitive realizations of genuine, underlying differences; "constructionists," on the other hand, stress that sexuality, and sexual identities, are social constructions, and belong to the world of culture and meaning, not biology. In the first case, there is considered to be some "essence" within homosexuals that makes them homosexual — some gay "core" of their being, or their psyche, or their genetic make-up. In the second case, "homosexual," "gay," and "lesbian" are just labels, created by cultures and applied to the self.[39]

Thus both metaphysical and biological essentialism, as I have defined them in relation to sex and gender, are clearly opposed to social constructionist arguments. Both look for pre-social truths about personal identities, and in that strict sense are generally inimical to feminist theorising and political organising.

This dichotomy, however, has been subjected to extensive deconstruction in recent feminist accounts. For example, Fuss argues that "essentialism is *essential* to social constructionism."[40] Taking up the theoretical position that the terms of any binary opposition are dependent upon and implicated in each other, she argues that social constructionism is not the antithesis of essence but rather its deferral. Merely invoking the category of "the social" does not preclude the possibility of essentialism in a different form:

> [T]he constructionist strategy of specifying more precisely these sub-categories of "woman" does not necessarily preclude essentialism. "French bourgeois woman" or "Anglo-American lesbian" while crucially

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[39] Epstein, "Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity": 11.

[40] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*: 3.

> emphasizing in their very specificity that "woman" is by no means a monolithic category, nonetheless reinscribe an essentialist logic at the very level of historicism. Historicism is not always an effective counter to essentialism if it succeeds only in fragmenting the subject into multiple identities, each with its own self-contained, self-referential essence. The constructionist impulse to specify, rather than definitively counteracting essentialism, often simply redeploys it through the very strategy of historicization, rerouting and dispersing it through a number of micropolitical units or sub-categorical classifications, each presupposing its own unique interior composition or metaphysical core.[41]

Thus Fuss takes a poststructuralist approach to argue that every invocation of a category, no matter how it is inflected, reintroduces essentialism by presupposing commonalities between the members of that category. Recognising the *reductio* in this argument, she claims that the crucial question to be posed of such categories as "women" is not whether essentialism, thus defined, can be avoided, but in what way it is deployed.[42] This claim will be central to the account of essentialism in the chapters that follow, as I ask where essentialism can inhere if not in metaphysical or biological accounts of gender.

Linguistic essentialism

Increasingly, as a variety of strands of Western philosophy have turned away from metaphysics and toward language, forms of essentialism premised on metaphysically realist claims about pre-social truths have been marginalised within the typology of essentialisms. Essence is more and more likely to be considered a feature of language, and theories of essentialism as accounts of meaning.[43] Linguistic (or *de dicto*) essentialism is the belief that the definition of a term provides the necessary and sufficient conditions of membership in its extension.[44] As one interpreter of Locke puts it:

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[41] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*: 20.

[42] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*: 20.

[43] See Hallett, *Essentialism*.

[44] It is worth noting here that although I discuss this position with regard to feminist theory, the enterprise of establishing definitions that are based on necessary and sufficient conditions has been largely discredited among philosophers of language.

> Thus, we will be able to use a general word meaningfully when we have grasped a set of necessary and sufficient conditions without which nothing can be an example of that particular sort. This set of necessary and sufficient conditions will be the nominal essence, the possession of which makes things like gold, water or triangles be whatever it is they are.[45]

We take different instances of the same category-term and abstract from them certain fixed common properties, which are then the defining characteristics of that concept. For example, Locke's nominal essence is found in the idea that we form from such defining characteristics — for example, the nominal essence of a triangle is the idea of a three-sided shape. This account of meaning presupposes a fixed core of features that all members of the relevant class possess. Nominal essences provide constant standards by which to make claims about instances of a category-term; namely, whether they do or do not count as examples of that term.

Even if we dismiss metaphysical essentialism as being of little concern to feminism (because there are no contemporary theorists who make claims about an ineffable Womanness), linguistic essentialism remains. To whom does the word "women" refer? Can we offer a set of necessary and sufficient conditions of being a woman? How do we make decisions about which similarities between women count as such conditions and which differences are irrelevant to uses of the term? Must women have something in common merely because they are called "women," and must the term refer to a bounded set of identifiable individuals? Should part of the task of feminist theory be to define the parameters of the concept "women," or to "get it right" about who women are? We might ask analogous questions about other central categories of feminist analysis, including "lesbians," "families," even "feminists."

If we reject the essentialist argument that women are women by virtue of physical sex, to claim that women are women by virtue of *any* fixed set of features of gender is still a *linguistically* essentialist claim. That is, the term "women" is taken to refer to a group of people by virtue of the socially constructed aspects of their femininity: their common traits resulting from socialisation (for example, caring), their shared oppression under patriarchy

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[45] Atherton, "The Inessentiality of Lockean Essences": 279.

(for example, femininity as subordination), or their collective experiences *qua* women. Thus linguistic essentialism consists in the claim that any definition of "women" must assume certain necessary and sufficient conditions of membership in that definition, whether or not those conditions are biological attributes. However, there is one glaring *prima facie* difficulty with this form of essentialism: if we look for a finite set of characteristics that define each member of the set "women," we are always going to find exceptions to every possible candidate. If we say, for example, that women are women because they have XX chromosomes, female primary sexual characteristics and the experience of oppression on the basis of gender, then we can easily find an individual who is considered by all to be a "woman" but who does not have all of these qualities (an individual with XXY chromosomes, for example). Thus any list of candidates for the essential attributes of "women" seems to fail, because exceptions can always be found.

It seems, on this account, as if *any* general account of membership in the class "women" is "essentialist," but it is not clear that this is a problem for feminism, or even that this form of essentialism can ever be avoided. Many influential feminist theories build their conceptual frameworks around particular general claims about the defining characteristics of being a woman, even as they include provisos about the scope of such claims. How could feminists possibly be "anti-essentialists" with regard to linguistic essentialism? Postmodern feminists like Judith Butler offer trenchant critiques of linguistic essentialism, showing the contingencies and exclusions built into any system of categorisation. As my argument in chapter three will show, I endorse this critical move. But Butler then suggests a *politics* that follows from this epistemological critique, one based on scepticism about and subversion of the very categories we deploy as feminists. I want to point to political worries around this version of linguistic anti-essentialism, since the argument of the dissertation as a whole is about how we can be sceptical about categories while avoiding this slippery slope.

Butler again offers us the most fully developed critique of linguistic essentialism in relation to feminist politics. She argues that contesting any descriptive content of "women" is a more progressive tactic than assigning any particular content to the term. The latter strategy merely factionalises feminists and generates the illusion that the very

identity that is contested can be a solidifying ground for feminist mobilisation, when in fact the notion of a pre-discursive feminine identity is precisely what needs to be undercut. Identity categories are normative, never merely "describing" a pre-existing group but also offering ideal-typical characterisations of its members, a process that serves to exclude those who do not match the conditions of membership. Rather than search for "foundations" (for the correct content of the term "women," for example), constant rifting of the content of the term is the very ground of feminist theory. Recasting the term "women" as a signifier rather than a referring expression expands the possibilities of being a woman and leads to enhanced agency: "women" are no longer a determinate set of members of a class with a fixed identity but can contest both that identity itself and the terms of membership.[46]

Viewed this way, a central task of feminist theory becomes the subversion of sexual binarism by challenging the prevailing social meaning of gender categories — which of course is what most feminist ideologies also seek to do — but without replacing them with other difference-denying constructs. The "strategic displacement" of gender categories, and poststructuralist feminism's refusal to reaffirm any specific content to the category "women," sets it apart from other feminist theories, as does its desire to multiply gender formations rather than accept *status quo* accounts of gender, even if these accounts are feminist. As Butler describes her early project in *Gender Trouble*:

> This text continues, then, as an effort to think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity.[47]

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[46] Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'," in *Feminist Contentions*, Benhabib et al.

[47] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990): 34.

Feminists wary of this radical anti-essentialism, however, argue that rejecting essentialism even in language leads to the conclusion that there can be no basis to feminist mobilising, that if the very category "women" is ungrounded then feminist activism cannot proceed. I am sympathetic to those feminists who have argued that fully to implement anti-essentialism may be disabling for certain feminist projects and disconnect feminists from useful humanist discourse that makes connections across difference, and I will return to the limits and dangers of anti-essentialism.[48] But here let me defend Butler's position against a straightforward *reductio* that I think obscures more significant objections to her linguistic anti-essentialism.

Is *any* invocation of *any* category "essentialist"? An affirmative reply might be elaborated by claiming that language itself erases difference, and homogenises in ways that must be resisted with the recognition that any counter-category will similarly exhibit a "contemptuous attitude toward the particular case."[49] Of course, there is a *reductio* here — if language *per se* essentialises, then essentialism is unavoidable if we are to speak at all. Some feminists have been somewhat truistically criticised for essentialism using exactly this premise. For example, Fuss criticises Monique Wittig's argument that "lesbians are not women"[50] on exactly the grounds that her "strong constructionist perspective" collapses back into essentialism. Wittig argues that the linguistic categories of "men" and "women" are not "real," but rather derive their most widely accepted social meanings from a patriarchal society that defines a dominant ideal of masculinity and a subordinate ideal of femininity:

> For there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary. The contrary would be to say that sex creates oppression, or to say that the cause (origin) of oppression is to be found in sex itself, in a natural division of the sexes preexisting (or outside of) society.[51]

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[48] See for example Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice"; Seyla Benhabib, "Subjectivity, Historiography and Feminist Politics," in *Feminist Contentions*, Benhabib et al.

[49] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958): 18.

[50] Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

[51] Wittig, "The Category of Sex," in *The Straight Mind*: 2.

Wittig places the "heterosexual contract" at the centre of the social meanings of gender, arguing that lesbians, by escaping the heterosexual order, form a third category outside sex with revolutionary potential.

Fuss' response trades on the *reductio*:

> The weakness of her analysis lies in her own tendency to homogenize lesbians into a single harmonious group and to erase the real material and ideological differences between lesbians — in other words, to engage in essentialist thinking in the very act of trying to discredit it.[52]

While differences between lesbians may be salient to any analysis of their political role, it does seem that the mere use of the term "lesbians" as a category of analysis is unavoidable if Wittig is to make her point. Rather than highlighting the specific ways in which "material and ideological differences" might actually nuance or subvert Wittig's argument, Fuss goes on to offer a critique merely of the use of general categories. If we were to accept this argument, feminist theory would be unavoidably implicated in essentialism, and to use "essentialist" as a pejorative would be entirely lacking in critical import.[53]

To avoid this *reductio*, we can modulate our critical response to linguistic anti-essentialism: instead of all language being unavoidably essentialist, we could argue, as Butler does, that anti-essentialism consists merely in the self-reflexive recognition of the erasure of difference by language and of the contingency of categories. Thus all categories are relative features of language rather than descriptive or objective, and all categories obliterate cross-cutting differences, or alternative ways of describing those within the category. Thus no-one who we might include in the category "women" fits only into that category — she is also old, Black, heterosexual, francophone, able-bodied, a survivor of sexual abuse, or any other combination of a myriad of descriptions. Likewise, if "women" is "only" a linguistic category, it follows that a redefinition of its boundaries is permanently possible, to include people who are on the borders of conventional gender categories, such

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[52] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*: 43.

[53] Fuss' response to this charge, elsewhere in the text, seems to be that essentialism should be "deployed" rather than avoided. This claim is under-explored, however, and is also in tension with her use of the *reductio* as a decisive argument against Wittig. See Eleanor Kuykendall's review essay "Subverting Essentialisms" (*Hypatia* 6:3, 1991).

as transsexuals. The facile response to the Butlerian critique of categories is to claim that if all linguistic categories are suspect then feminists are tongue-tied, unable to invoke the very labels — "women," "men"— that first gave rise to feminist movement and to the concept of feminist politics. A more nuanced understanding of poststructuralist feminism rejects the *reductio*, and so accepts the political necessity of ongoing recognition of the contingency of categories, their perpetual tension with difference, and the need to parody and subvert terms like "women" even as we invoke them. Yet even given this acceptance of aspects of poststructuralist anti-essentialism, we can still challenge certain political directions that this challenge to fixed categories and awareness of contingency can take.

There are three familiar objections to the ways poststructuralist anti-essentialism can play out in political contexts. What would a political practice look like that refused to affirm any fixed content to our political identities? The first is merely a strategic argument: apart from being a novel and somewhat counter-intuitive form of organising (although one that now has recognisable precedents[54]), anti-essentialist politics may play into etiolating liberal accounts of gender. That is, continually to deny the salience of gender, refusing to affirm any specific content to women's identity, is often to conform to dominant understandings of social organisation that simply *erase* gender.[55] Many forms of feminist separatism are sustained by the notion of a continuous and resistant counter-hegemonic identity, and objections to separatism often try to attack the legitimacy of, for example, women's insistence on separate space such as festivals, self-help groups, and so on. The identities that are invoked to justify separatism may be problematic (consider the furious debates surrounding the exclusion of male-to-female transsexuals from women's music festivals, for example[56]), but to point to their contingency may also fuel anti-feminist

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[54] See for example Valerie Lehr, "The Difficulty of Leaving 'Home': Gay and Lesbian Organizing to Confront AIDS," in *Mobilizing the Community*, eds. Robert Fisher and Joseph Kling (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993), for an account of a political campaign that attempts simultaneously to employ and to undercut identity categories.

[55] See Christine Di Stefano, "Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity and Postmodernism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Nicholson.

[56] Donna Eder, Suzanne Staggenborg and Lori Sudderth, "The National Women's Music Festival, Collective Identity and Diversity in a Lesbian-Feminist Community," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 23:4, 1995; Monica Kendel, Holly Devor, and Nancy Strapko, "Feminist and Lesbian Opinions about Transsexuals," forthcoming in *Gender and Transgender Issues*, eds. Vern and Bullough, (Amherst, NY: Prometeus).

demands for a return to "human" identities that have already been the subject of extensive feminist deconstruction.

This leads into a second point: many women, including many feminists, experience their identities as women (however they understand this assertion) as deeply authentic. Being a woman is not something to be treated "playfully," to be parodied or subverted. Rather it is a deeply personal understanding of one's self. Feminist ideology has, of course, never been loathe to challenge women's own self-understandings, refusing to accept the psychic inheritances of patriarchal societies. Nonetheless, the demand that we undercut every oppositional identity at the same time as we construct it may feel to many of us to be a kind of betrayal of ourselves.

Third, this strategy does not take seriously enough the possibility that some aspects of women's identities, while avowedly socially constructed artifacts of oppression, may nonetheless be ethically or politically valuable. Thorough-going anti-essentialism toward identity tends to diminish the normative claims available to feminists in presenting alternative visions of relationships, organisations, or social structures.

Throughout this dissertation I will be as concerned with showing the dangers of anti-essentialist positions as with attacking essentialism. On the one hand, linguistically essentialist feminist theories do rely on the notion that there are certain fixed properties definitive of membership in the category "women." While much more needs to be said about how to avoid this fixity and the extent to which it can be avoided, it is conceptually and politically problematic in many of the ways Butler suggests. On the other hand, the anti-essentialist alternatives offered by theorists like Butler seem to diminish the political resources available to feminist activists. Thus in pursuing questions about "women" using epistemological assumptions derived from linguistic essentialism or linguistic anti-essentialism, feminists have painted themselves into a corner. Forced to decide what the term "women" means prior to its use, they have alternately accepted linguistic essentialism and presented generalising accounts of gender to which exceptions and exclusions can easily be found, or fragmented the category of gender in ways that seem to undercut the very use of generalisations for political purposes. My argument in chapter three will be that both these issues can be sidestepped by a Wittgensteinian critique of essentialism. But

first, I present a detailed account of a final, related type of essentialism, one that is less about the exclusions inherent in the very use of language than about the methodologies we use to support our uses of particular categories or generalisations.

Methodological essentialism

Feminist debates surrounding essentialism are in fact primarily concerned with feminist method. That is, they are politically motivated arguments about how best to do feminist theory or practice, rather than truth-claims about the realities of sex and gender, or claims about the nature of linguistic categorisation *per se*. Many feminist anti-essentialists are concerned with the epistemological bases and political consequences of various social constructionist arguments. While accepting that gender is not a metaphysical or biological truth about persons, they look for different ways of understanding the differences and similarities between women and men. Elizabeth Spelman has argued persuasively that the most politically powerful critique of essentialism comes from examining how generalisations about women are constructed within feminist theory so as to exclude some women, and I examine her argument in depth in the next chapter. First I define methodological essentialism, and map out the surrounding terrain by looking at two exemplary methodological controversies in feminist theory: those over historiography and "women's experience."

I take "methodological essentialism," in its most general formulation, to be any way of doing either philosophy or social science that illegimately presupposes the significance of some general category of analysis. Here the *reductio* comes into play again — all political talk (including feminist talk) must of necessity use general categories. So methodological essentialism is only an interesting mistake if the application of those general categories obscures diversity in some particularly significant way. Again, for a feminist writing today to be described as a methodological essentialist is seldom, if ever, a compliment. What is the content of the charge? Presumably we can safely allow that no feminist ever applies a general category with explicitly metaphysical intent, deliberately imposing a false generality on a diverse group of people. Those feminists who have been

labelled "essentialists," whatever they think of the accusation, usually believe that their theories are, put naively, accurate descriptions of an empirical reality (although they may adopt different epistemological frameworks in justifying this belief). Essentialism of this particular form is a bad thing; a normative claim about the undesirability of methodological essentialism is written into my definition. The question I find interesting, however, is not whether general categories themselves present a challenge given "the problem of difference,"[57] but, given the necessity of general claims both to feminist research and feminist politics, *what methods of inquiry can legitimately be used to justify general claims about women, and what methods merely serve to impose false uniformity?*

I shall give two examples of areas of feminist debate where essentialism has been central to methodological discussions. What are the common threads in these cases? As should by now be clear, essence-talk is primarily identified with sameness, and anti-essentialism with difference. Critics of those authors accused of methodological essentialism argue that certain epistemological claims mask difference. Instead of arguments that generalise across time and place, they want instead to insist on contextual and specific investigation, and demand a renewed attention to situated differences.[58] Where linguistic essentialism raised analogous epistemological questions about the legitimacy of general claims, here I stress method. If feminists were to engage in scholarly and political projects while bearing in mind the debates outlined so far, how would they justify historical continuity and shared understandings of women's experiences?

i. Essentialism and historiography

Essentialism raises methodological issues for feminist history and historiography. As Martin points out, the claim that feminist analyses are "ahistorical" often accompanies

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[57] This locution comes in scare quotes for reasons well articulated by both María Lugones ("On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism") and Elizabeth Spelman (*Inessential Woman*: especially 162-164). See also Michèle Barrett, "Some Different Meanings of the Concept of 'Difference': Feminist Theory and the Concept of Ideology," in *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*, eds. Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989).

[58] See for example Fraser and Nicholson, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy."

(and is philosophically connected to) the claim that they are essentialist. An analysis that fails to situate itself, or that employs analytic categories divorced from time, place, culture, and so on, is taken, by default, to reify or idealise concepts that in fact take their meaning from a specific historical context. As Martin says, "the trouble with an ahistorical approach to sexuality, reproduction, gender, mothering, domesticity, and the family, then, is not simply that the resulting account will be incomplete but that findings that actually hold for one time period are apt to be projected onto other or even all time periods."[59] Thus ahistorical theorising comes to be a form of methodological essentialism through its reliance on the *a priori* and failure to contextualise. Rather than understanding particular concepts as historically embedded, local, and liable to change, some feminists, the argument runs, have been too hasty in assuming that their analyses are transferable to other contexts. This is a charge that has been made, for example, against Gilligan's ethic of care. In chapter four I look at the implications of essentialist method; here let me turn to a different example to illustrate the tension between essentialism and anti-essentialism in historiography.

Lesbian history is methodologically fraught with the ambiguities and shifts in meaning inherent in the term "lesbian." In contemporary North American contexts, the term "lesbian" already has numerous contested meanings. When a lesbophobic man talks about "lesbians," for example, he has a very different understanding of the term than does a lesbian-feminist, or a "lesbian" who understands her sexuality as a personal "orientation" rather than a political identity. Even individuals within each of these different subgroups are unlikely to agree precisely on a definition of the term "lesbian." In historical terms these ambiguities are even more striking: how can a historian write a "lesbian history" without transposing a contemporary understanding of lesbianism onto historical periods and places where that understanding does not fit with extant categories or conceptual schemes? What do we *mean* when we call "Boston marriages" and "romantic friendships," "lesbian relationships"? These questions have many answers, and numerous methodological strategies are employed by various scholars of lesbian history to explain

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[59] Martin, "Methodological Essentialism": 640.

various similarities and differences between members of the central term of analysis, and to justify narrative links.[60]

Feminist critiques of methodological essentialism motivate the question, "what can justify the use of terms like "lesbian," or even "woman" to refer to unchanging concepts?" In a sense this question is purely rhetorical and challenges a straw person: no historian would get away with treating midwives in modern Britain, for example, as members of exactly the same category as midwives during Britain of the witch-hunts. While we might want to trace a narrative that connects these two groups, we cannot claim that they are exactly the same kinds of people. A more sophisticated challenge is raised by the example of the category of "women" itself as an historical constant. If we take seriously the anti-essentialist claims I raised earlier about the socially constructed nature of sex itself, then the historiographical challenge is not to ask "what do Renaissance Italian women have in common with enslaved Black women in 18th century America?," but rather, "how do we justify the claim that those people who were counted as "women" in Renaissance Italy are members of the same category as 18th century Black American "women"? Once the appeal to "sex"— to women's bodies as evidence of their fixed membership in a stable class — is discounted, we are left with a more fundamental philosophical challenge to the historiography of "women's history," and questions about the justificatory strategies employed in establishing narrative links.[61]

The question of historiography in feminist studies highlights the significance of *context* for the epistemological framework of a feminist theory. The vice of "ahistoricism" is a form of essentialism insofar as it represents a failure to articulate important social, political, and economic (as well as historical) background that would serve to illustrate the contingency and the mutability of feminist analyses. The demand that feminist analyses be placed in context has its origin, I would argue, in a philosophically significant and politically indispensable response to essentialism that recognises the dangers of abstraction. Thus essentialism is an issue both to feminist historians, concerned with how

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[60] See for example Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Morrow, 1981).

[61] Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Woman" in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

to justify historical (dis)continuity, and to feminist philosophers concerned with the justifications and consequences of different methods of social inquiry.

Feminist dissent from a dominant anti-essentialism that challenges historical continuity focuses on the need not to give up entirely on uninterrupted narrative about, for example, the history of women's oppression. For example, Benhabib expresses disquiet with what she, again following Flax, labels the "Death of History" thesis. In its weak form, she says, "the Death of History could ... be understood as a call to end the practice of "grand narratives" that are essentialist and monocausal."[62] Quoting Fraser and Nicholson, Benhabib assesses the political significance of this weaker thesis for feminist theory:

> . . . the practice of feminist politics in the 1980s has generated a new set of pressures which have worked against metanarratives. In recent years, poor and working-class women, women of color, and lesbians have finally won a wider hearing for their objections to feminist theories which fail to illuminate their lives and address their problems. They have exposed the earlier quasi-metanarratives, with their assumptions of universal female dependence and confinement to the domestic sphere, as false extrapolations from the experience of the white, middle-class, heterosexual women who dominated the beginnings of the second wave . . . Thus, as the class, sexual, racial, and ethnic awareness of the movement has altered, so has the preferred conception of theory. It has become clear that quasi-metanarratives hamper rather than promote sisterhood, since they elide differences among women and among the forms of sexism to which different women are differentially subject.[63]

In its strong version, Benhabib claims, the Death of History thesis requires that we reject any historical narrative concerned with the *longue durée* or with macro- rather than micro-social practices. Benhabib thus depicts the strong thesis as the most extreme kind of historical fragmentation. Instead of "global history," the strong thesis instead demands *petits récits*: local stories about particular contexts. Benhabib objects to this kind of anti-essentialism on the grounds that it diminishes the critical resources available to disempowered groups seeking to make political demands based on a long history of oppression. Furthermore, the reappropriation of history — in the form of uncovering

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[62] Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Feminist Contentions*, Benhabib et al.: 22.
[63] Fraser and Nicholson "Social Criticism Without Philosophy": 33.

previously ignored or suppressed historical information and perspectives — is undercut by historiographies that treat agency as constructed through top-down mechanisms of social and discursive control. Benhabib argues that Butler's Foucauldian paradigm, for example, clashes with "the social history from below paradigm... the task of which is to illuminate the gender, class and race struggles through which power is negotiated, subverted, as well as resisted by the so-called "victims" of history."[64] Thus an anti-essentialist historiography both delegitimates grand historical narratives that may benefit oppressed groups, and erases the autonomy and agency of the historical subject. Benhabib fears that for both of these reasons, a strong version of the "death of history" may "eliminate... the practice of legitimation and criticism altogether," reducing historical argument to local stories about subjects entirely constituted by and reduced to an effect of social control.[65]

But how local? How circumscribed must the context be? What criteria do we use in assessing how widely applicable historically located concepts are? Few feminists sit down with the express intention of writing a "metanarrative," so it is not immediately clear which feminist theories are ruled out by this strong thesis. While the historiographical debate provides a useful theoretical framework for thinking about what is at stake in revising feminist methods so that they become "anti-essentialist," it can only be resolved by attention to particular cases where different degrees of generality will be differently justified. In this respect the debate around essentialism and historiography is emblematic of many methodological controversies in feminist scholarship. The contrasting arguments of Benhabib and Butler in *Feminist Contentions*, for example, while theoretically sophisticated, do not offer criteria for assessing the validity of any particular claim about women. They thus illustrate a major aporia in the feminist literature touching on essentialism — the lack of tangible examples of feminist praxis and how they might be changed by anti-essentialism.

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[64] Benhabib, "Subjectivity, Historiography, and Politics," in *Feminist Contentions*, Benhabib et al.: 113.
[65] Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Feminist Contentions*, Benhabib et al.: 28.

ii. Essentialism and "experience"

"Experience" is a key category of feminist thought, often taken to provide the epistemological basis of feminist theorising, especially in radical feminist thought and practice. "Essentialism" with regard to experience is the claim that women's experiences as they articulate them yield a single, privileged feminist interpretation. As I discuss in chapter five, this is the claim that Catharine MacKinnon makes for her theory, and is one of the bases on which she is labelled "essentialist." Feminist critics of this form of essentialism claim that there is no "objective," "true" way of describing any life-event, but rather alternative narratives are constructed with the discursive resources available.[66] All explanations of "women's experience" are power-laden and must foreswear claims to truth. To privilege particular interpretations of a particular experience is to "essentialise" it, where the pejorative force stems from the failure to incorporate the possibility of other accounts. For example, Fuss argues that:

> [T]he problem with positing the category of experience as the basis of a feminist pedagogy is that the very object of our inquiry, "female experience," is never as unified, as knowable, as universal, and as stable as we presume it to be....The appeal to experience, as the ultimate test of all knowledge, merely subtends the subject in its fantasy of autonomy and control. Belief in the truth of Experience is as much an ideological production as belief in the experience of Truth.[67]

Fuss adopts a perspective critical of the potential essentialism implicit in invoking testimony as truth.

In response, hooks argues that this perspective may fail to recognise the particular contexts of oppression that make it harder for some groups to speak out:

> Now I am troubled by the term "authority of experience," acutely aware of the way it is used to silence and exclude. Yet I want to have a phrase that affirms the specialness of those ways of knowing rooted in experience. I know that experience can be a way to know and can inform how we know

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[66] See Joan Scott, "Experience," in Judith Butler and Joan Scott eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (Routledge: New York, 1992).

[67] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*: 114.

> what we know. Though opposed to any essentialist practice that constructs identity in a monolithic, exclusionary way, I do not want to relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory.[68]

This exchange illustrates the tension in many feminist debates about essentialism between the political exigencies of fostering counter-hegemonic accounts and the demand for their critical deconstruction. We know that all explanations of experience are partial, interpretive and contingent, but if feminists reject *any* criteria for privileging one account over another, they risk playing into forms of subjectivism or extant dominant accounts that will only weaken feminist political goals.

One example from feminist practice is the construction of narratives about acquaintance sexual assault: female survivors often move from a widely disseminated patriarchal story of self-blame and sole responsibility for the "sex" that occurred, to a less readily available feminist story about coercion, power, and lack of self-esteem in the context of male violence. They may also develop other accounts of the experience at different times in their recovery process: occasionally coming to label the assault as basically trivial, or developing compromise stories wherein they ascribe some blame to themselves and some to others, for example. Each of these stories may well be profoundly influenced by other aspects of the survivor's experience: whether she was sexually abused as a child, whether she identifies as straight or as a lesbian, or whether she has also experienced racism, for example. The same "event" can be described within radically different frameworks that do not only take the same "facts" and apply different "angles," but which are normative to the core. Anti-essentialists like Fuss are presumably not entirely neutral on which of these stories to prefer (if they were, they would hardly be feminists). But they are more likely to suggest that the preferable interpretation depends on the context of the assault rather than on a predetermined structural explanation that labels one form of explanation "correct." And they will also allow that some of these

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[68] bell hooks, "Essentialism and Experience," in *Teaching To Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 90.

narratives may be more emotionally or politically *strategic* than others, even if they are not necessarily more "true" or "objective."

In a context where particular interpretations of experience, especially those coming from members of marginalised and oppressed groups, are trivialised and suppressed, to insist upon the epistemic significance of such accounts is a radical move; indeed, it is one of the central goals of feminist epistemology and pedagogy. With regard to the example of acquaintance sexual assault, as a feminist activist I want to respond that the acknowledgment of the possibility of multiple interpretations of a rape is scarcely the point; in many cultural contexts, a woman will be blamed for the rape, told that she asked for it, must have wanted it, or brought it upon herself. These messages are not only reinforced by direct responses offered to the survivor but also are played out in the criminal justice system, in therapeutic discourses, and other institutional contexts. Whatever story about her own experience a survivor finally accepts, feminist analyses of dominant cultural messages about sexual violence show how some interpretations are afforded far less legitimacy than others. Political struggle to have feminist renderings made more accessible does not have to impose them on every individual survivor; rather, it has to make available alternatives that do *not* impose misogynist narratives on women.

Feminists who base their theories on "women's experience" may have been too hasty in assuming a single privileged interpretation for experiences that are complex and subtly differentiated. In this sense, Fuss' anti-essentialist strategy is useful in reminding us of the fluid, contingent, and diverse nature of testimony. Her approach is less useful, however, in offering strategies for negotiating power structures that systematically silence certain social groups. Thus questions about the importance of essentialism and anti-essentialism in this context have political consequences, consequences again occluded by a too simple contrast between (bad) essentialism and (good) anti-essentialism. In this example, both Fuss and hooks recognise the dilemma, but do not go on to offer an alternative. Thus, again, good feminist practice requires a more nuanced set of criteria to distinguish methodological essentialism from the well-grounded deployment of generalising claims.

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This chapter illustrates the variety of ways in which the term "essentialism" is used in contemporary feminist theory. Few, if any, feminists deploy metaphysical essentialism in their arguments, and thus to criticise feminist theorists as essentialist in this way often distracts attention from subtler and more significant political tensions. Similarly, few are implicated in biological essentialism in the traditional sense, although critiques labelled "anti-essentialist" can consist in radically constructivist claims about the materiality of bodies. I set aside these issues to focus on forms of essentialism within social constructionism. In presenting linguistic and methodological essentialism I outlined the tensions between generalisations within feminist theory that risk reifying their central categories and that under-estimate politically significant exceptions, and anti-essentialist methods that seem to undermine feminist political analyses and goals.

All of the tensions outlined in this chapter are more often stated than resolved in feminist theory. Essentialism and anti-essentialism tend to be pitted against each other in ways that reiterate rather than move beyond the dichotomy. At the centre of the political salience of essentialism are questions about the category "women." The essentialism debates around this category challenge feminist thinking on many levels: our philosophy of bodies, our use of language, our political identities, our methods, and our practices. I want to focus on the methodological questions essentialism and anti-essentialism raise for feminist practice. The next chapter establishes a perspicuous problem-space for these questions, using Spelman's anti-essentialist critique of exclusion in feminist theory as a starting point.

2

Essentialism, Method, and Generalising About Women

From my discussion of methodological essentialism we can see that making unfounded generalisations — for example by presuming rather than demonstrating an essential "womanness" that all women share — is a strategy that masks diversity in ways to which anti-essentialists object. But is essentialism merely an epistemological problem? Why is essentialism something that matters politically to feminists? In the methodological debates outlined above, we can begin to see that essentialising strategies serve to foreclose discussion of women's specificity. They tend to distance us from more fully contextualised and precise theoretical accounts, offering what Spelman calls "a short cut through women's lives."[1] These forms of methodological essentialism are politically exclusive and insensitive to power differences between women. Conversely, it already seems as though an insistence on fragmenting the category "women" could weaken the terms of feminist politics. Some methodological anti-essentialisms seem to undercut generalisations about gender that sustain crucial feminist political claims.

This chapter spells out the political implications of various methodologically essentialist and anti-essentialist positions. I return to the impasse between the two, showing how dialogue between them has both motivated anti-essentialist claims and

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[1] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: 187.

provoked a renewed demand for more robust theoretical uses of gender with regard to individual political identity and identity politics. I articulate Spelman's exposition and political critique of essentialism, and then examine two challenges to her analysis. Such challenges fail to understand the ways a more local and contextual account of gender can be enabling for feminists. "Anti-anti-essentialism" does, however, have one worthy target — a dogmatic and politically unsophisticated fragmentation of gender. Between this fragmentation and the essentialism I contest is an under-explored middle ground.

The essentialism debates in feminism have been carried out increasingly at cross purposes, with self-described anti-essentialists talking past the claims of their allegedly essentialist opponents, and critics who present themselves as "anti-anti-essentialist" dodging the actual views of the anti-essentialists they condemn. There is an unacknowledged consensus that feminist theory should move on from merely pointing out the limitations of the dichotomy between essentialism and anti-essentialism. Instead, feminists should direct their energies towards generating novel methods that escape the terms of these polar opposites and constructively address ways of undertaking feminist political practice that are sensitive to the dangers of both essentialism and anti-essentialism. We are agreed that we need neither understand women as completely different from each other, nor assimilated into a single dominant identity, but what do we do next? Chapter three sets out a Wittgensteinian epistemology that enables feminists to sidestep methodological essentialism while retaining the possibility of strong generalisations, and chapters four and five give examples of how this method would play out in feminist practice.

Methodological essentialism and feminist political theory

In what sense is essentialism a political issue for feminist theorists? Essentialism is usually treated not as an obscure methodological mistake, but a political practice of enormous negative consequence to feminist analysis. In fact, most of the disapprobative force of being called an "essentialist" comes from its political connotations. First, essentialism raises important questions for feminist political theory about subjectivity: how

we come to define ourselves as members of particular groups and how the varied contexts of oppression come to shape self-identity. Second, developing out of questions of subjectivity, and bringing their own political significance, are debates that locate essentialism (of various kinds) in forms of identity politics. Feminists have been quick to accept the orthodoxy that (essentialist) identity politics are exclusionary and regressive, and that some alternative (often poorly articulated) forms of political organising are more likely to generate coalitions or other political alliances that are less essentialist.[2] Both these sets of issues are underpinned by questions about the possibility and validity of generalisations about women, and I will treat them in turn.

Subjectivity and essentialism

On the first point, questions of how to identify and characterise female subjectivities are at the heart of feminist politics. There are two main forms of essentialism here: the first concerns the sense in which women's identities can be said to be more or less "authentic" and the extent to which the deconstruction of claims about women must be relentless. The danger attributed to this kind of essentialism is that whatever distinctive identities feminists articulate, these identities will become reified, taken to be natural, or "the truth" about women. By failing to explore the genealogy of particular gendered qualities, feminists, anti-essentialist critics claim are not sufficiently aware of their contingency; we do not adequately interrogate identity claims and their processes of construction. Paradoxically, what began as an inquiry into the provisional social construction of gendered identity will fix or naturalise identity categories.

This process may occur in two ways: first, whatever positive feminist identities are presented as more truthful or authentic for women, they remain identities constructed under patriarchy, and are thus never immune from the charge that they are merely artifacts of oppression. Gilligan's ethic of care is often criticised for essentialism on these grounds:

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[2] For one of the most fully articulated versions of this position see Shane Phelan, *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) and *Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

to hold that there is a distinctive "woman's voice" in moral discourse, critics argue, is to attribute an identity to women that reflects only their socialisation under patriarchy, and may even serve to perpetuate their oppression. Instead of trying to discover those qualities that might make up an oppositional identity, "anti-essentialist" feminism should be concerned purely with resistance to the identities imposed on women by patriarchy, either refusing to offer a unifying picture of women's authentic selves at all, or offering alternatives that are explicitly contingent and temporary. As Julia Kristeva says:

> On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot "be"; it follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say "that's not it" and "that's still not it." In "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies.[3]

Critics of feminism's emphasis on women's experience as the root of feminist knowledge and identity have pointed to the interpretive and permanently revisable nature of human recounting of experience, and to the need constantly to criticise and re-evaluate our interpretations of our experience. This form of anti-essentialism rejects generalisations about women by virtue of scepticism toward all general claims about women's subjectivities, and particularly towards claims of authenticity.

Many feminists have convincingly argued, second, that essentialism resurfaces as the desire to have one quintessential "woman's identity" representing a variety of women (or even all women), whose experiences and interpretations of those experiences are quite different. This form of essentialism differs from, but is related to, the first. Instead of failing to make clear the continuity or discontinuity of particular concepts of gender, this kind of essentialism exaggerates or fails to specify their scope. The latter operates as an exclusionary tactic, allowing those women with the most power over feminist discourses to construct accepted feminist accounts of women's identity, to mould oppositional feminist identities in their own images. As Spelman puts it:

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[3] Julia Kristeva, "Woman Can Never Be Defined," in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980): 137.

> It is not as if, in the history of feminist theory, just any group of women has been taken to stand for all women — for example, no one has ever tried to say that the situation of Hispanas in the southwestern United States is applicable to all women as women; no one has conflated their case with the case of women in general. And the "problem of difference" within feminist theory is not the problem of, say, Black women in the United States trying to make their theories take into account the ways in which white women in the United States are different from them.[4]

Various authors have drawn attention to the way false generalisations operate as an exclusionary tactic in much the same way as sexism. For example, by establishing a norm for humanity that is implicitly male, Woman becomes Other; once a norm for femininity that is implicitly white, middle-class, Western and heterosexual is established, women of colour, working-class women, world majority women and lesbians become the Other(s) of dominant feminist discourses. These latter women need to be prefaced with adjectives in order to be identified, while dominant group women are "women" unmodified. This strategy keeps dominant group feminists at the centre of speaking and writing, the authoritative voices of the feminist movement, while relegating Other women to the margins, as special interest groups.

This political imagination depends on essentialism: at the core of the group "women" are some members who epitomise "womanness" for feminist purposes, who offer a neutral and representative picture of what it is to be a woman, while other women are fringe members who bring complicating and extra-gendered identities into the category. This essentialist imagination is also oppressive, denying the racial identity of white women, for example, in such a way that women of colour become the focus of analyses of racism, and the initiators of racism remain uncriticised. When Sunera Thobani, a Canadian "landed immigrant" and woman of colour, was elected President of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, for example, many commentators saw no apparent inconsistency or racism in claiming that while white women could quite adequately represent women of colour (and had supposedly been doing so in this job until Thobani's election), the reverse could not hold. Women of colour were too "biased,"

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[4] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: 4.

concerned only with "their own" interests, or not sufficiently knowledgeable about the "majority of Canadian women."[5]

Feminists who exhibit scepticism toward generalisations about women are not necessarily objecting to generalisation on principle. Rather they may be pointing toward trends in the history of political thought and in the structuring of academic feminism that "ought to encourage us to look at the degree of metaphysical and political authority presupposed by those who claim the right to point out commonality, who assert or exercise the privilege of determining just what it means in terms of others' identities, social locations, and political priorities."[6] Power relations are at the centre of any explanation of this form of essentialism. I want to criticise two related strategies here, both of them mistaken and politically regressive: one is the tendency for "dominant group" feminists to conjure up an "ideal woman," a mental picture of the woman they see as epitomising the subject of feminist theory. This Woman is then put to use in winning rhetorical victories in political debates. Invoking "sisterhood," dominant group feminists have sometimes made overly grand claims about what "women" need or want. It is worth noting that this strategy frequently carries weight with non-feminists, who, as part of the same power structures, are often most likely to respond to feminist claims implicitly made on behalf of dominant group women. Second, by homogenising women's experiences and identities, some feminist campaigns or targets are made to seem more clear-cut. The sexist denial within patriarchal cultures and institutions that women constitute distinctive constituencies or have legitimate particular political priorities and demands can incite dominant group feminists to invoke an unnuanced political agenda for women.

There is an important and obvious distinction, however, between generalisations and universals. When feminists claim, for example, that "women generally have lower incomes than men," they are not necessarily committed to any of the following claims: "all

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[5] This kind of essentialism was embedded in public discourse both at the time of Thobani's election, and when in June 1996 she supported the candidacy of another woman of colour to succeed her. For example, (white) journalist Brenda Larson says in an op-ed piece for the right-wing Era-Banner: "The committee seems to have moved from the broad-ranging agenda to promote equity and fairness for all people [sic] to a narrow field representing the rights of 'victims' — women of colour, poor women, lesbians... This group does not represent me."

[6] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: 138.

people with low incomes are women," "all women have low incomes," "all men have high incomes," or "no men have low incomes." It is perfectly possible to make a generalising claim that relies on observed connections, statistical significance, or another measure of a particular trend, without being committed to universal claims about all members of a particular category (and in my experience, a common anti-feminist rhetorical ploy is to attempt to undermine such general claims by treating them as if they were universals).[7] While some essentialist strategies may be methodologically suspect, furthermore, to equate essentialism unmodified with false generalisation is to imply that the same criticisms that can be made of other essentialisms apply equally to all generalisations about women, a suggestion I dismissed by distinguishing different types of essentialist claims in chapter one.

There is something about the essentialism debates that has encouraged feminist theory to stagnate around epistemological issues without examining more carefully how generalisations are used in feminist practice. If we can specify the uses to which feminists put generalisations about women, then perhaps we will be able better to understand both how politically risky and how politically indispensable they are. As chapter one pointed out, generalising categories are both a necessary feature of language and of social investigation. Every category in political theory picks out aspects of membership in a group to highlight as politically significant and sidelines others. Feminist theory, in choosing gender as salient, constructs claims about women and men in particular contexts (whether context is explicitly acknowledged or merely implicit in the theory's claims). The ability to use and to challenge gender categories is the root of feminism's rhetorical power. In particular, it provides a language with which to respond to patriarchy. One of the most disturbing aspects of anti-essentialism is the potential weakening of those challenges to dominant understandings of gender that propel feminist activism. So much useful feminist cultural criticism rests on recognising moments in dominant cultures where gender operates dichotomously. Gender dichotomies are imposed and policed in ways that do not reflect the diversity of gendered persons. But all sides in the essentialism debates

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[7] See Martha Minow and Elizabeth Spelman, "In Context," *Southern California Law Review* 63:6, 1990.

have often failed to capture the distinctions between gender as a set of cultural stereotypes, as lived experience, and as feminist reconstructions.

For example, eating disorders disproportionately affect women in part because cultural injunctions about the female body have a disciplinary effect on women.[8] Merely stressing the multiplicity of forms of bodily expression or other fragmentation of categories does not capture the overwhelming gendered force of body images. This is a context where we need to be clear that gender is a very significant structural force. But attention to this dichotomising structure might also require close attention to *particular* constructions of gender: while the beauty ideal that is imposed on women in contemporary North America is hegemonic — closely associated with whiteness, youth and heterosexuality — the ways different women experience eating disorders will vary according to their race, class, sexual identity, age, family dynamics and other distinctions. Feminist theories of the body have, until recently, tended both to minimise these differences and to erase them by positing the dominant experience of eating disorders as universal.[9]

Thus just because generalisations are based on measures of a particular trend, they are not for that reason unproblematic. Who establishes the measuring standards? What common features of the members of the category will we select? Who has control over those similarities that are counted as significant and those that are dismissed as irrelevant? The mere observation that generalisations necessarily obscure some differences while stressing some common thread does not provide criteria to justify any particular generalisation over others. Sensitivity to how the *power* of those constructing feminist accounts tends to obscure some differences while stressing other similarities provides the basis for answers to these questions.

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[8] There is now a large feminist literature documenting these claims. See Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*; Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981); Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Toronto: Random House, 1990).

[9] For responses from feminist critics who argue that dominant *feminist* constructions of eating disorders are prone to criticism for falsely generalising see hooks' critiques of Wolf in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 94-102, and Becky Thompson, *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women's Eating Problems* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

Essentialising strategies have long and dishonourable histories in feminist politics, and I in no way want to minimise the extent of racism, heterosexism or other forms of exclusion within Western feminist movements. However, the dogged self-criticism of white feminist theorists in particular often seems merely to repeat familiar fault-finding arguments, without creating space for the recognition of common interests and the development of respectful alliances. It also seems to replicate the very phenomenon it claims to decry: when white feminists persistently point out that, for example, they have placed themselves at the centre of feminist theory, they paradoxically reinforce that position. If we examine different instances of feminist political organising, the ways in which feminists, especially feminists from non-dominant groups, actually use "women" are often both more nuanced, and more attentive to shared interests between women, including women of quite different class, race, and other backgrounds. The recognition of politically pernicious forms of essentialism should not obscure the constructive attempts within feminist practice to overcome them.

Identity politics

The second general area in which essentialism becomes a political issue is in the practice of identity politics. As forms of political mobilisation based on membership in racial, ethnic, cultural, gender and sexuality groups rather than on traditional left-right ideological axes have become more politically significant, epistemological questions about the construction of those identities that define group membership have become more pressing. What implications does asserting a common identity as the basis for political mobilisation have? Forms of political practice that implicitly adopt a unitary women's identity, or that perpetuate separatist or exclusionary group identities, have been both adeptly scrutinised and unfairly dismissed as "essentialist." Such criticisms are analogous to analyses of the identities of individual women: assuming an identity for any particular group may reinforce the notion that this identity is fixed, not mutable, and erase diversity among the members of that group, as well as hindering cooperation with related constituencies.

For example, in a convincing application of Foucauldian historical analysis, Henry Rubin argues that the emergence of lesbian-feminism and the "woman-identified woman"[10] squeezed out those butch dykes and male-identified women who were no longer included in the category "lesbians."[11] One consequence of this new lesbian political identity was to force the creation of a new category — "female-to-male transsexuals" — who over time have created both a personal identity and a political movement distinct from lesbian-feminist organising. Thus, according to this theory, the identity on which any particular political movement is based creates conditions of possibility for new subject-positions and closes off others. One task for political theorists is thus to trace the genealogical processes by which this transformation of identity occurs. However, different political practices also raise both normative questions and questions of strategy. Again, who defines the identity on which political mobilisation is based? Who judges whether or not those on the margins of this identity should be included or excluded? How is the identity policed? What implications does the assertion of a particular identity have for the popular or self-perception of members of that group?

With regard to identity politics, feminist "anti-essentialists" argue against the assertion of a fixed identity as the basis of political mobilisation for reasons by now familiar. Fearing that to adopt a political identity based on group membership will reify that identity, as well as exclude groups and individuals with relevantly connected but not identical self-descriptions and political goals, many feminist theorists have reached the conclusion that "coalitional politics" is a more appropriate form of organising than conventional "identity politics." For example, Fraser & Nicholson conclude their articulation of a postmodern feminist theory by arguing:

> The most important advantage of this sort of theory would be its usefulness for contemporary feminist political practice. Such practice is increasingly a matter of alliances rather than one of unity around a universally shared interest or identity. It recognizes that the diversity of women's needs and experiences means that no single solution, on issues like child care, social

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[10] For the germinal published articulation of this lesbian-feminist ideology, see Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Julia Penelope, eds. *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1988), especially Radicalesbians, "The Woman Identified Woman."

[11] Rubin, *Transformations.*

> security, and housing, can be adequate for all. Thus, the underlying premise of this practice is that, while some women share some common interests and face some common enemies, such commonalities are by no means universal; rather, they are interlaced with differences, even with conflicts. This, then, is a practice made up of a patchwork of overlapping alliances, not one circumscribable by an essential definition.[12]

Stressing the limitations of politics founded on a "universally shared interest or identity" such theorists argue for the joining together of individuals or groups with related identities or political objectives around a common goal. Let me briefly give two examples of anti-essentialist arguments with regard to political organising to illustrate what is at stake.

First, taking up the claim that feminist separatism implicitly draws on a single exclusive female identity, hooks argues that separatists often assume that gender is a more salient feature of political identity and interest than race, and that many arguments for "woman-identified" feminist organising that exclude men have implicitly drawn on the experiences and identities of white women. In political terms, she argues, Black women organising in the United States have both good reason to be suspicious of white feminists and to identify with Black men. Thus separatist demands for the exclusion of men from feminist contexts neglect the intersection of race and gender interests and benefit white women more than Black women.[13]

Second, Shane Phelan argues for the recognition of difference within queer identity politics. Instead of stressing difference by setting "our" group apart from others, she argues, lesbians should "resist the impulse for total separatism and for purity in our allies in favor of workable coalitions and porous but meaningful communities."[14] Highlighting the way lesbian-feminist separatist arguments have tended to reinforce rather than undermine the "otherness" of lesbians (at the same time as they were a crucial factor in forming group solidarity) Phelan recommends an approach that makes gains and reinforces identity through coalitions of groups claiming different queer identities. This is a widespread claim in "postmodern" queer politics: instead of identifying as "woman-

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[12] Fraser and Nicholson, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy": 35.

[13] bell hooks, "Men: Comrades in Struggle," in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

[14] Phelan, *Identity Politics*: 166.

identified women" — an allegedly narrow, demarcated subject-position with a heavy ideological burden — the category "lesbians" should be taken to include bisexual women, male-identified butches, woman-loving FTM and MTF transsexuals, lesbian-identified women who have sex with men, and so on. While such groups are unlikely to understand their own identities in the same way, they may share common political goals (such as particular challenges to heteronormativity), and should form political coalitions on this basis.

One of the frustrations of the essentialism debates is the way such appeals are generally presented as the conclusion of argument rather than as openings to discussion of the actual shape of "anti-essentialist" feminist organising. Making normative assessments of different political interventions — whether they are firmly identity-based or loosely "coalitional" — surely cannot be merely a theoretical project based on general claims about the (un)acceptability of identity claims, but must also include strategic concerns. When feminists make claims about "women's identity" they never do so in a vacuum: the particular women they refer to or hope to mobilise, the kind of political goal they hope to achieve, the type of opposition they anticipate and experience, and the way their identities are shaped by the very process of organising, all must affect political-theoretical evaluation of different political practices. A few feminist political theorists have defended various forms of "strategic essentialism," arguing that exclusion is an unavoidable and necessary aspect of political organising.[15] If we problematise any claim to identity, then how can feminists operate in contexts where dominant claims about gender dichotomies require an unequivocal response? Or how do organisations make those decisions about inclusion and exclusion that are likely to form the basis of their political projects? Both anti-essentialist claims about feminist praxis and "strategic essentialist" responses often fail to provide concrete examples of the implications of their analyses. This discussion amply illustrates the need for criteria for assessing the legitimacy of identity claims that are more or less essentialist. An analysis of the debates surrounding identity politics and essentialism can

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[15] See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution," in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990).

suggest certain criteria for good feminist practice, and in turn experiences of feminist organising might provide useful interventions into the philosophical debates.

General versus specific: *Inessential Woman* and the slippery slope

The connection between false generalisations, "exclusion" and essentialism is most thoroughly drawn out by Elizabeth Spelman in *Inessential Woman*. The book argues against "a tendency in dominant Western feminist thought to posit an essential "womanness" that all women have and share in common despite the racial, class, religious, ethnic, and cultural differences among us."[16] Spelman shows both how feminists have inherited from a significant thread in Western philosophy a way of thinking that obscures the effects of race, class and other aspects of identity on gender, and how that thinking is perpetuated in contemporary feminist theory. Generalisations that presuppose a common and separable gender identity possessed by all women in fact often reflect only the experience of gender of women with dominant identities. Thus the "essential womanness" that has been deployed by feminist theorists in contemporary North America generally reflects the identity of white, middle-class women. Spelman is concerned primarily with revealing essentialist practices, and pointing out how in fact we are often required to categorise ourselves and others in ways that both establish and reinforce certain similarities and differences that seldom reflect the lives and experiences of non-dominant women.

Chapter one highlighted how essentialism has been linked to the obliteration of difference. Recognising the limitations of mutually exclusive, bounded categories leads to two questions about political identity: on the one hand, can (or should) we separate one axis of political identity from others (for example, by claiming that all women share certain experiences that are "the same" regardless of their race and class)? How might talking as if this were possible perpetuate forms of exclusion and oppression? Spelman uses the term

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[16] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: ix.

"additive analysis" to describe any theory that operates under the assumption that gender identity and oppression are separable from other aspects of identity and forms of oppression. She has three criticisms. First, additive analyses of sexism and racism, for example, distort the experiences of women of colour, who do not conceptualise themselves as "part woman, part person of colour" when thinking about who they are and how they have been oppressed. Second, additive analyses suppose that I can subtract that part of personal identity that is gendered from other parts of my identity, yielding a "pure" gendered part that I bring to bear on my feminist analysing and activism. However, "this does not leave room for the fact that different women may look to different forms of liberation just because they are white or Black women, rich or poor women, Catholic or Jewish women."[17] Additive analyses, furthermore, contribute to the erasure of women of colour by setting up mutually exclusive, bounded categories of "women" and "people of colour." Neither of these arguments is merely an epistemological thesis about the need to understand gender as always inflected by other aspects of identity and oppression. Spelman argues, third, that additive analyses trade on the invisibility of dominant identities to make that archetypal identity that allegedly represents "all women" most representative of white, middle-class women. To understand gender identity as epitomised by those women whose identities are "unmuddied" by race or class is to put white, middle-class women at the centre of feminist analysis. Thus Spelman argues that no individual should be conceptualised merely as the sum of discrete elements of her identity, be these race, gender, class, sexuality, or any of a host of self-defining characteristics that are more or less important to a person's self-description.

On the other hand, how, if at all, can (or should) we justify the subsumption of some characteristics under others (for example, by stressing the primacy of gender in explaining oppression)? Spelman offers various characterisations of the claim that sexism is a more fundamental form of oppression than racism. In the history of US feminist theory, she argues, feminist analyses based on all versions of this claim have ignored the status of both Black men and Black women. For example, Spelman points out how Kate

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[17] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: 125.

Millet's radical feminism is premised on the pervasiveness of institutionalised male power over women (via property ownership, economic dominance in the nuclear family, the professions, and even the police) that ignores the fact that Black men often do not possess such power, and particularly not over white women.[18] Spelman develops an analysis of this second question using an analogical argument about proceeding through labelled "doors." For example, if we choose to classify people (by asking — or requiring — them to walk through different doors into separate rooms) as either "women" or "men" and thereafter as "homosexual" or "heterosexual" (problematic categories in any case), then we end up with categories prioritising gender, and lesbians and gay men appear to have less in common than if we had first ordered people according to sexual identity, and then gender. This illustrates the problems inherent in both the very possibility of subsuming some characteristics under others, and in the decision-making processes that build and order the "doors."

This account demonstrates how decisions about the significance of similarities and differences between women are not merely epistemological, nor are they just a matter of "getting it right" by doing empirical research. The axes of power that give some women definitional control over feminist goals and descriptions of women's identity shape how those goals and identities are formed. Sometimes claims to similarity can be arrogant, appropriative, assimilationist, or deceitfully selective. And claims to difference can obscure common struggle, sustain an image of women different from myself as radically Other, or serve merely to underscore the importance of my own political objectives rather than genuinely taking account of diverse interests. María Lugones points out that, "White women theorists seem to have worried more passionately about the harm the claim [that some feminist generalisations are exclusionary] does to theorising than about the harm the theorising did to women of color."[19] Thus when we say "feminist theory should be more inclusive," which kind of theory do we have in mind? And how does that place a certain kind of theory at the centre of feminism while other kinds are made peripheral? When we talk about the "problem" of difference, how does that cast those differences? As a problem

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[18] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: 116-119.

[19] Lugones, "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism": 41.

for white feminist theory? An irritation generated by those tricky "Other" women who get in the way of smooth generalisations? By slipping into a philosophical jargon that etiolates the political significance of essentialism, dominant feminists have often managed to take the challenges raised by multiple oppressions away from the "rough ground" of political engagement with racism, classism, heteronormativity and other forms of exclusion.

Spelman's account of essentialism is convincing more as a critique of existing tendencies than as a constructive alternative. In the next chapter I build on her analysis to offer a Wittgensteinian feminist method that avoids the essentialism she highlights. Before I do so, however, I want to turn to two connected critical responses to Spelman, which set up a useful counterweight, defining a position hostile to anti-essentialism — a kind of "anti-anti-essentialism." Natalie Stoljar takes up some of the philosophical objections to Spelman's theory of identity, while Susan Moller Okin challenges her method on the basis of empirical evidence. Both critiques miss the mark. However, the questions they raise do point to an untenable form of anti-essentialism that I want to examine and dismiss. Some forms of anti-essentialism are as disabling as those forms of essentialism under critique, so before turning to my own "middle ground" I define the limits of useful anti-essentialism.

Spelman's critics stress the dangers of relativism. If gender has meaning only in particular contexts, they argue, then how can feminists justify any claims about what women have in common? For example, Stoljar argues that Spelman adopts an "extreme relativistic account of gender."[20] Spelman, she claims, fails to specify whether women constitute a "type" (that is, a genuine class the members of which are linked either by universal properties or "nominally" by falling under the same predicate or being part of the same resemblance structure). Stoljar takes Spelman's point that to know what "women" means is to be able to use the term correctly, as evidence that she endorses predicate nominalism. On this view, Spelman is claiming that

> the type "woman" is no more than an *ad hoc* collection of women in different racial and cultural contexts that is a collection simply in virtue of the arbitrary designation of the word "woman." Predicate nominalism provides no principled reasons for collecting women into a type, and hence

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[20] Stoljar, "Essence, Identity and the Concept of Woman": 25.

> cannot provide a justification for feminist action on behalf of women, nor an explanation of the similarities between individual members of the type.[21]

Spelman is not susceptible to this criticism, although Stoljar has raised an important objection to some other forms of anti-essentialism.

Stoljar seems to base her claim that Spelman endorses predicate nominalism on the observation that Spelman recognises that we are able to distinguish, albeit not without controversy in some cases, between people who do or do not merit the label "woman." Spelman thus allegedly assumes that all that women share is the linguistic designation "women." This claim is odd in the light of her extensive, if largely critical, comments on the need to establish criteria for assessing the salience of certain actually existing similarities between women.[22] I take it that Spelman does *not* think that essentialism is a problem only in language; her "principled reasons" for stressing any difference or similarity between women concern the political contexts in which those differences and similarities emerge. In fact, in Wittgensteinian fashion, Spelman's argument is fully compatible with the "resemblance structure" account that Stoljar herself favours.

Spelman argues that the meaning of the term "women" derives from its use, which is multiple and ambiguous, and that investigation of particular uses reveals exclusionary practices. Thus, far from endorsing an extreme relativism that precludes feminist action, Spelman's argument provides the foundation of a better feminist method:

> It is not a threat to the coherence of feminism to recognize the existence of many kinds of women, many genders. It may in fact help us to be more willing to uncover the battles among women over what "being a woman" means and about what "women's issues" are. It may make us more ready to recognize that our engaging in these battles is a sign of our empowerment, not something that stands in the way of such empowerment.[23]

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[21] Stoljar, "Essence, Identity and the Concept of Woman": 27.

[22] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: especially 137-159.

[23] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: 176.

Stoljar may be dissatisfied with the lack of concrete examples in Spelman's work of generalisations that *are* justifiable, of similarities drawn between women that are accurate and not exclusionary. This constructive work is absent from *Inessential Woman*; it is, after all, not what the book is about.

Okin also argues that Spelman's analysis evinces a "slide toward relativism" that makes it inadequate to the exigencies of a theory of justice.[24] Claiming that Spelman provides a "paucity of evidence" for her claims that "women's experiences of oppression are different," Okin argues that Spelman merely asserts the existence of radically different contextual meanings of gender, and needs to demonstrate the reality of such difference more thoroughly. She proposes to put "anti-essentialism" to the test by applying it to a comparison of the oppression of women in the "Western industrialized countries" and in "poor countries." Okin claims that this comparison will yield a result precluded by Spelman's analysis: that the situation of the latter group relative to the former is "the same, only more so." Thus Okin picks up the same criticism as Stoljar, but she argues against the alleged consequences of Spelman's theory of identity.

Aside from the simple retort that *Inessential Woman* is packed with concrete empirical examples of instances where essentialist accounts of gender have oppressive effects, many of them contemporary, Okin mistakes Spelman's exposition of the contingency of generalisations about women for necessary claims about differences between women. Spelman's method would itself affirm Okin's project of "testing the empirical evidence," and would not necessarily rule out her conclusion that she has found more similarities than differences between women in the "Western industrialized countries" and in "poor countries." Spelman's analysis does highlight the need to attend to the contexts that make such claims useful and legitimate, to other schemes of categorisation they rule out, and to relations of power that make white middle-class feminists (for example) predisposed to generalise in particular ways. Okin claims to refute Spelman's argument that unless a feminist theorist perceives gender identity as bound up with other aspects of identity she ignores the effects of these other differences. Her

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[24] Susan Moller Okin, "Gender Inequality and Cultural Differences," *Political Theory* 22:1, 1994: 5.

counter-argument runs: "One can argue that sexism is an identifiable form of oppression, many of whose effects are felt by women regardless of race or class, without at all subscribing to the view that race and class oppression are insignificant."[25] But this response is ambiguous: by reducing sexism to a single "form of oppression," Okin sidesteps Spelman's point that the (many) forms of gender oppression vary and that women do experience oppression differently according to race, class or other politically salient differences.

In missing all of these issues, Okin's own argument ironically becomes susceptible to Spelman's critique. Okin offers very broad analyses of various inequities that supposedly exist in the same form in a variety of contexts, differing only quantitatively, not qualitatively. On what basis does she claim these inequities are "the same"? To take one example, in describing social and economic inequality and injustice within families, Okin asserts that:

> The comparison of most families in rich countries with poor families in poor countries — where distinctions between the sexes often start earlier and are much more blatant and more harmful to girls — yields, here too, the conclusion that, in the latter case, things are not so much different as "similar but more so."[26]

The dubious link between degree of poverty and sexism within the family aside, Okin seems in such examples to exhibit precisely the kind of disdain for context to which Spelman objects. We might ask: What, or whose, definition of family is being deployed here? Which families are being compared with which, and why is that comparison chosen? What, or whose, definition of work is used to arrive at measures of inequality? How does unjust gender socialisation differ in a poor Bangladeshi and a middle-class Canadian family?

Any claim about women, if couched in sufficiently vague terms, can have broad applicability. I (and Spelman) would agree that, generally speaking, traditional patriarchal families are loci of gender oppression. But it raises more interesting challenges for

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[25] Okin, "Gender Inequality": 7.
[26] Okin, "Gender Inequality": 13.

feminists to ask specific questions about how that oppression is played out in particular contexts. To argue that the very same Western analyses can be straightforwardly applied to Other cultures is a familiar imperialist move, no less so if the analyses in question are feminist. Understanding gender in context — a position with no necessary link to cultural or moral relativism — is a cornerstone of culturally sensitive and appropriate "development" work. Okin recognises that the ostensible similarity of women's oppression in her analysis cannot determine the shape of "development" practice:

> As the work of some feminist scholars of development shows, using the concept of gender and refusing to let differences gag us or fragment our analyses does not mean that we should overgeneralize or try to apply "standardized" solutions to the problems of women in different circumstances. Chen argues for the value of a situation-by-situation analysis of women's roles and constraints before plans can be made and programs designed. And Papanek, too, shows how helping to educate women to awareness of their oppression requires quite deep and specific knowledge of the relevant culture.[27]

Spelman argues that the failure to understand gender in context reinscribes oppression. Okin argues that gender oppression is broadly similar cross-culturally, but steps back from drawing firm conclusions about feminist practice from this claim, allowing that "overgeneralising" may obscure, in this case, important cultural differences. It is unfortunate that Okin does not analyse the "we" in this quote who helps to "educate women to awareness of their oppression." It is not clear that Spelman would disagree with Okin's claim that the women's oppression has similar sites and forms across cultures, but her analysis does recommend a more cautious approach to assuming sameness across differences inflected, as are those between women in "developed" and "poor" countries, by relations of power.[28]

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[27] Okin, "Gender Inequality": 20.

[28] Clearly there is a lot more to be said about Okin's claims. For an excellent analysis of the essentialising construction of the "third world woman" in Western feminist texts — one that speaks precisely to Okin's mistakes — see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in Mohanty, Anne Russo and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

"Anti-anti-essentialism"

These two critiques of Spelman are instructive because they highlight what "anti-anti-essentialists" most fear — the fragmentation of gender. In "Anti-anti-relativism," Clifford Geertz points out that despite the laws of logic, "anti-anti-relativism" is not the same position as relativism itself. Just as one can adopt an "anti-anti-abortion" stance without thinking that abortion is a good thing, so one can be "anti-anti-relativism" without being a relativist.[29] Analogously, I suggest, one can be "anti-anti-essentialism" without being an essentialist. In this vein, several feminists have pointed to the dangers of an *a priori* affirmation of difference or a principled "gender scepticism." In defence of generality, some have argued that a knee-jerk invocation of difference in all methodological contexts may operate to obscure important commonalities rather than bring salient differences into view.

Emphasising how "essentialist" is used as a pejorative to undercut reconstructive feminist projects, for example, Jane Roland Martin asks whether "anti-essentialism" now forms a restrictive orthodoxy within contemporary Western feminist theory:

> Condemning essence talk in connection with our bodies and ourselves, we came dangerously close to adopting it in relation to our methodologies. In our determination to honor diversity among women, we told one another to restrict our ambitions, limit our sights, beat a retreat from certain topics, refrain from using a rather long list of categories or concepts, and eschew generalization. I can think of no better prescription for the stunting of a field of intellectual inquiry.[30]

Martin's concerns highlight the dangers of critiques of essentialism that operate at a theoretical level rather than taking into account the exigencies of feminist practice. What does it mean to operate against culturally dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity if invoking an alternative account of the feminine is disallowed? What if those dominant constructions have a significant impact on how men and women understand

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[29] Clifford Geertz, "Anti-anti-relativism," *American Anthropologist* 86:2, 1984.

[30] Martin, "Methodological Essentialism": 631.

themselves and each other? Do some forms of anti-essentialism lead us down the slippery slope to gender relativism?

Stressing the underlying reality of connections between women across race, class and other divisions, Susan Bordo points out, in a rich and persuasive article, that radical gender scepticism does nothing to ensure that the reality of diversity is respected, and undercuts the grounds of feminist politics.[31] Bordo identifies a new "cultural formation .... complexly constructed out of diverse elements."[32] She argues that this formation serves to shift feminist attention from practical contexts to questions of adequate theory, placing the construction of a theory that matches certain prescribed criteria prior to the adequate understanding of such things as relationships between white women and women of colour in a particular context. Bordo attributes responsibility for this gender scepticism to two phenomena: the academic elision of critiques of ethnocentrism with poststructuralist theory, and feminist appropriations of deconstructionism. Her "anti-anti-essentialist" arguments fall into two categories: first, she uncouples claims about racism, classism and other "-isms" from epistemological claims about generalisations. Second, she argues that the academic context of anti-essentialism generates qualms about its political motivations and effects.

The "dogma" of anti-essentialism — characterised here by Bordo as the claim that generalisations are in principle essentialist — fails to meet the needs of feminism for a number of reasons. First, she argues, there is no necessary connection between gender sceptical methodologism and anti-racism, for example. Simply asserting the value of fragmenting categories will not generate a better understanding of the micro-politics of oppression. Second, white feminists, in particular, seldom justify their deployment of the mantra of "gender, race and class," which pervades recent theorising. "Why *these* axes of difference?" Bordo asks. When the very ideological frameworks that originally cast these axes as politically salient are undercut by some of those theorists who invoke "gender, race and class," what justifies their choice of these categories? Bordo poses a similar question: "Why, it must be asked, are we so ready to deconstruct what have historically

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[31] Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism," in *Unbearable Weight*: 215-243.
[32] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight:* 217.

been the most ubiquitous elements of the gender axis, while we remain so willing to defer to the authority and integrity of race and class axes as fundamentally grounding?"[33] Setting aside whether this is an accurate description of feminist tendencies, the question nonetheless highlights the empty nature of this form of anti-essentialism. The necessity of ignoring some axes of difference in any particular context makes hostility to generalisations a methodological dogma rather than a useful guide.

Finally, Bordo argues that we can accept the multiplicity of women's identities while still acknowledging cultural moments where gender operates dichotomously. How we conceptualise such moments is clearly open to question, and Bordo provides a complex analysis of the Hill-Thomas hearings to illustrate her point. Whatever we make of this example, it shows, I think, that feminists cannot avoid gender duality by methodological fiat.

> Assessing where we are now, it seems to me that feminism stands less in danger of the totalizing tendencies of feminists than of an increasingly paralyzing anxiety over falling (from what grace?) into ethnocentrism or "essentialism." (The often-present implication that such a fall indicates deeply conservative and racist tendencies, of course, intensifies such anxiety.) Do we want to delegitimate a priori the exploration of experiential continuity and structural common ground among women? ... If we wish to empower diverse voices, we would do better, I believe, to shift strategy from the methodological dictum that we forswear talk of "male" and "female" realities (which ... can still be edifying and useful) to the messier, more slippery, practical struggle to create institutions and communities that will not permit some groups of people to make determinations about reality for *all*.[34]

Bordo is also wary of the academic context of gender scepticism. Mere theoretical attentiveness to difference does not ensure adequate representation for members of historically excluded groups, either in theory or in academic communities. In fact, insisting on the primacy of "difference" merely constructs radical Others and may actually preclude useful dialogue between women; it also occurs in academic contexts that are closed to actual difference, and rarely presents the often privileged academic with the more

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[33] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight:* 230.

[34] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight:* 225.

immediate challenges that arise from working within a diverse group. Generalising hypotheses are not necessarily silencing or exclusive, Bordo argues; in fact, they may invite dialogue, when deconstructive readings refuse to assume a shape for which they must take responsibility. The intense hostility of many feminists to positive constructions of the feminine (Bordo cites Gilligan, I think correctly, as an exemplary target of such hostility) may come less from concerns about their "essentialism" than from a fear of infection by the inferior female otherness they allegedly depict. The professionalisation of feminist philosophy, Bordo argues, works against the counter-hegemonic categories deployed by feminist activists:

> In this institutional context, as we are permitted "integration" into the professional sphere, the category of female "otherness," which has spoken to many feminists of the possibility of institutional and cultural change, of radical transformation of the values, metaphysical assumptions, and social practices of our culture, may become something from which we wish to dissociate ourselves. We need instead to establish our leanness, our critical incisiveness, our proficiency at clear and distinct dissection.[35]

I am deeply sympathetic to the tenor of Bordo's argument here. The level of abstraction at which the essentialism debates have been carried out has often seemed to me far removed from the exigencies of feminist political practice. And I often have to resist the temptation to let my own writing slip into a jargon-laden technical style that dissociates itself from the emotive political issues at stake. Bordo's claim that some anti-essentialist arguments tend to create distance rather than encouraging dialogue resonates for me as well: I have often experienced white women students using classroom discussion of some of the contentions loosely grouped under "postmodern feminism" to construct an image of "women of colour" as radically different from themselves. (A Black acquaintance once remarked to me wonderingly, after auditing a series of lecture/discussions on "feminist theory and women of colour" in which white female students had made strong claims about the Otherness of women of colour, "Who do they think I am? I grew up in the West Island! [a middle-class suburban area of Montreal]"). This both obviates the need

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[35] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight:* 233.

to answer such questions as "how can we work together respectfully?" and is a form of racism symmetrical with Spelman's "boomerang perception." Just as Spelman points out how "well-meaning white parents," in encouraging their children to overcome racist prejudice, used the ploy "they are just like you" (never, "you are just like them"), so the claim "we are *nothing* like them" encourages solipsism rather than reciprocal dialogue.[36]

I agree with Bordo, furthermore, that dogmatic anti-essentialism, and in particular "postmodern" feminist theories of subjectivity, have no necessary connection with arguments concerning false generalisations or multiple identities I have been addressing.[37] In fact, some feminists have argued that these two strands of anti-essentialist influence have conflicting political goals. For example, in "The Race for Theory," Barbara Christian argues that in the context of literary criticism, "deconstruction" of literary traditions perpetuates the very exclusions it purports to undercut:

> For I feel that the new emphasis on literary critical theory is as hegemonic as the world which it attacks. I see the language it creates as one which mystifies rather than clarifies our condition, making it possible for a few people who know that particular language to control the critical scene — that language surfaced, interestingly enough, just when the literature of peoples of color, of black women, of Latin Americans, of Africans began to move to "the center." ... Now I am being told that philosophers are the ones who write literature, that authors are dead, irrelevant, mere vessels through which their narratives ooze, that they do not work nor have they the faintest idea what they are doing; rather they produce texts as disembodied as the angels.[38]

Many women of colour writing today about their racial and cultural identities in feminist contexts both challenge monolithic, white-identified, accounts of womanhood and

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[36] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: 12.

[37] Throughout this dissertation I have tried to avoid using the generic phrase "postmodern feminism." As Bordo says, "The postmodern has been described and redescribed with so many different points of departure that the whole discussion is by now its own most exemplary definition" [Bordo, "Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies, Postmodern Resistance," in *Unbearable Weight:* 345]. I use the phrase here to capture a constellation of positions that seems to me to be one of the most readily identifiable aspects of broadly postmodern links with feminist theory.

[38] Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," in *Making Face, Making Soul/ Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990): 338-9.

reaffirm another devalued, marginalised or suppressed identity. bell hooks' work on Black women and self-recovery, for example, specifically appropriates the modernist language of self-help for radical political purposes, to argue that:

> Black female self-recovery, like all black self-recovery, is an expression of a liberatory political practice. Living as we do in a white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal context that can best exploit us when we lack a firm grounding in self and identity (knowledge of who we are and where we have come from), choosing "wellness" is an act of political resistance. Before many of us can effectively sustain engagement in organized resistance struggle, in black liberation movement, we need to undergo a process of self-recovery that can heal individual wounds that prevent us from functioning fully.[39]

By stressing the suppressed and previously distorted experiences of Black women in the contemporary United States, hooks' account offers hope of a more authentic, "healing" self-identity. Such work may rediscover old subjects or define new ones, or point to the complexity of cross-cutting axes of identity within all subjects. It does not, however, suggest that experience has no one privileged interpretation, or that the subject is dead — far from it, in hooks' case. In other words, many of the methodological insights contained within critiques of essentialism are not derived from postmodernism, nor even from postmodern feminism. Thus a feminist theory such as Spelman's can offer anti-essentialist views of subjectivity — for example a view that sees every invocation of identity as contextual and historically situated — without being committed to some of the bolder claims of anti-essentialism.

Bordo is more cautious and more nuanced in her critique of anti-essentialism than is Okin, recognising her own location and the political dangers of dismissing anti-essentialism too casually. My reservations about Bordo's argument centre on her construction of the position she is attacking. The dogmatic view she calls "anti-essentialism" verges on being a straw person, representing, at best, moments in some authors' work rather than a fully articulated programmatic approach. She is careful to

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[39] bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1993): 14-15.

characterise gender scepticism as a convergence of trends rather than a solid stance. This depiction itself, however, serves to elide "anti-essentialist" arguments that are very different from each other. When Bordo argues against principled gender scepticism, does her argument apply with equal strength to Butler's account of gender as performativity and to Spelman's contextual method? Isn't there an important difference between objecting to a particular generalisation because it is exclusionary, for example, and objecting to generalisations in general? Bordo recognises these distinctions, but, like Spelman, her account is critical rather than constructive. Where does this leave my own project?

From theory to method

This chapter expands on the connection between false generalisations about women and methodological essentialism. While feminism needs general claims, often these claims are constructed so as to reflect inequalities of power between women that allow dominant group feminists to define identities and political interests. Taking Spelman's account as a strong argument for the position that gender must always be understood as inflected by race, class and other differences between women (and *vice versa*), I defended her against critics. In the course of this defence, I pointed out how "anti-anti-essentialists" identify a position wherein feminists object to generalisations about women *per se*. This "principled anti-essentialist" position is incoherent; I have some doubts, furthermore, as to whether any feminist theorist consistently adopts it. It nevertheless defines one end of a spectrum, with metaphysical essentialism at the other. Along this spectrum are a variety of positions: from extreme *a priorism* about the Form of Woman, to a principled rejection of all generalisations about women. Just as in chapter one I suggested that metaphysical essentialism is a straw person for feminist anti-essentialists, so here I am suggesting that principled anti-essentialism is both an untenable position in itself, and a straw person for anti-anti-essentialists.

To motivate later chapters, I want to argue that despite the ostensible differences between the texts discussed, there is an unacknowledged consensus in the literature on

essentialism. First, Spelman, Okin and Bordo would all agree that feminism needs generalisations, and that a position rejecting all general claims is untenable. The existence of false generalisations, however egregious, does not necessitate avoiding all generalisations, and indeed, as these authors concur, to do so would be to commit a kind of methodological suicide, since all social theory rests to some degree on generalising categories and theses, however carefully nuanced these may be.

Recognising that the category "women" is too crude to be of real methodological use, we might substitute "working-class women" in a particular analysis. This becomes "white working-class women," or "white working-class married women," or "white working-class married women in Ontario in the 1980s," and so on down the slippery slope. Yet we do not have to commit ourselves to ending up at the bottom. Some of these adjectives may well enhance our analysis, make it more precise and informative; others may turn out to be less relevant, obscuring commonalities rather than highlighting important differences. To insist ahead of time that only difference is to count is to re-adopt a kind of methodological narrowness that inhibits productive feminist investigation. Such an *a priori* affirmation of difference may block the discovery and investigation of commonalities, and we cannot tell *a priori* which commonalities and differences are relevant to the political issue at hand.

For example, in my own work against sexual violence I am often struck by the straightforwardly radical effects of asserting women's commonalities against sexist efforts to fragment women as a group. Of those individuals who are victims of sexual assault as adults, around 90% are women, which is a startling figure by any sociological standard.[40] These women may be young or old, rich or poor, black or white, fat or thin, survivors of other sexual abuse or not, self-defined lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, and so forth. The consequences of the assault will be very different for these different women: an elderly woman with few financial resources leaving her abusive husband has her life changed by sexual violence in quite a different way from a young college student whose blind date rapes her.

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[40] Canadian statistic from a recent compilation in *1995 Volunteer Manual: The Sexual Assault Centre of McGill Students' Society*, Montreal.

Yet there are significant theoretical connections between these two occurrences in feminist analyses, in the emotional responses of the two women, in the attitudes and actions of their aggressors, in their healing processes, and in other respects, which make it both politically useful and useful *to these women* for feminists sometimes to campaign in relatively generic ways against sexual violence perpetrated against a wide range of women. Indeed, the strength of feminist organising against sexual assault resides in the creation of a general connecting discourse. If these two women find themselves in the same support group, their experiences, while very different, may resonate with one another, and they may find important common threads in the fabric of their lives.

If the support group wants to avoid being exclusionary, of course, it will address in its meetings how poverty, age, cultural background and other variables that are relevant to its members have affected their experiences of sexual violence. The group may decide to split into separate sub-groups at different times for different women. On a structural level it will have sliding scale or no fees, it will offer childcare services, it will schedule meetings at times and in locations that make it accessible. Yet members of the group may choose to march together on a "Take Back the Night" demonstration under a banner proclaiming "Women: Safe, Strong and Free," or they may lobby for changes in the law surrounding sexual assault. Thus this example demonstrates that feminist practice can often make use of general categories, women's common experiences, and relatively uninflected political analyses, while still avoiding exclusionary traps. This is not to deny that many feminist actions have been, and continue to be, exclusionary in practice. The extent to which uninflected categories should be discarded *because essentialist,* however, is a question that seems to speak to theoretical issues in feminist theory rather than to the pragmatic issues confronted by feminist groups in responding to sexism.

Thus all feminist theorists with any commitment to making their analyses relevant to feminist activism, of whatever kind, must be committed to allowing some sorts of generalisations about women. Crucial questions revolve around the nature of these generalising claims, how they are deployed politically, and how they are justified. Put simply, false generalisations are bad because they are *false*, not because they are generalisations. It often seems to me that the allure of anti-essentialist discourses has

immobilised feminist political theorists. We need not be committed to any form of essentialism when we identify commonalities among women, and these commonalities might still be accurate and truthful explanatory frameworks for oppression, or be experienced as deeply authentic identities. General claims about women are not *necessarily* essentialist, although they may misrepresent their alleged constituency, make false assumptions about "women's lives" or "women's experience," or make numerous other mistakes. Keeping this debate at the level of epistemological questions about generality and "difference" sidesteps analyses of power that offer criteria for understanding how homogeneity comes to be imposed, and when "strategic essentialism" might be most useful.

Thus we cannot arbitrate between different claims about what women have in common without giving examples of particular contexts where such claims apply. Some generalisations, it seems reasonable to assume, will be justified and others will not. All the authors I have been discussing draw this conclusion in one way or another. But the feminist philosophical literature on essentialism has tended toward internal dialogue, often at cross purposes (as in the case of Okin on Spelman), and has not effectively demonstrated that much is at stake for feminist practitioners in discussions of essentialism. This is one of the reasons Wittgenstein's "back to the rough ground" is an epigram for this dissertation. If we keep the debate at the level of epistemology, we run the risk of being trapped in an idle dichotomy: either we continue to be excited by anti-essentialist examples, seeing exceptions to every general claim, or we impose preconceived ideal-types onto women in ways that matter politically for those women.

Reclaiming the term "essentialist" may have important critical force in a discipline that has failed to interrogate its own professed "anti-essentialism." However, both accusations and allegiances, as Spivak says, often merely give information about "what color cockade you're wearing in your hat."[41] "Essentialism" and "anti-essentialism" are not two discrete and juxtaposed positions, but terms describing multiple positions complexly located on a spectrum. Neither end of the spectrum represents a viable position

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[41] Spivak, "In a Word," in *The Essential Difference*, eds. Schor and Weed: 175.

for feminist theorists. Therefore we need to look to the middle ground between essentialism and gender scepticism to find ways of talking about women that neither do violence to their diversity, nor represent them as inconsolably different.

In the next chapter I will find a perhaps unlikely ally in Ludwig Wittgenstein, who offers a critique of essentialism that can be appropriated in order to perform precisely this task. Wittgenstein's anti-essentialism recommends that we "look and see," an injunction motivated by concerns connected to my own evolving argument. Instead of trying to "get it right" about who women are, we can give examples of contexts where different claims are justified. However, this exercise still requires criteria of justification; it still demands that we define which similarities and differences between women are to count. In chapters four and five I take up the challenge of giving such examples, using my Wittgensteinian feminism to develop an anti-essentialist feminist research method and practice.

3

"Back to the Rough Ground!"
A Wittgensteinian Critique of Feminist (Anti-)Essentialisms[1]

Philosophical Investigations (In a Feminist Voice)

> And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.[2]

1. Let us consider the construct that we call "women." I don't just mean white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, young, beautiful, Western women, but all women. What is common to them all? Don't say: "there must be something in common or they wouldn't be called 'women'." Likewise don't say: "If women have nothing in common then how can feminism form a political movement?" Look and see what the construct of women consists in, and what women might have in common. For if you look you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them

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[1] An earlier version of this dialogue and of some of the ideas in this chapter appeared in *Investigating Wittgenstein: Essentialism and Feminist Political Thought*, MA Research Paper, Department of Political Science, McGill University 1993. A version of this chapter is forthcoming as "'Back to the Rough Ground!': Wittgenstein, Essentialism and Feminist Methods," in *Re-Reading the Canon: Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein*, ed. Naomi Scheman (University Park: Penn State Press).

[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed. trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958): § 67. All further references to this text will be indicated by the abbreviation PI followed by paragraph or page numbers.

at that. Look for example at heterosexual women. They are attracted to, and may form sexual relationships with, men. Now pass to bisexual women: some features drop out and others appear! Think now of a woman of colour (if you haven't already). How is she like a white woman? And what is the relationship of a white lesbian to a Hispanic heterosexual? Does a rich woman in England have anything in common with a poor one in South Africa?

> And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. [PI § 66]

2. Furthermore, even when I talk about one woman it is not correct to find the logical sum of these individual interrelated concepts: if I am white, anglophone, middle class, young..., the concept of "me" is not an additive analysis of these different parts. [PI § 68] I cannot abstract from the rest that part of me that is race, that which is sexuality, and so on. (Yet obviously I can still *use* the concept of myself.) Likewise when I compare myself to a woman of colour, whom I resemble in many other respects, I cannot say "add some colour, and we are the same."

3. "So how can you talk about 'women' at all?" Well, in talking about them I give examples and intend them to be taken in a particular way, so that they may be *used* (in the game of politics perhaps). The danger of this is that we may not recognise that these are just examples and not an ideal, an inexpressible common thing that represents all women. For what does the mental picture of a woman look like when it does not show us any particular image, but what is common to all women? I think that if you see "women" in a certain light you will use the term in a certain way, and because your account does not apply to all women, but only to those you are thinking of, in using an ideal you will be guilty of a generalisation that is quite unjustified:

> The idea now absorbs us, that the ideal '*must*' be found in reality. Meanwhile we do not as yet see *how* it occurs there, nor do we understand the nature of this 'must'. We think it must be in reality; for we think we already see it there. [PI § 101]

4. "So what is the purpose of this ideal, if it is not found in reality?" In this case, the ideal comes to serve a political purpose for you, as my examples serve my political purposes. The ideal woman can be held up as a metaphysical necessity that comes to legislate my identity. So when we identify similarities and differences, we must be quite clear that this is a pragmatic exercise: "How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: "This *and similar things* are called 'games'." [PI § 69]

5. "But if you are a feminist, then you need to make generalisations about women, for this is the essence of feminist politics!" Exactly. I have never denied that. When I look around a classroom, for example, I see women having common experiences of being excluded and trivialised. But that is not to say that even we are all the same. I can draw a boundary around us, for a special purpose. (Perhaps I want to show you something).

6. The ideal becomes an empty notion, which muddles me, and prevents me from seeing what I have to do. What feminist action should I take if I am in pursuit of a chimera? We have taken out all the substance of "women," and are left with a vacuous concept: "we have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!" [PI § 107]

7. Sometimes you draw a boundary around concepts to use them yourself. (This may be called a stereotype). What matters is that you look and see whether or not you have drawn the boundary self-consciously. Sometimes the boundary is oppressive; sometimes it acts as an object of comparison:

> For we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison — as, so to speak, a measuring-rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond. (The dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy). [PI § 131]

8. But now you will say: "This is nonsense. All women do have something in common; namely, their bodies. Do you want to deny that?" All right, the concept of "women" is bounded for you by the physical reality of gendered existence. It need not be so. You have given the physical character of "women" rigid limits, but I can use the term so that its extension is not closed by the same frontier.

9. This much I will allow you: some aspects of male and female bodies are different. But why have we drawn the most important boundaries there? Why do we not draw them around other differences between us? Certainly it matters that some women menstruate, have breasts, vaginas, bear children. But do all women share these features? The physical boundaries of gender are elective foundations, supported by the walls of social practice. The discourse we weave around our bodies is what creates what we think of as a necessary reality.

10. So now you agree: "bodies don't matter" (on this I am still only partly in agreement) and ask again, "if even bodies can change, how is the social construct of 'women' bounded?" By a set of rules which regulate it very well, yet which leave some gaps.

11. "*Essence* is expressed by grammar" [PI § 371]

The category of "women" has been confirmed by language — such as the gendered pronouns some languages use to divide the world in two. This obscures the contingency of that division and leads us to assign it more importance than we otherwise might: "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language." [PI § 109]

12. The category of sex is created and defined by an abstract boundary, which is in fact fluid. For what matters about being a woman? Look and see. We can claim things in common, like perhaps motherhood, or sexuality, or emotional sensibilities, but that is not to say that we will all, always, have these things in common. I use my own experience to

find out what the women I know have in common. The construction of gender identity is a complex thing, and varies between people, and that is to say that it is mutable. (We have approached the problem from the other side, and now we know our way about!):

> One might say that the concept "game" is a concept with blurred edges — "But is a blurred concept a concept at all?"— Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need? [PI § 71]

13. So, perhaps we don't need to specify what the concept "women" is at all. In fact, specifying might not be to our advantage. Rather we need to take the longer path towards discovering who we are, and who we are not.

14. And we extend our concept of women as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.

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What does the preceding Wittgensteinian conversation tell us about feminist theory? First, it elaborates the same stalemate I articulated in chapters one and two: namely, that any feminist theory that tries to incorporate the multiplicity of differences between women will not be able to make the generalisations required for feminist politics. This leaves feminist theory trapped between an acute gender scepticism, and the use of crude and exclusive generalisations. These polar accounts are sometimes presented as the only options for feminists, yet by enquiring both into meaning and into feminist method, a Wittgensteinian feminist critique of essentialism helps us to locate ourselves outside the terms of the dichotomy, on the "rough ground." This chapter uses the ideas in my own *Philosophical Investigations* to show how to continue with feminist theory and practice without falling into methodological essentialism. I argue that by paying close attention to Wittgenstein's remarks in a central section of his *Philosophical Investigations* (roughly §§

66-131), we can undermine the theoretical bases of essentialism through his challenge to one traditional philosophical picture that "holds us captive."

I proceed by briefly locating Wittgenstein's critique of essentialism, before showing how it connects to feminist anti-essentialism. Wittgenstein's later philosophy offers a solution to certain methodological problems within feminist theory. In particular, I present an articulation of the connection between Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance[3] and his critique of ideals, on the one hand, and problematic forms of essentialism with regard to the category "women," on the other. I indicate how this relates to Spelman's analysis in *Inessential Woman,* and point out how Wittgenstein's arguments for purposive boundary-drawing and his notion of "objects of comparison" provide insight into contemporary feminist theorising about sex and gender identities, making the case that conceptual delimiting is a matter of political strategy, not of epistemological necessity. Finally, I indicate that Wittgenstein's injunction to "look and see" might constitute more than a mere slogan for feminist social theory, and I outline the contours of a feminist method that offers a way to go on using anti-essentialist insights. Wittgenstein's scepticism toward theory moves our attention away from the "problem of difference" as a philosophical trope, towards questions about feminist practice. If we accept the Wittgensteinian argument that meaning is constructed through, rather than prior to, our use of language, then an anti-essentialist method must look at deployments of the term "women" and their political implications.

Wittgenstein, essentialism, and feminist theory

In debating the interrelation of canonical twentieth century philosophy and feminist thought, Wittgenstein is often mentioned, usually in the context of the epistemological consequences of his private language argument.[4] Little of the feminist literature, however,

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[3] In this paper I bracket potential feminist commentary on the contested term "family," and use the "family resemblance" analogy in the way Wittgenstein intended.

[4] See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, "Epistemologies of Postmodernism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism,* ed. Nicholson; Elizabeth Potter, "Gender and Epistemic Negotiation," and Lorraine Code, "Taking

seems to take up the challenge of weaving his later philosophy into feminist political critique in an explicit fashion.[5] Indeed, Wittgenstein's philosophy, especially his later philosophy of language, is often presumed to be at odds with agendas for social change. Wittgenstein himself was no feminist, and I bracket here any epistemological or political issues raised by appropriating for feminist work the ideas of canonical philosophers hostile to feminist politics.[6] I will argue that Wittgenstein's intentions notwithstanding, both linguistic and methodological feminist anti-essentialist arguments find a strong philosophical underpinning, and a way to go on, in his anti-essentialist arguments in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Wittgenstein's conception of essentialism was primarily linguistic, his targets being contemporary philosophy of language, logic and metaphysics. Among these targets was, of course, his own early work, the *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus*.[7] At points in the *Philosophical Investigations* he responds directly to his own earlier ideas:

> We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential, in our investigation, resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, proof, truth, experience and so on. This order is a *super*-order between — so to speak — *super*-concepts. Whereas, of course, if the words "language," "experience," "world," have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table," "lamp," "door." [PI § 97]

Subjectivity into Account," both in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[5] This is a trend that has begun to change with the recent publication of a number of articles making points contiguous to my own in this chapter: see Judith Mary Green and Blanche Radford Curry, "Recognising Each Other Amidst Diversity: Beyond Essentialism in Collaborative Multi-Cultural Feminist Theory," *Sage* 8:1, 1991; Chantal Mouffe, "Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Butler and Scott; Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender"; Stoljar, "Essence, Identity and the Concept of Woman"; Scheman, ed., *Re-Reading the Canon*.

[6] There is every reason (including some direct biographical evidence) to believe that Wittgenstein was hostile to feminism and to women in general, despite his close contact with successful women philosophers such as Alice Ambrose and Elizabeth Anscombe. See Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1991): 72-3 and 498 for Wittgenstein's asides on women, feminism and philosophy. See also 21-5 and 312-3 on his odd fascination with Otto Weininger's misogynist and anti-Semitic text *Sex and Character*.

[7] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

He views essentialism as a linguistic phenomenon entailed by the claim that members of a particular class share a common key property by virtue of their common name. He rejects the notion of a single "essence" to these classes, where "essence" implies a statement of the sufficient and necessary conditions for the application of a particular term. Wittgenstein conceives many of the linguistic "mistakes" associated with essentialism as arising from misguided metaphysical assumptions (for example, the assumption that terms in aesthetics and ethics can be conclusively defined [PI § 77]), and from the characteristics of logic [PI §§ 107-8]. He thus seeks to undermine linguistic essentialism by challenging both an account of language whereby terms refer to things existing as "natural kinds" in the world, and the belief, in its various forms, that meaning is constructed prior to the use of language. He raises two implicit objections to linguistic essentialism: first, that it relies on *a priorism* at the expense of empirical enquiry, and second, that linguistic essentialism is a theory that does not reflect our actual use of language.

General claims made about women that are based on the experience of only some women often exhibit the same *a priorism* and failure to examine empirical evidence that Wittgenstein criticised. An essentialist epistemology that takes the use of the word "women" to represent a collection of people with specified characteristics existing prior to the application of the term erases both the diversity of women and the fact that women's identities *as women* emerge from their particular social locations. Thus linguistic essentialism encourages us to assume, on the one hand, that all women are women by virtue of fulfilling a finite set of necessary and sufficient conditions, thereby inviting the assumption that the word "woman" describes merely an instance of these general conditions.

On the other hand, it obscures the varied contexts of the social construction of gender identity, encouraging feminists to posit a general definitional account of "women" that is allegedly specific to no particular woman.[8] Not only is this latter story epistemologically problematic in Wittgensteinian terms, but it also is susceptible to sustained feminist political critique. In the absence of linguistic and methodological

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[8] See Minow and Spelman, "In Context."

essentialisms, there is no reason to suppose that the experiences of some women can represent those of all women, and the picture that has held (some of) us captive is revealed as a political strategy rather than "the truth about women." In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein makes the case that the meanings of words are determined by an examination of their use, rather than their use being determined by pre-existing ideals. More radically, he argues that we can use words without being able to specify precise criteria for their application. One concept that elucidates this theory of language is Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances."

Additive analyses and family resemblances

Spelman employs a philosophy that is implicitly Wittgensteinian, and an explicit rendering of the connections between *Inessential Woman* and the *Philosophical Investigations* offers a powerful language for navigating our way out of the labyrinths she describes.[9] Wittgenstein articulates an anti-essentialist method more scrupulously than Spelman, gives a more detailed sense of how the philosophical "therapy" works, and demonstrates how to carry on given the recognition of essentialist errors. Most notably, Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances is an alternative to certain kinds of mistaken additive analyses (the phenomena Spelman criticises). Rather than offering an account of the linguistic essence of any particular term, he points to a variety of connected ways the term is used in language, none of which is definitive. [PI §§ 65-67] If we adopt the notion that women bear family resemblances to one another, we can avoid a misleading ontology that sets up mutually exclusive, bounded categories.

On this account there need be no definitive set of characteristics that all women share, but rather we can understand ourselves as connected to each other by a network of overlapping similarities, some of which may be biological — like breasts, a vagina, a uterus, the capacity to conceive and bear a child, XX chromosomes; others of which may be socially constructed — like a particular relation to one's mother, ethical attitudes,

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[9] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: see especially 140-144 for hints of Wittgenstein's influence.

experiences of subordination, and so on. But no characteristic is necessary to make an individual a woman, and none is sufficient. Thus, on this view, it is perfectly possible to make sense of the fact that two "distantly related" individuals can both be women and share none of the same characteristics except that they are called "women." A male-to-female transsexual woman, for example, might have XY chromosomes, experience of being raised as a boy in a white, urban bourgeois nuclear family, and conventionally feminine self-presentation. A butch woman might have XX chromosomes, experience of being raised as a girl by lesbian parents in a small Northern community, and conventionally masculine self-presentation. On my Wittgensteinian-feminist view, it is not "wrong" to call them both "women" even though they do not share any common features potentially definitive of womanhood. This is not to suggest that linguistic usage can never be changed (the argument commonly levelled against Wittgenstein's account of meaning as use). In what follows I develop the feminist possibilities for this view of language in the context of the need both to change conventional sexist meanings, and to offer justifications for political decisions about inclusion and exclusion.

Wittgenstein anticipates several objections to these considerations, all of which are helpful for our anti-essentialist feminism. First, he argues that all instances of concepts like "game" (or, we might add, "women") do not have a disjunctive shared property — some characteristic(s) we can identify as being common to all games — but rather the common term gathers together multiple instances that have overlapping similarities. Our attempts to find common properties are examples of our being led astray by the single word that links these family resemblances. Second, a concept is not the logical sum of sub-concepts, each of which can be rigidly defined — board-games, card-games, Olympic games, etc. — since we can, and often do, use it in a way that is not bounded. That is, we invent new games, or make the case that something not previously thought of as a game should be included in that concept. Wittgenstein rejects the idea that a concept without rigid boundaries is useless, and he shows us a variety of ways in which we use concepts despite the openness

of their frontiers. We must take explanations by example at face value, and avoid the temptation to seek out an essence for every phenomenon we encounter.[10]

This attack on linguistic essentialism has important implications for methodological essentialism. On the one hand, we have an alternative epistemology that sidesteps the view that there is an essential womanness, separable from class, race, and other contexts, that all women share. This approach also sidesteps the epistemological (if not the political) need to have people pass through classifications of the sort Spelman describes. On the other hand, we can still use the term "women," make generalisations about women, and engage in feminist politics. Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances offers not only a supplementary epistemological analysis of essentialist practices, but also a solution — a new way of thinking about the similarities and differences between people. Of course, to describe women as bearing family resemblances to each other only constitutes an epistemological therapy, or a way of freeing ourselves from the misleading philosophical picture that holds us captive, not necessarily a political riposte to those (myself included) who see pragmatic reasons for insisting on systems of classification. But it does reveal these reasons as purposive rather than pre-determined, and therefore as carrying a concomitant demand for justification.

A similar methodological correction arises from Wittgenstein's critique of ideals. Rather than considering language as revealing truths about the world, we are urged to examine linguistic usage. Thus instead of assuming a quintessential "womanness" that all women share because they are called "women," we should look more closely at the applications of the term. Then, to understand what "women" means, we would have to give empirical examples of different people called "women," and if feminists wanted to describe a particular social phenomenon as, for example, "a women's issue," we would have to justify that label by pointing to the ways it affects people we call "women," and stipulate the women to whom it applies. In addition to preventing some women simply ignoring the experiences of others, furthermore, this methodology would delegitimate the

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[10] See G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, "§§ 65-88" in *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning* Volume I, *An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

claim that the experiences of non-dominant women do not actually count *as* "women's experience."

The way the stale debate surrounding essentialisms in feminist theory "holds us captive" is similar to the problems the *Philosophical Investigations* sets out not to solve, but to dispel. Feminists of many kinds seek a way of thinking — a philosophical imagination — that embraces plurality, starting from the realities of women's lives, not from the exigencies of a theory unself-consciously trapped in essentialism. Wittgenstein's later work is one of the most profound modern sources of scepticism toward "philosophy" for its detachment from "the world," offering a critique of theory that resonates with much contemporary feminist writing.[11] His own conception of philosophy is one of the most vexed questions in scholarship on Wittgenstein, not least because the answers must be sought in some of his most perplexing aphorisms.[12] Primarily Wittgenstein rejects a Cartesian philosophy of doubt and certainty (the aim of philosophy thus being to discover what we can *know*).[13] Rather he examines problems in language, and seeks to demarcate sense and nonsense: "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense."[PI § 464] Philosophy offers only new insights into old facts, clarifying and describing rather than explaining: "Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain." [PI § 126] It offers no theories or hypotheses (unlike science) and consequently rejects idealisations:

> It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones. It was not of any possible interest to us to find out empirically 'that, contrary to our preconceived ideas, it is possible to think such-and-such'— whatever that may mean. (The conception of thought as a gaseous medium.) And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be

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[11] See for example, Christian, "The Race for Theory"; Naomi Scheman, "Though This is Method, Yet There is Madness In It: Paranoia and Liberal Epistemology," in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, eds. Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

[12] Robert J. Fogelin, "Wittgenstein's Critique of Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, eds. Sluga and Stern.

[13] The fullest articulation of this view appears in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969).

> anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. [PI § 109]

Philosophy does not help us progressively to accumulate knowledge, but rather becomes a skill for dealing with illusions stemming from those fundamental features of language and structures of thought that shape the way we look at things.[14] For those who see in this a kind of conceptual chaos, Wittgenstein offers carefully justified footholds. Adopting the family resemblance approach does not preclude a systematic description of conceptual phenomena or rule out generalisations: "What, then, are the criteria for possession of philosophical understanding...?... the skill manifest in marshaling analogies, disanalogies, and actual or invented intermediate cases that will illuminate the network of our grammar."[15] Wittgenstein seems to envisage philosophy as thus entering a new paradigm — a kink in the development of human thought analogous to Galileo's revisions[16]— where it no longer mimics science and struggled with metaphysics; instead: "The [philosophical] problems are solved, not by giving new information but by arranging what we have always known." [PI § 109]

In reflecting on recent feminist theory we can immediately see some points of connection. Certainly feminists have placed minimal emphasis on uncovering truth *a priori*, and feminist philosophy has in general been imbued with a keen sense of theory as de-/re-constructive, with the recognition and acceptance of previously silenced or unheard voices, and with philosophy as the investigation of alternative world-views. Philosophical language has featured in this project as a significant limitation to the free expression of women's voices: in the critique of sexist/phallocentric discourse, in creating new, gynocentric forms of philosophical expression, in challenging narrow parameters of what is to "count" as philosophy, and in confronting language as a tool of oppression.

Wittgenstein's strategy also undermines a phallocratic conception of philosophy that posits "hard" disciplines such as logic and epistemology as the "core" of philosophy,

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[14] G. E. Moore, "Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930-33," in *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959): 322-3.

[15] Baker and Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*: 544.

[16] Moore, "Wittgenstein's Lectures": 322-3.

whilst "soft" areas — like ethics — remain peripheral, and in so doing echoes his concept of the "democratic" "body philosophical."[17] For feminist philosophers too, philosophy is a skill and an activity, a way of challenging conceptual dogma through the affirmation of different experiences and realities. And Wittgenstein helps us to see the limits of narrow concepts, essences, and ideals, and to find a philosophical therapy that frees us from them.

This highlights the anti-philosophical nature of the Wittgensteinian feminist view, and indeed its opposition to any philosophy that seeks to identify metaphysical truths. It does not preclude, however, the type of philosophy that attempts a careful picking apart of the falsehoods that the old perpetuated, and a better kind of thinking that recognises its own location. The project of "feminist theory" can proceed, but with caution, avoiding the total fragmentation of its central categories. If "difference" is pursued with too much zeal, then one conclusion is that the only interests I can intelligibly have are my own (and they too disintegrate), and feminist politics descends into solipsism. It is impossible to imagine a world without theory, in the broadest sense of the term, where people did not enquire into different conceptualisations and seek to explain a variety of events within a single framework. This process itself is rightly prized, moreover, as one of the attributes of a self-determining individual or community, and the analyses offered by feminist theory are both liberatory and part of a legitimate strategy for resisting oppression.

The focus on essentialism as a *theoretical* problem is nonetheless an example of the kind of philosophy Wittgenstein's critique is directed against. To talk about essentialism as a purely epistemological problem can be a distancing strategy, a way of removing oneself from the particular and focusing on the general. Echoing Wittgenstein's remark, "instead of craving for generality I could also have said 'the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case'," [18] "theory" undermines specificity, not only by denying difference in language, but in reality. Lugones pinpoints this sentiment when she says:

> The white woman theorist did not notice us yet, her interpretation of the question placed the emphasis on theorising itself, and the generalizing and

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[17] Baker and Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*: 685.

[18] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958): 18.

> theorising impulse led the white theorizer to *think of all differences as the same*, that is, as underminers of the truth, force, or scope of their theories. Here racism has lost its character and particular importance — a clear sign that we have not been noticed. This trick does not allow the theorizer to see, for example, the need to differentiate among racism, colonialism, and imperialism, three very different interactive phenomena.[19]

The verbal sameness of the term "difference" and the multitude of arguments we have advanced under its banner again direct attention to linguistic uniformity rather than to the many political issues surrounding "different differences" that exist in real lives.[20] A philosophy of generality serves to delegitimate the needs of particular women. If we have a simple theory that explains sexism in one tidy slogan, then why look for different realities? The most crucial lesson is that the prerogative to define identity is not equally shared. Decisions about which similarities are to count (and which differences really don't matter) are usually made by those with the most power.

Drawing boundaries

Apart from looking at diversity within the group of people usually referred to as "women," we can challenge essentialism by examining some more or less successful attempts to defy conventional boundaries around the term. A Wittgensteinian epistemology locates us between methodological essentialism and principled anti-essentialism, and gives us reason to see the decisions we make about definitions as deeply political.

> Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy! [PI § 11]

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[19] Lugones, "On The Logic of Pluralist Feminism."

[20] See bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," in *Yearning*: 23-31.

In Wittgenstein's remarks on the possibilities of setting the boundary of a concept in many different places, and further on the need to set a boundary at all, we see radical possibilities for feminism. It might initially seem as if I am ignoring my own advice and using philosophy to obscure real biological difference, if the word "women" actually corresponds to the category of women bounded by the physical reality of the female body. Indeed we do need to recognise the reality and significance of biology, not as "facts" about chromosomes or genitalia, but as experience with politically significant cultural meaning. Others have argued in more detail that the female body has been erased both from canonical political theory and from certain feminist theories, and that both feminist and non-feminist discourses make uncritical assumptions about the necessity of sexual dimorphism.[21] Both of these phenomena have contributed to a biologistic fascination that does nothing to elaborate the connection between feminist concerns such as eating disorders, reproductive illnesses, and childbirth, and the construction of a female sexed body.

The specific contribution of a Wittgensteinian feminism to these debates lies in the argument that where we draw the boundary around the category of "women" constitutes in part a political act, and one that should be scrutinised for its particular purpose. "To repeat, we can draw a boundary — for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose)." [PI § 69] Thus we can aim for semantic control of the category of women and redefine its boundaries with the explicit acknowledgment that this is a political activity (not an "objective" scientific or medical one) within which power differentials affect the semantic authority of the participants, including different women.

Perhaps we can also take up the Wittgensteinian notion of foundations as axes:

> I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can *discover* them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility.[22]

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[21] See for example *supra* note 36, chapter 1, and notes 8 and 9, chapter 2.

[22] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*: § 152.

If we posit "women" as that bounded group of people held in place on its axis by various popular, medical, and scientific discourses, not fixed in the sense that a pre-existing reality "holds it fast," we can also see how adding feminist challenges to "the movement around" women might lead to a displacement of those who are accepted as women, an alteration in the meaning of that term.

Such methodological possibilities for the subversion of gender identities form a key part of undermining simplistic and rigidly imposed binary gender definitions — an integral part of the task of any feminist theory. If we agree that gender is a social construct, then there is no reason why it need reflect a binary sex distinction. The notion that male and female bodies create two discrete groups that are "bounded" obscures the fact that we almost never identify an individual's gender by unequivocal reference to primary or even secondary sexual characteristics (except, crucially, at birth, although even then intersexed infants can cause discursive chaos), although these characteristics usually are posited as the "cause" of gender identity.[23] In fact, physical gender cues can be overridden to a remarkable degree by social context.[24]

So in what ways can we challenge gender binarisms, and what justifies strategic boundary-drawing around particular groups of people? Some of the deepest challenges to the boundary of the term "women" in Western societies come from those who change their gender presentation and/or the physical sex of their bodies (transsexuals), or those who have ambiguous primary sexual characteristics (intersexuals). While an obsession with "genital status" can serve merely to reinforce the myth that sex and gender are determinately linked, transsexuality and intersexuality remain deeply fascinating from a feminist perspective, especially in the way they have been treated in literature and popular culture. The extreme reactions of confusion and distaste towards those whose bodies do not accommodate gender demonstrate its deeply ingrained nature. Thus it is partly through

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[23] Kessler, "The Medical Construction of Gender."

[24] See the case studies in Devor, *Gender Blending*.

the historical and contemporary examination of the treatment of sexually ambiguous individuals that we gain a clearer perspective on the contingency of gender identity.[25]

For example, in a growing literature on the feminist implications of transsexualism, we can see further efforts to highlight the potentially fluid yet socially significant boundaries of gender. On the one hand, Janice Raymond's classic hostile feminist analysis of the politics of transsexualism, and highly publicised essentialist transsexual memoirs, of which Jan Morris' *Conundrum* is the most highbrow, have contributed to a scepticism of the radical potential of transsexualism within feminist communities.[26] One major source of this scepticism has been the deployment of essentialist accounts of sex and gender in theories of transsexualism. Raymond, for example, stresses the conservatism of the then-dominant medical model of transsexualism, and makes the case that transsexualism (and, by default, transsexuals themselves) reinscribe patriarchal and oppressive sex and gender binarisms, and both reflect and generate popular support for metaphysical and biological essentialisms.

Popular discourse around transsexualism in contemporary Western cultures has until recently clung to an extreme metaphysical essentialism. For example, Morris remarks at the beginning of her autobiographical narrative: "I was three or perhaps four years old when I realized that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl."[27] And later:

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[25] See, for example, Michel Foucault's introduction to the memoir of *Herculine Barbin*; Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[26] Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (New York: Teachers College, 2nd edition 1994 [1979]); Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (New York: Harcourt, 1974). Raymond's classic analysis is generally unpopular with transsexual theorists. They point out that her exclusive focus on MTF transsexuals and her reductive interpretation of transsexuals' testimony merely reinforces a simplistic radical feminist analysis of transsexualism that understands MTF transsexuals as mimicking and reinforcing a patriarchal construct of femininity. See Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *Body Guards*, eds. Epstein and Straub, for the best-known postmodern response to Raymond, and Raymond's "Introduction to the 1994 Edition" of *The Transsexual Empire*: xxii-xxiii for a disappointing riposte to Stone; Morris' conservatism on gender issues emerges in several widely cited passages, for example "Such are the superficials of my new consciousness — and..., I must add to them a frank enjoyment, *which I think most honest women will admit to*, of the small courtesies men now pay me, the standing up or the opening of doors, which really do give one a cherished or protected feeling, undeserved perhaps but very welcome." [*Conundrum*: 160 (emphasis mine)]

[27] Morris, *Conundrum*: 9.

> Trans-sexualism is something different in kind. It is not a sexual mode or preference. It is not an act of sex at all. It is a passionate, lifelong, ineradicable conviction, and no true trans-sexual has ever been disabused of it. ... I believe [the 'conundrum' of transsexualism] to have some higher origin or meaning. I equate it with the idea of soul, or self, and I think of it not just as a sexual enigma, but as a quest for unity ... In my mind it is a subject far wider than sex: I recognize no pruriency to it, and I see it above all as a dilemma neither of the body nor of the brain, but of the spirit.[28]

Here in its most extreme form is the idea that one's soul is sexed. Biologically essentialist claims have also traditionally been embedded in medicalised understandings of transsexualism as a "disease" caused by, for example, hormonal imbalance.[29]

On the other hand, paradoxically, feminists have also been critical of transsexuals for the latter's failure to recognise the *inflexibility* of gender boundaries. Arguing that MTF transsexuals are not "real women," many radical feminists have resisted their inclusion in the category "women." "Border wars" over the admission of MTF transsexuals to women-only festivals and organisations, for example, continue to divide feminist communities.[30] Arguments for the exclusion of MTF transsexuals shy away from explicitly essentialist claims about the biological basis of femininity, claiming instead that MTFs cannot be real women because they do not have the experience of early female socialisation in a patriarchal society, or that they will contaminate women's hard-won separate space with their "male energy" or desire to appropriate. Nonetheless, the use of the euphemism "wimmin-born-wimmin" to characterise those who *are* included seems to belie this claim (one cannot, surely, since Beauvoir, be "born" a woman?).

This ambivalence notwithstanding, the advent of queer theory and of postmodern politics has led to more challenging and subtle feminist questions about the social construction of transsexualism, many of them posed by transsexual narrators and theorists themselves.[31] For example, *why* the public preoccupation mainly with male-to-female

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[28] Morris, *Conundrum*: 14-15.

[29] See Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*: 43-68 for an early discussion of medical models of transsexualism.

[30] See Kendel, Devor and Strapko, "Feminist and Lesbian Opinions About Transsexuals."

[31] Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*; Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1993); Minnie Bruce Pratt, *S/he* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1995); Rubin, *Transformations*. Discussions of

transsexualism? In what ways do medical gatekeepers persistently reinscribe conventional gender scripts when they insist on pre-op transsexuals living *as a man*, or *as a woman*, in their most patriarchal and essentialist senses? How can transsexuals challenge this scripting? What is the lived reality of being neither man nor woman, as some radical transsexuals now describe themselves, and what can feminist theorists learn from it? What insights into the political consciousness of gender can feminist transsexuals offer other feminists? How does the historical and sociological study of the changing shape of transsexual and transgendered identities make visible the cultural politics of gender ambiguity? How can theorists of transsexualism integrate the ambivalence of transsexuals themselves towards essentialist and social constructionist discourses?

In raising these questions I merely want to indicate, first, the connections between transsexualism and critiques of essentialism; second, I want to suggest that some loosely "postmodern" work on transsexed and transgendered identities constitutes an extension of the border of the concept "women" of the sort legitimated by my Wittgensteinian feminist analysis. This is not to say that the social construction of transsexualism, or individual transsexuals themselves, will always be in tune with feminist understandings of sex or gender, and there are undoubtedly strongly patriarchal, essentialist, and conservative currents in some discourses by and about transsexuals. The same can be said, however, of discourses by and about non-transsexed/transgendered women, and even, in some cases, by self-identified feminists. In feminists' attempts to justify the exclusion of MTF transsexuals from the category "women" we see another kind of methodological essentialism.

On the other hand, radical feminists have good reasons to resist the reduction of all sexual/gender identities to "queer," and the sometimes concomitant refusal to make oppositional political distinctions.[32] Thus radical feminist scepticism and postmodern queer celebration of transsexualism have become trapped in the terms of the same debate

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transvestitism likewise struggle with its cultural meaning as subversive or reactionary. See for example, Carole-Ann Taylor, "Boys Will be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[32] See for example Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger, "The Queer Backlash," in *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*, eds. Diane Bell and Renate Klein (Melbourne: Spinifex, 1996).

that I outlined with regard to essentialism and anti-essentialism in chapter two. The question "are MTF transsexuals women?" is not well-formed in the absence of a fixed set of criteria of womanhood to which we can appeal. I suggest that transsexuals bear family resemblances to those people conventionally labelled "women" and that there is no mistake entailed in calling them women. But the criteria of difference offered by some feminists (bodily experiences, childhood socialisation, and so on) may mean that in some contexts there are good political reasons for highlighting the distance of the relation between biological and transsexed women.

To give another example, Jacquelyn Zita, in her widely cited article, "Male Lesbians and the Postmodernist Body," poses the question "can men be lesbians?"[33] Zita asks whether a theory of the postmodern body might allow men to occupy the subject-position of women-loving-women. Clearly there is something Wittgensteinian in this:

> In this commonplace construction of lesbian identity, bodies come to occupy an historically pre-established category of existence. The "male lesbian" is not saying that occupants of this category are not lesbians, but that the category needs to be stretched — not by adding men, but by adding men who happen to be lesbians.[34]

The central drawback to this suggestion is that the "theory" works to its logical conclusions by focusing on semantics rather than on the politics of the bodily experience of the agent and how she is located in a societal context of oppression. There are reasons for drawing the boundary around the concept "lesbian" in such a way that it includes those who have lived experience of the female body, given its deeply significant social and political ramifications. Furthermore, the appropriation of the term "lesbian" by men — not all of whom would be well-intentioned — would result in tangible political losses: less "female lesbian"-only space, a fading of the distinct character of lesbian communities, or a weakening of the ability powerfully to name oneself "lesbian," for example.

The central difference between this case and the transsexual example is that the use of the term "lesbian" to apply to men fails to challenge conventional understandings of

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[33] Jacquelyn Zita, "Male Lesbians and the Postmodernist Body," *Hypatia* 7:4, 1992.

[34] Zita, "Male Lesbians": 117.

sex/gender boundaries: a person with the sexual features of a male who changes her gender presentation to female, feminist caveats not withstanding, is challenging an established frontier around the concept "women." The straight man dating women who suddenly renames himself "lesbian," however, is unlikely to be recognised as a gender outlaw!

Thus it is often the case that, even as we accept the radical consequences of an anti-essentialist Wittgensteinian epistemology, we must pay careful attention to the political consequences of where we draw boundaries around terms. Zita's discussion points not to an affirmative answer to the question "can men be lesbians?," but to the need for justificatory strategies that emphasise the political gains and losses of boundary-drawing in specific contexts. Ambiguously sexed bodies, transsexualism, the case of the male lesbian, and other examples act as case studies, which, if explored, would illuminate the politically salient, as well as the variously constructed, qualities of sex and gender boundaries. These examples highlight the fluidity of the boundary around the concept "women," the possibilities for challenge to our conventional usages. While our epistemological concerns give us some freedom in leaving terms open, however, the strategic imperatives of politics require objects of comparison; they demand that we draw boundaries around terms to use them as "measuring rods." Making a concept comparatively useful might entail that its boundary be firmly, albeit not immutably, fixed. Wittgenstein recognises the need for some conceptual delimiting; however, he urges us to acknowledge the contingent nature of our terms, and to view them as purposive tools rather than "a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond."

None of the foregoing implies that all categories are oppressive and that women should therefore cease to lay claim to gender as an explanatory element of social theory. The excessive reluctance to draw boundaries around terms can be just as epistemologically misguided and politically unhelpful as essentialism, not least because I sometimes suspect that this kind of theory is written by those who can afford to let their philosophical imaginations run away with them, leaving more prosaic politics behind for the less privileged. Some anti-essentialist philosophical strategies give the impression that "postmodern" feminists toy with, or are titillated by, the kind of examples that make an

anti-essentialist case, rather than examining how, in the light of anti-essentialism, we can move on and construct explanatorily useful feminist theory. To claim, for example, that "woman can never be defined"[35] may constitute a valuable critical contention within an existing philosophical discourse, yet does not obviously further feminist projects that must draw on the notion of specific groups of women, united in some identifiable set of experiences or political objectives.

We seem to have stumbled onto a curious paradox: namely, that at the same time as we try to subvert the stereotypical categories established by patriarchy, we may wish to defend the conceptual limits of the categories women create for themselves. Otherwise everything becomes available for linguistic co-optation, and in the process feminist claims lose their political saliency. Overcoming the "bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" is not simply a matter of opening every conceptual boundary and inviting everybody in. It consists in careful attention to the political and ethical implications of where we draw boundaries around terms, not on philosophical well-wishing.

Between the poles of radical deconstruction and rigid essentialism lies a large philosophical terrain, and it is here that Wittgenstein sets us down. His choice is plain: we can leave a concept open (using it in the knowledge that its constituents have no common disjunctive property) or we can draw a boundary around it for a purpose. Here there is a case for taking very seriously the possibly negative political implications of that boundary, yet not every concept in a Wittgensteinian feminism can keep its "blurred edges"; indeed, in some cases leaving open the frontiers of a concept might have negative political connotations, as we saw above. Some commentaries on categories like "women" and "lesbians" seem excessively reluctant to draw boundaries, and in leaving terms gaping risk political vacuity and ineptitude. There are good political reasons for being inexact about what we mean in some cases, yet at other times philosophy must not be allowed to run ahead of the political reality with which it contends, lest it participate in the creation of deconstructive theories that are as far from usage and experience as the metaphysical categories they seek to undermine.

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[35] Kristeva, "Woman Can Never Be Defined."

From "slippery ice" to "rough ground"

Implicit in my argument so far is the belief that anti-essentialism, in all its versions, has become a set of key insights into "difference," exclusion, and feminist theoretical method. These insights are, co-opting Judith Butler's words, "notions which have entered into an historical crisis that no amount of reflection can reverse."[36] Few feminist theorists, however, have taken up the challenge of exploring how anti-essentialist philosophy might relate to empirical social research paradigms, or to political practice — that is, what to *do* with anti-essentialism. And while feminist political practices have engaged with exclusion and difference in numerous sites, this engagement has sometimes been under-theorised and deserves to be articulated in closer connection with anti-essentialist feminist theory. These are strange lacunae in light of the fear of vapid generalisation and the desire to contextualise that supposedly characterise all anti-essentialist feminisms. We know that "there are no short cuts through women's lives," but where are the better paths?[37]

In the following two chapters, I examine the implications of my anti-essentialist account for feminist practice, and point out ways in which practice may shape anti-essentialism. Part of my overall argument in this dissertation is that anti-essentialism gains its critical force by bringing to feminism a contextual critique of power relations between women. Philosophising about "difference" may well make clearer to us how oppression is reinscribed by certain theoretical moves. But, as my Wittgensteinian analysis highlights, moving back to the "rough ground" of feminist practice is an essential part of formulating a feminist theory that incorporates plurality in ways which respond to the exigencies of, for example, feminist research and feminist activism.

Any anti-essentialist claim is under-determined by feminist theory. In this case, any account of the similarities and differences among women must be informed by some empirical considerations: which group of women do we mean? At what time? In what

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[36] Judith Butler, "For a Careful Reading," in *Feminist Contentions*: 132.

[37] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: 187.

place? But these questions cannot simply be labelled "empirical" without further investigation into how we arrive at empirically based knowledge about social contexts. After all, Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, one of the Second Wave texts most widely criticised for falsely generalising, is avowedly "empirical," based on numerous interviews with women "all over America."[38] The Wittgensteinian injunction to "look and see," occasionally invoked by philosophers as the last word, seems to me, as a political theorist with training in social science, to be only the beginning of our investigation into anti-essentialism:

> We have begun to realize that I don't necessarily correct my picture of what is true of women "as women" by doing "empirical research" rather than simply generalizing from my own case. For I can't simply "look and see" to find out what we have or don't have in common. First of all, I have to have decided what kind of similarity or difference I am interested in. It makes no sense to ask simply whether women are similar or different — I have to specify in what way they might be similar or different. Moreover, I have to employ criteria of sameness and difference — I have to use some measure by which I decide whether they are the same or different in the specified way. And finally, I have to determine the significance of the similarities and differences I find.[39]

In putting forward "anti-essentialist" ways of thinking about feminism, I have interdependent philosophical and political reasons for avoiding the purely critical project of pointing out homogenising tendencies in political theorists' invocations of social groups. I am concerned, as discussed in chapter two, that "accusations" of essentialism are not only theoretically confused, but also politically stifling. For example, two well-known feminists who are among those most often labelled "essentialist," both in published critiques and in academic conversation, are Carol Gilligan and Catharine MacKinnon. Anti-essentialist challenges to their work have, in some cases, been both theoretically sophisticated and politically compelling, bringing out buried assumptions about gender and hidden exclusions that require correction. I cannot help noticing, however, that both women are feminists deeply concerned with political action — in MacKinnon's case, as a

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[38] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* : 326.

[39] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: 140.

feminist litigator and anti-pornography activist, and in Gilligan's, as a social psychologist involved in the empowerment of adolescent girls. As I will discuss with regard to Gilligan in chapter four and MacKinnon in chapter five, this very concern with political action leaves them open to charges of essentialism. Feminists should be worried about a theoretical trend that risks undermining feminist political action rather than making it more just.

In what follows I take very seriously anti-essentialist claims about power and exclusion, while sounding a note of caution about the implications of a principled anti-essentialism. As Kathy Ferguson says:

> Genealogy ruthlessly pursued tends to avoid the problem of political action, not because it is incapable of allowing for political distinctions and moral claims, but because the evocation of difference does not in itself tell us which differences are most worthy of our attention. On one level calls for the deconstruction of gender, the loosening of the identities and coherencies organized around male and female, is a very radical project in that it strikes at the basic categories that enable sexism to exist. On another level, if the enormous inequalities between men and women are left intact, then deconstructing gender could simply legitimate that inequality by disguising it and also rob women of the capacity for resistance and struggle that their own women's voices can provide.[40]

We need criteria, though, to find out "which differences are most worthy of our attention." We need feminist methods for implementing anti-essentialism, and we need to know when to stop. Neither the interminable deconstruction nor the uncritical reification of the category "women" is adequate to the demands of feminist practice. Philosophical aims do not have to dictate conceptual categories any more than matters of direct observation. As Martin argues:

> While a person engaging in feminist scholarship is guided by both political and intellectual purposes and values, these no more dictate one's theoretical categories than do one's data. Just as different sets of categories will be consonant with a given body of data, alternate conceptualizations will be compatible with a given set of values and purposes. The question of which categories we should choose cannot be answered in advance of

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[40] Kathy Ferguson, "Interpretation and Genealogy in Feminism," *Signs* 16:2, 1991: 337.

> inquiry or decided upon once and for all because the contexts of our investigations change over time and so do our interests and purposes. Further, everyone need not choose the same categories. Indeed, if the categories that feminist theorists have been recommending seem to fit some research interests and purposes, the general categories that feminist theorists have told us to shun may turn out to be appropriate to other projects.[41]

Thus it strikes me that debates about anti-essentialism are in fact often making normative claims about *how to do* feminism. That is, arguments that feminist theory should be contextual, or should pay attention to differences between women, or should use generalising categories only with the explicit recognition that they are contingent constructions, are claims not only about how to construct new and more sophisticated theoretical accounts of women's oppression, but about how more obviously empirical feminist goals should be met. This seems to me a point where the professed interdisciplinarity of women's studies might most fruitfully be developed. For surely questions about the nature and legitimacy of generalisations about women are *empirical*, however we understand this term?

Within this dissertation, the move to examine some of the practice-oriented ways in which anti-essentialism might be relevant is in direct response to the exegesis of the tail-chasing that dominates the essentialism debates, as well as a Wittgensteinian scepticism toward theory. Divorcing claims about generalisation from concrete political contexts within which those claims are relevant puts us onto "slippery ice." That is, when we talk about the pitfalls of making generalisations, or the need to emphasise difference over sameness, we run the risk of privileging abstract philosophical discussion over the "rough ground" of practice. Again, there is no straightforwardly accessible truth about the right kinds of categories to invoke; we cannot simply point to reality to make objective claims about the similarities and differences that unite and divide women, as the following discussions of research methods and activism will illustrate.

We draw boundaries around "women" in order to use that category for a specific purpose. I take a corollary of this to be an important anti-essentialist point: that we

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[41] Martin, "Methodological Essentialism": 637-8.

deconstruct and reconstruct meaning *through* our use of categories. Such feminist processes, however, also take place in patriarchal contexts where ideas about "women" are always already constructed through the material conditions of different women's lives. The fragility of resistance can be exacerbated by theoretical and political insistence on the rejection of those categories that enable us to make sense of our opponents. Thus to fail to give examples of my anti-essentialist feminism in action, on the rough ground, would be to reinscribe those relations of power that my arguments aim to make visible.

My own "double life" as feminist theorist and activist gives me personal reason to be concerned with the failure of feminist theory to connect with practice. I take seriously the contributions of feminist theorising both to changing the academy and to informing feminist practice, and want to avoid the potential anti-intellectualism of a naive flight from theory. But activism yields a certain kind of knowledge of particular social contexts that is often erased within feminist theorising. For example, when I first started to organise against sexual violence, as a feminist who is not a survivor, I realised that I had seriously under-estimated the pervasiveness and the social significance of myths about incest. Observing how individuals, many of whom have quite "progressive" politics in other respects, reinscribe both crass and subtle stereotypes and fallacies made me realise that popular conceptions of childhood, power, "the family," and sexuality combined in potent ways to undermine women's credibility and confidence, including their ability to speak authoritatively in classrooms on unrelated topics.[42]

The knowledge I have gained through activism, first, makes feminism seem much more beleaguered in the world at large than it does in many academic contexts. This knowledge reveals the continued dominance of sexist, dichotomous understandings of gender, and the need for oppositional discourses that take a clear and unambivalent form. Second, it brings into focus the imperatives of practice, including the material conditions that sustain patriarchy. I am not suggesting that the relative privilege of feminist theory can or should simply be replaced with the privileging of practice, and any attempt to fix

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[42] This issue is debated in two noteworthy articles: Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?," *Signs* 18:2, 1993; and Nancy Potter, "The Severed Head and Existential Dread: The Classroom as Epistemic Community and Student Survivors of Incest," *Hypatia* 10:2, 1995.

this distinction will always ultimately be untenable. I don't want to assume a moral high ground, where "activist" concerns are arbitrarily distinguished from "theoretical" issues. But the high salaries, relatively comfortable working conditions, and social prestige accorded to academic feminists create standpoints quite different from the standpoints of feminists working in sexual assault centres, women's centres, feminist bookstores, and so on, in ways which need to be more explicitly acknowledged in academic feminist writing.

Finally, the project mapped out here offers a partial resolution of the activist/theorist dilemma that plagued Wittgenstein in a different context. He believed that the dissolution of conventional metaphysics and of the "bewitchment of our understanding" by language leaves no justifiable role for the "armchair philosopher." Hence he enjoined his pupils to be actors in the world and to abandon academic philosophy. What he leaves is a "therapy" in philosophy that can itself serve educational goals, but which, maybe more importantly, delegitimates the search for a single truth and sends us out instead to investigate multiple discourses. Thus addressing essentialism requires a change in the role of the philosopher, by identifying the rough ground as a domain of thought and engagement.

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I have sketched the usefulness of Wittgenstein's philosophical method to anti-essentialist feminism, showing not only how it offers a critique of certain ways of thinking, but also a way to go on, a philosophical therapy. His notion of family resemblance provides a way of reconceptualising the similarities and differences between women, and his account of purposive boundary-drawing provides a tool for halting the extreme fragmentation some forms of anti-essentialism seem to recommend. Wittgenstein's scepticism toward philosophy and his injunction to "look and see" are part of what motivates the interdisciplinary feminist project I have outlined here. From a vantage point outside the disciplinary boundary of contemporary Western philosophy, many of my arguments seem self-evident, and the rough ground appears as familiar terrain. "Of course," many feminists might say, "when have we ever done anything *but* start from

women's lives?" But for those who remain "bewitched" by essentialism, whether as reluctant advocates or as stalwart critics, a developed Wittgensteinian feminism could offer a methodological path between two extremes: on the one hand, affirming the unity of women in ways that are inattentive to difference and reify artefacts of oppression, and on the other, toying with the philosophical limits of categories in ways that discredit valuable generalising analyses of the oppression of women and undermine unifying feminist political goals.

With these concerns in mind, in chapter five, *Between Theory and Practice*, I examine in more detail the claim that feminist analyses can avoid essentialism by basing themselves in practice. In particular, I challenge MacKinnon's claim that her theory of women's oppression is not essentialist because grounded in empirical reality, women's experience, and feminist practice, arguing that she begs the crucial question of how essentialism is inscribed in all these categories. Wittgensteinian feminism offers important insights into the fragmentation and consolidation of "women" in activist sites, and I examine some specific examples of power and exclusion that might dictate the terms of our purposive boundary-drawing around categories such as "women." Before that, I turn in chapter four to feminist research methods, and examine the potential for essentialism and anti-essentialism in Gilligan's developmental model of girls' psychology.

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"Look and See": Gilligan, Essentialism, and Feminist Research Methods[1]

So what does the injunction "look and see" actually demand? Which practical contexts might we choose to rework in the light of the tension between essentialism and anti-essentialism, and how might our theories be shaped by the exigencies of practice? Recall that at the end of chapter two I pointed to an unacknowledged consensus among anti-essentialist authors that feminism needs generalising claims, but that neither the *a priori* affirmation of sameness nor of difference is adequate to the task of constructing feminist theories. And the previous chapter argued, in a similar vein, for a return to the "rough ground" of feminist practice as a means of ending the tail-chasing of the essentialism versus anti-essentialism debates in feminist philosophy. To elaborate variations on this theme is a major and under-explored interdisciplinary project in feminist studies, which has been framed in the abstract but not made concrete by feminists concerned with the set of issues surrounding essentialism.

"Look and see" cannot be merely a philosopher's gesture, a recommendation for a kind of naive empiricism. Feminist philosophies of science and social science have revealed the political complexities of our empirical investigations into natural and social worlds, and the ways these investigations are shaped by our epistemological inheritances, cultural

[1] A version of part of this chapter is forthcoming as "Anti-Essentialism in Practice: Carol Gilligan and Feminist Philosophy," *Hypatia* 12:3, 1997.

and historical specificity, and social locations. And far from methodological *a priorism*, most feminist philosophy has always understood itself as based on the realities of women's lives. Thus there is no clear distinction to be drawn between "the empirical" and "the philosophical" in this debate, and indeed the crux of my own argument is that this very distinction is untenable. Feminist practice is always motivated by theoretical claims, and theory is always connected to extant realities. The potential of interdisciplinary work across those broad and diverse fields commonly distinguished as "philosophy" and "social science," however, has been untapped with regard to the essentialism debates. This chapter redresses, on the one hand, the lack of feminist philosophical examination of specific attempts to justify empirically based generalisations about women. On the other hand, it points to the under-theorising of most feminist commentary on social research methods, which serves to divorce the insights of feminist philosophers into the epistemology of generalisation and difference from the insights of feminist social researchers engaged in particular projects that aim to analyse (and sometimes to change) oppressive social contexts.

I proceed by articulating, first, the connections between feminist research and the methodological problem to which my Wittgensteinian feminism provides a solution: namely, how to avoid falsely generalising claims at the same time as we construct empirically based accounts of women's oppression. I ask how false claims about the "sameness" of women's experiences and identities enter research processes, as well as how over-eager "anti-essentialist" criticism can diminish the value of research and undercut attempts to investigate and change instances of gender oppression. One way to explore the implications of this tension, recommended by a Wittgensteinian method, is to offer examples of research that engage it. Therefore, second, in this chapter I present a case study of a feminist theorist and researcher widely censured for essentialism who has attempted to respond to methodological criticism without letting go of the political aspects of her research.

Carol Gilligan's analyses of women's and girls' distinctive voices are an example of both the limitations and the necessity of generalisations about gender. I introduce her work to highlight how feminist theorists have failed to move on from dismissive anti-

essentialist critique to more nuanced, practical engagement with her political projects. I delineate criticisms of Gilligan's earlier work for its essentialism, and interpret her most recent book, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship*, co-authored with Jill McLean Taylor and Amy Sullivan, as her attempt, in part, to respond to charges of methodological essentialism.[2] This book revises her original method and thereby escapes those charges of essentialism levelled at her earlier work.

Feminist theorists who claim that Gilligan reifies femininity and draws overly general conclusions about women from the experiences of only a small group, I argue, are often cavalier in their dismissal of her political projects. They fail to recognise both the political value and the nuance of her work. This argument is not intended as a straightforward defence of Gilligan's theses in moral psychology, or of the ethic of care in feminist moral philosophy; indeed, I find much to disagree with in these theories. Instead, it aims to articulate the conditions that would have to obtain for Gilligan's method to evade charges that it is "essentialist." Gilligan meets surprisingly many, although not all, of these conditions. Although she does show an attentiveness to key axes of difference among girls and women that her critics have not recognised, her method fails fully to meet anti-essentialist challenges, in large part because she lacks certain methodological resources needed to make adequate contextual judgements about power. Thus her new work ultimately remains open to criticism for failing fully to incorporate the insights of a more practice-oriented anti-essentialism. I present these criticisms as conversational openings that suggest useful revisions to Gilligan's method, rather than as evidence that her project can be simply dismissed.

The essentialism debates and feminist research

"Feminist research" is an essentially contested concept. I bracket here the debates about whether feminist research currently has any one distinctive method, and assume that

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[2] Jill McLean Taylor, Carol Gilligan and Amy M. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). Hereafter references to this book are given in parentheses in the main text using the abbreviation BVS followed by a page number.

feminist research across humanistic and social scientific traditions draws eclectically on various epistemological frameworks and techniques.[3] By "research" I mean any form of structured inquiry into any social context, whether it is performed by outside investigators — such as professional academics or consultants — or by members of the group or community under investigation, or both. Feminist researchers employ a diversity of techniques, from statistical analyses of large data sets to the ethnography of everyday life. This chapter examines how and why Wittgensteinian anti-essentialism might be incorporated into *qualitative* research settings, in particular in contexts where dialogue between researcher and participants are the main research method. In order to be "feminist," such research should at least be methodologically motivated by the interests of oppressed and marginalised groups, with an integrated account of how gender contributes to oppression and marginalisation. Different feminist methodologists interpret such definitional requirements in different ways, and it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to summarise the existing literature on feminist critiques of social science and feminist research methods.[4] Here I want to focus on how feminist empirical inquiry, broadly construed, might be inflected by essentialism and anti-essentialism.

A survey of the feminist sociological literature on research methods reveals it to be relatively uninformed by the essentialism debates in feminist theory.[5] In particular, much theoretical discussion of feminist research continues to be premised on the dominant feminist theories of the 1970s, which brought feminist political movements into academia to challenge the literal and implicit exclusion and derogation of women in the theories and categories of the humanities and social sciences. Most feminist commentators on social research methods have taken men as a group whose interests have been served by

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[3] See Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press 1992) for an method-by-method overview of the fields of feminist research.

[4] For accounts of potential basic tenets of "feminist research" see Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?," in *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Liz Stanley, *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1990): esp. 20-47; Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith Cook, "Back to the Future: A Look at the Second Wave of Feminist Epistemology and Methodology," in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, eds. Fonow and Cook (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Maria Mies, "Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research," in *Theories of Women's Studies*, eds. Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein (Boston: Routledge, 1983).

[5] See references relating to feminist research in my bibliography.

conventional methods, and have invoked "women" as a counter-category.[6] Much feminist discussion of non-feminist research methods thus engages largely in a response to the exclusion of *any* women or of women's interests from methodological concerns. This literature situates itself primarily in opposition to a practice of social science that invokes a familiar agenda of objectivity, detachment from research subjects, transparently knowable social truths, and the virtues of generalisability and quantifiability.

Its neglect of power differences among women notwithstanding, much of this methodological writing and actual research has been essentialist in ways that enable feminists to attain highly significant, albeit partial, political goals. Bringing falsely general claims about "women" into contexts where *all* women are excluded does not constitute an adequate feminist politics, and certainly much feminist research has both created and perpetuated overly general claims about women's oppression. It has also opened up, however, a critical space for counter-hegemonic objections to conventional, sexist social scientific inquiry. These objections centre on both the content of social research and on method: not only are research results about "people" often drawn from all-male subject groups, but the very "ways of knowing" that characterise malestream social inquiry are brought into question. For example, when women have been studied, they have often been relatively powerless within the research context and their lives not understood as enmeshed in a system of gender oppression. Traditional research has seldom viewed political change as one of its goals; women have frequently been exploited by researchers prying into their lives with no aim of reciprocity or support.[7]

This characterisation of feminist critique — as an internal response to the limitations of particular disciplinary norms and an existing body of research — helps to explain the difficulty of making the connections between anti-essentialist feminist theory and the practicalities of social research. It has nonetheless created the conditions of possibility for a more thoroughgoing feminist critique of some of the categories employed

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[6] For an example of this genre see Dorothy Smith, "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology," in *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. Harding.

[7] For one of the best known early feminist arguments against this social scientific tradition, see Ann Oakley, "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms," in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

by feminists themselves. The feminist anti-essentialist challenge is therefore to question, in ways by now familiar, the category "women." This challenge is a necessary corrective, given the growing recognition that academic feminist research, while often marginalised in social scientific disciplines, is implicated in the same forms of essentialism I have been discussing with regard to feminist philosophy.

How, exactly, do essentialist claims enter feminist research? First and most obviously, feminist researchers often do not inflect or contextualise the category "women" in their methodological discussions. References to "women" researchers and "women" subjects provide the dominant categories of analysis. Likewise, feminist research methods are contrasted with sexist research, assuming or arguing that "women" have different interests in the process and outcome of research projects than "men," but not qualifying such claims by recognising that women have different interests from each other, or different interests from different groups of men. In stating that the goal of feminist research is to "collectivise women's experiences," for example, Maria Mies, in her widely cited discussions of action research in a battered women's shelter, fails to examine how differences in these experiences, whether racial, class-based or along other salient axes, might challenge her conception of "collectivising."[8]

Methodological discussions are inflected with this kind of essentialism in part because of the familiar assumption that diversity among women "subjects" makes it hard to generate feminist theory.[9] For example, Cannon et al. point out that:

> To generate theory, it is much more useful if the small samples under study are relatively homogeneous, since extreme diversity makes the task of identifying common patterns almost impossible. Unfortunately, as a result, much of the newly emerging scholarship on women excludes women of color and working-class women of all races.[10]

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[8] Mies, "Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research."

[9] See María C. Lugones, and Elizabeth V. Spelman. "Have We Got A Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice'," in *Women and Values: Readings in Recent Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Marilyn Pearsall (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1986).

[10] Lynn Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham and Marianne Leung, "Race and Class Bias in Qualitative Research on Women," *Gender and Society* 2:4, 1988: 459.

Again, in selecting small subject groups to evade the methodological difficulties allegedly created by "extreme diversity," feminist researchers, as women who are generally dominant group members themselves, have tended to focus on researching the experiences of white, middle-class women, presuming that their results are representative of women in general. This approach permits methodological essentialism: the category "women" is, *a priori*, the most basic, and other aspects of women's identities are mere overlay.

Second, and more subtly, these methodological accounts lead to inadequate analyses of power relations. For example, many authors classify "identifying with" "subjects" as one of the defining features, or even one of the necessary goals, of feminist research. I take this claim to mean that feminist inquirers see in the situation of their participants something of their own political identity or experience of oppression. While this assumption may be an adequate description of certain feminist projects or of their normative goals, it is rarely challenged by asking which criteria make such identification possible or desirable. Nor is it elaborated how differences between women may make identification of researcher and subject problematic. Indeed, the assumption on the part of many feminist social researchers that they have a particular identity or experience of oppression in common with their subjects reflects an implicit additive analysis that is made possible by the power of the researcher over the subject. The belief that "as a woman" one shares some particular set of experiences or identity with the women one is researching may be realistic in some cases. Yet to presume that there is a more general form of identification with women "as women" is an essentialist claim of the kind I have been criticising. The fact that, in most cases, the researcher shapes the terms of the research gives her the power to cast the research experience as one of feminist "identification," deploying her categories to make the subject's identity or experience conform to hers.

For example, Catherine Riessman analyses the interview transcripts of an Anglo middle-class and Hispanic working-class woman, each speaking to a white middle-class woman interviewer about her separation from her husband.[11] Riessman argues that the

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[11] Catherine Kohler Riessman, "When Gender is Not Enough: Women Interviewing Women," *Gender and Society* 1:2, 1987.

Anglo woman presents her narrative temporally and is well understood within the gendered framework familiar to the feminist interviewer:

> This collaborative [interview] process was aided by gender, class, and cultural congruity, which produced the unspoken but shared assumptive world of the two women. They implicitly agreed about how a narrative should be organized and about the content that was relevant to an account of marital separation.[12]

The Hispanic woman's narrative is episodic, but, Riessman argues, this is not grasped by the interviewer, who repeatedly tries to make her narrative fit the temporal framework with which she is more familiar:

> The interviewer and the narrator struggled over who would control the topic and what constituted an adequate answer to the items on the schedule. .... [D]espite gender congruity, the joint construction of an account of marital failure was hindered by the lack of shared cultural and class assumptions. The interviewer held onto the white, middle-class model of temporal organization and thus could not make sense of the episodic form that Marta used — the dramatic unfolding of a series of topics that were stitched together by theme rather than by time.[13]

Similarly, essentialism may be played out in the assumption of "trust" as a defining feature of feminist ethnography. Discussions of feminist research are replete with claims about the self-evident "rapport" that develops between woman researcher and woman subject. While in many cases this kind of emotional bond may exist, it seems more likely to develop where there are small power differences and personal similarities between researcher and "subject."

Thus we need to develop methods of feminist research that are capable of gendered critique and of highlighting the salience of gender in a particular research context, at the same time as they recognise other cross-cutting axes of difference and how power relations tend to reify certain accounts of gender. A Wittgensteinian feminist need not suppose any particular criteria of relevance when formulating or investigating any

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[12] Riessman, "When Gender is Not Enough": 190.

[13] Riessman, "When Gender is Not Enough": 189-190.

locus for research. She need not suppose, for example, that her participants will fulfil any necessary and sufficient conditions of womanness, nor that race, class or any other differences will be more or less significant than gender in particular research contexts. Furthermore, in investigating the multiply nuanced meanings of gender in specific contexts, she can conceptualise similarities and differences between women as family resemblances rather than as identity relations or Otherness. Thus she avoids the dangers of universalising from one group to another, and the familiar charge of relativism with regard to gender. Feminist researchers thus would not approach research contexts looking to find out what all women have in common, but looking for resemblances between their identities and experiences. Rather than posit an ideal type to which those identities and experiences do or do not correspond, they would be tentative about the significance of gender and its implications. Family resemblances thus offer feminist researchers a way to generalise without making sameness claims or asserting radical difference. The kinds of conclusions we will draw about women will be neither reductive, nor relevant solely in a single narrow context.

This kind of approach, however, has yet to be fully articulated. The recent response to essentialism in feminist theory and research has tended to approach essentialism as a "vice in itself;" as primarily representing a lack of intellectual rigour on the part of earlier feminists. We too often approach particular authors with the attitude that if essentialism can be discerned in the text, then the theorist's entire project can be discarded.[14] Part of this intellectual trend, as I pointed out in chapter one, involves the fetishisation of the dangers, pitfalls, and evils of "essentialism," and the demonisation of those texts considered "essentialist." Identifying latent essentialism has all too often become critique for its own sake rather than an integral part of an ongoing constructive project.[15] The problem-space defined by essentialism and anti-essentialism contains genuinely important epistemological and political issues. But many feminists tend to throw the baby of political efficacy out with the bathwater of essentialism.

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[14] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*: xi.

[15] See hooks, "Postmodern Blackness" in *Yearning*.

Nowhere is this trend more apparent than with regard to Carol Gilligan's projects in feminist psychology and politics over the past fifteen years.[16] Gilligan played a central role in bringing feminist analysis into the field of developmental psychology, showing how various models of "human" moral psychological development were actually premised on only one paradigmatic perspective, closely associated with masculine psychology. Her work has been unusually politically informed relative to her field, and increasingly premised on a feminist analysis that emphasises the empowerment of girls and women.[17] Anti-essentialist challenges to Gilligan have been, in some cases, both theoretically sophisticated and politically compelling, bringing out buried assumptions about gender and hidden exclusions that are often crucial correctives. One cannot help noticing, however, that Gilligan is a feminist deeply concerned with political action. These very concerns motivate her to make claims that leave her open to charges of essentialism. Her theoretical categories, while admittedly unnuanced, provide a basis for feminist analysis and mobilisation that is politically problematic at the same time as it can be enabling and galvanising for many feminists working with girls in contexts in which the psychology of gender is undertheorised. Gilligan is certainly aware of anti-essentialist criticisms, and has responded to them both theoretically and methodologically. This makes her an unusual and instructive figure in the essentialism debates. Many feminist philosophers are content to pursue the theoretical issues subsumed under "essentialism" without giving thought to

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17 Gilligan's work on this issue forms part of several research projects with other investigators, and is reported in numerous books and articles to date (see bibliography). In presenting this body of literature, by and large, as exemplary of "Gilligan's" method, I do not intend to erase the contributions of her co-authors, minimise the collaborative nature of the research, or suggest that there is a unitary authorial voice in these studies. Rather I want to avoid stylistic awkwardness, to stress how the later books rework ideas first presented in *In A Different Voice*, and acknowledge that Gilligan is the only author common to all the studies.

17 See Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2nd edition 1993 [1982]); Carol Gilligan, J. Ward and J. Taylor, eds., *Mapping the Moral Domain: A Contribution of Women's Thinking to Psychological Theory and Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Carol Gilligan, Nona P. Lyons and Trudy J. Hanmer, eds., *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Carol Gilligan, Annie G. Rogers and Deborah L. Tolman, eds., *Women, Girls and Psychotherapy: Reframing Resistance* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1991); Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

how they might inflect practice, while many feminist social researchers remain intent on pursuing methods that make uncritical use of the category "women."

Thus the preoccupation of Gilligan's readers with exclusively critical analyses of *In A Different Voice* does a disservice to the increasing nuance and sophistication of her prolific work during the fourteen years since this book's first publication in 1982.[18] Gilligan has been treated shabbily by most of her theoretically inclined interlocuters, who otherwise generally espouse and practice both intellectual generosity and interpretive charity. The remarkably pervasive attitude of disdain towards her work among feminist philosophers — often, I suspect, a disdain based on a very cursory reading only of *In A Different Voice* — confirms Bordo's comments:

> I have often been dismayed at the anger that (white, middle-class) feminists have exhibited toward the work of Gilligan and Chodorow. This sort of visceral reaction to theorists of gender difference ... is not elicited by their ethnocentrism or ahistoricism; it is specifically directed against what is perceived as their romanticization of female values such as empathy and nurturing. Such a harsh critical stance is protection, perhaps, against being tarred by the brush of female "otherness," of being contaminated by things "female."[19]

I want to make the related point that unfairly dismissive reactions to Gilligan are enabled by a theoretical orientation that does not understand itself as connected to feminist practice. My most fruitful discussions of Gilligan's work have not been with feminist philosophers but with feminist practitioners — a woman working on a children's help-line, a youth group leader, and training group facilitators at a sexual assault centre, for example. Anyone who works with girls or young women is aware of the paucity of feminist literature offering explanatory frameworks for our psychological struggles. Psychology is not the only or even the best discipline within which to generate theories of women's oppression, and Gilligan's empirical work no more gives her an epistemically unassailable position than it does any other feminist. But as a profoundly perceptive

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[18] Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*. For one of the most sophisticated and charitable critical readings of *In A Different Voice*, see Susan J. Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves: Carol Gilligan and Feminist Moral Theory* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1995): esp. 1-33.

[19] Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, Gender Skepticism," in *Unbearable Weight*: 233.

psychologist who is well-connected to numerous active and pragmatic feminist projects, particularly in education, she deserves our most charitable reading.

The challenge facing feminist theory thus lies in the observation that neither interminable deconstruction nor uncritical reification of the category "women" is adequate to the demands of feminist practice. The task we have inherited is to take seriously commitments entailed in anti-essentialism but to find ways effectively to incorporate them into counter-hegemonic political projects. Gilligan's *Between Voice and Silence* represents a departure from her earlier work in its explicit examination of race and class in the context of articulating girls' psychology. Yet Gilligan continues to make strong general claims about gender, as a basis both for important analytical distinctions in psychological development, and for feminist political mobilisation. In what ways does Gilligan's method continue to be "essentialist"? What epistemological and political issues does Gilligan struggle with in trying to respond to charges of essentialism? Is this a kind of essentialism that she can avoid, and would its avoidance attenuate or advance her political goals? To answer these questions a good starting point is to articulate an example of feminist practice that understands anti-essentialism and political engagement as indispensably allied, rather than inevitably at odds.

Carol Gilligan: the arch-essentialist?

In A Different Voice argues that conventional models of psychological development fail to understand the alternative paradigm of moral thinking Gilligan labels the "ethic of care." Existing psychological theory tends to cast women as failing to achieve separation from others, a separation attained with less ambivalence by men. Instead of labelling women as "less developed," Gilligan suggests that "the failure of women to fit existing models of human growth may point to a problem in the representation, a limitation in the conception of human condition, an omission of certain truths about life."[20] The ethic of care cannot simply be characterised as an imperative for self-sacrifice or

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[20] Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*: 2.

denial. Gilligan recommends an understanding of women's psychological development as struggling to remain connected in ways that are desirable, healthy and resistant, albeit politically fraught.

Since completing the work on which *In A Different Voice* was founded, Gilligan and her collaborators have focused on qualitative research with adolescent girls in the United States. They claim that girls' crises and dilemmas offer not only a window on the systemic disempowerment of girls in "Western culture" but also potential strategies and techniques for resolving generic human problems. Although in some ways this work turns away from the ethical decisionmaking that was a central theme of *In A Different Voice*, it continues to ask critical questions about gender bias in psychological theory and about the value and meaning of interpersonal connection and relationship. By uncovering the texture of girls' psychologies, Gilligan wants to articulate how women can help girls to overcome disempowerment (and *vice versa*), and turn girls' healthy resistance into a political force rather than a form of psychological corrosion.

Gilligan depicts a turning-point in girls' lives at adolescence that has profound and shocking resonances, I imagine, for many of her female readers, myself included. Gilligan perceptively describes girls' loss of self-confidence, self-esteem and honest connection with others, at a time when they are more likely to develop depression, eating disorders, suicidal behaviour, and to become distanced from relationships with family, teachers and friends. She characterises such crises as "problems of connection," rather than as a failure adequately to separate, and by uncovering the roots of women's psychological disenfranchisement, aims to provide an explanatory model that will offer insight into their continuing struggle as adults with problems of interpersonal (dis)connection:

> [Yet] teenage girls and adult women often seemed to get caught on the horns of a dilemma: was it better to respond to others and abandon themselves or to respond to themselves and abandon others? The hopelessness of this question marked an impasse in female development, a point where the desire for relationship was sacrificed for the sake of goodness, or for survival. Adolescence seemed to pose a crisis of connection for girls coming of age in Western culture.[21]

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[21] Gilligan, Lyons and Hanmer, eds., *Making Connections*: 9.

Gilligan locates girls' relational understandings of decision-making and moral dilemmas in contexts of oppression, arguing that girls' ethical perspectives are systematically marginalised and girls pressured to conform. "Human" problems, or at least some of the problems of "Western culture," she argues, can be illuminated by a clearer understanding of how girls negotiate disconnection, and how their understandings of relationship are obscured by patriarchy. In this sense Gilligan is avowedly feminist, her method including an explicit recognition of the devaluation and distortion of girls' voices in patriarchal culture, as well as a commitment to allowing their voices to come to the fore, and to incorporating them into feminist political solutions. [BVS: 191] By illuminating the developmental psychology of girls at adolescence, Gilligan hopes to make clear the transition from connection in childhood to disconnection in adulthood that both results from and reinscribes patriarchy.

The theoretical model for Gilligan's account of female adolescence continues to derive, albeit increasingly tenuously, from object relations theory. The key feminist premise of her account is that the central cause of male domination, in those societies where women are almost always primary parents, is separation of the self from the mother at a young age. This process of separation is supposedly the central cause of the masculine autonomous self with its "justice orientation" to moral problems and relationships. Girls, by contrast, retain their sense of relationship with their mothers (and others more generally) until adolescence, when they also go through a process of separation and dis-identification. Their experience, however, is complicated by patriarchy: girls are rewarded for dissociating from their desire to remain "in relationship" and are judged negatively if they fail to develop masculine attitudes to relationships and to ethical issues (as they were in Kohlberg's original psychological model). If they do adopt a masculine attitude, on Gilligan's account, they lose skills crucial to their healthy resistance to patriarchy. Thus at adolescence girls in Western cultures face a dilemma: they can either abandon their childhood knowledge of connection with others and lose a weapon in their struggle against patriarchy, or they can try to retain it and face being ostracised and negatively judged.

Gilligan continues to claim that her interviews illustrate ways in which girls are "out of relationship." But surely "relationship" (in the broad sense of connection with another person) is absolutely crucial to the development of all human beings at all stages of their lives? Girls who are disconnected and distant from family, teachers and friends are obviously going to struggle psychologically. To add theoretical substance to this claim, therefore, Gilligan premises her theory of psychological development on a complex social ontology that conceptualises healthy human lives as webs of relationships. Certain forms of dissociation or disconnection from these webs, she argues, are psychologically damaging for both men and women. Interpersonal dissociation is, however, both more typical of males, and is, in general, valued and rewarded by Western patriarchal cultures. Gilligan thus implicitly characterises as pathological certain masculine ways of not being in relationship, making the connection between these pathologies as individual dissociation, and as theorised phenomena in political and moral lives. Thus there is a normative sense in which we want to say that it is pathological for girls to become disconnected from relationships at adolescence:

> Efforts to be strong, self-reliant, and outspoken can be reasonable and effective survival strategies in a difficult, and even hostile, environment. These efforts can cease to be adaptive, however, when they move to a position that precipitates disconnections from others, covering over vulnerabilities and the desire for relatedness. [BVS: 68]

This theoretical framework is not always easy to detect in Gilligan's writing, which rarely contains arguments articulated in ways familiar to feminist philosophers. It is also a framework in a state of development and flux through her publications, and I think Gilligan is occasionally disingenuous about the extent to which her recent methodological revisions may entail repudiating her earlier position. Nevertheless, Gilligan does continue to draw upon all of the preceding claims even in her most recent work, arguing not only that this model is an accurate description of girls' experiences, but also that it provides a basis for feminist mobilisation among older women determined to break damaging cycles of gender socialisation and abandonment of girls and young women.

Gilligan and her critics on essentialism

Given this admittedly imperfect theoretical underpinning, on what basis is Gilligan labelled an essentialist? Some critics of Gilligan have implied that her essentialism is of a particularly strong kind, claiming that in attributing the "ethic of care" to women she is reinforcing a biologically determinist notion of women's nature. For example, Linda Kerber writes:

> I agree with Gilligan that our culture has long undervalued nurturance and that when we measure ethical development by norms more attainable by boys than by girls our definition of norms is probably biased. But by emphasizing the biological basis of distinctive behaviour... Gilligan permits her readers to conclude that women's alleged affinity for "relationships of care" is both biologically natural and a good thing.[22]

Gilligan displayed an early commitment to object relations theory and made use of Nancy Chodorow's work.[23] While *In A Different Voice* may be insufficiently explicit about the origins of gendered moral voices, at no point does Gilligan explicitly or implicitly argue that they are *biological* features of either men or women, in the sense of biological essentialism elaborated in chapter one. She adopts a social constructionist model and makes quite clear that these different voices are learned, albeit at a very young age.

A second sense in which Gilligan might be labelled an "essentialist" stems from her alleged failure to place the ethic of care in its political context. She does seem to proceed with the assumption that the ethic of care represents an "authentic voice" (in an ill-defined sense) for women (or at least for some people) without adequately setting the stage to illustrate how the ethic of care is a "slave morality" formed in the limiting circumstances of oppression. Commentators have pointed out the disturbing similarities between ideologies

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[22] Linda Kerber, "Some Cautionary Words for Historians," *Signs* 11:2, 1986: 309.

[23] Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

of femininity such as the Victorian "angel in the house" and a description of women as caring and oriented toward relationship. In contemporary contexts, they argue, the "different voice" merely illustrates the survival skills women learn under patriarchy, which reflect the necessity of remaining attentive to the oppressor more than any kind of pre-patriarchal authenticity. Thus, the criticism goes, Gilligan valorises socio-moral attitudes that are merely feminine, not feminist. Her analysis, if it is to be redeemed at all, should be more explicitly situated in a context of gender oppression, and offer a transformative vision of a better, more politically challenging moral voice, not merely a description of the existing voices.[24]

A third set of criticisms is that Gilligan is an essentialist by virtue of her use of overly general categories. That is, critics allege she is a methodological essentialist in the sense I articulated in chapter two. As Fraser and Nicholson put it,

> by constructing a female countermodel, [Gilligan] invited the same charge of false generalization she had herself raised against Kohlberg, although now from other perspectives such as class, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. Gilligan's disclaimers notwithstanding, to the extent that she described women's moral development in terms of *a* different voice; to the extent that she did not specify which women, under which specific historical circumstances have spoken with the voice in question; and to the extent that she grounded her analysis in the explicitly cross-cultural framework of Nancy Chodorow, her model remained essentialist.[25]

Gilligan is apt to use broad general categories ("women," "Western culture," and so on). These categories are inclined to erase historically, culturally, and politically salient differences among their individual members. Critics have observed that this tendency to generalise does not stress (but, it should be noted, does not necessarily deny) the socially constructed and necessarily local, temporally specific, and diverse nature of gender. These generalisations are not only philosophically undesirable because of their failure to contextualise; they are also undesirable because they are false. If feminists were to investigate the experiences of women and girls of colour, working-class and poor women

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[24] See for example Linda Nicholson, "Women, Morality, and History," in *An Ethic of Care: Feminist and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Mary Jeanne Larrabee (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[25] Fraser and Nicholson, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy": 33.

and girls, and so on, they would find that the model Gilligan first proposed is a less useful explanatory framework for the experiences of these "others." Thus many anti-essentialist criticisms are methodological. They come from other social psychologists, who argue that Gilligan's two paradigms of moral thinking are present in both male and female "subjects"; that Gilligan's samples are too small; and that her analysis unself-consciously describes a category "women" without critically examining the narrowness of her subject groups, the significant sociopolitical differences between women, or whether certain groups of men under conditions of oppression might not also systematically deploy an ethic of care.[26] By using in her original research women who are mainly white, mainly heterosexual, and mainly middle-class, her critics claim, Gilligan constructs an avowedly gendered model of moral development based only on a small group of dominant women. To the extent that the ethic of care is coextensive with "women's moral voice," that voice is most typical of a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman in the United States of the 1980s, and furthermore is perhaps heard only in certain limited moral situations.

The few published critiques of Gilligan's later work have returned to these arguments. For example, Judith Stacey criticises "Joining the Resistance: Psychology, Politics, Girls and Women"[27] for its undiscriminating use of humanist, universalist categories. In particular, Stacey suggests that Gilligan presents a transhistorical, transcultural and context-free account of female adolescence.[28] While these charges seem somewhat overstated, I too was struck by Gilligan's failure even to gesture toward the concerns of feminists of colour and postmodern critics. By omitting mention of the race of the girls she interviews, Stacey points out, Gilligan leaves the reader to assume that they are white. This seems to be an essentialising move of the kind I have criticised: white girls are simply "girls" — except when they are girls of colour, a difference barely worth mentioning.[29] It is remarkable that the cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds of the girls

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[26] See "Part III: Checking the Data," in *An Ethic of Care*, ed. Larrabee.

[27] Carol Gilligan, "Joining the Resistance: Psychology, Politics, Girls and Women," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29:4, 1990.

[28] Judith Stacey, "On Resistance, Ambivalence and Feminist Theory: A Response to Carol Gilligan," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29:4, 1990.

[29] Spelman, *Inessential Woman*: 133-159.

interviewed are briefly mentioned only in a footnote, and then with no indication of how this information might be relevant to the research process. Stacey, furthermore, rereads Gilligan's "muted attention" to social class in light of her own class autobiography, arguing that what Gilligan interprets as a gendered adolescent crisis in "Anna," one of her participants, can also be read as an ambivalent experience of social class.

Citing her own use of "dialogic," "reflexive" forms of representation, Stacey finds Gilligan's account of personal narratives simplifies the complex identities of the girls, and glosses the identity of the researcher and her role in the research process. Again, the identity of specific researchers is most often given in footnotes, without reference to their experiences of girlhood, their race, or their class. I suspect that Gilligan would abhor the forced insertion of her own and her colleagues' life stories into her texts, which remain admirably attentive to the voices of the girls. Yet it is precisely in her most elusive and fascinating methodological contribution — her thoughts on "voice"— that this information is most sorely needed: "Two questions about relationships clarified a woman's position: Where am I in relation to the tradition which I am practicing and teaching? and Where am I in relation to girls, the next generation of women?"[30] Surely the answers to both these questions depend on which woman is asking them, and on which girls she relates to?

Gilligan's own rebuttal of the philosophical criticisms of *In A Different Voice* has been brief:

> In listening to people's responses to *In A Different Voice*, I often hear the two-step process which I went through over and over again in the course of my writing: the process of listening to women and hearing something new, a different way of speaking, and then hearing how quickly this difference gets assimilated into old categories of thinking so that it loses its novelty and its message: is it nature or nurture? are women better than men, or worse? When I hear my work being cast in terms of whether women and men are really (essentially) different or who is better than whom, I know that I have lost my voice, because these are not my questions. Instead, my questions are about voice and relationship. And, my questions are about psychological processes and theory, particularly

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[30] Gilligan, "Joining the Resistance": 526.

> theories in which men's experiences stands for all of human experience — theories which eclipse the lives of women and shut out women's voices.[31]

Gilligan claims that her argument is interpretive and is based on narrative counterexamples to those examples favoured by conventional psychological theory, not on generalisable or statistical claims. She unabashedly puts gender at the centre in understanding relationships and adolescent crisis, although she allows that girls' and women's experiences are shaped in the context of other axes of power. Gilligan does not deny that some men use the ethic of care in thinking about moral problems, or that the ethic is shaped by conditions of oppression.[32] She does not simply describe a universal and essential feminine, but instead delineates a resistant and critical ethical perspective that challenges womanly self-sacrifice and unqualified caring and struggles to incorporate a self-protective attitude with the desire for relationship with others.[33] Indeed, in her later work she is increasingly explicit about how patriarchal oppression creates the necessary conditions for female crises of connection, she construes her project as an explicitly feminist intervention.

Gilligan's rich and evocative portrayal of girls' adolescent dilemmas in her later work, and her methodological discussion, are an invaluable contribution to feminist practice and a potential framework for "action research" aimed at, as the title of one ongoing research project indicates, "strengthening healthy resistance and courage in girls."[34] The significance of her contribution lies in providing a framework for understanding female adolescent psychology that is, first, not merely an amendment to existing research on boys, and second, avowedly feminist. Gilligan repeatedly stresses that adolescent girls have simply not been much studied; she attempts to explain why adolescence is the seedbed of female trauma and to document, within a theoretical framework, the processes of disempowerment that will plague girls throughout their lives.

By identifying a different way of thinking about relationships and moral dilemmas,

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[31] Gilligan, "Letter to Readers, 1993," *In A Different Voice* (2nd edition): xiii.

[32] See Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*: 2; Carol Gilligan, "Reply," *Signs* 11:2, 1986.

[33] Gilligan, "Letter to Readers, 1993," *In A Different Voice* (2nd edition): xiii-xv.

[34] See Gilligan, "Joining the Resistance."

and by telling a rich story about a time of crisis and impasse in the lives of the adolescent girls they study, Gilligan and her colleagues offer a framework for understanding the undertheorised feminist commonplace that all girls struggle psychologically in patriarchal societies. They argue that this struggle itself has produced ways of understanding connection to others that are systematically devalued and undermined by patriarchy, and that meet their most serious challenge at the time of female adolescence. By retaining until early adulthood the strong sense of connection with others that boys lose as young children, girls manage to avoid processes of dissociation that are distinctively masculine pathologies and that have, according to Gilligan and other theorists who have put object relations theory or the ethic of care to feminist uses, negative ethical and political implications.[35] Gilligan allows girls' voices to take centre-stage in her books and, however we criticise her method, such criticisms do not negate the path-breaking nature of her contributions to the social psychology of girls. Her work is an admirable example of interdisciplinary feminism, where insights from feminist philosophy are brought to bear on feminist research and practice, and *vice versa.*

Although Gilligan's critics have often treated her work rather reductively — reading her work casually and uncharitably only to attack it — criticisms that *In A Different Voice* is essentialist are significant: they pinpoint epistemological issues related to generalisation, contextualism, and pluralism, and they speak to methodological concerns about how inequalities of power foster essentialising research programs.[36] Still, the very familiarity of all these criticisms has bred a certain contempt for Gilligan — the arch-essentialist — and this has caused moral and political philosophers to dismiss her work as both inadequately theorised and insufficiently feminist. Few feminist philosophers have looked to Gilligan's more recent work for insight into essentialism and social research paradigms or for any performative response to her critics, despite the ever-burgeoning social science scholarship that applies the ethic of care to a variety of praxes

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[35] For example, Christine Di Stefano, *Configurations of Masculinity: A Feminist Perspective on Modern Political Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[36] Minow and Spelman, "In Context."

and policy issues, from feminist jurisprudence to nursing, pedagogy, and political organising.[37]

The most effective method for reading work like Gilligan's requires feminists to examine how generalisations are used; not to reject the use of generality altogether, but to ask what is enabled and what excluded in the context in question. Without Gilligan's generalisations, we would be left to depend on psychological theories that either ignore girls' narratives or rate them as second-class. Her early interventions stressed that girls' voices had *not* been listened to; thus the political salience of Gilligan's project lay in creating a space for girls to be heard. Having identified unanticipated characteristics of the girls' and women's voices in her early studies, Gilligan clearly approaches her later research fields with a set of preconceptions that may or may not adequately interpret the voices of "different" girls. If anti-essentialist insight is applied to this work, it should surely not be merely in the form of a set of criticisms, an interminable deconstruction, but as a route to a viable alternative method, with similar feminist goals of empowerment. Generalisations about the experiences of girls, furthermore, should not be rejected *a priori*. The imperative facing anti-essentialist feminists is not *whether* to make generalisations but *how* to make them.

Responding to critics: *Between Voice and Silence*

In this context, the recent publication of *Between Voice and Silence* raises an interesting set of questions about the ability of a social researcher, engaged in fieldwork of various kinds, effectively to respond to charges of essentialism. And there is no doubt that Gilligan has taken the label "essentialist," and its political connotations of racism and exclusion, to heart:

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[37] See for example Mary Cooper, "Gilligan's Different Voice: A Perspective for Nursing," *Journal of Professional Nursing* 5, 1989; Robin Leidner, "Stretching the Boundaries of Liberalism: Democratic Innovation in a Feminist Organization," *Signs* 16:2, 1991; Nel Noddings, "An Ethic of Caring and Its Implications for Instructional Arrangements," in *The Education Feminism Reader*, ed. Lynda Stone (New York: Routledge, 1994); Suzanna Sherry, "Civic Virtue and the Feminine Voice in Constitutional Adjudication," *Virginia Law Review* 72, 1986.

> Tensions within feminism over the last twenty years have become heightened over the question of difference. Women who are white and privileged have been criticized by both black and white women and called "essentialist" for speaking about gender without also addressing race, class, cultural and sexual differences among women. It is a mark of a racist and class-driven society that those who are in a dominant position can easily remain blind to the experience of subordinates and others and thereby to the reality of their own domination, and this blindness extends to women as well. At the same time, women often hold a higher standard for other women and are more forgiving of men. The implication that women must speak of everything or keep silent is one of the many constraints on women's voices that characterize and maintain a patriarchal society and culture. [BVS: 7]

Is the choice to "speak of everything or keep silent" a false dichotomy? Must feminists either fruitlessly struggle with the infinite complexities of political identity or give up the fight altogether? Although Gilligan makes useful contributions to our ability to bring anti-essentialism to bear on fieldwork problems and on the politics of feminist method, she struggles to implement fully the political theoretical concerns I raised earlier.

Between Voice and Silence continues Gilligan's original projects in the context of her growing feminist political concerns with race and class differences among women. This time, Gilligan's group of "participants" consists of twenty-six "working-class or poor" girls, of whom eight are African- or Caribbean-American, four are Latina, eight are Portuguese, and six are Irish- or Italian-American. Gilligan's method is still repeated, open-ended interviewing. The interviewer then listens to the interview transcripts according to the voice-centred method most recently formalised by Brown and Gilligan in their "Listener's Guide."[38] During the first listening, the interviewer notes the narrative content and direction of the interviewee; during the second she listens for the self — "for the voice of the 'I' speaking in this relationship"; on the third and fourth playbacks she attends to how the interviewee talks about relationships. Throughout their discussion, Brown and Gilligan stress the political nature of this listening method: "Our *responsive* Listener's Guide, in attending to realities of race, class, and sex (who is speaking, in what body, telling what story of relationship — from whose perspective, in what societal and

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[38] Brown and Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads*: 25-31.

cultural frameworks?), is therefore also a *resisting* Listener's Guide, that is, a feminist method."[39]

The content of the interviews differs from previous studies in that specific questions about race were later included, whereas none had been present before. The researchers, furthermore, participated in a series of retreats designed to examine women's relationships across racial difference. The retreats, we are told, involved eleven women — five black, five white, and one Latina — and entailed profound and painful examination of the differences and commonalities between them. Thus the research context is, compared with analogous projects, striking in the depth of its commitment to addressing the relational understandings of the researchers with regard to race and class.

How do Gilligan's theses about girls' adolescent crises fare when narratives are collected from working-class girls of colour? The interviews, perhaps unsurprisingly, did reveal differences between girls of different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds in their discussions of the interview topics. For example:

> What Ruby does not share with most of the girls from more privileged settings is the pressure to meet idealized images of femininity that many begin to face at this time. Concerns about not expressing anger or hurting other people's feelings, which become prominent from early adolescence onward among many girls from middle-class backgrounds, are not issues for Ruby. When she discusses conflicts or dilemmas, for example, she speaks about fairness, respect, and care, yet she does not excessively deliberate over whether or not she has hurt someone else's feelings. [BVS: 43]

> Ana [a Latina American girl] is likewise cognizant of the demands of conventions of femininity, which she both criticizes and tries to accommodate. The worst thing about being a woman, she writes in eighth grade, is that "you have to act like a woman at all times even when you're having fun." Ana describes a strict environment at home, where acting "like a woman" includes being discreet about her interest in boys. She often gets into trouble when she talks to her mother about boys: if her mother "feels all grouchy," she will get angry and "start saying, 'All you think about is boys.'" In fact, all the Latina girls in the study describe partial or complete injunctions against such conversations, unlike many of the African

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[39] Brown and Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads*: 29. Emphasis in original.

> American and white girls, who say they can talk with their mothers about sex and dating. [BVS: 61]

Much of chapter three is devoted to talking about differences between the relationships of African-American girls, Latina girls and white girls with their mothers, and recurrent themes throughout the interview narratives include dropping out of school and early pregnancy, topics that are absent in earlier research with more privileged groups of girls.

Gilligan is quick to stress that "difference" should not be interpreted as "lack," as implying that these girls' contributions to the researchers' understandings will be less useful:

> We will struggle in this book with the word *different*, mainly to hold it apart from its common mistranslation, "deficient." Our group of twenty-six girls was so informative in part because of the cultural and racial differences among them... Difference, in our understanding here, is the essence of relationship; it is not a code word for race or class or lower status. [BVS: 2]

The authors thus recognise the danger of establishing a white, middle-class norm from which "different" girls will deviate, and instead cast racial and class differences as always necessarily relational.[40] The project, however, implicitly rests on the assumption that whatever the differences between girls of different class and race backgrounds, these differences exist in the context of more significant similarities:

> Amid the diversity of race and ethnicity in this study, these spontaneous narratives describe aspects of these relationships that remain insistent across differences, aspects that form an unambiguous and powerful template for meaningful relationships between women and girls. [BVS: 118]

The authors rightly contest the false dichotomy that different women must be either hopelessly opaque to each other or assimilated into sameness, both in feminist

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[40] See Martha Minow, *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion and American Law* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

theorising and in forming political alliances. Thus overcoming difference for political unity is cast as a central goal:

> What would it mean for women to suspend the old terms of identity and move beyond the race, class, and gender divisions that cordon women off from one another in familiar ways: women of color/women of no color; women with and without privilege of class, ethnicity or sexuality? What would lead women to link arms across these categorizations? The political answer is a common vision for economic and political and societal changes. It is here that the engagement with differences becomes essential. [BVS: 208]

The conclusions Gilligan draws about the experiences of non-white, non-middle-class girls seem to hinge on the claim that they will experience the same kind of relational impasse at adolescence, but that it may well be worse than that of their white and/or privileged counterparts, and that it will certainly have more negative consequences. Despite these differences, Gilligan's original explanatory model for crises of connection remains the same, taking the same basic form for all girls in Western patriarchal cultures, although the context and consequences differ. How should we understand this ambiguous, generalising account of gender?

Anti-Essentialism and *Between Voice and Silence*

At the beginning of this dissertation I pointed to the limits of wholesale rejection of feminist projects for their alleged "essentialism." I mapped out a terrain where we recognise the value of feminist political goals and use anti-essentialist insights to engage political projects that may still be invested in essentialising discourses or may manifest essentialising moments. When situated on this terrain, Gilligan's work is neither right nor wrong, neither irredeemably essentialist nor politically utopian. My counsel for anti-essentialist feminists is thus not to bring the full force of philosophical critique to bear simply in order to ferret out Gilligan's essentialism, nor to step back from the political engagement of her work, but to create conversational openings for more pragmatic anti-essentialist insight. Anti-essentialist feminist analysis of *Between Voice and Silence*

suggests that categories need to be nuanced and situated, but that the exigencies of advocating for all adolescent girls require that their distress and disenfranchisement be heard unequivocally. Thus in suggesting ways in which Gilligan's most recent work might more effectively engage anti-essentialist feminist theory, I want to avoid an agonistic rejection of her project as insufficiently theorised, excessively generalised and unworthy of feminist examination, and instead offer criticisms that point to ways feminist theory and practice can come together to make the study of women's moral voices and attitudes to relationship more inclusive, more self-reflexive, and more politically useful.

Gilligan argues that she need not make dichotomous claims about girls and boys, and that her interpretive method merely sketches alternative ways of conceptualising relationships rather than fixing a universal gendered schism.[41] The homogeneity of Gilligan's initial samples, furthermore, does not presuppose any kind of essentialism, including the danger of falsely generalising from the experiences of a select group of girls to all girls. It could even be the case that girls' experiences at adolescence are sufficiently similar that the transfer of a model based on one group of girls to another group is unproblematic, and that the experiences of "different" girls merely provide more varied examples of the same general phenomenon.[42]

Gilligan's method does, however, predispose the researcher to elide or overlook how race, class, and other salient group differences shape processes of theory construction. This seems representative of those shortcomings feminists most often exhibit in trying to respond to anti-essentialist critique. "Difference" is often incorporated into feminist projects in a formulaic way, placing disproportionate emphasis on formal inclusion (adding participants from other social groups, for example) and less on examining the deeper methodological implications of anti-essentialist criticisms. Fully to understand how Gilligan's epistemological framework has changed between her early work and the recognition (especially in *Between Voice and Silence* but anticipated elsewhere) that her inherited method may be inadequate to the demands of anti-essentialist feminism is too large a project for this chapter. Gilligan's more recent work does,

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41 Gilligan, "Reply."

42 Martin, "Methodological Essentialism."

however, manifest a major conceptual and methodological transition, and she is rather disingenuous in her reiterated suggestions that it simply represents further application of the same approach.[43] Here I want briefly to give credit to how Gilligan's method has evolved to recognise more explicitly the power of the researchers to elide difference. Then I will turn to three specific examples in *Between Voice and Silence*. These examples are presented to explore the question: How might the existing research method encourage the investigators to ignore the particular histories and unequal relations of power structured into axes of difference?

Gilligan does not simply assume that there are facts about girls waiting to be discovered and presented in the "idiom in which [reality] prefers to be described"[44] and nor is she inattentive to how her own preconceptions have shaped her past inquiry. She straightforwardly acknowledges that her method plays a central role in generating and shaping her theoretical conclusions, and recognises that power is central to the context of interpretation. "Power differences constitute the social reality in which psychological development occurs, and these affect both development and how developmental research is carried out." [BVS: 29]

Gilligan herself points to the tension between her political goals and the research methods she has inherited from social psychology. As her work has progressed it has become more explicitly feminist, more resistant to disciplinary conventions, and more eclectic. For example, she resists traditional notions of objectivity to incorporate some of the insights of standpoint epistemology:[45]

> Listening to girls who are more on the edges of patriarchal society by virtue of race, class and cultural difference, we found their voices deeply

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[43] See for example Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence*: 14: "In *Meeting at the Crossroads* (1992) Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, observing the effects of different interviewers on girls' responses, noted in particular how an African American girl's interview conversation differs when an African American woman is listening rather than a white interviewer, and also how a playful interviewer can elicit a very different girl from the one who takes a more formal approach." In fact, both issues are treated quite marginally and in the context of larger similarities.

[44] Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988): 140.

[45] See Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

> informative; essential to composing a psychology of women and girls that is not imprisoned by the invisible racial blinder of whiteness, or by economic and political advantage, or by sexual and familial access to powerful men. Listening to girls of color, girls from different cultures, girls from families that are economically pressed, we heard relationships between girls and women, and also relationships among girls and women, described from different angles and reflecting different psychological and political realities. [BVS: 208]

In Gilligan's previous studies, the emphasis on voice was unidirectional, with "the interviewer" an unnamed and undescribed presence, the medium for the questions on the interview schedule. How girls' articulations of their attitudes to morality and relationships are shaped not only by patriarchal oppression, but also by power dynamics in the context of the research itself, is left virtually unexplored. Gilligan does gesture toward these difficulties: at one point in *Meeting at the Crossroads* she describes the developing underground of girls' responses in the school to the influx of interviewers, the ways the girls rehearse each other, and prepare for their interviews.[46] She maps out how this underground is influenced by the powerful identities of the researchers and the tools of social research that they use. In *Between Voice and Silence* we are told about the glossing over of power differences in the retreats:

> Related to issues of trust were difficulties in coming to terms with the existence and the effects of differences in power. Jill observed during one of the retreats that 'the less powerful in the group are very interested in having a conversation about power, but it has not always been so for everybody in the group... [which is why] it's got lost so often.' [BVS: 161]

In contrast with earlier work, the interviewers are sometimes named, and occasionally their relation to the participant is theorised in some way. For example,

> Anita's response [as an African-American girl to a white interviewer] taps into the central question in all psychological research — can one understand another whose life experience is different? She rejects the "you can't understand anything" position with respect to racial difference, but she also suggests that the interviewer's understanding of "this stuff" is limited because of her racial difference. "This stuff" has a number of

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[46] Brown and Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads*: 7-17.

> possible meanings, and as Anita elaborates further, many of them are related to race and racism. [BVS: 35]

The authors raise new concerns about how interviews are shaped by the presence of different interviewers; they recognise that the tone and content of the participant's speech will change depending on who poses the questions, and that this change will be linked to differences of race and class:

> The question "Who is listening?" now became an integral part of our voice-centred, relational method — integral to our understanding of both voice and relationship. We realized that our previous emphasis on "Who is speaking?" reflected in part our own and our research participants' class and cultural location. [BVS: 3]

It is not only in the interview itself that race and class differences influence the creation and interpretation of speech. In listening to tapes and reading transcripts, Gilligan enlarges the "interpretive community" to include more women of colour, concluding that this change has deepened and diversified the group's understanding of the girls. For example, Anita's interviewer and those members of the interpretive community who read her transcripts have very different understandings of her situation. Jill, her white interviewer, interprets her outspoken and forthright manner as both psychologically resilient and politically resistant compared to norms of femininity. But Pam and Janie, two African American readers, were dismayed by Anita, finding her "brash, opinionated, cocky and just a pain." [BVS: 37] Their interpretation of Anita's words as still politically feminist, but, in their view her "statements could be heard as excessively assertive and unyielding, almost belligerent, an example of 'resistance for survival,' and a reaction against destructive elements in her social world and in the larger sociopolitical context of the United States," rather than as desirably assertive and self-confident. [BVS: 38] Here is a positive example of reflexivity in Gilligan's work, which allows her to escape the generic anti-essentialist criticism that she fails formally to include women of colour in the process of interpretation, or that she fails to attach epistemological significance to this inclusion.

So what's the problem? Both the epistemology and the methodology informing the interviews, particularly the processes that generate general descriptions of female

adolescent crisis are still a concern. To avoid essentialism, Gilligan needs to interrogate further the relevance to the research process of the identities of the interviewers, their relation to the girls they interview, the epistemological significance of the "interpretive community," the influence of the interviewing method itself on the research findings, and the ways differences may or may not emerge in the research process.

First, Gilligan seems to assume that girls who resist connection with their interviewers are manifesting an unhealthy form of resistance, dissociating from relationship in pathological ways. When the researchers perceive the girls' voices to be inauthentic, they seldom connect this lack of authenticity explicitly to the research context, but instead attribute it to more general malaise in the girls' lives. The researchers thus adopt an epistemically privileged (though ambiguous) position outside the domain of relationship. This position is made possible not by ignoring differences of identity or experience between interviewee and interviewer *per se*, but by failing to analyse the interviewers' power over the girls, partly by virtue of these very differences. Gilligan has a keen sense of the ways girls exhibit resistance when they negotiate relationships with friends, mothers, teachers, and so on. But she seems less insightful about the forms of resistance girls may evince towards her own research.

Gilligan's generalisations serve particular purposes by highlighting certain aspects of girls' experiences across difference. Because they purportedly constitute the truth about girls, however, Gilligan faces no epistemological imperative to recognise their contingency, and tends to gloss over the particular cases that do not conform so neatly to the general theory. This is both a methodological and a practical problem: the tendency of dominant-group feminists to overlook difference is exacerbated by a method that does not adequately interrogate the histories of multiple axes of oppression in forming identities. In the example, Jill seems, as the authors admit, to lack the experiences shared by African-American girls, and in her interpretation of Anita's interview she falls back on the terms of a pre-existing interpretive grid to explain Anita's actions as defiant and resilient. Girls who challenge expectations of femininity are thus heard as resistant proto-feminists. Pam and Janie, on the other hand, use their own experiences (both of their own girlhoods and of work with other Black girls) to make sense of Anita even when this contrasts with the

working theory of feminist resistance operative in the research context. They hear Anita's responses more as a voice distorted, railing against the limiting conditions of powerlessness. Both interpretations are feminist renderings, but the former is more susceptible to the criticism of essentialism above: namely, that in trying to make Anita's narrative fit into Gilligan's epistemological framework, an interpretation is presented (and contested) that fails to recognise how different axes of power shape the girls' narratives.

The second problem is that Gilligan has always used interviewing as her primary method, and she continues to do so in *Between Voice and Silence*. Some of the foregoing concerns become magnified, however, in the context of dyadic forms of inquiry. In particular, "difference," while overtly conceptualised as relational rather than fixed, is nevertheless constituted within a relationship between two people rather than being negotiated in a larger group. Gilligan often understates how not only "difference" but also the power embedded in differences — including the historical and social background within which differences are formed — might shape girls' responses to questions from older women in positions of authority, often of a different race, and always of a different class (in terms of present status if not background).

There is a peculiar disjunction between the testimonial prose, literary references, and emotionally evocative discussions of women joining together across difference that characterise much of the text, and the glimpses into the interviews themselves, where the researchers follow "interview protocols." The valuable insight that an "interpretive community" can contribute to understanding the girls' responses seems curiously restricted to the later stages of the research. Gilligan is far less cavalier than many other feminist researchers about identification, trust, and rapport between feminist interviewer and female participant. Still, she seems to assume that the interpretive community will be able to uncover different standpoints simply by listening to the fixed results of a dyadic interview conducted in a single, power-laden context.

Third, Gilligan has taken anti-essentialist critique seriously enough to identify particular axes of difference that need to be emphasised in her revised research method. In *Between Voice and Silence*, race and class are identified as axes of difference that had

been previously glossed over. But are these the only differences that shape girls' experience of adolescence? Gilligan seems to acknowledge that they are not:

> A narrative account is produced interactively, depending not only on the questions of the interviewer and the experiences of the narrator, but also on the "social location" of both. Hence, any telling of "a story" may be affected by race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, religious background, personal history, character — an infinite list of possible factors that form the scaffolding of relationships between people. [BVS: 14]

Which of these "infinite" possible differences will be significant emerges in the course of empirical inquiry. Of course, it is a methodological commonplace that every researcher must enter a project with preconceptions that, at least initially, privilege some axes of difference over others. The most serious anti-essentialist challenge in this case, however, lies in recognising the contingency of those emphasised differences and remaining open to the possibility that previously recondite axes of difference will emerge. This challenge can best be met by recognising how power operates to make difference invisible to the powerful — in this case, to the researchers. Gilligan's agenda is not sufficiently flexible in this way; the girls have to fit into the "right" differences or risk being misheard.

It is surprising, for example, that Gilligan makes no mention of lesbian or bisexual adolescent experiences, especially given that the book contains an entire chapter on sexuality. A note to chapter 5, however, worth quoting in full, offers the following vignette:

> When Lilian's interviewer began the questions about sexual interest and sexual decision-making, *As teenagers, boys and girls have to make decisions a lot of times when they are going out with someone...,* Lilian asked, "With a boy?" Her interviewer confirmed this: *Yes, with a boy. Can you describe when you had to make a decision in that relationship?* "Not really, no." *Do you go out with boys?* "No." *Not really?* "No." Lilian's interviewer again tries to ask about sexual decision-making, to which Lilian first responds, "I don't know, I don't know... I'm sort of lost," and then, "I understand what you're saying. I'm just sort of, I'm trying to think... I really don't go out with boys. I get along with boys as good friends, we're basically good friends." *I was thinking more kind of in an intimate*

> *relationship with someone, with a boy... just a situation with a boy where you had to make... a sexual decision?* "I don't know, I'd rather not talk about it." *You'd rather not.* "If you don't mind." Then perhaps in an effort to focus her interviewer's efforts elsewhere, Lilian asks, "Would you like a piece of gum?." Although the interview protocol was designed so that questions about sexual interest and experience could apply to either sex, Lilian's interviewer in tenth grade unfortunately lapsed into the general cultural assumption of heterosexuality and asked specifically about boys, thus closing off any possibility of more discussion. [BVS: note 3 to chapter 5, 220-1]

On first reading, I was torn between admiration for the authors' intellectual honesty in including a damning admission that could easily have been left out, and deep disappointment that the only breakdown of heteronormativity in a girl's narrative had to be relegated to a footnote. It seems clear from this incident that, unsurprisingly, there are undercurrents of girls' lives and aspects of their experiences that are not revealed in the interviews. Other examples are addressed more directly by the authors: for example, in her interview, Sandy hints at, but does not reveal, sexual abuse, and elsewhere Gilligan mentions that specific questions about social class must be carefully couched so as not to run into taboos about poverty and deprivation that will generate more silence. [BVS: 111] What conditions make it possible to erase "non-conformist" sexuality in the context of a method that purports to be sensitive both to differences and to silence?

Gilligan's concludes, rightly, that an enlarged interpretive community, acting both as gatherers and interpreters of narratives, would offer more insights into the differences and silences which characterise the girls' speech. Part of the solution to problems like that manifested in Lilian's interview must be to prepare researchers to enter the research context with specific injunctions about difference in mind. As the authors acknowledge, dominant cultural assumptions will tend to render some differences invisible. The imperative to recognise differences and their effect on the construction of identity, however, cannot be premised only on the mantra of gender, race, and class; it also requires an understanding of the mechanisms of power which make some axes of difference more or less visible. Thus it would seem that the research group should not simply continually add more members, from different social groups, in order to maximise objectivity (although having just one openly lesbian researcher might well have altered the unself-

consciously heteronormative understanding of sexuality presented in chapter four).[47] Instead, the epistemological and methodological challenges articulated here are prerequisites for an analysis of power that lends flexibility to the research process by continually interrogating its context and categories.

Towards anti-essentialist research

Critics of essentialising discourses might still respond to Gilligan by claiming that she naively assumes that voices are more or less authentic, more or less "honed to the truth." [BVS: 11] These epistemological premises, one argument might run, reveal both her continuing (if ambivalent) investment in a kind of objectivity that has an undistinguished genealogy, and her failure to attend to power-laden discourses that obscure attention to difference and reinscribe hegemonic categories. A principled anti-essentialist might say that there can be no legitimate generalisations about girls' psychology. Girls' complex identities are necessarily negotiated in specific contexts, through relations of power, and amid infinite axes of difference. One anti-essentialist argument therefore constructs an epistemological case for Gilligan's hopeless naiveté in building an uncompromisingly universal picture of girls' realities through such unrefined methodological tools.

None of the critiques of Gilligan I have considered make their case in quite such uncompromising terms. In listening to responses to her work at conferences, in classes and in general academic discussion, however, I suspect that many feminist philosophers find much to agree with in this latter critique. Nevertheless, this is still the kind of critique that, standing alone, merely diminishes the political usefulness of Gilligan's project. It performs the act of dissociation she pointedly describes: "Learning about difference is not about epistemology, not simply about whether, or to what extent, we can know another human being or another culture. Exploring difference is about relationship." [BVS: 173]

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[47] Neither the sexualities of the researchers nor any explicit analysis of heteronormativity is presented in any discussion either of the retreat process, the interpretive community, or the research itself. Members of the research team may have identified as lesbian or bisexual, but this is not mentioned in the book.

The fact that girls' voices have *not* been listened to, and that Gilligan's work opens up a space for them to be heard, is part of what contributes to the political salience of her project. Certain implicit assumptions — that girls' voices can reflect "psychological truths" with varying degrees of accuracy and can legitimately be interpreted in terms of the same developmental model across race and class difference — predispose the researchers to emphasise certain aspects of the research context.[48] I do not want to deny that there are crucial commonalities in girls' experiences across race and class. Nor do I want to perform an act of dissociation, removing real, concrete questions about the emotional well-being of girls and women and abstracting to a philosophical safe haven. Rather I want to pinpoint ways the epistemological basis of Gilligan's work inclines us to ask certain questions rather than others, and not always those that will provide the most useful political insights. So how might anti-essentialist feminism be used to make constructive suggestions that develop rather than deplete the political resources available in empowering adolescent girls? How can we do justice to the complexity of difference and power in research at the same time as we construct accounts of girls' lives that are a strong basis for policy development and political intervention?

First, although Gilligan's interviews are loosely structured and dialogical, many of the methodological problems sketched in this chapter seem most pronounced in the context of a girl participant–woman researcher dyad. A complement to open-ended interviews is Elizabeth Frazer's use, in her research with British teenage girls from a variety of class and ethnic backgrounds, of discussion groups consisting of a small number of girls, with the investigator as facilitator.[49] Such groups will inevitably also produce their own silencing effects, as some girls hold back from speaking in front of others or present themselves as they would like to be seen by their peer group. No research method can guarantee that all girls will speak with equal ease — indeed, the quest for such an elusive method is part of the epistemological framework I am arguing against. Nevertheless,

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[48] Lugones and Spelman, "Have We Got A Theory For You!"

[49] Elizabeth Frazer, "Teenage Girls Talking About Class," *Sociology* 22:3, 1988; "Feminist Talk and Talking About Feminism: Teenage Girls' Discourses of Gender," *Oxford Review of Education* 15:3, 1989; "Talking About Gender, Race and Class," in *Researching Language: Issues of Power and Method*, Deborah Cameron et al. (London: Routledge, 1992).

Frazer's discussion groups, while acknowledging the researcher's powerful role, still allow for the interaction of girls who differ in important ways from one another. These groups also diffuse the power of the researcher, providing opportunities for girls to speak up together and to resist a particular conversational direction. Although some differences will always be repressed (for example, Frazer comments on the different taboos and silences surrounding social class for working-class and middle-class girls in her discussion groups), they are less likely to be differences that reflect asymmetries of power between researcher and participant.[50] By rearranging relations of power, discussion groups offer a different perspective on the same issues. While they may not be a suitable forum for soliciting confidences, they are one powerful research tool for negotiating complex and power-laden identities:

> A closed schedule questionnaire, or even an in-depth interview, is more likely to elicit from respondents a unitary and articulated opinion, attitude or belief. The discussion group elicited, instead, an uncertain negotiation of alternative positions which were frequently unresolved.[51]

My second suggestion is that Gilligan include more interaction between her research conclusions and the girls' interpretations of their own words. As she says,

> The interview process also demonstrated one of the most important benefits of speaking with and listening to girls in this way: it can help girls to develop, to hold on to, or to recover knowledge about themselves, their feelings, and their desires. Taking girls seriously encourages them to take their own thoughts, feelings, and experience seriously, to maintain this knowledge, and even to uncover knowledge that has become lost to them. [BVS: 128]

Gilligan herself mentions using feedback techniques in *Meeting At The Crossroads*, in which she describes giving interview extracts back to the girls, explaining her analysis, and inviting their responses.[52] Indeed, "checking back" and offering participants an

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[50] Frazer, "Teenage Girls Talking About Class."

[51] Frazer, "Talking About Gender, Race and Class": 99.

[52] Brown and Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads*: 228-232.

opportunity to respond to the researcher's interpretations of their lives is a familiar method in progressive ethnography.[53] Frazer, for example, takes account of participants' own descriptions of their experiences. In explaining the girls' narratives she checked back to ensure that her explanations meshed with the "concepts, categories and understandings" they used themselves. This approach is akin to a Winchian critique of social science, which in turn is based on Wittgenstein's notion of "forms of life," and his criticisms of insensitive ethnocentric investigations.[54] Gilligan and her colleagues would do well to develop activities that bring their explanations of girls' disconnection and relational impasse at adolescence more directly back to the girls themselves, for two reasons.

First, Gilligan's tendency to think that a "truth of the matter" in girls' initial responses to interview questions coexists uneasily alongside her recognition that they may change their minds about those answers, respond sceptically when her analyses are relayed to them, or give different responses depending on the social location of their interviewer. Second, Gilligan urges educators and youth workers to include girls' voices in processes of policy formation, yet she does not fully incorporate this insight into her own work. [BVS: 191] Engaging the girls more directly in dialogue in the research process itself is likely not only to produce more complex and difference-sensitive stories about girls' lives, but also to achieve feminist goals of empowerment.[55] More explicit acknowledgement both of the power relations embedded in difference, and of the ways different research methods create specific conditions of possibility for the negotiation of such differences, far from hindering Gilligan's political goals, would serve to make them more attainable.

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[53] "Checking back" is also a method with pitfalls. See Stacey, "On Resistance, Ambivalence and Feminist Theory"; Frazer, "Talking About Gender, Race and Class"; Katherine Borland, "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[54] Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958). See also Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §§ 19, 23, 241, pp. 174, 226.

[55] Frazer, "Talking About Gender, Race and Class": 100.

Just as Gilligan needs to move a collective exploration of power and difference to the centre of her feminist method, so our revisions of the political work of allegedly essentialist feminists need to avoid an epistemological critique that persistently fragments categories without exploring their empirical adequacy or political importance. This chapter has pointed out how Gilligan, far from being "an essentialist," has moved toward a politically informed anti-essentialist method. Laying out salient differences in advance of inquiry, as she does in *Between Voice and Silence*, is a necessary jumping-off point for the construction of anti-essentialist generalisations about girls; feminists have been rightly sceptical of researchers who paid no heed to the significance and interaction of gender, race, or class in formulating research problems. This chapter has suggested, however, that an anti-essentialist research method needs to be even more open to the introduction of new axes of difference and to the asymmetries of power that may obscure those axes, particularly asymmetries between researchers or theorists and the different others they seek to bring into their narratives.

The reconstruction of those feminist projects we have tended to dismiss as naively essentialist has only just begun. As feminists become increasingly exasperated with the superfluity of critique and the paucity of political strategies and solutions the essentialism debates offer, we need to bring our critical skills to bear in excavating and restoring those projects that have been buried underneath the disapprobative rubble of theoretical anti-essentialism. One major area in which the insights of anti-essentialist feminisms have been only tentatively applied is social research programs; yet anti-essentialism constitutes a set of claims precisely about the adequacy conditions of feminist method. By focusing on how power frames difference in the context of Gilligan's research, this chapter has tried to show how the method employed in one feminist project can be refined and nuanced in ways that advance its goals rather than reveal its limitations.

Finally, Carol Gilligan is remarkably perceptive about how women dissociate from relationships. One thing I may well have learned from her and her collaborators is that some recent feminist philosophy exemplifies another form of dissociation: from actual political problems that often seem too overwhelming to address. It is easier by far, but far less fruitful, to analyse the mistakes of allegedly essentialist feminists than to make

concrete proposals while fully incorporating a commitment to anti-essentialist method. Here I have shown how this commitment might play out in the context of feminist research; in the next chapter I ask similar questions of feminist organising against sexual violence.

5

Between Theory and Practice: MacKinnon, Essentialism, and Feminist Activism

As I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, one of the central questions raised by a form of anti-essentialism that urges us to "look and see" is how to give difference its due when it isn't unproblematically there to be discovered. The processes of making generalisations and highlighting differences are necessarily pragmatic tasks, but not straightforwardly "empirical" ones. As we saw in my analysis of Gilligan, research methods both discover and construct similarity and difference. The most useful question to pose of these different methods, I have argued, is not whether they are more or less accurate in their descriptions of difference, but rather how they interpret those relations of power that shape similarities and differences. Principled anti-essentialism fails to offer an adequate research methodology: we cannot deploy general categories without making decisions about inclusion in and exclusion from those categories; moreover, we cannot act politically without these categories. The necessity of categories of some kind invites us to think practically and ethically about issues of process — as chapter three argued, we need to be "mindful" of the categories we use, since both the tacit *status quo* and any conscious recategorisation creates a reality as well as describing one. So chapter four asked: why did Gilligan pick differences of race and class to broaden her analysis? That choice (and it is a choice) speaks to the ideology

of the researchers, criticisms of existing work, and to political systems that structure oppression along particular axes that construct the reality of those differences.

How do we think about this problem when the differences with which we are confronted arise in real situations of political conflict? When they are embedded in social structures of power, institutionalised, and disciplined in ways that we want effectively to resist? Feminist research always remains, however partially and however much the method may be constructed to avoid this dynamic, under the control of the researcher. She often has the leisure to adapt her method in ways that address perceived methodological inadequacies and control the research agenda, as we saw Gilligan and her colleagues do with the girls. By contrast, political practice takes place within the exigencies of "real" situations, where activists are more directly confronted with limited resources, questions of strategy, or conflicts, advancing or responding to emotive demands for inclusion or exclusion within a particular group. Sometimes groups not only have to respond to extant demands, but have to envision which "absent voices" need to be included and how this might be accomplished without condescension. Activists who adopt anti-essentialist positions in theory may have to deal with desires for authenticity ("this is who we *really* are"), with the identities that are created through practices of resistance, or with oppositional strategies that require the invocation of a group identity, however contingent. Any effort collectively to effect political change must negotiate the processes of identity formation inherent in oppositional intervention into existing systems of meaning. These struggles are not the limitations of an imperfect world in which the dichotomy of essentialism and "difference" fails to guide us; they are the rough ground on which feminist debates about essentialism should be conducted.

In advocating a return to this "rough ground" it initially seemed as if privileging feminist practice and retreating from theory would solve the problem of essentialism. I argued in chapter two that Okin's attempt to ground her generalisations about women in "empirical" realities, however, fails to recognise the complexity of this claim. Similarly, arguments that we can avoid methodological essentialism by privileging practice instead of theory fail to recognise that many of the same forms of essentialism I have identified in feminist theory are also embedded in feminist practice. Merely claiming the primacy of

practice, or arguing that a particular theory is grounded in practice, provides no actual information about the shape of that practice or the process by which it generates or justifies a particular theory. Thus, first, this interpretation of the injunction "look and see" fails to tell feminists much about how different forms of practice come to justify different theoretical accounts.

Not only does practice fail always to guide theory, however; theory also fails to guide practice. Feminist theoretical engagement with essentialism, even when it purports to be closely related to practice, often under-determines the shape of the feminist activism it might endorse. For example, anti-essentialist arguments in political theory often conclude by recommending "coalition building" as a way of breaking down identity group boundaries, thus resisting essentialism while retaining political effectiveness. This theoretical move, however, tells feminists little about the actual shape of anti-essentialist organising. Do we build coalitions with *any* group with similar ideology, identity, political goals, or strategic aims? What counts as similar? What criteria do we use in making those decisions? Anti-porn feminists forming a coalition with religious conservatives to ban pornographic signs face one set of concerns. Lesbian-feminists trying to decide whether to join forces with a gay men's group to campaign for human rights protection face another. Merely advocating the loosening of group boundaries or the formation of coalitions does not address these specific, strategic questions. Most theoretical arguments end where many of my concerns begin; anti-essentialist feminist theories often require more content if they are to be genuinely useful in practice.

Widening this gap between theory and practice in the essentialism debates is the lack of connection between the feminist theoretical literature on gender and political identity, and more empirical accounts of how identity has been negotiated within feminist political activism. At a time when much feminist discourse explores the theoretical ramifications of "anti-essentialism" and the limits of generalising about women, the empirical study of feminist practice has been remarkably uninflected by these concerns. And, as I argued in chapter two, philosophers concerned with essentialism and anti-essentialism now uniformly gesture to the need for empirical investigations and practical emphasis without themselves undertaking this research. There is a pressing need for

research on the political use of generalisations about women that is both philosophically sophisticated and informed by practice. Without this work, feminist theorists will continue to be stalemated by their own false dichotomies, and practitioners will continue to lack the conceptual tools to investigate empirical contexts.

In this final chapter I turn to feminist practice in its most concrete forms. I ask how the lessons of the preceding chapters about the construction and negotiation of generalisations about women might inform certain kinds of feminist activism, and how experiences of organising in turn might shape feminist theorising about essentialism. "Look and see" is most importantly an injunction to pragmatism — a call to remove oneself from the armchair consideration of "difference" (from where it is all too easy to under-estimate the power of "strategic essentialism") and to enter the messier fray of feminist politics. Whatever form our feminist activism takes — and I construe "activism" broadly in this chapter to include any political intervention that has the goal of ameliorating women's oppressions — it ought to be constitutive of how feminists think about essentialism and anti-essentialism.

Feminist theory and practice cannot be nor should be firmly separated —we cannot go to work in the morning thinking practical thoughts and leave off theorising until we are safely in the armchair that evening. The most challenging and productive forms of feminist engagement, in my experience, require a constant dialectic between ideas gleaned from philosophy books and classroom debate, and the lessons learned in feminist organisations and feminist relationships. There are good intellectual and political reasons for avoiding the privileging of any particular forum for the development of feminist knowledge. Nonetheless, barriers between feminist activism and feminist theory are structurally maintained in familiar ways: the intense competitiveness and individualism of academic careers (especially in the late 1990s) strongly motivate even "progressive" academics to direct their time and energy to research and teaching commitments that are seldom explicitly connected to tangible social change projects, for example. Feminists outside universities, on the other hand, whatever their own educational background and however they stand in relation to the women with whom they work, generally have fewer material

resources and face different imperatives.[1] The kind of tail-chasing I pointed out in chapter two is made possible by keeping the debates within academic feminist theoretical contexts where claims about sameness and difference do not engage with empirical claims. In fact, they are the kinds of debates that motivated Wittgenstein's famous description of philosophy: " It leaves everything as it is" [PI 124].

Considering both how anti-essentialist theory relates to practice, and how practice leads us to reconsider theory, is a relatively untrodden path in contemporary feminism. I argue in this chapter that to claim — as Catharine MacKinnon does — that essentialism can be side-stepped as a theoretical problem merely by appealing to feminist practice, begs the question of how essentialism is embedded in practice itself. Feminist theoretical encounters with essentialism, furthermore, often provide insufficient information to make concrete recommendations about the actual shape of anti-essentialist feminist practice. In negotiating that part of the rough ground on which debates about feminist organising against sexual violence take place, I draw on two of my Wittgensteinian arguments. First, family resemblances enable generalisations about women that are different in kind, not only in their scope. This distinction motivates my critique of MacKinnon as well as my own suggestions for a different kind of anti-essentialist practice. Second, MacKinnon follows the Wittgensteinian injunction to "look and see" by invoking "women's experience" as a way of challenging critics who say her work is methodologically essentialist. But she under-estimates the complexity of this injunction and how processes of looking and seeing are shaped by our preconceptions. Changes to organisations and practices in response to charges that they are essentialist are more than "icing" on the cake of women's commonality. They represent fundamentally different ways of understanding women's identities, particularly in acknowledging the relations of power between women that construct such categories as "women's experience." In casting all women as essentially the same in their relation to a sexuality of dominance and subordination,

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[1] For commentary on the nature and implications of this structural distinction, see Part Three: "The Interrelationship of Academic and Activist Feminism," in *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States*, eds. Constance Backhouse and David Flaherty (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1992).

MacKinnon erases these relations of power as well as the substance of the feminist political organising against sexual violence that tries to incorporate them into practice. Recognising this weakness, however, need not lead to giving up on gender as a central category of analysis. Both MacKinnon and I recognise the reality of gender differences, and offer feminist justifications for woman-identified activism, but we articulate different notions of inclusion in the category "women."

I then articulate some of the implications I think my own analysis might have for feminist activism against sexual violence. How can we move beyond vague gesturing toward the need for "diversity" or "multiplicity" to an anti-essentialism that provides concrete guidelines for practice? This exposition in turn raises questions of inclusion and exclusion. Does embracing anti-essentialism in this context imply a loss of political efficacy, or even a loss of the ability to justify our use of the category "women"? I take an extreme version of the problem — the issue of including pro-feminist men in feminist anti-sexual violence organising — and show how feminist anti-essentialism need not give up the kinds of generalisations about women and men that sustain feminist politics. Finally, I ask how we can actually reshape feminist organisations to reflect what we know about essentialism. What organisational structures and forms of representation will best facilitate anti-essentialist practice? Particularly with regard to this latter question, I am acutely aware of the limitations entailed in writing about feminist organising without a more extensive and ongoing dialogue with a community of women preoccupied with similar issues. The writing of a philosophy dissertation is in many ways a solitary and univocal process, and thus this chapter is as much a proposal for further investigation under better conditions as a conclusive statement.

Sexual violence, legal theory, and essentialism

The debate surrounding essentialism and feminist political practice has been most fully developed with regard to feminist anti-sexual violence discourse. In particular, Catharine MacKinnon's theory of sexuality and sexual violence against women and her legal practice (contributing to the emergence of the concept of sexual harassment, as well

as the Minneapolis Ordinance which would have made pornography actionable under civil law[2]) have been contested by women of colour who argue that her construction of "women" — in terms of her practice, not only her theory — is essentialist. MacKinnon argues that her account successfully avoids methodological essentialism by claiming the privilege of women's experiences and the feminist practice they generate. Her theory is sound, she claims, because it is grounded in the empirical reality of women's lives, and accurately reflects the similarity of women's experiences and of the construction of those experiences under patriarchy. MacKinnon thus invokes an appeal to "empirical reality" and to the grounding of her theory in feminist practice of the kind I have been interrogating. Does she succeed in constructing a generalising account of gender that is not methodologically essentialist?[3]

More generally MacKinnon argues that sexuality is the primary locus of women's oppression, and sexual violence the quintessential expression of male domination in a patriarchal society. Sex *is* the eroticisation of dominance and submission. And sex and violence are inextricably connected through the construction of masculinity as dominance and femininity as subordination. MacKinnon is thus a radical feminist: women's oppression is the result of male dominance, enacted through sexuality, itself disciplined through a plethora of interrelated forms of sexual violence, including sexual harassment, incest, rape, woman beating, sexual slavery, pornography, objectification and compulsory heterosexuality.[4] Claiming that authoritative liberal understandings of social justice focus on "difference" rather than "dominance," MacKinnon draws on Marxist theory to argue for a legal practice that addresses the totalising construction of identities through social relations of power. As with Gilligan's work, much of the power of MacKinnon's theory stems from its strong construction of the category "women" and the explicit relation of

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[2] Catharine MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); "Minneapolis Ordinance: Excerpts," in *Women Against Censorship*, ed. Varda Burstyn (Vancouver: Douglas and MacIntyre, 1985).

[3] For a related discussion see Elizabeth Rapaport, "Generalizing Gender: Reason and Essence in the Legal Thought of Catharine MacKinnon," in *A Mind of One's Own*, eds. Antony and Witt.

[4] MacKinnon articulates this view most fully in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989): especially "Sexuality": 126-154; "Sex Equality: On Difference and Dominance": 215-236.

this construction to feminist practice. MacKinnon presents her theory in unequivocal terms, and again, it is the lack of ambiguity in her account that has provoked charges that it is "essentialist." These charges have often been made simply by pointing to possible exclusions in MacKinnon's theory rather than offering alternative accounts of the phenomena she describes; earlier I argued that Gilligan's work has received similarly disappointing critical treatment. The substance and merits of MacKinnon's view have been extensively debated elsewhere;[5] here I want to focus particularly on charges that her theory is "essentialist," and specifically on MacKinnon's claim that she avoids essentialism by grounding her theory in feminist practice.

Angela Harris and Marlee Kline both object to MacKinnon's account on the grounds that it is essentialist, and in particular on the familiar basis that it excludes the identities and experiences of oppression of women of colour. Kline identifies various manifestations of methodological essentialism in white feminist legal theory.[6] The mistake she attributes to MacKinnon is that of over-simplifying the sites of women's oppression:

> Not only is her construction of the feminist project limited in its capacity to capture the complex impact of racism in the lives of women of color ... but her analysis is problematic in two additional, related ways: neither the differences in interest and priority that exist between white women and women of color nor the unequal power relationship between the groups are confronted or dealt with in her work.[7]

Kline posits that MacKinnon's emphasis on sexuality as the primary locus of women's oppression both is reductive, and derives from white women's construction of feminist practice.

Harris argues in more depth that MacKinnon's work relies on

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[5] See for example Drucilla Cornell, *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[6] Marlee Kline, "Race, Racism, and Feminist Legal Theory," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 12, 1989: 121.

[7] Kline, "Race, Racism and Feminist Legal Theory": 140-1.

> gender essentialism — the notion that a unitary, "essential" women's experience can be isolated and described independently of race, class, sexual orientation, and other realities of experience. The result of the tendency toward gender essentialism, I argue, is not only that some voices are silenced in order to privilege others (for this is an inevitable result of categorization, which is necessary both for human communication and political movement), but that the voices that are silenced turn out to be the same voices silenced by the mainstream legal voice of "We the People" — among them, the voices of black women.[8]

Black women, Harris claims, appear in MacKinnon's work as "white women, only more so."[9] In particular, MacKinnon's feminist legal theory of rape, she argues, fails to take into account the historically and racially specific vulnerability of African-American women to sexual violence. The experience and legacy of slavery and the sexual abuse and exploitation of Black women by white men (especially slave-owners or, after emancipation, male heads of households), the fact that rape of a Black woman during slavery was not a crime, the lynching and continuing disproportionate criminal punishment of Black men for alleged sex crimes against white women, and the complicity of white women in these injustices, all problematise any feminist theory *or* practice that understands rape as simply a "gender issue." This critique is an attack on methodological essentialism in MacKinnon's work. Central to it is the recognition not merely of "differences" between women but of differences of power, or "relations of dominance," in MacKinnon's language. Thus it is a particularly telling criticism of a theory that purports to place an analysis of power at its core. To address it, MacKinnon needs to justify her selective attention to certain relations of power — such as those between women and men — but not others — those between white women and Black women, for example.

What is MacKinnon's response to her methodological critics? MacKinnon claims to offer a direct reply to these charges, although, like Gilligan, she tends merely to make reference to their existence before once again elaborating the framework her critics dispute. She argues, first, that anti-essentialist critiques imply that there is no such thing as

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[8] Angela Harris, "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory," in *Feminist Legal Theory: Readings in Law and Gender*, eds. Katharine T. Bartlett and Rosanne Kennedy (Boulder: Westview, 1991): 238.
[9] Harris, "Race and Essentialism": 242.

the practice of sex inequality, and second, that there are empirical bases for widely applicable generalisations about women's oppression:

> I want to take up the notion of experience "as a woman" and argue that it is the practice of which the concept of discrimination "based on sex" is the legal theory. That is, I want to investigate how the realities of women's experience of sex inequality in the world have shaped some contours of sex discrimination in the law.[10]

MacKinnon's justification for her theoretical use of sex "unmodified" is that it is based on an "empirical statement about reality" [PT: 47]: "to speak of social treatment 'as a woman' is thus not to invoke any abstract essence or homogeneous generic or ideal type, not to posit anything, far less a universal anything, but to refer to this diverse and pervasive concrete material reality of social meanings and practices." [PT: 48] She argues that methodological anti-essentialism both trivialises "straight white economically privileged" women's oppression, and undercuts the possibility of understanding and remedying the practice of sex inequality. She also makes a point that resonates with Bordo's, albeit in more aggressive terms:

> I also sense ... that many women, not only women of color and not only academics, do not want to be "just women," not only because something important is left out, but also because that means being in a category with "her," the useless white woman whose first reaction when the going gets rough is to cry. I sense here that people feel more dignity in being part of a group that includes men than in being part of a group that includes that ultimate reduction of the notion of oppression, that instigator of lynch mobs, that ludicrous whiner, that equality coat-tails rider, the white woman. [PT: 53]

MacKinnon accepts the point that the otherwise unoppressed white woman is not definitive of women's oppression merely by virtue of this status, but she nonetheless

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[10] Catharine MacKinnon, "From Practice to Theory, or What is a White Woman Anyway?," in *Radically Speaking*, eds. Bell and Klein: 46. Hereafter references to this article will be given in the main text using the abbreviation PT and a page number in parentheses.

claims that the oppression of the most privileged women is an indicator of the force of sex oppression generally.

Thus on first reading, MacKinnon's response to her anti-essentialist critics might seem like an "anti-anti-essentialist" rejoinder fully in keeping with a Wittgensteinian ~~feminist method~~. She too wants to "look and see," to permit empirically based and politically effective generalisations about women. She wants her theory to be grounded in feminist practice, to avoid a kind of theory that "proceeds as if you can deconstruct power relations by shifting their markers around in your head." [PT: 45] And she bases these generalisations on the commonality of women's experiences of sex and sexual violence (or, in her terms, sex *as* sexual violence, sexual violence *as* sex). Patriarchy constructs women uniformly, through defining and controlling discourses and practices, but MacKinnon's feminist oppositional practice, by contrast, is allegedly grounded in women's diverse experiences:

> If we build a theory out of women's practice, comprised of the diversity of all women's experiences, we do not have the problem that some feminist theory has been rightly criticized for. When we have it is when we make theory out of abstractions and accept the images forced on us by male dominance. I said all that so that I could say this: the assumption that all women are the same is part of that bedrock of sexism that the Women's Movement is predicated on challenging. That some academics find it difficult to theorize without reproducing it simply means that they continue to do to women what theory, predicated on the practice of male dominance, has always done to women. It is their notion of what theory is, and its relation to its world, that needs to change. [PT: 54]

While I broadly agree with this set of assertions, the kind of theory (and practice) MacKinnon's analysis produces nonetheless both confuses and ignores the responses of her anti-essentialist critics. MacKinnon's rhetorically powerful rejoinders — like Gilligan's — tend to conceal a failure to interrogate the power relations that have generated her own theory and that shape her own story about what constitutes feminist practice. Casting women as a unified group by virtue of their construction through sexuality not only erases differences in that construction but also over-simplifies the exigencies of feminist practice. MacKinnon's appeal to the "empirical" as evidence that her theory is not essentialist

allows her successfully to evade the charge that she is making *a priori* generalisations about women, but, as I argued in chapter four, it is not a claim that has any determinate consequences or that constitutes an adequate response to charges of methodological essentialism.

Like Gilligan, MacKinnon agrees that some "theory" as understood outside (radical) feminism may have been essentialist in assuming a biological basis for women's oppression, but easily side-steps any suggestion that her work is essentialist in this sense. In assuming that she is being accused of biological essentialism, however, she fails to grasp the methodological usage of the epithet "essentialist." Thus MacKinnon's first response is to reject the charge of methodological essentialism by sleight of hand — this kind of mistake, she claims, is not *really* essentialism (although this semantic move does not obviate the need to address the problem). [PT: 48; notes 9 and 11] She nonetheless acknowledges (even if she doesn't call it "essentialism") the difficulties inherent in constructing a very general account of women's oppression while avoiding methodological pitfalls.

MacKinnon argues, however, that anti-essentialism must imply that there is no such thing as the practice of "sex inequality." But anti-essentialism is not the claim that gender is a useless or even insignificant category in and of itself, merely that arguments about women's oppression should not take the identities of a particular group of women as the epitome of gender oppression. I am sympathetic to MacKinnon's claim, echoing Bordo, that the invocation of class and race differences is used to undercut feminist theories of gender while the reverse is less often true. [PT: 50] But this is a contingent phenomenon that does not necessarily follow from anti-essentialist critique: in fact, anti-essentialism of the kind for which I have been arguing would insist also that theses in race theory, for example, be inflected by gender difference just as much as the reverse. Anti-essentialists agree that sexual violence, in the forms MacKinnon stresses, contributes to the oppression of all women. It seems clear, as MacKinnon herself comments, that when a woman of any race is raped, for example, she is raped, in some sense, *as a woman*. But, as I argued in chapter two, anti-essentialism need not consist solely in the claim that women cannot have shared experiences, but rather consists in a distinctively different way of

conceptualising the similarities and differences between those experiences, and in forms of theory construction that recognise the contextual nature of gender oppression. I suggest that to understand all women's experiences of rape as encapsulated by a unique description of that experience is to ignore the differences of power between women that have led to the privileging of one particular account. MacKinnon ostensibly disagrees with her anti-essentialist critics, but only by accusing them of rejecting all generalisations about women, not by addressing their charge that her theory fails to tell a story about differences of power between women.

MacKinnon does not clarify her position with regard to this stronger anti-essentialist criticism, although she seems hostile to it, and doesn't elaborate on her telling assertion that "how the white woman is imagined and constructed and treated becomes a particularly sensitive indicator of the degree to which women, as such, are despised." [PT: 54] Thus she simply does not respond to Harris' charge that the context of racialised sexual violence creates both a different experience of that violence for women of colour, and a different kind of feminist theory. When Harris argues that the different relations of dominance within which African-American women are situated make rape into a different kind of feminist issue for them, she is also making an "empirical" argument. Presumably, unless only what white women do counts as feminist practice, Harris can argue that the different feminist practice of African-American women against rape emerges from that distinctive experience. Of course, it is sometimes — empirically — the case that women with different experiences and different understandings of feminist issues have successfully worked together by focusing on their common goals. But the point of anti-essentialist critique is to demonstrate that at least sometimes feminist practice itself has been constructed to privilege the experiences of a particular group of women.

For example, one of MacKinnon's avowed motivations is to ensure that the previously "sex-blind" law develops provision for sex discrimination understood in radical rather than liberal terms. Without necessarily opposing this goal, however, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that methodological essentialism in feminist-inspired sex discrimination

law blocks legal recourse for Black women.[11] Giving three specific examples of how Black women's experience of oppression cannot be captured by existing anti-discrimination law, Crenshaw argues that in forcing Black women to chose between their gender and race identities, some feminist legal practice contributes to the erasure of the experience of oppression of those with so-called "intersectional identities." MacKinnon doesn't say *how* her account avoids this problem, except to wave toward a practice that is based on the multiplicity of women's experiences. In chapter two I argued that Okin mistakenly accuses Spelman of gender relativism, and makes appeal to the "empirical," to preclude essentialism. MacKinnon makes the same move, nuancing the latter claim by arguing that her "empirical" argument is grounded in feminist practice. MacKinnon's strategy permits her to jettison the criticisms of her anti-essentialist commentators through an important, but ultimately unsatisfactory, rhetorical appeal to practice.

MacKinnon claims to be building a theory from the empirical reality of women's common oppression as identified through feminist practice. This goal, however, is shared by many feminists of different stripes, and I have been arguing that feminists need to develop methods that will investigate and elaborate such claims. MacKinnon argues that her opponents adopt an overly abstract theoretical position from which to develop their practice, whereas she grounds her theory in the feminist practices of consciousness-raising and opposition to dominant constructions of sexuality. The distinction between theory and practice in MacKinnon's work, however, is never as clear as she would like it to be: doesn't MacKinnon fall into the trap of seeing what she is looking for? Of reinscribing relations of power within the group "women" even as she purports to describe a universal female reality? Her critics show how she neglects the political salience of racialised constructions of sexuality. But how exactly does this neglect matter for feminist practice? The appeal to feminist "practice" as a route to avoid methodological essentialism provides no more information than the claim that feminist theorists should "look and see." Essentialism can be perpetuated by practices as much as by theory. The challenge facing

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[11] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," in *Feminist Legal Theory,* eds. Bartlett and Kennedy.

feminists is to articulate the precise shape of anti-essentialist practice as it is mutually informed by anti-essentialist theory.

Learning from practice?

So if MacKinnon's account does not adequately describe a feminist practice that is not essentialist, how is essentialism inscribed in feminist activism, and what might anti-essentialist practice look like? There are many sites in which answers to these questions are played out; some of the most interesting are those where feminists have organised against the phenomena she describes as central to women's oppression. The history of feminist activism in this area in fact motivates many of MacKinnon's central claims: much anti-sexual violence organising in particular is rooted in radical feminist analyses that stress the strength of the connection between gender and violence. Claims, for example, that male violence is concordant with norms of masculinity rather than a feature of a few individual pathologised men, that sex and violence are intimately linked, that acts of sexual violence are prevalent and under-reported, or that petty acts of sexism are contiguous with harassment, rape and murder, are all based in analyses similar to MacKinnon's. Furthermore, sexualised violence really does cross race and class lines; it affects all women. Almost all acts of sexual violence are committed by men. And when this gendered dichotomy of aggressor and victim breaks down, there are plausible reasons to argue, as MacKinnon does, that "exceptional" acts of violence in fact reinscribe a gender divide.[12] For example, gay men are queer-bashed because their sexual identity undermines patriarchy, and are "feminised" through acts of sexual aggression; or women who are labelled "aggressors" are in fact acting in self-defence, in response to prolonged male violence they have themselves survived. Influential feminist analyses such as MacKinnon's suggest that gender is not only disciplined but actually defined through the nexus of images, attitudes and social structures that permit and perpetuate sexualised violence.

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[12] See MacKinnon, "Sexuality," in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*: 141-2. MacKinnon argues, "It may also be that sexuality is so gender marked that it carries dominance and submission with it, whatever the gender of its participants."

MacKinnon is right to claim, furthermore, that feminist theories of sexual violence are rooted in feminist practice, and these analytical claims are both generated by and inform, however partially, feminist organising against sexual violence. They appear in diluted form in the "breaking down myths" training that volunteers typically receive, in pro-survivor feminist counselling strategies, and in the kinds of political goals organisations choose. My experience suggests that many women who are drawn to this kind of feminist work understand themselves as acting in solidarity with women as a group. Women volunteers are encouraged to identify "as women." At all the sexual assault centres and battered women's shelters I know, only women staff phone lines and provide other front-line services. One woman working in a battered women's shelter in British Columbia informed me, before laughing at the irony of her own remark, that "this work is about women being together; it's not about men." Where men are directly involved in this work it is usually, I think appropriately, as educators or counsellors working with other men to challenge male attitudes. And activists working to improve sexual assault legislation often speak of the way it erases "women's experiences" or how the criminal justice system silences "the woman's voice." Thus feminist practice aimed at mitigating sexual violence is, as MacKinnon argues, one of the areas where a universalising account of women's oppression is indeed both widely accepted and empirically grounded. If generalisations about women are safe in any context, surely it is this one?

Much of the power of MacKinnon's analysis comes from her recognition of the pervasiveness of sexual violence and her anti-liberal insistence that it is made possible by relations of dominance enacted through social groups. But the two opposites of "difference" and "dominance" are not the only choices for feminists; it is possible to retain politically important notions of social group membership without understanding all members of those groups as uniform, and while incorporating recognition of cross-cutting relations of power. The example of feminist organising against sexual violence is instructive because here, as elsewhere, recognising the legitimacy and usefulness of certain generalisations about women neither makes relations of dominance between women irrelevant to political practice, nor determines its precise contours.

Just as Okin's claim that women in both "poor" and "Western industrialized" countries are oppressed within the family leaves many questions unanswered, so MacKinnon's claim that sexual violence is the empirical reality of all women elides differences in that reality and under-determines the shape of the practice it generates. At the same time as feminists act on the recognition that women *qua* women share common concerns, they also face the challenge that many "women's issues" are not straightforwardly universal. Anti-essentialism warns dominant group feminists to be wary of practice that merely "adds on" race or class or sexual identity to an existing approach, without attempting a more profound methodological rethinking. Adding "different" women to a pre-existing construction of a feminist problem forces those women to work through constructions that may not reflect their experiences. MacKinnon's critics accuse her of this kind of practice.

There is a risk that women of colour, for example, will be "invited in" to organisations that were originally established for and by white women. In grappling with guilt, anger, defensiveness, and the potent mixture of invisible racism and professed anti-racism, white feminists may express a desperate desire to "include." Motivated by abstract political goals, image-building, guilt and good intentions, we have often acted as if the mere fact of intra-organisational diversity were more important than the political reasons for it, or than its success. Thus anti-essentialist practice requires more than a simple add-on — an extra training session, an affirmative action slogan on a recruitment poster, a member nominated to act as the "women of colour" representative, or the claim that generalisations about gender oppression apply to Other women, only more so. It requires a thorough interrogation of the relations of power that construct feminist "issues."

The inequalities of power that construct feminist identities through essentialist practice are not always acknowledged. For example, Allison Tom investigated class differences between managerial and trainee women in a self-described feminist bank. She argues that the managerial women, instead of interpreting interpersonal and organisational conflict as indicative of a reinscription of class relations — as an indication of essentialist

practice — understood it as revealing inadequacies on the part of their trainees.[13] I argued in chapter four that entering a feminist zone with a clear sense of the kinds of inequalities and differences generally obscured or made visible by one's position of power or powerlessness generates better research outcomes. Analogously, in feminist practice, stepping back to reflect on the issues emphasised in this dissertation may change our perspective on aspects of our practice previously taken for granted.

Given the value of MacKinnon's analysis and its grounding in certain historically specific kinds of organising, and given the anti-essentialist critique I have been sketching, what should feminists do differently? Just as the reality of male violence against women is being even more fully documented and revealed as a widespread and cross-cutting social problem, so feminist initiatives are re-evaluating the relevance of their political work to different constituencies of women and to men. Feminists working within organisations comprised of and representing diverse constituencies of women have raised challenges to the constructions of feminist issues and identities.

For example, many feminists are challenging racism and working toward feminist anti-racist and culturally sensitive therapies.[14] All women *are* oppressed by a legal system that perpetuates gender oppression, but the ways this oppression is played out vary widely according to race and class, in ways that have been both quantitively and qualitatively documented by feminists undertaking legal advocacy. Any description of women's oppression under the law which fails to incorporate this observation will necessarily present some women's experiences of oppression as ideal-typical, and will interpret the legal system's understanding of that oppression as representative of the legal imagination more generally. A wealthy white woman raped by a Black stranger will not only have a very different experience than a poor First Nations woman raped by her white employer; her experience will be constructed differently within the oppressive frameworks of law.

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[13] Allison Tom, "Children of Our Culture? Class, Power and Learning in a Feminist Bank," in *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women's Movement*, eds. Myra Marx Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

[14] See Gilligan, Rogers and Tolman, eds., *Women, Girls and Psychotherapy*; Jeanne Adleman and Gloria Enguidanos, eds., *Racism in the Lives of Women: Testimony, Theory, and Guides to Antiracist Practice* (Binghamton: Harrington Park Press, 1996); Laura Brown and Maria Root, eds., *Diversity and Complexity in Feminist Therapy* (New York: The Haworth Press, 1990).

The feminist legal practice that may address the oppression of one will not, *pace* MacKinnon, necessarily remedy the oppression of the other unless legal practice includes a specific commitment to understanding contextual variation between cases. As part of anti-heterosexist practice, furthermore, feminists can no longer assume that domestic violence only occurs in heterosexual relationships and that lesbian relationships are immune. But nor can we assume that lesbian experiences merely mimic heterosexual violence, copying relations of power and roles found in straight communities.

Effective feminist anti-sexual violence organising adapts itself to local conditions, matching practice to the particular histories and needs of a community. For example, Nancy Matthews' analysis of racial diversity in a local anti-rape movement documents how historical trends worked against racial integration in feminist campaigning on sexual assault, arguing *inter alia* that the predominance of white women in the establishment of grass-roots rape crisis centres and their cultural and social links to the second wave of feminism discouraged the involvement of women of colour in the anti-rape movement in Los Angeles.[15] She focuses on two feminist organisations: the Rosa Parks Sexual Assault Crisis Center (founded 1984) and the Compton YWCA Sexual Assault Crisis Program, both organised by Black women for local Black communities. Both had bureaucratic (albeit "progressive") parent organisations, and both operated within a framework of community action and social service rather than the dominant feminist political frameworks. They identified quite different priorities for women of colour with regard to sexual assault than did their white counterparts. They had to overcome language barriers, a distrust of educators and media, and a different cultural ethic about seeking help from strangers (compounded by tense understandings of who was inside and who outside the boundaries of the community). They required considerable financial support due to the extra hours of work required for developing culturally appropriate outreach and crisis intervention programs, and for working through the multiple problems of their clients. This translated into different practical needs, including incest and alcoholism support

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[15] Nancy Matthews, "Surmounting a Legacy: The Expansion of Racial Diversity in a Local Anti-Rape Movement," *Gender and Society* 3:4, 1989.

groups, gang negotiations, and, in the absence of supporting services, attention to all aspects of clients' well-being. As Matthews quotes the director of the Compton program:

> A woman may come in or call in for various reasons. She has no place to go, she has no job, she has no support, she has no money, she has no food, she's been beaten, and after you finish meeting those needs, or try to meet all those needs, then she may say, by the way, during all this, I was being raped. So the immediate needs have to be met. So that makes our community different from other communities.[16]

In the context of a multiplicity of cultural issues and of the peer counselling roots of crisis intervention work, women of colour worked here to deliver services to other women of colour. Matthews contrasts this approach with the dominant subculture of the local anti-rape movement, which she describes as "(white) feminism strongly influenced by a lesbian perspective."[17] Black women, she argues, did not have the same political origins, and were more likely in this case to identify with a social service orientation and to be less suspicious of government funding. Thus the two communities had different reference systems and political vocabularies, compounded by concerns about racism or homophobia from the other group. While they were in dialogue, each met their objectives through separate and community appropriate organising.

Feminist anti-essentialist insights have also helped me and my colleagues to address problems of exclusion in recruiting and training help-line volunteers. For example, we have become more conscious of the implicit mental image most new recruits have of their prospective callers — namely, that they will be young, single or casually dating, heterosexual, Euro-Canadian, and childless. In other words, that the callers will be just like (most of) them. We have addressed this familiar problem in two ways: first, as my examples above suggest, by trying to diversify our volunteer body, and second, by actively undermining this "essentialised" image of callers by including training workshops on racism and sexual violence, cultural difference in phone dynamics, challenging

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[16] Matthews, "Surmounting a Legacy": 527.
[17] Matthews, "Surmounting a Legacy": 529.

heteronormativity, and so on. Such anti-essentialist strategies within feminist organisations are by now quite widespread. For many sexual assault (formerly "rape crisis") centres, the requirement of shared political values now includes that potential members be anti-racist, anti-heterosexist and responsive to the potential needs of working class women and women with disabilities. For example, *Vancouver Women Against Violence Against Women* now includes the following sessions in their volunteer training program: "deaf women, deaf culture and sexual violence," "anti-racism," "classism," "Jewish women and anti-Semitism," and "lesbian life," some of which are facilitated by the appropriate caucus. Thus the organisation has recognised that a phenomenon (sexual violence) that affects all women affects different women differently due to their social locations, and thus "purely" anti-sexist work disproportionately benefits white, straight, middle-class, able-bodied women. Feminist organisations are increasingly trying to confront these issues explicitly in their training and development programs.

But this commitment goes beyond the "add-on" approach. I also make sense of feminist anti-essentialism in practice by *refraining* from making claims about the sameness of different women's experiences of sexual violence. Just as many of us have been offended by the homophobic man, who, when "propositioned" by another man, says "now I know *exactly* what women mean when they talk about sexual harassment!," so I will not say "I know what you mean — the *exact same* thing happened to me last week." The assimilation of experience into the language of a dominant Other is a common essentialising moment in feminist practice. This is the kind of moment that Harris' anti-essentialist critique highlights, but that analyses like MacKinnon's tend to ignore. Instead, in identifying patterns in my work I conceptualise the relationships between different women's experiences as "family resemblances" rather than as identity relations. This conceptualisation also enables me to see respect and recognition in the claim that the experiences of ostensibly different women can be similar to my own notwithstanding important differences. For example, as a "non-survivor" of childhood sexual abuse, at the same time as I recognise "that's so terrible, I simply can't relate," I also acknowledge connections between my own experiences of growing up female in a sexist society and the experience of sexual abuse. Refusing to dissociate from survivors, refusing to make

"them" into a group distinct from "us," non-survivors, is as much a part of effective anti-essentialist practice as is respecting difference. This constant self-reflexive balancing of the dangers of assimilation and dissociation, which happens on the most personal and the most institutionalised levels, is how anti-essentialism should be played out in practice.

These examples represent challenges to a prevalent *feminist* understanding of sexual violence as a set of crimes perpetrated exclusively by men exclusively against their female partners, where these categories are understood as uniform. This strikes me as the kind of commitment dominant group feminists should derive from anti-essentialist feminism, a commitment underlaid by interrogating attitudes and structures with an eye to power and differences between women. MacKinnon's analysis, on the one hand, simply does not give us any tools for understanding and revising these forms of practice. Her theory usefully guides feminist interpretations of sexual violence *contra* popular liberal descriptions, but for those already converted to a dominance model it provides no theoretical insights or practical guidelines for negotiating oppressive relations of power within oppositional feminist contexts.

On the other hand, is there a danger that in challenging MacKinnon's theory of sexual violence, feminists will undermine their own political aims? What are the risks of admitting contextual variation and exceptions within any feminist model, when feminist interpretations in general are already aggressively contested? It would indeed be politically suicidal if the gender scepticism that Bordo identifies as damaging to feminist theory were to spill over into feminist practice. A principled anti-essentialism that merely valorises difference and makes no serious attempt to understand the history, context or implications of specific forms of oppression could function as an anti-feminist alibi, seeming to delegitimate any generalisation made in the name of politics. This kind of anti-essentialism would thus provide an easy weapon for discourses that seek to deny the salience of social group memberships. This move, however, is not typical of anti-essentialist critiques, although MacKinnon depicts it as such. We should not allow a justified feminist suspicion of principled anti-essentialism to motivate a negative response to the suggestion that we need an anti-essentialist feminist practice; instead, we need to ask how relations of power among women in feminist contexts might change our practice, not to abandon the

category "women," but to rethink it so that our practice can become more just and more effective.

The challenge of essentialism, the risk of anti-essentialism

What is most important about anti-essentialist feminist critiques of the kind I have been advocating is their analysis of the ingenuity of oppression within supposedly emancipatory and resistive contexts. For example, Lugones' work has proved extraordinarily valuable to me in pinpointing exactly how my own thinking has tended to reinscribe privilege by divorcing my experiential knowledge about racism and classism within feminist activism and pedagogy from my philosophical writing, which has tended toward rather abstract analyses of "difference."

Generalising about gender, however, is an indispensable activity within sites of feminist practice. This crucial observation in part motivates both Gilligan and MacKinnon to make relatively grand claims for the importance and uniformity of gender. The reshaping of feminist practice suggested by anti-essentialism problematises MacKinnon's argument that generalising accounts of gender can be based simply on existing practice generated from (some) women's experience. Anti-essentialist practice of the kind I have sketched nevertheless permits politically powerful generalisations about women, and my examples have in fact focused on organising that continues to place gender, albeit "multiply inflected," at the centre of its practice. These examples differ from an essentialist practice: they include analyses of cross-cutting relations of power between women and concomitant shifts in practice, and recognition of the importance of alliance-building with political groups not explicitly focused on gender. They thus echo the claim, often heard in articulations of "postmodern" politics, that coalition building undercuts essentialism. But how far can we take this analysis? How, ultimately, can anti-essentialists justify drawing a boundary around the category "women"? What role might anti-essentialist feminist practices create for pro-feminist men, for example? All political identity claims require some such boundary-drawing; I argued in chapter three that this process should be self-reflexive. But these statements don't provide much to go on, and their continued

invocation as the end of the story again exhibits a "contemptuous attitude toward the particular case."[18]

It is not obvious how some of the theoretical arguments of the preceding chapters might be implemented. Nor is it always obvious how the practice of those who disagree with anti-essentialist claims in feminist philosophy — like MacKinnon — should differ from that of anti-essentialist advocates. These debates came alive for me in the context of my own experience: concurrently with writing this dissertation, I have been active in a local feminist anti-sexual violence movement, and have maintained a particular interest in anti-sexual violence organising on Canadian university campuses. The centre I worked in is based on a university campus and offers services to a clientele composed largely of young English-speaking adults, especially high school and university students. It is a feminist organisation and works with both female and male survivors of sexual assault. How we can avoid methodological essentialism in our practice? I have thought most about this issue in the context of exclusion: how might identity claims exclude, and what criteria can we use in evaluating these exclusions? In the example that follows, I compare a set of responses to claims to exclusion and inclusion in a sexual assault centre. Some are power-conscious, others tokenistic, still others power-blind. The question in this context becomes: how can we (as feminist activists with some, however minimal, discursive control over the formation of feminist identities) distinguish productive and just exclusions from pernicious ones?

Consider the following two claims, made by prospective volunteers:

Claim 1 (by a woman of colour who is a recent immigrant to Canada): "As a feminist organisation, you purport to include the experiences and interests of all women who have survived sexual assault at this university. Yet your volunteer body is not racially, ethnically or culturally diverse, and your training program does not address the needs of women of colour and/or immigrant women who may be dealing with, for example, the threat of deportation when a woman who is not yet a Canadian permanent resident tries to

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[18] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958): 18.

leave her violent husband, or the needs of women of colour who face racialised sexual harassment at university."

Claim 2 (by a white male Canadian)[19]: "Your insistence that only women can work for your help-line and in almost all positions on your co-ordinating committee is exclusionary. Even though men are a minority of survivors of sexual assault, there are male survivors who should be able to speak with men about their experiences and your organisation should address this need. Furthermore, many men are very sensitive to these issues and have better feminist politics than many women. And who's to say that a woman of colour calling your line wouldn't rather to speak to a man of colour about her experience than to a white woman? On what basis have you made gender your fundamental organising axis?"

Both these claims point to forms of exclusion within a feminist organisation. Both have been made to me over the last two years (although, interestingly, critical comments about the exclusion of men have been made far more often and more volubly by both men and women, and have been given much more attention within the organisation). Implicit in both examples are anti-essentialist claims of different kinds. Anti-essentialist feminist activists, while giving careful consideration to both these claims, should take the first much more seriously than the second. I distinguish the interpretations of these claims offered by power-sensitive and by principled anti-essentialist accounts of gender. The anti-essentialist feminist arguments I have offered might inform, in some contexts, the way we think about the role of men in feminist organising. Some men who invoke "anti-essentialism" to legitimate their own inclusion in feminist projects, however, or simply to minimise their participation in gender oppression, divorce anti-essentialism from the relations of power that create its feminist political significance. This observation accords with my general argument that merely to recommend "diversity" or "difference" as a political goal is in fact unhelpfully to prescind from judgement on their form and limits in

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[19] Neither of these claims have been presented to me in precisely these terms; nonetheless, they do represent an amalgam of arguments that have circulated in a particular feminist organisation. Several readers have pointed out that the second claim is both stronger and more relevant to the succeeding arguments if it is made by a man of colour. It is white male Canadians, however, who have actually advanced versions of "claim 2" in the context in question.

practice. Principled anti-essentialism can operate in political situations not just as a brake on productive feminist inquiry, but in conjunction with anti-feminism. While we remain sensitive to the contingency of generalisations about gender, feminist analyses of power must remain central to our decision-making as we evaluate the relative strength of different claims about exclusion.

Critiques of essentialism are compelling because they have carefully shown how textual strategies (such as writing about "difference" not "racism," or "women" not "white women") and political strategies (such as insisting that lesbians keep "their" issues out of feminist organisations) actually reinforce many of the mechanisms of oppression that feminists have criticised in male dominant societies, where definitions and images of "humanity" (and access to the rights, respect, and so on, that ideally accompany human status) are controlled by powerful men. Feminist anti-essentialism has thus mainly been addressed to analysing and remedying oppression among different groups of women. It is, however, also relevant to debates surrounding the role of men in feminist discourse and practice. Some feminists have argued that politically salient differences among "women" and among "men" create cross-cutting cleavages, conflicts and alliances that are not reducible to the formulaic "men" versus "women" in motivating and justifying feminist political action. The essentialist identification of feminist politics with white, straight, middle-class women (in North American contexts) has not only served the factional political interests of those women, it has also delegitimated valued and historically significant political alliances between poor women and poor men, between Black women and Black men, and so on.[20] This extension of anti-essentialism is valuable in deconstructing the race and class biases in certain kinds of radical feminism (which is, not incidentally, the ideology that motivated the mainstream feminist rape crisis movement in North America), challenging a conception of gender as a totalising and fundamental axis of oppression; this anti-essentialism is rightly constructed within a critique of power.

Much anti-sexual violence organising *has* been inflected by the unsubtle assumption that gender is the only salient axis of oppression, and has thus constructed

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[20] bell hooks, "Men: Comrades in Struggle," in hooks, *Feminist Theory.*

essentialist practice not only with regard to different groups of women, as I showed above, but also with regard to the category "men." Men are sometimes themselves survivors of sexual violence, and the needs and role of male survivors of childhood sexual abuse in anti-sexual violence organising confound our gender categories. Especially when these men have not gone on to perpetrate sexual abuse, and especially when their abusers included women, they challenge feminists to address the ways "exceptions" might inflect our theory and our practice. The social phenomenon of male sexual violence against other men, whether lovers, acquaintances or strangers, however uncommon, also requires feminist attention. While this kind of aggression is explicable in feminist terms, it nonetheless challenges a simplistically gendered account of sexually motivated violence. Some men *are*, furthermore, sometimes falsely accused of acts of sexual violence. This is an unpopular claim within feminist circles, and I want to stress that I know that men who deny their implication in acts of sexual violence are very often lying or, at best, self-deceived. Nonetheless, the historical legacy and continued pattern of sex crimes being falsely attributed to Black and poor men, for example, gives feminists good reason not to make *a priori* assumptions about the truth of all accusations.[21]

Thus anti-essentialism changes how we think about "men" as well as "women" in this context. But isn't this an example of what we were most afraid of — that anti-essentialism would undermine the possibility of feminist politics? I argued in chapter two that the principled anti-essentialism that lies at one end of the spectrum merely pulls the rug out from under feminist feet. If we were to insist that only difference counts, we would be left with no guidelines for sustaining political interventions that rely on counter-hegemonic categories. In particular, discourses of anti-essentialism provide an obvious legitimation strategy to men who wish, for better or worse reasons, to be included in feminist theory or activism, and also to those men who, consciously or not, wish to

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[21] Angela Davis gives the example of a Black woman who, having been acquitted of the murder of the white prison guard who had raped her, lobbied on behalf of a Black man falsely convicted of raping a white woman. Few white women or organised anti-rape groups took up this cause, a reluctance Davis construes as "one of those historical episodes confirming many Black women's suspicions that the anti-rape movement was largely oblivious to their special concerns." Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983): 175. Also cited in Harris, "Race and Essentialism": 247-8.

minimise their own participation in structures of oppression. How do we assess whether men who label female feminists "essentialist" for crudely categorising men in their theories or their practice are making legitimate claims about exclusion from coalition building, or pointing to exceptions that are valid but have minimal implications for practice, or using "anti-essentialism" as an alibi to disassociate themselves from their implication in sexist oppression? Answering this question not only has important implications for how we as feminist activists justify broadly separatist strategies in a postmodern world, but offers insights into my more global question: How can we effectively combine anti-essentialism and feminist politics?

I think there are good reasons why men should be excluded from working in feminist organisations of diverse kinds. But how, as a feminist anti-essentialist, can I defend drawing a boundary around the category "women"? And where will I choose to draw that boundary when the postmodern literature on gender constantly insists that the reinscription of duality reifies the very oppressive structures feminists seek to undermine? How do I justify the implicit claim that gender is the fundamental axis of oppression in this context? I do not believe that all men, however defined, should always be excluded from all forms of feminist politics, however construed. I am evaluating arguments about power that apply within the context of anti-sexual violence organising in North America. We may be able to derive from these arguments a set of critical questions that will prove useful in evaluating claims about inclusion and exclusion in other contexts, but the conclusions we reach in other cases may well differ. A Wittgensteinian attention to the particular case here entails examining the micro-relations of power operative in the context in question, as well as alluding to generalities that highlight larger group memberships but may fail to capture the local character of those identities.

I am not attacking the efforts of men who form independent or even coalitional groups that offer services to (other) male survivors. There are many valuable ways in which men can be and are involved in anti-sexual violence work.[22] In some cases, pro-feminist men argue that they are motivated by their desire to work with other men against

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[22] See for example, Michael S. Kimmel, ed., *Men Confront Pornography* (New York: Meridian, 1991).

violence against women. The educational role of men in this area has been one of the most valuable contributions of men to feminist political goals, and is central to men taking responsibility not just for their own actions, or those of their fellow men, but for changing the construction of masculinity itself. I have also worked with male survivors who want to establish healing solidarity with others in the context of support groups or other services, or who want to join together with other anti-sexual violence activists to campaign on specific issues.[23] But is there any role for men to work providing services to female survivors? What role can and should men play in feminist organisations with a history of understanding sexual violence through radical feminist analyses? Anti-essentialism challenges us to think critically about these questions, rather than dismissing them as obviously insulting. The organisation I worked in was faced with these questions, for a while when — primarily due to a quirk of administrative rules originating outside our organisation rather than any political strategy — men were permitted to work in our office, potentially responsible, among other tasks, for providing information and peer counselling to women who had survived rape.

My argument against allowing men into the organisation stems from a feminist analysis of men's reasons for wanting to be included, and from an analysis of their likely impact and the consequences for the group. The reasons men actually gave for wanting to be involved in anti-sexual violence work, and in objecting to their exclusion from certain spheres (such as answering the help-line), were disappointing and angering to me. They are worth repeating here, not because they nuance my anti-essentialism — in fact they are by and large reasons that reveal little grasp of feminism at all — but because they reveal the dangers of an uncritical embrace of anti-essentialism and the potential loss of separate space and political cohesiveness it entails. They were an object lesson that, in Sandra Harding's words,

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[23] For example, the invitation to speak of McGill University's Department of Psychiatry to Harold Lief, controversial exponent of so-called "False Memory Syndrome" was effectively opposed on similar grounds by radical feminist groups, at least one pro-feminist men's group, male survivors' groups, individual women survivors, and others working against child sexual abuse in Montreal.

> Men love appropriating, directing, judging, and managing everything they can get their hands on — especially the white, Western, heterosexual, and economically over-privileged men with whom most feminist scholars and researchers most often find themselves interacting in various workplace and social institutions. Some have arrogantly tried to do so in the name of feminism, to claim a kind of feminist authority that as men they cannot have, thereby inadvertently revealing that they have not grasped even the most basic feminist principles.[24]

The reasoning of prospective male volunteers amply justifies this scepticism: they want to "meet women," they want to "teach" women callers that not all men are bad, or they want to "help" women "become more assertive and stop being victims." They want to learn skills through the organisation's training, they want CV points, references or access to particular careers or jobs where involvement of this kind would be a useful bonus, and so on. In a few cases I have suspected that men had other implicit and more sinister reasons for their interest in this work: they wanted kudos for being "sensitive," they were titillated by sexual violence, they thought it was a "sexy" and "glamorous" area of feminist activism, they wanted to decry bad men and separate themselves off from that category, or, most disturbing of all, they had themselves committed acts of sexual violence and were using the organisation either as an *ad hoc* conscience-salve ("see — it wasn't really rape: how could it be? I work in a sexual assault centre!") or simply as a means of further sexual gratification.

There are also consequential reasons why male volunteers should be excluded in this context that barely need rehearsing: women survivors calling us expect and want to speak to women, and most male survivors who express a preference indicate that they also do. Various cultural norms and taboos about discussing sexual issues with men come into play, as do constraints on speech based on a (multi-)cultural perception of men as potential aggressors. Men rarely, if ever, have a sufficiently similar experiential basis for empathy with female survivors. Many sympathetic men can grasp this fear intellectually, but almost never emotionally, and as a result tend to be less empathetic and more formal in

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[24] Sandra Harding, "Reinventing Ourselves as Other: More New Agents of History and Knowledge," in Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*: 280.

their interactions with survivors, both male and female. More controversially, my experience with men in positions of power within the organisation has been that men are likely to repeat behaviours learned under patriarchy, which cause them to look for control and dominance. Women also replay gendered patterns such as fear of authority and authoritarian reprisal, conflict avoidance, and so on, but these more often serve to downplay their individual presence within the group rather than magnify it. Women situate themselves quite differently, tending to be more closely identified with sexual violence as painful and oppressive rather than titillating. Thus in working with men in this particular context, I can point to patterns of behaviour and relations of power that, while they are not universally applicable, make the integration of men into the organisation problematic.

Should we persist, despite these caveats, in trying to break down dichotomous categories, both as a general feminist strategy, and in order to accommodate exceptions to those categories? While we can and do inflect the categories "men" and "women," if we cease to put them at the centre of our analysis, and to follow through on this in our practice, we will diminish any feminist political understanding of sexual violence. This would occur in numerous ways, many of which should by now be clear, so let me give just two further examples: first, gendered norms of victim blaming are sufficiently strong in contemporary Canadian culture that to fail to make them visible within our organisation would be to lose any empowering or healing way to talk about sexual violence. Put simply, I want a volunteer to say to a female caller who has been raped, "it wasn't your fault," and to mean it; the volunteer therefore requires a framework for understanding how it is that women are blamed for rape and why this is unjust. In other words, she needs a feminist framework that describes and explains dominant cultural ascriptions of femininity. In taking seriously feminist anti-essentialism we do not have to assume that all women experience these ascriptions in the same way. As I argued in chapter three, drawing a boundary around the concept "women" need not erase plurality, reify patriarchal constructions of "woman," or be insensitive to "border cases." Rather, we can speak of drawing a boundary for a particular political purpose, while recognising its contingency. In this case, I highlight the category "women" because I have identified gendered patterns to

sexual violence, not because I am making universal claims about all women's experience or all men's complicity.

Second (and this is my worry about much anti-essentialism that is not inflected by an analysis of power), to cease to invoke gender as a central organising concept would fit neatly with the conservative discourse of our main political opponents. Their central discursive goals are to avoid the construction of sexual assault on campus as an equity or a human rights issue (both of which require, in Canada, that one find discrimination against a designated social group), and they continually stress the individualistic nature of sexual violence, whereby incidents of date rape and sexual harassment are best understood as misunderstandings or failures of communication between random individuals, who may be men or women. Feminist analyses of sexual assault require a kind of pattern recognition made possible by the deployment of gendered categories. On the other hand, principled anti-essentialism, by insisting on the fragmentation of those categories, has considerable difficulty making sense of feminist claims, and thus explaining either how or why we should act on them. If our goals become the breakdown of categories, the incorporation of exceptional cases, and the recognition of cross-cutting alliances without regard to the context of power relations within which these concerns are more or less salient, then we fail to understand the feminist content of such claims. Feminist anti-essentialism is a political method for avoiding the reinscription of relations of oppression, not a justification for ignoring them.

Many of these observations are in keeping with MacKinnon's account of gendered patterns of power within this context. The difference between us, however, is that her claims are more ambitious in the breadth of their exclusion and more restrictive in the terms of their inclusion. Her construction of the relations of domination and subordination that characterise male and female sexuality under patriarchy cannot make sense of the exceptions to its own generalisations — the woman who sexually abuses her son, the gay man who is a victim of sexual assault — without an *ad hoc* revision of categories to make these individuals into men and women in its own terms. Nor can it grasp that in the contexts where these generalisations are most applicable — understanding sexual violence, for example — they are nevertheless inflected by differences in women's experiences and

relations of power among women. These differences preclude a uniform understanding of the category "women," and shape feminist practice in ways that are more than superficial. Negotiating the rough ground here is a matter of setting up signposts on local roads, not of drawing a global map. In practice, feminist anti-essentialism is a sensitivity to the particular case and to the specifics of feminist practice. It includes attention to the particular negative effects of discarding appeals to social group membership, an awareness of how coalitions may remain possible notwithstanding generalisations, a sensitivity to the construction of feminist issues within relations of power between women, and a commitment to respect for the local conditions that shape particular political interventions.

In the humdrum of photocopying and making phone calls, most of this analysis passes unnoticed. When we embody these analyses in practice, we are always acting within concrete conditions, especially conditions of scarcity. Like most feminist organisations, we lack money, space, time, energy, and political or institutionalised power. Our practice will always be, in many ways, cruder than our theoretical analyses. Constructing anti-essentialist feminist theory as has traditionally been done brings with it a rather different set of imperatives than does working through anti-essentialist feminist practice. The only coherent form of the latter requires that we go on using crude generalisations and revise them as we become aware of specific patterns of oppression and domination have been reinscribed by those in positions of power. Thus there are important ways in which anti-essentialist concerns, in general, can and should be accommodated within feminist practice. This accommodation only makes sense, however, within a critique of the power relations that motivate feminist anti-essentialism, relations that are frequently weakened or even erased within anti-essentialist discourses inattentive to power. In my own context, such a critique entails examining the professed and implicit motives of men wishing to enter the organisation, taking into account the negative political consequences of fragmenting or discarding the categories "men" and "women" in our practice, and recognising the political necessity of generalisations. Making decisions about who or what to include and exclude is always a strategic process, constrained by practical demands and woefully under-determined by the current state of the essentialism debates in feminist theory.

Anti-essentialism and feminist organisations

The literature on feminist organisations contains remarkably little about the ways identity and diversity are negotiated within feminist settings. While there is no doubt that feminist activists of the last twenty years have struggled to come to terms with some aspects of methodological essentialism in their political practice, much of the available literature on the internal workings of feminist organisations is in a sociological vein. It offers extended descriptions of feminist organisations with relatively little attention to cross-cutting oppressions crucial to feminist theories of identity, and to the emerging practice of many feminist groups.[25] While rich in case studies, this literature predominantly addresses the relation of feminist organising to non-feminist paradigms in organisational social science. Struggles within feminist groups to come to terms with differences between women and with the dangers of essentialism are brought into relief by a second literature that presents the experiences of women marginalised within particular feminist organisations and the politicisation of these exclusions.[26] The consequences of anti-essentialism have received perhaps the most attention in the field of "queer" organising, and it is here that theoretical models of identity formation have been most closely linked to political practice.[27] This work has yet to be fully integrated with recent feminist analyses of political identity, however, in ways that might suggest revised organisational structures or strategies. There is remarkably little investigation of *how* feminist groups can

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[25] See for example Myra Ferree and Beth Hess, eds., *Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement* (Boston: Twayne, 2nd edition 1994 [1985]); Ferree and Martin, eds., *Feminist Organizations.*

[26] See Adleman and Enguidanos, eds., *Racism in the Lives of Women*; "Part Four: "Racism and the Women's Movement," in *Challenging Times*, eds. Backhouse and Flaherty; Eder, Staggenborg, and Sudderth, "The National Women's Music Festival"; Tom, "Children of Our Culture?"; Robin Leidner, "Stretching the Boundaries of Liberalism"; Matthews, "Surmounting a Legacy"; Sandra Morgen, "The Dream of Diversity, the Dilemmas of Difference: Race and Class Contradictions in a Feminist Health Clinic," in *Anthropology for the Nineties*, ed. J. Sole (New York: Free Press, 1988); Carmen Sirianni, "Learning Pluralism: Democracy and Diversity in Feminist Organizations," in *Nomos XXXV: Democratic Community*, eds. John Chapman and Ian Shapiro (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

[27] See Epstein, "Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity"; Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out*; Lehr, "The Difficulty of Leaving 'Home'"; Phelan, *Identity Politics*, and *Getting Specific*.

adequately address the problems of alliance and coalition formation around issues of common concern to women of all classes, races, ages, and so on — in other words, how to generalise from the successes and failures of particular feminist groups in order to develop methods for understanding and addressing organisational implications of differences between women.

I used the example of men's role in anti-sexual violence organising to show that feminist anti-essentialists must decide to exclude at the same time as we highlight cross-cutting group memberships and recommend coalition building. Critical discussion of how these decisions should best be made is a project that embeds feminist theory in feminist practice. In the example above I discussed the criteria for exclusion, showing how they are best generated in a particular context by an activist community as a collective project. Making decisions about exclusion and inclusion on the basis of identity, however, not only requires discussion of the substantive claims that justify these decisions. It also requires attention to the group *processes* within feminist organisations more or less likely to avoid essentialism. How can feminist groups create formal organisational structures that are sensitive to the contingency and complexity of generalisations about women, and are likely to foster anti-essentialist feminist practice? As Carmen Sirianni says, "If alliances among diverse groups of women with multiple interests and identities are central to postmodern feminist politics, as Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson have argued, then we must pay increasing attention to those organizational features that facilitate and sustain coalitions."[28]

All feminist organisations, whether collectively or hierarchically organised, large or small, have to ask whether the interests of all constituents are justly represented and how intra-organisational processes contribute to essentialist practice. In larger feminist groups with an over-arching structure, questions arise about who will represent whom (in a delegation or as elected representative, for example), and how decisions will be made so as to take account of the needs of different members of the group. These are very old problems for democratic theory, but they have not yet been adequately connected to anti-

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[28] Sirianni, "Learning Pluralism": 299.

essentialist concerns within feminist practice. To avoid essentialism is to address the relations of power between women that permit certain subgroups to define feminist issues and to impose their own identity on a more diverse collectivity. Robin Leidner's study of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) is especially helpful to illustrate these concerns:

> The NWSA has worked to develop a system that is efficient but participatory; that protects the rights of individuals and also those of subgroups with special concerns, interests, or viewpoints; and that takes into account an underlying commonality of purpose yet provides means for dealing with conflicting interests and opinions.[29]

Leidner argues that existing political frameworks and organisational structures are not suited to this task. The tensions between commonality and difference that I have been discussing in more theoretical contexts raise important questions in organisational practice: how can feminist groups ensure substantive rather than merely formal equality, moving away from structures that simply represent numerical interests to structures that acknowledge inequalities of power? How should feminists juggle sometimes conflicting group or community needs and individual rights? How can organisations ensure that all identities, experiences, or interests are represented, at the same time as they maintain a perspective cognisant of commonality of purpose? How do potentially anti-essentialist structures of representation interact with anarcha-feminist arguments for minimising hierarchy?

The NWSA's attempts to find workable answers to these questions are instructive for feminists trying to put anti-essentialist theory into practice. The organisation has a system of caucuses, each of which can send delegates to the Delegate Assembly and the Co-ordinating Council. This system is an effort to equalise power where constituents' interests may conflict. Caucus members argued that they faced greater costs to participation, including poor incentives to join NWSA, the expense of attending meetings, reduced strength because of smaller numbers, the prejudices of other members,

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[29] Leidner, "Stretching the Boundaries of Liberalism": 265.

discrimination through self-identification (lesbians), fewer organisational skills or knowledge (working class women), or the failure of other constituencies to recognise the moral legitimacy of their needs. Similar concerns induced the NWSA to try to offset travel expenses and establish geographical equality. This system, however, raises several questions about the criteria used to decide which differences matter, and how power is understood as constructing these differences. As in the case of excluding or including men from an organisation or activity, merely to advocate institutionalising "difference" or "diversity" does not necessarily constitute an adequate justification for particular organisational structures. Conflict within the NWSA arose in part because the caucus system was conceived by some as a corporatist solution to diverse interests (as the existence of caucuses for relatively "privileged" women such as program administrators implies), and by others as a means of giving additional representational weight to oppressed groups. Is a caucus system legitimated merely as a way of representing "different" interests, or is it intended to provide separate space and additional voice to members of groups that are relatively less powerful as a result of systemic oppression? How can the organisation mediate these different strategies of justification, especially when they appear antithetical? Does prioritising caucuses for women of colour, lesbian and working-class women, for example, also commit white, straight middle-class feminists to always ceding to requests for asymmetrical representation within an organisation? How does the reality of overlapping memberships in these groups change the imperatives of representation?

A more radical difficulty emerges from the demand that the organisation change its political priorities and perhaps even its very objectives to accommodate different actual and potential members. In the case of the NWSA, Leidner points out, there was conflict over whether the organisation should target the needs of academic women, or should prioritise "activist" women and continue to expand its membership base (to, for example, nurses). These dilemmas are particularly acute given the funding crises most feminist organisations periodically experience, which often motivate controversies over the allocation of resources. One response could be to argue that feminist organisations are, by definition, established by a specific group of women to meet particular needs, and that no

single group can hope to be a universally representative entity. In the case of the NWSA, one could argue that it has a legitimate and politically effective position as a feminist organisation targetting academic women's needs. Women with political priorities that are not accommodated within existing organisational structures should therefore form independent organisations to meet their different needs. In some cases this may be the best strategy; as a blanket solution, however, this response fails to take into account the relative power of already established feminist organisations (such that membership is a good in itself), the reality of the (increasingly) diverse constituencies that most feminist organisations draw from or serve, the problems of women who are generally in a minority within a geographical community and would like to work with a national umbrella organisation rather than in their "own" smaller groups, and the moral demand that more privileged women actively oppose oppressive relations of power.

Anti-essentialist feminist theory speaks to these issues in feminist organising, suggesting that we need to bring together experience and study of the actual shape of successfully anti-essentialist feminist practice with anti-essentialist theorising in ways I can only touch on here. We need to explore not only the "personal" differences that members of an organisation bring into any group, but also the implications of group differences for our analyses of power, identity politics, and representation. This requires further research into how feminist organisations negotiate diversity: first, at the level of political structures (the efficacy of caucus systems, and the restructuring of organisational objectives, for example), as well as on an interpersonal level (how are feminist organisations structuring their training, groupwork and decisionmaking to incorporate political differences between women? How are they dealing with interpersonal conflict and emotional stress caused by internal divisions? What are the characteristics of a "successful" pluralist feminist organisation?[30]). Concerns about oppression within the feminist movement should focus more closely on feminist organisations, since they are a key locus of political conflict and action on these issues. It is important to know whether feminist organisations are

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[30] Emerging research projects address this issue. For example, the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women published its report *Looking for Change: A Documentation of National Women's Organizations Working Towards Inclusion and Diversity* in December 1996.

successfully developing anti-essentialist practice sensitive to multiple oppressions, or how they are struggling with fragmentation and conflict.

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My articulation of anti-essentialism as a set of constructive feminist methods shows why feminist practice needs to inform the construction of theory. We cannot understand the operations of particular relations of power without experiencing them, without making them visible and having them made visible to us. MacKinnon is right to assert that this process does not happen from a philosopher's armchair; it most often happens when feminists challenge structures of power in ways threatening to patriarchy. But our understanding of dominance and subordination does not simply hatch from the egg of women's experience, nor even of feminist practice. It is created through feminist methods, including methods of organising and decision-making, through the construction of feminist issues and feminist identities. When we become or make others aware of relations of power that permit feminist practice to be partisan, exclusive, essentialist, we need to have intertwined theoretical and practical tools and skills to address the problem.

Achieving equitable representation in organisations struggling to avoid the reinscription of oppression and negotiating multiple interests is a problem seemingly far removed from the philosophical discussion of essentialism which began this dissertation. Anti-essentialist feminist practice, however, can be inflected by my Wittgensteinian method, and in many ways faces the same challenges as feminist research. Merely to assert the primacy of practice — construed by MacKinnon as the struggle to end sexist oppression as it emerges from "women's experience" — as a strategy for avoiding methodological essentialism, begs the question of how that practice has itself been constructed. MacKinnon's attempt to justify her essentialism by appeal to the empirical reality of women's experience and to the exigencies of practice does not speak to questions about the shape of anti-essentialist feminist activism. Even as we move "back to the rough ground" to make sense of essentialism and anti-essentialism, we need constantly to interrogate our own foundations, those presuppositions which seem to require no

justification. In failing to do this, MacKinnon's rebuttal of her anti-essentialist critics is ultimately disappointing; she mischaracterises their concerns, and persists with an analysis unwilling to explore the relevance of power-laden differences to feminist organising.

Understanding how generalisations are constructed through relations of power in the multiple contexts of feminist organising provides indicators of the future shape of anti-essentialist practice. Organising against sexual violence — the quintessentially essentialist feminist issue — must be, and has been, rethought in the light of anti-essentialist critique. I offered a specific example of two claims to exclusion, asking how the feminist anti-essentialism I have developed provides criteria for assessing their legitimacy. While anti-essentialism shapes feminist practice, anti-anti-essentialism also informs feminist decision-making about when to include and when to exclude from identity categories and coalition formation. Balancing these two sets of demands requires deeper understandings of systemic oppression than the appeal merely to "difference" can yield. One of the ways they will be brought into equilibrium is through emerging research on their implications for different sites of feminist practice. Here I have only sketched some of the possibilities for this project. Much of this work lies ahead: it is the task of a feminist anti-essentialism that effectively brings together theory and practice.

Conclusion
New Directions for the Essentialism Debates

The central aim of this dissertation is to take the feminist philosophical preoccupation with essentialism more explicitly into the realm of feminist praxis. I hoped to demonstrate that the essentialism debates in feminism should not be understood as merely of philosophical interest, narrowly construed, but rather as touching on feminists' most practical concerns as we investigate and seek to change our lives. The anti-essentialist position I have sketched pins down the amorphous problem of essentialism at the same time as it recommends methods that avoid it. This position endeavours to mediate some of the central questions of diverse feminist theoretical camps, and brings a new sense of interdisciplinarity to feminist philosophy.

In chapters one and two I distinguished different meanings of the epithet "essentialist," arguing that neither metaphysical nor biological variants are at stake in contemporary feminist debates. The kind of methodological essentialism that allows the experiences and identities of certain more powerful groups of women to stand in for larger feminist claims, however, deserves to be challenged. But more than this, we need to find ways of avoiding methodological essentialism while continuing to justify politically enabling feminist claims. We can evade the fruitless tail-chasing of the debates between anti-essentialists and "anti-anti-essentialists," I argued in chapter three, by developing an alternative Wittgensteinian feminism that conceptualises the connections between women

as family resemblances, while still allowing for purposive boundary-drawing. How we justify the placement of these boundaries around categories is a central political question for feminists, and the simple injunction to "look and see" leaves this political question unanswered, even unposed. Therefore in the last two chapters I turned to instances of feminist practice to ask how anti-essentialism might inform feminist research methods and feminist organising, while investigating the work of Carol Gilligan and Catharine MacKinnon, the two contemporary feminists most often accused of methodological essentialism.

It is both the great strength and the difficulty of Wittgensteinian method in philosophy that it eschews large conclusions. My analyses here have tended to be local, contextual, and carefully bordered with caveats about the wider implications of my claims. It is tempting to conclude with a grand summing up, but this would risk disloyalty to my method. Nevertheless, I am not so deeply ensnared by Wittgenstein's own picture as to believe that no broader conclusions derive from my arguments. The concept in political philosophy that has come up again and again in this dissertation is *power*. It is the power of the researcher, I argued in my analysis of Gilligan's method, that enables her to construct the identities of her participants to be like her own. And her theory construction risks essentialism by imposing on girls' narratives a preconceived, if vague, account of their psychology that is not sensitive to its own contingency, precisely because it does not recognise how it is power-laden.

Similarly, MacKinnon's appeal to "feminist practice" as the basis of strong claims about sexual violence neglects the ways political practice is itself constructed in contexts where some women, however well-intentioned or politically astute, have discursive power over the construction of "women's experience" or "empirical reality." I am not suggesting that power is always a negative force or that we eradicate or even minimise power, only that power is always inevitably at work in any feminist context. Those feminist methods that are least likely to make the mistakes I have labelled essentialism are those that have the most fully developed understanding of the workings of power. Most specifically, they are methods that understand how power constructs identity, and that develop strategies

for undercutting the hegemony of dominant group feminists in the construction of political identities.

This version of anti-essentialist feminism suggests a new role for ideology in feminist discourse. A principled anti-essentialism that fragments all generalising claims may be naively indifferent to the salience of social group membership, and many have pointed out how postmodern feminisms run the risk of degenerating into methodological individualism or a shallow form of political liberalism.[1] Power-sensitive anti-essentialism does not reject generalisations *per se* but evaluates them in the ways I have been suggesting in this dissertation; it requires broad analyses of the mechanisms by which some social groups come to be more powerful in the first place. Many of the claims I have made in the course of my argument are premised on feminist, anti-racist, anti-heteronormative, and class analyses. To be politically convincing, any anti-essentialist feminism requires a larger account of the axes along which power operates to create structures of oppression based on social group membership. This requirement serves to distinguish feminist attempts to integrate analyses of racism, classism and sexism into one political theoretical structure, from analyses that eschew the very notion of ideology.

Casting the essentialism debates in this light also refocuses feminist attention on the importance of feminist analyses of power and feminist organisational theory. Social anarchist and anarcha-feminist analyses, for example, have been central in generating radical critiques of conventional organisations, suggesting new organisational structures, and articulating critical feminist accounts of power. But these ideologies are seldom given the prominence in curricula or writing that they merit given recent turns in feminist theory. Kathleen Iannello's recent *Decisions Without Hierarchy* is a rare contemporary investigation of feminist organising with an eye to anarcha-feminist frameworks.[2] Too often an interest in collectivist organising is seen as dated, a throwback to the heady Second Wave when idealistic radical feminists eschewed structure but slipped into the

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[1] See for example, Di Stefano, "Dilemmas of Difference" in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson.

[2] Kathleen Iannello, *Decisions Without Hierarchy: Feminist Organization Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

"tyranny of structurelessness."[3] Radical interpretations of Foucault in particular have generated renewed contemporary interest in feminist conceptions of power within political theory.[4] These accounts provide rich and valuable theoretical insights into power as a "capillary" or "disciplinary" social phenomenon, for example. If understanding power is at the heart of the essentialism debates, however, feminists need more theoretically developed accounts and more anecdotal evidence of how power is exercised and circulates among women and within diverse feminist groups.

"The Ineluctable Etcetera"

Several anti-anti-essentialist feminists mention their disquiet when the fragmentation of gender is not accompanied by calls to inflect other identity categories. The epithet "essentialist" is used disproportionately to undermine feminist claims, they argue, whereas the very concepts used to effect this venture — ostensibly presented as symmetrical with gender — remain themselves unchallenged. In other words, critics claim that anti-essentialists say that gender must be inflected with race, but not that race must be inflected with gender, for example. This allegation does point to an important flaw in certain feminist methods, at the same time as it evinces a disregard for the abundance of writing in philosophy of race that takes on this project.[5] Throughout this dissertation I have focused on feminist discourses foregrounding gender, and have asked how feminism

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[3] Jo Freeman's classic analysis of the drawbacks of collectivist organising argued that without formal structures guaranteeing a certain procedural fairness, feminist organisations risked other forms of injustice emerging from the dominance of charismatic personalities, nepotism, and so on. Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 17:2, 1972. See also Cathy Levine's less well known riposte, "The Tyranny of Tyranny," mimeograph (Montreal: Black Rose, 1984).

[4] For example, Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*; Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[5] Much "Black feminist" writing, for example, takes on the essentialist construction of both gender and race in radical political theory, as captured by the title of the classic collection *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982). See also hooks, "Reflections on Race and Sex," in *Yearning*; "Feminist Scholarship: Black Scholars," in *Teaching to Transgress*; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

might rearticulate its methods of analysing gender in the light of anti-racist or anti-heteronormative critique. Another way of thinking about these debates is to place other identity categories centre-stage to ask how other oppositional discourses that are themselves inflected by feminism but do not foreground gender might apply my Wittgensteinian method. These examples of future projects also rely on analyses of power.

Methodological essentialism is of enormous significance, for example, in political theories of race. In particular, many theorists are grappling with the same dilemma I faced at the beginning of the dissertation: how can we formulate a coherent concept of race (using labels like "people of colour" or "Black") that highlights the socially constructed, sometimes *ad hoc*, and complex nature of racial categories, at the same time as it acknowledges that use of the concept of race is central both to racism and to anti-racism?[6] This question generates four sets of questions for critical race theory. First, how can we understand the concept of "race" itself? Answers to this question range from deconstructive accounts to Afrocentricity.[7] Second, just as there are women of every possible racial identity, so any given racial group is divided into genders, sexualities, ages, classes, and so on. Can any theory of race and racism adequately capture the varying experiences of oppression of a young African-American working-class man in Alabama, and a middle-aged Black Caribbean female university professor in small-town New England? Should this be its goal? To pose this question is to approach my own questions about gender from the other side, asking how a theory of race, rather than a theory of gender, might conceptualise itself as analysing oppression along other axes. Third, this interrogation of racial identities has renewed interest in so-called "intrasectional" identities — such as mixed race — and the challenges they raise for understanding identity categories as bounded and homogeneous.[8] I would suggest that understanding the

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[6] See for example, David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Lucius Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[7] For a range of different positions within this spectrum, see for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *"Race," Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); K. Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Molefi K. Asante, *Afrocentricity*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988).

[8] See Naomi Zack, ed., *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995) and Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press,

relations between members of different racial groups as family resemblances answers certain questions and raises others for philosophers of race and racism, questions that are in many ways analogous to those faced by feminist philosophers. Finally, anti-essentialism in race theory, as in feminism, aims to understand the power relations that persistently problematise some racial identities and render others neutral or invisible. Thus it recommends the critical study of dominant identities (such as "whiteness") in order to reveal their particular social construction and implications in structures of oppression.[9]

Similarly, examples from lesbian and queer theory have featured throughout my discussion. Methodological essentialism is an important issue as we construct explanatory models of sexuality, in political theory-building, and in grounding political activism; again, Wittgensteinian anti-essentialist critique could be fruitfully developed . In chapter one I asked how we might define "lesbians" given our concerns about the historical continuity of the term's referents. And in chapter three I asked how purposive boundary-drawing might lead us to include "men" in the category "lesbians," and suggested some reasons why this might *not* be a useful course of action. Wittig's suggestion that "lesbians are not women" reverses this strategy, arguing that "women" takes its meaning from heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems, and that lesbians should thus be excluded from the category. Taking the family resemblance approach to the question "who is a lesbian?" highlights even more starkly issues of power: on the one hand, heteronormativity and lesbophobia manufacture lesbianism as a marginalised and stigmatised subject position; on the other, lesbian-feminists have struggled to seize discursive control over the construction of a counter-hegemonic political identity. Anti-essentialism, then, has to intervene in these debates to point out politically significant exclusions, without undercutting the possibility of radical politics.[10]

1993); Ruth Colker, *Hybrids: Bisexuals, Multiracials and Other Misfits Under Law* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

[9] For an example of "critical whiteness studies" within feminism see Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[10] Again, an extensive literature addresses these issues: see for example the essays by Ferguson, Penelope and Card in Jeffner Allen, ed., *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), and by Ginzberg, Dăumer, and Hoagland in Claudia Card, ed., *Adventures in Lesbian Philosophy* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994); Arlene Stein, "Sisters and Queers: The Decentering of Lesbian Feminism," *Socialist Review* 22:1, 1992; essays by Whisman and Hall in Arlene Stein, ed., *Sisters,*

Looking at methodological questions such as these with gender, race, class, and sexuality in mind — to take some, but by no means all categories — shows how difficult it is to remain true to Wittgensteinian anti-essentialism, to stay mindful of complexity. Whenever we conceptualise political problems we foreground particular aspects of political identity and sideline others. The inevitability and necessity of this process should not distract us from its limits: we need ideologies that explain oppression in terms of social group membership, but we also need the context and interconnectedness of those ideologies to be spelled out. Throughout this dissertation I have been acutely aware of the ineluctable etcetera that characterises much self-defined pluralist feminist theory. Often the very arguments that aim to stress the importance of context are content to list or gesture toward the countless "differences" that are to figure in their analyses, without considering which matter more, or why. For example, class is often given as an item on the list of differences worthy of feminist attention, even as many analyses side-step the structural critiques that have enabled leftists to make sense of class oppression. In other words, it is fashionable for feminists in North America to treat class as one of a string of differences between women, but it is less fashionable to claim allegiance to socialist or other analyses of the structural determinants of class. The very thin notions of social class membership that are evinced by much radical North American political theory allow the feminist mantra of "gender, race, and class" to remain an empty gesture. It cannot be enough to point to the mere fact that class differences between women are important for feminist theory and practice. We need thicker ways of understanding class membership as an economic and cultural phenomenon in North America. Therefore the very listing of differences that aims to avoid essentialism sometimes manages paradoxically to reinscribe it by failing to offer adequate analyses of specific relations of power.

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Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation. (New York: Plume, 1993); Verta Taylor and Leila Rull, "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism," *Signs* 19:1, 1993; Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier, "Collective Identity and Lesbian Feminist Mobilization," in *Frontiers of Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

All of these contexts represent attempts to articulate better understandings of the links between identity in political theory and in political practice. And that, I think, is all to the good: I have increasingly come to believe that feminist theory should be, as has been said in another context of politics *simpliciter*, "the art of the possible." Our contributions to even the "highest" forms of theory should be motivated by the need better to understand and change women's lives. This claim is more controversial than it might first appear: our ways of investigating and changing feminist realities are complex and contested. And the kind of feminist philosophy recommended by a practically oriented anti-essentialism is not uncontroversial. It is interdisciplinary, assertively political, and strongly connected to feminist activism and hence to feminist communities outside the academy. All these qualities are threatening to conventional contemporary understandings of the institutionalised discipline of philosophy itself, even though they find support in the work of many canonical philosophers — Wittgenstein being just one example — often neglected by feminists as well as our detractors. Both feminists and those hostile to feminism have charged that the study of research methods or of political organisations are simply not subjects appropriate to philosophy. But a consequence of my arguments is that our philosophical lives should not be technical and private affairs, lived among other specialists. If feminist philosophy has a vocation, it is constantly to return to the question of why philosophising matters, and how, if it all, it might make the world a better place for women. In arguing for a feminist anti-essentialism that is intimately intertwined with political practice, I hope to make that vocation my own.

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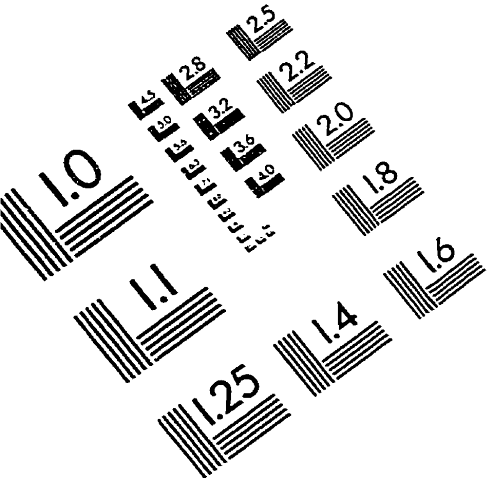
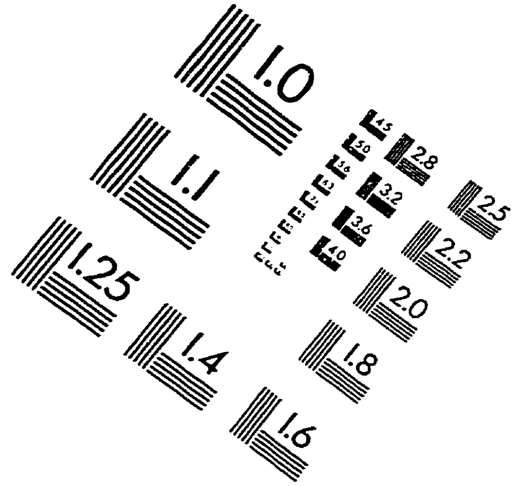
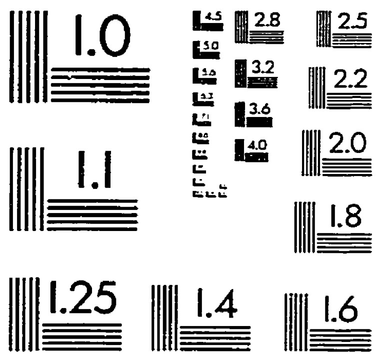

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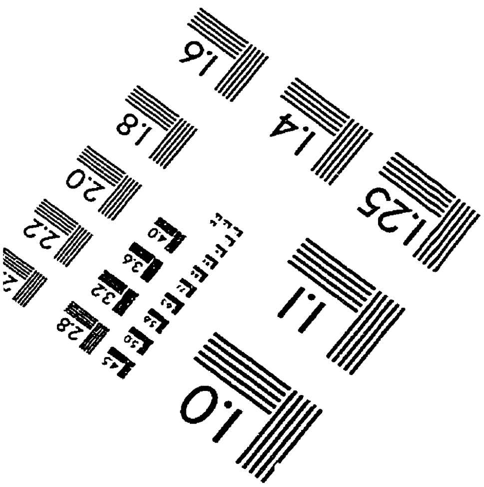
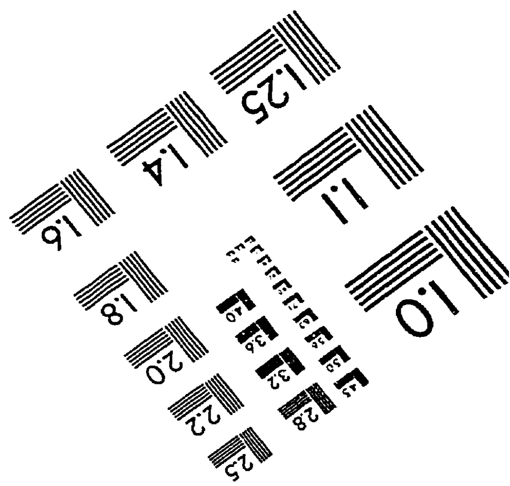

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