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Gendered Public Spaces: Examining Cities Within the Nature-Culture Dichotomy

Examining the evolution of essentialist claims about women and anti-essentialist responses reveals how feminist theory can offer scholars new perspectives. In this paper I extend Sherry Ortner's universalist analysis of women's subordination by applying her nature-culture dichotomy to urban planning and taking a fresh look at public space. First, I offer a brief review of her argument in *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?*, and her conceptualization of nature versus culture. Second, I use examples from public space to illustrate applications of the nature-culture dichotomy, demonstrating both the physical dominance of culture over nature in public space, and the effect on women's subordination in cities. Next, I discuss Ortner's concept of intermediacy, and walk through a series of examples demonstrating middle, mediating, and ambiguous intermediacy. Finally, I call for using feminist theory to take urban planning, as a field and a practice, beyond the nature-culture dichotomy.

Ortner and the Nature-Culture Dichotomy

Feminist scholars have responded swiftly to essentialist claims about women, among them Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, a stinging retort to the idea that biological differences between men and women justify women's subordination. During the 1970s, Sherry Ortner moved the conversation forward by revisiting de Beauvoir's rejection of biological determinism and offering a culturally based explanation for why women universally hold a secondary status in society. She argued that the "secondary status of women in society is one of the true universals," (p. 67) and developed a nature-culture dichotomy to explain the consistent devaluation of women. Although today we may reject the idea of a single category of 'woman,' it's important to note that at that moment in history, recognizing women as a group was necessary for forward progress of scholarship and feminist theory¹.

Ortner set the foundation for the nature-culture dichotomy by first examining the physiological differences between men and women, with women's bodies and their functions more closely tied -- for a greater proportion of their lives -- to reproducing the species than men, thus closer to nature. Based on the functions of men's bodies, and their less involved role in species reproduction, they are deemed freer to "more completely take up the projects of culture" (p. 73). Next, Ortner suggested that women's bodies and their functions inherently position them in more traditional social roles, such as mothering, which is perceived as having lower cultural value than men's social roles. Finally, Ortner asserted that a woman's body and its functions, coupled with the social roles cast by that body, produce a "different psychic structure, which, like her physiological nature and her social roles, is seen as being closer to nature" (p. 74), thus solidifying a woman's position as less than men.

Within the nature-culture dichotomy, men are seen as participating in transcendental activities aligned with culture. Ortner, using de Beauvoir's framework, contrasts the natural creativity of a woman's

¹ Additionally, Ortner is careful to remind readers that her arguments are about generalized humanity.

body in reproducing the species and the amount of time a woman spends with this endeavor, with man's "opportunity to assert his creativity externally, 'artificially,' through the medium of technology and symbols" (p. 75). Although we are all subject to mortality, she suggests that in this sense a woman's body prescribes her a life's work focused on the "perishable," reproducing and rearing humans, while a man's body -- absent the close connection to nature -- allows him the possibility to create permanent, lasting, and highly-regarded additions to our culture.

Ortner's nature-culture dichotomy takes on new life when applied to the context of cities, where physical manifestations of men's dominance and women's subordination fill public space. Visual examples from city spaces in context with Ortner's nature-culture dichotomy reveal that while feminist scholarship has moved well beyond generalizing women as a group, urban planners and those tasked with designing city spaces still struggle with recognizing women as a class of citizens. The nature-culture dichotomy as applied to cities unfolds from here in several ways. First, I provide visual examples of the domination of men (through culture), and the subordination of women (through nature) throughout the built environment and public space. Then, I look to the practical implications of subordinating women and taking the experiences of men to be the only experiences when making planning decisions.

Physical Applications in Public Space

The subordination of women in the public spaces of cities has deep roots in the built environment, where the phrase "man made" is taken literally -- the fields of architecture and construction are dominated by men. It is widely acknowledged in planning that women are severely underrepresented in the field of architecture, a concern that is also echoed by the Association of Women in Architecture². The implication is that unless the concerns and needs of women are considered during design phases, it is unlikely the buildings, neighborhoods, and cities we live in are constructed with women in mind. In line with Ortner's nature-culture dichotomy, men not only dominate the professions tasked with building cities, but their creations are lasting, permanent, objects that shape and reflect culture. The built environment is an overwhelming visual reminder of male dominance in cities. For instance, San Francisco's famous Transamerica Pyramid is easily recognizable and is a phallic reminder that it was at one time the tallest building west of the Mississippi.

The nature-culture dichotomy is also present when looking to what a city chooses to memorialize. There is no clearer example than our nation's capital where the vast majority of monuments are dedicated to war and male leaders -- the city of Washington centers around a phallic obelisk in his name. A black marble facade is dedicated to the Vietnam War, a walled stone monument to World War II interrupts the national mall, and statues to war generals dot the landscape. In this example, men are linked to war, and war is likened to a transcendental activity, which is thus aligned with culture. While men receive recognition for their service in separate monuments to each war, a monument condensing

² The history of the Association of Women in Architecture includes notes that it formed because women needed a space of their own in a field overwhelmingly dominated by men. More information on the AWA can be found at awa-la.org.

all women's contributions to military service during all wars, a "living memorial honoring all military women -- past, present and future,"³ is tucked inside Arlington Cemetery, away from the prestige of being located on the mall. The mall also serves as an example of how public city space is divided into spaces of nature and culture. The mall is lined on each side by museums containing art and cultural treasures, clear signs of man's realm of culture, while the open spaces in the middle of the mall contain grass and reflecting pools -- signs of nature. Families picnic in the natural grassy areas, while in the museums, sites of culture, participants are encouraged to learn and contemplate.

Implications for Women and Public Space

Safety and security are significant concerns when examining how public space reflects the needs and concerns of men and women. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris's research on public transit and fear (2009) examined the experiences of women riding public transportation. Women articulated concern with waiting alone at bus stops or transit stations at night, and worried that closed circuit television (CCT) cameras were worthless in the moment of an attack. Additionally, women expressed a desire for more in-person policing, rather than relying on technology as a safety measure, despite the current security trend to increase technology to reduce the labor costs of in-person policing. Her study revealed that only three percent of transportation agencies have women's travel programs in place.

Based on this study there are several connections between the nature-culture dichotomy and transportation policy: 1) transportation planning is a male-dominated field, 2) transportation represents culture and technology, and 3) from the perspective of (male) transit authorities, the use of technology for security is perceived as a cost-cutting improvement, not a means of decreasing safety for customers. The implication for women passengers is a mismatch between their concerns and fears, and men's solutions. This is emblematic of the relationship between urban planning and women -- it takes a female academic researcher to ask the question of how women experience fear and public transit in order to demonstrate the mistaken normalization of a man's perception as the sole transit experience. In this example, men's experiences are positioned as the only experiences and therefore dominate decision-making, while women's experiences remain largely unrecognized by transit authorities.

The physical split between nature and culture, and thus women and men, is carried further when applied to the home: the inside of the home remains private, a place for women to engage in the "social-structural arrangements" which Ortner describes as defining "women as being somehow less cultural than men" (Ortner, p. 82). Pulling from the work of Nancy Chodorow, Ortner affirms her argument that it is these social-structural arrangements such as mothering, and not simply a woman's biology, which position women as closer to nature. An inverse of this nature-culture split brings forward an intriguing question: as more men become stay-at-home dads, will their masculinity change as they move further

³ Find more information about the Women in Military Service for America Memorial here: <http://www.womensmemorial.org/>

from culture and closer to nature? Are the bounds of culture adjusted to accommodate their new role? Or will they occupy a new place in Ortner's spectrum of intermediacy?

Interpretations and Applications of Intermediacy

Ortner discusses the concept of intermediacy as having three potential interpretations or readings for women (p. 86-87). First, women may be cast in a *middle* position, occupying a space between nature in culture, but they are still considered at a lower level than culture. Second, women may be perceived as *mediating* nature and culture, but only so far as the control of culture allows -- culture must control the any change from nature to culture. Third, women's intermediacy may be interpreted as *ambiguously* between nature and culture, meaning women are positioned as polarizing or contradictory.

The nature-culture dichotomy is complex when it comes to displays of women's bodies in public. Society has grown accustomed to seeing hyper-sexualized imagery of women in advertising, whether on billboards, bus stops, or in storefront windows. In these images, photo manipulation software allows women to represent their furthest rendition from nature, occupying a middle ground where they inch closer to culture through digital alterations. Applying intermediacy to images of women in public advertising reveals several potential interpretations. Photography serves as the transcendental medium to transfer nature into culture, bringing women closer to culture; however, this mediating function is controlled by culture, and women are associated with a lower level of culture than men.

The ambiguous approach applies here as well. Some advertising images essentialize women by photographing them in compromising positions, and focusing on their bodies or sexual acts that, by consequence, may result in reproduction. For instance, American Apparel ads frequently showcase overtly sexual and demeaning photos of women, and a recent campaign by the Hard Rock Hotel in Las Vegas featured a young woman dressed in provocative lingerie holding what appears to be a whip behind her head, while a male, and presumed "rocker," plays guitar on the bed in the background. These images also fulfill the contradictory element of this interpretation of intermediacy: the focus of these images is a woman's body, the very thing that by its reproductive functions designates the social arrangements which position women closer to nature and further from culture -- yet in these images, that same body, in a photo advertisement, is used as the subject in an object of culture.

However, there is growing evidence that exposure of a woman's body in its natural state is increasingly cause for conflict. Recent news stories suggest a level of intolerance for women who choose to breastfeed their children in public. In one recent example, a mother nursing her child at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) was asked to cover-up or move⁴. This prompted a swift response from the breastfeeding community which staged a "nurse-in" at LACMA and other public stores, united behind the disbelief that the natural act of nursing has become offensive in a time when images of women's breasts are on constant public display. In this example, non-formalized rules of

⁴ News story and video found here: http://abclocal.go.com/kabc/story?section=news/local/los_angeles&id=8651965

public space operate as a mechanism for maintaining the nature-culture dichotomy. Nursing aligns women with nature, and the action of breastfeeding is a physical manifestation of the relationship between mother and child. In this context, a public space for a woman to nurse her child is considered to have less value than a public space for experiencing culture (despite art exhibits at LACMA containing female nudity), thus the subordination of women through the nature-culture dichotomy continues.

The Clothesline Project⁵ is also an example of intermediacy, and seeks to raise awareness of sexual violence by using the public space of campuses to display t-shirts containing messages from sexual violence survivors. T-shirts are color-coded and hung on clotheslines to encourage passersby stop and read. Organizers are able to take the experiences of violence against women (and men) and transform them into expressions of culture through the creation of individualized t-shirts, and the collective art installation. The experiences of women are memorialized through semi-permanent objects⁶. However, even though nature is successfully converted into culture, within the nature-culture dichotomy this satisfies the ambiguous component of intermediacy. Women participants in this art project are aligned with culture, but are frequently assigned a potentially polarizing status such as victims.

Monuments and Intermediacy

Returning to the discussion of monuments in the built environment, statues of women present an intriguing case of intermediacy. Perhaps the most famous female monument is the Statue of Liberty; however, this statue does not showcase the female body, represent woman as a natural being, or demonstrate women as mothers or caretakers. There is no assumption of anything beneath her robe but a long flight of stairs leading to the observation deck. Instead the Statue of Liberty falls into the middle of the nature-culture dichotomy, aligning with nature by the presumed function of her female body, but aligning closely with culture through her presence as a more than 300 foot monument to freedom and democracy. The Statue of Liberty falls within the ambiguous category of intermediacy because she portrays woman within the polarizing category of goddess, modeled after statues from the times of the Greeks and Romans and holding a torch meant to symbolize enduring freedom and democracy.

Thus far I have used popular monuments as examples so as to avoid the confusion of referring to less familiar monuments. This is problematic in a discussion of public memorials to women, as the Statue of Liberty is one of the only widely recognized female monuments in the country. In the context of the nature-culture dichotomy this is unsurprising because women's accomplishments, no matter how great or significant to society, are not perceived as achieving the same high level of culture as men's. One line of logic might suggest that the lack of women presidents or war generals results in the absence of women's monuments; however, these monuments do more than document a certain level of

⁵ For more information on the The Clothesline Project, visit www.clotheslineproject.org.

⁶ Semi-permanent in the sense that clothing is easily lost or disposed of, whereas a statue would represent a more permanent object.

leadership -- they document high levels of success and influence in our country, and bolster a system which constantly devalues traditional women's professions. These monuments highlight an accepted, yet unacceptable, pattern in public space: immortalizing the nature-culture dichotomy by creating permanent objects reinforcing culture as a man's realm, and devaluing the work of women as culture-less and unworthy of similar recognition.

A Place for Feminist Planning?

Sherry Ortner wrote about the nature-culture dichotomy in 1974, an era when women as a class were struggling for recognition and validation of their differences. In many ways, city spaces, designed and built by men, still reflect an outdated moment in time when addressing the concerns and needs of women as a group was seen as unnecessary. In order to move forward, planners and architects need a renewed focus on the specific concerns of women in cities.

For planners, finding an answer for how to move forward is complex and calls for scholars to explore what feminist planning looks like today, and how it is taught and learned by students. Although the number of women attending planning school continues increasing, gender as a category is still not perceived as a necessary frame for understanding planning theory or practice, and it is a misconception to believe that all women planners automatically support feminist values. Many planning schools fail to design courses about gender and planning. Planners can only utilize the theories and strategies they know and understand. If critical analyses of women, feminism, and gender are absent from core classes, or are dismissed as a special interest, then we are telling future planners they don't need to carefully consider the experiences of more than 50% of the city's population.

Although we no longer consider women as a single group, distinguishing the needs of women is a necessary start for the field of urban planning and those tasked with creating our built environment. The distinction of a woman/man binary seems to instill hierarchal dominance as normal, but without first recognizing this distinction, our cities operate under the guidance of a single unnamed, experience -- the experience of men -- often without recognition that other experiences are possible. Until gender issues in planning are considered as seriously, and as an integral part of planning sectors such as transportation or economic development, the nature-culture dichotomy will continue uninterrupted.

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