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Perilous Navigations in the Postmodern: Donna Haraway, bell hooks, and Feminist Rethinking of Identity

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I. Introduction: Feminism Under Siege

> Somehow it seems highly suspicious that at the precise moment when so many groups have been engaged in "nationalisms" which involve redefinitions of the marginalized Others that suspicions emerge about the nature of the "subject," about the possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, about historical "progress." Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?[1]

In her 1987 essay Nancy Hartsock plays with the idea of conspiracies and paranoia to introduce a more sophisticated argument about gender and power relations. Her parody of paranoia is, however, more than just a clever way of getting the reader's attention. Hartsock's series of pointed and provocative questions effectively captures a prevalent "mood" in feminist theorizing of the last decade. The tone of such theorizing frequently betrays irritation and aggression when "the subject" or the mode of feminist theorizing are debated. Questioning of the principles underlying general theory and accepted ideas about the subject often generate a reaction verging on paranoia. In principle, it is the tone of the besieged and, upon reflection, this tone is not really so surprising.

In the 1980's academic feminism perceived itself as being under attack from both within and without its ranks: from within by feminists usually loosely labeled of "women of color" and from without by scholars involved with the new theories termed "postmodern." There are differences in the argumentative strategies of these two groups, but their critiques of academic feminism converge in a particularly significant way in regards to feminism's use of the term gender. In essence, both groupings argued that gender terms alone were insufficient to discuss oppression and to analyze present social conditions. The positions which the different arguments take are important, but it is perhaps more important to take into account the provocativeness of the critique itself. Critiquing gender does not mean critiquing one aspect of feminism. It means critiquing feminism's central concept. Gender is the key tool of feminist analysis across the disciplines On the theoretical level feminism examines how gender difference takes form at the very basis of Western thought by, for example, looking at how the term "man" as universal subject is constituted by its implicit opposition to the term "woman." How what is classified as "woman" or "female" is then relegated to the margins of

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[1] Hartsock, Nancy, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p. 163.

cultural discourse, how this marginalized and silenced history can be "recovered" or archeologically "uncovered," the ways in which socially constructed gender differences lead to divergent socializations, behavior patterns, and privileges are further areas of inquiry. However, women function not only as the group whose experiences and representations feminism sets out to explore. Women are also the group in whose name specific claims are made: political claims, claims for compensation based on discrimination, claims for social change. And women then also form the unit which organizes to gain these claims. All of these varied theoretical and political projects hinge on the existence of the category woman. This category may be a construct, but it is an absolutely critical one for feminist thinking across the board. It presupposses that an individual in India and an in individual in Indiana can belong to the same category of woman. This is the foundation of their identity, despite myriad differences in their circumstances. It is this supposition which "women of color" and postmodern theorists reject. Difference like those between an Indian and an Indianan cannot simply be swept under the carpet. As a consequence, they argue for more complex models of identity beyond the bipolar gender model.

Voices from the "women of color" camp offered a very early and biting critique of the reliance on the single category of gender. In a manifesto which gained a great deal of attention through its inclusion in the influential and controversial anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* the Combahee River Collective focused on the shortcomings of feminism's traditional focus on gender and gender alone as the primary source of identity and oppression. This group of African American feminists writes: "[We] find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously."[2] The collective's critique suggests that the blanket term woman elides important differences among women and, as others have argued in the wake of the the manifesto, enacts essentialism. The related argument is that it these essentializing categories distort the real dynamics of discrimination. Identity concepts which only focus on gender are unsatisfactory because gender is only one factor, one category according to which one is discriminated against. This repression is, however, intertwined with others. This intertwining cannnot be glossed over by a focus on gender if you want to work towards actual liberation. But reliance on unproblematized notions of gender identity not only impedes emancipatory politics, it also reenacts the

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[2] The Combahee River Collective, "Black Feminist Statement," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color,* eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Latham, N.Y.: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), p. 213.

very dynamics of discrimination which feminists ostensibly criticize. In her book on the experience of African American women bell hooks points out this danger in feminist theorizing. "While it is no way racist," she writes, "for any author to write a book exclusively white women, it is fundamentally racist for books to be published that focus solely on the American white woman's experience in which that experience is assumed to be *the* American woman's experience."[3] The experiences and problems of middle-class, white women are presented as universally feminine concerns. The concerns of African American or working class are pushed to the margin and silenced by these approaches.

At the same time as hooks and others were formulating their critique of academic feminism a new kind of theorizing began to make its way through America's humanities departments which would have a profound effect on academic feminism: postmodernism. Postmodernism is, of course, as vague a term as "women of color." It often seems to serve as a sort of grab bag term for anything differing from traditional approaches or for newer philosophy just as "women of color" is offered as a classification for anyone who is not part of the white mainstream - whatever that may be. Speculations about postmodernism's exact definition practically constitute a mini-industry if you can judge by the number of articles and anthologies produced on the topic. The most common starting point for all of this scholarly inquiry is, however, the definition proposed by the first self-proclaimed postmodern philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard. In the report he prepared for the government of Quebec Lyotard labeled our era as postmodern and identified "the distrust of metanarratives" as being its defining attribute. According to Lyotard's analysis a metannarrative is a discourse which claims to be able to situate and evaluate all other discourses. Examples of such metadiscourses are the Hegelian notion of history as continual progression of spirit until it thinks itself absolutely or, even more important for Lyotard, Marxism. Our mistrust of these metanarratives follows from the suspicion that they are not "meta" at all. Rather, they are simply narratives among others. This distrust of the narratives themselves quickly leads to the development of other suspicions. After metanarratives become shaky the next victim is the subject. First, it is the subject of history intrinsic to metanarratives which bears the weight of critical scrutiny. Metanarratives hinge on the notion of a subject who can know himself and objectively see and analyze society, culture, and history. This subject takes on "the God's eye view" of history

[3] Hooks, bell, *Ain't I a Woman?* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), p. 137. Emphasis in the original.

or, as it also been quite amusingly put, he does the "God trick."[4] As fascinating as the notion of the "God trick" is, it is criticized as illusory. No critic views society from Olympus; he or she is embedded in power structures and this position needs to be considered in analysis. As a second effect, the crisis faced by the subject of history then has repercussions for the idea of subjecthood in general. In a sense, talking about *the* subject necessitates using the "God trick." It involves a profound claim to authority to claim an unitary subject: You are a woman - and primarily that, he is black- and that above all, and so on, Moreover, such a move necessitates establishing borders and forbidding their crossing. A subject is perhaps not one at all, but, as Jacques Derrida suggests in much discussed interview, many.[5] This idea of multiplicity is expressed quite visually by the pre-eminent postmodernist Lyotard when he speaks of the social bond. Rather than thinking of society as a totality with an overarching structure or a common consciousness such as national or class consciousnes, society is a fabric in which different discursive thread cross each other. The subject is not just a man or a woman. The subject simply exists where different threads meet, be they the threads of class, race, gender, sexual preference or whatever.[6]

On the one hand postmodernism would seem to be the natural ally of feminism. Both critique universalizing tendencies and explore the internal contradictions under the surface of a universalist rhetoric. But it is precisely the critique of universalizing metanarratives and the search for internal contradictions which pose a threat to feminism when they are applied to gender. Gender, after all, takes on the function of a quasi-metanarrative in much feminist theorizing. If one uses gender as a template one should be able to see, at least according to certain currents in feminist thinking, patterns and developments which would not otherwise be visible. Because of this power it is the privileged critical perspective. The notion of woman as a unitary subject derived through the "divine" perspective is crucial in this kind of theorizing and the political action which should ideally result from it. Contacts with postmodernism give a second impetus for critiquing these kinds of feminist strategies beyond the critiques formulated by hooks and others. In the postmodernist context the critique of metanarratives

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[4] Haraway, Donna, "Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14:3 (1988), quoted in Sandra Harding, "Reinventing Ourselves as Other: More New Agents of History and Knowledge," in *American Feminist Thought at Century's End: A Reader,* ed. Linda S. Kaufmann (Cambridge and Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 140.

[5] Derrida, Jacque and Christie V. McDonald, "Choreographies," *Diacritics* 12: 1982, pp. 66-76.

[6] Lyotard, Jean Francois, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 11ff.

and subjects in general leads to critique of the feminist variants of these models as being as problematic as the old "patriarchal" ones.

The various conflicts played out in the field of feminist theory point to the clear need for new concepts about identity and the subject within feminism. Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser were among the first to address the challenge posed to feminism by postmodernist critique and to suggest a revision of accepted identity concepts through an encounter with postmodernism. Proceeding with Lyotard's critique of the metanarrative they critique the metanarratives of feminism and call for a rethinking of identity without recourse to essentialist categories:

> Postmodern-feminist theory would [...] replace unitary notions of women and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among other, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation.[7]

The authors believe that in this way you have a greater chance of alliance with other progressive movements and, thus, the possibility of new political coalitions with a broader base than those based solely on female solidarity.

Where Fraser and Nicholson see a chance, other feminist critics see a potential danger. The fear is that in giving up categories like gender you also give up the basis for organization and coalition. Within the concept of the social fabric the whole political project hinges on finding a common point. The question is if one can find this point at all working with a notion of subjectivity which rejects everything generalizing as potenially essentializing and which relies instead on difference to discuss identity as Nicholson and Fraser argue with their list of relevant identity strands: gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. As Jennifer Wicke sees it the trend toward difference in such conceptions of identity means that "identities are seen as additive or cumulative, with smaller and smaller subdivisions to mark more and more specialized identity formations."[8] The danger which certain factions within the feminist community see in this trend is that if taken to the extreme it could perhaps result in a repetition of the classical liberal view of absolute individuality. This is, according to Iris Young, one of the primary reasons for perceiving of women as a group. The individualist per-

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[7] Fraser, Nancy and Linda J. Nicholson, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p. 35.

[8] Wicke, Jennifer, "Postmodern Identities and the Politics of the (Legal) Subject," *boundary 2* 19:2, 1992, p. 22.

spective obscures power structures beyond the individual and precludes exchange.[9] While open for critical dialogue with postmodernism Patricia Waugh also voices concern about finding a common ground for exchange in the postmodern scenario of language games and social fabric She argues that the notion of a common ground is absolutely essential to the feminist project:

> Feminism must believe in the possibility of a community of address situated in an oppositional space which can allow for the connection of the 'small, personal voice' [...] of one feminist to another and to other liberationist movements.

The challenge which she sees is to modify the inheritance of the Englightenment such as the concept of the subject and human rights "in the context of late modernity but not to capitulate to the postmodern condition."[10] The challenge then is to rethink the subject in a way which avoids essentialism without precluding communication and coalition.

All in all this rethinking is a hazardous undertaking fraught with potential pitfalls and hurdles. In a certain sense feminist theorists trying to rethink identity must negotiate their path between Skylla and Charybdis. One the one side is Skylla who demands that identity be conceived without essentialism. On the other side lurks a Charybdis who insists on the need for providing a common basis for coalition. It is a tricky passage between these two figures and feminists cannot use any of Ulysses' clever tricks to avoid dangers. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer point out the wily adventurer was able to survive the test of the sirens by employing an extremely clever trick. This is, however, a trick which feminists cannot use. They must simultaneously listen to history, the song which the sirens sing, and act. They cannot simply let their hands be tied. Heading the lessons of history is essential because if feminism wants to be emancipatory it cannot repeat the very tendencies that it criticizes in the Western tradition, essentialism and marginalization, in its own discourse. Moreover, feminism must combine this awareness with action because from its beginning feminism has had an explicit commitment to political action. It is not and should not be a solely academic exercise.

In this paper I want to look at two very different attempts to chart this difficult course which try to sketch out a point of identification or a common ground for feminism while si-

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[9] Young, Iris Marion, "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture in Society* 19:31, 1994, p. 718.

[10] Waugh, Patricia, "Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Patricia Waugh (London, New York, Melbourne, and Auckland: Edward Arnold, 1992) p. 195.

multaneously avoiding essentialism. First, I will look at how Donna Haraway negotiates the dangers of Skylla and Charybdis by imagining a new kind of individual and collective identity which present itself as a blasphemy within the context of traditional thinking about the subject because it offers no wholeness, only assembled fragments: the cyborg. Bell hooks takes a different tact in the second model that I will examine. On the surface she offers little rethinking of individual subjectivity, but she offers an interesting new model for a community which embraces difference by grounding itself on two principles which even in the postmodern condition can be labeled universal: yearning and love.

II. Cyborg Bodies: Donna Haraway's Model of the Postmodern Self

> The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle about life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.
>
> The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self. [11]

In her discussion of identity formation Wicke emphasizes the importance of individual identity in politics and particularly in American politics. It is, in her words, "an individualizing rhetoric [which] permeates all our social forms." Thus, "the community identity models itself on individual identity."[12] Haraway inserts herself into this particular identity tradition, but not as a loyal follower. On the contrary, she presents herself as a heretic and her vision of ideal individual and, thus, group identity as blasphemy. Assertions such as "there is nothing about being 'female' which naturally binds women" certainly has the ring of the blasphemous for early feminists who count as one of their primary accomplishments the development of sisterhood (197). The true heresy of the cyborg only really becomes visible, however, when viewed from the perspective of traditional concepts of identity based on unity as well as in connection with feminist theory.

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[11] Haraway,Donna, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p. 191 and p. 201. Further references to this article appear paranthetically in the body of the text.

[12] Wicke, Jennifer, "Postmodern Identities and the Politics of the (Legal) Subject," *boundary 2* 19:2, 1992, p. 22.

[12] Young, Iris Marion, "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture in Society* 19:31, 1994, p. 22.

Haraway's entry into the discourse of identity does not initially appear overtly blasphemous: it is the image of the body. But it is not the smooth, perfect body of Greek sculpture or contemporary advertising. Rather it is an image of the body as a conglomerate of myriad components: the cyborg. Haraway describes this odd entity as, "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of reality and of social fiction." So goes on to add, "by the late twentieth century [...]we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; on short we are cyborgs [...] a condensed image of both imagination and material reality"(191). The blasphemy of this notion lies in the fact that these varied components do not form a whole. The cyborg remains a collection of parts. But what precisely are these parts? In her description of the cyborg Haraway highlights four aspects: the organic, social reality, fiction, and the machine. The image of a body made of these different components - an organic arm, a leg made of social reality, a fictional head, and a mechanical trunk - is an effective image for thinking about our current condition and identity, but it is perhaps helpful to step back from the image of the body and to ask how the body takes on this form. In effect, the individual functions as the site where these different aspects - the organic, social reality, fiction, and the machine- converge and then shape the organic material. As Haraway paraphrases Simone de Beauvoir in a later essay, "bodies [...] are not born; they are made."[13] The question to be pursued is how this cyborg body is "made."

As already noted, the organic material of the body is where various forces converge. It is also, however, in a certain sense the organic which shapes this body. The concept of identity being formed by the organic, by material processes is a mainstay of conservative gender theory and radical feminism alike. These two movements would seem to be odd bedfellows, but both tend to proceed from the fact of biological motherhood to make their claims about the difference of feminine identity. An early radical feminist like Shulamith Firestone looks at the fact of reproduction and draws from this fact the ammunition she needs to argue that gender oppression is the first and most virulent oppression. Reproduction could be one of the organic forces which Haraway sees shaping the individual. Social reality, the second shaping force, is closely related to it. A materialist feminist might elaborate on Firestone's argument by taking the fact of female reproduction, the attendant relegation of the work of mothering to women and by placing these facts in analogy to production construct a basis for an analysis

[13] Haraway, Donna, "The Biopolitcs of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse," in *American Feminist Though at Century's End: A Reader*, ed. Linda S. Kaufmann (Cambridge and Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 204.

aligned with Marxist tenets. The mode of production within the home and the workplace inarguably shape subjectivity. Both Firestone and our hypothetical materialist feminist would make this claim. Both also base their theses on work with the empirical, the real in the sense of the tangible and observable.

This concrete, "real" aspect is, however, only one part of identity according to the cyborg model. Fiction also shapes cyborg identity. Theorizing and imaginative constructions or representations construct identity just as much as material conditions based on biology or on certain types of production. This is more than just a distinction between first-order reality and its reflection or reproduction. Haraway's concept of fiction has the hint of Jean Baudrillard's simulacra: the copy of something which appears to be the original, but is not. Identity also takes shape in this sphere which cannot be nailed down to production or material conditions. Simulations of reality shape the cyborg, but at the same time Haraway does not wholly eliminate something like first-order reality. She intimates the possibility of both or at least she does not preclude their double, tension-ridden existence. Social reality and social fiction touch, intertwine, and irritate each other's borders.

Haraway does not stop at this already extremely provocative mix of identity components in the cyborg. She goes a step further and adds another potentially volatile element: the idea of the machine. This is perhaps the most difficult part of Haraway's construct to grasp. It the same time it is arguably the most important. Technology has gained an enormous influence on our daily lives through computer or medical technology. It is, however, not simply the influence of the internet which shapes us. The argument goes deeper than that. In its dictionary definition the cyborg is a human who has some of its bodily processes controlled by cybernetic devices. Cybernetics, the key to the dictionary version of cyborg identity, is the study of control processes and information flow within a system. The devices developed through these studies then regulate the cyborg. We clearly find ourselves in the vicinity of Foucault's fields of force concept: the will to knowledge leads to fields or discursive formations which aim at control, at the shaping of individuals or groups be they women or the insane or the incarcerated. Through observation and study a net of control falls over these groups which simultaneously shapes them. A similar suggestion seems to be at work in Haraway's notion, although it is framed more clearly in the rhetoric of the machine, the computer and in the idiom of programming. In the information age it is perhaps efficiency and logical thinking according to the model of computing which function as the regulative ideas in our discourse. By striving to attain these features we slowly become like the machines which we

produce just as Foucault's prisoners slowly internalize the function of observing and monitoring originally performed outside of themselves by their wardens. In short, we fabricate and program ourselves.

This self-programming aspect is perhaps the most disturbing part of the cyborg. As Mary Poovey puts it in her analysis of cyborgs in film, such ideas provoke fears "about ceasing to be human."[14] This uncomfortable relationship to machines is, however, only one in a collection of shifting parts in the cyborg body. This sense of fragmentation also causes its share of discomfort. This is not due to the state of dispersal per se. Disturbing is the fact that this state of dispersal is not a temporary one. Cyborg parts have no connection to wholeness either at the beginning or at the end of their development. As Haraway says the cyborg "does not mark time on an Oedipal calendar." Thus, there is no pre-oedipal fantasy of symbiosis with the phallic mother in its infancy. Moreover, old age offers no comfort because this fragmented creature is "outside of salvation history" (192). In contrast to Hegel's spirit it will never reach a synthesis of its internal contradictions.

Haraway places her blasphemous cyborg theory firmly in the role of disruption. She is working ironically; she is striving to irritate; she is playing within the field of postmodern and feminist thought. It is, of course, not play for theory's sake alone. Haraway couples her reflections with politics outside the ivory tower of theory. She peppers her argument with names and catchwords from postmodern theory like simulacra, but at the same time she repeatedly cites examples of what she terms real-life cyborgs: The Liverpool Action Group or Asian women working in electronics factories. She clearly sees the cyborg as a a very real means for liberation, but the question to be answered is how you can form something like a cyborg coalition and what the work of a cyborg would be. These are are two questions which Haraway strives to answer in her essay and which we have to pursue in order to see how well Haraway negotiates between the Skylla and Charybdis threatening these kinds of projects in feminist theory.

Haraway poses the question of coalition in the following way:

> Who counts as "us" in my own rhetoric? Which identities are available to ground such a potential political myth called "us," and what could motivate enlistment in such a collectivity? (197)

The answer which Haraway offers is the development of a new consciousness: "[Cyborgs] are about consciousness - or its simulation" (197) This consciousness or copy of consciousness

which has no original- Haraway keeps both possibilities open -hinges on the realization of a massive shifting of paradigms. Like Fredric Jameson Haraway argues that we have left industrial society and its structures behind us. Haraway's version of late capitalism emphasizes information flow, design, and system dynamics. When one recognizes this new condition in which myriad forces converge to shape the individual Haraway implies that one has also gained this new consciousness. This sounds straightforward enough, but forming cyborg consciousness differs from notions such as class consciousness and national consciousness which previously dominated political thinking in a very simple and fundamental way. To experience class consciousness you have to belong to a class be it the working or the middle class. Similarly national consciousness presupposes membership in the nation. Consciousness in these models operates through exclusiveness. In contrast, everyone is potentially a cyborg in Haraway's scenario. There is, however, perhaps an implicit clause to this extremely inclusive notion of the cyborg. Although anyone can have a cyborg consciousness and thereby join the cyborg "we," Haraway's examples of actual cyborg groupings suggest that those who actually gain a cyborg consciousness are those who are not empowered by the forces at work in late capitalism. Active cyborgs in Haraway's account are disadvantaged cyborgs such as female Asian factory workers. Haraway, of course, also offers examples of cyborgs who want redraw current fields of force like The Livermore Action Group. In the latter case, however, one might argue that these movements which are dominated by women and/or activists from earlier socialist movements are also motivated by the perspective of the disadvantaged. Managers and a factory workers are both cyborgs, but activist cyborgs are not to be found in the executive suite.

The question nevertheless remains: "How do these different self-conscious cyborgs find each other?" Consciousness is, of course, a first step, but it is not enough. The next step is coalition and in coalition building the notion of the cyborg in its fragmented, component form is crucial. Coalitions are traditionally formed as a response to a particular issue or along the lines of identity. This second form of coalition is tricky for the cyborg because cyborg identity differs from those of traditional cultural politics in its diffuseness and, quite significantly, in its invisibility. Some of the most effective coalitions in cultural politics like the women's movement or African American politics organize according to a significant trait which the members of these movements have in distinction to others: the status of being a

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[14] Poovey, Mary, "Feminism and Postmodernism: Another View," *boundary 2* 19:2, 1992, p. 35.

woman in the former case and being black in the latter. This mode of organization has been effective, but it carries a danger with it. Because this difference is frequently visible and marked in the organic material for many the distinction between construct like race or gender and a "natural" trait like skin color becomes indistinct. This is not the case with the cyborg. You cannot see the cyborg with the naked eye. You can only see cyborgs through a consciousness of current conditions and the way in which they shape us.

The cyborg is a shifting, nebulous creature due to its diffuse components, but it can nevertheless be used as a tool in building coalition. However, as I have already suggested, this can most emphatically not function according to the traditional mode of identity politics in which connection are forged on the basis of the identical or the same: I am a woman, you are a woman, thus we form a coalition. Instead Haraway argues for coalition through affinity. Haraway sees affinity as relation by choice in contrast to blood (196). The dictionary also offers a helpful definition for thinking about what this kind of coalition could be; it defines affinity as a relationship or similarity based on common origins. Given Haraway's emphasis on choice and the dictionary's on origin one could say that the notion of the cyborg as the site where various shaping forces meet might serve as a point of reference to which individuals could refer to in order to see the similarity in their conditions and/or the common origins of their predicament. The strength of coalition through affinity is that it does not mean that the varied forces of late capitalism must shape coalition members in identitical ways. It is the dynamic which is similar. The form of the individual cyborg varies.

The notion of affinity very neatly avoids the danger of essentialism. The question is if it can really provide a basis for political organization. A quite simple argument which could be raised in opposition to the model of coalition building that Haraway presents along with her notions of cyborg consciousness is that it probably would not work. This is something which can only be answered through political practice and experimentation. A second argument challenges Haraway at a more fundamental level: these concepts are not necessary. One could ask to what extent new categories for identity are really needed when categories like "woman" and "black" still operate in very real and concrete ways. These are pertinent points, but the question is if the continued use of such categories and, even more important, continued thinking in these categories might be more counterproductive than productive. Gender and race, to name only two examples, are without questions important categories in social discourse. The danger of limiting analysis to these categories is that this focus could blind us to the complexity of our current situation. On the one hand, Haraway notes that we seem to be

experiencing an intensification of gender. This, however, potentially functions as a smoke screen because, on the other hand, gender also seems to be eroding when viewed in the context of information flow and system dynamics (209). In their introduction to a special issue of *Signs* dealing with feminism and postmodernism Wicke and Margaret Ferguson name as one of the major challenges facing us today, "the haunting requirement to match identities with putative experiences, to click invisible designations into place." [15] This is, in essence, what Haraway is trying to do with the notion of cyborg consciousness and cyborg coalition. "Liberation," writes Haraway emphatically, "rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension of oppression and so of possibility" (191). On a rather ominous note she adds, "it's a matter of survival" (195).

Survival is, however, not only a matter of consciousness. It also involves action. A major question which Haraway's manifesto has to answer is the question of practice. We know what a cyborg is, but what does a cyborg do? At the beginning of her analysis Haraway characterizes her text as "an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction" (191). Haraway has the same ambitions for her cyborg: it contains the "positive" moment of construction and the "negative" moment of disruption. The former ambition is embodied in the coding project which Haraway sketches out and the latter seems suggested by notions of discursive weaving.

Haraway introduces what I have termed the "positive" cyborg activity early in her essay immediately after presenting the outline of her cyborg concept. She writes: "The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must *code* (205. My emphasis, MSK.). Haraway argues for "the translation of the world into a problem of coding" (200). Taken from the fields of cybernetics and genetics the code concept implies the hope of a common language, but not in the sense of a universal, transparent speech. Instead it is closer to Wittgenstein's language games or to Foucault's concept of discourse. An object, like the human body, is not regarded as a signifier whose signified has to be deciphered. There is no essential meaning to the body at all in this view. In contrast the body is viewed as a system in which there is a certain flow of information, particular boundaries are set up, and specific strategies developed. Coding involves examining

[15] Wicke, Jennifer and Margaret Ferguson, "Introduction: Feminism and Postmodernism; or, The Way We Live Now," *boundary 2* 19:2, 1992, p. 6.

and mapping the strategic moves with the body system.[16] In a manner comparable to Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping, Haraway wants to apply coding to the social body in order to trace the shaping forces in late capitalist society. This type of coding has a twofold purpose: first, to mark and, thus, make the forces visible that shape our lives and, secondly, to find a point of entry from which to disrupt these forces. In strategic systems like the human body and the social body the crucial points in the transfer of information and in strategic operations lie at the interstices of one system with another. As Haraway puts it: "control strategies [...] concentrate on boundary conditions and interfaces, on rates of flow across boundaries" (204). The oppositional cyborg, if it codes carefully, can then slip through these boundaries.

The point of entry identified through coding is the starting point for what one could call the "negative" mode of cyborg politics. It is negative because of its disruptive intention. Haraway conceives of the interlocking strategic systems which coding maps out as networks. Traditional feminists and multinational capitalists "network," Haraway asserts. They link different systems and make connections. This is not cyborg practice. "Weaving," Haraway writes, "is for oppositional cyborgs" (212). Haraway evokes a common feminine handicraft in her image and, thus, links her work indirectly with older feminist theory which drew more explicitly on traditions like handicrafts. Cyborg weaving is, however, most emphatically not about bringing threads together to form a whole tablecloth, blouse, etc. Cyborg weaving retains the idea of diverse threads, but rejects the whole. The cyborg which Haraway connects with irony, partiality, speaking in tongues, and heteroglossia in her essay picks ups the threads in different systems in her path, connects them, but does not finish the pattern. The cyborg moves through the different strategic fields and threads them together, but not in a linear way and without the intention of thereby creating synthesis. On the contrary, weaving has the additional meaning of the indirect approach which veers to one side and then the next and perhaps even goes back. By circling, tracing, and crossing back across the field of contemporary experience the cyborg questions the borders of the strategic fields it crosses and problematizes their presentation as separate, discrete entities.

Susan Bordo sees this aspect of the cyborg as comparable with the archetype of the trickster. The cyborg weaving its way across the body politic is like the trickster a shape-

[16] For a more extensive discussion of the coding concept see Haraway's article "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse," in *American Feminist Though at Century's End: A Reader*, ed. Linda S. Kaufmann (Cambridge and Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 209f.

changer who continually changes personality and identity. This figure is especially appealing for feminists, she writes, because "it appears to celebrate a 'feminine' ability to identify with and to enter into the perspectives of others, to accept change and fluidity as features of reality." At the same time this archetype carries a certain danger with it which threatens the political viability of Haraway's construct. Bordo charges that the different variants of the trickster which have arisen through cultural studies' interaction with recent French philosophies lead to irresponsible theory making. Irresponsible in the sense that they never stop their shape-changing long enough to enter into dialogue and to take a position. Bordo states her case in the following way:

> Deconstructionist readings that enact this protean fantasy [of the trickster] are continually "slip-slidin away"; through paradox, inversion, self-subversion, facile and intricate textual dance, they often present themselves (maddeningly to anyone who wants to enter into critical dialogue with them) as having it any way they want. They refuse to assume a shape for which they must take responsibility. [17]

Haraway sees cyborg weaving as subversive. Given her idea of strategic systems and pressure fields she, like others influenced directly or indirectly by French thinkers like Foucualt and Derrida, apparently sees this as the only viable revolutionary practice left. While not dismissing the notion of intertwining systems Bordo suggests that the weaving Haraway proposes is not subversive enough. It provides for mild disturbance, but then dissipates without a trace. Bordo calls this irresponsible and, worst, suggests indirectly that such a strategy does not really challenge the system at all. The direction of her argument implies that the passing through of the cyborg should leave some kind of change, some sign, some mark. Simple movement is not enough.

Another way to phrase the question touched on by Bordo is to ask if the cyborg notion really succeeds in offering a new kind of politics or if it remains mired in the oppositional. In his discussion of postmodernism and cultural studies Steven Connor draws on the distinctions used by Michel Pêcheux to discuss identity. Pêcheux distinguishes between three modes of identity formation: identification, counteridentification, and disidentification. In Connnor's summary of Pêcheux's concepts "identification with a discourse means living withins its terms; counteridentification is the mode of the trouble-maker who stays within a governing structure or ideas, but reverses its terms; disidentification is the attempt to go beyond the

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[17] Bordo, Susan, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p. 144.

structure of oppositions and sanctioned negations supplied by a discourse."[18] Haraway's concepts clearly want to work through disidentification. The goal is to think and construct identity, to develop practices in ways which break with conventional modes focused on unitary principles like gender. Bordo suggests, however, that Haraway remains in the disidentificatory mode of the troublemaker in the sense that the cyborg does not alter existent structures. The examples given of real life cyborgs cited by Haraway tend to confirm the suspicion voiced by Bordo. One of Haraway's most vivid examples is the Livermore Action Group:

> I like to imagine the Livermore Action Group, LAG, as a kind of cyborg society, dedicated to realistically converting the laboratories that most fiercely embody and spew out the tools of technological apocalypse, and committed to building a political form that actually manages to hold together witches, engineers, elders, perverts, Christians, mothers, and Leninists long enough to disarm the state. (196)

Problematic in this example is the fact that these Leninists and perverts only work together because they are opposed to something, in this case the nuclear arms race, and it is the institution of arms production which holds them together. They do not seem to be a group banded together because of affinity in the sense of common origin, as Haraway wants to see them. Rather, Haraway's own rhetoric suggests that it is only opposition to an existing structure which unites them. In Haraway's words they are only together "long enough to disarm the state." This is, of course, a project which will take an extremely long time to say the least. Nevertheless, the point is that it is only in opposition that this group functions and as soon as their goal is reached they will disappear without a trace.

The incongruence between the theoretical ambitions of Haraway's project and the examples she gives is symptomatic of a general dilemma in current feminist theory and in political theory in general. As Wicke puts it, "postmodern feminism is trying to catch up to a reality we barely have a name for [...] with a feminism still involved in a straightforward identity politics."[19] In such a situation one can hardly expect an absolute match of theory and reality. Indeed, a tension between both is perhaps more productive as it provides impetus for change, reflection, and more effective action and theorizing. In any case, Haraway's concepts provide feminism with challenging new concepts to think about. In her essays Haraway proposes an interesting concept of identity which neatly evades the pitfall of essentialism and offers a way to think about multiplicity which goes beyond mere lip service to fragmentation,

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[18] Connor, Steven, *Postmodernist Culure: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 237.

[19] Wicke, "Postmodern Identities and the Politics of the (Legal) Subject," *boundary 2* 19:2, 1992, p. 33.

which itself has become a cliche in contemporary theory. For all its interest the idea of the cyborg is, however, only conceived of as a beginning. In a footnote to the 1990 version of the essay Haraway writes: "It has proved impossible to rewrite the cyborg. Cyborg's daughter will have to find its own matrix in another essay"(190). In this remark Haraway refers to her later treatment of the cyborg idea in her analysis of immune system discourses. It is simultaneously a call for continued thinking about the issues which she raised in her first piece of cyborg writing. The cyborg was conceived of in response to the political situation in the Reagan years. It was an attempt, in Haraway's words, "to find a feminist place for connected thinking and acting" (190). Cyborg's daughter has to address this need in the nineties and beyond. Although hooks and Haraway differ in the material which they look at, their style, and in some ways approach hooks' work does address this need for finding places for connected thinking and acting. Her model of a community which allows for connection while embracing difference is perhaps one of the new matrixes around which cyborg's daughter can be thought.

III. Building the "Beloved Community": Hooks' Path Between Difference, Yearning, and Love

The subject is not the only concept to have become controversial in recent theory. The ideal of community has also come under attack. All too frequently according to Waugh Lyotard's call to "wage war on totality" has meant a "hostile attitude towards [...] ideals of collectivism and community"[20] Interestingly enough, the hostility towards community and subject in much of contemporary thought revolves around the same catchword: difference. The denial of difference has emerged as the primary target of critique in contemporary debates about the subject in feminism and Iris Marion Young begins her critique of community with precisely this point:

> The ideal of community presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves. It thus denies the difference between subjects. The desire for community relies on the same desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism on the one hand and political sectarianism on the other.[21]

In an interview conducted for the anthology *Angry Women* hooks offers a critique of conventional concepts of community which echoes the points made by Young. She takes up Richard

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[20] Waugh, Patricia, "Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Patricia Waugh (London, New York, Melbourne, and Auckland: Edward Arnold, 1992), p. 189.

Rorty's argument in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* that whites in the United States could be in solidarity with black youth if they did not look at them as black and instead saw them as Americans and then makes the following observation:

> Rorty's idea is a whole notion of "If you can find yourself in the Other in such a way as to wipe out the Otherness, then you can be in harmony." But a "grander" idea is "Why do we have to wipe out the Otherness in order to experience a notion of *Oneness*?"[22]

The passage is not simply a critique of Rorty and his ideas. Her comments contain the challenge to think further than Rorty does. Moreover, her response sketches out what thinking further would mean in relation to community. The implicit goal of this rethinking is a concept of community which avoids the trap of effacing difference or, as she puts it "wiping out Otherness." The difference between subjects which Young also emphasizes must be maintained in community thinking. At the same time a "notion of oneness," a feeling of sameness needs to be present. This is necessary for the feeling of "we" in a community and in order to facilitate political action. As hooks notes in the same interview, "we're more strengthened when we can show the self-love expressed through bonding with those who are like ourselves." [23]

Trying to conceive of a community in this way is as challenging as thinking about cyborg identity and certainly fraught with as many potential Skylla and Charybdis figures. And it is a challenge which hooks repeatedly takes up in her writing. Indeed, community is practically a leitmotif of her theoretical work. In two of her most recent books *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* from 1994 and *Yearning* from 1990 hooks has offered some challenging new concepts to think about community which expand on the points she only sketches out in in the *Angry Women* interview. Both works are collections of essays. Some speak about community more directly and others only touch on the topic here and there. Thus, hooks does not offer a manifesto comparable to Haraway's text. In order to grasp the rethinking of community which hooks offers one has to look at the body of her recent work. In her varied thoughts on community there are in my opinion three main coordinates which are essential to hooks' community concept. Hooks' ideas about difference and the related concepts of the authentic and the personal form the first thematic complex to be examined. Then,

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[21] Young, Iris Marion. "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1989) ,p. 302.
[22] Hooks, bell, "Moving Into and Beyond Feminism: Just for the Joy of It," in *Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 234.
[23] *Ibid.* p. 216.

the interesting double foundation of her theoretical community can be more profitably looked at: yearning and love.

If there is one the which hooks is not it is demure. She speaks decisively and is pointedly provocative. Her critical voice has resonated particularly well in debates about cultural difference. In this debate she has been criticized for defending the essentialization of ethnic difference as a necessary step in political struggle as well as for privileging the notion of experience in her discussions of difference. Stuart Hall critiques this kind of privileging quite directly. In his essay "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture" he responds to hooks' defense of essentialism and Gayatri Spivak's call for strategic essentialism as a necessary moment in political struggle in the following way:

> The question is whether we are any longer in that moment[the strategic moment where essentialism is necessary], whether that is still a sufficient basis for the strategies of new interventions. [...] This moment essentializes differences in several senses. It sees difference as "their tradition versus ours," not in a positional way, but in a mutually exclusive, autonomous, and self-sufficient one.

Hall goes on to emphasize the danger created when this essentialized difference is linked to terms like experience and the authentic. "We tend," he observes, "to privilege experience itself, as if black life is lived experience outside of representation. We have only, as it were, to express what we already know we are."

Hall concludes that this strategy is insidious because it blinds us to the role of representation:

> It is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that welcome to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation, and we cannot wield "how life really is out there" as a kind of test against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular cultural strategy and, hence, this way of understanding.[24]

I have quoted Hall at such length because the danger which he describes is also the lurking danger which many see in hooks' discussions of difference. It seems quite a simple step to equate hooks' work with the tendency that Hall describes when you consider phrases in hooks' work like "the truth of our reality"[25] or "this is not a mythic notion [...] it comes from

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[24] Hall, Stuart, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace,* ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), pp. 29-30.

[25] Hooks, bell, "Love as the Practice of Freedom," in *Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994, p. 248.

lived experience."[26] I think, however, that we can read hooks in a different way than the reading suggested by Hall's argument. She certainly evokes experience in her writings, but not necessarily in order to postulate an essential black difference. Hooks herself destabilizes this notion of the authentic or the essential by on several occasions connecting difference with the idea of performance. Focusing on the personal in the sense of personal pain or one's own biography can be seen as "a moment of performance where you might step out of the fixed identity in which you were seen, and reveal other aspects of the self."[27] In this sense the moment of experience could be read as being compatible with the idea of a multi-faceted, non-unitary self and, thus, not conflatable with the notions of ethnic essence critiqued by Hall. At least by bringing in the notion of performance the possibility of having both the personal and the non-unitary as elements in a personal, pragmatic identity strategy is not necessarily foreclosed.

There is, however, another aspect of the personal moment in hooks' work which I would like to explore. The inclusion of personal or familial experience within the theoretical text is a hallmark of hooks' writing. The function of passages describing hooks' grandmother's home or the visit of two little girls from the neighborhood goes beyond the anecdotal. Hooks sets up a trajectory in her writing. The telos is the development of a heightened consciousness and critical ability which hooks calls "radical black subjectivity." The beginning of this development is the interaction with one's own biography and experience. Contemplating a sitting room or reflecting on the function of the front porch serve as the starting point for critical thinking and analysis. For her the process of becoming a subject "emerges as one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one's own life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness." In this function I like to see the autobiographical in hooks' work as a kind of *petit récit* or little narrative in the sense proposed by Lyotard. Rather than trying to explain the expanse of human history like the grand narratives of Hegelian dialectics or Marxism, the *petit récit* is a local, limited narrative. This little narrative about one's own experience, one's own position in the social fabric, the immediate locale in which one finds oneself provides the foundation for further analysis. In Lyotard's terms one might say that the construction and the awareness of this first narrative opens up the possibility of examining other language games. Through the first act of analysis in one's own

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[26] Hooks, bell, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) p.150.

locale one gains the critical tools to read in another context. Feminist theorists Sandra Harding and Bordo would also add that this grounding in the initial personal narrative helps to avoid a common pitfall in contemporary theorizing. In the wake of Lyotard's critique the condemnation of the God's eye view in theory has become practically unanimous. Harding and Bordo both describe this "divine" perspective as the "view from nowhere." Nowhere means that the subject of history in such theory ostensibly has his place outside of the system. The nowhere they speak of also suggest the idea of coming from no particular place. The theoretical subject in this sense covers up certain class and group interests inherent in the theory by not specifying his "place." In the general desire to correct such theoretical blind spots, however, new problems emerge. Efforts to diversify perspective lead to something which Harding terms the "view from everywhere" and Bordo calls the "dream of everywhere" Everywhere is, in essence, only another variation of nowhere. There is no focus and no clarification of position and interest. Hooks' personally inflected theory comes neither from nowhere, nor from everywhere. It is grounded in a particular place and time. Harding would see this as one strength of hooks' writing. Beyond that, beginning analysis with the personal *récit* is also a generally liberating move. If a disadvantaged group takes its own generally disvalued life as a starting point it means the development of new paradigms that are neither drawn from someone else's life nor dictated by the "view from nowhere." At the same time critics like Harding argue that this implies endowing such experience with new value in opposition to the devaluation which it conventionally undergoes.[28]

As potentially liberating as the personal *récit* as a foundation and touchstone for critical thinking might be, its potential comes with certain inherent weaknesses. As a grounds for legitimation in current cultural debates it has the stability of quick sand precisely because it is personal and subjective. In the court of public opinion, where claims are made regarding curricula, funding, and simply attention, one person's personal experience can only be pitted against another person's. Experience is neither observable, nor quantifiable. Thus, it cannot and should not be used to gain advantage in cultural debates about, for example, university studies. The story about a chat with the two neighborhood girls which hooks uses to introduce a critical perspective in *Yearning* does not suit as an argument for funding African American

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[27] Hooks, bell, "Moving Into and Beyond Feminism: Just for the Joy of It," in *Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 210.

[28] Please see Harding, Sandra, "Reinventing Ourselves as Other: More New Agents of History and Knowledge," in *American Feminist Thought at Century's End: A Reader*, ed. Linda S.Kaufmann (Cambridge and Oxford:

Studies. At worse, this use of the personal degenerates into a reiteration of clichés and the dialogue leaves the realm of real debate and sinks to the level of the melodramatic and confessional. When used in the manner, the recourse to experience can become a silencing technique: "I have suffered, so only I can legitimately speak." As deadly as such a position is to research and thinking is, it is a perceivable attitude on college campuses and, sometimes, in critical writing.[29]

The dangers attached to the used of the personal are all, unfortunately, pitfalls that hooks' work is not entirely free of. The personal as a starting point for critical thinking often slides too quickly into the vignette or something that sounds suspiciously like justification for a critical position. This tendency toward slipping and sliding about with the personal arises partly from a desire to be polemical, to raise the hackles of academia, and - I believe - to preserve significant practices of early feminism and African American studies. With its dissemination via t-shirts and bumper stickers the "personal is political" threatens to become another hackneyed, tired slogan. For scholars in Women's and African American Studies, however, the personal narrative has served as tool for raising awareness, honing analytical skills, and spurring political action. Writing personal essays in introductory Women's Studies courses, a standard assignment, is a product of this kind of thinking. As much as hooks wants to rile academia her writing is also a child of this tradition and can be read with other, more moderate feminist thinkers across the disciplines.

A glaring exception to the correspondence of hooks' work with that of other contemporary feminist scholars is the way in which she embraces the term subject. She links her concern with the personal narrative quite explicitly with the idea of the subject, that newly controversial term.[30] At a time when the term subject is so loaded -at least in the theoretical context - it seems quite provocative and problematic to so emphatically set subjectivity as a goal. But this attachment to the subject is not necessarily nostalgic nor reactionary. One cannot say that hooks is advocating the unitary subjectivity critiqued by people like Haraway. Her

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Blackwell, 1993) p. 144; Bordo, Susan, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p. 142ff.

[29] This argumentative strategy has even been known to provide a new twist to the beloved "the dog ate my homework" scenario. In a story much circulated among humanities majors during my undergraduate studies at the University of California, Irvine a student in an African American literature seminar attempted to explain why he had not completed an assignment with the words: "How can I write about this? I've never worked on a plantation." "Neither have I, " responded the rather disconcerted and black professor. The anecdote oscillates between the comic and the disturbing. The disturbing aspect is that the student was simply drawing the logical conclusion of a discourse which privilege experience as a means of legitimation.

comments on performance certainly would not support this. Rather than ignoring postmodernist thought, hooks is a careful reader and does not fall into the trap of equating the critique of the subject made by postmodernism with the general foreclosure of subjectivity. Indeed, she sees the interpretation of postmodernism as calling for the wholesale elimination of the subject as a misreading. It is, however, perhaps a constructive misreading in the sense that it gives feminist and cultural theorists the feeling that there is something that they have to defend. This newly instilled "fighting spirit" could provide the impetus for more polemical and more challenging criticism and, hooks might add, a more nuanced defense of the "positive" aspects associated with the traditional understanding of the subject. There are certain aspects which we associate with subjectivity that hooks wants to retain in her theory. Indeed, she insists on them. Being a subject means having a voice in our culture and in the context of the personal narrative it means being the subject of your own history. This does not mean that either the personal narrative or its subject are necessarily linear and unitary. One can have different selves, multiple voices. But these voices can be expressed and explored.[31] This exploration constructs the personal *récit* which I discussed earlier or, as hooks says at one point, provides a "blueprint" for further thought and action.[32] This then brings us to the second critical aspect of subjectivity for hooks. Being a subject means being the one who acts, not the one who is only acted upon, in short, the object. Subjectivity entails having a certain amount of control, the power of reflection, and of choice. It does not mean absolute power over one's fate and absolute independence like that which Benjamin Franklin, that cultural icon of liberal individual ideology, seems to possess. The self-made Franklin forges his way and continually refashions himself without any reflection of race, class, or gender barriers. The subject can also, in contrast to Franklin's evaluation of his situation, be bound in net of social obligations and institutional limits. Within this context the subject might not have absolute control, but certainly a degree of control or at the very least the potential for this control. In contrast to an object which is solely a means to an end or a victim a subject is someone who has the ability to makes choices. This capability dictates a certain treatment despite the situation in which the subject finds him or herself. An object or a victim can be pitied or patron-

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[30] Hooks, bell, "Radical Black Subjectivity," in *Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 15.

[31] Compare hooks, bell, "Moving Into and Beyond Feminism: Just for the Joy of It," in *Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 208 or "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), pp. 146-147.

[32] Hooks, bell, "Love as the Practice of Freedom," in *Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 248.

ized. In contrast, because of his/her potential autonomy a subject should be respected. Treating others with respect, as separate beings with dignity and the power of reflection and choice could be considered one of the "humanizing survival strategies" which hooks sees as critical to community building.[33]

The question is how subjects in hooks' sense come together in a community. Formulated in a slightly different way one could ask what upon which basis such a community might be built. Hooks emphasizes that community cannot simply be built on opposition. In a statement which parallels our discussion of the flaws in Haraway's examples of coalitions she says, "one has to build community on much deeper bases than "in reaction to."[34] An alternative model is, as Haraway would certainly also maintain, extremely difficult to develop. As hooks notes, we tend to set up "false frontiers." In her interview for the *Angry Women* anthology she defines this notion as the "idea that you make or construct someone as an enemy who you have to oppose, but who in fact may have more in common with you then you realize." [35] The challenge is not to see this commonality in relation to sameness in the sense of sexual preference, skin color, or gender. Hooks meets this challenge by suggesting a way of experiencing similarity on the basis of feeling.

Again, the trope of subjective experience with all of its dangers seems to rear its head. Community identity based on "feeling" alone appears to be a shaky construct at best. The idea, however, seems less to make feeling the underlying structure for identity than to use these terms to emphasize different modalities of the identification process than those which current debates focus on. Logically, every decision that "I am like so and so" involves a simultaneous decision that I am not like another person. Disparity and similarity build the two poles of identification. Hooks proposes a re-emphasis of the similarity pole via the terms yearning, which I will explore first, and love.

One of hooks' most recent essay collections is entitled *Yearning* and this term is the key to understanding what she means by "commonality of feeling.". In a typically personal framing of the question hooks relates an experience "At dinner last night when I looked around me across differences, I wondered "what is uniting us?" Yearning is the concept which answers her question:

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[33] Hooks, bell, "The Chitlin Circuit: On Black Community," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 39.
[34] Hooks, bell, "Moving Into and Beyond Feminism: Just for the Joy of It," in *Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 217.
[35] *Ibid.* p. 234.

> All of us across our different experiences were expressing this longing, this deep and profound yearning to have this oppression *end* [...] a yearning to just be in a more just world. So I tried to evoke the idea that if we could come together in that site of desire and longing, it might be a potential place for community-building. Rather than thinking we would together as "women" in an identity-based bonding we might be drawn together by a *commonality of feeling.*[36]

It is an evocative idea, but the question is if it really differs from conventional community models. I would argue that the answer is yes, if we see the oppositional model as the norm. Yearning differs from opposition as a basis for community building in a critical way. Yearning proceeds from the idea of lack, something missing within society and within us as part of society. Oppositional thinking does not necessarily contain this moment. It is anti-nuke, anti-war, anti-whatever. Very crudely formulated, the oppositional group operates by identifying a problem, labeling it "bad," and then working towards its elimination. This "bad" entity is outside of the group and the group remains focused on this external evil. In this process it often neglects to examine how the external evil might be implicated in the internal workings of the group. Besides the danger inherent in insufficient reflection of group dynamics, there is the acute danger that the institution which a group is opposed to, for example segregation, becomes the independent variable and the movement for social change the dependent variable. That means that as soon as the enemy disappears so do they because they have no basis for existence independent of opposition to a particular something and frequently no conceptions for alternative models. A community based on yearning also looks outside of itself. However, rather than trying to identify the primary external evil they try to perceive what is lacking in society. This lack is not necessarily solely outside of the group. Lack can also be within the group. Thus, framing the problem in terms of lack and desire to overcome this lack eliminates the artificial barrier between "us" and "society" which marks the rhetoric of so many political movements. In contrast to taking the oppositional position of simply being against social institutions and aiming towards elimination, they try to work towards remedying the lack within the institution and within the social fabric.

One could make the objection that this simply repeats the dynamics of a metanarrative like Marxism. Marxism also saw a lack - the alienation of work - and saw history as working dialectically towards the resolution of that lack -revolution. The comparison seems facile.

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[36] Hooks, bell, "Moving Into and Beyond Feminism: Just for the Joy of It," in *Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 217. Emphasis in the original.

The model which hooks sketches out clearly differs from the Marxist one. She neither wants to unite the international proletariat, nor totally change economic structures. I would argue, however, that these aspects do not really represent the key differences between hooks and Marxism. Far more critical is the fact that she does not emphasize the telos of political activity. It is rather the moment and movement of desire which she places in the foreground. This foregrounding echos contemporary thinking about desire influenced by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. According to Lacan absolute fulfillment of desire, the telos, is only a fantasy, a wish which can never be reached. The roots of this fantasy are to be found in early childhood when the baby experiences no difference between itself and the world. With the entry of language difference enters the infant's universe. The search to regain this feeling of undifferentiated oneness and absolute presence then becomes the motor of expression. The speaker moves through language, from one signifier to another trying to attain his goal. Fulfillment is impossible, but the movement of desire remains.[37] Hooks is no Lacanian, but the model she suggest offers a similar dynamic. She speaks of ideals like "justice," but she does not indicate that they must be fully achieved. In contrast, she speaks of a "more just world." These kinds of formulations do not imply the attainment of the absolute, rather movement. Important is the fact that the movement of desire towards an unattainable goal is potentially endless. It is not a movement which stops when an institution closes its doors, as in the case of oppositional politics. This sense of continuous activity fueled by desire is one extremely strong point in hooks' argument. Another promising part of the concept is the fact that the "commonality of feeling" which she speaks of provides a foundation for broad-based communities. As hooks states in another essay, "yearning is the word that best describes a common psychological state shared by many of us, cutting across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexual practice."[38]

A perhaps more threatening objection to this whole idea of yearning is that it only amounts to a correction of existing structures. To repeat the terms used by Pêcheux, it remains in the realm of counteridentification, rather than pointing towards disidentification. A less fundamental, but no less important question which hooks' yearning model alone does not answer is how tribalism could be avoided in communities based on yearning: tribalism in the sense of one kind of yearning dominating the rest. Hooks offers a corrective to this danger

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[37] Compare Lacan, Jacques, "Subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire," in *Écrits: A Selection* (New York and London: Norton, 1977), p. 292ff.

and a powerful model for disidentification in the second concept which builds the basis for her thinking on community: love.

Desire for change may be what brings people together in political struggle, but love is what enables profoundly different people to work together in ways which do not simply aim to eliminate difference. When asked, "how do we deal with difference?" hooks consistently responds with the love model. It is certainly the model of Christian love that she refers to, but when she speaks of love hooks frequently draws on our experiences of falling in love with someone to illustrate her point. When the topic of difference is broached in an interview she enters the theoretical terrain by connecting with precisely this experience: "What do you do when you meet somebody and are attracted to them? How do you go about making that communication? Why do you think that wanting to know someone who's 'racially' different doesn't have a similar procedure?"[39] In the love relationship which results from this reaching out to the other each person remains distinct, but together they form a whole. They are a couple, a family, and, when extended further, a potential community. When defining love hooks draws on the work of another feminist scholar: Linell Cady. In her essay "A Feminist Christian Vision" Cady defines love in the following, evocative way:

> Love is a mode of relating that seeks to establish bonds between the self and the other, creating unity out of formerly detached individuals. It is a process of integration where the isolation of individuals is overcome through the forging of connections between persons. These connections constitute the emergence of a wider life including yet transcending the separate individuals. This wider life that emerges through the loving relationship between selves does not swallow up individuals, blurring their identities and concerns. It is not an undifferentiated whole that obliterates individuality. On the contrary, the wider life created by love constitutes a community of persons. In a community, persons retain their identity, and they also share a commitment to the continued well-being of the relational life uniting them.[40]

The love model proposed by Cady and hooks is certainly a compelling model for what interpersonal relationships could be, but what does it mean precisely? It certainly does not signify that one loves everyone as one loves one's significant other, rather it suggests that one's relations to others should be analogous to relations within a love relationship. Con-

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[38]Hooks, bell, "Postmodern Blackness," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 27.

[39] Hooks, bell, "Moving Into and Beyond Feminism: Just for the Joy of It," in *Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p.219.

[40] Cady, Linell, "A Feminist Christian Vision" quoted in Hooks, bell, "The Chitlin Circuit: On Black Community," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 35.

cretely this would entail a respect of difference as well as an acknowledgement of connection. These two moments are the cornerstones of what we could call the love ethic. But what are the ramifications of relating to people within the boundaries of a love ethic? Hooks' believes that the one of the first consequences is a correction of egoism within political struggle. She observes that "often [...] longing is not for a collective transformation of society, an end to politics of domination, but rather simply for an end to what is hurting us." Love is needed to, as she puts it, "intervene in our self-centered longings for change."[41] Love accomplishes this because we see the other as connected to us and we, thus, give up the notion of absolute separateness which is the nurturing ground for egoism. The love ethic is then not only a corrective for selfishness. Within theory it also helps to allay critical blind spots like marginalization and fantasies of mastery in the discourse of difference. Hooks charges that discussions about the other often only serve to marginalize the other. Even worse, the discussion ends up being an appropriation of the other. Hooks writes:

> Often this speech about the "Other" annihilates, erases: "No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak abut yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk."

Hooks offers a simple, curt response to this kind of discourse: "Stop." This kind of theorizing, this mode of viewing the world needs to stop and the alternative she gives to this encounter with the other, which amounts to a marginalizing and essentializing of the author within a narrative of mastery, is love. The love ethic corrects such tendencies in theory, but love suggests more than that. When hooks talks about love she is really theorizing about a radically new, disidentificatory mode of conceiving identity, community, and interpersonal relationships. This is not the love of greeting cards and Hollywood movies. It is revolutionary love that she wants.

The combination of love and revolution is, of course, not hooks' own invention. By speaking of love and social change she draws on a powerful, religiously tinged rhetoric. This becomes most apparent in her most focused essay on the topic of love and social transformation: "Love as the Practice of Freedom" in *Outlaw Culture*. In the course of her argument she

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[41] Hooks, bell, "Love as the Practice of Freedom," in *Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 244.

repeatedly draws on the teachings Martin Luther King Jr. and explicitly points to his "beloved community" as a model for her thinking. King saw this community as a group of people who had overcome their racism in order to live together. He posited love as the answer to the problems facing the planet. These problems are so grave, however, that love as a corrective is insufficient. Love as disidentification is needed and this is point where hooks begins to argue in a very interesting way. The term hooks chooses to express what this disidentification via love would mean is also a religious one:

> As long as we refuse to address fully the place love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a *culture of conversion* where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination.[42]

In the biblical tradition conversion means turning away from sin and turning to God. For hooks conversion clearly means a turning away from domination and marginalization and towards a new, wholly different mode of being. This mode is in hooks' eyes the love model which she presents in her work. For, as she states in her essay on love, "a culture of domination is anti-love. It requires violence to sustain itself. To choose love is to go against the prevailing values of this culture."[43] And in this sense "against" is not an oppositional against. It is an against which signifies going against the grain of thought. Simply put, to think love in this way, to love as part of a conversion experience is to practice disidentifaction. This is, at least, what it could be.

It is rare to hear this much about love outside of a greeting card shop, but what hooks is striving to do is, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. It is a perilous venture at best. Institutional religion and religious rhetoric have in recent years become the domain of political conservatives. Indeed, the preservation of the status quo and religion have frequently worked hand in hand. Even when religious activity was subversive, it often had a "vent" function and, thus, was only a means to preserve social stability. By using religious rhetoric hooks is trying to infuse the church idiom with the revolutionary potential King saw in it. It is also a populist move, in the positive sense of the word. Her theorizing about disidentification does not use the elitist, theoretical vocabulary of postmodern theory. She theorizes in a language familiar to Americans across the social spectrum. With terms like conversation and love ethic one could, for example, quite effectively organize a march on Washington or an activist group. This is due to the fact that the terms are immedi-

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[42] *Ibid.* p. 243. My emphasis, MSK.
[43] *Ibid.* p.246.

ately recognizable and, thus, have a greater immediate impact than terms which have to be explained and adjusted to like the cyborg alliance

The advantages of using the tools provided by the religious idiom are apparent, but such a strategy could nonetheless easily backfire. As I already stated, in today's political landscape right wing groups have staked out the religious metaphor as their own. Liberal attempts to reclaim this terrain could be quite easily sabotaged. The voice of hooks and others could be quite easily be drowned out by the more powerful discourse coming from fundamentalist Christians and politicians appealing to this constituency. Perhaps even more threatening for hooks' project is the possibility that this discourse might assimilate a call for conversion and love and use it for its own purposes.

A greater danger is the fact that well-known discursive frameworks always come with their share of cultural baggage. Hooks is trying to adapt Christian rhetoric to her critical project, but Christianity has its share of unattractive hand luggage. A tradition of misogyny and the justification of oppression through a valorization of meekness and timidity are two just rather discomfiting elements of the Christian tradition which cannot necessarily be neatly excised through attempts to "revamp" church rhetoric. A reliance on known categories like the ones provided by Christian thought can also be potentially blinding. As Haraway might point out, our situation has changed since the 60's when King used the model of the beloved community to mobilize people. Considering the changes since then can we take up such a model today or has the cultural terrain changed too much for it to be effective? Which problems can it not address? Which situations does it offer no answers to? More radically: What do we miss if we rely on such models? Related to these questions is also the objection that love and yearning used to emphasize the similar rather than the different in the identification process only remains on the surface of the problem. Shifting emphasis is perhaps not enough. Maybe it is the structure itself and not its coordinates that needs shaking up.

For all the potential dangers in hooks' rethinking of community, her thoughts offer a different spin on Wicke's comments about feminist theory. Wicke sees feminist theory trying to catch up with situation we do not even have a name for. The suggestion in Wicke's argument is that we need new concepts to deal with this nameless new situation so unsatisfactorily labeled "postmodern." Hooks' theorizing suggests that this search for the new might be the false path. If hooks is working on a new a matrix for the cyborg, for that odd creature which postmodern forces has made of us, then it is not the Hubble telescope or a moon landing which provide the basis for this matrix. On the contrary, it is only by turning the microscope

of analysis on oneself which opens up the possibility for new configurations in hooks' theory. Love, conversion, desire - all emotions and terms in daily experience and familiar discourse- serve as the basis for new models which allow difference to be embraced and connections to be forged at the same time. Concern with the personal as a basis for reflection which so emphatic in hooks' work thus extends to the search for new models to negotiate the Skylla and Charybdis monsters threatening theory.

In all this rethinking, however, the image of lurking dangers and feminist theory as a perilous journey implied in the Skylla and Charybdis also perhaps needs to be rethought before we can conclude our encounter with radical cyborgs and yearning, loving communities.

IV. Conclusion: From Navigation to the Dance

In trying to place the theoretical constructs developed by Haraway and hooks in context I choose a strategy which suggested danger and crisis. Hartsock's evocation of paranoia was the starting point and the Skylla and Charybdis motif structured my argument. The tone thereby set was one which emphasized the precariousness and the difficulties confronting feminist theory today.

There are, of course, certain advantages to thinking of the current situation as a crisis. Apathy might be avoided and a "crisis" mentality could lead to more polemical, more challenging criticism. There are, however, other models which one could use to contextualize recent feminist theorizing. Rather than talking about navigating between monsters, one could speak of the dance as Annette Kolodny does, while still emphasizing potential dangers, in her important essay "Dancing Through the Minefield" or as Derrida does in his influential interview with Christie V. McDonald "Choreographies." In contrast to the navigational image I used, the idea of dance suggests a movement which has its own dynamic instead of having its steps determined by the evasion of potential pitfalls. Conceived in this way, hooks and Haraway are not dodging bullets and crossing minefields and feminism is not a reaction to a crisis. Both women are, in contrast, engaged in a vital, dynamic field of inquiry . Thought of in this way, they are simply doing what feminists should do: thinking, imagining, and theorizing in different and challenging ways.

To change the terminology a bit one could say that Haraway and hooks are not navigators, not theorists, not activists, but first and foremost dancers and especially skilled ones at that who dare to do more than the standard two-step. Their moves on the dance floor of contemporary critical inquiry are closer to revolutionary improvisations full of surprises and

challenges. New ways of looking at personal identity, community concepts, and the postmodern situation are only isolated steps in their varied repertoires. Given the variety of their writings and the differences in their approaches how can one summarize the moves which this paper has tried to trace? There is perhaps no more appropriate summary of hooks' and Haraway's "identity dance" than the motto offered by Derrida at the beginning of his interview with McDonald and, thus, no more appropriate conclusion to this examination of feminist theory in the postmodern era:

> Let us play surprise. It will be our tribute to the dance. [44]

[44] Derrida, Jacque and Christie V. McDonald, "Choreographies," *Diacritics* 12: 1982, p. 66.

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