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FEMINIST THEORY AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

CARTOGRAPHIES OF GRACE

SERENE JONES

GUIDES TO
THEOLOGICAL
INQUIRY

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For Charis Augusta Parsons Jones
and her future

FEMINIST THEORY AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY
Cartographies of Grace
Guides to Theological Inquiry series

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phases. Kalbryn McLean and Shelly Rambo gave deft form to this book in ways too numerous to name.

This book and its many maps would not exist if it were not for the encouragement and constant guidance of Kathryn Tanner, my editor, good friend, former teacher, and, of course, a brilliant theologian. My sisters Verity Jones, Kindy Jones, Cornelia Dinnean, and Tamara Jones continue to teach me what sisterhood means, and my parents, Sarah Jones and Joe Jones gave me the gift of a feminist spirit from the time I was born. The bright landscapes of Shepard Parsons, both painted and lived, serve as a palate for much of what I say here; he vividly colors my world (and my maps) in so many ways. Because Lynne Huffer and I have intellectually and soulfully dwelled so closely together over the past ten years, I find it difficult to say which parts of this book are mine and which are hers; we map together. And finally, I offer prayers of thanksgiving for the wee soul, Charis Augusta Parsons Jones, whose daily shouts of joy both keep me writing and make me not want to write. If her feminist spirit is any indication of things to come, the future is not only bright; it is intensely so.

1

Mapping Feminist Theory and Theology

My family and friends jokingly refer to the third Tuesday of every month as Serene's "feminist day." After getting my daughter to day care by eight o'clock, I prepare for the afternoon class on feminist theory I teach to seminary and undergraduate students. I love teaching this class; the students' eagerness to learn about recent trends in feminism is inspiring, and their own feminist feistiness keeps me on my toes. After teaching, I hurry to the monthly faculty meeting of the Women and Gender Studies Council. There, our conversations typically focus on how to run an effective academic program, although we also discuss feminist theory. I am the only theologian (and divinity school professor) on the council, and we rarely discuss religious matters, although when the topic comes up, these very secular colleagues listen to me with care and respect. Years of fighting for women in the trenches of the university have built strong bonds of trust among us, and out of these bonds has grown an atmosphere of mutual learning, even about a topic like theology.

After the council meeting, I walk to my local church parish house in downtown New Haven to join a monthly "Tuesday-night women's group" for dinner. We represent a diversity of ages, races, classes, and sexual orientations (to name only a few of our differences), yet a shared history and faith bind us together. We have done many things together over the years, but the most important has been to talk with each other about our lives and faith. We read Scripture and reflect on what it means for us—exhausted women living in the new millennium—to believe in a triune God whose grace embraces us and opens us to life abundant.

As I share in those discussions, reflections on grace intermingle with thoughts about my daughter, my students, my faculty colleagues, and this group of friends. I talk about the feminist theory I have been teaching all day and how it has given me new ways to understand our stories and struggles. I

wonder how grace touches us and enlivens us here and now, and how feminist theory might help us see this. To my surprise, my gathered friends always want to hear more, particularly about feminist theory; they want to know about its importance for theology and its effects on understanding God's grace. Though I am the only trained theologian and feminist theorist in the room, the other women have their own expertise concerning matters like gender, God, grace, and the messy complexity of daily living. These women remind me again and again that high theory and local wisdom make wonderful companions.

I offer this description of my "feminist Tuesday" because it sets the context for the reflections that unfold in the pages ahead.¹ My faculty colleagues in Women and Gender Studies make me appreciate feminist theory and its social environment. The folks in my Tuesday-night group force me to think about the applicability of feminist theory to the lives of ordinary women and to struggle honestly with the theological issues it raises. My divinity and undergraduate students help me appreciate the subtlety of play that can exist between theory and theology and the hope to which this gives rise.

In conversation with these communities, this book explains what feminist theory is and illustrates its relevance to contemporary theology. Students of theology have much to learn from feminist theory, I believe. It deepens our understanding of human identity and community and opens up new avenues for understanding the Christian theological tradition and its view of divine grace. I also believe that feminist theory has much to learn from theology, but alas, that topic awaits another time.

Feminist Theory

When I first explained feminist theory to the women in the Tuesday-night group, I had to deal with their fears about the enterprise as a whole. They thought of feminist theory as a specialized discipline carried on by highly trained scholars and analysts, and they felt they lacked the necessary qualifications for doing theory—such qualifications as having a Ph.D. in philosophy, reading French, and understanding the finer points of structuralist semiotics. To them, feminist theory seemed an ivory-tower enterprise with little practical relevance. Yet, as I went over debates in feminist theory, these attitudes quickly changed. They realized that topics feminist theory discusses in highly technical (and sometimes off-putting) terms were immediately applicable to their daily lives. While not engaged in the abstract theorizing of the feminist scholars explored in this book, they realized they already practiced a kind of lay feminist theory when, for instance, they reflected on the conditions of their lives and asked about the role gender

plays in them. Suspending their suspicions, they became eager to learn as much as they could from the material I introduced to them.

What is feminist theory?² Although women have been engaged in philosophically rigorous reflections on the conditions of their lives for centuries, the term "feminist theory" has a short history. Emerging in the newly born field of Women's Studies during the 1970s in North American universities, the term describes a collection of feminist texts with shared goals, practices, and assumptions. Although focusing on a collection of writings, feminist theory also includes the conversations of women that bring these texts to life. I therefore describe feminist theory as a collection of critical texts and a conversation—and not as a discrete academic field. Feminist theorizing is not limited to a particular discipline but takes place in almost every department of the university (in sciences as well as the humanities) and in many places outside the university (in government policy offices as well as in national women's organizations and local women's Bible-study groups).

What do these texts and conversations share? A number of ideals mark their common aspirations, although they may not always live up to them. First, they share a common goal, namely, the liberation of women. This goal makes these works "feminist": they struggle against the oppression of women and for their empowerment. This commitment is not abstract; it is grounded in political movements that actively seek change. For the earliest feminist theorists, this meant standing in service to the "women's movement."³ More recently, this commitment has involved linking theory to diverse sites of struggle where women and others seek to overturn oppression, such as national Gay and Lesbian Pride marches, neighborhood rape crisis centers, and international solidarity networks. For this reason, feminist theory often refers to itself as a kind of political practice. Just as one would call forming a tenant organization a form of political action, so, too, feminist theory represents a form of oppositional political action, albeit one with unique tools.

To understand these tools, one must see why feminist theory emerged in the first place, why the women's movement needed people doing research and writing in a mode called theory. From the outset, the goal of liberating women had two aspects. First, feminists sought to identify the various forms of oppression that structured women's lives, and second, they imagined and sought to create an alternative future without oppression. What soon became apparent, however, was that oppression is not always easy to name. In fact, because oppression affects the very way one thinks about oneself and one's world, it is often quite difficult to even see, much less name. Oppression makes itself invisible, distorts vision, and twists thought. Similarly, it is hard to envision new ways of living when everything one experiences is rooted in old, oppressive forms of knowing and acting.

What theory offered to feminists in this context was an opportunity to self-consciously analyze the thought processes involved in naming oppression and imagining a new future. To do theoretical analysis is to analyze thought itself, its assumptions and its rules. Put succinctly, theory analyzes the signposts (orders, rules, assumptions) that structure and direct thought. When feminists “do theory,” they look at individual and collective thought processes and ask about the grounding assumptions, orders, and rules that actively but often invisibly contribute to both the oppression and the ultimate flourishing of women. The multiplicity of such assumptions and rules requires feminists to do their analysis at many different levels—language, emotions, physical expressions, institutional forms, economic systems, and so on—and in many different places—at home and in offices, laboratories, synagogues, mosques, churches, courtrooms, and university lecture halls, to name just a few.

In this book, I look at what feminist theorists have discovered about the rules of their various academic disciplines. For example, in the hard sciences, feminist theorists question one of the discipline’s traditional Enlightenment assumptions, namely, that science can be and is objective—unbiased, factual, unquestionable. As another example, feminists working in political science and legal studies use theory to suggest that basic assumptions concerning the existence of “the free, property-owning citizen” are not only deeply problematic and illusory but also dangerous. Likewise, in the area of economics, feminists question the assumption that unpaid domestic work and wage labor are fundamentally different species of work. Challenging assumptions like objectivity, freedom, and the division of labor is no small matter, and when feminist theorists do it, the results are monumental and controversial.

These examples of theoretical work may seem far removed from the broader culture and the more common signposts of thought that order our everyday lives. Don’t these more common rules and directions need interrogating as well? In answering this question, feminists argue that the assumptions of academic disciplines are mirrored in more general cultural values. I have certainly found this to be the case. For example, when I go to the grocery store, I usually assume (along with scientists) that the label on the cereal box is “objectively true”; I act (along with political scientists) as if I am “freely” buying food for tomorrow’s breakfast; and I assume (in concert with economists) that time spent shopping is not “work time” but “leisure time.” Using feminist theory, however, I can ask, how might a nutritional label be an advertising ploy, designed to sell the product to women and not just to inform me about facts? I can ask as well: Is choosing cereal a useful way to understand “freedom”? Or similarly, if I need to buy this cereal to eat and

have energy for my job, why is the time I spend considered “leisure”? Perhaps because it’s “women’s work”?

While it may seem trivial, this example makes an important point about the scope of feminist theory’s project: this theory reaches into not only the academy but also the most personal dimensions of everyday living. Recognition of this fact has led feminist theorists to point out that many “texts” in our culture participate in feminist theorizing outside the mainstream academic disciplines. In poets and novelists, feminists have often found the voice of critique and reconstruction powerfully articulated on questions of identity, history, and community.⁴ Through moving chords of music and song, persons have experienced new sounds and ways of hearing feminist thought. Through the eyes of visual artists and filmmakers, dominant conceptions of agency and space have been creatively questioned and reworked by feminists.⁵ While these cultural “texts” are not usually considered feminist theory, they are places where feminists have blurred the borders between the academic disciplines and popular culture to great effect.⁶ Along with feminist theory, they share an imaginative and contestatory practice aimed at critiquing thought and its most treasured conceptual markers.

I hope these introductory comments about feminist theory help clarify the subject matter of this book. The book’s ideas will become even clearer when, in the course of the chapters ahead, one has the chance to see what feminist theory actually does. To facilitate this clarification, a few more comments are needed to orient readers to the markers that direct and structure feminist theory itself. Not surprisingly, feminist theory, like all thought, has its own rules, grounding concepts, and (often hidden) assumptions. Although changing constantly, they form a loose nexus of assumptions within which feminist theory locates itself.

As I explained earlier, feminist theorists hold that what makes their work feminist is a commitment to participating in the struggle against the oppression of women and for their liberation. Several aspects of this claim clarify the grounding concepts of feminist theory. First, feminist theorists focus on women not because they believe no other group of persons is worthy of critical analysis or because liberating women is the sole key to liberating the world. They do so because women’s lives have long been ignored as a subject of critical reflection and because of a sense of urgency related to the present-day harms being done to women. In feminist theory, this decision to put intellectual energies in places where it is needed most is referred to as a “preferential option” for women.⁷

This preferential option for women is qualified, however, by a second feature of feminist theory. Anyone who reflects on women’s lives knows that the fate and future of women can never be separated from the fate and future of

all persons and of the planet as a whole. Feminist theorists acknowledge this interconnection. Their concern is not only for the liberation of women but for *all* who are broken, physically and in spirit, by the oppressions of our world. Feminists emphasize the inclusive scope of the future for which they struggle by saying: "We are struggling for the liberation of women and *all people*."⁸ Feminist theorists know that if women were emancipated, all oppression would not suddenly disappear, and they recognize how women's oppression is intertwined with other forms of oppression, such as racism, poverty, exploitation, heterosexism, ageism, and discrimination against children and the disabled, to name only a few. Appreciating the complexity of interlocking oppressions is crucial to the work of feminist theory, and I return to this topic and treat it at great length in chapter 2.

This discussion of interlocking oppressions and inclusive liberation leads to yet a third clarification concerning the goal of feminist theory. As stated earlier, feminism sees its fundamental task as identifying oppression and changing the social systems that perpetuate injustice. But is this the only thing that drives the theory? As I show in the pages ahead, there is much more to women's lives and to feminist theory than accounts of oppression. There are, for example, the complex dimensions of lives that have survived and flourished throughout the centuries into the present, even in situations of wrenching violence and despair; these lives need to be studied and celebrated. For this reason, the flourishing of women is the subject of constructive feminist analysis and the source of some of its most creative insights. Feminist theorists lift up many different aspects of this flourishing of women—respect for their bodily integrity and creativity as well as social conditions and relations of power marked by mutuality and reciprocity. Feminist theorists also recognize the rich cultural and historical differences of women's experiences in various eras, geographical locations, communities, and ethnicities, differences that are not simply examples of either oppression *or* flourishing. As such, feminist theory tries to hold its analysis of women's oppression in tension with an appreciation for both the flourishing of women and the complex "givenness" of their multiple circumstances. In doing so, feminist theory views women not only as history's victims but as its active agents and ever-engaged protagonists as well.

This brings me to a fourth, extremely important clarification of feminist theory's overall project. Respecting differences in the lives of women requires that feminist theorists listen carefully to the varied experiences of *all* women and avoid too quickly imposing upon them theoretical categories that do not fit. This means attending to women's accounts of their lives *in their own words*, according to their own narratives. This turn to story expands the scope of feminist theory as a whole; in telling and listening to women's

stories, we discover new rules, assumptions, and categories of thought that provide new material for feminists both to analyze and critique and to explore constructively and use.⁹

This listening to women's diverse voices is happening in many areas. For example, in womanist thought, African American women are developing new analytic categories appropriate to their historically specific experiences and stories.¹⁰ Latina women are constructing *mujerista* analysis to understand better and describe the unique experiences of Latina and Chicana women.¹¹ Native American women are giving theoretical form to thoughts and stories that structured their traditions and practices and are critically expanding the scope of our present-day understandings of women's lives.¹² European American women are beginning to see how their experience is not normative for all women but the product of their own heritages. Lesbians are contributing to the feminist conversation as they reveal the dynamics that accompany being women who love women in a culture that privileges heterosexuality. And the growing wealth of theory related to disabled women's lives is expanding the horizons of feminist theory by challenging age-old assumptions about bodies, work, and community. The list goes on as more women claim the particularities of their lives as subjects worthy of theoretical reflection.

This focus on differences among women brings me to a fifth clarification concerning feminist theory's goal of critiquing oppression and advocating the liberation of women. In recent years, the meaning of the term "women" has come under scrutiny in feminist studies. Questions have emerged, such as: Do women constitute a stable group that can be analyzed and liberated? Differences among women seem to make it impossible to speak of ourselves as a single human collective, and yet feminists assume some sort of unity among women. But on what basis is this unity constituted? Does "women" refer to a social class? A biological genus? A historical group? Or is it a meaningless fabrication? To this last question, most feminists answer, No! They insist that the category "women" serves an important political and analytic function in their work. Exactly what this function is, however, remains an issue of debate. The weight of this debate has been felt with particular force in feminist discussions of "identity" and "human nature"; because both terms play a crucial role in feminist theory, I treat them extensively in the next chapter.

One of the most significant effects of this debate over the term "women" is the emergence of the term "gender" as an analytic category for feminist thought. These days, it is not unusual to hear talk of gender studies, gender-bending, or gender-inclusive language. What does "gender" refer to here? In the next chapter, I discuss the term at length, setting it in the context of its

development and highlighting its nuances for different theorists. For now, however, a simple definition suffices. *Gender* is distinguished from the term *sex*, which refers to the physiological differences between men and women. In contrast to *sex*, *gender* refers to culturally constructed systems of meaning that identify various things—persons, ideas, gods, institutions, and so on—according to the binary categories of “women/men” or “feminine/masculine.”¹³ To capture the dynamic process whereby these categories define and identify things in a given culture, feminists often speak of how things are “gendered” or of “gendered constructions.” These terms emphasize the feminist contention that societies and persons create and are created by systems of meaning. These systems are in turn ruled by assumptions about binary gender differences that are not natural but produced by social convention. When one speaks about “gender” or offers a “gender analysis,” one is trying to decipher the varied ways in which gendered categories are deployed to create meaning and identity in a given social context.

The contexts of such analysis are quite varied. For example, one can apply gender analysis to a television advertisement for paper towels, noting how gender roles for women and men are enacted in interesting and complex ways around a diner’s front counter (where a female waitress in a dress cleans up a spill made by a male truck driver in work pants) and highlighting how the paper towel is given a masculine gender (“tough on stains”) just as the spill is feminized (“messy and unruly”). Similarly, in a more traditionally academic context, gender analysis can be used to uncover the dynamic gendered meanings attributed to such philosophical concepts as matter, fluid, chaos, order, mind, body, beauty, goodness, and truth as well as more concrete things like boats, buildings, nations, and leaders. This kind of analysis is important because changing oppressive ways of thinking about the construction of “women” involves unpacking oppressive gendered ways of thinking about *all* reality. As feminist theory constantly reminds us, the gendered assumptions of Western thought run deep in the conceptual bedrock of our language and hence in all of our experience.

One might ask at this point, haven’t terms like “oppression,” “liberation,” and “women” now been so expanded and qualified that the goals of feminist theory no longer make sense? Many of feminist theory’s central terms, indeed, are presently up for grabs. This indeterminacy of terms is, however, partially an intended consequence of feminist theory itself, for practitioners of feminist theory enjoy taking a common and seemingly perspicuous term (like “women”) and uncovering its hidden meanings and its multiple social functions. They hope this will enable people to determine better when oppressive assumptions about gender are at work in language and thought and when not. They hope, as well, that playing with established meanings

will create room for hearing the marginal, the exiled, and the insurgent voices of women discounted by the dominant culture. Thus, in the world of feminist theory, indeterminacy is not always viewed as a problem; sometimes it is seen as a promise of new things to come.

The flip side of feminist theory’s sometimes playful view of language and its indeterminacy is its commitment to developing stable, normative criteria for assessing oppression and measuring the liberating structure of a new future. Far from promoting an “anything goes” attitude toward life, many (although not all) feminist theorists develop cultural standards, values, and ethical rules that can be used to make judgments about right and wrong, truth and falsehood, justice and injustice, and freedom and enslavement. Without such normative criteria, a term like “oppression” makes no sense—one needs a framework for naming injustice, and one needs justice to discern when oppression occurs. Similarly, without norms, a notion such as liberation loses its content and meaning—one needs some concept of freedom to imagine what liberation looks like. Should these terms lose their meaning and force, feminist theory would be emptied of the prophetic, emancipatory impulses that drive it. The need for normative criteria does not imply, however, that such norms are easy to discern, much less to justify or implement. In the chapters ahead, I explore models that feminist theorists have developed for sorting through these issues, models that try to hold in tension the feminist commitment to diversity, critique, and playful indeterminacy, on the one hand, and, on the other, an abiding concern to give specific content to terms like “justice” and “truth.” In current feminist theory, this tension is most vividly felt in discussions of three specific topics: women’s nature, oppression, and community. These are the three themes around which my discussion of feminist theory is built.

One final comment about this broad definition of feminist theory and its rules, norms, and goals. Over the years of my involvement in feminist political action, I have been repeatedly struck by feminism’s undaunted predilection for the future. Feminism has always been sustained by the belief that things can get better. This hope is reflected in the theory that comes out of the movement. When a feminist theorist challenges a given social structure, one can be fairly sure that lurking behind her challenge is an imaginative construal of a liberating alternative. Similarly, when a feminist theorist makes normative claims about things such as human nature and the character of justice in gender relations, one can be certain that her argument holds a vision of a better, possible future. To be sure, these images of the future often remain blurry and fragmentary. They are visions that need development and clarification; at the same time, they remain open enough to welcome the emergent insights of each new generation of feminists.

In my experience, these hopes and visions of women flourishing are not usually naively utopian or otherworldly. Rather, they are marked by a pragmatic realism grounded in the experience feminists have gained in years of work to change social systems and reconstruct social institutions. In this sense, the future that feminist theorists imagine is one that has already left its mark, often as a barely discernible imprint, upon the face of history. It is a future that is both “already” and “not yet” present in history. Using theological language, I refer to this predilection for the future as feminist theory’s *pragmatic eschatological orientation*. Naming its eschatology thus highlights feminist theory’s leanings toward that which is to come. As this book will show, this eschatological dimension of feminist theory crucially shapes my understanding as a Christian feminist of the relation between feminist theory and theology.

Feminist Theology

The purpose of this book, as I said earlier, is not simply to introduce feminist theory; I want also to illustrate its relevance to Christian theology and its many traditions. This second task is the most distinctive contribution of this project: there are a number of general introductions to feminist theory, but few written specifically for persons with theological interests and faith-related questions.¹⁴ In the pages ahead, readers should exercise their own expertise in making everyday theological judgments. Just as the theoretical portions of this book need to be tested against the readers’ practical experiences of being women and men in today’s world, so too the theological reflections I offer here need to be measured against the lived experiences and traditions of persons who seek to know God truly and to live faithfully.

Given the breadth of topics covered by feminist theory, I could bring this theory into productive conversation with any number of theological questions, themes, figures, doctrines, or schools of thought. For example, it could be used to open up new avenues of exploration in fields such as Christian ethics, biblical studies, church history, preaching, and pastoral care.¹⁵ Likewise, it could be applied to such traditional Christian themes as the cross, salvation, the nature of God’s providence, and the ever present problem of evil and suffering. It could be used as well to throw new light on social issues with which today’s Christians struggle—the environmental crisis, reproductive rights for women, the intransigent injustices of racism, and the increasing poverty of most of the world’s population. At the same time, it could also assist in clarifying more ordinary tasks like teaching a child to look at art, deciding which hymns to sing on Sunday morning, and figuring out what the church should do with an unexpected estate gift. As stated

earlier, feminist theory deploys its analytic tools upon even the most minute details of our cultural thought processes; no topic is too insignificant or too preciously important—from communion cups and old hymnals to abstract doctrines and wrenching existential questions—not to benefit from conversations with feminist theory.

In this book, however, I touch on only a fraction of these many topics. I bring feminist theory into conversation with my own field: Christian feminist systematic theology informed by doctrines of the Reformation traditions. Although limiting the conversation in this manner leaves out many voices and theological issues, it allows me to explore in detail how feminist theory can inform the thought patterns of one particular tradition. In my experience, feminist theory is most illuminating when applied to a *particular* system of thought and *specific* imagistic patterns of reflection. This sharp focus allows feminist theory to show its relevance to the complex weave of ideas and images that constitute a tradition. One can then appreciate the subtle ways feminist theory informs theology, often with the turn of a phrase or the twist of an image. Such a sharp focus also has the practical advantage of engaging a discrete (but not isolated) theological tradition that continues to shape people’s lives in specific and discernible ways.

How might one define the narrowed field of feminist, constructive, systematic theology in the Reformation tradition that I bring into conversation with feminist theory? As the women in my Tuesday-night group continually remind me, the technical language of theology can be as off-putting and inaccessible as the language of feminist theory. To avoid this, let me offer brief definitions of five facets of the arena in which I work as a feminist theologian: “Christian theology,” “feminist theology,” “constructive systematic theology,” “doctrinal theology,” and “Reformed theology.”

Let’s first explore what it means to say I engage in “Christian” theology, and then second, what it means to call this Christian thought “feminist.” When I refer to the theological sections of this book as “Christian theology,” I situate this project within the work of a long line of theologians who have shared in the critical task of helping the church reflect on its present-day witness and practice to see if it continues to be faithful to the revelation of God manifest in Scripture, tradition, and the ongoing life of the Christian community. Using this definition of theology highlights the “churchly” or ecclesiastical character of my feminist theology. Far from being a disinterested academic enterprise criticizing Christianity from the outside, my Christian feminist theology locates itself within the Christian faith and attempts to serve and strengthen the community from inside. This form of feminist theology is therefore responsible to Christian faith communities as its audience and contextual judge. This means I have to ask: Would what I’m saying

make sense to people who sit in church pews on Sunday morning? Does it make a difference in their lives? Does it deepen faith? Does it help us to pray? Does it assist the church in serving God's purposes of liberation? This communal grounding affects the uses to which I put feminist theory—I make feminist theory do “church work.”

This does not mean, however, that this form of theology is a compliant and unquestioning servant of the church. For centuries, theology's position vis-à-vis Christian community has been restless, uneasy, challenging, and critical. With this posture toward the church, my work in feminist theology once again shows itself firmly planted in the soil of a Christian theological tradition that sees its task not as a simplistic reiteration of the community's traditional and present-day beliefs but as a contribution to the church's ongoing process of self-examination and reform. One must rigorously test conventional practices and beliefs to see whether they have remained true to their purposes or have become distorted by complacency, arrogance, the temptations of power, and the unrelenting passage of time. In doing so, theology helps the church see with renewed clarity the comprehensive theological vision that grounds and centers its faith.

This brings me to the most important feature of the Christian theology I undertake: its commitment to exploring the central truths of the Christian message. While centuries of experience have taught the church that this message is never static or unambiguously self-evident, Christian communities found their identity upon a firm belief that a divine truth or vision beckons the community to an ongoing covenantal relationship with God. I too make truth claims about the reality of God and the nature of the gospel. This affirmation of faith roughly follows the story of Christian faith told in Scripture and unfolded in the classical creeds. It begins with the affirmation that God calls the world into being and seeks to be in loving relationship with it. Creation, in the mystery of its freedom, however, turns from God in sin. God nonetheless continues to seek relationship with God's creatures, a seeking vividly embodied in the history of Israel, in the New Testament community, and in present-day communities of faith. Although not treated with much depth here, at the heart of my theological reflections also lie the affirmations that in Jesus Christ, God reconciled the world to Godself and redeemed humanity from sin and that this triune God calls us to abundant life in community and promises to dwell with us here and now and in the world to come.

This short summary of “the Christian message” is hardly a developed theological confession. It simply serves to orient the reader to the general features of my theology. In the chapters ahead, only a few of these themes will be clarified and expanded; others will be left underdeveloped. By asserting

that these are “truth claims,” I also leave a number of epistemological issues hanging, such as: What do I mean by truth? As my analysis of both feminist theory and theology will suggest, I am at heart a critical realist.¹⁶ I believe there is a “fact of the matter” about ourselves, the world around us, and God, but I also hold that we do not have unmediated access to these facts.¹⁷ This critical realism is explored briefly in the next chapter, but this is not primarily a book in theological epistemology.

Having said this about the “Christian” nature of this enterprise, what does it mean to say that this is “feminist theology”? Like many terms used in this book, “feminist theology” means different things in different communities. For some people, it immediately calls up negative images of angry women destroying the church with pagan rituals. For others, it evokes more positive images, such as a round banquet table where feminist theology “happens” as women gather, from all corners of the world, to celebrate creation and to praise the God of life and liberation, singing and feasting on the “bread of hope” and the “cup of salvation.”¹⁸ Even for those with positive images, however, the term “feminist theology” means many things. Sometimes it refers to the broad movement of feminism in the church; at other times, it describes a highly intellectual enterprise undertaken only by professional theologians. “Feminist theology” can refer, as well, to any type of feminist “spiritual” thinking about God, be it by a Muslim Imam, a Baptist organist, or a New Age poet.¹⁹ In these contexts, “feminist theology” can name anything from the liturgy of a healing ritual to a formal treatise on matriarchal symbols.

What are we to make of this diversity? “Feminist theology” as an official title has a relatively short history (although the history of feministlike theological reflection is quite long).²⁰ Like feminist theory, its roots are in the women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s in North America. In places ranging from church-basement Bible studies to women's consciousness-raising groups, feminist theology emerged as a grassroots challenge to traditional views of women's role in religion and society. In its earliest stages, few distinctions were drawn among Jewish feminist, Christian feminist, and post-Christian contributions to the movement's critiques of women's oppression. Similarly, the distinction between feminist theory and feminist theology was less important then. In fact, the most treasured texts of early feminist *theory* were texts written by women theologians and philosophers of religion: Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* and the essays collected by Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow in *Woman Spirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*.²¹ Also, in these early years it was often in religious studies departments that Jewish, Christian, and post-Christian feminist theologians and philosophers of religion introduced the topic of feminism to the curriculum

of college campuses. This same heritage continues in many present-day college classrooms where the cutting edge of womanist and *mujerista* theology cuts across the usual boundaries separating theory and theology.

When I use the term "feminist theology," I work within this broad tradition of reflection, but I focus on the Christian tradition. Feminist theology in this context, therefore, does not represent the theology of every woman who reflects on her spiritual journey and her beliefs about God and the world. Nor does it represent Jewish, Muslim, and post-Christian feminist theologians and feminist philosophers of religion, all of whom play an instrumental role in feminist theology in North America. Instead of representing all religious reflection undertaken by feminists, I focus here on distinctly Christian themes.

What makes this specifically Christian theological enterprise "feminist"? It takes a special interest in the lives of women, their stories, their hopes, their flourishing and failures, and their multilayered experiences of oppression. This kind of feminist theology brings these lives and experiences into the drama of the Christian message and explores how Christian faith grounds and shapes women's experiences of hope, justice, and grace as well as instigates and enforces women's experiences of oppression, sin, and evil. The term "feminist," then, locates the distinctive interests of this theology. It is a theology that articulates the Christian message in language and actions that seek to liberate women and all persons, a goal that Christian feminists believe cannot be disentangled from the central truth of the Christian faith as a whole.

What does this mean in concrete terms? Let us look for a moment at how the term "feminist" adds to my previous description of theology as a communal, self-critical, and truth-seeking enterprise. When feminist theology claims the church as its audience and practical judge, it particularly attends to *women* in the church, a group that centuries of theologians have failed to include in their church audience. Feminist theology also listens to women who have been harmed by the Christian community or who have left the church, for these women are able to identify, often with painful clarity, the most broken and twisted places in church life for women. This commitment to listening extends as well to many voices with no confessional connection to Christian faith and practice, whose insights illuminate what it means to be "women" and "men" in other cultures and other times—for example, a feminist atheist in France, a Buddhist activist in Sri Lanka, or a Jewish rabbi in Los Angeles.

Being "feminist" informs, moreover, how this theology grapples with the self-critical and reforming task of Christian thought. Feminist theory plays a particularly important role here. Its principal function, you will recall, is to

analyze how gender constructions inform our most basic thought processes. This same kind of analysis can be used to explore the gendered character of Christian rules of thought. Feminist theory provides critical methods for analyzing terms such as "sin," "human nature," "Christian freedom," and "the Holy Spirit." By exploring these terms, feminist theory helps us better understand how cultural constructions of gender have affected the development of Christian thought and practice over the centuries into the present. As we shall see in the next chapters, the revelations about gender and women that emerge from these explorations are often startling and disturbing; they show how deeply the oppression of women is embedded in the most innocent-seeming habits of Christian thought.

At first glance, this enterprise of bringing women's lives into theological focus and analyzing gender constructions in church doctrine and practice appears straightforward. Anyone with a commitment to the church, a willingness to take women's stories seriously, and an openness to critical thinking about gender assumptions can do it. And this is true to a certain extent. Feminist theologians include women like my mother, who challenged traditional assumptions about gender by becoming the first woman elder in our local church in the 1960s, and my friend who last year organized a Bible study for incest survivors in New Haven. They include the young student who on Sunday mornings belts out "she" every time the hymnal reads "he," just as they include the quiet, elderly accountant who sits in a front pew of my church with the woman she loves and finds great comfort in the reading of the psalms. They include many women in communities across the country and around the world who are transforming not only their own lives but the lives of the church and the broader society, as they think critically and creatively about gender, women, and the dynamic truth of the Christian faith.

Having said this, if I were to ask the women I mentioned to identify a feminist theologian, they would not point to themselves but to the books on feminist theology they were handed by a friend or in an adult education class. Unfortunately, by pointing only to the work of these women, they miss the opportunity to affirm their own roles in feminist theology. Still, they are partially correct in identifying official "feminist theologians" as the ones who write these books. There is a group of feminist scholars who have developed highly respected reputations for their work in the fields of religion and theology. One can find their books on the shelves of any good theological library, and some of these women have names well known enough to elicit nods of recognition in places ranging from Enid, Oklahoma, to Bangalore, South India—names like Russell, Ruether, and Schüssler Fiorenza. The new generation of professional feminist theologians in North America

includes too many names to list.²² Most hold teaching positions in theology on university, college, and seminary campuses, and most are active in local communities of faith. They represent different ages, races, and Christian traditions, and yet they share a high level of academic training and a commitment to using this training to advance the cause of women. Like the women in my local church, I point primarily to the work of such women when I use the term “feminist theology” in the chapters ahead.

In light of the account of feminist theology offered here, what does it mean that this theology explores doctrine? Given the rather rigid and authoritarian connotations of the word “doctrine,” many feminist theologians hesitate to use it to describe the focus of their work, preferring instead terms like “faith claims,” “theological models,” or “Christian themes,” because they capture the lively and creative character of the liberating faith feminists confess. Some feminist theologians, however, like me, have chosen not to forgo the term “doctrine” altogether but to breathe new life into it by redefining its conceptual contours and its social function.

When I use the term “doctrine” in this book, I refer to topics that regularly appear in the history of Christian theology and play a normative role in the shaping of Christian faith. In Western Christianity, the list includes the doctrine of God (Trinity), Creation, Human Nature, Sin, Christology, Incarnation, Redemption (Atonement), Pneumatology (the Holy Spirit), Soteriology (the Christian Life), Ecclesiology (the Church), and Eschatology (the “last things”). Given their normative roles, doctrines are often described as communally inherited teachings that serve a regulatory function in the life of the Christian community: they regulate beliefs by setting out the broadest parameters of what Christians do and do not believe.²³ Another way of putting it is to say that doctrine provides the basic outline of the theological drama within which the Christian life unfolds.²⁴ Through images, concepts, arguments, and story lines, doctrines provide the Christian community with a sketch of the arena where faith is shaped and lives are crafted. In concert with the definition of the term “theory” I offered earlier, one might say that doctrines consist of the signposts (rules, orders, assumptions) that direct and structure Christian thought and action.

Feminist theologians move beyond traditional views of doctrine, however, by insisting that, as life-shaping dramas, doctrines do more than simply provide Christians with propositional statements or static rules. Doctrines serve as imaginative lenses through which to view the world. Through them, one learns how to relate to other persons, how to act in community, how to make sense of truth and falsehood, and how to understand and move through the varied terrain of life’s everyday challenges. Viewed this way, doctrines are the conceptual arenas in which character is shaped or personhood is crafted.

Doctrines shape not only individual identities but the identities and practices of entire communities as well. In community, these person-shaping concepts are reshaped and passed on to new generations. Hence, these doctrines give specific form and shape to collectives of people—determining the tenor and pace of their actions and interactions as well as defining the nature of the institutions and power relations that mediate the character of their public life.

As the theological arenas within which faith unfolds, doctrines thus serve as the “concepts we live in” or “inhabit” both individually and communally, and as such they touch and shape all aspects of the Christian life, from the most intimate relations with family and friends to public commitments. Contemporary theologians use different images for this particular understanding of doctrine; some describe doctrine as a language game, others as a cultural logic or an imaginative lens. In this book, I use two images to capture the character of the forming power of doctrines. The image of theological dramas suggests that doctrines function like loose but nonetheless definitive scripts that persons of faith perform; doctrines are the dramas in which we live out our lives. The image of landscape suggests that doctrines construct an imagistic and conceptual terrain within which people of faith locate and interpret their lives and the world around them. This terrain is marked by signposts that classical theology identified as the central doctrines of the faith.

From my perspective, this view of doctrine is crucial for the central task of feminist systematic theology. Doctrines play an enormous role in mediating the gender relations that structure our lives and the multiple levels of oppression that restrict the flourishing of women. Feminist theology recognizes this and concentrates on identifying the ways doctrines do so. Feminist theology does so by looking at the drama of a given doctrine like the Trinity and asking: What views of women are embedded in this drama? How might a person whose character is shaped by the Trinity live as a woman in today’s world? Would having the Trinity as the conceptual drama within which a woman lives make a difference in how she responds to gender roles? And, perhaps most important, does the landscape of the Trinity promote the full liberation of women and all persons? Is it a doctrine that situates the community within the drama of God’s emancipatory will for creation? There is no one answer to these questions, just as there is no single feminist theological opinion about the liberating force of doctrines like the Trinity. In the following chapters, I explore the multiple levels at which feminist theory informs the theological analysis of such questions.

As with “doctrine,” feminists hesitate to use the word “systematic” to describe their enterprise because it evokes images of tightly calculated, closed conceptual systems. Such images hardly seem conducive to the feminist project of exploring the often invisible nature of women’s oppression,

gender constructions, and the life of faith. Feminist theologians know that purportedly comprehensive conceptual systems inevitably exclude things—and in many cases, those “things” are related to women. As such, feminist theologians remind us how exclusions are embedded in any discourse that presumes to “cover it all.”²⁵

These concerns about the potentially exclusionary nature of systems have led feminist theologians like me to conceive “systematic” theology differently. The term “systematic” highlights the need for theology to be internally coherent and practically viable. This means theologians must tell the Christian story in a language and with images and doctrines that hold together as a whole. A theology holds together if it takes the various strings of the Christian message and weaves them together in a manner that avoids internal contradictions and demonstrates the mutually supportive character of its parts. For example, a systematic theologian would be troubled by an account of the Christian message that affirms both that God creates the human body as good and that the pleasures of the body having to do with women are inherently bad or sinful. The task of putting the different parts of the Christian message together into a coherent whole is not unlike the task of the feminist theorist who looks at the structure of our cultural thought processes and tries to see how it all fits together, how it works internally, and where its weak points might be.

Feminist systematic theology also identifies “fitting connections” between doctrine and concrete actions in the Christian community. This means at least two things. First, feminist systematic theology asks whether the church practices what it confesses. It asks, for example: Does it make sense—is it coherent—for a Christian community to confess that by the grace of God, women and men are fully equal and yet leave the community’s decision-making power in the hands of men? Second, feminist systematic theology requires that doctrinal dramas be tested in the concrete lives of women. It asks, for example: What happens when a battered or raped woman looks upon the sacrificed, tortured body of Jesus on the cross? Is the cross a celebration of victimhood and abuse or a condemnation of sin and the violence of the powerful? While there is, again, no one answer to such questions, feminist theologians insist that if the lives of women are taken into consideration when interpreting doctrines and church practices, new and challenging insights promise to emerge.

The last feature of my feminist systematic theology is its distinctive focus on doctrines central to the Reformation. I focus on these traditions, particularly in their Calvinist form, not because I think they are unusually suited to feminist theoretical reflection but because their doctrinal dramas and landscapes are familiar to me. I have long been interested in John Calvin and

Martin Luther and their ongoing roles in shaping Protestant communal identity in contemporary North American culture. Their Reformation theological vision, I believe, continues to fund the identities of Christian communities such as my Tuesday-night women’s group. As such, exploring the thought of Calvin and Luther from a feminist perspective allows me rethink patterns of reflection with deep roots in Christian traditions and a continuing presence in today’s faith communities. The hope is that such exploration will assist these communities in making informed decisions about the doctrines, practices, and beliefs they embrace—whether to reconstruct them or consider them unfaithful to the Gospel story.

Like most theological traditions, Reformation ones are doctrinally rich; they cover all the major doctrines I listed previously. In this book, I am especially interested in those related to divine grace and to the role they play in our understanding of individual and communal identity. I look at what these traditions say about faith and the dynamic process by which divine grace judges, frees, and envelops believers. I also look at the doctrine of sin and explore the traditional Protestant claim that graced believers nonetheless remain sinners caught in patterns of thought and action contrary to grace. I explore as well the doctrine of the church, asking what it means to be part of a community marked by this double logic of grace and sin. While these three topics—faith, sin, and community—are not the whole of Reformation thought, they allow one to peek inside the systematic web of beliefs that constitute this particular strand of Christian reflection.

Cartographies of Grace

Having defined the two main topics of this book, what remains to be explained is how I relate feminist theory and feminist theology to each other. As the subtitle of this book suggests, I find the image of mapping to be a useful metaphor in describing this relationship. Taking up the role of cartographer, in the pages ahead I lay feminist theory over the terrain or landscape of Christian doctrine to see how the lines of theory might map the contours of theology. I like the image of remapping because it captures well the fact that feminist theory’s principal contribution to theology lies in analyzing and reorienting the conceptual markers that Christians use to describe the terrain of their faith. The cartographical metaphor makes clear feminist theory is concerned not so much to reconstruct the terrain of faith as to provide markers for traveling through the terrain in new ways. In the chapters ahead, I hope the reader will come to better understand what this remapping involves and to appreciate how feminist theory can be respectful of the tradition it maps while displaying formerly unseen dimensions of its landscape.

A second metaphor I use for the relationship between feminist theory and theology follows from the idea of doctrines as scripts or dramas. As I discussed earlier, doctrines can be understood as sets of performative directives that define the possibilities and boundaries of appropriate Christian identity and behavior. Christians and Christian communities can be said to “perform” these scripts when, in faith, they try to follow their rules and directives. Doing so involves some individual and collective improvisation. To enact a dramatic role, one has to make the script one’s own while recognizing that one does not own it—the script has its own logic from which the actor improvises. In this process of improvisation, feminist theory suggests to us new performative possibilities. As it remaps traditional doctrinal terrain, it allows Christians to find new ways to live (enact) their knowledge of the reality of God’s grace.

In the following chapters, I remap and improvise by moving back and forth between the worlds of theory and theology, each time pairing a theoretical concept with a theological theme. In chapter 2, I discuss a current debate in feminist theory over the character of “women’s nature.” In chapter 3, I use this conversation to remap the doctrines of justification and sanctification. In the fourth chapter, I discuss feminist theory’s multifaceted understanding of women’s oppression, and in the fifth chapter, I use this theory to reorient the doctrine of sin. I continue this pattern in the last part of the book when, in chapter 6, I explore debates in feminist theory over the nature of community and then, in chapter 7, use them to remap features of the doctrine of the church. In this process of remapping, I bring feminist theory directly into contact with some of the Reformation traditions’ most treasured themes and thinkers. As such, this process of remapping is fraught with tension, because these themes and thinkers are incontestably oppressive in their views of women and yet they tell a Christian story filled with emancipatory possibilities.

The reader will no doubt begin to recognize in each of these chapters those places where my own story, in both its theological and feminist theoretical dimensions, enters the picture. My story, too, is filled with its tensions. I write this book as a woman with the status and power afforded by a position at an elite institution, and yet I have felt the awkward smiles and silent dismissals that accrue to the body of a pregnant scholar in a masculine world. I speak in this book as a U.S. citizen with forty years of experiencing the protection and the economic advantages of being white in our racist nation, and yet I remain deeply haunted by the violence known by my Cherokee great-grandmother more than a century and a half ago. I do theology as a person of faith who celebrates her roots in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ, and yet I am

wrenched by the abuses our language, our theology, and our church perpetrate against women and gays.²⁶ I enter this theological-theoretical conversation as one who finds the scholarly world as potentially dangerous as it is life-giving, and I believe that both bold normative visions and a robust respect for history and difference are necessary for the liberating struggle that lies ahead. Standing in these tensions, I offer this book as a contribution to that struggle and its many participants.

Women's Nature?

There is not the least doubt that women are by nature maternal and men are not and that it is the essence of the maternal attitude toward life to be sensitive to the needs of others and to retain the miracle of creation and the miracle of love.

—Ashley Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women*

One is not born, but becomes, a woman.

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

I recently served on a ministerial search committee that was debating whether a woman should be hired as the next pastor. No specific candidates had yet been considered; the discussion was about hiring a woman “in principle.” Should calling a woman be a priority since we had never had a female pastor? Or should we simply call the best candidate, male or female? As we debated these questions, revealing comments were made about what a woman minister is and is not.

In support of hiring a woman, some members suggested that women ministers are more nurturing and pastoral than men; that women are good listeners and excellent teachers of children; and that a woman’s more intuitive spirituality would bring a sense of God’s “feminine side” to our worship. Some members also argued that we needed female role models in the community, that the pastoral presence of a woman “makes a difference.” On the other side, several members asserted that women have soft, high voices, which people in back pews cannot hear; that they usually do not have enough experience to be senior pastors; and that the congregation was simply not ready for such a radical change. A few committee members even argued that having a female minister “makes a difference” in a negative way,

although it was hard for them to say exactly how. One member put it succinctly: “It’s just not the same.”

This church conversation reflects just one of the many ways debates over “women’s nature” have taken shape in Western Christianity over the centuries. As the comments suggest, assumptions about what women are, and should be, are built into our theology and church practices. These assumptions consist of deep, often unexpressed images of “woman” and what it means to be Christian and female. They run so deep that the simple statement “It’s just not the same having a female minister” receives knowing nods from even those who support hiring a woman. These images and assumptions are, in fact, so basic to a Western view of the world, they structure thinking about God and humanity even when gender is not under explicit consideration.

Many of these images of women’s nature are found in our scriptures, confessions, creeds, and liturgies. They also show up in many of Christianity’s most valued theological writings. From the time of the early Christian apologists, theologians have asked about “woman”: Is she fundamentally or essentially different from man? Is she created by God to be more nurturing, loving, motherly, and intuitively spiritual than man? Perhaps because she can bear children, she understands embodiment and the cycles of life and death in ways that men cannot imagine. Does she therefore have a uniquely close relation to God? Or, negatively, is she weaker than man? Was she created to help and follow him? Or do her bodily cycles make her more powerful than man and hence more connected to sin, more responsible for the fall, more prone to wander from the path of true faith? Is she thus less capable than man of bearing the image of God? And, perhaps most important, can God bear her image? Can God be metaphorically figured as a woman?

In this chapter and the next, I explore the insights that recent feminist theologians and theorists have offered concerning women’s nature. At their center lies the essentialist/constructivist debate. This debate wrestles over the origin and character of our understandings of women’s nature in particular and of human nature in general. It asks: Is being a “woman” the product of nature or nurture? Put another way, does “womanhood” express an inborn, natural, female disposition or follow from socially learned behaviors? This question cuts to the heart of the pastoral search committee’s debate over a female minister; it also sits at the center of the many conversations about sexual difference taking place in workplace meetings, in public-policy discussions, and perhaps most important, in daily conversations between family, friends, and neighbors. The pages ahead explore how the essentialist/constructivist debate developed in the nontheological world of feminist theory.¹ With this secular debate as backdrop, I turn in the third chapter to its implications for feminist theology.

The Essentialist Side of the Debate

It is late Monday afternoon, and my class on feminist theory begins with a conversation about women's nature similar to that of my church's search committee. We are discussing Hélène Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa."² Several students recount how strange they found her writing. They express surprise at the essay's unusual genre; its mixture of abstract, nonlinear prose and fragmented poetic reflections challenges their assumptions about what "theory" is. They also express surprise at the essay's bold thesis—that women, because of their embodied reality, have a fundamentally different way of knowing and being than men. Because of this difference, Cixous argues, women need to break free of male forms of writing and reclaim a genre that reflects their unique embodied perspective. Women need to "write their bodies," connecting with their feminine erotic pulses and nurturing motherliness. Women must morphologically "write in white ink" with their milk.³

As the class sorts through this idea, different reactions surface. Some women say that they deeply resonate with Cixous's descriptions of "womanhood" and "woman's writing."⁴ They feel excluded and silenced by men's ways of speaking and knowing, especially in the classroom, and Cixous's book gives them permission to claim their distinctive voices and to speak loudly, without apologizing for the fact that they do not sound like men.⁴ Several of these students identify with Cixous's descriptions of "woman" as having a "cosmic libido," as "spacious singing Flesh."⁵ Some class members also like Cixous's descriptions of their internal "mother nature."⁶ For these students, Cixous opens up dimensions of womanhood that patriarchal thought has long excluded, and in doing so opens onto new forms of seeing, doing, speaking, and writing—each with the potential to revolutionize Western thought.

Some class members, however, do not find Cixous's text liberating. They feel excluded by her analysis of womanhood. They find her descriptions of motherhood alienating, her evocation of women's bodies more fantastic than realistic, and her call for women to "write with their milk" ridiculous and marginalizing. As one student remarks, "Cixous tells me to celebrate the very characteristics that patriarchal society uses to oppress me. That sounds more like a prison than an open door." Another student feels uncomfortable about Cixous's mother image because, "my mother was far from nurturing." And another sums up by exclaiming, "Cixous's just an *essentialist!* And I don't like it."

With the claim that Cixous is an "essentialist," the class breaks into passionate, fast-paced arguments. Some students exclaim that, yes, she is an essentialist but not the old-fashioned oppressive type. She is a *feminist essentialist*, and that is good because women need to reclaim their essential

identities before they can overturn oppressive, patriarchal ways. Other class members argue that ascribing a specific "nature" to women is inevitably oppressive because it recapitulates old stereotypes about male and female differences. A few others, however, are not quite sure what "essentialism" means, much less whether they think it's a positive thing. One such student finally explains to the rest of the class, "There seems to be a whole vocabulary at work here about 'essentialism' and its related concepts and I need some explanations before I can jump into the argument." I welcome this comment because, in the field of feminist theory, no single term is more used and less defined than the term "essentialism." Let me define the term and explore its related concepts—such as sexual difference, gender, and gender binaries. This groundwork will help clarify why all feminist theorists reject the old essentialisms of Western culture but some, nonetheless, feel the need for a new, reworked, feminist essentialism.

Defining Essentialism

To unravel the multiple meanings of "essentialism," it is best to start with the term's classical roots. These roots go back to ancient Greek philosophers who classified "things" according to inherent and unchanging qualities or "essences."⁷ These essences were considered the fundamental and indispensable properties of persons or objects and thus constituted their most basic or core identity. In contrast to accidental properties that may vary over time, essential properties were thought immune to historical forces; they inhere in an object naturally and cannot be attributed to culture or convention. Essential properties are thus *universal* in that they must be present in all instances of the object. Take the "essential identity" of a table. It consists of the properties that are necessary to its being a table—ones present in all instances of "table." These essential attributes might include having a flat top and sitting on legs. In contrast, its "accidental" attributes—its color, the kind of material it is made of, its age, general condition, and number of legs—can change without changing the table into something else.

What happens when "essential identity" applies not to objects such as tables but to a group of persons defined as "women"? Classical philosophers offered a rather interesting list of women's "essential traits."⁸ Some were strictly *biological*—for example, the "hystera" or uterus was described as an empty receptacle awaiting the male "energy" necessary for procreation.⁹ Some were dispositional—such as female "hysteria," a state of disorientation and anxiety caused by the womb's proclivity to wander around a woman's body seeking the stabilizing force of male intercourse. Other traits were offered as well, traits that have come to be associated generally in the West with things "feminine"—passivity, instability, emotionality, and nurture.

The oddity of much of the Greek account makes clear that perceptions about women's nature change dramatically over time. Each generation adds to and subtracts from the list. Feminist theorists such as Cixous join in when they come up with accounts of female "essences" rooted not in male philosophers' opinions about the "other sex" but in women's experience. Disagreement exists, however, among feminist theorists about the character of these essences. But all agree on one thing: most traditional views harbor deeply problematic patterns of thinking about women and gender. So, before exploring the new feminist essentials, let us look at the central features of the older, more problematic patterns of thought. By identifying them, we will see more clearly which of them continue to the present day and how they might be challenged.

The first aspect about these traditional patterns of thought is that they have not always been precise or logically consistent. In many of classical philosophy's most renowned texts, comments on women's nature are sparse, ill organized, and often drawn from popular opinion rather than from the "reasoned logic" devoted to other topics. Although often put forth with great zeal and certainty, few grounds are offered in their support. Sometimes "women's nature" receives only a passing mention, leaving one to infer from the broader argument what her "essence" might be. Some classical texts even treat the topic of "human nature" or "man's nature" without specifically mentioning women's nature at all. Does this silence mean the author has no position or only a passing interest in women's nature? Feminist theorists respond that silence often speaks loudly of very definite positions. Classical texts sometimes say little about "woman" because they assume she is automatically included under the broader category of "man." This assumption means that "women's nature" is defined according to the standard of "man's/human nature"—a standard that includes no reference to women's experiences. Women are also left out because, for some, they simply did not exist as subjects for philosophical reflection: they either were not human or, more often, their subordinate social position placed them outside the philosopher's frame of reference.

Feminists note something else as well: traditional texts that *do* discuss women's nature frequently speak not only of "essentials" but of "universals." For this reason, "essentialism" and "universalism" are interchangeable terms in feminist theory. Defined most broadly, essentialism/universalism refers to any view of women's nature that makes universal claims about women based on characteristics considered to be an inherent part of being female. The notion of universality highlights the all-pervasive scope of essentialist claims about women's nature, namely, the belief that features of womanhood cover women's lives in every place, age, and culture without exception. If one is an

essentialist or a universalist, then one usually believes as well that these universal features constitute an unchanging core of womanhood—hence the idea of the "essential woman" or the "universal feminine."

This belief in an unchanging core of womanhood signals two additional features of essentialism: its naturalism and determinism. Essentialist views of women historically appeal to a "natural state of affairs" as the basis for claims about universal features. These features are believed to be inherent in all women, meaning that they are not produced by cultural training, learned conventions, or social expectations but are natural. They are "inborn," "innate," "native," "instinctual," or "presocial." Essentialists believe these natural, universal essences constitute "the authentic woman" or "the true inner woman." This language carries determinism with it. Determinism assumes that the so-called essential or true woman is not an abstract ideal that women should try to model; the "essences" or "universals" describe what women inherently *are*, whether or not they choose to acknowledge it. As natural traits, these essences therefore are believed to determine what a woman can become as she moves into her future.

Traditional forms of essentialism have some other interesting features that feminists highlight. One is the role sexual difference plays in defining women. Feminists note a tendency to define the essential core of womanhood by its "difference" from the essential nature of manhood. This tendency is often correlated with the belief that a fundamental biological difference between men and women undergirds human society. Tied to this belief is the further one that sexual difference predetermines how men and women relate to each other. They are biologically oriented toward each other (hence, they are essentially heterosexual). Anyone reading the daily paper realizes that the claim of innate differences between the sexes is not limited to the past; it continues today in research projects on heart disease, talking styles, stress levels, voting patterns, and child-rearing practices.

Feminists refer to another recurring pattern of essentialist thinking as "the sex-gender scheme."¹⁰ As mentioned earlier, the sex-gender scheme is a tendency in Western thought to identify sexual difference with both biological/physiological dimensions (sex), and dispositional/psychological and social characteristics (gender). Greek thought reflected this tendency. In Plato's day, women and men were distinguished biologically by their reproductive organs (that is, the woman's hystera), and then dispositionally by such attributes as their emotions (that is, the woman's proclivity to hysteria). Today, the biological "universals" supposedly connected with the female sex range from her distinct chromosomal structure and hormonal makeup and cycles to the structures of her brain, heart, and nervous system. Correlative dispositional gender traits are equally diverse: in behavioral studies of

gender, women are described as more relational, nurturing, and emotional than men, while also less mechanical, self-confident, and individuated than their male counterparts.

As feminist theorists chart how these patterns of sexual difference and the “sex-gender scheme” function in Western culture, they note their many forms. To get a sense of the variety, look not at a classical text or a formal study of sexual difference but at the casual assumptions about men and women that people make over coffee with friends or as they watch children on the playground. People often refer to differences between men’s and women’s natures as if they were opposites: women are relational (connected) and men are autonomous (independent). Women and men are also differentiated by complementary traits: women are emotional and men rational, or men are assertive and women receptive. In another variation on this binary theme, men and women are placed in hierarchical relation: men are physically superior to women, or women are emotionally more developed than men. The relationship between the sexes is also defined by absence or lack: men experience a castration complex because they have a penis, whereas women, because of an anatomical absence, suffer from penis envy. In other cases, difference is a matter of degree: women are *better* with children, or men have *more* technical aptitude. As these examples show, essentialist thinking about women assumes male essences as well. Feminist theory examines such popular assumptions about gender and sex and tries to discern the relational logic of male and female differences.

Feminist theorists also trace how these dualistic patterns (also called “gender binaries”) describe things other than actual men and women. In the introduction, I illustrated this point with a paper-towel commercial where the masculine towel is depicted as tough on stains and the feminine spill as messy and unruly. To get a general sense of how freely and often gender binaries are used to describe the world around us, look at this frequently cited list of dualities:

male/female
 culture/nature
 straight/curved
 reason/intuition
 public/private
 humanity/nature-animality
 production/reproduction
 subject/object
 self/other
 mind/body

civilized/primitive
 good/bad
 master/slave¹¹

Using this list, one can ascribe a gender—and hence a set of binary relations—to every element in daily life, from paper towels to a prayer over dinner or a late-night newscast about war in Eastern Europe.¹² I return to the topic of gender and language throughout this book, but I raise it now to highlight again an important point about gender binaries, essentialism, and discussions of women’s nature. When one describes various things according to a gendered logic of essentialized thinking about women and men, the things being gendered frequently seem “universally,” “essentially,” and hence “naturally” gendered. For example, it is often assumed that differences between public and private spheres or distinctions between civilized and primitive societies are as historically inevitable as “natural” differences between men and women. When essentialized categories function this way, the whole world begins to look not only gendered but naturally dualistic and often hierarchical.

Feminist Responses to Essentialism

Given this description of the character and pervasiveness of sex/gender binaries, it should not be surprising that feminists find this type of essentialism problematic. Their resistance is easy to understand. They question essentialist naturalism because it makes women’s historical subordination to men seem like a natural fact rather than a cultural product. Feminists also challenge the determinism of essentialism because, in a world full of gender “givens,” it is hard to imagine radical social change in support of women’s full equality with men. Feminist theorists also note that, in these schemes, women’s nature is often defined only as “the other” to men’s nature and is reduced thereby to a function of masculine identity. Women thus have no identity of their own. Moreover, attributes that have traditionally passed for the “essentials” of women’s nature, feminists point out, are often the projections of a culture that depends upon notions of sexual difference to justify its division of labor. Finally, feminists argue that these views of women’s nature are simply not accurate: they fail to describe the complex reality of women’s (and men’s) lives.

In the next section, I explore more fully these critiques of essentialism. It is important to note now, however, that some feminist theorists (such as Cixous) also defend essentialism, albeit in a feminist version. On what grounds? These “feminist essentialists” admit that many aspects of the traditional sex/gender binaries are false and oppressive to women, particularly

such value-related binaries as good/bad and master/slave. They approve, however, of some others—binaries such as straight/curved or reason/intuition. The historic problem with these binaries, they claim, is not that male and female were distinguished but that the masculine was valued over the feminine. In response, they argue that present-day feminists need to celebrate and perhaps even privilege feminine distinctiveness.

As an example of this positive use of essentialism, recall my church search committee. When several committee members argued for hiring a woman, they made statements like “women do this . . .,” “women are always . . .,” and “women are just like that.” They asserted, for instance, that women are more nurturing, intuitively spiritual, and better with children than men are. They may simply have meant that most women have been socialized to behave in these ways. Their comments, however, probably reflected the deeper belief that women exhibit these traits because of their inherent nature. One does not have to be a student of Plato or an avowed sexist to believe that essentialism makes sense of the lived differences of experience.

There are other reasons universal claims about women’s nature are attractive to feminists. As the feminist movement has demonstrated, identifying universals in women’s experience can serve a positive political function. On the pastoral search committee, essentialist arguments were garnered *in favor* of hiring a female pastor: a woman would bring a new spirit of nurture, care, relationality (connectedness), and feminine spirituality to a job too long held by clergymen not disposed to “womanly” qualities. This positive form of the essentialist argument hopes that women will bring new ways of acting and new insights, values, and commitments into areas historically dominated by men. If women are finally no different—essentially—from men, hope is more difficult. Furthermore, if feminists could identify universal characteristics shared by diverse women around the globe, these universals would provide common ground for worldwide political movements and networks devoted to the liberation of women.¹³ They could serve as the basis for a common women’s vision that articulates and defends what is truly good for women (and all people) in a world that has hitherto silenced and oppressed women.¹⁴

Perhaps the most famous and popular form of feminist essentialism is Mary Daly’s work, which articulates and celebrates the unique experience and perspective of women.¹⁵ According to Daly, patriarchal male paradigms of the world have dominated women’s experience, an experience with the potential to revolutionize our present-day forms of knowing and acting. Daly is often referred to as a “biological essentialist” because she suggests that the source of women’s revolutionary way of being rests “within them” as part of their embodied distinctiveness. She generates images and vocabularies

that value the uniqueness of women’s bodies—something, she argues, that is desperately needed in a culture that ignores and undervalues the specificity of women’s physical experiences.¹⁶

Daly is not the only feminist theorist who makes biological sexual differences the starting point for emancipatory projects, however. A number of recent works on mothering argue that women’s reproductive capacities and childbearing activities provide them with a unique perspective—a perspective more peaceful and nurturing than competitive and aggressive male interactions.¹⁷ This kind of thinking is clear in New Age women’s spirituality that helps women reclaim and celebrate their “feminine essence” by focusing on both the physical and spiritual dimensions of women’s unique sexual and soul power.¹⁸

Another form of feminist essentialism sets its universalizing roots not in women’s bodies but in the human developmental process. Often referred to as “psychoanalytic universalists,” these feminists admit the role cultural expectations play in the construction of gendered identity but insist on the important, universal influence of roles of “mother” and “father” in a child’s psychological formation. This universal process of development, they argue, needs to be understood by feminists in order to help families avoid harming their children with ill-conceived notions of gender. While few feminists have not benefited from its insights, this type of essentialism has its critics. It does not always allow for cross-cultural differences in child-rearing practices, and the assumption that identity formation occurs in a triadic nuclear family (mother, father, child) ignores the varied shapes of family life.

The Constructivist Side of the Debate

It is another Tuesday afternoon, and as I leave my feminist theory course, I encounter a student in the hall. “Professor Jones, I need to talk to you about the material we read this week. I feel my whole world is being turned upside down, and I’m very confused by all this ‘constructivist stuff.’” The set of her jaw and the furrow in her brow tell me she’s serious, and I soon learn why. The student is personally—and not just abstractly—wading into the murky, turbulent waters of the constructivist side of the feminist debate on women’s nature. Her identity as a woman is being swirled and seemingly dissolved, and she feels as if she is standing on quickly shifting, unstable ground as a feminist and a person of faith.

The reading that provoked this reaction is Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, a text with a strong defense of the claim that “gender,” “sex,” and “woman” are neither natural facts nor essential/universal features of personhood but rather are effects of the dynamic

play of culture and convention.¹⁹ For Butler, the “essences” and “universals” of essentialism are “fictions,” “fables,” “inscriptions,” “phantasmic constructions,” and “illusory grounds” falsely passed for “the real” and “the natural” over the centuries. Being a woman or a man is therefore not the expression of a natural predisposition or a biological fact; gender identities are better understood as “performances” in which one puts on the “drag” of culturally generated gender/sex/body assumptions and thus enacts (or is enacted by) socially inscribed roles and positions. Butler thinks this is true not just for the categories of sex and gender but also for the varied identities we perform over a lifetime, such as race, ethnicity, and age. She concludes that there is no “ready-made subject” nor “foundational self” available to ground discussions of women’s nature. There are only multiple discourses positing shifting “selves,” all of whom are always and already performing in “drag.”

Defining Constructivism

Butler’s position is not new to Western discussions of human nature. Constructivism goes back, as essentialism does, to the age of Plato and Aristotle. It has a rich and diverse history in contemporary feminist theory as well. Butler echoes Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement in the 1950s—“One is not born, but becomes, a woman”—as well as Monique Wittig’s more recent assertion that because lesbians reject heterosexual codes, “they are not women.”²⁰ What these theorists share is a profound appreciation for the constitutive role of nurture or socialization in the construction of “women.” Feminist constructivism can be defined as a theory that focuses on the social, cultural, and linguistic sources of our views of women and women’s nature. Feminist theorists do not always use the term “constructivism” precisely, however. In most cases, use of the term makes the general point that supposed eternal verities of women’s nature are historically and culturally variant and, consequently, that gender is “formed” rather than “given.”²¹

Feminist constructivists explain that this formation process happens in myriad ways. As children grow, they learn to see the world in terms of the gendered categories and meanings that language makes possible. This occurs in schools, courts, hospitals, workplaces, churches, synagogues, and mosques as well as in the family. In each institution, children learn to behave as “girls” and “boys” by following certain gender codes. The force that language and institutions exert over the years to shape them into “women” and “men” is heavy and persistent; the process consists not just of soft directives and subtle hints. Its scope is so pervasive and its weight so enormous that no individual or community escapes its power. Because these forces constantly shift, however, the making of gendered persons takes many forms, and outcomes are never entirely predictable.

Feminist theorists often refer to the constitutive role played in this process by culture or cultural constructs. Feminist constructivism is itself a form of “cultural constructivism.” By “culture,” feminists usually mean the entire system of symbols, languages, beliefs, actions, and attitudes within which persons live and learn to organize and make sense of their world and actions.²² According to Hazel Carby, culture consists of “lived, imaginative constructs,” which persons and communities inhabit and through which they experience the world.²³ Echoing the definition of “doctrine” I offered in chapter 1, this view of culture emphasizes its all-embracing scope: culture consists of the endless and often subtle patterns of knowing, feeling, acting, and believing—the web of meanings—in which we live.²⁴

This definition of “lived, imaginative constructs” has several features. To call cultural constructs “imaginative” means that they have been creatively generated out of the ongoing struggle of communities to interpret their worlds. They are human artifacts, not pre-given, natural facts; we have crafted them, sometimes over the course of centuries, sometimes in response to a single event. We shape them through the workings of our imaginations. “Imagination” refers to the vast world of our conceptual capacities and not to “fantasy” in a narrow sense. “Constructs” are thus imaginative lenses through which the world, ourselves, our relationships, and even our faith come into view and receive shape and significance. While one may shift cultural frames over one’s life or even live in a number of different imaginative frames or cultural constructs at the same time, one can never know anything outside them, because these constructs are what make knowing possible.

Another dimension of this definition is its description of these cultural constructs as “lived.” The category “imaginative” might mistakenly suggest that these constructs exist “only in our heads.” One avoids this danger by describing these constructs as “lived.” They quite literally *construct* the material reality of our lives both at the level of individual actions and lifestyles and at the level of institutions and social structures. As an example from my own life, look at just one way that culturally constructed, “imaginative” views of gender are lived and are thereby material realities. I am going to a Wednesday faculty committee meeting to discuss the appointment of a guest lecturer for the next academic year. Entering the room, I notice I am the only woman along with four other men. I make these gender identifications using codes my culture has taught me to read—codes embedded in things like clothes, posture, tone of voice. My wearing lip gloss and a silver hair clip codes me as the lone woman, and their coats and ties code them as men. By wearing this “drag,” we all perform gender roles that are materially evident (and clearly not just “imagined”).

As the meeting progresses, I worry about how forcefully to make my opinions known, and I feel increasingly insecure about the legitimacy of my perspective. Could this be another way in which I inhabit the gender/cultural constructs I have been taught since childhood—by experiencing self-doubt, feeling out of place, and thinking I am not meant to speak in a “man’s world”? Probably so. Sitting in the room, I feel uncomfortable in the large leather chairs that are so deep my feet do not touch the ground. Someone bought these chairs years ago because they fit the purchaser’s image of a male academic’s body size—a decision based on cultural assumptions about gender and the academy. Those assumptions feel very real as my back gets sorer. The committee is deciding between a junior-level, African American woman in church history and a well-established, Anglo American man in biblical studies. Although race, gender, and rank never explicitly enter the conversation, the committee votes to invite the biblical scholar. The “cultural constructs” of the committee members make him appear the better scholar. With a sore back, with feelings of frustration for not having spoken more, with lips in need of more gloss, and the knowledge that once again the figure occupying our lectern will be senior, white, and male, I leave the meeting quite aware that “cultural assumptions/imaginative constructs” are not just “ideas” but the very institutional materiality within which I live. I leave feeling, knowing, and concretely seeing the reality of cultural/gender constructs.

Weak vs. Strong Feminist Constructivist Views of Women’s Nature

Based on this description of constructivism, it may not be clear why my student felt so disoriented by Butler. After all, in contemporary North American culture, it is a broadly accepted fact that one’s social environment affects everything from the type of religion one practices to the ice-cream flavor one prefers. Are feminist constructivists saying anything new or radical? At one level, no; they simply develop the logic of a fairly commonplace insight about the intimate relation between identity formation and social context. They often, however, push beyond this broadly accepted position; these “stronger” claims are what my students find troubling.

Before discussing this strong version of constructivism, let us examine the more common and “weaker” constructivist position. The popular claim that “culture shapes gender identity” is often softened by the idea that culture begins with “raw material” of a biologically sexed and genetically predisposed woman or man. This raw material is “the essential self” of the “sex-gender scheme.” The environment works upon a preexisting self with certain natural limits, such as being female, Native American, short, and of average intelligence. While admitting that culture can profoundly affect the

identity that emerges from this raw material, “weak” constructivists insist there are unalterable bottom-line givens—such as being female. Like the clay of a potter, the raw material of personhood can be formed by culture into different figures, but it never ceases to be clay.

Feminist theorists in recent years have gone beyond weak constructivism at several levels. Theorists such as Butler argue that culture so profoundly determines human beings that no point beyond convention (no “Archimedean point”) exists from which to ascertain what is “nature” (the clay, the raw material of personhood) and what is “nurture” (the potter, culture) with respect to sexual difference. They are making a claim here about how profoundly culture determines how we know and interpret human nature. They are thus making an *epistemological claim* (from the Greek *episteme*, meaning “knowledge”) about the relation between gender categories and our knowledge of the natural. They argue that because social contexts so profoundly mediate our experience of the world, we are incapable of ascertaining what is “natural,” “given,” or “essential.” Apart from heavily gendered cultural rules about sexual binaries, identifying the truly natural is impossible—particularly given that the category “natural” is itself a construct.

How might constructivists of the weaker variety respond? They assert that while culture profoundly contributes to our perceptions of differences between men and women, the raw material of male and female bodies is more than a cultural construct: it’s biological; it’s chromosomal; it’s genetic; it’s real! Science can therefore measure it and prove it; objectively speaking, men and women are *by nature* different. Faced with this response, strong constructivists such as Butler argue that, *at an epistemological level*, culture so disposes one to see the human body in terms of sexed differences that science cannot help but identify and analyze biology in gendered terms. Science measures and analyzes sexed differences as if they were self-evidently natural because it looks at bodies through the lens of Western cultural conceptions of gender.

To illustrate this point, strong constructivists ask us to imagine living in a culture where another set of identifying characteristics marks the raw material of personhood, for instance, a world where the color of one’s hair is as important as our present-day emphasis on one’s sex. In such a world, science would generate an elaborate and seemingly objective apparatus for evaluating the significance of hair as the raw material of personhood. The cultural construction of “hair color” would thus function as a mediating lens through which human bodies would be measured and interpreted. In such a world, the significance of hair color might be raised to such a level of cultural importance that our present-day cultural emphasis on sexual difference

would appear insignificant or irrelevant to discussions of human nature. Although one may be looking at the same bodies in this imagined world and our present one, framing the body through a different interpretive lens significantly alters the differences we claim to “know.”

As my student indicated, moving into this strong constructivist terrain can be quite disorienting. After all, it seems a straightforward, empirical fact that women and men are biologically different—and that hair color is less significant than sex in shaping personhood. Seeing culture as the origin of sex and gender is troubling because it seems to imply that women do not exist apart from one’s cultural proclivity to identify them as such. This suggests, further, that the people we confront each day are only cultural constructs and, hence, that bodies as “matter” do not really matter. If strong feminist constructivism were to lead to such conclusions, it would seem to undermine the possibility of talking about the material realities of women’s lives.

Few feminists, however, endorse such an antirealist and relativistic account of constructivism. Most strong constructivists point out that recognizing the cultural limits of knowledge need not imply that the material world does not exist; it implies only that one’s cultural perspective profoundly predetermines the significance one gives to it. For this reason, feminist constructivists often heartily support scientific research on women and gender in the hopes it will help interpret the world and the place of women in it in new and useful ways. They remind us, however, that such research on women should be treated like all generalized views about people: not as findings about purely natural facts but about the diversely structured play of gendered culture and its interpretive lenses. They remind us as well that this “diversely structured play of culture” often produces “facts” deeply oppressive to women. For this reason, strong feminist constructivists are epistemologically skeptical about naturalized claims concerning women’s nature—that is, they recognize the limits of knowing and are suspicious of perspectives that ignore or pretend to have overcome such limits. They are also ontologically agnostic—that is, they remain uncommitted (but suspicious) on the question of the real status of sexual difference.

General Features of Feminist Constructivism

In order to understand how feminist theorists analyze the gender codes of culture, one must understand a few additional features of constructivism. The first is its peculiar view of the “human subject” and the “self.” For feminist constructivists, “selves” are no longer assessed and measured by universals but are viewed as dynamic products of vast cultural forces. To emphasize this, feminists refer to the self not as a stable entity but as a kind of “site,”

“terrain,” “territory,” or “space” through which cultural constructs move, often settle, and are frequently contested and changed. This emphasis on the dynamic character of personhood does not imply there is no self pulling together the varied forces of culture in any given moment. A self exists, but not one that, from moment to moment and place to place, remains the same. Constructivism conceives of persons as fluidly constituted; as webs of discourses, agendas, attitudes, relationships; and hence as more messy, unstable, and open-ended than essentialists’ discussions of human nature allow. For this reason, feminist constructivists are often described as de-centering the subject—which means that, by removing those central anchors called “essentials,” they acknowledge the shifting complexity of forces and histories that constitute our ever changing identities.²⁵

A second feature of feminist constructivism follows from this de-centering of the subject; this feature directly challenges an “additive approach” to women’s identity.²⁶ According to an additive approach, if one wants to describe a particular woman, one takes as the baseline her gender and then adds to it such layers as race, class, geographic region, and sexual orientation. For example, in the additive model of identity, a woman like my neighbor Carmen might be defined first as a “woman” and second as “Latina.” She might be further described as a “mother” and then as a “social worker” and “middle-class.” By not commenting on her sexual orientation, this description assumes she follows the “norm” of heterosexuality—an example of how unstated identifying descriptions can be as strong as the spoken. According to the additive model, Carmen’s identity is then calculated by adding up, in careful order, all these different “lived, imaginative constructs” that make her who she is. Each is viewed as a stable entity in itself—as if, for example, when Carmen is said to be a “mother,” the meaning of “motherhood” is self-evident, stable, and clear to all.

Viewed from the perspective of the constructivist’s de-centered subject, Carmen’s identity appears, contrary to the additive view, as a site where multiple “lived, imaginative constructs” simultaneously converge.²⁷ Once the notion of a well-ordered, additive self is abandoned, it is easier to see the particularities and peculiarities of Carmen’s life. She can be described as a “place” where many cultural discourses intersect and where each of her identifications is shaken up, redefined, and enacted by Carmen in various ways. For example, what constitutes being a woman in her Mexican hometown may be different from what I, as an Oklahoman, learned about womanhood in early childhood. When this difference is combined with the dynamics of being “Latina” in Connecticut instead of “Hispanic” in Texas, and “middle-class” in New Haven but “upper-class” in Mexico, Carmen may well seem quite different from the woman assumed in the static additive model with its

one definition for each feature. Furthermore, Carmen's identity is no longer derivative from a standard model of "woman." When the self is a site where multiple constructs course with persistent force, such static standards seem illusory.

With this de-centered understanding of personhood comes a third feature of feminist constructivism: its view of agency. When the self is described as a "site" or "space," what role is left for human freedom? Some feminists have argued, against constructivists such as Butler, that turning persons into "spaces" occupied by multiple languages, institutions, and histories makes them passive recipients of their culture rather than engaged protagonists. Persons begin to look like mechanical products of their environment, and the possibility of self-determination and intentional action is lost. If this is the constructivist picture of personhood, then feminists are right to be concerned, for they have long affirmed the importance of promoting women's agency and have resisted the notion that women are inactive recipients of other people's desires, projects, and meanings. A careful reading of feminist constructivism, however, reveals a more complex picture—one suggesting that women have sometimes less and sometimes more agency than one might imagine.

To see why women have *less* agency than one might imagine, look at the overly agentic view of woman that constructivists contest. This highly agentic woman, for example, appears daily on television commercials and in so-called professional women's magazines; she is the emancipated woman who, by strength of will, fights off sexist forces of cultural expectation and makes it in a "man's world" of corporate success and power. Feminist constructivists wisely point out that this is a tremendous burden of agency for women to bear, one that often prevents them from appreciating the force that culture does exert on their lives, in both oppressive and emancipatory ways. In other words, an overly agentic view of the self and social change eclipses the dynamics by which culture "enacts" women.

On the other side of the agency question, however, constructivists such as Butler are careful to say that women are not *incapable* of actively and intentionally participating in processes of cultural formation. They protect the notion of agency by saying that, unlike essentialism's subject, "woman" is shaped not by inevitable traits but by "imaginative" products of human community and can therefore be contested and changed. Resistance to determinism, according to feminist constructivism, does not require stepping outside of culture and seeing things in the critical light of pure reason. They advocate, instead, an "implicated resistance," one that is never completely free of the constructions it contests but with enough critical distance from them to challenge the status quo and envision alternatives. The vague

and underdeveloped character of this defense of agency is acknowledged, even celebrated, by constructivists. To say more about "agency"—to make it into a stable structure or calculate its universal form—would be to step onto the terrain of rock-hard essences that constructivists avoid.

Given their rejection of universal structures and essential qualities, how do constructivists describe the shape of women's lives? This question brings me to yet another feature of constructivism: "localized thick description." Instead of offering a single description of "womanhood," constructivists analyze the varied cultural constructs shaping specific groups of "women." Constructivists do not clearly define what constitutes a "group of women." It could be a collection of women who live on a single block in New Haven or who ride daily buses in New York. It could be a group of charismatic Appalachian women church leaders, a gathering of first generation Asian American grandmothers who cook together, or a collective of "drag queens" in New York who problematize the dominant culture's definition of what a "real woman" is.²⁸ The subject of constructivist study could also be an individual woman's life (including reference to her many constitutive communities) or the lives of women in a given nation-state or continent during a particular historical period. One could also give localized descriptions of "representations of women" in classical literature or the image of the "witch" in Puritan piety in order to ascertain how a given culture produces and disseminates its views on gender. Constructivists want the discrete parameters of one's analysis to be named and localized in specific historical and social contexts so as to avoid the illusion of universality. By establishing a localized scope of analysis, one more fully attends to the particularities of a given situation or person and refuses essentialist analyses with a global frame of reference.

By attending to the local, feminist constructivists generate thick accounts of women's lives. "Thick" means two things.²⁹ First, it indicates that localized descriptions are composed of many layers. For example, when I reflect, in a constructivist mode, on the women who live on my block in New Haven, I immediately do a quick economic analysis of the incomes of different households and the tax structures of their properties. I think as well about the history of this block, particularly in terms of the fast-changing ethnic makeup of the city as a whole. I reflect further on the social functions of the different family configurations in each household and on the psychological dynamics that seem to play into their child-rearing practices. To make my analysis thicker, I also think about how the women on the block describe their own lives, the stories they tell about who they are, the loves and hates they harbor, and the hopes and fears that drive them. Descriptions of this sort are often referred to as "bricolage" (a French word meaning

“something constructed by using whatever comes to hand”)—a term highlighting the often ad hoc, diverse character of thick descriptions.³⁰ Like loosely constructed stone walls, such descriptions are made up of differently shaped pieces of insight and analysis that rarely fit together tightly yet give the appearance of solid artifice.

This multilayered analysis is also “thick” in a second sense. My account of women neighbors is not unbiased or value free; it is “thickly layered” with my own cultural presuppositions and therefore not transparent to these women’s lives. Consider the questions I bring to my neighborhood situation—questions of economic location, familial patterns, and ethnic history. My posing of them is rooted in years of academic training in contemporary social theory. Yet most women on my block do not share this background; they have not been formed by the culture of the university as I have. Their descriptions of their own lives, therefore, are different from mine. Whose description is correct? According to constructivists, both are legitimate and neither is correct. Both are legitimate because each reveals something about the one doing the describing as well as the one being described and hence reflects our different “lived, imaginative constructs.” Neither is unambiguously correct because there is no single, “correct” description of a situation, person, or community; there are only shifting sites where diversely constructed selves are rendered meaningful and, in turn, render meanings.

Responses to Feminist Constructivism

As with most topics in feminist theory, feminist constructivism has both strong advocates and critics. Feminists cite several elements in its favor. One is its ability to combat one of essentialism’s most dangerous side effects: a “wall of inevitability” or “don’t mess with nature” syndrome in politics. Recall that feminist theory was inspired from its inception by a vision of human community in which women were not oppressed. This vision presupposed that radical social change is both possible and necessary and that change will cut deeply into our conceptions of the normal and the possible. The counterclaim is that such change is impossible because the present order of male and female relations reflects a “natural state of affairs.” Feminist theorists have had to argue vigorously against this deep sense of inevitability. One of the best tools for doing so remains a constructivist view of “women” that shows how thick essentialist stones are made not from solid rock but from the humanly constructed, porous material of culture. Constructivists argue we are free to chip away at these stones and thereby open up space for new forms of human community.

Feminist theorists also find constructivism useful because it can account for diversity in women’s lives. What woman has not felt that she is not living

up to a cultural model of “essential womanhood” because her sense of self, her lifestyle, or her community does not fit essentialist claims about women? She may be African American in a racist culture or a lesbian living in a country where “heterosexual white womanhood” defines the “essential woman.”³¹ She may be labeled “right-brained” (reasoning) in a culture that thinks women should be “left-brained” (feeling); or she may have no desire for children in a culture where maternal instincts are considered as natural as the desire to eat and sleep. A constructivist approach can be liberating in such situations because it allows one to appreciate the different ways women are shaped by their contexts. In doing so, it allows one to ask critical questions about the particular cultural standards of “natural womanhood” that have been imposed on women. Complex questions such as *Who* in this culture benefits from essentializing a standard of white, heterosexual womanhood, and *How* is this view of woman disseminated, promoted, and enforced? Or simple ones such as *Why* are all the teachers at my child’s day care women? Or *Why* are their salaries so low? . . . It’s hard to imagine a more important job.

These two reasons for favoring constructivism offer a glimpse of the perspective constructivists take toward the world. They are skeptical about views of women that invoke universals and inevitability. They find differences among women as interesting as the similarities. And they interrogate the cultural logic and power relations that undergird sexual differences and the seeming inevitabilities that structure women’s lives.

The positive aspects of constructivism, however, have occasioned some of its harshest criticisms. Feminists worry about the political effect of celebrating the fluid, fragmented character of women’s identity at the very moment women are arguing that their identity has been overly fragmented by the dominant culture.³² They also worry that although constructivists defend agency, the logic of constructivism might lead to a cultural determinism even more oppressive than the determinism of essentialism. Women can appear to be nothing more than victims of a sexist culture. Further, feminists point out that for the purposes of political organizing, one needs descriptions of women’s lives that bring people together *across* lines of difference; one needs a rhetoric of commonality. Constructivism does a good job investigating the particular and the indeterminate in the lives of women, but has a more difficult time with the general and the decisive, both of which play important roles in political movements for social change. Finally, critics worry about constructivism’s leaning toward moral relativism. If no single description of women’s lives is correct and all are equally valid, what standards are available for assessing harm or the nature of justice and injustice in women’s lives? Don’t we need normative standards for assessing what is good

and bad? Questions such as these have led some feminists to advocate a middle ground in the feminist constructivist/essentialist debate: strategic essentialism. To this third option, let us now turn.

Strategic Essentialism

At midsemester, my feminist theory class reads a series of essays by the French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray. Like Cixous's, her writing style is unconventional, a mixture of poetic allusion and philosophical analysis. My students have trouble figuring out which side of the essentialist/constructivist debate she belongs to. From her earlier works, they get the impression she is a strong constructivist. In her later works, however, she sounds like an advocate for essentialism. Can she really be both? they ask. I suggest she can, but it is an awkward place to be. At this point, however, the students have learned that awkward places can be interesting, and the lively conversations we have about Irigaray witness to this.

The class first looks at some of Irigaray's early essays in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Here, Irigaray uncovers the hidden gender story of Western philosophy and psychoanalysis: the story of "phallogentrism."³³ By doing a feminist midrash on classic texts such as Plato's *Republic*, Irigaray shows that Western thought patterns define the "true" or the "good" by referring to their opposites—what is not true (false) and not good (bad). Irigaray further illustrates that in Western thought, we typically ascribe to the former (the true and real) a masculine identity and to the latter (their opposites) the space of the feminine. In this way, the feminine is put in the untenable position of being defined according to the needs of the masculine; as she states it, the feminine becomes solely a function of masculine desire. According to Irigaray, this leaves "women" in the fragmented cultural space of having no identity apart from the "men" they were constructed to define. Irigaray thus leaves her reader with the impression that her feminist constructivist sensibilities run deep. She leaves the reader, as well, with a clear sense that this gender story (she calls it "phallogentrism") is not only disturbing but dangerous for women.

The class next discusses a later work, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*,³⁴ in which they encounter a different Irigaray. Adopting a posture that is more positive and seemingly essentialist than her earlier position, Irigaray gives vivid descriptions of what women (and men) need to become in order to relate to each other in a manner that does not reduce women to a function of male desire. She provocatively depicts "woman" as needing to be *enveloped* in a structure of identity that enables autonomy and thereby contests the fragmenting relationality that Western discourse has imposed upon

her. As she poetically describes it, "woman" needs to "adorn" herself in garments of her own desires rather than wear the clothes of men's desires. She needs to "become herself." Irigaray also suggests that God plays a role in this adornment, as the one who authors the space of her becoming.

Irigaray then adds an equally vivid account of woman's need to remain connected to the world. Rather than allow her to rest secure but isolated in her envelope, Irigaray sends woman on a journey toward "the other"—much like an envelope traveling through the mail toward its destination. The purpose of woman's envelopment is not simply to enclose her in her own desires but to give her sufficient definition to meet and be met by "others" in a play of "wonder." We experience wonder when we encounter someone truly different and differentiated from us, and we embrace this other with an openness that is made possible because of our adorned differences. This double ethic of envelopment and wonder becomes, for Irigaray, a normative description of "essences" worthy of woman's embodiment. It describes the space in which she flourishes—a space of bounded openness.

The class now returns to Irigaray's place in the essentialist/constructivist debate. Some like her early, critical work but find her later vision hopelessly reductive. Others like her vision of envelopment and wonder. It seems to be what North American women standing on the edge of a new millennium need to further their struggle. Still others argue for something in-between. They applaud Irigaray's early critiques of gender constructions; they agree with her that "men" and "women" are products of deeply phallogentric patterns of thought and action. But they also applaud her later, more essentialist work because it offers what present-day, socially constructed "women" need in their struggle to contest phallogentric patterns of thought. While they realize Irigaray's essentials are social products and hence implicated in the very language these essentials contest, the students find them pragmatically compelling. Although the students in this third group are not initially aware of it, they are defending what feminist theorists call "strategic essentialism"—that "awkward third option" in the essentialist/constructivist debate.

Defining Strategic Essentialism

I have so far explored two sides of the ongoing feminist debate over gender identity. To highlight the central points championed by each, I emphasized the radical difference between them: the essentialist believes in gender fundamentals, and the constructivist is suspicious of them and searches for the social roots of our varied experiences of gendered personhood. By focusing on the differences, I tried to capture the passion of the debate. Although I looked primarily at academic positions, I also described ways in which each side finds expression in everyday, nonacademic thinking about women.

Whenever one finds oneself thinking, “Women always do this . . . ,” or “Men never do that . . . ,” then one is engaged in essentialist thinking about gender. Whenever one responds to a popular view of womanhood with the exclamation “I am not like that!” or “My mother never acted that way!” then one has stepped onto the path of constructivist social critique.

I also showed why each position makes sense from a feminist perspective, and why, in everyday discussions, many people (feminists included) spend time in both camps. Often in the course of a single conversation, I make the two observations “Women always . . .” and “I’m not like that. . . .” I may be simply inconsistent and confused. Some feminist theorists argue, however, that it is preferable to spend time in both camps, in a position somewhere in-between, a position known as “strategic essentialism.”³⁵ The position goes by other names as well: normative constructivism, pragmatic utopianism, and pragmatic universalism. This in-between position applauds constructivist critiques of gender but feels nervous about giving up universals (or essences) altogether. While its proponents respect the hard questions posed by the debate, they believe that the divide between essentialists and constructivists fails to capture the complexity of daily experience.³⁶

To understand the roots of strategic essentialism, recall my previous discussion of the relationship between feminist theory and feminist activism. Feminist theory has always understood itself as serving larger movements for the liberation of women and all persons. Feminist theory has its roots in a practical concern to support and encourage concrete political struggles on behalf of women. Because of this activist orientation, feminist theory must answer these questions: How do our theories actually function when used by people involved in struggles for liberation? Are they helpful? Or are they problematic—maybe even irrelevant? Feminist activists and theorists have recently posed these questions to both essentialists and constructivists. One mark of strategic essentialism is its commitment to offering pragmatically useful answers.

When a strategic essentialist asks the question Is there an essential character to women’s identity or is it a product of culture?, she does so from a distinctive angle. The issue of practice comes to the fore. The strategic essentialist is a “pragmatist” or “functionalist,” because she uses “practical effect” as the measure of theory. Instead of relying on rigid principles (either constructivist or essentialist), she asks: Will their view of women’s nature advance the struggle for women’s empowerment? She also makes calculated, “strategic” decisions about which universals or essentials might work in a given context and which might fail. The almost militaristic emphasis on strategy highlights the fact that she is *not* a disinterested observer of other persons’ practices and theories. She is a politically engaged analyst studying

the practical effect of views of women’s nature so as to craft ones that are emancipatory and life-giving.

What view of “women” is pragmatic and useful? Strategic essentialists give no single, unchanging answer. The claim that women are “by nature” more nurturing than men may be oppressive when used to argue that women are not tough-minded enough to be good political leaders. The same view, however, may be emancipatory if it brings women’s nurturing sensibilities into public politics in order to challenge patriarchal views of power, hierarchy, and control.³⁷ In another example, the constructivist rejection of universals is liberating when it exposes the racism and classism embedded in falsely essentialized notions of white womanhood. When used to argue that violence against women is culturally defensible, however, it no longer serves emancipatory ends.³⁸

The strategic essentialist’s task is also complex because in determining what is “emancipatory,” she must make strong normative judgments. As the name “strategic essentialism” suggests, a feminist theorist in this camp finds positive value in making essentialist claims about human nature in general and women’s nature in particular. She pragmatically values essentialism because she believes people simply cannot live without a view of human nature that includes “essentials” or “universals.” Further, she believes that constructivism alone cannot sustain ongoing movements that require not only collective action but also normative visions of human nature and the human good.³⁹ Both points will be explored in chapter 6, but a brief elaboration of them now is needed.

With regard to the first claim (that it seems impossible to live without “universals”), a strategic essentialist notes, in concert with the constructivists, that language systems, cultural forms, traditions, and social organizations that persons inhabit inevitably consist of conceptual rules (imaginative constructs) that make sense of the world. These rules usually include normative views about the nature of human persons. While it is certainly possible to analyze and critique these views (as a constructivist would), one does so *not* by stepping outside of all language and culture and adopting a “view from nowhere,” but by stepping into a cultural space shaped by an alternative set of normative views. When this occurs, old and oppressive “essentials” about human nature and gender may be critiqued and discarded, but only insofar as new or different rules about human nature are simultaneously adopted. In the parlance of feminist theory, pure critique is impossible. Note, too, that the principal difference between the strategic essentialist and the constructivist is that the constructivist is usually content to offer localized thick descriptions of constructed rules and essences, whereas the strategic essentialist elaborates the normative meaning and power of these universals with respect to the flourishing of women.

In addition, a feminist strategic essentialist argues that “essentials” serve an important political function.⁴⁰ Anyone who has participated in a feminist political battle recognizes the importance of an alternative view of “what women are.” Simply criticizing oppressive views of women’s nature does not get very far. Likewise, shouting out that “women exist only as a social construction” probably guarantees the struggle will die before it gets off the ground. Putting all of one’s energy into elaborating the particularized differences between women with no reference to commonalities makes effective collective action difficult. Yet, if a movement lifts up an alternative, unifying image of “women” that is believable and compelling—even if this image is admittedly only a universal *ideal*—then it is likely to make a good start. This normative imagining, in its universal or essential form, provides a regulative ideal. Such ideals involve a “utopic essentialism”—they are utopian visions that, by breaking open the present, imagine humanity anew.

At an even more concrete level, a strategic essentialist supports the practical importance of essentialism by reflecting on the fact that “universals” about human nature abound in the most common tasks. Take, for example, the complicated process of raising a child. One constantly calls upon some normative view of human nature to make child-rearing decisions. For instance, if I believe that lesbian relations are *not* essentially unnatural and can be good and fulfilling, I will not raise my daughter to expect that she will find joy in adulthood only with a male companion. If I believe women are essentially agents capable of making decisions, owning their bodies, and crafting their own lives, then I will encourage my daughter to think for herself and take on responsibilities. While I am trying hard to do these things, I also recognize how her own growth and development challenge my deepest, often unconscious convictions about human “universals.” Her delight in dancing teaches me to view the human body in more expansive and imaginative ways, just as her surprisingly early inclination to hit her cousins challenges my lifelong view that human beings are inherently peaceful and non-violent. I offer this example not as a normative feminist vision of parenting but as an instance of strategic essentialist thinking in one of its most deeply personal and yet most profoundly political forms.

This in-between position is different from the essentialisms discussed earlier. Recall that the most significant difference lies in the degree to which strategic essentialism stays open to critique and hence continually revises its “universals.” Revisions may be prompted by a number of things: the “universals” may no longer serve feminist emancipatory ends or be intelligible to the community that holds them; they may come into direct conflict with other, more important “universals”; or they may be “essentials” that historical and cultural reflection disproves. When “in use,” they may also prove not

to be universal but exclusive. A strategic essentialist therefore keeps one foot in the constructivist camp; she remembers that all “universals” are inescapably marked by context. A healthy dose of constructivist suspicion, along with an emphasis on feminist practice, thus keeps strategic essentialism from assuming the fixed positions associated with traditional forms of essentialist reflection.

As one example of this revising of universals, look at how discussions of women’s sexuality and feminist sexual ethics have evolved over the past forty years. In the women’s liberation movement of the early 1960s, emancipated women embraced “free love” as a central step toward the liberation of women and humanity as a whole. In the language of essentialism, the liberation call was for women to give into their “natural sex drive” and thereby throw off the shackles of repressive views of monogamous sexual ownership and constrained feminine sexuality. As the movement evolved, however, it realized that “freeing one’s natural sex drive” was not what it appeared. This view of “essential sexuality” made it culturally permissible (even liberating) for men to claim unlimited access to women’s bodies. What had once passed as a feminist “liberating essential” came to seem instead a constructed oppression.

In response, the women’s movement revised its rhetoric of sexuality by shifting to “essentials” emphasizing a woman’s ownership of and control over her own body and pleasures, as in the famous book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.⁴¹ While this image of autonomous ownership served an important political function in a society seeking to control women’s bodies, it was not long before it, too, was challenged. Lesbians contested the heterosexist assumptions of this feminist rhetoric about embodiment, and women of color raised questions about the classist and racist assumptions in “universals” of “property” and “ownership.”⁴² Language of sexuality thus began to shift once again to include such universal principles as “agency,” “the erotic,” “difference,” and “relationality.” These terms were recently challenged again by feminist debates over such topics as butch/femme relations and the moral status of lesbian sadomasochism.⁴³ In each of these conversations, competing views of “essential human nature” and “sexual universals” play a normative role—as, for example, in the debate over the nature of pornography: Is it a product of innate sexual desire or constructed relations of power and social control? Likewise, there remains a lively sense that “universals” on each side are deeply shaped by culture and should stay open to radical revision and reconstruction. If these two moments—the universal and the critical—remain together, then strategic essentialism will likely mark future conversations about sexuality as well.⁴⁴

As this brief example suggests, contemporary feminism is a history of shifting essentials; strategic essentials are constructed anew for each generation of

activists and new terrain of struggle.⁴⁵ As to present-day “strategic essentials” that mark the terrain of North American feminist reflections, I have already mentioned a few: agency, embodiment, relationality, and difference. A quick glance at the Women and Gender Studies section of any bookstore reveals numerous volumes devoted to these normative values and to others, such as Irigaray’s ethic of envelopment and wonder. To appreciate the full range of feminist reflections on these matters, however, one needs to look to the religion section, where one finds the writings of feminism’s oldest and most experienced “strategic essentialists”—the feminist theologians. Let us now turn to their world of discourse and explore the further lessons that feminist theology and theory have to teach.

3

Sanctification and Justification: Lived Grace

If she is to be able to contain, to envelop, she must have her own *envelope*. Not only her clothing and ornaments of seduction, but her skin.

—Luce Irigaray, “Place, Interval”

Wonder goes beyond that which is or is not suitable for us.

—Luce Irigaray, “Wonder”

On a Wednesday night near the end of the semester, I sit in a local coffee shop with three divinity-school students from my feminist theory class. Disheveled piles of books and coats surround us, and the air is crisp with the excitement of early winter and the energy of good conversation. We have gathered to talk about how feminist theory relates to pastoral work in local churches and the community. The discussion crackles with humor, passion, and an abundance of ideas as we move from topic to topic—from worship and preaching to ministerial counseling and political action, and even to the broader topics of women’s nature, gender, and God. Having spent the semester immersed in the world of high theory, the students express delight at moving back into the more familiar world of theology. They all agree, however, that the world of Christian doctrine no longer looks the same.

As one student explains: “Feminist theory has given me a new road map for driving through an old theological neighborhood. I still recognize the place, but I now see things I missed before, and even the most familiar terrain looks different.” The other two nod and offer vivid descriptions of how feminist theory has affected the theological landscapes of their faith. They describe how feminist critiques of essentialism have made them painfully aware of Christianity’s centuries-old role in promoting oppressive views of