Reproductive politics is in large part about language and the contestation of meanings. Since the 1980s, women's political struggles in the domains of reproductive rights, control over fertility, sexual freedom, and freedom from sexual violence have made the language of "owning" or "controlling" one's body a commonplace of feminist rhetoric. This is true not only in North America and Europe but in Latin America, South Asia, and parts of Africa, and certainly wherever international feminist activists gather. But this language has also been challenged, not only by conservatives and religious fundamentalists on the right but from within feminism: first, on moral grounds, by radical feminists, for whom such language evokes patriarchal and commercial practices of objectifying women's bodies, treating them as goods; and second, on analytical grounds, by postmodernists, for whom such language rests on the illusion of agentic, coherent, physically bounded selves.

This chapter is part of a larger study that reconsiders these critiques of women's "right" to own their bodies with both a culturally and historically open lens on the meanings of property, especially "self-propriety" or self-ownership, and an understanding of the language of self/body ownership as a rhetorical strategy for political mobilization and defining identities, not a description of the world. I wish to recuperate the notion of self-propriety as an indispensable part of feminist conceptions of social democracy and even property more generally. Rhetorical claims on behalf of women's ownership of their bodies invoke meanings of ownership as a relationship of right, use, and caretaking-meanings that have different cultural moorings from the commercial idea of property that the regime of triumphal international capitalism conventionally takes for granted. Perhaps there are good reasons to defend this language-partic-
ularly as it pertains to people's relationship to their bodies. Perhaps owning one's body is a necessary element of citizenship in an affirmative but noninterventionist state (Eisenstein 1994).

Feminist caveats against using the "language of property" or the "language of control" in reference to the female body share a common concern about women's bodily subjection, whether through medical science, population-control agencies, or the patriarchal organization of sexuality and kinship (Akhter 1990, Diamond and Quinby 1988, Pateman 1988). These caveats have an intuitive appeal when one thinks of women's bodies as trafficked, transacted, commodified through the ages, or certainly when one notices the proliferation of odd transactions of body parts and services in the present. To name just two examples, witness legal conflicts over ownership of frozen embryos and reports of Brazilian women 11 asked to provide proof of sterilization before they can be hired" (New York Times, 11 January 1991: Al2, Williams 1991). In a world where such "choices" are highly constructed by poverty, prison conditions, and the total commercialization of daily life, these cases raise ethical questions well beyond the issue of whether the choices involved are voluntary or involuntary. They force us to ask, What do our bodies (my body, tier body, "the body") mean to us? What value do they have? How are the meaning and value of our bodies connected to our communities of reference, our constitutive concerns [and] identities" (Taylor 1991: 49)?

Like many feminists, I am troubled by the deceptions, exploitations, and recollection of chattel slavery implied in the commercial traffic in bodies and body parts and in women's sexual and reproductive capacities. My intention is not to condone the reduction of women's bodies and uteruses to objects for sale or rent but rather to challenge the narrow conceptual frameworks in which some feminists criticize these transactions. Controversy over the language of property in feminist theory starts from a narrow premise that interprets property and ownership in terms of a Lockean paradigm through which "property in one's person" signifies radical individualism, instrumentalism, and a dualism between the body as commodity and the "person" as transactor. This perspective tends to reify the idea of property itself, to encase it in a prevailing economism and nullify its tremendous cultural variation. An alternative perspective would be to rethink the meanings of ownership and thereby reclaim both a feminist idea of bodily integrity and a radical conception of property at large. To rethink the concept in this way, it is helpful to look at the variety of local meanings that women in noncapitalist societies, radical democrats, and slaves have given to the idea of owning their bodies, as well as the value that contemporary feminists of color are placing on reowning their bodies as an aspect of self-definition. The "objects of property" may have more to tell us from their vantage point than we can
learn from positioning ourselves within the debates of the treatises, the lawbooks, and the political-theory canon (Williams 1991: 216-19).

CONCEPTS OF PROPERTY

Theorists caught in the Lockean paradigm forget that the idea of property-like "selves," "persons," and even "bodies"-varies widely across cultures and historical times. In a simple but compelling analysis, MacPherson has argued that the meaning property acquires is "the product of a particular set of historical circumstances." Whatever its context, we are better off thinking about property as a right-or, I would prefer to say, a relationship-than a thing, and about private, exclusive property as a historically and culturally circumscribed form of owning. Private property came to predominate and to have the appearance of "things" during the era of developing capitalism in Europe, when the right to use was superseded by the right to sell or alienate and also became nonconditional on any social function performed by the owners of property. This type of property is distinct from common property, which refers not to state ownership of spaces or facilities (such as highways, parks, rivers, hospitals) but to individual people's rights "not to be excluded" from access to these spaces and facilities (MacPherson 1978: 4-10; compare Held 1984: 167). Private property, then, refers not to the thing I have (piece of land, car, factory, uterus) but to my right to keep others out. This relational basis of property adheres despite our culturally induced propensity to translate rights of access into objects of exchange.

The observation that no "paradigmatic and a temporal concept of property" exists is both a matter of common sense and an insight of Marxist analysis (Tully 1980: 114). Marx's writings were, after all, a kind of ethnography of capitalist folkways and practices, an unmasking and localization of "the fantastic nature of the capitalist concept of property":

The general consensus among anthropologists is that we too should get away from the notion of private property as we know it, when we analyse the economic systems of preliterate peoples, but instead talk of a multiplicity of rights of different types. Thus, in such societies, people may have rights of temporary use, rights to exclude foreigners, rights to claim something if they particularly need it. Nevertheless, all these types of rights contrast fundamentally with the "once-and-for-all" rights vested in an individual that we think of as private property. This difference is all the more complete in that different rights in the same thing or place may be and usually are held by different people or different groups of people in those societies. (Bloch 1985: 92)

Actually, rights of temporary use, of use but not exchange, of common access, of custody but not ownership, to inhabit but not to destroy, and
of cooperative ownership have a long history in the laws and practices of "literate" societies as well (for example, co-ops, condominiums, residents only parks and beaches, guardianship, foster care). A variety of property relationships is present in the interstices of Western capitalist economies and thus culturally available to the contemporary (urban, literate) feminist imagination.

Looking farther afield, an ethnographic study of property relations among New Guinea highlanders by Strathern could give that imagination sonic rich food for thought. Strathern too notes the strangeness of Western notions of property that transmute social relations into relations between people and things and can even transform people into things. In contrast, among the New Guinea highland groups she studied, "equations between women and wealth ... have little to do with 'property' in the sense of rights over objects. They are related instead to the way in which wealth items signify aspects of the person." Among the present-day Daulo, networks of mothers sponsoring daughters" (wok meri) routinely loan money and "claim control of money" in the same way, and through the same rituals, that symbolize their nurturance of children or growing of pigs and coffee trees. Strathern describes the "potent equation between the tending and producing of wealth and women's maternal roles" that exists among these cash-crop-producing cultivators: "For Daulo 'mother,' like 'father,' is a term for 'owner': 'As a mother cares for her child, so does an owner look after her property" (1984: 160-62, 171-72).

Wok meri women "own" not so much their bodies as the reproductive and productive functions through which their embodiment is socially configured. For them, ownership is a relationship of caretaking and collective authority over resources, a relationship that both defines and is defined by aspects of one's social personhood. That Daulo women own What they care for and achieve the status of owners via their reproductive activity is obviously suggestive from the standpoint of feminist struggles and debates over reproductive rights. I cite this example here merely to reinforce the argument that how we think about the concept of "property in one's own body or person may vary greatly depending on how we understand property in general.

When we shift to the early-modern European origins of ideas about owning one's body, we find that such ideas have less to do with property in an economic sense than with claims to protect one's sexuality and personal security from arbitrary invasion. Historian Natalie Zemon Davis discovered what may be the first recorded European reference to the idea of having a right of ownership in one's body in the archives of the Reformed Consistory of Geneva. In 1568 the Geneva elders heard the defense of a woman from Lyons accused of sleeping with her fiancé
The rhyme in this extraordinary protofeminist slogan "suggests this was a proverb" that had broader popular visage as a strategy for asserting personal autonomy (Davis 1986: 63). The metaphor it employs is the principle of territorial sovereignty, or dominium, more specifically the customary feudal notion that tenure in land, and above all the king's demesne, was inalienable (Maine 1986: 102-4). But here it applies not only to the right of consent in marriage (by now well-established among Protestant reformers) but to enjoyment and pleasure in one's female body. Where could such a notion come from, especially since radical sects espousing "sexual freedom" were not a feature of French Calvinism as they were of the Reformation in England, Germany, and the Netherlands (Davis 1975: 84, Hill 1972: chs. 9, 15)?

The French historian Jacques Rossiaud informs us that in the heavily Protestant southeast French towns of this period "the daughters and wives of reputable townsfolk were demanding their right to break through traditional constraints, take part in [amorous] sports, and talk of love." Not only were they participating in organized dances and festivities and strolling with young men through the streets; they were also writing passionate poetry, marrying without their parents' consent, and declaring their right to pleasure "just like young men." As one declared, "The most joyous thing in this world is to share youthful love with a partner who is one's equal" (Rossiaud 1988: 134-39). Our rebellious Lyonnaise, then, represents a precise social milieu of sexual self-determination, condensed into the association of her dominion over her body with royal dominion overland.

In England, not only customary rights to use of common lands but also popular (adult male) participation in town meetings and male and female preaching and speaking out in radical congregations may have provided a basis for claims to bodily self-possession and the godliness of "the created flesh" (Winstanley 1973: 261, 348-49, Thomas 1972: 60-61). As Hill points out, the terms Leveller and Digger arose in the context of popular protests in the Midlands against enclosures of the commons; thus notions of "self-propriety" among these groups were inherently rooted in the defense of property as a shared rather than a private resource (1986: 21). Moreover, Leveller activists, though largely urban tradespeople being displaced by rising monopolies, were tempered in the fire of religious persecution and long imprisonments. Their actions in defense of self-propriety and to broaden the (male) franchise reflected not only class issues but their experience of constant arrest and political-and sexual-harassment.

Early one morning in 1649, for example, Richard Overton and three other Leveller leaders, asleep with their wives and children in one house,
were arrested by officers of Cromwell's Protectorate. Under cover of a political raid, Cromwell's soldiers summoned marriage licenses and accused the detainees of not only sedition but whoredom, cuckoldry, fornication, and an immoral belief in the "community of wives." Seething from years of arbitrary arrests under the crown, Overton expressed particular outrage at the sexual implications of this invasion. During a long sojourn in jail following the arrest, he warned other potential victims of Puritan moral policing to "have a care what you do, or how you look upon your wives, for the new-Saints militant are paramount [to] all Laws, King, Parliament, husbands, wives, beds, etc." (quoted in Haller and Davies 1944: 214-19).

For such early-modern European radicals, the claim to self-ownership was not a formal abstraction, an economic demand, or an instrument of personal striving (compare MacPherson 1962). Rather, it was an oppositional stance against interference by public authorities in one's sexual and bodily life. While confined in Newgate Prison in 1646, Overton wrote his most well-known and eloquent expression of this idea: "To every individual in nature is given an individuall property by nature, not to be invaded or usurped by any: for every one as he is himselfe, so lie hath a selfe propriety, else could he not be himselfe" (in Aylmer 1975: 68). These words, seeming to anticipate Locke's in his famous chapter "On Property," actually connote different ontological and epistemological premises. Overton suggests by "selfe propriety" both a concept or the self rooted in the physical body and in mortalist doctrine (a belief that the human soul dies with the body and comes to life again only at the time of the Final judgment) and a view of natural rights grounded not in the possession of "reason" but in "natural birth" and "deliverance of God" (Aylmer 1975: 69). Undergirding our selfhood and our rights is our creatureliness—that is, our mortal bodies (Zagorin 1966: 19).

Now, without any doubt, an important component in the claim to selfpropriety by Overton and other Leveller men was their own status as heads of households—a civil condition whose "naturalness" they hardly questioned. (They never thought to demand the franchise for women, for example.) Yet Leveller women, like other seventeenth-century English women, were active as producers in crafts and trades, traders in local markets, and preachers and congregants in radical evangelical sects (Brennan and Pateman 1979, Hill 1972, Smith 1982). During the Civil Wars, Leveller women also "intervened as women in politics," organizing frequent demonstrations to bring pressure on Lords and Commons, gathering in the thousands to sign petitions and "sit in" at Parliament, and often braving arrest and bloody, misogynist reprisals (Higgins 1973). The Women's Petition of 1651 to Cromwell proclaimed "our undoubted right of petitioning, since God ... [makes] no difference of persons," and as
asserted "that we have an equal share and interest with men in the Commonwealth": "Are any of our lives, limbs, liberties, or goods to be taken from us more than from Men? Would you have us keep at home in our houses, when men ... are ... forced from their Houses? Are not our husbands, our selves, our children and families by the same rule as liable to the like unjust cruelties as they?" (quoted in Higgins 1973: 206, 216-17).

The language of this Leveller women's petition -published the same year as Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*-is remarkable not only because it asserts women's equal right to leave the household and engage in "States' matters" but also because it expresses the idea of a right of the body ("lives, limbs") to be secure from arbitrary invasion by the state. Unlike Hobbes, however, for whom individual bodies and body rights remain entirely atomized, the Leveller women strongly identify individuals' bodily integrity with the collective, common rights of the families and communities they come from. For the Levellers-perhaps even more for the women than for the men-self-ownership takes its meaning from the context of popular protest and the concept of popular access to public space.

**THE PLACE OF LOCKE IN THE LOCKEAN PARADIGM**

It would not have occurred to the authors of the Leveller women's petition to see a dichotomy between individual claims to integrity and ownership in one's "person" (body) and communal claims to justice and free use of the commons; indeed, they were interdependent. Only at the end of the seventeenth century, when the radical social movements had been suppressed and the "men of property" firmly controlled the House of Commons, did "privacy" become a synonym for "freedom" and "goods" take precedence over "lives, limbs, liberties." The narrow definition making property exclusive, personal and objective did not become wellestablished in English common law and usage, it appears, until the eighteenth century. By the time of William Blackstone's 1765 *Commentaries*, property had come to mean the "sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world." And "persons" under the law were those men only who exercised such dominion (Aylmer 1980: 89,95).

John Locke's theory of property played a critical role in effecting this shift to an absolute, individual, and explicitly masculine model of property ownership. Locke's famous formulation that "every Man has a Property in his own Person" in fact appropriates the radical language of the Levellers, with whose writings he was undoubtedly familiar, and rechannels it toward different ends from theirs (Ashcraft 1986: 165, n. 145). For
Locke, property in one's person becomes an instrument of or evidence justifying the accumulation of things; because I own "the labor of my body and the work of my hands," the materials I work and the objects I produce (or my servants produce) become mine (Locke [1690] 1960: II-27). The older sense of ownership of one's person in order to be a person (including a citizen)-to "own" one's sensual and sexual experience and defend oneself against arbitrary bodily abuse and repression-drops out. Indeed, for Locke (unlike Hobbes), the body is of little consequence except as an instrument consigned to us by God for purposes of industry. But then Locke never sat languishing in Newgate Prison. Nor was he dragged before the authorities to account for his bedroom behavior or called by his contemporaries "Medusa," "Amazon," "vermin," "whore," "bawd," "dirty and tattered slut" or told by men in Parliament to "goe home and looke after your owne businesse" for daring to petition them (quoted in Higgins 1973: 180, 183, 190, 203).

But if feminists are well advised to abandon the "abstractly individualist conception of social life" contained in the Lockean paradigm (Brennan and Pateman 1979: 199), does that mean we must also discard altogether the language of self-propriety, bodily integrity, and rights that preceded-and in many ways continued to challenge-that conception? I have tried to show that the idea of self-ownership, or a property in one's person, originated in a European context among folk who were directly and collectively opposing market relations, not defending them. This idea was intertwined with notions of sexual autonomy, gender equality, and communal identities and with democratic participatory values and radical political movements, all of which Lockean thinking aimed to co-opt, rechannel, and contain. That it did not succeed entirely is evidenced in a statement by a young man arrested for homosexuality in England twenty-two years after Locke died: "I did it because I thought I knew him.... and I think there is no crime in making what use I please of my own body" (quoted in Hill 1986: 233).

**FEMINIST CRITIQUES**

Instead of uncovering the subversive and contextualized meanings in women's claims of possession and ownership of their bodies, recent feminist critics assimilate these claims to property in a Lockean or crude Marxist sense. Farida Akhter, a women's health activist and researcher in Bangladesh, condemns "the individual right of woman over her own body" as an "unconscious mirroring of the capitalist-patriarchal ideology ... premised on the logic of bourgeois individualism and inner urge of private property." According to Akhter, the idea that a woman owns her body turns it into a "reproductive factory," objectifies it, and denies
that reproductive capacity is a "natural power we carry within ourselves" (1990: 8-10). Behind her call for a "new social relationship" with regard to this "natural power" of women lies a split between "the natural" woman and "the social" woman that brings Akhter closer to the essentialized embrace of "difference" by radical feminists than her Marxist framework might suggest.

Consider the affinity between Akhter's critique and the more systematic and encompassing one of Carole Pateman in her book *The Sexual Contract* (1988). In Pateman's view, the "language of the individual" and bodily self-possession, or a "property in one's person," implicates its feminist proponents in a 300-year unbroken history of masculine contractarian fictions to justify "possessive individualism" and the relentless appropriation of others. Feminists who invoke "women's right to own their bodies" are reinforcing a language that can just as well validate their "right" to sell their bodies through civil contracts for prostitution, surrogacy, marriage, labor, or slavery. For Pateman, since the advent of contract theory, saying we "own our bodies" means and can only mean that we are "free" to sell our bodies (or body parts or sexual and reproductive services) in the marketplace.

Prostitution for Pateman is the classic case of men as a "fraternity" gaining a "right of access to women's bodies" through the fictive device of contract (voluntary consent). Underneath this contract is another, more insidious fiction that equates women's reproductive and sexual capacities with labor power, as a "service" that can be alienated from the "self" without compromising the self's "moral freedom." But "selves are inseparable from bodies." "When a prostitute contracts out use of her body" she is doing something different from a worker getting a job; "she is ... selling *herself* in a very real sense," alienating herself from her sexuality, which is integral to her "womanhood" (1988: 207). Likewise, when a woman enters into a surrogacy contract, she transforms her uterus into an "empty vessel" and alienates "the unique physiological, emotional and creative capacity of her body, that is to say, *herself as a woman.*" "To extend to women the masculine conception of the individual as owner, and the conception of freedom as the capacity to do what you will with your own, is to sweep away any intrinsic relation between the female owner, her body and reproductive capacities. She stands to her property in exactly the same external relation as the male owner stands to his labour power or sperm; there is nothing distinctive about womanhood" (1988: 203-7, 214-16, my emphasis).

Thus Pateman's answer to the "language of the individual," which she rejects as inherently masculine, is the language of the "essential woman" as sexual and reproductive being. In reaction to the unitary, totalized "person." (individual/man), Pateman gives us what Eisenstein calls "dif-
ference' as homogeneity" rather than "differences as diversity"-a duality of abstract "masculine" and "feminine" in which all prostitutes, all surrogate mothers, all wives become the same (Eisenstein 1988: 32, 38). The argument "that women have the right to determine, for themselves, how they will use their bodies, whether the issue is prostitution, abortion/reproductive rights, lesbian rights, or the right to be celibate and/or asexual" (Delacoste and Alexander 1987: 17), evokes for Pateman the self-contained, disembodied owner-decider, who is intrinsically male. Since women-whose bodies are open, sensate, procreative-can never be "individuals" in this way, for feminists to invoke "the language of the individual" is to reconstitute women as pseudo-men (1988: 221-24).

Pateman's retelling of the social contract story remains not only locked in a quarrel with the (white male) political theory canon but imprisoned in the conventional (bourgeois) notion of property that involves exclusivity, isolation, objectification, and self-interest. From this vantage point, owning the body necessarily means reducing it to a commodity. By taking the story of the social contract as her starting point, Pateman cedes to the social contract theorists the ground of meaning, ignoring the far more radical and potentially feminist ideas they both appropriated and redefined.

ALTERNATIVE VISIONS

But rejecting a language because it got constructed in misogynist ways may be to abandon language as a site of political struggle. A different approach to concepts like autonomy and self-ownership has been taken by feminists of color in the United States, who are engaged in reappropriating these concepts. Patricia Williams's book The Alchemy of Race and Rights (1991), for example, is laced through with references (sometimes playful) to selfhood, "the real me," "self-assembly," "owning the self in a disowned world"-along with a repositioning of the language of rights in relation to the conditions of African Americans. As a professor of contract law, Williams is all too aware of the hoary fictions and fantasies that permeate contractarian ideology, particularly in those contracts presuming a free or voluntary bargaining away of one's body or bodily capacities. Having discovered what may be the original contract of sale of tier own great-great-grandmother, she has access to an immediate touchstone for understanding the deeper convolutions of thought about (black female) bodies-as-property embedded in analogous transactions, such as the trade of sterilization for jobs in Brazil or Norplant for nonimprisonment in the United States ("buying" her freedom by paying the price of tier womb") (1991: 32-33, 2 18-19). At the same time, Williams is steadfast in her commitment to reclaiming women's ownership of their flesh and blood by
reinventing the language of self-ownership, or what she calls "the formulation of an autonomous social self" (148): "where one's experience is rooted not just in a sense of illegitimacy but in being illegitimate, in being raped, and in the fear of being murdered, then the black adherence to a scheme of both positive and negative rights to the self, to the sanctity of one's own personal boundaries -makes sense" (153-54).

In Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins likewise emphasizes "the power of self-definition" for black women's survival as a group and for their resistance to "efforts to control [their] reproduction and sexuality." Black women, she argues, have forged a sense of self and bodily integrity that is rooted in strong dyadic relationships with their children. Motherhood becomes here a source of self-determination that is integrative, extended, communal. "We are together, my child and I," she quotes from Alice Walker (1990: 34, 50-51, 91-96, 136-37). A similar notion emerges in Williams's chapter on "Owning the Self in a Disowned World," where she argues for the "interconnected, flesh-and-blood bonded" relationship between a fetus and a pregnant woman's body and thus for policies that improve pregnant women's circumstances rather than making them adversaries of the fetus (1991: 183-85; compare Petchesky 1990).

Implicit in black feminist ideas about self, body, and motherhood is not only a communal, dyadic concept of mothering but a maternal, caretaking concept of ownership—not unlike that of the wok meri women in New Guinea. Those who tend, care for, carry are by definition those with authentic claims to be named owner of the things or people whose growth they nurture. For black feminists, this concept grows organically out of the history of slavery and slave women's narratives about resistance to tile uses of their maternal and sexual bodies as slave property.

Historians, fiction writers, and above all former slaves themselves bear eloquent witness to the acts of violence through which slaves' bodies were literally inscribed with the marks of domination: brands, whiplashes, shaved heads, and, for women especially, rape and forced pregnancy. These rituals of bodily inscription were also, however, fields of resistance; indeed it is fair to say that slave culture, in rebellion against the laws of property, generated an ethic and practice of bodily self-determination, however constrained the "choices" (Lerner 1973: 34-40, Genovese 1976: 244-52, Patterson 1982: 51-62, White 1985: 32-33). In the case of slave rebels who ran away or defied the lash—for example, the bellicose Fannie, a Tennessee slave who asserted, "I'll go to hell or anywhere else, but I won't be whipped" (quoted in Lerner 1973: 37)—this resistance is easy to see. But it also emerges in the frequent situations where slave women subjected themselves to terrible beatings rather than submit to the sexual advances of their masters or other men. Or in the example of the South Carolina slave Rose Williams, who stubbornly refused to marry or sleep
with the male slave her master tried to foist upon her for breeding purposes, declaring, "After what I does for de massa, I's never wants no truck with any man" (quoted in White 1985: 102-3).

Mitch controversy surrounds the question of whether and where slave women engaged in abortion, birth control, or infanticide as ways of reappropriating their bodies and resisting the master's domination. It is difficult to know when we are justified in reading into such actions a conscious expression of the idea that "my body is my own," especially when dealing with oral cultures that did not record their reasons or defend their actions in philosophical terms. Yet convincing accounts show slave women in the British Caribbean deliberately rejecting the role of mother and slave breeder. The persistence of low fertility rates among Caribbean slaves, despite pronatalist incentives, may well have been the result of herbal methods of birth control and abortion brought from Africa and "passed on from mother to daughter" as a "form of slave resistance" (Bush 1990: 120-27, 132-42, Reddock 1984: 17-18).

Evidence regarding slave women in the United States is more ambiguous since here slave fertility remained high until relatively late, and declining fertility could as easily have been caused by the rigors of field labor and forced migrations. Yet historians recount numerous reports by white physicians of slave women's secret ability to "destroy the fetus at an early stage of gestation," their use of herbal remedies, and cases of women thought sterile who became miraculously fertile after emancipation (Gutman 1977: 80-82, White 1985: 84-87). Evidence also exists that slave women aided each other in inducing abortions as well as in feigning pregnancy (to obtain reduced work loads), thus creating "a sort of female conspiracy" (Hine and Wittenstein 1981: 293). Yet, as White observes, "living on the precipice of destruction as the individual slave did, giving birth [too] was a life-affirming action . . . , ironically, an act of defiance," particularly when a slave woman openly declared her child "mine" (1985: 101-2, 104-5, 110). Taking into account the strong value placed on motherhood in West African cultures and the matrilocal family structure found among southern slaves, we probably should be wary of reading such acts of defiance as affirmations of "her own body" rather than her motherhood. The African American slave woman's body was deeply enmeshed in the ties of household, kin, community, and maternity; its freedom and theirs were inseparable (Collins 1990: 133-37). Out of this experience, black feminist theory points to an ethic of women's bodily integrity that is communal and extended rather than individualized and privatized.

And especially poignant illustration is the case of Harriet Jacobs, who published her autobiographical Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself (under the pseudonym Linda Brent) in 1861 (reprinted in
Gates 1987). Jacobs's story exemplifies the slave woman's assertion of her own bodily integrity and selfhood as a means of reestablishing bonds with her children and kin. Constructed as a dialogue with the white female reader, *Incidents* allows us to connect the practices of slave women to a series of conscious ethical prescriptions about bodily ownership. Aware that physical beauty and passion in the slave woman are "her greatest curse," Jacobs confronts with ambivalence the reality that being an object of property is the fundamental structural fact of her existence. At first she accedes to it, expressing willingness to be bought by her free black lover as a means toward liberation (342-43, 370). Much later, faced once again with the option of having her freedom bought by a friend, she resists: "The more my mind had become enlightened, the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property; ... being sold from one owner to another seemed too much like slavery" (511). Yet she finally agrees and, now free, rejoices at the thought of how her grandmother, who had tried to manumit her own son years before, "would leap for joy." Manumission becomes a form of kin solidarity rather than (in the disparaging view of some abolitionists) a concession to the system of bondage.

A close reading of *Incidents* reveals a narrative of struggle to reclaim body and personhood; in it the self emerges as ethical subject but always embedded in the communal context of the suffering of other slaves and their efforts to achieve freedom. It is never just the story of an "individual" and in this way contrasts, as Washington (1987: 8) points out, with the male-heroic structure of Frederick Douglass's Narrative. In her most triumphant and complex moment of self-assertion, Jacobs takes a (white) male lover of her own in defiance of her tyrannical master. Here she is clearly enacting the claim to own her body and sexuality, aggressively refusing "to be sexually used and compromised" while redefining Victorian morality on her own terms (Carby 1987: 56-60). The slave woman, seen in her actual condition, Jacobs suggests, "ought not to be judged by the same standard as others." Within the constraints that bind her, site has used her body to define her own dignity: "It seems less degrading to give one I 's self," she writes, "than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (385-86). Being a slave-whose body is both not her own and all she owns-she embraces her sexuality as a theater of self-invention. In the end, however, authentic freedom for Jacobs is not merely sexual assertion but the constitution of her extended body in a matrifocal family, with no male protector or master: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free!" (513).

When the "objects of property" speak they remind its that the lan-
language of self-creation, self-propriety, and freedom is always a story told and retold, and to reject that language wholesale is to leave those without property nothing at all to own. As Williams observes, to repudiate formalized claims to personal worth and rights (as, for example, Critical Legal Studies proponents often do) is to trivialize the experience of those who historically have been treated as worthless. She argues that rather than discarding rights discourse we should expand and diversify it: "the problem is not that the discourse is itself constricting but that it exists in a constricted referential universe." Instead of discarding the rhetoric of property, pet-sons, and bodies, we need to enlarge its frame of reference, to broaden who and what count as owners and the moral and communal spaces in which they define their "selves" (Williams 1991: 149, 158-60, 164-65; compare Taylor 1991: 31, 50-52). As my examination of Leveller tracts and slave narratives suggests, "self-propriety" may refer to a concept of property that is inclusive rather than exclusive and a model of the body that is extensive rather than insular. It may become a rallying point through which individuals establish their connection "to a larger group and community" (Schneider 1991: 309). But the "sanctity of one's own personal boundaries" (Williams 1991: 154) will remain, even for the extended or communally embedded body, a normative ground in the process of self-creation and self-engagement.

Through reference to (a still largely Eurocentric) social history and recent African American feminist theory, I have been attempting to construct an ethics and a politics of self-ownership. Undoubtedly the epistemological premises behind this effort would meet objections from postmodernist thinkers, who doubt the reality of any coherent or underlying "self," and from Foucauldians, who see subjectivity as contingent and nondeterminate (Rorty 1985, Foucault 1977: 201-23). I would argue, however, that we can recognize the historical coherence of self-ownership as a moral and political claim without subscribing to any essentialist assumptions about fixed or transcendent subjects. Even Foucault's view of selves and bodies as the constructs of discourse and pedagogy is tempered by an acknowledgment of the dialectical process through which selves and identities come to life: "It was life more than the law that became the issue of political struggles, even if the latter were formulated through affirmations concerning rights. The 'right' to life, to one's body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or 'alienations,' the right to rediscover what one is and all that one can be, this 'right' . . . was the political response to all these new procedures of power" (Foucault 1978: 145).

It seems to me the task is to develop a concept of selves as they are constituted dialogically in relation to others and of rights-including rights to bodily integrity-as they emerge from and become the expres-
sions of collective aspirations for change. Selves may be individuals, which means not only that they are attached to individual bodies (embodied) but that they are "defined by a social trajectory strictly speaking irreducible to any other." Or they may be collectivities (kin groups, religious or ethnic/racial groups—"my people," genders, age cohorts, neighborhoods, nations) (Bourdieu 1977: 86, Geertz 1973: 363-67). While the sense of autonomy is always an illusion, the sense of individuality or identity may be documented through distinct narrative histories and memory. We imagine and reconstruct our selves and our bodies all the time, though not just as we please but in ways constrained by our particular cultural settings and social circumstances. Put another way, "we build the picture of our body again and again" (Paul Schilder, quoted in Martin 1987: 75).

The historicity of the body-established now by a whole generation of post-Foucauldian writers-does pose a problem, of course, insofar as it involves contingency, the mediation of our "control" over our bodies through discourse, power, social process. "My authority over my body may be a necessary feature of human agency, but the nature and extent of that authority depend heavily on my social circumstances—my body may be somebody else's legal property" (Turner 1984: 246; compare Bourdieu 1977: 85-95, Laqueur 1990: passim). Many women live in circumstances in which their bodies/selves are not constructed as autonomous but rather are enmeshed in obligatory social relations, especially to kin. For them, the sense of self-ownership is a discovery, a recovery, not a given. Nora Protacio, a member of Woman-health in the Philippines and herself a mother and housewife from a poor community in Manila, describes the relationship of women like herself to their bodies:

Whenever the husband wants to have sex and the woman refuses he resents the rejection, feels jealous and beats up the woman, whom he has come to know as his property. In fact, most of our women speak about sexual relations as 'faggamit, to be used.' Very often, we do not mind [that is, take care of] ourselves, our own body especially. Even when we feel some pain or discomfort our foremost concern is how to feed our families. As wives and mothers, we are mainly responsible for ensuring good health for our families, and yet we take care of our own health last. (1990: 2)

In her remarkable film, Children of Desired Sex (1988), the Indian filmmaker Mira Nair interviewed married women and couples in Bombay who had undergone amniocentesis as a method of sex preselection. As Indian feminists have urgently insisted, various sex-determination and sex-preselection techniques combined with the availability of abortion have resulted in a systematic practice of aborting female fetuses, contributing to the unusually male-biased sex ratio in India. This practice is
clearly a reflection of the social preference for sons, in a culture that is highly patrilocal and patrilineal. While sons are considered necessary to tend graves, expiate the gods, carry on the lineage, daughters must be provided a dowry upon marriage. Thus, a woman's worth may hinge upon producing male children (Patel 1989). But the film's interviews reveal a deeper layer of meaning in what the women leave unsaid. When asked "But what do you want?", they mention multiple pressures and the desires of husbands and other kin; "only I will suffer, others will be happy," says one, as if this is explanation enough. When women's identity and embodiment are so dissolved in kinship structures, how can the idea that "your body is your own" take hold or even make sense? I think of the Indian feminist poet Meena Alexander's words about her grandmother's contemporary, the writer Balamaniamma, "numb in the fiftieth year of her life, with the loneliness that can come from living in a woman's body," knowing "her body is a house." Or her grandmother with the "house of a thousand doors", kneeling "at each/ of the thousand doors in turn/ paying her dues" (Alexander 1988: 50, 3).

I am haunted by this image of a woman's body as a house with many doors that others come in and out of, inhabited, possessed by others, yet the "household gods ... will not let her in" (Alexander 1988: 3) This dispossession from one's own body's "house" can take quite various cultural forms, through the occupancy of a single male or of a whole community or race. In her interviews with U.S. women about the medicalization of reproduction, anthropologist Emily Martin encountered a pervasive feeling among her subjects of separation from their bodies, particularly in the contexts of menstruation, menopause, and birth, of their bodies being a thing detached from or even antagonistic to their "selves" (1987: 77-84). In a very different vein, Williams suggests that the history lodged in our flesh -specifically, the meanings we give to insemination, procreation, birth-is saturated with racism. What does it mean, she wonders, when a white mother sues a sperm bank that supposedly inseminated her with her (white) husband's sperm for the "tragedy" and "nightmare" of having given birth to a black baby (New York Times, 9 March 1990: B1)? What does this event tell us about the "supposition that it is natural for people to want children 'like' themselves" and "what exactly constitutes this likeness"? The house of our "female space" defines the "boundaries of valuation" that determine which babies/bodies are prized, "which mothers should be bearing which children" (Williams 1991: 226-27). We do not "own" our bodies so long as they are occupied, colonized by this racist history.

In a social and historical context in which to be someone means to own something, in which women's bodies have been so systematically expropriated that they have become inured to picturing their bodies as the
property of others, in which reproductive bodies are signs of racist values, it seems vital that a process of reappropriation, reowning, take place. Before our bodies can be ourselves, we have to take them back for ourselves. As Pitanguy has put it, "We have lost control over this territory, so close and yet so distant, which is our own body... It is urgent to put onto the agenda of the world's relevant political issues [the need to abolish] predatory forms of occupation, whether of women's bodies or of the environment" (1990). The language of owning—which, after all, means being the author of, the authority over, the caretaker of—seems an appropriate one for signifying women's collective need to reconstitute ourselves as political actors.

For women's movements globally, the idea that a woman owns her body stands not as a description of reality but as a rhetorical achievement (Petchesky and Weiner 1990). In the late 1980s this "European" concept echoed in Nairobi, India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Brazil, Bangladesh, Nicaragua, and Peru. It became part of an international rhetoric of feminist collective identity, growing out of diverse conditions of sexual violence, reproductive hazards and needs, and resistance. For example, in a strategy paper on reproductive rights, the Women's Resource and Research Center (WRRC) in the Philippines asserted that "reproductive rights politics" enables women "to gain a measure of control of themselves" and to break out of poverty and dependence. Beyond issues of either fertility regulation or family health, WRRC argues, women's "selfdetermination and pleasure in sexuality is one of the primary meanings of the idea of 'control over one's body' and a principal reason for access to safe abortion and birth control" (Fabros 1991). For many other women's movements around the globe, the idea of women owning their bodies is similarly not an individualist, exclusionary interest but rather a fundamental condition for women's development and strength as a social group and thus for their full participation as citizens.

But owning our bodies depends integrally on having access to the social resources for assuring our bodies' health and well-being; selfownership and proper caretaking go hand in hand with shared ownership of the commons. The Leveller women and the Daulo women took this basic fact for granted. An urban poor woman like Nora Protacio or a black middle-class woman like Patricia Williams, who have chosen selfpropriety as a conscious rhetorical strategy and part of their feminist identity, know it only too well because of the circumstances of their own and their kinfolks' lives. As part of collective feminist efforts to reclaim a property in our bodies, we must redefine all essential health care and services (and a safe, clean environment, education, housing, a livelihood) as common property to which all people are entitled access. We must reconnect our self-ownership to our right to communal resources. Of
course, in a world where the language of social need and common ownership is rapidly disappearing in the universal babel of the market (which so easily co-opts the idea of individual choice), this would almost mean turning the world upside down. The language of reproductive freedom is still burdened with 300 years of the dominant Euro-American model of dichotomization between self and community, body and society. But I am convinced that language has as much resilience and power to transform as do the social movements that deploy it and the politics they reinvent.

REFERENCES


