

**Gender, Embodiment and Cultural Practice:  
Towards a Relational Feminist Approach**

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## Abstract

Establishing similarities between embodied practices typically posed as fundamentally distinct (such as ‘African’ female genital cutting and ‘Western’ cosmetic surgery) has become increasingly common within feminist literatures. Cross-cultural comparisons can reveal the instability of essentialist binaries constructed to distinguish various groups as culturally, ethnically and morally ‘different’. These strategies, however, are also problematic. In their emphasis on cross-cultural *commonalities* between practices, they often efface historical, social and embodied particularities, while reifying problematic notions of ‘culture’. When employed by privileged ‘Western’ feminist theorists, such strategies can involve appropriations which affirm, rather than challenge, dominant discursive hierarchies. Consequently, the crucial links between violent histories of embodied differentiation and contemporary relations of power are not effectively interrogated and problematic binaries remain intact. This thesis thus seeks to develop a more historically-grounded, relational and politically accountable feminist approach to addressing essentialist constructions of embodied ‘cultural practice’.

Mapping feminist and other critical literatures, I identify three main approaches to linking embodied practices: the ‘continuum’, ‘analogue’ and ‘subset’ models. Through three case study chapters, I conduct a comprehensive analysis of these models and their potential discursive-material effects. Each case study focuses on a different set of practices which have been linked: ‘African’ female genital cutting and ‘Western’ body modifications; Muslim veiling and anorexia; and ‘passing’ practices associated with the categories of race, gender and sexuality. I argue that rather than illustrating how particular practices or their imagined subjects are fundamentally similar, we should examine how they are constructed relationally *in and through one another*. This is possible through genealogically tracing how their historical trajectories of production intersect and inform one another. As an alternative to commonality-based comparative approaches, I advocate a ‘relational web model’ which traces multiple constitutive connections within a network of differently situated embodied practices or figures.

'I Carolyn Pedwell, hereby state that this thesis is my own work and that all sources used are made explicit in the text'

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## Chapter 1:

### Feminist Approaches to Embodied Cultural Practices

#### Cross-Cultural Comparison, (Anti)Essentialism and (Anti)Humanism

Western women have confronted the same problem of female genital surgeries that African women face today albeit in our own cultural context.

*Isabelle Gunning, 1991:226*

Making links between gendered practices rooted in divergent cultural contexts has become increasingly common within feminist literature on multiculturalism and cultural difference. Such cross-cultural comparisons are predominantly employed as a strategy to counter cultural essentialism – the production of culture-specific generalisations that depend on totalising categories such as ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’, ‘First world’ and ‘Third world’ or ‘the West’ and ‘the Muslim world’. For example, Isabelle Gunning (1991) argues that although African female genital cutting (FGC)<sup>1</sup> has been represented by Western commentators as a ‘barbaric’ and ‘patriarchal’ cultural practice of the ‘other’, female circumcision is ‘part of our own history’ (211). Circumcisions performed on American and English women as a ‘cure’ for mental illness in the nineteenth century, she suggests, were explained by ‘the same kind of rationales’ as

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen the label ‘female genital cutting’ (FGC) to refer to the broad group of procedures which are, or have been, practiced (with great variation) within some African and Middle countries (i.e. Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Egypt, Mali, Kenya and Ethiopia) and their diasporic communities. I have selected the label FGC as it avoids the pejorative tone of the term ‘female genital mutilation’ as well as the equation with male circumcision that the label ‘female circumcision’ implies. I also avoid using the terms ‘clitoridectomy’ and ‘infibulation’, which refer only to more specific forms of FGC. These are value-laden choices, however, as there is much controversy regarding what an appropriate label to identify such practices is, or whether it is appropriate to use one label to identify such a wide variety of practices. Some alternative labels that have been employed include the terms ‘female genital surgeries’, ‘female genital operations’ and ‘female genital alterations’.

African practices of FGC are today, such as a belief in their health benefits (203, 218). African FGC and American clitoridectomies should thus be seen as cultural ‘analogues’, she insists.<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Mervat Nasser (1999) argues that Muslim veiling represents a contemporary ‘equivalent’ to the growing epidemic of anorexia in the industrialised West. Both practices represent strategies on the part of women and girls that respond to ‘conflicting cultural messages and contradictory cultural expectations’ (407). Feminist critics have also linked Muslim veiling and ‘Western’ beauty practices, such as the wearing of makeup (Jeffreys, 2005), and fashion trends from ‘Wonderbras’ and ‘mini-skirts’ (Hirschmann, 1998) to the contemporary ‘porno-chic’ style (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006).<sup>3</sup>

Cross-cultural comparisons have also been made between particular gendered forms of domestic violence. In order to deconstruct essentialist thinking which associates ‘culture’ with practices of dowry-murders in India but not with domestic-violence murders in the United States, for instance, Uma Narayan (1997) shows how the two practices represent similar systemic problems of violence that affect roughly the same proportion of women in each nation. She explains how this connection is often unidentified by Western commentators because, ‘in contrast to “dowry-murder”, fatal forms of domestic violence in the US are a problem lacking a term that “specifically picks them out” from the general category of “domestic violence”’ (95). This ‘absence’, she maintains, ‘operates to impede Americans from making the connections that would facilitate seeing dowry murder as a form of domestic violence’ (96). Similarly, Lama Abu-Odeh (1997) offers a comparative review of the ways in which ‘crimes of passion’ in the United States and ‘honour killings’ in Arab contexts have been constructed and evaluated within American and Arab legal frameworks. She seeks to interrogate ‘the fallacy of both the orientalist construction that the East is different

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<sup>2</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Three, African, Asian and Middle-Eastern rooted practices of FGC have also been compared to a host of other ‘Western’ practices such as: cosmetic breast augmentations, operations on intersex babies, body modification procedures (such as piercing, branding and cutting), transsexual surgery, female reproductive procedures (such as episiotomy, hysterectomy and caesarean sections), abortion and eating disorders, as well as various ‘non-Western’ practices including, Chinese foot-binding and Indian sati (or widow burning).

<sup>3</sup> Parallels have also been drawn between Muslim veiling and other ‘non-Western’ practices such as surgical hymen repair (Saharso, 2003).

from the West and the almost contradictory idea of international feminism that all violence against women all over the world is the same' (287) <sup>4</sup>

While these comparative feminist approaches differ in a number of ways, it is significant that they each frame their cross-cultural comparisons as a means to interrogate and disrupt cultural essentialism. Culturally essentialist representations 'depict as homogenous groups of heterogeneous people whose values, interests, ways of life, and moral and political commitments are internally plural and divergent' (Narayan, 1998:87-88). Furthermore, through constructing various cultural groups and practices as fundamentally and hierarchically distinct, culturally essentialist discourses often reify ethnocentric and racist notions of cultural difference. From the pervasive 'us/them' rhetoric employed to 'legitimise' the Bush-Blair led 'War on Terror',<sup>5</sup> to the ubiquitous media representations of 'the veil' as a sign of Muslim women's 'backwardness, subordination, and oppression' (El Guindi, 1999:3), culturally essentialist discourse is widespread within the contemporary socio-political sphere. As several feminist critics emphasise, cultural essentialism has also pervaded feminist theory and practice, from second wave feminist calls for 'liberated Western women' to save African women from the 'unspeakable atrocity' of female genital mutilation (Daly, 1978; Hosken, 1981), to contemporary liberal feminist discourses which construct minority (i.e. foreign) cultures as 'more patriarchal' on the whole than mainstream (i.e. Western) cultures (Okin, 1999:15). Through illustrating the ways in which particular gendered cultural practices involve similar bodily procedures and/or personal and social motivations and rationales, feminist cross-cultural strategies seek to reveal the constructedness and instability of the essentialist and imperialising boundaries which distinguish various groups as culturally, ethnically and morally 'different'. They also aim to encourage critical thinking about the geo-political relations of power through which particular gendered practices are represented and (re)produced and query how the term 'culture' is employed differentially on the basis of embodied axes such as race and nation. These are clearly important goals.

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<sup>4</sup> See also Volpp, 2000 and Phillips, 2003, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Cultural essentialism of course also figures in Al Qaeda's representations of 'America' and 'the West'.

It is my contention in this thesis, however, that a more in depth inquiry into the possible effects of constructing various gendered cultural practices as ‘similar’ ‘equivalent’ or ‘universal’ is necessary. It is crucial to ask, for instance, what such cross-cultural constructions of commonality may leave out or cover over. On what bases are links between specific practices made and could crucial historical, social and embodied particularities be effaced in the process? In extracting particular practices from their discursive-material<sup>6</sup> trajectories of production, might the construction of cultural ‘analogues’ or ‘equivalents’ elide the complex relations of power through which particular cultural practices have been constituted? Furthermore, it is important to consider what views of ‘the body’ such feminist comparisons employ. If any attempt to see a multiplicity of embodied practices as equivalent or continuous necessarily depends on imposing one particular vision of embodiment across differently located subjects and practices, might it not be the case that any such vision will always function to include some bodies while excluding others? Might such a well-intentioned, yet ultimately homogenising, move perpetuate epistemic violence<sup>7</sup> in obscuring the processes of ‘othering’ which continuously (re)produce embodied ‘differences’? The motivations on the part of particular theorists for comparing various practices should also be explored. Are such comparisons impelled exclusively by a desire to counter cultural essentialism, or are there also other theoretical and representational objectives at work here? How can comparative feminist approaches be evaluated within the context of global ‘Western’ hegemony, and specifically the dominance of Euro-American academic production?

These questions relate, in part, to a larger trajectory of thinking about the relationships linking gender, embodiment and cultural difference. I began thinking about the

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<sup>6</sup> I use the term ‘discursive-material’ to convey the complex coimbrication of ‘discursive’ and ‘material’ processes and structures of power.

<sup>7</sup> I follow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) who employs the term ‘epistemic violence’ to describe ‘the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other’. ‘This project’, she writes, ‘is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-tivity’ (278-9). Epistemic violence involves establishing ‘*one* explanation and narrative of reality...as the normative one’ (italics in original) (Spivak, 1999:267) through silencing or disavowing other ways of knowing.

connections among these three axes during work on a Masters dissertation which sought to compare how the practices of disordered eating and Muslim veiling are constructed and portrayed. This project sprung from a particular frustration I had with the way that 'Western cultures' are continuously portrayed as 'better for women' (offering more substantive opportunities for physical and mental development, fulfilment and freedom) than 'non-Western', and particularly, 'Muslim' cultures. The realm of body image and eating disorders initially appeared to be an arena in which this imperialising assumption might be revealed as untenable. If veiling, and the embrace of Islamic ideologies that the practice represents, serves to empower some Muslim women, ensuring that they are not affected (to the same extent or in the same ways) by the body-related cultural pressures that distress large numbers of mainstream Western women, perhaps this was a case study which could turn the Western/non-Western, non-Muslim/Muslim dualism on its head.

I soon came to see, however, that simply reversing this binary was not going to get me very far, as it would leave the problematic binary structure intact and hence perpetually open to re-reversal. Furthermore, it clearly positioned 'Muslim women' as being *beyond* the binary in rather fetishising ways. I saw that in order to avoid reifying the original binary structure, I needed to examine and exploit the complexities and contradictions within the two groups constructed as 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim' women. I proceeded to explore the particular privilegings and exclusions that my reversed Muslim/non-Muslim dualism entailed, interrogating the essentialist assumptions about agency and culture that it continued to uphold. I ended the dissertation with an attempt to further deconstruct the divide between the two groups by illustrating some of the ways that eating problems and veiling might be *linked* in respect to their mutual focus on the female body. Particular forms of both practices could, I argued, be seen to involve individual attempts to gain and assert control within cultures which regularly manipulate women's bodies in an effort to protect and project hegemonic social, political and economic interests.

At the time, this deconstructive and comparative cross-cultural methodology seemed to be the most effective way to disrupt culturally essentialist binaries. Since then, however, I have become convinced that such an approach is not sufficient to move beyond the binary structure, and, in fact, may serve to reify dominant relations of power. Drawing similarities between eating problems and veiling in this context involved privileging ‘gender’ above and beyond other axes of embodied differentiation and making broad generalisations that did not allow me to say anything particularly meaningful about the complexities of either set of practices. Instead, it left me in a position of political paralysis. This thesis thus begins in a sense from where my dissertation ended. It asks the critical question of ‘what comes next?’ after we recognise and revalue a particular essentialist binary. How can we theorise the relations between various gendered cultural practices posed as fundamentally ‘different’ without reifying essentialist notions of cultural difference *or* collapsing into disembodied sameness? And how can we disrupt and resignify problematic self/other, West/non-West, non-Muslim/Muslim, First world/Third world binaries in the process?

In this introductory chapter, I provide an overview of some of the cross-cultural linkings of different embodied cultural practices that have been made by feminist theorists in recent years. My focus here, and throughout the thesis, is on analysing the ways in which particular comparisons are made within feminist (and other relevant) texts and the potential social, political and theoretical effects such approaches produce. In the first section, I examine some of the cross-cultural parallels made between FGC and other body modifications and link such strategies to broader feminist criticisms of cultural essentialism. I consider some of the motivations underlying feminist cross-cultural approaches and identify some of their potentially positive outcomes. I then move on to examine some of the more problematic effects associated with such comparative techniques. Drawing on critical feminist perspectives on embodiment, I suggest that in maintaining an emphasis on similarity or sameness, many cross-cultural comparisons risk eliding crucial particularities as well as the complex relations of power through which various practices are constituted as morally, politically and culturally ‘different’ from one another. I then consider how varying feminist motivations for

deconstructing culturally essentialist binaries may be linked to the idea of an ‘unfinished’ humanist project. I conclude by considering some epistemological and methodological concerns relevant to my project and outlining the structure of the thesis.

## **Crossing Cultures: Comparative Feminist Approaches**

The cross-cultural comparison most commonly made by feminist theorists in the service of anti-cultural essentialism is that between ‘African’ female genital cutting and ‘Western’ body modification practices, such as cosmetic surgery. Cosmetic surgery procedures, several theorists argue, can cause comparable levels of pain and suffering and may appear equally horrific (and condemnable) to ‘Third world women’ as FGC may appear to many Western women. As Isabelle Gunning (1991) asserts of breast augmentation surgery, ‘how bizarre and barbaric must a practice like implanting polyurethane covered silicone into one’s breast be perceived by one not accustomed to the practice’ (213). In a similar vein, Sheila Jeffreys (2005) suggests that both ‘female genital mutilation’ and ‘cosmetic surgery practices such as breast implant surgery’ are associated with ‘damaging health consequences’ (30-1). The psychologically harmful consequences of beauty practices are downplayed or undocumented, she suggests, ‘because such practices have not been considered problematic’ (31). She thus maintains that both cosmetic surgery and FGC should be considered, along with a host of other ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ practices, such as veiling, transsexual surgery and makeup, as ‘harmful cultural practices’ within the United Nations’ legislative framework. It has also been argued that such practices are often underscored by similar motivations and rationales. Simone Weil Davis (2002) suggests, for instance, that many of the reasons African women give for undergoing FGC are analogous to those articulated by Western women who undergo cosmetic labiaplasty, including ‘beautification, transcendence of shame and desire to conform’ (23). Euro-American and African genital reshaping procedures should thus be conceptualised on a continuum rather than measured by different yardsticks.

While each of these theorists claims similarities between African or Middle-Eastern rooted practices of FGC and ‘Western’ body modifications, their political perspectives and theoretical approaches reveal some significant differences. For example, Jeffreys works from a radical feminist position to link FGC and cosmetic surgery through a notion of common gendered oppression. For her, the label of ‘harmful cultural practices’ usefully emphasises ‘that culture can enforce and that women and girls are not free agents able to pick up and choose’ (2005:34). By contrast, Weil Davis applies a critical feminist framework to resist representing women as ‘undifferentiated victims’ (2002:27). She is interested in pursuing an investigation of the complex issues of ‘agency’ and ‘consent’ surrounding both sets of practices. These theorists also employ different theoretical models to link FGC and other body modifications. I have termed these models the ‘analogue’, ‘continuum’ and ‘subset’ approaches. The analogue approach, employed by Gunning, involves establishing a likeness between (at least) two cultural practices as counterparts. The continuum approach, utilised by Weil Davis, involves situating various cultural practices on a spectrum of embodied practices deemed similar to varying degrees. The subset approach, adopted by Jeffreys, involves including multiple practices of a similar kind within one encompassing category or subset. These various models are not always discrete and may merge or overlap in particular theorists’ texts. I discuss the analogue and continuum approaches in further detail in relation to Gunning’s and Weil Davis’s texts in Chapter Three, and the subset approach in Chapter Four and with particular reference to Jeffrey’s text in Chapter Five.

Notwithstanding these differences, all three thinkers *frame* their cross-cultural approaches with a desire to interrogate cultural essentialism. They each express concern with the theoretical inadequacy and underlying racism and cultural imperialism of dichotomising discourses which set ‘Western cultures’ in sharp relief against ‘non-Western cultures’, ‘First world women’ against ‘Third world women’, ‘non-Muslim women’ against ‘Muslim women’ and so on. As such, we can see these comparisons as linked, though in different ways and to different extents, to a wider anti-cultural essentialist feminist project.

### **The feminist anti-cultural essentialist project**

While it would be misleading to identify a cohesive and unified anti-cultural essentialist feminist project, there are number of theorists, including Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991, 2002), Uma Narayan (1997, 1998), Leti Volpp (1996, 2000), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, 1999), Lila Abu-Lughod (1998a, 1998b, 1999/1986), Anne Phillips (2003, 2004), Sherene Razack (1998) and Avtar Brah (1996, 2003), who may be seen as linked through their critical analysis of cultural essentialism and its relationship to sexual and racial essentialisms. Such theorists have paid careful attention to the ways in which cultural and other linked essentialisms are (re)produced through the construction and reification of cultural binaries.

Feminist and postcolonial thinkers have long argued that the logic and effect of culture-based (and indeed all) binary structures is to overvalue one pole (usually 'the West') while disparaging the other (usually the 'non-West'). Such dualisms consistently function to exaggerate differences between groups while effacing differences within and to emphasise separation and opposition while suppressing similarity and overlap. Essentialist binaries which construct 'Third world women' (or 'Muslim women' etc.) as a homogenous group promote ethnocentrism which reinforces dominant Western values and modes of representation. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) has most influentially argued, the construction of the poor, victimised, oppressed 'average third world woman' presumes and promotes the contrasting implicit self-representation of Western women as educated, modern and having control over their bodies (56). Similarly, we can see how the portrayal of the helpless, mutilated African 'victim of female genital mutilation' constructs the reciprocal image of the empowered Western 'woman/saviour', or how the representation of the covered and oppressed 'veiled woman' implies the image of the skin-showing and liberated 'Western woman'. As a result of such 'discursive colonisation' all 'marginal and resistant modes and experiences' are erased (73). Those positioned as 'other' to the predominant 'Western self' are characterised as having no ability to shape the social relations in which they operate. From this perspective, it becomes hard to analyse specific historical and

contextual differences between ‘Third world women’ and thus difficult to theorise legitimate strategies for positive social transformation.

As culturally essentialist binaries often position a bounded, ahistorical notion of ‘cultural difference’ as the fundamental axis of differentiation *between* groups, they ignore the fluidity, contradiction and change *within* cultural groups. Such culturally essentialist dualisms also efface the role of other forces that are not exclusively ‘cultural’ (i.e. economic, political, religious, legacies of colonisation, transnational capital etc.) in structuring conflict and oppression, as well as resistance. As Anne Phillips (2004) argues, there is a tendency to employ the term ‘culture’ when ‘faced with something we cannot otherwise understand’ (11). Phillips suggests that reference to culture can be unhelpful in addressing the current politics of both FGC and veiling, as ‘culture’ (however defined) may not be primary to the ways in which such practices are constructed and maintained in particular contexts. Furthermore, when sharp, all encompassing contrasts are made between ‘Western cultures’ and ‘other cultures’, possible (Western-based) responses become polarised between the imperialising condemnation/salvation position, and the cultural relativist stance (which fails to make political and ethical judgements to curtail harm). Moreover, as Uma Narayan (1998) points out, essentialist constructions of ‘Third world cultures’ also pose particular problems for feminist agendas in developing countries. Political movements that are hostile to women’s interests in various parts of ‘the Third world’ often depict culturally dominant norms of femininity and practices that adversely affect women as central components of cultural identity, so that women’s conformity with the status quo is equated with the ‘preservation of culture’ and their challenges to such norms and practices as ‘cultural betrayals’ (91). In this sense, we can see how cultural essentialism is often intimately linked with sexual essentialism.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> It has also been argued that cultural essentialism is sometimes produced through efforts to *prevent* sexual essentialism. As Narayan (1998) suggests, ‘The project of attending to differences among women across a variety of national and cultural contexts then becomes a project that endorses and replicates problematic and colonialist assumptions about the cultural differences between “Western culture” and “Non-Western Cultures”, and the women who inhabit them. Seemingly *universal* essentialist generalizations about “all women” are replaced by *culture-specific* essentialist generalizations that depend on totalizing categories’ (italics in original) (87).

The way that culture is conceptualised and linked with race within culturally essentialist discourses has also been analysed and critiqued by postcolonial and anti-cultural essentialist feminist theorists. Leti Volpp (2000) argues that problematic behaviour, such as underage marriage, is more readily attributed to ‘culture’ when it is the behaviour of immigrant groups of colour, rather than that of mainstream white Americans. A tendency to perceive white Americans as devoid of culture, she claims, leads to attempts to construct other, ‘non-cultural’ explanations for white people’s behaviour. Under this schema, white people are seen as individual actors (with agency) while people of color are perceived as members of groups (devoid of agency). Similarly, Narayan (1997) argues that a certain racialising of culture is in operation when ‘cultural explanations’ are produced to explain fatal forms of violence against ‘Third world women’ while such forms of violence against mainstream Western women appear to be resistant to such ‘cultural explanations’ (84). This inconsistency, she claims, results in essentialising portrayals of Third world women as victims of their culture. Both Volpp and Narayan are concerned with how such racialised cultural binaries reify notions of fundamental moral differences between Western cultures and their so-called ‘others’. By illustrating the ways in which particular cultural practices or behaviours are inherently similar, they, like Gunning, Weil Davis, and to some extent Jeffreys, aim to highlight the racialising discourses which construct various cultural groups as essentially different.<sup>9</sup>

Drawing cross-cultural parallels between gendered practices which have generally not been associated, or have been routinely posed as oppositional, can be an important technique to interrogate essentialist deployments of cultural difference, race and nation. Utilised alongside careful analysis that illustrates the heterogeneity and changes in practices within all cultural groups, such comparisons can disrupt rigid, culturally imperialist dualisms. Essentialist boundaries separating cultures can be shown to be human constructs, developed and deployed for political ends. Furthermore, the notion that ““actual cultural differences” correspond very neatly to the “packages” that are

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<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler takes up this argument in *Precarious Life* (2004b), suggesting that the racialising of culture operative in the US socio-political sphere not only positions some subjects as ‘victims of their cultures’, but also constructs some lives and bodies as *more disposable* than others.

currently individuated as “separate cultures” or manifest themselves as evenly distributed across particular “cultures”, can be problematised (Narayan, 1998:102). Careful, theoretically well-informed, cross-cultural feminist work may also play an important role in constructing bases for cross-cultural or transnational political alliances and activism. Jacqui Alexander and Mohanty (1997) argue, for instance, that cross-cultural feminist endeavours can produce a shared sense of ‘engagement based on empathy and on a vision of justice for everyone’ (xlii). They suggest that in our current world order which is structured by the operation of transnational capital, ‘comparative, relational feminist praxis’ is required in order to understand and respond to the ways in which various global communities are connected and interdependent (xx). Making cross-cultural comparisons across embodied practices can therefore be an important feminist technique grounding political interventions at both local and transnational levels.

It should be acknowledged, in addition, that within such feminist frameworks ‘essentialism’ is not conceived as something which can be disrupted and dispensed with once and for all. As Sara Ahmed (1998) emphasises, ‘we need to qualify our arguments by a recognition that essentialism is not a conceptual horizon that can be simply transcended’ (91). Moreover, ‘essentialism’ and ‘non-essentialism’ are not cast straightforwardly as opposites. Rather, a more complex relationship between the two forms of representation is theorised. Diana Fuss (1989) has persuasively argued, for instance, that constructionism (the position that differences are constructed and not innate) actually operates as a more sophisticated form of essentialism, and hence ‘the bar between essentialism and constructionism is by no means as solid and unassailable as advocates of both sides assume it to be’ (xii). Rather than identifying clear cut, universalising categories of ‘essentialism’ and ‘non-essentialism’ which retain the same meaning across different contexts, feminist anti-cultural essentialist analyses seek to examine the operation of particular discourses which function in essentialist ways within specific historical, social and political contexts. What is problematically essentialist for particular subjects in one place or time may not be in another, and constructions of essentialism can alter and be transformed. Feminist debates relating to

essentialism have also discussed whether ‘strategic’ mobilisations of essentialism may sometimes be necessary within feminist political practice.<sup>10</sup> Political action, it has been argued, may require some provisional forms of essentialism as one phase within larger deconstructive projects.<sup>11</sup>

There are also, however, several problematic effects associated with cross-cultural feminist strategies which require more in depth examination and analysis. In the remainder of this chapter, I draw primarily on critical feminist perspectives on embodiment to make a series of criticisms of these comparative feminist approaches. I use the term ‘critical theorists of embodiment’ to describe such thinkers as Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, Margrit Shildrick, Raia Prokhovnik, Moira Gatens and Rosi Braidotti. These theorists employ diverse (and sometimes conflicting) theoretical approaches. However, they may be linked by the view that bodies are not simply ‘pre-given’ in biology, nature, or culture but are continually produced and differentiated through complex historical, social and political relations of power. Interrogating the sex/gender distinction has been of particular theoretical importance to many of these thinkers, who have perceived it to be intimately intertwined with a host of other oppressive dualisms (i.e. mind/body, nature/culture, male/female and heterosexual/homosexual). In underscoring an overarching patriarchal, heteronormative system, the sex/gender distinction obscures recognition of how bodies (as opposed to being purely a product of nature) are constituted dichotomously as ‘sexed’ and/or ‘gendered’ through power-imbued grids of intelligibility (Prokhovnik, 2002; Gatens,

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<sup>10</sup> One pervasive stand of feminist discourse relating to ‘strategic’ or ‘provisional’ essentialism relates to debates over whether Luce Irigaray’s approach to sexual difference can be considered problematically essentialist. Early critics of Irigaray’s work (1985), such as Toril Moi (1985), objected to Irigaray’s ‘essentialist’ position of women and femininity. Contemporary advocates of Irigaray’s approach, such as Elizabeth Grosz (1989, 1994, 2005), Rosi Braidotti (2002, 2006), Naomi Schor (1994), Margaret Whitford (1994) and Diana Fuss (1989), however, argue that her ‘essentialism’ is in fact strategic or provisional. They insist that her project should ultimately be understood as one geared towards affirmative deconstruction. The major misinterpretation of Irigaray’s work, they claim, has been to see her essentialism as the final stage, when it is actually part of a larger deconstructive process.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, other theorists advocate the development of new forms of ‘essentialist’ feminist analysis. For example, Mridula Nath Chakraborty (2004) argues for an ‘embodied essentialism’ imagined within the locus of race. For her, current trends of anti-essentialism merely reinscribe the racist and ethnocentric assumptions of hegemonic feminist theorising. Focusing on histories of slavery, imperialism, colonisation and global capitalism, this embodied essentialism would provide an in depth reading of the race relations structuring feminist knowledge.

1996; Butler, 1999/1990, 1993). Rejecting the notion of a pre-given biologically 'sexed' body upon which gender is deterministically inscribed, they have emphasised the impossibility of ever having 'direct, unmediated access to some "pure" corporeal state' (Shildrick, 1997:14). As Moira Gatens (1996) asserts, one of the key questions feminists need to be asking is 'how does culture construct the body so that it is understood as a biological given?' (52). Sex/gender is of course not the only paradigm through which relations of power function to produce particular forms of embodiment. Critical feminist theorists of embodiment are also concerned with how bodies are constituted differentially through the heterosexual matrix of power (Butler, 1999/1990, 1993, 2004a) and through processes of racial and cultural 'othering' (Butler, 1993; Ahmed, 2000, 2004a).

## **Problematic Effects of Comparative Feminist Approaches**

[T]o recognize the importance of an ever deepening understanding of the complexities of multiplicity and intersectionality should not preclude a parallel concern to analyse how discourses of the universal continue to operate as the constitutive ground for these geometries of power and structures of inequality.

*Gail Lewis, 2006:88*

One of the key problems feminist cross-cultural comparisons encounter relates to the structural analysis scholars employ to disrupt essentialising binaries. Margrit Shildrick (1997) and Raia Prokhovnik (2002) advocate similar deconstructive strategies designed to enable theorists to move away from conceptualising issues in terms of essentialising binaries (such as mind/body, reason/emotion, man/woman, sex/gender, self/other etc.).<sup>12</sup> Shildrick sees this strategy as involving three theoretical steps (Prokhovnik's strategy is conceived in two steps but is quite similar as she takes Shildrick's first step as a given):

1. Expose the binary not just as a simple difference between equal terms but a hierarchy between margin and centre.

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<sup>12</sup> Shildrick and Prokhovnik's strategies are influenced by both Derridean and Irigarian approaches to deconstruction and resignification.

2. Provisionally reverse the equation so that the marginal term is privileged or at least re-valued.
3. Displace the very structure of the binary model with the irruptive emergence of a new concept which cannot be understood in terms of the preceding binary (110).<sup>13</sup>

The first step involves acknowledging, as many feminist and postcolonial theorists have, that dichotomies always imply a relation of power. As opposed to indicating an 'A or B' relationship, binaries more specifically designate a hierarchical 'A or not-A' association.

The second step is conceived as a critical, yet short-term or provisional, phase in which the typically undervalued 'not-A' term is reclaimed and made visible as a means to expose the oppressive operation of the binary pair. This approach is evident in feminist strategies to reclaim a concept of embodiment as a means to highlight the oppressive operation of the mind/body dualism, or similarly, to make 'gender' or 'sexual difference' visible as a means to illustrate the patriarchal basis of 'gender neutrality'. This deconstructive technique can also be discerned in many of the cross-cultural comparisons of various embodied cultural practices. When similarities are drawn between female genital cutting and cosmetic surgery or between veiling and anorexia, and the self/other binaries which structure such pairings are discursively 'revalued', the constructedness and instability of such (liberated/oppressed etc.) binaries are revealed. To extend Shildrick and Prokhovnik's model somewhat, I would argue that the act of revaluing which takes place in the second step may involve a broader range of deconstructive options, beyond the technique of 'reversing' the two binary poles (whereby the previously inferior term is privileged). What is characteristic of the second step across various feminist approaches is that it remains deconstructive.

Both theorists emphasise, however, that this second step of deconstruction will not be effective in the long-run unless it is followed by a critical final step which seeks to move beyond the binary structure. To simply reverse the dualism would leave the

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<sup>13</sup> Prokhovnik (2002) articulates a two-step deconstructive strategy: 1) increase women's visibility rather than attempt to degender women 2) construct a relational mind-body connection, expressed in the recognition of corporeal subjectivity (11).

binary structure intact and thus could only reiterate the economy of the same, leaving open the possibility that the dualism will once again be reversed. It is necessary to follow the provisional second step with a third step which entails the creation of a new concept that can no longer be understood within the dichotomous terms of the original binary. For Shildrick, a celebration of ‘radical sexual difference’ can displace the interconnected mind/body, sex/gender, male/female binaries. By theorising difference beyond the dichotomous pairings of male/female, the concept of ‘radical sexual difference’ speaks to ‘a multiplicity of differences in which all women might find a place’ (1997:216). Similarly, Prokhovnik argues that the construction of a relational mind-body connection expressed in the recognition of ‘corporeal subjectivity’ can ultimately trigger movement beyond these restrictive dichotomies (2002:11). As she asserts, ‘the concept of corporeal subjectivity takes into account that it is not enough to demonstrate the poverty of the dualism; we cannot simply dissolve oppositions and ignore them, but must construct something on the basis of them’ (165). As I discuss later, because of its privileging of sexual difference over other axes of embodied differentiation, Shildrick’s concept of ‘radical sexual difference’ may represent a limited or problematic approach to step three. I thus want to emphasise that the resignificatory phase may take a broader range of forms (beyond the paradigm of sexual difference). What is characteristic of step three is that it radically reconceives the dualistic relation of the A and not-A terms. For both Shildrick and Prokhovnik the third step is not intended to do away with the terms of the binary structure (as this would arguably be impossible), but rather to extend and resignify these categories so that their meanings are transformed and their relationship rearticulated.

Drawing on this model, I want to suggest that the problems feminist theorists encounter in making cross-cultural comparisons between embodied practices may be located within their problematic transition from the second to the third step of this (or a similar) deconstructive strategy.<sup>14</sup> To illustrate, I will provide a few brief examples in relation

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<sup>14</sup> I do not want to claim, however, that such deconstructive strategies can be (unproblematically) conceptualised as involving three discrete and sequential steps. I take Susan Bordo’s (1993) point that, as ‘relocations of this sort are always concrete, historical events enacted by real people, they cannot challenge every insidious duality in one fell swoop, but neither can they reproduce exactly the same

to Uma Narayan's and Leti Volpp's anti-cultural essentialist approaches. I share significant political ground with both these theorists (indeed my own project has sprung in part from their important and powerful critiques of cultural essentialism). However, I want to suggest that their shared emphasis on cross-cultural commonalities produces some problematic effects and may leave them stuck in the 'step two' phase of reversal or revaluing.

### **Anti-cultural essentialism and recourse to 'sameness'**

In disrupting dichotomous pairings, both Shildrick and Prokhovnik take as a starting point the need to recognise the significance of (non-essential) embodied differences, as opposed to effacing such differences through claiming 'sameness' or collapsing into relativism. As Shildrick (1997) emphasises, in such a deconstructive approach 'the embodiment of differences, rather than their abstraction, will be taken as a determining feature' (5). By contrast, anti-cultural essentialists such as Narayan and Volpp start from the contention that it is the imposition of 'difference' upon homogeneously characterised cultural groups that fundamentally underscores cultural essentialism and imperialism. For both theorists, it is thus predominantly essentialist notions of 'difference', rather than 'sameness', that need to be tackled head on.

Narayan (1997) emphasises the importance of acknowledging how cultural imperialism as it functioned in colonial contexts denied rather than affirmed that one's others were 'just like one's self'. Even when 'sameness' was implied, she argues, 'the other' was only seen as a deficient example of the Western, colonial self. She is particularly concerned with the ways in which references to 'culture' can 'combine with ideas of "Third world backwardness" and the tendency to think of Third world contexts as realms of "Very Other Cultures" to make "foreign phenomena" seem comfortingly intelligible while preserving their "foreignness"' (104). Similarly, Volpp (2000) is

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condition as before "in reverse"' (32). Clearly, as Shildrick and Prokhovnik point out, the steps overlap in different ways and therefore cannot be separated entirely. This is why, for them, each step must be conceived of and tackled as part of an integrated scheme, and not in isolation. Making a distinction between 'short-term' (second step) and 'long-term' (third step) goals is important, however, as trying to do both at the same time generates confusion (Prokhovnik, 2002:163).

concerned that through the projection of racialised ‘cultural differences’, immigrant groups of colour are perceived as fundamentally different (on a moral scale) from the white mainstream in America. Cultural imperialism, racism, misogyny and homophobia all depend, in part, on the perception and articulation of essentialist, hierarchical differences which separate subjects. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that a feminist approach which insists on recognising the full significance of historical, social and embodied differences between particular practices and their imagined subjects risks perpetuating the ‘violence of reifying, exoticizing or romanticizing the otherness of the Other’ and thus reinscribing culturally imperialist discourses (Cornell, 1992:54). The potential for epistemic violence also exists in the act of assuming ‘that the particularity of the other is within our grasp, that the place of the other is fully accountable from the outside’ (Shildrick, 1997:3, see also Spivak, 1988).

As discussed earlier, in order to deconstruct essentialist thinking which associates ‘culture’ with practices of dowry-murders in India but not with domestic-violence murders in the United States, Narayan (1997) shows how the two practices represent similar systemic problems of violence that affect roughly the same proportion of women in each nation. Similarly, Volpp wants to disrupt culturally essentialist discourses which associate culture with the practice of underage marriage when such acts involve people of color, yet not when they involve mainstream, white Americans. She emphasises the parallels between a case of underage marriage involving a Mormon girl and man in Utah (seen as aberrant, individualised behaviour) and a case involving a Mexican girl and man in Texas (seen as culture-influenced, group-oriented behaviour) to show their overarching commonality. ‘Juxtaposing these narratives of similar stories differently perceived’, she asserts, ‘illustrates how distinctive interpretive lenses are applied to *virtually identical behaviour* according to the actor’s identity’ (italics mine) (113).

In drawing similarities between cultural practices perceived as fundamentally different, both these analyses do important work in exposing the racialising hierarchies which so often underscore culturally essentialist discourses. The advances they achieve,

however, may remain locked within ‘step two’ of Shildrick and Prokhovnik’s strategy. If ‘Americans’ are encouraged to make connections that would allow them to conceive of dowry murder in India as similar or equivalent to domestic violence in the United States, or underage marriages within Utah-based Mormon communities and Texas-based Mexican communities as representing ‘virtually identical behaviour’, might they not be tempted to avoid dealing with the (embodied) political processes through which, as Sara Ahmed puts it, ‘some others are designated stranger than other others’ (2000:76). Might attention be redirected from the ways in which relationships of social antagonism continually function to constitute bodies, subjects and practices differently?

It should be emphasised that both Narayan and Volpp address the significance of the differences constructed between particular bodies. Indeed, they argue that it is precisely because of perceived embodied ‘differences’ (i.e. visual markers like skin colour, ‘traditional’ dress etc.) that some groups are picked out as being culturally and indeed morally different from the white mainstream. They trace the historical differences that race and culture have made in the ways in which various groups have been (and continue to be) perceived and treated. Yet in illustrating the ways in which the practices they are concerned with are in fact alike (contra essentialising binaries), they seem to position this recognition of commonality as an appropriate end-point to the process of disrupting culturally (and racially) essentialist binaries. In the course of her article, for example, Narayan gives careful consideration to the *divergent* national and cultural contexts through which Indian dowry deaths and American domestic violence murders are constructed as ‘different’. However, because she is so concerned to make a ‘visible connection’ between the two forms of gendered violence (1997:84, 89, 96) as a means to overcome the ‘asymmetry that exists between explanations of violence against women’ in the Indian and American cultural contexts (104), the thrust of (and conclusion to) her argument seems to be that *beneath these distorting constructions*, the two practices are *fundamentally* similar.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> As Narayan suggests in her conclusion, not only are the statistics for the deaths of women as a result of the two practices of violence comparable, but so are the reasons given by women in both contexts for remaining in abusive marriages, including ‘economic dependency, worries about the custody and welfare

Narayan thus implies a problematic distinction between the discursive representation of particular practices and material reality. This prevents her from addressing effectively how the cultural context in which specific practices of violence are discursively produced in fact conditions the ways in which such violence will be *experienced* (and how particular bodies will be *shaped* as a result) – in other words, how ‘the discursive’ and ‘the material’ are fundamentally interwoven. From a critical feminist perspective on embodiment, one’s understanding of one’s own embodiment is always closely tied to historical, geographical and cultural specificities, and hence bodies cannot be separated from their cultural contexts. In this sense, I concur with Elizabeth Grosz’s (1994) insistence that, ‘Bodies cannot adequately be understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself’ (x). In concluding via recourse to ‘sameness’, Narayan’s analysis falls into a rather disembodied and a-cultural mode. It consequently fails to progress to the ‘irruptive emergence’ of a ‘new understanding’ which would be required to move from step two revaluing to step three resignification.

Volpp, in particular, risks reinscribing the dominance and privileging of the ‘Western self’ when she insists that one of the most important outcomes of such cross-cultural comparisons is to promote critical introspection on the part of the privileged Western subject. Volpp wants to force ‘us’ to recognise and examine the problematic practices within ‘our own culture’. ‘When we gaze with condemnation at other cultures’, she suggests, ‘we can miss the fact that “our” culture is also characterized by problematic, sex-subordinating behaviour’ (2000:113). This is clearly an important point, and one that has been made by many feminist and postcolonial theorists (see, for example, Hirschmann, 1998; Honig, 1999). Cultural essentialism is indeed partly perpetuated by the failure of those in positions of privilege to interrogate their own notions of ethical and moral superiority by acknowledging the specific systems of oppression operating within their own culture. However, a strategy which repeatedly instructs those in

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of children...and the threats of violence that have followed upon previous attempts at leaving’ (1997:115).

positions of power to *focus on themselves* risks maintaining attention predominantly (if not exclusively) on the privileged 'Western' or 'First world' subject, and perpetuating a situation where the 'other' is used for the purpose of self-discovery, to define the 'I' (Ahmed, 2000). While such a move may function initially to 'reverse' the imperialising gaze, it might also reinscribe the privileged Western subject, 'as the implicit referent, the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural others' (Mohanty, 1991:52).

In this vein, I want to argue that there is an important distinction to be made between the act of employing 'the other' as a mirror for Western consciousness, and adopting a critical feminist practice of reflexivity. A critical approach to reflexivity emphasises that we must 'interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice in which we engage' (Alcoff, 1995:112) (see also England, 1994). From Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) perspective, when the privileged theorist assumes her/his own 'transparency' (while arguing that 'the other' can speak for her/himself), the structural relations of power which condition 'who can speak' (and be heard) are effaced. Reflexivity is thus a crucial starting point in discursive analysis of 'others' on the part of privileged speakers. In order to displace 'rather than only reversing oppositions', analyses 'must take the investigator's own complicity into account' (Spivak, 1999:244). Gaining awareness of (or altering) *one's own consciousness* is not, however, the exclusive or final aim of reflexivity, though it will surely be a key element in a larger reflexive process. Linked to this, reflexivity also works towards producing more 'generous' discursive encounters with one's 'subjects'. From Ahmed's point of view, 'a generous encounter may be one which would recognise how the encounter itself is implicated in broader relations and circuits of production and exchange' (2000:152). There must also, however, be room within a generous encounter for 'the one who is already assimilated' to 'move beyond the encounter which names her and holds her in place' (152). By contrast, within analyses which employ 'the other' as a mirror, 'the self' is both the starting point for such a trajectory and its ultimate end-point, and, as such, the complexity and agency of 'the other' often gets lost somewhere in between. Rather than seeking to nurture more 'generous' encounters between self and other, the

privileged Western subject's analysis of 'the other' risks remaining predominantly 'self-referential' (Chow, 2006). From this perspective, 'One is tempted to wonder whether we have merely taken a detour to return to the position of the Other as a resource for rethinking the Western self' (Frankenberg and Mani, 1993:301).

While not all comparative cultural analyses collapse into 'sameness',<sup>16</sup> those that over-privilege cross-cultural commonality or invest in it as an endpoint risk effacing embodied particularities and recentring dominant discursive and material hierarchies. Such approaches may prevent analysis of the ways in which particular practices are discursively and materially linked beyond (or in contrast to) the relationship of commonality. They can also thwart the development of effective localised interventions which depend on recognising how practices and bodies are constructed and experienced *differently*. It is also important to consider, however, if the tendency of various feminist cross-cultural approaches to become permanently delayed in 'step two' may be related to the problematic *structuring of the three-step deconstructive strategy itself* in its inclusion of a binary 'reversal' phase. As these examples would seem to indicate, strategic reversals may actually thwart and circumscribe the possibilities for the disruption and radical rearticulation of oppressive binary structures. In the next section, I examine whether focusing on the *relational* construction of binary terms may provide a means of resignifying essentialist dualisms that avoids problematic second-stage reversals. I begin this discussion by considering how various feminist cross-cultural approaches may be linked to the notion of an 'unfinished' humanist project (Simpson, 2001).

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<sup>16</sup> For example, while Waririmu Ngaruiya Njambi (2004) draws links between 'female circumcision' and 'cosmetic surgery' (291) she interrogates the notion that 'bodies can be separated from their cultural contexts' and criticises the act of 'universalizing a particular Western image of a "normal body" and sexuality' (281). Njambi advocates a critical feminist framework 'that is accountable to local specificities and variations, rather than replicating the Western view of a "natural body"' (293).

## Cultural Commonality and the ‘Unfinished’ Humanist Project

Identity is always bounded and particular... Nobody ever speaks of a human identity. The concept orients thinking away from any engagement with [a notion of] basic, anti-anthropological sameness...

*Paul Gilroy, 2000:98*

In *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000), Paul Gilroy claims that ‘new hatreds’ are being created not through the essentialist enforcement of stable racial categories, but through a troubling inability to maintain them. He argues that the only appropriate response to this uncertainty is to demand liberation from *all* racialising and racialological thought through the development of an ‘empathetically post racial humanism’ (37). I begin this section with Gilroy’s utopian vision of a ‘new humanism’ because his argument coalesces with the feminist strategy of drawing cross-cultural similarities between embodied practices in several key ways. It also links with Shildrick and Prokhovnik’s deconstructive approach, which I have used as a critical model to evaluate these cross-cultural methodologies. In this section, I want to suggest that the comparative cross-cultural approaches I have discussed represent a humanist move which posits an underlying (essential) commonality among human lives. Many feminist and anti-cultural essentialist theorists who seek to draw similarities between embodied practices, such as FGC and body modification, veiling and anorexia, domestic violence murders and dowry death, may thus support (either implicitly or explicitly) a ‘new’ humanistic ideology. From (at least one strand of) a critical feminist perspective on embodiment, however, such new humanist frameworks may problematically efface the exclusionary processes through which ‘human’ subjects are constituted.

Gilroy contends that the contemporary socio-political climate is characterised by a ‘crisis of raciology’ (2000:28). Race has ‘lost much of its common sense credibility’, he argues, because we have become more aware of the ‘elaborate cultural and ideological work’ that goes into (re)producing race as a category and, as such, it has

been ‘stripped of its moral and intellectual integrity’ (28). Moreover, the global market’s flattening of substantial linguistic and cultural differences, alongside the impact of the DNA revolution, has further destabilised the ‘meaning and status of racial categories’ (24). This crisis of race, he stresses, offers us an opportunity to ‘free ourselves from the bonds of all raciology’ (15) through recognising the ‘anachronistic condition of the idea of “race” as a basis upon which human beings are distinguished and ranked’ (37). As an alternative to racialised notions of subjecthood, Gilroy advocates a conception of a fundamental human identity premised on ‘basic, anti-anthropological sameness’ (98). This specifically post-racial notion of humanity signals for him a decisive move away from problematic and exclusionary humanist discourses of the past and constitutes a ‘new’ (inclusive) humanist endeavour. Thus, from Gilroy’s perspective, humanism’s potential as an ‘unfinished project’ may be within our powers to direct.

Desires to deconstruct culturally essentialist binaries on the part of feminist theorists may be similarly related to larger commitments to an ‘unfinished’ humanist project. For example, Mohanty (1991) calls for ‘a reconsideration of the question of “human” in a posthumanist context’ (74) and, in a pertinent footnote, appears to indicate her hope for a ‘new humanism’.<sup>17</sup> It seems relevant in this respect that in ‘Under Western Eyes Revisited’ (2002), Mohanty places more emphasis than she did in her earlier publication on feminist ‘solidarity and shared values’ (502), ‘commonalities’ across cultural contexts (504) and how ‘specifying difference allows us to theorise universal concerns more fully’ (505). Similarly, from Narayan’s perspective, fundamental transformations in the political, social and philosophical landscapes of our world will occur ‘as the “Others” of modernity’s ideal for humans – such as women, and peoples from non-European races and cultures – increasingly are recognised as *fully human*’ (italics mine) (Narayan and Harding, 2000:ix). These views resonate with Gilroy’s vision of an emphatic ‘post-racial humanism’ in which race is no longer a ‘basis upon which human

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<sup>17</sup> Mohanty’s note reads: ‘For an argument which demands a new concept of humanism in work of third world women see Lazreg: “...when feminists essentially deny other women the humanity they claim for themselves, they dispense with any ethical constraint. They engage in the act of splitting the social universe into ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’” (Lazreg cited in Mohanty, 1991:77).

beings are distinguished and ranked' (37). From this perspective, it may be possible to extend drastically and transform humanism so that *all* human subjects might find an equal place within its parameters of representation.

Some of the feminist comparisons made between FGC and other body modifications might also be interpreted within this 'new humanist' framework. Through illustrating fundamental similarities between embodied practices, these cross-cultural approaches seek to disrupt culturally essentialist and racist depictions of particular groups or subjects as 'barbaric', 'depraved' and 'non-human'. In place of such 'othering' discourses, they construct a notion of underlying, cross-cultural human commonality. This theoretical move is illustrated particularly, I would suggest, through the calls for cross-cultural or transnational *empathy* in some of these texts. As I discuss in Chapter Three, in several of these analyses, the development of empathy is premised on the recognition of fundamental similarities in women's lives, experiences and practices across cultural contexts. For example, in employing an analogue approach to link 'African' FGC and nineteenth century American clitoridectomies, Gunning seeks to compel Western feminists to empathise with African women through recognising that they 'have confronted *the same* problem of female genital surgeries that African women face today' (italics mine) (1991:226). Describing these differently located traditions of genital cutting as 'the same problem', she constructs African and American women as bearers of common 'cultural wounds'.<sup>18</sup> Jeffreys' (2005) argument that 'African' FGC and 'Western' body modifications must be understood as analogous 'harmful cultural practices' may be read as similarly producing shared cultural experiences of gendered violence or oppression. It is on the basis of these mutual cultural wounds that a common *human* conception of embodiment and a common *human* capacity for empathy are implied. In this sense we might read some of these comparisons as articulating not only an anti-cultural essentialist agenda but also envisioning a new humanist horizon.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For discussion of how particular cultural 'wounds' can become problematically transformed into identities, see Brown, 1995 and Ahmed, 2004a.

<sup>19</sup> From a slightly different perspective, feminist cross-cultural approaches may be understood as responses to a 'cross-cultural nihilism'. These comparative frameworks may be interpreted as calling attention to the ways in which women's bodies are violated and damaged across cultures in ways that signal a common (problematic) will to power which represents a fundamental *inhumanity*. In this sense,

How would a critical feminist perspective on embodiment address new humanist claims? Some thinkers I have grouped within this category, namely Prokhovnik, Gatens and Shildrick, would appear to share the hope for the construction of a ‘new humanism’. While Prokhovnik (2002) argues for the need to make ‘sexual difference’ visible as a ‘short-term’ or provisional approach, she emphasises that in the long-run, the sex/gender distinction must be decisively resignified through the emergence of a new concept grounded in a non-dichotomous notion of ‘human’ corporeality. For Gatens (1996), the challenge of feminist theory is to ‘theorize *human* embodiment without losing the sexual, political, or ethical particularity of different bodies’ (italics mine) (viii). Prokhovnik also emphasises that ‘the recognition that *we all have bodies*, which follows from overcoming the mind/body split, is more important than the sex (that is, the biological “natural” sexual difference) of those bodies’ (italics mine) (13). From this perspective, like that of Gilroy and anti-cultural essentialists such as Mohanty and Narayan, it may be possible to rework humanism so that it is inclusive of *all* human subjects. As Shildrick (1997) argues, ‘the recognition that the humanist subject is discursively constructed, but never fully determined, by a nexus of exclusionary practices, should allow us to resignify the parameters of agency’ (135).

For other critical feminist theorists of embodiment, however, the prospect of a new humanism is seen as inherently problematic. Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed each seem to decisively reject the possibility of new humanism on the basis that no matter how much resignification of essentialising frameworks and categories takes place, constitutive social and psychic relations of power will always function to exclude some bodies in delimiting what qualifies as ‘human’. While there are clear differences between Grosz and Butler’s approaches to gender resignification,<sup>20</sup> their perspectives

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cross-cultural or transnational invocations of empathy may be employed to counter nihilism. This reading links with Gilroy’s vision of a ‘planetary humanism capable of comprehending the universality of our elemental vulnerability to the wrongs we visit upon each other’ (2004:4).

<sup>20</sup> The differences between Grosz and Butler’s approaches indicate, for example, two significantly different embodied strategies of deconstruction. Influenced by Monique Wittig’s work, Butler believes that the categories of sex and gender can be radically disrupted through parodic acts which reveal their constructed nature. By contrast, because Irigaray influenced theorists such as Grosz and Rosi Braidotti see sexual difference as irreducible they believe that ‘feminists cannot afford to merely cast off their sexed identity’. Instead, they need to radically repossess it (Braidotti, 1994:120). Shildrick and

may be seen to coalesce on the insistence that ‘bodies are never simply human bodies’ (Grosz, 1995:83), that ‘sex’ is one of the norms through which bodies become viable as human at all. As Butler (1993) asserts, ‘the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the “human”’ (7). This claim that bodies will always be differentiated bodies before (if ever) becoming human bodies, and that cultural grids of intelligibility produce only *some* bodies as ‘human’, relegating others to the non-human or sub-human domain, relates closely to Ahmed’s (2000) argument that bodies are produced asymmetrically through relations of antagonism and violence. She contends that bodies *only* come to be ‘lived’ through being continually differentiated from ‘other’ bodies conceptualised and constituted as ‘strange’ or ‘alien’. ‘In such an approach’, she claims, “‘my body’ and ‘the other’s’ body would not be structurally equivalent (even as impossible bodies), but in a relation of asymmetry and potential violence’ (48). If bodies are actually *constituted* differently, to the point where they cannot be compared within the same structural field, ‘new humanist’ attempts to deconstruct cultural essentialism by emphasising cross-cultural parallels between particular embodied practices may be fundamentally misguided.

This anti/new humanist divide<sup>21</sup> leaves us at a problematic impasse. On the one hand, the ‘new humanist’ position threatens to fall back on a vision of fundamental human commonality which precludes analysis of the exclusionary processes through which ‘human’ subjects are constituted. On the other hand, the ‘anti (or non)-humanist’

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Prokhovnik’s three-step deconstructive strategy involves a similar process of ‘repossession’. Thus Grosz and Braidotti’s approaches may be described as seeking to *repossess* the feminine through an affirmative mode of mimesis and Butler’s strategy might be articulated as aiming to *disrupt* the feminine through a parodic practice of performativity.

<sup>21</sup> Rosi Braidotti’s (2002) position complicates this anti/new humanist divide between critical feminist perspectives on embodiment. On the one hand, her focus on sexual difference and her emphasis on embodied materialism provides a radical anti-humanist critique of the traditional humanist subject. She also underscores the importance of resisting ‘the uncritical reproduction of sameness on a molecular, global or planetary scale’ (13-22). On the other hand, her Irigarayan linking of sexual difference with ‘issues of transcendence and universality’ suggests that underlying her motivations for resignifying binary sexual differences is a desire to develop a new *feminist* humanism (58). Thus what Braidotti’s position throws up is the need to make a distinction between ‘new humanist’ projects per se (whereby all human beings might be acknowledged and represented as human, first and foremost, and not as ‘sexed’ or ‘raced’ in specific ways), and ‘feminist (or feminine) new humanist strategies’ aimed at creating a new version of humanity whereby sexed subject positions are assumed from the start. Braidotti may be more aligned in this respect with Shildrick, who also envisions a rearticulation of the humanist subject through the development of a concept of radical sexual difference.

perspective risks reifying an essentialist notion of ‘difference’ which could thwart analysis of cross-cultural links or the development of transnational solidarities. Yet is the divide between these ‘anti/new humanist’ perspectives as stark as I have suggested? Is there a way to move beyond this impasse by refiguring the ways in which we theorise the relationships between ‘self’ and ‘other’? Like Gilroy, Butler and Ahmed both indicate their awareness of the need to strike a balance between the poles of ‘fundamental sameness’ and ‘radical alterity’. Butler contends that ‘at the level of political community, what is called for is the difficult work of cultural translation in which difference is honoured without (a) assimilating difference into identity or (b) making difference an unthinking fetish of alterity’ (1995:140). Similarly, Ahmed points to the need to move beyond ‘an opposition between narratives which totalize, which refuse the “otherness” of the other (human and modern) or narratives which resist that totalization by respecting the other as radically other (anti-humanist and postmodern)’ (1996:88-89). She argues that what we require instead ‘is an economy’, which does ‘not exclude the possibility that discourses may be incommensurable’ but ‘suggests that incommensurability may not be radical, as the very fact that discourses are conflicting or competing means that they exist in some form of relationship to each other’ (89).<sup>22</sup>

Taking these visions of a (relational) ‘economy’ which enables cultural translations across different discourses as a point of departure, I suggest that developing a perspective which draws out the constitutive connections (rather than commonalities) between bodies, practices and subjectivities may help us negotiate these counter-posed anti/new humanist positions. It may also enable us to move beyond the sameness/difference binary which these positions sometimes fall into. A focus on relationality and the mutual constitution of identity categories and embodied subjects is in fact shared by theorists across the anti/new humanist divide. Gilroy, for example, emphasises the importance of examining the relational ‘interdependency’ of dualistic pairings such as ‘black/white, settler/native, colonizer/colonized’ in the process of repudiating them (2004:45). A notion of interdependency also structures his

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<sup>22</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Six, Elizabeth Grosz takes a more decisive ‘anti-humanist’ stance than either Butler or Ahmed.

perspective on the processes through which subjects and identities are constituted: ‘The Other, against whose resistance the integrity of an identity is to be established’, he argues, ‘can be recognized as part of the self that is no longer plausibly understood as a unified entity but appears instead as one fragile moment in the dialogic circuits...called a “representation economy”’ (2000:109-10). Similarly, both Butler and Ahmed understand subject formation as an ongoing relational process. For Butler, ‘One comes to “exist” by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the other’ (1997a:5). As ‘interpellated beings’ with a ‘prior vulnerability to language’ we are ‘dependent on the address of the Other in order to be’ (5). Similarly, from Ahmed’s perspective, ‘given that the subject comes into existence as an entity only through encounters with others, then the subject’s existence cannot be separated from the others who are encountered’ (2000:7). As noted above, such processes of subject constitution and identity formation are often exclusionary. However, the mutuality on which they depend also holds the possibility for imagining more positive embodied and social *connections*.

Such possibilities are illustrated through the example of empathy. On the one hand, we can examine how empathy may function as a discourse of embodied exclusion which reifies the hierarchical categories of ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’ or ‘less human’. Butler’s analysis of the ways in which the deaths of some subjects (i.e. the heterosexual victims of the 9/11 attacks) are grieved for within American society as ‘our loss’, whilst other deaths (i.e. gay people who have died of AIDS and Palestinians who have died by the Israeli military with the United States’ support) are not, seems pertinent in this respect (2004b:32). The racialised cultural politics of which bodies are deemed ‘grievable’ function to reify some bodies as ‘more human’ than others. Butler insists therefore that ‘we have to ask about the conditions under which a grievable life is established and maintained, and through what logic of exclusions, what practice of effacement and denominalization’ (2004b:38). On the other hand, grief and empathy may enable *connections* to be forged between subjects based on the recognition of mutuality. As Butler points out, grief illustrates how ‘we are in the thrall of relations with others that we cannot recount or explain’ and this recognition ‘often interrupts the self-conscious

account of ourselves we might try to provide in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control' (2004a:19). '[F]urnishing a sense of political community of a complex order', grief brings to the 'fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility' (2004b:22). The recognition of mutuality which empathy and grief can produce may thus suggest the possibility of acknowledging 'a responsibility toward the trace of the other' (Spivak, 1999:199).

Importantly, in emphasising constitutive connections, a relational approach does not depend on identifying some shared core or substratum that makes us all human. Recognising mutuality does not require claims of commonality or equivalence between bodies, lives or experiences. Indeed, if empathy is developed through the assumption of equivalence between various 'forms of injury', as in Gunning's and Jeffreys' texts, it can problematically cut off particular injuries from 'a history of "getting hurt" or injured' (Ahmed, 2004a:32). It 'turns the wound into something that simply "is" rather than something that happened in time and space' – and thus risks wounding all over again (32).<sup>23</sup> In suggesting that 'self' and 'other' are constructed in and through one another, a relational approach may be able to preserve particularities and recognise exclusions, without disavowing the possibility of common ground. In this vein, constitutive connection may provide a fruitful perspective from which to trace the articulations among embodied cultural practices and their imagined subjects. Throughout the following chapters I seek to develop and extend this understanding of relationality as part of the interpretive framework I draw on in this thesis. I discuss the politics of empathy further in relation to practices of FGC and cosmetic surgery in Chapter Three and return to consider the relationships between anti, new and post humanist perspectives in Chapter Six. In the next section I discuss some epistemological and methodological concerns that are pertinent to the thesis as a whole.

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<sup>23</sup> It is also clear that reading all forms of FGC (or other body modifications) as 'wounds' or 'injuries' reifies (rather than disrupts) culturally essentialist and colonialist frameworks, which are premised on processes of imperialist exclusion rather than (new humanist) inclusion.

## Epistemological and Methodological Issues

This thesis has been particularly challenging to write, in large part because of the multiple pressures and contradictions I have struggled with as an author. As a white, Western, middle-class, female scholar, I have endeavoured throughout the processes of developing this thesis to think reflexively about how my particular social location may affect and shape the ways in which I conduct and present my research. I am aware that my location produces particular (partial) ways of looking at the world, including specific ways of evaluating issues of representation relating to embodied cultural practices. I am also conscious that my privileged position implies clear possibilities of reinforcing dominant relations of power.

As such, I have felt somewhat anxious about trying to represent particular embodied practices of which I myself have no direct experience. My anxiety has been particularly acute in relation to dealing with African, Asian and Middle Eastern-rooted practices of FGC as well as Muslim practices of veiling, which have, within feminist circles, been the focus of intense debates around issues of location, representation and ethnocentrism. As a Western speaker who is not part of any particular circumcising community and does not wear any forms of Islamic dress, I am conscious that my interventions into discourses relating to FGC or veiling might be seen as uninvited, if not imperialist, by women who are members of such communities or who see themselves as linked to or invested in FGC or veiling in other ways that I am not. Indeed, some might argue that the very act of producing *yet another* analysis which takes practices of FGC or veiling as a focus, functions automatically to re-fetishise these practices. At the same time, however, I have had to interrogate my own, initially unacknowledged, presumption that, as a Westerner (a Canadian living in London), I have any more entitlement or authority to speak about practices such as cosmetic surgery, anorexia or passing (which I discuss in Chapter Four), or that my engagement with the discourses surrounding such procedures will necessarily be any less vexed or problematic.

In this vein, it seems appropriate to emphasise some things that I *do not* seek to suggest or undertake in the thesis. I do not claim to have any privileged knowledge about how particular embodied practices may be experienced by individuals in specific contexts nor do I endeavour to represent any of the embodied practices discussed in the thesis ‘fully’ or with complete ‘accuracy’ (even if such a feat were possible). My focus is not on making judgements about any of the practices I discuss, nor do I seek to make practical recommendations for programmes or measures designed to address such practices (i.e. education, regulation, medicalization, eradication etc.). What I *do* want to pursue in the thesis is an investigation of the particular ways in which such embodied practices are represented within feminist and other critical literatures and an analysis of the potential effects of such representations. I am particularly interested in identifying modes of representation and theorisation which are problematic and in considering possible alternatives which may provide better tools for theorising the relations between particular embodied cultural practices, and the links between cultural difference and embodiment more generally.

I am conscious, however, given my focus on embodied practices (such as FGC) which many feminists consider serious acts of gendered violence, that my emphasis on issues of discursive representation may be interpreted by some as a lack of concern (or empathy) for the suffering of ‘real’ women and children. Similarly, I have faced criticism that my discursive critique may obscure the social and material effects of, and relations of power surrounding, such practices (which such critiques suggest are more vital than discursive aspects). My feeling, however, is that we should not *assume* that violence or oppression is inherent to, or typical of, all forms of any of these practices - although there are certainly aspects of some procedures which I would describe as violent, damaging or coercive. Furthermore, I feel that the epistemic violence inflicted by particular patterns of representation requires as much critical attention and analysis as material violence and, in fact, that these two forms of violence should be understood as intrinsically linked, rather than discrete. However, consistently illustrating and drawing out such discursive-material links is a challenging and ongoing process, and

one which, although important, I am not sure that I have had the time or space to do justice in this thesis.

Another issue I want to address is my own partial (and fluctuating) ambivalence in regards to some of the arguments I make in this thesis. At times I have struggled to justify the critiques I have developed of the continuum, analogue and subset approaches in a social context in which the need to attack racist and culturally essentialist cultural binaries seems ever more pressing. Indeed, while much of the thesis is centred on a critique of feminist cross-cultural or transnational methods of linking different embodied practices, I have a lot of understanding and sympathy for such strategies. This sympathy surges every time I am faced with yet another essentialist media portrayal of the free and liberated 'West' set against a oppressive and barbaric 'Africa', 'East' or 'Muslim World'. It intensifies each time I tell a new acquaintance that part of my research is concerned with critiquing the feminist linking of FGC and 'Western' practices such as cosmetic surgery as analogous and I elicit a response along the lines of, 'Well of course they're different, FGC is about coercion and force and cosmetic surgery is about active choice'.

It is at these moments, in particular, that I am forced to consider the political effects and question the ethical implications of my work. I sometimes wonder if I should really be focusing my efforts on critiquing feminist strategies which earnestly seek to break down culturally essentialist and racist binaries. Will my critique be (mis)interpreted as a move intended to reinstate the very problematic dualisms feminists seek to upset? I have often then reminded myself that my intention is not to criticise the *project* of interrogating racist and culturally essentialist binaries, which I see my work as advocating and pursuing. Rather, I seek to critique *the problematic aspects of specific theoretical models* employed to upset such binaries, with the aim of improving those methods or developing more effective ones.

## Conclusions and Outline of Chapters

In this chapter I have set out my argument that the feminist technique of drawing links across different cultural practices in the service of anti-cultural essentialism, while potentially effective in highlighting the instability of imperialising binaries, does not move the analysis sufficiently beyond the problems that these binaries entail. Instead, through constructing 'fundamental' similarities between embodied practices, such comparative approaches risk effacing social, historical and embodied particularities and reinscribing dominant discursive hierarchies. Similarity-based cross-cultural approaches should not, therefore, be the end-point or overarching focus of effective feminist analyses. Through the examination of three in depth case studies - each of which interrogates the linking of a different pair or collection of salient cultural practices or figures - this thesis explores how the problems associated with feminist cross-cultural approaches play out in specific contexts. Attempting to do what I suggest others should, I take these examples as a starting point for thinking through the constitutive relations between particular practices, subjects and histories. While I focus on illustrating the ways in which various comparative feminist approaches produce *similar* problematic effects, I recognise that cross-cultural strategies are diverse, and do not seek to lump them all within the same (essentialising) category. As such, I also pay careful attention to the ways in which these approaches, as well as the locations and political agendas of particular theorists, differ.

In Chapter Two, I outline and explore the conceptual tools I draw on throughout the thesis. My analysis engages with Black feminist approaches to intersectionality, postcolonial and queer perspectives on relationality and feminist frameworks for thinking about embodiment. I consider how these various (overlapping) literatures complement one another in fruitful ways and also productively illustrate one another's limitations. The chapter as a whole fleshes out a critical feminist framework for addressing the various techniques employed to link embodied practices and their imagined subjects within feminist and other critical literatures.

In Chapter Three, I provide an in depth mapping of the kinds of comparisons made between FGC and practices such as cosmetic surgery, intersex operations and nineteenth century American clitoridectomies. Two key critiques of the continuum and analogue approaches are presented. First, because these models privilege gender and sexuality, they tend to efface the operation of other axes of embodied differentiation, namely race, cultural difference and nation. As such, the continuum and analogue approaches often reproduce problematic relationships between race and gender whilst failing to address the implicit and problematic role that race, cultural difference and nation continue to play in such models. This erasure of these axes, I contend, is linked to the construction of a 'Western' empathetic gaze. This is my second key critique. The desire on the part of theorists working in the West to establish cross-cultural 'empathy' through models which stress similarity and solidarity often conceals the continuing operation of geo-political relations of power and privilege.

In Chapter Four, I explore how links between 'race passing', 'gender passing' and 'sexuality passing' have been highlighted by critical theorists. Many of these authors adopt a 'subset model', which functions to encompass various passing practices within a single performative sphere. Unlike theorists who compare 'African' female genital cutting with 'Western' body modifications, these authors do not seek specifically to disrupt culturally essentialist First world/Third world, West/non-West binaries. However, in common with the previous case study, they are all interested in disrupting essentialist constructions of race, gender and sexuality as 'natural', ontological categories. I argue that, through subsuming a vast array of embodied cultural practices in the realm of 'the same', the subset approach often does not adequately address the relational, intersectional nature of passing and the important social and historical distinctions between different passing practices. Moreover, due to a problematic reliance on registers of visibility, the subset model can result in the fetishisation of particular 'passing' subjects. I suggest that an approach which focuses on historicising the relational construction of various passing practices may provide a more effective framework for theorising constitutive links without occluding *or* fetishising particularities.

In Chapter Five, I examine some of the similarities between attempts to link Muslim veiling with anorexia and/or 'Western' beauty practices and those comparisons between embodied practices made in the previous two case studies. I provide a mapping of the literature, showing how, in employing the analogue, continuum and subset approaches, authors risk producing many of the same problematic effects, such as making superficial claims of 'sameness' and failing to interrogate 'Western' privilege effectively. The main thrust of the chapter, however, is on theorising the ways in which the figures of 'the anorexic' and 'the veiled woman' have been produced relationally, and are hence constitutively connected. Drawing on historical and contemporary literatures, I highlight the ways in which the figures of 'the Western woman' and 'the Muslim woman' and 'the anorexic' and 'the veiled woman' have always been open to reformation and reconstruction, and hence cannot be fixed.

In Chapter Six, I offer a 'relational web approach' as an alternative to the analogue, continuum and subset models. I argue that in order to move through the phase of discursive disruption and towards radical resignification, it is important to imagine each pair of mutually constructed cultural figures or practices as part of a larger representational economy. Employing examples from each case study chapter, I illustrate how we might begin weaving relational webs that map complex, intersectional relations between multiple 'selves' and 'others' and theorise both particularity and connection. Moreover, through locating binaries within a broader web of signification - in which the categories of 'self' and 'other' are both multiple and shifting - the web approach presents the possibility of resignifying such binaries.

## Chapter Two:

# Theorising Intersectionality, Relationality and Embodiment

### Developing a Critical Feminist Framework

It makes no sense to hint at the superimposing and intersecting aspects of class, race and gender in the world of individual experience without being able to specify how and by what means class, race, and gender are constituted as social categories.

*Corelina Klinger, 2003:25 cited in Knapp, 2005:259*

If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation?

*Judith Butler, 1999/1990:11*

This chapter introduces and examines the conceptual tools I employ throughout the thesis. In Chapter One, I argued that feminist approaches which attempt to link various embodied practices across cultures are problematic when they fail to theorise the historical, political and cultural differences between such practices effectively. When these approaches collapse into an economy of sameness they do not succeed in disrupting essentialist self/other binaries through which embodied cultural practices are (re)produced. Thus, the key question guiding this chapter is, what tools and frameworks can we draw on to theorise the particularity of specific practices and their imagined subjects - as well as the links between them - without falling into the traps of cultural essentialism *or* disembodied, ahistorical sameness?

My analysis engages with Black feminist approaches to intersectionality, postcolonial and queer perspectives on relationality and feminist frameworks for thinking about embodiment. Drawing on a selection of key texts, I examine the critical tools each set

of literature offers my own project while also exploring their limitations. My focus throughout is on mapping the fruitful ways in which intersectionality, relationality and embodiment overlap with, complement and critique one another. The overlaps are illustrated by my own citing of particular theorists across these categories and my selection of texts for discussion, such as those of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991, 2002), Judith Butler (1999/1990, 1992, 1993, 2004a), and Sara Ahmed (2000, 2004a), which straddle and productively integrate insights from two or more of these areas of critical analysis. Through probing both the differences between such literatures and the ways in which they merge and intersect, I aim to flesh out a critical, feminist epistemology and methodology for addressing how particular embodied practices and their imagined subjects have been linked within feminist literatures. This interpretive framework will inform my analysis in both the critical case study chapters and the reconstructive concluding chapter, where I set out an alternative approach.

### **Intersectionality: Black Feminist Thought**

Intersectionality was initiated through Black feminists'<sup>24</sup> powerful critiques of white, middle-class bias within mainstream feminist theory and practice in North America and Western Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>25</sup> It finds its roots in political projects such as that of the Combahee River Collective, a black lesbian feminist organisation from Boston which emphasised the problems with privileging one dimension of experience of oppression (gender) above and beyond other axes (such as race and sexuality). In their 'Black Feminist Statement', the group discussed the combined racial, sexual,

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<sup>24</sup> I employ the label 'Black feminist' to signify a particular political position and perspective, rather than a fixed embodied identity category.

<sup>25</sup> It is important to acknowledge that the history and development of feminist approaches to intersectionality differ in other geo-political contexts. This is partly because categories of social and embodied differentiation, such as gender, race, sexuality, class and gender, do not retain the same meaning across different cultural contexts. Bahovec and Hemmings (2004) explore the ways in which the meaning of concepts such as sex and gender are 'context specific across space and time' (334). Moreover, Knapp (2005) has addressed how the Anglo-American triad of 'race-class-gender' does not hold the same resonance in the German context. 'Rasse is a category that cannot be used in an affirmative way in Germany', she explains: 'it is neither possible to ascribe a Rasse to others nor is it acceptable to use Rasse as a basis for identity claims, which by comparison is a common practice in the United States' (256).

heterosexual and class oppressions facing black women and stressed the importance of 'the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking' (Combahee River Collective, 1997/1977:272). The Collective's criticism of mainstream feminism's narrow (and unacknowledged) focus on white, middle-class experience was developed by numerous other Black feminists in the 1980s and onwards. Hazel Carby's 'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood' (1982) provided a critique of key feminist analytical concepts such as 'patriarchy', 'the family' and 'reproduction', illustrating how each privileged gender over other social divisions, such as race, in a permanent hierarchy of social divisions. Other landmark texts such as Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* (1981), Gayatri Spivak's 'French Feminism in an International Frame' (1981), bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1982) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984), Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), Anzaldúa's *La Frontera/Borderlands* (1987) and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) contributed to a fundamental 'decentring' of mainstream feminism's 'normative subject' and underscored the need for analyses of women's particularities to address interlocking structures of oppression.

The coining of the term 'intersectionality' is most often attributed to the African American feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw. In two widely cited articles, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Class' (1989) and 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Women of Color' (1991), Crenshaw drew on and developed earlier Black feminist analyses to craft a potent critique of the treatment of race and gender as 'mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis' within both feminist theory and antiracist politics (1989:139). While Crenshaw's articles were published nearly twenty years ago and several other feminist theorists have developed intersectional approaches in recent years, I focus on her texts

because of the enormous influence they have had, and continue to have, in the field of intersectionality and feminist studies more broadly.<sup>26</sup>

Employing American antidiscrimination law as a case study, Crenshaw (1989) illustrates how dominant conceptions of discrimination problematically frame subordination within ‘single-axis frameworks’ (139): ‘In other words, in race discrimination cases, discrimination tends to be viewed in terms of sex-or class-privileged Blacks; in sex discrimination cases, the focus is on race-and class-privileged women’ (140). Such single axis approaches, she argues, are also perpetuated in both feminist and antiracist politics which organise under the vectors of ‘gender’ and ‘race’ respectively. Through these frameworks Black women’s particular experiences of oppression, produced through the *interaction* of race and gender (as well as other axes such as class), are elided. Stressing that ‘intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism’, Crenshaw underlines the difficulty with simply adding (or subtracting) the multiple oppressions Black women face through the analogy of a traffic intersection:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another... if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm (149).

While black women experience the complex coimbrication of race and gender in their daily lives, she emphasises, neither feminist theory nor antiracist politics seem prepared or equipped to address such intersectionality in any rigorous and sustained manner.

Crenshaw offers several compelling examples of why the failure to address intersectionality within feminist theory *matters* to the types of analyses it produces. For instance, feminist discourses on rape, she argues, have routinely applied a single-axis framework of gender, thus taking white women’s experiences as the norm and failing to

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<sup>26</sup> For examples of feminist texts which draw on Crenshaw’s analyses see Butler, 1997a; Narayan, 1997; Knapp, 2005; McCall, 2005; Zack, 2005.

consider how complex histories of racism make black women's experiences of sexual violence qualitatively different. While feminists rightly criticise the role that law has played in establishing the bounds of normative sexuality and in regulating female sexual behaviour, they often fail to acknowledge, Crenshaw argues, that rape statutes do not merely reflect '*male control of female sexuality*' but specifically '*white male regulation of white female sexuality*' (italics in original) (157). A feminist account of rape which is sensitive to Black women's experiences, she suggests, needs to account for the fact that, in contrast to white women, there has been no institutional effort to regulate Black female chastity and that, in fact, 'courts in some states have gone as far to instruct juries that, unlike white women, Black women were not presumed to be chaste' (157). While attempts to regulate women's sexuality put 'unchaste' (white) women outside the law's protection, Black women were always already constructed as 'unrapeable': 'When Black women were raped by white males, they were being raped not as women generally, but as Black women specifically: Their femaleness made them sexually vulnerable to racist domination, while their Blackness effectively denied them any protection' (161). Therefore, feminism's 'singular focus on rape as a manifestation of male power over female sexuality', Crenshaw argues, 'tends to eclipse the use of rape as a weapon of racial terror' (161). Bringing the specificities of sexual violence into focus, she maintains, necessitates an intersectional analysis, which foregrounds histories of gendered racial prejudice.<sup>27</sup>

Since the publication of Crenshaw's texts, many other feminist theorists have developed analyses of intersectionality and interlocking oppressions. For example, in *Inessential Woman* (1990), feminist philosopher Elizabeth Spelman analyses the texts of founding second wave feminist theorists such as Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone, Betty Friedan

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<sup>27</sup> In an article published two years later, Crenshaw (1991) extends her analysis of how race and gender interact in black women's experiences of violence, employing domestic violence and rape as case studies. In both cases, she emphasises, linear feminist or antiracist analyses which fail to address the ways in which 'systems of race, gender and class domination converge' produce inadequate theories of violence against black women and lead to ineffective interventions (1246). Single-axis frameworks also constitute counter-productive resistance strategies for feminist and anti-racist politics as 'the failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women' (1252).

and Mary Daly to illustrate the problems associated with additive analyses of gender and race that privilege one as more fundamental than the other. She argues that ‘as long as race is taken to be independent of sex, racism as independent of sexism, we are bound to give seriously misleading descriptions of gender and sexual relations’ (117). It remains crucial for feminism to address ‘how one form of oppression is experienced is influenced by and influences how another form is experienced’ (123). Furthermore, in ‘Difference, Diversity and Differentiation’ (1996), Avtar Brah argues that ‘structures of class, racism, gender and sexuality cannot be treated as “independent variables” because the oppression of each is described in the other – is constituted by and is constitutive of the other’ (12). From Brah’s perspective, ‘it is imperative that we do not compartmentalize oppressions, but instead formulate strategies for challenging all oppressions on the basis of an understanding of how they interconnect and articulate’ (19). In a more recent publication, ‘Ain’t I A Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality’ (2004), Brah and Ann Phoenix employ a broader perspective on intersectionality which encompasses the articulation of multiple axes of social differentiation within numerous overlapping frames of social analysis, including the ‘economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential’ in ‘historically specific contexts’ (76). From this perspective, intersectionality signifies not only the importance of multiaxial analysis, but also the necessity of an interdisciplinary feminist framework.

Intersectionality has today become a central category of analysis within feminist theory. As Leslie McCall (2005) comments, ‘One could even say that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with other fields, has made so far’ (1771). Despite (or perhaps because of) intersectionality’s pervasiveness, some have argued that the era of intersectionality is now over (see, for example, Zack, 2005): that the concerns regarding mainstream (white) feminism’s problematic privileging of gender have been taken on board within feminist theory and practice and hence are now outmoded. As Malini Johar Schueller (2005) comments, ‘The consensus seems to be that the kinds of challenges posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her landmark 1981 essay “French Feminism in an International Frame” or even later by bell hooks in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (1984)

have now been met' (63): 'It seems anachronistic, therefore, to name a project of universalism within white feminist theory today' (64). Like Schueller, however, I would argue that many of the intersectional critiques raised by Black and other critical feminists from the 1970s onward remain cogent today.

In response to Black feminist critique (as well as criticisms on the part of feminists speaking from 'lesbian', 'working class' and other 'marginal' locations), mainstream feminism *has* clearly made significant progress in its efforts to interrogate white, heterosexual, middle class privilege. Postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist critiques have also contributed to feminism's thoroughgoing deconstruction of the category 'woman' (see, for example, Flax, 1987; Hekman, 1990; Butler, 1999/1990, 1992; Ahmed, 1998).<sup>28</sup> Yet, as I will argue in relation to the feminist cross-cultural approaches I address in my case study chapters, and in my assessment of feminist embodiment theory later on in this chapter, many feminist analyses continue to assume (in advance) that gender is privileged over and above other axes of social differentiation and/or treat gender and other axes, such as race, analogically.<sup>29</sup>

From this perspective, I want to argue that it is perhaps precisely *because* (the notion of) 'intersectionality' has become so central to mainstream feminist theory that it has now come to function, in many texts, as merely a theoretical shorthand for the importance of acknowledging 'difference' – a shorthand which actually *precludes* sustained critique of frameworks which problematically privilege one axis of differentiation and rigorous, historical analysis of articulating axes of social differentiation and oppression. As Gudrun-Alexi Knapp (2005) asserts, the reification of 'race-class-gender' into a formula to be sign-posted in any feminist criticism, 'being largely stripped of the baggage of

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<sup>28</sup> Clearly, as an intersectional approach would emphasise, 'Black feminists', 'lesbian feminists', 'working class feminists' and 'postmodernist feminists' are not mutually exclusive categories.

<sup>29</sup> In this vein, Schueller (2005) argues that influential critical feminist texts which continue to be highly salient within feminist theory and practice, including Gayle Rubin's 'Thinking Sex' (1984) and Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1990), 'offer the dominant paradigm for the imperialist incorporation of women of color in contemporary gender and sexuality studies: incorporation by analogy' (65). While Haraway's more recent text, *Modest\_Witness* (1997) as well as Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993) further 'feminist theory's investigation of race', she suggests, 'they simultaneously continue to include race analogically' (65).

concretion, of context and history, has been a condition of possibility of its acceleration' (254-5). The dual message this formula signals 'is "I'm well informed" and "I'm politically correct"'. By just mentioning other "differences" besides "gender", the work to be done continues to be delegated to the respective "others" (255). From this standpoint, it is not the case that the concerns raised by intersectionality are now anachronistic, but rather, that they remain pressing and yet are often still *suppressed*. In this vein, Brah and Phoenix (2004) insist that 'understanding complexities posed by intersections of different axes of differentiation is as pressing today as it has always been' (75).

I want to suggest, therefore, that on the one hand, the brand of intersectionality that simply announces its 'position' or pays lip service to the race-class-gender triad needs to be discontinued within feminist studies as its engagement with particularity remains much too superficial and simplistic. On the other hand, we need to examine how the most valuable insights of intersectionality theory can be integrated more substantively within feminist analysis. Intersectionality's interrogation of linear analyses which privilege one single dimension of experience, its critique of additive and analogous approaches to evaluating discrimination and oppression, its disruption of 'women' (and other founding categories) as universalist constructions, and its advocacy of multi-axial analyses of interlocking oppressions which foreground the importance of historical context all signal its usefulness as a conceptual tool for theorising particularity in regards to cultural groups, subjects and practices.

Feminist approaches to intersectionality, however, encounter various limitations. Firstly, intersectional perspectives provide in depth examinations of the intertwinement of different axes of social differentiation in the production of particular subjects and/or groups and their experiences of oppression. Yet they do not always provide the same close investigation of how particular subjects and/or groups are constituted *through* relations with *other* subjects and groups, or, in other words, how categories of 'self' and 'other' are constituted relationally through intersectional processes in which multiple

axes of social differentiation articulate.<sup>30</sup> Intersectionality may therefore not be fully equipped to theorise the discursive and material connections between specific subjects, groups and practices in conjunction with their individual particularities. Furthermore, in suggesting that analysis of the intersection of multiple axes of differentiation is necessary to avoid excluding particular subjectivities and experiences, intersectional approaches can become susceptible to their own critiques. In short, they become vulnerable to being accused of leaving out a crucial variable and thus not being intersectional enough. Finally, some intersectional approaches do not provide rigorous analysis of how particular essentialist identity categories and binaries might be productively disrupted and resignified, and instead tend towards maintaining such categories and relations. Without the possibility of disruption, it becomes difficult to contemplate how the violence and oppression (re)produced through the exclusive and hierarchical constitution of categories of embodied differentiation might be resisted.

In the sections to follow I explore how feminist intersectional perspectives might be enhanced, and indeed transformed, through (further) taking on board some of the insights and methodologies of postcolonial and queer perspectives on relationality as well as feminist perspectives on embodiment. To be clear, my intention is not to construct a linear ‘narrative of relentless progress’ in which feminist thought moves from the radical Black feminist critiques of the 1980s towards the more ‘sophisticated’ and ‘complex’ poststructuralist critiques of the 1990s and beyond (Hemmings, 2005: 115-116). Within this dominant narrative, ‘feminist poststructuralist theorists are repeatedly positioned as the first to deconstruct “woman”, and often as ‘heroic in surpassing past mistakes’ (116) whilst Black feminist critique (like radical and lesbian feminist discourses) is implicitly posed as overly simplistic and/or redundant.<sup>31</sup> In fact,

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<sup>30</sup> It should be acknowledged, however, that some feminist approaches to intersectionality have usefully emphasised the importance of tracing the *relational* social and historical processes through which particular categories have been produced and reified. Hazel Carby (1987), for example, examines how norms of white and black femininity in the antebellum American South were constructed relationally through ‘two very different but interdependent codes of sexuality’ which produced ‘opposing definitions of motherhood and womanhood for white and black women which coalesce in the figures of the slave and the mistress’ (20).

<sup>31</sup> Again, ‘Black’, ‘radical’ and ‘lesbian’ feminism should clearly not be taken as discrete categories but rather as political designations which overlap and intersect.

I position Black feminism as pioneering *complex* critiques of mainstream feminisms' universalist normative subject which remain germane today. I argue, in turn, that queer and feminist perspectives on relationality and embodiment can be enriched through further integrating particular insights of intersectionality theory. In this next section I stage an encounter between intersectionality and relationality.

### **Relationality: Postcolonial and Queer Perspectives**

Crenshaw's analogy of a traffic intersection with two lines of traffic (race and gender) colliding and becoming enmeshed enables us to envision the structural articulation of race and gender oppression experienced by black women. In her later text, Crenshaw employs a similar analogy of 'two tracks' intersecting to represent black women's experience of the coimbrication of racism and sexism (1991:1278). Yet what both models are less able to offer is an incorporated way of theorising how particular intersections might be linked or connected *to other* intersections. While Black women's experience, subjectivity or identity is constructed through the coimbrication of race and gender, it is also constituted through ongoing social and discursive relations with other groups of women, such as white women, Hispanic women or Arabic women, whose experiences are also produced through intersections of race and gender. How can we theorise the particularities of each group as well as their constitutive relationship to one another?

It should be acknowledged that Crenshaw concentrates on black women 'as the starting point' for her analysis of intersectionality as a means to show how the use of single-axis frameworks in both feminist and antiracist politics function to 'erase Black women' (1989:140). She seeks to 'contrast the multidimensionality of Black women's experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences' (139). The problem, however, is that in focusing almost exclusively on how racism intersects with sexism in black women's experiences of oppression, and leaving largely unexplored the ways in which black women's intersectional experiences are materially and discursively contingent with those of other groups of women, she risks (unintentionally) reifying the

essentialist notion that race has ‘something to do with the presence of Black people’ (Brah, 1996:8-9). What is notable about Crenshaw’s traffic intersection analogy and her image of ‘two tracks intersecting’ is that both models leave the roadway or tracks intact – they are fixed at the beginning and remain untransformed throughout. Within this framework, ‘black women’, it would seem, are *always* oppressed through the imbrication of race and gender and are produced and defined as a coherent category as such.

From this perspective, we need not simply a critique of how ‘woman’ is universalised within mainstream feminism through the exclusion or effacement of black (and other minority) women’s experiences, but also an in depth account of how a construction of ‘woman’ which narrowly reflects white, middle-class women’s experiences *requires* black femininity as its constitutive ‘other’. Or, in relation to the FGC/cosmetic surgery binary, we need an account of how ‘the victim of female genital mutilation’ represents ‘the cosmetic surgery’s consumer’s’ founding surrogate self, even while the two practices are posed as fundamentally separate and discrete. As Meyda Yegenoglo (1998) puts it, ‘what is at stake is not merely an unveiling of the subject’s abstract universal pretensions, but also a demonstration of the fact that its illusory self-production is a denial of relationality, complexity and dependence on the other’ (7-8). As I will discuss, theorising both particularity and relationality in this way is also crucial to the project of *disrupting* essentialist binaries. In order to resignify binary structures we need to understand and illustrate how they are (re)formed and operate in various contexts. It is in these senses that encounters between Black feminist theories of intersectionality and postcolonial feminist approaches to relationality have been (and could be increasingly) productive.<sup>32</sup>

One of the first (and certainly the most prominent and widely cited) texts to develop a postcolonial perspective on relationality was Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). Said

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<sup>32</sup> Relationality has obviously also been theorised extensively from other disciplinary perspectives, such as critical anthropology, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist economics, which I do not draw on explicitly in this chapter. Furthermore, various queer and feminist perspectives on relationality have also been developed, which I address in later sections.

argued that ‘the Orient’ was essentially a ‘constituted entity’ (322), produced ‘politically, socially, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively’ through Western (and non-Western) practices of Orientalist scholarship and cultural production (3). ‘The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe’, he claimed, ‘it is also...one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other’ (1). This binary relationship between ‘the West’ and ‘the Orient’ represented a ‘relationship of power’ (5) through which ‘European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self’ (3). Said’s analysis of Orientalism has since been expanded, developed and criticised by feminist theorists working from a postcolonial perspective. Drawing on the legacy of Black feminist critique, feminist critics have focused on the ways in which Orientalist and imperial discourses were (re)produced intersectionally through the articulation of sex and gender *with* race, nation, and cultural difference (among other axes).<sup>33</sup> Yegenoglo, for example, argues that in order to understand the complex patterns of signification that constitute Orientalism we need to examine ‘how the discursive constitution of Otherness is achieved simultaneously through sexual as well as cultural modes of differentiation’ (1998:1-2). She suggests that because Orientalism produces and depends on a metonymic association between the Orient and its women, ‘the process of Orientalization of the Orient is one that *intermingles* with its feminization. The *interlocking* of the representation of cultural and sexual difference is secured through mapping the discourse of Orientalism onto the phallogocentric discourse of femininity’ (italics mine) (73).

Among the most influential feminist texts offering a productive amalgamation of intersectionality theory and postcolonial perspectives on relationality is Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s seminal article, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’ (1991).<sup>34</sup> Her focus on the discursive construction of embodied cultural practices and her critique of cultural essentialism within cross-cultural

<sup>33</sup> See Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1991; Aziz, 1992; Grewal and Kaplan, 1994; McClintock, 1995; Brah, 1996; Yegenoglo, 1998; Ahmed, 2000, 2004a; Lewis and Mills, 2003; Lewis R., 2004 and Lewis G., 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Mohanty first published a version of this article in 1984, following up with a revised version in 1988 and a subsequent version in 1991 which I draw on here.

comparisons make her text particularly relevant to my own project. Mohanty interrogates the discursive colonization which is achieved through ‘the production of the “third world woman” as a singular monolithic subject’ in various Western feminist texts (51). She argues that such colonization is produced in these texts through the imposition of cross-cultural frameworks which problematically privilege ‘sexual difference’ in the form of a ‘singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance’ (53). For example, Fran Hosken’s (1981) analysis of ‘female genital mutilation’ in Africa, Mohanty argues, employs an essentialist concept of patriarchal oppression to define ‘African women’ as ‘archetypal victims’ (56). The problem with these types of analyses, she maintains, is that it is assumed that women ‘are already constituted as sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the arena of social relations’ (59). Yet, in fact, women are also ‘produced through these very relations’ (59). Concepts such as ‘gendered violence’ and ‘the sexual division of labour’ are only helpful, Mohanty argues, ‘if they are generated through local contextual analyses’ (68). If such concepts are treated as if they are universally relevant, she stresses, ‘the resultant homogenization of class, race, religious and daily material practices of women in the third world can create a false sense of the commonality of oppressions, interests and struggles between and among women globally’ (68).

While Mohanty’s analysis is intersectional, it also utilises a relational postcolonial framework of critique. Situating Western feminist academic production within ‘the context of the global hegemony of Western feminist scholarship,’ (55) she emphasises that linear Western feminist analyses which produce images of ‘Third world women’ also implicitly produce corresponding representations of ‘Western women’. She seeks to ‘draw attention to the similar effects of various textual strategies used by writers which codify Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western’ (52). What is shared by the various texts Mohanty critiques is that they each ‘take as their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the US and Western Europe’ (51). They all set up their ‘own authorial subjects as the implicit referent, i.e. the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others’ (55). As in other

'Orientalist' discourses, representations of 'the other' thus function in these texts to define a privileged image of 'the self'. As Mohanty explains,

A homogenous notion of the oppression of third world women as a group is assumed which 'produces the image of an "average third world women" who 'leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "third-world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimized etc.) This... is in contrast to the (implicit) self-presentation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions (56).

'Without the "third world woman"', Mohanty stresses, the particular self-presentation of Western women as privileged and liberated 'would be problematical...the one enables and sustains the other' (74).

Postcolonial feminist perspectives both draw on and enhance intersectional approaches by tracing the ways in which embodied identity categories such as 'black' and 'white', 'East' and 'West', 'Muslim women' and 'non-Muslim women', 'Third world women' and 'First world women' are relationally (re)produced through specific circuits of power in which multiple axes of differentiation intersect and articulate. They situate intersectional, raced gender relations within the context of global power relations<sup>35</sup> and place emphasis on the operations and effects of discursive representation in both reifying and resisting dominant material relations of power. As Mohanty says of her own perspective, 'the focus is not just on the intersections of race, class, gender, nation and sexuality in different communities of women but on the mutuality and coimplications, which suggests an attentiveness to the interweaving of the histories of these communities' (2002:522). Feminist perspectives which combine Black feminist theories of intersectionality and postcolonial feminist approaches to relationality can, from this standpoint, trace and illuminate 'the historical and experiential specificities and *differences* of women's lives as well as the historical and experiential *connections*

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<sup>35</sup> Mohanty problematises her earlier construction of 'Western hegemony' in 'Under Western Eyes Revisited' (2002): 'Within the United States, the European Community, and Japan as the nodes of capitalist power in the twenty first century, the increasing proliferation of Third and Fourth Worlds within the national borders of these countries, as well as the rising visibility and struggles for sovereignty by First Nations/indigenous peoples around the world, *Western* and *Third World* explain much less than the categorizations *North/South* or *One-Third/Two-Third Worlds*' (italics in original) (505).

between women from different national, racial and cultural communities' (*italics mine*) (522).

Yet despite these strengths, much of this intersectional postcolonial literature fails to interrogate assumptions of *heterosexuality*. Before I discuss this problem however, I want to take a brief detour to consider how it relates to another (broader) limitation of intersectionality theory. That is, in suggesting that analyses should *always* assess the intersections of multiple axes of oppression in order to avoid excluding particular experiences, intersectionality becomes susceptible to its own critiques. It has, for a number of years now, been the ultimate feminist 'trump card' to declare someone's work 'problematic' or 'lacking' because s/he has missed out a crucial axis of differentiation. As it is impossible to ever produce an analysis which is fully comprehensive or inclusive of *every* axis of differentiation, critiques can always be made on the basis of 'absence'. Judith Butler (1999/1990) refers to this problem as the dilemma of the 'embarrassed "etc"': 'theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed "etc" at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete' (182).

In this sense, it is easy to pick out variables which are absent from particular intersectional feminist analyses. Meaningful discussion of how sexuality factors in black women's lives is, for example, notably missing in Crenshaw's articles. While Crenshaw argues that single-axis analyses in feminist and antiracist discourses erase black women's experiences, it could be argued that her own analysis elides lesbian, bisexual and transgender women's (and men's) stories because her two vector model excludes examination of how sexuality makes a difference in their lives. However, we could similarly note that Crenshaw's analysis fails to engage with a (potentially endless) number of other axes, such as religion, ability, age etc. Moreover, this critique could be made of my own analysis in this thesis. Critiquing any text *simply* on the basis of what it leaves out, therefore, does not provide a particularly cogent or useful strategy on its

own. What *is* valuable and crucial, I would argue, is examining the *effects* of particular repeated elisions and/or privilegings. Identifying what sorts of categories, practices and subjectivities are reified through repeated occlusions of particular embodied axes of differentiation, and in turn, what categories, practices and subjectivities are marginalised or occluded through the ontological privileging of particular variables remains an important task.

While I would not argue that sexuality is the *one* crucial variable missing from Crenshaw's analysis, her lack of attention to sexuality seems particularly problematic given that her focus is on sexual violence. Crenshaw is clearly aware of this omission in her work. In her later article she acknowledges that factors she addresses 'only in part or not at all, such as class and sexuality, are often critical in shaping the experiences of women of color' (1991:1244). 'My focus on the intersections of race and gender', she explains, 'only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed' (1244). Yet, in this same text, she makes some problematic statements which appear to reveal a profound lack of awareness regarding how sexuality may structure the lives of women and men who do not identify as heterosexual. For example, in discussing the ways in which race and gender often conflict in black women's experiences, she claims that 'The need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront' (1251-2). In neglecting to acknowledge the ways in which, for example, gay, bisexual and transgender men of color (as well as lesbian, bisexual and transgender white women) may experience significant conflicts between race (as well as, for example, religion) and sexuality, Crenshaw not only erases their particularity, but also reifies heterosexuality as the norm. Later on in this text Crenshaw comments that when identity politics 'fail' women of color, 'it is not primarily because those politics take as "natural" certain categories that are socially constructed' but rather because 'the descriptive content of those categories and the narratives on which they are based have privileged some experiences and excluded others' (1297). It may be true that the negative value attributed to the categories of 'black' and 'female' (in relation to their

positive value accorded to ‘white’ and ‘male’) may, in some contexts, seem more damaging to women of color than the presumed naturalness of such categories. Yet Crenshaw’s statement fails to acknowledge how lesbian or bisexual women of colour experience oppression precisely because their sexual subjectivity is deemed ‘unnatural’ in relation to constructions of heterosexuality as ‘natural’. As Butler (2004a) argues in her analysis of heterosexual normativity, being called unnatural or ‘unreal can be not only a means of social control but a form of dehumanizing violence’ (217). ‘To be called unreal’, she maintains, ‘and to have that call, as it were, institutionalized as a form of differential treatment, is to become the other against which the human is made’ (217-218).<sup>36</sup>

While performing a careful, in depth analysis of the relationships between two axes of differentiation may yield important insights which would not have been possible through a broader analysis of multiple vectors, such insights need not come at the cost of reifying other embodied identity categories in problematic ways. As Siobhan Somerville (2000) underscores, ‘the challenge is to recognize the instability of multiple categories of difference simultaneously rather than to assume the fixity of one to establish the complexity of the other’ (5). Theorists seeking to employ intersectional approaches, therefore, need to pay careful attention to, and become accountable for, the potential effects of repeatedly eliding particular vectors. When sexuality, for example, is consistently left out of intersectional analyses we need to ask what specific histories, processes or effects might be obscured from view, and in turn, what stereotypes or dominant categories (such as heterosexuality) might be fixed or reified. In this respect, I want to argue that feminist intersectional postcolonial perspectives might be enhanced through taking on board some of the key insights of queer approaches to relationality.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This failure to actively interrogate heteronormativity is reproduced in some postcolonial texts. While Said’s analysis of Orientalism has been interrogated on the grounds that it does not deal effectively with gender, it has also been criticised for reifying heterosexuality. For example, Joseph Boone (2001) argues that Said’s analysis of colonialist erotics remains ‘ensconced in conspicuously heterosexual interpretive frameworks’ (44).

<sup>37</sup> I am using the term ‘queer’ broadly here to refer to critical literature which critiques binary constructions of heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as stable notions of lesbian, gay (or straight) identification. There are many diversities and specificities within this literature, however, which complicate and fracture any notion of ‘queer studies’ as an overarching or all encompassing theoretical or disciplinary designation.

Like the postcolonial perspectives discussed above, queer frameworks examine how particular identities, practices and categories are discursively constructed through the production of binary oppositions, but with a particular focus on relational constructions of sexuality.<sup>38</sup> In her landmark text, *Gender Trouble* (1999/1990), Butler suggests that an ‘epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality’ (xxviii) produces and reifies binary frameworks of gender and sexual difference.<sup>39</sup> Published one year later, Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991) argues that ‘many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured – indeed, fractured – by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition’ (1). Exploring the construction of the heterosexual/homosexual binary in her introduction to the collection *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (1991), Diana Fuss discusses how it produces a distinction ‘between a pure and natural heterosexual inside and an impure and unnatural homosexual outside’ (2), whereby ‘the homo becomes identified with the very mechanism necessary to define and to defend any sexual border’ (3). Homosexuality, she suggests, ‘becomes the excluded; it stands in for, paradoxically, that which stands without. But the binary structure of sexual orientation, fundamentally a structure of exclusion, and exteriorization, nonetheless constructs that exclusion by prominently including the contaminated other in its oppositional logic’ (3). The ways in which the hetero/homo opposition both produces and elides ‘other’ sexualities and identities (such as bisexual, transgender and transsexual) has also been explored by numerous theorists in recent years.<sup>40</sup> Through focusing on how heterosexual/homosexual (and other) binaries structure and produce experiences, categories and identities, such queer perspectives on relationality call

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Foucault, 1978, 1984; Butler, 1999/1990, 1993, 2004a, 2004b; de Lauretis, 1991; Sedgwick, 1991; Fuss, 1991; Epstein and Straub, 1991; Hemmings, 2002; Halberstam, 1998, 2005; Prosser, 1998; Fausto-Sterling, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> I save discussion of Butler’s framework until the next section on critical feminist perspectives on embodiment.

<sup>40</sup> In *Bisexual Spaces* (2002), Clare Hemmings investigates ‘the repeated production of bisexuality within much queer and feminist theory as an abstract and curiously lifeless middle ground’ (1). In *Second Skins: Body Narratives of Transsexuals* (1998) Jay Prosser examines the ways in which the ‘transgender subject’ is (re)produced as the subject who crosses, and hence subverts, boundaries through constructing the ‘transsexual subject’ as the agent that reifies them (5). Similarly, though from a different perspective, Judith Halberstam interrogates the subversive/conformist binary construction of ‘butch lesbian’ and ‘FTM transsexual’ in *Female Masculinity* (1998) by examining ‘the differences and continuities between transsexual, transgender, and lesbian masculinities’ (142).

attention to the potential effects of continually excluding sexuality (and consideration of the effects of heteronormative power structures) from the much cited intersectional feminist triad of ‘gender-race-class’.

It is also crucial, however, that a critical approach be employed to queer perspectives on relationality in order to interrogate the effects of their own particular exclusions, namely a lack of attention paid to the vectors of race and nation. As Katrina Roen (2001) points out, ‘Queer theories have been variously criticised for their ethnocentrism’ (253).

‘White’ and ‘Western’-centred perspectives continue to resonate, largely unacknowledged within queer theorising. In this vein, Bidy Martin (1994) argues that constructions of ‘queer studies’ as able to offer more complex analyses of gender and sexuality than lesbian feminist theory often function to ‘project fixity onto race and gender’ (110). The move on the part of some queer theorists to construct ‘parodic performance as that which makes lesbianism specific and subversive’, she suggests, ‘can obscure the social mobility of racial as well as sexual and gendered meanings and oppositions’ (115). Furthermore, Gayatri Gopinath considers how Western ideals of queer visibility and embodiment often exclude gay and lesbian subjects in other parts of the world. Public and visible forms of ‘queerness’, she argues, may not be available to lesbians in South Asia, where it may be in the private sphere of home that bodies can explore homo-erotic pleasures (Gopinath, 2003, cited in Ahmed, 2004a:151).

The number of queer-oriented texts which critically examine intersections between sexuality, race and nation has increased in recent years<sup>41</sup> and the field of ‘transnational queer studies’ is growing rapidly.<sup>42</sup> There is still, however, room for significant development of such intersectional, relational perspectives. Approaches which conduct relational analyses of the intersections of race, nation, gender and sexuality (among other vectors) from a queer-postcolonial perspective can illustrate, for example, how binary constructions of sexual identity, such as ‘heterosexual’ versus ‘homosexual’ are both produced by and in turn produce oppositional constructions of racial categories,

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Somerville, 2000; Stokes, 2001; Hawley, 2001.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Manalansan, 1995; Lee, 1996; Puar, 2002.

such as 'white' and 'black'. Somerville (2000) explores how in the nineteenth century, 'the formation of notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality emerged in the United States through (and not merely parallel to) a discourse saturated with assumptions about the racialization of bodies' (4). Similarly, employing a framework which integrates queer and postcolonial approaches, Joseph Boone (2001) shows how binaries such as 'West' and 'East' and 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' were (re)produced in and through one another in the narratives of Western male travellers. These narratives imposed 'traditionally assumed Western sexual categories' as well as 'stereotypical colonialist tropes' to construct a 'mythic East as an object of desire' and a site for the satisfaction of Western homoerotic desires (46). Such integrative frameworks can also be employed to trace the ways in which particular raced and sexualised figures are produced relationally through complex intersections of gender, race, nation and sexuality. Sander Gilman (1992) shows how two seemingly unrelated female images, the black African 'Hottentot' and the white, British 'lesbian', were produced relationally in mid-nineteenth century Britain, and reciprocally linked to the figure of 'the prostitute', through notions about their shared deviant and degenerate sexuality and physiognomy. As these texts illustrate, particular raced and gendered experiences or constructions may only become visible in their intersection with sexuality (and vice versa) and indeed may be (re)constituted in various contexts *through* particular constructions of sexuality. In this vein, I argue in Chapter Four that intersectional analyses of race, nation, gender and sexuality are crucial in relation to cross-cultural practices of passing because of the ways in which racial and cultural distinctions are often (re)produced precisely through sexual pleasure and erotic desire.

Importantly, queer-postcolonial perspectives can also help to develop an approach to relationality as a process that is never static, but always context-bound. This link between relationality and context is usefully developed within some of the queer literature on passing that I discuss in Chapter Four. Such texts explore how, through practices of passing, particular embodied identities are variably (re)constructed via inter-subjective interactions between multiple bodies which are conditioned by time and space. For example, Amy Robinson (1994) conceptualises passing as a 'skill of

reading' that involves 'multiple codes of identity' (716). 'The pass', she suggests, 'offers competing rules of recognition in the place of discrete essences or "natural" identities' (716). Within this framework, 'not only is the passer's "real" identity a function of the lens through which it is viewed, but it is the spectator who manufactures the symptoms of a successful pass by engaging in the act of reading that constituted the performance of the passing subject' (728). From this perspective, the constitutive relations between particular embodied subjects or groups cannot be conceptualised in deterministic ways as such interactions will always be dependent on inter-subjective dynamics as well as social and historical context. Moreover, particular embodied identities cannot be fixed, as identities and bodies may be constructed differently through various relational encounters. In other words, different differences come to matter in different times and places. Race, for instance, might take on greater significance in some times and spaces than others and the ways in which race is constructed or interpreted will change across contexts. While this standpoint suggests that particular regimes of power and differentiation *may* hold greater weight in some contexts than others, it also emphasises – in common with intersectionality theory - that presuming *in advance* that particular axes can and should be privileged above and beyond others is problematic. It is on this notion of the fluidity and 'unfixability' of embodied identity categories that queer theory productively merges with critical feminist perspectives on embodiment.

## **Embodiment: Critical Feminist Approaches**

As discussed in Chapter One, theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, Margrit Shildrick, Raia Prokhovnik, Rosi Braidotti and Moira Gatens explore the ways in which bodies and embodied identities are constituted differently through particular relations of power. Through focusing on embodiment, they explore how complex processes of social, cultural and psychic differentiation proceed through bodily channels, and how power shapes bodies in particularly enduring ways.<sup>43</sup> In several

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<sup>43</sup> Some of these theorists argue that it is the 'indeterminate' position of the body that enables it to be employed as a powerful strategic tool to upset the logic of oppressive embodied binaries. Neither wholly

ways these feminist perspectives are similar to, and are intertwined with, queer approaches to relationality. Indeed, many of these thinkers may also be characterised as ‘lesbian’ or ‘queer’ theorists. I discuss these thinkers together in this section because, in contrast to other prominent queer theorists, they have all (at some point) identified their theoretical concerns as ‘feminist’. Reading these theorists together enables me to highlight some of the overlaps in their perspectives on sex/gender, embodiment and power as well as the points on which they (sometimes substantively) differ. In this section, I consider both the tensions between critical feminist perspectives on embodiment and feminist approaches to intersectionality, and in turn, how embodiment theory might be employed to enhance intersectionality.

In one sense, intersectionality, postcolonial and queer relationality and feminist embodiment theory might be seen to converge in their common interrogation of the universalising operations through which the category ‘woman’ is (re)produced within mainstream feminist theory. Thus, from Brah and Phoenix’s perspective, ‘intersectionality fits with the disruption of modernist thinking produced by postcolonial and poststructuralist theoretical ideas’ (2004:82). There are also, however, significant tensions between these literatures which relate to the kind or extent of disruption each advocates and produces. As mentioned earlier, a good deal of feminist intersectionality theory does not seek explicitly to *disrupt* essentialist identity categories, such as race, gender and sexuality, but rather to address how these categories reproduce particular exclusions. From Crenshaw’s standpoint, the oppression facing marginalised groups such as African Americans stems not predominantly from the fact that they are categorised in essentialist ways, but rather from the fact that particular categories are negatively valued and exclusionary (1991:1298). She sees it as a key problem that categories such as ‘black’ and ‘woman’ are constructed through narratives which ‘have privileged some experiences and excluded others’ (1298). Indeed, rather than seeking to radically disrupt essentialist identity categories, Crenshaw calls attention to the ways

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natural nor cultural, neither fully material nor discursive, the ambiguous character of the body can play an important tactical role in interrogating essentialist discourses (see, for example, Grosz, 1994:22). The fluidity of bodily boundaries, or the ability of bodies to continually exceed and seep beyond the dualistic frameworks which seek to control and regulate them, is seen to indicate the permeability and indiscretion of all binaries and borders (Shildrick, 1997).

in which ‘the most critical resistance strategy for disempowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it’ (1297).

By contrast, critical feminist theorists of embodiment (in conjunction with queer and other postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches) have argued that embodied identity categories are always produced relationally through hierarchical processes of ‘saming’ and ‘othering’. As such, there exists a fundamental problem with the categories themselves which cannot be remedied simply by revaluing or expanding them to make them more equitable or inclusive. A significant amount of the theorising in this respect has revolved around the exclusionary and hierarchical production of categories of gender, sex, and sexuality. Luce Irigaray<sup>44</sup> has famously sought to illustrate, for example, how women are positioned within the male symbolic system as representable only in relation to men (either as inversion or counterpart), and hence as ultimately unrepresentable. She points to the power of phallogocentric structures of thought ‘to reduce all others to the economy of the same... to eradicate the difference between the sexes in systems that are self representations of a “masculine subject”’ (1985:76). Both the subject and the Other, she suggests, are masculine foundations within a phallogocentric signifying economy which excludes the feminine altogether. The goal is thus not to neutralise women’s embodied differences in order to grant them full membership in the universal realm of humanity, as this would keep the hegemonic male economy intact. The only route to achieving genuine autonomy for women is through radical resignification of the whole phallogocentric system of representation through which embodied differences and their effects are produced.

Later critical feminist theorists of embodiment aim to reveal how the history of Western thought, language and ethics has been founded and developed around the exclusion and denigration of the female body, and other bodies outside the white masculine mainstream (Grosz, 1994; Gatens, 1996; Shildrick, 1997; Braidotti, 2002). Moira Gatens (1996) has argued that the concept of rationality (one of the key historical

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<sup>44</sup> Irigaray’s work has been particularly influential to the analyses of many of the critical feminist theorists of embodiment.

criteria for political participation and other citizenship rights) has been defined in opposition to the qualities typically thought to correlate with femininity and the female body. As she asserts,

Women are most often understood to be less able to control the passions of the body and this failure is often located in the a priori disorder of anarchy of the female body itself... Political participation has been structured and defined in such a way that it excluded women's bodies (50).

Such historical exclusions, she argues, have caused the public sphere, in most, if not all, societies, to develop in ways which assume that its participants have a male body and thus to enshrine within public life the preferences, desires and interests of a very specific embodied group. From Gatens' perspective, these patterns of development have had important material effects on the ways in which excluded bodies have been constituted, affecting both their present capacities as well as their future possibilities (104): 'Power differentially *constitutes* particular kinds of bodies and empowers them to perform particular kinds of task, thus constructing different kinds of subject' (italics in original) (66). She points out, for example, that the body of a woman confined to the role of wife/mother/domestic worker, 'is invested with particular desires, capacities and forms that have little in common with the body of a female Olympic athlete' (69). She thus maintains that denying the historical forms that sexual difference has taken, and treating subjects as essentially sex-neutral, will result only in reifying present inequitable relations between the sexes. In a similar vein to Irigaray, Gatens emphasises that what is required is a politics of difference which accounts for the ways in which bodies have been constituted differently through complex relations of power, and acknowledges that different forms of embodiment are open to change.

Coming from a somewhat different (though related) perspective, Judith Butler proposes that gender, and the accompanying categories of sex and desire, are produced performatively. That is, 'what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body' (1999/1990:xv). Gender 'is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence', which are underscored by the regime of

compulsory heterosexuality. In turn, the ontological categories of sex, gender and desire ‘support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality’ (xxviii). The ‘very thinking of what is possible in gendered life’, Butler suggests, is thus ‘foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions’ (viii). The conception of ‘gender’ presupposes ‘not only a causal relation among sex, gender and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire’ (30). Idealising gendered categories within feminist identity politics can thus only function to ‘produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion’ (vii-iii). As such, Butler is concerned to explore the ways in which gender categories might be ‘denaturalised’ and ‘resignified’.

It should be acknowledged that several critiques of Butler’s notion of performativity suggest that it is inherently a *disembodied* approach. Grosz (2005) and Braidotti (2002) argue that in reducing morphology and corporeality to discursive practices, Butler ultimately de-emphasises the embodied nature of the subject. Furthermore, Lynne Pearce (2004) claims that performativity is probably the ‘most striking and familiar instance of disembodied thinking in 1990s feminist and cultural theorising’ (144). From her perspective the *linguistic* performative ‘is not adequate in all the contexts that Butler uses it and all the different things she clearly hopes it will suggest’ (144). What is common to these critiques is the assertion that linguistic strategies are ultimately ineffective in this context, because they function to reduce everything to discourse. I accept that Butler’s theory is one geared more towards language and less towards the materiality of the body. However, I do not agree with the charge that her approach is fundamentally limited by its focus on language or that performativity is essentially disembodied. I think that Butler makes some convincing arguments about why taking materiality for granted as irreducible can be a dangerous exercise and her suggestion that ‘feminists should be invested not in taking materiality as an irreducible, but in conducting a critical genealogy of its formulation’ is key (1993:32). Theorists of performativity in fact seek to trace the relationship *between* ‘the linguistic’ and ‘the material’ as opposed to permanently dismissing the latter in favour of the former. As

Butler emphasises, performativity is not just about speech acts, but also about bodily acts – and more specifically the relation between them (2004a:198).

By contrast, Crenshaw seeks to distance her approach to intersectionality from ‘antiessentialist’ and ‘postmodernist’ perspectives which emphasise the constructedness of various identity categories, because she fears that such frameworks will lead to the paralysis of marginal politics. It is important to recognise, Crenshaw stresses, that while projects of naming involve ‘unequal power’, ‘there is nonetheless some degree of agency that people can and do exert in the politics of naming’. Identity remains ‘a site of resistance for members of different subordinated groups’ (1991:1297). From her perspective, ‘recognizing that identity politics takes place at the site where categories intersect thus seems more fruitful than challenging the possibility of talking about categories at all’ (1299). Similarly, Mohanty (2002) objects to the ‘postmodern appropriation’ of her earlier work which produces a misreading ‘that labels as “totalizing” all systemic connections and emphasises only the mutability and constructedness of identities and social structures’ (504). ‘I am misread’, she claims, ‘when I am interpreted as being against all forms of generalization and as arguing for difference over commonalities’ (504).

Crenshaw’s and Mohanty’s concerns seem both understandable and important. In the context of the late 1980s and early 1990s, anxiety surrounding the rise of deconstructionist postmodernist and poststructuralist theories was widespread within feminist academic communities.<sup>45</sup> Cogent critiques of the ‘elitism’ and ‘disembodiment’ of postmodernist and poststructuralist theory called attention to the ways in which, through their (ironically) ‘universalising’ frameworks, such perspectives risked marginalising the concerns of those traditionally positioned as ‘other’ all over again and thus thwarting, rather than enabling, social justice. As Ziauddin Sardar

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<sup>45</sup> While some scholars argued that feminist studies had much to learn from postmodernist and poststructuralist perspectives (see, for example, Flax, 1987; Hekman, 1990; Butler, 1992), others voiced concerns that, in dismissing the ‘grand narratives’ of modernity and facilitating deconstruction of the category ‘women’ into an array of multiple and fragmented identities, postmodernist frameworks obscured material inequalities between the sexes (see Klein, 1991). It was also claimed that deconstructive postmodernist approaches bolstered post-feminist claims regarding the ‘death of feminism’ and feminist studies (see De Groot and Maynard, 1993).

(1998) argues, ‘far from being a new theory of liberation, postmodernism, particularly from the perspective of the Other, the non-Western cultures, is simply a new wave of domination riding on the crest of colonialism and modernity’ (13). Such concerns have certainly not gone away or become anachronistic in contemporary contexts. Moreover, it is probably true that some postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches contributed to the generation of (sometimes over-stated and/or uncritical) academic preoccupation with the dangers of ‘essentialism’ and ‘identity politics’ (Fuss, 1989). Nevertheless, I would argue that Crenshaw’s and Mohanty’s representations of the dangers of postmodern deconstruction present more a *caricature* of postmodernism, than a complex or nuanced portrayal. While Crenshaw acknowledges that ‘the descriptive project of postmodernism of questioning the ways in which meaning is socially constructed is generally sound’ (1991:1296), she focuses narrowly on the dangers of ‘one version of antiessentialism’ which offers what she terms a ‘vulgarized social construction thesis’: ‘since all categories are socially constructed, there is no such thing as, say, Blacks or women, and thus it makes no sense to continue reproducing those categories by organizing around them’ (1296). It is telling that neither Crenshaw nor Mohanty provide any references for texts which participate in the ‘vulgarized social construction’ or ‘postmodern appropriation’ that they criticise.

In fact, many critical feminist approaches to embodiment argue for an interrogation and resignification of essentialist binaries and categories, whilst acknowledging that such categories neither can nor should be dispensed with all together. Butler, for instance, argues for ‘not doing away with the category, but trying to relieve the category of its foundationalist weight in order to render it a site of permanent political context’ (1992:8). She also maintains that because ‘juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power’ (1999/1990:8) we can find ‘no political position purified of power’ (xxvi). Thus, for her, ‘the political task is not to refuse representational politics – as if we could’ (1999/1990:8). This is one point at which Butler distances her approach to ‘troubling’ the categories of sex, gender and desire from that of Irigaray, who argues that the only route to genuine autonomy for women is

through making the feminine express a ‘different difference’ that goes beyond patriarchal representation. Contra Irigaray, she argues that

If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is “before”, “outside”, or “beyond” power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impractical dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself (40).

For Butler then the aim is not to do away with particular categories all together, or act as if they do not exist, but to produce ‘a critical genealogy’ of their constitution and ‘legitimizing practices’ (8) which in turn enables ‘a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves’ (163).

Moreover, whilst Crenshaw (1991) fears that revealing categories such as ‘black’ and ‘women’ to be wholly socially constructed will deny marginal political groups the means to articulate their agency and resistance, Butler insists that ‘the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated’ (189). Political agency, for Butler, emerges then not through the preservation of embodied identity categories, but through their critical interrogation and rearticulation: ‘the question of *agency* is reformulated as a question of how signification and resignification work’ (*italics in original*) (1999/1990:184). In this vein, I want to argue that one of the most valuable theoretical tools that feminist embodiment theory offers intersectionality theories, as well as my project as a whole, is a genealogical approach to tracing the complex historical, social and political processes through which particular embodied identity categories are formed and reformed (and secured as ‘natural’ or ontological).<sup>46</sup> A genealogical method simultaneously enquires into the political processes through which such categories might be disrupted and resignified.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Butler’s genealogical approach draws significantly on Foucault’s reformulation of Nietzsche (Foucault, 1984).

<sup>47</sup> Butler’s genealogical method offers a different resignificatory approach to Shildrick and Prokhovnik’s three-step deconstructive strategy because it does require a provisional phase of binary reversal.

Critical feminist approaches to embodiment can move intersectional approaches away from an abstract, ‘grid-lock’ model of social differentiation in which particular pre-formed axes of differentiation interact in deterministic ways, and towards a more fluid framework in which the nature of particular embodied ‘differences’ cannot be known in advance, but rather is continuously (re)formed through located articulations of power. Moreover, through treating the production of embodied subjectivities as an ongoing and always unfinished process, such frameworks acknowledge that no approach to theorising processes of social differentiation can be complete or all encompassing – there will always be excesses which evade recognition or translation.

### **Intersectionality strikes back**

Several critical feminist theorists of embodiment employ the *language* of intersectionality in their work. Judith Butler discusses ‘the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity’ (italics in original) (1999/1990:6). The term ‘fails to be exhaustive’, she points out, because ‘gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender *intersects* with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities’ (italics mine) (6). As such, ‘it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural *intersections* in which it is invariably produced and maintained’ (italics mine) (6). Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz acknowledges that ‘bodies are always irreducibly sexually specific, necessarily *interlocked* with racial, cultural and class particularities’ (italics mine) (1994:19-20). She argues that ‘this interlocking, though, cannot occur by way of intersection (the gridlock model presumed by structural analysis in which the axes of class, race, sex are concerned as autonomous structures which then require external connections with other structures) but by way of mutual constitution’ (20).

Despite employing the discursive apparatus of intersectionality, critical feminist perspectives on embodiment may not be as substantively intersectional as their language suggests. Irigaray’s project clearly positions sexual difference as *the*

difference which plays the most crucial role in the constitution of embodied subjects. She famously claimed in *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*: 'Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age' (1993:5). As Rosi Braidotti (1994) points out in relation to Irigaray's work, 'In her perspective sexual difference cannot be considered as one difference among many, but rather as a founding, fundamental structural difference, on which all others rest' (118). Grosz similarly makes it explicit that, for her, sexual difference not only precedes race, but actually conditions how racial differentiations take shape. In a paper focusing on developing feminist links with the work of Darwin, for instance, she advocates Darwin's view 'that it may be precisely the sexual appeal or attractiveness of individual racial variations... that explains the historical variability and the genealogical emergence of racial differences' (Grosz, 1999:37).<sup>48</sup> Thus, for Grosz, it seems that sexual difference is irreducible because it is the founding morphological phenomenon through which all other forms of differentiation are produced.

From an intersectional perspective, this *ontological* privileging of sexual difference is problematic because it assumes that sex or sexual difference is *always* prior to and separable from other axes of differentiation such as race or racial difference. Grosz argues against an additive approach to social differentiation and emphasises the need to focus on mutual constitution. Yet it is precisely the privileging of sexual difference as primary that underscores the additive analyses of social differentiation which feminist theorists of intersectionality have criticised. If sexual difference is positioned as prior to racial difference in this way, sexual difference is problematically read as *white* sexual difference in ways that 'other' non-white women. As Butler asserts, 'to claim that sexual difference is more fundamental than racial difference is effectively to assume that sexual difference is white sexual difference, and that whiteness is not a form of racial difference' (1993:182).

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<sup>48</sup> From Grosz's perspective, 'Darwin provides an ironic and indirect confirmation of the Irigarayan postulation of the irreducibility, indeed ineliminability, of sexual difference, and its capacity to play itself out in all races and across all modes of racial difference' (1999:42).

While in *Gender Trouble* Butler focuses on how gender differences are produced through the heterosexual matrix of power, in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) she revisits this construction, emphasising how the ‘social regulation of race... subverts the monolithic working, of the heterosexual imperative’ (17). Despite her stated intentions, however, Butler has been criticised for her work on race by feminists who argue that she continues to subsume race to gender (Fusco, 1995; Zita, 1998; Schueller, 2005). Many of the critiques have been directed at her analysis of Jenny Livingston’s film *Paris is Burning* (1991), a documentary about black and Hispanic drag ball culture in Harlem. For Butler, the film suggests - contrary to dominant psychoanalytic perspectives on the symbolic - that ‘the order of sexual difference is not prior to that of race or class in the constitution of the subject’ (1993:130). She claims that the drag queen competitions that the film depicts (all of which are judged on the taken for granted criteria of ‘realness’), illustrate that the ‘symbolic is also and at once a racialising set of norms’, that ‘the norms of realness by which the subject is produced are racially informed conceptions of “sex”’ (130). Butler’s critics insist that her reading of the film ultimately depends on the act of assuming sexual difference as primary and determinant that she herself claims to critique. Coco Fusco (1995) argues that while Butler’s analysis is partly a response to bell hooks’ (1992) earlier critique of the film,<sup>49</sup> she fails to adequately acknowledge hooks’ particular references to the drag queen’s ‘embrace of white supremacist notions of female beauty’ (72). From Fusco’s perspective, Butler accuses hooks of essentialism in assuming that the drag queens are imitating women in a misogynist way, but does not deal with the distinction hooks makes between ideals of femininity and ideals of *white* femininity, hence allowing race to drop out of the equation.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> hooks (1992) argues in regards to Livingston’s film that ‘within the world of the black gay drag ball culture she depicts, the idea of womanness and femininity is totally personified by whiteness’ (147). From her perspective, what viewers are seeing in the film is ‘not black men longing to impersonate or even to become like “real” black women but their obsession with an idealised fetishized version of femininity that is white’ (147): ‘The film in no way interrogates whiteness’ (149).

<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Fusco, along with Jacquelyn Zita (1998), cites Butler’s claim that Livingston’s apparently ‘gender-bending’ gaze (as director) subverts ethnographic convention as another instance of sex and gender taking priority over race in her analysis. They argue that while Butler wants to see the possibility of a white lesbian director’s desire for a black transvestite subject as transgressive because it introduces ambiguity which subverts gender identity, such a perspective functions to efface histories of racial exploitation that cross genders and sexualities. From Fusco’s perspective, Butler’s reading of the

In failing to fully integrate the matter of race into her analyses of subject formation, Butler sometimes privileges gender, sex and sexuality. While she provides in depth analysis of how sexuality and gender are performatively constituted, she does not give the same space to discussing precisely how race is interpellated through 'racialising norms' (Salih, 2002:94). Thus, if Butler really wants to avoid privileging *white* sexual difference, she may need to examine further the ways in which sex and sexuality continue to overlay and outweigh race in her work on subject formation. It has also been argued that Butler's analysis of the intersections of gender, race and sexuality in *Bodies that Matter* remains lodged within a problematic additive framework. Schueller (2005) suggests that 'although Butler is clearly aware of the problems of simply adding race to the understandings of the body and of sex, her own positioning of race in the introductory is nonetheless additive' (83). She points to Butler's comment that 'race is not simply another domain separable from sexual difference, "but...its 'addition' subverts the monolithic workings of the heterosexual imperative...'" (Butler, 1993:18, cited in Schueller, 2005:83). In this sense, critical feminist approaches to embodiment such as Grosz's and Butler's might be productively interrogated and enhanced through a more substantive encounter with feminist perspectives on intersectionality.

It is also worth considering, however, whether Butler's efforts to incorporate race into her analysis of gendered subject formation are problematic from the start because of her reliance on psychoanalytic models which position racial difference as secondary to a logic of (white) sexual differentiation. Sara Ahmed (1998) argues, for example, that 'the use of psychoanalysis has invariably meant that other differences are explained through an act of translation back into the model which elaborates the division of subjects into sexes (the resolution of the Oedipal crisis, castration anxiety and the phallic logic of fetishism)' (103). From her perspective, the translation of racial difference into the logic of Freudian psychoanalysis means that 'the "unmarked" language of that topology is held in place (whereby "the subject" becomes implicitly conflated with "the white subject")' (104). Arguably, it is Butler's rootedness in

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film reveals a tendency to fetishise crossing as inherently transgressive, which depends on once again positing sex and sexuality as primary and downplaying the role of race.

psychoanalysis which returns her to sexual difference paradigms she would otherwise reject. As different as Butler's approach to gender resignification is from those of Irigaray and Grosz, they all would seem to reify sexual difference as prior to (or more fundamental than) other axes of differentiation through their mutual focus on the primacy of the psychoanalytic within processes of sexual subject formation. For this reason, I am more interested in the social, cultural and political processes of differentiation through which embodied differentiations are produced.<sup>51</sup> What Butler's work offers to a process of thinking about how axes such as race and cultural difference intersect with sex, sexuality and gender in the production of bodies and embodied subjectivities, is an understanding of how embodied subjects are constituted through relational processes of 'othering'. This is the strain of Butler's work that I see Sara Ahmed as developing.

Sara Ahmed's work provides one example of how Black feminist theories of intersectionality, postcolonial and queer approaches to relationality and critical feminist perspectives on embodiment can be productively integrated. In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000), Ahmed explores how bodies come to be lived precisely through being differentiated from 'other' bodies constituted as 'strange' or 'alien', a process which she refers to as 'inter-embodiment'. From her perspective, embodied identities and particularities are historically determined (relationally) through antagonistic encounters with (and between) 'others'. While embodied identities are constituted through such encounters, so are social bodies. The boundaries of communities are demarcated and fortified by expelling those 'others' who, on account of their 'marked' bodies, are seen not to 'belong'. Within this framework, globalisation, migration and multiculturalism all represent particular contemporary modes of proximity, which, through re-opening such prior histories of encounter that already mark some bodies as stranger than others, (re)produce both the figures of 'the stranger' and the 'body-at home' in different ways (13). Via such antagonistic embodied encounters, notions of gender, race, sexuality and cultural difference are

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<sup>51</sup> I do, however, want to acknowledge the productive feminist work that seeks to trace links between psychoanalytical and postcolonial perspectives. See for example Ranjana Khanna (2003) *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*.

continually (re)produced. Furthermore, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004a), Ahmed extends her framework to consider the role of heteronormativity in (re)forming both individual and social bodies through processes of inclusion and exclusion. Discussing how 'heterosexuality becomes a script that binds the familial with the global', she suggests that 'it is this narrative of coupling as a condition for the reproduction of life, culture and value that explains the slide in racist narratives between the fear of strangers and immigrants (xenophobia), the fear of queers (homophobia) and the fear of miscegenation (as well as other illegitimate couplings)' (144).

For Ahmed, acts of othering and fetishisation which produce and fix particular bodies as 'other' can be disrupted (and potentially prevented) in part, through conceiving of 'difference' differently. She suggests that we need to locate difference, not on bodies of individuals, but within particular modes of encounter. 'Rather than thinking of gender and race as something that this other *has* (which would thematise this other as always gendered and racialised *in a certain way*) we can consider how such differences are determined at the level of encounter' (*italics in original*) (2000:145). From this perspective, difference cannot simply be read off the body of 'the victim of genital mutilation', 'the veiled woman' or 'the anorexic'; it must be understood as created through a relation *between* bodies. When embodied particularity is understood 'as a question of modes of encounter through which others are faced' (144), transforming essentialist discourses about embodied differences becomes a project of changing the ways we encounter one another. From Ahmed's point of view, 'a generous encounter may be one which would recognise how the encounter itself is implicated in broader relations and circuits of production and exchange' (152). Thus, such an encounter would necessitate awareness of the relations of power which already mark some bodies differently than others and the ways in which particular forms of embodiment must always be conceived *in relation to* the 'others' which have enabled their construction.

As a critical approach to analysing processes of social differentiation and the formation of embodied subjectivities and identities, Ahmed's concept of inter-embodiment enables theorising of how embodied particularities are (re)formed through

intersectional, relational processes and encounters which are situated contextually within particular configurations of power. At the same time, her perspective is not deterministic. It seeks to trace the ways in which such relational encounters might be redirected, and hence how the formation of particular problematic and essentialist identity constructions might be rearticulated. Within her framework, various embodied selves and others are differentiated and yet also fundamentally connected, but never essentially fixed in place. As in Butler's approach to performativity, from Ahmed's perspective, embodied identity categories are understood to be the product of complex histories of relational construction. As such, the possibility exists that they might be disrupted and 'constructed differently' (Butler, 1999/1990:11).

### **Conclusions: Fleshing out a Critical Framework**

Throughout this chapter I have explored various conceptual tools for theorising cultural formations and practices offered by critical approaches to intersectionality, relationality and embodiment. By mapping their specific overlaps and intersections, I have sought to illustrate how these literatures can illuminate and critique one another's limitations whilst also enhancing one another and producing useful insights. It is important to emphasise that the critical interpretive framework which I have begun fleshing out through this analysis is not one that simply transplants the tools each approach offers (intact) and combines them additively to create a 'more comprehensive' approach. Rather, the theoretical 'encounters' between intersectionality, relationality and embodiment staged in this chapter have altered the character and contours of each, and hence the role they play in the emergent framework.<sup>52</sup> By way of concluding, I outline the key elements which define this approach.

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<sup>52</sup> In this sense, while my framework seeks to incorporate some of the most productive insights of intersectionality, it may not *itself* be characterised as 'intersectional', if 'intersectionality' remains associated with a more deterministic project of examining the ways in which particular pre-formed vectors come together to produce specific experiences of oppression or with a superficial process of paying lip service to the 'race-class-gender' triad.

In tracing the particularity of various subjects, groups, practices and experiences, my framework seeks to resist assumptions of universality or linearity and to avoid privileging (in advance) one axis of social differentiation as primary. Drawing on the insights of Black feminist approaches to intersectionality, it underscores the importance of looking for and addressing complex articulations between multiple axes such as race, gender, class, sexuality, nation and culture, without assuming that these axes exist 'out there' in any fixed form. My hope is to avoid additive or analogical analyses which elide historical, contextual and embodied specificities and instead to focus on tracing the (re)production of relational links. As opposed to looking for (or constructing) commonality - which often collapses into superficial or uncritical constructions of sameness - my framework seeks to trace the constitutive connections which mutually implicate particular subjects, figures and practices. Focusing on connection enables an understanding of subjectivities and identities as relationally contingent, and hence unfixed and inessential. This emphasis on relational connection involves the genealogical tracing of the multi-axial configurations of power in which social and embodied differentiation occurs and through which particular embodied subjects and figures are (re)constructed.

In examining the ways in which social differentiation proceeds through inter-subjective embodied encounters which function to (re)shape and (re)constitute bodies, my framework seeks to move away from the abstraction and rigidity that conceptual models of intersectionality sometimes encounter. Avoiding a perspective in which categories of social differentiation come pre-formed and interact in deterministic ways, it understands such categories as continually (re)produced through particular relations of power and hence unfinished and always dependent on historical and social context. Furthermore, as I will argue in my three case studies and illustrate in my final chapter, it is precisely the *process* of tracing the relational histories of construction of various cultural practices and their imagined figures that provides the means by which such histories might be redirected and by which problematic or essentialist constructions might be constituted differently.

## Chapter Three:

### Theorising 'African' Female Genital Cutting and 'Western' Body Modifications

#### A Critique of the Continuum and Analogue Approaches

Bored with your Brazilian? Hundreds of North American and European women are choosing female genital mutilation.

*Kate Catchpole, Jane magazine, April 2004*

This rather sensationally headlined article (above) was passed on to me a couple years ago by a friend. It suggests that 'female genital mutilation' is not merely an African practice and discusses a range of genital modifications being undertaken by women in the US and the UK as a form of 'body art' or as a means to increase or decrease sexual pleasure. While surfing online a few weeks later, I came across a *Newsweek* interview with Eve Ensler, creator of the *Vagina Monologues*. Asked to comment on the relevance of the title of her newest play, *The Good Body*, Ensler responds that 'everything women do is about being good'. In every culture, she suggests, this imperative to be 'good' is linked with particular ways of controlling women through 'mutilating, hiding, fixing, reducing, shrinking' female bodies: 'There's skin lightening in some countries, female genital mutilation in another, fattening a bride in another, and dieting and anorexia in another' (Ozols interview with Ensler, 2004). These articles represent only two mainstream examples of 'African' practices of female genital cutting (FGC) being linked with 'Western' body altering procedures.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> I feel it is necessary to use labels such as 'African practices of FGC' (or simply 'FGC') and 'Western body altering procedures' to indicate how particular practices have been differentiated and compared within the literature I am analysing. Such descriptive markers, however, are problematic because they group together and homogenise a vast range of diverse practices, downplaying complexity, contradiction and hybridity. My use of such labels should therefore not signal an assumption that all practices placed within particular categories (such as that of 'FGC') are necessarily similar in their origins, characteristics or meanings. However, as most of the theorists who make comparisons between practices of FGC and

I had already identified a growing trend towards making such cross-cultural comparisons in the feminist academic literature. In *The Whole Woman* (1999), for example, Germaine Greer suggests parallels between ‘African’ ‘female genital mutilation’ and a wide range of ‘Western’ procedures, including operations on intersex babies, male circumcision, body piercing, cutting, gender reassignment surgery, breast augmentation, episiotomy, hysterectomy and caesarean sections. Criticising Martha Nussbaum’s (1998) portrayal of African-rooted FGC as worse than, and in greater need of eradication, than Western practices of cosmetic surgery and dieting, Clare Chambers (2004) considers connections between FGC and cosmetic breast implants. Outside the specifically feminist literature, Gerry Mackie (1996, 2000) links FGC with Chinese foot-binding, whilst Sander Gilman (1999a) and David Gollaher (2000) suggest similarities between FGC and male circumcision. Legal scholars Sally Sheldon and Stephen Wilkinson (1998) compare FGC and cosmetic surgery procedures such as breast augmentation, suggesting that the legal frameworks relating to the two sets of practices in the UK should be made more consistent.

It would seem that, within both mainstream and academic discourses in the contemporary West, African-rooted practices of FGC have become a prevalent site for comparison with a broad range of other embodied practices. An analysis of the diverse collection of actors who seek to link FGC with other embodied practices and the wide array of practices to which FGC gets compared would be interesting for a number of reasons. How is FGC figured as such a porous and flexible practice that can be stretched to link with such a varied spectrum of other practices worldwide? Through what processes has FGC become fetishised as the practice of choice for so many comparisons? What are the motivations for making such comparisons on the part of

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other body altering procedures do not consistently specify which particular form of FGC they are referring to, it will often be difficult for me to make such distinctions in my own discussions. These labels are also problematic in that they force false dichotomies between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ procedures which are often untenable given that practices of FGC are not only rooted in African cultures, but also some Asian and Middle Eastern cultures. Furthermore, such practices are performed within many Western locations, whilst cosmetic surgery and intersex operations are now practiced all over the world. This discursive division also effaces the historical processes through which practices have been constructed as ‘African’ and ‘Western’ in the first place. Thus, while I employ such labels in this chapter for practical reasons, I will seek throughout the course of my analysis to illustrate the ways in which they continue to be problematic.

various theorists? And crucially, what are the potential discursive-material effects of such comparisons?

In what is to follow, I address each of these questions. My particular focus, however, is examining how making links across different cultural practices is employed by feminist theorists as a means to counter racism and cultural essentialism. The vast majority of texts fitting into this category are produced by theorists living and working in the West (who are situated differently in regards to race, ethnicity, nation and sexuality). Within the feminist texts I have analysed, practices of FCG, which themselves are very diverse, have been compared to cosmetic surgery procedures such as breast augmentation, labiaplasty, and liposuction<sup>54</sup>; ‘body art’ practices such as piercing, tattooing and cutting<sup>55</sup>; nineteenth century circumcision operations performed on women in the United States and Britain to ‘cure’ masturbation, nymphomania and hysteria<sup>56</sup>; contemporary reproductive procedures such as caesarean sections, episiotomies, tubal ligations, hysterectomies and radical mastectomies,<sup>57</sup> and, more recently, operations to ‘correct’ ambiguous genitalia in intersex babies.<sup>58</sup>

Clearly, these comparisons are diverse and the feminist theorists who make them vary in their approaches and motivations. What these thinkers may be seen to share, however, is an objection to the cultural essentialism and racism involved in mainstream, as well as feminist, representations of such embodied cultural practices as fundamentally different.<sup>59</sup> Some also take issue with national laws and international

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<sup>54</sup> See Women’s Caucus of the African Studies Association (WCASA), 2002/1983; Wolf, 1990; Gunning, 1991; Greer, 1999; Meyers, 2000; Weil Davis, 2002; Chambers, 2004; Njambi, 2004; Jeffreys, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> See Leonard, 2000; Salecl, 2000; Njambi, 2004; Jeffreys, 2005.

<sup>56</sup> See WCASA, 2002/1983; Gunning, 1991; Meyers, 2000. For a historical analysis of such procedures see Barker-Benfield, 1975.

<sup>57</sup> See WCASA, 2002/1983; Greer, 1999.

<sup>58</sup> Meyers, 2000; Boyle, 2002; Chase, 2002; Weil Davis, 2002.

<sup>59</sup> Portrayals of FCG by second wave feminists such as Fran Hosken and Mary Daly which described ‘female genital mutilation’ as an ‘unspeakable atrocity’ (Daly, 1978) and purely patriarchal (Hosken, 1981; 1993) have been the subject of much critique by African, ‘Third world’ and other feminist theorists who have conceived such representations as highly problematic in their essentialism and implicit racism (Mohanty, 1991; Gunning, 1991; Abusharaf, 2001). More recent portrayals of FGC, such as Alice Walker’s novel, *Warrior Marks*, and Walker and Pratibha Parmar’s subsequent film, *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993), have been similarly critiqued (Engle and Khanna, 1997; Abusharaf, 2001; James and Robertson, 2002).

directives designed to regulate, ban or eradicate practices of FGC and yet not other body altering procedures which may involve similar health risks.<sup>60</sup> Waririmu Ngaruiya Njambi (2004), for example, criticises the American Medical Association and the World Health Organisation for producing directives which describe FGC as ‘medically unnecessary’ and requiring ‘eradication’, while failing to address ‘culturally acceptable’ practices such as male circumcision and cosmetic surgery (291). She also questions how the label ‘mutilation’ becomes attached to practices of FGC in African cultures, yet not to a range of body modifications fashionable in Western cultures, such as tattooing, piercing, penis/clitoris slicing, tongue slicing, and cosmetic procedures, including botox injections, liposuction, breast implants, and female genital trimming (299). These theorists thus seek to establish similarities between FGC and Western body modification practices as a means to break down culturally essentialist binaries which construct non-Western (in this case usually African) cultures as patriarchal and oppressed and Western cultures as liberated and self-determining. As discussed in Chapter One, in order to emphasise the cross-cultural affinities between such embodied practices, some feminist theorists have adopted a ‘continuum approach’. Others have advocated an ‘analogue approach’. Both models seek to position various practices of FGC alongside other body altering procedures deemed ‘similar’ or comparable.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The platform of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 explicitly cited FGC as dangerous to women’s reproductive health and a violation of their human rights and directives urged countries to pass and enforce strict laws ‘against the perpetrators of practices and acts of violence against women, such as female genital mutilation’ (Gollaher, 2000:194-5). Joint statements by the international bodies WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP in 1996 expressed support for FGC eradication efforts under the women’s rights as human rights model (Boyle, 2002:55) and strategies for eradication have been pursued in countries such as Senegal, Sierra Leone and Egypt (Lionnet, 2003:371). The UK was the first Western country to introduce legislation prohibiting FGC in 1985, with similar laws banning the practice in the US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia following in the 1990s (Sheldon and Wilkinson, 1998). In France, and recently in the United States (Haines, 2006), officials have taken legal action against both circumcisers and the legal guardians of circumcised children. Furthermore, in 1996, the US Board of Immigration appeals granted Fauziya Kassindja political asylum, establishing fear of female genital mutilation as legitimate grounds for granting asylum (Gollaher, 2000:188). By contrast, while the US Food and Drug Administration has banned the use of silicone implants for women who want them strictly for cosmetic reasons, cosmetic surgery and other ‘Western’ body modification procedures have not, on the whole, been seen as a matter of criminal law, and there have been no international movements, directives or calls for eradication by international bodies in relation to such practices (Sheldon and Wilkinson, 1998).

<sup>61</sup> As mentioned in the introductory chapter, a third model employed by theorists to link such practices is the ‘subset approach’. I save discussion of the subset model until Chapters Four and Five.

In the introductory chapter I suggested that strategies of establishing similarities between embodied cultural practices are problematic because they often flatten out critical historical and contextual distinctions between embodied practices and, in the process, shore up dominant discursive-material hierarchies. In this case study chapter, I consider these critiques, as well as others, in greater depth. I begin by mapping some of the comparisons made between FGC and other body altering procedures within the feminist literature and consider three theorists whom employ analogue or continuum models. I move on to two specific critiques of the continuum and analogue models. First, because these models privilege gender and sexuality, they tend to efface the operation of other axes of embodied differentiation, namely race, cultural difference and nation. As such, the continuum and analogue approaches often reproduce problematic relationships between race and gender whilst failing to address the implicit and problematic role which race, along with culture and nation, continue to play in such representations. This erasure of race, culture and nation, I contend, is linked to the construction of a 'Western' empathetic gaze. This is my second key critique. The desire on the part of theorists working in the West to establish cross-cultural 'empathy' through models which stress similarity and solidarity often conceals the continuing operation of geo-political relations of power and privilege.

### **Mapping the Continuum and Analogue Approaches**

As discussed in Chapter One, I employ the term 'continuum approach' to describe the model of theorising advocated by authors who suggest that imagining FGC alongside other body altering procedures within a single 'continuum', 'spectrum' or 'range' of cross-cultural body modification practices would enable a move beyond problematic binary representations. I use the term 'analogue approach' to refer to the theoretical model utilised by theorists who seek to highlight similarities between different embodied practices, but do not explicitly conceive of them as forming a single continuum. The continuum and analogue approaches are not mutually exclusive: The continuum model involves identifying cultural practices which are similar and analogues can (though need not necessarily) be part of larger continuums. Some

theorists employ a combination of the continuum and analogues approaches. Both approaches are utilised to imagine and theorise connections between various forms of FGC and ‘Western’ body altering procedures deemed to be similar or comparable.

It is necessary to make a distinction between the two approaches, however, because in some cases, their structural differences can become significant. A continuum is, by definition, ‘a continuous sequence in which the elements next to each other are very similar, but the last and the first are very different’ (Oxford UP, 2001:185). Choices regarding where to position various practices in relation to one another on a particular continuum are shaped by culturally specific norms and beliefs and as such the continuum model risks reifying culturally essentialist differences. An analogue, on the other hand, is defined as ‘a person or thing that is like or comparable to another’ (27). The emphasis in this model is on ‘likeness’ and thus, when employed uncritically, the analogue approach risks collapsing into sameness.

Feminist anti-cultural essentialist theorists who explicitly employ continuum approaches to link FGC and ‘Western’ body altering procedures include Diana Teitjens Meyers (2000) and Simone Weil Davis (2002). Among those who adopt an analogue model, Isabelle Gunning’s ‘world-travelling’ approach (1991) may be the most well-known. Each of these theorists has a different motivation for employing comparative approaches to emphasise similarities between different embodied cultural practices. Meyers wants to advocate FGC-related educational programmes in Africa which emphasise the possibility of autonomy *within* culture, Weil Davis is interested in examining issues of consent, aesthetics and social control in relation to embodied practices in the United States and elsewhere, and Gunning seeks to consider how international human rights discourse can be employed as a non-punitive model for eradicating practices of FGC. All, however, articulate their projects through a desire to interrogate racist and culturally essentialist representations of embodied practices.

There are also other prominent examples of the continuum and analogue approaches in the feminist literature concerned with cultural essentialism. The American volume

*Genital Cutting and Transnational Sisterhood* (2002) provides a case in point. This collection begins with a reprint of the Women's Caucus of the African Studies Association's 'Position Paper on Clitoridectomy and Infibulation' (2002/1983). In this piece, the authors critique imperialist Western interventions into debates on African practices of FGC, arguing that such condemnations fail to recognise the many analogous procedures which are part of Western cultures:

Surely no one residing in a nation in which newborn males are routinely circumcised without benefit of anaesthesia and in which other operations such as caesarean sections, tubal ligations, hysterectomies, and radical mastectomies are sometimes performed on women for questionable medical reasons ought to single out any other group's customs for special attention. Western cultures have in the recent past practiced clitoridectomy on young women as a cure for masturbation and nymphomania and certainly do not regard the sexuality of women as a benign or positive force (2).

In their introduction to the articles which follow, editors Stanlie James and Claire Robertson suggest that much feminist theorising about FGC falls foul of what they refer to as 'the colonial flaw': 'although many feminists by now are aware that clitoridectomy was practiced at different times and places in the United States, most confine it to the past' (2002:13). As a means to overcome this problem, James and Robertson advocate an analogue approach which traces the similarities between FGC and other embodied practices normally categorised as 'different', namely US intersex operations. Other chapters in the collection, such as Cheryl Chase's, adopt a similar perspective. Chase critiques Western constructions of African practices of FGC as fundamentally distinct from American operations on intersex babies asserting, 'Western feminism has represented African genital cutting as primitive, irrational, harmful, and deserving condemnation. The Western medical community has represented its genital cutting as modern, scientific, healing and above reproach' (2002:145-6). She maintains that laws prohibiting African practices of 'female genital mutilation' in the United States should apply equally to intersex surgeries. The message conveyed by the collection as a whole is that issues relating to female genital cutting require transnational feminist responses which are sensitive to the links and similarities between different gendered embodied practices across cultures.

Another recent example of the analogue approach can be found within a 2004 issue of *Feminist Theory* which focuses on new feminist responses to FGC. The issue is structured around a key article, 'Dualisms and Female Bodies in Representations of African Female Circumcision – A feminist critique', by Waririmu Ngaruiya Njambi (2004), and a series of responses to it by various critics, including Kathy Davis, who has become well-known for her work on cosmetic surgery (1994, 1997, 2003a, 2003b). Njambi interrogates the 'imperialistic impression that only those with some social, political and economic power and who live in the west have the right to take risks with their bodies' (2004:299). She seeks to explore how it may be possible to 'situate the potential for infections associated with female circumcision in the context of similar risks with the multitude of other body modifications practices by people worldwide' (298).<sup>62</sup> In her response, Davis suggests that Njambi's argument is 'well-taken' and that Western feminists should treat African practices of FGC as similar to cosmetic surgery or intersex operations in the sense that all such practices require analysis, rather than automatic condemnation (2004:306). Davis concludes that cross-cultural comparison is a crucial means of making Western feminists aware of their own ethnocentrism, enabling them to become more critical of their own local practices (309).

Several other examples can be found. Lori Leonard (2000) argues that particular forms of FGC are comparable to Western body modification practices such as piercing and tattooing in that all such procedures are, in some senses, fads - they are partly about 'about young girls copying each other' (227). Sally Sheldon and Stephen Wilkinson (1998) suggest that making legal frameworks pertaining to body modifications in the UK more consistent would challenge 'the perception that female genital mutilation and cosmetic surgery are *fundamentally* different' and situate 'both on a continuum of body modification practices' (italics in original) (284). As these examples illustrate, within the Western feminist literature concerned with questions of culture, essentialism and embodied practice, continuum and analogue approaches seem to be employed

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<sup>62</sup> Njambi's text is exceptional (representing a departure from most texts which employ analogue and/or continuum approaches), however, in that she employs cross-cultural comparisons between FGC and other 'Western' body modifications in ways that avoid uncritical and ahistorical assumptions of sameness, and interrogates universalist constructions of female embodiment.

frequently, and perhaps increasingly. In the remainder of this section I look more closely at the continuum and/or analogue approaches employed by Meyers, Gunning and Weil Davis, focusing on *why* and *how* they link FGC and other body altering procedures.

In ‘Feminism and Women’s Autonomy: The Challenge of Female Genital Cutting’ (2000), Diana Teitjens Meyers utilises a continuum approach to link ‘the range of worldwide FGC practices – including “corrective” surgery for “ambiguous genitalia” in Western cultures as well as the various initiation rites observed in some African and Asian cultures’ (469).<sup>63</sup> Through imagining such practices on a fluid continuum she seeks to disrupt neo-colonialist binaries which pose FGC and intersex operations as oppositional and distinct. Meyers is particularly concerned ‘to dispel some prevalent misconceptions about culture’ which portray non-Western women who practice FGC as oppressed by culture and without autonomy, in contrast to Western women as active agents freely negotiating their flexible cultural milieus (474). As such, she aims to illustrate that FGC is a practice common to both non-Western *and* Western cultures. Drawing a discursive similarity between the different sets of cultural practices, she adopts the label ‘female genital cutting’ (usually only employed to refer specifically to African or Asian practices of female circumcision or infibulation) to describe a wider range of body altering procedures including Western operations on intersex babies:

Many Euro-Americans believe that *female genital cutting* is a single procedure, but this is not true. In addition to Western cosmetic procedures designed to “feminize” ostensibly male genitalia, practices range from sunna... to infibulation... (italics mine) (473).

Intersex surgeries and practices of FGC are comparable from Meyer’s perspective because they are both potentially harmful and health-endangering practices of cutting female genital tissue. Linking all such practices in regards to their possible health risks, Meyers suggests a continuum:

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<sup>63</sup> Meyers also links nineteenth century American clitoridectomies to African practices of FGC, although this is not her central comparison (472).

Correlated with this *spectrum* of outcomes is a spectrum of health risks in the immediate aftermath of the procedure and a *spectrum* of long-term consequences for women's sexuality, physical health and psychological well-being (*italics mine*) (473-4).

She also claims that both intersex surgeries and various forms of FGC are impelled by 'potent culturally specific feminine bodily norms' (486) which do not tolerate 'unnatural' or 'ambiguous' genitalia. Meyers' key aim in the article is to advocate educational programmes which seek to enhance women's autonomy *within* FGC-practicing communities, without necessarily calling for the eradication of the practice. She wants to emphasise that 'autonomy' is not mutually exclusive with 'culture' for women who practice FGC and that 'many women exercise effective agency' with respect to the practice, as both accommodators and resisters (469).

In 'Arrogant Perception, World-Travelling and Multicultural Feminism: The Case of Female Genital Surgeries' (1991), Isabelle Gunning advocates an analogue approach as a means to disrupt culturally essentialist depictions of FGC and Western body modifications. Gunning is particularly concerned to address what she, borrowing from previous feminist critiques, refers to as 'arrogant perception',<sup>64</sup> a self-centred and culturally essentialist way of viewing 'the other'.<sup>65</sup> As a means to prevent arrogant perception in this context, Gunning draws on the concept of 'world-travelling' developed by Maria Lugones (1990) to advocate a three pronged approach: 1) understanding one's own historical context 2) seeing yourself as the other woman might see you and 3) seeing the other woman, her world and sense of self through her eyes (202). Required as part of Gunning's 'world-travelling' approach is 'an in depth look at one's own cultural context in search for *analogues* to culturally challenging practices in the "other's" culture' (*italics mine*) (205). For her, nineteenth century female circumcisions performed on American and English women as a 'cure' for mental illness

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<sup>64</sup> Marilyn Frye uses the term 'arrogant perception' in her collection *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (1983). Maria Lugones in turn draws on Frye's use of the term in her article 'Playfulness, "World"-Travelling, and Loving Perception' (1990).

<sup>65</sup> As Gunning explains, arrogant perception involves the construction of distance between self and other: 'The "other", in arrogant perception terms, is unlike me. The "other" has no independent perceptions and interest but only those that I impose. Any evidence that the "other" is organized around her own interests is evidence of defectiveness in the "other"' (1991:199). She claims that arrogant perception operates in many representations of FGC, including those of the well-known second wave feminist Fran Hosken (200-1).

provide one suitable analogue with FGC. She argues that ‘the same kind of rationales’ have been given for both sets of procedures, such as beliefs in their health benefits, (205, 218) and suggests that women have demonstrated similar attitudes or responses towards the two sets of procedures, including, in some cases, ‘submissive or welcoming behaviour’ (208). Furthermore, women have played a key role in supervising, and in some ways perpetuating, both procedures.

Through illustrating that female genital surgeries have been practised in Western cultures too, she seeks to disrupt culturally essentialist and racist perceptions of FGC-practicing communities as ‘backward’ or ‘barbaric’ and women who have undergone clitoridectomies as victims of ‘false consciousness’. In a similar (though not identical) way to Meyers, Gunning employs language to discursively equate the two forms of body alteration:

The practice of reconstructing female genitalia through surgery is a *universal* one that crosses cultural boundaries. It is part of our own history (*italics mine*) (211).

Western women have confronted the *same* problem of female genital surgeries that African women face today albeit in our own cultural context (*italics mine*) (226).

Gunning also makes links between FGC and other embodied practices, such as cosmetic breast augmentation, intersex surgery, abortion and eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. These comparisons are established to encourage Westerners to acknowledge that ‘non-Westerners too can view Western practices as culturally challenging’ (212) and to increase ‘multicultural dialogue’ through a ‘shared search for areas of overlap, shared concern and values’ (91). Establishing such multicultural dialogue is important to Gunning’s overarching objective in this article, which is to advocate ‘the international human rights regime’ as a positive tool, for developing and applying ‘universal human rights norms’ to practices of FGC (247-8).

In ‘Loose Lips Sink Ships’ (2002), Simone Weil Davis advocates a continuum approach as an alternative to binary depictions of FGC and Western procedures of genital alteration. Concerned with culturally essentialist and racist representations of FGC in the media, US law and Western academic critique, she claims:

It is a (prevalent) mistake to imagine a quantum distinction between Euro-American and African reshapings of women's bodies: far too often, they are measured with entirely different yardsticks rather than on a continuum (21).

Elsewhere in the paper she again uses the word 'continuum' to link African and Middle Eastern practices of FGC and American labiaplasty (as well as intersex surgeries) (27). In constructing links between these practices, Weil Davis seeks explicitly to employ Gunning's world-travelling approach, and its requirement to 'look at one's own culture anew and identify [...] practices that might prove "culturally challenging" or negative to some other' (Gunning cited in Weil Davis, 2002:27). From Weil Davis's perspective, labiaplasty would likely not only seem as 'culturally challenging' to African women as FGC appears to American women, but could also be understood as analogous to FGC in several ways. The key motivations impelling women to undergo both sets of practices are similar, including 'beautification, transcendence of shame, a desire to conform' (24). Moreover, both sets of practices involve issues of agency, choice, consent and appropriation which should be analysed with a feminist lens. Through using a continuum approach, Weil seeks to move beyond the 'prurient, bifurcating tunnel vision' of many Western commentators who 'pretend a clean break between the "primitive barbarism" or "ritual" cutting of African women... and the aesthetic of medical "fixings" of those Amero-European women' (27). She argues that a less binary approach to interpreting such embodied practices could lead to 'a deeper understanding of core issues like the nature of consent, of bodily aesthetics and social control, and of cross-culturalist activist collaboration' (22).

## **Discussion**

Both the continuum and analogue approaches challenge the widespread perception that practices of FGC are fundamentally different from other body altering procedures. They situate the potential for health risks associated with FGC in the context of similar risks linked to other body modifications and highlight the comparable motivations across cultures for undergoing such procedures. They can also encourage people to think critically about different cultural practices (including those within their own

cultures) and challenge their ethnocentrism, whilst increasing solidarity and ‘multicultural dialogue’ (Gunning, 1991:91). However, in my view, the continuum and analogue approaches do not provide ultimately effective means disrupting and resignifying binary structures.

Meyers and Weil Davis’s use of a continuum approach may make them more susceptible than Gunning to reifying problematic differences between various embodied practices. For example, Meyers’ image of a ‘range’ of female genital cutting practices correlated with ‘a spectrum of health risks’ and ‘a spectrum of long-term consequences for women’s sexuality, physical health and psychological well-being’ (2000:473-4) suggests that some practices of genital alteration will be more serious, harmful or problematic than others. The point I want to make here is not that we should never make distinctions between particular practices (indeed, this thesis underscores the importance of differentiating practices), but rather that if we are delineating practices on the basis of how harmful, damaging or extreme they are, these judgements cannot be neutral. They will always be guided by culturally inflected values which need to be recognised and accounted for. The continuum argument should thus not be seen as a simple ‘way out’ of cultural essentialism or ethnocentrism. In light of the difficulties the problem of cultural ‘bias’ would seem to raise for advocates of the continuum approach, it is perhaps significant that neither Meyers nor Weil Davis endeavour to undertake any specific plotting of practices within a continuum structure. The fact that such continuums must remain completely vague in order to avoid re-essentialising various cultural practices raises crucial questions about the theoretical utility of the continuum approach in this context.

Gunning’s use of the analogue approach may make her more susceptible to the trap of ‘sameness’ than the other theorists. While in her discursive linking of intersex operations and FGC practices Meyers explicitly states that female genital cutting is not a ‘single procedure’ (1991:473), Gunning’s language at times suggests that nineteenth century circumcisions and contemporary African practices of FGC are ‘the same’ (226). In such moments, her analogy collapses into an equalization, which effaces contextual

and historical distinctions. Yet, in other moments, Gunning appears to re-establish fundamental differences between the very practices she has previously equated. For example, it seems significant that after linking FGC to a number of 'Western' practices including, cosmetic surgery, anorexia, bulimia, intersex surgeries and abortion (in addition to her central comparison with nineteenth century clitoridectomy), it is only FGC which she argues should be addressed (and indeed eradicated) through the international human rights regime (albeit through non-punitive means). The unavoidable, if unintended, implication is that African practices of FGC are worse than the Western body altering procedures. This would seem to represent a problematic slip into a continuum approach on Gunning's part. Furthermore, unlike Myers and Weil Davis, who make comparisons between FGC and contemporary Western procedures, Gunning's central analogue links FGC to Western procedures which took place in the past. It may be telling that she chooses to focus her critique on nineteenth century procedures that no longer exist in the present context of the West (at least in the specific form and context which Gunning details) and thus cannot be addressed or eradicated through contemporary human rights frameworks.

Considering that Gunning claims to be employing a version of Lugones' 'world-travelling' approach, and that Weil Davis seeks in turn to follow Gunning's methodology, it may be useful to think briefly about the extent to which we might see these theorists as being faithful to Lugones' vision. Lugones (1990) describes world-travelling as 'the experience of "outsiders" to the mainstream White/Anglo organization of life in the US' which involves the 'the acquired flexibility in shifting from the mainstream construction of life to other constructions of life where she is more or less "at home"' (390). She suggests that while this flexibility is necessary for the outsider, it can also be employed by those who are at ease in the mainstream as a means to prevent arrogant perception. Travelling to the 'other's world' can enable the self to recognise the other's complex subjectivity and hence to identify with her: 'to see oneself in other women who are quite different from oneself' (393). Lugones stresses, however, that the approach to travelling must be 'playful' rather than 'agonistic'. While the playful attitude involves 'openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness to self-

construction or reconstruction' (401), the agonistic attitude is imperialistic, revealing a desire to conquer (400). By playfully travelling to other women's worlds, she contends, 'we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*' (italics in original) (401).

On the surface, Gunning's three-pronged methodology would seem to capture the spirit of Lugones' approach, enabling the (Western) traveller to comprehend what it is to be the (African) 'other' and to understand how the 'other' sees her. What Gunning adds to Lugones' methodology is the requirement on the part of the traveller to search for *analogues* (practices in one's own culture which may be analogous to those in the others'). As I have suggested, a common outcome of the analogue approach in the feminist literature is a melding of self and other which can result in an uncritical assertion of sameness. Yet, as far as I can see, Lugones does not suggest that travelling to the other's worlds should require us to identify the ways in which the two worlds are inherently similar or that identification between self and other should depend on the recognition of likeness. In fact, her approach to world-travelling would seem to place an emphasis on the recognition and appreciation of irreducible differences between women and their worlds: 'Seeing myself in her through travelling in her "world" has meant seeing how different I am from her in her "world"' (402). From this perspective, it may be that the analogue and continuum approaches are actually incompatible with Lugones' vision of world-travelling. Keeping these questions regarding the theoretical effectiveness of the continuum and analogue models in mind, the remainder of the chapter fleshes out two more specific critiques.

### **Erasing Race, Erasing History**

At the most basic level, African practices of FGC are linked with Western body altering procedures, such as nineteenth century clitoridectomies, cosmetic labiaplasty and operations on intersex babies, on the basis that all are practices which are performed exclusively (or predominantly) on female bodies. They are all procedures designed to alter (or, in the case of intersex surgery, construct) female genital tissue in ways that

may be harmful or health-endangering. Beyond this primary gender-based similarity, I have mapped five recurring, and overlapping, sub-themes present in the ways in which particular sets of practices are linked. While some theorists make different connections, the five sub-themes I have picked out came up repeatedly in the texts I examined, and thus seem to signify (at least some of) the primary ways in which the various practices are connected.

The first theme is the cross-cultural notion of there being two separate and distinct sexes which correspond with two separate and distinct gender identities. For example, Gunning links ‘the belief in the existence of only two clearly delineated sexes’ (1991:210) to the development of African and Asian practices of FGC, nineteenth century American clitoridectomies and contemporary US intersex surgeries. Along the same lines, Meyers argues that both FGC and US intersex surgery reflect the cultural belief that ‘babies can be born with “unnatural”, though not sexually or reproductively dysfunctional, genitalia’ (2000:472). She claims that particular forms of both practices are linked to the notion that surgical ‘demasculinizing’ is required in order to enable the formation of proper female identity (472).

The second theme centres on aesthetic norms about the ideal female body. Weil Davis argues that one of the key motivating factors raised by both African women who support FGC and American women seeking labiaplasty is ‘beautification’ (2002:23-4). She claims there are ‘aesthetic parallels’ between FGC and labiaplasty which are illustrated through the common desire ‘for the clean slit’ (24). Similarly, Stanlie James and Claire Robertson assert that both FGC and operations on intersex babies are impelled by aesthetic ideals which produce disgust for ‘abnormal’ genitalia: ‘In some African societies, “ugly” female genitalia are made “beautiful” by infibulations; in the United States, nonconforming genitalia are regarded with aesthetic distaste, theoretical puzzlement, and possibly even fear’ (2002:13). Gunning also comments that ‘contemporary African arguments favouring the [FGC] surgeries are very similar to Western rationales for the enhancement of feminine beauty’ (209).

The third theme relates to how such feminine bodily norms are *established* and *enforced*. Kathy Davis, who links FGC and intersex surgeries, suggests that both sets of practices reflect ‘the ways femininity is constructed and policed through interventions in women’s bodies’ (2004:309). In a similar vein, Weil Davis suggests that, in relation to both FGC and American labiaplasty, feminine body norms are often enforced through gendered feelings of ‘bodily shame’, produced and circulated within relations between females. She maintains that the two sets of practices are linked in their relationship to ideas about ‘gendered bodily performance’ which girls, in both Africa and the US, learn through their experiences as ‘members of both real and imagined female “communities”’ (2002:26).

The fourth theme relates to female agency, autonomy and notions of consent. Many theorists relate both FGC and various Western procedures to the patriarchal control of women. For example, Gunning suggests that particular forms of both FGC and nineteenth century clitoridectomies are linked to ‘the basic motivating desire to control women into submission’ (1991:210). Most theorists, including Gunning, however, acknowledge that neither practices of FGC, nor the various Western procedures to which they are compared, can be understood *only* through a model of patriarchy. Many seek to examine how issues of women’s agency, autonomy and consent relate to such practices in more complex ways. For example, Meyers includes both African practices of FGC and American intersex operations in a ‘range of worldwide FGC practices’ in which women’s agency and autonomy are at stake (2000:469). Yet, through emphasising the significant variation within practices of genital cutting, and women’s responses to it, she seeks to ‘undercut simplistic dismissals of women’s autonomy with respect to female genital cutting that rely on attention-grabbing horror stories and generalised theories of patriarchal domination’ (471). Similarly, Weil Davis acknowledges that FGC is often positioned as different from cosmetic surgery on the basis of consent (in this construction FGC is understood to be forced on unconsenting minors and cosmetic surgery freely sought by consenting adults). She argues, however, that ‘we must also look at the social and cultural means whereby consent is

manufactured, regardless of age, in the West as well as in African and other countries engaging in FG[C]' (2002:22).

The fifth theme focuses on the effects of the various procedures on women's sexuality. Meyers argues that both African practices of FGC and nineteenth century American clitoridectomies have been connected to the rationale that 'female genital cutting reduces women's sexual appetite and enforces norms of chastity, and thereby protects family honour' (2000:472). Similarly, Gunning argues that, in relation to both FGC and nineteenth century American clitoridectomies, there have been particular contexts where women saw themselves as facing a 'social quagmire' in which 'women undergo the surgeries to secure marriage and satisfy their husbands, but the surgeries can lead to difficulties in sexual satisfaction for both men and women' (1991:219). Other analyses have suggested, however, that both FGC and cosmetic surgery procedures have been employed, in particular contexts, with the belief that they will increase women's sexual sensitivity and pleasure (Ogbu, 1997:414 cited in Meyers, 2000:472; Braun, 2005).

Common to all these sub-themes is a linking of FGC and other body altering practices on the basis of gender, and in some cases, its intersection with sexuality. Gender and sexuality are clearly crucial to the operation all of these embodied practices, which makes feminist analysis particularly important in this context. Furthermore, many of these gendered comparisons reveal important links between particular forms and aspects of embodied practice across cultural contexts which are not often identified within the mainstream and are actively effaced by binary constructions which pose the practices as fundamentally distinct.

My concern, however, is that within all these comparisons and continuums, establishing similarities on the basis of gender appears to proceed (in part) through a temporary erasing of embodied, social and historical differences relating to race, culture, and nation. If we examine the language used by particular theorists in their advocacy of the continuum and analogue approaches, I think we can detect this inclination to address

problematic constructions of race through acts of erasure. For example, as Weil Davis makes clear of her own use of a continuum,

In approaching the politics of female genital operations... I would argue that it is imperative that both consent issues and vaginal modifications themselves be considered on a continuum that is not determined along hemispheric, national or racial lines (2002:27).

It is clear that she intends here to emphasise that race and nation should not be used to differentiate 'Western' and 'non-Western' forms of genital alteration in neo-colonialist ways within the continuum model. However, by occluding the significance of 'hemispheric, national or racial' considerations, she leaves her theoretical models less able to deal with the ways in which axes of differentiation such as race, nation and culture (in their intersection with gender and sexuality) have been crucial to the construction of meaning in relation to different forms of both sets of embodied practices. Admittedly, the theorists I am critiquing have been making particular political arguments and, as such, have not set out to offer a comprehensive analysis of any of the practices, theorising the significance of every axis of social differentiation within each specific cultural and historical context. Indeed, attempting to provide an analysis which 'does everything' is problematic and counterproductive (Butler, 1993:18-19). My argument, however, is that if the object is to address the racism and cultural essentialism inherent in representations of these embodied practices, a model that proceeds by dropping race, nation and cultural difference *out* of the picture is problematic.

For example, we could construct a continuum which situates particular African practices of FGC alongside American labiaplasty on the basis that both procedures relate to aesthetic ideals of femininity, pressures to approximate appropriate gendered bodily performance and desires to conform on the part of women and girls. These links might well be legitimate, but what elements are hidden through this construction? How, for example, would historical links between slavery and the development of practices of FGC in specific contexts be represented and theorised? Gerry Mackie (1996) has outlined a strong connection between the enslavement of Sudanic people by Egyptians

in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the adoption of FGC in Sudan and Egypt. Documentation from this period suggests that female slaves were more lucrative in the Islamic slave trade if they were infibulated in a way that made them unable to conceive (Mackie, 1996; Boyle, 2002). Here we see how a particular form of FGC in one region may have originated and spread through violent embodied encounters in which race, religion and cultural difference *intersected with* gender and sexuality. A model which links FGC and ‘Western’ body altering practices *exclusively* on the basis of gender and/or sexuality risks occluding these intersectional historical trajectories and the role they may play in how particular forms of FGC are represented and experienced in specific contexts.

Furthermore, how would a continuum approach take into consideration histories of colonial domination and religious imperialism, which have been central to the construction of FGC as an oppositional practice in particular contexts? To take the example of Kenya, by the 1930s, after more than two centuries of Western Christian missionary attempts to ban FGC, the practice had become closely linked to nationalist sentiments in the country (predominantly through the rhetoric of nationalist male leaders<sup>66</sup>). In response to such discourses, images of FGC as primitive, barbaric and patriarchal were employed by colonial administrators to illustrate why such populations were in need of colonial control. This only served to shore up support for the practice among some native Kenyans and to intensify nationalist fervour (Njambi, 2004). Thus, as Karen Engle and Ranjana Khanna argue, FGC ‘is (and was) in at least some places for at least some people an oppositional practice. Gender violence and patriarchy cannot alone explain it’ (1997:76). Without downplaying the patriarchal nature of colonial and nationalist rhetoric concerning ‘cultural’ practice and women’s bodies, theorising FGC in this context would necessitate an intersectional approach which avoids repeatedly privileging one axis of embodied differentiation (i.e. gender) above and beyond (or through the erasure of) other articulating axes.

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<sup>66</sup> In his national treatise, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (first published in 1938), Jomo Kenyatta, who would later become Kenya’s first president, criticised missionaries and other Westerners for seeking to eradicate FGC without any true understanding of the practice. He portrayed FGC, referred to as ‘irua’, as a source of cultural and ethnic Kikuyu identity (Zabus, 2001:336), describing it as ‘the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral and religious implications’ (Boyle, 2002:39).

We could ask similar questions in relation to practices of cosmetic surgery. How, within the continuum model, would the relationship between the construction of cosmetic surgery as ‘white’ and ‘Western’ and histories of Western imperialism and colonial appropriation be represented? The oldest existing records indicate that cosmetic surgery originated in Hindu castes in India.<sup>67</sup> Yet, after the ‘discovery’ (and exportation to the West) of such techniques by colonial powers in India, cosmetic surgery was appropriated and portrayed as an invention of modern Western medicine (Gilman, 1999b:75; Sullivan, 2001:33-4). Western commentators’ explanation for why traditional Indian medicine had developed such sophisticated procedures (while Western physicians had been left in the dark for several centuries) was that Indian culture included ‘barbaric’ customs of punishing thieves, deserters and adulterers which made such surgeries necessary, while European cultures did not (Gilman, 1999b:77).<sup>68</sup> According to this narrative, it was only through exporting the procedures to the West that they could be redefined as civilised within structures of modern medicine and culture. Thus, it is through a relational model of colonial othering that cosmetic surgery comes to be appropriated and constructed as belonging to the ‘West’. Rather than effacing such relational constructions, it would seem crucial to recognise and trace the processes of their formation. We might also ask how a continuum approach would consider the relationship between the medicalization of cosmetic surgery procedures in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century and popular racial ideologies or how it would enable one to theorise the links between contemporary cosmetic ‘beauty’ procedures such as labiaplasty and breast augmentation and histories of racist aesthetics (Gilman, 1999b).

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<sup>67</sup> The oldest known written account of surgical reconstruction of the nose and ear lobes is contained in the Sushruta Samhita, written approximately 600 BCE and based on the Hindu hymn Rig Veda, which originated some 900 years before (Brown 1986, cited in Sullivan, 2001:33). The procedures, which involved using skin grafts from the cheek, and later the forehead, were first carried out by families in the lowly Hindu castes of potters and bricklayers (Sullivan, 2001:33-4).

<sup>68</sup> While a similar technique had been employed in Europe in the sixteenth century to rebuild syphilitic noses, it had subsequently gone into disuse and disappeared until it was ‘rediscovered’ by British colonial powers in India in the eighteenth century, and published in a 1794 edition of *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (Gilman, 1999b:9-10).

The continuum and analogue approaches would seem to lack the resources to represent and theorise the intersection of gender and sexuality with race, cultural difference and nation (among other axes of differentiation such as religion, class or ability).<sup>69</sup> This weakness is particularly notable in the case of the continuum model which, because of its linearity, appears only to work as a means of linking practices through a singular model of social differentiation (in this case, gender). Yet a relational, intersectional analysis of the practices tells quite a different story than a linear gendered one about the relations between practices such as FGC and cosmetic surgery. First, it reveals that the practices are disjunctive. For example, particular forms of FGC appear to be linked to slavery as well as postcolonial nationalist struggle in ways that practices of cosmetic surgery are not. Second, it points to how such practices might be connected in ways that *cannot* be reduced to gender/sexuality. Here, we might consider how the development of particular forms of both practice are related to Western imperialism during the colonial period.

I am not arguing here that the thinkers I have mentioned fail to acknowledge the importance of race, nation and cultural difference. Indeed, the racial hierarchies implicated in certain ways of analysing FGC and other body modifications represent the starting point for most of these authors. Weil Davis, for example, discusses the ways in which ‘gender politics’ has often linked with ‘racial imperialism’ in relation to the historical objectification and manipulation of female genitalia (2002:18). Similarly, Gunning acknowledges that insidious ideas about race, nation and class intersected with those about ‘gender’ in the development of nineteenth century American clitoridectomies.<sup>70</sup> My point is that, after identifying the relevance of race as it articulates with gender and sexuality in the development and meaning of particular practices, they then go on to advocate *models* of representing and theorising the *similarities* between particular embodied practices which do not seem capable of

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<sup>69</sup> An article in the *Guardian*, ‘Malaysian Muslims told not to use Botox’ (Aglionby, 2006), which reports on a ruling by the country’s National Fatwa Council ‘that Botox contains substances prohibited under Islam, including those from pigs’, suggests that cosmetic procedures such as Botox may also be discursively constructed through recourse to religion in various contexts.

<sup>70</sup> She points out that while the operations were practiced mainly on upper or middle class white women, related gynaecologic surgeries had first been ‘tested’ on black slave women and then destitute white immigrant women (Baker Brown, 1978 cited in Gunning, 1991:204)

illustrating such articulations in any sustained way. It also seems important that while several theorists raise the relevance of issues of race, nation and cultural difference in regards to practices of FGC at some point in their texts (if not in the theoretical models they employ), most do not see such issues as also relevant to cosmetic surgery. Presuming that FGC is ‘raced’ and that cosmetic surgery is not, may function to keep intact the problematic racialised binaries which these theorists want to disrupt.

### **From binary to continuum or analogue**

How might we better understand what is happening in this erasing of race at the *moment* that a new representational/theoretical model is conceived or advocated? I use the ubiquitous (Euro-American) binary construction of FGC and cosmetic surgery to work through this process. It is relevant here to remember that within this dualism the ‘victim of female genital mutilation’ is invariably raced and coded as ‘black’, whilst the ‘cosmetic surgery consumer’ is (almost) always de-raced and hence coded as ‘white’ (whiteness, within this construction, is seen as not having to do with race, which is only seen to accord with blackness). These codings of race are then associated problematically with ideas about culture and agency, as depicted in the chart below.

<b>‘Victim of female genital mutilation’</b>	<b>‘Cosmetic surgery consumer’</b>
Black	White
African/Asian/Middle Eastern	Western
Oppressed by culture	Operating outside realm of culture <i>or</i> actively negotiating flexible cultural norms
Sexuality repressed by others	Seeking to enhance own sexuality
Victim of primitive tradition/custom	Active consumer of modern science/technology

In order to upset this racialised, culturally essentialist binary, the continuum and analogue approaches are then used by feminist theorists to link the two sets of embodied practices and their imagined figures as *common gendered subjects* through constructing a continuous ‘*raceless*’ plane, as depicted in the chart below.

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**‘Common gendered subject’ of female genital cutting and cosmetic surgery**

Restricted by heterosexist norm of dichotomous gender identification  
 Compelled to achieve bodily norms of ideal femininity  
 Under pressure to perform appropriate gendered bodily performance  
 Desire to conform and validate membership within female community/peer group  
 Member of society/cultural group in which choice and consent are manufactured

In the movement from the top chart to the bottom chart, the continuum and analogue approaches work to collapse the original binary into a single field.<sup>71</sup> The imagined characteristics of the common gendered subject on the bottom chart (relating to gender/sexuality) do not, on the whole, correspond with those listed in the binary chart above (relating to race, nation, culture). Where we do see an overlap is in regards to sexuality and agency. However, whilst in the original binary, agency and sexuality were figured differentially on the basis of ideas about race, nation and culture, now agency and sexuality are linked with gender. From this perspective, the continuum and analogue approaches have not specifically interrogated each point of assumed difference within original binary, but rather have replaced the entire binary with a new construction emphasising similarity. The new ‘common gendered subject’ is a de-raced subject – it has been constructed through erasing the previous divisions of race, culture and nation.

Yet while race, cultural difference and nation, on the one hand, are erased within such analyses; they problematically resurface on the other hand. Indeed, the ‘common gendered subject’ is only a façade, temporarily disguising the role that race, nation and cultural difference continue to play within the continuum approach. The continuum functions as a rather ‘fuzzy’ model in these texts: no one ever seeks explicitly to plot various embodied practices on a continuum structure and it is assumed that there are

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<sup>71</sup> Within the analogue approach both subjects would exhibit each of the criteria or characteristics listed in the chart in (largely) analogous ways, whilst in the continuum approach it is assumed that there will be some differences in the quality of or degree to which each criteria is exhibited or experienced by the different cultural subjects and these differences will determine at which points particular subjects are placed on continuum structure.

sections within which distinctions between practices will be blurred. There are still, however, implicit assumptions being made about where particular practices would sit in relation to each other. One clear example of this is Gunning's implication that only practices of FGC, and not the other 'Western' body altering procedures she discusses are in need of eradication. These assumptions are often highly racialised – those practices which are seen to be raced (various forms of African, Middle-Eastern or Asian-rooted FGC) are on the whole seen to be more extreme, harmful or damaging, and thus are imagined as sitting towards one pole of the continuum whereas those practices which continue to be seen as de-raced or un-raced (cosmetic surgery, reproductive surgery, intersex surgery) are assumed to be less extreme, harmful or damaging and are thus imagined as sitting towards the opposite pole. From this perspective, within the continuum model, race continues to play the problematic role that it did within the original essentialist binary. Rather than upsetting the binary structure, the continuum has merely stretched it out, leaving its previous divisions more or less in tact. While the analogue often risks collapsing into uncritical assertions of sameness, its simultaneous susceptibility to slipping into the continuum mode (as noted in Gunning's text) reveals what is often a continuing dependence on racialised scales of difference. To be clear, my point here is not to deny that some practices are more extreme or carry greater health risks than others, but to call attention to the ways in which particular notions about race and culture often operate 'invisibly' in the process of making such distinctions.

### **Empathy, Location and the 'Right' to Represent**

In linking FGC with other body modification practices, several feminist theorists working in the West have argued for the importance of establishing empathy with those in 'other' cultural groups through recognising 'common' experiences of violence or oppression. For example, Gunning's use of the analogue approach seeks to compel Western feminists to empathise with women in other global locations, by endeavouring to 'see' such women as these women 'see themselves'. As mentioned earlier, Gunning sees the development of such empathic understanding as aided by 'an in depth look at

one's own complex cultural context in search of analogues to culturally challenging practices in the "other's" culture' (1991:205). In other words, being able to empathise with 'the other' in her cultural context requires that the Western subject identify similar experiences in her own context. In constructing nineteenth century circumcisions performed on women in the West as an analogue to contemporary practices of FGC in Africa, Gunning implores Western feminists to empathise with African women who 'today' face 'the same problem of female genital surgeries' (211).

Similarly, Meyers argues that empathy on the part of Western subjects is important in disrupting conceptions of embodied practices such as FGC and intersex surgery as fundamentally different:

Sensitized to the role that Western gender norms are playing in one's empathy for the American mother, one now appreciates how potent culturally specific feminine bodily norms are, and one can sympathetically reconstruct how a vastly different set of norms could figure in an African mother's feelings and decision about infibulation (2000:486).

Like Gunning, she suggests that developing transnational empathy requires that, through introspection, the Western subject 'discover hidden similarities between others' experience and one's own' (486).<sup>72</sup>

As a concept, empathy has been important to the development of feminist ethics and epistemologies.<sup>73</sup> From my own perspective as a Western researcher working on cross-cultural and transnational issues, empathy seems important as a continuous reminder that the embodied practices I discuss do not exist merely as words on a page, but are linked to real women with real experiences and emotions, which may include pain and suffering, but also joy and pleasure. The process of trying to understand the circumstances a woman might face, and the feelings she might have, in a cultural

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<sup>72</sup> Although, in contrast to Gunning, Meyers' language in this example does not suggest that the Western subject should consider the two practices 'the same'. Indeed she suggests that the two sets of practices involve 'vastly different' sets of norms. In addition to this example of transnational empathy, Meyers also discusses the importance of developing empathy within particular local communities that are divided by differences in regards to religion, socio-economic class, sexuality etc. This particular invocation of empathy is not about encouraging privileged the Western subject to empathise with the Third world 'other' (2000:485).

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Hill Collins, 1990; Meyers, 1994; Koehn, 1998.

context very different from one's own seems crucial to conducting valid and ethical research. I remain concerned, however, about the effects of developing an 'empathy' imagined or produced through collapsing critical historical and contextual distinctions between different embodied locations, practices and subjectivities. The potential for appropriation on the part of the privileged 'Western' subject in this context is especially worrying.

I am using the term 'Western' here to denote a geo-political location of relative social and economic privilege within transnational circuits of academic knowledge production and dissemination. The individual theorists whom I include in this category are of course located (and hence privileged) differently on the basis of intersecting axes of social differentiation such as race, ethnicity, class, nation and sexuality. For example, while Meyers locates herself as a white, Western feminist theorist, Gunning acknowledges that she speaks from the position of an African American, feminist scholar. Other feminist thinkers working on these issues within various Western contexts may identify as 'African', 'Black (African identified)', or in a multitude of other ways that complicate any clear-cut binary of 'privileged Western theorist' and 'African other'. Such specificities relating to social location and identity will surely make a difference to (without directly determining) the ways in which particular cross-cultural constructions of empathy are formed and interpreted in a variety of ways I want to acknowledge and do not have space to explore fully here. I am aware that in tracing the construction of a generalised 'Western empathetic gaze' I sacrifice a more in depth analysis of the complexities and contradictions of feminist social and geo-political positionalities and discursive strategies. However, I would argue that there are also important locational specificities and discursive patterns associated with 'the West' in an academic and political context within which Western hegemony remains salient (Mohanty, 1991; Grewal and Kaplan, 1994). Such patterns need to be examined and highlighted precisely so that they may be accounted for and addressed. Indeed, what is interesting, and problematic, about a number of 'Western' constructions of cross-cultural empathy articulated from *different* social locations is the way in which they

nevertheless function to reify dominant Western dualisms and discursive hierarchies (though in different ways and to different degrees).

It is well known that within feminist circles (and more broadly), practices of FGC have been the focus of intense ongoing debates about location and representation. In a historical context in which African women's bodies have been routinely fetishised, pathologised and violated by Westerners, interventions in discourses relating to the eradication of FGC by Western feminists, and other commentators outside of particular FGC-practicing communities, have been perceived by many African women as ethnocentric and imperialist. In such circumstances, arguments have developed about who has the 'right' to represent the interests of women who practice (or are at risk of) FGC and have been directly linked with particular ideas about embodied location. For example, the Women's Caucus of the African Studies Association argue that 'changes in the practice of clitoridectomy and infibulation in Africa must be initiated and carried out by members of those African cultures in which the custom exists' (2002/1983:2). By contrast, Christine Walley claims that practical or representational restrictions made on the basis of experience or race and ethnicity essentialise 'both practitioners and non-practitioners by locating them in bounded groups assumed to share common beliefs – a reductionist view that ignores a far messier reality' (2002:21).

Within a political framework in which representation is a fraught issue, the continuum and analogue approaches may be employed by 'outsiders', in part, as a strategy to establish their authority to speak. If, through the production of cross-cultural 'empathy', a Western feminist theorist can show that FGC is inherently similar to practices within her 'own' culture, such as cosmetic surgery, body art or operations on intersex babies, and that such body modifications thus represent something shared across cultures, then perhaps she can more easily establish her legitimacy to represent 'contested' cultural practices such as FGC. Gunning, for example, argues that,

As feminists... we must develop a method of understanding culturally challenging practices, like female genital surgeries... The focus needs to be on multicultural dialogue and a shared search for areas of overlap, shared concerns and values (191).

Her claim that ‘The focus needs to be on *multicultural dialogue*’ functions implicitly to reject claims (such as that of the WCASA’s) that only those who are part of cultures in which FGC is practiced should have the right to initiate changes in relation to FGC.

Similarly, Kathy Davis encourages ‘sympathetic’ cross-cultural comparisons between FGC and intersex surgeries. She writes:

Genital cutting in all its manifestations, both in Africa and in the west, demands a reflexive and sympathetic politics of engagement. *This is not the time for feminists in different parts of the world to “back off” and focus on their own parochial concerns*, rather it is time to take up the challenge posed by transnational feminism and find ways to build coalitions around issues that are of concern to us all (italics mine) (2004:309).

Within this statement about challenging ethnocentrism, there is an explicit claim about Davis’s (and other Western theorists’) authority and legitimacy to speak about FGC. Presumably, in this context, it is the privileged Western feminist, and not the indigenous African or ‘Third world’ feminist, who worries (or has been told) that she should ‘back off’ and focus on her ‘own parochial concerns’.

Making claims which establish one’s legitimacy or authority to speak is important, and indeed necessary, on an ongoing basis in academic discourse and dialogue. Clearly, as a white, Western scholar, I have been involved in multiple acts of implicitly establishing my own legitimacy to discuss such issues throughout this thesis. As I have suggested, I realise that some might wish to dispute my ‘right’ to intervene in these debates. However, like Walley, I feel that placing restrictions on the ‘right’ to speak or represent on the basis of ‘experience’ or various other embodied axis of differentiation can be highly problematic due to the essentialist distinctions they construct.<sup>74</sup> Yet if privileged ‘Western’ theorists are claiming their ‘right’ to represent or speak about particular embodied practices via constructions of cross-cultural *empathy*, it seems important to interrogate the relations of power through which this ‘empathy’ is

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<sup>74</sup> There is also the question of how practical, or indeed possible, it is to delineate particular embodied locations, in definite and distinct ways. For example, whilst the Women’s Caucus of the African Studies Association argues that changes in practices of FGC in Africa ‘must be initiated and carried out by members of those African cultures in which the custom exists’ (2002/1983:2), the boundaries of this category remain blurry. Does it refer only to indigenous Africans living within circumcising communities or does it also include African Americans (such as Gunning) who identify with African culture, yet live and work in the United States, and claim no attachment with circumcising communities?

produced and may in turn reify. From my perspective, an empathy based on claims to commonality risks appropriating ‘points of view and modes of expression from the so-called margins and mystif[ying] the very workings of power that enable such appropriations’ (Kaplan, 1994:148). It thus seems necessary to ask whether Western theorists’ constructions of cross-cultural commonality can generate empathetic engagement with differently situated subjects that is *grounded in an awareness of the relations of power which condition their interaction* or whether they are more likely to shore up Western hegemony precisely through covering over such power differentials.

Interestingly, there are also examples where continuum and analogue approaches are employed by Western feminists as a rhetorical device within discourses which take ‘Western’ practices as their focus, rather than as a means to enter debates relating to African practices of FGC. For example, Cheryl Chase links African-rooted FGC with American intersex surgery to raise awareness for the US intersex campaign, which seeks to call attention to the dangerous and damaging effects of ‘corrective’ surgery on intersex babies. Chase, who is Executive Director of the Intersex Society of North America, opens the article by criticising ‘media and scholarly discourses on “female genital mutilation” which have not engaged with intersex surgeries, ‘instead serving up only representations of African women’ (2002:126). She frames her concern with this phenomenon as one relating to ethnocentrism:

These discourses continue a long tradition of making Africans into the “other”, suggesting that ethnocentrism is a key factor in the sometimes purposeful maintenance of ignorance about contemporary US genital surgeries (126).

Implied by Chase’s opening critique is her belief that FGC and intersex surgery should be considered as analogous, rather than fundamentally different. While one might expect the following text to focus on both sets of practices and draw out the links or similarities that may exist between them, the article never makes any explicit case for why FGC and intersex surgery should be considered analogous. While Chase’s article provides a sophisticated and compassionate critique of intersex surgery, the link she suggests (rather than establishes) between intersex surgery and African FGC is predominantly no more than rhetorical. In this sense, it could be argued that while

Chase, as an intersex person, speaks from a relatively marginal Western position, her text nevertheless functions to shore up dominant geo-political relations of power because she appropriates FGC as a tool to critique various aspects of ‘Western’ culture. Through such a discursive move, critical attention is once again turned back on the Western ‘self’ and the fetishised figure of the African ‘victim of female genital mutilation’ may be reified rather than displaced as the surface of her text suggests.

Returning to Gunning’s use of empathy, she claims that in linking contemporary African practices of FGC with nineteenth century American clitoridectomies, her intention is *not* ‘to suggest that because Western women have confronted and “overcome” the specific problem, the practice of genital surgery is a “phase” cultures pass through; that whatever was done in Western societies just needs to be done in African societies’ (1991:226). Yet the language she uses to call for empathy from Western women - ‘It is part of our own *history*’ (italics mine) (211) – suggests that Western women are being asked to develop empathy on the basis of experiences they have apparently already worked through. As such, it risks preserving particularly problematic notions of cultural difference related to assumptions of advancement and progress. In this case it may be that, as Sara Ahmed articulates in another context, ‘empathy sustains the very difference that it may seek to overcome’ (2004a:30).

Earlier, I suggested that Gunning’s analogue approach might not be faithful to, or compatible with, Lugones’ original world-travelling method. However, in addressing the relationship between empathy and privilege, we may also want to consider whether Lugones’ methodology has its own potential weaknesses. Her playful approach to travelling seeks to encourage identification between divergently situated women through enabling an awareness and respect for each other’s *differences*, rather than the establishment of inherent or essential similarities. Yet, her notion that world-travelling enables one to ‘see oneself in other women who are quite different from oneself’ opens itself to a rather different interpretation (393). It may risk enabling a problematic *projection* of the self *onto* the other, in ways that maintain the privileged self’s status as the one who is always imagining, seeing, and contemplating her own subjectivity

through others, and hence moulding others in her own image. As Adrianna Cavarero argues, ‘To recognise oneself *in* the other is indeed quite different from recognizing the irremediable uniqueness of the other’ (italics in original) (2000:91).

As a strategy for establishing anti-cultural essentialist commonality, empathy may be limited to the second stage of Margrit Shildrick and Raia Prokhovnik’s strategy for disrupting essentialist binaries. In aiding the ‘Western self’ to see hidden similarities between herself and the ‘non-Western other’, this approach may collapse into a ‘sameness’ which, in flattening histories of embodied differentiation, simply reifies the essentialist differences identified as problematic in the first place. Histories of othering and violence through which particular embodied identities and practices have been (re)constituted, such as slavery, colonialism and racism, are again effaced and the cultural and historical context in which particular practices are constructed can be forgotten.<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusions: Ways Forward

An alternative model of empathy might seek to develop understanding, awareness and compassion by tracing the processes through which embodied and cultural differences are relationally constituted. In this vein, I would like to think further about how empathy might be more effectively grounded in an embodied politics of location which emphasises political and epistemological accountability within feminist transnational and cross-cultural contexts. This focus suggests the need to explore how empathy in relation to embodied practices might further upset geo-political hierarchies of power and involve more mutual or dialogic processes. As I indicated earlier, my analysis raises questions about how cultural context and social location may affect the operation, effects and reception of empathy as a discursive strategy. While my critiques have

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<sup>75</sup> Karen Engle and Ranjana Khanna have similarly critiqued the ways in which empathy is used as a tool in transnational politics in Alice Walker’s novel *Warrior Marks* (1993). They suggest that in linking African practices of FGC, gum surgery and her own eye injury as a child by her brother with a bb gun as comparable forms of patriarchal ‘mutilation’, Walker employs a ‘particular transnational empathy’ which ‘suggests that the cultural context of wounding is irrelevant’ (Engle and Khanna, 1997:69).

centred around the potential for reifying problematic discursive hierarchies associated with ‘Western’ feminist perspectives, it would be interesting and vital to consider how specificities and complexities within the category ‘Western feminist theorists’ play out in this context. It would also be useful to examine how the employment of cross-cultural techniques by feminists working within other geo-political locations may raise different issues or concerns. For example, what difference would it have made to centralise the ways in which ‘African women’ both in Africa and the West, or Black (African-identified) women in the West, either as migrants or settlers, have discussed such issues?

Looking at the bigger picture, my critique of the continuum and analogue approaches underscores the imperative, suggested in Chapter One, to think about how to theorise the relations between self and other differently. The original FGC/cosmetic surgery (or FGC/intersex surgery) binary holds these two practices and their imagined subjects apart in a hierarchical relationship of difference (A/not-A). While purporting to disrupt the binary structure, the continuum and analogue approaches end up either stretching out the binary but keeping its extreme poles of self and other intact, or merging the two sides of the binary together through collapsing self into other. Both models fail to interrogate the social and historical embodied processes through which self and other have been constructed as oppositional. As I have suggested here and in the previous two chapters, one way to think about the self/other dynamic differently in this context is to theorise self and other relationally. In the context of this analysis, a relational perspective would ask: How are the figures of ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’ and ‘the victim of female genital mutilation’ constituted (in part) *in and through* one another? What social and historical processes of saming and othering are involved in their ongoing (re)construction? I take up these questions in Chapter Six. In the next chapter, I examine a third cross-cultural model, the subset approach, which is used to link various embodied practices as ‘similar’ or ‘universal’. Through my discussion of the ways in which the subset approach is employed to group together different practices of passing in feminist and other critical literatures, I also seek to further develop a focus on relationality as an alternative to commonality-oriented, cross-cultural models.

## Chapter Four:

### Race, Gender, Sexuality and the Politics of Passing

#### A Critique of the Subset Approach

Just as the ontology of race exposes the contingencies of the categories “white” and “black”, so the ontology of gender exposes the essential inauthenticity of “man” and “woman”... Further, like race passing, gender passing creates category crisis.

*Elaine Ginsberg, 1996:13*

In her introduction to the collection *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (1996), Elaine Ginsberg compares the passing narratives of Edmund Kenney, a black slave who escaped from a Virginia slave owner through disguising himself as white, and Brandon Teena, an American teenager born with female anatomy who moved to Nebraska to live as a man, later to be raped and murdered by two men who discovered his ‘true’ identity. On the basis of these examples, she argues that both ‘race passing’ and ‘gender passing’ involve the negotiation of identities that are simultaneously socially constructed and biologically inflected and operate within an economy of specularities (2). Moreover, and fundamentally for Ginsberg, both forms of passing represent acts of boundary crossing which produce ‘category crisis’ and hence the possibility of disrupting essentialist bodily binaries.

Within gender, postcolonial, queer and cultural studies, links between practices of passing in relation to race and passing in relation to gender have been highlighted by a number of critical theorists. For example, linking the case of Susie Gilroy Phipps who took the State of Louisiana to court in 1981 for refusing to change her birth certificate (which recorded her racial designation as ‘colored’) to read ‘white’, and Sean O’Neill, a teenager from Colorado who, like Brandon Teena, was born with female genitalia but passed as a man, Catherine Squires and Daniel Brouwer (2002) compare news media

coverage of ‘race passing’ and ‘gender passing’. They note similarities between ‘Black and queer coverage’ of the two types of passing, such as ‘community consternation about the passer’, as well as differences, including ‘disparate focus on civil rights rather than identity issues’ (283). Kathy Davis (2003a) suggests that all practices of cosmetic surgery, whether to alter perceived ‘racial or ethnic features’ or to enhance ‘femininity’, should be understood via a model of ‘surgical passing’.<sup>76</sup> She maintains that ‘the desire to become “ethnically invisible” resonates with the wish to become “normal”, “just like everyone else”’, expressed by many (white) female cosmetic surgery patients (89). Moreover, Marjorie Garber (1992) argues that transvestism has in common with other types of crossing or passing (such as those centred around categories of race, class, or religion) the ability to create ‘category crisis’: ‘a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits border crossing from one (apparently distinct) category to another’ (16). Comparisons have also been made between race and/or ethnicity passing and passing in relation to sexual identity or sexual preference. Linda Schlossberg (2001) notes the ways in which experiences of passing have been seen as comparable for Jews and homosexuals in that they ‘share the dubious honor of being largely invisible or unreadable’ (2). Due to anxieties surrounding physical intelligibility, both groups have been subject to a barrage of pseudo scientific literature devoted to identifying the ‘Jewish’ and ‘homosexual’ body (2). Furthermore, Amy Robinson (1994) suggests that both race and sexuality passing depend on ‘a skill of reading’ on the part of African American and/or gay and lesbian spectators (716).

Unlike the feminist theorists who compare ‘African’ female genital cutting with ‘Western’ body modifications, authors who link various forms of passing are not, on the whole, seeking specifically to disrupt culturally essentialist First world/Third world, West/non-West binaries. The particular styles, arguments and motivations of authors who make such passing comparisons vary. However, in common with the previous case study, they are all interested in the possibility of disrupting essentialist notions of

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<sup>76</sup> Davis draws on the work of Sander Gilman who, in *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (1999b), argues that ‘the model of “passing” is the most fruitful to use in examining the history and efficacy of cosmetic surgery’ (22),

embodied identity categories. They all seek to assess whether (or not) passing represents a critical practice capable of radically resignifying bodily binaries.

The term ‘passing’ describes an individual (or group of people) regarded by others as belonging to an embodied identity group (i.e. race, gender, sexuality, class<sup>77</sup> etc.) which is not their ‘own’.<sup>78</sup> Thus, a person who considers herself to be, or has habitually been labelled by others as, ‘black’ may, in particular circumstances, pass for ‘white’.

Historically associated most commonly with discourses of racial difference and the legacies of slavery and segregation, the practice of passing is often represented as a deliberate strategy on the part of light-skinned blacks to gain improved social status and/or political and legal rights and privileges (although in many cases it would more accurately be described as a matter of life and death). This ‘social mobility framework’ has also been applied to interpret acts of passing on the basis of gender. For example, when 1920s American jazz pianist and saxophonist Billy Tipton (who was married with three adopted sons) was discovered to be a ‘woman’ upon his death in 1989, his long-term practice of ‘gender passing’ was interpreted by many as a means to pursue a career as a musician in the male-dominated world of jazz. However, as I argue in this chapter, social mobility frameworks are often reductive. Passing may be motivated by a wide range of overlapping (and conflicting) concerns, from safety and social mobility to erotic excitement and pleasure and may be deliberate or unintended, permanent or temporary.

From one perspective, the very possibility of ‘passing’ depends on the essentialist assumption that there exist discrete, natural identity categories which people inhabit from birth and may subsequently transgress. Yet passing is complex and does not always refer to the category one is assumed to be passing *into*. For instance, Judith Shapiro argues that ‘transsexuals commonly believe that it is when they are trying to

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<sup>77</sup> While class may at first not appear to be an ‘embodied’ category in the same way as race or gender, critical theorists of class have argued that the body is the most prominent location for the materialization of class tastes (Bourdieu, 1984) and that ‘the body and bodily dispositions carry the markers of social class’ (Skeggs, 1997:82).

<sup>78</sup> Passing has also been discussed in relation to other identity categories, such as for example, religion (Schlossberg and Sanchez, 2001) ethnicity and culture (Melman, 1992; Lewis, 2004; Zayzafoon, 2005).

play the role of their anatomical sex, as opposed to their subjectively experienced gender, that they are trying to pass as something they are not' (1991:256). Furthermore, passing is not always (if ever) associated with a simple binary (i.e. black/white, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual). It is often intersectional, involving movement within and articulation between multiple identity categories. Several theorists have noted, for instance, how within African American literature, 'race passing' is often combined with 'sexuality passing' and/or gender-oriented cross-dressing (Garber, 1992; Ginsberg, 1996; Somerville, 2000; Schlossberg, 2001).

One of the greatest complexities of passing is the paradox that defines it as a critical practice. While the logic of passing involves convincing some other(s) that one belongs to a particular embodied group that, 'in reality', one does not, it is only through detection – through the failure to pass – that passing becomes intelligible as a critical act. As Carole-Anne Tyler comments, 'passing can only name the very failure of passing, an indication of a certain impossibility at its heart, of the contradictions which constitute it' (1994:212). Judith Butler's theory of performativity depends critically on what we might refer to as the *strategic failure* of passing. This paradox of passing is a point to which I return later in the chapter, relating it to concerns of intelligibility and visibility.

The politics of passing are highly relevant to the concerns of relationality, embodiment, intersectionality, (anti)essentialism, identity politics and visibility that I explore in this thesis. However, a significant amount has already been written about passing within feminist and other literatures and, as such, I do not seek to offer original historical, social or cultural analyses of passing practices per se. The purpose of this chapter is to explore how the linking of embodied cultural practices works within this particular dynamic, whilst highlighting some of the similarities and differences with the comparisons made in the previous chapter. Through my analysis of the literature on passing, I also further develop my approach to relationality as a conceptual tool. A number of key questions arise: Through which processes and models is 'race passing' linked to 'gender passing' and 'sexuality passing' in these texts? How are the

relationships between various axes of embodied differentiation represented and theorised within such models? How can we understand the motivations of different authors for making such links and what are the potential effects of these comparisons? How might passing be theorised as a relational, performative practice?

All the authors discussed in this chapter seek to call attention to, or disrupt, the problematic constructions of race, gender and sexuality (among other categories) as natural, ontological categories, which often underscore problematic identity politics. While some employ versions of the continuum and analogue models discussed in Chapter Three, others adopt a slightly different linking strategy which I refer to as the ‘subset model’. The subset approach involves grouping together a number of different passing practices which, on the basis of various criteria, are seen to fall within the same performative sphere. Through subsuming an array of embodied cultural practices in the realm of ‘the same’, however, the subset approach often fails to theorise effectively the relational, intersectional nature of passing and the important historical, contextual and political distinctions between different passing practices.

In the first part of this chapter, I examine a slippage which occurs within several texts from comparisons between specific passing practices to much more generalised claims about the nature of *all* passing. I consider how authors who use the subset approach also often employ problematically reductive thematic models, such as the social mobility framework, as a means to link various acts of passing. In the second part, I identify and evaluate two key claims made by advocates of the subset approach: ‘the passing as subversive’ and ‘we are all passing’ arguments. Both claims risk flattening critical political, historical and embodied distinctions between passing practices. I also examine how, due to a problematic reliance on registers of visibility, the linking of passing practices through the subset model can result in the fetishisation of transgender, transsexual and mixed-race subjects. I conclude by suggesting that an approach which historicises the relational construction of particular passing practices may provide a more effective framework for theorising the constitutive links between passing formations without occluding *or* fetishising their particularities.

## Passing and the Subset Model: Too Wide, Too Narrow

The theorists discussed in this chapter indicate varying political agendas for linking different passing practices. Some authors who connect race passing with gender passing seek specifically to interrogate problematic constructions of race and gender which pose one as ontologically prior to, or more fundamental than, the other. As such, they aim to illustrate the ways in which race and gender operate as similarly structured identity categories in passing and crossing narratives. For example, contesting Henry Louis Gates' assertion that race is 'the ultimate trope of difference', Ginsberg argues that in relation to passing, gender 'is a trope of difference that shares with race... a similar structure of identity categories whose enactments and boundaries are culturally policed' (1996:13).<sup>79</sup> For Amy Robinson (1994), it is a desire to interrogate 'the inadequate dichotomy of visibility and invisibility' that motivates her complex linking of race and sexuality passing. She seeks to develop 'a vocabulary of passing... in terms of the spectatorial positions produced in response to the pass' (723) that disrupts the construction of race and sexual preference 'as binary opposites in a visual economy of readable identity' (717). Other theorists, such as Judith Shapiro (1991), who comments that 'addressing gender issues through sex change surgery is a bit like turning to dermatologists to solve the race problem' (262), make links between different forms of passing in order to deny specificity to transsexuality as a sexual (and political) identity, in part, as a means to preserve 'sexuality' or 'queer studies' as an umbrella category.

Many of the authors make links between various passing practices through the use of a model I call the 'subset approach'. As discussed in the previous chapter, the continuum model imagines particular procedures on a broad spectrum of embodied practices deemed similar to varying degrees and the analogue model involves making specific links between two or more practices deemed alike. The subset model operates through

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<sup>79</sup> Ginsberg's objection to the ontological privileging of one axis of embodied differentiation (race) as more fundamental than another (gender) reflects concerns similar to my own expressed in Chapter Three where I criticised the repeated privileging of gender and sexuality (to the exclusion of race) in feminist linkings of FGC and body modification. However, unlike Ginsberg, I would not advocate establishing race and gender as analogous as a means of ameliorating the problems with accounts or models which privilege one axis of differentiation.

drawing a permeable boundary line around a group of practices seen, on the basis of various commonalities, as belonging to the same performative sphere. My understanding of the subset model has been aided by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003) discussion of 'periperformative utterances'. In her study of performative language, Sedgwick names 'periperformative' those sentences and sentence complexes which do not fall into the category of explicit performative utterances (as delineated by J. L. Austin in *How To Do Things With Words*) but instead allude to such utterances: 'Periperformative utterances aren't just about performative utterances in a referential sense: they cluster around them, they are near them or next to them or crowding against them: they are in the neighbourhood of the performative' (2003:68). This idea of particular utterances or acts clustering together within the same 'neighbourhood' is what the subset model seeks to convey as an approach to linking different passing practices.

In the examples discussed in this chapter, the subset model is employed to link practices seen to be in close proximity to one another because they are constituted by identity categories, namely race, gender and sexuality, which are seen to be structurally similar and which often intersect. Race and gender are both understood to be socially constructed and (re)produced through regimes of visibility, as well as being biologically inflected and legally constrained. Furthermore, both categories are articulated through dominant binaries (white/black and male/female) in which the so called 'inferior' or 'not-A' terms ('black' and 'female') often stand for the category as a whole (i.e. black is constructed as a metonymy for race while female is produced as a metonymy for gender). These marginalised categories are also frequently read into one another (i.e. race, read as 'black' or 'non-white', is often either effeminised or hyper-masculinised). Furthermore, and crucially, race and gender (as well as sexuality) are understood as performative categories that may be interrogated, disrupted and potentially 'constructed differently' (Butler, 1999/1990:11). For many of the theorists discussed in this chapter, the subset model serves as a tool for linking passing practices understood to be potentially subversive in their ability to disrupt 'natural' identity categories and deconstruct essentialist bodily binaries. In this respect, the subset model is *itself*

periperformative because it yokes together various performative acts or processes through making statements about their shared structural similarities and potential social and political effects (Sedgwick, 2003:79).<sup>80</sup>

In this vein, I want to consider some of the similarities between Judith Butler's work on performativity and texts that link passing practices through the subset model. Like those authors who include race passing and gender and/or sexuality passing within a single subset of subversive acts of embodied disruption, Butler claims commonalities between 'a set of parodic practices... that disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification beyond the binary frame' (1999/1990, xxxi). She is also interested in exploring how performative practices which transgress binary categories of gender and sexuality may be linked to those that negotiate and disrupt racial boundaries (1999/1990, 1993, 1997). For example, (in a pertinent footnote) Butler acknowledges a similarity between her theories of gender performativity and those of the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, who explores the possibility of disrupting the categories of race, ethnicity and culture through the practice of mimicry.

Bhabha's work on the mimetic splitting of the postcolonial subject is close to mine in several ways: not only the appropriation of the colonial "voice" by the colonized, but the split condition of identification are crucial to a notion of performativity that emphasizes the way minority identities are produced and given at the same time under conditions of domination (1999/1990:192, note 11).

For Butler, what links the categories of gender, sexuality and race is their own inadequacy. Like heterosexual gender norms, rigid racial boundaries are 'continually haunted by their own inefficacy, hence the anxiously repeated effort to install and augment their jurisdiction' (1999/1990:237).<sup>81</sup> Performative acts such as drag, racial mimicry and passing can thus all function as resignificatory practices which achieve subversion through 'working the weakness in the norm' (237). In this sense, we might

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<sup>80</sup> 'Though not themselves performatives', periperformative utterances 'are *about* performatives' (Sedgwick, 2003:68).

<sup>81</sup> In *Bodies that Matter* (1993) Butler is particularly interested in how performative practices involve complex articulations of gender, sexuality and race. She explores how, in Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*, practices of passing disrupt the claim 'that sexual difference is more primary or more fundamental than other kinds of differences, including racial difference' (1993:181).

see Butler as pursuing a strategy comparable to the subset approach in her linking of different parodic practices on the basis of their similar subversive potential.<sup>82</sup>

### Expansion and slippage

A crucial feature of the subset model is that its circumferences are not fixed. Sedgwick explains that ‘like the neighbourhoods in real estate ads, periperformative neighbourhoods have prestigious centres (the explicit performative utterance) but no very fixed circumferences’ (2003:68). Indeed, the subset model is in part defined by its ability to *expand* its performative reach, subsuming within its boundaries an increasing array of performative practices. While it usually starts on a small scale by describing a specific passing practice or theorising the similarities between two particular passing narratives, it often then moves on to encompass a wider host of practices and experiences which may be peripheral to the initial explicit comparison or object of analysis. For example, Davis (2003a) jumps from making a specific comparison between cosmetic surgery to enhance ‘femininity’ and surgery to alter ‘ethnic markers’ to claiming that *all* forms of cosmetic surgery can be subsumed within a model of passing:

I raise the question of how such ethnic cosmetic surgery might differ from other types of cosmetic surgery (such as breast augmentations for “enhancing” femininity or face-lifts to eliminate signs of aging) and, more generally, whether ethnic cosmetic surgery raises different normative or ethical issues (73).

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Passing is the basic motivation for any form of cosmetic surgery, whether ethnically marked features are involved or not... In short, cosmetic surgery is a form of “surgical passing” (78).

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<sup>82</sup> Butler is at pains to emphasise in *Bodies that Matter* and in the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary volume of *Gender Trouble* (1999), however, that, contrary to the ways in which her arguments in the 1990 text were widely interpreted, performativity should not be confused with the deliberate act of performance on the part of a voluntarist subject (1993:225).

Similarly, we can note a move in Ginsberg's text (1996) between a specific comparison of 'race passing' and 'gender passing' and generalised claims about *all* forms of passing:

The very real possibility of gender passing – cross-dressing – thus is likely to threaten not only the security of male identity, as race passing threatens the security of white identity, but also, as does race passing, the certainties of identity categories and boundaries (13).

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*Whatever the rationale*, both the process and the discourse of passing interrogate the ontology of identity categories and their construction. For the possibility of passing challenges a number of problematic and even antithetical assumptions about identities... (italics mine) (4).

We might also observe how within Garber's analysis of cross-dressing, the category of 'the transvestite' stretches to include any situation in which 'any person of one sex is clad in any form or any part of the other's dress, in life or in art, for any length of time, and under any circumstances' (Hollander, 1992:34). As Anne Hollander comments in her review of *Vested Interests*, within Garber's text,

[The transvestite] can be both Cary Grant momentarily wearing a frilly negligee in *Bringing up Baby* and also Dr. James Barry, inspector general of the Medical Department of the British army, who, after serving for more than forty years as a physician and surgeon, was discovered to be a woman on her death in 1865 (34).

Through such expansion and slippage, these subset approaches produce various generalised periperformative utterances: 'all recipients of cosmetic surgery can be interpreted through a model of passing', 'the process of passing is inherently subversive', 'all forms of cross-dressing represent transvestism'. In this sense, the subset model can be problematic in that it is often impossibly wide. While it may be argued that abstracting from specific distinctions in order to make more general claims is precisely what theory *does*, my argument is that the subset model's tendency to encapsulate an increasingly expansive array of practices within its boundaries makes it prone to theoretical *overextension*, which can lead it to lose its value as an analytic. The

problem is not with generalisation per se in this context, but rather with the *effects* of particular, repeated generalisations. My focus is on tracking those marginal practices, bodies and subjectivities which are repeatedly elided and/or problematically fixed through various entrenched generalisations about passing. In this respect, I want to argue that while the subset model can be too wide, it is also often problematically narrow.

### **Particularity and the ‘social mobility framework’**

Elaine Ginsberg (1996) argues that the social mobility framework is relevant to the majority of (if not all) practices of passing in the American cultural experience. For her, ‘the cultural logic of passing suggests that passing is usually motivated by a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access to social and economic opportunities’ (3). Ginsberg acknowledges that ‘the rationale for passing may be more or less complex or ambiguous and motivated by other kinds of perceived rewards’ (5). She makes clear, however, that the assumption underlying her text ‘is that critical to the process and discourse of “passing” in American history and in the American cultural imaginary are the status and privileges associated with being white and being male’ (5). Later she asserts that,

Given the asymmetry of privilege and power in most societies, it is not difficult to understand the rationale for most female cross-dressing. When women cross-dress, they usually do so to gain access to professional and economic opportunities or to experiences seen as available only to men. (13).

As these extracts illustrate, for Ginsberg, passing within the American context operates *primarily* through female to male or black to white trajectories and is engaged in deliberately on the part of the passer as a means to gain perceived social and/or material privileges or rewards. This type of social mobility framework is certainly applicable to many historical acts of passing.<sup>83</sup> But can passing be viewed solely through a social mobility framework? What does the model leave out or obscure from view?

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<sup>83</sup> As discussed, social mobility has been central to some experiences of ‘race passing’ within the context of slavery in the United States. Furthermore, people who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual may choose

Contrary to the social mobility framework, passing may not represent a conscious or deliberate strategy on the part of the passer. The passer may not intend to pass or even realise that s/he is indeed passing. For example, in Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1997/1929), the female protagonist, Clare, a light-skinned black woman, is read 'mistakenly' as a white woman by a former acquaintance who fails at first to recognise Clare as she sits in a café unaware she is being watched. In this sense, passing gains significance primarily through the visual reading(s) of its spectator(s) (Robinson, 1994:718). Furthermore, passing does not always involve an individual from a disadvantaged or stigmatised social group seeking to be viewed as a member of a more privileged class as a means to gain social status and privileges or to avoid discrimination and abuse. For instance, transsexuals born with male anatomy who undergo hormone treatment and/or surgery to pass as women may find themselves facing gendered discrimination and oppression they did not before experience as they move from the relative social privilege of the embodied identity category 'male' to the subordinate status 'female'. In such cases, passing may not be about social mobility but rather about feeling that one's physical embodiment is consistent with one's psychosocial identity.

Pointing to the importance of employing an intersectional approach to interpreting diverse practices of passing, Ginsberg acknowledges that passing is 'not always associated with a simple binary' (1996:3) and that passing narratives often involve 'the complex imbrications of race and gender' (12). Historical analysis suggests that an intersectional perspective is indeed necessary to understand the complex nature of various passing practices. In slave narratives, such as William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, for example, escaping slavery plantations and travelling to seek freedom in Northern states involved not only passing as white, but also transforming gender and class identities in order to make the presentation of

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to pass as straight in particular contexts as a means to avoid stigmatism and/or violence. As Schlossberg (2001) comments, 'because an accurate reading of the queer body can, in many social and political contexts, result in obviously terrible consequences (even unto death), passing becomes a form of passive resistance, one that protects the gay subject from hostile interpretations' (3).

‘whiteness’ more credible (Garber, 1992:282).<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, in Western women’s nineteenth century travel narratives from the Middle East, cultural cross-dressing was often combined with gender passing, partly because women were denied access to various public spaces on account of their sex, but also because passing as men allowed female travellers to explore other traditionally circumscribed practices or desires. For Isabelle Eberhardt, a European woman who travelled through the Maghreb as an Arab man at the turn of the nineteenth century, wearing a cross-cultural, cross-gender ‘disguise’ not only enabled her to gain access to sites and communities forbidden to Westerners and women but also to fantasise about expressing her sexual desire for other women (Zayzafoon, 2005:51-2).

Despite Ginsberg’s acknowledgement that passing *is* intersectional, however, it is not clear that she analyses effectively the complex articulations which structure and differentiate various passing practices. As suggested above, for some subjects in some contexts, passing may be engaged in, not exclusively or primarily as a means towards social mobility, but rather as an experience of pleasure and/or erotic excitement. As Schlossberg (2001) notes, passing can be interpreted ‘as a uniquely pleasurable experience, one that trades on the erotics of secrecy and revelation’ (3). Passing may be experienced ‘as a source or radical pleasure or intense danger; it can function as a badge of shame or a source of pride’ (3).<sup>85</sup> In this respect, it is particularly interesting, given Ginsberg’s advocacy of intersectional frameworks, that her generalising model repeatedly elides sexuality and erotic pleasure as relevant to passing. I mentioned in the

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<sup>84</sup> Dominant class and gender regimes in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century meant that it would be much more common (and hence believable) for a white, male slave owner (rather than a white, middle or upper class female) to be travelling ‘alone’ with a black male slave. Ellen Craft’s lighter skin enabled her to more easily ‘pass “up” into the class of slave holder – male slave owner’ (Garber, 1992:283).

<sup>85</sup> Joseph Boone argues that for many male colonialist travellers to the Middle East, putting on ‘Arab drag’ provides a disguise ‘that allows for the play of sexual and gender ambiguity’ and the expression of homoerotic desire ‘that lurks in Western fantasies of Eastern decadence’ (Boone, 2001). Particular instances of passing may also be linked with erotic desire or pleasure on the part of spectator(s) of the pass. As Judith Butler (1993) points out, in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, ‘it appears that the uncertain border between black and white’ is precisely what is eroticised by Bellew, husband of the female protagonist Clare who passes as ‘white’. This bodily ambiguity is ‘what he needs in order to make Clare into the exotic subject to be dominated’ (172). Moreover, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, when Eliza Harris cross-dresses as a young, white man, her ‘sexual appeal for her husband is enhanced in this moment by her male disguise as well as by the danger in which escape will put them both’ (Garber, 1992:285).

introduction that jazz musician Billy Tipton's 'gender passing' has been widely interpreted through a social mobility framework. Ginsberg herself suggests that Tipton 'lived his professional life as a man, *presumably* because his chosen profession was not open to women' (italics mine) (3). Through imposing a social mobility framework to explain Tipton's passing, Ginsberg interprets his 'transvestism' in 'the register of socio-economic necessity', and hence normalises it (Garber, 1992:68). From Garber's perspective, social mobility or 'progress' narratives, which routinely avoid 'any mention of sexuality', function to smooth over 'whatever discomfort is felt by the reader of audience' in encountering what may be an experience of 'an erotic pleasure and play space' (69). Making a similar point in regards to transgender subjects, Judith Halberstam argues that 'too often...the histories of women who pass as men, or the narratives of transgender men, attempt to rationalize rather than represent transgender lives in the glory of all their contradictions' (2001:22). In this view, social mobility frameworks such as Ginsberg's are problematic 'because they ignore the complex and often unconscious eroticism of such self-transformations and masquerades' (Garber, 1992:69).<sup>86</sup> Thus, if, in the previous case study, the privileging of gender and sexuality in models for linking FGC and cosmetic surgery meant that the significance of race, national and cultural difference was problematically effaced, in this example we find that emphasis on making links between race and gender results in an elision of sexuality and the related concepts of eroticism and pleasure. Such elisions function predictably to reify heterosexuality and elide non-normative sexualities.

The effects of the social mobility framework's repeated occlusion of sexuality and erotic pleasure are significant, not least because of the ways in which erotic pleasure and racial difference articulate and mutually (re)produce one another. In the literature on cross-cultural passing, for example, the libidinal excitement involved in passing for the native 'other' is often both produced by, and serves to reify, racial distinctions. Gail Ching-Liang Low (1996) suggests that in the colonial era novels of Kipling and Haggard, passing in native costume on the part of the white protagonists always 'returns

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<sup>86</sup> Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* (1998) takes up Billy Tipton's narrative fictionally primarily in terms of sexual desire (rather than socio-economic progress).

to a fundamental racial and cultural fault line' (211). In Kipling's novel *Kim* it is precisely Kim's knowledge of his white skin beneath the disguise that heightens the pleasure of wearing an exotic native costume. As Low argues, 'it is only through a fetishisation of Kim's whiteness that the colonial text is secured and the reader is enabled to participate in the pleasurable fantasy of cultural/racial metamorphosis' (215). Similarly, Reina Lewis (2004) has discussed the intersections of sexual desire, race and nation in the travel narratives of Grace Ellison, an English woman who stayed in a Turkish harem at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ellison's thrill in wearing exotic Turkish dress – which was linked to 'the imagined affinity it allowed her with the observed and fantasied luminosity of Ottoman female sexuality' (248) - was underscored by her own security in her white racial identity. As Lewis suggests, Ellison 'could enjoy the pleasures of cultural transgression without having to give up the racial privilege that underpinned her authority to represent her version of Oriental reality' (217). As these examples show, attention to sexual pleasure and erotic desire within passing narratives can be crucial to mapping the way in which racial and cultural distinctions are (re)produced. To be clear, the point here is not that that sexuality should be privileged above and beyond other axes of differentiation in this example or that *every* analysis of passing should focus on sexuality. Rather, as I have suggested in the previous two chapters, my argument is that a critical intersectional analysis needs to account not only for that which may be repeatedly excluded by its terms of analysis, but also the potential effects of such exclusions.

Furthermore, while Ginsberg spends a significant portion of the text trying to establish the ways in which race and gender passing are analogous, the very terms of her comparison (race passing is similar to gender passing) assume that each practice is, to some extent, bounded and discrete. Race and gender are, for the most part in her analysis, seen as *parallel* rather than intersecting axes with mutual effects. As such, Edmund Kenny's practice of passing is understood as one predominantly about racism and racial transgression. It is interpreted as 'a movement that interrogates and thus threatens the system of racial categories and hierarchies established by social custom and legitimated by the law' (1996:1-2). Brandon Teena's passing experience, like that

of Billy Tipton, is in turn read fundamentally as a story about gender transgression. Brandon's murder is interpreted as 'a tragic consequence of a female's transgression and usurpation of male gender and sexual roles' (Ginsberg, 1996:2). What Ginsberg's parallel construction elides are the ways in which both passing narratives are constructed through multiple intersecting vectors which effectively disrupt any neat division of 'race passing' and 'gender passing'.

Reading Brandon Teena's experience of passing (including his murder) exclusively through the nexus of gender/sexuality, as Ginsberg and the vast majority of commentators on his case have, obscures the role of race and racism in this narrative. It seems pertinent, in this respect to note that Brandon was one of *three* young people murdered by Thomas Nissen and John Lotter in 1993, including Brandon's friend Lisa Lambert (a white woman) and her friend Phillip Devine (a black, disabled man). Yet, in nearly all media coverage and dramatic representation of the case, including both the Hollywood film *Boys Don't Cry* and the documentary *The Brandon Teena Story*, Phillip's existence has been either completely obliterated or 'given little airplay' (Halberstam, 2005:29). The omission of Phillip's presence from 'the Brandon archive' appears increasingly problematic in light of his killer's links with a white supremacist group, the 'White American Group for White Americans' (Jones, 1996, cited in Halberstam, 2005:154).<sup>87</sup> While it is difficult to ascertain how relevant these details might be to the murder of these three young people, they do suggest that an intersectional (rather than a linear) analysis of Brandon's story (and those of his friends) is necessary. As Judith Halberstam argues, 'while Nissen's flirtation with brutally racist and white supremacist groups need not surprise us, it does nonetheless flesh out the particular nexus of hate that came to focus on Brandon, Lisa and Phillip' (29).

By this same token, interpreting Edmund Kenney's experience, and other African American passing narratives, within a linear framework of race misses the ways in which such narratives are also constructed through other vectors, such as gender and

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<sup>87</sup> Aphrodite Jones provides information that situates Nissen's tattoo as a symbol of white supremacy politics (Jones, 1996:154, cited in Halberstam, 2005:29).

sexuality. As Vikki Bell points out, for example, in the passing narrative of *Jazz* by Toni Morrison, 'acting black' is presented by Henry, the father of the male protagonist, Golden as a 'question of gender': "pull your manhood up" (1996:226). Moreover, Siobhan Somerville (2000) argues that in the work of both James Weldon Johnson and Pauline E. Hopkins, two key figures within the early twentieth century African-American genre of passing narratives, the disruption of racial binaries is constructed in and through the disruption of essentialist boundaries of gender and sexuality. For instance, while Johnson described his novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, as a text which concerns 'some colored man who has married white' (Johnson, cited in Somerville, 2000:111-2), Somerville argues that 'the pursuit of interracial (heterosexual) marriage is hardly the main trajectory of desire in the text' (111). In fact, she stresses, 'it is both integral to and subordinated by, another form of desire figured as "perverse"... that of male homosexuality' (111-2). Constructing both homosexuality and interracial desire as deviant sexual object choices, the text produces 'the (hybrid) mulatto' as a figure of gender inversion (125). As Somerville illustrates, in sexological texts of this time the figure of 'the mulatto' was often seen as 'analogous to the invert: the mixed-race body evoked the mixed-gender body' (2000:80). These examples indicate that separating 'race passing', 'gender passing' and 'sexuality passing' as discrete and/or analogical modes of practice risks occluding the ways in which race, gender and sexuality (among other vectors) intersect and articulate in complex narratives of passing.

## **The Politics of Passing**

### **Passing as subversive**

As mentioned earlier, in several of the texts, 'race passing' is seen to reside within the same performative neighbourhood as 'gender passing' and/or 'sexuality passing' on the basis that all such practices involve acts of bodily ambiguity which can disrupt essentialist binaries (i.e. man/woman, straight/gay, white/black). For example, Schlossberg (2001) argues that 'passing wreaks havoc with accepted systems of social

recognition and cultural intelligibility' and 'blurs the carefully marked lines of race, gender, and class, calling attention to the ways in which identity categories intersect, overlap, construct and deconstruct one another' (2). Similarly, Ginsberg (1996) contends that while the boundary anxiety created by particular acts of passing may be experienced as 'either liberating or threatening' depending on the context, the *process* of passing is itself subversive in that it interrogates essentialist categories of identity and 'discloses the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent' (4). In this vein, she is keen to emphasise the 'positive potential of passing':

In its interrogation of the essentialism that is the foundation of identity politics, passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress (16).

Moreover, for Marjorie Garber, the category crises instigated by cross-dressing have 'extraordinary power' to 'disrupt, expose, and challenge... the very notion of the "original" and of stable identity' (1992:16). She claims that '*transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just category crises of male and female but the crises of category itself' (italics in original) (17).<sup>88</sup> Finally, Judith Butler's vision of a 'set of parodic practices' (1999/1990:xxxix) linked to the categories of gender, sexuality and race, which function similarly to 'work the weakness in the norm' (1993:237) may also be seen to figure various acts of passing and other performative practices as subversive.

While I firmly support the project of disrupting essentialist identity categories which motivates the use of the subset approach on the part of many of these authors, there are several problems with the 'passing as subversive' claim that this model constructs. If

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<sup>88</sup> It is important, however, to make a distinction between passing and cross-dressing in many contexts. While cross-dressing (which has been described as the act of wearing clothing commonly associated with another gender within a particular society) *can* constitute a form or element of passing, not all cross-dressers intend to 'pass'. For example, unlike passing, drag is often a deliberate means of calling 'attention to the act of impersonation and foregrounds its status as imitation' (Robinson, 1994:727). However, passing and drag can be seen to converge within the 'passing is subversive' argument on the basis that, in order to be understood as transgressive, both practices require a spectator privy to the 'artifice' of the embodied performance. As such, the subversive logic of both practices 'depend on the primary intelligibility of the anatomical body of the performer' (730).

passing is read as a fundamentally subversive process, attempts to distinguish between performative acts (or aspects of acts) which reinforce dominant relations of power and those which threaten to subvert such systems become increasingly problematic.<sup>89</sup> This is not to claim that it is always easy or indeed possible to make distinctions between ‘subversive’ and ‘regressive’ acts of passing, or that subversive and regressive acts exist in binary relation to one another. Particular passing practices may be dissident in some ways and conservative in others and the political effects of specific performative acts always depend on the cultural context and framework(s) available for interpretation. Furthermore, it is clear that ‘subversive actions always signify in unexpected ways’ (Lloyd, 1999:207) and we cannot know, in advance, what all the effects of a particular performative act or practice will be (Butler, 1999/1990:187).<sup>90</sup> Yet, as Moya Lloyd (1999) argues, ‘even if we accept that there are incalculable effects to all (or most) statements of activities, this does not mean that we need to concede that there are no calculable effects’ (207). Nor does it mean that we can make no distinctions among the various performative acts that may be employed to disrupt bodily and/or cultural boundaries. The recognition that bodily ambiguities are often recuperated into oppressive political systems underscores the importance of being able to make such differentiations.

For example, Ginsberg’s claim that ‘passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency’ and ‘to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress’ (16), downplays the ways in which dominant hierarchies of power may be secured *through* the destabilisation of embodied identity categories which passing can invoke. In this vein, Sara Ahmed (1999) contends that the ‘dis-organizing of social identities’ triggered through passing practices ‘can become a mechanism for the re-organizing of social life through an expansion of the terms of surveillance’ (91). Ambiguous bodies which blur existing criteria for identification can ‘keep in place, or are even the condition of possibility for, the desire to tell bodies apart

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<sup>89</sup> This is a criticism of performativity which has been made by several theorists in recent years. See, for example, Lloyd, 1999; Fraser, 1995.

<sup>90</sup> Subversion/regression models of action also do not encompass the wide range of embodied political action and subject positions (Mahmood, 2005).

from each other through the accumulation of knowledge' (92). Furthermore, whilst Garber emphasises the 'extraordinary power' of transvestism to 'disrupt, expose, and challenge... the very notion of the "original" and of stable identity' (1992:16), she places much less emphasis on the ways in which such disruption may serve conservative social, political and financial aims. This seems particularly relevant in the context of global capitalism 'where formal fluidity, fragmentation and marketing through difference are central elements' (McClintock, 1995:68). As Epstein and Straub (1991) comment, 'capitalism allows marginalized or stigmatized forms of social behaviour and identity to filter into consumer culture packaged in disguised forms which take away the edge of the political threat posed by those sexualities' (10). Subsuming different passing practices within a single subset on the basis of their subversive potential can thus lead to a rather uncritical celebration of ambiguity and disruption which fails to explore and theorise effectively 'how power is distributed through that disruption or ambiguity' (Epstein and Straub, 1991:23).<sup>91</sup>

It should be acknowledged that some of the theorists who consider the subversive possibilities of passing make important qualifications. Garber points out that cross-dressing can function as a mark of privilege in particular contexts: 'To cross-dress on the stage in an all-male context like the army or the navy is a way of asserting the

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<sup>91</sup> While these examples suggest that there is no necessary link between passing and transgression, we might further ask whether transgression *itself* is necessarily socially transformative. Elizabeth Wilson (1993) contends that, as a political strategy employed within gay, lesbian and bisexual politics (as well as other critical projects), transgression implies 'a flouting of the rules, or a rule, behaviour agnostic to what is established, the opposite, a radical challenge to what is prescribed' (109). She points out, however, that 'just as the only true blasphemer is the individual who really believes in God, so transgression depends on, and may even reinforce, conventional understandings of what it is that it to be transgressed' (109) (see also Wiegman, 2005:97). Wilson's criticisms resonate in respect to arguments that construct the process of passing as fundamentally transgressive. It has been argued, for example, that passing is only legible as a critical practice if underscored by the belief that there exist identity categories that might be transgressed in the first place. Moreover, passing can only be subversive politically if it ultimately *fails*. In order to disclose 'the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent' (Ginsberg, 1996:4), the 'artifice' of any particular act or practice of passing must, at some point, be disclosed. Yet does this necessary exposure of 'artifice' not in fact function to *shore up* (rather than disrupt) normative identity categories? In this vein, Carole-Anne Tyler (1994) argues that passing, or 'mimicry' as she calls it, is similar to other performative practices such as 'coming out' in that both processes actually serve to *reify* essentialist identities. Rather than representing similarly subversive strategies, both mimicry and coming out, she contends, involve the desire for 'an essence', a 'proper name' (236) and 'a natural sign' (238).

common privilege of maleness. Borderlines like officers/“men” or gay/straight are both put into question and redrawn or reaffirmed’ (1992:60). As I have discussed, however, the thrust of Garber’s argument remains the positive potential of category crises.

Providing a more sceptical assessment of the subversive possibilities of passing, Schlossberg acknowledges that ‘passing can be fundamentally conservative: although it may often represent social progress for an individual, it generally holds larger social hierarchies firmly in place’ (3). Passing, she points out, may also ‘seem to result in the disappearance or denial of a range of “minoritized” or queer identities’ (1).

Butler makes similar qualifications regarding the transgression achieved through parody, clarifying (but also gradually revising) the position on performativity she argued for in *Gender Trouble* in her subsequent texts. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993) she acknowledges that ‘drag is not unproblematically subversive’ (231) and in a revised preface included in the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary reprint of *Gender Trouble*, concedes that ‘[g]ender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all... Sometimes gender ambiguity can operate precisely to contain or deflect non-normative sexual practice and thereby work to keep normative sexuality intact’ (1999/1990:xiv). In *Undoing Gender* (2004a) Butler reworks her position further, this time appearing to reverse her original claim regarding the subversive potential of performativity.<sup>92</sup> She writes, ‘the point to emphasise here is not that drag is subversive of gender norms, but that we live, more or less implicitly with received notions of reality, implicit accounts of ontology, which determine what kinds of bodies and sexualities will be considered real and true, and which kind will not’ (214). Butler

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<sup>92</sup> This shift takes place in Butler’s work in part because, in her later texts, she seeks to clarify her position on intentionality and voluntarism in response to readers of *Gender Trouble* who sought to reinstate the voluntarist subject that she disavows (particularly through analysis of Butler’s discussion of drag). As Lloyd argues, such readings were ‘partly the result of the ambiguity of Butler’s own account for the distinction between performance and performativity in *Gender Trouble*’ (1999/1990:199). She writes: ‘Butler endorses Derrida’s contention that both ordinary speech acts and theoretical performances are underpinned by the same citational practices (Butler, 1995:134-5). This means that an easy separation between a performance and the performative is difficult to uphold since both reiterate the same conventions’ (201).

admits 'that resignification alone is not a politics, is not sufficient for politics, is not enough' (223).<sup>93</sup>

Yet despite these acknowledgements that the 'category crises' produced by passing and other performative practices may be appropriated to serve dominant interests, the problem remains that the subset model does not seem to be capable of theorising, in any depth or sustained manner, the social and political *distinctions* between various passing practices which such acknowledgements suggest are crucial.<sup>94</sup> The subset model often functions simply to subsume various passing practices within its performative boundaries and does not enable any complex mapping of the contexts or circumstances in which particular forms or acts of passing might produce subversive or socially transformative effects or, in turn, those in which they might have regressive and socially conservative outcomes. Nor does it provide an adequate framework for theorising the *specific* similarities that these scholars suggest various practices of passing may share as structural formations. Left unanswered by this model are several critical questions about the *politics of passing*.

### **'We are all passing'**

Linked to the argument that race, gender and sexuality passing all interrogate the naturalness and stability of embodied identity categories is the claim that explicit passing practices illuminate the extent to which *we are all passing*. In exposing the artificiality of binary identity categories, various passing practices are said to similarly reveal the extent to which all subjects 'pass' in their daily lives in order to assume various constructed identities. For example, Schlossberg (2001) argues that 'the

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<sup>93</sup> Nancy Fraser (1995), among others, had previously critiqued Butler for suggesting that resignification is inherently positive: 'In Butler's usage the term "resignification" carries a strong, if implicitly, positive charge....Since Butler's term carries no implication of validity or warrant, its positive connotations are puzzling. Why is resignification good? Can't there be bad (oppressive, reactionary) resignifications?' (68). As a better alternative, Fraser suggests the term 'critique'.

<sup>94</sup> Butler does, however, point to the necessity of making distinctions between various performative practices: 'There must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony' (1999/1990:177).

passing subject's ability to transcend or abandon his or her "authentic" identity calls into question the very notion of authenticity itself' (2). Passing, 'threatens to call attention to the performative and contingent nature of *all* seemingly "natural" or "obvious" identities' (*italics mine*) (2).

This 'we are all passing' narrative crops up in several texts which focus on passing and/or crossing and sexual identity. These texts often position transsexuals and/or transgender subjects as those who reveal passing as a function of all embodied identities. For example, Judith Shapiro claims that 'transsexuals make explicit for us the usually tacit processes of gender attribution' (1991:257). Following Harold Garfinkel, she suggests that 'the transsexual reveals the extent to which the normally sexed person is a "contingent practical accomplishment"' (Garfinkel 1967:181). In other words, they make us realize that *we are all passing*' (*italics mine*) (257). Garber argues that the social critique performed by 'transvestite magazines for readers who are not themselves cross-dressers is to point out the degree to which *all* women cross-dress as women when they produce themselves as artefacts' (*italics in original*) (1992:49). Moreover, in a controversial statement (which she later revises in *Female Masculinity* (1998)), Judith Halberstam asserts:

In a way, I claim, we are all transsexuals... We all pass or we don't, we all wear our drag, and we all derive a different degree of pleasure - sexual or otherwise - from our costumes. It is just that for some of us our costumes are made of fabric and material, while for others they are made of skin; for some an outfit can be changed; for others skin must be re sewn. There are no transsexuals' (1994:212).<sup>95</sup>

In different ways, these thinkers deny or downplay specific or exclusive links between transgender and transsexual subjectivities and practices of passing, instead framing passing as a universal experience.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> In her later text, Halberstam (1998) revisits her earlier 'universalist' construction of transsexuality and passing. She writes: 'We are not all transsexual, I admit, but many bodies are gender strange to some degree or another, and it is time to complicate on the one hand the transsexual models that assign gender deviance only to transsexual bodies and gender normativity to all other bodies, and on the other hand the hetero-normative models that see transsexuality as the solution to gender deviance and homosexuality as a pathological concern (153).

<sup>96</sup> This is in part because these authors do not want to see the field of queer studies weakened and dissipated through excessive fragmentation. Like Butler, they argue for queer studies as an umbrella discipline. Other theorists, such as Jay Prosser (1998), however explicitly challenge these approaches.

There are clearly some positive effects of the ‘we are passing’ argument, particularly its success in calling attention to the constructedness of embodied categories like maleness, heterosexuality and whiteness, which are so often presumed to be ‘natural’. However, through subsuming so many different passing practices within the realm of the same, and denying specificity to particular acts of passing, the ‘we are all passing’ discourse threatens to efface critical distinctions between passing practices. It routinely glosses over the ways in which the meanings and effects of passing practices are determined by cultural, social and historical context as well as the embodied locations of both the passer(s) and the spectator(s). As such, the ‘we are all passing’ argument, like the ‘passing as subversive’ claim, often fails to theorise effectively the *politics of passing*.

It seems important, on both historical and political grounds, to make some critical distinctions between various practices of passing on the part of differently located subjects. For example, because passing ‘involves the re-opening or re-staging of a fractured history of identifications’ (Ahmed, 1999:94), the act of passing as a member of an embodied identity group of which one is already assumed to belong is *different* from passing for a member of an identity group which one is not assumed to inhabit. As a person born with female anatomy who has identified as, and been labelled by others, as ‘white’ and ‘female’ throughout the course of my life, surely the various stylised embodied acts and rituals I have learned and (more or less loyally) repeat each day to pass as a ‘white woman’ (i.e. having my hair long, speaking in a particular tone of voice, wearing certain styles of clothing etc.) signal a somewhat different political relationship to the practice of passing than those I would go through to pass as a ‘white man’ or as a ‘black woman’. Furthermore, would the act of passing for a ‘white woman’ not represent a different politics of passing for my friend, who has consistently identified (and been interpreted by others) as ‘female’ and ‘black’ throughout her life? In this vein, Sara Ahmed (1999) has argued that it is possible (and necessary) to

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Prosser criticizes how framing queer studies as an umbrella discipline often depends on constructing ‘the gender-ambivalent subject’ as ‘the lever for the queer movement to loosen the fixity of gender identities enough to enable affiliation and identification between gay men and lesbians’ (5). In other words, ‘queer studies’ is constructed as open and inclusive *through* fetishising ‘the transsexual’.

differentiate between a *black* subject who passes for white and a *white* subject who passes for white:

[O]ne's relation to whiteness as something which is passed through depends on a prior history of self-identification and identification by others. Would one worry, would one fear being caught out, if one did not *already* perceive oneself as passing for white? Would there be danger, would there be death? In other words, passing for something that one is not already assumed to be makes a difference to the politics of passing (*italics in original*) (93).

Ahmed maintains that the argument that 'passing constitutes a general logic of assuming an identity' (i.e. the 'we are all passing' claim) involves a refusal 'to recognize the constraints which temporarily fix subjects in relations of social antagonism' (95). The legacies of colonialism, slavery and racial segregation mean that, in attempting to pass for a 'white woman', my friend may face risks or dangers which I do not in my everyday passing as a 'white'. Furthermore, if I attempt to pass for a 'black woman', I might face accusations of appropriation, fetishisation or exoticization which are not experienced by my friend in her habitual 'passing' as black. Downplayed by the 'we are all passing' claim are complex historical and political questions regarding embodiment, power, appropriation, pleasure and danger, which remain pertinent to the task of mapping differentiations and discontinuities among various passing practices.

Through figuring passing as an act inherent to all identity formation, the subset model also often fails to acknowledge and theorise the significance of embodied social location of, and inter-subjective relations among, various participants in the pass. Via its universalising tone, the 'we are all passing claim' downplays the fact that the meaning of particular acts of passing is dependent on the cultural and geo-political context in which they occur. In other words, passing only becomes visible – *we only see it* - under certain conditions and circumstances. Robinson argues, for example, that because sexuality is so often laminated to visible codes of gender (in the absence of gender, sexuality is presumed to be invisible), 'the readability of sexuality differs across racial and cultural contexts because gender signifies differently in these contexts' (1994:718). What might be read as 'gender "abnormality"' in one class or racial context

may simply confirm the hegemonic spectator's presumption of heterosexuality in another' (718). Similarly, discussing how in the early 1990s in London 'the skinhead look' was read as a 'politically affirmative' identity for gay men that challenged (through parody) the idea that all 'masculine' men are 'straight', Lloyd (1999:199) points out that, 'the deployment of certain signs by gay (white) men may be read by others, particularly black gay others, in an entirely different way to that intended' (207). Embodied identity categories are constructed differently in different spaces and in relation to other categories. Sweeping readings of the effects of performative practice, elide questions about 'when, where and to whom gendered performances are either "passable" for straight or readable as queer' (Walker, 1995:71 cited in Lloyd, 1999:207).<sup>97</sup>

Moreover, passing never simply involves one body operating within an isolated sphere. It always involves complex embodied encounters with multiple embodied subjects, each of whom will be located differently in relation to the politics of passing. In this vein, Robinson suggests that many textual narratives of passing are structured around a 'triangular' model of relationality: 'Three participants – the passer, the dupe, and a representative of the in-group – enact a complex narrative scenario in which a successful pass is performed in the presence of a literate member of the in-group' (1994:723). Within this dynamic, the passer's 'real' identity is constructed as an effect of the lens through which it is viewed. For instance, in order for an 'in-group clairvoyant' to see drag she must observe a successful pass – 'she must see the hegemonic spectator earn the title of dupe if she is to regard the spectacle of passing through the lens of drag' (727). Passing thus 'emerges as a discursive encounter between [at least] two epistemological paradigms' (723, see also Somerville, 2000:83).

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<sup>97</sup> It should be acknowledged, however, that some authors who link passing practices are careful to avoid uncritical assertions of commonality. Schlossberg, for instance, points out that 'the notion that identity is performative... has different consequences for the passing subject' (6). Highlighting differences between race passing and sexuality passing, for instance, she asserts that, 'the dominant social order often implores gay people to stay in the closet (to pass), while subjects who pass for white are encouraged to "come out" or reveal themselves as authentically "racial" subjects – at times by both minority groups and the dominant social order' (6). As we have seen, however, other authors (such as Ginsberg, Davis and Garber) place a much greater emphasis on establishing congruity between various passing practices and on making claims regarding the nature of *all* forms of passing.

In other words, passing always represents a *relationship* between a judgement and that which is judged. From this perspective, rather than figuring passing as a *practice* which retains common contours and/or effects across time and space, we might more productively conceptualise passing in terms of embodied relationships or encounters which are enacted and (re)produced in and through particular historical *contexts*.

This analysis of the ‘we are all passing’ claim calls attention to the subset model’s inefficacy as a theoretical tool – its tendency to collapse under its own discursive weight. As the model’s boundaries continue to expand, becoming increasingly permeable and subsuming more and more practices within its circumference, it increasingly loses its heuristic value. As we reach a point where anything and everything represents an act of passing, the subset model’s theoretical relevance dissipates. What is *not* passing? What is *not* performative? So many practices have been subsumed within one single model that it becomes increasingly difficult to make such critical distinctions. The necessity for a framework which enables mapping and theorisation of the embodied, social and political particularities of specific (relational) passing processes is thus underscored. In the next section I explore further problems associated with the subset model’s ‘we are all passing’ claim, focusing on issues of visibility and fetishisation.

### **Passing, (in)visibility and fetishisation**

As I have suggested, passing is closely linked to discourses of visibility. The relationship between visibility and the construction of passing as a subversive practice is often a problematic one. In many versions of the ‘we are all passing’ claim, particular subjects (namely transsexual, transgender and mixed race) are problematically fetishised as figures<sup>98</sup> who function to reveal the constructedness of all

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<sup>98</sup> Following Sara Ahmed in her discussion of ‘stranger fetishism’ (2000), I am employing the term ‘fetishise’ derived from the Marxist account of ‘commodity fetishism’ (4). As Ahmed argues, Marx’s theory suggests that ‘the process of fetishisation involves, not only the displacement of social relations onto an object, but the transformation of fantasies onto figures’ (5). For Ahmed, fetishism thus signifies ‘the displacement of social relations of labour *through the transformation of objects into figures*. What is at stake is the ‘cutting off’ of figures from the social and material relations which over-determine their

embodied identity categories, precisely because of their presumed (in)visibility. In other words, their bodily ‘ambiguity’ enables them to be both ‘invisible’ (i.e. to pass) and ‘visible’ (i.e. to be detected as a ‘fake’).

The key argument structuring Garber’s text is that ‘cross-dressing or transvestism, is looked *through* rather than *at* in critical and cultural analyses’ (italics in original) (1992:389). She objects to ‘how often, indeed how insistently, cultural observers have tried to make it mean something, anything other than itself’ (389). Yet it could be argued that Garber produces the very effect she objects to through continuously constructing ‘the transvestite’ as a theoretical tool, ‘figure’, ‘index’, or ‘effect’ (16). To provide just two examples:

The transvestite... is both terrifying and deductive precisely because s/he incarnates and emblemizes the disruptive element that intervenes, signalling not just another category crisis, but – much more disquietingly – a crisis of “category” itself (32).

What it points toward is the centrality of the transvestite as an index of category destabilization altogether. We are speaking of an underlying psychosocial, and not merely a local or historical, effect. What might be called the “*transvestite effect*” (italics in original) (37).

Similarly, while Shapiro (1991) seeks to downplay the specificity of transsexuality as a sexual identity (distinct from other non-normative or ‘queer’ sexual subjectivities), it is ‘the transsexual’ who is fetishised in her text as the figure who, through the performance of passing, ‘reveals’ for others the artifice of all identity:

Transsexuals *reveal* to the more detached and sceptical observer the way in which such a natural attitude is socially and culturally achieved (italics mine) (228).

The way in which transsexuals go about establishing their gender in social interactions reminds us that the basis on which we are assigned a gender in the first place (that is, anatomical sex) is not what creates the reality of gender in ongoing social life (257)

We might also note that within many texts that focus on ‘race passing’, it is the mixed race subject who (light skinned enough to pass as ‘white’, yet ambiguous enough to risk detection) is constructed as the figure who reveals the instability of all racial

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existence, and the consequent perception that such figures have a “life of their own” (italics in original) (5).

boundaries. For instance, in Ginsberg's text (1996) it is the fact that the escaped slave Edmund Kennedy's 'physical appearance made it obvious that his legally invisible white ancestors likely outnumbered the African' which enables him to pass, signalling 'a transgression not only of legal boundaries...but of cultural boundaries as well' (1). Furthermore, in the literary genre of the passive narrative, 'the mulatta heroine' functions frequently as a figure who disrupts racial (as well as sexual and gender) divisions (Somerville, 2000).<sup>99</sup>

In this vein, we can consider how Butler's work on performativity may similarly fetishise particular subjects as figures. In much of Butler's writing, it is the transgender and/or the cross-dressing subject who engages in the parodic 'repetition of heterosexual constructs' hence illuminating the artifice of the categories of gender, sex and sexuality. As she explains:

Drag and transgender enter into the political field...by not only making us question what is real, and what has to be, but by *showing us* how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted (italics mine) (2004a:217).

The construction of transgender as a privileged signifier within Butler's work, and queer theory more generally, has been noted by a number of critical theorists. Clare Hemmings comments that 'transgender performances assumed an almost mythical position within queer theory and politics in the early 1990s as *the* manifestation of discontinuity between sexed body and gender role or identity' (italics in original) (2002:118). From Jay Prosser's perspective, 'nowhere is the pivotal function of transgender in queer studies more evident and more intricate' than in Butler's work (1998:5). We can compare the ways in which 'the transgender subject' is constructed as a trope within such texts to the ways in which 'the victim of female genital mutilation' and 'the cosmetic surgery consumer' in the previous case study, and 'the

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<sup>99</sup> It could also be argued that within Homi Bhabha's (1994) work on colonial mimicry, it is the mixed race (Indian) subjects who become mimic men, the vehicles of colonial ambivalence ('almost the same but not quite', not white) (122) and who thrust into focus the uncertainty of colonial discourse, hence disrupting its authority (126). In mimicking the colonizer the mixed race colonial subject demonstrates the artifice of colonial privilege (it is constructed and can be copied), and as such produces a space for resistance.

anorexic' and 'the veiled woman' in the next chapter, are installed as metaphors for their respective cultures.

The fetishisation of particular subjects as figures within these texts is problematic for a number of reasons. On the one hand, through repeated characterisations of transgender subjectivity as 'subversive' or 'illuminating', the assumed contours of the transgender subject can become fixed, determining a reductive image of transgender as *the* figure of boundary crossing. As a result, the diversities, complexities and contradictions of transgender subjectivity and embodiment are covered over. This fixing and fetishisation can, in relation to transgender, transsexual and mixed race subjects, involve exoticization as well as problematic assumptions of 'knowability' (Ahmed, 1999:98). On the other hand, repeatedly constructing particular subjects as tropes or theoretical tools can also invest these subjects with an *excess* of (often conflicting) meanings. Halberstam (1998) argues in this respect that 'transsexuality... seems burdened not only with an excess of meaning but also by the weight of competing discourses' (165). Transsexuals are 'represented as "empire" and the subaltern, as gender dupes and gender deviants, and as consolidated identities and fragmented bodies' (166).<sup>100</sup>

Furthermore, it could be argued that through constructing particular figures as symbols of boundary crossing, performativity repeatedly requires the same 'ambiguous' or 'transgressive' bodies to do the work of interrogating and destabilising binaries, while other 'normal' bodies once again remain invisible. Passing and parody may thus function to reify, rather than disrupt, problematic or essentialist constructions of embodied 'difference'. In this vein, passing can also be seen as an *exclusive* critical strategy, in that it may only be taken up by particular subjects. It would seem that some bodies (in some contexts) are more able or willing to participate in political strategies which depend on visibility and/or recognition than others. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Gayatri Gopinath argues that Western ideals of queer visibility and embodiment are not often available to lesbians in South Asia, where it may be in the private sphere

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<sup>100</sup> Although, as suggested earlier, Halberstam's own theoretical approach to transsexuality might also be seen as problematic in its simultaneous rejection of transsexuality as a privileged signifier and construction of 'the transsexual' as a theoretical tool.

of home that bodies can explore homo-erotic pleasures (Gopinath, 2003, cited in Ahmed, 2004a:151). In her study of white, working class women in the UK, Beverly Skeggs (1997) suggests that, for many of her subjects, passing as middle class ‘does not involve ironic mimicry...because it wants to be taken seriously; because it speaks from a position of powerlessness and insecurity’ (87). Those who are middle class find it easier to play with passing as a form of ironic mimicry because ‘playing at not being middle class does not jeopardize their ability to use and capitalize upon their cultural capital’ and because those ‘who can judge their failure to pass have little impact and little social power’ (87). From this perspective, Mariam Fraser (1999) contends that ‘it is important to consider those who choose *not* to be (made) seeable and who may therefore be excluded from a politics that lends itself to visibility’ (*italics in original*) (124). Passing, and other performative practices which rely on visual identification in order to achieve their subversive potential, may thus problematically fetishise certain subjects whilst excluding a wide range of ‘others’.

For Butler, performativity can be seen to entail the strategic failure of passing, a failure that is premised on visual identification. In her framework, as in the other texts which argue for the subversive potential of passing, passing is *only* transgressive to the point where it reveals the constructedness of ‘reality’ by being perceived or seen as very close to ‘the real’, yet not quite ‘the same’. As Butler explains:

The repetition of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames *brings into relief* the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy (*italics mine*) (1999/1990:41)

We can note in both this passage and the previous one Butler’s use of language (‘brings into relief’, ‘showing us’) to imply the importance of visibility to performativity as a strategic critical practice. As Hemmings puts it, ‘queer transgression of heterosexual presumption is marked by its visible closeness to and difference from the dominant... Thus, queer subversion occurs only when passing is incomplete, when the drag performances can in effect be read as gay drag performances’ (2002:119). It is important to ask how this necessity of visual identification in relation to passing may

function to reaffirm (rather than challenge) problematic notions of bodily authenticity. Robinson points to the ‘critical function of the real’ in performative acts that attempt to deconstruct normative categories. She argues that while theorists of performativity may insist that ‘the disjunction between inside and outside that enables drag performance “effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity”, the logic of drag seems to depend on the primary intelligibility of the anatomical body of the performer’ (1994:729-30). From this perspective, passing is *not* a strategy which ‘evades the dominant terms of representation and the necessities of referential claims of identity’ (730). It would seem that while performative bodily acts can upset or bring into focus regimes of visibility, they can also just reassert the power of those ‘telling the difference’ (Ahmed, 1999). Linking back to the importance of conceptualising passing in terms of relationships within specific contexts, the question of *who* has the authority and power to ‘tell’ the ‘real’ from the ‘unreal’ in relation to particular parodic acts seems crucial.

## **Conclusions: Thinking relationally**

As a model for linking various experiences of passing, the subset model can problematically occlude embodied, historical, and political distinctions between passing practices as well as the ways in which passing is produced through relational, intersectional encounters which shift across time and space. Moreover, like Butler’s theory of performativity, the subset model of passing sometimes functions to fetishise particular figures through its problematic reliance on visual identification. The subset approach can thus thwart the possibility of distinguishing between socially regressive and socially transformative aspects of particular passing acts, whilst downplaying the contextual relations of power through which social and political effects are produced. Through failing to theorise difference and complexity in passing narratives, the subset approach may reify (rather than interrogate or disrupt) dominant discourses and systems of power linked to perceived embodied differences.

How then might we theorise more effectively both the relationships between various experiences of passing and their individual particularities? How can we conceptualise passing in terms of relationships of power and proximity which are always intersectional, embodied and context-bound? Extending the argument I made at the end of the previous chapter, I suggest that rather than illustrating how particular practices are fundamentally similar or how they have universal effects, we might more fruitfully examine the ways in which specific forms of passing are relationally *connected*. In other words, instead of showing that ‘race passing’ is similar to ‘gender passing’, that ‘the process of passing is inherently subversive’ or that ‘we all pass in our daily lives’, we could productively explore the ways in which particular experiences of passing are linked temporally and spatially and, as such, are (in part) mutually constituted.

Returning to Eve Sedgwick’s (2003) analysis of ‘the periperformative’ is useful in this respect. I drew on Sedgwick’s framework at the beginning of this chapter to illustrate how, through seeking to house an increasing array of practices within a single performative neighbourhood, the subset model produces overly generalised periperformative utterances which lead it to lose its value as an analytic. Sedgwick’s notion of the ‘periperformative’ is also helpful for thinking about how, and through which historical processes, particular performative modes of practice have become lodged in close proximity to one another. For example, Sedgwick’s own aim is to explore the dynamics of the potent ‘Victorian periperformative topoi’ which ‘yokes together the performative acts and scenes that constitute marriage among British subjects, with the performative acts and scenes thought to characterize the institution of chattel slavery of Africans and their descendants in the New World’ (79). Rather than focusing on the ways in which marriage and slavery might be understood as analogous in this context, she traces how discourses surrounding the two institutions have been constructed relationally because of, and through, their temporal and spatial proximity to one another in nineteenth century Britain and America. Slavery constituted such a ‘complex and protracted historical crime’, that it inevitably ‘gored its mark (highly differentially) on the modes of meaning that were possible for anyone in its performative ambit’ (89-90). Moreover, abolitionist discourses about slavery and

suffragist rhetorics regarding marriage were not only articulated alongside one another at this time, but also actively appropriated one another's discursive repertoires, thus becoming intertwined in complex ways.

Siobhan Somerville (2000) provides a similar relational analysis of the ways in which the 'crisis of homo/heterosexual definition' in America during the late nineteenth century intersected with and was shaped by 'concurrent conflicts over racial definition and the presumed boundary between "black and white"' (3). Examining the temporal proximity (and mutual effects) of three legal trials in the United States and Britain at this time – those of Homer Plessy in 1892 who defied a Louisiana law requiring railroad companies to enforce racial segregation among passengers; Alice Mitchell who in the same year was tried for the murder of her female lover Freda Ward; and Oscar Wilde who was charged with 'gross indecency' between men following the imposition in England of the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1885 – Somerville suggests that 'the formation of notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality emerged in the United States through (and not merely parallel to) a discourse saturated with assumptions about racialized bodies' (4). All three trials were set against a background in which intense programmes directed towards 'telling the difference' between various bodies, including sexology and other expert discourses, had emerged: 'the heightened surveillance of bodies in a racially segregated culture demanded a specific kind of logic which...gave coherence to new concepts of homo-and heterosexuality' (4). Similar to Sedgwick, Somerville shows how the modes of discourse and utterance relating to bodies and embodied practices available during a particular historical moment in the United States were closely linked to and made possible by the wider social, legal and political processes which structured that cultural context. Like the periperformative utterances produced in respect to marriage and slavery during this period, discourses surrounding racialised, sexualised and gendered categories of embodiment often reflected, and in fact (re)produced one another, in part because of their spatial and temporal proximity.

In their focus on the historical and social processes through which particular performative categories and formations have become naturalised, Sedgwick's and

Somerville's analyses articulate with Butler's critical genealogical approach. Moreover, like Sedgwick and Somerville, Butler is interested in exploring how one category 'becomes the condition of the other, how one becomes the marked background of action of the other' (Bell interview with Butler, 1999:168). What Sedgwick's periperformative framework adds to (or draws out from) Butler's focus on performativity's 'temporal complexity' is an emphasis on the spatiality of performative acts and utterances (Sedgwick, 2003:68). Furthermore, Somerville's approach may complement Butler's framework in providing a rich, intersectional model for *historicising* particular formations in relation to wider social, cultural and political frameworks, as opposed to simply *locating* particular practices historically (Hennessey cited in Fraser, 1999:116-7).

Employing this type of framework to think about passing could enable us to trace the relational connections between particular formations of passing without recourse to a discourse of 'sameness'. Both Sedgwick and Somerville's analyses may aid us, for example, in thinking about how discourses about and experiences of 'race passing' in the United States were linked to and constituted via those pertaining to 'gender passing' and 'sexuality passing' during the 'Jim Crow' period – a historical context in which the legacy of slavery and segregationist imperatives to 'tell the difference' between racialised bodies were intertwined with anxieties about the epistemological uncertainties surrounding sexualised and gendered bodies. While such anxieties were articulated in close temporal proximity during this period, they were also related spatially. In seeking to legislate the proximity of racialised bodies, for example, segregationist policies were simultaneously articulated through 'a discourse of panic around sexual mobility' (Somerville, 2000:35).<sup>101</sup> Through fleshing out the social particularities of this context in American history, it becomes possible to trace how the discursive repertoires available for constructing embodied acts (such as passing) which threatened to disrupt fledging categories of sexuality and gender were informed by, and

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<sup>101</sup> As Somerville's analysis of the Plessy, Mitchell and Wilde cases indicates, fears about inter-racial desire and the proximity of 'black' and 'white' bodies were linked to those surrounding homosexual desire.

thus often articulated as analogous to, those pertaining to transgressions of 'the color line'.

It is important to emphasise that while a relational approach traces the ways in which discursive formations such as 'race passing' and 'gender passing' are constitutively linked, it remains interested in 'the often starkly irreconcilable aspects of their cultural deployment' (Somerville, 2000:7). Indeed, through historicising the discursive production of particular practices and figures, and linking such histories to the processes through which they are constituted and enacted in contemporary contexts, a relational approach may provide an effective framework for making the types of social, political and embodied *distinctions* between particular formations and practices of passing that my analysis in this chapter has suggested are crucial. As the constitution and effects of particular performative acts always depend on 'context and reception' (Butler, 1999/1990:177), the object here is not to construct a fixed typology, but rather to provide a historically grounded framework for tracing the regimes of visibility and the (power) relationships between bodies that constitute formations of passing or crossing within particular contexts. On the one hand, the process of tracing the ways in which particular passing narratives have been discursively constructed and historicising particular embodied identity categories disrupts the 'naturalness' of bodily boundaries in a way that material practices of passing may fail to do. On the other hand, without assuming that it is possible to map 'the range or reach of all the forms of subversion emanating from specific discourses, acts, practices' (Lloyd, 1999:207), this process may provide us some insight into sketching which performative acts (or aspects of acts) have the potential to be transformative and which are more likely to be regressive.

## Chapter Five

### Tracing 'the Anorexic' and 'the Veiled Woman'

#### A Relational Account

Both anorexia and the veil reflect inner conflict and convey distress, symbolic of struggle that looks like resignation, rebellion that takes the shape of conformity and resistance that is dressed in complicity.

*Mervat Nasser, 1999:409*

The solution is to refuse...to be dragged into the binary opposition between East and West in which so many arguments are mired. However, the most powerful way to do this is to fearlessly examine the process of entanglement.

*Lila Abu-Lughod, 1998a:16*

The 'new' Muslim veiling phenomenon represents a contemporary 'equivalent' to the growing epidemic of anorexia in the industrialised West, Mervat Nasser has argued (1999). Like anorexia, she contends, the new veiling, signalled by the growing number of young Muslim women wearing Islamic dress within universities, workplaces, urban centres and political organisations around the world, responds to multiple pressures felt by women globally including 'conflicting cultural messages and contradictory cultural expectations' (407).<sup>102</sup> Both embodied practices<sup>103</sup> function as forms of problem solving which, in the absence of real power or control, help women cope with the competing demands of ambitious professional goals and pressure to maintain a

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<sup>102</sup> 'Veiling' is an English word used to refer to a very wide array of women's Islamic dress around the world, such as the turban in Turkey, the chador in Iran, the hijab in Britain, the burqa in Afghanistan (and the many internal variations of Islamic covering in all of these and other locations). As such, while the term 'veiling' has wide currency in Western industrialised nations, it problematically homogenises a diverse collection of practices. As Egyptian feminist Fadwa El Guindi points out, there is no one Arabic term equivalent to the English 'veil' (1999, xi:7). Moreover, it should be acknowledged that veiling is not exclusively a Muslim practice, but is also associated with Jewish, Christian and Hindu traditions.

<sup>103</sup> Anorexia is today the object of various competing discourses. It is constructed simultaneously in terms of physiological dysfunction, genetic predisposition and cognitive deficits or biases, as a consequence of familial dysfunction, social ideals of thinness and of patriarchal oppression (Malson, 1998:98).

traditional female identity. And both, she suggests, ultimately lead to the reproduction of tradition and the reinforcement of gender inequality.

The establishment of ‘the anorexic subject’ as a counterpart to ‘the veiled woman’ within cross-cultural comparisons draws on a significant strand of feminist literature (now pervasive in mainstream cultural discourse). Against constructions of ‘the West’ as the land of gender equality, liberation and freedom, feminist commentators have inaugurated the figure of the anorexic as a metaphor for the continuing embodied oppression associated with gendered power relations in industrialised Western countries (Orbach, 1993/1986, 2006/1978; Wolf, 1990; Bordo, 1993).<sup>104</sup> Within these texts, and comparisons between veiling and anorexia which employ their terms, ‘the anorexic’ serves as a generalised figure representing the widespread subjugation of the female body within the West’s patriarchal, capitalist beauty system – a system that impels women and girls to discipline their bodies in pursuit of an unachievable ideal. As Nasser comments, ‘weight phobia, fear of fatness and pursuit of thinness are modern terms that are now used interchangeably to refer to anorexia nervosa’ (1997:1). She adds, ‘If eating disorders are indeed metaphors... it is likely that what they symbolize now encompasses this social disruption and cultural confusion’ (97). A general message these cross-cultural comparisons impart is that when it comes to gender and the body, ‘the West’ is no less patriarchal or oppressive, and may in fact be more so, than ‘the Muslim East’.

Several other theorists have made comparisons between Muslim veiling and embodied practices linked to the Western ‘beauty system’.<sup>105</sup> Nancy Hirschmann (1998) suggests

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<sup>104</sup> Such feminist writers have argued that while women have made professional, economic and legal gains since the second wave of feminism in the West in the 1970s and 1980s, claims to universal equality and female empowerment are undercut by the rising epidemic of anorexia and other forms of disordered eating and bodily discipline which point to the conspicuous operation of Western culture to ‘keep women down’.

<sup>105</sup> In this chapter, as in Chapter Three, I employ terms such as ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’, ‘Eastern’ and ‘Muslim’ to indicate the types of distinctions made in the literature I am analysing. The generalisations they imply, however, are often problematic. For example, labelling Muslim veiling ‘non-Western’ obscures the wide practice of veiling in Western industrialised countries by women who may consider themselves both ‘Muslim’ and ‘Western’. In turn, labelling ‘anorexia’ as ‘Western’ similarly effaces the growing number of women who experience eating disorders in locations outside the

that Western feminists need to ask themselves whether the veil is more oppressive than Western fashion trends such as Wonderbras, miniskirts and blue jeans (361). Similarly, Sheila Jeffreys (2005) argues that beauty practices prevalent in the West such as makeup, dieting and cosmetic surgery should be understood as ‘harmful cultural practices’ comparable to procedures typically thought of as non-Western, such as female genital mutilation and veiling. She suggests that makeup and the veil represent ‘two sides of the same coin of women’s oppression’ - both have been seen as voluntary practices through which women can express their agency, yet both arise from pressures linked to male dominance (37). These types of comparisons are now increasingly echoed within mainstream media and cultural discourse. For example, an article exploring veiling practices in the UK in *The Observer* argues that ‘the veil and the bra top are really two sides of the same coin’ (Anthony, 2005:17). The premature recognition of female sexuality implicated by the veiling of girls as young as seven or eight, the author contends, ‘is every bit as significant, and disturbing, as dressing a child in a high-street approximation of Britney Spears, all bare midriff and attitude’ (17).

As in the comparisons between female genital cutting and body modification examined in Chapter Three, the theorists who make links between veiling and anorexia and/or ‘Western’ beauty regimes differ in their social locations, perspectives and political agendas. Most, however, frame their comparisons with a concern to interrogate ethnocentrism, racism and cultural essentialism. They seek to deconstruct the ubiquitous self/other binary of the ‘liberated, uncovered Western woman’ and the ‘oppressed, veiled Muslim woman’. This dualism can be traced back through the centuries to representations created within early Western travellers’ narratives, proto-feminist colonial discourse, nationalist and anti-Western idiom and, most recently, the rhetoric of the American-led post-9/11 ‘War on Terror’. In the midst of a second Western-initiated war in Iraq, such culturally essentialist portrayals of ‘free, skin-showing, Western women’ and ‘downtrodden, covered Muslim women’ once again

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industrialised West. It is also clear that so called ‘Western’ beauty procedures are practiced all over the world. The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the ways in which practices such as veiling and anorexia are socially and discursively produced through relational encounters which criss-cross boundaries of East and West, fundamentally imbricating the two poles.

dominate the mainstream Western socio-political consciousness. In different ways, theorists who link veiling with anorexia and/or Western beauty practices aim to contest enduring Orientalist images of Muslim and Arab women as 'other' against a privileged 'Western self'.

Some theorists have attempted to interrogate the Western/Muslim binary by reversing it (valuing veiled Muslim woman as empowered and devaluing Western women as oppressed). For example, Fadwa El Guindi (2003) discusses how veiling and Islamic religiosity are seen to offer women true emancipation, in contrast to the false freedom of Western women, exploited and sexualised in Western consumer culture. Similarly, several young Muslim women, primarily through Muslim websites and publications, argue that, unlike the rising numbers of Western women beset by eating disorders and body image disturbance, veiled Muslim women 'don't suffer from insecurities about their bodies, because the philosophy and clothing of their culture discourages it' (Knight cited in Dixon, 1999:2).<sup>106</sup> Such strategies correspond to the second stage of Shildrick and Prokhovnik's three-step process for deconstructing and resignifying binaries.

Other theorists, pursuing what I have previously described as an attempt to realise the third step of this deconstructive process, have sought to resignify the terms of the Western/Muslim binary through establishing fundamental similarities between 'Western women' and 'Muslim women' that transcend the self/other distinction. Randi Gressgård (2006) argues that, on a structural level, the figures of 'the veiled woman', 'the anorexic' and 'the transsexual' reveal a 'striking similarity' (325). Through using their 'freedom of choice to choose submission' (336), all three figures display an ambivalence between 'transcendence' and 'immanence' attached 'to the notion of woman, within a hierarchical order' (336). Articulating a different perspective, although also emphasising similarities between veiling and other embodied practices, Homa Hoodfar (2003) argues that the veil 'may be worn to beautify the wearer...much in the same way Western women wear makeup' (11). In her keynote address at the

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<sup>106</sup> See also Franks, 2000; Ali, 2000; Chopra, 2002; Yusufali, 2002; Hoodfar, 2003 and Rahman, 2004.

Feminist and Women's Studies Association (UK and Ireland) Nineteenth Annual Conference in Bradford in July 2006, Haleh Afshar compared Muslim girls wearing the hijab at school to non-Muslim girls sporting short-skirts or body piercings. Pointing out that she does not object to the latter forms of bodily presentation, Afshar asks why it is that 'when someone puts a veil on her head the whole institutional guard comes down'. We are, she maintains, 'ascribing different identities to almost identical dress codes' (my transcription) (Afshar, 2006). Similarly, Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen (2006) suggest that both girls wearing headscarves and those dressed in 'porno-chic' are 'submitted to the meta-narratives of dominant discourse' which define their everyday practices as inappropriate and deny them the power to define their own action (103). In this vein, Hirschmann (1998) understands veiling and 'Western' fashion trends as similarly combining the potential for agency and the reification of patriarchal relations of power, Jeffreys (2005) sees veiling and makeup as harmful cultural practices which both mark women as unequal citizens and Nasser (1999) conceives of both veiling and anorexia as problematic bodily practices women pursue to deal with conflicting gendered cultural messages.<sup>107</sup>

In this final case study, I illustrate some of the similarities between comparisons of veiling, anorexia and beauty practices and linkings of embodied practices made in the previous two case studies. In the first part of the chapter, I provide a mapping of the literature, showing how, in employing the analogue, continuum and subset approaches to link Muslim veiling with anorexia and/or 'Western' beauty practices, authors risk producing some of the problematic effects noted in the previous chapters. In the second part, I push my analysis further, employing my relational framework. This relational

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<sup>107</sup> The diverse groups of feminist theorists I have listed above are located differently in relation to nation, ethnicity, religion and political perspective, among other axes of differentiation. While the majority of the proponents of cross-cultural approaches I discussed in Chapter Three identified as 'Western' feminist theorists, some of the scholars cited above work in locations outside the industrialised West and identify in as 'Middle Eastern', 'Egyptian', 'British-Iranian' etc. These theorists' varying social locations of enunciation raise interesting questions, which I do not have space to address adequately in this thesis, regarding how the potential social and political effects of the comparisons they make may differ. How, for example, might a comparison between veiling and make-up made by the white, Australian radical feminist Sheila Jeffreys be interpreted or received differently by various audiences than a similar comparison made by the British Iranian postcolonial feminist critic Haleh Afshar, or Homa Hoodfar, a feminist of Iranian origin currently working in Canada? How might we examine and trace the complex relations of power structuring such political and cultural enunciations?

approach serves as both an alternative means of interrogating essentialist bodily binaries and a framework for theorising the links and disjunctures among particular gendered cultural practices. Exploring historical and contemporary literature within three key overlapping themes, Orientalism, women's travel writing and cross-cultural comparison; Colonialism, (proto)feminism and 'westoxification'; and Body image, cultural difference and politics, I trace a series of encounters across East/West borders which are relevant to the relational construction of the contemporary figures of 'the anorexic' and the 'veiled woman'.

The comparison between veiling and anorexia is particularly relevant to my project for a number of reasons. While links between anorexia and veiling are not (yet) made as frequently as those between female genital cutting and cosmetic surgery or intersex operations, the comparison is timely in the context of the current social and political climate in which 'differences between Muslim and non-Muslim women are constructed as posing insurmountable cultural differences' (Brah and Phoenix, 2004:79). The veiling and anorexia example also represents the point at which I began this project in my Masters dissertation, which explored the ways in which 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim' female subjectivities are differentiated in the realm of body image and eating pathology. In this chapter, moving on from the analogue approach which I concluded with in my dissertation, I hope to shift my theoretical analysis in a different direction. In the next section, I focus on the texts of three theorists, Sheila Jeffreys, Nancy Hirschmann and Mervat Nasser, who link veiling and anorexia and/or beauty practices in different ways.

## **Veiling, Anorexia and Beauty Practices: Comparisons and Critiques**

### **Cross-cultural comparisons**

In *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West* (2005), Sheila Jeffreys argues that the United Nations' concept of 'harmful cultural practices' is helpful for analysing 'Western' embodied practices, as well as those in other parts of the world. Importantly for Jeffreys, this concept situates 'traditional' gendered

practices within the culture of male domination, rather than linking them exclusively to notions of individual choice. In making her case, Jeffreys clearly couches her analysis in the language of anti-cultural essentialism. She explains that her book was motivated by a 'growing impatience' with the 'Western bias' of the United Nations' conceptual categories which currently interpret practices in the West as 'emanating from consumer "choice" from "science" and "medicine" or "fashion"', rather than culture, which 'may be seen as something reactionary that exists in the non-west' (34). Using a subset approach, Jeffreys includes within the category of 'harmful cultural practices' a wide range of 'Western' and 'non-Western' procedures such as labiaplasty, female genital mutilation, veiling, dieting, transsexual surgery, piercing, cutting and branding, depilation and the wearing of high heels and makeup. She maintains that if Western beauty practices are also recognised as harmful cultural practices, 'governments will, as required by the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, need to alter the social attitudes which underlie them' (45). Jeffreys also employs continuum and analogue models to draw more specific links among particular practices. Acknowledging that the wide range of procedures she names involve 'different degrees of harm to women', she argues that 'a continuum of Western beauty practices from lipstick on the one end to invasive cosmetic surgery on the other, fit the criteria set out for harmful cultural practices in United Nations understandings, although they may differ in their effects' (28). She also argues that while veiling and makeup are often seen as opposites, they are in fact analogous in that both mark women as subordinate, revealing their 'lack of entitlement' in patriarchal cultures (38). Like other advocates of the analogue approach discussed in Chapter Three, Jeffreys maintains that, 'Western feminist criticisms of harmful cultural practices in other cultures need to be founded on a profound critique of such practices within their own' (35).

In 'Western Feminism, Eastern Veiling, and the Question of Free Agency' (1998), Nancy Hirschmann seeks to move beyond essentialist and ethnocentric Western feminist portrayals of Muslim veiling. She frames her article as a critique of Western privilege and cultural essentialism, arguing that 'many Westerners tend to associate

veiling with extreme gender oppression, even seeing the veil as the ultimate symbol of a unified, monolithic Islam' (357). Invoking a continuum argument to counter essentialist portrayals of patriarchy as a problem unique to Muslim cultures, she argues that 'from fashion shows to domestic violence, Western women participate in a myriad of practices that can be seen as deeply patriarchal' (360).<sup>108</sup> Like Jeffreys and others discussed in this thesis, Hirschmann emphasises the importance of a cross-cultural approach 'that includes the recognition of the need for Western theorists to be *self-critical*' (italics in original) (354). Rather than condemn veiling, she argues, 'the need to attend to contexts within which choices are made should make Western feminists ask whether the veil is any more oppressive than Western clothing trends such as Wonderbras, miniskirts, or even blue jeans' (361). While Jeffreys dismisses feminist analyses of the ways in which veiling and other embodied practices may enable women to express their agency in particular contexts, Hirschmann is more interested in 'understanding veiling as a complex practice within which women's agency functions in similarly complex ways' (348). She suggests that the practice of 'veiling can be used as a vehicle' (349) for developing 'a cross-cultural feminist understanding on agency' (360).

In 'The New Veiling Phenomenon – is it an Anorexic Equivalent? A Polemic' (1999), Mervat Nasser employs an analogue approach to link 'the Western anorexic position and the new veiling' (407). She suggests that while the new veiling may appear 'completely different, if not alien to the anorexic position' it is necessary to trace their commonalities as a means 'to go beyond the traditional Orientalist definition and perception of the veil and to depart from the Western static vision of women of the Orient' (408). Throughout the article, she seeks to illustrate the social and psychological similarities shared by anorexic and veiled subjects. Drawing on Arlene Macleod's (1991) concept of 'accommodating protest', she argues that both practices are types of 'veiled resistance' undertaken by women who are torn between tradition

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<sup>108</sup> It is interesting that both Jeffreys and Hirschmann employ continuum approaches specifically to suggest a range of 'Western' practices, rather than an integrated spectrum of 'Western' and 'non-Western' procedures as in the FGC/body modification case study, a point which I address later in the chapter.

and modernity (411). She also points to the 'social contractibility' of both practices, represented by the phenomenon of 'me-too-anorexics' and the wide spread of veiling among young women (409), and to the (in)visibility of both subjects, who seek to hide behind anorexia or the veil, yet are 'paradoxically conspicuous in any group setting' (409). Nasser's central argument is that, as both practices are 'are derived from tradition and affirmative of it', anorexics and veiled women both 'obstruct the potential for real change' in regards to gender roles and relations of power (411). She hopes that the 'cultural confusion/cultural lag' symbolised by both practices can lead finally to 'a proper formulation of gender roles' (411).

As with the previous two case studies, there are several potential benefits to these comparative cross-cultural approaches. They can disrupt ethnocentric and essentialist assumptions that 'Western' and 'non-Western' practices are essentially different, generate greater awareness and critical thinking about 'culture' (as well as race and gender) and promote productive cross-cultural dialogue. Moreover, providing a counter discourse to post-feminist perspectives which 'assume female sexual agency and desire to be inscribed in the visibility and openness to view of the body' (Macdonald, 2006:12), such comparative constructions highlight the ways in which women's and girls' bodies regularly function across cultural contexts as carriers for wider political, cultural, economic and nationalistic imperatives and the surfaces onto which political positions are etched (McClintock, 1995; Narayan, 1998). Analysis of the gendered oppression involved in Western beauty practices also interrogates simplistic notions of personal choice and individual agency and emphasises that 'the personal is political'. Nasser's and (particularly) Hirschmann's analyses are useful for thinking critically about conceptions of agency and subordination within particular social and historical contexts and relations of power. Hirschmann asks important questions about how agency can be theorised in ways which do not simply assume and project Western, liberal conceptions and frameworks.

Furthermore, Jeffreys' argument can be seen as serving a valuable political purpose, linked to a well-established trajectory of radical feminist critique. A key argument of

the widely held sexist ideology to which radical feminist models in the 1970s and 1980s protested, and which Jeffrey seeks to interrogate further, was the assumption that women alone – and not men’s desires or patriarchal culture – bore responsibility for their suffering in regards to matters of beauty and the ‘bodily tyrannies of fashion’ (Bordo, 1993:21). As Susan Bordo argues,

The insistence that women are done to, not the doers, here; that men and their desires bear responsibility; and that female obedience to the dictates of fashion is better conceptualized as bondage than choice – was a crucial historical moment in the developing articulation of a new understanding of the sexual politics of the body (21-22).

While Bordo acknowledges that such radical feminist models ‘may have been insufficiently attentive to the multiplicity of meaning, the pleasures of shaping and decorating the body, or the role of female agency in reproducing patriarchal culture’ she emphasises that these discourses offered ‘a systemic critique capable of rousing women to collective action’ (31).

As I have argued in the preceding chapters, despite these advantages, the analogue, continuum and subset approaches are problematic in several ways, not least because none of them succeeds in transcending the essentialist Western/Muslim, self/other binaries originally identified as in need of redress. I have discussed the problems at length in the past two case studies and will not therefore offer a comprehensive or in depth critique of the veiling and anorexia/beauty practices example here. I will, however, discuss a few examples to illustrate the ways in which the comparative approaches used by authors in this chapter run into traps similar to those identified in the FGC/body modification and passing case studies.

### *Superficial sameness*

Through the establishment of superficial similarities based on uncritical assumptions, the comparative approaches used to link veiling and anorexia and/or Western beauty practices can paradoxically reify essentialist notions of cultural difference. For example, in including ‘Western’ beauty procedures alongside ‘non-Western’ practices

within the category of 'harmful cultural practices', Jeffreys unambiguously assumes that a variety of 'non-Western' practices, such as female genital cutting and veiling, are fundamentally patriarchal and harmful to women and simply seeks to have 'Western' practices measured by the same yardstick. Insisting that 'beauty practices are not about women's individual choice or a "discursive space" for women's creative expression but...a most important aspect of women's oppression' (2), she thinks less critically about the histories of production and contextual complexities of 'Western' and 'non-Western' practices, placing them all within the same category of gendered oppression. Furthermore, it seems significant that Jeffreys, like Hirschmann, only employs a continuum approach to articulate the need to theorise distinctions between 'Western' practices (suggesting that some of such procedures may be more extreme or 'harmful' than others). The implication of this theoretical move is that similar distinctions need not be theorised with respect to 'non-Western' practices, which can be less problematically lumped together as 'oppressive'. Jeffreys also reinforces a divide between 'Western' and 'non-Western' procedures that downplays the ways in which these practices clearly cross-over national and cultural contexts. Thus, while Jeffreys' analysis is framed as one motivated by anti-cultural essentialist imperatives, one might argue that her model risks reifying ethnocentrism and essentialism by taking the oppressive nature of non-Western practices for granted.

Furthermore, Nasser seems to suggest that anorexia and veiling are mutually exclusive options available to women in the face of contradictory social pressures: 'They are forms of veiled resistance adopted by women who are torn between tradition and modernity. The reason however as why (sic) a young woman would *choose* the veil *instead of* the anorexic look is likely to be bound by a set of circumstances namely class and economic structures' (italics mine) (1999:411). In collapsing the Western/Muslim binary into an economy of sameness (insisting on the 'equivalence' of the two practices) only then to pull it back apart (separating veiling and anorexia as discrete either/or choices), Nasser's analysis functions paradoxically to reinstate potentially essentialist notions of cultural difference. She does not discuss the possibilities for

hybridity and cross-over in embodied practice and subjectivity;<sup>109</sup> for example, the likelihood that there are women who veil *and* who experience disordered eating or body image distress.<sup>110</sup> My argument here is not that generalisations or assertions of similarity can never be made but that, in these texts, an uncritical insistence on ‘sameness’ or ‘equivalence’ easily slips into assumptions of the problematic (essentialist) cultural, national and racial differences that the authors claimed initially to want to overcome. This appears to be a problem in cross-cultural approaches which emphasise commonalities between embodied practices.

### *Flattening intersections*

Through repeatedly privileging gender to the exclusion of race, sexuality and nation, some of the authors discussed in this chapter also do not theorise the intersection of multiple axes of differentiation as central to the meaning and experience of veiling, anorexia and various beauty practices. Jeffreys’ analysis, in particular, relies predominantly on a model of universal patriarchy to link ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ practices. While she makes brief reference to feminist analyses of the ways in which veiling may enable Muslim women to ‘alleviate the harms suffered by women as a result of male dominance’ (2005:39), she (unlike Nasser) does not consider the ways in which veiling and anorexia may serve as adaptive strategies which respond to other oppressive systems such as racism and poverty. In her study of Muslim women living in Canada, Homa Hoodfar (2003) found that veiling has played a crucial role in helping some Muslim women adapt to the Canadian society in the face of cultural difference, exclusion and racism.<sup>111</sup> Becky Thompson (1992) has argued that, rather than relating

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<sup>109</sup> See, for instance, Chantal Zabus’s (2001) analysis of Sabrina Kherbiche’s novel *La Surture* (1993), in which the female protagonist develops anorexia after a forced genital excision. As Zabus suggests, in Kherbiche’s text, the concept of ‘surturing’ reflects ‘the suturing of disordered discourses, i.e. the collision of reconstructed virginity and self-starvation’ (342). ‘Usually defined as a Western ailment, anorexia nervosa here is simultaneously developed as a tortured response to being wedged between a Western and a non-Western culture’ (344).

<sup>110</sup> In other publications, however, Nasser does acknowledge that veiled Muslim women are not immune from body image distress (see Nasser, 1997:xi, 21).

<sup>111</sup> Hoodfar explains, for example, how Somali refugees who had come to Canada to escape civil war and upheaval turned to Islam, the Muslim community and veiling for support upon their arrival, as ‘for many

exclusively to the gendered 'culture of thinness' in the West, eating disorders such as anorexia represent ways in which women cope with a broader host of traumas including sexual abuse, racism, classism, heterosexism and poverty. Furthermore, Jeffreys does not consider the connections between veiling and anti-colonialism and a rejection of 'Western' values, which are of course linked to indigenous patriarchies, but cannot be simply incorporated into a linear model of gender oppression (Ahmed, 1992; Göle, 1996; El Guindi, 2003).

Jeffreys' theoretical framework has implications at the level of intervention. In the context of her comparison of veiling and makeup she seems to suggest that simply deciding to not be concerned with wearing makeup or veiling can provide liberation for Western and non-Western women, insisting:

Women can invent themselves anew outside the stereotypes of western and non-western patriarchal culture. Women can have access to the privilege possessed by men of not having to be concerned for appearance and being able to go out in public barefaced and bareheaded (2005:38)

Jeffreys' language here veers dangerously close to the brand of 'unveiling for freedom' rhetoric employed by the Bush/Blair alliance to 'legitimise' the Western military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq (as if simply going barefaced and bareheaded could produce gender liberation). It also ignores historical lessons from countries such as Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan, which have shown that unveiling can be felt as just as oppressive to women as veiling, especially if coerced by government pressure (Ahmed, 1992; Göle, 1996, Macdonald, 2006). These examples illustrate the inadequacy of a linear model of gender oppression in theorising the relationship between 'Western' and 'non-Western' embodied cultural practices and point to the need for an intersectional analysis.<sup>112</sup>

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Somalis emphasizing their membership and participating in the Muslim community is a means of coping with a new culture and social system' (13).

<sup>112</sup> For example, on the basis of her research that eating problems can develop as a response to a variety of forms of trauma, Becky Thompson argues that the prevention of eating disorders depends not simply on the reduction or elimination of patriarchy, but 'on women's access to economic, cultural, racial, political, social, and sexual justice' (1992:559).

### *Universalising embodiment*

Jeffreys' apparent desire for Muslim women to unveil themselves also suggests a problematic assumption of what constitutes a 'natural' body. In constructing the 'bare-headed' Muslim female body as associated with freedom from 'harm' or oppression, she universalises one particular conception of embodiment as *the* feminist ideal. Yet, this implied equation of bare-headedness (and bare-facedness) and liberation risks reifying *post-feminist* assumptions that associate the visible display of the body with female sexual agency.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, in delineating both 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim' women's embodied actions into the binary categories of (patriarchal) oppression or (feminist) resistance, Jeffreys may 'impose a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power' that makes it difficult to understand forms of embodiment and bodily action 'that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms' (Mahmood, 2005:9). As Saba Mahmood (2005) argues in her analysis of the Islamic piety movement, 'it is critical that we ask whether it is even possible to identify a universal category of acts – such as those of resistance – outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their political meaning' (9). This argument clearly underscores the problems with separating bodies and embodied subjectivities from the cultural contexts in which they are (re)constituted. Hirschmann's analysis is stronger in this respect, as she emphasises that 'women's agency, resistance and freedom can be understood only by their location' (357). There is, however, still an implied link between 'agency' and 'resistance' in her formulation.

### *Fetishising figures*

Due to their visibility, 'the veiled woman' and 'the anorexic' are made to stand as metaphors for their respective cultures. As Nasser explains,

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<sup>113</sup> Moreover, in suggesting that feminist empowerment may be achieved through choosing to present a 'visible' or 'open' body, Jeffreys' argument risks reproducing 'the disciplining and normalizing gaze of modern colonial disciplinary power', which, through 'the unveiling of the Oriental woman... ensures a "panoptic" position for the colonial subject' (Yegenoglu, 1998:111).

In anorexia, the cultural ideal of thinness was seen as a metaphor of woman's struggle against conflicting social definitions of femininity (sic), combining desirable qualities of the new woman namely control with the qualities required from the traditional woman, i.e. attractiveness, weaknesses and helplessness... The same metaphor is used here as a framework towards understanding this 'new veiling', arguing that it could in fact be a contemporary *anorexic equivalent* (italics in original) (1999:408).

The figure of 'the veiled woman' has long been read within the West as a synecdoche for Muslim culture as a whole.<sup>114</sup> As mentioned earlier, the construction of 'the anorexic' as a symbol for Western culture can be traced (in part) to the work of feminist cultural theorists, such as Susie Orbach, Naomi Wolf, and Susan Bordo, who have understood anorexia as a 'metaphor for our time' (Orbach, 1993/1986).<sup>115</sup> I want to argue, however, that the construction of 'the veiled woman' and 'the anorexic' as cultural metaphors within these cross-cultural comparisons is problematic for reasons similar to those discussed in the previous case study.

Constructed as generalised cultural representatives, the figures of 'the veiled woman' and 'the anorexic' are extracted from the histories and processes of their discursive and social production and fetishised as objects (Ahmed, 2000). Through such fetishisation, the contours of anorexia and veiling and their imagined subjects can, like those of the 'transsexual', 'transgender' and 'mixed race' figures, become fixed in troubling ways. When anorexia is employed as synecdoche for Western culture's patriarchal, consumer-driven oppression of women it is often constructed as a condition 'caused' exclusively by media ideals of feminine thinness and beauty. This dominant narrative of 'anorexia' not only functions to constitute anorexics as passive victims and/or cultural dupes, it also effaces the many other complex factors which may combine to produce anorexia in particular contexts, such as experiences of trauma and abuse (Brain, 2006).<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Western fantasies of 'penetration into the mysteries of the Orient' through looking behind 'the veil' are particularly relevant to the discourses around veiling in the context of French colonialism in Algeria (Yegenoglu, 1998:39-40; see also Fanon, 1965:42-44).

<sup>115</sup> Bordo comments that 'the anorectic thus appears, not as the victim of a unique and "bizarre" pathology, but as the bearer of very distressing tidings about our culture' (1993:60). Similarly, Orbach argues, 'Anorexia nervosa – self-starvation – is both a serious mental condition affecting thousands upon thousands of women, and a metaphor for our age' (1993/1986:4).

<sup>116</sup> In fetishising anorexia and 'the' problem facing women and girls in the West, such constructions also elide the diversity of other forms of disordered eating and body image distress which women (and men) face, not to mention the wide array of other areas in which women in Western industrialized nations

Similar problems with theorising women's agency occur when 'the veiled woman' becomes fetishised through such cultural comparisons. In Nasser's text, 'both anorexia and the veil demonstrate *women's confusion* about the seriousness of society's intention towards their progress' (1999:411) and, through both practices, 'women *unwittingly* obstruct the potential for real change' (italics mine) (411). She goes on to describe both anorexia and veiling as signs of 'cultural lag' which must be overcome to produce more appropriate gender relations:

It is hoped, however, that this *cultural confusion/cultural lag* (symbolized in gestures like anorexia and the veil) would finally lead to a *proper formulation of gender roles* and a better development of a new identity for women that is more reconciled with itself and society (italics mine) (411).

The connotations of the term 'cultural lag' are clearly problematic, suggesting that as the primitive vestiges of particular cultures who have failed to assume proper gender roles, both anorexic and veiled women remain fixed in an atavistic state.<sup>117</sup>

It could be argued that 'veiled women' are valued predominantly within some of these texts as conceptual tools which provide insight to the West. Hirschmann offers a sophisticated analysis of how agency is constructed differently across cultural contexts in ways that disrupt or exceed any 'universal' Western model. Yet she does not interrogate how representing veiling as a mirror for Western consciousness and subjectivity may serve not to deconstruct Orientalist representations but rather to reify Western privilege. For example, in her analysis:

Indeed, precisely because veiling is "other" to most Westerners, it may be able to *reveal aspects of the West to which Westerners are often blind*, such as assumptions about individuality, agency, and difference, as well as Western feminists' lack of self-consciousness about our own practices, including our forms of dress (italics mine) (1998:349).

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continue to be disadvantaged, devalued, discriminated against and/or oppressed, from income inequality to domestic and sexual violence.

<sup>117</sup> While Nasser draws on Macleod's (1991) analysis of the new veiling in Egypt and her concept of 'accommodating protest' to frame her argument, Macleod herself criticises the concept of 'cultural lag', arguing that terms such as break, gap and lag 'disguise a lack of understanding of the actual dynamics of the moment of social and political change' and fail to grasp 'the concrete actions and concerns of subordinate groups in relations of power, the concrete struggles and negotiations which end at times in the reproduction of power relations and occasionally in real change in the terms of inequality.' (15)

Westerners must *listen*, if for no other reason than that more comprehensive understandings of *our own experiences* – including the way we dress and its significance for Western women’s freedom – can occur with such attention (second italics mine) (364).

One could argue that ‘locating oneself in one’s research’ (England, 1994) functions here not to produce a more ‘generous’ view of ‘the other’, but rather to reflect the privileged ‘Western’ gaze back to itself (Ahmed, 2004b:2). Thus, while Reina Lewis and Sara Mills comment that the veil ‘is invested with the potency to hide or reveal the “truth” about the Orient which the West ultimately seeks’ (2003:14), we might add that it is also apparently invested with the power to reveal the truth about *the West* to the West. From this perspective, the primary role of ‘the veiled woman’ in these examples is to help Westerners become more developed, aware and multifaceted subjects. The risk of such constructions is that veiled women themselves may, by contrast, remain fixed and voiceless.

Through emphasising cross-cultural commonality, these comparative approaches all avoid theorising the ways in which the imagined figures of ‘the anorexic’ and the ‘veiled woman’ are, and have been, constructed relationally. As suggested in Chapter Three, in collapsing ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’, or the ‘victim of female genital mutilation’ and ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’, into an economy of sameness (which often slips back into problematic difference) these cross-cultural models can cut these figures off from their historical and contemporary trajectories of production. They may thus fail to interrogate the ways in which these figures have been constructed, in part, *in and through one another*. Yet, from my standpoint, it is precisely through a genealogical tracing of the relational power dynamics through which these figures have been constructed, that the discursive fibres of contemporary dualisms may be examined, unravelled and radically re-woven. In this sense, I share Lila Abu-Lughod’s perspective that the most powerful way to refuse to be ‘dragged into the binary opposition between East and West’ is to ‘fearlessly examine the processes of entanglement’ (1998a:16). In the next section, I explore how such ‘entanglements’ might be mapped and theorised.

## Towards a Relational Approach

I aim to show that a relational approach focusing on tracing constitutive connections offers a more effective alternative to the commonality-based analogue, continuum and subset approaches. Thinking in terms of relationality provides a framework for theorising links *and disjunctures* between embodied practices without collapsing into sameness or fetishising difference. It also offers a means of interrogating and disrupting culturally (and other) essentialist constructions. In this section, I map some of the ways in which ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ have been socially and discursively (re)produced relationally and, as such, are each ‘always-already caught up in systems of meanings, symbolic representations and power relations’ (Malson, 1998:6). Drawing on Judith Butler’s concept of ‘genealogical critique’ (1999/1990, 1993), as well as Eve Sedgwick’s notion of ‘performativity’ (2003), I map some of the varying historical processes and relations of power through which the ontological status of particular binary constructions related to anorexia and veiling has been produced and secured.

Anorexia and veiling are clearly different embodied practices with divergent and localised histories of construction and meaning. The discursive and social trajectories of production of these practices do, however, cross-over and flow into one another historically through particular moments of relational representation, embodied encounter and performative enactment. In tracing the relational constitution of ‘the veiled woman’ and ‘the anorexic’, I draw on material from both ‘Eastern’ contexts (i.e. Egypt, Turkey and Iran) and ‘Western’ milieus (i.e. North America and Western Europe), dating from the eighteenth century through to the present. I do this, in part, because these figures have been produced historically precisely through the (often indiscriminate) yoking together of customs and values rooted in divergent ethnic and cultural contexts. My objective is not, however, to reproduce such homogenising discourses by suggesting that the histories of construction associated with either veiling or anorexia are ‘the same’ across these diverse geo-political contexts. It is important, in this respect, to underscore that the Middle East, like the industrialised West, is and was a vast and ethnically diverse region ‘where local differences seemed more vivid than

those between East and West' (Hoodfar, 2003:18).<sup>118</sup> Nor do I seek to underscore a fundamental continuity between past and present. My aim is to show that, *as discursive-material constructions*, particular cultural binaries, concepts and figures linked to anorexia and veiling have been produced via movement both within *and across* geo-political borders and boundaries.<sup>119</sup> As these constructions have 'travelled' across time and space they have retained some commensurable features, but have also been radically rearticulated and reproduced, and as such, cannot be fixed.

My perspective pivots on the notion that we all operate in an inter-subjective social economy in which one's own sense of subjectivity is always caught up with, and constructed through, that of multiple others. As Linda Alcoff (1995) puts it, 'we are collectively caught in an intricate, delicate web in which each action I take, discursive or otherwise, pulls on, breaks off, or maintains the tension in many strands of the web in which others also find themselves moving' (109). I draw on Sara Ahmed's (2000) notion of inter-embodiment which acknowledges that embodied identities are produced asymmetrically through acts of 'saming' and 'othering' that differentiate between bodies on the basis of multiple intersecting axes of power such as gender, race, sexuality, class, nation, religion and culture. Embodied differences are understood within this framework to represent relations of power *between* different bodies.

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<sup>118</sup> For example, discourses pertaining to Muslim veiling were linked to processes of Westernization in both Egypt and Turkey in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet in Egypt, western economic and cultural encroachment was tied to British colonialist occupation of the region, whereas in Turkey, 'westernization' was linked to the Ottoman reforms of the Tanzimat movement. Moreover, the discursive-material construction of veiling in twentieth century Iran differed in some significant ways from that in Egypt during the same period. In Iran, the Shah banned the chador as a means to Westernize the nation and the Islamic revolution in turn enforced wearing of the chador in order to indigenize tradition. Whereas in Egypt, Islamic dress worn after the mid 1970s by women was part of a grass-roots activist movement (El Guindi, 2003:587).

<sup>119</sup> While I aim to trace the ways in which discourses regarding femininity and womanhood emanating from 'the Muslim East' and 'the West' have been (re)constructed relationally across this border, my object here is not to suggest that the relationship between East and West is the only, nor necessarily always the prominent, axis of relationality relevant to the construction of 'the anorexic' and 'the veiled women' or other related imagined figures. It is clear that traces from other cultural locations, such as those emanating from Africa and 'the South', have also played a role in forming both 'Western' and 'Eastern' notions of womanhood.

## Orientalism, women's travel writing and cross-cultural comparison

As Edward Said first catalogued in *Orientalism* (1978), there exists a long tradition of Western discourses which established the superiority of the West through 'othering' the Muslim East. From at least the fifteenth century onwards, European male travellers' accounts represented Muslim practices (such as polygamy, seclusion, female genital cutting and veiling) as backward, depraved and oppressive to women but simultaneously exoticised and sexualised veiled women and 'the harem' as symbols of Muslim libidinousness and objects of Western fantasy. In the eighteenth century, however, the publication of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763)<sup>120</sup> laid the groundwork for an 'alternative, gender specific discourse on the Middle East' (Melman, 1992:2). In this section, I examine the ways in which 'Western Christian' and 'Eastern Muslim' women positioned themselves and each other within female-produced travel writing on 'the Orient'. Analysis of this literature reveals the seeds of a productive history of relational production of 'Western' and 'Muslim' femininities, which provides historical grounding for the later relational construction of 'the veiled woman' and 'the anorexic'.

Western women's tales of Muslim women and their practices gained notoriety because, unlike the narratives produced by men (who were not allowed access to women's living quarters or bath houses), they were seen as 'inter-subjective', eye-witness accounts (62).<sup>121</sup> From a relational perspective, what is most interesting about these inter-subjective travel narratives is that Western women travellers repeatedly employed descriptions of Muslim women and Muslim societies as a means to criticise European gender relations. Several writers were dissatisfied with male Orientalist representations

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<sup>120</sup> Montagu's letters were written in Constantinople during the period of her husband's ambassadorship beginning in 1717. The letters published in 1763 were not in fact the real letters she wrote to friends, but a compilation of pseudo-letters dated and addressed to people either named or nameless. According to her granddaughter, she extracted these letters from a journal which she wrote during the Embassy visit (Montagu, 1965:xiv).

<sup>121</sup> As Billie Melman (1992) explains, many of these women travellers 'became engaged in the phenomena of people they described; they took part in the ordinary activities of Muslim women and in the rituals observed in harems'. As such, these women's accounts were characterised by 'inter-subjective relation', a communication, or exchange between the observer and her subjects (62).

of Muslim women, which they found inaccurate, essentialist and overly exoticised (Melman, 1992; Montagu, 1965).<sup>122</sup> In drawing links between Muslim women's practices and living conditions and those of Western women in order to make political arguments about Western society, their accounts operated in a similar way to contemporary feminist analogue, continuum and subset approaches. For example, Lady Montagu argues that Turkish women clearly have more sexual liberty than English women because their clothing protects them from both public recognition and male harassment on the street.<sup>123</sup>

Tis very easy to see they have more Liberty than we have, no Woman of what rank so ever being permitted to go in the street without 2 muslins, one that covers her face all but her Eyes and another that hides the whole dress of her head... You may guess how effectivly this disguises them, that there is no distinguishing the great Lady from her Slave and 'tis impossible for the most jealous Husband to know his Wife when he meets her, and no Man dare touch or follow a Woman in the Street... This perpetual Masquerade gives them entire Liberty of following their Inclinations without the danger of Discovery (328).

Montagu offers a critique of British attitudes to women and broader Christian notions of femininity and sexual morality (92). Associating sexual freedom with economic independence, she suggests that the (upper-class) Ottoman woman is 'economically as well as sexually free' (Melman, 1992:88).

Interestingly, in respect to the relational constructions of anorexia and veiling which would later emerge, Lady Montagu also highlights differences she perceives in Muslim and Western women's attitudes towards their bodies. Recounting a visit to a women's bath house (or bagnio), she describes walking in to see sofas covered with cushions 'on which sat the ladys, and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> their slaves behind 'em, but without any distinction of rank by their dress, all being in the state of nature, that is, in plain English, stark naked, without any Beauty or defect concealed, yet there was not the least wont on (sic) smile or immodest Gesture amongst em' (Montagu, 1965:313). Her portrayal of the Turkish women emphasises their remarkable comfort and confidence in their own

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<sup>122</sup> Of course, not all, and perhaps not most, Western women travellers took such culturally relativist or anti-essentialist perspectives. Many were content simply to reproduce the culturally essentialist and racist tone of dominant male Orientalist discourse (Mabro, 1991; Melman, 1992).

<sup>123</sup> The text is from a letter to Lady Mar (her sister) dated 1 April 1717.

naked bodies, which she presumably sees as worth noting for a Western audience unlikely to behave the same way if placed in a similar context. Montagu goes on to describe how the women tried to persuade her to join them in the baths until she was 'at last forced to open my skirt and shew them my stays' (her corset) (314). Contrasting the restrained form of her own corseted body with the free bodies of the Turkish women in 'the state of nature', she remarks that the sight of her corset 'satisfy'd them very well, for I saw they believ'd I was so lock'd up in that machine that it was not in my power to open it, which Contrivance they attributed to my Husband' (314). As Billie Melman comments, in Montagu's juxtaposition of herself and the Turkish women, 'the Ottoman women are "natural", because they indulge their senses and bodies. It is the Western travellers, not the orientals, who need to be released from imprisonment in a tortuous "machinery"' (1992:92).

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there were many other examples of cross-cultural 'self-criticism' on the part of Western women travellers. For example, after living in Egypt in 1862, Lucie Duff Gordon wrote that 'what most shocked Egyptian men about the English was... the way Englishmen talked about women among themselves, their hard and unkind treatment of their wives and women in general' (Mabro, 1991:34). In 1888 Emily Said-Ruete compared polygamy with 'the hypocrisy of Christian marriage' and maintained that 'the benefits of Muslim family life outweighed the evils of polygamy' (Lewis, 2004:99). In her travelogue, *In the Shadow of Islam*, published posthumously in 1920, Isabelle Eberhardt transformed Orientalist stereotypes of 'Muslim women' to criticise the ideal of domesticity in European society (Zayzafoon, 2005:32-3). Also in the early twentieth century, Grace Ellison contrasted male support for Ottoman feminism with the masculine hostility encountered by suffragists in England (Lewis, 2004:15).

While these examples represent a cross-cultural comparison technique similar to the 'reversal' step of Shildrick and Prokhovnik's deconstructive strategy, many of the authors also employed what we might classify as an analogue approach designed to emphasise, against the 'prevalent codification of the polygamous harem as a space of

sexual depravity and random cruelty' (Lewis, 2004:13), the fundamental similarities between European and Muslim societies and social values. For example, writing to her sister, Lady Montagu emphasises the underlying sameness between English and Ottoman women's morality, conduct and lifestyles:

As to their Morality or good Conduct, I can say like Arelequin '*tis just as 'tis with you,* and the Turkish Ladys don't commit one Sin the less for not being Christins' (sic) (italics mine) (Montagu, 1965:327).

As Montague insists in this example, Turkish Muslim women are 'just like you and me'.

These accounts point to a number of interesting observations regarding the relational construction of 'Western' and 'Muslim' femininities in this context. Firstly, they illustrate that an awareness of the problems with (what we would now refer to as) essentialist or Orientalist representations, and the employment of cross-cultural models to address such descriptions, are *not* something new or unique to the contemporary moment but are linked to a long history of comparative critique. It is also clear that, despite their efforts to interrogate Orientalism, such historical comparative approaches manifested some problematic effects similar to those produced by contemporary enactments of the analogue, continuum and subset models. While seeking to interrogate racialised notions of cultural difference, descriptions of 'Muslim women' in these eighteenth and nineteenth century examples function predominantly to tell Western readers something about themselves. Like the contemporary fetishised figures of 'the veiled woman' and 'the anorexic', 'Muslim women' are utilised to generate insight and knowledge about social life in the West for Westerners. They are surfaces onto which Western women travellers project their grievances, desires and ideals, and which reflect back to these authors the 'truth' about the authors' own social condition. Such processes of representation often function to re-centre 'Western' privilege. As Yegenoglo argues, 'by rendering visible the invisible space of the harem, Lady Montagu not only serves the purpose of fulfilling the Western voyeuristic pleasure, but also constitutes herself as the gazing Eye/I' (1998:90). Within this frame, she suggests, 'the visibility of the other is the point at which the subject anchors [her] identity'

(90).<sup>124</sup> Similarly, in Eberhardt's text the Arab 'Muslim woman' functions as a 'surrogate self' through which the author 'reflects her inner desire to reconstruct a European womanhood that is free from the prison house of gender' (Zayzafoon, 2005:50). Constructing the Arab 'Muslim woman' as more independent and autonomous than the 'French woman', Eberhardt uses her as a tool to discuss and establish her own place and status in European society (56, 57).

While appearing to centre primarily on issues of gender and sexuality, these cross-cultural comparisons were underscored by particular constructions of race, class and religion. 'Muslim women' and 'European women' were produced as similar in such narratives only through the construction of other 'others'. In Lady Montagu's *Letters*, for example, it is through praising Muslim society as tolerant and progressive that the Protestant, anti-papist author reiterates her beliefs about the 'intolerance' of Catholics (Melman, 1992:94-5). Furthermore, Eberhardt's construction of 'the Arab Muslim woman' as a liberated and autonomous surrogate self is set in opposition against 'the black Muslim' woman as a sexually promiscuous alter ego (Zayzafoon, 2005:49-57). Her construction of the black Muslim woman as 'harlot' mirrors her own practices in North Africa where she had many Algerian, Tunisian and French lovers (49) and reflects her 'desire to liberate herself from the sexual oppression imposed by bourgeois morality' (49-50). Through such relational representations, Eberhardt disrupts Orientalist and colonialist representations of Muslim women as downtrodden and oppressed victims and yet simultaneously reinforces racialised stereotypes of sexually promiscuous 'black' femininity. The Arab Muslim woman is thus 'de-othered' in her text only through the 're-othering' of the black Muslim woman. Moreover, as all of these Western women travellers came from the middle or upper classes and wrote predominantly of the lives of elite, heterosexual Muslim women, it is also important to recognise that constructions of Western and Muslim women as similar in these texts

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<sup>124</sup> Myra Macdonald argues that within Western Orientalist discourse the harem represented 'the lure of a sybaritic world where women could be imagined through the male voyeur's eyes as seductive, languorous and available for sexual fantasies, including those of lesbian dalliance' (2006:11). From this perspective, Montagu's voyeuristic pleasure in the *Letters* could also be read, I would suggest, as an expression of sexual desire.

were produced precisely through the othering or exclusion of working class and non-heterosexual women's experiences in both Eastern and Western contexts.

Thus, while Melman claims that within Western women travellers' texts, 'analogy led to self-criticism' which 'resulted in an identification with the other that cut across the barriers of religion, culture and ethnicity' and that 'Western women's writing on "other" women then substitutes a sense of solidarity of gender for sexual and racial superiority' (1992:8), I would argue that the use of analogue approaches in such writing often proceeds through *reifying* essentialist constructions of religion, race, sexuality and class. Through plotting similarities along the linear axis of gender, these historical comparisons risk shoring up racism, classism and religious and cultural essentialism in similar ways to contemporary cross-cultural strategies.

Western women travel writers in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not working in a vacuum. The representational web in which they operated linked them both to male, Western Orientalist discourse, and to male and female authored 'counter-discourses' emanating from the Muslim East. Muslim women living in Eastern countries were clearly often aware of and sought to interrogate stereotypes of Muslim women and Muslim society produced by Western Orientalists (see, for example, Göle, 1996:27). As Reina Lewis (2004) has documented, one strand of female counter-discourse was represented by a small collection of Ottoman Muslim women writers who were published in the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These included Demetra Vaka Brown, Halide Edib, Zeyneb Hanım and Melek Hanım, all, like their Western counterparts, heterosexual women of the upper of middle classes. Lewis argues that the voices of these women 'illustrate how the West was never the sole arbiter and owner of meanings about the Orient... Orientalism was a discourse framed by the responses, adaptations, and contestations of those whom it constructed as its objects' (2-3). In the remainder of this section I employ Lewis's analysis of the Ottoman women's writing, and the ways in which these authors were 'connected

textually and socially' (4) to Western women writers, to highlight how images of Western and Ottoman femininity were produced inter-subjectively through discourse.<sup>125</sup>

While eager to contest Orientalist images of Muslim women such as 'the lascivious odalisque' and views of 'the Orient as a zone out of time locked in a pre-modern past' (Lewis, 2004:7), the Ottoman authors found they also had to performatively enact stereotypical constructions, both to market their publications successfully, and in order to subvert Orientalism. As Lewis explains, the Ottoman writers were acutely aware that 'as a topic, the harem sold books' and they 'cannily entitled their books with the evocative words "harem", "Turkish", "Arabian", or "princess", and pictured themselves in veils and yasmaks on the front cover' (12). These discursive and visual representations served, in some ways, to reify dominant Western images of Ottoman women. When Western readers moved beyond the covers to engage with the texts, however, they often found descriptions of 'harem life' which contrasted sharply with Orientalist expectations. Thus, in many senses, the Ottoman women's interventions were transgressive. They 'were able to intervene in Orientalist culture with a self-conscious ability to manipulate cultural codes that was not normally attributed to the inferiorised, silenced, woman or the harem stereotype' (7). Yet, as Lewis notes, this 'performativity' did not always provide an effective means of resignifying Orientalist representations for the Ottoman authors. In some cases, the writers attempted to draw strategically on codes of femininity which, while perceptible to their Eastern audiences, were only partially comprehensible to a Western readership (166-168). In such instances, attempts at 'doing gender' parodically (Butler, 1999/1990) could break down, failing to achieve the desired subversive aim.

Alongside redressing 'Western' views of harem life, these authors described Ottoman women's struggles for female emancipation and critiqued the ostensible liberation of Western women (Lewis, 2004:12). Keen, on the one hand, to show the ways in which Ottoman women and Western 'New Women' were similar, they also, on the other,

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<sup>125</sup> Like most travel writing at the time, the texts of these Ottoman women writers was highly citational, engaging in 'textual dialogue' with each other, Western women (contemporary and historic, such as Montagu), and male writers from both East and West (Lewis, 2004:18).

employed cross-cultural comparisons to argue that, where they were different, Ottoman women were superior (102). Interestingly, these gendered cross-cultural constructions of Ottoman and Western ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’, often proceeded, like those of their European counterparts, through problematic processes of racial and class-oriented othering. Whereas Western women were produced as similar to Ottoman women in some respects and different in others, ‘the black African woman’ functioned within some of their texts as an ultimate ‘other’. For example, Zeyneb Hanim employs a stereotype of ‘the black African cannibal’ to suggest that Muslim and European women may have different ideas of happiness, but also, simultaneously, to establish commonality among East and West through the exclusion of the African ‘other’.<sup>126</sup> Similar again to their Western contemporaries, the Ottoman women writers often constructed similarities between themselves and elite European women whilst insisting on their difference from the European working class.<sup>127</sup>

In addition to indicating the basis for a long tradition of relational representation of ‘Western’ and ‘Muslim’ femininities (beset with its own problematic effects), this section highlights the fundamental ambivalence and fluidity of Orientalist discourse. A multiplicity of different, and often contradictory, images of ‘Western women’ and ‘Muslim women’, have been produced and reproduced discursively through relational representations by various groups of actors, each occupying different social locations of enunciation. The long-established binary of ‘the free and liberated Western women’ and ‘the oppressed and downtrodden Muslim woman’ is in fact never fixed during this period, but always open to reversal and reconstruction, such as through the production

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<sup>126</sup> Hanim wrote: ‘When I was fifteen years old they made me present of a little native from Central Africa. For her there was no greater torture than to wear garments of any kind, and her idea of happiness was to get back to the home on the borders of Lake Chad and the possibility of eating another roasted European’ (Hanim, 1913:186-8 cited in Lewis, 2004:126). As Lewis points out, the anecdote is intended as a joke ‘that she and her Occidental readers can share’ (127). The figure of the naked African cannibal, she explains, ‘simultaneously exemplifies the non-universality of human happiness, thus naturalising the different aspirations of Turkish (Muslim) and English women, whilst also uniting the Turks with the Europeans thus separating them from the Africans’ (127).

<sup>127</sup> For instance, it was ‘clearly imperative for Zeyneb Hanim to be recognized as a lady and seen as distinct from a primitivised working class’ (Lewis, 2004:133).

of the 'sexually and economically subordinate Western woman' and 'sexually and economically liberated Muslim woman' dichotomy.<sup>128</sup>

Through their repeated construction of racialised and classed other 'others', these women's cross-cultural narratives also illustrate the claim, central to Sara Ahmed's concept of inter-embodiment, that 'there is never simply an encounter between self and self or between self and other...there is always more than one and more than two in any encounter' (Ahmed, 2000:141). Within women's travel accounts emanating from both East and West, there are always other 'others' who intervene to subvert simple dialectic constructions of difference or to underscore assertions of sameness. 'The subject is not simply differentiated from the (its) other, but comes into being by learning how to differentiate between others' (24). Finally, as part of 'Eastern' counter-discourses, performative enactment provides a means to intervene in and potentially resignify Orientalist representations of women; however, Ottoman women's deployment of performativity is always limited by the boundaries of cultural translation and economic necessity. In the next section, I explore how such gendered cultural binaries are (re)produced during and after the height of European colonialism in the Middle East.

### **Colonialism, (proto)feminism and 'westoxification'**

The Muslim veil was first transformed into a substantive object of social, political and religious contention in the context of European colonialism in the Muslim East in the late nineteenth century (Ahmed, 1992:150; Hoodfar, 2003:7). During this period discourses between Western colonialists, native modernisers, religious conservatives, nationalists and feminists (among other groups) produced competing politicised images of 'the veil'. Each group sought to construct veiling in ways that supported their own social and political interests. Around this same time, anorexia nervosa was constituted as a feminine nervous disorder in a Western context in which social and medical links between 'women' and pathology were particularly salient, the 'hysterical woman' was a

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<sup>128</sup> Of course, as has been argued by several postcolonial theorists, Orientalism established 'its *unity* despite the polymorphous nature of the texts that constitute it' (italics in original) (Yegenoglo, 1998:81).

prominent cultural figure, and feminists were challenging women's social and economic subordination (Malson, 1998:57, 67). It is within this socio-historical nexus that a dualistic construction of the 'weak, frivolous and appearance-obsessed Western woman' and the 'strong, pious and modest Muslim woman' emerges as a precursor to the contemporary anorexia/veiling comparisons. This binary was (re)produced as part of discourses around the 'new veiling' which emerged in various Muslim countries during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and is linked to the rise of the 'anorexia epidemic' in the West. It is, of course, alongside and against other binary cultural constructions, namely the 'free and liberated Western woman' and 'the oppressed and downtrodden Muslim woman', that this dualistic construction is repeatedly (re)constituted.

The topic of women and the veil as a political problem was first discussed publicly by Muslim intellectuals in countries such as Egypt and Turkey, both nations which were experiencing the beginning of processes of 'Westernization' (through British colonial occupation in Egypt and through the Ottoman reforms of the Tanzimat movement in Turkey) by the end of the nineteenth century. In these discourses, 'the woman question' was directly linked with issues of nationalism and the imperatives of national advancement and political, social and cultural reform (Ahmed, 1992:128). In *The Liberation of Women* (1992/1899), for example, Qasim Amin, the elite reformer considered by many as the 'father' of Egyptian feminism - although his 'feminist' credentials have been criticised in recent years by feminist historians (see Ahmed, 1992 and Abu-Lughod, 1998b) - argued that 'the inferior position of Muslim women' is the 'greatest obstacle' preventing Egypt's advancement as a nation (60). He maintained that 'if Egyptians have an interest in and a sincere desire for happiness, if they wish to preserve their existence and to strive toward security and survival, they should discard all unacceptable habits and eliminate every undesirable trait that hinders their progress' (64). Advocating women's partial de-veiling, he insisted that 'the veil as we know it is a great hindrance to women's progress, and indeed to a country's progress' (47).

Modernisers such as Amin wrote in a colonial context in which the occupying British powers sought to legitimise their colonising mission by illustrating the essential

'backwardness' of Middle Eastern cultures visible through 'oppressive' practices such as veiling and polygamy. The British colonial official in Egypt, Lord Cromer, argued that Islam's oppression of women, expressed in the practices of veiling and seclusion, represented a 'fatal obstacle' to the Egyptian's 'attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilisation' (Ahmed, 1992:153). Colonialists like Cromer imagined a progressive continuum of 'proper womanhood' in which Victorian femininity was positioned at the most advanced pole and Muslim womanhood towards the opposite pole.<sup>129</sup> It is clear that Egyptian reformists drew on and reified these hierarchical cultural distinctions. Amin insists that in arguing for a less rigid practice of veiling for women, he 'is not in any way requesting this change because we wish to imitate for the sake of imitation, Western nations and traditions and conditions' (46). Yet he proceeds to produce a cross-cultural comparison in which Western culture is 'strong', 'happy' and 'advanced' and Egyptian culture is 'weak', 'miserable' and has 'fallen back' (46). Praising the 'benefits gained by Westerners in bringing up their daughters properly and accepting their place in the world of men' (59), he argues that a less extreme approach to veiling would 'greatly improve our way of life' (46).

Ahmed's comparative approach also reifies notions of hierarchical embodied 'differences' between Eastern and Western women. Measuring Egyptian Muslim women against a British Victorian feminine ideal, he constructs a figure of the 'ugly, obese and unhealthy Muslim woman' as 'other' to the 'attractive, slim and healthy Western woman'. He argues that Egyptians' 'preference for seclusion has even undermined our women's health... They have sick bodies and spirits, and never taste the joys of this earthly life' (51). The seclusion system, he maintains, 'causes many of our women to be afflicted with obesity and poor blood circulation' (51). Amin further proclaims that 'Most Egyptian women are not in the habit of combing their hair

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<sup>129</sup> Attitudes of colonial officers towards Muslim societies relied on social evolutionary theories of race and culture, and models such as the 'Great Chain of Being', which elevated middle-class Victorian English society (including mores surrounding Victorian womanhood) as the pinnacle of evolutionary progress and civilization (Ahmed, 1992:150-51, Gilman, 1992; Young, 1990). Through such hierarchical frameworks, Muslim veiling could be portrayed as 'patriarchal' and 'backwards' against a white, British ideal of femininity, despite the fact that 'Queen Victoria, on many occasions, wore a veil herself' (Gressgård, 2006:330).

everyday', do not 'bathe more than once a week' and 'do not attend to what is attractive in clothing though their attractiveness and cleanliness strongly influence men's inclinations' (29).<sup>130</sup> Later, in Turkey, Eastern reformers similarly constructed the 'Europeanized woman' as an ideal model for modern Turkish women (Göle, 1996:65). As Göle describes, in the early Republican era, 'the distinction between civilized and uncivilized began to influence the values attributed to aesthetics as well, and sources of the definition of beauty stated to be found on the European Continent rather than in the local milieu' (65). What is evident from these brief examples is that the arguments of Western colonialists and Eastern reformers regarding women and veiling were intimately linked and depended in part on comparative cultural constructions of feminine embodiment. It is through relational colonial and modernising discourses that the veil is constituted as a sign of Muslim backwardness and gender oppression and the binary of liberated Western women/oppressed Muslim women is (re)produced.<sup>131</sup>

While these 'proto-feminist' voices portrayed Western societies as 'advanced', 'strong' and 'happy' and constructed 'the Victorian middle-class woman' as an ideal to be emulated by Muslim women, an examination of Victorian notions of femininity points to a rather different story. Within nineteenth century Britain and North America, the link between 'women' and pathology was particularly evident.<sup>132</sup> A figure of the 'hysterical woman' had gradually begun to emerge in nineteenth century medical literature, signified by characteristics such as suggestibility, narcissism, idleness, self-indulgence, moral weakness, lack of will power and 'craving for sympathy' (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972:659, 667). While hysteria was generally seen as linked to women's

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<sup>130</sup> Constructions of 'Muslim women' as unattractive, unfit and somehow primitive in their knowledge regarding appropriate care of the body continue to be employed in more contemporary discourses. For example, an article published in a 1988 edition of the magazine *Marie Claire* entitled 'Arabia, Behind the Veil' describes Western women's experiences of 'seeing a collection of small dumpy women, covered from head to toe in what appears to be lined dyed blotchy charcoal, roaming slowly through the department stores of capital cities' (Mabro, 1991:3-4).

<sup>131</sup> Of course, actors other than colonial officials, such as missionaries and European feminists, also participated in the construction of this Western/Muslim binary through their engagements veiling practices (Ahmed, 1992:154).

<sup>132</sup> Women, especially middle class married women with children, frequently complained of 'isolation, loneliness, and depression' (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972:657). Books written in the last half of the nineteenth century consistently 'assert that a large number, even the majority of middle class American women, were in some sense ill' (Douglas Wood, 1973:26).

inherently 'diseased' reproductive system, namely the womb, a wide array of symptoms, ranging from seizures, to headaches, to general fatigue and depression, were seen as indicative of the condition. Such medical discourses were reinforced by scientific ideas relating to women's evolutionary weakness (such as those of Darwin) and cultural notions of 'the perfect Victorian lady' who combined 'total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption and the workship of the family hearth' (Vicinus, 1972:ix).

Specific to middle class white women, these medical, scientific and cultural ideas about feminine fragility and pathology did not generally extend to working class and slave women who, consistent with Victorian economic and political imperatives, were thought to be healthy, robust and fit to work in the fields and wash-houses (Ehrenreich and English, 2005:125-6). When working class or black women were diagnosed with hysteria, it was seen as originating in their sensuality, indecency, and sexual excess (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972:670). Characterised as 'essentially asexual and not uncommonly frigid' (663), the figure of the white, middle class 'hysterical woman' was thus produced directly against representations of black and working class women's unrestrained sexuality. In this sense, we might also see the de-sexualised Victorian 'hysterical woman' as constructed against the Middle-Eastern 'harem woman', represented within ubiquitous eroticized Orientalist representations at the time as overly sexualised and libidinous (Lewis, 2004).

Assumptions regarding Muslim women's excessive (and yet hidden) sexuality were often linked with notions of their abundant appetites. As Melman argues, within Victorian culture and travel literature, food and eating as symbols had 'become inseparable from the image of the Orient as *locus sensualis* and that of orientals as generally lascivious' (italics in original) (1992:122-3). Muslim women were continually described during this period as consuming food with others and 'references to excessive, irregular eating are scattered in harem literature, particularly in descriptions at the harems of the elite' (123). Particular references were made to women in harems consuming 'rich and heavy' foods and digesting meat, which was

‘universally believed to arouse sexual feelings, aggravate lust and cause somatic disorders’ (126). Descriptions of Muslim women’s communal and unrestrained eating were particularly significant in the Victorian context because they represented a marked contrast to pervasive gendered social norms in the West which constructed eating as ‘unfeminine’.<sup>133</sup> For Victorian middle and upper class women (who were most likely to be diagnosed as ‘hysterics’), food was linked to gluttony, which was in turn linked to lasciviousness. Denial of food thus ‘became a form of moral certitude’ and a means of ‘advancing in the moral hierarchy’ (Brumberg, 1988:182).

By the late nineteenth century, hysteria was a chronic and ‘socially accepted sick role’ for middle class Victorian women (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972:671). Ill health had become ‘positively fashionable’ for women (Douglas Wood, 1973:26) and a ‘morbid aesthetic developed in which sickness was seen as a source of female beauty’ (Ehrenreich and English, 2005:119). As Ehrenreich and English argue, ‘It was acceptable, even stylish, to retire to bed with “sick headaches”, “nerves”, and various unmentionable “female troubles”’ (2005:118-9). These prominent links between womanhood, pathology, nervousness and hysteria (as well as discourses around ‘unfeminine eating’) formed the social and political context for the emergence of anorexia nervosa as an object of medical discourse in the last decades of the nineteenth century (Malson, 1998). As Helen Malson suggests, intimately linked to gendered notions of hysteria, ‘anorexia figured as a political forum, as much as a medical one, in which to debate and therefore constitute and reconstitute feminine nervousness’ (1998:49). It was not until the late twentieth century, however, that ‘the anorexic’ would come to figure as potent metaphor for Western femininity.

The nineteenth century ‘hysterical woman’ can, as feminist historians have argued, be seen as ‘both product and indictment of her culture’ (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972:678). From Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s perspective, the ‘hysterical woman’ provided ‘a stark caricature of femininity’ (1972:671) in a Victorian context in which middle class

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<sup>133</sup> The figure of the ‘hysterical woman’ emerged in a nineteenth century context in which ‘invalidism and scanty eating commonly accompanied each other’ and ‘wasting was in style’ (Brumberg, 1988:171).

women were consistently socialized to ‘fill a weak, dependent and severely limited social role’ (677). Feminist theorists have also pointed out that the figures of ‘the hysteric’, and later ‘the anorexic’, emerged as pathological gendered subjects precisely within social contexts in which feminists and other women sought to contest patriarchal oppression (Douglas Wood, 1973; Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1998). Indeed, just as colonialists such as Lord Cromer were espousing proto-feminist arguments about the need to liberate Muslim women in Egypt, British women were rising up to protest their own subjugation under patriarchy. As Leila Ahmed (1992) has discussed, however, the ‘feminist’ views of British colonialists abroad certainly did not extend to women in their own countries. In England, Lord Cromer served as founding member and president of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage (153). Thus, while the morally refined and socially capable ‘Victorian woman’ was installed by colonialists and native modernisers as the ultimate ideal of femininity in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, the figure of the fragile, depressed and sickly ‘hysterical woman’ had come to, in many senses, define femininity in the Victorian Euro-American context.

Historical evidence suggests that these prevalent images of Victorian women’s debility, nervousness and ‘inappropriate’ fixation on fashion made the cultural crossing from Western nations to the Middle East. For example, in his travel memoir recounting his journey to a scholarly congress of Orientalists in Stockholm and his subsequent travels throughout Europe in 1889 (the same year that Amin’s *The Liberation of Women* was published), the Ottoman author Ahmed Midhat described his travelling companion, Madame Gülnar, a Russian noblewoman, as often feeling ill, needing excessive amounts of sleep and spending some days without leaving the hotel (Findley, 1998:32). After Madame Gülnar’s mother and son arrive to join the pair on their travels, Midhat is startled at her ‘childlike submission to the will of her mother and her absent husband’ (32). Such descriptions of fragile and subordinate Western femininity came at a time when Muslim conservatives and nationalists were concerned not only by European economic encroachment in Egypt, but also by the infiltration of Western social and cultures mores (Ahmed, 1992:142). It was in this context, I want to argue, that those who objected to the modernising projects of European powers and native reformers (in

Egypt as well as other nations such as Turkey and later in Iran) drew strategically on such images of Victorian womanhood to reappropriate a figure of the Muslim 'veiled woman' as strong, pious and modest *against* a construction of 'Western woman' as weak, frivolous and appearance obsessed.

Those who opposed the Western modernising project in Egypt constituted not only nationalists and religious conservatives who sought to preserve Islamic and national heritage and did not want to be unseated from their positions of power and control, but also some Muslim feminists who were critical of colonial and reformist rhetoric regarding the liberation of women (Ahmed, 1992:147, 148, 179-181).<sup>134</sup> The dominant voices of Egyptian feminism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, like their European feminist counterparts, supported the calls of Amin and others for un-veiling and 'promoted a feminism that assumed the desirability of progress toward Western type societies' (174). Upon returning from a meeting of the International Alliance of Women in Rome in 1923, the prominent feminist Huda Shaarawi and her colleagues in the Egyptian Feminist Union removed their veils to onlookers on the train platform in Cairo as a sign of protest against enforced veiling and the harem system (Shaarawi, 1986:1). Other Egyptian feminists, such as Malak Hifini Nassef, however, were wary of reformist arguments for unveiling and pointed to the problems with abrupt demands on the part of male elites for women to unveil when women were accustomed to veiling (Ahmed, 1992:180). Arguing that women should 'bring a critical and discriminating eye to the issue of adopting Western customs' (181), Nassef commented on the phenomena of women on the streets of Cairo in European dress, 'congratulating themselves on being modern' (180). She describes these Westernized 'upper class women' as 'pre-occupied with fashion' and 'not motivated by a desire for liberty or persuaded that the veil hampered them in the pursuit of knowledge' (180). Such discourses draw on prevalent images of Victorian women within the era of 'the hysterical woman' as idle, lacking in agency, and obsessed with frivolous fashions

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<sup>134</sup> This group also included lower and lower middle class people who were negatively affected or derived no benefits from Western occupation (Ahmed, 1992).

(even to the point of making themselves appear ill in order to be 'in style'), setting them against Muslim veiled women's greater political awareness, strength and sensibility.

Contrasting representations of Eastern and Western femininity became even more pronounced, though with an arguably non-feminist spin, in the 1930s with the rise of popular nationalist groups in Egypt espousing strong anti-Western sentiments. For example, the Muslim Brethren (founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928) rejected Western women as a model for Muslim women, maintaining that the West 'used women and female sexuality to increase profits' and that 'advertisements with a beautiful secretary, model or saleswoman exploited women in the service of capitalism' (Ahmed, 1992:194). Similar arguments were being voiced by conservative Islamist intellectuals in the years leading up to the Kemalist revolution in Turkey. The scholar Said Halim Pasha argued, for instance, that 'the abandonment of veiling, women's companionship with men, and their beginning to live like 'Western' women, constituted social dangers' and that the liberation of women would result in a 'pleasure-oriented', hedonistic society rather than a society of 'decency and virtue' (Göle, 1996:41). Similarly, in his book *Women and the Constitution*, Mehmet Tahir referred to the denigration of Turkish women under the impact of the West and commented that 'the most defining characteristic of our women, dignity, has been replaced by love of lace and ribbon and or fashion and corsets' (43). As Nilüfer Göle discusses, such Islamic traditionalists saw women's new freedoms and increasing 'Westernization' as signs of 'moral breakdown' and 'in their writings they brought forward examples of dignified and honourable Muslim women in contrast to unveiled, Westernized, flirtatious women' (1996:43).<sup>135</sup>

This dualistic gendered construction of the 'weak, frivolous and appearance-obsessed Western woman' and the 'strong, pious and modest Muslim woman' resurfaces in the context of nationalist conflict throughout the twentieth century in particular Eastern contexts. A pertinent example is provided by a strand of political discourse and debate

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<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, this sense of moral panic associated with Turkish women's adoption of European dress and manners was not limited to the discourses of Islamist writers and groups. A poster printed by the police in Istanbul in 1917, for instance, stated: 'In recent months, examples of some disgraceful fashions have been observed in the streets of the capital. Thus, all Muslim women are asked to lengthen their skirts, wear *charshafs* and not to have corsets' (Göle, 1996:48).

pervasive in Iran in the years leading up to the 1979 revolution, an event which profoundly reinforced existing identifications between radical Islamism and veiled women. In the early 1970s, the Iranian writer Jalal al' Ahmad published his famous critique of Iran's 'mindless' push towards Western modernization, entitled *Westoxification* (Sullivan, 1998:215). Ahmad employs the term 'Westoxification' to symbolise all that is negative about the Western economic, political and cultural influence in the Middle East. He refers to 'being afflicted with "westisis"' as akin to 'being afflicted with cholera' (215). In the wake of the 2,500 year celebration of Persian monarchy in Persepolis staged by the Shah of Iran, the radical thinker Ali Sharitati employed this controversial text to denounce the Western cultural influence on Iranian women who symbolised the moral crises produced through westoxification: 'the idle, made-up, consumerist Westernized "painted dolls"' (Ahmed, 1992:14-15). Despite their 'power to effect social change' Sharitati argued, Western women, and those Eastern Muslim women who seek to emulate their model, 'allow their desires to be so manipulated that they become vulnerable pawns in capitalist consumption and leisure' (Sullivan, 1998:218). Against these images of 'westoxified' femininity, Sharitati (through his much celebrated text *Fatima is Fatima*) (re)constructs the figure of Fatima, the daughter of the prophet Mohammed, as a symbol of how Iranian women could 'enter modernity and remake themselves as neither Western nor traditional' (217). Once again, the strength and honour of 'the Muslim woman' is constructed relationally against the weakness and frivolousness of 'the Western woman.'

It is interesting to note that Iranian representations of 'westoxification' and Western(ized) women as inactive, appearance-conscious and consumerist emerged precisely at a time when the notion of an 'anorexia epidemic' had infiltrated public consciousness within the West. While the causes of and treatments for anorexia nervosa had been discussed and debated within medical, psychological and cultural journals since the late nineteenth century, knowledge of the condition did not cross the general public radar until the early 1970s with the publication of articles in more popular mediums such as psychiatrist Hilde Brunch's *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia* in 1978 (Brumberg, 1988). By 1981 the *International Journal of Eating*

*Disorders* was founded and the (reported) incidence of anorexia in the United States increased more than 50 percent in the 1970s and 1980s (Gremillion, 2003:1). As Joan Brumberg argues, 'In effect, anorexia was the disease of the 1970s' to be eclipsed only by AIDS in the 1980s' (10). Within this context of a rising anorexia 'epidemic' in the West, al' Ahmad's concept of 'westoxification', and Sharitati's application of the term to Iranian 'painted dolls', provide powerful metaphors linking Western culture, gender and disease. Western culture is imagined as a powerful contagion, poisoning women with its toxic bodily ideals and values.

These representations of diseased Western(ized) women were also employed at a moment when feminist critiques of Western culture's patriarchal, competitive and consumerist values as a breeding ground for the development of eating disorders and body image distress, such as Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978) and Kim Chernin's *The Obsession* (1981), were just beginning to come to the fore. From a relational perspective, Sharitati's image of 'the idle, made-up, consumerist Westernized "painted dolls"' (Ahmed, 1992:14-15) can be seen to combine images of both the nineteenth century idle, fatigued, middle class 'hysterical woman' and those of the late twentieth century 'anorexic' who grapples with the competing cultural pressures of capitalist consumption, individual competitiveness and the feminine imperative to remain always slim and 'beautiful'. Against toxic Westernized 'painted dolls', it is the image of the strong, 'fundamentalist' Muslim women marching en masse in black chadors that the Iranian revolution installed as a model of Muslim womanhood. Images of feminine hysteria were in turn deployed by Western media to describe the Iranian Revolution as the 'collective hysteria of frantic masses' (Göle, 1996:83). In this moment, Western 'hysterical femininity' is again re-appropriated to feminise and hence Other 'irrational' and 'pathological' Muslim fundamentalism. And so the cycle of relational representation continues.

As this section has illustrated, the discourses employed to construct 'Muslim women' and 'Western women' as oppositional through the colonial and postcolonial periods were always relational and always open to reinvention. 'The anorexic' and 'the veiled

women' in the examples discussed above are (re)produced not through indigenous, culturally-bound discursive systems, but precisely through social and discursive interactions and encounters that reverberate across East/West borders. Such relational representations are not constructed exclusively along a linear plane of gender, but rather through the intersecting axes of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, religion, nation, and culture. Furthermore, the discursive reversal, reconstruction and resignification of 'Western' and 'Eastern Muslim' femininities in these narratives highlight the ways in which 'difference' is produced as a relation *between* bodies, rather than existing as an essential property which can be read off particular bodies (Ahmed, 2000). This is not, of course, to say that embodied particularities do not exist, but rather to highlight the ways in which embodied 'differences' are socially and discursively (re)produced through particular relations of power, and as such, are not innate or natural, as culturally essentialist discourses often imply.

### **Body image, cultural difference and politics**

In the contemporary moment, comparative constructions of 'the anorexic' and 'the veiled woman' have come to the fore. In a post 9/11 social and political context in which depictions of 'downtrodden' veiled Muslim women are wide-spread, contrasting images of the 'anorexic, body-image conscious Western woman' and the 'confident, secure, veiled Muslim woman' are (re)produced, in part, as a means to disrupt the resurgent 'liberated Western woman' and 'oppressed Muslim woman' binary. One significant stand of such comparative cultural discourse is voiced by young Muslim women (many of whom live in Western industrialised countries) in Muslim publications such as websites and magazines. The main argument expressed by such comparisons is that veiling, and the embrace of Islamic values that the practice represents, serves to empower Muslim women and increase their self-esteem by ensuring that they are not affected by the body-related 'cultural pressures' and experiences of disordered eating and body image distress that trouble non-Muslim, Western women.

Contrasting 'Muslim culture' with 'non-Muslim culture' in the realm of body image, for example, Makeda Knight claims that 'Muslim women don't suffer from insecurities about their bodies, because the philosophy and clothing of their culture discourages it' (Dixon, 1999:2). Similarly, Sehmina Jaffer Chopra argues that

The Muslim woman does not feel the pressure to be beautiful or attractive, which is so apparent in the Western and Eastern Cultures... It is very different from the cruel methods that other societies subject women to, in that their worth is always judged by their physical appearance (2002:1).

As opposed to popular representations of veiled 'Muslim women' as restricted and oppressed, Chopra asserts, veiling provides 'liberation from the shackles of male scrutiny and the standards of attractiveness' (2002:1). Moreover, as Sultana Yusufali explains,

The concept of the hijab, contrary to public opinion, is actually one of the most fundamental aspects of female empowerment. When I cover myself, I make it virtually impossible for people to judge me according to the way I look. I cannot be categorized by my attractiveness or lack thereof (2002:1).

She compares this vision of 'Muslim culture' to an image of 'non-Muslim culture' in which women 'are constantly sizing one another up on the basis of our clothing, jewellery, hair and makeup' (1). In her interviews with young Muslim women in Canada, Homa Hoodfar (2003) observed similar perspectives on the part of her respondents: 'They argued that Canadian societies and the Occident as a whole have turned women into sexual objects, their half-naked bodies used to sell everything from toothbrushes to sports cars...women preoccupy themselves with achieving these standards instead of improving their minds and becoming confident and useful members of society' (2003:29). From the perspective of Hoodfar's respondents, the veil, 'even with all its problems, removes women to some degree from these preoccupations. It relieves the emphasis on their bodies, enabling them to participate in public life as people rather than bodies' (29).<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Although, interestingly, other Muslim and Islamist discourses acknowledge that increasing numbers of Muslim women *are* suffering from anorexia and other eating disorders and blame this on the influence of Western culture. See, for example, Leila Ali (2001) 'Anorexia: A Product of Western Ideals?'

If the 'new veiling' is constituted relationally, so too is contemporary anorexia. Within the West, anorexia has long been constructed as a white and middle class (and of course female) 'culture-bound syndrome' (Prince, 1983; Swartz, 1985). As such, 'the anorexic' is constituted against 'other' femininities (as well as masculinities), particularly working class and black, but also Middle Eastern and Muslim. Such raced and classed constructions of anorexia are prevalent within the medical, psychological, sociological and feminist literatures. They may also be produced through dominant clinical approaches to treating anorexia. In her study of a North American anorexia treatment facility, for example, Helen Gremillion argues that within the centre 'anorexia's "typical" clinical presentation is written through and against constructions of identity that appear to deviate from this normative picture' (2003:159). Clinical constructions of 'typical' or 'true' anorexia emerge in this context, in part, through 'clinicians' justifications for excluding from full participation in the program...nonwhite and working-class anorexic patients' (160). Furthermore, through its association in mainstream media with white, affluent celebrities, such as Jane Fonda, Calista Flockhart, Victoria Beckham and Lindsay Lohan, 'anorexia continues to be raced and classed' (Brain, 2006:88). Constructions of anorexia as white and middle class are supported by, and in turn (re)produce, images of the raced and classed 'others', such as the corpulent black Mammy, the poor black welfare mother (Gremillion, 2003:52) and, I would add, the body-confident Muslim woman. These constructed figures are excluded from the category of 'anorexic', and hence form its constitutive outside.

Within young Muslim women's comparative constructions of 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim' femininity, the veil is constructed as a visual symbol conveying Muslim women's honour, piety and Islamic beliefs. By defining themselves against the figure of 'the anorexic' and/or 'the body conscious Western woman', they reappropriate images of Muslim women as secure in their bodies, robust in their eating habits and empowered by their religious and cultural beliefs, while simultaneously discarding images of Muslim women as 'unhealthy' and 'obese'. Confirming these young women's dignity and self-esteem, such comparative constructions also invert Orientalist

representations of veiled Muslim women's hidden sexuality and lasciviousness and emphasise their refusal to be viewed as sexual objects within a patriarchal, Western consumerist culture. Thus, as a particular mode of 'doing' Muslim femininity, the new veiling may be read as a strategic reappropriation of dominant cultural conceptions of 'veiled women' as oppressed and downtrodden and a bringing together of old and new, traditional and modern, in ways which can create productive confusion and dissonance. The gap produced between these young, confident and outspoken Muslim women's 'expected' and 'actual' embodied performances may therefore be seen, from one perspective, as creating space for the resignification of cultural essentialism.

However, as a strategy to disrupt the oppressed Muslim woman/liberated Western woman binary, such counter discourses represent a second step 'reversal', which may risk remaining locked within the binary structure (and hence open to re-reversal). In homogenizing 'Muslim' and 'Western' femininities, they elide social, political, historical and embodied particularities and reify an essentialist 'packaged picture' (Narayan, 1998) of cultural groups in similar ways to some of the historical representations discussed above. Representations of Islamic culture as 'anti-consumerist' against Western culture's rampant 'consumerism' (which is in turn associated with the 'anorexia epidemic'), for example, disavow the various ways in which Islam is mobilised for and intertwined with consumerist discourses and practices in specific contexts. In their analysis of consumption patterns in contemporary Turkish society, Ozlem Sandickei and Gülneş Ger (2001) argue that 'Islam, at least in the context of Turkey, does not seem to oppose consumption or offer an alternative to consumerism' (148). They discuss how, since the 1990s, as wealth among particular sections of the religious population has grown, a bourgeoisie class, 'conservative in values but avant-garde in consumption practices' (148) has emerged, heightening consumer demand for the '200 Islamic fashion companies now competing in an ever-expanding market to serve women who want to look fashionable yet fulfil the requirements of Islam' (146). Similarly, Baris Kilicbay and Mutlu Binark (2002) note the rise of a 'fashion for veiling' in Turkey which 'is inseparable from consumption, commodity, even pleasure patterns, and is stimulated by global and local trends in the

market economy' (499). Such analyses interrogate the notion of an essentialist divide between Islam and consumerism. They also disrupt rigid distinctions between 'Muslim femininity' and concerns regarding fashion, appearance and body image. As consumers of Islamic products such as luxury Islamic hotel resorts, middle and upper class 'turbaned women are seen...doing aerobics or heard talking about dieting' (Sandickci and Ger, 2001:147).

Moreover, it is clear that 'the veil' and other forms of Islamic dress (presented in young Muslim women's discourses as symbols of their empowerment and essential 'difference' from mainstream Western culture) may easily be co-opted by Western/global consumer industry. An article from the fashion section the *International Herald Tribune* (2006) flagging up a trend towards the 'Muslim-ization' of fashion points to this possibility:

Various influences are pushing fashion away from bare-it-all vulgarity... thoughtful designers are putting the change of mood into a different context, as they talk about the "Muslim-ization" of fashion. They are referring both to drawing, deliberately or unconsciously, on a culture of female sobriety. In a world clearly in turmoil, cocooning clothes are a response (Menkes, 2006:11).

This example illustrates how susceptible identity politics which depend on binary reversals are to recuperation back into the very cultural and socio-economic relations of power they seek to counter or distance themselves from. The article also points again to the relational links between 'the anorexic' (this time symbolised through the ubiquitous image of 'the anorexic runway model') and 'the veiled woman'. With the 'Muslim-ization' of fashion, the figures of 'the veiled woman' and 'the anorexic' flow into one another in a capitalist figure of cultural fusion or hybridity.<sup>137</sup> As much as the figures of the 'Western woman' and the 'Muslim woman', 'the anorexic' and 'the veiled woman' are contrasted, differentiated, and held apart, they are never stable or fundamentally fixed but rather always open to reversal, redeployment, or reconstruction in a different guise.

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<sup>137</sup> I would also note the interesting phenomenon of 'Western' fashion designers such as Calvin Klein developing 'haute couture' hijabs.

What is also particularly interesting from the relational perspective I have been developing in this thesis, are the ways in which young Muslim women's comparative counter-discourses rely on and (re)produce a host of 'internal others' which exceed (and may potentially disrupt) the 'Muslim woman'/'Western woman' binary. Sandickci and Ger suggest that in Turkey, urban, middle-class women who wear the turban do not differentiate themselves exclusively from 'Western' women (or 'Westernized', secular Turkish women); 'they equally distance themselves from the traditional Islamic women who wear a headscarf out of habit in rural areas and small towns and from the newly-rich Islamists' (2001:148). These young women, 'reject both the image of covering as a sign of cultural backwardness and as sign of extravagance and flaunting' (148).

Similarly, pointing out how class differences are often glossed over in discourses on veiling which emphasise Muslim women's empowerment, Haideh Moghissi criticises the notion that that veiling fights consumerism and erases class distinctions among Muslim women. She stresses that 'even the material used for the *chador* itself varies considerably, signalling clear differences in class and wealth' (1999:45). From this standpoint, the figure of 'the pious, confident and self-secure veiled woman' is constructed in this context not only through producing 'the anorexic' or 'the body conscious Western woman' as a constitutive outside, but also through differentiation from (and between) multiple other 'others' (re)produced through the intersecting axes of class, religion, ethnicity, politics, culture and sexuality.

## **Conclusions: Relational Interdependencies**

In this chapter, I have attempted to illustrate how a relational approach to theorising the social and discursive production of the figures of the 'veiled woman' and 'the anorexic' might work. Rather than stretching out or collapsing together the binary figures of 'the Western woman' and 'the Muslim woman' as the continuum, analogue and subset models often do, the relational approach allows us to imagine these two figures as interdependent, inseparable and dependent on one another for meaning. Rather than cutting 'the anorexic' and 'the veiled woman' off from their historical, social and discursive trajectories of production, the relational model teases out these processes,

situating them within specific contexts and relations of power such as colonialism, nationalism, racism, patriarchy and capitalism. Moreover, as a way of trying to resist fetishising women from ‘Muslim’ or ‘Western’ cultures as (passive) objects and vehicles for Western knowledge, it emphasises the ways in which women in different geo-political locations actively participate in the processes of discursive construction, relational representation and performative enactment through which particular embodied subjectivities are (re)constituted. Finally, from a relational approach, it cannot be assumed that *all* forms of performativity are inherently subversive. Instead, a relational methodology positions particular parodic modes of discourse within their contexts of production and assesses possibilities, limitations and potential effects within such located frameworks.

In highlighting the ways in which the figures of ‘the Western woman’ and ‘the Muslim woman’ and ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ are always open to reformation and reconstruction, the relational approach deconstructs the ubiquitous ‘liberated Western woman’/ ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ dualism, illustrating the problems with encasing these figures within binary categories. Furthermore, through tracing the production of *other* ‘selves’ and ‘others’ that function both to support and subvert cross-cultural constructions of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’, this approach highlights how the relationships that link various subjects *exceed* both binary and dialectic structures. Pointing to the multiplicity of differently situated figures linked to any one binary construction, the relational embodied approach suggests the image of a *relational web*. In the final chapter I discuss how the ‘web’ provides a useful theoretical model for tracing the constitutive connections among multiple imagined subjects.

## Chapter Six

### Mapping Multiple ‘Selves’ and ‘Others’:

#### Weaving a Relational Web

Bodies-in-time are embodied and embedded entities fully immersed in webs of complex interaction, negotiation and transformation with and through other entities.

*Rosi Braidotti, 2006:154*

The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibilities of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared connections in epistemology.

*Donna Haraway, 1990:191*

The concept of the ‘web’ has become a salient metaphor within contemporary critical theory. From Donna Haraway’s ‘webs of connections’ (1990:191), to Linda Alcoff’s ‘intricate, delicate web...in which others also find themselves moving’ (1995:109), to Gilles Deleuze’s web-like proliferation of binary terms (2004/1968), to Rosi Braidotti’s ‘webs of complex interaction’ (2006:154), the image of the web has been employed increasingly to indicate the necessity of theorising complex interconnections between various discursive-material entities. The web metaphor signifies complexity and multiplicity (rather than linearity, binarism or dialectism) as well as relationality (as opposed to ‘sameness’ or ‘difference’). It also signals the possibility for developing empathetic social connections across cultural and geo-political contexts. In this chapter, I explore how, beyond being a useful metaphor, the relational web provides a productive theoretical approach to mapping the multiple links between particular embodied cultural practices and their imagined subjects.

I began this thesis by identifying some of the problematic effects associated with feminist approaches that rely on establishing similarities between embodied cultural

practices as a means to counter cultural essentialism. I maintained that, in their emphasis on 'commonality' or 'equivalence', the analogue, continuum and subset approaches often either efface crucial embodied, historical and political particularities *or* end up reifying culturally essentialist differences. As such, I argued, none of these approaches offers a satisfactory model for theorising the complex relationships between various gendered cultural practices, nor an effective means of disrupting and resignifying essentialist bodily binaries. My second chapter outlined the critical links between three conceptual areas, intersectionality, relationality and embodiment, that provide useful theoretical tools for developing a critical feminist framework within which to theorise the relationships between various embodied practices more effectively.

In my three substantive case studies, I examined critically some of the ways in which the analogue, continuum and subset models are employed in various feminist (and other critical) literatures. In Chapter Three, I argued that feminist analogue and continuum approaches often privilege gender and sexuality above and beyond other axes of embodied differentiation and hence reproduce problematic linear models of gendered commonality. I also suggested that through employing such comparative models, Western feminist theorists often seek to develop cross-cultural empathy which, while well intentioned, can function troublingly to keep 'Western' privilege intact. In Chapter Four, I argued that when the subset approach is employed either to group together various acts of passing as similarly subversive, or to figure passing as a universal practice common to all subjects, it does not enable rigorous analysis of the political and contextual distinctions between specific practices or the more complex ways in which they may be linked. In order to map and theorise particularities and connections in relation to various acts of passing, I maintained, a relational approach is required. In emphasising the ways in which passing always involves a relationship between a judgement and that which is judged, such a framework moves the focus away from 'practices' with generalised effects and towards analysis of embodied encounters and relations of temporal and spatial proximity within particular historical contexts. Chapter Five sought to build on this concept of relationality. I illustrated how we might

genealogically trace the relational constitution of ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ to tease out the ways in which they are discursively and socially entangled. I argued that this relational embodied approach provides a means of disrupting culturally essentialist constructions of embodied cultural practices by highlighting the ways in which ‘embodied difference’ is (re)produced by relations *between* various figures.

The key argument in this final chapter is that in order to move through discursive disruption and towards radical resignification, we need to theorise relationality *beyond* the self-other dialectic. This is possible through imagining each pair of mutually constructed cultural figures or practices as part of a larger representational economy. In other words, we need to theorise a *relational web* of multiple ‘selves’ and ‘others’. In what follows, I draw on and extend various ideas that have been percolating in some of the critical literatures from which my project arises in order to propose a viable alternative to the analogue, continuum and subset approaches. In the first section, I employ examples from my case studies to illustrate how we might begin to build relational webs that map complex, intersectional relations among numerous, differently situated imagined subjects. I suggest that the web model offers a framework for theorising particularity and connection as well as disruption and resignification. In the second section, I discuss some of the theoretical and political groundings and effects associated with a relational web approach, focusing on the concepts of location, cultural translation and empathy. I also situate the web model in respect to relevant contemporary discourses pertaining to ‘the human’, emphasising its focus on constitutive connection, as opposed to fundamental commonality.

## **Web Weaving**

The first step in constructing a relational web involves a genealogical tracing of the relational construction of a particular unit of embodied cultural practices. As illustrated in Chapter Five with the example of the relationship between ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’, this tracing process involves interrogating various points of comparison which make up a particular cultural binary (or, in this case, the revision or flattening out

of an original binary)<sup>138</sup> and showing how specific cultural and embodied ‘differences’ and ‘similarities’ are constituted relationally. I examined how ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ have been historically (re)produced through particular moments of relational representation, embodied encounter and performative enactment. While anorexia and veiling remain divergent embodied cultural practices, my genealogical tracing revealed how the political and social trajectories of their production (and that of their imagined subjects) are imbricated in complex ways.

We could conduct a similar genealogical tracing of the relational construction of ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’ and ‘the victim of female genital mutilation’. We might start by investigating the historical construction of ‘black’ and ‘white’ as morally and aesthetically invested ‘opposites’.<sup>139</sup> We could examine how, through such racialised constructions, particular notions of gender, sexuality and nation have been mobilised to mark the black African female body as abnormal, grotesque, diseased, libidinous and overly-sexualised *against* constructions of white, Western femininity as ideal, classical, pure, uncontaminated, virtuous and chaste (Carby, 1987; Roberts, 1994; Hall, 1995; Morgan, 2005; Stoler, 1995, 1997; Ahmed, 2002). We might then investigate how such divergent constructions of ‘black African’ and ‘white Western’ femininity and sexuality were both reified *and* disrupted by colonialist discourses which established African female genital mutilation as a backward, patriarchal cultural practice requiring eradication: Some scientific documents and travel logs depicted African women’s ‘overdeveloped genitalia’ and ‘heightened sexual instincts’ (in comparison with white, European women) as a legitimate ‘rationale’ for FGC,<sup>140</sup> thus reifying constructions of

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<sup>138</sup> The anorexia-veiling unit is in fact already one step removed from the original binary which impelled it, representing a theoretical revisioning - an attempt to see the two figures as analogous - of the long-standing ‘liberated Western woman’/‘oppressed Muslim woman’ dualism.

<sup>139</sup> This is a long trajectory which ranges from the traditional associations of ‘blackness’ with death and sin in Christian symbolism, to the juxtaposition of black and white bodies in art, literature and travel narratives, to the institutionalisation of hierarchical constructions of black and white femininity in ‘The Great Chain of Being’, to the racialised gender roles enshrined in the ‘cult of true womanhood’, to contemporary representations of black and white women’s bodies in popular cultural discourses.

<sup>140</sup> For example, David Gollaher describes how students of African cultures in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries concluded that ‘the operation was performed only to lessen the extraordinarily active sexual instinct of women among the African tribes... or because so many African women had unusually large clitoral or labial bulges’ (2000:196). From this perspective, it was because African women’s bodies

black African women's 'abnormal' sexuality and/or their *over-sexualised* 'nature'. Other discourses, however, such as those produced by missionaries and colonial officials, constructed African women as the downtrodden and *de-sexualised* victims of barbaric traditional practices which had to be put to an end, ideally through native Africans' exposure to the more modern, enlightened and humane ways of their colonisers (Boyle, 2002; Njambi, 2004).

We could, furthermore, consider how, while critical in drawing international attention to FGC, Western feminist efforts to eradicate such practices in the 1970s and 1980s extended colonial representations of African women as oppressed 'victims' (see for example, Daly, 1978; Hosken, 1981). They also galvanized a fundamental shift from images of 'African women' as stereotypically over-sexualised to constructions of African women as essentially de-sexualised.<sup>141</sup> In this context, images of 'African women' as helpless, mutilated and 'robbed of their sexuality' were, in part, necessary to reciprocally constitute Western feminists as their potential saviours. Indigenous and diasporic African, Middle Eastern and Asian women's campaigns against practices of FGC have been longstanding within a number of different national and cultural contexts.<sup>142</sup> Often more attuned to the local specificities of particular forms of FGC than some Western feminist critics, such discourses have, in many cases, produced less homogenising and ethnocentric depictions of FGC and the communities which practice such procedures, including more complex representations of women's sexuality (see, for example, Toubia, 1988). However, such initiatives have not obtained anywhere near

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were 'abnormal' and their sexual instincts 'overdeveloped' that FGC was 'necessary' as a corrective and repressive method.

<sup>141</sup> African opponents to FGC (in its various forms) had been present for some time before second wave feminist campaigns (Boyle, 2002:45). In 1960, at the United Nations seminar on the participation of women in public life, held in Addis Ababa, African delegates called upon WHO to undertake a study of the medical aspects of FGC (Kouba and Muasher, 1985:106). However, it was not until the better financed and institutionally supported Western feminist campaigns of the 1980s that international awareness of the practice and substantive support from WHO to eradicate it were achieved (Boyle, 2002).

<sup>142</sup> Campaigns and programmes directed at eradicating or reducing the health risks associated with FGC have been led by numerous groups including, Women Living Under Muslim Law, the International African Congress, Union Nationale des Femmes de Djibouti, the Somali Democratic Women's Organization, Le Mouvement Femmes et Soci t  (Senegal), Union Nationale des Femmes du Mali, the Babiker Bedri Foundation for Women's Studies and Research (Sudan), the Association of African Women in Research and Development, the Women's Group Against Sexual Mutilations (France), and RAINBO (UK) (Kouba and Muasher, 1985; Gunning, 1991; Obiora, 2000; Meyers, 2000).

the level of financial and institutional support, nor the media airplay, that Western-based programmes have. As such, their potentially more nuanced and contextualised portrayals have not infiltrated public consciousness (in the West) to the same degree as the ‘attention-grabbing horror stories’ produced by Western media and ‘generalised theories of patriarchal domination’ offered by early (and some later) feminist critics (Meyers, 2000:471).

Interestingly, where African and Arab women’s engagements with FGC may have informed the FGC/cosmetic surgery binary more significantly is in reinforcing an image of the ‘consumerist Western woman’ as a highly sexualised subject. In an article (published in a collection of papers from the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association Conference) comparing the health risks facing Sudanese women with those encountered by Western women, for instance, Nahid Toubia (1988) portrays women in the capitalist and ‘consumerist’ West as constantly being made to fill the role of ‘seductress’ and to ‘see themselves as objects of pleasure’ (99). The contemporary Euro-American FGC/cosmetic surgery binary now depicts the African ‘victim of female genital mutilation’ as wholly unsexualised *against* constructions of the Western ‘cosmetic surgery consumer’ as actively choosing to increase her sexual desirability and pleasure through procedures such as labiaplasty or breast augmentation. However, traces of the historic sexualisation and fetishisation of the black African female body lurk beneath this veneer and are revealed, for example, through Westerners’ often voyeuristic and prurient interest in images of circumcised girls and women. Wackuka Mungai argues, for example, that ‘there is a heated and eerily prurient interest expressed over the Web in accessing documentary photos of girls and women who have undergone clitoridectomies, excisions, and infibulations’ (Mungai cited in Weil Davis, 2002:19).<sup>143</sup>

We might pay careful attention to how, through various colonialist, indigenous nationalist and feminist discourses relating to practices of ‘female genital cutting’ within particular African and Middle Eastern contexts, ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ are made

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<sup>143</sup> In a CNN news programme aired in 1994, for example, a young Egyptian girl’s circumcised genitalia were displayed on video for ten minutes (Dawit, 1994, cited in Njambi, 2004:285, see also Boyle, 2002).

to *stick* to ‘black’ female bodies rather than (or in different ways than they are to) ‘white’ female bodies (Narayan, 1997, 1998; Volpp, 2000; Walley, 2002). Returning to the example discussed in Chapter Three, we could ask how cosmetic surgery comes to be appropriated (through, for example, the exportation of early Indian surgical techniques) and constructed as belonging to the ‘modern’ West precisely through colonial models of racial and cultural ‘othering’ (Gilman, 1999b; Sullivan, 2001). We could also map the ways in which ‘white Euro-American women’ have been constituted as the subjects, consumers or beneficiaries of science and technology through relational historical processes which constructed black African and African descended women as the objects of scientific investigation and technological development. Here we might consider the nineteenth century European exhibitions of Saartje Baartman, ‘the Hottentot Venus’ (Gilman, 1992), the US gynaecologist J. Marion Sim’s surgical experiments on slave women in the antebellum American South (Barker-Benfield, 1975) and the use of poor ‘Third world women’ as guinea pigs for the testing of experimental (and unsafe) contraceptives. Pursuing each of these avenues for relational tracing (among the many others that may be relevant) would enable us to gain a much more complex, intersectional and historically anchored understanding of the ways in which the contemporary figures of ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’ and ‘the victim of female genital mutilation’ have been mutually (re)produced.

Rather than stretching out the binary figures (A and not-A) like the continuum approach, or collapsing them like the analogue and subset models, this relational approach allows us to imagine the two imagined subjects as conceptually and materially intertwined.<sup>144</sup> The transition from binary structure to relational connection which this tracing process achieves might be depicted as follows:

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<sup>144</sup> We might think about the relationship between the two figures in each relational unit as akin to Elisabeth’s Grosz’s (1994:xxi) notion of the Möbius strip - an inverted three-dimensional figure eight: **8**. She employs this image to represent the necessary interdependence of psychological interiority and corporeal exteriority, thus upsetting the traditional philosophical mind/body dualism by depicting the relational existence of mind and body.

A/not-A (binary)

O/O

?

A-not-A (relational)

O? O

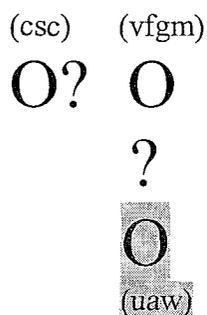
Through tracing the ways in which the ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’ and ‘the victim of female genital mutilation’ have been constructed in and through one another within particular relations of power, we can illustrate how each is implicated with and dependent on the other for meaning. From this relational perspective it is possible neither to *separate* the two figures through the imposition of rigid boundaries nor to *collapse* one into the other because they remain constitutively intermeshed. It should be noted that this tracing process does not (and cannot) do away with the binary all together. Binaries, after all, are not just about separation, but also about *hierarchical connection*. Yet binaries operate precisely by *concealing* the relationship of interdependence between their A and not-A terms. Thus, illustrating how the A and not-A figures have been constituted relationally functions to *dismantle* the binary that holds them apart by *exposing* its mechanics and its historical trajectories of production and thus disrupting the power it commands. Importantly, a relational approach also avoids binary reversals, which I have argued represent a problematic (and often paralysing) ‘second step’ in many deconstructive strategies.

### **Linking numerous imagined subjects**

This first stage of relational tracing (while crucial) is not, however, sufficient to radically resignify the categories of self and other in this structure. Clearly, ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’ and ‘the victim of female genital mutilation’ cannot be seen as insulated from all other embodied constructions and historical and cultural traces. They are not related *only* to each other and constructed *exclusively* through each

other, but rather, as the relational tracing in Chapter Five illustrated, they are historically, subjectively and materially linked to a host of other embodied ‘selves’ and ‘others’ (Ahmed, 2000). As such, we need means of representing and theorising relationality in such contexts as *complex* and *multiple*. If we widen our field of analysis and imagine the binary in question as existing within a relational *web* of other binary relations we can think about resignification from an ontological starting point of multiplicity. Within such a web, ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ or ‘the victim of female genital mutilation’ and ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’ would be situated as simultaneously linked to numerous other imagined subjects or figures. Tracing some of the multiple links structuring such a relational web may therefore allow us to begin developing a relational approach to resignification that enables us to theorise relationality *beyond* the binary self/other dialectic, yet without effacing the relations of power that particular binaries produce and secure or disavowing the power of such binaries to endure.

Let me try to show how we might begin to weave such a relational web, starting with the example of the binary relation of ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’ and ‘the victim of female genital mutilation’. If we take this relational unit, in which ‘A’ is the ‘cosmetic surgery consumer’ (csc) and ‘not-A’ is the ‘victim of female genital mutilation’ (vfgm), what happens if we think about other imagined subjects which might be relationally linked to each of our original ‘A’ and ‘not-A’ figures? Suppose that we draw a relational link joining the ‘victim of female genital mutilation’ to, for instance, the figure of the ‘uncircumcised African woman’ (uaw) as depicted below:



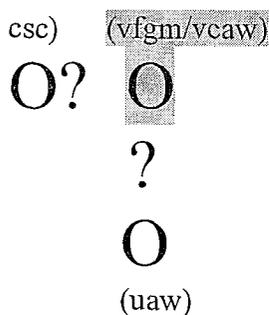
How does adding the imagined ‘uncircumcised African women’ (uaw) to the existing relational unit *alter* our relational web? In order to address this question, we need to begin tracing the relational connections between ‘the victim of female genital mutilation’ and ‘the uncircumcised African woman’ in much the same way that we interrogated the relational construction of ‘the victim of female genital mutilation’ and ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’.

To start, we might acknowledge, as some feminist theorists who employ continuum and analogue approaches in this context do, that in some communities which practice FGC, the genital cutting or circumcision ritual is understood as a mark of virtue, cleanliness and/or proper femininity. As Rogaiya Mustafa Abusharaf points out, ‘the Arabic term for circumcision, *tahara*, also means purification’ (2001:116). As such, negative attitudes may be exhibited towards uncircumcised girls and women in various African and Arab circumcising contexts. In her study of a circumcising community in Douroshab township in Sudan, for example, Abusharaf shows how many of the women she interviews understand FGC as a ‘virtuous act’ which morally, aesthetically and ethnically delineates those who have undergone the procedure from those who have not. Drawing on the responses of three women, she explains how within this Sudanese context, ‘circumcised’ and ‘uncircumcised’ women are constructed relationally:

To Saadia, Aziza, and Zakia, circumcision is important because it gives voice to gender and collective ethnic identity, serving to distinguish the border between themselves as pure *taharat* and others as polluted *nijسات* women. The politics of conformity go beyond keeping clean; they have to do with one’s character, sociality, and personal and collective identity (*italics in original*) (127).

From this perspective, we can begin to see how posing the ‘uncircumcised African woman’ in relation to the ‘victim of female genital mutilation’ alters the presumed character of the latter. In this particular relation, the ‘victim of female genital mutilation’ is no longer seen primarily as a victim of patriarchal ideologies or barbaric cultural rituals, but rather becomes a ‘virtuous circumcised African woman’ (vcaw) who is defined hierarchically *against* ‘the uncircumcised African woman’. Whereas in relation to the ‘cosmetic surgery consumer’, the ‘victim of female genital mutilation’

was ‘other’ (the ‘not-A’ term), in her new position as ‘virtuous circumcised African woman’ she becomes the ‘self’ (the ‘A’ term). One’s perspective within the relational web at this point becomes crucial. In the context of this new three-point linking, the status of vfgm/vcaw (the term highlighted in the diagram below) *changes* in relation to whether one is interpreting the relationship from the perspective point of csc or from uaw. Furthermore, as I address later in this chapter, one’s own social, cultural and political location and perspective will shape how one constructs and views such a relational web.



As such, vfgm/vcaw cannot be interpreted as *either self or other, A or not-A*. She is in fact both and/or neither. Consequently, neither the original relation nor the new one can be understood solely in terms of a binary model. They must instead be seen as fluid links within a web of multiple relationalities.

As part of the process of tracing the relational construction of this new link between the ‘virtuous circumcised African woman’ and ‘uncircumcised African woman’, we need to pay careful attention to the ways in which particular ideas about gender and sexuality have been socially and discursively (re)produced through the construction of particular notions of virtue, cleanliness and femininity. Through which gendered social, cultural and/or religious processes has FGC been constructed as ‘virtuous’ within particular circumcising communities? Furthermore, how might such processes be linked, not only to gendered relations of power, but also to histories of slavery and/or to Western colonialism and concomitant indigenous nationalist movements of opposition to

colonial rule, in which gender and sexuality have intersected with race, ethnicity and nation?

Moving on, we can continue thinking about how the nature of the relational web would change again if we added another imagined figure, for example, ‘the cosmetic surgery rebel’ (csr), this time linked to ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’, csc.

(csr)

O

?

(csc) (vfgm/vcaw)

O? O

?

O

(uaw)

While cosmetic surgery has largely been interpreted by feminist commentators as an ‘oppressive technology’ employed to ‘colonize’ women’s bodies (Negrin, 2002:21), some feminist theorists have advocated the use of cosmetic surgery for ‘subversive’ feminist purposes. Kathryn Pauly Morgan argues, for example, that ‘healthy women who have a feminist understanding of cosmetic surgery are in a situation to deploy cosmetic surgery in the name of its feminist potential for parody and protest’ (2003/1991:179). She suggests that women ‘might constitute themselves as culturally liberated subjects through public participation in Ms. Ugly Canada/ America/ Universe/ Cosmos pageants *and use the technology of cosmetic surgery to do so*’ (italics in original) (179). The French performance artist Orlan has enacted such radical experiments with cosmetic procedures. Her performative project, ‘The Ultimate Masterpiece: The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan’, initiated in 1991, has involved a series of televised surgical procedures ‘designed to transform her face in ways that destabiliz[e] male defined notions of idealized female beauty’ (Negrin, 2002:31).

Through this consciously political endeavour, she ‘seeks to disturb the notion of the perfected, the fixed and the standardized, producing a result which is at odds with conventional ideals of beauty’ (32). In Orlan’s own words, she is ‘not trying to conform, but refusing conformity’ (Orlan cited in Featherstone, 2000:160). Thus, in contrast to the constructed figure of the ‘cosmetic surgery consumer’ who actively pursues cosmetic surgery as a means to achieve cultural ideals of feminine beauty and sexual desirability, the imagined ‘cosmetic surgery rebel’ undergoes such procedures precisely to resist and destabilise such ideals.<sup>145</sup>

As with the previous example, the addition of this new relational strand to the web will function to transform the assumed character of ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’. Through her relational linking with ‘the cosmetic surgery rebel’, the ‘cosmetic surgery consumer’ may now be interpreted, rather differently, as ‘the cosmetic surgery victim.’

(csr)

O

?

(csc/csv) (vfgm/vcaw)

O? O

?

O

(uaw)

When connected in binary relation to the oppressed and downtrodden ‘victim of female genital mutilation’, the ‘cosmetic surgery consumer’ could be constituted as liberated and self-determining, making her own ‘free’ choice to engage in cosmetic procedures. However, once linked to ‘the cosmetic surgery rebel’, the consumer’s choices are no longer seen as free, but instead as reductively shaped by dominant cultural imperatives.

<sup>145</sup> ‘The Ultimate Masterpiece: The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan’ was completed in 1996, yet Orlan’s other artistic, performative and theoretical work in this area remains ongoing ([www.orlan.net](http://www.orlan.net)).

Rather than being defined as autonomous and empowered, 'the cosmetic surgery victim' becomes the interpellated *object* of patriarchal, consumerist ideologies, the woman persuaded by 'the beauty myth' (Wolf, 1990), or even, the obsessive 'scalpel slave' (Balsamo, 1996:70). Thus, through the construction of the 'cosmetic surgery rebel' as subversive, the 'cosmetic surgery victim' is (re)constituted as conformist.

It is important to interrogate the various intersectional and relational processes through which this subversive/conformist binary is produced and secured. The 'cosmetic surgery rebel' and 'the cosmetic surgery victim' can be posed as oppositional through a largely gendered narrative (through her parodic performance of femininity, the 'rebel' actively resists oppressive patriarchal ideals of beauty, whilst the 'victim' more passively embraces and embodies such norms). We need to explore however, how this particular gendered narrative might also be produced, for example, through various raced and classed relations of power. Is 'the rebel's' capacity for subversion via surgical measures secured precisely through her class and race privileges? As other critical theorists have argued, performative or parodic experimentation with cosmetic surgery is not a strategy that is equally available to all subjects (Bordo, 1993; Skeggs, 1997; Ahmed, 1999). Llewellyn Negrin points out, for example, that 'it is only those who already have a secure sense of their own identity who can afford to entertain the possibilities of its dissolution' (2002:38). Drawing on Susan Bordo's analysis (1993), she argues that radical cosmetic surgery 'is a rather "aristocratic" form of revolt, which can only be engaged in by those who have the freedom from economic need to be able to contemplate and realize different forms of embodiment' (39). Christian Klesse suggests furthermore that 'racialized bodies' cannot be 'reconstituted and made into a project' as easily as other bodies as 'there is always a problem of visibility and passing in which the incorporated histories of bodies weighs down the potential for action' (2000:21).

In this vein, we might want to consider how the inclusion of an imagined 'ethnic minority cosmetic surgery patient' (Kaw, 2003), linked either to the 'cosmetic surgery rebel' or 'the cosmetic surgery consumer' would further transform the relational

dynamics of our web model. As discussed in Chapter Four, it has been argued that ethnic or racial minorities ‘generally have less discursive space than their white counterparts for justifying their decisions to have cosmetic surgery’ (Davis, 2003a:75). As Kathy Davis suggests, while surgery (perceived as being undertaken) to alter ‘racial or ethnic features’ elicits ‘surprise and disapproval’, procedures to enhance femininity ‘may seem so ordinary that they have become – more or less – acceptable’ (2003a:75). Moreover, Balsamo notes that many cosmetic surgeons, ‘mindful of keloid formation and hyperpigmented scarring, routinely reject black patients’ (Vaughn cited in Balsamo, 1996:61). To what extent, then, does the inclusion of the ‘ethnic minority cosmetic surgery patient’ bring into relief the assumptions of whiteness through which both the ‘cosmetic surgery rebel’ and the ‘cosmetic surgery consumer’ are constituted?

We might also enquire into the effects of adding ‘the male cosmetic surgery consumer’ to our relational web. How, for example, is the (female) ‘cosmetic surgery consumer’ defined in part *through* the imagined ‘male cosmetic surgery consumer’ via the (re)production of traditional gender roles? Balsamo argues that the ‘cultural meaning’ of women’s and men’s ‘gendered bodies already determines the discursive rationale they can evoke to explain bodily practices’ (1996:69). As ‘their “essential” natures are defined differently, men must construct elaborate justifications for decisions for plastic surgery’ (69). Such processes can in turn function to (re)produce rigid gendered identities that become materially expressed in particular ways. We could also ask how the addition of the ‘transgender’ or the ‘transsexual’ cosmetic surgery consumer might further alter the web, and so forth. As I have tried to indicate, there are many different relational avenues we could pursue in building our web and we could continue adding relational links until we felt that we had a picture sufficiently complex and multiple.

O? O O  
 ? ? ?  
 O? O? O? O  
 ? ?  
 O O? O

Once fleshed out, what this particular relational web would illustrate most potently is that the ‘victim of female genital cutting’/ ‘cosmetic surgery consumer’ binary represents *only one* constructed link in a much larger representational system, hence disrupting the insulated or dualistic framework that makes a more basic relational approach insufficient. As a theoretical model, the relational web shows that, within any particular embodied cultural binary, the ‘self’ is only the ‘self’, and the ‘other’ is only the ‘other’, from one particular nodal point within the web – as your point on the web (and hence your perspective) changes, so do the hierarchical categories (the relation is produced through one’s perspective), and as such, they resist being fixed.

We could also apply this web model to theorise the ‘the anorexic’/‘veiled woman’ pair within a wider relational framework. In Chapter Five, I illustrated how the fluid self/other relationship between ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’ has been historically mediated through the construction of various other imagined figures, including ‘the Arab Muslim woman’, ‘the black Muslim woman’, ‘the hysteric’, ‘the working class Victorian woman’, the ‘non-heterosexual Victorian woman’, the contemporary ‘porno-chic girl’, the ‘fashion-conscious Muslim girl’ and the ‘pious Muslim girl’. Continuing the project initiated in that case study, it would be productive to map the multiple histories of relational construction binding each of these other ‘selves’ and ‘others’ to ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the veiled woman’. How is the ‘liberated and self-determining Western woman’ constructed against ‘the oppressed and downtrodden Muslim woman’? How is ‘the anorexic’ defined both through her presumed opposition to ‘the liberated and self-determining Western woman’ and her

similarity to ‘the veiled woman’ and ‘the hysteric’? How is the figure of ‘the hysteric’ (produced at the intersection of gender, sexuality and race), constructed through the othering of both ‘the middle-class Victorian woman’ and ‘the radical Muslim’? How, through the articulation of sexuality, gender, religion and class, is ‘the pious Muslim woman’ defined against ‘the anorexic’ and ‘the fashion-conscious Muslim girl’? How does the addition of each new relational link alter the presumed character of the original relational unit, disrupting its self/other dialectic and the notion of essentialist categories of embodied identity?

In relation to practices of passing discussed in Chapter Four, we might employ a version of the web model to trace some of the ‘peripformative’ (Sedgwick, 2003) historical, social and political relationships among different passing practices grouped together within a specific performative subset. How, for example, does the historical construction of ‘race passing’ differ from that of ‘gender passing’ in the American context and how do such histories intersect? How were the figures of ‘the mulatto’ and ‘the invert’ produced relationally within sexological frameworks and later in psychological discourses in the nineteenth century? (Somerville, 2000:32). How are such historical relational constructions related to the contemporary production of imagined ‘passers’ such as ‘the transgender subject’ and ‘the mixed race subject’? Moreover, how are ‘transgender’ and ‘mixed race’ figures constructed as subversive and transgressive precisely through the production of other figures, such as ‘the transsexual’ or ‘the ethnic minority cosmetic surgery consumer’, as conservative and conforming? (Prosser, 1998; Hemmings, 2002; Halberstam, 2005). On a micro-level, a web approach also enables us to map the embodied relations between various subjects that converge to produce a particular act of passing within a specific context. How do context and embodied specificity condition the potential effects that various passing encounters may produce? Within both the ‘macro’ and the ‘micro’ incarnations, the web model provides a framework for interrogating the historical processes through which particular ‘fetishised figures’ have been constructed and reified, rather than simply taking the nature of such figures for granted.

### Theorising particularity, connection and disruption

What does the web model offer to a critical feminist project of theorising cultural formations and binaries? Providing an alternative to the analogue, continuum and subset approaches, the relational web enables theorisation of particularity as well as connection. As such, it moves us away from the reification of essentialist embodied and/or cultural differences *and* the flattening or effacing of important specificities. It provides a theoretical framework through which the production of salient gendered cultural figures and practices can be genealogically traced with an emphasis on intersectional, historical and contextual relations of power.

The concept of particularity is useful in this context because it departs from a colonialist 'difference from' register which posits hegemonic axes such as 'the West', 'whiteness', and 'heterosexuality' as norms against which subordinate entities and embodiments reveal their 'difference'. In this sense, particularity does not 'belong' to the minoritized 'other', but rather represents the specific intersection of multiple social and embodied axes through which each particular subject, practice or figure is constituted. Mapping the complex discursive-material processes through which various cultural practices or figures have been produced enables the development of a more fully-dimensional and historically-grounded view of embodied cultural practices than most analogue, continuum and subset approaches offer. Being attuned to the particularities of various practices is critical in preventing essentialist, ethnocentric and homogenising constructions. It may also aid comprehension of the complex reasons why particular forms of specific practices perpetuate in certain contexts (and not others). Furthermore, it could help determine whether intervention is necessary or appropriate in respect to a specific practice in a particular context, and if so, which kinds of *localised* interventions may be more effective than others.

Crucially, in conjunction with theorising particularity, the web approach also maps the constitutive connections between various practices or figures. Connection is a productive conceptual tool because, unlike commonality, it does not imply the

‘similarity’ or ‘equivalence’ of various experiences, practices or subjects. Instead, it points to the ways in which such entities are constitutively linked, and as such, does not disavow the possibility of common ground. Connection underscores the ways in which processes of social and cultural differentiation and the production of embodied particularities are always relational, rather than bounded or discrete. The web approach acknowledges that the discursive-material links between various practices or figures are *relationships of power* which may function as modes of ‘othering’ and exclusion. Yet, as I discuss in the second part of this chapter, it also suggests that such constitutive links represent relationships of mutuality which hold the potential for the development of transformative social links and interactions between differently located subjects. As such, it negotiates an important path between ‘assimilating difference into identity’ and ‘making difference into an unthinking fetish of alterity’ (Butler, 1995:140). Moreover, in illustrating that ‘there is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which my words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experiences of others’ (Alcoff, 1995:108), the web model provides the basis for thinking (beyond the self/other dialectic) about multiple interdependencies between a range of differently located (and shifting) subjects. Rather than seeking exclusively to ‘acknowledge a responsibility toward the trace of the other’ (Spivak, 1999:198-99) (where both self and other are imagined as singular, fixed entities) the web model suggests the necessity to account for a wider network of subject positions in which one is implicated sometimes as a ‘self’, sometimes as an ‘other’, and perhaps other times as neither or both – yet always within specific structural relations of power.

Through the process of genealogically tracing particularities and connections, the web model also offers the possibility of disrupting and resignifying essentialist binaries and identity categories. It acknowledges that embodied identity categories are not pre-given or fixed, but are rather the product of particular histories of discursive and embodied construction and, as such, retain the potential to be radically reconstructed. Indeed, within the network of dynamic, relational links that the web model constructs, there is ‘no way to “be” simultaneously in all, or wholly in any, of the privileged (subjugated) positions structured by gender, race, nation and class’ (Haraway, 1990:193). Moreover,

as suggested above, within the relational web, the binary categories of ‘self’ and ‘other’ are shown to be unstable and untenable. I am aware that a reader might argue that the web model’s emphasis on examining the production of essentialised figures (such as ‘the victim of female genital mutilation’ or ‘the anorexic’) may function to reify or re-fetishise such stereotypical constructions. The *process* of this relational approach, however, is geared precisely towards illuminating and unravelling the discursive-material *construction* of these figures and interrogating the historical and political processes of their relational constitution. Indeed, its persistent focus on *contextual* relationality produces a shift *away* from thinking of set ‘figures’ and ‘practices’ and towards contemplating the relationships produced in and through particular encounters within specific contexts.

Despite the ways in which the web model departs from the other comparative approaches I have critiqued, it should not be seen as completely divorced from these, but rather as a partial extension and (re)development of some of their more effective and productive elements. As Sara Ahmed (2004b) usefully points out, ‘the work of critique does not mean the transcendence of the object of our critique; indeed, critique *might even be dependent on non-transcendence*’ (italics in original) (11). For example, tracing a relational web may include theorising specific cultural analogues or similarities between practices or figures within particular contexts. The point is, however, that the establishment of such analogues does not represent the *end-point* of the web approach, but rather one integrated component of a larger genealogical process. On the whole, the relational web is a way of bringing together and potentially moving in a different direction various contemporary critical ideas relating to gender, cultural difference, relationality, anti-essentialism, intersectionality, embodiment and location. In the next section, I engage with such relevant literatures to consider the political and ethical groundings, effects and possibilities of the relational web model. This discussion enables me to return to some of the key critical themes, questions and debates raised in the preceding chapters of the thesis.

## Political and Ethical Groundings, Effects and Possibilities

As I have sketched it above, the relational web model may (at this stage) seem rather abstract, overwhelming or impractical. It is therefore important to address some of the questions and concerns that might be raised in relation to a web approach and to discuss in further depth some of its potential theoretical outcomes and practical possibilities as well as its limitations. To start, I want to underscore that, while the web model suggests a particular understanding of the embodied subject, it is not designed to trace complex processes of subject constitution. Moreover, the web approach is not presented as an all encompassing framework which will be universally applicable, but rather an approach which may provide an effective means of tracing the discursive-material production of particular salient cultural binaries in specific contexts. It does not claim to represent any practice or figure 'fully' or to provide a 'comprehensive' analysis of the infinite social and discursive traces which could be mapped in relation to any particular cultural formation. Rather, the web approach seeks to identify and interrogate some of the points at which the discursive trajectories of particular cultural practices or figures cross-over and to theorise some of the potential effects of those articulations.

Historical analysis is central to the web model in this respect. One might therefore ask whether I am advocating *historicising* as 'the answer' to the problem of cultural (and other linked) essentialisms. One of my key critiques of the analogue, continuum and subset models is that, in focusing on commonality, equivalence or universality, they often fall into a rather a-historical mode that elides the historical processes through which practices have developed and gained meaning in specific contexts. Within a relational framework, historical tracing provides an important means of addressing this problem. It focuses on the critical links between how practices are understood, represented and experienced in contemporary contexts and their discursive trajectories of production. However, historicising on its own is not sufficient to address the various problematic effects associated with commonality-based cross-cultural approaches. As I have argued, relational, historical analysis needs to be specifically genealogical. The object is not to uncover the 'hidden truth' of particular forms of cultural practice, but to

trace some of the processes through which specific cultural constructions and binaries have come to be understood as 'natural'. Furthermore, effective analyses of the relational constitution of salient cultural practices or figures need to map complex intersections between various axes of embodied differentiation, without taking these categories as fixed. Another question that might be asked in respect to the web model is whether *all* relational analyses need to historicise. In other words, must we all become historians? Within the web approach, historical grounding remains crucial to avoid cutting particular cultural figures (i.e. 'the veiled woman' or 'the cosmetic surgery consumer') off from 'the social and material relations which over-determine their existence' (Ahmed, 2000:5). Yet historical tracing may not be central to every relational analysis. For example, in some contexts, examining the spatial proximity of particular cultural formations (i.e. 'race passing' and 'gender passing') may be more appropriate or useful. In short, historical analysis is one among a number of important components of the relational web model. It may take more or less prominence depending on the practices or figures being traced and the approach taken by the individual tracer.

### **Location, empathy and 'generous' encounters**

From the perspective of 'mainstream' social science, the relational web approach that I advocate would probably not be defined as either 'scientific' or 'objective'. There are no set rules governing the web weaving process, such as which binary to start with, which imagined figures to add, how precisely to map the relational links among particular figures, or when to stop adding links and declare any particular web 'sufficiently complex'. The idea, however, is to start with a particularly contentious or problematic binary or unit of cultural figures or practices and weave in additional figures or practices which are salient within relevant literatures and/or mainstream discourses. Of course, embodied cultural practices or figures do not always have to be examined in pairs (or webs). Yet if the objective is to disrupt culturally essentialist, racist or ethnocentric representations of a particular practice or figure, identifying the relational processes through which that practice or figure has been constituted is crucial

and likely to lead to examining other practices and figures. Fundamentally, decisions about how to proceed in weaving any particular relational web will always be in the hands of the individual tracer(s), and, as such, will be subjective (shaped by individual social location and political perspective). Differently situated tracers will inevitably produce different relational webs.

The web model's lack of normative objectivity need not, however, be interpreted as a fault or disadvantage. Rather, following the legacy of feminist writing on 'the politics of location',<sup>146</sup> it could be seen as an opportunity to reflect critically on the links among location, embodiment, power and knowledge within cross-cultural and transnational feminist theory projects. In this vein, it is important to try to account for the ways in which the decisions one makes in constructing any particular relational web are shaped by one's specific social location. I have tried throughout this thesis to think critically about how my desires to choose certain paths, to develop specific arguments and to make particular connections have been influenced by my own located perspective. For example, the embodied practices which have been culturally salient to me as a feminist student living and working in the UK (such as 'veiling', 'female genital cutting', 'anorexia', 'cosmetic surgery' and 'passing') and which I have opted to trace, are shaped by both my feminist lens and the multicultural Western context in which I am operating. Being an English speaker working in a London-based university has also, to a great extent, determined the types of historical and contemporary texts I have had access to and drawn on in my genealogical tracings. Moreover, my academic training has been primarily in poststructuralist and postcolonialist feminist methodologies and this has influenced my focus on discursive construction and the legacies of slavery, colonialism and imperialism in the (re)production of particular embodied practices and imagined figures. All of these factors play into the type of relational web I will produce in respect to any particular cultural formations and thus need to be assessed reflexively.

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<sup>146</sup> See Rich, 1986; Spivak, 1988; Haraway, 1990; Hill Collins, 1990; Frankenberg and Mani, 1993; Braidotti, 1994, 2002, 2006; Diprose, 1994; Kaplan 1994; Alcoff, 1995; and Brah, 2003.

While acknowledging the potential effects of my particular location on the type of web I may produce is a crucial step, it is also important to explore how and why my relational web might *differ* from a web produced by a theorist working from a different social location. For example, if the binary of ‘the cosmetic surgery consumer’ and ‘the victim of female genital cutting’ had been traced by a theorist centred in an African or Middle Eastern context, it would possibly look quite different from my model, although there may also be some important similarities and overlaps between the two webs.

Discussing (with subjects located differently than oneself) the cultural and historical specificities relating to particular gendered practices or figures (and the structures of assumptions that underlie various theoretical formulations) could provide an opportunity to work through some of the challenges cultural translation raises within specific critical frameworks. This process could help theorists in various locations to become ‘accountable for [their] own investments in cultural metaphors and values’ (Kaplan, 1994:139), whilst also developing a better understanding and appreciation of the ways in which others’ cultural investments may differ from (as well as intersect with) their own. Ideally then, the process of weaving relational webs and tracing the construction of hierarchical cultural and embodied ‘differences’ would become a collaborative, inter-subjective, cross-cultural project. The time and effort needed to construct a relational web model are clearly great. As such, the web approach suggests ‘a politics invested more in its process than in its results’ (Grosz, 2005:2). If this process could be undertaken as a shared endeavour engaged in by two (or more) differently-located subjects, perhaps this could be a way not only of sharing the labour, but also of facilitating discussion regarding the difference that location and perspective make to feminist theory, analysis and history as they relate to embodied cultural practice.

By mutually tracing the ways in which particular embodied cultural, social and historical differences are constructed, it may be possible to engender cross-cultural or transnational *empathy* in ways that acknowledge asymmetries of power and privilege and avoid relying on uncritical assertions of sameness. One of the most powerful messages that the process of constructing a relational web imparts is how we are all

interconnected discursively, historically, socially and politically. Within the relational web framework, the subject is always inseparably linked through discursive and corporeal exchanges with multiple 'selves' and 'others' and hence is 'partial' (Haraway, 1990) and 'non-unitary' (Braidotti, 2006). The embodied 'self', whether interpellated abstractly as 'the anorexic', 'the victim of female genital mutilation', 'the cosmetic surgery rebel', 'the fashion conscious Muslim girl', 'the mixed-race subject' or otherwise, is thus constructed not as a discrete, contained self, but rather as a 'representational economy' (Battaglia, 1995:2). As Deborah Battaglia puts it, the self is 'a reification continually defeated by mutable entanglements with other subjects' histories, experiences, self-representations; with their texts, conduct, gestures, objectifications' (1995:2). From this perspective, embodied subjectivity is never a completed or individual construction, but always unfinished, ongoing and mutual.

Through identifying and understanding the constitutive links that bind us to (multiple) selves and others, perhaps we can develop empathy for those located at different nodes of the web, not because our experiences are fundamentally similar or because we share common 'cultural wounds', but rather on the basis of our fundamental discursive and social interdependence: 'Partial in all its guises, never finished... always constructed and stitched together', the relational subject may, as Donna Haraway (1990) has suggested in another context, be more 'able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another' (193). In other words, empathy might be productively developed if we can acknowledge and map some of the specific ways in which we continuously *affect* one another and shape one another's conditions and experiences, if unequally and often violently. As Butler argues, 'this way of imagining community affirms relationality not only as a descriptive or historical fact of our formation, but also as an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence' (2004b:27).

It is important to emphasise that this empathy would not be produced through flattening distinctions of power and privilege between differently located subjects, but rather through understanding precisely how such relations of power operate and shape our

multi-layered encounters with one another. In some circumstances, empathy involves ‘acknowledging the power differentials that make absolute mutuality or correspondence an impossibility’ (Ahmed, 1998:57). Moreover, the web model’s aim is not exclusively to jolt *oneself* out of a particular view of seeing the world, but also to work towards producing more ‘generous’ representations of and encounters with the (multiple) selves and others to which one is constitutively linked. As I mentioned in Chapter One, Ahmed envisions a ‘generous’ encounter as one ‘which would recognise how the encounter itself is implicated in broader relations and circuits of production and exchange’ but would also offer room for ‘the one who is already assimilated’ to ‘move beyond the encounter which names her and holds her in place’ (2000:152). The web approach both recognises the complex, multifaceted relations of power that structure the ways in which discursive-material encounters between various subjects operate *and* allows for the possibility that subjects’ positionality will shift within and between encounters. Providing the possibility of mapping what Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan have referred to as ‘scattered hegemonies’, the web model may thus enable the production of ‘analysis that acknowledges our structurally asymmetrical links’ and refuses to ‘construct exotic authors and subjects’ (1994:15).

### **Negotiating anti/new/post humanisms**

In the opening chapter of this thesis I suggested that desires to deconstruct essentialist cultural and bodily boundaries on the part of theorists who employ analogue, continuum and subset approaches may be closely related to larger commitments to an ‘unfinished’ humanist project. I argued that such cross-cultural models are underscored by a tenuous humanist claim (‘fundamentally, we are all the same’) and, as such, often avoid dealing with the relationships of social antagonism which continually function to (re)constitute bodies differently. I maintained that we need to pay careful attention to the ways in which bodies are differentially (re)produced in ways that make containing (all of) them in one normalising humanist category problematic.

The web model clearly rejects the notion of the individualist, autonomous and self-contained subject upheld by traditional liberal humanist theory, envisioning instead a fragmented, non-unitary subject who is always linked to other subjects in a relational network. Rather than collapsing different bodies or embodied subjects into one single category or linear plane, the web approach seeks to recognise and account for the ongoing construction of embodied particularities (produced through the multiple intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class and nation, among other vectors). It thus makes a decisive move away from traditional liberal humanisms' underlying assumptions of (disembodied) sameness. As discussed, the web model proceeds from the assumption that bodies, as well as embodied practices and their imagined figures, cannot be separated from the contexts in which they are (re)constructed and gain meaning, but rather, must be theorised within those contexts. Moreover, it acknowledges that making discursive and/or political connections between various practices or enactments in different contexts often necessitates processes of *cultural translation*, which may not be easy, or indeed possible, in all circumstances.

In Chapter One, I also provided a brief mapping of how some of the key critical theorists that I draw on in this project, including Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti, Margrit Shildrick, Moira Gatens, Raia Prokhovnik and Paul Gilroy, could be positioned in respect to various anti/new humanist discourses. Some of these thinkers, I argued, seemed to be expressing a desire (similar to that illustrated by some advocates of the analogue, continuum and subset approaches) to reclaim and revise a critical new humanist project. Since I began this thesis, I have the sense that this desire has in some cases intensified. For example, in *After Empire* (2004), Paul Gilroy provides 'a critique of racial hierarchy and the inhuman life forms it creates' which is informed by, in his words, an 'unabashed humanism' (xii). Extending the case he made in *Against Race* (2000) for the development of an 'empathetically post-racial humanism' (37), he argues for 'a multicultural ethics and politics...premised upon an agnostic, planetary humanism capable of comprehending the universality of our elemental vulnerability to the wrongs we visit upon each other' (2004:4). Moreover, in *Transpositions* (2006), Rosi Braidotti signals her desire to reclaim and radically revise

(rather than abandon) the humanist project: ‘classical humanism needs to be reviewed and opened up to the challenges and complexities of our time...I offer a nomadic alternative of a sustainable ethical subject as a way of radicalizing the humanist vision’ (35). Extending her earlier argument for the development of what I referred to as a specifically ‘feminist’ humanism (2002:58), she seeks in this text to develop a ‘materialist post-humanist ethics’ (Braidotti:182) anchored to a vision of a ‘non-unitary subject’ (35) linked to other subjects through relations of ‘deep affectivity’ (182). While Braidotti’s vision (which might be situated as ‘post-humanist’) differs from Gilroy’s in some significant aspects, they share a similar desire to salvage and redirect humanist-oriented ethics in more productive and inclusive ways.

Even Judith Butler, who, along with Sara Ahmed and Elizabeth Grosz, I situated in my opening chapter as critical of new humanist positions, focuses in *Undoing Gender* on how the ‘human’ might be rethought and resignified by those who have been excluded from it (2004a:13).<sup>147</sup> Advocating what could be described as a ‘new humanist’ ethics, she argues for the importance of developing a ‘new legitimating lexicon for gender complexity’ within ‘law, within psychiatry, within social and literary theory’ which would effectively include and recognise those genders not currently ‘admitted to the terms that govern reality’ (219). In *Precarious Life* (2004b) she theorises the operation of a common human ‘corporeal vulnerability’ (42) which makes a ‘tenuous “we” of us all’ (20). She is careful to stress, however, that there is no guarantee that our common vulnerability will be recognised in any particular encounter: ‘In this sense, vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through different norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject’ (43).

Meanwhile, other critical theorists have moved towards a more radical *anti*-humanist perspective. For example, in *Time Travels* (2005), Elizabeth Grosz seeks to ‘push even further the drive to antihumanism that has been central in some key post-Foucauldian

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<sup>147</sup> Evaluating the impact of *Gender Trouble* here, she describes her agenda in that seminal text as arising from ‘humanist’ ideals: ‘I wanted something of *Gender Trouble* to be understood and accorded dignity, according to some humanist ideal, but I also wanted it to disturb – fundamentally – the way in which feminist and social theory think gender, and to find it exciting, to understand something of the desire that gender trouble is, the desire it solicits and the desire it conveys’ (2004a:207).

developments in feminist theory' (185). Distinguishing her perspective from Butler's focus on performative processes of 'subject-constitution and consolidation', she advocates a theoretical framework in which 'inhuman forces, forces that are both living and nonliving, macroscopic and microscopic, above and below the level of human are acknowledged and allowed to displace the centrality of both consciousness and the unconscious' (186). She argues for a 'politics of *imperceptibility*, leaving its traces and effects everywhere but never being able to be identified with a person, group or organization' (italics in original) (194).

How, therefore, can we situate the relational web model in respect to these various anti/new/post-humanist perspectives? I do not understand the web approach as advocating a revised 'humanist' project similar to the one Gilroy envisions. On the one hand, Gilroy's interest in interrogating dualistic pairings such as black/white, settler/native, colonizer/colonized (2004:45) and his desire to offer 'multiple genealogies of racial discourse' (31) seem very close to my own theoretical concerns. I share his perspective that such binaries should be investigated and unravelled 'via a concept of *relation*' and a focus on 'the complex, tangled, profane and sometimes inconvenient forms of interdependency' (italics in original) (45). Indeed, this is precisely what the relational web model seeks to do. On the other hand, his vision that such relational or genealogical work can and should necessarily lead to the development of a 'post-racial humanism' remains problematic. From my perspective, it may not be possible or *desirable* to dispense with embodied categories such as 'race' in the way Gilroy imagines. The argument that particular categories of social differentiation can be disrupted and done away with does not address the ways in which bodies are *produced and shaped* in part *through* such categories, and hence bear their corporeal traces and effects. As Sara Ahmed puts it, 'race, like sex, is sticky; it sticks to us, or we become "us" as an effect of how it sticks, even when we think we are beyond it' (2004b:12). From her perspective, dealing with the effects of racism requires us not to disavow or move beyond the 'stickiness' of race, but rather to 'live with that stickiness, to think it, feel it, do it' (12).

This point about the impossibility of extracting race and sex from their constitutive role in shaping bodies relates to the differences between the various theoretical positions advocated by Butler, Grosz and Braidotti. While Grosz (2005) and Braidotti (2002) see Butler as advocating a project of ‘undoing gender’ (which might be seen as comparable to Gilroy’s project of ‘doing away’ with race), they argue that gender cannot be simply ‘undone’ as the effects of sexual differences remain permanently ingrained with particular bodies as a productive corporeal force. In relation to this debate, the web model does not claim to provide a model through which gender, sex or race can be undone in any total sense of the word. Instead, it offers a framework that might allow us to better understand the discursive-material histories which shape (rather than determine) the contemporary effects of such categories. Illustrating that race, sex and gender have a *history* (or indeed multiple histories) not only disrupts their status as ‘natural’ or ‘essential’ categories (within, for example, culturally essentialist constructions of embodied practices such as ‘female genital mutilation’ and ‘cosmetic surgery’), but also provides an impetus for thinking through possibilities for their radical reconstruction or redeployment within specific contemporary contexts.

Returning to Gilroy’s work, I would also question whether his notion of a new humanism that is specifically ‘post-racial’ problematically implies that race remains the *only* category preventing the development of a new humanist epoch - or, to put it another way, that doing away with *one* vector of social differentiation (race) and its oppressive and exclusionary effects will somehow also lead to the demise of *all other* vectors and their problematic effects (for example, gender, sexuality or nation). From an intersectional perspective, any radically new *non-exclusive* humanism would have to be inclusive of (and pay attention to the effects of) *all* categories of social differentiation (i.e. not just race). In this regard, it is interesting (and I would argue troubling) that Gilroy pays little attention to the ongoing oppressions and exclusions associated with categories such as gender and sexuality.<sup>148</sup> In short, Gilroy’s new humanist vision problematically extricates race from its constitutive relationships with

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<sup>148</sup> He also does not draw on the vast body of feminist literature which analyses the ways in which race always intersects with other vectors of embodied differentiation. Indeed, Gilroy mentions feminism in this text only to comment on its ‘demise’ (2004:28, 79).

other axes of embodiment. He is not alone, however, in implying that ‘doing away’ with one oppressive social vector can bring down the whole house of embodied oppressions. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Margrit Shildrick (1997) has envisioned the rearticulation of the humanist subject through the development of a concept of radical sexual difference. While I have drawn on Shildrick’s deconstructive method as a critical model, her ‘new humanist’ approach, like Gilroy’s, is weakened by a failure to effectively integrate intersectionality (and its relationship to embodiment).

While I do not see the web model as a ‘new humanist’ framework, I also would not categorise it as strictly ‘anti-humanist’ along the lines, for example, of Elizabeth Grosz’s project. Grosz’s interrogation of the ‘drive to identity, recognition, and self-affirmation’ within ‘contemporary feminist, queer and minoritarian politics and theory’ (2005:186) provides a useful critique of the ways in which critical politics can problematically reify, and indeed fetishise, particular identities and subjectivities (for example, ‘mixed-race’ and ‘transgender’, as I argued in Chapter Four). I share her perspective that developing ‘a politics of acts, not identities’ (186) might provide a means for critical feminist theory to break down essentialised constructions of gender, sex and culture and to open (rather than restrict) its possible future trajectories. Unlike Grosz, however, I do not think that we can or should dispense with concepts such as ‘subjectivity’ and ‘identity’ all together. Examining and tracing the ways in which particular constructions of subjectivity and identity are (re)constructed and mobilised within specific contexts remains crucial not only to addressing embodied and epistemic oppressions, exclusions and violences, but also to tracing possible spaces for resistance.

Furthermore, while Grosz advocates a ‘politics of imperceptibility’ which can never be ‘identified with a person, group or organisation’ as the most fruitful direction for ‘feminist futures’ (186), this strategy seems somewhat contradictory. Such a political approach *could* enable feminist (or other critical) politics to let go of particular identity categories (i.e. ‘woman’) that some see as limiting; however, it would also mean that such politics would, by definition, cease to be called ‘feminist’ (if such a politics cannot be associated with any person, group or organisation, then presumably it can also not be

named by the label ‘feminism’). Furthermore, while a politics of imperceptibility *could* function to disrupt oppressive hierarchies and relations of power by dismantling the essentialist identity constructions which underscore them, it could also work to shore up existing privileges by dis-enabling and silencing various disadvantaged peoples who already have little means of improving their life situation. From this perspective, I would maintain (in a similar fashion to Butler’s argument above) that it does not yet seem possible to dispense with ‘inclusion’ and ‘recognition’ as political strategies, although we must continue to interrogate their potentially problematic effects.<sup>149</sup> Finally, while I would argue that Gilroy’s new humanism privileges race problematically, Grosz’s anti-humanism, as I suggested in Chapter Two, maintains an exclusionary focus on sexual difference. Neither perspective offers the kind of engagement with intersectionality that I have argued remains crucial to maintaining rigorous analysis within critical theory of the ways in which bodies are constantly (re)produced *differently*.

The relational web model occupies a theoretical space somewhere between Gilroy’s humanism and Grosz’s anti-humanism (although, as I have suggested, it does not make sense to think of their perspectives simply as oppositional). While the web approach is based on a rejection of a rigid humanist notion of sameness and a recognition that bodies are constantly produced as different it is also underscored by a principle of relationality. Bodies and embodied subjectivities are constituted differentially through particular relations of power and thus cannot be subsumed within any normative category; however, they are also linked constitutively to other bodies and embodied subjectivities. In being (re)produced by and through others, ‘each of us carries with us “impressions” of those others’ which shape our bodies, gestures and turns of phrase’ (Ahmed, 2004a:166). As Vikki Bell puts it, ‘what is seen as one body is in fact made up of several bodies, entwined with various types of narratives’ (1996:231). In this sense, relationality (and the model of relational subject formation that the web model

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<sup>149</sup> Grosz maintains that as an alternative to thinking about subjectivity or identity, we should concentrate on impersonal ‘wills, forces, powers that can be ascribed no humanity’ (2005:186). Yet, in my opinion, she provides little useful description or examples to clarify what shape or form such wills, forces and powers might take and how we might identify them (let alone theorise them).

suggests) intervenes productively *between* sameness and difference, disrupting their dialectic relationship through theorising both particularity and connection. Importantly, as I have emphasised, connection is not the same as commonality. So, rather than providing a framework for theorising the ways in which we, *despite our differences*, all share basic or fundamental commonalities, the relational web approach offers a model which illustrates how we are all connected *through, or because of, our differences*.

## Postscript

Potential directions for future research in this context are multiple. For example, while my project has concentrated primarily on the *similar* problematic effects that various comparative cross-cultural approaches may produce, it would be productive to examine the significance of their *differences* in further depth. How, for instance, does the social and geo-political location from which particular cross-cultural parallels are constructed make a difference to the potential political effects of such comparisons? How might location shape the ways in which various cross-cultural comparisons are interpreted by different audiences? Moreover, my focus has been on how making links between different cultural practices is employed to break down essentialist identity categories within feminist *theory*. It would also be useful to examine how comparative cross-cultural strategies are mobilised specifically within feminist activism or how they might be employed within more mainstream or popular cultural mediums. In this vein, we might consider whether, in addition to its potential contribution to feminist theory projects, the web approach might be utilised or adapted by activists or practitioners working 'on the ground'. In conclusion, the web I have begun to weave here suggests one particular path (produced from my own specific social perspective) that the development of a critical relational model of this nature might take. It is unfinished and, as such, unfixed. I would encourage others to build on it, critique it, or to explore alternative paths, directions or shapes that such a project might take.

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