Introduction: The Construction of Gender and Modes of Social Division

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In the last issue of Cultural Critique we explained how the two volumes on "The Construction of Gender and Modes of Social Division" are of particular import to the concerns of the journal because they focus on how different modes of social division, such as those based on race and class, are instrumental in constructing divisions based on gender and/or sexual preference. The articles in both issues examine the intersection of two or more modes of social division as well as the intersection of feminist theory and cultural criticism. Thus they not only consider interdisciplinary, transcultural, and current methodological premises and models that influence various feminist positions today, but they also examine these topics through sociopolitical, cultural, and aesthetic parameters.

The theoretical attention given to differences between women and men during the seventies has given way to an emphasis on the differences among women in the eighties. Feminist theories of the
subject and subjectivity have shown that most women's "identities" are plural, heterogeneous, and fractured, for race, class, and gender construct a web of allegiances and identifications—sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradictory—through which their consciousnesses are shaped and achieved. The codings of patriarchy and capitalism enmesh women in multiple and sometimes discontinuous positions. Therefore, how are strategies of resistance to be developed within this multiple and by no means coherent field of allegiances? The notion of heterogeneous identities leads to questions about the congruence of interests among differently situated women and raises questions about how to theorize and organize political practice in ways that recognize our diversity.

In our efforts to do this, feminists have looked to a variety of theories. But what effects do these other discourses have on feminist thinking? These "foreign" frameworks enable us to interrogate and examine our projects in a new light, but they must be regarded with skepticism as well in that unintended assumptions often accompany appropriated theories. Most fundamentally, the question to be addressed is how to develop perspectives that take account of the variety of subjugated social locations which women occupy and the strategies of resistance that women have constructed in opposition to those subjugated positions. The development of "situated knowledges" appropriate to feminist theorizing is a larger project, but the essays in these two volumes are intended to contribute to that effort.

Nancy Hartsock, in her article "Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory," proposes that white feminist theorists in North America have been attracted to the work of postmodernist thinkers partly in response to the criticism made by women of color, which argues that feminist theory has not taken sufficient account of differences among women. However, Hartsock suggests, the turn to postmodernism is not useful for feminist theory because while postmodernist theorists are right to reject the epistemological assumptions they define as Enlightenment assumptions, their projects ultimately inhabit the same dichotomies. Writings by those who have been defined as outsiders

and enemies of society can represent an alternative epistemologi-
cal terrain—one defined by the experiences of marginalization, 
distortion, and erasure on the one hand, and resistance and crea-
tivity on the other. The specific mechanisms that structure these 
processes vary for groups situated differently, yet the subject-
tivities which are constructed by the dominated have some impor-
tant epistemological similarities—similarities that could facilitate a 
politics of alliance.

Sherry B. Ortner’s “Gender Hegemonies” looks back to the 
early seventies in order to reevaluate the question of universal 
male dominance. In writing a critical overview of the basic terms 
and themes characterizing this debate, she has allowed us to iden-
tify and locate more satisfactorily the manner in which the central 
problems of this controversy have been articulated. Were there 
matriarchies in the past? Or any examples of egalitarian societies? 
Ortner states that the consensus among anthropologists at the 
time was in the negative: men were perceived as “the first sex” in 
all known societies. The collection of articles that she and Harriet 
Whitehead coedited in 1981 (Sexual Meanings) reaffirmed this 
universalist position. In “Gender Hegemonies,” Ortner recon-
iders critiques that have appeared in response to this book and 
points out three dimensions to “the phenomenon of gender sta-
tus” that cause part of the disagreement between universalists and 
nonuniversalists: first, relative prestige, “a culturally affirmed, 
relative evaluation or ranking of the sexes, something that is per-
haps most commonly called ‘status’”; second, “male dominance 
and female subordination,” whereby men control female behavior 
and women conform to male demand and authority; third, 
“female power,” which suggests that neither male prestige nor 
dominance can totally negate women’s ability to determine some 
aspects of their own and others’ actions. Ortner suggests that au-
thors who saw gender asymmetry as universal were not discussing 
male dominance or female power but were talking essentially 
about prestige and status: “gender is itself centrally a prestige 
system—a system of discourses and practices that constructs male 
and female not only in terms of differential roles and meanings 
but also in terms of differential value, differential ‘prestige.’”

In “Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and 
the Unvoiced Female,” Abena P. A. Busia shows that there has 
been virtually no serious discussion of the representation of the
colonized female subject. The male figure appears to be the focus of most studies, and the voice of the colonized woman is suppressed, symbolizing the “alienation and otherness” (the “feminineness” and the “blackness”) within the dominant discourse. In Busia’s examination of representations of the female “other,” she looks at texts from Shakespeare, Conrad, Marjorie Perham, and novelists of the 1960s, and deals with particular historical “moments”—imperialism, colonization, decolonization, and independence—as reflected in the literature. Busia concludes that minority women must continually attempt to free themselves from “the inadequate language of the master’s texts,” texts that have consistently denied them power and have refused to represent their speech. However, although colonial discourse has portrayed the native woman “as voiceless and storyless” and has erased her as a historical subject, Busia states that she is not rendered silent: “In unmasking the disposessions of the silences of fiction and the fictions of silence, we (re)construct self-understanding. . . . We women signify.”

In “Woman in Difference: Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Douloti the Bountiful,’” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak investigates the representation of the subproletariat and, in particular, the gendered subaltern subject. According to Spivak, the contestatory power of Mahasweta Devi’s short story derives from the figuration that it gives to Douloti, a bonded tribal worker who is sold into prostitution in repayment for her father’s small loan. In Spivak’s penetrating analysis, the story of Douloti opens up a space that cannot easily be assimilated to the familiar narratives of decolonization. If “decolonization” undertakes to tell the story of India’s transformation from a British colony into an independent nation-state, then it is possible to see that the subproletariat has no place within such a narrative framework. Situated outside the complex of institutions and interests (national identity, parliamentary democracy, multinational capital) that the colonizer transfers to the new nation-state, the subproletariat puts in question the master narratives of decolonization. There is no space for the bonded tribal worker-prostitute in the national identity of an independent India. As Spivak writes, “In ‘Douloti the Bountiful’ the Aufhebung of colony into nation is undone by the figuration of the woman’s body before the affective coding of sexuality.” Thus, to put into discourse the gendered body of the subaltern, as the compelling
image that ends Mahasweta Devi’s story does, is to displace the political agendas of nationalism and neocolonialism. In this way, the discursive practice of “Douloti the Bountiful” demonstrates how the body of the bonded tribal worker exceeds and interrogates the narratives that seek to recode her as the subject of the newly independent nation-state.

A continuing task of ideology critique is the analysis of the construction of gender in reactionary discourse. Sydney Bryn Austin in “AIDS and Africa: United States Media and Racist Fantasy” undertakes an analysis of the media narratives that link the “origin” and transmission of AIDS with “Africa” and “African” sexuality. She is able to demonstrate how “the complex narrative of ‘AIDS in Africa’ . . . is intimately linked to historical notions of ‘Africa’, the black subject, sexuality, and disease in the white Western imagination.” Contemporary medical reporting organizes its narratives about the spread of AIDS among heterosexuals in Africa around a familiar and conventionalized cast of characters: the educated urban male who is tragically infected with the fatal illness, the treacherous prostitute who is the source and transmitter of disease, the innocently infected wife who leaves behind a motherless family. This cast of characters is reduplicated and rewritten in storytelling forms that are inscribed with racism, bestiality, perverse sexuality, and violence. The result is a highly charged political fantasy that allays the fears and anxieties of white heterosexuals by reassuring them that the disease is to be explained by the Otherness of black African sexuality. But this is not all. Austin goes on to show that the forms and conventions utilized to narrate the stories of “AIDS and Africa” have their counterparts in earlier accounts of black sexuality and infectious disease in American medical discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The racist fantasies that the media have revived and reinstalled in narratives about AIDS and Africa therefore cannot be understood without reference to the concrete history of race, gender, and sexuality in North America.

A somewhat different but related set of questions about the construction and deployment of gender in a reactionary discursive formation is explored by Pamela McCallum in “Misogyny, the Great Man, and Carlyle’s The French Revolution: The Epic as Pastiche.” Carlyle’s representation of the French Revolution, McCallum argues, is organized and mobilized around a political
codification of gender. Within the stylistic irregularities, abrupt dissonances, and startling neologisms of Carlyle’s text, the Revolution is given figuration as a savage and monstrous female principle—most notably in the menacing form of the sansculottes woman—that has the power to engulf and dismember the individual male subject. Even such apparently “strong” personalities as Danton and Mirabeau find themselves overwhelmed and destroyed in the whirling schizophrenic flux of history. Drawing on the analyses of the German writer Klaus Theweleit, McCallum demonstrates how the misogynist fantasy structure in The French Revolution projects a “problem” to which the solution is the “great man” whose decisive and brutal action promises to control the vicissitudes of history. As she writes: “if the threatening elements of sexuality, Jacobin womanhood, and the organic itself coalesce in the interminable antagonistic struggles of the Revolution, then the male principle must be called upon to stand firm against the onslaught of feminine dissolution and confusion.” It is important to grasp the politics of gender that underpins Carlyle’s The French Revolution not only as a crucial strategy within the nineteenth-century iconography of revolution, but also as a representational strategy that is appropriated and rewritten within twentieth-century reactionary discourses.

Chandra Mohanty, in “On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s,” discusses the ways in which the academy has managed and commodified the challenge of race. This is not the construction of reactionary fantasies so much as the liberal recuperation of discourses that opens the potential for change. Mohanty argues that while race has been explicitly addressed over the last decade, what is required is a reconceptualization of fundamental categories of analysis rather than the all-too-common endorsement of an apolitical pluralism that domesticates discourses on race. She analyzes the way this is constructed in women’s studies classrooms and in workshops on diversity for upper-level administrators. Practices in both these areas, she argues, often rewrite histories of race and colonialism as problems of individual sensitivity. In the politicized women’s studies classroom, despite efforts to construct oppositional pedagogies, the effort to give authority to marginal experiences can lead to a process in which the students of color come to embody the voice
of the oppressed, while white students embody guilt. The latter may become mere observers of what is regarded as the authentic voice of the oppressed. The result is the construction of a discourse of cultural pluralism in which all supposedly occupy different but equally valuable positions. In the case of administrators, prejudice-reduction workshops serve to redefine the problem as one of “managing diversity” by means of individuals dealing with other individuals. Mohanty thus underlines some of the problems our highly individualized society throws up in the face of efforts to take account of the results of domination and inequality. She argues, instead, for the creation of a culture of dissent with spaces for standpoints that can recognize the importance of material structures.

Ruth L. Smith, in “Order and Disorder: The Naturalization of Poverty,” also deals with the problems posed by liberal society’s stress on the autonomous individual. She argues that liberal society’s characterization of nature in dualistic terms allows that society to be seen as “good” nature and all that lies outside it as “bad” nature, as expressing disorder. The good nature/bad nature dichotomy is then reinforced and augmented by the dualisms of order/disorder and autonomy/need and lack of freedom. This allows the poor, who supposedly lack the autonomy necessary for citizenship because they are associated with need, to be aligned with disorder and ‘bad’ nature. Women and the poor are treated similarly in conceptual terms: both are held to have experiences that do not allow for autonomy because they have bodies that can be penetrated and, therefore, can need. Smith’s argument has interesting intersections with Tennenhouse and Armstrong’s article in the last issue, for it points to some of the associations of lower-class position with the body. Given that women are also associated with the body, Smith notes that class privilege can allow women’s bodies to be converted into good nature, as in the case of nineteenth-century middle- and upper-class women who were considered the embodiment of moral goodness, whereas the effects of this class/gender construction were, of course, quite different for poor women.

The focus shifts in Maria Damon’s “Tell Them about Us.” Here Damon gives a concrete account of one group that has been defined as disorderly, hostile, and menacing. She shows the crea-
tivity and resistance of young working-class women, as well as the ways their poetry represents the postmodern world they inhabit. These poems create their own worlds out of a variety of artistic forms, from street aphorisms to teen-magazine verses. Damon argues that the poems reveal both defiance and adaptation to gender and class roles and indicate that the authors know how the media talk about working-class people and how their situation is one of “watching ourselves watching you watching us.” Those defined as outsiders, as “natural,” must see themselves through the eyes of the dominant group; the signification of marginal groups is mediated by the objectifying institutional discourses of what Smith has termed liberal society.

In “Toward a Feminist Cultural Criticism: Hegemony and Modes of Social Division,” Donna Przybylowicz examines various contemporary theories in order to develop an emancipatory discourse that counters the negative dialectics of much deconstructive and postmodern texts. She is concerned with the necessity of negotiating a nexus point from which contradictory positions of race, class, gender, sexual preference, age, and ethnic background can intersect and bring about positive social change. A new political coalition would therefore be based on otherness, on difference, on opposition. In the process, Przybylowicz looks at a range of techniques employed by feminists in order to confront and understand the assumptions and formulations of hegemony so as to develop a position that could challenge, critique, and dismantle patriarchal structures. For her, the deconstructive moment in cultural textual analysis is important in its demystification of ideological apparatuses. Through such “negative dialectics,” the constructs of bourgeois history and its objects are deprivileged. But this must simultaneously involve a utopian moment pointing to “the collective intersubjective impulse among women—perhaps this is the next dimension—to look for the positive utopian moment rather than subjecting oneself to the limits of a hegemonic language and social structure.” The creation of such “new groupings of signification . . . can hopefully reveal the revolutionary possibilities of the present” and culture can become “part of a dialectical process.”

One theme or issue repeatedly raised by these essays is the necessity of grasping the construction of gender within concrete
social, cultural, and historical situations. Again and again the writers of the articles in these two special issues insist upon the awareness that the gendered subject must be understood as a subject bound up and enmeshed in a network of political, economic, linguistic, sexual, racial, ethnic, and other determinations interacting in a complex and all-too-often contradictory manner. But it must not be supposed that such a profoundly historical account of the construction of the gendered subject implies a reductionist model in which agency disappears. On the contrary, the uneasy negotiation of the subject among plural and conflicting positions permits a range of strategies of resistance. One thinks, for instance, of the appropriation of the Malinche figure by Chicana feminists, of the rewriting of a debased media language by the young working-class women of South Boston, of the revision of modernism by Djuna Barnes. At the same time, it is clear that none of these various and multiple praxis projects is comprehensible without reference to the contingent historical circumstances in which they take shape. Knowledge of gender is a situated knowledge.

A parallel and related point concerns the recognition that critical practice must remain vigilantly aware of differences in the voices, writings, and experiences of the gendered subject. If earlier feminist criticism valorized "woman" as a contestatory term against "man," it now seems quite inappropriate to resort to such monolithic and undifferentiated terminology. Similarly, the binary opposition implied in the concept of "the other" or "otherness" may need to be rethought. As Linda Hutcheon suggests, new theoretical perspectives and postmodernist aesthetic practices have provoked such a revaluation: "the single concept of 'otherness' has associations of binarity, hierarchy, and supplementarity that postmodern theory and practice seem to want to reject in favor of a more plural and deprivileging concept of difference and the ex-centric."2 To affirm this critical rethinking, however, is not to reject the conception of "otherness." As many of the essays included here demonstrate, it continues to be of the greatest strategic importance in disentangling and analyzing the work of ideology in the construction of gender. In this sense, "otherness" and

"the other" remain indispensable terms through which to understand how gender is used to elaborate and maintain modes of social division.

Finally, we would like to emphasize that none of the essays in these two issues of *Cultural Critique*, nor the issues taken together, claim global or privileged insights into the questions of gender, race, class, or sexual preference. Indeed, to do so would be to contradict the critical orientation and discursive practice of the essays included here. Rather, we have tried, in a provisional way, to illuminate problem-complexes, theoretical options, and interpretive strategies as part of an ongoing discussion among cultural critics. As scholars from different disciplines, we have tried to cover, perhaps inadequately, a fairly wide spectrum of current feminist thinking, and we hope that these issues will provoke responses from an even larger range of women and engender a debate that can be continued within the pages of *Cultural Critique*.³

³ We would like to thank Jean Martin for her dedication, energy, and labor in helping us get together these two issues on "The Construction of Gender."—eds.