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# Thinking Like a Feminist: What Feminist Theory Has to Offer Sociology

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## Abstract

What does feminist theory have to offer sociology? Defining feminist theory as work that problematizes the gender binary and the relations of domination that constitute and emerge from it, we explore four key aspects of feminist scholarship. We begin with work that explores gender as a structuring trope. We then turn to how gender is coconstituted with other structures of power and domination. Next, we survey how feminists have theorized the relationship between nature and the social through the body. Finally, we examine feminist epistemological claims. We conclude by demonstrating the inextricability of feminist conceptual work and feminist politics. As we move across these bodies of work, we show how they are linked with one another and suggest some of the ways in which thinking like a feminist would help sociologists better grasp the dynamics of the social worlds we study.



## THE STAKES FOR SOCIOLOGY

Nearly 50 years ago, Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne wrote an article entitled “The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology” in which they lamented that feminists have “yet to change the basic conceptual frameworks of the field” (Stacey & Thorne 1985, p. 301). The article spawned a series of follow-ups (Acker 2006b, Alway 1995, Lorber 2006, Ray 2006, Rosenberg & Howard 2008, Rupp 2006, Williams 2006), each of which has included the same frustration: Although sociology is full of interesting work on gender, and many sociologists consider themselves feminists, the claims that gender is a fundamental structure of social life at every level and that it provides a lens that changes what we observe, how we observe it, and how we understand what we see have had little impact on the field as a whole. In this article, we do not attempt to explain this dispiriting situation. Rather, we aim to demonstrate that feminist theory has significant lessons for sociologists, including for scholars not focused on gender or sexuality as primary objects of study. It behooves those outside the field of the sociology of gender to take advantage of these insights.

From studying glass ceilings to the division of household labor to representation in politics, US sociologists have done important work documenting women’s oppression [see, for example, Correll et al. (2007), Daminger (2019), England (2010), Hochschild & Machung (1989)] and masculine power [see, for example, Carlson (2015), Connell (1995), Pascoe (2011), Radhakrishnan & Solari (2015)]. US-based feminist theory,<sup>1</sup> whether written inside or (more often) outside the discipline of sociology, sets itself a logically prior task. As we define it here, feminist theory is work that, whatever its other aims, problematizes the normative discourse that interpellates humans into two oppositionally defined and mutually desiring categories, constituted through a relation of domination (Rubin 1975). We see this set of relations, which we tag “the gender binary,” (Butler 2004, Ingraham 1994, Lorber 2022), as fundamental to feminist scholarship.<sup>2</sup> After all, the gender binary underlies and gives meaning to the gender categories around which masculine domination is organized. What is more, in challenging these structures, feminist theory is necessarily critical as well as descriptive; feminists aim not merely to analyze, but to change the world they reveal (Ahmed 2010, Combahee River Collect. 1977).

Our intentions in this article are not exhaustive. We make no pretensions to surveying the entire field of feminist theory,<sup>3</sup> a body of scholarship that defines the stand-alone discipline of gender studies even as it crosses multiple other disciplines and flourishes well beyond the borders of the United States. Instead, in the pages below, we delineate what, after all these decades, sociologists have to benefit from thinking like a feminist, even if their principle empirical object, analytical focus, or even political commitments lie elsewhere. We lay out the field of feminist theory in four invitations, in each case aiming to make visible the tip of an iceberg beneath which a curious reader will find a plethora of other writing beyond the elemental work we have space to cite here.

<sup>1</sup>Given the size of the task, we have chosen to limit ourselves, for the most part, to work written or published in the United States. This limited scope leaves out many rich literatures beyond US borders, which we hope future reviews will discuss (see Connell 2014).

<sup>2</sup>In *Split Decisions*, Halley (2006) offers a three-part definition of feminism, the first of which centers the production of the gender binary: “a distinction between something m and something f; a commitment to be a theory about, and a practice about, the subordination of f to m; and a commitment to work against that subordination on behalf of f” (pp. 4–5).

<sup>3</sup>Among other limitations, we do not attempt to cover the extensive, overlapping but distinct (Marcus 2005, p. 201), field of “queer theory.” The *Annual Review of Sociology* itself has published five articles that are devoted specifically to queer theory/sexuality (e.g., Gamson & Moon 2004). Reviews of queer theory are even more abundant outside the discipline. Clearly gender and sexuality are fundamentally intertwined, and feminist theory itself reflects that fact, as is evident in the discussions below. However, for comprehensive reviews of queer theory in its own terms, readers should look elsewhere (Kunzel 2011, Marcus 2005).

We open with feminist theory's most counterintuitive claim. Although gender is often understood as identifying individuals, we argue that the gender binary is a fundamental constitutive structure that is implicated in producing many of the macro structures central to sociology, such as capitalism, science, and the state. Next, we explore the rich set of feminist theorizations of gender's coconstitution with race and other structures of power and difference, generally tagged as intersectionality in sociology but moving well beyond. The third section turns to feminist theories of the relationship between nature and the social through the study of bodies and embodiment. Feminists have argued that the relationship across these domains is interactive rather than unidirectional. We draw out the implications of this perspective for how we think about gender and more. Fourth, we turn to ways of seeing, from the foundational insights of feminist standpoint theory to other contemporary conversations in feminist epistemology. Although many of these claims have been explored elsewhere in sociology, including beyond the sociology of gender/sexuality, in troubling the social world from the vantage point of a destabilized gender binary, received claims from the social to the natural sciences are themselves problematized and illuminated in distinctive ways. This discussion ultimately brings us to politics, to transformation, and to the powerful legacy of feminist theory in linking analysis to action. Gender is a central axis of social life. Thinking like a feminist, therefore, is fundamental to thinking sociologically.

### THE GENDER BINARY AS CONSTITUTIVE TROPE

In public facing discussions in 2024, Judith Butler incisively defined gender as a “framework” (Bennett 2024) and as “a way of organizing society” (Remnick 2024). We open our review with this tradition of feminist scholarship, discussing a selection of feminist theoretical traditions that analyze gender as a set of meanings and practices that shape not only gendered identities but also macro dimensions of social life. This generative understanding of gender and sexuality as shaping other elements of the social is evident in the work of theorists focusing on a wide variety of structures.<sup>4</sup> In this section, we take up three of these. Each illuminates the modalities through which gender can be structuring as well as structured, macro as well as micro, and broadly relevant to social forms and subject formation. In the discussion below, we underline the distinctive emphases of these traditions. Although none of this work is rigidly cultural or material, the relative weight that each places on linguistic structures and social practices can help clarify the many ways that gender operates in and on social processes.

The most explicitly discursive of these claims about gender as structure emerged in the work of feminist poststructuralists in the 1980s, who claimed that the gender binary is at the root of the basic structures of “modernity” (Butler 1990, Felski 1995, Scott 1986). This argument, focused primarily although not exclusively on language and meaning rather than practice, was initially advanced in a pathbreaking 1986 essay by Joan Scott. Scott (1986) argues that gender is a dichotomous category that operates as a “primary way of signifying relationships of power” (p. 1067). Gender thus operates as an implicit reference against which other forms of hierarchical difference are legitimated and stabilized. This function, she argues, is made possible by gender's anchoring in the natural, thus supposedly immutable, dichotomy of sex itself. The body operates as a conduit from a purportedly fixed nature to an otherwise unstable social world. Thus, Scott reads the gender binary as an elemental underpinning to Western hegemonic common sense that is in

<sup>4</sup>Some areas that we do not have space to cover in this section, in which feminists have done important work thinking about gender as structure, include the state (see Adams et al. 2005, Brown 1995, Haney 2002, Orloff 1996, Pateman 1988, Puri 2016, Roychowdhury 2020, Vijayakumar 2021) and science (see the section below titled *Sexing the Gender Binary*).



turn fundamental to other forms of domination. A more recent version of this kind of analysis can be found in Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's (2020) *Becoming Human*. Jackson identifies discourses about Black maternity and sexuality as the root of colonial insistences on the subhuman nature of Black Africans. Racialized gender anchors colonial epistemologies, she argues, not only about Blackness, but about the very category of the human. At a similarly discursive if less macro level, Scott (1989) famously reads E.P. Thompson's analysis of the British working class in gendered terms. We can find these kinds of empirically grounded discursive analyses in contemporary sociology as well. For instance, Salzinger's (2016) ethnographic account of bank-based, peso-dollar markets reveals some of the ways that neoliberal financial markets are legitimated through a set of contrasts between the ostensibly rational masculinity of the market and the performatively hysterical masculinity of the traders themselves. This genre of work foregrounds gender and sexuality's function as an underlying hegemonic common sense, a structure of meaning against which other social claims are made, stabilized, and legitimated.

Marxist feminist theory similarly argues for gender's constitutive force. Rather than emphasizing gender as a discursive frame, this tradition emphasizes material structuring, analyzing the ways that heteronormative gender and family forms structure and support capitalism. These theorists argue that actually existing capitalism is enabled by and organized around binary gender as well as putative racial difference (Fraser 2022). Silvia Federici famously elaborates this claim in two stages throughout her work. First, in *Caliban and the Witch* (Federici 2004), she argues that modern gender was produced in early capitalism's introduction of new separations between "home" and "work" in the imperial center and even more violently in the imposition of Christian European ideas of appropriate gender on native communities in the Americas. She then argues that gendered difference, once established, feeds and enables capitalism in practice. In collaboration with her comrades from the International Wages for Housework Campaign [e.g., Dalla Costa & James 1975 (1972), Federici 2012, Fortunati 1995 (1981)] and the more recent Social Reproduction Theorists (e.g., Bhattacharya 2017, Ferguson 2016, Fraser 2016, Glenn 1992, Salzinger 2021), Federici claims that the work of making not things but people—social reproduction—is obscured under capitalism by its unwaged character. This invisibility makes it possible for the work to be both ignored—allocated to unrecognized (m)others—and devalued—consigned to underpaid women of color domestic workers (Glenn 1992; Parreñas 2000, 2015). This system benefits both men and White people along the way, but it is ultimately structured in the interest of capital. The surplus extraction that takes place during commodity production is enabled, enlarged, and made even harder to see by the unfree and undervalued labor of the women and people of color who produce the holders of "free labor" at little or no cost to the capitalists themselves (Arruzza et al. 2019, Fraser 2022). Thus, these theorists argue, capitalism as we know it can be understood only with reference to the gendered and racialized practices that augment exploitation with expropriation and thus enable the profits that guarantee the system's long-term survival.

Unlike the scholars discussed above, transnational and postcolonial theorists are specifically interested in theorizing gender's simultaneously material and discursive modalities of shaping global relations of power.<sup>5</sup> Feminist theorists such as Anne McClintock (1995) and Ann Stoler [2010 (2002)] make the argument that women, in McClintock's (1995) memorable phrase, served as a "boundary marker" of imperialism (p. 24). These scholars argue that European colonists legitimated conquest with reference to the lack of European feminine modesty performed by Native

<sup>5</sup>It is interesting to note the intellectual trajectory of postcolonial theory in sociology. Transnational feminist sociologists were theorizing gender and postcoloniality throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. However, it was not until the decades following, which coincided with an expansion in the object from postcolonial states and gender to US empire and race, that postcolonial critique gained traction in the broader discipline.

women (Federici 2004, McClintock 1995, Schuller 2021), and conversely that heteronormative, male-dominated households back in the imperial center were sustained and bought off with access to cheap colonial goods (Mies 1986). The alleged eternal victimization of women across the globe, moreover, became a rhetoric that has been used to rhetorically justify imperial and neo-colonial interventions into the third world under the guise of “saving brown women from brown men” [Spivak 1988, p. 296; Abu-Lughod 2002; Mahmood 2011 (2005); Mohanty 1984, 2003]. Postcolonial feminists today argue that contemporary “governance feminist” (Halley et al. 2019) projects are continuing these practices (Abu-Lughod et al. 2023, Bernstein & Jakobsen 2022), upholding postcolonial domination through ostensibly feminist narratives. The combination of discourses of normatively racialized femininity and masculinity, along with life practices organized across transnational space in concert with those discourses, together justified, enabled, funded, and enforced European colonial projects and ongoing postcolonial relations. In a recent series of lectures, Lisa Lowe terms this nexus “colonial domesticity,” the “governance of kinship, family, and household that is central to both colonial extraction and to the maintenance and reproduction of colonial social relations” (Lowe 2023, p. 4). As in the other strains of feminist theory discussed in this section, one of the strengths of this theoretical frame is its capacity to identify ways gender constitutes global structures, rather than focusing merely on the ways it is (also) shaped by them.

We can see how sociologically illuminating this kind of theorizing is in the work of Joan Acker (2006a, 1990). Acker argues that the modern capitalist employment contract assumes a working subject with no external care work obligations. The prototypical worker, in other words, is presumed to be a masculinized subject supported by a heteronormative caring infrastructure that frees him (sic) from all care work obligations and, consequently, frees the employer from considering care obligations in workplace planning. This assumption not only shapes how a “worker” is understood by employers, but also constitutes the home/work dichotomy as a naturalized organizational practice. Acker’s groundbreaking work provides a powerful example of how putting this kind of thinking into practice—leveraging both discursive and practice-focused forms of feminist theory—can sharply illuminate a primary area of sociological analysis.

In opening this review article with theorists who argue that binary gender undergirds our most significant contemporary social structures, we aim to upend the ways that gender is often raised and addressed in sociology: as an added variable rather than an omnirelevant characteristic of social reality overall. From nature to culture, from our ways of thinking to the ways we organize daily life, these theorists find gender at the root. Gender is a constitutive part of the structure that generates the rest.

Feminist theorists are also concerned with subjectivity and subject formation, of course, and we turn to that terrain in the section that follows. There are many elements here that we might discuss, but a fundamental and persistent challenge shared by feminist theorists and many sociologists is how to think about the constitution of the subject in a social world that is shaped by multiple structures of meaning and subjectivity simultaneously. This issue has bedeviled the field of feminist thinking, both politically and intellectually, and its centrality has led to a significant and innovative set of provisional solutions and fertile debates. We turn to those conversations now.

## THE GENDER BINARY IN COMPANY AND PLURALIZED

Since its beginnings, feminist theory has had to contend with a fundamental tension: how to make claims about the persistence of gender domination across time and space while also recognizing its fundamental fragmentation, inconsistency, and malleability (Riley 1989). One of the primary ways that this question has been explored in the field has been to theorize how an apparently singular



gendered binary has, in fact, been variably coconstituted with and through other structures of power and subjectification (Spelman 1988). The refusal of dualistic thinking is a fundamental characteristic of feminist thought, from early work on the coconstitution of gender and sexuality (Butler 1990) to the more recent work in “new materialisms,” by scholars such as Mel Chen, who traces “animacy” from stones through the more familiar processes of human subjectification (Chen 2012). The ways that feminists have worked with complexity and emphasized connection across difference should be instructive to sociology, a discipline in which parsimony is sometimes unduly rewarded.

Feminist theory has not always embraced complexity. Initial struggles to make “woman” herself visible as a social subject dominated early mainstream (White, elite, Global North) feminist writing. However, from Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I A Woman?” in the nineteenth century to the Caribbean-born communist Claudia Jones (1949) and Combahee River Collective (1977) in the twentieth century, arguments for a more complex understanding have long been a part of feminist conversations. In the late 1960s, Frances Beal [1971 (1969)] illuminatingly termed this experience “double jeopardy,” arguing that Black women experienced forms of sexism and racism that went beyond that of the White women and Black men with whom they shared gender and race categories and that those experiences were not only worse than their more privileged comrades, but different in kind [see also Deborah King (1988) on “multiple jeopardy”]. In the mid-1980s, Patricia Hill Collins (1986) brought this concept to sociology in “Learning from the Outsider Within.” The following year, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) took this discussion into legal studies, creating the more abstract and easily transported term “intersectionality,” which has come to dominate the discussion in feminist theory and beyond (Nash 2019). A Google search reveals more than 30,000 citations of Crenshaw’s article, far outstripping citations to others in this arena. Using a generative set of metaphors around mapping and axes, Crenshaw argued that structures and concepts defined around a single axis of difference, such as race or gender, obscured the distinct forms of discrimination and harm visited on Black women. Theoretical discussion of the framework has soared over the last four decades, and it has emerged as an obligatory, if sometimes perfunctory, reference in empirical work in gender studies. Intersectionality’s “citational ubiquity” (Wiegman cited in Nash 2008) has made it the object not only of special issues (e.g., in the 2013 volume of *Signs* and the 2012 volume of *Gender & Society*) and textbooks (e.g., Collins & Bilge 2020), but also of fierce debate (Choo & Ferree 2010, Cooper 2015, Nash 2019, Tomlinson 2013).

Beyond the fundamental claim that gender, whether as structure or identity, is always coconstituted with other systems of power, there are multiple questions and points of disagreement in the field (Cooper 2015; Nash 2008, 2019). A significant debate has emerged among intersectional feminist theorists over whether it is appropriate to use the concept to analyze the privileged. In a much-cited essay, Nikol Alexander-Floyd (2012) argues that applying the term to the analysis of other groups decenters Black women in their own framework and thus functions as a form of “neocolonization.” Others in the field strongly disagree (e.g., Carbado 2013), arguing that the power of intersectionality as a framework lies precisely in its capacity to illuminate the copresence of multiple structures, confined neither to subjugated identities nor, among those, to gender and race. In fact, some argue that assuming that Black women’s centrality to the theory indicates that it cannot be generalized to other social groups is itself a symptom of racism and sexism (Carbado 2013, Cooper 2015, Nash 2008).

Two significant critiques of intersectionality have emerged as well. First, in perhaps the most persistent challenge to the framework, some feminist scholars have argued that intersectionality highlights identity at the expense of structure, obscuring the larger processes that produce otherwise easily essentialized forms of subjectivity (Choo & Ferree 2010, Puar 2012). And yet Crenshaw herself advocates a more structural reading, insisting that exclusively identarian uses constitute a



misreading of the theory<sup>6</sup> and that intersectionality is focused explicitly on “multilayered and routinized forms of domination” (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1245, cited in Cho et al. 2013, p. 797). Subjectivities, moreover, are intimately linked to the structures that create them and that they feed in turn (see also Collins & Bilge 2020, Tomlinson 2013). A second noteworthy critique concerns the framework’s domestic bias. Jasbir Puar (2012) argues that the intersectional mantra of race, class, and gender is itself a “product[s] of modernist colonial agendas” (p. 54) and nationalist categories. Vrushali Patil (2013) finds that over 75% of empirical work using the term intersectionality in the year 2000 addressed domestic dynamics. The field’s “methodological nationalism,” she argues, takes for granted a set of assumptions about the possibility of thinking about the United States as if it were not fully and constitutively embedded in transnational relationships. Any sociologist grappling with the empirical reality of the copresence of multiple forms of difference and domination would benefit from reading through these debates.

The critique of intersectionality’s US centrism is part of the broader, autonomous project of transnational feminism. Like intersectional feminists, transnational feminists interrogate the constitution of the gender binary across and through other categories (Kaplan & Grewal 1999, Kim et al. 2005, Mohanty 1984). However, if Crenshaw wants to understand how pre-given categories operate within the law, transnational theorists pose a Foucauldian question, pushing back against understandings of woman that take it to be a transhistorical and unified category in the first place (Grewal & Kaplan 1994, Kaplan et al. 1999, Puar 2012). Instead, they understand the gender binary to be always already constituted through geographic and colonial relations that are multiple rather than dualistic. Contrasts between colonial and imperial subjects, moreover, are understood to be as fundamental to what counts as gender as any sex differences. This, they continue, has consequences both for who women are and for the stability of colonial domination discussed in the previous section (Mohanty 1984). Thus, transnational feminists see the coconstitution of gender with other elements of the social as central, much as their intersectional feminist colleagues do, but here it is the very configuration of state and nation and subject (Kim et al. 2005) that shapes and is shaped by gender. This theoretical framework has continued to generate significant analytic work.<sup>7</sup>

Over the past couple of decades, we have seen the emergence of another generative theoretical framework that addresses gender’s fundamental hybridity: decolonial feminism. The term, first coined by Maria Lugones (2007), centers its attention on the colonial conquest as the moment in which gender, as it is currently understood in the contemporary Global North, emerges at all (Anzaldúa 1987, Bacchetta et al. 2020, Lugones 2010).<sup>8</sup> These theorists argue that gender is a violent racialized discursive imposition on Native cultures that divides world populations into European humans, who are heterogendered (binary, hierarchical), and colonized subjects, who are not accorded the privilege of gendering at all because they are not seen as fully human. In this sense, gender as we know it today is fundamentally a racialized and colonial structure, one that did not exist before the colonial conquest and one that categorizes differently racialized

<sup>6</sup>If sociologists use the term too frequently to describe the multiple demographic characteristics and experiences of individual subjects with scant reference to context, perhaps that reflects less about the original framework than it does about practices all too common in sociological research that focus on subordinated subjects.

<sup>7</sup>To name only a few, in recent years Kimberly Hoang (2015), Jyoti Puri (2016), and Minoo Moallem (2018), all working within this tradition in sociology, have published pathbreaking work on states, nations, commodities, and subjects.

<sup>8</sup>Whereas postcolonial feminism emerged primarily from theorizing how gender operates in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, decolonial feminism emerges primarily from the Americas (Anzaldúa 1987, Lugones 2010).





subjects in radically distinct ways. This view goes far beyond intersectionality. Gender and race do not intersect; instead, gender is made by racialized processes. Not coincidentally, this latter view rhymes with Black feminist arguments about the same colonial era. Enslaved Africans, Black feminists argue, were addressed as ungendered flesh, even as they were simultaneously gendered in violent ways and, as such, denied common humanity by their enslavers via gendered discourses (Douglass 2020, Hartman 2016, Spillers 1987). In both cases, decolonial and Black feminists argue that gender is a fundamentally fractured category, with different meanings for peoples within different contexts and when viewed from inside and outside relations of domination.

The following example can clarify some of what is at stake for sociology in all these arguments. Functionalists such as Talcott Parsons classically characterized the home as a haven from work. In response, Marxist feminists insist that thinking about gender reveals the home as an unwaged workplace [Fortunati 1995 (1981)], to which Glenn (1992), among many, responds that home is a waged workplace for women of color across the postbellum period. Each time the category of relevant personhood is expanded, it illuminates the larger social form more fully. This intersectional insight can be further developed if we move into either a postcolonial or a decolonial frame. Postcolonial and decolonial theories would both suggest that we consider home not as a haven with modifications, but as fundamentally constituted at the outset by colonial relations at all scales. That is, the very definition of home as a sanctuary from work emerged from the gendered development of capitalist and colonial binaries (Mies 1986), which in turn makes the current predominance of (im)migrant women in paid household labor itself a tale foretold (Parreñas 2000). In the present, thus, home's functions as a space of rest, unwaged work, and waged work are not consecutive modifications. Instead, they are interdependent aspects of a single whole.<sup>9</sup> The theories we have discussed above give us tools for recognizing and analyzing this complexity.

In closing this section, we turn to a study featured in the work of both transnational (Gonsalves 2022, Kim et al. 2005, Patil 2013) and decolonial feminists (Lugones 2007). In an empirically rich monograph looking at the colonial imposition of gendered categories in Africa, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997) demonstrates that precolonial Yoruba culture did not have male/female categories as we understand them in the contemporary West: oppositional and hierarchical. Humans do have a variety of bodily differences, she argues, but these do not necessarily map onto fixed binary roles and hierarchically ordered positions. Insofar as gendered frameworks emerged among the Yoruba, these were imposed as an element of colonization itself in an iterative process that began with their devaluation as Africans and continued with their further devaluation as women within that category (Oyèwùmí 1997, p. 122). For Western feminists to make totalizing laments about the necessary relationship between body and gendered identity or experience not only proves to be empirically inaccurate in this case, but also reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of gender itself. "Making an African sense of Western gender discourses" reveals that the very sexing of the body is neither universal nor transhistorical.<sup>10</sup> And so, with Oyèwùmí's damning read of the colonial assumptions of Western feminism, we find ourselves at the root question of the complex relationship between nature and the social—between sex and gender—as understood by feminist theorists in the US academy today.

<sup>9</sup>For a wonderful version of this argument focused on the nuclear family, readers are directed to Weeks (2023).

<sup>10</sup>Oyèwùmí's warning matters not just for the study of gender, but for the study of desire more broadly. The use of "same-sex sex" as a solution to the problems of universalizing posed by the categories "gay" or "homosexual" raises problems similar to those Oyèwùmí identifies. If the distinction between sexes is socially contingent, then so is the meaning that people attach to bodies and sexual practices. "Sex," loses its putatively universal applicability in both senses, as sexual practice and as socially agreed upon biological criteria.

## SEXING THE GENDER BINARY

The relationship between nature and society has been a longstanding problem and problematic for both sociology and feminist theory. The draw has been particularly strong for feminist theory, since it functions against the backdrop of a conception of the human in the modern West that anchors a gender binary in the sexed body, links women inextricably to nature, and uses both as key justifications for masculine domination (Laqueur 1992, Schiebinger 2004, Scott 1986). This political problem has concentrated the minds of feminist scholars, its high stakes leading to a generative, sophisticated, and constantly evolving discussion.

Given the common sense to which it responded, it is not surprising that as early second-wave feminism's political project began taking aim at women's subordination, its intellectual project opened by challenging the ostensibly natural logic alleged to undergird it (de Beauvoir 1949, Moi 1999). The most consequential work of the 1970s responded to the idea that gender was but sex in sheep's clothing by downplaying the sexed body entirely. This framing was most famously exemplified by Gayle Rubin's (1975) argument in "The Traffic in Women" that biological difference was real, but minor, and that the question was not what those bodily differences were, but how they were organized socially. The project was not to fetishize differences in embodiment, she argued, but to understand the process through which they became a mainstay of social life, primary subjective experience, and male domination.

The minimization of the cumbersome body was intensified in the following two decades. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, counterintuitively argued that sex was constituted by gendered meanings, rather than the inverse, thus going beyond downplaying the body to effectively reading the body as constituted by gendered identities: "Sex," they wrote, "by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" (Butler 1990, p. 14).<sup>11</sup> In sociology, this line was argued most influentially by the ethnomethodologists West & Zimmerman (1987), who defined "sex" as merely a set of "socially agreed upon biological criteria" (p. 127).

In giving gender precedence over sex, feminists pushed against established understandings of the relationship between gender and sex, incisively captured by Butler's (1990) concept of the "heterosexual matrix." Conventional wisdom, according to Butler, is that binary sex gives rise to binary gender and that females/women and males/men are necessarily mutually attracted. This system of compulsory heterosexuality, they argue, requires gender, which in turn requires a particular binary conceptualization of the body. Female/male difference is not a fact of the body, therefore, but a consequence of heteronormativity and binary gender. The body matters in this account not as a prior biological reality, but instead as a powerful discursive legitimation for the mandatory matrix of complementary identities, bodies, and desires. Feminist sociologists, for the most part, have accepted the primacy of the social in these arguments, pushing not for more body, but rather to embed it in specific contexts of power and practice (Patil 2018, Salzinger 2003).

Over time, however, downplaying the body has come to seem increasingly untenable, both experientially and intellectually (e.g., Grosz 1994). In the natural sciences, feminist biologists had been worrying this bone for some time. As early as the mid-1970s, Ruth Hubbard, a feminist biologist at Harvard, had been teaching a class entitled "Biology and Women's Issues."<sup>12</sup> In 1987, Anne Fausto-Sterling published a pathbreaking monograph, *Myths of Gender*, arguing that the body emerges and develops in intimate relationship with its environment, a version of dynamic

<sup>11</sup>In later work, Butler has stressed the importance of the body and clarified its theorization in their work, firsts and most explicitly in *Bodies That Matter* (Butler 1993); nonetheless, their work continues to undertheorize the body as an agent (e.g., Jagger 2015, Prosser 1998).

<sup>12</sup>In an essay written in the mid-1980s, Hubbard (1983) argued that "people's biology develops in reciprocal and dialectical relationships with the ways in which we live" (p. 7).



systems theory (Fausto-Sterling 1987; see also Fausto-Sterling 2000). Rather than asking how a prefixed biology shapes the social or how a freestanding discourse shapes biology, this work argues that the relationship between the body and the social is mutually constitutive. Demonstrating this concept empirically, she shows that women's vulnerability to osteoporosis, relative to men's, is a reflection of feminized practices such as diets, low levels of exercise, and less time spent outside (Fausto-Sterling 2005).<sup>13</sup> Feminist theorists outside biology in science studies have increasingly taken up and elaborated on this interactive model, from exploring how studies of the body are shaped by masculine domination in the field of natural science (Richardson 2019, Roy 2018) and its consequences for the study of "women's health" (Tuana 2006) to extending analysis of the iterative coproduction of bodies and the social (Barad 2003, Grosz 1994, Pitts-Taylor 2016, Richardson 2019, Wilson 2004) to the binary sex/gender assumptions that shape the study of humans (Jordan-Young 2011, Karkazis et al. 2012, Martin 1991) and nonhuman animals, bacteria, and plants (Packer & Lambert 2022, Subramaniam & Bartlett 2023). Feminists in science studies thus refuse to argue over whether the body or the social comes first.

This significant discussion in biology and science studies has been impelled as well by the visible rise of transgender social movements in the United States since the 1990s. Empirically observable social changes, including the increasing social and political recognition of transgender people and the move from pathologizing to gender-affirming medical care, have made evident that Butler's "heterosexual matrix" is neither universal nor transhistorical. When Butler first developed this descriptive metaphor in the early 1990s, they were interested primarily in highlighting the role of sexuality in producing conventional gender, but the metaphor itself contained an assumption of binary gender and an ontological distinction between sex and gender. Trans studies theorists have begun to illuminate the limits of the concept: As transgender identity has become more socially legible, the matrix no longer captures the relationship between contemporary gender and sex (Gonsalves 2020).

Trans studies theorists<sup>14</sup> argue, contra early feminist theorists, that the incongruence between the experience of the body and the way it is perceived by others highlights the centrality of the body in gender accomplishment. Although the "felt sense" of the body may not match its "exterior contours"—an experience of course also familiar "even for normatively gendered subjects" (Salamon 2010, p. 2)—trans subjectivities make evident that the body is an inextricable element of gender legibility [see also Prosser 1998, Stryker 2006 (1994)]. Whereas mainstream feminists highlighted gendered performances' interactions on, in, and with the body, trans studies theorists draw attention to how the body "constrains and enables" the accomplishment of normative gender (Meadow 2018, Schrock et al. 2005, Shuster 2021) and to how the gendered structures enabling social legibility are simultaneously racialized (Aizura 2018; Gill-Peterson 2018; Gonsalves 2020, 2024; Menon 2017; Snorton 2017). Critiquing sociological emphases on "passing," trans studies theorists focus instead on intersubjectivity: "[I]f recognition is the means through which sex/gender becomes materialized and naturalized, then the conditions of recognition are the conditions of gender. . . sex is a product of recognition" (Plemons 2017, p. 10; Gonsalves 2024, Pfeffer 2014). Social intelligibility—being read as a man or a woman—hinges on the body. Individual

<sup>13</sup>Although this article for the most part talked about "women" as a unified category, it promised a follow-up article on race, which then came out in 2008 (Fausto-Sterling 2008).

<sup>14</sup>The relationship between feminist theory and trans theory has been a subject of considerable debate within trans studies, in terms of their political commitments and conceptual focus (Awkward-Rich 2017, Enke 2012, Hannsmann 2016). We use the terms "feminist theorist" and "trans studies theorists" descriptively and to note the specific ways that theories of embodiment emerge from a productive conversation between feminist and trans theory.

experiences of gendered identity, therefore, may require changing the body in order for them to make sense within a larger understanding of gendered meanings. Gendered meanings, and the complex configuration of body, identity, gender, and sexual desire, are in turn historically and socially situated (Aizura 2018, Dutta & Roy 2014). Bodies matter, in other words, because they enable people to be recognized within gendered and racialized structures of subjectivity, but that does not make them secondary or unimportant.

Feminist and trans studies theorists have long discussed the body not only in relation to gender legibility, but also in relation to struggles for fundamental autonomy. Bodily autonomy involves both the freedom to choose what to do with bodies and freedom from bodily violations. Feminist theorists have done important work conceptualizing bodily autonomy, including theorizing the freedom to modify one's body through gender-affirming surgery (Aizura 2018, Plemons 2017), whether to have children (Luna & Luker 2013, Roberts 1997), and freedom from assessment based on normative femininity and masculinity—an embracing of bodies that are fat, dark-skinned, covered in hair, disabled, wrinkled, and so on. While these pursuits are obviously different, since gender-affirming care has to do with fundamental social legibility and the related protections from bodily harm, linking them reminds us that they all speak to the issue of the control that people have, or are refused, over their own bodies.

From the beginning, trans studies theorists have highlighted the potential of sex-gender incongruence for destabilizing sex, gender, and the relationship between the two [Stone 2006 (1987), Stryker 2006 (1994)]. While the social demands required to live a livable life including the normative expectations of embodied gender may reinscribe (Balsamo 1992, Butler 2004, Prosser 1998, Spade 2006) or coerce (Amin 2020, Chen et al. 2023, Garland-Thomson 2005, Schuller & Gill-Peterson 2020) embodied ideals, transness also contains disruptive possibilities. Using Donna Haraway's metaphor of monstrosity to highlight the liminality and outsideness of transsexuality, Sandy Stone's [2006 (1987)] foundational essay invited trans people to "come out" as transsexual, or to be "posttranssexual," rather than attempt to be socially legible within existing gender categories (see also Halberstam 2020). This social illegibility and abjection, as Susan Stryker [2006 (1994)] writes, produce a rage that can, in turn, be harnessed for social transformation.<sup>15</sup>

As this section notes, the body has been an object of concern for feminists since its emergence, even as the ways it has been theorized are varied and have shifted over time. The body has clearly been a fundamental element in legitimating masculine domination. As is increasingly apparent, however, it is also an essential element in becoming socially intelligible. Feminists have shifted from asking which comes first to performing a more complex analysis of the body's coconstitution with identity and meaning. The rapidly moving terrain of the body has given rise to exciting new frameworks that attempt to make sense of this mutual production, with all its complexities and ironies. Given that sociologists too are grappling with the relationship between nature and the social, from the rising influence of (epi)genetics to the multitude of subjectivities that emerge through institutionally mediated categories such as disability, this vibrant area of feminist theory has much to offer the field of sociology.

## THE GENDER BINARY AS LENS

Feminist theory has implications not only for how we understand gender and how it works in the social world, but also for how we see at all. The position of woman has proved to be a generative epistemological vantage point, due both to the fundamental fact of subordination and to the

<sup>15</sup>Sociologists have also begun to theorize and empirically explore the undoing of gender in recent decades (e.g., Risman 2009, Saguy & Williams 2022).



content of conventional expectations of the feminine. Beginning in the 1970s, feminists responded to the characterization of women's insights as subjective or irrational by interrogating the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity. Knowledge is situated, they argued, shaped by the social locations and daily practices of the knowledge producer (Collins 1992, Combahee River Collect. 1977, Harding 1986, Hartsock 1998, Smith 1987). While sociological theorists from Du Bois to Bourdieu to Burawoy include elements of these arguments, feminist standpoint theory suggests that starting from a problematized gender binary illuminates specific aspects of social reality otherwise obscured by heteronormative life practices and especially by masculine positioning within them.

Feminist epistemologists make three claims. First, as Dorothy Smith (1987) argues, women's social location within male domination makes it possible for women to see, once subjected to feminist analysis, the power relations that are invisible to those positioned as men (Haraway 1988, Harding 1986, MacKinnon 1982). Patricia Hill Collins (1992) extends this insight to intersecting hierarchies of race and sexuality. As Collins (1992) argues, their social location further enables women who are situated at the bottom of multiple structures of inequality to see and understand how power works (for more contemporary work, see Gonzalez 2019, Gonzalez et al. 2022). In its strongest statement, work in this tradition claims that the vantage point of gendered subordination together with consciousness raising or other forms of feminist processing provides a privileged view of power relations overall (MacKinnon 1982). If reflexive sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu are concerned with "departing from lived experience to build anti-ideological knowledge," feminist standpoint theory examines normative women's lived experience as the starting point for a break from dominant ideology (Sweet 2020, p. 931).

Second, moving from social location to a focus on the epistemic fruits of daily practices, Hartsock (1998 [1983]) and Smith (1987) argue that because of the specific work women do every day, they are better positioned to see and thus understand how daily life actually works. Women's social location can enable them to denaturalize purportedly innate gendered power relations and inequalities (Smith 1987, Sprague 2016). From experiences rooted in their obligatory practices, women are better able to see (and theorize) the feminized and racialized devaluation of child care, housework, emotional labor, and the invisibility of reproductive labor more broadly. Men, "liberated from having to attend to their needs in the concrete and the particular" (Smith 1987, p. 83), are able to ignore the body and the labor that enables their own daily survival. Women's daily involvement in social reproduction brings into view the work of care, the experience of the body, and the inequalities that structure them. Consciousness raising brings those shared experiences into conversation, thus revealing common patterns of injustice. More recent decolonial work takes this set of claims beyond binary gender, arguing that the outsourcing of domestic work produces "epistemic ignorance" for heterosexual couples in the Global North (Prattes 2020), whether they are women or not.

Within the academy, autoethnography has offered a potential empirical avenue for making heteronormative structures visible and has generated considerable debate among feminist theorists and sociologists alike (Crawley 2002, 2012; Ettore 2016; Taber 2005; Wiegman 2020). If standpoint theory draws attention to the social conditions under which knowledge is produced, the turn to memoir and autobiography emphasizes the relationship between researcher and research subject, between data and theory generation. Feminists have turned to autobiographies because they offer firsthand accounts that do not unwittingly impose on (or create) research subjects. Autoethnography offers a "direct line from the analyst to the member, unobstructed by the Schutzian problem of conveying language *out loud*" and a writing style that can be simultaneously evocative and analytic (Crawley 2012, p. 145; emphasis in original). Collapsing the

boundary between self and research subject might provide an opening to new research questions and illuminate how social location enables one to see and understand power.<sup>16</sup>

A third epistemic challenge to positivist science takes on the idea of objectivity itself as a universal or transcendent form of knowledge. Rejecting what she memorably terms “the god trick,” Haraway (1988) argues that feminist objectivity “means quite simply *situated knowledges*” (p. 581). All knowledge is partial, and knowledge producers can only ever tell partial stories. Rather than aiming for “transcendence and the splitting of the object and subject,” Haraway’s feminist objectivity emphasizes “limited location and situated knowledge” (p. 583). This work does not reject the language of objectivity as such. Instead, it insists on tracking objectivity’s local conditions of production so as to “counteract the hegemonic tendencies of objectified knowledge” (Collins 1992, p. 78).

Exemplary for sociologists is to see how feminist theorists have expanded their epistemological analyses to respond to silences produced not only by gender, but also by postcolonial and decolonial power relations. If early feminist standpoint theory attended to the social conditions under which knowledge is produced domestically, postcolonial and decolonial feminists further point to the colonial power relations that shape understandings of gender in both the (former) colonies and in the (former) colonial center [McClintock 1995, Puar 2018, Spivak 1988, Stoler 2010 (2002)]. Understanding how women’s movements work in countries outside the Global North, for instance, requires attending to the interests and concerns they articulate rather than assuming women’s interests are universal [Mahmood 2011 (2005)] or that all women in the Global South are passive or repressed (Abu-Lughod 2002, Mohanty 1984, Ray & Korteweg 1999).<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, parochialism continues to be a problem in the U.S. sociology of gender. Publishing feminist work within the US academy, which occupies a hegemonic position in global knowledge production, remains impermeable to most scholars outside the Global North. The production of knowledge about gender and sexuality suffers as a result.

Answering a distinct empirical challenge, Black feminist historians have responded creatively to the ways that slavery and masculine domination produced silences in the archives, which in turn create profound obstacles to understanding the lives of enslaved women. Saidiya Hartman’s (2008, 2016) intervention, “critical fabulation,” brings together critical theory and fictional narrative to fill gaps in the archive. Black feminist work, as Nash (2020) writes, is “necessarily speculative,” given the culture of “dissemblance and secrecy” wrought during slavery and in the centuries after (see Hine 1989). These scholars argue for the use of Black feminist imagination in order to do the necessary and truthful work of going beyond slaveholders’ narratives and perspectives. Narrative fiction enables not only a rethinking of the past, but a creative imagining of different kinds of futures, one that allows us to move beyond “convincing others of what is” and instead to “expand our visions of what is possible” (Benjamin 2016, p. 2).<sup>18</sup>

Sociology, of course, has its own productive history of debates over the challenges of supposedly value-neutral, objective research; feminist theory demonstrates the value of thinking through the consequences of a highly specific set of relations of power and social location in grappling

<sup>16</sup>For an interesting example that brings together elements of an autoethnographic approach with feminist standpoint epistemology, see Mignon Moore (2017).

<sup>17</sup>An especially powerful demonstration of this idea can be found in Saba Mahmood’s [2011 (2005)] account of participants in Egypt’s Women’s Mosque Movement, whose diligent work to be more pious, docile, and passive is a form of “agency” that cannot be captured by Western liberal feminism’s equation of “agency” with “freedom.”

<sup>18</sup>Although Benjamin’s essay, published in the journal *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, and Technoscience*, does not explicitly engage feminism or gender, the insights around narrative fiction are relevant to the field.





with epistemological questions. Epistemological debates over what qualifies as rigorous and value-neutral research, whether and how social position shapes the lens and questions asked, and which methods are best tasked with answering which questions are becoming more and more marked. Feminist theory, which makes visible a specific set of social locations with traceable epistemological consequences, adds to the empirical rigor of what can otherwise be highly abstracted discussions.

### ACTING AGAINST THE GENDER BINARY

From standpoint theory and Black feminism to decolonial and postcolonial feminism, debates over epistemology emerge from struggles to understand and challenge inequality and injustice. Feminism famously insists on linking the personal to the political. Feminist theorists both within and beyond the academy amplify that tradition by contesting the border between theory and activism.<sup>19</sup> Although feminist movements are wildly heterogeneous, the discussions above suggest that the body undergirds them all. In this last section, we turn to fights that bring that to the fore, highlighting struggles over the body that demand notice as of the time of this writing.

The fight for bodily autonomy—in embodied expression, in reproduction, against sexual violence, and in sexual pleasure—is a core element of feminism in both theory and practice. All four of these arenas have become flashpoints of transnational political discussion and struggle over the last decade. Dizzying waves of feminist protest and victories alternate with violent crackdowns and tightening legal strictures on embodied freedom of all kinds.<sup>20</sup> We briefly spotlight just the first two, as they make clear the fierce interchange across theory and practice that feeds them both.

The fight for reproductive justice, for the right to have or not to have children and to parent the children we have, is a long-standing feminist issue (Lawrence 2000, Littlejohn 2021, Luna & Luker 2013, Murphy 2017, Roberts 1997). These struggles reverberate transnationally as the right to access abortion has moved to center stage in politics across the globe. In Mexico, the Southern Cone, and elsewhere, long-standing feminist struggles have led to the decriminalization of abortion as part of a larger green wave of activism for the right to gender self-determination (Fischer 2020, Gago 2020, Sutton 2021, Sutton & Vacarezza 2021). At the same time, in other regions including Eastern Europe and United States, previously established rights to abortion have been upended. Attacks on abortion rights are often part of larger conservative or fascist movements that see gender as a central node of eroding authoritarian control (Butler 2024, Chadwick & Mavuso 2021). In the United States, the end of the constitutional right to abortion has meant not only that millions of people do not have access to abortion, but also that many are facing further threats to their basic freedom of movement. States have not only limited access to abortion in their own jurisdictions, but also are also attempting to restrict travel to access care elsewhere.

And yet, these crackdowns have sometimes produced unintended consequences. In the United States, mainstream abortion groups with little left to lose have begun rejecting *Roe*'s limited framework of "privacy" (Ziegler 2023), with its attendant taint of mournful necessity and shameful

<sup>19</sup>Feminist manifestos are a time-honored genre working precisely at this intersection between academic theory and political practice, and two relatively recent collections by Weiss & Brueske (2018) and Fahs (2020) provide rich overviews of these brilliant polemics, which would be especially useful for undergraduate teaching.

<sup>20</sup>The rights to sexual pleasure and freedom from sexual violence are also central to the feminist fight for bodily autonomy. Most recently, the #MeToo movement in the United States and beyond has drawn attention not only to clear instances of sexual violence, but also to the murkiness of consent and sexual pleasure (Meadow & Schilt 2016, Pascoe 2022, Sweet 2018, Tambe 2018). Feminists have drawn attention to the importance of feeling safe walking around at night and an end to rape culture, or the trivializing of sexual assault examined through campaigns such as "Take Back the Night" and "Slut Walk" in the United States and the Latin America-based transnational campaign "Ni Una Menos."



private workaround. Following where Black feminists went long before (Roberts 1997), reproductive justice organizations have begun to articulate a more assertive set of arguments around embodiment, autonomy, and freedom. From Substacks<sup>21</sup> to *The New York Times* opinion page, feminists are articulating new understandings of embodied autonomy as central elements of political freedom. These crackdowns have also fed growing transnational resistance in the form of feminist mutual aid groups mailing abortion medications across national and state lines (Belfrage 2023, Calkin 2023, McCaffrey 2023). This work follows on the heels of the long-standing use of abortion medication around the globe and the legacy of feminist collectives offering abortion pre-*Roe* (Kaplan 2019), often similarly accessed through illegal or semilegal feminist channels. This activism, of course, has vital consequences for how reproductive justice is understood by scholars. And in keeping with the characteristic dialectic of feminist theory and practice, it is also fundamentally reshaping how feminist theorists understand the body and its relationship to freedom overall (e.g., Fischer 2020, Thomsen & Morrison 2020).

Recent decades have also seen increasing mobilization around gender itself. Activists are resisting and reworking compulsory sex and gender binaries and the taken-for-granted correspondence between sex assigned at birth and self-understood identity. Around the world, gender-variant and intersex activists are fighting for the freedom to modify their bodies and for freedom from unwanted or coerced modification. While gender-variant people are lobbying for the right to change their bodies and to be recognized as their gender without sterilization requirements (Aizura 2018, Cabral Grinspan 2017, Dutta & Roy 2014, Spade 2015), intersex activists seek autonomy from coercive genital modification (Davis 2015, Gill-Peterson 2018). Both gender-variant and intersex activists have seen some successes. Gender-affirming care and gender marker changes have expanded widely in some places and intersex infant genital surgery has been banned in some European countries and in some US states (<https://interactadvocates.org/>). However, opposition to these movements, which provide fundamental challenges to the sex/gender binary, has also grown steadily (Butler 2024, Patternote & Kuhar 2018). Fights over sex/gender expression and over reproduction function to denaturalize the gender binary and its links to a fixed body and heteronormative compulsions, leading to often violent forms of pushback. Both struggles are, moreover, located squarely within the question of bodily autonomy.

Together, these movements and the backlashes they have sustained are signs of binary gender being thrown into question. These questions are further reflected in the productive ferment over the role of gender and the status of the body in feminist theory itself. One of the most powerful consequences of these struggles has been the rich interchange it has produced across scholarship and activism. If feminist theorists for too long tried to downplay the body, the present has made that impossible. Vibrant new theoretical frameworks are reverberating between activists and theorists in private conversations, public debates, and academic journals. In theory and practice alike, the body has become a primary site of struggle over the right to the self.

## DO YOU KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS? FEMINIST THEORY AS OBJECT

Across the United States and around the globe, right-wing politicians' stump speeches circle around gender and sexuality: abortion, bathrooms, health care, children's books, gender and sexuality studies departments, and more. From within the blizzard of public polemics, draconian laws, and petty prohibitions, we want to end this review by drawing attention to one political flashpoint

<sup>21</sup>Jessica Valenti's Substack, "Abortion, Every Day," is a vibrant example of the public feminist analysis and writing being done around reproductive justice right now (<https://jessica.substack.com/p/abortion-every-day-83123#details>).



that is of particular note for scholars: feminist theory itself. It is a striking feature of feminist theory that it has become its own political subject, a significant object of right-wing anxiety, political attack, and even physical violence (Butler 2024). From an assault on Judith Butler in Brazil in 2018 to the eradication of gender studies programs in Hungary in 2018 to the 2023 abolition of a public gender studies program in Florida, feminist theory and theorists have become objects of fear and hostility in countries around the world. Joan Scott's (1986) perspicacious claim that gender is "a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (p. 1067) is more relevant than ever. Given that binary gender anchors so much else, feminist ideas matter both inside and outside the academy. Feminist theory's capacity to reveal alternate social possibilities within and outside the structure of gender has political consequences at all scales, consequences that are revealed by the ferocity of recent political attacks.

The explicitly political—even electoral—attacks on feminist theory are not unique. To the contrary, this tendency is evident in the increasingly organized attacks on the institution of the academy and knowledge more broadly.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, the gendered and sexualized specificity and brutality of these rhetorics bring this issue to a fine point. Fascists understand that gendered meanings are a fulcrum of what makes society tick and that what gender means is newly up for grabs. They are angry and frightened and fighting for a world they think is slipping. It is time for sociology to take notice. They are telling us something significant, and feminist theory has a plethora of tools for figuring out what is going on. Do you know what time it is? Something is shifting. Feminist theory has tools for understanding what that is and why it matters.

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<sup>22</sup>The attack on feminist theory is part of a broader movement against universities as centers of critical thought. We also see this politicization in the field of critical race theory, for instance, another trigger point for the right.

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