

**MAKING FEMINISM MATTER AGAIN**

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“Making Feminism Matter Again” analyzes new shifts in gender and their social representations in feminist theory. I take as my point of departure the “crisis” of feminism and the loss of its explanatory and transformative effectivity in the wake of the cultural turn, which, I argue, was a class development in feminism brought on by the economic crisis of profit in capitalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. I question its main assumptions of gender, articulated in texts by Derrida, Foucault, Negri, Fraser, Butler, Gibson-Graham, Sandoval, Probyn, Wiegman, Felski and others, for the way they culturally rewrite materialist concepts such as “class,” “division of labor,” “ideology,” and “history” and represent cultural shifts in gender as “constitutive” of material change—and ultimately as progress—for women within capitalism.

“Making Feminism Matter Again” re-examines the historical significance of cultural shifts, including shifts in feminist theory as well as new gendered forms of work (“caring” and “service labor”), family, consumption, diet, clothing, sexuality, and love. In analyzing gender now, I demonstrate that culturalism analytically dissolves gender into autonomous differences and “ethics,” and uses cultural values to obscure over the crisis of transnational capitalism’s class relations and deepening economic exploitation of women. As a result, cultural feminisms are not an intervention but an affirmation of the way things are.

I argue for a historical materialist theory of gender in the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Alexandra Kollontai, Eleanor Leacock, and such contemporary critics

as Angela Davis, Delia Aguilar, Elizabeth Armstrong, and Teresa Ebert, which shows that permutations in gender are not new because the wage-labor/capital relations that exploit women have not changed. Instead the changes are an updating of gender to adjust women to changes in the division of labor under which surplus-value is extracted.

In the intersection of labor theory and cultural theory, “Making Feminism Matter Again” maps the material relations of gender now. This map is also a materialist re-mapping of feminist theory and the development of a new model for a materialist analytics of gender as a way to contribute to restoring the explanatory and transformative effectivity of feminism now.

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## PREFACE

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*This dissertation is dedicated to my sisters, Bridget Cotter and Melinda Morris—who know all too well the ruthlessness of capitalism on women and the need for feminism in the interests of the working class..*



## **PART I: A WAKE FOR FEMINISM**

## 1.0 FEMINISM IN CRISIS

Along with the end of ideology, the end of history, and the end of socialism, feminism is also said to have ended. The “end” projects are, of course, all grounded in a theology and their goal is to put certain practices such as ideology, history or socialism, outside the reach of history. My goal here is not to offer a reading of the “end of feminism” as a supersession of the existing material relations of economic exploitation and social injustice, and therefore a new opening to history (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*) or a re-writing of the “ends” before this “end” (Jean François Lyotard, “Re-writing Modernity”). Rather, I am interested in the specific project of the “end of feminism” in the sense of an exhaustion. Feminism is said to have been exhausted (“ended”) because, for example, it is believed that the project of women’s freedom is over. It is over, the argument goes, because feminism is in “crisis.” Feminism has lost its way. Many women have become successful and have abandoned projects concerned with women’s freedom, others hope to become successful and talk about “post-feminism,” and many have simply given up and have concluded that there is no feminism, the project is finished.

The notion that feminism is in “crisis” is, of course, by no means new and has been a major theme of feminism itself, particularly in the decades following World War II and the material conditions of the West at the end of “the long boom” of capitalism roughly from the end of World War II to the oil crisis of 1973. In a sense, feminism has always been in crisis in that historically it came to being in the material crisis of the so called “democratic” societies of capitalism and their continuing social injustice, economic inequality, and exploitation. What has changed is the way the “crisis” has been interpreted and the strategies deployed to deal with it.

These interpretations range from a purely culturalist understanding of the crisis theorized as “patriarchy” (see Shulamith Firestone’s recently re-released book *The Dialectic of Sex*); through a poststructuralist analysis based on the crisis of sexuality and the body theorized in terms of language and its performativity (see Diane Elam’s *Feminism and Deconstruction*, Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies*, and Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*); and a “transnational” analysis based on the crisis of the “transnational-local civil society” (as in Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan’s *Scattered Hegemonies*); to a historical materialist re-understanding of “crisis” in terms of labor theory (see Teresa Ebert’s *Ludic Feminism and After*, Lindsay German’s *Sex, Class and Socialism*, and *Science and Society*’s January 2005 special issue on *Marxist-Feminist Thought Today* edited by Martha Gimenez and Lise Vogel).

By most counts, to be clear, contemporary feminists do not actually openly declare an “end” to feminism as do conservative cultural critics (see, for example, Kay Hymowitz’s “The End of Herstory” and Phyllis Schlafly’s *Feminist Fantasies*, 2003). To openly declare an “end” to feminism is considered to be an act of closure and a denial of difference. For example, the Introduction to *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century* (an anthology in which prominent postmodern feminists such as Judith Butler, Biddy Martin, Rosi Braidotti, Rey Chow, Lauren Berlant and others discuss the “end of feminism” and feminisms’ futures), Misha Kavka suggests that the question of “end” inevitably:

returns us to the problem of feminism being a set of practices without a single definition, rather than a practice that has overreached its own goal. The problem is not that the project has been completed. On the contrary given that feminism lacks a single origin as much as a single definition, it can also have no single moment of ending. (xi)

In other words, to posit an “end” implies a beginning, an origin, and a presence. Contemporary feminism—by which I mean primarily the dominant feminist theories of gender, sexuality, and difference canonized in poststructuralist, postmodernist, postcolonial, and postmarxist theories—does not openly use the concept of “end” because “end” (*telos*), like “origin” (*arche*), is considered to be an absolute and as an absolute it is a “totality.” Moreover, as a totality “end” is premised upon “presence” and as a “presence” it is understood to be based on the repression of “absence.” Much of contemporary feminism is, therefore, careful not to talk overtly about an “end” on the grounds that “end” presupposes a closural conception of feminism and women and thus denies the ongoing differences of feminisms.

However, while no one actually dares to utter the word “end” for fear that they may be read as too closural, linear, or reductive, the discourses of contemporary feminism are haunted by the spectre of the “end.” Contemporary feminism alludes to and hints at an “end,” without openly declaring an end to feminism, by evoking a “crisis” in the “old” mode of feminism and the emergence of a “new” mode of feminism. For example, for several decades now, contemporary feminists—along with cultural theorists—have hinted at an end by alluding to the end of so called *modern* feminism and evoking a “new” mode of what has most commonly been referred to as *postmodern* feminism. Modern feminism reached its height in what has been called the “second wave” of feminism, which came of political and intellectual age in the material conditions of the West immediately following World War II, particularly during the “long boom” of capitalism a period of unprecedented growth of the capitalist economy—as well as intense economic disparity worldwide—which led to the expansion of the welfare state and the culture industries in the West including the universities. To varying degrees, feminism at this time contested over how to explain “women” as a social collectivity. Some, such as Betty Friedan in

her book *The Feminine Mystique*, saw this collectivity as an existential identity whose “universal” interests were met by women obtaining an equal share of upper-middle class life enabled by the prosperity of the long boom. Others, such as radical feminist Shulamith Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex*) and socialist feminist Heidi Hartman (“The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism”) saw women as a separate “class” from “men” whose material interests for economic freedom and social justice could only be satisfied by a revolution in family and sexual relations and by women receiving the benefits of social democracy and the welfare state (in forms such as payment for domestic labor). Still others such as Angela Davis explained “women” as a product of the division of labor in class society and, moreover, argued that women could not be freed from economic inequality and social injustice without freedom from class relations and, hence, they could not be freed without transformation of the capitalist social relations of production (see, for example, *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*).

These contestations over women as a social collectivity and how to collectively transform material relations as a means of bringing about economic equality and restoring social justice for all women have long been thought of in contemporary feminism as having reached a “crisis” and collapsed (“ended”) under the weight of their own discursive and cultural contradictions. *All* understandings of “women” as a social collectivity situated in a totality of social relations—regardless of whether this was understood as an ahistorical existential identity, or an independent “class,” or a labor force explainable by wage-labor/capital relations—have been taken to be forms of “reductivism” that re-inscribe in women a fixed identity or essence. The “reasons” offered by feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Judith Butler, Diane Elam, and Drucilla Cornell for the collapse or “end” of these debates is that the very notion of “woman” contained within it an epistemological “crisis” that made it impossible to serve as a ground of collective action and

material transformation. To attempt to explain the “difference” of gender by a historical and material outside that would situate women as a social collectivity has been considered to be an act of discursive violence that “prescribes an exclusive identification for a multiply constituted subject ... [and] enforce[s] a reduction and a paralysis . . . at the expense of race or sexuality or class or geopolitical positioning/displacement” (Butler, *Bodies* 116). This particularly took the form of cleansing Marxism from feminist theory and from explaining the relationship of gender, sexuality, and difference to issues of class, labor, the social relations of production, and wage-labor/capital relations (exploitation). Marxism was considered, in the words of Gayle Rubin, a ‘dismal exercise’ for feminism (“Thinking Sex” 33). Taken as sure signs of the “old” reductivism of “modernist” cultural critique, therefore, is any emphasis on issues of solidarity and collectivity in politics, matters of universality and conceptuality in epistemology and philosophy, positions regarding any grounding material conditions of production that lie “outside” of gender and sexuality and explain them, particularly class, labor, and production, as well as concerns of historical and dialectical development, liberation, emancipation, and revolution.

The “new” in this case has been characterized by the irreducible singularities of differences such as gender and sexuality. Differences in this mode of feminism are seen as cultural and culture itself has most often been primarily understood as the discursive. When class is addressed in these discourses, it has been treated primarily as a cultural difference (rather than a material relation and structure of conflicts) and, therefore, a matter of “textuality,” a “self-inventing” discourse that is (semi)autonomous from material conditions of production. In the dominant discourses of contemporary feminism, “race matters,” “gender matters,” “sexuality matters” and they “matter” as autonomous or “irreducible” singularities. Politics, in these terms,

was retheorized as an “ethics of difference”—of the disclosure of established meanings in culture and the social representations founded on these meanings. The “end” or “crisis” of “modern feminism” and the ushering in of this new “postmodern” era of differences seemingly autonomous from questions of grounding material conditions in capitalism was given enormous credibility in feminism and cultural theory generally as an emerging transnational capital was dismantling the welfare state and trade-unions once useful to capital, moving from Fordist mass-production to niche-marketing, pulling women and persons of color *en masse* into the labor force, and re-organizing the social division of labor from “domestic” (national) production to (trans)national production.

Today, however, this “end/new” is itself by no means new, it the old “end/new” of “New Times,” “post-Fordism” and “postmodernism”—set by a *fledgling* transnational capitalism which sought to break up workers collectivities and solidarity, break up the welfare state once useful for production for profit, and de-regulate the nation-state limits on “free trade.” This old “end/new” is now in the midst of being re-articulated into a new “end/new” under the rubric of “globalization,” “transnationalism,” or “cosmopolitanism.” One of the signs that the old “new” is now under duress and coming into “crisis” is that the spectre of the “end” has once again been raised in feminism and cultural theory generally. In her widely discussed essay “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” for example, Wendy Brown re-examines the academic institutionalization of *postmodern* feminism and laments: “why, when we looked so closely at this project for which we had fought so hard and that was now academically institutionalized, could we find no *there* there?” (80). In Robyn Wiegman’s anthology *Women Studies On Its Own*, which takes Brown’s 1997 essay as its point of departure, feminist theorists such as Wiegman, Rachel Lee, Sneja Gunew, Diane Elam, Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal are absorbed with the

quandary of how to come to grips with what they characterize as the current “crisis,” “impasse,” “malaise,” and “paralysis” not of *modern* but of *postmodern* feminism. Moreover, Misha Kavka codifies the “crisis” in the following terms:

the very terms through which we might now seek to define feminism have been refined, pluralized, displaced, and/or deconstructed to the point where they hardly seem available anymore, certainly not if one claims to be defining feminism on behalf of ‘women.’ Which brings us to the paradox of being involved in a political practice that can no longer define itself as a practice, let alone define its goals. (x)

Feminism, now in its poststructuralist and post-poststructuralist incarnations, according to the assumptions of its own proponents, seems once again to have exhausted itself. It has, so the story goes, become paralyzed by its own assumptions and criticisms to the point in which it has come into a “crisis” under the weight of its own immanent discursive contradictions; it has imploded (ended) and now, it is claimed, it is again time for something “new.” This is part of the spectre of a broader “end” in which “postmodern cultural theory,” as Timothy Brennan suggests, has “finally been placed on the defensive” by which he means that it is “forced to explain itself to the public sphere” which includes not merely traditional liberal humanists but others on the “left” (*At Home* 96). Many cultural critics are now suggesting that postmodern cultural theory (especially poststructuralism), with its logic of “undecidability,” its denial of any historical foundation upon which to base effective political praxis, and its fetishizing of the local, contingent, and aleatory, has made it virtually impossible for anyone to conclude or decide on any collective plan of action, except the plan of remaining undecided and undecidable. Brennan charges that rather than offering a progressive politics that challenges existing social configurations, postmodern



cultural theory has lent itself to creating a cultural climate of “political abstention” (82) which “destroys the very means of possibility of liberatory thinking” (93) by reducing all forms of collectivity, organization, and political plans of action to the hegemony of the “state” (84). Consequently, contemporary feminists such as Kavka are now suggesting that “feminism has—perhaps—been through the era of differences, learned its lessons and is now moving on” (xxiii).

The new “new” in feminism is now being articulated around a “transnational feminism” and such issues as how to forge an *ethical* “unity” through transnational-local values such as Chela Sandoval’s notion of “post-modern love,” new forms of “governance” via non-governmental organizations—an ethical unity across lines of difference. Transnational feminism, to be clear, is in many ways reworking and updating “postmodern” feminism in response to what is being called its constitutive “crisis.” For example, in the Introduction to their anthology *Scattered Hegemonies*, transnational feminists Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue that the postmodernism of Lyotard and others has maintained a localizing ethnocentric focus on Western texts and restricted debate to aesthetics and culture at the exclusion of politics (3-5). They argue that, in its references to “the circuits of transnational capital,” poststructuralism has lent support to “construct[ing] an apolitical collage of locations and people, linked not through their historicized social relations but through their mystified experiences as players in a field of global travel” (7-8). As a consequence, they argue, it has been “unable to account for contemporary global conditions” (1) and produce an effective politics that intervenes in them.

Yet at the same time while they distance themselves from poststructuralism, they hold on to poststructuralist politics. For instance, they reject the notion of emancipation and revolution and re-state Foucault’s notion that what can be done under capitalism is “resistance.” In their essay “Transnational Feminist Cultural Studies: Beyond the Marxism/Poststructuralism/

Feminism Divides” Grewal and Kaplan further argue, “there is no space outside of [existing] power configurations,” and no “binary” position from which to overthrow them, and thus feminism must “negotiate” within the existing structures of violence and power (356). This view is based on the notion of power that Foucault spelled out in *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1. For Foucault, power is autonomous from any “general system of domination” such as capitalism “exerted by one group over another” (92). Power relations have their own “immanent logic” that is “not . . . the effect of another instance that ‘explains’ them” (94-95). This is, to be clear, in direct contrast to the Marxist understanding that “power” derives from the private ownership and control of the means of production—of the material resources of society and the ends and interests to which they are put—and is thus, at its basis, the capacity to command over the surplus-labor of others. By contrast, Foucault claims, “relations of power are not in superstructural positions” to production (94). Instead, power is a “multiplicity of force relations” that “comes from everywhere” (93). Moreover, there is no material basis for revolutionary struggle “instead, there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case” (96). Power cannot be overthrown because “there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations” (94).

In the presumed absence of structural connections of class relations, transnational feminism articulates the “unity” of various local sites—between the “local” and its global context—on the basis of what Derrida called “a link of affinity, suffering and hope” (*Spectres of Marx* 85): affect, values, tastes and *consumption*. “Transnationalism” is signaled by the fact that “one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald’s food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and ‘retro’ clothes in Hong Kong” (Lyotard, *Postmodern* 76). The “transnational-local” relation is understood to be brought about by what Bruce Robbins

calls “feeling global,” by which he means ethical responsibility to “others” in the world. This “transnational-localism” is the hallmark of a call for a “new global civil society”—what Spivak in an interview with David Plotke called “globe girdling”—composed of a combination of “nongovernmental” organizations (NGOs) and locally based activist groups that serve as a foundation for a new global citizenship. Following this logic, Michael Clough has argued that, “our best and perhaps only chance to bring into being a more peaceful, humane and equitable world is to give civil society a greater role in governance” (16). Translated into “concrete” terms, this means an “ethical consumerism” (Yúdice) and “enlightened donorship” (Spivak) on the part of those in the “North” and the development of new consumer publics through redistributions of resources in the south. Along these lines, Spivak argues for a “southern global resistance” in which she claims that “local initiatives . . . brought on in the name of sustainable development are constituting themselves as a transnational network and are the new global front . . . In this sense, local initiatives are immediately global” (Spivak and Plotke 6).

But how “resistant” to capitalism is this transnational-local “resistance”? In the context of transnational-localism, “hard-core economic resistance,” as Spivak defines it, involves not an abolition of capital but “reallocating the uses of capital” (8). That is, it involves a radical democratic “redistributive use of capital” (11). Now that transnational capital has, relatively speaking, matured it has reached a new level of class contradictions in which it is currently embroiled in an imperialist battle to re-divide the surplus-labor of the globe and export capital to maintain profit. “Values” have emerged as the “new” horizon through which the culture of capital attempts to suture together in a spiritual unity the isolated workers whose lives have been materially fractured by the onslaught of transnational capitalism into all levels of social and economic collectivity. The postmodern ethics of difference once used by capital to help re-

organize its division of labor and break up worker's solidarity is currently being re-articulated today into a "new" "post-difference" hegemony of values to enable transnational capitalism to bring together isolated workers as new consumers.

In the cultural aftermath of "9/11" and the so called "war on terror," moreover, the spectre of the "end" and positing of a "new" has grown even more exaggerated. The plays of the sign seem to be coming to a grinding halt as many contemporary feminists are all the more eager to dispense with once engrossing meditations on the fate of the signifier in order to embrace a "post-difference" spiritual unity in the family, the state, and neo-conservative civic "values" of a "new era." Judith Butler, who became an academic feminist "star" in the 1980s and 1990s by rejecting the state and its norms against freedom of sexuality and desire in such books as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, after 9/11 (through a relay in which she formally distances herself from the Bush regime) defended the state and its "anti-terrorist" measures ("Guantanamo Limbo"). Similarly, Drucilla Cornell who in 1992 argued against Enlightenment concepts as reinscribing a "fixed essence" to women in *Beyond Accommodation*, now has turned to the romanticism of Kant's notion of "ideal humanity" as a way of coping with "terrorism." While (like Butler) she formally distances her argument from the practices of the Bush regime in the wake of 9/11 toward all persons whom it considered "un-American," the core of her argument is that "we are part of the ideal of humanity no matter what we do" ("Facing" 173). By this logic, too, the terrorizing practices of the Bush Administration and its pre-emptive class aggressions on behalf of U.S. capital against workers—and women—all over the world are also dissolved into this ideal humanity! In the "roundtable" discussion, "Restoring Feminist Politics to Poststructuralist Critique," between Susan Lurie, Hortense Spillers, Tania Modleski, Ann Cvetkovich, and Jane Gallop (and introduced by Carla Kaplan), several of the participants

suggest that feminism has now arrived at a “post-poststructuralist” historical moment in which the lessons of poststructuralism have been thoroughly assimilated and, echoing the sentiments of the ailing Democratic Party, declare that it is time to “update” feminism to focus on moral values (Lurie *et al*, 679; 680; 688).

At each stage contemporary feminism does not openly declare an “end” to feminism as such, but feminists have alluded to an “end” by invoking a “crisis” in the “old” mode of feminism under the weight of its immanent contradictions and positing a “new” and “improved” mode of feminism. In much of contemporary feminism the so called “crisis,” “end,” or “impossibility” of feminism, in fact, has been and continues to be considered the *sine qua non* of feminism itself. For example, the notion that feminism is “in crisis” and has arrived at a moment in history in which any terms through which it is possible to define a coherent project of social transformation are no longer historically available—that is, that they have been “exhausted” and “ended”—is itself taken as a sign by many contemporary feminists that *feminism is working*. “The change marked by ‘post’,” Kavka remarks in her discussion of the crisis of feminism, “thus happened while we were *doing* feminism; the change happened *because* we were doing feminism” (xi). This, however, is itself a “progress” narrative of feminism. Feminism, in this story, has been on an autonomous discursive and ethical pilgrimage toward the spiritual resolution of material contradictions in capitalism. Through this pilgrimage away from modernism and toward postmodernism and now “transnationalism,” feminism (it is assumed) has made *progress*: it has now, so the story goes, transitioned from a movement once solely absorbed with valuing the desires and discontents of white, upper-middle class, heterosexual women to one that values the differences in desires and discontents of races, classes, sexualities, ethnicities, (trans)nationalities and so on. The transitions in the dominant canonical conceptions of feminism

from “modern” to “postmodern” and increasingly to “transnational” theories of feminism is offered as a story of the “success” feminism has made and continues to make as a movement.

The historical “evidence” offered by contemporary feminists for the “success” of feminism as a result of “the change marked by ‘post’” is that feminism has now achieved an unprecedented level of “success” in various cultural and political institutions around the world. In her recent *Signs* article, “The Semiotics of Premature Burial: Feminism in a Postfeminist Age,” Mary Hawkesworth reinforces this position by suggesting that feminism after the “post” has experienced “unprecedented growth.” It is now a major feature of government institutions, the media, the academy, and non-governmental organizations (961-962). In her book *Literature After Feminism*, Rita Felski suggests contemporary feminism’s success can be measured by the fact that “Feminist criticism is a widespread and well-known field of study that [...] has had more impact on the teaching of literature than any other recent school of criticism. It has generated innumerable books, conferences, and articles and has its own phalanx of superstars” (5). Now, the institutional “success” of feminism after the “post”—the canonization of “post” modes of feminism—is considered to be constitutive of the effectivity of these canonical discourses toward bringing about “progress” for women. So much so that as I marked above, many contemporary feminists are suggesting that it is now time to move on to a new era of feminism; by which they mean feminism free from “old” debates about economic exploitation and social injustice. Rita Felski argues that now that feminism is “an established institution, not a fragile and delicate seedling,” it is time to “sort through” feminism and determine “what is worth keeping and what is not” (5). In a recent interview for Stacy Gillis *et al*’s *Third Wave Feminism* (2004), Elaine Showalter argues that feminism “cannot pretend anymore that no women have power” (“Interview” 61-62). Thus, she concludes, it is time to “let go of feminism” altogether

and its “out of date” focus on the “powerlessness” of women which, she claims, has “gotten in the way” of making alliances for real change. Similarly, in her anthology *Women’s Studies on its Own*, Robyn Wiegman remarks that feminists today work “within [...] positions of power that feminism in the academy has made possible” (2). Moreover, she contends that on the basis of working within these positions of power, feminism (particularly in the academy) now can turn away from the questions of power and inequality that dominated the discussion of feminism in earlier generations and up through the 1980s and 1990s and “think about the field otherwise” (3).

While contemporary feminists formally distance themselves from narratives of “progress” and “end,” they in fact *assume* various “end(s)” to feminism by virtue of its own success (progress) within capitalism. Although they don’t openly declare an end to feminism, and therefore keep talk about feminism alive, the dominant understanding of feminism’s “crisis”—and the transition from the “old” to the “new”—is grounded on the assumption that feminism (or at least earlier generations of feminism) has achieved and accomplished what it set out to and that in the contemporary historical situation the “older” goals of social transformation for the emancipation of women from social injustice and economic inequality are no longer relevant today.

These perceptions of feminism and its “crisis” are part of a class narrative of feminism that puts forward the interpretation of “free” and “freedom” in purely cultural and legal senses. For example, since, at least on the social surfaces, (some) women in transnational capitalism are seemingly more “free” to express their differences and desires in cultural values—from miniskirts to *hijab*, from subsistence farmers to corporate C.E.O.s, from hip-hop artists to Secretary of State, from “soccer moms” to queer urban tribeswomen—women are deemed to have material freedom. But “freedom” of expression (whether the expression of desire or the

expression of discontent) is an empty freedom because it is a conversion of the material into the cultural. It suppresses the material conditions under which specific freedoms become possible. While contemporary feminism has received increasing institutional support and “freedom”—as have *some* women—over the last several decades in the university and other social institutions in the culture of capitalism, the material conditions of the majority of women’s lives in the international division of labor have severely deteriorated. While in the last 30 years capitalism has pulled more women than ever before into the paid workforce—and given new cultural freedoms to women to accommodate these shifts—the gap between rich and poor has grown astronomically and along with it the vast majority of women have sunk deeper and deeper into poverty. For instance: “Working outside the home and being economically independent means [women] don’t have to answer to any man, but the ‘race to the bottom’ on which the expansion of global capital is being built means that, typically, this work entails long hours at low wages and makes caring for children very difficult” (Horgan).

It is its conversion of the material into the cultural—that is, the translation of the economic contradictions of capitalism into “new” cultural values—that is really at the heart of the crisis of feminism today and is my main object of study: how feminism has been appropriated and converted from a struggle for economic equality and freedom from exploitation through the transformation of material relations of production in capitalism into a social movement for cultural *values*, whether they are “left” values (open desires, border-crossing, performativities of sexualities, hybridities and transnationalities) or “right” values (family values, abstinence, motherhood, virginity, patriotism and nationalism). This is also to say that the crisis of feminism is the “crisis” of its cultural theory—and of the “Cultural Turn”—and the fact that feminism after the Cultural Turn has been increasingly unable to explain the deepening of



economic inequality alongside dramatic cultural changes for women in transnational capitalism. This dissertation is an investigation into and explanatory critique of the “Cultural Turn” in feminism which has converted gender and sexuality into matters of cultural signification, values, tastes, affect, aesthetics and confined the material terrain of struggle and freedom for women to teasing out local sites of textual and cultural resistance in the culture of transnational capitalism, to lifestyle reform, to new transnational-local modes of governance (“state”) within capitalism, and to new transnational codes of affect, caring, civility, tastes and consumption.

## TWO

The question remains, how do we understand and explain the crisis of feminism? What is the relationship between the “old” and the “new”? What, to put it another way, is the relation of gender, sexuality, and feminism to historicity? In facing the prevalence that the “end of feminism” (like other “end” projects) has had in the contemporary cultural discussions about gender and sexuality, and the question of whether or not feminism continues to be an urgent and viable social practice “at all” or is “finished,” we are at the same time confronted with the question regarding *why* this has become a problem to begin with? Why, in short, has it become an urgent social and political matter and the focus of extended social and cultural debate? As Donald Morton has put it in his essay “Pataphysics of the Closet: Queer Theory as the Art of Imaginary Solutions for Unimaginary Problems,” in such situations,

we face a fundamental philosophical and political question about the status of questions: what makes a social question appear on the historical horizon as at one stage *a question*, then at another stage as *a significant question*, and then at yet another stage as *an urgent question*? Questions simply do not exist in the

“timeless,” “a-historical” realm of “good/bad ideas”; indeed what makes a question recognizable as a “good/bad idea” are certain historical and material conditions which enable its very appearance. (Morton 7)

In like manner, I argue that *all* theoretical problems and questions that are considered to be “urgent,” “valuable” or “new” subjects of public discussion and debate, do not make their appearance or become the center of heated philosophical, cultural and political debate in society, come into “crisis,” or become “passé” because they are trans-historical and trans-social matters of the existential human condition. Nor do they do so spontaneously as an effect of a pan-historical, floating, and self-inventing discourse that collapses under the weight of its own immanent textual and cultural contradictions. They are not, to put it another way, endowed with an “autonomous” cultural value. Rather, what make particular questions emerge and become the subject of political and cultural debate—what makes them “valuable”—are the historical and material conditions that enable their production to begin with; namely the class relations in which they become possible.

In his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx put this forward in the following way: humankind “inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation” (21). Whether the issue is “*hijab*,” “gay marriage,” “weapons of mass destruction,” “the death of Derrida,” “terrorism,” “national security” “the ‘crisis’ of theory,” or “the end of feminism” the appearance of particular philosophical, social, political, or ethical questions on the cultural and discursive agenda of the day—and the urgency or “value” they take on in cultural debate—is a product of material developments and transformations in the mode of production and the effect

this has on social life. Ideas and values—including our changing values of gender, sexuality, what is meant by “feminism,” and whether or not it has a “future”—do not have their own autonomous meaning and value. Instead, they are a product of the material relations of production obtaining at the time; class contradictions in production that are “fought out” at the level of ideas in public discussion and debate but that can only, ultimately, be materially resolved by material transformation (see also Morton 7-15).

In the canonical understandings of feminism institutionalized by “post” theories, “crisis,” the relationship between the “old” and “new” or, to be more precise, the relation of gender, sexuality and feminism to historicity, is explained primarily as a *re-writing* which has not ended but is an interminable and indeterminable process (having no origin, presence, or end) of repetition and substitution. For several decades, contemporary feminism has invoked what it understands to be a *constitutive* “crisis” of the category “woman” and, as a consequence, declaring what Judith Butler (following Ernesto Laclau’s article “Beyond Emancipation”) has called the “unrealizability of emancipation” (“Poststructuralism and Postmarxism” 8) as a way to explain the various “phases” or “waves” of feminism and moreover, the relation of gender, sexuality, and feminism to historicity. Feminism as a historical and collective project of social transformation to emancipate women from economic inequality and social injustice in capitalism has “ended,” so this argument goes, because it is constitutively impossible. Such a project of social transformation is constitutively impossible, it is assumed, on the grounds that the subject of feminism—women—is always already in *conceptual* and *epistemological* crisis.

In the classic poststructuralist feminist interview of Jacques Derrida by Christie MacDonald, “Choreographies,” Derrida advanced the notion of a constitutive impossibility of feminism as a coherent theory or political project of emancipation of women from conditions of

oppression and exploitation on the grounds that “woman” and her “history” are textualities that are in a state of permanent conceptual crisis:

Perhaps woman does not have a history, not so much because of any notion of the “Eternal Feminine” but because all alone she can resist and step back from a certain history (precisely in order to dance) in which revolution, or at least the “concept” of revolution, is generally inscribed. That history is one of continuous progress, despite the revolutionary break—oriented in the case of the women’s movement towards the reappropriation of woman’s own essence, her own specific difference, oriented in short towards a notion of woman’s truth. Your “maverick feminist” showed herself ready to break with the most authorized, the most dogmatic form of consensus, one that claims (and this is the most serious aspect of it) to speak out in the name of revolution and history. Perhaps she was thinking of a completely other history: a history of paradoxical laws and non-dialectical discontinuities, a history of absolutely heterogeneous pockets, irreducible particularities, of unheard of and incalculable sexual differences; a history of women who have—centuries ago—“gone further” by stepping back with their lone dance, or who are today inventing sexual idioms at a distance from the main forum of feminist activity with a kind of reserve that does not necessarily prevent them, from subscribing to the movement and even, occasionally, from becoming a militant for it. (167)

“Woman” is, according to this classic poststructuralist narrative, first and foremost a literary category—an indeterminable and undecidable text that cannot be explained on the basis of conditions of material necessity. That is, according to poststructuralism, “woman” cannot be

explained on the basis of any determinate historical and material conditions that produce gender and sexuality without re-inscribing an illusory notion of female “existence” (the “Eternal Feminine”). To situate women in terms of a definite material history of social relations, and locate women in a structure of material conflicts—for example, to locate “woman” as an historical subject of class relations—is understood to project an *a priori* and fixed identity of woman, a pre-conceived notion of woman’s place in social relations and an idealist notion of historical progress. Such concepts of “woman,” “history,” “material conditions,” “revolution,” “emancipation,” were all considered by Derrida to be a form of metaphysics on the grounds that all conceptualization—all explanation—is a fantasy of reason because explanatory concepts presuppose that one can go beyond language and explain its outside. It presupposes a “referent” or “outside” to language that, according to the speculative philosophy of poststructuralism, is itself produced by the textualities of the inside of language. The “concept of the concept,” Derrida continues, “along with the entire system that attends it, belongs to a prescriptive order” (175). Thus, for example, to explain gender and sexuality in terms of an underlying history of material relations that produce gender and sexual difference is not only to posit an illusory “origin” it is also to re-inforce a “law of the proper place” for woman (168). In other words, it unleashes a form of discursive violence against women by re-inscribing a closural understanding of sexual difference and in doing so it confines women to a prescriptive order of sexual difference (167, 174-175). Unable to transcend language and provide any reliable knowledge of an outside, feminism constitutively—by necessity—ends before it begins by the play of the sign. That is, feminism as an historical project of social transformation to bring about economic equality and social justice becomes “impossible” owing to the constitutive “crisis” of “woman.” “End” is not actually eliminated rather, it is translated into a process of indeterminable repetition

and substitution: the notion that there is no historical and material outside to feminisms, there are feminisms, that there have always been feminisms, and that there will always be feminisms. Feminism, in other words, is not historical—it is not a historical project of social change that intervenes in and transforms historical, and therefore, changeable material relations—rather it is an interminable and undecidable mode of talking, writing, and knowing.

But what is the notion of “constitutive crisis” embedded in the theory of history as an interminable and undecidable process of repetition and substitution, except itself a theory of necessity/non-necessity? Indeed, “Choreographies” is riddled with re-inscribing—as “other,” “unnecessary,” “inappropriate,” and “outside” to feminism—questions about historical material relations outside of literary configurations of “women.” For example, in his elaboration of poststructuralist feminist reading through the trope “hymen,” Derrida suggests:

One could say quite accurately that the hymen *does not exist*. Anything constituting the value of existence is foreign to the ‘hymen.’ And if there were hymen—I am not saying if the hymen existed—property value would be no more appropriate to it for reasons that I have stressed in the texts to which I refer. (181-182)

In the course of deconstructing a historical material “outside” or “referent” to the “literary” (the textualities of the inside) and specifically “woman” as a literary category, Derrida presupposes all sorts of binaries between accurate/inaccurate, existence/not-existence, constitutive/non-constitutive, foreign/native, property value/hymen-al value, appropriate/inappropriate—all of which reproduce a binary “inside/outside” and a *foundation* or notion of “causality” (i.e., “for reasons that I have stressed in the texts to which I refer”), but an “inside” and “foundation” now *cleansed of their relationship to historical and material relations for women in transnational*

*capitalism*. Namely in the process of deconstructing an “outside,” that is, “anything constituting the value of existence,” and naming the textualities of the inside “hymen,” Derrida *excludes* as “inappropriate” and “foreign” to “hymen” (and really, in this sense, also as OTHER to *feminism* which is reduced in poststructuralism to a mode of reading and writing called hymen) all sorts of questions about how the “textualities of the inside” *become* the inside. On what grounds (and Derrida does assume a “ground” and “cause” since he refers to *reasons*), can anything or any question (such as the question of “property value”) be said to be *inappropriate* (which assumes a notion of *appropriate* and *the proper!*) or *foreign* (which constructs an *other* to what is inclusive of *value*) to ‘hymen’—without also turning hymen (which is one of many terms that Derrida uses to advance a historically specific mode of speculative idealist reading in the West called poststructuralism) into an unquestioned, transhistorical *value* and fixed identity—if indeed one cannot explain an outside to the assumed value? In short, poststructuralism assumes a value to the textual maneuvers and mode of reading Derrida calls hymen *over*, for example, a mode of reading that assigns a property value to hymen. It *excludes* from historical explanation and marks as “*outside*” and *other* to what is “*appropriate*” any question of where its own mode of reading (and what is understood as an “appropriate,” “native,” “inside” reading) gets its “value.” In doing so it assumes a fixed identity and self-evident value to a particular brand of speculative philosophy in the post-War years in the West. Moreover, what poststructuralism does is bypass the question of how “value” becomes “value”—the historical material “outside” that produces values as “valuable”—and simply displaces one mode of valuing (e.g., property value) with another (e.g., literary value) and treats the latter as a self-producing and, therefore, self-evident value.

How does “value” *become* “value”? How, for example, do we explain what is valued as “valuable” without turning it into a fixed identity which tautologically or self-evidently presumes that value has to be recognized as valuable—that it is a self-evident “value”—unless we explain it from its historical and material outside? What, for example, determines the “value” of disbursing the National Guard with “shoot to kill” orders into hurricane ravished New Orleans to protect private property from so called “looters”—those who managed to survive Katrina with only their lives and, by necessity, had to collect food and other necessities to sustain human life wherever they could find it? Or for that matter why did Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice consider it “valuable” to go shopping for a pair of shoes in the thousands of dollars at the Ferragamo in Manhattan as thousands of New Orleans’ predominantly African-American poor, now starving, homeless, and destitute, languished locked in the Superdome—and so “valuable,” in fact, that it also became “valuable” for her to have security physically remove from the store a woman who challenged Rice’s notion of “value” by questioning why Rice would “shop for shoes while thousands are dying and homeless” (“Breaking: Condi Rice”). These terms and conceptions of value get their *values* from the private property relations of capital and therefore from historical and material relations *outside* of the immanent play of signification. Hurricane Katrina—not as an “act of god,” a “natural disaster,” or even a social disaster (an “event”) but as an articulation of the social relations of capital—is part of the historical and material outside that explodes the inside of racial segregation, poverty and sickness and throws into sharp relief their relation to production for profit and the protection of private property over material need in transnational capitalism through global militarism. This class relation is hidden by the inside of New Orleans “culture” (of Jazz, Mardi Gras, Bourbon Street, etc.) and now by the “inside” of the culture of “humanitarian relief” (of FEMA, Walmart, Amazon.com, Clinton-Bush Sr. etc.). It is



part of the outside that unmask the inside at all levels and begins to reveal the class interests of feminist and other cultural theories that have canonized the poststructuralist notion that “differences” such as “gender,” “sexuality,” and “race” are discursive categories or errant tropes with no outside (and in doing so have marked out all questions of the “outside” as “inappropriate”). The direction that our concepts (e.g., of “value,” “race,” “inside,” “outside,” “women,” “race,” etc.) take (whether, for example, they are used to “shoot to kill” or feed people) is not determined by the immanent textualities of knowledge and is not a “self-evident” value rather, as Marx argued, it is set by the material relations and level of class struggle in transnational capitalism.

The canonical or “post-” understandings of gender and sexuality in contemporary feminism, such as poststructuralism, have instituted a culturalist analytic of gender, sexuality, difference—and of feminism and its “crisis”—that cleanses from feminism knowledges of the historical and material relations that produce gender and sexuality from its “outside” in transnational capitalism. This does not, as I have marked, get outside of fixed identity. The opposition of poststructuralism to conceptual explanation of a material outside—to theory as explanatory critique of an objective world not its own immanent textualities—has been an opposition to explaining the historical and material relations that produce “woman” as “woman” and “women” as “women.”

Presenting feminism as having no origin and no end puts feminism, and the material conditions through which women are oppressed and exploited, outside of the reach of history—outside of the historical and material conditions that produce them and through which they are transformed—and turns feminism into a theology. If feminism is “originless” or “endless” it is “always already” which is another way of saying that gender and the exploitation and oppression

of women—to which feminism is an historical response—are also “always already.” This represents the conditions that oppress and exploit women as outside the reach of historical and material transformation—as existential conditions of life as such. It cleanses feminism of its relationship to the material contradictions of capitalism and to class struggle. In the notion of the “crisis” of feminism as a process of discursive repetition and substitution, the social and economic inequalities which are an effect of class contradictions that are integral to bourgeois social relations of production (the property and class relations of capitalism) are presented as the “normal” condition of life as such. To think that crisis will end (after capitalism) is therefore, from this perspective not just utopian but rather naive. In the cultural aftermath of “postmodernism,” the canonical feminisms normalize and de-historicize the conditions of life for women under capitalism and its exploitative division of labor as life as such and then obscure the historical character of crisis (contradiction in production) by the un-said of an existential move. It is important to note here that the canonical modes of feminism and cultural studies institutionalized in “post” theories, deny that they make such a move since they are formally a rejection of the existential and existentialism, but they do so by putting forward the notion that all contradictions are ultimately the result of an interminable, endless, epistemological crisis. The implication is that that life IS crisis and since life is an on-going process, then crisis is itself an on-going process not end-able by revolution (which will put an end—by change of social practices—to the crisis). By insisting on crisis as process, life as such is equated with social life under the class system (wage-labor).

These assumptions institutionalized in much of feminism today are a contemporary version of what Eleanor Burke Leacock called “myths of male dominance.” The “myth of male dominance,” Leacock explains, is founded on “the dominant view [...] that women have always

been to some degree oppressed—the usual term is “dominated”—by men” (17). Contemporary feminism seems to have dealt with this view *not* by challenging its basic assumption that the historical conditions and material relations of oppression and exploitation of women (that develop as a result of private property relations) are “always already” a basic condition of life as such. Rather, it has done so by pluralizing within this framework the range of dominations and social inequalities that are “always already” in play. In feminism today, following the inculcation of women *en masse* into the paid labor force in the post-World War II years and, in the cultural imaginary, the dismantling of identity in the wake of poststructuralism, it is not necessarily assumed that women are the subjects only or even mainly of *male* domination. However, what continues to be assumed as a matter of commonsense is, as transnational feminists Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal claim, that “there is no such thing as a feminism free of asymmetrical power relations” (“Transnational Practices” 73)—by which they mean that there is no historical possibility of social relations free from inequality for women and between women. While the “causes” of economic and political inequality in the class relations of capitalism have been “deconstructed” in this view, the *existence* of it is presupposed to be a permanent feature of life. As Leacock explains, such assertions “casually relegate to the wastebasket of history [...] questions about women’s status,” by which she means questions about the material relations of production and the historical conditions under which production takes place, that reproduce “gender,” “sexuality,” “race” and the position of women in society.

### THREE

In recent years the questions of “materialism,” “history” and a historical material “outside” to discourse have returned to feminism with renewed urgency. Contemporary

feminism is having to confront the fact that the reduction of “woman” to a literary category—and the notion of the terrain of feminism as a terrain of interpretation and the teasing out of textual “resistance”—in the canonical understandings of gender and sexuality has coincided with the historical and material deterioration of women’s conditions of life in transnational capitalism. Feminism has to confront the fact that, in capitalism now, its dominant understandings of gender and sexuality have become so redefined and emptied of any explanatory content and relation to the historical development of material contradictions and a coherent project of social transformation to bring about social justice and economic equality for women that feminism is now easily used in the service of transnational capitalism and U.S. imperialism. The wars in Central Asia and the Middle East (which are a thinly disguised armed mugging of the surplus-labor of the “other”), the sexual torture by female soldiers of male inmates at Abu Ghraib prison, the iconization of “Bushwomen” such as Condoleezza Rice and Karen Hughes, and the “remaking” of transnational capitalists such as Martha Stewart—all of which have been defended by transnational capital in the name of “feminism” and “freedom for women”—are impossible to exclude from a feminism cleansed of the relationship of gender and sexuality to class, labor, production and exploitation in transnational capitalism. On what grounds can they be excluded if feminism is not only to be so undecidable as to be rendered open to all interpretations but also if feminism is to be reduced merely to a matter of (re)interpretation?

In an interview for *Signs* (Summer 2004), Nancy Fraser, like many feminists today, distances herself from what she calls the “standard,” “ahistorical” and “self-congratulatory” narrative of progress in feminism in which feminism, through a series of progressive waves, has shifted from a movement dominated by “white middle class heterosexual women” and increasingly become an “inclusive movement that better allows for the concerns of lesbians,

women of color, and/or poor and working-class women” (1109). This story, she points out, is “pre-occupied exclusively with developments inside the movement [and] fails to situate interior changes in relation to broader historical developments and the external climate” (1109). Instead of the “standard” interpretation of progress in feminism, Fraser’s analysis of the phases of feminist history suggest that they should be explained in terms of what she calls the “life cycle of social movements” in which the various so called “waves” of feminism go through an inevitable process of radicalization, normalization, then crisis. For example, in reference to “second wave” or “modern” feminism and the prevalence of social movements which argued for women as part of a social collectivity and the notion that it is possible to fundamentally transform existing material relations, Fraser argues that:

Such moments, of course, do not and cannot last. The heady spirit of the early second wave was followed by a period of normalization in which feminism eventually became more or less integrated into the existing political structures of the various countries in which it was situated. (1107)

Indeed, as I discuss in greater depth in Chapter 2, much of second wave feminism—despite the prevalence of revolutionary rhetoric compared to the feminism of today—limited itself to and became part of the existing structures of capitalism at the time. However, what is of interest for the moment is the way in which Fraser explains *why* this happened. According to Fraser, what accounts for the institutionalization and normalization of respective “waves” of feminism is that such a process is an *inevitable* part of the ebb and flow—the “life cycle”—of radical social movements. Feminism in the post-WWII years, she contends, has gone through a series of “phases”—from modernism, to postmodernism, to “post-nationalism” or “globalization”—each of which has started out as a “radical resistance” to the limits of the last phase but, by an

interminable and indeterminable process of substitution and repetition which she calls the “life cycle of social movements,” each ends up normalized in the structures of capitalism, brought to “crisis” (exhausted) for its failures to continue to advance freedom for women, substituted with a “new” version of feminism for “new” conditions, and then the inevitable “life cycle of social movements” repeats.

This notion of history does not break with the canonical understanding of gender, sexuality, and their crisis rather, it is a cultural updating of them that de-historicizes feminism in the name of materialist analysis of history. For example, the fact that the “New Social Movements” worked on disarticulating gender and other social differences from class and the welfare state at the very same time that a fledgling transnational capital was dismantling the welfare state, deregulating the nation-state, breaking up unions, and incorporating women and persons of color into the workforce *en masse* as cheap labor in order to stave off a period of deep stagnation and decline in its rate of profit is treated in mythical and theological terms. In Fraser’s “story” of “phases” of feminist history, the explanation that is offered for why specific phases of feminism were brought to crisis and lost their political effectivity for social transformation—why the old became the new—is a mystical one of “bad timing” (1112), of “tragic historical irony” (1111), of the “miraculous resurrection” of neo-liberalism in the face of radical social movements (1110), of the “decline” of “utopian energies” (1109), and of history mysteriously bypassing projects that were once valued as “radical” social movements making these values no longer “make sense” (1110). In place of materialist analysis of history, Fraser offers a truncated genealogy of feminism in which there is no historical and material relation between the “old” and the “new.”

In this story, “crisis” again becomes “crisis-as-usual” in which the social contradictions of capitalism—and what capitalism does to adjust itself to new conditions of production and maintain profit—become the *normal working* of feminism. The “cure” for the “crisis-as-usual” is the usual cure to install a “new.” In the face of “crisis,” it is taken for granted as “given” that for feminism to matter again its task is to update itself to produce a “new” feminism—a new set of cultural values of gender and sexuality—for the “new” times. The task of feminism as each so called “wave” begins to unfold, and prior to being brought to crisis, is according to Fraser to produce a “*Zietdiagnose*” (a diagnosis of the times)—a diagnosis of the cultural politics and values that prevail at a particular historical juncture—and on the basis of this *Zietdiagnose* to update its gender and sexual politics accordingly. For instance, according to Fraser, during the time in which social democracy and the welfare state were prevalent, it “made sense to try to marry a feminist perspective with the New Left critique of the welfare state” in order to “extend its egalitarian ethos from class to gender to beyond” (1110, 1111). When “social democracy [was] on the defensive” owing to a “miraculous” return of “neo-liberalism” from the historical dustbin, and feminists were “unable to make headway against the injustices of political economy” it then “made sense” for feminists to give up on questions of political economy and shift focus onto issues of “recognition” and “cultural value” of “difference.” Now that we are moving into a new era of “globalization,” so the story goes, it “makes sense” once again to “update” feminism to the global values and concerns of “the times” by turning to questions of new forms of “state” in “non-governmental organizations” and transnational “civil society.”

This breaking from the “old” and positing of a “new” without examination of their relationship to the material relations of production is part of the social contradictions of capital which—just as it seeks to repackage commodities which can no longer be sold on the market—

also works to update and repackage its culture to reproduce the conditions necessary to maintain social relations of production based on profit. The culture of capital constantly remarkets, repackages, and “renews” itself and, in so doing, represents its culture as “new” and beyond the reach of the history of class relations (exploitation). At the same time, capital is also updating and “renewing” its cultural practices in order to more effectively adjust the workforce to new strategies used to exploit surplus-labor. What the “re-newing” of capitalist culture—the remaking of its “commonsense”—conceals over is that the “new times” in capitalism have always been undergirded by the same old social division of labor between wage-labor and capital—that is, private property relations between those who own the means of production and command over (exploit) the surplus-labor of others who only own their labor to sell in order to survive. What has changed is the level of historical development of laboring practices, the modes in which exploitation takes place, the cultural forms deployed in order to update workers for exploitation in capitalism now. But, as I demonstrate throughout the dissertation in an examination of “new” modes of gender and sexuality—from clothing, to diet and health, to new gendered caring and service labor forces—the basic division between exploiter and exploited has not been transformed and “new” relations and modes of gender and sexuality in transnational capitalism bear the marks of this exploitation and their relation to private property relations.

The notion of “crisis” as a mechanical and interminable process of cultural substitution and repetition is one of the ways in which the structure of intelligibility in contemporary feminism instituted by the canonical—that is, “post”—conceptions of gender and sexuality have bypassed the questions of class, labor, production, capitalism, and exploitation. Fraser’s culturalist analytics of history marginalizes the fact that for example, the focus on an “ethics of difference” and disarticulating gender and sexuality from class and private ownership of the



means of production, “made sense” when a fledgling transnational *capital* was in need—in order to maintain profit—of the dismantling of the welfare state, the breaking up of workers solidarity, and new modes of gender and sexuality to update women as collective producers for capital. This was a time in which, at the end of the long boom, capital fell into stagnation and decline and needed to pull women and more workers of color *as cheap producers of surplus-labor* into the wage-work force and re-arrange the social division of labor and, therefore, transform gender, sexuality, and race practices to accommodate its emerging methods of producing for profit. The old division of labor useful for production for profit which produced the language of “woman” was in the process of being superseded by new divisions of labor useful for production for profit that required a plurality of differences and a new language of “woma/en” (i.e., gender with a *differance*—the ethics of difference and the irreducibility of singularity of the letter “a”). These means of disarticulating the difference of gender from class “made sense” *for capital* at the time and, as a result, they also “made sense” for some class-fractions of women that capital was willing to invest in at the time, so that it could (re)secure the material conditions necessary for production for profit.

The relation between “woman” and “wome/an,” between the old and the new, and the relation of gender, sexuality, and feminism to historicity, is the relation of labor. Capitalism as a social relation based on turning the labor power of the “other” into profit—that is exploitation—has not been transformed, what has changed are the modes through which exploitation takes place and the cultural practices required to update the “other” for new modes of exploitation. “Women” is one of these practices. To put this another way gender is not a literary category or an irreducible cultural difference, it is a social relation of capital. Gender, sexuality and other social differences have become spaces of historical agency and sites of social struggle not owing

to an irreducible difference or inviolable singularity but owing to the division of labor and property relations.

As I have marked in the beginning of this chapter, these practices are also part of a broader tendency in contemporary feminism not particular to Fraser. What Fraser's argument does is indicate the degree to which the dominant historical tendency of feminism to adjust itself to the new cultural values that are *valuable to capital* is institutionalized and normalized as the limits of the possible in the discourses and practices of contemporary feminism. The cultural updating of feminism by means of a process of substitution and repetition is a mode of *class cleansing* of feminism—a ferreting out of feminism its historical and material relationship to class, labor, production, exploitation and class struggle. It is, to put it another way, a means for identifying the class contradictions endemic to capitalism—and the cultural values it produces to maintain production for profit—as the material interest of women for freedom from exploitation. It is this *class cleansing* of gender and sexuality that enables (at the level of culture and ideas) the onslaught of transnational capital and private property relations against social justice and economic equality to be “unwritten” in gender and sexuality today as it is in the discourses of the Bush Administration and its war to transfer wealth from the Middle East and Central Asia into the hands of U.S. capital.

#### FOUR:

In her book *Myths of Male Dominance*, Eleanor Burke Leacock critiques the way in which the historical and material “outside” to gender relations get obscured in culturalist theories and as a result the way in which transformable relations of production get taken for granted as transhistorical and mechanical life processes. For example, in her critique of the “monolithic

structuralism” of Lévi-Strauss’s cultural anthropology, she argues that “the problem arises from his universalization of an historically specific set of relationships” by, for example, “assuming as given male exchange of women, and masculine control of women’s economic and sexual activities” (215). “By taking the exchange of women for granted,” she continues “Lévi-Strauss rules out the necessity of explaining the sexual division of labor itself and of analyzing changes in its form and function” (215). The “sexual division of labor,” she explains, is itself an effect not of a “fixed” set of conditions: “To postulate the relations of men to women as universally relations of people to commodities mystifies the processes whereby marriage took on the character of a commodity relations, and women became ‘objects in men’s transactions’” (216). The task of feminist theory for Leacock, is to explain the material causes of “women’s status” and the materialist conception of history advanced in Marxism is integral to doing so, she argues, because Marxism examines the “historically specific” as “evolved sets of relationships among people as they work under different constraints to maintain and reproduce themselves” (214). Leacock argues that:

Marxist oppositions are never static, reflecting each other at different levels; they are active interrelations, processes that subsume other relations. Rather than endlessly involuting and inverting, Marxist oppositions lead to change, they move to qualitative transformations that involve changed relationships among different levels of social reality as well as changed relations within them. And Marxist dialectics are used to describe processes as they unfold in the context of specific historical circumstances, seen not in the Lévi-Strauss sense of ethnographic context, but in the fully structural sense of production relations. (213)

The historical materialist conception of history in other words understands the “outside” as a structure of material conflicts within which people act not according to an independent will, but on the basis of their material relations of production. Yet, at the same time, these relations themselves are not “fixed” rather, they are materially produced by people as they work—as they labor—under different material constraints and are transformable.

Marxist theorizations of an historical and material outside to “women” such as Leacock’s argument that the outside is a set of *relations* of production, however, have been buried and all but completely forgotten in the cultural intelligibilities of contemporary feminism. “Marxism,” after all is taken to be one of many discourses, values, or modes of interpretation. To use Marxist analysis to understand different “locals” has, for example, been read widely in canonical feminisms as a Eurocentric narrative of history and an instance of “cultural imperialism.” This is the case, for example, in Chandra Mohanty’s now classic postcolonial feminist essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” For Mohanty differences are explainable only on the basis of local conditions and thus to explain them on the basis of a structure of relations of production is to construct them as a “preconstituted” transhistorical fact (203). By addressing the local in a “case-by-case” way as having its own materiality autonomous from a broader social series, Mohanty claims to locate the production of “gender” in “material histories” rather than in either idealist, metaphysical, or “discursive histories,” which she locates as part of Eurocentrism. Yet, Mohanty’s own mode of explaining the “local” differences is a discursive one. In fact, from the outset of her essay she abandons understanding “colonialism” and “imperialism” as material structures of social contradictions over the exploitation of people’s labor for understanding them as “predominantly *discursive*” and, in doing so, “focusing on a certain mode of appropriation and codification of ‘scholarship’ and ‘knowledge’ about women in

the third world by particular analytic categories” (196). In other words, from the outset the primary concern of this “materialist” text is the question of cultural “values” and “coding.” To be clear, it is not Mohanty’s concern with values coding, as such, that is the root of her own discursivism rather, it is that cultural values and coding are understood as the fundamental basis of the material reality of women’s lives: they are the materiality that makes the “local” local. Mohanty locates the “crucial forgotten point” for a materialist analysis of “women” in Michelle Rosaldo’s argument that ““woman’s place in life is not in any direct sense a product of what she does (or even less, a function of what, biologically, she is) but the *meaning* her activities acquire through concrete social interactions”” (qtd. in Mohanty 203; emphasis added). In other words, it is not material relations but the production of meaning that is of central importance: gender itself is a product of “value” coding. For example, Mohanty argues that the fact “that women mother in a variety of societies is not as significant as the value attached to mothering in these societies. The distinction between the act of mothering and the status attached to it is a very important one—one that needs to be stated and analyzed contextually” (203). But what Mohanty “forgets” in her separation of “act” and the “cultural value” attributed to practical activity is that the *act* of “mothering” itself is historically produced through a social division of labor—material relations of production. The act of “mothering” itself is not a natural given that gets its differences through local values. It is not primarily a discursive activity—a matter of signification and meaning. “Mothering” is an economic activity that does not simply have a local “cultural value” but a global *economic* value in the material relations of production in transnational capitalism. “Mothering” in class based societies is one of the means by which the ruling class can make a greater profit off of workers—by pawning off onto individuals the cost of reproducing the next generation of labor-power. “Mothering” to put this another way is not autonomous from the

structure of the “family” in capitalism. Moreover, the “family” as an economic unit in which the vast majority of people in the world are economically compelled to survive, is itself an historical and material relation dependent on the social division of labor and property relations in capitalism. In taking these practical relations behind “mothering” as ahistorical “givens,” Mohanty reifies the *historically produced labor and property divisions in class society* in which women are inculcated, and out of which they are produced as women. Furthermore, in divorcing meaning production from practical activity and labor divisions Mohanty reproduces a self-generating notion of “cultural difference” (in this case “gender”) as she cannot explain *why*, historically and materially, seemingly “local” and “isolated” phenomena such as sexism, racism, heterosexism and class exploitation persist *all over the world*. In doing so, the material processes of production in class society and their relation to the reproduction of economic inequality and social injustice on a global level in transnational capitalism are themselves left unexamined as untransformable givens—which has itself become part of a Eurocentric narrative of capitalism as the “end of history”<sup>1</sup> and the understanding that its injustices as a consequence of an inevitable “clash of civilizations.”<sup>2</sup>

Part of what is necessary is to begin to “de-localize” history. Rather than fetishizing the local (difference) as “autonomous” and abstracting it from the material processes of exploitation in transnational capitalism it is necessary to begin to unpack its relation to these processes. Leacock understood this in her Marxist historical analysis of women cross-culturally. “Consider,” she remarks, “how the history of capitalist development has been written as if wholly white, deriving almost totally from internal European processes. Relations with Africa,

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<sup>1</sup> For the “end of history” thesis, see Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*.

<sup>2</sup> For the “clash of civilizations” thesis, see Samuel P. Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

Asia, and the New World are seen as . . . unimportant until quite late when they set off Europe's final explosion" (15). In much historical analysis it is "agreed that English capital which made industrialization possible" was itself "derived in major part from the triangular trade in slaves, rum, and sugar (produced in what were models for European factories, the sugar mills of the Caribbean plantations" and then "the significance of this fact is forgotten" (15). One dimension of the "significance" of this is that the cultural values that have their history in cultural contexts outside of North Atlantic capital are no more autonomous from the material conditions of exploitation in class relations and do not serve as a autonomous local resistance to these relations when the material conditions upon which they are produced are part of the history of class relations.

In the discourses of contemporary feminism, as I have implied, the *material* processes of capitalism, specifically the economic crisis of capitalism, the position of women in this crisis, and the relation of differences such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, transnationality to this crisis are converted into a cultural "crisis" of local values—a "clash of civilizations"—abstracted from the material processes of global capitalism. Moreover, this cultural crisis is taken to be the material terrain of freedom and struggle for women. It will be helpful here in order to further unpack this matter and demonstrate the historical and material urgency for women of bringing back concepts of class, labor, production, and exploitation into feminist theory, to momentarily pause the broader discussion of "crisis," "end" and "historicity" of feminism and examine a specific instance of the way in which the culture of transnational capitalism is currently ideologically converting the economic contradictions for women's lives in the international division of labor into questions of contesting local values and aesthetics and in doing so

embroiling women and feminism into cultural mediations of economic contradictions in ways that shore up capitalism from all sides.

In class society, the position of women has long been regarded as exclusively a cultural matter: a matter especially of morals, ethics, and values. One of the ways in which the culture of capitalism converts gender and sexuality into matters of cultural values can be seen in the contestations that re-emerged in public discussion in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, between the cultural practices of western fashion and the *burqa* or, for that matter, any mode of *hijab* (Islamic “modest dress”) that requires women to put on some level of covering to “veil” their morality (from the full coverage of the *burqa* used under the Taliban, to the *chador* of Iran, to a simple headscarf). In the United States, for instance, *hijab* has been regarded by many women as a sign of a “barbaric” and “evil” culture that “hates” the difference of women and is therefore undemocratic. Women’s individual freedom to be “unique” and to buy and wear what they want has, moreover, been elevated to an act of moral resistance to “terrorism” and “evil”: something along the lines of “shop or the terrorists win.” By contrast, many Muslim women have argued that *hijab* is itself an act of moral resistance to the cultural imperialism of the “West,” including the routine commodification of women, their bodies, and their sexuality under capitalism. Morality, modesty and piety in sexual relations, and family values are considered to be *material* determinants of women’s economic and social position (its elevation or degradation) in society, as if sexual relations outside of marriage on the part of women are the root of the economic inequality.

Despite what has been understood in the cultural commonsense (in, for example, the United States) to be a fundamental moral opposition, both arguments are ideological modes of legitimating capitalist production. This is because at root, the *moral* and *ethical* debate over



women's clothing—*hijab* and western fashion—and the seemingly opposed cultural practices that this debate represents, together form a united position. In the course of this discussion I am calling this united position “(anti)*hijab*” and, I argue, that it serves as a strategy for transnational capitalism to update the international labor force. More specifically, both of the culturalist positions on *hijab* and “western fashion” are ideological positions addressed at women as a “reserve labor” force that can be pushed in and pulled out of productive labor, to meet the needs of capital to control its access to labor-power.

To put this another way, (anti)*hijab* is a class issue and an articulation of capital's fundamental reliance on the exploitation of human labor-power in order to make a profit. The reduction of the veil to a matter of moral laws (not an economic and labor matter) ideologically shores up capitalism by putting forward the ideological illusion that moral values determine class. The (anti)*hijab* debate is an instance of what Frederick Engels called the “application of morality to economics” (Introduction 6). It reads the “concrete” of the economy on the basis of *cultural values* not on the basis of *economic relations* and historical conditions. In doing so, it treats morality ahistorically as “an eternal, ultimate and forever immutable ethical law on the pretext that the moral world too has its permanent principles that stand above history and the differences between nations” (Engels, *Anti-Dühring* 118). By retreating into ahistorical notions of values as “above” class and production relations, (anti)*hijab* conceals the theft of workers' surplus-labor by owners and the increasing disparity between classes through moral and legal codes of conduct. As a consequence, it conceals the economic laws and historical conditions that determine women's lives, making the economic conditions of women's lives appear to be a consequence of their moral and ethical choices. Both Islamic family law and liberalism, for instance, see “fairness” and “equality” in economic relations to be derived from moral and

ethical behaviors on the part of individuals: how individuals conduct themselves in business and personal relations and how they regard others. In short, they are efforts to promote an “ideal human” as the basis of agency and change. In actuality morality and the “ideal human” always reflect the social relations and, in class society, the interests of the ruling class. Whatever choices an individual has are shaped by the material conditions she is in, especially those which determine to what degree she will command material resources: whether only so much as to allow her to be an exploited wage-laborer or more than enough so that she may have command over the labor of others as a capitalist.

For instance, liberal feminists who oppose *hijab*, shore up capitalism by approaching women’s position in society as a matter of inherent “rights” to individual freedom, “unique-ness” and “choice.” This position supports the existing relations of production in capitalism, which are based on private property, by substituting a formal justice and equality of “individual rights” and “uniqueness,” for economic equality, freedom from necessity, and social justice for all. Liberal feminists see freedom for women as autonomous from the mode of production and whether all people own the means of production and therefore collectively determine the social uses toward which labor-power is put, or only some people privately own the means of production and, therefore, use the labor-power of others to produce profit. This means that they do not think that freedom of labor from exploitation and freedom from necessity for all are requirements for the emancipation of women. Instead, they support capitalism through reforms, by advancing women’s “rights” to individual freedoms and promoting an “ethical” or “caring capitalism,” which puts the freedom of bourgeois women to exploit others before the needs of the majority of women who are exploited as workers.

In their arguments that *hijab* is an unethical practice, liberal feminists have held up as a sign of classlessness and justice that women in the West are “liberated” to choose how they want to dress and to wear cosmetics and fashionable clothing. In fact, freedom of choice regarding fashion and cosmetics—aspects of lifestyle—has been regarded as the epitome of freedom for women and is offered as evidence that women are determined by their own “individuality” not by class. This is because class is understood to be an act of consumption and the freedom of the individual that is defended by liberal feminism is identical to the freedom to go shopping: to buy whatever one wants, to wear whatever one wants, to consume. *Hijab* is too restrictive for consumption, which is why liberal feminism opposes it.

But freedom from class for women is determined by the material relations of production, not the image of the “ideal human” put forward in fashion magazines! What seems to be an “unrestricted” freedom for women in the U.S. to “wear” and “buy” what they want is actually a product of economic compulsion in class society. In fact, as Evelyn Reed has shown, Western fashion and cosmetics have always been used as a way to naturalize class antagonisms and production relations based on private property (105-131). Western fashion is exclusively a product of class society and, since its inception, it has signified economic inequality. Both fashion and cosmetics in the West arose under feudalism as a privilege of the aristocracy and were used as a mark of class distinction by both men and women of the aristocracy, in contrast to the serf labor upon which the aristocracy’s wealth depended. Once the bourgeoisie overthrew the aristocracy and feudal relations of production were displaced by capitalist relations of production, the majority of laboring women were displaced of their productive role in society as the household ceased to be the center of productive labor. Cosmetics and fashion became an expression of women’s economic dependence on men in capitalism and sexual competition

between women for men, brought on by their displacement from productive labor with the onset of commodity production and exchange.

Now, with the advance of the productive forces in capitalism, “beauty” products and “fashionable clothing” which once distinguished one class from another, are produced for the mass market making it appear as if all women now also have access to equal class positions, because they all have market access to beauty and fashion. Liberal feminists, such as Elaine Showalter who defend the class privileges of women who can afford to wear *haute couture* clothing such as Prada and Armani, argue that “once fabric and clothing were mass produced, they became matters of choice rather than class” (“Fade to Greige”). Class, in other words, is normalized as a matter of lifestyle and one’s consumption choices, cultural values, and aesthetic tastes.

As in all cases, however, consumption is limited by production. Cosmetics and “fashionable” attire for women are an unspoken requirement in most workplaces in order to gain, and often retain, employment. Keeping up-to-date is not a “choice” for women who do not own the means of production but must sell their labor-power in order to survive. Contrary to the ideological representation, it is not possible to determine your class position through “dressing for success.” The fact that one’s position in the social relations of production is what determines class, and not one’s attire, becomes quite clear when the fashion and beauty industry changes the standard in order to create a new “need” for their commodities—for example, by adjusting a hemline or altering the acceptable color scheme—and thus “outdate” the previous season’s clothing before they have outlived their usefulness as protective covering. What may be a form of entertainment for ruling class women, who can afford to discard their wardrobe for the latest fashions is extremely costly for working class women who are required to adhere to corporate

“beauty” in the workplace. The “fashionable feminism” advanced by elite academics such as Showalter erases the real conditions of need for the majority of women in class society who either produce the clothing and cannot afford basic necessities of life from their wages or who are required to wear “fashionable” clothing at work and must go into debt doing so. What seems like “freedom of the individual,” and evidence that class no longer determines the lives of women, is actually the subordination of women to commodity production and exchange and the freedom of the corporation to turn over a profit at the expense of workers. At most what it offers is the limited freedom for working class women to “look classy” while they are being further impoverished economically by the transfer of wealth away from social resources in education, healthcare, social security, ... and toward the defense budget, tax-credits for the rich, corporate welfare—all of which defend the interests of transnational capital.

On the other hand, *hijab* is also an articulation of private ownership of the means of production and the wage-labor/capital relation as the basis for women’s “rightful” place in society. Islamic feminists, such as Fadwa El Guindi in her book *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, Resistance*, appeal to abstract notions of “individual rights” and “morality” by supporting *hijab* as a “resistant” agency for women and defending *hijab* for both men and women as a matter of the “private spiritual space” of the individual in the public sphere; for women, specifically their freedom from the male gaze and sexualized attention. By defining people as “private spiritual beings” who stand “outside” of the public sphere, this position also conceals the increasing disparity between classes and capitalism’s material determination of the conditions of women’s lives worldwide.

It is telling that an Islamic revival and a turn to *hijab* within nations that do not legally require women to wear the veil, such as Egypt, are gaining ardent support among wealthy young

men and women. It has been argued that *hijab* gives spiritual security to women regardless of their class position. Heba Kandil's view, in discussing the uses of the veil in Egypt in the webpages of *Free Republic*, is quite telling: "for some poor people who live in nasty neighborhoods, the veil protects women because it sends a message that they're conservative and not easy prey." Not unlike the assumption in the West that "dressing differently" is a material terrain of freedom, in Kandil's view it is women's clothing and their moral values, in short, that are considered to serve as protection of women from crushing poverty and the blows of domestic violence and rape. I leave aside the fact that domestic violence and rape rates remain high in both nations where *hijab* is widely practiced as well as in nations, such as the United States, that see it as "oppressive" to women. The "spiritual protection" and "inner peace" that has been attributed to *hijab* is actually an effect of the economic security of *some* (ruling class) women who benefit from class inequality—an economic security that is allowed to some women that is represented as a "spiritual" and "moral" security of all women.

This may seem like a contradiction since the popular interpretation of "Islam" in the United States is that it is against capitalism and "free trade"—most sharply signified by the events that led to the destruction of the World Trade Center. Moreover, this view has been also codified in the arguments of Islamic feminists who defend and wear *hijab* and argue that it is an expression of "freedom" of women from the "male gaze" and the commodification of their bodies and sexuality in capitalism, and therefore serves as a "resistance" to the effects of "imperialism" on women. But, Islamic Family Law (*Shari'ah*), which regulates and defines contemporary practices of *hijab*, is a legal and moral expression of private property relations. Its rules for gender relations, the family and reproduction, and inheritance laws and rights—while widely interpreted and contested among Muslims in general and Islamic feminists in particular—

presuppose the historical development of private ownership of the means of production and, therefore, class society. The moral laws articulated in the name of “Muhammad” on issues of ethical trading, price controls, taxation of markets, etc.—that have also become sites of intense conflict between various cultural and religious groups over how to interpret the Qur’an—all presuppose the existence of trade and private property. Moreover, one of the claims of Islamic feminism has been that Islam in its “pure form” is the most progressive of all religions regarding women specifically because the Qur’an explicitly grants women private property rights: the right to own their own business, to inherit wealth, choose marriage partners and divorce them; rights which have not always historically been granted to women in the history of the West. But this, too, is a ruling class freedom for women—it is gender equality for *property holders* and equal exploitation for those who are denied ownership of the means of production.

The unfreedom of class relations for the majority of women is in the *practical relations behind* both the ethics and the aesthetics of clothing; material relations which are not transformed by what women wear. The veil and the seclusion of women appeared many centuries prior to Islam in the class societies of Assyria, classical Greece, the Byzantine Christian world, Persia, and India. Like Western fashion, veiling has been used since its inception as a mark of class distinction. For instance, Assyrian Kings introduced the veil and the seclusion of women in the Royal harem. Moreover, prostitutes and slaves were forbidden from veiling and could be slashed if they disobeyed this law (“The Bruqa, Chador, Veil and Hijab!”). Its original adoption by Islam also followed this historical trajectory: it was used by women of the ruling class to distinguish themselves from women of exploited classes. *Hijab* morality grew out of imperatives of private property relations and the concentration of the social surplus into the hands of a few. It was used to support the interests of the ruling class by marking the class position between women and,

accordingly, adjudicating the inheritance rights of their offspring in order to help maintain the concentration of wealth into fewer hands. Today, these marks of class distinction reassert themselves even in countries where all women are required to wear some form of *hijab*, such as in Iran, where wealthier women are starting to wear designer *chadors* of fine, colorful fabrics and intricate embroidery (now promoted in Iran's first fashion magazine since 1979: *Lotous*).

Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that both Western fashion and *hijab* (and the codes of morality that these draw from) are not autonomous cultural values rather, they are *historical* and have their roots in class society. Moreover, inequality and injustice for women is not, in the final analysis, rooted in ethical imperatives or aesthetic choices but in material relations of exploitation and the division of labor—the private property relations founded on private ownership of the means of production. It is not ethics that determines women's economic position; rather, ethics derives from what Engels calls the “practical relations on which their class position is based—from the economic relations in which they carry on production” (*Anti-Dühring* 118). For example, ethics that grant women of the property owning class equal ownership of private property cease to make any sense at all in a society which has done away with private property relations altogether. Instead, they are historical and “in the last analysis [...] the product of the economic conditions of society obtaining at the time. And just as society has so far moved in class antagonisms, so morality has always been class morality” (118-119).

The “practical relations”—that is, the production relations—of capitalism are not constituted by moral values; they depend on the exploitation of human labor-power. What makes a capitalist wealthy is not that he is an “ethical citizen” or has “democratic ethics,” but that he owns the means of production and can, therefore, appropriate the surplus-labor of those who do not own the means of production but must sell their labor-power to survive. It is not morality,



ethics, or aesthetics but the exploitation of human labor-power that is a necessary condition for capitalism because only labor-power can produce surplus-value. That is, at a specific stage of historical development of the productive forces, labor-power can produce more value than the labor necessary to produce articles required for its own reproduction. It is the theft of this “surplus-labor” (exploitation) that is the basis of profit in capitalism. What is necessary for capital to make a profit is, therefore, access to a continuous supply of exploitable labor-power, and the capacity to control this supply depending on the historical conditions of the productive forces of society. Because only labor-power can produce surplus-value the increase of the laboring population is a necessary condition, if capitalist accumulation is to be a steady, continuous process. But the “absolute growth” of the laboring population in reproduction, as Marx makes clear, itself depends upon definite material conditions in production: for instance, an increasing population “presupposes an average wage which permits not only reproduction of the labouring population but also its constant growth” (*Theories* 477). If economic conditions are not developed enough (or have been deteriorated, for instance, through warfare) capitalism needs to make provisions so as not to disrupt its capacity to extract surplus-labor. Thus, “Capitalist production provides for unexpected contingencies by overworking one section of the labouring population and keeping the other as a ready reserve army consisting of partially or entirely pauperized people” (477).

(Anti)*hijab* is not explained by a semi-autonomous “ethical” or “aesthetic resistance” which can be turned against capitalism because, upon closer examination, the seemingly contesting cultural practices are all articulations of the exploitative labor relations of the capitalist mode of production. Instead, it is explained by the dependence of capitalism on the exploitation of human labor-power and the fact that it must use “reserve labor forces” to manage

its access to and control over a continuous supply of exploitable labor-power in order to make a profit. Western fashion's moral imperative of "uniqueness" is an articulation of capitalism's need to pull reserves of previously reproductive workers into productive labor—specifically by incorporating women as collective producers into wage-labor—and, at the same time, ensure that women will be a compliant labor force that see themselves not as exploited labor (and, therefore, part of a class) but as cultural singularities. The morality of *hijab*, "modesty" in sexual relations, and romanticizing of motherhood, translates into cultural and religious values the *economic imperatives* of capitalism, specifically, its economic imperative for controlling the rate of profit by using the "reserve labor forces" of women in reproduction in order to control the rate of growth and development of the supply of labor-power. Its emphasis on "family values," moreover, helps to limit the cost of social reproduction to within the privatized family so that an increased population does not serve as a drain on profit for capitalists.

The cultural differences over *hijab* and women's dress do not have to do with fundamental oppositions over private property, the basic process of exploitation, or the use of women as "reserve" labor for capital. Rather these cultural debates are the effect of increasing systemic crisis and instability in capitalism brought on by the concentration of wealth into fewer hands and resulting in increased inter-capitalist competition around the globe and uneven levels of development of the productive forces internationally. What is read in contemporary feminism as acts of "cultural resistance" that can be teased out within capitalism are actually ideological strategies that address different sectors of the international working class, depending on the historical level of development of the productive forces under which capitalists must work to make a profit.

*Hijab* and its emphasis on “family values” and “private spiritual space” has grown in many nations of the South as a response to deteriorating economic conditions, brought on by imperialist assault and the concentration of global production into fewer hands. In Iraq, for instance, the return to religion and the donning of *hijab* by working class women has increased dramatically from the deterioration of its productive forces as a result of Gulf War I and prolonged economic sanctions (to try and force out national capitalist competitors that stand in the way of U.S. capital’s access to Iraqi oil reserves and labor-power). The severe deterioration of economic conditions has led to a situation in which the social resources necessary in order to reproduce the laboring population have seriously declined. State-funded programs of childcare, public education, etc. that the Iraqi government established in the 1970s and 1980s to pull women into skilled productive labor in order to address labor-shortages for the developing national bourgeoisie have now been cut. The increasing acceptance of pro-*hijab* morality and “privacy” of gender relations (rather than understanding gender as social and historical) is an effect of economic compulsion of class relations and increasing class contradictions. Although it is taken up by many working class women in Iraq, *hijab* is a ruling class morality that has served to help ideologically bolster the interests of the struggling national bourgeoisie in Iraq, which is facing severe labor shortages as a result of the human slaughter of U.S. led imperialist war and needs “absolute growth” of the labor force, without dipping into the surplus-value that the ruling class needs to reinvest in capitalist ventures in order to accumulate profit.

Western fashion and liberal feminism with their emphasis on “individualism” and “choice” on the other hand, are useful for articulating the labor needs of capitalism under different conditions of development of the productive forces. Liberal feminism is used as a ideological means for helping capital to incorporate reserve labor forces of women into the

workforce, while maintaining the ideological illusion of “classlessness” for working class women that covers over the theft of their surplus labor. But, in its economic content, the projection of “classlessness” for women on capitalist relations of production is a *defense* of the class relations of capitalism, which becomes increasingly evident as liberal feminism is used to defend the imperialist interests of U.S. capital. The “moral outrage” on the part of liberal feminists of the United States in the wake of 9/11 toward the use of *hijab* in Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, has helped serve to put a “progressive” spin on U.S. capital’s imperialist interests in Central Asia and the Middle East. It covers over the economic relations in transnational capitalism behind the resurgence of *hijab* and, moreover, helps to inculcate the international labor reserves of women into labor that is productive of surplus-value for the capitalists of the imperialist nations. It represents not the end of women’s oppression in class society, but a different mode of it suited to the interests of U.S. capital. It is, in short, a moral expression of the fact that as capitalist production has developed into imperialist capitalism, higher levels of productivity at the same time have made capitalist accumulation more difficult to maintain. The advanced productivity of workers (brought on by advances in labor saving technology) and intensified concentration of capital into fewer hands, means that capital starts to invest more in machinery and raw materials and less in labor-power, since less is needed in order to produce the same commodities for exchange. But, this leads to a crisis of profitability since without increased labor-power, there is no increase of surplus-value, and capitalist profit tends to decline. Liberal feminism has helped to justify the export of capitalist production into new areas under the name of “advancement for women” when capital needs access to more and more quantities of productive labor at a cheap price, and it has more or less exhausted the current labor

reserves within its own national boundaries (or these reserves are more costly to use) and must seek them out elsewhere and transform previously unproductive laborers into productive ones.

(Anti)*hijab* morality, in other words, has become a way to cover over the instability of capitalist productive processes and its increasing periods of crisis, and normalize the theft of workers' surplus-labor which is a necessary condition of capitalism. Even the moral objection that the oppression of women is "wrong" is enabled by the contradictions in the economic conditions of production of capitalism. As Engels put it in his Preface to the First German Edition of Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy*: "If the moral consciousness of the mass declares an economic fact to be unjust, as it has done in the case of slavery or serf labour, that is proof that the fact itself has been outlived, that other economic facts have made their appearance, owing to which the former has become unbearable and untenable" (6). On the one hand, the use of "reserve labor forces" is increasingly made practically unnecessary by the development of productive forces in capitalism. There is, for example, enough productive capacity of the world's workers for all 6 billion people on the planet to have their needs met for nutrition, shelter, education,... without the constant threat of "unemployment." But the maintenance of private property and production for profit leads to continuing economic crisis, insecurity, and instability for both workers and capitalists (who must compete more aggressively to maintain profit levels) as the productive forces develop. Unemployment, starvation, destitution, economic stagnation and decline, bankruptcy, and the maintenance of economically insecure "reserve labor forces" that can be pushed in and pulled out of employment to drive down the cost of labor-power are all the inevitable results of maintaining capitalism.

What this goes to show is that the position of women in society is not a cultural matter of ethical values and moral codes of conduct, but of economic conditions of necessity. Capitalism

needs to keep workers economically insecure in order to drive down the cost of wages. Using women as a “reserve labor force” is one way to help do this. But doing so does not actually “resolve” the contradictions and crises in capitalism: both the wealth gap and the instability of capitalist ventures are growing. Changing the position of women in society is not, at root, founded on “moral demands” regarding their position, but on “the inevitable collapse of the capitalist mode of production which is daily taking place before our eyes to an ever greater degree” (Engels, Preface 6). It therefore requires not “ethical negotiation,” but heightening the fundamental contradictions in capitalism between wage-labor and capital, bringing them to crisis, and fundamentally transforming them.

In concealing class antagonisms in the international division of labor, however, capitalism translates economic inequality into a matter of “negotiable” cultural values. Ruling class academics put forward a “cultural materialism” that claims that if morality derives from “economic relations of production,” and moral codes of conduct differ across nations, this must mean that the “relations of production” themselves are “undecidable” relations; that is, Marxist political economy is unreliable as a guide for global social change because it emerged from a very different European context that no longer exists today.

For instance, it is said among globalization theorists that the “nation” has been “outflanked” in an era of transnationalism (see, for example, Peter Drucker’s *Post-Capitalist Society*). That is, global capitalism has “surpassed” national difference, thus, the continued existence of “difference” in an era of globalization can only mean that, at root, it is based on cultural identity and preference (not uneven developments within capitalism). Capitalism, in other words, has led to its own “transcendence”—a capitalism beyond capitalism—and all matters of culture are now matters of taste and preference, not labor and class. The shift of

women in the North Atlantic to Islam and *hijab*, and the loosening of *hijab* among some women in predominantly Muslim nations who are taking up western dress, for instance, is seen as evidence that (anti)*hijab* is a matter of cultural preference and taste and a sign that global relations are undecidable and follow no necessary logic, especially the logic of economic laws of motion of capitalism. Resistance to capitalism is, therefore, thought to be brought about by the local, individual, reversibility of cultural practices within capitalism.

But this cultural determinist theory is a ruling class theory that embraces capitalism through a cultural relay. It covers over the exploitation of workers behind profit and conceals why capitalist production goes all over the globe, crossing national boundaries: because the nation is the geography of labor-power, historical conditions of necessity in the development of the productive forces of capitalism, making it “more or less expensive to use” (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto* 115). It is not the cultural agency of *hijab* or western fashion that enabled freedom for women from the material constraints of capitalism, but the emancipation of their labor from material relations of exploitation. Contrary to the ideological claims of (anti)*hijab* to “classlessness” or resistance to capital, it is not possible to move beyond material contradictions on the basis of cultural values or practices. This is because classlessness (and freedom of women from the commodification of their sexuality) is a *structural relation of production*, not an autonomous cultural value. As Engels put it, a “classless morality” is an effect of praxical relations of production, thus, under capitalism “we have not yet passed beyond class morality.” A “classless” ethics or morality “which stands above class antagonisms and above any remembrance of them becomes possible only at a stage of society which has not only overcome class antagonisms but has even forgotten them in practical life” (*Anti-Dühring* 119).

What this discussion of “(anti)*hijab*” begins to reveal is that behind the seemingly autonomous cultural differences in transnational capitalism there is a structure of material relations of production in capitalism of which both are a part. Difference, to put it another way, is difference within a social totality of material relations. Rather than translating the material relations of this totality into tropes and treating totality as a “master narrative” that is, by way of the performativity of language, brought into being by discussing it, it is time for feminism to begin to openly examine, analyze and confront its own material relation to the social totality of capitalism.

FIVE:

“Crisis” is a contested term and cannot serve as the basis for a cultural critique that goes beyond the notion of a “self-evident” and “fixed” set of social relations nor can it serve as an explanation of the state of contemporary feminism, without sustained theorization that locates it in the historical conditions and material relations in which it is produced, and through which it is transformed. The significance of the concept of “crisis” for feminism, I argue throughout this dissertation, is that it points to a *social totality*, by which I mean a system of material relations and, moreover, to the material instability of this system of relations—more specifically, the breaking to the surface of the fundamental material contradictions in capitalism between wage-labor and capital. It marks the difference between “what is” and “what is becoming”—a historical change in material relations. “Crisis” is a historical and material relation; a structure of conflicts that is not an abstract, ahistorical, mechanical or permanent process of life as such but is historically and materially produced and therefore transformable through material praxis.



This dissertation is an investigation into and explanatory critique of the theoretical assumptions of the “Cultural Turn” in feminism and material conditions which have allowed feminism to equate “crisis” with cultural “crisis” and freedom with cultural freedom—the transformation of cultural values. The “Cultural Turn” in feminism and Cultural Studies has actively marginalized and dismantled historical materialist—that is, Marxist—knowledges that explain the relationship of gender and sexuality to class and the crisis of labor in capitalism. It has ideologically “unwritten” in differences of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and (trans)nationality the material contradictions in the production (private property relations) of capitalism and converted (in the cultural imaginary) differences into matters of values, aesthetics, lifestyle, and consumption. So much so that to critique the fusion of feminism with a “values movement” is looked on within contemporary feminism as a betrayal of women, as a betrayal of persons of color, as a betrayal of multiple sexualities...—in short as an erasure of difference. Yet, at the same time, this very mode of “valuing” difference in feminism has come into “crisis” because, as Lindsey German has put it in her essay “Women’s Liberation Today,” feminism has:

run up against the limits of class society: the existence of a small minority of women with access to top jobs and all the material advantages that these bring with them is perfectly compatible with the continued existence of class exploitation. (35)

Contemporary feminism has increasingly ceased to be a material force for social transformation and increasingly become an instrument of capital for updating women as collective producers for the contemporary workforce of capitalism.

Feminism needs to break with its debilitating culturalism and its obsession with “post” theories and bring back into its analysis of the conditions of women’s lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Marxist concepts and debates over the relationship of gender and sexuality to class as ownership of the means of production, labor, production, exploitation, imperialism, need, and ideology that have been buried in the cultural intelligibilities of capitalism today on both the “left” and the “right.” What this requires, among other things, is clearing out what have become sedimented notions of gender, sexuality, culture, and difference institutionalized in the culture of capitalism by “post” theories. However, to address these issues only at the level of culture is, I argue, not to heed a fundamental materialist argument that is necessary in struggles for social transformation—as Marx puts it: “Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life” (21). This is another way of saying that to deal only with contemporary feminist theory on its own terms (immanently) is to only address a theory in terms of what it says about itself: it is to develop a deeply one-sided analysis. What I aim to do is deal not only with the immanent terms of contemporary feminism and its canonical “post” conceptions of gender and sexuality, but with the “outside” of the dominant consciousness. Throughout the dissertation, therefore, I bring to bear on the presumed *cultural* crisis of feminism and its cultural theory and the strategies deployed to deal with it, the *economic crisis of capitalism*: the breaking to the surface of capitalism’s fundamental material contradictions between wage-labor and capital brought on by crisis of profit.

I argue that feminism, in its most effective moments, has not simply been a struggle over cultural values—it has been a struggle over economic freedom from exploitation, which is denied to women not because of cultural matters but because of the difference of class: the difference of surplus-labor. Economic freedom—including freedom of gender and sexuality from

being used as tools of exploitation—is denied to women, in other words, as long as they can be used as collective producers of surplus-labor for profit. *This* feminism has not “ended” because material relations of exploitation in transnational capitalism have not ended. But to make this argument and contribute to bringing back the knowledges needed to do so is an enormously difficult task in the material conditions of capitalism now. These times—of imperialist warfare and brutal assault by capital to redivide the surplus-labor of globe and (among many other consequences of these material contradiction in transnational capitalism) of the Patriot Acts—are not friendly times for such an investigation. Yet these times—which are not at all “new times”—are precisely the times in which “root” knowledge for making feminism and other social struggles matter again as projects of social transformation is urgently needed.

**PART II: CURING THE CRISIS (AS USUAL)**

## 2.0 THE CULTURAL TURN AND LABOR IN TRANSITION

My marking of “so called” or “what have been called” waves of feminism in the previous chapter is to indicate that “wave theory” is itself a contested terrain. By this I do not mean simply the observation that the respective “waves” of feminism have been constituted by multiple, conflicting, and competing approaches to social change.<sup>3</sup> Nor do I mean what has become a commonplace in Cultural Studies in the West in the aftermath of poststructuralism: that the concept of “wave” is—like all concepts—an allegory of the play of cultural signification and therefore cannot be explained (i.e., its meaning cannot be “pinned down”) on the basis of objective relations outside of it.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I mean that the dynamic of history is *class not culture* and therefore, the relation of feminism and gender to historicity is a relation of labor not a relation of culture, values, knowledge, the episteme, etc. As I marked in the previous chapter in my discussion of the way contemporary feminism has made sense of its own changes (and particularly in my discussion of Fraser), “wave” theory—whether in its “modernist,”

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Benita Roth's *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*.

<sup>4</sup> This is, in fact, one of the major themes of what is now, albeit contradictorily, self-identified as “third wave feminism.” See, for example: Stacy Gilles *et al Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*; Lesile Heywood and Jennifer Drake *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*; and Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. For example, in their contribution to *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, Gillian Howie and Ashley Tauchert suggest that “to perceive a wave at all, we artificially arrest the movement by which it is constituted, and separate out one of the myriad manifestations of that movement” (37). They proceed on this basis to tease out multiple meanings of “wave”—from an “energy-carrying” disturbance to “an attempt at nonverbal communication”—as a means of indicating that the metaphor of wave is useful to feminism as a “paradoxical” metaphor. That is, “wave” is an allegory for the disclosure of established meanings in culture and the representations founded on those meanings. This is, of course, not so much an explanation as it is a substitution of the discursive resonances of “wave” as a metaphor and trope for the explanatory critique of the material conditions of gender, sexuality, and women's lives. It is, in other words, to reduce cultural theory and historical explanation to metaphor, albeit a metaphor not with a singular referent but with a network of multiple and shifting references.

“postmodernist,” or “transnationalist” articulations—sees gender and sexuality as primarily (semi)autonomous cultural differences and understands the phases of feminist history in largely *cultural* terms in isolation from economic developments and contradictions in the social relations of production in capitalism. I am arguing, by contrast, that the cultural phases of feminist history need to be reunderstood in dialectical relation to the labor and property relations confronting women in capitalism.

One of the implications of my argument is that “cultural phases”—of modernity, postmodernity, and globalization—need to be reunderstood in relation to the social relations of production in capitalism. “Modernity,” “postmodernity,” and “globalization” are not autonomous cultural phases or formations nor do they constitute the material relations of capital, rather they are cultural apparatuses of capitalism at different stages in the development of its material relations: of its forces of production as they come into conflict with its relations of production. Modernism, postmodernism, and transnationalism—and the respective modes of feminism and dominant theories of gender and sexuality articulated within them—are part of the cultural apparatuses of capital made possible by material developments in capitalism (dialectical turns in production) and deployed at particular stages of the material development of class contradictions in capitalism, for the subject of capitalism to come to terms with, to locate herself within, and adjust to the contradictions of wage-labor and capital.<sup>5</sup> They do not exist autonomously from the economic relations of capital: the social relations of production within which these cultural apparatuses develop, and the development of contradictions between wage-labor and capital. Specifically, in the case of “modernism,” this is the period of capitalist development from

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<sup>5</sup> In my discussion of “waves,” I draw from Teresa Ebert’s discussion of “modernity” and “postmodernity” as cultural apparatuses in her contribution to Shaobo Xie and Fengzhen Wang’s collection of interviews, *Dialogues on Cultural Studies*. See especially, pages 51-54.

laissez-faire capitalism to monopoly capitalism. In the case of “postmodernism,” it is the period of the development of a fledgling transnational capitalism in which not simply commodities but capital is increasingly exported from one “nation” to another and production is starting to be integrated on a global scale. In the case of “globalization” it is a more advanced stage of transnational capital. To be clear I use transnational to mean globalization as consumption—turning the world into a global market with local “national-states” acting as local law enforcement on different sectors of workers of the world. Contrary to the way transnationalists represent it, transnationalism (world market) is a *class-based* globalization based on the integration of capitalist production.

As cultural apparatuses of capital and its exploitative labor relations, modernism, postmodernism, and “globalization” are sites of contradiction, conflict and contestation (Ebert, “Interview” 52)—part of what Marx called becoming conscious of material conflicts and “fighting them out.” However, these changes in the cultural apparatuses are the effects of dialectical developments in capitalist production, but not permutations or fundamental changes in the structure of wage-labor/capital relations; in short they are not an index of a supersession or of a “fundamental break” in capitalism but the effect of the intensification of class antagonisms in production (see also Ebert, “Interview” 51). To abstract these cultural apparatuses from their relation to the material conditions of capitalism, as is done in culturalist feminism is to dehistoricize culture and reproduce an ahistorical notion of waves of progress within capitalism.

As Teresa Ebert has also argued, to continue to explain material history—and feminism’s relation to historicity in terms of “modernity,” “postmodernity,” and “globalization” is to mystify history by substituting a *description* of changes in the culture of capitalism for an explanatory critique of the underlying relations of exploitation (the private appropriation of surplus-labor)

that continues under the changes on the surface (“Interview” 51). The history of contemporary feminism, I argue, is best explained by *different levels of class contestation* within capitalism that have produced these cultural apparatuses and their attending conceptions, practices, and modes of gender and sexuality. The different and conflicting modes of feminism have all been various attempts to come to terms with, grasp, or what Ebert calls “locate,” and explain in “practical consciousness” the material position of women as subjects of capital (51). Even those forms of feminism that have denied the existence of capitalism or at least marginalize the position of women as subjects of capital and re-understand women, for example, as literary subjects—subjects of the performativity of language—are part of the cultural apparatuses of capital, enabled not primarily by discursive contradictions but by material contradictions in the social relations of production of capitalism.

This is also to say that material change for women is not homologous to changes in the cultural apparatuses of capitalism, but requires transformation of the social relations of production. This is because, as I explain further below, social differences of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and nation are not autonomous cultural differences rather, they are social relations of capital. Differences, in other words, derive not mainly from cultural productions, values and discursive constructs but from the social division of labor. In order to contribute to the development of transformative social praxis, therefore, feminism must re-understand gender as a social relation of capital and start by re-examining its own history in relation the economic relations of capitalism.



## TWO

Before moving on to further discuss feminism and the Cultural Turn, I would like to first conceptually clarify at length what is only implied above: In my critique of the limits of canonical feminist understandings of the relation of feminism and gender to “historicity” and the “role of history,” I am making a distinction between *history* and *historicism*. Historicism is a bourgeois practice of regarding history as a self-enclosed series of events, each of which is an effect of the other. This version of historicism, which Foucault (following Nietzsche) calls “monumental history,” is now theorized, updated and instituted as genealogy. Genealogy is historicism *without a transcendental subject*: a historicism without teleology but nonetheless it is historicism because “events” here are treated as autonomous from and unrelated to a structure. By *history*, on the other hand, I mean a *structure of conflicts*—specifically a conflict over the appropriation of social surplus-labor between workers and owners. History (not historicism) is a class analytics and it is to discredit this analytics that Foucault in his most famous essay, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” argues that history is “*alea*” (chance) and “regulative mechanism” (88). He uses the phrase “regulative mechanism” as a marker of a repressive history that does not allow the freedom of *events*. However what is actually involved here is that by discrediting “regulative,” he is obscuring the dynamic of history which is class.

“Genealogy,” Foucault elaborates, “must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality” (76). Foucault remarks further that:

If the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms. Examining the

history of reason, he learns that it was born in an altogether “reasonable” fashion—from ‘chance’ [...]. (78)

Part of the purpose of Foucault’s dismantling of the concept of “essence” is to dispute a transcendental subject of history and a “transcendental ideal”—the ahistorical idea that history is the effect of a “miraculous origin” and develops in a preordained fashion. Moreover, in developing “genealogy,” Foucault is the heir of Nietzsche in such writings as Nietzsche’s posthumously published “Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” where he argues that:

Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal. No leaf ever wholly equals another, and the concept “leaf” is formed through an arbitrary abstraction from these individual differences, through forgetting the distinctions; and now it gives rise to the idea that in nature there might be something besides leaves which would be “leaf”—some kind of original form after which all leaves have been woven, marked, copied, colored, curled, and painted, but by unskilled hands, so that no copy turned out to be a correct, reliable, and faithful image of the original form. (46)

Here, Nietzsche is criticizing the positivism of empiricists such as John Locke who argues in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that *sensory experience* combined with the private individual’s transparent *reflection* on this experience gives rise to concepts (such as, in Locke’s words, “whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, man, elephant, army, drunkenness’ and others”) that constitute *universal* positive knowledge (186-187). Instead of this kind of thinking, Nietzsche argues that concepts (e.g., “leaf”) are not a transparent reflection on experience (e.g., of leaves) but are an abstraction imposed onto the irreducible singularities of the concrete (“leaves”). Abstract knowledge, according to Nietzsche, is only ever a positing of a

transcendental ideal rather than an explanation of an independent material reality. When examined further, the “truth” is (in Nietzsche’s view) actually a “mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms [...] without sensuous power” (46-47). Against abstract thinking, Nietzsche posits the irreducible singularities and particularities of the concrete. This is the framework of the genealogical analytic and the sense in which Foucault discusses the historical “event.” Unlike Derrida, who argued “*il n’ya pas de hors-texte*” or (in Spivak’s translation of Derrida) “there is nothing outside the text” (*of Grammatology* 158) and, moreover, that what disrupts the *concept* (of the “event” or “history”) is the *immanent play* of language, for Foucault (like Nietzsche), there is a material “outside” to writing that “resists” conceptual explanation.

It is on these terms that Foucault goes on to elaborate on the “effective history” of genealogy as a point of departure from the historicism of “monumental history”:

“Effective” history [...] deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics, their most acute manifestations. An event, consequently, is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked “other.” The forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflict. (88)

Foucault’s concept of “effective history” presents history—and the event—as “effects” without any systemic material causes. If, according to Foucault, one analyzes into the “causes” of events one finds other “events” (which are themselves effects) an increasingly intricate, internecine, and aleatory array of events. At the same time that Foucault is working to dismantle the concept of a

transcendental subject of history he is, therefore, also getting rid of an analytics which understands history as a *material relation and structure of conflicts independent of “will”* (i.e., independent of a transcendental subject). For example, Foucault states, following Nietzsche, that the “relationship of domination is no more a ‘relationship’ than the place where it occurs is a place; and, precisely for this reason, it is fixed, throughout its history, in rituals, in meticulous procedures that impose rights and obligations” (85) *Relationality* itself is, for Foucault, *always already* “regulative mechanism” imposed from the outside onto events which have *no necessary material relation* to other events but, rather, are grounded in “disparity” (79).

Contrary to the way Foucault presents “effective history,” his theorization of the “singularity of events” (76) not grounded in a material structure of conflicts is itself *not* a “non-reductive” or “non-abstract” theory of history. It reduces history to localities, singularities, and micro-causes—to *alea*. The “chance” and “singularity of events” becomes the *abstract macro-logic* (the “grand narrative”) of Foucault’s analytic of history. The “problem” with this, to be clear, is *not* the immanent contradiction that Foucault in the end “reduces” or has an abstract theory of history; *all* theories—including theories of history—reduce in the sense that they analyze and/or explain seemingly disparate phenomena on the basis of proposed conditions of possibility (whether those conditions of possibility are proposed to be “psychology,” “class relations,” “gender,” “the play of language,” or “the singularities of events”). Moreover, abstract concepts are *necessary* to explain the material structures that enable seemingly disparate phenomena. While the tools of abstract thinking, namely language, place historical limits on knowledge of material relations (just as any instrument—such as an x-ray machine or a telescope—places limits on knowledge), this is not a reason to conclude that these limits *constitute* material relations or to conflate these limits with the object of knowledge or the truth.

Foucault (in contrast to Derrida), on one level, understood this by pointing to a non-discursive reality outside of the historical limits of language (against which monumental history could be brought into sharper relief). Yet, at the same time, in his elaboration of genealogy in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” he also ultimately assumed that *all structural* relations are “regulative mechanisms” rooted in *discursive invention* (which was later reworked and solidified into the notion of “power/knowledge” apparatuses) and that, ultimately, historical reality has no structure of conflicts other than discursively imposed ones and that it is otherwise *founded on the alea of events*.

But this is exactly where genealogy returns to historicism. To read history on the terms of the genealogical analytic cuts the events which occur in one “locality” off from the material structure of conflicts that produce “events” in the next and their relation is understood to be only contingent, aleatory, and accidental. I discuss the limits of a localizing view of the “concrete” for feminism in greater detail in Chapter 4, but to provide a brief example in capitalism now: on the terms of a genealogical analytic of history, for example, the emergence of the events which now fall under the sign of “suicide bombing” have *no structural relation through which they are necessarily related* to other events. According to a genealogical analysis an “event” can trigger other “events” but this is a relation of chance and contingency.

Uri Avnery—the Jewish founder of Israel’s *Gush Shalom* (Peace Coalition) and a vociferous critic of Israeli occupation—in his careful and historically aware reading of “suicide bombing” (“The Revenge of a Child”) written in the immediate aftermath of the events of November 10, 2002 when a young Palestinian, Sirkhan Sirkhan, broke into Kibbutz Metzger and shot to death a mother and her 4 and 5 year old children as they clung to her, points to the urgent need to move beyond the *acausality* and “*alea*” of events and, instead, to locate events in the

*material contradictions* which make them possible. With great sympathy and respect for the dead, Avnery argues that “nothing in the world can justify a Palestinian who shoots at a child in his mother’s embrace, just as nothing can justify an Israeli who drops a bomb on a house in which a child is sleeping in his bed.” On no uncertain terms, he argues against the notion of “a child for a child.”

Yet, he also points to the blindness of an analytic that sees “events” in isolation from the material *relations* that make them possible. Avnery starts by disputing some of the most commonsensical “explanations” in Israeli society for why Palestinians have undertaken such actions (e.g., that they are “crazy killers,” “blood thirsty from birth,” “their genes our different from ours”) used to dissolve history into a “pathology” of the Palestinian “biology” or “culture” against the monumental superiority of Israeli “biology” or “culture.” He then goes on to explain the systemic conditions of the Israeli occupation: homes are demolished, and Palestinians are turned overnight into the homeless; fruit trees which are the products of generations of labor and the main source of livelihood for many, are razed to the ground; children are kept from attending school; adults are robbed of any reliable means of employment and subject to daily harassment and humiliations at checkpoints; the sick are kept from hospitals; ambulances are prevented from entering at checkpoints leaving the injured to die of otherwise preventable and curable causes; people are shot at for being out past the curfews imposed on them. All of these conditions, he argues, create the potential for suicide bombers. Moreover, these conditions, his analysis implies, are not “random” occurrences in a relationship of contingency and chance—they are not the effect of “culture” clash—they are systemic conditions that are caused by the contradictions created by the Israeli occupation. Avnery concludes his analysis of the material conditions that enable “suicide bombing” by emphasizing: “All this does not justify the killing of children in the

arms of their mother. But it helps to grasp *why* this is happening, and why this will go on happening as long as the occupation lasts” (emphasis added). In other words, “suicide bombing” is not an event best understood through the analytic of “chance” but by its necessary relation to a definite material structure of conflicts.

Avnery, in the above statement, demonstrates awareness that an inquiry into *why* events occur—i.e., an inquiry into their *historical and material* origins and causes—is *not* an *ex post facto* moral justification of events with no material basis (a placing of them in a “monotonous finality” of “monumental history” as Nietzsche might say) rather, it is a contribution to an explanatory critique of events and the material structure of conflicts that produce them. Moreover, his analysis implies that to change events requires not moral outrage but *transformation* of the material basis of events—in this case, according to Avnery, by ending the Israeli occupation. Avnery is, in this way, offering a critique of the dominant analytic of history in contemporary Israeli society (legitimated by the State of Israel) which takes “events” out of their historical material *relations* and presents them as “unrepresentable” affect reducing them to trauma—to which the only response is more trauma (Avnery remarks “The chiefs of the IDF have a simple solution: hit, hit, hit”). In the dominant discourses—just as in the mainstream presses in the U.S. in the wake of 9/11 and the Patriot Act—any probing analysis into “why” (into origins, causes, and material relations of necessity) is dismissed as lunacy or “terrorism.”

Not only does this inquiry into *why* offer an intervention into the “monumental” history of biological and cultural superiority, but it also, I think, points to lessons in the limits of genealogy as an analytic of history; lessons important in the course of all struggles for social transformation, including the development of a transformative feminism. Genealogy is, to be clear, quite different from the monumental analytic that explains history according to biological

destiny or a “pre-ordained” cultural superiority. According to its proponents,<sup>6</sup> it is aimed to “elaborate” or “inventory,” as Edward Said put it, “the formidable structure of cultural domination and, specifically for formerly colonized peoples, the dangers and temptations of employing this structure upon themselves or upon others” (25) and in this way to dismantle or “advance a little in the process of [...] ‘unlearning’” it (28). Yet, on the terms of the genealogical analytic, the history of the Israeli occupation and its brutal oppression and exploitation of Palestinians can only ultimately be understood as a nexus of power and knowledge or “cultural domination,” ultimately derived on the basis of “minute deviations” and “incalculable errors” that have been solidified into rituals and a fixed axis of action (Foucault 81).

Avnery points to the politics of “accident” and implies that “accident” and “error” as an analytic of historical events is quite consistent with “all the hundred and one pretexts of professional spokesman.” “Accident” as an analytic of events, to put this another way, has become a way to legitimate the continuation of class rule by pre-empting probing analysis into the historical and material (that is, *structural*) relations that produce events and mapping them onto matters of chance (and by pre-empting such analysis, making it less possible for people to grasp the material contradictions in which they live in order to more effectively transform them). “*Alea*” is also, for example, the main mode through which the collapse of “Enron” and the transfer of millions of dollars of workers pensions into the hands of a few corporate owners was explained away by auditors at Arthur Anderson (friends of the audited) who in Nietzschean fashion read the criminal destruction of Enron documents as an effect of the corrupt practices and calculation errors of a handful of renegade accountants and their corporate CEOs. By

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<sup>6</sup> One of the most rigorous and well known applications and developments of the genealogical analytic of the history to the question of Palestine in particular can be found in the writings of Edward Said. See, for example, *Orientalism*.



contrast, the collapse of Enron is, instead, an effect of the *systemic crisis of capital*—the fall of the rate of profit. The corrupt practices merely hide this *structural* crisis from the public; they are not the cause of it. “Error,” too, has become a means of explaining away U.S. capital’s *class war* in Iraq as the effect of “misunderstanding,” miscalculations, corrupt CIA reports, errors in judgment, the limits of investigations into weapons of mass destruction, caprice—when it is the effect of U.S. capital’s falling rate of profit; it is not a culture war between the “west” and the “rest” but a class war to transfer the wealth produced by the “rest” into the hands of the “west” to bolster its falling rate of profit. Because genealogy, in the final analysis, dissolves history into to the disparate and aleatory, it covers over the material structure of conflicts propelling history.

It is important to point out here, for the historical record, that while Avnery discusses the relationship of “suicide bombing” as having a necessary relation to the material contradictions brought on by the Israeli occupation, he does not himself situate the Israeli occupation in relation to the material contradictions of capitalism. However, the material conditions that he mentions that have contributed to the production of “suicide bombers” are made possible by the material contradictions of private ownership of the means of production (production for profit). It is not, in the final analysis, a conflict over religion, heritage, values, affect, or desire for power. These explanations ultimately dissolve the history of the conflict into a *culture* war or clash of civilizations—an explanation perfectly compatible with the Israeli and U.S. security *juntas* that are now defending the interests of North Atlantic capital. Moreover, it is not “land” that is the dynamic of Israeli occupation or of the struggle of the Palestinians against the occupation. “Land” is the geography of labor-power and the conflict over the “land” is an effect of an imperialist *class war* over the appropriation of the surplus-labor of the Palestinian people (labor made “cheaper” than the Israeli worker by a long history of occupation and deterioration of the

Palestinian's material conditions of life) to bolster the rate of profit. Palestinian "suicide bombers" and the Israeli occupation are not best grasped by "*alea*" or "singularity of events" in which events trigger other events with no necessary material relation. It is not, in other words, "minute deviations" and "errors" (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 81) that give rise to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but a *structure of material conflicts* based on private ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of surplus-labor that have enabled the Israeli occupation. Capital is the dynamic of the conflict and, in this case, is *fronting* as the State of Israel. In this context, as well, it is important to mention that ending the occupation is an urgent historical necessity; but it is not an end in itself; while it is an advancement of what is in essence a class struggle of the Palestinian people with capitalism, it does not transform the material contradictions of wage-labor/capital upon which the continued exploitation of Palestinian workers—and all workers—rests (and if left as an end in itself leads to new class contradictions).

The dynamic of history, to put this another way, is neither a *transcendental subject* nor "regulative mechanism" subverted by *alea* (the "singularities of events") but a *material structure of conflicts*. It is better grasped by the materialist conception of history which understands that "the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life" (Engels, *The Origin* 6). This analytic of history starts with the premise of "the existence of living human individuals" who produce in definite material conditions and definite relations of production that exist independent of their will:

The fact is, therefore, that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations [...] the social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, however, of these individuals, not as they may appear in their own or

other people's imaginations, but as they *actually* are, i.e., as they act, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions, independent of their will. (Marx and Engels, *German* 41)

Historical forces are not brought into being by consciousness, ideas, values, or chance but by means of “productive” or “praxical activity”—labor—which is also an *historical* relation. Labor is, as Engels puts it, not only the source of all wealth but the “prime basic condition for all human existence” (*Dialectics* 170). This is the case since men and women “must be in a position to live in order to be able to ‘make history’”; they must be in a position to satisfy needs of “eating and drinking [...] habitation, clothing and many other things” (Marx and Engels, *German* 42). There is no “human existence” that is prior to labor and labor is itself not outside of history it is a dialectical relation:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. (Marx, *Capital* 283)

It is important to explain further what this means since, in Cultural Studies today, and particularly in feminism, after a long history since Marx's writings of the rearticulation of “essence” and “nature” as essentialist terms that “construct” an “outside” of history (in biology, etc.), this argument is often read as its inverse: the existentialist notion articulated by Heidegger

and Sartre that there is “human existence” (Being) prior to “essence” (what one becomes in history)—that we are “thrown” in this world and through our daily struggles we make our “essence” (we become who we are). Marx’s theorization of the dialectical praxis of labor, by contrast, is an explanation that “human existence” is itself a historical and material relation of labor which is to say that it is not “naturally given.” Even, for example, the “natural forces” of the “body,” “arms,” “legs,” “head,” and “hands” are the product of a history of the dialectical praxis of labor and its historical and material development in response to specific conditions of production as Engel’s points out in his analysis of the role of labor in the transition from ape to human and the development of the opposable thumb on the human hand (*Dialectics* 170-183). It is, to put it another way, an explanation of historical material necessity: the fact that “human existence” and its course of development never exists independently of the material conditions of production prevailing at the time (the forces of production) and the social relations within which this production takes place (the relations of production or property relations). And these conditions and relations are themselves the product of past labor and, in turn, shape the course of all other aspects of social life. But labor conditions never remain static: as the forces of production develop this results in the production and satisfaction of new needs which come into direct contradiction with the relations of production, requiring transformation in the relations of production. Human existence is not prior to the social “metabolism” between the forces of production and the relations within which this production takes place and are transformed. It is on this basis that Engels also argues that “the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men’s brains, not in men’s better insights into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought not in the *philosophy*, but in the *economics* of each particular epoch” (Engels, *Socialism* 54).

Seen on these terms “agency” and “freedom” of any kind are neither naturally “given,” nor are they a product of volition, will, or spirit rather, they require material conditions to be in place and, therefore, they are ultimately dependent on and limited by the material relations of production. Freedom is in dialectical relation to material relations of necessity; which means that it requires material conditions to be in place. Freedom for women is not simply freedom from “moral constraint” (Nietzsche) or “regulative mechanism” but freedom from material constraint. Freedom, in other words, from the material constraint of the relations of production. In a world in which the productive forces have developed to the point in which it is possible to provide all persons with food, clean water and irrigation, clothing, shelter, healthcare, transportation, childcare, freedom from greenhouse gasses and global warming, and so on... freedom is freedom from the private property relations (production for profit) that have become fetters to these forces and prevent all persons from having access to this. It on this basis that history is a structure of material conflicts and *specifically a conflict over the appropriation of social surplus-labor between workers and owners*. Class, in short, is the dynamic of history including the history of feminism. This is the case because private property in the relations of production is the *material limit* beyond which human freedom—and therefore freedom for women—cannot go *without transforming* the material relations of production (and abolishing class relations) by means of transforming social praxis (revolution).

### THREE:

To many, my claims regarding feminism, culture, and history will appear completely out of sorts at this point in the historical development of Cultural Studies in general and feminist Cultural Studies in particular. After all, the concept of “modern” and “postmodern” have been

used to mark historical and material change for several decades, with “globalization” gaining increasing use in the last 10 years, so that it is almost unheard of to conceive of historical change otherwise. Moreover, as I have discussed extensively in the previous chapter much of contemporary feminism sees itself as already having surpassed “wave” theory and its notion of “progress” for women within capitalism by its adoption of especially poststructuralist and postmodern modes of feminism in which “culture” is read as a semi-autonomous from the economic and is primarily understood as a realm of signifying practices that does not follow a logic of progress. Most significantly, the objection to my critique is that examining culture in terms of capitalism is a late form of economism and economic reductionism and that culture *is* the terrain of material struggle, freedom and social transformation. As I have marked in the previous chapter, as a result of the “cultural turn” in much of contemporary feminism in the U.S. (which has been reinforced by the canonical understandings of gender and sexuality institutionalized by “post-” theories including poststructuralism, postcolonialism and post-Marxism), differences are thought largely to be cultural—and quite often discursive—and change for women is also understood primarily in terms of cultural and discursive changes. My argument that “class” is the dynamic of history will, therefore, be read by many contemporary feminists as a violent exclusion of differences of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, disabilities... As I aim to show, however, the culturalist views of “difference” and the relationship of differences to historicity produces as feminist politics based on class rule and in doing so limits its changes to changes for some women who have gained within capitalism at the expense of the majority.

It will be useful to start here to unpack the central lines of contestation for the Cultural Turn in feminism, in the prominent late 1990s debate over the relation of culture to the economic

between Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser, both highly influential postmodern feminists. It is important to mark here that the Cultural Turn (as I discuss further on in this chapter) really begins much earlier on; Butler and Fraser are rehearsing (in relation to debates over sexuality) what began to develop in feminism in the West during the New Social Movements. In her essay “Merely Cultural,” Butler argues against the conceptual distinction between culture and the economic on the grounds that it renders struggles other than class, namely sexuality, as “merely cultural.” The “economic/culture” divide, she contends, is a conceptual and analytical anachronism and invention that has presented culture as “immaterial,” situated struggles for freedom of (homo)sexuality in this domain of “immaterial culture,” and in doing so, has marginalized these struggles as derivative and secondary. To put this another way, Butler’s contention is that the emptying of struggles for freedom of sexuality of their economic content is really an effect of the *conceptual* distinction between “economics” and “culture.” To deal with this problem, Butler proposes that it is necessary to deconstruct and abandon the conceptual distinction between “economics” and “culture” in favor of, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have also put it, “the increasing indistinguishability of economic and cultural phenomena” (*Empire* 275). “Is it possible,” Butler asks, “to distinguish, even analytically, between a lack of cultural recognition and a material oppression, when the very definition of legal ‘personhood’ is rigorously circumscribed by cultural norms that are indissociable from their material effects?” (41). On this basis, she contends, it becomes clear that “sexuality must be understood as part of [the] mode of production” (41). For Butler, the (mis)recognition of sexuality—both “normative sexuality” and the “non-normative sexualities it harbors within its own terms . . . [and] the sexualities that thrive and suffer outside of those terms—are not “merely culture” but are constitutive of economic relations themselves. Moreover, in this view, it is only by

understanding sexuality and gender as “part of the mode of production” (and expanding the definition of the economic beyond relations of wage-labor/capital), that struggles over social inequalities of sexuality and gender can be returned to struggles for economic freedom and not reduced to the “merely cultural.”

But of what, according to Butler, do “economic struggles” for freedom of sexuality consist? The “material” and “economic” struggle for freedom of sexuality, for Butler, is a struggle over cultural recognition and legal personhood. To put this another way, in proposing to redefine sexuality as an economic struggle not “merely cultural,” Butler in actuality rewrites the economic relations in cultural terms by, for example, arguing that struggles over “cultural recognition” and “legal personhood” for gays and lesbians are “part of [the] mode of production” itself (41). What this argument does is equate the cultural struggles that appear on the surface of capitalism, particularly for inclusion in private property rights, with fundamental changes in the private property relations themselves and the relationship of sexuality and gender to them.

In her “Heterosexism, Misrecognition and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler,” Nancy Fraser contests Butler’s evacuation of the culture/economic conceptual distinction on the grounds that such a maneuver posits the indistinguishability of cultural and economic phenomena “by definition,” not through historical analysis and analytical grasping of material practices. Struggles over sexuality, for example, do not alter the relations of class inequality in capitalism because the regulation of sexuality “structures neither the social division of labour nor the mode of exploitation of labor-power in capitalist society” (145). The historical evidence, she firmly establishes, is that “capitalist society now permits significant numbers of individuals to live through wage labour outside of heterosexual families” (147). Moreover, multinational corporations such as Apple, Disney and American Airlines have shown that they are not



incompatible with the recognition of sexual difference by instituting policies such as domestic partner benefits. “Contemporary capitalism,” she maintains, “seems not to require heterosexism” (147).

In the absence of historical evidence that changes in cultural recognition of sexuality have a transformative effect on the social relations of production in capitalism, Fraser concludes that the cultural theory that is most useful for understanding struggles over gender and sexuality is, therefore, one which sees sexuality as strictly a matter of cultural change and, moreover, culture as materially autonomous—not coterminous with and indistinguishable—from the economic. Culture and, therefore, sexuality, she maintains, have their own, independent, materiality. For Fraser, economic inequalities (what Fraser euphemistically calls “economic disabilities”) for homosexuals are “better understood as effects of heterosexism in the relations of recognition than as hardwired into the structure of capitalism” (147). The material inequality of gays and lesbians, according to Fraser, is not connected to the structure of wage-labor/capital relations but a matter of how gays and lesbians are *culturally valued*. The larger lesson of Fraser’s text is that culture and cultural values *should be* the terrain of struggle for economic equality and social justice for those marginalized on the grounds of sexuality and gender. She writes, “The good news is we do not need to overthrow capitalism in order to remedy those disabilities” (147). Capitalism can continue exploiting the labor of workers for profit, and private property relations can continue, with no effect on material inequalities of gender and sexuality and the economic, social, and political equality of homosexuals and women. In other words, she writes the struggle for freedom of sexuality as purely a struggle for cultural, legal and political equality within capitalism. This evacuates feminism as a struggle for freedom from economic exploitation: it re-inscribes it as a ruling class movement based on equality of “values.”

Despite their local differences in how they define the relationship of culture to the economic, what unites the arguments of Fraser and Butler is that, as part of the Cultural Turn in feminism, they convert the economic contradictions of women's lives into matters of cultural values. Their arguments are based on the notion that it is the struggle over cultural norms and values that is the terrain of economic and material freedom on the basis of sexuality and gender. To be clear, the "difference" between Butler and Fraser is that Butler contends that changes in cultural recognition of sexuality and gender "constitute" fundamental changes in wage-labor/capital relations, while Fraser argues that such changes have little or no effect on the relation of wage-labor to capital but, she contends, such changes do constitute material and economic change for women and homosexuals (if not for all workers). These are really formal differences in their main argument: while Butler defines the cultural as constituting the economic, and Fraser defines it as autonomous from the economic, their main argument is that the struggles for material freedom of gender and sexuality are waged on the terrain of battles over legal personhood, cultural recognition, and the way in which human beings are morally, ethically and culturally valued, respected, or esteemed. In other words, material freedom and social justice in the dominant cultural theory are founded on cultural values.

How effective is this "value theory" of gender and sexuality as a theory of inequality, historical change, and the material relations and social praxis through which this occurs? Have the dramatic cultural changes in gender and sexuality relations, values and mores that have taken place for some—particularly in the West and in cosmopolitan centers of commerce—over the last 50 years (from so called "modernity," through "postmodernity," to "globality") *constituted* material freedom for women and material freedom of sexuality, thereby offering historical and material evidence that gender and sexuality are best addressed on the terrain of cultural values?

Moreover, have these changes in culture, as theorists such as Hardt and Negri seem to maintain, fundamentally transformed the *very structures of production* in capitalism so that it is no longer based on the exploitation of surplus-labor and is now *constituted* by the desires of a multicultural, polysexual, transgendered, and transnational “multitude”?

On the cultural surfaces of capitalism, (some) women’s lives, indeed, appear to have changed dramatically since the end of World War II. Women around the world, in the North and in the South, have been more thoroughly incorporated into the waged workforce over the last 50 years. Moreover, owing to greater participation in the workforce, the economic status of many women is not dependent on the income of a husband. In many regions of the world women are a more visible part of public life than in previous generations, with increased political and legal freedoms to take part in political office, business, public institutions, public demonstrations and civilian life. Some women have more freedoms, comparatively speaking, to express their desires or discontent with respect to sexual relations: including pre-marital sex, living outside of monogamy and/or marriage, legal right to birth control and abortion, bearing children outside of marriage, the right to divorce, and sexual relations and/or domestic partnerships with women.

Yet, these increased “cultural freedoms” of gender and sexuality for (some) women have not freed women from material inequality and economic exploitation. At the same time that women have gained “cultural freedoms” to participate in the paid workforce and women all over the world have become part of the wage-labor force in increasing numbers, women also constitute some of its most exploited sections. Moreover, not only for the majority of women, poverty has increased for *all* workers: the top 100 CEOs who 30 years ago made 39 times the average workers income, now make 1000 times their income (“Ever Higher Society”). The wage gap between men and women workers has narrowed, but 59% of this is owing to men’s falling

wages rather than rising wages for women (“Working Women in the Global Economy”). The moving of women into the workforce and “cultural freedoms” that have coincided with this, in other words, have taken place in the context of a transnational capitalist economy in which the gap between rich and poor has grown astronomically, suggesting that alongside increased employment for women, and increased working hours for those who are employed, wealth is being transferred upward. The incorporation of women into the workforce, in other words, has coincided with increased exploitation—the private appropriation by the few of the surplus-labor of the majority—and the concentration of wealth into fewer hands. Economic freedom is an illusion when women—while culturally and legally “free” to work—make less than men and, along side the majority of men, are subject to exploitation. Moreover, the cultural and legal freedom to wage-work is only a formal freedom not only when women still get paid less than men, but when their increased workforce participation is used as a means to lower wages and increase the rate of exploitation, and when it has coincided with increased poverty of women worldwide. While in the last 50 years capitalism has pulled more women than ever before into the paid workforce—and given new cultural freedoms to women to accommodate these shifts—the gap between rich and poor has grown astronomically and along with it the vast majority of women have sunk deeper and deeper into poverty. For instance, as Goretti Horgan has argued in her essay “How Does Globalisation Affect Women?”: “Working outside the home and being economically independent means [women] don’t have to answer to any man, but the ‘race to the bottom’ on which the expansion of global capital is being built means that, typically, this work entails long hours at low wages and makes caring for children very difficult.”

While some women have gained increased cultural freedoms to live and have sexual relations outside of marriage, monogamy, “mono-culturalism” and heterosexuality these

polysexual and multicultural “kinship” relations have also coincided with the deeper subordination of sexuality, kinship, and family relations to commodity relations and production for profit. As of 2001, in the United States for example, while less than 25% of the population (compared to 45% in 1960) lives in the traditional “nuclear family” of two married, heterosexual parents with biological children (Benfer “The Nuclear Family Takes a Hit”), the increased diversity of the family has not freed kinship and sexual relations from economic inequality under capitalism. According to a report from the University of Dayton’s School of Law, between 1977 and 1999 “the after-tax income of the richest 20 percent of American families increased by 43 percent, while that of the poorest 20 percent decreased 9 percent, allowing for inflation. The actual income of those living on the lowest salaries was even less than 30 years ago” (“Widening Gap Between Rich and Poor”). “New” polysexual, multicultural, transgenerational kinship, affective, and family relations are not so “new”: they do not constitute the transformation of the material structure of the family under capitalism. The family is still an economic unit of capitalism in which (multicultural, polysexual, transgenerational) workers shoulder the cost of social reproduction out of their wages while the socially produced wealth is appropriated by owners. Households headed by women, for example, while increasingly common represent one of the fastest growing poverty groups around the world (Horgan).

Moreover, what for *some* is increased cultural acceptance of multiple sexualities, and transnational kinship arrangements, has come hand in hand with the growth of the transnational sex industry, mail-order-brides, domestic labor migration and the deeper subordination of all modes of sexuality, kinship, and family to commodification and production for profit. When one looks at the historical evidence of “sexual freedom” under capitalism, on one level sexual freedoms *appear* to have increased and some sexual mores *appear* to have to relaxed. On another

level, in the material structure of social relations, sexual relations have become more subordinated to commodity production and exchange suggesting that it is not so much freedom of sexuality that had been won but freedom to deploy sexuality on the market and to be ever more subjected to the relations of wage-labor.

For example, not only “family values” but also “queer values” are enabled by capitalism and marked by its class contradictions. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (glbt) values have been depicted in television programs such as *Will and Grace* and in films such as *Transamerica* as increasingly part of mainstream life, particularly in the West. But closer examination reveals the class divided structure of the material relations producing the changing values over glbt. The material conditions of freedom are quite different for instance for an upper-middle class queer urban tribe in Manhattan, Paris, or Tokyo and a brothel of transgendered multi-cultural sex workers in the same cities. While both may be marked by multiple sex partners and both serve as an extended “kinship” structure and are historically speaking a response to the contradictions and failures of the nuclear family and monogamous marriage under capitalism, they are also markers of the limits to and contradictions in “sexual freedom” and “values recognition” under class relations. The transgendered sex workers are otherwise “unemployable,” owing to their marginalized status. Their sexuality and “daring,” while giving them “freedom” from conventional family values, does not give them economic freedom and, in fact, is used as a tool of exploitation against them, making them “more or less expensive to use.” The marker of this economic unfreedom—is that sexuality is subordinated to the commodification of sexual relations, to economic compulsion, and the subordination of sexual relations to financial considerations. These constraints are not simply matters of “cultural values” with economic repercussions rather the cultural values are themselves an effect of the social

relations of production in capitalism and the fact that all levels of human existence—including sexuality—are subordinated to production for profit. The increased cultural acceptance for some has really been an articulation of class freedoms for a now polysexual managerial class living in the West, not sexual freedom for all which requires freedom of sexuality from private property relations.

The seeming exception to the general deterioration of women's conditions of life in transnational capitalism is that there is now a small minority of women, alongside and independent of ruling class men, who own and control the material wealth of society and, therefore, wield tremendous power over the life conditions of other men and women. Moreover, some women have also increasingly joined the ranks of upper-middle class managers and receive substantial remunerations from capital for their services of managing workers (both men and women) to adjust to the imperatives of transnational capital and production for profit. For this small minority of women, changes in cultural values have meant the opportunity to wield class power and privilege independent of men. However, their "freedoms" are themselves not representative of freedoms for women or freedom of sexuality but of class freedoms, which are materially dependent on the exploited labor of others including the vast majority of women. For example, the "freedom" of ruling class and high managerial women from the constraints of the family under capitalism and for leisure time either entirely away from or in addition to work is made possible not by material freedom for all women but by the exploitation of others, including women employed as domestics and caregivers. Exploitation, in other words, has continued along into "new" social and cultural relations of gender and sexuality. While on the surface of capitalism, there appear to be new freedoms that suggest a break within capital from its exploitative past, if we go into the "hidden abode of production" we find that the same,

fundamental division between capital and wage-labor still shapes social difference, culture and cultural freedoms (*Capital* 279).

#### FOUR

These historical and material developments throw into sharp relief the theory in contemporary feminism that, as Stuart Hall once put it, “the word is now as ‘material’ as the world” (“New Times” 233). The “value theory” of gender and sexuality, which argues that cultural change—and particularly discursive change in established meanings in culture and the social representations and cultural values of recognition “founded” on those meanings—is economic change has been unable to explain the fact that exploitation and increasing economic inequality have been brought along into changed social and cultural relations and have accompanied new cultural representation and “freedoms” of gender and sexuality. Changes in cultural representations, values, and “everyday” practices of gender and sexuality, in other words, do not *constitute* material and economic freedom for women from the exploitation of their labor and increasing poverty in capitalism. Moreover, the counter-part to this culturalist argument—that what is lacking and, therefore, what is needed for freedom are the further extension of “cultural freedoms” of “recognition” and “ethical value”—has been unable to explain why, historically, new “cultural values” of recognition (including new “left” modes) are produced and why they have coincided with increased impoverishment of the majority of women worldwide, the deterioration of the economic conditions of the majority of men and women in transnational capitalism, and the transfer of wealth away from social resources in education, childcare, healthcare, social security and toward corporate welfare, the defense, and other measures that defend the freedom of transnational corporations to make a profit.



Feminism in the wake of the Cultural Turn has been and is increasingly unable to explain and work to transform the deepening social and economic contradictions of gender and sexuality in capitalism now because it has bypassed issues of labor and abandoned a *materialist conception of history* for culturalist conceptions of gender and sexuality as autonomous signifying practices and cultural singularities. It has abandoned knowledge of the relationship of differences such as gender and sexuality to the *material relations of production* in capitalism, to the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, and particularly to class as a material relation of the subject of labor to ownership of the means of production; a social relation based on the exploitation of surplus-labor. In doing so the canonical feminisms have helped transnational capital to dismantle feminism as a movement for social transformation to end economic exploitation and have converted feminism into a cultural values movement to update women to contemporary modes of exploitation.

It is important here to further clarify what I only mentioned briefly earlier: that class is the dynamic of history including the history of feminism. Class, to be clear, is not an “identity” it is a *material relation of production*. Class is the relation of the subject of labor to ownership of the means of production: whether one owns the means of production and privately appropriates the surplus-labor of others, or whether one only owns one’s labor-power in order to survive. This is *the* root issue for feminism and struggles for economic equality and social justice because class (the relation between those who own the means of production and exploit the surplus-labor of others who only have their labor-power to sell in order to survive) is the material relation that structures all other social relations in capitalism. This is because it is the material relation that determines whether or not people own the means of production and therefore command over the labor of others and the ends and interests toward which the socially produced wealth is put or

whether they are exploited and live in abject poverty. The capitalist mode of production, which is at its root a social relation of production for profit, does not fundamentally rely on the *exclusion* of difference rather, it relies on the exploitation of surplus-labor for profit. In the course of its historical development, moreover, capitalism *produces* differences: it produces increasingly complex divisions of labor in order to increase its capacity to extract surplus-labor and with these complex divisions of labor, in turn, it also produces the cultural means and “practical consciousness” through which the subject of labor adjusts to these divisions. The “differences” that are acquired in the formation of “identities” are a culturalizing of the material relations of capitalism and its divisions of labor.

The reason that the materialist conception of history and the distinction between the “economic” and the “cultural” is necessary for feminist theory is because it enables those struggling for social transformation to grasp the difference between the cultural changes in, for example, gender and sexual relations that occur as a response to the intensification of class contradictions in capitalism and the way it extracts surplus labor and material changes that result from the transformation of the production relations themselves. To collapse the distinction between the “cultural” and the “economic” is to erase the material difference between cultural shifts in capitalism, which derive from the development of its forces of production and the intensification of class contradictions between the forces and relations of production and *material* transformation, which derives from the transformation of the social relations of production (private property relations). In doing so, this collapse substitutes changes in the modes through which the subject of labor is given the necessary “cultural skills” to live under changing forms of exploitation for the transformation of the relations of exploitation themselves. “Feminism,” under these conditions, becomes a means for *reforming and updating gendered and*

*sexed subjectivities* to culturally, subjectively and psychologically adjust to more complex and sophisticated modes of exploitation—and increasingly brutal economic and social inequalities—as the class contradictions of capitalism intensify, but not of transforming social relations of production based on exploitation.

In order to begin to produce a theory and praxis of transformative feminism it is necessary to break from the contemporary feminist embrace of the “Cultural Turn” and its reformist conception of social change that we find in feminist theories such as those articulated by Butler and Fraser and, instead, produce a materialist theory of social difference and historical change. What feminism needs is *a labor theory of gender and social differences*. This means that social differences such as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity are not primarily “discursive constructs,” “signifying practices,” “literary categories,” or matters of legal personhood, identity, affect, values, ethics, or even public policy or law rather, they are *social relations of capital*. Moreover, the way feminism and the transformation of material relations of exploitation and oppression of women are articulated in history is not *homologous* to cultural changes such as changes in cultural representations, signifying practices, legal arrangements and public policy, management styles and strategies, lifestyles, desires, affects, values and/or cultural productions of women.

To explain gender, sexuality, and other social differences as “social relations of capital,” is not to ignore or discount differences rather, it is to explain that they are, as Teresa Ebert has argued, “situated in the world historical processes of labor and capital” (“Rematerializing” 34) or that they are what Delia Aguilar calls “class-bound” issues. By understanding social differences as “class bound” issues, Aguilar more specifically means that they are social relations bound to the material relations of production based in the exploitation of surplus-labor (413). In

contemporary feminism in the West, Aguilar argues, “The theoretical frames utilized” to explain and analyze concrete matters of gender and sexuality “(most of which can be safely classified as belonging to the postmodern constellation) are those that carefully steer clear of the vaguest notions of surplus labor, so that no matter how eloquently empirical data may speak of exploitation, the transcription winds up telling another story” (413). In her analysis of “sex work” and “domestic labor”—particularly of the material conditions of Filipina sex workers and domestics—she shows that in the absence of a clear grasp between the relationship of gender and sexuality to class relations and the exploitation of surplus-labor, postmodern conceptions of gender and sexuality end up producing a very moralizing, individualist and idealist understanding of difference and social change based on the autonomous agency of the local subject abstracted from the englobing material relations of exploitation in capitalism.

As Teresa Ebert argues in her essay “Rematerializing Feminism,” social differences such as gender, sexuality and race are forged out of the material processes of capitalism namely, the social division of labor and private property relations (the social relations of production). They are produced and change as an effect of these material relations of production. Moreover, they become social differences, indexes of social inequality, and “spaces of historical agency and sites of social struggle [...] *because of the divisions of labor and property relations (class)*” (Ebert, “Rematerializing” 38). “Gender,” for instance, has what Ebert calls “a material history” in the sexual division of labor in the family in class society (37-40). This means that, for example, cultural practices of “femininity” and “masculinity” are an articulation and culturalizing of the division of labor between “reproductive” and “productive” labor in, for example, early industrial capitalism when women are primarily located in reproductive labor in the home.

However the “gender division of labor”—e.g., where women are located in the division of labor between production and reproduction, or paid or unpaid labor and what occupations they hold vis-à-vis men—is not autonomous from class relations nor do they “constitute” these relations. The gender division of labor is dependent on and determined by the root division of labor and property relations between owners and laborers: in capitalism the division between capital (exploiter) and wage-labor (exploited). Engels discusses this in his historical analysis of the way in which the transformation of the mode of production and property relations from feudalism to capitalism, and the shifting of social production from the patriarchal household under feudalism to modern industry under capitalism put the gender division of labor “topsy-turvy simply because the division of labor outside the family had changed” (*Origin* 158). This transformation of property relations in production transformed the character of women’s labor and placed women in a relationship of economic dependence on men.

The basic understanding that the “gender division of labor” is itself the effect of class (private ownership of the means of production) is also applicable in capitalism now: production for profit has now pulled women *en masse* into the workforce and has altered gender and sexual relations to accommodate this shift. Yet, these new modes of gender and sexuality relations are still used as tools of exploitation by, for example, placing women into contingent, part-time, and low-paid workforces. What underpins not only changes in the location of women in the workforce but in reproductive relations and matters of lifestyle, personal relations, and the daily practices of “gender” and “sexuality” is, under capitalism, production for profit. Gender and sexual relations in this respect are determined by class relations and the division between those who own the means of production and therefore command over the material resources and conditions of life of the majority of people of the world and those who only have their labor to

sell in order to survive and are exploited. For example, “same sex” marriage and family are not simply sites of desire, choice, and affect that are autonomous from production rather they are “class-bound” sites of economic necessity and compulsion under changing labor relations in capitalism. For many, “same sex marriage” has become an economic necessity under capitalism. Yet, at the same time, “same-sex” marriage and family—like heterosexual marriage and family—is a “private property” relation marked by class inequality. It is not indicative of and does not bring about freedom of sexuality from privatized social reproduction in capitalism in which the cost of social reproduction of the workforce is the private responsibility of workers and in which some families live off of profit while the majority live off of wages and are exploited.

To restate, gender and sexuality each have a material history in the social division of labor. What make “gender” and “sexuality” sites of social struggle and change is that they are reproduced as tools of exploitation. They are used in capitalism as a means to raise or lower the rate of exploitation. This is both the case in terms of the way in which gender and sexuality are used to raise or lower wages as well as, for example, the way in which gender and sexuality are used to control the rate of growth and development of the working population and, therefore, control capital’s access to the supply of exploitable labor. But these measures are themselves dependent on the social relations of production: the fact that capital relies on labor-power to produce surplus-labor for profit. Capitalism, in other words, reproduces social differences—and requires changes to cultural relations—to pull workers in and out of the workforce, raise or lower their wages, depending on what is most profitable. With this in mind, material freedom for women is not simply a matter of their relocation in the workforce nor is it a matter of the changes in everyday gender and sexuality practices that the inculcation of women into wage-labor has

made necessary. Rather it is a matter of emancipation from exploitation through the praxical transformation of social relations of production.

## FIVE

To elaborate on these issues further it will be useful here to re-examine contemporary feminism's increasing embrace of culturalism—which has taken place in what have been understood as respective “waves” of feminism—not just in terms of their immanent contradictions but to show how the Cultural Turn in feminism is itself an effect of contradictions in the social relations of production, starting in this chapter with the “second wave” of feminism in the United States and the early stages of its transition from “modern” to “postmodern” feminism. What has been called “second wave” feminism came of political and intellectual age in the material conditions of capitalism in the decades immediately following World War II, particularly during the “long boom” of capitalism—the most sustained economic boom in capitalism's history, roughly spanning from the end of World War II to the oil crisis of 1973, in which the world capitalist economy underwent enormous growth in productivity and produced wealth on an unprecedented scale. Imperialist nations such as the United States, France, and Germany saw their gross national product triple, quadruple, and quintuple respectively. Industrial urban centers were produced throughout the globe and the rural populations of not only imperialist nations but also nations such as Spain, Italy and Ireland were reduced to less than one third of the total population (Harman 75).

The institutionalization of Fordist mass production practices—large-scale, mass production, with moving assembly lines—in the technical division of labor and of Taylorism in management appeared to many at the time to “free” workers (at least those in the West) from the

class contradictions of capitalism (in much the same way that more recently, globalization theorists believe that “post-Fordism” frees workers from class contradictions). Moreover, with production taking place primarily within the respective national boundaries of competing capitalist interests, capital maintained an economic interest in supporting the reproduction of the domestic labor-supply. Capital is dependent upon the exploitation of surplus-labor of workers to produce profit. Moreover, it also needed these workers to act as consumers in an attempt to stave off crisis of profit caused by overproduction. In order to deal with labor shortages following the war and reproduce a national working population that could both produce at the existing levels of production and at the same time actually purchase mass consumer goods in order for profit to be realized, it was useful for capital at the time to maintain high wages and moreover, to allot part of the wealth produced to economic and social welfare, education, etc. As a result, the wage-working populations, particularly of the imperialist nations which saw steady increases in their gross national production, also saw a steady relatively uninterrupted increase in their wages, access to mass consumer goods, an expansion of economic and social welfare and the “welfare state,” as well as an expansion of the culture industries aimed at social reproduction of workers, such as the university, and a steady increase in the standard of living of large sectors of the working population (Pelizzon and Casparis 122-126; Allen 288-289).

But the *appearance* of capitalism does not correspond to the *essence* of capitalism: the root material relations of production based on the exploitation of surplus-labor of workers who do not own the means of production and its appropriation into the hands of a small fraction of owners. Behind the *appearance* of equilibrium and progress under capitalism to many in the West, this unprecedented productivity and wealth was undergirded by the structure of exploitation manifested in sharp class inequality, imperialist conquest and warfare to subordinate



new areas and regions of the globe to capitalist production, displace and proletarianize the rural poor, and transfer wealth produced by workers throughout the world into the hands of the capitalist class. Despite the “boom” in the global capitalist economy, economic inequality persisted globally. In Latin America for instance, urban workers lived in a state of frequent unemployment, dire poverty, and primarily resided in shanty towns without electricity and running water. China and India produced huge urban centers while the majority of their populations still resided in rural poverty (Harman 75). Even within nations that benefited enormously from the long boom, such as the United States where the wage-working population was experiencing a steady rise in wages and employment in what many at the time thought was proof of a secure “balance” between labor and capital, economic exploitation still existed below the surface. Many women, particularly in the earlier stages of the long boom, were pushed out of the waged workforce and back into reproductive labor in the home to help re-supply the depleted domestic labor force after WWII. Women wage-workers faced inequality in the workplace, lower wages, which, among other things, reinforced economic compulsion into the family, heterosexuality, motherhood, and marriage. Workers of color and immigrant workers, moreover, faced intense racism and segregation which devalued their labor-power forcing them to work in conditions of sporadic employment, low-wages, dead end jobs with the threat of state sanctioned brutality for resisting unequal conditions. To put this another way, on the social surfaces of capitalism, particularly in the West, there *appeared* to be a stable balance between wage-labor and capital and the notion that capitalism—and the dominant Fordist production practices it deployed at the time in order to produce profit—led to increasing prosperity for all. On the other hand, this increased productivity on the part of workers and the “prosperity” that was enjoyed by the capitalist class and some segments of the laboring population, was not actually founded on a

mutual accord but on the private appropriation of surplus-labor (exploitation) which resulted in increasing economic inequality, instability and crisis worldwide.

What has been called the “second wave” of feminism in the West, and its conceptions of gender and sexuality, were forged on the basis of these class contradictions during the “long boom” of capitalism and at a specific stage of historical development of its laboring practices—or “productive forces”—of Fordist mass production. Feminism at this time, of course, used a variety of contesting and conflicting analytical approaches to understand and act upon the material contradictions and their relation to gender and sexuality in the decades immediately following World War II—such as the liberal feminism of Betty Friedan, the radical feminism of Shulamith Firestone, the “dual systems” theory of Heidi Hartman, the black feminism of Dorothy Joseph and Audre Lorde, and the socialist feminism of Angela Davis, Mary-Alice Waters and the members of the Combahee River Collective. But despite their differences, like the feminist theories of today, they are all marked by the economic contradictions of the day. They are articulations of the social relations of production and class struggle over women’s relationship to class, exploitation, and capital.

Take, for instance, the classic modernist conception of feminism typified in the liberal humanist feminism of Betty Friedan. In her landmark contribution to the inauguration of “second wave feminism,” *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan critiqued the way in which what she called “the feminine mystique” re-defined the “woman question” exclusively in terms of women’s “sexual role” and excluded women from being considered, alongside men, as “human beings of limitless human potential”:

[T]he logic of the feminine mystique redefined the very nature of woman’s problem. When woman was seen as a human being of limitless human potential,

equal to man, anything that kept her from realizing her full potential was a problem to be solved: barriers to higher education and political participation, discrimination or prejudice in law or morality. But now that woman is seen only in terms of her sexual role, the barriers to the realization of her full potential, the prejudices which deny her full participation in the world, are no longer problems. The only “problems” now are those that might disturb her adjustment as a housewife. So career is a problem, education is a problem, political interest, even the very admission of women’s intelligence and individuality is a problem. (61)

The “feminine mystique” that Friedan brought to the fore of public discussion emerged at a time in which many women who were previously drawn into the waged workforce for the first time during World War II in order to serve as productive labor for capital were now being pushed back into reproductive labor in the family. Historic gains made for these women in institutions of public education, childcare, social welfare to make it possible for women to participate in the waged workforce had been re-privatized in the 1950s to re-secure women’s reproductive labor in the home. Friedan’s own analysis of “the feminine mystique,” for example, points back to previous historical periods in the United States, such as the 1910s and 20s as well as during World War II in which women’s participation in the waged workforce was on the rise and in which sexual mores were not always confined strictly to “family values” and women’s place in the home. In fact she argued that one of the characteristics of “the feminine mystique” was that it contributed to *narrowing* the scope of women’s participation in public life and the scope of what were understood as the problems confronting women of the time.

To be clear, Friedan’s argument does not contain an explicit address of the relationship of gender, sexuality, and women to class and capitalism and instead defines the “woman question”

exclusively in terms of subjective idealism. There is, in fact, no mention of capitalism in Friedan's text at all. According to Friedan's analysis, the structure of the "woman problem" (that is, the terrain of material struggle and freedom for women) was a psycho-cultural one—a pathology in women brought on by "the dehumanizing aspects of modern mass culture"—that kept them trapped in domestic "purposelessness":

it is not an exaggeration to call the stagnating state of millions of American housewives a sickness, a disease in the shape of a progressively weaker core of human self that is being handed down to their sons and daughters at a time when the dehumanizing aspects of modern mass culture make it necessary for men and women to have a strong core of self, strong enough to retain human individuality through the frightening, unpredictable pressures of our changing environment.

(305)

The main problem, as defined by Friedan, was "the new feminine morality" and women's fear of their own "success" which prevented them from equal participation in the workforce and public life. In other words, "why" women were oppressed, according to the logic of *The Feminine Mystique*, had to do with cultural values that kept men dependent upon women's servitude and women pathologically fearful of their own success alongside men. The struggle for women's liberation, therefore, was defined primarily as a struggle for redefinition of gender and sexual values to allow for the inclusion of women as equal participants in the workforce and public life under capitalism.

However, the "discontent" and "cultural values" that Friedan marks as an expression of *internal desires and drives* of all women as "human beings of limitless human potential" is actually a *class desire* whose meaning is fought out not in the immanent textuality of Friedan's

text but in the material relations of capitalism outside of the text that enable it. The narratives of discontent are laments over such issues as having to ask husbands for money to go shopping and out to lunch with friends rather than control their own disposable income to spend, doing the majority of housework rather than paying domestic labor to do it, not using one's ivy league education for advancement in the professions and instead attending college to find a husband. Such "problems," however, are not *existential* conditions of life as such for "women" as "human beings of limitless human potential." Rather they are the highly determined material contradictions of a particular class-fraction of women whose economic privilege in class society—though dependent on and controlled by their fathers or husbands—afforded them luxuries such as disposable income and ivy league educations to begin with. The existentialist and psychologistic—or subjective idealist—approach of Friedan abstracted social contradictions of gender, marriage, sexuality, work and so on from the *material relations of production* based on private property. Understanding the "woman question" and the material contradictions of "marriage" and "family" under capitalism in these existentialist and subjective idealist terms abstracted from the relations of production in capitalism masked the material relations of exploitation that bring about these contradictions for the majority of women (who did not have the luxuries of Friedan and other upper-middle class women). In doing so, it limited the terrain of feminism as such to the material interests and contradictions faced by a class-fraction of women for whom independence from their husbands for a position of relative economic privilege was a material possibility; women who wanted to maintain this relative privilege on their own by gaining a greater "independent" share of distribution.

The material reality of the time is that the majority of women—working class women and women of color—both in "advanced capitalist" nations such as the United States as well as so

called “developing” nations such as Spain, China and India were facing a much sharper set of social and economic contradictions than, for instance, the problem of having their own independent share of disposable income and being able to enjoy a position of relative class privilege in the professions. For the majority of women already working, their conditions of life were marked by low wages, economic insecurity and continued economic compulsion into marriage and the bourgeois nuclear family not for the class privileges of a disposable income but for (limited) protection from homelessness, starvation, and dire poverty under private property relations. *The Feminine Mystique* and the “discontent” that it expressed was in the end a lamentation of the bourgeois woman of the suburbs, culturally far removed from—but economically enabled by—the class contradictions faced by and the exploitation of women of the urban proletariat and the rural poor.

The “discontent” that Friedan outlined was, contrary to her own claims, a product of changes in the mode of production not, as she proposed, an expression of the fact that (as she and other liberal feminists have claimed) women were changing as the result of internal desires and drives and that they were finally starting to “wake up” to their “true selves.” The understanding of “woman” as “human beings of limitless human potential” is an idealist one from the outset. It is based on the notion that people form a concept of the ideal human—or in this case the ideal “woman”—and “win freedom” for women “to the extent that was necessary to realize this concept.” In actuality, the conception of “woman” and the “value” placed on this ideal are effects of the social relations of production. As Marx and Engels put it the notion of an ideal “human” (or the ideal for “woman”) “corresponds to the definite relations *predominant* at a certain stage of production and the way of satisfying needs that correspond to these relations” (*German* 457). Friedan’s emphasis on women becoming “full adults” and “human beings of limitless human

potential,” through being working mothers was in actuality an articulation of what capitalism at that historical moment required of women in the social division of labor as collective producers in order to stave off declines in the rate of profit. Women’s incorporation into the workforce of capitalism was not in itself a manifestation of their liberation but was an effect of the fact that capitalism needed exploitable labor-power at reduced cost. The modern feminism of Friedan, in short, covered over the material contradictions confronting women and translated the economic interests *of capital* at the time into “new” cultural values for women.

In the more politically and intellectually developed forms of feminism at this time, “women” were grasped on historical and social terms as part of a broader social collective of exploited and oppressed people against social relations that were at root fundamentally unequal and exploitative. The notion of women as a social collective was, in other words, not explicitly understood as an “existential identity” as found in the liberal feminism of Friedan. Such notions of “existential identity” were critiqued at this time for the way in which they put forward an ahistorical notion of “sisterhood” and commonality among women, and for the way in which they translated historical and material questions of patriarchy, nationalism, racism, imperialism, and heterosexism into matters of the “cultural pathology” of the oppressed and exploited. For example, members of the Combahee River Collective argued for understanding “patriarchy” as part of interlocking structures of oppression of “white supremacist, patriarchal capitalism.” They argued that “the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.” Others, such as the Chicago Gay Liberation organization argued that sexual liberation is “inextricably bound to the liberation of all oppressed people” (49).

On the one hand, the increased productivity and investment in social and economic welfare, and expansion of the culture industries and the universities, among other things, led to a growth of questions of collectivity and the notion of the possibility of a society free from economic inequality. On the other hand, the collectively produced wealth was still privately appropriated by capital and, as it is today, it was distributed and adjudicated in terms of what is profitable for capital and the production of profit and, therefore, could not serve as a material basis for eliminating economic and social inequality. The contradictions between the increased productivity, investment in social and economic welfare and expansion of culture industries on the one hand and, on the other hand, the exclusions from the prosperity of the long boom and the benefits of the “welfare state” gave rise to increasing resistance on the part of workers, women, gays, bisexuals, and lesbians, and persons of color. Moreover, as capitalism came into crisis in the late 1960s and early 1970s culminating in the end of the long boom with the oil crisis of 1973, it became increasingly clear—even within those nations which benefited most from the long boom—that the post-war “prosperity,” the “welfare state,” the continuously increasing standard of living (for some, albeit large, sectors of the working population) could not contain the crisis of capital as its fundamental class relations broke through the surface and began to dismantle the economic and social welfare.

The increased economic instability as capitalism began to go into stagnation and decline at this time burst open the temporary “bubble” created by the long boom and threw into sharper relief the fact that capital was fundamentally based on exploitation. These conditions also led to open critique of capitalism for the way production for profit fundamentally precluded the temporary (and now increasingly illusory) freedoms promised by the long boom and the welfare state and arguments for abolition of private ownership of the means of production as a necessary



material condition of bringing about economic equality and restoring social justice. So, for example, Angela Davis articulated a very different notion of “collectivity” than the existential (ruling class) conception of “women.” For example, in her analysis “Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting,” she argues that “the violent face of sexism, the threat of rape will exist as long as capitalist society survives. If the anti-rape movement is to avoid the dilemma of Sisyphus, its current activities—ranging from emotional and legal aid to defense methods and educational campaigns—must be complemented by larger offensive measures and situated in a strategic context which envisages the ultimate defeat of monopoly capitalism” (Davis 137). In this mode of feminism the “women’s problem” is not centered around a universal existential identity for women but is articulated by social relations of production in capitalist society and requires the transformation of these relation—the ultimate defeat of monopoly capitalism.

However, many of the critiques of the classic modernist feminism of Friedan by radical, socialist, lesbian, black and Latina feminists of the second wave also shared some of the same assumptions about social transformation as a matter of inclusion in the prosperity of the long boom of capitalism. I call them “modernist” because they took for granted the historically specific but *temporary* modern capitalist cultural features under which capitalist production for profit (the exploitation of surplus-labor) took place at that time and saw these as *fundamental* features of capitalist production as such and its class relations founded on exploitation. By assuming that capitalism fundamentally relied on the welfare-state, the Fordist division of labor, and the “nuclear” family with its strict allocation of domestic labor as “women’s labor” and, therefore, identitarian notion of “woman,” a number of feminisms focused on the reform or even transformation of these temporary features of capitalism. For example, many saw the re-organizing of the welfare state and the technical division of labor (occupations) to include

women and persons of color as tantamount to the revolutionary transformation of class relations (the division of labor between property owners and workers). In doing so, they left unexamined the underlying conditions upon which “modern capitalism”—like contemporary transnational capitalism—rests: the exploitation of surplus-labor.

Many “second wave” feminisms did explicitly deploy the idea of class but class was often used in a modified way so as to allow for the centering of its cultural features. The relationship of gender and social difference to class was by and large understood to mean that *gender is a class*, *sexuality is a class*, *race is a class*. For example, in what is considered to be one of the inaugural books of radical feminism, Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex*, rewrites Engel’s labor theory of gender (as outlined in *Origins of The Family, Private Property and the State*) in order to argue that women form an autonomous, collective “sex-class.” The goal of feminism, according to this theory of gender *as a class*, was “seizure of control of *reproduction*: not only the full restoration to women of their own bodies, but also their (temporary) seizure of control of human fertility—the new population biology as well as all the social institutions of child-bearing and child-rearing” (Firestone 11). In her classic socialist feminist essay, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Toward a More Progressive Union,” Heidi Hartmann builds upon Firestone’s theory of gender as a distinct class by arguing that “the material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men’s control over women’s labor power” (15). According to Hartmann, the historical and material evidence of women’s separate class position, was that “men have a higher standard of living than women in terms of luxury consumption, leisure time, and personalized services” (9). The implication of this is that, for Hartman and Firestone, women’s “emancipation” was to be brought about, much like

it was for Friedan, by giving women greater reproductive freedoms and a larger share of social distribution relative to men.

In her “Black Feminist” critique of Hartman’s essay, “The Incompatible Menage À Trois: Marxism, Feminism and Racism,” Gloria Joseph argued that the “categories of marxism are sex-blind *and* race-blind” (93). Joseph argued that the exclusion of race from the socialist feminist understanding of inequality for women was to reduce “Black discontent” to a pathology and neurosis and conceal over the fact that “discontent” is “a response to a social structure in which *Blacks* are systematically dominated, exploited, and oppressed” (97). Joseph’s critique, to be clear, was an immanent critique that accepted the basic assumptions of Hartman’s “dual-systems” analysis of social relations and difference. The category of “race,” she argued, needs to be *added* to the socialist or “dual-systems” feminist theory of class to account for Black women as a separate “class” owing to the fact that “Black females are on the very bottom rung of the occupational status ladder” (102). For Joseph, like Hartman, and many other feminists at the time, social differences were not explainable on the basis of wage-labor/capital relations but rather, they were explainable by understanding race, gender, and sexuality, as their own “classes.” As Joseph’s arguments made clear, this was a way of saying that social differences are not or are “no longer” determined by economic exploitation and that ending social injustice and economic inequality was not dependent on ending private ownership of the means of production:

As the extensive brutality of women by men does not appear to be reducible to the economic factors involved, so the virulent suppression of one race by another does not appear reducible to purely economic consideration [...] racial differences and antagonisms are no longer basically due to economic exploitation. (103)

In historical support of her claims that “race...does not appear to be reducible to economic considerations” Joseph argues that “Education, professional jobs, and housing are three areas where empirical evidence proves that economics is no longer the prime motivator for Black exclusion and exploitation” (104).

By articulating gender, sexuality, and race as distinct class positions, in other words, class itself was understood in much of feminism at the time to be determined by such features as income, the number and spacing of children, access to birth control and other reproductive technologies, marital status, occupation, access to education. So, for example, for Joseph the way to address “Black discontent” was, as it was for Friedan’s notion of “women’s discontent,” to address questions of status. The differences between “men” and “women,” “blacks” and “whites,” “gay” and “straight” were understood to constitute separate class positions owing to the fact that these differences were indicative of inequalities in cultural features of status. While different modes of feminism in the second wave—liberal, radical, lesbian, black, Latina, and socialist feminisms—emphasized specific cultural features of status to varying degrees according to what sector of the population they were addressing, what many of these modes of feminism had in common is that their understanding of class was staunchly rooted in the notion of class as a matter of “status.” Thus when many second wave feminists spoke of revolution to “overthrow” class what this meant *in practical terms* was to seize control of these features of status—giving women, persons of color, and gays, bisexuals and lesbians a greater share of distribution by giving them higher wages, wages for housework, access to education, childcare, access to middle-class housing and neighborhoods, more social mobility and life chances on the market.

At the core of this culturalist conception of “class” is the late 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century notion of embourgeoisment articulated by such thinkers as Thorstein Veblen (*The*

*Theory of the Leisure Class*) and Max Weber (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*)—the idea that the working class moves up the social ladder by the acquisition of new wealth (status). The main focus of feminisms informed by this theory of class, to put this another way, has been on raising the *status* of women, persons of color, gays, bisexuals, and lesbians by promoting their access to new wealth—what contemporary feminists such as Fraser have called “redistribution.” The theory of embourgeoisment is a mediation of class relations which presupposes that class is determined by the acquisition of new wealth and therefore, the fundamental transformation of “class” is constituted by the transformation of distribution. So, for example, class can be cataloged by the articles of consumption owned (houses, clothing, cars, etc.). However, the commodities owned by a particular class, or class fraction, at a specific historical moment are a historical index of the development of social production but not a fundamental feature of its labor and property (class) relations. What is owned by one class at a particular historical moment as a “luxury” changes and becomes accessible to others as social production develops. However, the ownership of new articles of consumption by the working class does not change the social relations of production under which exploitation takes place. It does not change the fact that those who own the means of production still privately appropriate the surplus-labor of those who only own their labor-power to sell in order to survive. Private property is not a catalog of objects it is a social relation of exploitation between those who only have their labor to sell in order to survive and those who own the means of production and can therefore, as Marx and Engels put it, “command over other people’s surplus labor” (*German* 274).

“Redistribution”—contrary to the popular rhetoric of the time—is not revolution in the social relations of production. Redistribution merely transfers the wealth already produced by the

exploitation of surplus-labor in production without transforming the relations of exploitation in which new wealth is produced. Redistribution without transformation of the relations of production is endemic to capitalism: it is the way in which capital transfers a fraction of the wealth exploited from some workers to others so as to control the rate of growth and development of the working class and regulate access to the future labor supply from which it extracts profit in the form of surplus-value. “Redistribution” in other words is dependent on exploitation and is a spiritual resolution of material contradictions of class society. It does not actually resolve the class contradictions endemic to capitalism it merely temporarily buffers them for some workers: the success in “redistribution” of some women, some persons of color, some homosexuals and the upper-middle class “way of life” ultimately advocated by the new social movements in the U.S. was paid for by the surplus-labor of workers around the world who saw their material conditions of life increasingly deteriorate.

In production for profit, moreover, redistribution and the transformation of cultural features of “status”—such as income and access to education—are always, in the final analysis, determined by production for profit and what is needed by capital to maintain profit. As the “long boom” of capitalism began to come to crisis in the late 1960s—with its sharpest crisis in 1973—and capitalism entered a period of deep stagnation and decline, U.S. capital moved manufacturing offshore in search of new investment and cheaper labor and unemployment started to rise among workers in the North who had previously thought their conditions of life were infinitely secure. In the years immediately following World War II, capital continued to have a strong investment in building the productivity of the “national” workforce by increasing its job skills (education), wages (income), standard of living (housing, health, access to consumer goods) and so on. However, once many industries grew to a higher level of productivity they

began to come into a crisis of overproduction in which they needed to compete more ruthlessly on an international level in order to maintain and increase their rates of profit. Under such conditions, what was once “profitable” to capital to increase its access to and supply of labor power after the war—e.g., the redistribution of a fraction of surplus-labor to workers “at home” in terms of social welfare, increased wages, job security, increased standard of living, and other features of “status,” etc.—came into severe contradiction with the interests of capital in maintaining its rates of profit.

In order to stave off declines in profit, capital required many of the changes to gender, sexuality, and race relations advocated by the new social movement’s turn to culture. To take one example of “status” raised by feminists of the second wave: the need to revolutionize the “family” by changing the domestic division of labor between men and women, freeing women from this labor, allowing them to work, giving them choice for the number and spacing of children through access to birth control and abortion, rights to divorce, etc. Both “socialist feminists” such as Hartman and radical feminists such as Firestone and Gayle Rubin saw the solution to women’s oppression as a matter of a revolution in kinship and “reproduction” which they thought was increasingly severed from the transformation of the social relations of production. But the history of women in capitalism proves otherwise. Capitalism has itself “revolutionized” the family and dramatically transformed it in response to material contradictions in maintaining levels of profit while at the same time continuing to exploit the majority of the world’s women.

The onset of the transfer of mass-production abroad and of the dismantling of social welfare as capital came into crisis, meant a drop in wages and the incapacity of the “nuclear family” to support itself on the wages of a “male head of household.” Out of economic necessity,

women were drawn into the waged workforce in increasing numbers by the end of long boom. Women's incorporation into the waged workforce was not itself without economic contradictions marked, for example, by lower wages and sporadic unemployment: "The resumption in the late 1950s of the growth in the share of female labour [...] took place against a changed background" of the rise of "part-time" and "low wage" employment (Tabak 93). With wages significantly lower for women and workers of color, they provided part of the exploitable labor-power needed by capital at a cheaper price. These changes, made by capital to maintain profit, led to a "crisis" in the "nuclear-family": the sexual division of labor in the home, the question of access to birth control, rights to divorce, access to higher levels of education and skills training for women became burning questions not only to women but to *capital* which was pulling women into the workforce to exploit their relatively cheaper labor. In other words, capital required the transformation of legal and cultural arrangements of gender and sexuality, without transformation of the social relations of production, in order to "free" women from a division of labor that was increasingly getting in the way of profit for capital and to update gender and sexuality relations for new strategies for securing an exploitable labor force.

The stripping of gender and social differences of their relationship to private ownership of the means of production in the culturalist analytics of second wave feminism was at root a *private property* conception of freedom for women that articulated projects of freedom and justice within the confines of private property relations. As a consequence of its retreat into culturalism much of "second wave" feminism acted very much the way unions acted: the material conditions of capitalist production at the time (for example, the lack of labor-power after the war, the post-war economic boom, etc.) allowed unions to argue for and get a "social wage" and establish "social welfare." For example, capitalist production throughout the world at



the time was still heavily dependent on national workforces for sources of surplus-labor extraction and, therefore, U.S. capital was compelled to invest in the reproduction of the labor supply through allotting a greater portion of the social surpluses back into social welfare. But these very conditions also limited union practices—they ended up as extensions of state apparatuses that helped to maintain capitalist production under the historical and material conditions of the time. In like manner, much of “second wave” feminism (and other oppositional movements of The New Left) served to critique the way in which women, gays and lesbians, persons of color were excluded from the prosperity of the long boom. At the same time, insofar as feminists retreated—or were pushed back—into the cultural dimensions of this problem and abstracted gender from the social relations of production based on exploitation, they also ultimately limited feminism to political practices endorsing reformist policies aimed at *helping capital* by updating women for the contemporary workforces needed by capital.

As the economic crisis of capital wore on, the class basis of “second wave” feminism’s turn to culture became more apparent as feminism retreated further and further into an upper-middle class identity politics and the protection of the “way of life” of a small minority of women in the U.S. at the expense of collectivity and solidarity with the struggle to transform capitalism. Identity politics—which Ellen Willis defines in her book *No More Nice Girls* as “the idea that one’s experience as a member of . . . a [marginal] group determines the authenticity and moral legitimacy of one’s politics” (xv)—continued the culturalizing of the social division of labor under capitalism. In its method of social analysis “identity politics” emphasized personal experience of oppression as the basis of knowledge of the social relations producing this oppression. Such an empiricist view however obscures that “experience” does not “explain” material relations, it is rather what is explained by material relations. In her materialist analysis

of racism and race theory, Sue Clegg explains this in the following terms: “Oppression,” she argues, is often “experienced in terms of being black, or being a woman, or being Irish, or being gay, but it cannot be explained simply by virtue of this experience. For that we need an analysis that goes beneath experience. These oppressions cannot be overcome one-by-one because they are connected to the central dynamics of capitalist exploitation” (112). Moreover, “lived experience”—feeling, affect, perception—is what Althusser has called the “lived experience” of “the reality of ideology” (“A Letter on Art” 223). “Experience,” Althusser argues, is the ideological domain of the “individual” in “abstraction from [material] structures.” In this sense, it conceals the conditions of its own explanation. Materialist explanation, by contrast, requires concepts and analytics that intervene in the ideology of “lived experience” (feeling, affect, perception) and go “outside” of experience to uncover the material relations that produce it.

This approach to the social increasingly led to the detachment in the cultural imaginary within which many second wave feminists were working, not only of gender, sexuality, and race but also of class itself from the social relations of production. It represented the material contradictions women confronted in capitalism less and less as a structural relation of the subject of labor to ownership of the means of production and more and more not only as matters of cultural features of status but also increasingly as matters of “interpersonal” relations, “choice,” and the “care of the self.” The primary way of ameliorating the material inequality for women in capitalism became a matter not of transforming collective conditions of exploitation for all but giving some class fractions of women in capitalism a greater share in distribution and moving them into positions of power to manage other workers on behalf of capital.

While the universal conception of “woman” advocated by Friedan was *not* an adequate challenge to the exploitation of women, since it obscured the material differences between those

women who are members of the ruling class and own and control the material resources of society and those who only have their labor to sell in order to survive, the abstraction of social differences from class merely updated Friedan's class politics for capital. Far from increased inclusion, the turn away from economics and class to culture and "identity" resulted in what Willis called a "logic of fragmentation into ever smaller and more particularist groups" (xv) legitimating transnational capital's assault on movements for social transformation. This was not indicative of the material separation of gender, race, sexuality,... from class as it was an index of capital's class war on movements for social transformation and converting them into movements for reforms needed by capital to maintain profit.

## SIX

It is important at this juncture to address at length the objection that will surely arise among many feminists and cultural theorists: that the kind of argument I am making displaces culturalism with a late form of "economism." I would like to pressure this assumption, by returning to Gramsci's historical materialist critique of economism—a notion of "economism" which is quite different from the way it is understood in the wake of the cultural turn. But first, in my reading of Gramsci, I am implying that there are two and not one Gramsci in Anglo-American cultural theory. The first is a Marxist writer who, in the tradition of classical Marxism, engages in debates and discussions with classic texts and, like all classical Marxists, insists on the primacy of the material (labor) in the formation of all social practices, including culture. This is the Gramsci that, following Engels in, for instance, Engels' letter to Joseph Bloch, insists that the economic is the basis of all human activities but that this does not mean that once these activities are put into place they do not have their own dynamics. Typical of this materialist

Gramsci is his reading of Marx's critique of Proudhon's economism (i.e., *The Poverty of Philosophy*). In the course of his critique of "economism," Gramsci remarks:

One point of reference for the study of economism, and for understanding the relations between the structure and the superstructure, is the passage in *The Poverty of Philosophy* where it says that an important phase in the development of a social group is that in which the individual components of a trade union no longer struggle solely for their own economic interests, but for the defense and the development of the organization itself. (162)

He then goes on to remark that "*The Poverty of Philosophy* is an essential moment in the formation of the philosophy of praxis" (162). In the section of *The Poverty of Philosophy* to which Gramsci refers, Marx discusses the way in which competition between capitalists over profit puts workers in competition with each other on the market and "divides their interests." In putting workers in competition with each other, capital also (and more easily) lowers their wages to increase the amount of surplus-labor extracted during the workday (the source of profit). At the same time, however, Marx points out, "the maintenance of wages, this common interest which [workers] have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance—combination" (168). In other words, workers have in common an economic interest in maintaining and raising their wages and this brings them together to unite politically.

Marx clarifies further in this passage, "combination always has a double aim." On the one hand it is what has been described above: "that of stopping competition among the workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the capitalist" (168). However, and more to Gramsci's main point in his theorization of "economism," Marx also points out:

If the first aim of resistance was merely the maintenance of wages, combinations, at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists in their turn unite for the purpose of repression, and in face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than that of wages. This is so true that English economists are amazed to see the workers sacrifice a good part of their wages in favour of associations, which, in the eyes of these economists, are established solely in favour of wages. (168)

In other words, what starts out as what one might call a *united "self-interest"* of workers who have been politically fractured, alienated, and isolated on the market (at their own expense!) but now unite together to each maintain their own conditions of life as workers (wages), develops instead into a fledgling *collective* effort in which workers begin not to unite on the basis of a shared or mutual "self-interest" for individual workers survival within capitalism but on the basis of their *collective* interests *as a class* in which they *begin* to consider that the condition of their own life are dependent on the conditions of life of all. In turn, they even contribute a *portion of their individual wages to maintain their collective effort*. This is at the root of what Marx means when he goes on to argue that:

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle of which we have pointed out only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. (168)

Gramsci regarded Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* as a groundbreaking contribution to the critique of economism and, moreover, as "an essential moment in the formation of the philosophy of praxis" (162) because economism (as I elaborate further below through Gramsci) is not the Marxist understanding that human activities have a necessary relation to class rather, economism is putting your own self interest first, ahead of workers as a collective, and therefore advancing the interest of the owners.

The second Gramsci is a *culturalist* Gramsci that is grounded in the reinterpretation of his writings by Chantal Mouffe in her edited collection, *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, specifically in her highly influential essay "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci." This is the Gramsci that has had tremendous impact on cultural theory and cultural studies in the West, especially through Stuart Hall. In this Gramsci, his insistence on the material is erased by the misinterpretation of his concept of "economism." From the outset of her essay, Mouffe reads Gramsci's concept of "economism" to mean what in contemporary cultural theory is called "economic reductionism." "Economic reductionism," has become the touchstone for dismissal of classical Marxism (and the understanding that culture and ideology are determined by the social relations of production) in the Euro-American left including Euro-American feminism. So it is imperative here to unpack the assumptions behind the conflation of "economism," "economic reductionism," and Marxism. More specifically, Mouffe states that:

The economic problematic of ideology has two intimately linked but quite distinct facets. The first one consists in seeing a causal link between the structure and the superstructure and in viewing the latter purely as a mechanical reflection of the economic base. This leads to a vision of ideological superstructures as epiphenomena which play no part in the historical process. The second facet is

not concerned with the role of the superstructures but with their actual nature, and here they are conceived as being determined by the position of the subjects in the relations of production. (169)

To put this another way, according to Mouffe, “economism” is the understanding that the economic—and more specifically class relations—determine ideology, culture and, more broadly put, the superstructure. Moreover, on the terms of this view, “economism” is the understanding that the positions that one takes in ideological, cultural, philosophical, etc. contestation have (to use Mouffe’s words) a “necessary class-belonging” and are ultimately enabled by the mode of production. In short, for Mouffe, “economism” is the rigorous distinction at the core of historical materialism that Marx makes between the “material transformation of the economic conditions of production” (the *base*) and the “legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out” (i.e., the *superstructure*) (Preface 21). According to Mouffe, this distinction (which she inaccurately understands to be at the core of what Gramsci calls “economism” in theory and praxis) is “reductionist” and only leads to a “mechanical” understanding of the relationship of ideology and culture to the economic and the reduction of the former to “epiphenomena” of the latter.

However, in Gramsci (and in historical materialism generally), economism is something altogether very different from what Mouffe presupposes from the outset. Economism does not refer to the uncovering of a necessary material relation to the economic relations of production (class), it means *indifference to class relations*. In other words, (and here Gramsci is influenced by Lenin) “economism” means putting your own self-interest first—as in Trade unions where the union bosses disregard *workers as a collective* in order to get two extra vacation days for themselves. In his critique of economism, Gramsci argues that when economism discusses

“economic facts” in actuality “it means self-interest of an individual or small group [...] In other words, *it does not take economic class formations into account, with all of their inherent relations*, but is content to assume motives of mean and usurious self-interest” (163; emphasis added). Economism, in other words, entails the imagined separation of the “individual or small group” from the class contradictions in which they are objectively situated and, in practice, limits political practice to seeking to ameliorate the conditions of a small minority *at the expense of* workers as a collective. When workers engage in “immediate self-interest” over other workers they are not advancing their class interests they are actually inadvertently advancing the material interests of the owners and, ultimately, at the expense of workers as a collective (including at their own expense in production relations; though many do this for a fee). In his critique of economism, moreover, Gramsci vehemently stresses that economism in both bourgeois political economy and in “theoretical syndicalism” (by which he means “trade-unionism”) is *not rooted in “the philosophy of praxis”* (by which, as I establish above, Gramsci means *classical Marxism*) but is rooted in *laissez-faire* liberalism. Against the theoretical distortions of classical Marxism during his day, Gramsci explicitly argues that the connections of “economism” (including “trade-unionism”) and classical Marxism are “only extrinsic and purely verbal” (159).

The “economistic problematic of ideology,” to use Mouffe’s language, is actually quite the reverse of what she argues. Proceeding from her (mis)reading of Gramsci’s concept of economism, Mouffe goes on to argue that a “non-economistic” understanding is one in which “ideological elements” are understood to have no “necessary relation” to the social relations of production and no “necessary class-belonging” (171). In other words, a “non-economistic” frame of intelligibility is, by Mouffe’s logic, one that posits the structural autonomy of ideology from the social relations of production. Moreover, for Mouffe, “it is ideology which creates subjects



and makes them act” (187) and this process is disconnected from the subject’s relation to the material relations of production or, more specifically, to the means of production (class). Ideology is, in Mouffe’s discourse, the material condition of possibility for subjectivity and agency and ideology itself has no structural basis or necessary relation to the social relations of production.

From this logic, in the course of Mouffe’s argument, Engels’ historical materialist argument that the economic always determines the objective conditions of life “in the last instance” is re-written to mean that class is *ideologically imposed* after the fact. Class, in other words, is converted in Mouffe’s logic from a *material relation* of production into an *ideological invention*. Mouffe concludes from this that “‘political subjects’ are not social classes but ‘collective wills’ which are comprised of an ensemble of social groups fused around a fundamental class” (196-197). Mouffe’s basic logic is to sever ideology and hegemony from the material relations that produce them and to dehistoricize them. Ideology is understood to have its own independent “materiality” divorced from any historical and material conditions outside that produce it. “Collective will”—or what Gramsci calls “consent”—are in Mouffe’s account removed from the material relation that produce them under capitalism and what Marx called “the silent compulsion of economic relations” (*Capital* 899). “Collective will,” furthermore, is presented in Mouffe’s logic as the *material basis* of hegemony.

In doing so, she actually reverses the entire complex of Gramsci’s discussion of “consent” which is an effort to explain the material structure of conflicts in class society that produce it. While Gramsci refers to hegemony as the “spontaneous” consent given by the proletariat to the conditions of their exploitation, “spontaneity” itself is not removed from the relations of production. This consent he explains is “‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and

consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys *because of its position and function in the world of production*” (118; emphasis added). Here, in other words, Gramsci relates the “consent” of workers to the conditions of their exploitation as having a necessary relation to the *material* position of the ruling class in the social relations of production. One way to re-read Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony” and “spontaneous” consent, then, is through Marx’s theory of the material basis of ideology in *Capital*. For Marx, “ideology” is based on material relations of necessity—what Marx explains as a much broader “silent compulsion of economic relations” in which “the advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws . . . [and] once [capitalist production] is fully developed, breaks down all resistance” (899). Consent, on one level of appearance, seems to be “spontaneous” but when one looks at the material basis of this “consent” in the structure of economic relations, consent is far from spontaneous but is the result of the advance of capitalist production and grounded in material contradictions of necessity brought on by exploitation.

It is exactly this evacuation of a materialist concept of ideology that makes it possible for Mouffe to say that a class gains hegemony by “genuinely *concern[ing] itself* with the interests of those social groups over which it wishes to exercise hegemony” (181; emphasis added). Because Mouffe has already abstracted “hegemony” and “ideology” from *material relations of necessity* (that is, from their objective relation to the social relations of production), her remark about “genuine concern” implies that hegemony represents a *material unity of seemingly* disparate interests rather than, what historical materialism argues: that hegemony is a spiritual unity of material contradictions that is, in the final analysis, based on “silent compulsion of economic relations.” This is the basis of theories of “consent” and “agency” as a matter of “choice,”

“personal consumption,” and “popular will” which are quite different from Gramsci’s notion that “consent” and hegemony secured by the place of the ruling class in production.

Moreover, this is to return to quite an ideological explanation of hegemony and consent. It is not “genuine concern” (a moral or ethical question) that is at the basis of the concessions that the owners may temporarily make to workers but economic interests in reproducing the relations of production founded on exploitation. This is the case, for example, with Walmart and Amazon.com, in the case of its donations to people rendered homeless in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Walmart and Amazon.com in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina are exemplary of what Engels in *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* called “Pharisaic philanthropy” of the bourgeoisie. Engels writes in response to the English bourgeois philanthropist:

As though you rendered the proletarians a service in first sucking out their very life-blood and then practising your self-complacent, Pharisaic philanthropy upon them, placing yourselves before the world as mighty benefactors of humanity when you give back to the plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them! (314)

Walmart has been at the forefront of breaking any fledgling movement on the part of workers to organize in unions, of violations of child labor laws, of forcing workers to work off the clock and then presents itself as a great benefactor of humanity by “giving” a fraction of what it has exploited from workers. On a broader level, the material basis of capital’s “giving a hundredth part of what belongs to [workers]” is actually the *transfer of wealth away from workers and the concentration of wealth into fewer hands*.

Mouffe claims that “it is this whole anti-reductionist conception of ideology which is the actual condition of *intelligibility* of Gramsci’s conception of hegemony” (172). Her re-reading of

Gramsci's writings empties his writings of their theoretical relationship to classical Marxism and, in doing so, de-historicizes Gramsci who dedicated his entire life to struggling to transform the material relations of production and end *class* relations. Moreover, in the course of his contribution to class struggle, he worked to produce historical materialist knowledges of the relationship between ideology and the "silent compulsion of class relations"; and the way that ideology on the one hand has its own dynamic that inverts the material contradictions that workers live in, yet at the same time is a bearer of these class contradictions enabled by them. Despite limits, ambiguities or contradictions to his work for the transformation of class relations (that are beyond the scope of this project in feminism to discuss further), he did so in an effort to help workers see through the cultural and ideological *mystification* of their material conditions of life under this "silent compulsion of economic relations" and the onslaught of fascism and to help them see through and break from practices that would ultimately lead to their common ruin and, instead, develop more effective revolutionary praxis to transform these relations.

To be clear, the point of this discussion is not to suggest that there are no ambiguities or contradictions in Gramsci's writings or differences from classical Marxists. Rather, it is to examine the way in which historical materialist knowledges have been and are being dismantled in contemporary cultural theory, to inquire into the *material* conditions that make this possible, and examine the consequences this has on feminism and the project to transform social relations to emancipate women. "Reading" and "interpretation"—such as Mouffe's reading of Gramsci—are not, in the final analysis, caused by "mis-interpretation" and "mis-understanding" (a *marché de dupes*). (Mis)interpretation is not simply accidental, it too is an historical effect of material contradiction in the relations of production (the economic) and the relation of the subject to them. To use Mouffe's words, her "symptomatic reading" of Gramsci is not so much

symptomatic of the “actual condition of intelligibility” of Gramsci’s theoretical arguments as it is symptomatic of the class interests (“the actual condition of intelligibility”) advanced by the dominant tendencies in the Euro-American left in the late 1970s and 1980s. After the crash of the long boom, when capital began to dismantle any semblance of social welfare and solidarity among workers and in doing so transfer massive amounts of wealth from workers upward to the ruling class, many upper-middle class<sup>7</sup> leftists, including feminists, lost their “interest” in class solidarity with workers around the world and instead looked to gaining their own share of this exploited wealth in exchange for solidarity with capital and its reforms. “Left” cultural theory has been a bearer of these class contradictions. Mouffe contributed to articulate a “new” theoretical program for the “new” left that would translate the praxical (class) interests of North Atlantic capital into “new left” ideals. Mouffe’s theory of “non-reductivism,” in other words, returns to precisely what Gramsci critiqued as “economism.” It is part of an articulation of the material contradictions of capital that erased the relationship of ideology to class relations. This development in “theory” has helped to ideologically normalize the prioritizing of the material interests of capital and the placing of the self-interests of managers over *workers around the world as a collective*.

## SEVEN

I would like to emphasize here that this does not mean that feminism should abandon culture as a terrain of analysis and critique. Rather, it needs to re-understand culture materially and historically. Culture, while analytically and materially distinct from the economic, is not

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<sup>7</sup> I use this term in the dissertation to mean “a special kind of wage-laborer . . . who commands during the labor process in the name of capital” (Marx, *Capital* 450). The middle class, in other words, is exploited wage-labor that is paid a larger portion of the social surplus in the form of higher wages (and other benefits) relative to other workers in order to act on behalf of capital as managers of other workers.

autonomous, it is forged on the basis of labor and property relations and is a bearer of economic interests. But culture is also “inversive” meaning that it is a transcoding of material contradictions: it cannot resolve the material contradictions that develop at the point of production.<sup>8</sup> For instance, “cultural freedoms” regarding gender and sexuality, made possible by the dialectical praxis of labor, are still forged on the basis of private property relations and the exploitation of surplus-labor. Not only does this mean that many of these freedoms are possible only for a small segment of society, it also means that when cultural values and mores in gender and sexual relations change for the majority and “new cultural freedoms” of gender and sexuality are increasingly made available to the majority they are forged on the basis of its exploitative labor relations and used as more and more sophisticated means through which transnational capitalism works to inculcate women into relations of exploitation.

Seen in this regard, culture also has a role in reproducing the subject of labor for the social relations of production and the historical conditions under which production takes place. Culture, to put this another way, is the apparatus through which the subject of labor—and the subject is always a subject of the dialectical praxis of labor and the social relations of production (property relation) within which labor takes place—is given the consciousness skills made necessary by the material relations of production to act within them. But culture is itself dependent on labor and the social relations of production and does not constitute these material relations and, therefore, it is not the main terrain of material transformation. Culture does not transform the material relations of production but culture is a site in which, to use some of Marx’s words, people “become conscious” of their class conflicts which are developed in their

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<sup>8</sup> For an exposition of “inversion” see: Jorge Larrain, *Marxism and Ideology*, specifically pp. 122-141.

material social relations and “fight it out” (Preface 21). As a zone of class conflicts, culture has, of course, its own effectivity and as Engels writes in a letter to Joseph Bloch:

According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—political forms of the class struggle and its results, such as constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc. juridical forms, and especially the reflections of all these real struggles in the brains of the participants, political, legal, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas—also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles in many cases determine their form in particular [...] We make history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite antecedents and conditions. Among these the economic ones are ultimately decisive. But the political ones, etc. and indeed even the traditions which haunt human minds also play a part, although not the decisive one. (Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence* 394-395)

Culture develops its own dynamic but, at the same time, does so under specific economic relations of production. In this regard, culture *does* have effects in shaping the direction of social praxis. Thus, the way in which people “become conscious of class conflict” and “fight it out” in culture—whether, for example, they understand “consumption,” “ethics” or “production” as the material basis of “what is” and therefore the material terrain of change—is going to have an

effect on how people grasp and how they direct their praxical activity in relation to the material contradictions in which they live. But culture does not transcend these material contradictions and cultural change does not transform them; culture does not resolve material contradictions that originate in production. Material contradictions can only be resolved by means of “praxical activity”—revolutionary transformation of them.

It is important to interject here that the effects that culture *does* indeed have are in large part *why* an investigation into contemporary feminist theory and its relationship to the material contradictions of capitalism now is necessary for feminism; and why, moreover, bringing back historical materialist analytics of gender into feminist theory and praxis is necessary. If culture were to have no effect on shaping the direction of social praxis then such investigations into culture and “fighting it out” in the cultural arena would not be necessary (or by contrast, corporations would not have to spend billions of dollars every year in advertising and the production of consumer subjects). In fact, culture does have an effect: the hegemonic feminisms after the Cultural Turn are ruling class feminisms that have instituted an internal cultural dynamic that marginalizes women’s class struggles with capitalism by distracting women and workers from grasping the relationship of their conditions of life to capitalism. As I have begun to show in this chapter and as I elaborate further in relation to more recent permutations of cultural feminism, they have ended up advocating for reforms quite useful to capital and quite useful to the class interests of some women at the expense of the majority of women. Feminism in these articulations, ends up serving as a ruling class means for updating women and gender and sexuality relations to the contemporary needs of capitalism. In its most developed articulations (after the second wave) it is, in fact, an instance of what Peter Sloterdijk has called “enlightened false consciousness” and “cynical reason”: it has in some cases knowingly and



wittingly suppressed and marginalized women's struggles against capitalism from feminist theory and praxis in the name of "plurality" and has served as apologism for capital in order to maintain the relative class privileges of some women (5-6).<sup>9</sup> And such practices also have had an effect on misdirecting the struggles of people who are working not to maintain these class interests but to transform material relations of exploitation.

It is therefore necessary to begin to intervene in the ruling class ideology of cultural feminisms and uncover the material relations and class interests behind them. In other words, to begin to produce transformative theory and praxis, it is necessary for feminism to produce rigorous conceptual explanation of the objective material relations and contradictions in which women live and critique the ideological means of obscuring these objective contradictions. To be clear, knowledge of material contradictions in itself and by itself never transforms social praxis because "material force can only be overthrown by material force" (Marx, *Hegel* 133). Moreover, the position one ultimately takes in relation to social relations (whether or not, for example, one ultimately takes up practices to maintain or transform existing social relations) has to do with one's *material* relation to social relations. However, knowledge of the material contradictions (and therefore also critique of ideological mystifications and their relation to these material contradictions) is necessary for serving as a guide to effective transformative social praxis.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, my critique of Jane Gallop's *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* in my essay "Sexual Harassment as/and (Self) Invention: Class, Sexuality, Pedagogy, and (Creative) Writing." *Transformation* 2 (2001): 155-216.

### 3.0 THE TEXTUAL HEALING

At the end of the long boom, the dominant feminism in the West underwent an increasingly rapid conversion in the 1980s and the 1990s from a project focused on the collective revolutionary struggle to transform capitalist economic relations of production and “inter-locking” social structures of oppression and toward a movement based on an “ethics of differences” in which social change was re-articulated in terms of matters of changing representations, cultural values of recognition, interpersonal negotiation, lifestyle, consumption, and “direct action tactics.” While the philosophical and political support for this shift in feminist theory and praxis began in the 1960s and 1970s with the “new social movements” of the New Left, “socialist” and “radical” feminisms in their varying degrees of support for the notion of patriarchy as “autonomous” from capitalism, reproduction as separate from production, social differences as autonomous “classes” (status), and “consciousness raising” based on “personal experience” (identity politics), the most significant philosophical and political index of this shift has been the institutionalization of “postmodern” theories—from poststructuralism, to postcolonialism, to post-Marxism—in feminism (and on the Euroamerican left generally) in the 1980s and 1990s. At the center of the “post-alization” of feminism lies a fundamental shift in Euroamerican “left” practices from politics (the principled understanding of and intervention into existing social *structures* and economic *relations*) to “ethics” (the understanding of the “social” as a series of incommensurate, aleatory, “events”—individual instances that have to be approached “care-fully” without the

security of any common and underlying principle of judgment). Ethics, of course, has always been in the forefront of social theory. However, there is a radical difference between the traditional “ethics” (of Plato, Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, etc.) and “post” ethics. “Post” ethics (which is the consequence of a re-reading of Kant by, most notably, Jean François Lyotard) is an “ethics” without foundation: an ethics in which its evaluation is completely immanent and has no reference to any “outside” principles based on material relations or objective laws of historical and material development.

Like the liberal, radical, socialist, black, and dual-systems theorists of the 1960s and 1970s, postmodern feminists also used a variety of analytical approaches from the poststructuralist feminisms of H el ene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Drucilla Cornell, Diane Elam, and Judith Butler, to the queer feminism of Diana Fuss and Elizabeth Meese, the postcolonial critique in the writings of Chandra Talpade Mohanty as well as Gayatri Spivak’s “deconstructionist-Marxist-feminist” critique, to the post-Marxist or “post-socialist” feminism of Donna Haraway, Nancy Fraser, and J.K. Gibson-Graham. What is common to these positions (despite what has often seemed to be sharp contestation between them), and what sets them apart at least formally from the dominant tendencies of feminism in the 1960s and early 1970s is the articulation of social differences of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, class and so on as increasingly “irreducible” differences and, especially “signifying practices.” This is to say that in the discourses of the “post,” social differences are unexplainable on the basis of an outside underlying global logic of historical development or a social totality of material relations and particularly underlying relations such as capitalism, the mode of production, economics, class, labor, and exploitation. In the wake of the “post-” conversion, therefore, social differences which were once understood as “interlocking” social structures of oppression and part of a social

totality of material relations such as “white supremacist, patriarchal capitalism” are now reunderstood as, at most, “intersecting” and (semi)autonomous differences. The inter-relation of gender to sexuality, race, ethnicity, nation, and/or class, in this view, is considered to be a network of aleatory and contingent relationships. As a consequence, unlike many feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, who advocated for collective and mass movements for “revolutionary” social transformation, postmodern feminists most often argued that the only possible politics is local, contingent, and at most “coalitional” (temporary and strategic affiliations based on affinity, not on collectivity and structural relations of material necessity).

Part of the “reasons” offered for this shift—or conversion—in feminist theory and praxis is the understanding that the material relations of capitalism have themselves changed—and undergone a “fundamental break”—and that they are no longer determined by wage-labor/capital relations. At the forefront of this shift in Western feminism of the 1980s and 1990s, and presenting itself as the foundation for a “new socialist feminism,” was the retheorization of global material relations themselves. Advanced most notably by such “post-socialist” feminists such as Donna Haraway and J.K. Gibson-Graham, this retheorization of material relations claims that we have now entered a post-production, post-labor, post-class and post-capitalist society. The historical “evidence” offered for this shift was the emergence of “a world system of production/reproduction . . . called the informatics of domination” (*Simians* 163). For Haraway “‘advanced capitalism’ is inadequate to convey the structure of this historical moment” (160) as the world has been “intimately restructured through the social relations of science and technology . . . [which] provide fresh sources of power, [and] . . . need fresh sources of analysis and political action” (165). In such a social arrangement, Haraway and other post-socialists contend, it is no longer ownership and control over the means of production that is the material

basis of power rather, it is the ability to understand and manipulate information technologies—“the systems of myth and meaning structuring our imaginations” (163). Feminist politics, on these terms, was converted from a struggle to transform material structures to what Michèle Barrett called a “politics of truth” or what Haraway called “coding” and the resignification of cultural norms: “cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly” (176). In short, material transformation is considered to be tantamount to a semiotic reorganization of representation as if the rewriting of capitalism were enough to end the exploitation of women under these conditions.

Exemplary of the canonic poststructuralist articulation of feminism is Drucilla Cornell’s “ethical feminism.” In *Beyond Accommodation* Cornell attempted to affirm “feminine difference” without positing a referent outside language which would secure a ground for this difference in an essential feminine identity. For Cornell, “no woman can claim that hers is the ultimate reality excluding all others, based on a concept of gender identity or on the uncovering of the essence of woman” (2). What is important to recognize in this poststructuralist formulation is that the process of deconstructing the construct of an “essence of woman” and “fixed identity,” Cornell *also* denies any material base to the production and reproduction of gender. Moreover, she rejects the possibility of producing *any* conceptual framework—any social theory—that can explain the material relations of oppression outside discursive constructs of gender. At the core of Cornell’s feminism is a rejection of the very notion of conceptuality predicated on the idea that it is a representational apparatus of domination. According to Cornell, even “to conceptualize difference is once again to reinstate its identity through its very determination as a concept” (182). For Cornell “woman” is a signifier without a signified; gender is a trope that is

subject to the play of meaning traces in language or what Derrida calls “*différance*.” Any explanation of gender produces a closure of meaning that serves to enforce a female “identity” which merely makes a “simple reversal” of the gender hierarchy without actually *displacing* it (Cornell 11). On these terms, essentialism is not merely understood as the positing of a “biological essence”—a transhistorical and unchangeable ontology upon which the oppression of women is forever founded—but it is also *any* situating of “feminine” or “sexual difference” within historical and material relations. Cornell goes on to posit that “there is no ultimate outside referent in which this process of interpretation comes to an end, such as nature or biology *or even conventional gender structures*.” (83; emphasis added).

The materiality of “gender” and social differences is, in other words, reunderstood as a “materiality” constituted by discourse. Along these lines, in *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler advances a notion of “material reality” as an effect of signification. According to Butler,

to be material means to materialize, where *the principle of that materialization is precisely what “matters” about that body, its very intelligibility*. In this sense, to know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where ‘to matter’ means at once ‘to materialize’ and “to mean.” (32; emphasis added)

For Butler and other poststructuralist feminists materialization is itself an effect of “intelligibility.” It is a discursive process enabled by the closure of established meanings that “stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (*Bodies* 9). On the terms of poststructuralist feminism to posit a set of determinations (an historical truth) such as the social division of labor and mode of production, is simultaneously to *construct* this as an outside cause. In other words, it is to construct through discourse what we consequently regard to be a determining cause and, as such, the proposed material cause is

actually an “effect” of discourse. To this end, Butler argued that positing causal relations “misses the point that the historicity of discourse and, in particular, the historicity of norms . . . constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names” (*Bodies* 187). Informed by Foucault, this theory presupposes that discourse “constitutes” objective reality; a particular discourse “finds a way of limiting its domain, of defining what it is talking about, of giving it the status of an object—and therefore making it manifest, namable, and describable” (*Archeology* 41).

However, in order to attribute to language the “performative power” to “constitute” material reality, discourse itself gets theorized as a “self-inventing” practice. Butler argues that “materialization [is] governed by principles of intelligibility that require and institute a domain of radical *unintelligibility* that resists materialization altogether or that remains radically dematerialized” (*Bodies* 35). In other words, the “material” in the “post” understanding of differences is an *effect* of discourse. Moreover, these “materializing effects” are governed by a logic of discursive supplementarity which contains *within itself* the means by which its “effects” can be deconstructed. So, “precisely because such terms [as “sex”] have been produced and constrained within such regimes [as sexism], they ought to be repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims” (123). In order to account for the “invention” and “reinvention” of the real without explaining the production of meaning in historical and material relations, the only “viable” alternative is to posit the immanent repetition of the structure of signification itself. As there is no “outside” to discourse, nothing propels this “repetition” except its own internal laws, the laws of semiosis. Repetition, resignification, reiteration, rewriting, redescription and so on are represented as *self-motivating* practices: transhistorical, cut off from the social, cut off from the economic, cut off from material conditions of necessity (i.e., the material conditions in place for cultural values of “gender” to become values).

One of the main consequences of the institutionalization of the poststructuralist reunderstanding of material reality and the “performative power” of language has been to dismantle from feminist theory its capacity to explain the difference between the “appearance” of material relations and the “essence”—or structure—of material relations. All modes of explanation that attribute a structure of material and historical causes to “what is” become understood as homogenizing discursive constructs. A telling example of this is the conceptual framework through which Chandra Mohanty makes her criticism of the limits of “modernist” Western feminism and what she called its “discursive imperialism” in her 1984 essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse.” Mohanty argues that to explain women as “powerless,” “exploited” or “sexually harassed” is “quite similar to sexist discourse of labeling women weak, emotional, having math anxiety, etc.” (338). This, however, is quite a reductive reading. By appealing to the performative power of discourse to bring into being that which it names, this reduces *all* historical explanation and critique of the systemic material relations in capitalism that exploit women’s labor with “homogenizing” and “essentializing” women as *inherently* unable to act to transform these material relations. To put this another way, “performativity” conflates historical explanation of the englobing material relations of capitalism with its inverse: the pathologizing and individualizing of women’s inequality in which inequality is attributed to inherent “psychological” or “existential” characteristics of women. The effect of the institutionalization of such discourses was to dismantle from feminist theory its explanatory critique of gender, race, and ethnicity as social relations of capital and its critique of capital and imperialism as *material* (not simply discursive) relations.

In the wake of poststructuralism, gender and sexuality, and social differences generally, have been increasingly abstracted from the material relations and division of labor in which they



are made possible. They have been translated and ideologically (not materially or praxically) converted into *cultural* and discursive constructs, tropes, metaphors and literary categories which develop and change independently of class, labor, and the material relations of production. Moreover, even when “class,” “labor,” the “mode of production,” “exploitation” or an “outside” are considered, they have also been translated in the wake of the institutionalization of poststructuralism into *cultural and discursive constructs* that are transformed through changes in values. The consequence of this is the understanding among many contemporary feminists that it is not the material relations of capitalism that need to be transformed but our values regarding these material relations that need to change. A case in point is J.K. Gibson-Graham’s *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. In this text Gibson-Graham claim that “we hope to counteract the tendency to emphasize the social effectivity of property ownership, domination and consciousness, while ignoring exploitation. For a moment then, we wish to hold exploitation up to the light and to analyze—not presume—its relations to power, ownership, consciousness, and other social dimensions” (52-53). For Gibson-Graham, however, “capitalism” is not a material relation within which human beings are situated regardless of their will rather, it is primarily a hegemonic “economic and social *descriptor*”—a mode of representation—that gets reinforced by those forms of political practice that seek to oppose capitalism (2).

For instance, according to Gibson-Graham, “Marxism has produced a discourse of Capitalism that ostensibly delineates an object of transformative class politics but that operates more powerfully to discourage and marginalize projects of class transformation” (252). On these terms, explanation—or explanatory critique—is reification: it is bound to produce an “essentialist” representation of capitalism as an “all powerful” and “insurmountable” hegemon—

a “self-same” identity—that is immune to intervention and change. They contend that by explaining all social practices on the terms of a totality of material relations in capitalism, the transformation of capitalism is represented as an impossibility (43).

In order to intervene in what they see as an occlusion of “class transformation” by Marxism, Gibson-Graham propose to disarticulate “class,” “surplus labor,” and “exploitation” from the material relations of production in capitalism and re-understanding different types of labor as “non-capitalist class processes of surplus labor appropriation and distribution” (168). Included in these so called “non-capitalist class processes” are, among other things, domestic labor, self-employment, and “alternative” forms of distribution that, they argue, are “outside” the capital/wage-labor relation. In other words, they aim to pluralize class as classes. This is a re-articulation of second wave feminism’s notion of gender as a class but now further removed from the idea that “classes” are interlocking structures of oppression. Classes instead are diffuse, amorphous, social differences. At the core of this, disarticulation of class from capitalism is Gibson-Graham’s argument for the necessity of explaining class as a “process” by “divorcing [it] . . . from the idea of economic and social ‘systems’ or structures” (65). In this context, multiple “relations of production” can occur at the same time. For instance, according to Gibson-Graham while wage work may involve capitalist social relations, domestic labor operates under “feudal” relations of production, and “self-employment” occurs under yet another set of relations of production. They claim that re-understanding capitalism as a “heterogeneity” that exists alongside “non-capitalist class processes” but does not subsume them, and retheorizing “class” and “exploitation” as social processes, opens up the possibility of a “new” and “different” class politics that will actually enable “class transformation” (53).

It is important to be clear here that by “transformation” Gibson-Graham do not mean the eradication of class, but a reorganization of its form. They make clear that their “new” politics of class “transformation” “might not be concerned to eradicate all or even specifically capitalist forms of exploitation but might instead be focused on transforming the extent, type, and conditions of exploitation in particular settings, or on changing its emotional components or its social effects” (53). As a result, the effect of placing the emphasis on “class” and “exploitation” as social processes is to shift the focus from eradicating exploitation as such, to changing HOW exploitation and the extraction of surplus-labor is performed within specific contexts and changing the range of subjective responses that are historically available to the extraction and appropriation of surplus labor: “Projects of class transformation . . . do not necessarily involve social upheaval and hegemonic transition . . . Rather, they take place whenever there is an attempt to change the way in which surplus labor is produced, appropriated, or distributed” (59). In the process they shift attention away from WHY surplus-labor is produced and suspend an inquiry into the possibility and necessity of entirely eradicating its conditions of possibility. Gibson-Graham claim that, “in slaying the capitalist monster, we have eliminated as well the subject position of its opponent” (21). Thus, instead of opposing capitalism, class society, and exploitation as such, they argue that what is necessary for the advancement of the global situation of women is a redefinition of capitalism: a “vision of a capitalist future [that] is not predicated on the general eradication of capitalism but simply involves the acknowledged coexistence of capitalist and non-capitalist economic forms” (179). For Gibson-Graham working to abolish capitalist exploitation (and hence, capitalism) is “too reductive” and “homogeneous” compared to the “economic heterogeneity” of preserving and defending capitalism along with other so-called “non-capitalist economic forms.”

What Gibson-Graham advance as feminism is a “politics of phrases” that cleanses feminism and changes in gender and sexuality relations of their material relation to class by transcoding the material contradictions in capitalism and its changing labor relations for women into epistemology. They abstract the changes for women in capitalism from the historical and material relations that produce them and thus cleanse feminism as a project to transform these material relations. They reduce feminism to a politics of “fighting phrases with phrases.” Thus, by a rhetorical sleight of hand they simply redefine and revalue “what is” in global capitalism as “what should be” for women. By converting the material contradictions of capitalism into epistemology, a politics of phrases, or what in feminism has been called the “politics of truth,” excludes a critique of the material interests served by the *mystification* of the material relations of capitalism, or what Foucault in his rejection of Marx dismissed as the “economics of untruth.” The “economics of untruth” is a class analysis based on the understanding that the “truth” is not determined by the performative power of language but by historical and material relations in capitalism. In relativizing all explanation as inherently predicated upon mystification, feminism after poststructuralism provides a useful alibi for multinational capital in its efforts to conceal the exploitation of workers and promote new strategies of extracting profit.

If we move our analysis away from the relatively privileged sectors of the North Atlantic petit-bourgeoisie, to rural female piece-rate workers in the Talleres Rurales del Valle Precooperative (TRV) just north of Cali, Colombia we can see the way in which this blurring of the “economics of untruth” is a means for mystifying the proletarianization and exploitation of rural women in global capitalism. Legally a “co-operative,” the TRV, like other so called “non-profit” organizations, presents itself as a “worker-operated” and “worker-owned” program with the aim of “lend[ing] dignity to peasant women” and promoting development of the production

process “through the applied use of co-operative methods” (Truelove 50). In the parlance of postmodern feminism and its “ethics of difference” such *redefining* of women as persons with “agency” gives them power. In actuality, as Cynthia Truelove demonstrates, “co-operatives” such as the TRV program are sites for “outsourcing” work from national and multinational industries that aim to close their plants in urban sites where worker organization and social benefits are much higher, and secure sites of “unprotected” labor in rural areas. Despite the formal “democracy” and legal responsibility on the part of co-operative members for “managing” the co-operative, the actual negotiation of labor contracts and the management of day-to-day operations are determined by the executive branch of the TRV in conjunction with the subcontracting industry.

As Truelove argues, the members of the so-called “co-operatives” are in actuality “disguised wage-laborers” and “industrial proletarians” whose “surplus value generated through this labor arrangement is directly manifested in the profit generated for industry through the employ of cheap labor” (56). The official legal classification of these women as “*socias*” (members of a worker-managed co-operative) instead of wage-workers is “primarily a legal convenience for industry” (53). It is a means for exempting national and multinational corporations from having to provide social benefits (healthcare, education, etc.) over and above wages, as would be the case for legally protected workers. While the piece-rate workers are entitled to “benefits,” as “*socias*” with their own “autonomous agency” they are required to pay for these “benefits” out of deductions from their wages. Moreover, insofar as these “co-operatives” are in actuality functionaries for corporate profit, the ideology of “co-operativism” and “teamwork” that they promote is a way to weed out those who attempt to organize for greater control of the production process on the part of workers.

For the “disguised wage laborers” in the TRV the knowledge that the reality of their material conditions as wage-workers is indeed *hidden* from them—in the form of “non-profit” organizations and “co-operatives” which “affirm” the “difference” of peasant women, and the legal classification of their status as “*socias*”—is an important insight for their political struggle against the exploitation of their labor-power. It is the development of this knowledge of the economic untruth of the “co-operatives” and the legal classification of women as “*socias*” and the economic reality of their exploitation as wage-workers (not a transhistorical truth but an historically produced, and therefore transformable, truth) that has enabled these women to more effectively contest the lack of control they have over the sale of their labor-power and the production process in general (55).

The conversion of the material into the discursive and cultural in “postmodern” feminisms is not a direct reflection of the material relations of capitalism rather it is a “spiritualizing” of these relations which is to say that it is an ideological inversion of material relations. To put this another way, the notion of “constitutive reality” is not actually a praxical transformation, a fundamental break, or material supersession of the material relations in capitalism, it is a *textual healing*—or a “spiritual resolution”—of material contradictions. It does not actually praxically resolve contradictions that materially develop at the point of production, it merely ideologically suspends them and conceals over the material relations that produce them. In this way it provides an ideological frame for political practices that focus on surface reforms of capitalism that have been quite useful to rearticulating feminism in the interests of transnational capitalism and dismantling feminism as a movement of social transformation. This “ideological inversion” however, is itself the effect of the material processes of capitalism: “if in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this

phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical-life process” (Marx and Engels, *German* 42). Poststructuralist philosophy and its “ethics of differences,” to be more specific, is the ideology of a fledgling transnational capital which was at that time already *materially* transforming the social division of labor in respect to relations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and nation *in order to intensify exploitation and bolster the declining rate of profit* without the transformation of class relations (exploitation).

The presupposition of a “discrete singularity” (“sign”), with a “self-same identity,” or singular correspondence between language and a stable or “fixed” referent or thing—what Kant refers to as the *noumenon* in his book *Critique of Pure Reason*—that has characterized “modernist” philosophy ultimately became the privileged mode of referentiality in industrial capitalism, which at its highest level of historical and material development used Fordist assembly-line mass production and Taylorized managerial practices that break down the production process into “discrete” parts and reduce the subject of labor to the individual of calculated mass-assembly time. Singular referentiality—the presupposition of a correspondence between “words” and “things”—is the referentiality of mass production. Its “referent”—the “thing” which is named—is abstracted from the *material relations* of production in which “things” are produced. To put this another way, the singularity of the noumenon is part of the administrative reason of capital which conceals the *material relations of exploitation* under which the commodity is produced and therefore puts forward an idealized understanding of the material as abstract “things.”

In this same regard however, contemporary cultural theory, including feminism, also abstracts the material from the material relations of capitalism. First, as Teresa Ebert has argued,

it does not actually break from a “referent” and “referentiality” as it claims. Instead it puts forward a different *mode of referentiality* that rejects a one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified and pluralizes the range of referents into a network of shifting *signifiers* in a relation of textual play, rather than extricating itself from referentiality altogether. In place of a singular referent, the canonical feminisms put forward a “post-referential” referentiality that is characterized by a series of “object substitutions,” doublings, a network of multiple and shifting discursive references (Ebert, “Interview” 48-49). Yet, unless discourse has some form of “immanent” *theological* power which accounts for the formation of objects, but is itself not accounted for by the historical and material relations of the mode of production, then this theory necessarily assumes the existence of matter *outside of any historical relation whatsoever* until it is inculcated into *discursive* relations. This is an ahistorical notion of “matter” which reduces it to a static, reified mass. In the guise of being “more historical” than historical materialist analyses of women’s oppression which were thought to “essentialize” material reality in economics, poststructuralist theories of discursively “constitutive” reality obscured the material as a *structure of material conflicts*; what Marx has called the “ensemble of social relations” of production (*German* 122). Poststructuralist feminism reproduced the same theory of abstract matterism as Ludwig Feuerbach, that Marx critiqued in his “Theses on Feuerbach.” In poststructuralism, material reality is only conceived of as an “object of contemplation,” not as *practical relations*, “hence in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism” (*German* 121).

Like the Kantian “noumenal” theory of laissez-faire and industrial capitalism, poststructuralism conceals the *material relations* under which this matter is *produced*: the capitalist relations of production. In doing so, it occludes exploitation and the material conditions



under which the majority of women on the planet live. This is clearly manifested in Derrida's notion that there is nothing behind the text except textuality itself. Signifying practices are autonomous from objective reality so that any "outside" (reality) to which we may refer is always an extension of the "inside" (textuality). As there is no "outside" to discourse, nothing propels the repetition of discursive norms except its own laws, the laws of semiosis. Discursive repetition is defended as a "self-motivating" transhistorical practice. Like Feuerbach, poststructuralism "does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity . . . hence [it] does not grasp the significance of 'revolutionary,' of 'practical-critical,' activity" (Marx and Engels, *German* 121).

The "deconstruction" of modernist conceptions of gender and sexuality rooted in existentialism, the notion of a natural female "essence," Hegelian and Kantian philosophies of *ideal* concepts and especially Cartesian binary conceptions—while at the same time ideologically abstracting gender and sexuality from any *structure of material relations such as class and capitalism*—by poststructuralist feminisms was taken to be a material transformation of gender. But knowledge practices do not transform class contradictions—which can only be resolved through the transformation of social praxis (revolution). Instead, this "deconstruction" has been an ideological articulation of material changes that became a historical necessity *for capitalism*. The cultural theories of the "post-" were made possible by and helped provide the knowledge practices and cultural intelligibilities needed by early transnational capital to update the contemporary workforce to dialectical and material developments taking place in production for profit.

What is most telling in this regard is that at the same time of the initial institutionalization in feminism and cultural theory generally of an "ethics of difference," the "post-referential,"

declarations of the “irrelevance” of class, Marxism, and collective struggles for social transformation, and the necessity to rearticulate gender and sexuality as “flexible” and “irreducible” floating textualities or cultural singularities “resistant” to the authority of the state but unexplainable in terms of economics, the social division of labor, and the mode of production, North Atlantic capital was engaged in a massive *class war* on workers’ conditions of life by working to dismantle state welfare provisions and labor laws (including social welfare and labor laws for women) and re-privatize social wealth that had been allotted to public institutions (such as education, social security, day care, health care, welfare, etc); break up social collectivity and worker’s solidarity in trade-unions; deregulate “free trade” by, for instance, removing legal barriers and tariffs to transnational corporations, as well as deregulating labor laws enforced by “nation-states” abroad; and shift manufacturing production sites outside of the North where relatively cheaper labor could be secured.

For instance, the notion of “categorical crisis” of “woman” which contemporary feminism treats as an always already unavoidable and constitutive structure of difference, is itself a ruling class articulation of the way the social relations of production determine gender. It is a manifestation of the way in which the sharpening of class contradictions, and the drive of capital to stave off declines in profit through increasing the extraction of surplus-value, produced changes in gender and sexuality relations. The “new” gender order in other words, is not “above” wage-labor and capital relations (exploitation) rather it is an articulation of these relations at a historically specific level of development of its productive forces: post-Fordism.

Particularly during “the long boom” in which productivity and profits for U.S. capital increased steadily, and there were labor shortages as a result of the wars, it was profitable and necessary for capital to focus on the economic development and regulation of the national

workforce for the re-supply of its exploitable labor-power. It was therefore possible for workers to collectively bargain for capital to invest a greater portion of the socially produced wealth not only directly in production but also in the reproduction of the labor force to support its economic needs for an increased supply of highly skilled, but nonetheless *exploitable* labor power. These investments took the form of rising wages or a “family wage” and investments in public institutions such as the expansion of education, especially higher education and moving of larger numbers of the workers (men and women) into higher education. These investments were ultimately supported by capital in order to deal with acute labor shortages and reproduce a domestic workforce endowed with the skills appropriate to the current level of production.

The construct of a stable and fixed “identity” or “feminine essence” for woman is both an effect and an ideological articulation of the division of labor between women who were often primarily located in unpaid reproductive labor in the home and forced into positions of economic dependence on marriage and the family, and men who were primarily located in paid wage-labor outside the home. This division of labor, under the existing historical conditions of capitalist production at the time, was useful to support capital’s need for controlling and regulating the labor supply needed by production for profit. In such a situation of Fordist assembly-line factory production, Taylorist managerial strategies, and a fairly rigid division of labor, the dominant mode of referentiality in culture was singular. In these material conditions the dominant conception of woman as a “fixed,” “natural” and “singular” identity was useful to capital for adjusting the labor force to the economic interests of the ruling class. In this respect, “woman” *appeared* under capitalism, and according to those representations serving the interests of capital at the time, to have a relatively fixed meaning in a “feminine essence” or “identity.” In actuality,

gender was not grounded in a fixed “feminine essence” but produced by the social division of labor.

Such an understanding of “referentiality” in general and “woman” in particular, however, became increasingly outdated *for capital*, particularly after the crash of the long boom. At this time the world capitalist economy entered a period of general economic stagnation and decline in the rate of profit. As a consequence of the economic crisis of capital and dialectical development of contradictions in production, the state allocations in social welfare and public institutions to support the reproduction and growth of the domestic labor force that were once *necessary for capital* to maintain profit now became a hindrance to profit for the ruling class. Capital that had relied heavily on workers “at home” to provide exploitable labor-power during the long boom increasingly moved production abroad to seek out cheaper labor and less restrictive conditions of production—conditions that had been made more “amenable” to capital in the West owing to brutal imperialist conquest and colonization—in order to be competitive with other capitals internationally. This also had the effect of giving a fledgling multi-national capital a greater foothold to dismantle the workers solidarity and class collectivity in trade-unions that workers developed in advanced capitalist nations during the long boom and through which they collectively bargained for such measures as a family wage and forty hour work week. The economic crisis in production, therefore, resulted in the rapid decrease of full time, steady employment in advanced capitalist nations, the shifting of production to colonized and formerly colonized nations, and the increase of unemployment and part-time, contingent labor among workers in the West.

Both “at home” and “abroad” women were pulled into wage-labor in increasing numbers. Many women who had not worked previously were economically compelled to work for a wage

in addition to unpaid reproductive labor in the family because of the deterioration of the family wage. It was also in the material interest of capital to employ women and workers of color in increasing numbers and move them into new occupations because, owing to their historical position of material inequality in capitalism, they were less expensive for capital to use as exploitable labor power. As a consequence of these changes in the material conditions of capitalist after the collapse of the long boom, and the drawing of women into the workforce *en masse*, capital produced changes in gender and sexual relations and women's relationship to the family. Capital necessitated and accommodated cultural and legal changes in gender and sexuality relations in order to "free" women to join the exploitable workforce in increasing numbers.

The singular identity "woman," and the rigid binary between "woman/man" once ideologically useful to capital to naturalize a strict division between reproductive and productive labor increasingly became a redundant project under economic crisis and the development of new conditions of production to increase the extraction of surplus-labor from the workforce. The singular referent—between language and a stable object—was and still to a large extent is seen as "oppressive," because this mode of referentiality serves to ideologically adjust the workforce to modes of extracting surplus-labor that began to serve as a hindrance to *profit*. Capital needed to break class collectivity on the one hand, but make legal and cultural accommodations for the inclusion of differences on the other in order to accommodate drawing workers into new modes of extracting surplus-labor. Early transnational capital needed an "ethics of difference" in order to break strong trade unions and class solidarity and isolate workers of the world to raise the rate of profit for the owners. It did so through the differences of gender, sexuality, age, nationality and race. This "ethics of difference" helped to break the notion of fixed social differences that

were once useful under capitalism's "old" modes of extracting surplus-labor which used Fordist production practices and Taylorist managerial strategies, and reinstated a new notion of social difference based on "post-Fordist" production practices.

The canonical "post-" modes of feminism have been part of the cultural apparatuses which provided ideological responses and "spiritual resolution" to material developments and contradictions *already taking place* in the social relations of production. "Post-" theory—and its "post-referential" conception of "women"—is not a point of departure from the administrative reason of capital manifested in, for example, Kantian philosophy it is, rather, a *rationalization* of the administrative reason of capital. It is a further breaking down of the immanent operations of this administrative reason and the assertion of the impossibility of an "outside" to it. This "post-referential" referentiality is enabled by material developments in the division of labor: the further breaking down of the Fordist mass-assembly division of labor and Taylorized managerial practices into ever more particularized divisions of labor and complex and layered managerial practices. However, these developments are themselves enabled by class relations and the drive for the extraction of surplus-labor for profit. This now canonical mode of "post-referential" referentiality, however, conceals the class relations of capitalism that have produced changes in the culture of capitalism and has led many feminists once again to read surface cultural changes in the modes through which capital extracts surplus-labor from the workforce, as "constitutive" material changes in capitalism and particularly root changes for women.

By putting forward theories that either sever culture from class and the economic or that make the cultural changes of capitalism "constitutive" of the economic, contemporary feminism has actually retreated into an increasingly localized form of micropolitics and local cultural reforms within capitalism. Identity politics (the cultural recognition of differences and the

inclusion of the *local experience* of differences as the limit of politics) is a rationalization of the differences that capitalism produces in the division of labor to extract wealth from workers. The “differences” of identity politics are a *culturalizing* of the social division of labor and material process of exploitation in production under capitalism (Ebert, “Rematerializing” 39). This includes identity politics after “poststructuralism” and the notion of woman as an instance of “*differance*,” a regime of “power/knowledge” networks or of the performative power of language without a “referent.” These theories articulated by poststructuralist (and what one might now call “post-poststructuralist”) feminists and queer theorists such as Judith Butler, Diane Elam, Drucilla Cornell, Elizabeth Grosz and others are not a departure from identity politics even though they are a departure from the notion of “singular” referentiality. Rather, they are an updating of identity politics by translating it into an ever more pluralized and localized “micropolitics” after the crash of the long boom when capital fell into a period of economic crisis, needed access to new sources of cheap labor, relocated women into new areas in the paid workforce which required changes in the family and the production of new modes of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity relations and subjectivities that could accommodate these shifts.

The effect of micropolitics has been to ideologically cut the chain of causality that relates the class privileges of some women to the increasing poverty of the majority by abstracting these inequalities from class relations and private ownership of the means of production and translating them into matters of local desires, affects, values and lifestyle choices. In doing so, they accommodate economic inequality between the few and the many, including the majority of women, while arguing for “democracy” and “cultural freedom” of “differences.” In isolating the “local” or “micro” from the social relations of production feminism has been converted into a project to support the “success” of a tiny class-fraction of women. What is most telling in this

regard, is the way in which the “post” ultimately returns to the volitional subject as the basis of agency and change. This is evident in Gibson-Graham’s discussion of the “relationship” between struggles against the oppression of women via rape and struggles against globalization. In this discussion, Gibson-Graham’s reading largely hinges on seeing the oppression of women by men through rape as an analogy to the exploitation of labor by capitalism through globalization—as an autonomous but comparable set of relations. Having assumed the relationship between the oppression of women and exploitation under capitalism to be one of analogy (“unique” modes of oppression with no structural relation), Gibson-Graham argue that the “dominant” approaches to “rape” and to “globalization” lead, respectively, to constructing “women” and “labor” as “victims” that are incapable of any “agency” that enables change. More specifically, Gibson-Graham draw on Sharon Marcus’ theorization of rape in order to argue that rape a “language script” that can be “rewritten” in order to prevent a rape from occurring.<sup>10</sup>

For this theory, discourse constitutes material reality, and a discourse that attempts to *explain* and *critique* the conditions that oppress and exploit women—and restrict their “choice”—performatively reproduces such a restriction. Thus, Gibson-Graham oppose feminist discourses that work to critique the material conditions of exploitation that prevent “choice” on the idealist grounds that it is feminist discourses which critique the oppression of women, that are responsible for making women into victims. Like “power feminists” who want to retheorize “woman” as a “self-empowered” agent who is not defined by the rape script, Gibson-Graham want to theorize *class* as a discursively reversible and “free-agent” not defined by capitalist globalization—a theorization that, they claim, allows greater agency for resistance. However, this is idealist because it assumes that discourse theologially brings into being that which it

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<sup>10</sup> For Sharon Marcus’ argument see her essay “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention” in Judith Butler and Joan Scott’s *Feminists Theorize the Political*.



names: saying and perceiving that women are oppressed and producing knowledges of the conditions of oppression, causes our oppression and, by contrast, saying and perceiving that we are “freely consenting” and “powerful” causes our “liberation.” In doing so, this idealism blocks the production of the knowledges necessary to effectively intervene in and transform the conditions of women’s oppression and exploitation, and moreover, reproduces the reactionary ruling class fantasy that people need only look within themselves and “recognize their power” in order to be “powerful.”

What is common to these approaches is the way in which they attempt to resurrect “personal choice” as the basis of one’s social position. In fact, Gibson-Graham argue that, if it seems bizarre to talk about a ‘choice’ among class positions, that attests to the aura of paucity and constraint that surrounds the discourse of class, and the prevailing sense that class is thrust upon us by a system outside which we have no existence and within which we have no purchase. (168)

In the (perceived) absence of the possibility of any collective revolutionary transformation of material relations of production, Gibson-Graham offer the highly constrained and limited “agency” that patriarchal capitalism has always offered in its cultural imaginary: the “choice” to pull oneself up by one’s own bootstraps and change “oneself” and “one’s” response to the dominant social relations—but not the collective agency to work to transform these social relations themselves.

In theorizing “empowerment” as based on personal choice and a self-motivating agency, Gibson-Graham abstract violence against women from the social conditions in the international division of labor which continue to make it possible. In doing so they represent violence against women as an effect of interpersonal relations between men and women, where class politics and

contradictions are hidden from view. However, violence against women cannot be understood in isolation from the conditions of women's lives in the international division of labor. It is a tool of class exploitation. In order to naturalize and justify this exploitation, divide the working class to prevent it from effectively fighting this exploitation, and produce new specialized markets for consumption, capital necessitates the production and reproduction of historical differences such as "gender." In short, these differences are the result of exploitation and serve in its ideological legitimation. In this context, violence against women can be understood as a concentration of practices meant to reinforce, exacerbate, and intensify gender differences. It thus contributes to the justification of the economic exploitation of women and helps to maintain a politically divided labor force that is, as a result, prevented from collectively fighting the entire system of social oppression and exploitation.

Violence against women is symptomatic of much broader strategies of violence in the international division of labor, used to "cheapen" women's labor-power and keep us more vulnerable and less resistant to the global logic of capitalist exploitation. As Maria Mies has argued,

Violence against women and extracting women's labour through coercive labour relations are [. . .] part and parcel of capitalism. They are necessary for the capitalist accumulation process and not peripheral to it. In other words, capitalism has to use, to strengthen, or even to invent, patriarchal men-women relations if it wants to maintain its accumulation model. If all women in the world had become 'free' wage-earners, the extraction of surplus would, to say the least, be severely hampered. (*Patriarchy* 171)

Violence against women is a tool for the accumulation of capital. The history of violence against women and keeping women relatively isolated and excluded from wage-labor has set up the conditions necessary for an extremely cheap labor force that can be easily manipulated depending on what will make the most profit for the capitalist. Now, in a time of economic crisis, and a subsequent increase in ruthless and reckless inter-capitalist competition on a global scale, more women are being proletarianized on this scale than ever before. The crisis of capitalism that is the effect of the fall of the rate of profit, requires employment of more women (and other low paid workers) to increase or at least maintain the rate of profit. These shifts in the mode of production have opened up the possibility for women, who were previously relatively isolated from each other, to develop collective practices with each other and male workers to resist, intervene in, and transform the conditions of their exploitation. Yet, to suppress the development of collective revolutionary praxis, capitalist relations of production require an increase in managerial strategies that will maintain gender distinctions to (re)produce a labor force that will be more easily exploitable by capital. As part of these strategies there has developed a significant backlash against advances made by women all over the globe which includes both covert ideological violence through the “repetition,” and “recitation” of gender norms in the media and educational systems, and the development and maintenance of practices of overt physical violence against women.

In this context, it is not surprising to see where Gibson-Graham are led by their reliance on a poststructuralist politics of difference which abstracts gender from capitalism: to the ruling class conclusion that it is transnational capital and the multinational corporation that is the material basis of the emancipation of women. For Gibson-Graham the activity of MNCs in the Third World is “unwittingly generative rather than merely destructive” for the conditions of

women's lives (130). When the oppression of women gets abstracted from the international division of labor it becomes possible to assume that women can be emancipated within and by capitalism. On these terms they argue that, "involvement in capitalist exploitation has freed [women] from aspects of exploitation associated with their household class positions and has given them a position from which to struggle with and redefine traditional gender roles" (132). But what they totally erase here is that capitalism necessitates these changes. They do not question the social relations in which some women have more "choice" and "power" than others and thus they ignore the reorganization of relations of production in the international division of labor in which capitalism is perfectly supportive of enabling some women to succeed within its ranks so as to more effectively manage the majority of women as free and cheap labor.

It is important to note that the "textual healing" offered by poststructuralist and post-Marxist feminists in many ways is a translation of the dominant bourgeois theories of post-Fordist political economy and the reigning post-Taylorist managerial philosophies prevalent at the time articulated in such books as Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* and Peter Drucker's *Post-Capitalist Society*—or today Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat*—into gender theory and politics. Post-Fordist and post-Taylorist managerial theories celebrate the development of new technologies and post-Fordist managerial practices as fundamental transformation of exploitation in production and *progress* (a material supersession) beyond the material contradictions and class relations of capitalism. These theories have been an updating of the Weberian theory of class for new developments in the productive forces of capitalism. They take changes in which commodities are owned (computers instead of typewriters), what means of production are used, and changes in the managerial strategies of capital to extract more wealth from workers as a material transformation of the basic relations of exploitation. The theory of a

fundamental break from capitalism to a “post-class” “informatics of domination”—or what has similarly been called “New Times” (Hall), “post-industrial society” (Bell), “post-capitalist society” (Drucker), or “post-Fordism” (Amin)—has, among other things, entailed the abstraction of cyber and information technologies from the material relations in which they are produced. To stave off declines in profit competing capitals have had to revolutionize production practices by producing labor-saving technologies—in this case information and cybertechnologies—to extract more wealth from the working population. These developments in the forces of production have also led to new technological and occupational divisions of labor and conditions of production or what have been called “post-Fordist” production practices and “post-Taylorist” managerial strategies based on flexibility and plural organization. The production of new technologies, changes to the *technological* division of labor, and the development of new managerial practices, however, are not actually an index of material changes—i.e., a “fundamental break” as Hall has called it—or a supersession of capitalist production (a supersession of the exploitation of surplus-labor) with a “knowledge economy” based on control of information.

Far from fundamentally restructuring the material relations of capitalism, and offering “freedom” from exploitation, information, knowledge, and cybertechnologies such as the “computer” are themselves the effect of social relations of production based on the exploitation of labor for profit. In his article “Capitalism, Computers, and the Class War on your Desktop,” Bob Hughes remarks on the fact that cybertechnologies are not a transformation of the material relations of production in capitalism:

The machine on which I write this was massively subsidised by the sweat, tears, taxes and poisoned aquifers of the people of Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and China. It was assembled in Taiwan’s notorious Hsinchu “science

park,” into which \$60 billion of public money has been pumped, and from which perhaps 40,000 tons of toxic water is pumped into local waterways every single day. Its silicon chips have consumed 700 times their own weight in water, hydrocarbons, toxic gases and solvents. Its hard disk was made in a factory in Thailand, where women have actually dropped dead at their work benches from lead poisoning. It’s a laptop, so at least its display contains no lead (5-8 lbs in a typical CRT); instead, it contains about 30mg of mercury: either a lethal dose, or several times the lethal dose, depending on how you ingest it. It has perhaps 30 capacitors containing tantalum: very likely part of the spoils of Congo’s civil war, which has killed around 4 million people. The price of tantalum, and almost everything else in a computer, varies wildly; legitimate production is expensive and inflexible; so there will always be a role in the supply-chain for discreet, ever-flexible militias. The power-supply was assembled for next to nothing by some of the millions of young men and women who leave the land in China every year, as part of “economic restructuring.”

The notion that knowledge, information and cybertech has fundamentally transformed capitalism, and is “free” from the constraints of class, conceals over the living labor which produces new technologies and the conditions under which this labor takes place: the conditions of private ownership and brutal exploitation in which the majority of the population does not own the means of production and is compelled under the threat of starvation, homelessness, and destitution to work part of the working-day to reproduce their own means of subsistence and part of the working-day to produce surplus-value for the ruling class.

Moreover, “new technologies” are not only produced under such conditions they are deployed in production for profit. “The computer,” Hughes continues,

has been turned into a humourless device for extracting profit from people; systematically wasting their effort, ideas, hopes; turning any luxury it allows us into a costly, burdensome necessity; and, finally, erasing all evidence that human beings were ever involved. It has been recruited into capitalism’s historic mission to annihilate competition and generate needs, which so dominate our lives it is almost impossible even to notice that there is a real world out there.

Like all technologies the ends and interests toward which they are put—whether they are used to provide clean drinking water and house people or to reduce an entire nation to rubble and destitution for profit—is determined by the material relations in which they are produced and used. With this in mind, the notion of “post-class” conceals feminism’s relationship to the material contradictions of capitalism and is a particularly devastating retreat for feminism in a time when workers in transnational capitalism are increasingly subordinated to the exploitative logic of capitalist relations of production—often while producing the goods and services that are the necessary preconditions for this new “cyber-reality.”

What many postmodern feminists presented as “effective” feminist practice in the name of feminism were the cultural intelligibilities of upper-middle class women such as knowledge workers in the academy because, by focusing on issues of deconstruction, coding, knowledge, discourse, etc. they were able to gain the cultural and labor skills they needed to “succeed” within the changing labor relations of capitalism. In fact, the intense focus on issues of “affinity” within “information networks” as articulated by Haraway and others was really more a model of networking among multicultural managers of the transnational labor force. But this success was

dependent on the fact that transnational capital was investing in producing technical managers and knowledge workers in the North—and it had capital to invest in this as a result of the exploitation of surplus-labor around the world. What the “object crisis” of feminism and its notion of “post-referential referentiality” concealed is that the majority of women in transnational capitalism who gained new skills in “informatics,” coding, discourse analysis, flexibility, etc. because these were the marketable skills at the time, were still subject to exploitation. The evidence of this is not only the continued exploitation in the service industry but the increases in wealth gaps between rich and poor, despite the updating of workers skills. The crisis of capitalism in the mid-1990s which entailed, among other things, the crisis of the “dot.com” industries in the North and the transferring of production for computing and technology both suggests that it is not “knowledge” but the extraction of surplus-labor and securing the material conditions for continued exploitation of surplus-labor that is the source of wealth—in this case now produced by workers in Latin America, India, China and Pakistan who are now the main suppliers of cheap labor for transnational capital.

Displacing the material referent to any signifier, as poststructuralism does, is at its basis a *class* question. Displacing the referent to the “category” and various discourses on “women” is an ideological means of preventing the possibility of explanatory critique of the *historically produced* (not inherently given) and, therefore, transformable *material relations of capitalism*. That is, it is a means of preventing the production of knowledges that can explain the material relations *outside* discourse that (re)produce gender and sexuality as social relations of capital and sites of exploitation and, in this way, historically speaking it has served as a force on behalf of transnational capital for the dismantling of knowledges needed to develop materially effective praxis in the struggle for social transformation. It does so by shifting the emphasis of the struggle



for social transformation from transforming the material relations of capitalism—its division of labor and property—to the transformation of signification, representations, and cultural productions of women which have become necessary for capital under the ever more complex strategies that capital uses to exploit workers. The “post-” conversion of feminism, in other words, has been part of the ruling class project of dismantling feminism as a force for social transformation and (again) converting it into a means for updating women as collective producers of capitalism. It is symptomatic not of the fact that feminism is “above” the mode of production and class antagonisms but of a class war over feminism and whether it will be articulated in the interests of social transformation to free women from the exploitation of their labor for profit or of capitalist reforms.

In many respects, capitalism has indeed changed on its cultural surface but the basic division between exploiters and exploited that is at the core of the wage-labor/capital relation is far from “over.” The changes have been changes in the modes through which exploitation takes place, but not the basic social relations of exploitation. The “post-” conversion of feminism has been a cultural movement of ideas—a cultural updating of ruling class ideology—that conceals over the inequality of women and its material relationship to the social division of labor and social relations of production in capitalism. At the same time, it is developments in the economic relations of capital that have enabled this “cultural conversion.” To put this another way the post- conversion of feminism is indicative of the way in which “culture” is a bearer of social relations and, more specifically, the way in which culture under capitalism is reduced to “ideology” and used in the service of the material interests of the capitalist class as a means to obscure the material relations of exploitation.

#### 4.0 THE “CONCRETE” BODY

In the Foreword to her book *Arts of the Possible*, Adrienne Rich, a long time advocate of contemporary feminism’s rejection of Marxism, calls for contemporary feminism to re-examine its own “uncriticized and uninvestigated” anti-Marxism. When she first invoked Marx, she recalls, it was “to dismiss Marxism ‘for women’” and, in doing so, she, along with the dominant part of the U.S. feminist movement, was “echoing the standard anti-Marxism of the postwar American cultural and political mainstream” (4). In the meantime, the feminist method of “the personal is political” which was meant to show that the personal and daily lives of women were not of their own choosing and individual making but were the product of a totality of social relations that themselves needed to be transformed has, in the wake of the suppression of Marx’s explanatory critique of the social totality, turned into the understanding that personal choice is the root of women’s position in society. “Personal anecdote was replacing critical argument” as the means by which to investigate the conditions of women’s lives and the class desires of some women were displacing the needs of all women for economic equality and social justice. While “personal narrative was becoming valued as the true coin of feminist expression,” she observes, “at the same time, in every zone of public life, personal and private solutions were being marketed by a profit-driven corporate system, while collective action and even collective realities were mocked at best and at worst rendered historically sterile” (2). Articulating feminism on the terms of collective struggles for the social emancipation of all persons from the

exploitation of labor in capitalism, from imperialism and racism, in this context, has been overtaken by a “growing middle-class self absorption” (3) with one’s own life, pleasures, experiences.

Indeed, contemporary feminism has by and large abandoned any notion of the relationship of gender, sexuality, and the daily lives of specific women to collective needs, capital, labor, and their relation in the mode of production (that is, exploitation). It has disconnected feminism from the struggle to transform the fundamental economic and social relations of production that shape women’s lives. Contemporary feminism has taken the “unrealizability of emancipation” that postmodern feminist Judith Butler declared in the early 1990s as an uncontested truth (“Poststructuralism and Postmarxism” 8). Instead it has (at most) resigned itself to offering codes of affect and caring and rules for “civil” and “ethical behavior” as the only means for addressing economic inequalities and social injustice around the globe.

What is striking is that, in large part, this shift and the growing myopia of contemporary feminism have occurred in the very name of an engagement with the “material” conditions of women’s lives. “Materialism” to be clear, has itself been rearticulated in the wake of “post” theories—from poststructuralism to post-marxism—to mean what Teresa Ebert has called “delectable materialism.” As Ebert explains, “delectable materialism” is “the theory of the material put forth in late capitalism to displace *dialectical materialism*” (280). “Delectable materialism” places a great deal of emphasis on what it calls the “concrete.” But by “concrete” it means not the materiality of the totality of social *relations* and the conditions of necessity that can explain why women’s conditions of life are being deteriorated around the globe, but the materiality of the sensuous, erotic, and tactile—particularly the sensuousness of the body and its pleasures and pains. For example, in her book *Volatile Bodies*, “delectable materialist” feminist

Elizabeth Grosz argues for the “primacy of corporeality” in explaining the material conditions of women’s lives and as a means to “transform women’s social subordination to men” (viii). According to Grosz, “Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds. Indeed, for feminist purposes the focus on bodies, bodies in their concrete specificities, has the added bonus of inevitably raising the question of sexual difference” (vii). The “concrete” of gender, sexuality, “questions about which kind of bodies, what their difference are, and what their products and consequences might be” are all to be explained by the sensuous singularities of the body that “resist” conceptualization and exceed explanation (vii).

This notion of the concrete as a sensuous singularity, I argue, is a far cry from the *dialectical* materialism that is actually needed for feminism to explain the social relations of production that are confronting women in capitalism now—and to see through the local differences of its strategies for exploitation—so that it can effectively “transform the social subordination of women” to private property around the globe. The success of delectable materialism within feminism and cultural theory in general is in part owing to the fact that it claims to go beyond what it calls a “reductionist,” “abstract,” and “totalizing” logic of classical Marxism, which is now declared to be outdated in the face of triumphalist capitalism. These claims have, in fact, become trademarks of contemporary cultural theory after the “post” and are so much a part of the contemporary commonsense that they go unquestioned. But herein lies the problem. They have received a great deal of publication space, funding, and university support in the North precisely because they articulate the interests of transnational capitalism by covering over its trouble spots and representing the actual conditions of labor and need in capitalism as unsayable. Delectable materialism all but eliminates class, production, social totality, labor, collectivity, etc. from the explanatory vocabulary of contemporary feminism and reduces world

historical concerns for women in transnational capitalism—the exploitation of their labor—that have brought about the deterioration of their financial income, health, nutrition, economic security, and social well being to matters of individual choice, taste, and preference.

A case in point is Elpeth Probyn's *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities*, in which she applies Grosz "corporeal feminism" to questions of "food" and the "gendered, eating body." For Probyn, the concrete "materiality" of gender, sexuality, food and eating is located in "alimentary assemblages": the alimentary and erotic "sensations" of the body and its multiple surfaces. Eating, Probyn argues, is at root a "radically solitary" and "physical act." In this view, the concrete of food and eating is constituted by its physicality and singularity: the feelings and sensations of the body in taking in and expelling food, from touch, texture, and taste to "hunger, greed, shame, disgust, and pleasure" (11). Using this delectable materialism, Probyn's sensuous reading of food marginalizes burning social questions about the material relationship of women to the social relations in which food is produced and distributed in transnational capitalism. Probyn argues for what she calls "gut ethics"—or thinking "with our stomachs"—as the method of social change for women. "Gut ethics" requires acting on the body's physio-psycho-social reaction—that is, feelings of appetite, desire, greed as well as dread, repulsion, shame, and disgust—that underlie and belie our reasoned decisions. Thinking with our stomachs and with our bodies requires abandoning so called "reductive" scientific and theoretical inquiry as a means to explain the material conditions of life for our "gut feelings" and "drives." Probyn argues that "gut ethics" is a "non-reductive" understanding of the concrete of gender and food because it does not prescribe a set of moral rules and regulations that restrict others; rather, it is a matter of what Foucault calls the "care of the self."

Instead of being more “concrete” and “innovative” Probyn’s theory is a re-articulation of Ernst Mach’s 19<sup>th</sup> century “subjective idealism” that Lenin critiqued in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. As Lenin shows in his critique of Mach, when the body is theorized as a “complex of sensations” whose materiality does not exist independent of these sensations then all that is left is a “naked abstract *I*, an *I* infallibly written with a capital letter and italicised” (35). What is offered as “concrete,” in other words, is the height of bourgeois myopia: the abstract and ahistorical monadic individual of “civil society” who is autonomous from the external world and its social relations.

The consequence of Probyn’s “care of the self” and “monadic subject” of civil society is that collective needs, and the position of the majority of women as collective producers—exploited labor-power—who are denied access to basic needs (such as food) is unsayable. Instead, Probyn translates important social questions for feminism over food, hunger, starvation, and economic inequality—that is, who eats well and who eats not at all—into a frivolous matter of individual preferences, tastes, and choices. As a basic necessity, without which human beings cannot live and no social formation can exist, “food” and the social relations that shape the production of food and citizens’ access to it is an urgent social question for feminism. Food is an important index of whether a society is organized so that the material resources and social products belong to all members of society or whether they are privately appropriated by a few who own the means of producing these resources for profit. Under capitalism in which articles of necessity are produced as a means for profit not need, control over the world food supply means control over world development, the supply of labor-power and the rate at which workers can be exploited. This question of the organization of ownership and control of means for producing material resources and necessities such as food is crucial for feminism at a time when the

expansion of global capitalism has widened the gap between classes and, moreover, these increased class contradictions have significantly deteriorated the material conditions of women's lives in the international division of labor. According to a 2002 United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization report, at the same time the global economy produces enough food to feed 6 billion people, 2 billion suffer from malnutrition and of these people 840 million—disproportionately women and girl children—suffer long term malnutrition (“Progress in Reducing Hunger”). A Global Health Council report indicates that “nearly a half billion women are stunted from malnutrition” (qtd. in Mathis “Global Statistics”).

The turn away from the relation of women to basic necessities such as food under the wage-labor/capital relation is an extremely disabling view for feminism because it steps backward from decades of the struggle to re-understand the material conditions of women's lives as social and historical, and therefore changeable, and instead reduces unequal social and economic arrangements to personal differences—a matter of taste, preference, and consumption.

The erasure of collectivity has led many feminists, including Rich, to question “whatever happened to feminism” and where is it going without Marx? As Maya Jhansi has put it, “Feminists need to rethink the relationship of women's liberation to Marx, so that we do not fall into the same blithe reiterations of post-Marx Marxism.” Moreover, “until the women's movement confronts Marx” she continues “it will not be able to move ‘beyond’ anything—let alone capitalism.” What the reflections of Rich, Jhansi and other feminists who are now “questioning” the rejection of Marxism and the turn away from class, labor, and production in feminism points to is that the history of contemporary feminism is proving that a feminism not founded on *material* conditions—on the relationship of gender and sexuality to the social relations of production, wage-labor/capital, imperialism, and the international division of labor—

has been completely ineffective for transforming the material conditions of women's lives in transnational capitalism.

However, Rich and other contemporary feminists who are now formally objecting to the “post-” logic of much of contemporary feminism still have a very divided understanding of the use of Marx for feminism. On the one hand, Rich and others argue for the need to “return to Marx” and understand “women” on the basis of a totality of relations in capitalism, on the other hand, they want to restore Marx without using his dialectical materialist theory of political economy to explain the “concrete” conditions of women's lives. One exemplary articulation of this is Nancy Holstrom's essay “The Socialist Feminist Project” in which she argues that:

Marxism's basic theory does not need significant revision in order to take better account of women's oppression. However, I do believe that the theory needs to be supplemented [...] [by] a social theory that gives a fuller picture of production and reproduction than Marx's political economic theory does, one that extends questions of democracy not only to the economy but to personal relations. (46)

On these terms, Marx's theory of the totality of social relations of production cannot serve to explain the concrete of women's lives. Instead, Marx is mainly returned to as a philosopher of ethics, morality, and caring. Like the postmodern feminism that they critique for its abandonment of collectivity, Rich, Holstrom and others see the personal relations of women as separate from the economic relations of class society. Despite their deployment of concepts of “class” and “capitalism” and their gesturing to the growing social inequalities, these concepts are emptied of any meaning. Rich, Holstrom and other socialist feminists are not “returning to Marx” as much as they are attempting to re-write the history of Red Feminism—of the revolutionary theorization of gender as determined by class and the social division of labor enabled by the wage-labor



capital relation. They are, in short, trying to make Red Feminism more palatable and reconcile it with the imperatives of the “upper middle class” feminism that they claim to critique. They do so by advancing a theory of feminism in which the daily aspects of women’s lives cannot be explained except by the sensuous and experiential, and thus by a theory of class as lifestyle and not as one’s relation to the means of production.

This humanist reading of Marx leads Rich to read the crisis of contemporary feminism and its complete incapacity to help emancipate women, its absorption with upper-middle class lifestyle and self-improvement over collectivity and the material needs of all, as the product of a “moral,” “ethical,” and “psychic” crisis in American culture: “a cognitive and emotional dissonance, a kind of public breakdown, with symptoms along a spectrum from acute self-involvement to extreme anxiety to individual and group violence” (147). However, it is not, as Rich contends, a “moral,” “ethical” or “cultural” crisis that lies behind the transformation of feminism into a “self-absorbed” discourse in which collectivity is at best ridiculed and “mocked.” Rather, it is the *economic crisis* endemic to capitalism. The monadic subject of private property advanced in contemporary feminism is needed by capitalism in crisis. In order to stave off a decline in the rate of profit transnational capital has embarked on a war on any notion of collective needs, social welfare, and economic well being—to re-privatize social resources, cheapen the cost of labor-power, and raise the rate of exploitation. Far from being a matter of cognitive or emotional confusion, contemporary feminism has been a most effective ally of transnational capitalism.

The development and heightening of the economic crisis in capitalism is, moreover, at the root of the renewed interest in Marxism on the part of feminists and cultural critics who have spent the last several decades denying the relevance of Marxism and class to the study of culture.

The economic buffer of higher salaries, retirement investments, health insurance for some, that once helped to support the illusion that “we are all middle class now” in imperialist nations is quickly becoming eroded as economic crisis heightens class contradictions around the globe and the conditions of workers lives both in the North and the South are being severely deteriorated. As unemployment grows in the North it has become increasingly clear that the middle class only exists on paper: usually in the form of credit card bills, mortgages, bankrupt retirement investments, HMO statements denying coverage of prescription drugs and necessary medical procedures, rising grocery receipts... As more wealth is being transferred from workers to the ruling class, those who were once part of the so called “upper middle-class” and thought class was irrelevant to their lives are now having to take a second look.

But the question for feminism remains: is feminism going to focus on the local conditions of some women’s lives (the formerly “upper middle class” of the North) in isolation from the global (all workers in the international division of labor) and, therefore, consider class, exploitation, production only so long as “our way of life” (as right-wingers put it) in the North is threatened by the current wave of economic crisis? Or is it going to be a practice that is capable of weathering the local strategies of capitalism in crisis, seeing through them by grasping their historical relation to the laws of motion of capitalism, and advancing emancipation of all persons from exploitation? Only a grasp of gender and sexuality in relation to the social totality of the capitalist relations of production is going to enable feminism to be a transformative practice capable of bringing about economic equality and social justice for all. It is, therefore, all the more imperative for feminism to (re)examine the explanatory materialist critique of social totality offered by Marxism and to distinguish this from the hybrid renditions of Marxism in the contemporary which represent it as a moral and ethical code of conduct. While “post-” theories

have made these kind of sharp distinctions unsayable in the contemporary by representing them as an articulation of reductivism, totalization, and exclusivity, they are exactly what is necessary to move feminism out of its impasse.

## TWO

Rather than the sensuous and individual, what is needed in feminism is a method that can explain the relationship of specific women's lives to the social relations of production in capitalism and the international division of labor—not treat individual women as “autonomous” singularities and isolated monads. Dialectical materialism is necessary for this because it understands the “concrete” as a complex set of historical and social relations—not the empirical or individual. The “concrete,” as Marx argues in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, “is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations—hence, unity of the diverse” (101).

It is important to note here, before proceeding, that this argument is widely (mis)construed in contemporary cultural theory and turned into a point that is quite the opposite of what Marx argues: that the “concrete” is *indeterminate* and, therefore, in excess of social totality. One extremely influential reading that ultimately leads to this conclusion can be found in Antonio Negri's reading of the *Grundrisse* in *Marx Beyond Marx*. Among other things, Negri argues that the concrete in Marx is the product of what Negri calls “determinate abstraction.” In contrast to “naïve methodology that begins with the concrete as a presupposition,” Negri proceeds, “Marx's methodology takes *the concrete as a result*,” which Negri regards to mean that the concrete is the product of “the development of a ‘process of synthesis’ of the givens of intuition and representation” (47). According to Negri, Marx argues that the concrete is the result of “the cognitive process” and that the determination of the concrete “is the product of a

theoretical approximation which utilizes general abstractions, polarities and dimensions for this end” (47). “Therefore,” Negri proceeds, the necessary method goes from “the abstraction to the concrete, to the determination” (47).

To put this another way, Negri uses Marx as an endorsement of idealizing the concrete, arguing that epistemological abstractions are what enable us to arrive at the “concrete” and constitute it. Negri attributes to Marx a metaphysical explanation of the “concrete.” In effect, Negri argues that the “concrete” only has an ideal existence, not a material existence, and, in doing so, he puts forward a binary between “concrete” determinations and “abstract” universals that Marx actually subjects to a historical materialist critique. Marx never argued that the “concrete” is determined by “epistemological abstraction.” On the contrary, he argued that the “concrete” is determined by historical material relations. In contrast to this metaphysical reading, in outlining the dialectical materialist understanding of the “concrete” in the *Grundrisse*, Marx argued that:

It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g., the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production. However, on closer examination this proves false. The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g. wage labour, capital, etc. These latter in turn presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price, etc. Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception [*Vorstellung*] of the whole, and I would then, by means of

further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts [*Begriff*], from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations. (100)

In Marxism, the “concrete” is not a metaphysical abstraction—the empirical, individual, or epistemologically indeterminate—as it is represented in contemporary cultural theory. Rather, it is a *materialist abstraction of social relations*, which must be explained through conceptualization of these relations. The “concrete” is a concentration of the totality of historical and praxical *relations* in which human beings enter into conditions of production independent of their will and produce their conditions of life. A materialist explanation of the “concrete” requires explaining how and why it is situated in these historical labor processes and praxical relations of production.

On the one hand it is surprising to see a theorist, such as Negri, who is regarded as having in-depth and nuanced knowledge of Marxism, put forward such a superficial (mis)reading of Marxism. On the other hand, Negri’s reading is particularly revealing of the “post” condition in contemporary cultural theory, which represents the actual contradictions of private property—in which some people own the means of production and therefore command over the surplus-labor and lives of the majority who are exploited—as epistemological contradictions and language games.

The reason that such readings of Marx have been so dominant is because they help to provide explanations of transnational capitalism that present the fundamental conflict between

capital and labor as solvable outside of any question of transforming private ownership, and simply by the expansion of the market and of global capitalist production. The basing of the “concrete” on “determinate abstraction” is at the core of Negri’s theory that the “knowledge economy” has displaced labor as the basis of production. It is telling that Negri, along with his collaborator Michael Hardt, argues not for the emancipation of people “through” labor—through the transformation of the relations of production in which labor processes take place—but for “liberation from waged and manual labor” (Hardt and Negri, *Labor* 281). To be clear, for Hardt and Negri, this means a liberation *from* labor; a “post-labor” economy. What Hardt and Negri put forward is a reading of capitalism quite useful for the labor needs required for transnational capitalism to stave off a decline in the rate of profit. On the one hand, it serves the need of transnational capitalism for the skilled labor necessary to expand the market by representing the service and technical labor in the North as free from wage-labor/capital relations; on the other hand, it conceals the private property relations that continue to determine both skilled advanced technological labor as well as unskilled labor, making them both occasions for the private appropriation of surplus-labor. Negri’s notion of “determinant abstraction” actually returns to the same notion of the “empirical concrete” that he claims to avert, by fetishizing the local conditions of production in the North as an explanation of the global *relations* of production in capitalism. By moving from “abstraction to the concrete, to the determination,” Negri’s “post-” theory does not de-idealize the “concrete” rather, it is an articulation of the pursuit of the concrete over the global totality of relations.

But what does this understanding do for feminism? How does it explain the concrete of women’s lives and their needs? One can see how the “determinate abstraction” is really a version of the “empirically concrete”—and that both are idealist abstractions—by examining the

concrete of social needs such as food in contemporary feminism. In her reading of food, for instance, Probyn deploys Negri's notion of the concrete as "determinate abstraction." Probyn maintains that a "non-reductive" understanding of the concrete of food sees it as indeterminate. Probyn claims that by "reducing"—that is, explaining—bodies and the food they consume on the basis of their determination by one's conditions in the social relations of production, class analysis re-enforces the existing "alignment of tastes, food, and class, that threaten to colonise the body in fixed identities" (31). Moreover, according to Probyn, the "problem" with class analysis is that it leads to the understanding that "food can only confirm identity" (31). Instead, she wants to articulate a theory in which food "can open up new avenues" of subjectivity, to "answer back" (31). In short, for Probyn, food is *indeterminate* and, therefore, can work to realign the relationship between gender, class, sexuality, and the body.

This is itself a very abstract and highly commodified notion of food which makes food its own independent agency endowed with special powers. Probyn's notion of food as indeterminate is basically a form of commodity fetishism that abstracts the "power of food" from the social relations that determine its production: from the labor relations based on private ownership of the means of production and exploitation of labor. Instead, Probyn presents food as its own agency: as an independent source of wealth and value, outside of labor, that can resist and change the class relations in which it is produced. In fact, it is precisely private property *relations* that enables the "commodity fetishism" of food. As Marx explains, "this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labour which produces them" (*Capital* 165). It is under private property relations in which workers do not own the means of production and therefore, do not have access to and control over the products of their own labor, that things appear to inherently produce wealth without the intervention of labor.

Even a brief look at world historical conditions reveals that food does not have an independent agency and in itself it does not radically transform conditions of life for the majority in capitalism. In Indonesia, for instance, economic inequality and class contradictions have not decreased or been reversed by a greater abundance of food. A 1999 report on the South East Asian Food Security and Fair Trade Council's (SEAFTC) fact-finding mission on Indonesia's food crisis shows that citizens' unequal access to food is not the result of food shortages brought on by natural disaster, warfare, or even to lack of food production but "an economy unable to provide food for the hungry" ("Mission Uncovers Food Crisis in Indonesia"). In fact, not only Indonesia's participation in transnational agribusiness, but also its small-scale farming has increased significantly over the last decade. What has not improved are its levels of malnutrition and poverty. In like manner food production around the world has been on the rise and the concurrence of hunger and starvation alongside huge food surpluses has intensified. The abundance of food and the agricultural and technological capacity to produce food does not, in itself, produce wealth and transform the class position of the majority. This is precisely because food is *not* an autonomous agency invested with special value-producing powers outside of the dialectical praxis of labor and the totality of social relations of production in which it takes place.

According to the SEAFTC, the main problem in Indonesia is widespread poverty and the inability of people to purchase basic needs such as nutritious food ("Mission Uncovers"). That is, on the one hand, while workers have increased their productivity in agriculture and related food industries, on the other hand, their access to the resources that they produce has declined. What remains un-assessed here, however, is *why* poverty, payment for basic necessities, and the inability of those who produce basic needs to pay for them continues to persist—especially when there is no lack of their abundance? What lies underneath the concrete of food and the alienation



of direct producers from the products of their own labor is private ownership of the means of production and social production for profit. Under such conditions food, like any commodity, is merely a means for surplus-value extraction and the realization of profit, not need. What determines wealth—what changes class position—is not access to food (and other articles of consumption) but access to the means of production.

To isolate the concrete of needs such as food (its consumption, exchange, distribution...) from the totality of material relations in capitalist production and to represent it as an autonomous agency is to produce a one-sided abstraction—an imagined concrete—that has very little to do with the real conditions of labor and need confronting the majority, including the majority of women, in capitalism. At best what such a method enables is the negotiation of specific women's individual relationship to food, poverty, and class relations, but it leaves all questions of why poverty, class relations, and the production for profit not needs must persist, and thus treats them as inevitable.

It has now become commonplace in feminism to represent Marxism's emphasis on labor and the social relations of production as a method that dehistoricizes women. One such argument is articulated in the ecofeminist arguments of Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen in their book *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy*. Here Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen offer a similar reading of Marx as does Negri: that is, they understand his emphasis on labor to be an instance of "determinate abstraction"—an idealist understanding of the concrete—that erases the actual conditions of women's lives. The "difference" from Negri is that they use their formal rejection of abstraction in order to reject Marx for feminism. Labor, they argue, is a destructive and monolithic force that exploits nature, by treating it as a "free good" for human consumption and, in doing so, exploits women's labor as part of nature. The

reliance of Marxism on the category of labor, they argue, makes it participate in the same exploitation of nature by capitalism. Like Negri, Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen argue that the key to emancipating women is not the emancipation of women through labor—through the transformation of the social relations of production based on private ownership of the means of production. But, in contrast to Negri, they argue that women are freed from economic inequality through their liberation from the service industry and advanced technological labor.

At the core of their book is the understanding that the “root problem” with capitalism is an “evidently ineradicable male fixation on technology” (180). Science, growth, and technology inevitably lead to hunger, exploitation, and violence against women, they assert, because they ultimately rest on the colonization and expropriation of nature as a “free good.” For Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, exploitation is founded on “the development of the productivity of human labour [power]” through its transformation of nature, not the private ownership of the means of production, which enables owners to command over the workers surplus labor (34). Moreover, they claim, it is the expropriation of nature as a “free good” that is the basis of the exploitation of women’s reproductive and “life giving” labor. This is, for Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, a failure of both bourgeois ideology and Marxism in accounting for women and nature. They suggest that the Marxist argument for freeing the forces of production from the existing relations of production shares the enlightenment conception of nature (and women’s reproductive labor) as “free” and “unlimited,” which leads to the boundless appropriation of nature and, consequently, the exploitation of women’s unpaid reproductive labor for private gain and profit.

As an alternative, they advocate for a “subsistence perspective,” which involves rejecting industrial and technological development and a conservation of local agricultural production controlled by the subsistence labor of women—what they call “the real female-maternal,

agrarian subsistence practice” (181). The subsistence perspective, they argue, demonstrates respect for nature by above all, respecting women’s bodies and recognizing that “women [are] the beginning, the *arkhé*, of human life” (33). Moreover, they argue, that by turning away from the development of human labor-power, the subsistence perspective promotes meeting needs over profit.

However, when Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen collapse “women” and “nature,” they repeat the same patriarchal logic that was used to naturalize the social division of labor under capitalism and keep women out of the workforce. Moreover, they put forward an ahistorical and idealist understanding of oppression that *abstracts* out the transformation of nature and the development of the forces of production from the social relations of production toward which this development is put: whether labor is used for profit or need. By suppressing the importance of the relations under which social resources are produced, Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen actually treat nature and “human need” in a very ahistorical and idealist way. For one, they presuppose that the resources necessary to meet human needs (and not profit) ultimately exist in “nature” *alone*, without the intervention of labor. But even a “basic” form of satisfying hunger—the gathering of vegetation grown without human intervention—requires the appropriation of nature by labor. Moreover, Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen do not escape the appropriation of nature with the subsistence perspective. Subsistence production requires agriculture which itself requires a whole series of historical developments of the productive forces (the disruption of the existing ecosystem to clear land for crops, the extraction of metal for tools with which to plow, the domestication of animals... ). As Marx explains: “The earth itself is an instrument of labor, but its use in this way, in agriculture, presupposes a whole series of other instruments and a

comparatively high stage of development of labour-power. As soon as the labour process has undergone the slightest development, it requires specially prepared instruments” (*Capital* 285).

Far from offering a materialist understanding of meeting needs, the subsistence perspective does not even account for the necessary conditions for its own existence: that is, the dialectical praxis of labor in which, as Marx explains: “by acting on external nature and transforming it” to meet needs, “humankind also transforms its own nature” including its needs (*Capital* 283). In other words, Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen base their argument for the subsistence perspective on an imaginary independence from conditions of necessity.

It is hardly surprising, owing to their idealist theory, that Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen read the dialectical materialism of Marxism as itself a version of idealism which posits “nature” without limits, and technology as the basis of emancipation. But what they attribute to Marxism is actually a reversal of its dialectical materialist understanding of nature and technology. As Marx argued, nature is indeed just as much the source of use-values as labor (which is itself only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power) (*Gotha Program* 13). What Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen do not account for is that, “precisely from the fact that labour depends on nature it follows that the [one] who possesses no other property than [her] labour power must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of others who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labour. [She] can work only with their permission hence live only with their permission” (13).

The articulation of freedom from the exploitation of labor-power as “too abstract” to be of root importance to women is actually a highly privileged notion for women who no longer see exploitation as a problem because they seem to have the freedom to “live without permission” of others who exploit them: to eat nutritious, well balanced meals, have access to high quality

health care, to good housing, education, etc. But in Marxism, labor is not the empty abstraction that is presented in contemporary cultural theory and feminism in order to maintain the class position of those who own the means of production. Even the “simplest economic categories,” Marx argued, “can never exist other than as an abstract, one-sided relation within an *already given, concrete, living whole*” (*Grundrisse* 101; emphasis added). This is to say that even the simplest concepts are made possible on the basis of the *material* conditions of production. Concepts and economic categories do not have their own independent existence. They too are dependent upon the material conditions determining their production. As Marx makes absolutely clear, this is even the case with such founding concepts in historical materialism as “labor”:

Indifference towards any specific kind of labour presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labour, of which no single one is any longer predominant. As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone. On the other side, this abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form. (*Grundrisse* 104)

Even as an abstract concept, “labor” is enabled by the *historical* level of development of the forces of production and the *social* relations of production within which this development takes

place. The “abstract” in Marxism is not an idealist abstraction disconnected from the actual conditions and relations under capitalism, but a materialist one: “in the theoretical method, too, the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition” (102). In short, for Marx, totality is always explained on the basis of actually existing relations of production. It is not, as it is in Hegel and post-Marxism, a self-producing ideal that erases the complex concreteness of daily life under capitalism, rather, it is founded on explaining the praxical relations in which people carry out the production of social life—that is, the mode of production. Totality is the *historical* grasping of the complex social series, what Marx calls “the ensemble of social relations.” Far from being the “evil monolith” that contemporary feminism attributes to it, the historical grasping of social totality, and the relation of the seemingly “singular” and “particular” to social totality is necessary for feminism if it is going to work to transform existing social relations. It is the only way to explain on what basis the conditions of life for women are not simply personal or “women’s problems.” It is, moreover, the only way for feminism to move beyond the class privileges of an ever smaller clique of women.

Contrary to the idealist naturalism of Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen’s ecofeminism, Minnie Bruce Pratt begins to illustrate the necessity of social totality for feminism in a recent critique of the imperialist wars in Central Asia and the Middle East. “Fighting to Stop Pentagon War is a Women’s Issue,” she argues:

not because women are instinctively and ‘naturally’ more peaceful. Not because women give birth or because women have been the “guardians of life” while men have been making war. Fighting Pentagon war is a women’s issue because it flows out of the inherent need of capital to expand its markets and its rate of exploitation in order to survive—and women’s labor, paid and unpaid, is a

foundation upon which this profit system rests. Capitalism wages brutal imperialist wars and imposes brutal imperialist peace in order to secure those profits, extorted from working class, oppressed and impoverished people of all sexes.

It is impossible to understand the relevance of the war to women—and to resist the cynical appropriation of the “liberation of women” in the service of imperialist warfare—without a historical grasp of social totality. Nor can feminism, without social totality, grasp how “women’s labor, paid and unpaid” is not simply a “women’s issue” but is determined by the exploitation of human labor-power—of “people of all sexes”—and is therefore a class issue that affects all.

### THREE

It is important to clearly re-state here that the problem with excluding the dialectical materialist critique of social totality from feminism is not that feminism does not go “far enough” without it but that, by erasing the relation of women to the mode of production, it actually *helps* transnational capitalism cover over its trouble spots, its fundamental contradictions and the economic crises that result from them. The gestures in feminism toward “materialism” and “Marx” without a historical grasping of the social relations of production are ways to help update ruling class ideology and dismantle the revolutionary knowledges necessary to emancipate women from exploitation.

Such updatings are driven by the needs of transnational capitalism in crisis. Transnational capitalism, to be clear, is increasingly a highly unstable system of production, which requires desperate and violent “solutions” to help try and create “stability” and “equilibrium.” Not only does this show up in the daily struggles of workers who are forced to go without basic needs in

health care, social security, education... so that the ruling class can fund massive military expenditures in order to protect or gain access to conditions necessary to stave off a decline in profit, it also shows up within the ruling class itself in the form of increased bankruptcies and failed business ventures as wealth gets concentrated into fewer hands. The root issue is that the objective structures of private property in capitalism are based on exploitation and the accumulation of socially produced wealth (capital) in the hands of the few and the increased immiseration and impoverishment of the majority.

Crisis brought on by the concentration of wealth is endemic to capitalism. As capital accumulates, it becomes increasingly difficult for the ruling class to maintain its rate of profit. This is because surplus-value is only produced by labor-power however, in order to undercut and compete with other capitalists, capitalists invest in labor-saving machinery (produced by previous labor) to reduce labor costs and increase the number of commodities produced in the same time other capitalists produce fewer commodities. In other words, capitalists must seek new technologies and labor saving devices as a means to raise the productivity of fewer workers and thus increase the rate at which workers can be exploited. Yet, because technology does not produce surplus-value (and only transfers value from the machine to the commodity) with the employment of less labor, the rate of profit tends to fall (because there are historical and material limits—such as death!—to how much workers can be exploited). So capital on the one hand in order to compete on the market, capital tends to “overproduce” capital by displacing productive labor with machinery, on the other hand this overall tends to lead to a decline in profit because less labor-power (which is the only source of surplus-value) is employed. In order to stave off falling rates of profit, capital must not only produce labor-saving technologies, expand production to create new needs (and thus, new sites for profit), at the same time it also ultimately



export capitalist production to new regions where access to reserves of cheap labor can be found. All of this requires a continuous supply of labor-power from which surplus-labor can be extracted. The transnational ruling class, therefore, has every interest in battling over the life conditions of workers of the world in order to control the development and growth of the surplus-value producing population and thus, the rate at which it can be exploited.

Contemporary feminism has served as a most effective ally of transnational capitalism by helping to incorporate women into the labor needs of capitalism now. The differences between the feminists that I have discussed thus far—that is, those such as Probyn who see the “post-” as an enabling condition for women and those such as Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen who see it as disabling for women—is not all that vast. This is because both positions articulate the labor needs of transnational capitalism. Their differences are not fundamental differences over the social relations of production. Rather, they are differences that are the effect of these relations of production: the fact that capitalism brings about “uneven development,” that its constant quest for profit which requires it to expand production, export capital, etc. also requires that it have both “skilled” and “unskilled” labor. Their “differences,” in short, are local differences—specific needs of capital for particular kinds of labor—that are determined by the general need of capitalism for a continuous supply of labor-power that it can exploit for profit. The problem for feminism is not the status of the “post-” (whether feminists are “for” or “against” it; whether women are living under “modernity” or “postmodernity,” etc). Rather, it is the private ownership of the means of production that cuts across the local differences in production for women in the international division of labor.

For instance, “delectable feminism,” with its emphasis on an “ethics” for “care of the self,” is especially useful for articulating the labor needs of transnational capitalism in the

imperialist nations of the North. In order to turn over a profit, capital needs to maintain a skilled labor force to work increasingly complex means of production but at the same time, as a means of securing high rates of profit, it must maintain such a workforce while still keeping the social cost of its reproduction low. Delectable feminism helps with this task by focusing on strategies for women that are aimed, on the one hand, at expanding the market by creating new “needs” so that workers can absorb some of the cost of overproduction and, on the other, at reducing the social cost of the laboring population so that wages can be lowered and the rate of exploitation can be raised. It articulates a new ethics for transnational capitalism that will enable women of the North to adjust to the specific historical labor needs that capitalism requires of them now in order to maintain profit.

It is in the context of the growing crisis of production that Probyn’s theory of “gut ethics” works in theory to legitimate a new regime for controlling labor costs in the North. Responding to a crisis of obesity among working people that is threatening corporate profits, what is notable in Probyn’s gut ethics is the emphasis she places on the “productive” powers of “shame,” “disgust,” and “restraint.” “Shame” and “disgust,” Probyn argues, are “productive forces” of the body that help to “remake” gender relations. “In denying their affective force,” she continues, “we stand to lose the acuteness of the body’s own capacities for reflection” (141-142). In a criticism of the limits of “fat pride” for addressing the empowerment of women who are overweight, Probyn argues that the “fat pride” movement covers over the “productive use” of shame and disgust—what they tell us about the limits of existing social arrangements and what they reveal about our desires. To this Probyn emphasizes not only the “productive powers” of shame and disgust but also the “powers of restraint.”

“Body weight,” according to Probyn’s delectable feminism, is a matter of “self-regulation.” She proceeds with sensuous specificity in describing the “affective and relational possibilities” of an “ethics of restraint [...] embodied in the slow caress given to each detail, each ingredient, the sense of timing and movement so essential to eating, cooking, loving, and being” (77, 97-100). But what are the conditions that enable a woman to “eat well” in the first place, with access to the resources with which to purchase “each ingredient” and the “freedom” to allow a relaxed and comfortable sense of “timing” and “movement” in the preparation of food? Is her time spent on “each ingredient” and “cooking” owing to the fact that she has her basic needs met and can view cooking and eating as “fun” and “exotic” or because her position in the social relations of production also relegates her to the daily grind of a strict division of labor that is inflexible regarding gender? Is her sense of “self-regulation” and “restraint” an effect of access to an abundance of ingredients and familiarity of cosmopolitan cuisines gained from travel and access to diverse restaurants? Or is it the effect of crushing poverty and lack of access to food? The conditions in question are fundamentally connected to a woman’s class position and her position in the social division of labor. Yet, delectable feminism proceeds by erasing the class privilege of the pleasures and pains of the eating body that it celebrates. In short, while such a theory *might* explain the conditions of life for ruling class women who are able to meet their every desire and can thus selectively determine their eating habits, how does this theory stand to explain the “concrete” of women’s body weight, nutrition, and health for the majority for whom necessity is the determining factor? How does this theory, for instance, stand to explain and address the “concrete” reality of obesity which is increasing among women and children of the North and, worldwide, now equals the 1.1 billion people who are facing hunger and starvation (“Chronic Hunger and Obesity Epidemic”)?

One explanation of this rise in obesity is that the labor needs in the North have changed as manufacturing and manual labor have been moved to the South and, as a result, the dietary needs of workers laboring under more sedentary conditions (e.g., telemarketing, data entry, computer programming, etc.) have also changed. On the terms of Probyn's "delectable feminism" what is needed is a more "caring" and "selective" understanding of food in order to allow women to adjust to these new conditions. But obesity, as many studies are now showing, cannot be explained by a mere lack of "sophisticated," urbane, "self-restraint." It is a form of malnutrition that is the effect of economic exploitation and the production of food for profit. As one study from the University of California, Davis indicates: "women struggling to put food on the table are more likely to be overweight than those with a reliably full refrigerator" (qtd. in Lok "Lean Times"). As household income "nears the poverty line," the study states, "the prevalence of obesity increases among women." In the United States, "Poor neighborhoods often lack large grocery stores, forcing people, especially those without cars, to shop at small, local convenience stores which stock little fresh fruit or vegetables but plenty of high-fat, high-starch processed food" (qtd. in Lok). Contrary to what Probyn implies—that a lack of "self-restraint" in consumption is at the root of the problem—it is actually a "lack of control over their food supply" that is leading to obesity in women. It is not a "diet of excess" but a "diet of poverty" that has made obesity rates increase in the United States, especially among African-American, Mexican-American, and Native American women. Obesity rates are not simply higher among women of color, they increase for women of color as poverty rates increase (Leigh and Huff 74). Moreover, this is, in part, because poverty often reduces these women to diets high in carbohydrates and fats and low in fruits, vegetables, and often protein (Lok).

To put this another way, women's body weight and (mal)nutrition cannot be explained entirely by their consumption practices. In fact, it also cannot be explained entirely by the relationship between their food consumption and the *specific*, concrete labors that they perform for capitalism (i.e., whether they are required to engage in manual and physical labor or intellectual, information, etc. type labor). Rather, it is their *relationship to the means of production* that determines women's relationship to food consumption, position in the technical division of labor, and body weight. When women live in conditions of private ownership of the means of production and are not owners of the means of production (as is the case with the majority of women) their surplus-labor and lives are economically commanded over by those who own the means of production. In capitalist production, women's position within the division of labor, their consumption and food intake, their health and nutrition are all determined by the ruling-class imperatives of profit. This is because production for profit (not need) determines what jobs are "necessary" and what resources are available to workers to consume. Without freeing women from the conditions of necessity in capitalism that determine women's lives, the focus on "body weight" is simply the necessary strategy for capitalism to increase worker's productivity and therefore profit for some. It is not about putting the root conditions in place for economic security (including health and nutrition) for all women.

Probyn's "gut ethics" of "disgust" and "self-restraint" represents obesity as a matter of "pedestrian excess" and, in effect, mocks the class relations in capitalism that reduce millions of women to the diets of poverty and malnutrition that lead to obesity. Her only imagined alternative to the limits of "fat pride" is the "agency of anorexia." Probyn reads "anorexia" as an agency of resistance to the excesses of commodity culture and social control: "instead of conceiving of the anorexic as a victim of social forces, it may be that she is also registering

profound disgust at those around her. Rather than placing her as a hapless cipher, this reveals the strength of the anorexic's response to the world: 'it/you are disgusting, I will not take you in'" (141).

It should not go without saying that in this reading Probyn glamorizes an extremely disabling and life-threatening effect of the commodification of women's bodies in capitalism by representing anorexia as "radical resistance" to commodity culture. But what is *most* telling about her reading is the way that it articulates the labor needs of the ruling class in capitalism now. In many advanced capitalist nations, such as the United States, where obesity and related health problems (diabetes, heart disease, osteoarthritis...) especially among women and children have been rapidly increasing as the physical and technical requirements of new divisions of labor are changing what workers must do, obesity is costing the economy an average of \$118 billion dollars a year in lost work days, lowered productivity, and medical bills (Knight, "Health: World's Overfed").

Probyn's "ethics of restraint" is a "new" strategy for new conditions that continues a very old task in capitalism: to lower the cost incurred by the ruling class for the social reproduction of the laboring population and increase the rate of exploitation. In response to the rising social cost of obesity, the ruling class, the corporate media, and celebrity spokespersons such as Sarah Ferguson have declared a moral and ethical crisis in food consumption and the need to transform consumption behaviors. Such strategies are essentially about protecting the economic security of ruling class and upper-middle class women who want to reserve greater amounts of the social surplus for their own use and reduce the social resources that go to the life conditions of working class women. Moreover, the notion in delectable feminism that the regulation of one's "own" regimen is the basis of change follows the same corporate logic as Republicans who support the

cutting of food stamps on the one hand and authorize tax breaks to individuals and insurance companies for weight loss programs on the other. The overt ideological spin for these measures is that they reduce the social cost of obesity and obesity related disease to the economy and, at the same time, allow for more “freedom” and “choice” for individuals to pursue weight loss options in consultation with a physician.

In actuality, they are aimed at transferring wealth in medical benefits and nutrition away from workers and into the hands of weight loss companies and pharmaceutical cartels who are already pulling in an average of \$33 billion per year (and counting) out of the pockets of workers, especially women, on weight loss related programs and products while obesity rates continue to grow. On the one hand, these measures enable the continuation of obesity and unequal access to nutritious food brought on by food production for profit and, on the other, they put forward “solutions” to economic inequality and malnutrition that help bolster the profits for the ruling class. The crisis of obesity is not a moral, ethical, or cultural crisis: it is an economic crisis in production for profit. As one study has put it: “the century with the greatest potential to eliminate malnutrition instead saw it boosted to record levels” where “the number of hungry people remains high in a world of food surpluses” (“Chronic Hunger and Obesity Epidemic”). In short, production for profit subordinates the production and consumption of basic necessities such as food to what it profitable to transnational corporations.

“Subsistence feminism,” using a different mode, also articulates the labor needs of transnational capitalism, but not for women of the North. Its emphasis on a “moral economy” in which people consume less and economic development is halted, articulates the labor needs of transnational capitalism for women of the South—where transnational capitalism relies on a continuous supply of unskilled cheap labor. It is quite telling in this regard when Mies and

Bennholdt-Thomsen read the relationship between the capitalist and wage-laborer as an exchange of equivalents by taking the legal labor contract at face value. In order to posit the expropriation of nature, and not the appropriation of surplus-labor, as the basis of class society, they erase the exploitation in the wage-labor capital relation altogether and present it as a relationship of equality. Thus, instead of working to transform the relations for the extraction of surplus-labor by capital, the “subsistence perspective” proclaims that what needs to be changed are consumption behaviors. It is “excessive consumption” of the North that drives “development” and causes the dire need in the South and the use of women’s labor as an “unlimited resource.”

The subsistence perspective asserts that by opening up pockets of “resistance” such as community gardens in the city, growing one’s own vegetables alongside farming for corporations in the country, reclaiming land for common use in subsistence farming, workers, and women in particular, can gain autonomy from the production of food for profit and can gradually “edge it out” and reclaim production for need. The understanding here is that by decreasing demand for food produced by transnational agribusiness and other industries and increasing the demand for locally grown and produced food, small scale farming and handicrafts can be revived against transnational capitalism. But what this conceals is the way in which “subsistence farming” is itself inculcated into the wage-labor/capital relation. As one study of rural life in Kenya and Lesotho puts it:

In Kenya, the tendency of increasing numbers of rural households to become [integrated into the market economy] [...] has been disguised by the fact that many smallholders cling to small, infertile, degraded plots of land. They are not ‘landless’ in the strict sense, but have been forced into reliance on casual wage-



work, non-farm artisanal activities, and high-value export crops [...] [The] resulting paradox: the dissolution of the peasantry ‘takes place precisely at the same time as a highly weakened peasantry continues to retain relations to patches of land and hence maintains the illusion of a property owning class.’ (Wisner 26)

The proletarianization of the peasantry does not require that it ceases to own land when all means of production necessary in order to work the land, and all that is necessary to sustain the life of the workers, are privately owned and controlled. What Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen erase is that *all* needs under capitalism are produced under conditions of private property. While they might “control” an immediate plot of land, subsistence farmers are nonetheless compelled to rely for basic needs on a host of privatized services including healthcare and veterinary medicine; farm equipment, livestock and seed reserves; clothing and education... This is the material reality under capitalism that drives many subsistence farmers out of farming and into the factory and other modes of wage labor: because “land” without the means to support labor, and even food produced on the farm, does not pay for medicine, farm equipment and repairs, plant disease control, irrigation systems... It also makes subsistence farmers sites for outsourcing of some of the labor of agribusiness and thus involves subsistence farmers directly in the wage-labor/capital-relation as exploited labor. In effect this turns many subsistence farmers into “disguised wage-laborers” whose farms are corporate annexes where even the minimum of labor laws do not apply. Without confronting the wage-labor/capital relation—without working to transform the world’s agricultural and industrial production in its totality—“subsistence feminism” merely puts forward a “just say no” policy to capitalism: assuming that the pressures of production for profit on farmers is a matter of consumer “choice.”

But more than “just saying no,” subsistence feminism actually is useful to transnational capitalism and helps capital to ideologically conceal its needs for a continuous cheap labor supply from the South. For one, since the “subsistence perspective” does not actually work to transform the objective pressures on farmers and workers of social relations of production for profit, what its “anti-development” policy does instead is help to keep the cost of reproducing labor low, and thus make it less expensive for transnational capitalism to use.

Moreover, the subsistence perspective is not only a means to normalize the strategies of transnational capital to make sure that existing labor-power remains cheap, it also helps to normalize the strategies by which transnational capitalism works to maintain control over the continuous supply of labor-power: the rate of growth and development of the laboring population. This is especially apparent in the way in which the subsistence perspective attempts to revive the “innate power” of femaleness and childbirth to produce wealth. According to Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, “femaleness is more than only a symbolic metaphor for natural, life giving growth... after all,” they contend, “women’s capacity to give birth to children cannot be separated from women, in spite of all the intellectual acrobatics” (188). But in fact, reproduction and women’s capacity to give birth is not a “given” or “autonomous” capacity, nor is it an innately female power requiring, as it were, the involvement of men. On the contrary, a woman’s capacity to reproduce is in dialectical relation to the social relations of production, her material conditions of necessity, and her position within the division of labor. For women of the South, who contribute to producing the majority of the world’s food resources, private ownership of the means of production has led to a situation in which there are increasing numbers of women reduced to a diet of less than 1,500 calories/day (1,000 less than the recommended minimum).

Moreover, even when calorie intake is higher, the production of food for profit has led to a diet severely lacking in micronutrients and protein.

Poverty brought on by the concentration of socially produced resources in the hands of a few has made it impossible for workers to afford to buy the more expensive protein and micronutrient rich food. The priority to produce food for profit and keep social reproduction costs to capital at a minimum has led to the least nutritious foods being the most widely available for the proletariat. Such a situation has led to a rise in the level of anemia, protein deficiency among women and the increase in rates of infant and maternal mortality, childhood disease and deformity. Moreover, long term malnutrition brought on by production for profit has led to the loss of menstruation and the capacity of many women to reproduce. Far from being an “innate power” that women can use to transcend conditions of dire need, women’s capacity to reproduce is historical and depends upon their position in the social relations of production.

The control of women’s diets that is advocated in “subsistence feminism” is also a strategy by transnational capitalism to control women’s reproductive cycles and control the future labor force and the “surplus population”: how much reserve labor-power is available for capital to exploit, the cost of its social reproduction, and whether or not it is “cost-effective” for capital to invest in the social reproduction of labor-power (i.e., whether it will receive a “return” of greater profit for its investment or not). As long as the reproduction of daily life, health, nutrition, and children takes place within relations of production based on private ownership of the means of production in which the few can command over the surplus-labor of others, this reproduction will continue to be subordinated to production for profit.

Although in different rhetorics, both “delectable feminism” and “subsistence feminism” ultimately advance a transnational “ethics” that argues for freedom on the terms of *consumption*

under capitalism, and thus leave unexamined and intact for women the material conditions of private ownership in capitalist *production* that necessitate the exploitation of their surplus-labor. In other words, both put forward the understanding of freedom as autonomous from conditions of necessity and, therefore, assume that women are autonomous agents who can be freed from economic inequality and social injustice without transforming the fundamental property relation under capitalism. The maintenance of private property relations and production for profit leads to continuing economic crisis, insecurity, and instability for both workers and capitalists (who must compete more aggressively to maintain profit levels) as the productive forces develop.

Unemployment, starvation, destitution, economic stagnation and decline, bankruptcy, are all inevitable results of maintaining capitalism. What this goes to show is that the position of women in society and their relationship to their bodies, desires, and needs is not a cultural matter of ethical and moral consumption choices, rather it is the product of economic conditions of necessity brought about by private property relations. Capitalism needs to keep workers economically insecure in order to drive down the cost of wages and make it easier to adjust workers to new strategies for ruling class profit. But doing so does not actually resolve the contradictions and crises in capitalism: both the disparity between workers and owners and the instability of transnational capitalism is growing not diminishing. Changing the position of women in society is not, at root, founded on the local strategies of capitalism in crisis, but on the transformation of private property relations. It therefore requires not “ethical consumption” or a “moral economy,” but heightening the fundamental contradictions in capitalism between wage-labor and capital, bringing them to crisis, and fundamentally transforming them.

By contrast what is needed is a Red Feminism, which grasps the local strategies of capitalism in the global North and the global South in relation to the underlying labor relations in

the international division of labor and thus which advances *material* freedom for women through fundamental transformation of the material conditions of necessity not through imagined autonomy from them. This is because, as I have argued, what determines gender, sexuality, and women's relationship to their bodies and need (such as food) is not consumption but *class*—whether they are owners of the means of production or exploited surplus-labor. Without transforming the social relations of production based on private ownership of the means of production, projects that inculcate women into changing consumption patterns merely inculcate women into “structural adjustment” to transnational capitalism in crisis but do not change their fundamental conditions of economic exploitation. Only with the historical grasping of the totality of relations of production can feminism work not simply to avoid the conditions of labor and necessity for the majority, but work to transform them.

## 5.0 THE EMPIRE'S NEW MORALITY

Under the pressure of increasing class contradiction for women in both the North and the South, the discourses of “postmodern feminism” which have served to help adjust women as instruments of labor to the needs of a fledgling transnational capitalism, have increasingly been brought to a crisis as transnational capitalism has matured. After the crash of the dot.com economy in the late 1990s, what was already clear to many workers around the world was made unsubtly clearer to thousands of dot.com workers in the North thrown out of their jobs: that “knowledge” has not displaced “labor” and that, contrary to popular belief, class is far from over. Just as capital that exploits so called “hard labor” (the manufacturing of automobiles, computers, etc.) was exported in the 1970s and 1980s to Mexico, Taiwan, the Philippines, China... to raise profits by exploiting cheaper labor, so in the late 1990s capital that exploits so called “soft labor” (data processing, telecommunications, etc.) was exported to exploit the highly educated and skilled but much cheaper labor of workers in India, Pakistan, Latin America...

Many feminists since the late 1990s, therefore, have sought to update cultural feminism with a “transnational feminism” which is thought to be more “resistant” to capital. For example, contemporary transnational feminists such as Caren Kaplan, Inderpal Grewal, Norma Alarcón and Mino Moallem claim to “resist” both the Enlightenment principles of abstract equality in the modern nation state (Alarcón *et al*, *Between Woman* 14-15), which divorces freedom and equality from the material conditions of women’s lives, as well as an apolitical post-structuralism

that is “unable to account for contemporary global conditions” of women in capitalism (Grewal and Kaplan, *Scattered* 1). Yet, far from confronting capitalism and its consequences for women and working to transform the material conditions of women’s lives in the international division of labor, these same feminists have retreated into a hybrid logic of “border crossing” and “muddying”—in short of “inbetween-ness”—in which the only way to address the objective reality of women’s lives is to ethically negotiate *within* capitalism and its cultural arrangements. Transnational feminism, in other words, posits a “hybrid” break within capitalism in which capitalism is always already divided “within.” It therefore proposes ethical resistance within the dominant cultural practices of transnational capitalism—from civil society, to consumption, to lifestyle, to interpersonal relations, without transformation of their material basis.

To be clear, before moving on, I use the term “transnational capitalism” to refer to a stage in capitalism in which consumption has been globalized—turning the world into a global market in which local “nation-states” act as local law enforcement of different sectors of workers of the world on behalf of capital. However, in “transnational” (or transnationalist) cultural theory, including transnational feminism, the globalization of *consumption* is taken to be a material transformation or supersession of class contradictions in *production*. In this view, the “transnational” is a globalization free from imperialism, intra-class competition and the binary contradictions of wage-labor/capital. This view, which was developed in Karl Kautsky’s notion of “ultra-imperialism” which proposed that capitalism had reached a phase of peaceful co-operation of competing capitals, was critiqued by Lenin (in his pamphlet *Imperialism—the Highest Stage of Capitalism*) for the way in which it produced a “lifeless abstraction” (120) that obliterated “the realities of the capitalist system” (119). Imperialism and “the rule of finance capital,” Lenin argued, does *not* actually “[lessen] the unevenness and contradictions inherent in

world economy” rather, “in reality it increases them” (94-95). In addition to Kautsky’s notion of “ultra-imperialism,” the view that the globalization of consumption transforms production was also obliquely elaborated by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* when he describes that now: “one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald’s for lunch, and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and ‘retro’ clothes in Hong Kong” (76). More recently, this theory of an empire beyond imperialism, is most famously laid out in Hardt and Negri’s book *Empire* (and their related concept of the “multitude”) in which they argue that “imperialism is over” (xiv).

Just a few short years after the publication of *Empire*, however, the class interests of this theory are now being thrown into sharper relief by the current crisis of profit in capitalism and the resulting *imperialist* wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. Timothy Brennan, for example, has argued that the basic premises upon which the theory of *Empire* rests is “now little more than a cliché of the management genre” (“The Italian Ideology” 101). Ellen Meiksins Wood has argued that the theory of *Empire* is “a manifesto for global capital” that “is compatible with class rule by the rich” (63). Bashir Abu-Manneh in his essay “The Illusions of *Empire*,” unpacks the basic structure of assumptions in *Empire* when he demonstrates that Hardt and Negri’s theory of empire is based not on a development of Lenin’s theory of imperialism as Hardt and Negri claim (*Empire* 232-234), but on Kautsky’s notion of ultra-imperialism by positing a “post-imperialist moment” (Abu-Manneh 161-164).

In actuality, the globalization of consumption and the turning of the world into a global market has most certainly *not* transformed production; it has not dissolved class antagonisms, inter-capitalist competition, or the material labor of workers, including the majority of women and persons of color (which is what Hardt and Negri assumed with their concept of a classless,



genderless, colorless multitude). In other words, the “transnational” is a *class-based* globalization. Not only in general, in the sense that production is still based at its root on the exploitation of surplus-labor but also, more specifically: turning the world into a global market is itself *class based*. It is made materially possible on the basis of the integration of capitalist production. This integration of production is not without crisis, contradiction, and the outbreak of imperialist war to re-divide ownership of the surplus labor of the globe; that is, war in which the capitalist class or, as Lenin put it “two or three powerful world mauraunders armed to the teeth [...]”conscript workers of the world “in their war over the division of their booty” (Lenin, *Imperialism* 11). This integration of production, however, also leads to the emergence of a *world* working class which, for the first time, allows people of the world to be aligned along class lines (i.e., class for itself) rather than nation (which is a species of “class in itself”).<sup>11</sup>

It is to marginalize the material emergence and development of these class struggles (i.e., the development of workers as a class *for itself* not simply a class *in itself*) from feminism that transnational feminism rewrites women’s class struggles with transnational capitalism as “ethics” and, therefore, institutes in place of revolutionary praxis an “ethical resistance”—a transnational civil society. Ethical resistance, to be clear, converts the laws of motion of capital into sentimental codes of affect, caring, and civility and advocates primarily for changes in codes of affect, caring, behavior, and, *at most*, legal and cultural arrangements under capitalism. In this context, in this chapter I am re-examining the way contemporary feminism has placed primary emphasis on interpersonal, emotional relations, and specifically caring labor and emotional labor as the root site of resistance and agency for women. In doing so, transnational feminism puts forward the understanding that the social relations of *reproduction* are not only autonomous from

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<sup>11</sup> See my discussion in Chapter 2 of the distinction that Marx makes in *The Poverty of Philosophy* between class “in itself” and class “for itself” (a distinction which also serves as the basis of Gramsci’s critique of economism).

the relations of production but also the root social relations that need to be transformed in order to emancipate women. In doing so, transnational feminism restricts change for women to within the social relations of production based on exploitation.

For instance, cultural theorists such as J.K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff argue that what is important in determining the material conditions of people's lives under capitalism is not whether or not they are exploited but the "affective [and emotional] intensity associated with exploitation"—that is, how they experience exploitation (*Class and Its Others* 14-15). Following this logic, feminists such as Harriet Fraad and Jenny Cameron argue that what is necessary for changing the conditions of women's lives is transforming the "emotional division of labor" and how women affectively and emotionally perceive their position in the mode of production and the social division of labor. As a consequence, contemporary feminists, are advocating as solutions to material inequalities and conditions of economic necessity for women under capitalism, "new" models of civil, interpersonal, and emotional behavior such as Chela Sandoval's "postmodern love," Marjorie Mayo's "emotional democracy," and Rosemary Hennessy's "revolutionary love." Ethics, as I have marked throughout the dissertation, is the spiritualization of material class conflicts; it is the ideological conversion of economic contradictions into cultural values. The cultural values do not resolve the material contradictions. In *Their Morals And Ours*, Leon Trotsky says of "democratic morality" that "in order to guarantee the triumph of their interests in big questions, the ruling classes are constrained to make concessions on secondary questions, naturally only so long as these concessions are reconciled in the book-keeping" (23). But, as my analysis will show, once the concessions are not "reconciled in the book-keeping" (once it is not profitable for capital) capital no longer affords the social niceties of "ethics" or "reform."

What makes a critique of this turn to ethics and civility all the more urgent is that many contemporary feminists (such as Mayo and Hennessy) who advance ethical resistance do so under the pretext of presenting a “revolutionary,” “socialist” or “anti-capitalist” solution to the material contradictions of women’s lives in capitalism and, as a consequence, misdirect women’s struggles with capitalism to reformist solutions. In re-examining these claims, I will show that transnational feminism purports to address the needs of women globally—but the actual practices proposed by transnational feminists do little to change the material conditions of the vast majority of women’s lives, and in fact reveal that the (affective/emotional) “needs” to which transnationalists attend are actually the very privileged concerns of those whose needs have already been met.

This is because by reducing the transformation of material conditions of exploitation to codes of civil conduct, feminism goes no further than offering a “caring capitalism” as “resistance” to material inequality and dire necessity for the majority of women around the globe. As I argue in this chapter, far from working to address the material conditions of need for women in transnational capitalism, the new models of “transnational civil society,” “civility” and “ethical citizenship” that transnational feminism offers are actually an updating of the traditional and illusory notion of “freedom” as “autonomy” from material conditions of necessity that has long served to help maintain capitalist production and the exploitation of the majority’s labor for the profit of the minority. In fact, transnational feminism has become a most effective ally of transnational capitalism, which is violently working to undermine and erode the material conditions available for collective social well being, economic security, and freedom from exploitation and economic necessity for all persons, in order to maintain profit. By putting forward the notion that social transformation for women is to be found primarily in localities,

transnational feminism abandons any notion of material freedom for women, which requires not merely local and ultimately “self-empowered” changes in personal conduct and how we emotionally and affectively perceive the material conditions in which we live, but change in the material conditions of production that subordinate the needs of the majority to profit for the few.

TWO:

Before further examining the consequences for women of contemporary feminism’s turn to civility, it is first necessary to further examine the underlying “post-” theory of “difference” that transnational feminism uses to support its argument for “ethical resistance” and “negotiation within” capitalism as the only way to change the material conditions of women’s lives. As I have marked already, the canonical feminisms have long embraced “post-” theories which understand social “differences” as “irreducible differences” that are “post-production,” “post-class,” and “post-labor.” In other words, contemporary feminism sees differences as autonomous and unexplainable on any terms outside themselves such as the mode of production. With increases in material inequality in the international division of labor, there has been a renewed interest in materialism and pressure on feminists to address the material conditions of gender and sexuality and their relation to inequality in transnational capitalism. However, while many contemporary feminists now *formally* distance themselves from post-structuralist theories and articulate a transnational feminism, transnational feminism embrace (and merely updates) poststructuralist politics by approaching material reality through a logic of “muddying” and “inbetween-ness” in which there is no way to totally transform social relations, only the possibility of “negotiation” within capitalism.

It is by now a routine assumption within contemporary feminism (and the left in general) that a dialectical and historical materialist theory of “totality”—which explains social differences in terms of their root historical relations in the mode of production and opens up the possibility of fundamental transformation—reduces the material reality of women’s lives to an “abstract” and “binary,” metaphysical narrative. For instance, in their Introduction to *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalism, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón and Mino Moallem argue that “the marxist call to ‘totalize’ in opposition to ‘globalization’ ignores the implications for many subjects vis-à-vis the (dis)array of localities and differences that have been produced through the material effects of discursive practices and the discursive effects of material practices” (3). The claim here is that dialectically relating gender and sexuality to the mode of production represents the material reality of differences as fixed and self-evident and, therefore, erases the actual conditions and lived reality of historical women. What is instead necessary, transnational feminists argue, is a logic of “in-betweenness” that does not purport to resolve social contradictions but “negotiates” within them. According to this argument, an eclectic position that negotiates social differences (without deciding on any set position) produces a more historically aware and post-binary understanding of concrete material reality of historical women that links discourse to lived reality. Transnational feminist cultural studies has, therefore, embraced a logic of “negotiation,” “muddying” and “inbetween-ness” to explain the material conditions of women’s lives and the relation between various differences. In fact, transnational feminists Kaplan and Grewal argue, it is precisely a logic of “inbetween-ness” and “negotiation”—what they call a “muddying” logic which “refuses to choose”—that “bypasses conventional binary divisions” and brings Transnational Feminist Cultural Studies beyond the divides between gender and class, as well as between Marxism and feminism . . .

They, therefore, go on to argue for an eclectic fusion of feminism, Marxism, and poststructuralism as a way to “negotiate” the historical divides between gender and class and resolve the rift between Marxism and Feminism.

What is at stake in this in-between theory of materialism and how does a muddying logic explain the historical conditions of women? More importantly, what consequence does this explanation have for struggles to transform the material conditions of women’s lives and free them from conditions of exploitation and dire need in the international division of labor?

At the core of transnational feminism’s “in-between” theory is the argument that social differences such as “gender,” “sexuality” and “race” are “non-dialectizable,” or what Judith Butler calls “irreducible” differences. More specifically, this means that they cannot be posited as having material conditions outside themselves such as the mode of production, class, and labor. Instead, transnational feminists such as Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoq Moallem argue that “differences” are constituted by an internal “double bind.” A “double bind” to be clear, is an epistemological contradiction within “differences”—what is considered in “post” theories to be a basic condition of all language, meaning, and explanation—that denies difference and simultaneously universalizes difference. Kaplan, Alarcón and Moallem argue, for instance, that “difference” is constituted by:

*An aporia, a spatial-temporal indeterminacy where *différance* as ‘interminable experience’ comes into being, [which] is not a ‘dialectizable contradiction in the Hegelian or Marxist sense’ and is constitutive of a double bind that cannot be overcome except through an epistemological metanarrative, which in turn denies the marginalization of difference qua difference and the suffering that construction entails. (2)*

For these feminists, there is no definite outside to the “double bind” that constitutes differences and social inequalities. To put this another way, there is no position from which one can decisively oppose social exploitation without, at the same time, universalizing and erasing difference and, therefore, reproducing another set of inequalities. The only way to try and explain differences outside of this “double bind”—that is, the only way out of the simultaneous erasure and universalization of difference—is through a contesting epistemological metanarrative. Moreover, according to this same logic, a “metanarrative” cannot actually resolve the contradiction at the core of the “double bind” without at the same time reinstalling a universalized identity that erases difference. This is because any new “narrative” or mode of explaining difference is, according to this theory, always based on this irresolvable “double bind.” This internal “double bind” in other words, is the fundamental and basic condition of all differences. For this theory, the *only way* one can ultimately explain social differences is to see them as “epistemological contradictions” and yet, this theory ultimately leads to the conclusion that there is no way outside of such epistemological contradictions and the inequalities they create. The “double bind” is a pan-historical and eternal contradiction. As a consequence, social inequalities that are thought to be “enabled” by this double bind are also presumed to be eternal. Here transnational feminist cultural studies re-turns to exactly what it claims to move away from: an ahistorical post-structuralism that reduces social contradictions to the textual play of differences in meaning and, meanwhile, leaves the historical and material conditions of exploitation for women in capitalism intact.

“Inbetween-ness” and “negotiation” in other words, do not offer a position that explains the relations of exploitation that have produced social differences rather, they advance a metaphysical account of social differences that reduce difference to an ahistorical aporia or

“interminable [that is, endless] experience.” This is not so much a position “beyond binaries” as it is a return to a new order of experientialism that displaces the social and historical relations that produce material inequality with “textual” interpretations and descriptions of “experience.” But what lies behind this ahistorical notion of difference is the understanding that social differences are autonomous and self-producing differences. For instance, in Danielle Juteau’s contribution to *Between Woman and Nation* she argues that social differences such as “gender,” “ethnicity,” “nation” and “sex” are constituted by analytically distinct social formations, each with their own “conditions of production, reproduction, and transformation” (142). There is no outside to social differences, only an internal self-producing dynamic—like the metaphysical dynamic of the “double-bind”—that lies outside of any historical relations that enable their production.

It is not surprising, therefore, to see transnational feminists such as Norma Alarcón, return to “flesh and blood experience” as the basis for understanding the “materiality” of gender, and sexuality. In the midst of the claims for uncovering the social conditions of “historical women” is a return to the “naturalness” of differences and “bodily experience” of them. Such a position naturalizes social differences and, as a consequence, conceals over the social and historical conditions that produce differences and that enable difference to be used as a tool for increasing exploitation. What this reveals is that transnational feminism does not, in fact, produce a “post-binary” position (“beyond” male/female, inside/outside, idealism/materialism, nature/culture, etc.) rather, it produces an eclectic position that merely oscillates between “discursive invention” (the understanding that social differences are “invented” by discourse) and “biologism” (the understanding that social differences are “self-producing,” “self-evident,” and natural processes outside of any historical and social relation of production). In short, what



lies behind transnational feminisms' call for "negotiation" is a thin culturalism that is actually as a very traditional defense of the autonomy of social differences. "In-between-ness" and "negotiation" are, in other words, rhetorical moves for advancing "singularity," particularity, and autonomy: the notion that social differences are natural, unchangeable and independent of any external historical and material conditions that enable their production. In short, the notion that they are "self-inventing," "self-producing" differences.

But what are the consequences if feminism presents the root condition of social inequality and differences for women in the international division of labor as "outside" of the social relations of production and instead founded on a metaphysical, ahistorical and autonomous "flesh and blood" or "interminable experience"?

It is quite telling when transnational feminists such as Norma Alarcón read the collective struggles of women workers in the *maquiladoras* as an instance of Lyotard's "differend." Following Lyotard, Alarcón argues that the *maquila* woman is "a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of rule of judgement applicable to both arguments" (qtd. in Alarcón 70). According to Alarcón, the root problem for women workers of the *maquiladoras* (and other Chicana, female workers on the U.S./Mexican boarder) are the state-regulated cultural constructions they are caught between: on the one hand, for instance, an "Anglo-American literacy" enabled by the U.S. nation-state "that interpellates them as individuals" and, on the other, a "communal mode of power" enabled by the Mexican nation-state that "interpellates them as 'Mothers' (the bedrock of the 'ideal family' at the center of the nation-making process...)" (69). The female maquiladora worker, Alarcón argues, is an instance of an "actual Chicana differend" whose basic condition for freedom and equality is her "engage[ment] in a living struggle to seize her 'I' or even her feminist 'We'" (70).

The basic condition of “freedom” for female *maquiladora* workers is, according to Alarcón’s argument, “freedom” of “self-representation” of one’s own “flesh and blood experience” unregulated by the state and other “nation-making processes” (70). Even being part of a “we,” in this case, is preconditioned on the *maquiladora* worker’s struggle to “seize her I.” To put this another way, the basic precondition for freedom and equality for women in the international division of labor is, according to transnational feminists, freedom to be “oneself” to maintain control over one’s own “identity-in-difference.” Far from being a “radical” understanding of freedom, however, this understanding of “freedom” (freedom to seize one’s own “I” in all of its “differences”) is basically a re-articulation of the right of the “private individual” to be protected from state regulation. That is, it is a re-articulation of classical rights of civil society—particularly the right to “liberty”—in bourgeois democracy under capitalism and a return to the same “abstract equality” that transnational feminism claims to oppose in the first place.

The notion of “freedom” as ownership, control, and “liberty” over one’s own “identity” (one’s “I”) or person is itself founded on private property as a necessary precondition. The right to “liberty”—for control over one’s own person and identity—is “a question of the liberty of man regarded as an isolated monad, withdrawn into himself . . . not founded upon the relations between man and man, but rather on the separation of man from man” (Marx, “On the Jewish Question” 42). Moreover, “the practical application of the right to liberty . . . is the right to private property . . . the right to enjoy one’s fortune and to dispose of it as one will, without regard for other men and independently of society. It is the right of self-interest” (42). On these terms equality “is only the equal right to liberty . . . namely that every [human] is equally regarded as a self-sufficient monad” (42).

This understanding of “freedom” as “liberty” of the nomadic subject is, in fact, quite useful to transnational capital in the international division of labor (for example those corporations which have come to the *maquiladoras* to secure sources of cheap labor) because it allows the ruling class to extract greater amounts of surplus-value from workers without having to turn as much of its profits over to the cost of social reproduction and public welfare. One striking example of the way in which the ideology of the “self-sufficient monad” enables the cutting of reproduction costs for capital are the “self-help settlements” in Mexico made up of *casas de cartón* (shacks built of scraps and cardboard) the standard housing of the extremely poor in Mexico and a common place of residence for a vast number of *maquiladora* workers and their families. As Elvia Rosales Arriola demonstrates in her article “Looking out from a Cardboard Box,” in these “self-help settlements” of cardboard shacks, there is no publicly funded infrastructure: no paved streets, sidewalks, no electricity, no plumbing and sewer services, or clean drinking water. While some of these “self-help settlements” eventually achieve the status of “Colonias,” and therefore become entitled to *some* public funding for paved roads and sidewalks, this process can take 20 years and, even then, “Colonias” still contain substandard living conditions brought on by unmet needs such as “lack of sufficient water or sewer services to meet the residential needs.” By regarding the *maquiladora* workers who live in these settlements as “self-sufficient” and therefore, not in need of public funds, the Mexican government is able to offer its citizens at a cheap wage to attract transnational corporations. Moreover, these transnational corporations, who extract surplus-value from these workers for private profit, are prevented from having to turn money over to the state to support the cost of social reproduction for the workers who have produced the surplus value to begin with.

The *maquiladoras* and the living conditions of its workers are not a “special case” that is autonomous from the social relations of production but, in fact, part of the daily workings of class society and production for profit not needs. What is taken for granted in the notion of freedom as liberty of the self-sufficient monad in all of her “differences” (i.e., freedom to seize one’s own “I” free from regulation), are the unequal material conditions in a society based on private property and class relations. In such a society, those who own the means of production are able to command over the surplus-labor of others and, therefore, privately determine the uses toward which collectively produced resources are put. What this means for workers is a continual decrease in their standard of living from not only shouldering the burden of the cost of their own reproduction, but producing surplus-value for the profit of the ruling class.

Moreover, as Marx argues, “the political suppression of private property”—that is, the fact that it is not legally or politically recognized as what qualifies one as a citizen, as a political subject endowed with “rights”—“not only does not abolish private property; it actually presupposes its existence” (“On The Jewish Question” 33). While in the notion of “freedom” as “liberty” there is a formal denial of “private property” as a qualification for being a political subject of the state, private property and the capacity to command over the labor of others that it enables—as well as other differences that stem from this basic inequality such as education, differences in access to health care, nutrition, clean drinking water, quality housing and protection from the elements, etc—are still allowed to “act after their own fashion” as “personal,” “singular,” “autonomous” differences in civil society. Totally excluded in this notion of “freedom,” which is based on freedom *of* “private property” is freedom *from* private property and exploitation and for social and economic well being for all persons.

Transnational feminism, by putting forward an autonomous notion of “difference” and limiting its struggles to freedom of “identity-in-difference” (one’s “I”) from state regulation, is only rearticulating as a “resistant citizenship” the normal workings of “civil society” (and its contradiction with the state) in capitalism: as an arena in which differences that are a consequence of exploitation and class society (and used as a site of exploitation) are allowed to “act in their own fashion” and appear as “independent” and “autonomous”—or “authentic”—differences. In short, transnational feminism goes no further than opposing the “state” (“power”) without opposing wage-labor (exploitation). (What reveals the ruling class interests of transnational feminism is that, even on the limited terms of “interminable experience” it completely excludes from its analysis of “experience” the daily conditions of the working day for the majority of persons under capitalism who work part of the day to reproduce their own conditions of life and part of the day producing surplus-value for the benefit of the ruling class). Moreover, by opposing the state without opposing wage-labor and exploitation (i.e., the class relations on which the state is founded) transnational feminism is actually serving in the interest of transnational capitalism insofar as it works to “deregulate” the nation-state to help produce international conditions more conducive for the extraction of surplus-value. As Teresa Ebert has shown, the dominant feminism merely succeeds in joining efforts of transnational capital in its attack on “social citizenship”—the guarantee of economic and social well-being, and freedom from exploitation and necessity for all persons—and its attempt to privatize all aspects of workers’ lives turning them into sites of production for profit (Ebert, “Spectral” 278-279).

This is a particularly destructive understanding of “rights” and “citizenship” for feminism because it erases the material conditions of exploitation and dire necessity that the majority of women face in the international division of labor that fundamentally prevent them from

economic and social well-being. It puts forward the understanding that “freedom” is a matter of personal will and does not require material conditions to be in place. In doing so, it limits the struggles of feminism to a defeatist position of teaching women to adjust to conditions of economic inequality and necessity within class society. It also has the effect, once again, of “universalizing” and rendering transhistorical the existing class relations and the inequalities in economic access that they produce.

The logic of transnational feminism’s defense of “liberty” becomes quite clear if we widen the scope of analysis of women in the *maquiladoras* beyond transnational feminism’s notion of “flesh and blood experience” to account for the dialectical relations of gender and sexuality to the mode of production, specifically wage-labor and capital and their relation (exploitation). In the *maquiladoras*, it has become a longstanding practice on the part of transnational corporations such as Zenith, Tyco International, Johnson Controls, Samsung Group, and Sunbeam-Oster, to submit women to pregnancy testing as a condition of hiring or continued employment. In order to gain or maintain employment, women workers in the *maquiladoras* have been routinely required to produce urine specimens for pregnancy testing, to undergo abdominal pregnancy exams by company doctors, and fill out detailed questionnaires about their menstruation cycles, birth control use, and sexual activity to determine pregnancy. Some female *maquiladora* workers, such as those who work for Siemens, Lear Corporation, and National Processing Company, have also been required by their employers to show used sanitary napkins to factory infirmaries as a means of proving that they are not pregnant. Moreover, those who become pregnant after being hired are often fired or pressured to quit, sometimes by being shifted to tasks with heavy lifting and toxic fumes to compel them to quit (“No Guarantees”). At the same time, health and safety standards in the *maquiladoras* are so low that many workers

have received toxic exposure leading to nausea, vomiting, urinary tract cancer and, among women, loss of menstruation and the capacity to reproduce children.

If we restrict our analysis to the ahistorical “flesh and blood experience” of the body that transnational feminism advances, the issue of “menstruation” and “pregnancy” for *maquiladora* women can only, ultimately, be considered a woman-specific issue. Indeed, many “human rights” organizations, such as “Human Rights Watch” see the regulation of women’s menstrual cycles, pregnancy, and sexual activity as primarily a “sex-based” form of discrimination. As a consequence of limiting their analysis to the “flesh and blood experience” of women, such human rights groups advocate for “reproductive freedoms” for women to choose the “number and spacing” of their children free from regulation by the state and corporate interests. But this position restricts freedom for women to “reproductive choice” and says nothing of the conditions of production in which they reproduce. While access to the material conditions for women to freely determine the spacing and number of children is necessary for the emancipation of women and their economic well being, freedom to determine the spacing and number of children is a limited freedom when one cannot determine the life conditions within which children are reproduced and the ends and interests toward which their lives are put.

The control of pregnancy by transnational capitalism is not merely control of women but control over the future labor force and the “surplus population”: how much reserve labor-power is available for capital to exploit, the cost of its social reproduction, and whether or not it is “cost-effective” for capital to invest in the social reproduction of labor-power (i.e., whether it will receive a “return” of greater profit for its investment or not). As long as the reproduction of children takes places within relations of production based on private ownership of the means of production in which the few can command over the surplus-labor of others, this reproduction

will continue to be subordinated to production for profit—regardless of the number and spacing of children involved. This is just as much the case when women are discouraged or prevented from childbearing as when women are encouraged to bear children through romanticizing “motherhood,” “childbearing,” and “family values”—as is increasingly the case for women of the North.

Freedom of sexuality, reproduction, and freedom for women, as the case of women in the *maquiladoras* shows, is in dialectical relation to the social relations of production and one’s position within the division of labor. Under conditions of private property, specific sexual and reproductive relations are enabled (or disabled) depending on whether or not they help to reproduce conditions necessary for production for profit. Understood in this context, gender, sexuality, and reproduction become tools for the extraction of surplus-labor and regulation of the workforce to make it more conducive to surplus-value extraction. By abstracting gender and sexuality from the social relations of production, transnational feminism accepts the logic of ruling class strategies used by transnational capital in the *maquiladoras* to isolate women workers from their collective class interests with all workers and command over women’s labor as collective producers. Moreover, by denying the dialectical relation of gender and sexuality to the mode of production and class relations, and presenting social differences as “autonomous,” transnational feminists go no further than “freedom” of gender and sexuality (which amounts to a limited “reproductive freedom”) without freedom from exploitation (the private appropriation of surplus-labor). In doing so, it advocates for (a limited reproductive) “freedom” for *some* women and continued exploitation for the majority. That is, it advocates for the limited “freedoms” available in capitalism to those women who already have access to material conditions to meet their needs.



As the conditions of dire need for women in the *maquiladoras* clearly demonstrates, what is needed is a historical materialist understanding of freedom that can account for the conditions of exploitation that must be transformed in order to free workers from economic necessity and compulsion. Engels clarifies this materialist understanding of “freedom” in *Anti-Dühring*, when he argues that “Freedom . . . consists in command over ourselves and over external nature, a command founded on knowledge of natural necessity; it is therefore necessarily a product of historical development” (144). Understood as a “product of historical development” freedom is not “imaginary independence” from conditions of necessity, but command over these conditions which, at root, requires *collective* ownership and control of the means of production and the abolition of class society. Engels, of course, has been read as simply reproducing capitalism’s drive to dominate and exploit nature by emphasizing “collective control.” However, what these criticisms conveniently erase are the fundamental differences between a society based on private appropriation of social and natural resources (which privileges profit, regardless of the unmet needs of society and the costs to the environment among other things) and a society based on collective ownership (which prioritizes social need). The effect of such a (mis)reading however is to simply oppose the effects of capitalism without ever addressing the conditions under which private ownership is produced, in effect occluding the conditions under which human’s relation to nature can be radically transformed. It is, in short, not “control” over nature that is the “problem” with capitalism (a purely formal analysis of capital), but that all natural and social resources are privately controlled for the production of profit—at the expense of the vast majority of people as well as the environment. If feminism is going to take seriously the conditions of women in the international division of labor and not simply use the example of women in the South, as Norma Alarcón does, to advance a ruling-class notion of freedom as

“self-help,” it must put forward a feminism for freedom from economic necessity founded not upon imaginary independence from conditions of necessity but upon changing the social relations of production (of private ownership) that determine the production and meeting of needs.

What is needed for such a transformative feminism is a dialectical understanding of social difference that explains them in terms of a totality of relations: in terms of their root relations in the social relations of production. What enables feminism to account in materialist terms for the “lived reality” of “historical women” is not the seeming “tangibility” of “flesh and blood” experience, but the historical relations of production behind the “lived reality” of women’s lives. As I discussed in Chapter 4 through Marx’s argument in the *Grundrisse* that the “concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations” (101), far from being “concrete,” the very notion of material reality as a “tangible experience” (that transnational feminism puts forward as the “concrete” reality) is actually an “abstraction” that must be explained through conceptualization. To begin with the immediate perception of the concrete—its “flesh and blood” experience—in other words, is to begin with an abstraction which itself must be unpacked to explain the root relations behind it that enable its production. Moreover this unpacking and explain requires “moving analytically toward ever more simple concepts [. . .] arriv[ing] at the simplest determinations [. . . which] would have to be retraced [...] but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations” (Marx, *Grundrisse* 101). It is only by unpacking the historical conditions of production behind the “concrete” of women’s lives and retracing the dialectical relation between these conditions of production and their effect on the material conditions of women’s lives—that is,

understanding gender and sexuality as part of a totality of relations—that feminism can begin to explain and work to transform the conditions of necessity for women under capitalism.

### THREE

What are the consequences of transnational feminism’s notion of “difference” and “ethical resistance” and what kind of changes does it actually advance in the material conditions of women’s lives?

Proceeding from the logic of transnational feminism’s theory of differences as irreducible and unexplainable on the terms of the mode of production, many feminists argue that what is most needed to change the material conditions of women’s lives in the international division of labor is a “resistant ethics” or “new morality” that embraces differences and takes “loving care” to understand the point of view of others. For instance, transnational feminists such as Chela Sandoval are now articulating a “new morality” of “postmodern love” as the way to address social inequalities around the globe. “Postmodern love” is what Sandoval describes as “radical *mestizaje* . . . a complex kind of love in the postmodern world, where love is understood as affinity—alliance and affection across lines of difference that intersect both in and out of the body” (170). This “postmodern love,” Sandoval argues, is forged through what she calls the “methodology of the oppressed,” which are essentially “semiotic skills” that “recode” and “redefine” reality, and have been developed by oppressed persons in order to psychologically survive under conditions of oppression in capitalism. According to Sandoval, “postmodern love” serves as a “punctum” that “breaks through” established understandings of social difference, “traditional, older narratives of love, [and] that ruptures everyday being” in the interests of the oppressed (142). Sandoval claims that it is “postmodern love” (and the “semiotic skills” she calls

the “methodology of the oppressed”) that serve as “technical skills” required for “survival” within capitalism and “produce. . . human being[s] that are capable of generating egalitarian social relations” (168).

The claim here is that the “radical *mestizaje*” of “postmodern love” undoes traditional notions of love in which love is understood as a singularity of the isolated “couple in love.” Through postmodern love, Sandoval claims, “subjectivity becomes freed from ideology as it ties and binds reality” (170). This modality of love, according to Sandoval, “undoes the ‘one’ that gathers the narrative, the couple, the race, into a singularity. Instead, . . . [it] gathers up the *mezcla*, the mixture that lives through differential movement between possibilities of being” (170). Yet, at the same time that Sandoval claims that postmodern love undoes “singularity,” what she claims is radical about it is that it sees differences as “instances of ‘elaborate specificity’ and the ‘loving care’ people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another point of view” (170). Sandoval presents this “elaborate specificity” and particularity as in opposition to singularity because it emphasizes “plurality.” But “singularity” is not simply determined by its “lack of plurality” but by its autonomy from conditions that produce it. “Affinity through difference” is concerned with restoring our understanding of the “specificity” and “particularity” of social differences not the capacity to explain them on the terms of the larger historical and material conditions that produce them.

What is especially revealing in Sandoval’s theory of “love” and human relations for the “postmodern world” is that it is theorized as a “transclass” love in which “‘love’ is a hermeneutic, . . . a set of practices and procedures that transit all citizen-subjects, *regardless of social class*, toward a differential mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement” (140; emphasis added). Postmodern love, in other words, is a

trans-social modality of love—what Sandoval describes as a “drifting” or “movement of meanings that will not be governed”—that claims not to be determined by social conditions such as private property and class relations (143). But such a view of a “transclass” notion of love is not one that works to transform the conditions that produce class in the first place rather, it merely accepts the co-existence of classes and encourages better relations between them. Seen on these terms, it becomes clear that while “postmodern love” is concerned with “making *a place for the different social subject*” (172), it says nothing of the conditions of exploitation within which these differences are produced and used as tools for the extraction of surplus-labor. Differences are, in fact, quite acceptable in social relations of production as “instruments” of labor,” making it “more or less expensive to use” (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto* 115).

In fact, the “methodology of the oppressed,” “survival skills,” and “postmodern love” that Sandoval argues are a mode of “radical resistance” to unequal conditions for women in transnational capitalism, are actually identical to new managerial and behavioral control strategies of “emotional tolerance” that are advocated for in corporations to increase worker productivity and maintain the economic “bottom line”—that is, conditions that are favorable to increasing surplus-value extraction and profit for owners. In the advanced capitalist societies of the North where a great deal of productive labor now takes place in the “service” industry, in jobs often held by women, strategies of “netiquette,” civility, and behavioral control have become increasingly important to the ruling class in order to help reproduce conditions that enable production for profit. They are, in other words, ruling class strategies to enable workers to adjust to economic exploitation and keep them from changing the social and economic conditions that alienate them in the first place. But many corporations are finding that

maintaining these conditions requires seemingly “open” and “flexible” arrangements with workers.

In a study of “emotional management” in the workplace over a decade ago, Nicky James argued that the “repression of emotional expression” may appear to have greater efficiency in production, but that there are “hidden costs” for capitalism and the production of wealth in this style of “emotional management.” For example she argues:

It has been suggested that a society which requires equilibrium for the production of wealth must minimize the impact of death [. . .] With fewer people taking a day off work to attend a funeral than formerly there is less disruption in the workplace, but an increase in the amount of pathological grieving [. . .] with hidden costs in health care. (20)

A more recent study of job stress in the service industry, in fact, suggests that the “emotional labor” (combined with low wages) required of clerical and service workers, in which “service with a smile” is mandated by the company, not only can cause “absenteeism, decreased productivity, fatigue, and burnout” but, according to industrial and organizational psychologist Alicia Grandey, it also “taxes the body over time by overworking the cardiovascular and nervous systems and weakening the immune system” which research has linked to “high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer” (qtd. in Blaum and Fong). This same study reports that the American Heart Association estimated cardiovascular diseases cost the U.S. economy more than \$130 billion dollars (in health care, lost productivity, and employee replacement costs) in 1995. As a consequence, Grandey argues that “Overall, companies need to be concerned about providing friendly customer service but also recognize how this may tax their employees’ health. Both have an impact on the bottom line.”

But what these analyses actually reveal (contrary to the claims of both James and Grandey who support “emotional expression” and “behavioral change” as a root material change in labor relations), is that it is neither the “emotional repression” nor “emotional expression” that is the core of root changes in material relations in order to meet the needs of the majority: both can be used as managerial behavioral strategies for capitalism depending on what reproduces conditions that are most cost-effective (the “bottom line”) to make a profit. The “post-repressive” understanding of emotion (that James and Grandey each ultimately endorse) can just as easily be used as a managerial strategy under capitalism in order to make conditions more favorable for surplus-value extraction as “emotional repression.” In fact, since the time in which James wrote her article, many corporations have come to recognize the “hidden costs” of “emotional repression management” and, as a response to the negative effect this has had on production levels, corporations are now putting in place new “post-repressive” managerial strategies in order to get workers to adjust to their conditions of exploitation more easily.

According to Temple University’s Department of Human Resource Administration, one “effective” managerial approach in increasing worker productivity has been to:

train employees to try to generate real, rather than fake, emotions when working with customers. Akin to famous theater director Stanislavsky’s notion of actually ‘becoming the role’ one is asked to play, employees can be encouraged to try to empathize with and feel toward the customer in a way that is appropriate for their task. (“Faking It” 2)

By instituting policies that allow for the “emotional differences” of employees and, moreover, get employees to identify and empathize with the “emotional differences” of customers, corporations have, evidently, been able to increase job performance within the workplace. This

is, in fact, identical to the strategies in transnational feminism for changing “ethical” and “civil” behavior,” such as Sandoval’s notion of “postmodern love,” at the root of which is “behavioral management” and a “new morality” in order to “empathize” with the “other” and “survive” within capitalism. As Sandoval puts it: “the semiotic perception of signs in culture as structured meanings that carry power” as well as the capacity to “deconstruct” and “recode” these signs and perceive differently are “basic survival skills necessary to the subordinated and oppressed citizenry” (131).

On the contrary, instead of being “trans-social” and “above” class relations, ethics (and the codes of civility and emotional conduct advocated by a particular “ethics”) are in dialectical relations to class. Human beings “consciously or unconsciously, derive their ethical ideas in the last resort from the practical relations on which their class position is based—from the economic relations in which they carry on production and exchange” (Engles, *Anti-Dühring* 118). It is, for instance, under conditions in which private ownership of “personal property” develops that the moral injunction “Thou shalt not steal” develops and becomes commonplace. The “ethical ideas,” in other words, are not eternal truths: “In a society in which the motives for stealing are done away with ...how the preacher of morals would be jeered at who tried solemnly to proclaim the eternal truth: Thou shalt not steal!” (118). Ethics as well as emotional relations with others, are historical products of the social relations of production.

The ethical ideas of Sandoval’s “trans-class” postmodern love are no exception. They are ruling class ideas aimed at producing subjects—what Sandoval calls “risky subject-citizens”—who can more easily adjust to capitalist relations of production. Her call for “postmodern love,” “affinity” and “alliance and affection across lines of difference” is really no more than a traditional call for liberal pluralist “inclusion” and “awareness” of the other—a call for



“respecting differences.” Such a position presupposes that the conditions of exploitation and economic necessity for the majority in capitalism are simply a product of insensitive and disrespectful *attitudes* toward differences. This is, moreover, quite useful in protecting the economic interests of some women at the expense of the majority by allowing them to opportunistically “oppose” the oppression of women only insofar as it serves as a limit to their own “success” within capitalism (articulated as their own “particular differences”). When “affinity,” “affirmation,” and “affection” are understood as the foundation of social transformation then one need only participate in social change so long as one feels “affirmed” in doing so. What “postmodern love” occludes are the material conditions of exploitation that economically compel the majority of women of the world to affirm and respect the difference between “exploiter” and “exploited.” Capitalism, in other words, does not depend on the “exclusion” of difference rather, its social relations of production based on exploitation produce social and economic differences.

Postmodern love, is not at all trans-social or trans-class but enabled by historical developments in the capitalist mode of production. “Love,” as Alexandra Kollontai argued, is a “social emotion”: both the kinds of love produced and the “needs” that they work to fulfill are enabled by the mode of production. As the forces of production have developed, and capitalist production has expanded, this has changed the social division of labor and, in doing so, it requires new subjectivities and new modalities of “interpersonal relations” to help maintain conditions for production for profit. While earlier stages of capitalism sharpened antagonisms between men and women by isolating women within the “family” and robbing women of their role as productive laborers, the advance of capitalism puts into place conditions that throw “gender” into sharp relief. At the same time that capitalism continues to reproduce conditions for

the privatized family, it needs the productive labor of women to maintain profit—it needs their surplus-labor as collective producers—and, therefore, pulls women out of the “home,” integrates women into productive wage-labor, makes women’s relation to wage-labor/capital more evident and confronts working women with the fact that a solution to conditions of women’s oppression in general cannot be found in abstraction from solution to the class question.

Traditional notions of “couple-love,” while still useful for the ruling class because of the way in which they construct love as a “private matter” and, therefore, help “to channel the expression of love in its class interests” (279), are increasingly becoming historically outdated in the face of changes in the division of labor brought on by developments in the forces of production. As a consequence of these changes, the bourgeoisie in advanced capitalism is now also supporting practices that “negotiate” between “class” and “gender” because it cannot avoid the issue that capital requires the labor-power of women, but at the same time, in order to help maintain social relations of production based on profit it seeks to blunt the class consciousness of workers in general and women in particular by offering a position of “negotiation” of the fundamental class contradictions for women. “Postmodern love” is a useful mode of love for transnational capitalism because it emphasizes “flexibility,” “negotiation,” and survival *within* existing social relations of production. Such a position, which sees social differences such as “gender” as “affectively linked” to class but not dialectically related, “addresses” gender without addressing the material needs—the historical preconditions—that must be fulfilled in order to free women from exploitation. To put this another way, it attempts only to resolve interpersonal problems and, at that, only for ruling class women (and petit-bourgeois women who protect the interests of the ruling class), but does not actually materially resolve the conditions of economic inequality for proletarian women of the world who are excluded from “negotiation.” In this way,

despite the fact that “postmodern love” is presented as a “resistance” to traditional modes of couple-love—and, therefore, a site of “emotional freedom” for women—it is likewise a “bourgeois ideal of love” that “does not correspond to the needs of the largest section of the population—the working class” (284). As Kollontai further argued, without working to free women for subordination to production for profit, women cannot be freed from emotional and personal relations based on financial considerations (274).

The “postmodern love” of Sandoval’s “risky citizen-subject” is actually a liberal hegemonic coalitionism, which sutures the utopia of pluralism from multiculturalism to the deregulation of the transnational corporation. The “risky” and “drifting” subject represents the abandonment of economic and social well being for all for the ruthless and reckless practices of the transnational corporation, which must maintain flexibility in its quest for the accumulation of profit all around the globe. Instead of being “anti-imperialist” and “anti-capitalist,” transnational feminism is really quite useful for the accumulation of capital on a world scale as it works to produce the pragmatic, flexible subjects necessary for capitalism to ensure a cheap labor force from which to extract surplus-value. The “risky citizen-subject” is the new entrepreneur of transnational capitalism whose “drifting” and “deregulation” eliminates the limits to profiting off of the labor of others.

Yet the root condition for capitalist “deregulation” is the increased exploitation of workers of the world, including the majority of women. If feminism is to prioritize the economic and social emancipation of all women over the liberation of an already privileged minority of women, then it must work to transform the social relations of production instead of limiting its interventions to lessons in “moral conduct” for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If we understand “morality” in historical materialist terms then “morality which stands above class antagonisms and above any

remembrance of them becomes possible only at a stage of society which has not only overcome class antagonisms but has even forgotten them in practical life” (Engels, *Anti-Dühring* 119). The root issue in determining whether or not society is organized so that its “interpersonal” and “emotional relations” are based on freedom from class relations, exploitation and economic necessity, or whether they will be a front for the class interests of some at the expense of the majority, is whether social resources are privately or collectively owned and thus, whether society produces for profit or collective need. In itself, transforming emotional and ethical behavior toward others does not resolve the root material inequality brought on by production for profit, which is the basic condition that causes alienation among workers. Without confronting “class” and private ownership of the means of production, feminism cannot understand the conditions that produce dire need and economic compulsion of workers brought on by exploitation. Without confronting conditions of necessity and economic compulsion, there is no ground upon which to establish collectivity. Collectivity is not a structure of *interpersonal relationships* and *behaviors* rather, it is a structure of *social and economic relations* founded on collective ownership and control of the means of production. It is a social relation in which no one person can privately own means of production and, therefore, command over the surplus-labor (and thus lives) of others.

#### FOUR

Under the pressure of growing class contradictions, transnational feminism has increasingly turned to the concept of “emotional labor” to explain the material basis of “emotion,” “behavior” and morality. The concept “emotional labor,” it is claimed, proposes to recognize that “emotions,” “behavior” and “morality” are structured by the social relations of

production and points to a dialectical relation between “emotion” and all other forms of labor relations in capitalism. However, the dominant analysis of “emotional labor” is not a dialectical one but a localist analysis that isolates it from other labor relations as a “special case.” The main way in which this is advanced is that “emotional labor,” it is argued, is treatable through a change in emotional relations and not the social relations of production. Insofar as “labor” is theorized it is as a largely interpersonal “process” not as a structure of ownership of the means of production.

What is notable here is that at the same time transnational feminism denies class antagonisms, it claims to advance class as a necessary category of analysis in its readings. But class, for transnational feminism and the transnational left generally is, as J.K. Gibson-Graham argue in their writings, a *process* in which what matters is the “distributive moment.” Class is not understood in terms of irreconcilable property relations but in terms of a process of *distribution* and *consumption* of the products of labor, *irrespective of one’s relationship to ownership of the means of production*. “Class” as a “property relation” is considered too abstract to explain what are multiple and varied processes of “surplus-value” appropriation.

In their respective contributions to the volume *Class and Its Others*, Jenny Cameron and Harriet Fraad each articulate a theory of “*emotional* surplus labor” and “*emotional* exploitation” in which the concepts of “labor” and “exploitation” are seemingly “freed” from private ownership of the means of production. As Fraad argues, “emotional exploitation” is understood to be the process by which *any* labor that involves emotional expenditure is “appropriated by those who are not performers of that labor” (70). What is most central to the “exploitative relation” is *not* whether or not one privately owns the means of production and, therefore, has

command over the labor-power of others rather, it is whether or not one consumes the products of other peoples labor or produces for their consumption.

In actuality, this theory does not produce a more historical and materialist understanding of “labor” and “exploitation.” Instead, it produces an unspecified and ahistorical understanding of surplus-labor. When surplus-labor is taken to be *any* labor produced by one person whose product is consumed by another, then a disabled person who receives rides to work from his cousin, a homeless person who sleeps in a bed prepared at a homeless shelter, or, as Cameron claims, a child who eats breakfast prepared by her father, can all be considered exploiters of surplus-labor just as much as an owner of a transnational corporation who appropriates the surplus-labor of thousands of workers for the sole purpose of capital accumulation. But labor is not *inherently* and transhistorically productive of surplus-value. It is not the concrete usefulness of labor for others that determines surplus-labor rather, it is the social relations of production. Labor is productive of surplus-value only when material conditions of production have reached a level in which socially necessary labor time for producing the existing conditions of life does not monopolize all available labor-time. When the forces of production are considerably less developed and all hours of the day must be spent by *all* members of the community to simply sustain life, a surplus of collective resources is not historically and materially possible. Moreover, labor is only productive of surplus-value when it is “directly consumed in the course of production for the valorization of capital” not when it is consumed for the reproduction of labor-power (Marx, *Capital* 1038).

The consequence of abstracting surplus-labor from property relations and turning it into an entirely local power relation in which “everyone” exploits and is exploited is to suppress transformative praxis for collective social relations of production. If all labor is exploited

surplus-labor by virtue of being used by others, then collective social relations—based on collective ownership of the means of production—are inherently relations of exploitation. Exploitation, in other words, is a transhistorical phenomenon that can only be modified in form but not abolished. This erases the social conditions of labor and represents a society in which “the free condition of each is the free condition of all” as impossible and unnecessary. On the one hand transnational feminism claims to acknowledge the “labor” of those not “recognized” by capitalism (a gesture toward the “other” and the “interdependence” of individuals). On the other, because it is still working within the framework of capitalist relations, it ends up asserting a deeply individualist argument—the unsaid (yet familiar) conclusion of which is that we should all aim to be as independent and “self-sufficient” as possible. That is, the problem of capitalism is that individual people cannot meet their own individual needs, *by themselves*. But it is not because people rely on others that individual’s needs go unmet rather, it is because of the production relations in which that interdependence is organized.

This abstract and ahistorical reading of exploitation in “emotional relations” is itself historically specific to capitalism and works to produce subjectivities that are useful to the ruling class. At the core of this reading is the monadic subject of civil society in capitalism for whom freedom is “freedom of private property” relations. This monadic subject is ruled by what Marx called “the right of self-interest” which leads every person to see in other persons “not the realization but the limitation of his own liberty” (“On the Jewish Question” 42). On these terms, emotional relations and emotional needs—in fact, all needs—are understood as individual and “private matters” that are separate from and contrary to the social collective and the needs of others in society. In fact, the needs of others are understood as a hindrance to one’s own personal

liberation since meeting the needs of another is fundamentally and transhistorically considered to be an instance of exploitation.

But this is a specific result of the subordination of collective needs to private property relations. To return to what I discussed in Chapter 2, as Marx and Engels explain in *The German Ideology*, the production and satisfaction of “needs” is fundamental to human life and at the same time develops in historical relation to the mode of production:

life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing, and various other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.

(47)

In other words, “needs” and the conditions for producing and satisfying needs are historical. As Marx explains, they involve the dialectical praxis of labor in which humans “act upon external nature and change it, and in this way . . . simultaneously change [their] own nature” (Marx, *Capital* 283). The production and satisfaction of needs, in turn, gives rise to new needs. As the forces of production develop so do needs and the methods and modes of producing and meeting needs: “Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively” (Marx, *Grundrisse* 92). For instance, what counts as “nutrition” and the conditions necessary in order to gain access to this nutrition (whether this requires hunting and gathering, tools for agricultural cultivation, or large scale industry) is



historically enabled by the mode of production. In this way “production not only supplies a material for the need, but it also supplies a need for the material” (92). The conditions of production, both the forces of production and the relations in which they are organized, therefore, determine both the historical development of need themselves and the way in which they are fulfilled.

Under capitalism, where the productive forces have enabled the historical development of new needs and ways of fulfilling them, the private property relations subordinate the majority to dire economic necessity by excluding them from access to the resources necessary to meet needs. By subordinating the needs of many—the collective needs of all persons for freedom from exploitation and economic necessity—to production of profit, capitalist relations of production impede the development of human capacity enabled by meeting existing need and increasingly deteriorate the standard of living of workers. When human beings are reduced to a means for profit-making for a few, workers are pitted against each other for mere survival and must shoulder the economic burden not only of meeting their own needs but producing surplus-value for the ruling class, the needs of others represent an obstacle to capital accumulation for the ruling class and impoverishment for workers.

When inequality in emotional relations is divorced from class contradictions in the mode of production and the dire economic necessity that exploitation produces for the majority, at best, one can work for what Marjorie Mayo calls “emotional democracy” and Fraad calls “communal emotional relations” in which persons have the right to express their own feelings and the key to social change is ethical negotiation and behavioral reform: adopting caring behavior toward others and negotiating with them to get needs met. But it is telling that one of the signs that such “communal emotional relations” are “working well” is that, as Fraad explains, a school age child

can negotiate between “sustaining [communal practices] at home while learning to submit, at least to some extent, to what are often non-communal emotional requirements at school” (81). In short, the theory of class processes and negotiation merely advocates a more “humane” capitalism—a caring capitalism—with “functional” emotional, sexual, and family relations that help to reproduce subjects who can more easily adjust to capitalism and its cultural consequences.

Far from freeing emotional relations from private property, the dominant feminism’s theory of “negotiation” and “ethical resistance” offers an idealist and illusory freedom that has no ground in the real material conditions of need and labor that shape gender difference, sexuality and emotional relations. Instead of working to address the needs of all persons for freedom from economic necessity and exploitation, it serves as a cover for the reproductive requirements of capital, which is now engaging in a massive assault on any notion of social collectivity in order to secure an exploitable labor force with which to make a profit. Behind the privatized and individualized “need” that grounds dominant theories of emotional labor in feminism are the *class* interests of the bourgeoisie to bolster property relations and the monadic individualism of civil society as the only ground of freedom.

One of the objections from transnational feminists to the critique I have made thus far of the turn in feminism to “civility” and “ethical resistance” is that Marxism “ignores” the “emotional” and “affective needs” of people and that without putting a foundational emphasis on “ethics” and the “affective experiences” of others, it will be impossible to build the kind of collective organization necessary in order to transform existing social relations. This understanding of collective organization and Marxism is, in fact, so pervasive that even theorists who claim to advance “classical Marxism” are now rearticulating its revolutionary theory of

“needs” and “labor” to prioritize “affective needs” as a foundational component to revolutionary struggle. One striking example of this is Rosemary Hennessy’s book *Profit and Pleasure* in which she claims to advance a “Marxist” theory of sexuality and “affect” and their dialectical relation to needs, class, and labor. Hennessy’s book is especially important to examine here because of the way in which it rewrites the Marxist concepts of “class,” “collectivity,” “labor,” and “need” at the same time that it claims to restore their centrality in contemporary cultural critique. Her text, in fact, argues that one of the main limits to contemporary cultural critique is an erasure of “class,” “needs” and “production” as fundamental structures that must be transformed in order to enable material transformation of the conditions of people’s lives. More specifically, she claims to want to restore the centrality of the Marxist concept of “need” (and its dialectical relation to the mode of production) to debates about desire, sexuality, identity, affect, and emotion.

But when we look closely at Hennessy’s theory of “need,” “labor” and “class” we find not a materialist understanding, but one which once again separates emotion from the relations of production. According to Hennessy, not only the dominant cultural theory but also revolutionary collectivity has by and large proceeded by abstracting “affect” and “human affective capacities” from basic needs and the social relations of production and, in doing so, revolutionary organizations have limited the possibility and scope of revolutionary praxis and class struggle by alienating potential participants and their “individual” experiences in their everyday lives. For Hennessy, “affect” represents a “basic human need” which is no less necessary to survival than other “basic needs” such as food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare. The primary concern of revolutionary organization, she argues, should therefore be “how to marshal our human affective

capacities in the struggle to redress the inequitable meeting of other human needs” (208).

Hennesy continues:

If we no longer ignore affect in the calculus of human needs, then in forging a collective standpoint for oppositional—even revolutionary—forms of consciousness we will need to acknowledge how political agency, practice, and commitment are motivated, complicated, and undermined by our human capacity for affect,” to which she adds “perhaps especially the emotion . . . “love.” (208)

In fact, as a solution to the abstraction of “affect” from “needs” she argues that revolutionary organizations need to be organized on the basis of what she calls “revolutionary love.” Revolutionary love, according to Hennesy embraces “multiple” forms of love—both “individual” and “collective”—so that individuals in their everyday “love” and “affective” lives are not fundamentally alienated from revolutionary struggle. “To endorse . . . collective love [i.e., love for a collective people]” she is quick to point out “without acknowledging other kinds of love that are more individual . . . that also have an intense hold on us, would be not just dishonest but a costly political mistake” (205). “Revolutionary love” in short, is able to “bridge” the gap between “individual experience” and “collectivity” that Hennesy argues is “missing” from revolutionary praxis, by working to meet the “affective needs” of its participants.

Rather than producing a dialectical understanding of “love” and “affect” that understands its relation to the mode of production and need, Hennesy rewrites “need” to produce the understanding that it is “love” and “affect” that form the basis of production relations. As part of her theorization of “affective needs” Hennesy argues that, “affective needs are inseparable from the social component of most need satisfaction . . . but they also constitute human needs in themselves in the sense that all people deserve to have the conditions available that will allow

them to exercise and develop their affective capacities” (210-211). But affective capacities are here treated very ahistorically: the right to develop these capacities is in itself quite banal—this amounts to the right for freedom of emotional expression, but abstracts the “expression” itself from the conditions in which it is produced and the ends and interests that it serves. Moreover, Hennessy argues that “alienation from sensation and affect *underpins* the organization of commodity production and consumption and the logic of exchange value. In capitalist divisions of labor, the extraction of surplus value requires that *workers alienate themselves* from their human potentials, including their sex-affective potentials” (217; emphasis added). This is another way of saying that alienation is not founded upon class and the separation of workers from ownership of the means of production but on our separation from “ourselves,” our “experience,” and from the “ideal human” (which Hennessy calls “human affective potential”).

What belies the idealism of Hennessy’s project of “revolutionary love” is that it requires an idealized human being who *already embodies* the interpersonal relationships and affective capacities that are projected onto a communist future. This is a far cry from the understanding of “emotional relations” and “love” produced by historical materialists such as Alexandra Kollontai who argued that the basis of the “hypocritical morality” of capitalism is not in its failure to produce “ideal human beings,” but on “the structure of its exploitative economy, while at the same time mercilessly converging with contempt any girl or woman who was forced to” depart from this ideal (263). It is important to note here that the concepts of “red love” and “love-comradship” produced by revolutionaries such as Kollontai are dramatically different from Hennessy’s sentimentalizing of revolutionary struggle because they understand “love-comradeship” to be based on a structure of economic relations in which no person can appropriate the surplus-labor of others. “Red Love” in other words is not a set of interpersonal

relations nor even “solidarity” but a set of social and economic relations in which class antagonisms have not only already been abolished (because private property has been abolished) but have been “forgotten in practical life.” Hennessy’s theorization of the concept of “affective needs” and their exclusion from revolutionary “solidarity” is not a historical materialist understanding of the relationship between “affect,” “love,” and needs but a version of Max Stirner’s theorization of the “ideal human” that Marx and Engels critiqued in *The German Ideology*. Like Stirner, Hennessy’s concept of “revolutionary love,” “imagines that people up to now have always formed a concept of man, and then won freedom for themselves to the extent that was necessary to realize this concept; that the measure of freedom that they achieved was determined each time by their idea of the ideal of man at the time” (Marx and Engels, *German* 456). In actuality, however, people won freedom for themselves “to the extent that was dictated and permitted not by their ideal of man” (for example, the revolutionary lover who is able to harmonize her personal relationships with her relationship to revolutionary struggle), “but by the existing productive forces” (457). However, so long as the “productive forces” themselves continue to be restricted by the social relations of production based on private property, “development [is] possible only if some persons satisfy their needs at the expense of others” (457).

An instructive example of the fact that Hennessy’s theorization of “need” empties it of its revolutionary content and restricts social change to within capitalism is her critique of the “minimum wage.” In this discussion, Hennessy argues that the “minimum wage,” which represents the “needs” of the proletariat that are excluded by capitalism, “is of course invariably not the same as a living wage” (216). Unlike the “living wage,” Hennessy argues, “the minimum wage cannot cover even the most basic needs for living—food and clothing and housing and

healthcare, no less education and time for intellectual and creative development—many unmet needs for living a full human life are virtually “outlawed” (216). But what is left unchallenged by her defense of the “living wage” is the system of “wage-labor.” The “needs” of workers are not excluded by the minimum wage alone, but by the system of wage-labor founded on private property. Moreover, what is obscured here is that even with a “living wage,” workers are still exploited. Such a reading of living/minimum wage in other words shows how the theory of “ethical resistance” and “revolutionary love” has the effect of distracting attention away from causes of exploitation and oppression, substituting the amelioration of the effects of capitalism for their transformation.

If feminism is going to be a transformative praxis and not simply a cover for ruling class interests, it must break with the idealism of “ethical resistance” and the “monadic subject” and build a theory and praxis of emancipation for women as part of a social collectivity based on meeting needs, social well being, and freedom from exploitation for *all*. Feminism needs to articulate a materialist theory—a red theory of gender and sexuality—which understands needs, including emotional needs, as not simply private matters or “free floating” choices, but historical practices that develop and change in response to the development of forces of production as they come into conflict with the relations of production. The conditions of possibility for freedom for women, including in their emotional and sexual relations, are in dialectical relation to class and economic necessity—that is, to the material conditions within which their society produces its needs and their position within the social relations of production and division of labor. The material conditions for freedom of sexuality, emotions, and love for women who occupy gendered positions in the social division of labor and are economically compelled to take up strictly heterosexual positions in marriage such as single women in the export processing zones

of Taiwan who are trading their eyesight for cash to save money for expensive dowries, are quite different from the conditions for women who are well paid professionals in occupations in advanced capitalism that are relatively flexible regarding gender. Understanding “emotional relations” as separate from class antagonisms and restricting change to within interpersonal relations is strategy of transnational capital to “maintain an elastic labor force” by “muting” class consciousness and turning women away from their “commitment to work and their solidarity . . . with men as well as women” (Gallin 190).

The significance of private ownership of the means of production and command over the labor-power of others as well as its normalization in contemporary feminism, matters because it determines what material resources and conditions are at the disposal of all members of society (and what material interests they can advance) and therefore determines whether the social arrangements will be able to free all persons from necessity or whether they will need to be transformed to do so. Freedom of sexuality, love, desire cannot be produced unless emotional relations are, as Alexandra Kollontai argues, freed from financial considerations, which is to say, freed from class society and its privatized relations of production that produce dire economic necessity for the majority. Transnational feminism, with its focus on “ethical resistance” to the material conditions of inequality for women, actually works in the interest of subordinating the needs of women for material equality and freedom from necessity to the reproductive requirements of transnational capitalism. What is necessary in feminism is not the individualized “responsibility” of transnational feminism but the collective solidarity of revolutionary internationalism for a feminism that will participate in the class struggle to abolish capitalism’s regime of profit and wage-labor and therefore put the material conditions in place to emancipate *all* people from exploitation and economic necessity.



**PART III. MAKING “CRISIS” (UNUSUALLY) CRITICAL**

## 6.0 HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND GENDER

In all class societies, at historical junctures when class contradictions reach a crisis moment, there is a shift in the social logic. The world is explained in, broadly, spiritual terms in order to obscure the material social relations as cultural values and represent class antagonisms (that have now broken through the surface of the “old” social logic) as cultural differences. It is on these terms that, in the wake of the increasing collapse of the U.S. economy and the ongoing imperialist wars, the canonical feminism has (once again) become increasingly fascinated with its own “end.” As I implied in Chapter 1, contemporary feminism by and large enacts an “end” to feminism through the circuitous route of presenting a counter-narrative of feminism as an ongoing, “vibrant,” cacophonous project—with no origin and no end—rich with diverse, conflicting, and contesting cultural values. In what is presented as bringing a breath of fresh air to feminism—particularly in the wake of the collapse of postmodernism—feminist theorists located in the United States and Europe are calling for moving “beyond” the “endless” divides, impasses, and debates over questions of universality and difference, power, identity, etc. that have dominated feminist discussion through the 1980s and early 1990s leading to impasses, dead ends, and so on and turning to the exploration of cultural values as the means of renewing feminism and re-connecting it to the lives of women.

Here I would like to examine in a bit more depth a few examples only mentioned in Chapter 1 regarding the turn in feminism now, and then move on to what is needed to make feminism matter again. For example, in her book *Literature After Feminism*, Rita Felski remarks that “Feminist criticism is a widespread and well-known field of study that [...] has had more

impact on the teaching of literature than any other recent school of criticism. It has generated innumerable books, conferences, and articles and has its own phalanx of superstars” (5). But feminism, Felski continues, is a “mixed bag” that, in the wake of postmodernism, has become obsessed with a “fruitless zigzagging between universality and difference” (16). Now that feminism is “an established institution, not a fragile and delicate seedling,” Felski argues, it is time to “sort through” feminism and determine “what is worth keeping and what is not” (5). She claims that the source of this “fruitless zigzagging” is that feminism has for too long concerned itself with understanding cultural and aesthetic “values” as “ideology” and, therefore, as “nothing more than an endorsement of current power relations” (164). Feminist critique, according to Felski, has alienated the “female reader” and her “values” and, by implication, it is this critique of culture and values and their relationship to unequal material relations that has turned women off of feminism. “The feminist scholar who earns her living by analyzing texts,” Felski states, “is not doing the same thing as the female reader who picks up a book in the hope of finding several hours of enjoyable distraction” (53). In Felski’s narrative, feminism benefits more women—and is, therefore, more “valuable”—when it provides “hours of enjoyable distraction” or “pleasure and consolation in aesthetic experience” from women’s “exhausting and stressful lives” (53).

As it turns out, what Felski means by “sorting through” feminism is quite literally the *sorting out* of feminism any trace of a materialist analytics of inequality and exploitation under which the majority of women in capitalism live today. Felski’s discussion cuts out of consideration the material relations that have brought about increasingly “exhausting and stressful lives” for the majority of women, even after some class-fractions of women have become part of a “phalanx of superstars” and moved into positions of economic privilege and institutional power over other working women and men within capitalism. Instead, she celebrates

a symptom of the way in which the capacity of working class women in the North to critique their conditions of life—that is, their historical capacities to analyze the superficialities of culture under capitalism and uncover the material relations of exploitation and inequality behind them—has been so dismantled and paralyzed that most workers and most women in the U.S. today are immobilized in the face of the rising poverty rates for single mothers, declining social security, inaccessible health care, the rise of a national security state and the onslaught of imperialist warfare under the pretext of “freedom for women.”

In place of analytical critique and conceptual analysis of material relations behind these contradictions, Felski puts forward moral clarity and certitude over “our values” and “way of life.” She puts forward the “values” of disengagement from the political and retreat into the aesthetic as self-evidently valuable and in doing her argument converts the cultural intelligibilities that are now being used to justify imperialism into “new” values for feminism. Moral certitude over “values” and “our way of life” has become the conservative benchmark for ideologically translating U.S. capital’s *class* war to appropriate the cheap labor and material resources of the Middle East and Central Asia into a “culture war” over civilization, democracy, and freedom for women’s values. “Democracy” of “values” has become a political cover for the material transfer of wealth (exploitation) from the “rest” to the “West.” Perhaps Felski’s comments regarding a postcolonial literary canon are especially telling in this regard:

This literature no longer stands for sober reportage and single-mindedness of purpose; it is no longer viewed as an instrument, a weapon, or a tool. Instead, it is hailed as a polyglot, hybrid, Creole form teeming with multiple and conflicting voices. [...] Once seen as formally unadventurous, even dull, the postcolonial text is now on the cutting edge of aesthetic excitement. [...] Rather than a clarion call

to justice, the writing of the non-Western world is now a thoroughly ambiguous mélange of voices that is not easily deciphered. (159)

Felski suppresses analytical critique through articulating a new exotica which basically reassures a Western public that the non-Western (literary) world is now “safe” for travel, pleasure, and consumption. For both working class women in the North and workers in the South, Felski puts forward as the *other* of feminism now any “clarion call to justice.” Felski does not, of course, come out and say that “calls for justice” should be criminalized. Instead, she takes the more moderate position that we should “value” the end of such calls. But clarion calls for justice and oppositional critique are an objective outcome of class contradictions; they are an effect of capitalist social relations of production and the inequalities they produce. The “end” of such calls is also the effect of material developments in class contradictions. To value the “end” of “clarion calls for justice”—without the transformation of the class relations that produce exploitation and inequality—is to lead feminism to value the material practices that have led to the violent suppression of workers’ struggles against capitalism through national security juntas, global militarism, and pre-emptive strikes.

In a recent interview for Stacy Gillis *et al*’s *Third Wave Feminism*, Elaine Showalter’s comments make the class interests of the contemporary “renewing” of feminist values even more stark. She argues that feminism “cannot pretend anymore that no women have power” (61-62). “Feminism,” Showalter remarks, “has operated for several decades on an ethics of powerlessness” when, instead, for a feminism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “we need to investigate an ethics of power” (Gilles *et al* 61). Feminism as a critique of social inequality and economic injustice and the material relations that produce them, and as a mode of organizing to transform these relations, according to Showalter and a growing number of feminists, is over. It has

become “out of date” in the face of women’s achievements in leadership, government, and business. By focusing its critique on the way in which the existing social relations continue to oppress and exploit women, so this argument goes, feminism has gotten in the way of “making alliances” for real change. It is therefore time to “let go of feminism” (61-62). For Showalter, although “academics, social workers, and welfare mothers” may have “good ideas” they have no “real leverage” for making change and thus, she concludes, “I would invite some rich women to these discussions” (62). The (post-) feminism of today, she claims, needs to concern itself with “women who are powerful economically and politically as well as women who make things happen” (63).

Showalter’s comments are notable because they mark the degree to which many contemporary feminists have abandoned the principles of social transformation and materialist analysis of the oppression and exploitation of women that situates it as an effect of *social relations* and have increasingly moved toward the notion that women’s material conditions of life are of their own making. Showalter’s implication is that women—for example so called “welfare mothers”—are not oppressed and exploited by structurally unequal economic and social relations but by cultural *values* of “powerlessness”—what has been chastised in right-wing blogs such as *Free Republic* and *American RealPolitik* as a “culture of victimhood.” In fact, Showalter’s very use of the term “welfare mother” is an index of the degree to which many contemporary feminists—in the name of a “re-newed” feminism—have moved to the political and economic project of the right. For instance, Showalter’s argument that it is “rich and powerful women” who will make all the difference for a 21<sup>st</sup> century feminism is identical to the strategies of the Bush administration and its tax laws, which give tax breaks to the wealthiest segments of the population. Like Showalter’s view that it is wealthy and powerful women that

will benefit the most exploited and oppressed segments of the female population, the defense of corporate welfare is, of course, that such tax breaks, by giving the most wealthy and powerful economic rewards, will “trickle down” in jobs, resources, health care provisions, etc. for working men and women who do not otherwise have access to wealth. What historical evidence has shown however, is that such “trickle down” measures have actually resulted in a massive transfer of wealth to the wealthiest segments of society—a transfer that has contributed to a situation in which, compared to 30 years ago, the income of the top 1% of the U.S. has grown from 133 times the bottom 20% to 189 times the bottom fifth (“Ever Higher,” *The Economist*).

But the argument for the removal of materialist analytics of feminism now is not only emerging in the more obvious instances of Felski and Showalter, it is also emerging in a very different and more subtle language by feminist cultural theorists who would, likely, find Felski and Showalter to be unlikely allies. Robyn Wiegman, in the introduction to her anthology *Women’s Studies on Its Own*, remarks that “those of us trained by the founding generation [of second-wave feminists] have the opportunity to carry something forward, and to do so from within the positions of power that feminism in the academy has made possible for us” (2). Women who are working in positions of power in the institutions of capitalism (in particular in academia), in Wiegman’s narrative, should now give just due to earlier feminist critiques of inequality between women and consider their own positions of power as a “positive political inheritance” for feminism (2). But, she stresses, it is now time to move *beyond* debates over inequality and power between women and “think about the field otherwise” (3). These debates, according to Wiegman and other contributors to *Women’s Studies on Its Own*, only lead to an “impasse,” “general malaise,” and “faulty and damaging divides”—in short, the “crisis” of feminism. According to Wiegman there is a “difference that resides in the present” which now

requires feminists to rethink feminism. In this regard, Wiegman remarks: “how non-identical are our motivating factors and how newly legible are the contexts and problems that generate this important rethinking of the interventionary project of the field” (44). This is another way of saying that we are in a “new era” in which the social inequalities and material contradictions for women have fundamentally changed. According to Wiegman, in this so called “new era” the “central problematic and most important animating feature of feminism as a knowledge formation” is the “impossibility of coherence” of feminism or of our conception of women (170).

In each of these stories of “feminism now” there is assumed to be, as Wiegman remarks, a “difference that resides in the present” requiring a “rethinking” of feminism. Feminism has become an established institution in the culture of capitalism—from academia, to politics, business, international relations, non-governmental organizations, Hollywood, *haute couture*, and so on—and many women now occupy positions of power when they would not have a few generations ago. Feminism in the West, this story also presupposes, has become a progressively multicultural, transnational, polysexual, multilingual and “inclusive” movement with the criticisms of women of color, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons, and the “innovations” of poststructuralist and postmodern theories of differences. Feminism has, according to this narrative, gone from a movement that was once absorbed with a monolithic, white, straight, and logocentric conception of “Woman” to a “post-movement” that is a collection of diverse and contesting values, an incoherency of positions—what Felski calls a “hybrid polyglot” of inclusivity and what Wiegman calls the “impossibility of coherence.” Now that the “lessons” of the past few decades of feminism have been “absorbed,” there is something still standing in the



way of feminism causing it to come to an impasse or “crisis”—threatening its end or exhaustion—from which feminism now needs to be “freed.”

What we find out is that, according to these narratives, what is standing in the way of so called “feminism” is, simply put, the residue of any serious project of social transformation of the material relations of capitalism to bring about economic and social equality for women. The critique of unequal material relations and the struggle to transform them are the “old” values of feminism that only stand in the way of feminism and women and, so the story goes, it is time to move on to a “new” and “renewed” feminism. While most contemporary feminists formally distance themselves from narratives of “origin” “progress” and “end,” they in fact *assume* an end to feminism by virtue of the success (progress) of *some* women within capitalism—that some women have become more wealthy, powerful, and successful by gaining a greater share of the distribution of social wealth. Although they don’t openly declare an end to feminism, and therefore keep talk about feminism alive, the dominant understanding of feminism’s “crisis”—and the transition from the “old” to the “new”—is grounded on the assumption that feminism (or at least earlier generations of feminism) has achieved and accomplished what it set out to and that in the contemporary historical situation the “older” goals of social transformation for the emancipation of all women from exploitation and economic inequality *cause* conflict, division, crisis, and are no longer relevant today.

This culturalist understanding of “crisis” takes as its starting point the notion that “crises,” “divides” and “impasses” in capitalism are the effects of a loss of “ethics,” “morality,” “unity,” etc., when they are actually the objective consequence of exploitation and capitalism’s inherent tendency towards a falling rate of profit. Feminism is divided and in “crisis” because of deepening inequality for the majority of women in transnational capitalism brought on by

exploitation in production while some class-fractions of women have moved into positions of class privilege independent of men. This means that it is not critique, debates and public contestation over “women” and “power” that *cause* feminism to come into “crisis” rather it is the material contradictions of class society that have made feminism a divided terrain. The unsaid of these arguments for ending “faulty and damaging divides” and “renewing values” is that the crises of capitalism (i.e., the crisis of profit-making)—and the way it is wreaking havoc in the lives of women today—are the result of women’s struggles against and in opposition to capitalism and not the result of exploitation and capitalism’s tendency towards a falling rate of profit. Again, this is a standard conservative analysis in a slightly updated language: capitalism is not the problem for women; capitalism and its “efficiencies” are the solution for women. Anything that gets in the way of this “efficiency,” this productivity is pathologized as the problem from which feminism needs to renew itself.

In actuality, the crisis of feminism today—i.e., why feminists are now calling once again for “new values” to “renew feminism” against its impasses and “ends”—is not a “crisis of values” rather it is a *class crisis*; it is the effect of the *economic* crisis of wage-labor in capitalism. What bourgeois theorists call the “end” of feminism—or allude to as the “end” in their calls for “renewal” of feminism by removing from it materialist analytics—is simply a new dialectical turn: it is an ideological response to new changes in the *organization* of labor. Capitalism requires changes to its organization of labor not because of a crisis of *values* (culture) but a crisis of *profit* (economics). But it produces new values in order to conceal this. For example, post-Fordism is seen as the “end” of Fordism not because exploitation has ended but because niche marketing is needed by capital in order to stave off declines in profit. “Postmodernity” was seen as the end of “modernity” because a fledgling transnational capital

needed to break up the “welfare state” no longer needed for securing exploitable labor power for profit. Today, “postmodernism” in general and postmodern feminism in particular are increasingly the subject of discussions of the “end” because capital no longer needs the “ethics of difference” institutionalized in “post” understandings of difference and now needs a “post-difference” hegemony of “values” to ideologically unite isolated workers—whose lives have been fractured by the increasing concentration of wealth—together as consumers. In like manner, the spectre of the “end” has once again been raised in feminism because the class fraction that fought for the integration of (some) women into positions of wealth and power within capitalism has now achieved those goals and therefore sees the fulfillment of its own *class* ambitions as the “end” of the emancipation of all women from inequality and exploitation. What is called “end” in bourgeois feminism, in other words, is in material reality a new *class* development in feminism.

The “end” of feminism is not an “end” (termination) to the project of freedom for women rather, it is an *index of class struggle*. It has to do with the way in which private property relations and production for profit objectively—in their material relations—work to root out all forms of collectivity, reprivatize any gains made, and to convert all struggles for freedom from exploitation into social forces for maintaining profit. But these relations are not permanent; they are not the “end” of history and they are in tremendous instability and crisis. The taking of more and more desperate measures by capital to stave off collapse and decline in profit is an effect and symptom of this instability and structural crisis. These contradictions and their aftermath, moreover, are also gathering social forces for the transformation of class relations that can redirect feminism in new directions and enact a change in it. The re-emergence of “class” in public discourses in general (see for example the *New York Times* series on “Class Matters”),

among cultural theorists (see, e.g., Žižek's *Revolution at the Gates*) and in feminism in particular (even in bourgeois discourses such as Gibson-Graham)—are all *symptoms* of these gathering social forces. To be clear, I am *not* pointing to these examples as models and directions for the way class should be *analyzed* in the contemporary. Formally and theoretically the way class is understood in *all* of these examples is by and large still through the lens of ruling class ideology. Rather, what I am suggesting is that the re-emergence of “class” in public debate is an index of gathering material forces in opposition to capitalism. It is an indication that even in the struggle for basic subsistence, workers—which includes the majority of women—are and will increasingly find themselves collectively in confrontation with the owners of capital and with class *relations*, which increasingly stand as obstacles in the way of their material conditions of life. The re-emergence of class *and the decisive “cover up” of the class crisis* in contemporary feminism is also an indication that working class women in particular are increasingly brought into conflict with capitalism just to get basic needs met and are being brought into conflict with class relations themselves. It is on this *material basis* that question of “class” and its transformation continue to break through in public discourse in general and feminism in particular.

This dissertation has been an examination of the way the canonical feminisms have continued to conceal class contradictions and the crisis of capital and have re-directed social forces for transformation toward ends that reform capitalism; and how this updates women for the contemporary workforces of capitalism in order to stave off declines in profit for the owners. In short, it has been an examination of the way that the dominant feminisms have acted on behalf of the self interests of a minority of women, and therefore the material interests of capital in theory and practice. If feminism is to matter again and not become a force for maintaining profit

and ideologically covering over the crisis of capital and the condemnation of millions of people to living in the ruins of capitalism in crisis, it must break with liberal pieties about its “successes” and break from finding “agency” and “resistance” sites for women within the most reactionary and retrograde practices of “free trade” in capitalism. It must instead situate the struggle for women’s freedom firmly on the material basis of transforming class relations and work to support the development of fledgling social forces in the struggle to transform class relations.

One of the *first steps* for doing so is the development in feminism of an historical materialist analytics in the study of gender, social differences, culture and ideology under capitalism—what I have called a *labor theory of gender*—to contribute to developing the capacity of workers in general and women in particular to critique the ideology and culture of capitalism and to grasp the *material contradictions* confronting women in capitalism now. The task of feminist cultural theory is to produce materialist cultural critique that offers serious conceptual analysis of the ways in which the economic interests of the ruling class are converted into cultural values and used to obscure the material conditions under which working people, including the majority of women, are exploited. Feminist cultural critique today should demonstrate how culture under capitalism is reduced to ideology and deployed to obscure the violence and brutalities of transnational capital, and how it can be made to matter again in struggles for social transformation. While cultural theory—which is a knowledge practice and therefore part of the cultural relations in which human beings fight out material conflicts at the level of ideas—does not itself constitute material transformation for women, it is necessary in struggles for social transformation.

Feminism should help produce a materialist analytics of gender that helps people grasp that what unites the “old” cultural arrangements for women with the “new” cultural

arrangements for women is the exploitation of labor under capitalism. One of the resources for building historical materialist critique is returning to the writings of classical Marxists and Marxist feminists such as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Alexandra Kollontai, and Clara Zetkin and reconsidering their critiques of women and the working day in relation to women and the crisis of capitalism now. In these writings, what is foregrounded are not simply *how* gender has been “constructed” in culture and how to “resist” one mode of construction with another, but, more importantly, *why*: the fact that gender is an instrument of labor and a social relation of capital. Gender is used, for example, as a means to cheapen labor-power and make relative adjustments between the ratio of surplus labor to necessary labor within the working day. It is also used as a means of produce a “surplus population” pulling different sectors of the waged workforce in and out of the workforce depending on what is profitable for capital. The fact that gender is at root an instrument of labor is marked by the fact that as women have been pulled further into waged labor, they have also on a world scale fallen further into poverty. Marx explained the *class* basis of this economic development for women in the following way:

The value of labor-power was determined, not only by the labor-time necessary to maintain the individual adult laborer, but also by that necessary to maintain his family. By throwing every member of that family on to the labor market, spreads the value of the man’s labor-power [was spread] over his whole family. It thus depreciates his labor-power. To purchase the labor-power of a family of four workers may, perhaps, cost more than it formerly did to purchase the labor-power of one, but, in return, four days’ labor takes the place of one. In order that the family may live, four people must now not only labor but expend surplus labor for the capitalist. (Marx *et al*, *The Woman Question* 28)

The further integration of many women from exclusively unpaid labor in the home to part-time or full time wage-labor has overall not led to the increase in women's economic conditions of life in capitalism, but to the deterioration of women's conditions of life and to catastrophic increases in the wealth gap between rich and poor. What Marx shows here is that this is owing to the hidden relation in the work day in which the worker works part of the day to reproduce the value equivalent to her own subsistence, and part of the day to produce surplus-value for the capitalist. What seems like a "free exchange" that would then lead to the increase of the conditions of life of workers around the world as women have been pulled further into the *waged* workforce, actually ends us as an instrument to increase exploitation and increase poverty for *all workers*.

On the social surfaces of capitalism, women's working day has dramatically transformed in terms of the kind of tasks and occupations that have monopolized their labor-time: not only have women been more thoroughly inculcated into paid wage-labor so that now they are spending a significant time in paid wage-labor outside of the home, in addition to the unpaid reproductive labor in the family, women have also been drawn into new occupations—themselves the outgrowth of new divisions of labor—that require new skills and new technical knowledge of the contemporary workforce. The material conditions of women's lives in capitalism have not, however, fundamentally transformed so that the project of feminism has been "finished." On the contrary, the daily conditions of women's lives in capitalism have been determined by production for profit. For all of the changes on the surface of the working day of capitalism, and women's place in the technical division of labor, the structure of the working day in capitalism is still founded on the theft of surplus-labor. It is still founded on the fact that the minority privately own and control the means of production and therefore command over the

surplus-labor of the majority who only own their labor to sell in order to survive; it is still structured by the fact that workers work part of the day to reproduce the value equivalent to their own means of subsistence and part of the day producing surplus-value for those who own the means of production.

Even a brief comparison of the conditions of life in a socialist nation such as Cuba and an “advanced capitalist” nation such as the U.S. indicates the decisive difference that the relations of production (i.e., whether they are based on private ownership or public ownership of the means of production) have on all aspects of social life, including for women. The degree to which production is privatized or socialized determines whether or not (and to what extent) needs for all are prioritized over the profit of some. Cuba, a socialist nation under decades of stringent U.S. economic embargo in an attempt to force it to privatize its economy (euphemistically called “liberalizing”), nonetheless has put into place substantive socialized institutions which provide to all citizens healthcare, education, food, housing, childcare, paid medical and parental leave, economic security in retirement, social and medical support in old age, workers’ safety... Cuba has universal school enrollment and attendance. Public education (paid for out of the workers fund at no additional cost to citizens) goes from preschool to a Ph.D. In the span of 10 years Cuba reduced illiteracy rates from 40% to zero. In education, UNESCO has ranked it first out of all Latin American countries in math and science, equally among men and women. Even a World Bank study (which, as an instrument of capital, works to dismantle all semblance of socialized economies including Cuba) has remarked that Cuba’s education system: “pedagogically consistent in all areas” of the island not favoring some more than others (qtd. in “What do Cubans Stand to Lose?”).



Cuba has universal health care in which all citizens are entitled to publicly paid healthcare at all levels. All citizens are entitled to paid medical leave when ill. Parents are guaranteed paid parental leave and infant child care is publicly funded. Cuba's public healthcare includes guaranteed medical care at all levels from routine and preventative checkups and emergency care, to full neo-natal and pregnancy care, publicly funded abortion, multiple forms of birth control and STD protection, to hospitalization and long term care. All citizens suffering from any illness in Cuba, including people with severe illness such as AIDS get full medical care and guaranteed paid medical leave for missing work. As of February 2007, moreover, the National Assembly of Popular Power has voted to begin discussing legislation to make gender reassignment surgery part of its socialized health program, paid for out of the workers' collective fund at no additional cost to individual workers who request it. Sex education starts in elementary school and for over 20 years has included mandatory education of all young in understanding multiple sexualities (gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, transgendered sexualities) as a viable parts of human expression and social life. All citizens have the right to legally change their name and their gender identity (Wickham "When it Comes to Gay Rights"; "What do Cubans Stand to Lose?").

By contrast, in the United States: more than 45 million of its citizens go without health insurance. People are "rewarded" for surviving cancer and *living* with HIV by being denied medical coverage for the rest of their lives putting them at risk for severe poverty. Public education is being dismantled and eroded leading to spiking illiteracy rates. According to a 1998 U.S. government survey, *The State of Literacy In America*, 90 million adults are either functionally illiterate or nearly illiterate, having an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level or less (Roberts, "Illiteracy on the Rise"). Social security only exists on paper. Thousands of people who "own"

their homes have done so on the basis of government inflated loans (designed to transfer wealth from *workers* in the U.S. to *owners* of banks). In other words, what is “owned” in no way represents actual wealth for the majority as many found out when they lost their Enron retirements to corporate CEOs and many more are finding out as the real value of their homes is sinking leaving them as indentured servants to banks for the remainder of their lives. According to 2005 U.S. Census data “extreme poverty”—defined as a family of four who live off of less than \$9,903—is at a three-decade high and grew 26% from 2000 to 16 million people (“In US, Record Numbers”). In the U.S., under the dictatorship of private property, the frontier of “public health” and “sex education” in many regions consists of public policy makers still fumbling about over such “quandaries” as to whether or not one of the most archaic forms of birth control and one of the most primitive forms of protection from the transmission of STDs—the condom—should be publicly distributed to sexually active young people. AIDS patients are routinely left to die in poverty and isolation because they either don’t have insurance or are denied coverage for treatment from the health insurance cartels (whose *only* purpose is to profit off of human suffering). Gay-marriage has been constitutionally banned. Publicly funded childcare is non-existent and single female heads of household are one of the fastest growing poverty groups.

Many in the North Atlantic still attribute the gains made in matters of freedom for women and freedom of sexuality to the economic pressure on Cuba by the U.S. embargo to privatize its economy and to dismantle socialized production and collective welfare. For instance, transnational feminist Sujatha Fernandez in her article “With or Without Fidel” uses the “cultures of revolution” to eclipse the *economics* of revolution and, therefore, erases the material base of Cuba’s advances in matters of gender and sexuality, as well as the material basis of its

setbacks in these areas. In her cultural analysis of contemporary Cuba, she attributes “the emergence of a critical layer of artists, intellectuals and activists in Cuban society” and “greater tolerance toward opposition groups” (by which she means, for example, feminists and gay rights activists) to the “political and economic *liberalization* of the early 1990s” (emphasis added).

This, however, is a seriously misleading analysis that is also quite consistent with the analysis of Jo Ritzen, the former Vice President of Development for the World Bank, who argues that “liberalization” leads to “more freedom for people to pursue their desires for a higher standard of living.” “Liberalization” is merely a euphemism for the dismantling of public industry and the reprivatizing of social wealth concentrating it into fewer hands. What is most telling here are related comments Ritzen makes along with the Former President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn. To be clear from the outset, the World Bank, of course, has had no hand in Cuba’s advances because the World Bank is an instrument for capital to transfer wealth into fewer hands and, it observes the U.S. embargo. Nonetheless, both Ritzen and Wolfensohn laud the advances made in Cuba in education, healthcare and other basic human institutions as “remarkable” and, Ritzen adds, “if Cuba shows that it [i.e., socialism] is possible, it shifts the burden of proof to those who say it’s not possible.” Yet, Ritzen also remarks that this “may not be easy to sustain in the long run”—but “not so much because the economy may collapse and be unable to support such a system.” Rather, according to Ritzen, it is that “any transition after Castro passes from the scene would permit more freedom for people to pursue their desires for a higher standard of living” but the trade off would be the dismantling of the social institutions it has now (qtd. in “What do Cubans Stand to Lose...”). As one writer put it in response to these comments, emphasizing the ruling class “irony” of the Ritzen’s remarks:

One way or another, socialism will pass from the scene and “freedom” will reign—a form of “freedom,” however, which is somehow incompatible with the very best health and education system in Latin America! You may wonder who will benefit from these “opportunities for more prosperity?” Apparently *not* those who would be using public health care and education—average working Cubans! Apparently with all of their newfound “prosperity,” they would no longer be able to afford these levels of services! Regrettable perhaps, but that would be the price of “progress” World-Bank-IMF-style in Cuba’s newly globalized economy. (qtd. in “What do Cubans Stand to Lose...”)

“Liberalization”—i.e., privatization of social wealth and its concentration into the hands of owners—as we see in the case of the United States above contains a *hidden* cost to workers in general and historically especially to women in particular. The deterioration of socialized resource hits women and other relatively marginalized workers first. When social reproduction such as health care for aging or disabled persons is not provided publicly out of the social wealth produced by workers (because this wealth is being privately appropriated by the owners), it becomes the private responsibility of the family to pay for social reproduction out of their wages (or to labor more hours in the home). In this sense workers are not only exploited in the workplace but wealth gets concentrated into fewer hands as they have to take on privately more and more of the economic responsibility for basic reproduction just to make it to work the next day (to be exploited again). To put this another way, the family and kinship are *not simply affective units or relations of affinity and desire* as, for example, Judith Butler argues in her discussions of “kinship.” The family (whether or not it is legally bound or recognized) is *an economic unit* in capitalism. It is a private property relation and the main institution through

which capital forces workers to shoulder the cost of their own reproduction. Historically this has especially fallen to women who are used in capital as reserve labor, to pull in and out of the workforce in reproduction and production depending on what is most profitable.

If one examines the *material basis* of the question in the relations of production one can begin to see that the pressure to so called “liberalize” (to privatize public industry and wealth) by the U.S. led to the deterioration of *all* Cuban’s conditions of life—for example, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the *embargo* reduced the caloric intake of the Cubans by one third. It is under these conditions, as well, that many women were economically compelled to take up sex work and other forms of sex tourism. The deterioration of women’s conditions of life is a direct result of the onslaught of capital fronting as the U.S.’s “Democracy Pact” with Cuba (the main legislation that mandates economic embargo). In other words, the relative increase in the commodification of gender and sexual relations is a direct consequence of a class war fronting as the United States. Any understanding from the material basis of the issues has to examine the way in which Cuba is the site of continued class contestation—between socialism and capitalism. It is in its *class struggle against* capitalism—and therefore against the cost of “liberalization” to its citizens and its deterioration of *collective* conditions of life—that Cuba has not only significantly let go of relics of class society (such as the ideology that homosexuality is simply a practice of decadence under capitalism) but struggled to put in place basic human institutions for women and queer workers that prioritize the need of all not the profit of some. So much so that it excels over so called “advanced” societies in these areas (see Wickham, “When it Comes to Gay Rights, is Cuba Inching Ahead of the USA?”). Far from disproving the relationship of gender and sexuality to class, labor, and production relations this provides indication of the way in which freedom of sexuality and freedom for women are dialectically related to freedom from

material exploitation and to the socialization (public ownership) in the relations of production. Moreover, it is historical evidence for the case for a feminism serious about social transformation and not simply engaged in what Lenin called “liberal pieties” about the inclusion of the difference of “women.”

On a final note, for many feminists, my suggestion to return to Lenin in particular, will be difficult to consider because of the place that Lenin has had in particular in feminist debate. It is worth mentioning here that the return to Lenin in general and reconsidering his understanding of “theory” (in *What is to Be Done?*) and imperialism (in *Imperialism—The Highest Stage of Capitalism*) would actually shed a great deal of clarity on debates in contemporary theory today in a time of the dismantling of public critique and “wars without end.” But in my comments here, I will focus on Lenin’s discussion of women and feminism. Lenin had a sharply critical relation to the *bourgeois* feminism of his time which he saw as placating and condescending toward the majority of women of the world by “appeasing them with reforms” and “liberal pieties” useful to *some* women and aimed at “lulling [working class women] into inaction and keeping them on leading strings” (Marx *et al*, *The Woman Question* 91). When he referred to “feminism” and critiqued and opposed it in his writing, it is this *ruling class* feminism that he was opposed to. However, he did not take the ideological and practical limits of the *bourgeois* feminist movement to be a cause for the *indifference* of revolutionary movements to the “woman question” or to what he called “the burning needs, the shameful humiliation of women in bourgeois society” (91).

For example, in an interview with German Marxist feminist, Clara Zetkin, Lenin started from the premise that the “woman question”—women’s unequal conditions; brutality and violence against women by employers, managers, men; political oppression, exploitation,

growing poverty; the whole nexus of contradictions and inequalities in the workplace, the family, sexual relations and all parts of social life confronting the majority of women—derives from “the inseparable connection between the social and human position of the woman, and private property in the means of production” (Marx *et al*, *The Woman Question* 89). Far from popular belief, which has charged that Marxism advocates for “waiting for the revolution” before the “woman question” needs to be addressed, Lenin argued quite the contrary: that the “woman question” should be considered *not* “women’s problem” but “part of the social question, of the *workers’* problem” (90; emphasis added). Women should, he argued, be regarded as full and equal members of the revolutionary party “with equal *rights* and *duties*” and should be understood not as “support” but as revolutionaries who are “equals in transforming the old economy and ideology” (90, 91). Yet, he argued, at the same time, this does not mean *dissolving* the struggle against oppression and exploitation of women into the struggle for socialism and “closing our eyes” to the specific class contradictions confronting women in capitalism and deteriorating their conditions of life. Nor did it mean turning a blind eye to the limits *within the revolutionary party itself* and softening critique of practices which maintained the exploitation of women. Lenin harshly critiqued tendencies within the revolutionary party itself that did not consider the development of a mass movement of working women to be “an important part of *entire* party activity” (92; emphasis added). He, moreover, critiqued the “occasional recognition of the necessity and value of a powerful, clear-headed Communist women’s movement” in the party as a “platonic verbal recognition, not the constant care and obligation of [i.e., needed within] the party” (92).

And most importantly, Lenin argued that doing away with the “right and dignity of a man” and developing a mass movement of working class women within the party, as without in

society at large, must be done on the basis of making clear *material* advances for women in matters of work, education, marriage, family, law, sexual relations, health, childcare, and so on a priority, recognizing that without doing so women would not be in the *material* position to act as full and equal participants in revolutionary struggle. But, he added, this must be done without limiting the struggle for women to the limited reforms within bourgeois democracy in capitalism which redirect these struggles to solutions profitable for capital but exploitative for women (92-93).

Understood on this basis, feminism is not finished because freedom for women is not simply success in the conventional sense—that is, success in distribution for some women by becoming wealthy and powerful—but what Engels called “the reintroduction of the entire female sex into public industry” (74). This, however, is not merely a change of the “gender” division of labor—changing the distribution of exploited wealth to some women and relocating the majority of women from unpaid work in the family into new exploited wage-labor forces within capitalism—rather, it requires the abolition of private property relations through the transformation of the social relations of production. “Ending” feminism, in other words, requires transformation of the *material relations of production* in which women are exploited. Feminism does not “end,” namely, until class relations end.



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