Naturalizing Power

ESSAYS IN FEMINIST CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Edited by
Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney

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embedded in symbolic systems as well as elaborated through contextualized, material practices. Because of our interest in understanding the relation between gender and other forms of inequality, feminist anthropologists have begun to explore the ways in which other relations of inequality are naturalized.

The papers in this volume analyze a variety of cultural practices in which inequality and hierarchy appear to be logical consequences of people’s identities and the order of things. The natural order that people and institutions are perceived to reflect is sometimes construed as rooted in biology, sometimes as functional and rational, and sometimes as god-given.

The American kinship project was launched at the University of Chicago in the 1960s—a time thought to be pretty radical. Neither David Schneider nor his colleagues could ever have foreseen that the truly radical implications of his cultural analysis would be picked up by feminist anthropologists; even less could they have imagined that thirty years later a group of feminist anthropologists would form a panel at the AAA meetings and publish a volume to tell him where their conversations with him are taking them.

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The essays in this volume explore ways in which differentials of power come already embedded in culture. That is what we mean by naturalizing power, for power appears natural, inevitable, even god-given. The focus of these essays is those domains in our society that are crucial for people’s identity—family, sexuality, race, nation, religion.

The question of identity has always been important, and in the past few years it has come to the forefront of academic and popular discourse in our society. A good deal of the concern with identity obscures the fact that the question “Who are we?” entails the questions of origin, “Where do we come from?” This in turn implies a question of orientation: “Where are we going?” The concern today is an indication that we have lost our way; we don’t know where we’ve come from or where we are going, and thus we do not know who we are. The problem is ontological as well as social—just who is the “we,” anyway? Not only has it seemingly become problematic to assume a “we,” but many people appear to have lost ways of knowing how to think about who the “we” is—that is, of forming bases of community and solidarity—except in the most narrow and constricting of essentialisms.

Answers to each of these questions involve biological, social, and ontological dimensions which, in any one person, were once assumed to be coterminous even though they could be separated analytically. Today, however, with the increasing circulation of peoples globally, identities are being fragmented, hyphenated and in conflict, and can no longer be put back together in the same old way. The verities on which identity—whether of gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, or religion—have traditionally been based no longer provide the answers, in part because of the contact and conflict between peoples and in part because the explanatory schemes upon which identity was based have been shown to rest not on the bedrock of fact but suspended in narratives of origin.

Narratives of origin tell people what kind of world it is, what it consists of, and where they stand in it; they make it seem natural to them. By
anchoring individual lives to some kind of larger, cosmic order, identities are secured (Geertz, 1973:90). Within the context of origin stories, people spin meaningful lives. Narratives of origin incorporate classificatory schemes that describe the order of things, as well as the relations between things and between different kinds of people. For people whose origin story it is, these schemes take on aura of the sacred. As Mary Douglas pointed out some time ago: “holiness consists in keeping distinct the categories of creation” (1966:53).

When the order is disrupted or when people are uprooted from the sites where these stories and identities make sense (such as is occurring with the contemporary movement of peoples on a world-wide scale), then not only are identities challenged but so too the hegemonic order. For some people this situation contributes to an erosion of faith in the explanatory schemes, while for others it leads to championing their own particular visions more emphatically—as, for example, in the reinvigorated debate between creationists and evolutionists.

Origin Stories

Origin stories are a prime locus for a society’s notion of itself—its identity, its worldview, and social organization. Anthropologists often include origin stories of the peoples they study, recognizing, after Malinowski, that “an intimate connection exists between the word, myths, the sacred tales of a tribe, on the one hand, and their ritual acts, their moral deeds, their social organization, and even their practical activities, on the other” (1954:96). Yet these same anthropologists hesitate at the threshold of their own society, reluctant to explore their own origin myths (whether religious or scientific), as these have naturalized their own world view. They have treated their own origin myths as taboo—set apart and sacred—under the notion that their stories of origin are, in some sense, real and true while those of others, especially primitive others, are myth and superstition. This view is, itself, embedded in an evolutionary paradigm—first there were myths, then religion, and finally science. Myths are something relegated to the dim past, something we have outgrown. Because of the lingering view of myth as false stories, we have ignored the extraordinary power of myth to provide identity to a community and meaning to individual lives.

We propose to treat origin stories neither as false tales nor as possible windows into real true origins, but as representations of origins. Stories of origin are told to every generation and thus affect how people imagine themselves to be. New contexts and changed circumstances can imbue the stories with new meanings and generate new interpretative challenges; in the process both the understandings and the stories can be transformed.

Stories of origin have to do with notions of “coming-into-being,” simultaneously physiological, social, and ontological. Yet while all peoples have origin stories, origin stories are hardly the same world-wide. Not only do the specifics vary by culture but so too the form; for example, not all origin myths are myths of creation. Anthropologists and others have often carelessly elided these two ideas—origin and creation—without realizing that the different assumptions and trajectories inherent in each type have different implications (for example, for notions of time and history). In other words, the assumptions embedded in the origin stories have wider ontological meaning that affects the way the world is conceived. Rather than a story of creation, for example, some stories of origin imagine emergence from underground, others the perpetual transformation of one thing into another. A monistic or pantheistic system has quite different implications from one in which a Creator creates a world which is not only different from but dependent on that Creator.

The notion of Creation is part of the dominant origin narrative in the West—the story is told in Genesis, common to both Jews and Christians, and in a slightly different way to Muslims. It is unlikely that devout Jews and Christians would accept a Hopi or Australian aboriginal origin myth as a replacement for Genesis. Because of our embeddedness in a monotheistic system, we often assume there must be one origin myth, yet a number of cultures have a variety of origin stories to describe the origin of a variety of things. Origin myths, precisely because they hook individual identities to ontological realities, are not substitutable; they describe the natural and supernatural orders that people often fight over and are willing to die for.

In the story told in Genesis, God created the world and everything in it. He did it by himself; he had no partner. Nor did he create it out of himself, but by fiat, by his word. The world (nature) was created material, dependant for its existence upon the Creator and subordinate to Him. In the biblical story, God is symbolically masculine while nature becomes symbolically feminine, and these symbolic associations have implications for the way men and women are imagined to be. In this origin myth, Man was the epitome of creation and often imagined as the mediator between God and nature; Man was given dominion over nature and ordered to increase and multiply. Yet the power to procreate was given to the male of the species.

Nature, in this cosmological picture, has a very specific meaning and place—a place and meaning it could not possibly have in a dualistic or pantheistic worldview. In the biblical world view, God’s order and plan were imposed or implanted in the world, and the world of nature obeyed God’s commands. What was “natural” was god-given. Early modern scientists such as Bacon, Copernicus and Galileo assumed they were discovering God’s order when they explored nature. That is to say that the nature
they were exploring was already of a specific kind, and imbued with a specific form.

From the Order of Creation to the Natural Order

In the nineteenth century the Biblical worldview began to collapse and God began to drop out of the picture—at least among certain members of the intellectual elite—and what was left was a rule-governed Nature, Nature stripped of its cosmological moorings and therefore presumably generalizable to all peoples. Rather than the dichotomy between the natural and supernatural, what was left was “nature” vs. what man did with it—namely, “culture.” This move obscured the specificity of the concept of “nature.” It precluded an awareness that it could not possibly have the same meaning everywhere. But without a similar notion of nature, could “culture” have the same meaning? Culture, for us, is after all dependent on this concept of nature. What is considered “natural” cannot be assumed a priori, as Strathern (1980) has so convincingly argued in “No Nature, No Culture.” Indeed, how could nature and culture be considered universal categories in vastly different world views? The fact that the opposition nature-culture derived from and related to a very specific world view at a specific historical moment went unnoticed, and instead its supposed universal character became part of the assumptions and project of anthropology.

The nature-culture dichotomy, we suggest, was a precipitate of the upheavals in 19th century European and American society. The turmoil within these societies—due to industrialization, questions about slavery and women’s rights as well as increased contact with other peoples and other classificatory schemes—all worked to call into question the basis of their own. The biblical world view that had provided the master narrative within which individual lives were placed and found meaningful was being undermined from within and without. Biblical scholars began to question the origin and composition of the text and suggested that, rather than the Word of God transmitted directly to Moses, it was composed from fragments of different provenance. Discoveries of ancient, sophisticated and literate cultures in the ancient near east challenged the biblical view of ancient society and, especially as a number of parallels to the stories in Genesis began to emerge, the Bible’s claim to uniqueness was severely undermined. As the foundations of the 19th-century Euro-American world were crumbling, social philosophers—Bachofen, Darwin, Maine, Morgan, and others—scrambled for more solid ground, which they felt would be provided by science. They sought scientific explanations for origins. The extent of their anxiety can, perhaps, be gleaned from the number of titles directly related to origins—of society, of species, of institutions such as marriage and the family, and of the world itself. Determined to get to the bottom, they searched for scientific bedrock on which to build a more secure order. In the process, however, many assumptions and categories of the biblical order were unwittingly built right back into the foundation. Rather than being spurred to question their own schemes they anxiously responded to the disruptions “by constructing evolutionary accounts of “how it all began” ” (Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako, 1982:6), both at the human and non-human levels. But in the shift from the biblical account to an evolutionary one, something of the god-given quality remained—that is, the accounts appeared to naturalize the orders of creation.

The social was embedded in the natural, but in a particular version of it. The vision of nature that permeates both the social and the natural accounts is of the Hobbesian variety—the struggle for survival in a situation of scarce resources, with self-interest as a motivating force. This vision of the socio-economic order was then read into the natural world. Marx, the first to point this out, noted: “It is remarkable how Darwin recognizes among beasts and plants his English society with its divisions of labor, competition, opening of new markets, ‘inventions’ and the Malthusian ‘struggle for existence’. It is Hobbes ‘bellum omnium contra omnes’ ” (quoted in Sahlin, 1976:53). But in this struggle, not only did Man just naturally arrive at the top of the “tree of life,” but so too did the white Euro-American represent the epitome of civilized Nature.

“We are the only people who think themselves risen from savages; everyone else believes they descend from the gods” (Sahlin, 1976:52–53). Yet, ironically, the title of Darwin’s book on human origins was Descent of Man, rather than Ascent of Man. In Darwinian theory the natural order retained both the hierarchical order of Creation and its god-given quality; the difference is that the power no longer came from God, it came from Nature. No longer did the principle of “divine election” determine who would be saved; instead “natural selection” determined who would survive.

The secularization of the hierarchical order of Creation was exemplified in social evolutionary models such as that constructed by Morgan. Morgan’s goal was to find the origin of the American Indians and through them, perhaps, the origin of and the relationship between all the races of mankind. When he realized that the Iroquois system of relationship differed in important respects from the system with which he was familiar—the European system of kinship—he thought he had discovered the method of arriving at an answer to his questions. Morgan made several crucial assumptions. First, he assumed that in kinship terminology systems the oldest memorials of human history were deposited and one needed only to find the key to tap this vein. Second, and like many others at that time and since, he assumed that kinship was a matter of blood and sex, and therefore he reasoned that different systems reflected different forms of marriage—forms that would
obscure the “real, true” blood relations. These, of course, were known to the Euro-Americans, and the acquisition of that knowledge was fitted to constitute one of the great achievements of humankind. Finally, he assumed that even though the vocabulary might change, the structure of the various systems might provide a means to trace the ancient divergence of nations from least complexity to the most. At a later date, he construed these differences in evolutionary sequence and ranked the peoples of the world in hierarchical order. Not surprisingly, the Australian aborigines came to occupy the lowest rung, as they did in numerous other studies of the time, whereas the Euro-Americans were at the summit. Kinship, which has been at the core of anthropology since the nineteenth century, has been a primary site for the development of a natural progression that echoes the hierarchical order inherent in the Great Chain of Being.

What is More Natural than Sex?

Evolutionary theory or ideas have so permeated human consciousness in the West that it has seemed “natural” to compare human society and behavior to that of animals. Once this projection has been effected “the same theories are transferred back again from organic nature into history and it is claimed that their validity as eternal laws of human society has been proved” (Engels quoted in Sahlin, 1976:54). Especially are sex and reproduction held to be quintessentially natural activities; indeed they are considered our “animal” behavior. And when we attempt to answer the child’s perennial question “Where did I come from?” we often employ metaphors that claim parallels between humans and the animal kingdom such as “the birds and the bees.” Knowing that this was the cultural euphemism for “sex education,” Sylvia Yanagisako and her sister, as teenagers, jokingly berated their father for his failure to tell them about “the birds and the bees.” They were surprised when their usually unrelenting father agreed that he had been remiss and decided that it was time to do so. They became even more incredulous as he proceeded in a very serious and ponderous tone and were totally unprepared for his concise summation of the “facts of life.” “The average bird,” he said, “is bigger than the average bee!” Although he was making fun of the association, this joke would totally backfire in cultures where the association between animal reproduction and human “coming into being” is not made. This has been humorously recounted by David Schneider in describing his perplexity when confronted by ‘obviously’ contradictory statements of the Yap about procreation.

First, Schneider said, there is the simple question of whether coitus did or did not result in pregnancy” (1968:127, emphasis added). The Yap (a group of people living on an island in the Pacific) told him of all the promiscuous women who nevertheless remained childless “and, they added, quite properly too, for women as promiscuous as they could never be rewarded for such behavior.” To prove their point that the connection (between coitus and pregnancy) is not necessary, they went on to point out a very ugly woman with whom no man would think of engaging in sexual relations, yet there she was with two children. What complicated the problem, however, was when he came upon several men removing the testicles of a pig.

“Always the anthropologist, I did not assume that I knew why; I asked. Makes the pig grow much bigger, they said. But, said I slyly, could a sow ever get pregnant from such a boar? Not from that one! they affirmed. It needed a boar whose testicles had not been removed. I was unnerved, I admit. So I went back over the whole matter slowly and carefully. Castrate the pig and he grows larger than if he is castrated. Right! But a castrated pig cannot get a sow pregnant. Right! And then they added once again, if you want a sow pregnant you must get her to a boar which has not been castrated. They copulate, the sow gets pregnant, the pigs are born.

But, I protested, everyone has been telling me that coitus does not make women pregnant. That is correct they said. But they were puzzled and so was I . . . I had presented them, I felt, with logically inconsistent statements that fairly cried out for explanation. They could not see what my problem was since they had provided me with the full array of necessary, correct facts and to them there was no problem. So we kept at it until I again put the contradiction to them. . . . suddenly one man saw what my problem was, for he put it plainly and emphatically: ‘But people are not pigs!’” (Schneider, 1968:127–28, emphasis added)

Schneider goes on to say that “once that point was made, the rest followed in happy, logical order. I had obviously assumed that biological processes operate for all animals and had included man among them. But they had assumed that no one but a fool would equate people and pigs” (ibid. 128).

So thoroughly has the process of naturalizing sex and reproduction been accomplished that it is difficult for a Westerner to realize this has not always been the case. “Reproduction” as the term to refer to the process of coming into being came into use in the 19th century and was at first considered a quaint metaphor, hardly a description of fact. The metaphor consisted of analogizing human procreation to that of animals and plants. Previously the process was discussed in one of three ways: in terms of procreation, with clear allusion to Creation; in terms of generation, with the stress on generativity; or, more simply, the biblical “begetting and bearing,” highlighting what were conceived to be the male and female roles in the process. These roles clearly had very different meaning and value. In Genesis only males beget, and there are long chapters of who begat whom as the basis
of the patrilineage. Women, in contrast, were those who bear; they were conceptualized as the means through which what was begotten comes to be.

This is not unlike the Aristotelian explanation of human procreation in Generation of Animals (1979), another extraordinarily influential text that naturalized male power as it constructed notions of gender that have persisted, in one form or another, to this day. Supposedly a work that was empirical and biological, Generation of Animals incorporated a number of prior assumptions that framed the evidence. By virtue of their power, men were thought able to heat the blood so that it would become more concentrated (concocted) as it evolved into the essence of semen. The female analog, menstrual blood, remained in an undifferentiated state and was the matter that semen in-formed. Semen was imagined to impart the form as a carpenter or artist gives form to a block of wood (Aristotle, 1979:113). Nothing physical or material passes between one and the other. While menstrual blood was the source of the (living) body in the non-living, semen was the vehicle through which the sentient soul (that which distinguishes animals from plants) and the rational soul (that which distinguishes humans from animals) were allegedly transmitted.

Although all women have sentient and rational souls, according to Aristotle, they receive them from their fathers; women, therefore, depend on men for their full humanity. Because the rational soul was free of its physical element (transmitted through the semen but not of it) Aristotle imagined that it was related to the eternal and divine; it was seen as analogous to an element belonging to the stars, "ungenerated, indestructible and divine" (Aristotle, 1979:171).

"That is why in cosmology they speak of the nature of the earth as something female and call it mother while they give to the heaven and the sun and anything else of that kind the title of generator and father." (ibid. 11)

This is not so different from Bachofen's statement in the 19th century: "Triumphant paternity partakes of the heavenly light, while childbearing maternity is bound up with the earth that bears all things" ([1861] 1973:110).

Aristotle's views were reintroduced to the West by Muslims in the Medieval period. A number of eminent Christian, Jewish and Muslim theologians—Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Giles of Rome, Maimonides and Ibn Sina, Averroes—utilized his theories not just to systematize theology, but to rationalize the social implications of these patriarchal religious traditions. This included rationalizations of notions of gender, including that of God. Aquinas, for example, argued that the attribute of "Father" was not symbolic but represented a real quality: "for we can say that paternity is God, and that paternity is the Father" (Summa Theologica, I, q.32, a. 2).2

Men and women became defined by and identified with what they contributed to procreation. In contemporary Euro-American belief, "reproduction" has been reduced to its natural character and is associated with women; women have been defined by and confined to their reproductive role. Men, on the other hand, have not been so confined because a man need not become a father to partake of the power assigned to the male role in procreation; instead that power is abstracted and generalized as creativity, productivity, genius.

Gender definition and value have been inherent in the Western theory of procreation, but procreation is not just about the natural; it includes an ontological dimension. Because gender is at the heart of these socio-religious systems it is not surprising that issues of gender and procreation—marriage, family, birth control, abortion, sexuality, homosexuality, new reproductive technology—are at center of contemporary debates in our society, for new beliefs and practices are not just about the private, domestic domain, but challenge the entire cosmological order.

Blurred Boundaries

By bringing to light the gender definitions and values inherent in theories of procreation—both ours and those of others—feminist cultural analysis challenges the assignment of sex and reproduction to the category of "biology." As with our rejection of the assignment of women and families to a "domestic" domain that stands in opposition to a "politico-jural" or "public" domain (Yanagisako 1979, Yanagisako and Collier 1987), this calls into question the analytic domains conventionally used by social scientists as well as by those they study. We argue instead that cultural domains, like social institutions, are human-made and only appear to be natural.

Our challenge to conventional distinctions among analytic domains has been incited, in good part, by David M. Schneider's denaturalizing of kinship through his questioning of its supposed universal, genealogical basis (1964, 1968, 1972, 1984). Until Schneider demonstrated that anthropological kinship theory was rooted in the cultural system of symbols and meanings to which most North Americans ascribe, anthropologists assumed that all people who knew the "facts of life" reckoned their kinship relationships using a genealogical grid in which relations of blood (consanguinity) and marriage (affinity) were mapped. The genealogical relation between any two individuals could be determined using combinations of the basic units of father, mother, husband, wife, son and daughter (Schneider 1984). Any particular kinship system was thought to be a cultural elaboration of the biological facts of human reproduction, and anthropologists recognized that there were significant differences in how far out these genealogical maps extended
and how the relations in them were classified. But these differences, which constituted the basis of anthropologists' classifications of "kinship terminological systems," were considered variations of "The Genealogical Unity of Mankind" (Schneider 1984).

In contrast to other people's "classificatory" systems of kinship terminology, which lumped together categories of kin that we would keep separate, our "descriptive" system of kinship terminology was viewed as accurately representing natural categories.

"As a system it is based upon a true and logical appreciation of the natural outflow of the streams of blood, of the distinctiveness and perpetual divergence of these several streams, and of the difference in degree, numerically, and by line of descent, of the relationship of each and every person to the central Ego. It is therefore a natural system, founded upon the nature of descent and may be supposed to have been of spontaneous growth. (Morgan 1870:468)

The "natural system" to which Morgan referred was, we now recognize, a cultural system of symbols and meanings which attributed to "the streams of blood" connections of diffuse, enduring solidarity.

Schneider's argument that kinship theory in anthropology is rooted in the beliefs of our own cultural system has led feminist anthropologists to recognize that similar assumptions pervade anthropological analyses of a number of other institutions and cultural domains. Like other symbolic anthropologists of the 1960s and 1970s, Schneider did not address the question of how inequality is embedded in cultural systems—including its categories of persons and domains—in part because he did not follow out the logic of the specificity of symbols, but instead made abstractions of them. He failed to explicate the meanings of other crucial elements besides "blood" in the "facts of life" out of which American kinship is constructed, such as the different and differentially-valued contributions of fathers (generative seed) and mothers (nurturant soil) in the creation of babies (Delaney 1986; 1991). Likewise, though he recognized that coitus is a key symbol of American kinship, he overlooked the gender hierarchy entailed in most Americans' expectations about who should be "on top" in sexual intercourse. Yet Schneider's explication of the folk model of biology underlying both anthropological and American cultural models of kinship laid the groundwork for analyses which link ideologies of the "natural" to systems of inequality.

Because of our commitment to challenging the gender status quo, feminist anthropologists have been at the forefront of these attempts to situate ideologies of natural identities within structures of inequality. We have brought cultural analysis the insight that hierarchies of status and power come already embedded in symbolic systems which, however, can be known only through contextually specific cultural practices. This has proven a crucial step in the development of critical analyses of ideologies of character, power, and substance, especially in the realm of kinship and gender (see for example Delaney 1986 and 1991; Strathern 1988 and 1992; Yanagisako and Collier 1987).

If the meanings of "male" and "female" are not, as we have shown, just about natural differences, this prompts us to explore the ways in which these meanings articulate with other inequalities which are supposedly structured by other differences. We need to ask not only how these other inequalities are themselves naturalized—i.e., made to appear the logical outgrowths of other "facts of life"—but how their distinctiveness from gender is naturalized. This has led us to critically examine the boundaries between gender and other categories of difference. Among these are sexuality, race, nation, ethnicity, and religion. As Schneider has noted, since the mid-nineteenth century anthropologists have viewed institutions and cultural domains as the basic building blocks of society. The "quartet of kinship, economics, politics, and religion" (Schneider 1984:181) was purported to fulfill functions considered indispensable to the orderly reproduction of society. Despite the shifts in anthropological theory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this traditional quartet has proven resilient. Yet, it has never been clear where one cultural domain ends and another begins. In our own society, for example, rules and practices of property inheritance blur the boundaries of the domains of kinship and economics. "Ancestor worship"—a term formerly popular in the comparative study of religion—challenges the distinction between kinship and religion.

Previous works, including those by some of the authors in this volume, have demonstrated the benefits of investigating the permeability of cultural domains and their mutual structuring (see Strathern 1981 on kinship and social class; Yanagisako 1985 on kinship and ethnicity; Yanagisako and Collier 1987 on kinship and gender; Delaney 1991 on kinship, gender, and religion). A productive question is to ask how culturally-specific domains have been dialectically formed and transformed in relation to other cultural domains, how meanings migrate across domain boundaries, and how specific actions are multiply constituted. In other words, we need to historicize our domains and trace their effects.

Abandoning the assumptions that have defined the analytic domains of "kinship," "gender," "politics," and "religion," however, is not the same as abandoning the study of the meanings and relations previously confined to those domains. The notion that the members of the "social constructivist school" who have purportedly "deconstructed kinship" are calling for the end to kinship studies is an unfortunate misunderstanding (di Leonardo 1991; Scheffler 1991). This misunderstanding appears to stem from an
inability to differentiate those relations and institutions conventionally included in the domain of kinship from assumptions about their basis in the "facts of life." When, for example, we call into question the assignment of "motherhood" to the domain of "kinship" defined as rooted in sexual reproduction, we deny neither the existence of physiological processes of human reproduction nor the importance of studying ideas and practices of motherhood. Rather, by questioning the assumption that motherhood in our society as well as in others is fundamentally structured by these physiological processes, we suggest paths of inquiry that will lead us to the productive analysis of other social processes and cultural meanings that are inscribed in motherhood. In other words, we argue that we should discard the assumptions that have defined kinship as a domain of study, but not the study of those relations previously located in that domain.

Our argument that "kinship" and "gender," like "race" and "religion," are not rooted in a universal set of facts is not an expression of an "idealistic" position that denies the existence or significance of material and bodily realities. We accept the existence and salience of physiological processes, but we reject the idea that they are the same, immutable "facts of biology" that form the core of the domain of kinship and gender everywhere. As Marilyn Strathern (1992) acutely notes, it is a misnomer to call those who argue this point social constructivists, because this implies that gender (and kinship) is constructed on certain stable, essential facts of life and nature. Like Schneider, we think that what constitutes kinship and any other cultural domain must be discovered rather than assumed (Schneider 1972).

Cultural domains are culturally specific, but they usually come with claims of universality, which are part and parcel of their seeming to be given-in nature and/or god-given. The apparent logic and naturalness of these domains is a consequence of the way they are made real through the institutional arrangements and discourses people encounter in everyday life. Unlike explicit ideologies that can be traced to people with particular social positions and interests, hegemonic understandings are more difficult to trace to human agents (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991). Instead, they seem to emerge from each person's own experiences. The discreetness of domains is encountered directly by people whose lives are organized along institutional fault lines that are themselves the products of hegemonic cultural distinctions. As a consequence, religion seems to be about god rather than about gender; the family seems to be about reproduction and childrearing rather than about gender and religion.

In addition, cultural domains usually come with prohibitions against reading across them. The confinement of cultural exegesis to the space inside domains is especially rigid when it comes to the sacred. Sacred meanings may be read into other domains, but the reverse is not acceptable. Indeed, what defines the sacred is that which is sealed off from readings emanating from other cultural domains. The meaning of the sacred can only be revealed by those with cultural authority to interpret it. If the sacred is open to divergent readings by people who bring with them ideas associated with human social life, the claim that it is "god-given" is undermined.

What constitutes the sacred, of course, differs from one instance to another. For anthropologists, the sacred has generally been coterminous with religion. "Primitive" religion, with its myths of origin and ritual practices, constituted the sacred in comparative ethology. As social scientists working in a discipline rooted in liberal humanism, anthropologists have felt we can look critically and dispassionately at other people's religion, but not our own. This is in part because our religion generally has been construed as "real" religion, whereas those of others have been construed as myth and fantasy. It is also in part because liberal humanists tend to be distanced from religion, which they view as an archaic "survival" of the pre-modern past in the modern world. In the implicit social evolutionary scheme to which most anthropologists have subscribed, the rationalism of science was expected to displace the mysticism of religion, rendering it inconsequential, if not non-existent. At most, religion would become a matter of sentiment and individual choice rather than continue to be a generative force in cultural production. Embedded in this social evolutionary scheme is an implicit progression of human understanding: from myth to religion to science. This formulation is self-serving rather than self-reflexive, and misses the fact that for liberal humanists the sacred is not religion, but science. For us, science is the sacred domain we are prohibited from reading across, because the truths claimed by science supposedly transcend human agency. These truths, it is argued, reside in the natural world and are only discovered by humans. The claim that science is separate from culture naturalizes a hierarchy of knowledge, much as does the claim that religion is separate from culture. It entails a prohibition against reading across the boundaries of the sacred whose truths are said to exist apart from human subjectivity and agency.

Reading across domains, including the sacred, is by no means new to our discipline. It has been a standard analytic strategy of cultural anthropologists, who have happily read across other people's cultural domains. Indeed, the holistic analysis of culture, the dominant paradigm of North American ethnography, is rooted in the practice of reading across the domains of other people, especially those in so-called "simple" societies that are not characterized by formal social institutions like our own and so are deemed to be "less-differentiated." Among these other societies, the intermingling of the sacred and the political (e.g., African kingship), of ritual and economy (the potlatch), and of religion and kinship (ancestor worship) rendered necessary reading across cultural domains, however sacrilegious or foolish this might seem to the natives.
Cultural domains in our supposedly more functionally and institutionally differentiated society, on the other hand, could not be read across so cavalierly. In particular, our sacred domain of science, which includes the "scientific study of cultures," could not be read across. The topics we chose to study, the human dilemmas and puzzles we chose to investigate, and the analytic categories and methods we found to be most useful could be traced neither to our economic system nor to our political hierarchy. It certainly could not be thought of in relation to our gender hierarchy. After over a decade of work by feminist scholars of science (Haraway 1989; Martin 1987; Traweek 1988), however, it has become apparent that studies of primate behavior, immunology, and particle physics are not quite so independent of our cultural vision of gender and our cultural concerns and predicaments.

The purpose of this volume is to reverse the conventions of anthropological reading rules concerning cultural domains and cultural others. Ten of the eleven essays in this volume are read across cultural domains in ways that breach the reading rules of anthropology as well as of the natives studied. In all of these cases, the natives are members of our own society or a society whose cultural system shares much with our own (members of the Turkish nation-state). These ten essays constitute a genre of reading across cultural domains that are defined as separate, isolated, and constituted by different rules. It is a critical genre of reading across genres, especially those which are supposedly dependent on social life and whose truths are said to be rooted in nature. What makes it a genre of feminist cultural analysis is that the incentive to challenge the boundaries of the domains and their knowledge claims has emerged from a feminist critique of the fixed truths of gender.

In her discussion of genres among the Mountain Ok of New Guinea, Harriet Whitehead cautions against cavalier readings across meaning domains in other societies. Whitehead argues that we may be doing interpretive violence to other cultures when we disregard their reading rules in ways that we find useful in critically analyzing our own culture. Just as we cannot assume that others' cultural domains are organized like ours, we cannot read across these domains as we would ours and expect the same analytic benefits. Rather, we need to pay careful attention to local patterns of meanings-in-practice, figure out what constitutes particular cultural domains, and find ways to appropriately and productively read across them. We then need to proceed carefully to construct a compelling reading across domains, considering the culturally specific evidence required to make such a reading convincing. This is not to say that breaking other people's hegemonic cultural rules is taboo, for complying with such a proscription would make cultural analysis very dull indeed. Rather, such breaches must themselves emerge from a cultural analysis that is grounded in the meaningful practices—including contestations over meanings—of the people studied.

An argument for feminist cultural analysis cannot escape confronting the issue of the usefulness of the concept of culture for feminist theory. Perhaps no other concept in the social sciences and humanities has been subjected to as unrelenting a critique over the past decade as that of culture. The combination of post-structuralist, post-colonial and postmodernist critiques has laid bare the totalizing, homogenizing, essentializing, and orientalizing modes in which the culture concept has been deployed. While most anthropologists today acknowledge these abuses of the culture concept—and many were aware of them before the recent round of criticisms—there is considerably less agreement as to whether these failings are inherent in the concept or a result of its reductionist misuse. Anthropologists, after all, have never agreed on a single concept of culture.

A good deal of the recent critique of the concept of culture has focused on its role in regimes of power and knowledge that have legitimated the political and economic domination of those studied by those who have studied them. Out of the political project of dismantling hierarchies of "cultures" has emerged a broader epistemological critique of an objectified notion of culture as something which exists apart from the representational politics of those who employ the concept. Some critics have argued that the idea of cultural "difference" is what makes possible distinctions between groups of "natives" (conceptualized in primordial, essentialist, static, and ahistorical terms) and "us" (metropolitan Western society conceived in just the opposite terms). Abu-Lughod, for one, suggests that...

"...'culture' operates in anthropological discourse to enforce separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy. Therefore, anthropologists should now pursue, without exaggerated hopes for the power of their texts to change the world, a variety of strategies for writing against culture." (1991:138)

A promising theoretical strategy for "writing against culture," according to Abu-Lughod, lies in shifting to the increasingly popular terms "practice" and "discourse." Drawing on Bourdieu (1977), Abu-Lughod claims for "practice" a focus on "strategies, interests, and improvisations over the more static and homogenizing cultural tropes of rules, models, and texts" (1991:147). Discourse, on the other hand, derives from Foucauldian "notions of discursive formations, apparatuses, and technologies...[and] is meant to refuse the distinction between ideas and practices or text and world that the culture concept too readily encourages" (1991:147). Abu-Lughod's research on an Egyptian Bedouin community led her to think in...
terms of discourses rather than culture as she grappled to make sense of what appeared to be

"...two contradictory discourses on interpersonal relations—the discourse of honor and modesty and the poetic discourse of vulnerability and attachment—which informed and were used by the same individuals in different contexts." (Abu-Lughod 1991:162)

These terms, Abu-Lughod suggests, might “enable us to analyze social life without presuming the degree of coherence that the culture concept has come to carry” (1991:147). When combined with self-reflexive attention to the historical connections between the community of the anthropologist and those studied and an ethnography of the particular that avoids the generalizations inscribed in terms such as “Bedouin culture,” such a theoretical shift would enable anthropology to avoid its past tendency towards “othering” and instead bring out the “similarities in all our lives” (Abu-Lughod 1991:157).

Ethnographic representations of cultural difference are certainly produced by people placed in historically specific relations to those they represent. These representations, as feminist critics of colonial discourse (Mohanty 1989; Trinh 1989; Mani 1987) have shown, can legitimate colonial domination when they are part of an orientalizing discourse. But ethnographic representations of cultural similarities are no less the products of people placed in historically specific relation to those they represent. Assimilating “them” to “us” can do violence to what people cherish that is distinct about themselves. And, claims of cultural similarity can also justify forms of social domination. The naturalizing of gender inequality, for example, is commonly based on observing “similarities” in the relations between women and men in different societies. These “similarities” are adduced as evidence of a common “human condition” that makes gender hierarchy inevitable. Likewise, superficial assessments of similarities in the roles and sentiments of women in different societies can lead to the naive conclusion—rampant in U.S. white feminist scholarship in the 1970s—that all women can readily comprehend each other’s suffering, sorrows, and joys. In short, they can lead to patronizing representations of other women as “ourselves unclothed” (Rosaldo 1980).

The attention to discursive formations inspired by Foucault has the advantage of forging connections between forms of knowledge, institutional structures, and regimes of power. Cultural analysis of the 1960s and 1970s tended to overlook these connections, even while noting the cultural and historical specificity of systems of meaning. The insights of Foucauldian discourse analysis have contributed to feminist cultural analysis an awareness of the connections between gender meanings and structures of inequality. However, discourse has not proven to be an adequate replacement of the culture concept.

The analysis of discourse in our own society tends to follow institutional divisions or other social divisions: we have medical discourse, legal discourse, minority discourse, feminist discourse, and so on. An example of this tendency is Martin’s (1986) analysis of the metaphors of biological reproduction in contemporary North American medical textbooks which reveal a dominant image of the body as an information transmitting mechanism, managed by an organic structure of authority with obvious parallels to institutional forms of authority in our own society. Martin argues that the metaphors used in medical texts to describe physiological processes have profound implications for the way in which a change in the basic organization of the system (for example, menopause) is perceived. For example, our negative view of menopause derives not only from the devaluation of aging women by American culture, but is a logical outgrowth of a model of the body as a hierarchical information-processing system (Martin 1987:42). Menopause is described in medical textbooks as a breakdown of a system of authority, a breakdown in communicative function that resonates with cultural assumptions about the relations between authority and order and between hierarchy and function in society.

Given this cultural model, it is not surprising that the upper-middle and middle-class white women among Martin’s informants speak of the body as separate from the self. In terms consistent with dominant medical metaphors, these women describe the body as sending signals to the self, as needing to be controlled by the self, and—as Martin concludes—as aspects of a fragmented self. In contrast, the black and white working-class women in Martin’s study were reluctant “to give the medical view of menstruation” (Martin 1990:78). Rather than attribute this reluctance to a “radical polyphony” or “heteroglossia,” Martin proposes that

“working-class women have simply been more able to resist one aspect of the scientific view of women’s bodies, either because it is not meaningful to them or because it is downright offensive, phrased as it is in the negative terms we have seen. The ironies here are multiple: middle-class women, much more likely to benefit from investment in the productive system, have swallowed a view of their reproductive systems which sees menstruation as failed production, and which is divorced from women’s own experience. Working class women, perhaps because they have less to gain from productive labor in the society, have rejected the application of models of production to their bodies.” (1990:78)

On the one hand, Martin appears committed to a theory of discursive practices in which people internalize and voice discourses which serve their class interests. On the other hand, she treats the working-class women’s
accounts as if they were direct readings of bodily experience and not, like the middle-class women’s accounts, discursively constructed. Because Martin is intent on demonstrating that working-class women’s representations do not conform to the middle-class discourse of failed production, she characterizes the former merely as a discourse of resistance. She does not go on to scrutinize the other ideas that seem to pervade working-class women’s accounts—ideas about women’s essential nature, the inevitability of childbirth, and the natural link between gender and reproduction.

Martin’s exclusive focus on medical discourse leads her to ignore the multiplicity of non-medical, but equally, if not more, pervasive discourses which shape women’s bodily subjectivity in the U.S. There are, after all, other popular discourses at play here, both specialized public, mass-media and more class and ethnically specific folk discourses on natural bodily functions, pornographic discourse, advertising representations of women’s bodies, fundamentalist Christian discourse on sex, sin, and abortion, and racist discourse on race and sexuality. It is not just among the working class, but among the upper-middle and middle classes as well, that other discourses about women’s bodies circulate. The model of fragmentation Martin distills might be traced to these other discourses, as well as to medical discourse affirming the production hierarchy of capitalist society.

When anthropologists study societies such as the Egyptian Bedouin that appear not to have formal institutional domains like our society, they tend to construct discourses into broad cultural domains or “interpersonal relations,” which they further subdivide into coherent systems of meaning such as “the discourse of honor and modesty” and “the poetic discourse of vulnerability and attachment” (Abu-Lughod 1991:162). An overarching cultural coherence connecting these discourses is not claimed—indeed, they may be deemed to be contradictory, as in the case just cited. Instead, coherence is located within each discourse.

In addition to having simply relocated claims for coherence, these analyses of discourses too readily grant the ethnographer’s analytic units an ethnographic status, without adequate ethnographic evidence as to whether and how people actually organize their thinking and acting. While institutions and cultural domains of meaning have a profound impact on shaping ideas and practices, people do not necessarily organize their everyday actions according to these divisions. Rather, people think and act at the intersections of discourses.

All social action is constituted and interpreted by a multiplicity of discourses. Monodiscursive analysis is limited by a rather stodgy notion of the relationship between discourse and social action, which is in turn rooted in a social cosmology that is a surprisingly conventional one. To assume that “medical discourse” is what shapes “medical practice,” discourse on “interpersonal relations” is what shapes “interpersonal relations,” and “family discourse” is what shapes “family relations” is to accept these discursive domains as given, rather than analyze them as the products of historically specific social institutions—thus losing the key Foucauldian insight regarding the historicity of domains. This reinforces the boundaries between cultural domains, which is counter to our argument that it is productive to read across them.

An understanding of discourses and practices requires an understanding of the broader frames through which people connect them. We agree with Strathern that

“... culture consists in established ways of bringing ideas from different
domains together." (1992:3)

Culture is what makes the boundaries of domains seem natural, what gives ideologies power, and what makes hegemonies appear seamless. At the same time, it is what enables us to make compelling claims for connections between supposedly distinct discourses. In other words, it is both what makes jokes funny and what makes possible our reading across domains in prohibited ways.

We do not intend to defend holism and retreat to an indefensible concept of culture as an isolated, discrete system of symbols, meanings, and practices which are soldered together into a seamless whole. Neither do we want to celebrate a postmodernist dissolution of culture as fragments of meaning which take on the biogenetic aura of a recombinant system of information—as if people can choose bits and pieces and put them together as bricoleurs into whatever meaningful arrangement they like. These “bits and pieces” come not just with histories of embedded meanings which do not allow for the free play of signification; most of them also come through institutional structures which do not allow individuals to freely reinterpret them. Catholicism, for example, is not just what individual people say it is. There is a pope, an institutional apparatus, and structures of power quite removed from what any individual thinks.

The concept of culture has been, in spite of some lapses, a productive site for discussion and debate about difference and similarity. It has also been a productive site for continual assessment of the coherence among a society’s discourses and practices. This creative dialectic of the culture concept is lost when it is reduced to one of its poles. The productiveness of the concept depends on our commitment to use it as an incitement to continually rethink what is same and what is different, how they are so and what this means; and to continually reassess the fragmentation or coherence of discourses, domains, and institutions—whether they hold together and how. Once this heuristic tension is resolved in favor of either side of the opposition, culture is no longer good to think with.
Feminist Cultural Analysis

The essays in this volume focus on cultural processes of identity-making and social group formation that naturalize identities and social bonds by claiming for them an autonomy from human social agency. All these identities and bonds are ascribed a nonhuman basis, whether in nature, biology, or god. All legitimize hierarchies of difference in which power relations are embedded. In short, all naturalize power.

Anthropologists have been perhaps most conscious of these processes of naturalizing power in their studies of race. The argument that race is not a system of biological differences but rather a system of social categories constructed in terms of biological difference has been a central tenet of cultural anthropology in the twentieth century. The essays in this volume demonstrate that ideologies of ethnicity, sexuality, nation, and religion are also hierarchies of difference in which power relations are embedded. All draw on notions of gender, sex, reproduction and descent. It is the common basis of these processes of identity-making which makes it highly productive to read across them, to understand each in relation to the others.

Unlike race, ethnicity, nation, or religion, gender is not a domain. It is a system of difference that has not been the basis of social groupings of likeness. Yet, gender pervades all these domains, and this is why we think feminist cultural analysis is especially crucial for rethinking them. If holism is about keeping categories separate, then feminist cultural analysis could be considered sacrilegious, because we are breaking a taboo by reading across culture.

The essays by Susan McKinnon, Janet Dolgin, Rayna Rapp and Kath Weston in the first section, "American Kinship and the Facts of Life," question the taken-for-granted quality of the facts of life which are assumed to be the basis of sex, reproduction, and the family. The family, construed as a natural unit of diffuse, enduring solidarity, takes on an aura of the sacred in social discourse. However, even the biological facts of the family are judged differently depending on class, sexual, or marital status. Taken together these essays ask, if even in the families we choose—whether through gay and lesbian unions, new reproductive technologies, or genetic screening—much of the same ideologies of gender and biogenetic kinship are reinscribed. They also reveal how cultural notions of kinship in the U.S. are increasingly articulated and authenticated through scientific discourse without scientists or the general public being aware of the role of culture.

The essays by Anna Tsing and Harriet Whitehead in the second section speak to the question of what birds and bees have to do with each other, not to mention what they have to do with human sex and reproduction. Even when we are more aware of cultural mediation, as when we talk about "the birds and the bees," we need to be mindful of the comparisons we make. Modes of reading and comparison cannot be generalized across cultures; they must take into account specific systems of classification and meaning.

As Carol Delaney and Brackette Williams argue in the third section, "The Origin of Nations," other forms of diffuse, enduring solidarity—including the nation and race—are also rooted in systems of classification and meaning. The enduring bonds which constitute the nation and its citizens are predicated on naturalized notions of sex, reproduction, and the family. The title of this section is a clear allusion to Darwin's The Origin of Species which both offended people and provoked new ways of thinking because it muddied the categories of human and animal.

The final group of essays (by Phyllis Chock, Sherry Ortner, and Sylvia Yanagisako) are all about the American dream of moving up the social hierarchy through making one's self. They show how celebrations of social mobility can simultaneously naturalize inequality—leading to the conclusion that it is your own fault if you did not succeed. The class position of individuals and ethnic groups change and even ethnic categories change, but ideas about the origin of these distinctions in sex and reproduction and their transmission through the family remain.

Notes

1. Anna Tsing also recounts this story in her essay in this volume.
2. Carol Delaney wishes to thank Louise Doire, a graduate student at Harvard Divinity School, for calling her attention to this statement of Thomas Aquinas.
3. We thank Harriet Whitehead for suggesting this phrase.
4. When women have attempted to make it so—as in the recent second wave women's movement in the West—it has provoked fierce resistance.

References


