



# AFRICAN GENDER STUDIES



AFRICAN GENDER STUDIES  
A READER

Edited by  
*Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí*

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AFRICAN GENDER STUDIES

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*For  
Wangari Maathai  
Nobel Peace Laureate 2005  
Who taught us that in order to make change,  
we must take charge*



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## P R E F A C E

*Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí*

In *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Oyèwùmí 1997) I demonstrate that the problem of gender in African Studies is also an epistemological one. This is because the conceptual category of gender is in origin, constitution, and expression bound to Western culture. In that study, I show that the delineation of gender categories are an outgrowth of the biological foundationalism of Western thinking about society: ‘The cultural logic of western social categories is based on an ideology of biological determinism: the conception that biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world. Thus this cultural logic is actually a “bio-logic”’ (Oyèwùmí 1997: ix). Such a conception of the social world is by no means universal.

Paradoxically, though gender is proclaimed to be socially constructed, the way it is used in dominant discourses implies that it is a biologically determined category. Furthermore, most of the scholars who do research on gender have derived their conceptual and theoretical tools from studies based on Western Europe, the United States, and Canada. Although some researchers have conducted studies in Africa, it is apparent that the questions and concerns that drive most studies are based upon Western European and North American experiences. Africa is used merely as a vehicle for articulating Western preoccupations and modes of understanding.

Nevertheless, the use of gender as an analytical category in African Studies is expanding. However, accounts of various African societies, such as Igbo (Amadiume 1987) and Kikuyu to give just two examples, reveal that conceptions of gender cannot be taken at their face value if we are to make sense of African cultures. From the small but expanding original research interrogating gender in African social formations, some lines of divergence from mainstream women’s studies are already apparent. I wish to draw attention to two of them. First, the category women cannot be used as a synonym for gender (as is often the case in conventional women’s studies research) given the fact that in many African societies social roles are not necessarily biological roles: the best examples being the categories of “wife” and “husband”. As a number of studies have shown that neither these conjugal categories nor kinship classifications are sex-specific.

Secondly, because some social roles are truly socially constructed in various African societies, discussions of gender in studies of Africa do not immediately generate or link to discussions of sex and sexuality. In the dominant

women's studies literature, gender and sexuality are almost identical twins; discourses of gender are necessarily discussions about sexuality. In fact, increasingly in the United States, the word gender has come to signal sexuality. This is not necessarily the case in African discourses or institutions: social roles and sexual roles are understood to be separable. Consequently, the starting point of research on gender in Africa must be to interrogate foundational assumptions undergirding hegemonic intellectual tools while at the same time recover local epistemologies.

The anthology *African Gender Studies: A Reader* aims to do just that. Taking Africa seriously, it represents part of the effort to correct the long-standing problem of Western dominance in the interpretation of African realities. The focus of the collection is to bring African experiences to bear on the ongoing global discussion of gender, race, power, hierarchy, and other linked concepts. The topics covered include feminism, women's agency, human rights, social identities, globalization, development, the politics of knowledge and representation, and social transformation. Our concern is twofold: that Africa must be studied on its own terms, and that African knowledge must be a factor in the formulation of social theory.

The most important criterion for the selection of papers for this anthology is the extent to which they interrogate foundational assumptions and substantive issues relating to gender and women's studies, and the extent to which they incorporate African experiences into our understanding of the social world. Bringing together classic and new writings, this book includes articles that speak to a range of debates in the interdisciplinary field of women's studies and African studies, as well as those that address issues in specific disciplines such as history, literary studies, philosophy, sociology, political science, and anthropology.

The anthology contains twenty one chapters and is divided into seven sections. Preceding each segment is an overview of the articles contained within the section.

I would like to acknowledge a grant from the Center for Black Studies at the University of California Santa Barbara that enabled the publication of this volume. I especially appreciate the role of Claudine Michel, who as director of the center set aside the funds for the project, and the active support she continued to give throughout the editorial process. In addition I thank Anna Everett, the current director of the center, for her contributions. Dora Morse and Mashid Ayoub, staff members of the center, also played central roles in getting the project off the ground.

Furthermore, I wish to acknowledge the contributors for allowing me to include their work in this anthology. Taken together, their papers represent essential readings in the interdisciplinary field of African gender studies.

SECTION I  
TRANSCENDING THE BODY  
OF KNOWLEDGE

In the opening essay “Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African subjects,” Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí makes a case that the narrative of gendered corporeality that dominates Western interpretations of the social world is a cultural discourse and cannot be assumed uncritically for other cultures. Thus the recent discovery of gender as a universal and timeless social category cannot be divorced from the ideology of biological determinism that underpins Western systems of knowledge. Oyěwùmí concludes that gender is not only socially constructed but also historical. She then looks at the implication in African studies of uncritically imposing Western ideologies and systems of thought, arguing that Africa must be studied on its own terms.

Beyond visible bodies, the paper “Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History” by Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng examines Asante conceptions of power which assigns a central role to spirituality in structuring authority and hierarchy. The significance of this paper is that in our quest to understand African systems of knowledge, we must be cognizant of the relevance of the metaphysical in the constitution of power, and pay attention to the ways in which spirituality undergird interpretations of the material world.



## CHAPTER 1

# VISUALIZING THE BODY: WESTERN THEORIES AND AFRICAN SUBJECTS

*Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí*

The idea that biology is destiny—or, better still, destiny is biology—has been a staple of Western thought for centuries.<sup>1</sup> Whether the issue is who is who in Aristotle’s polis<sup>2</sup> or who is poor in the late twentieth-century United States, the notion that difference and hierarchy in society are biologically determined continues to enjoy credence even among social scientists who purport to explain human society in other than genetic terms. In the West, biological explanations appear to be especially privileged over other ways of explaining differences of gender, race, or class. Difference is expressed as degeneration. In tracing the genealogy of the idea of degeneration in European thought, J. Edward Chamberlain and Sander Gilman noted the way it was used to define certain kinds of difference, in the nineteenth century in particular. “Initially, degeneration brought together two notions of difference, one scientific—a deviation from an original type—and the other moral, a deviation from a norm of behavior. But they were essentially the same notion, of a fall from grace, *a deviation from the original type*.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, those in positions of power find it imperative to establish their superior biology as a way of affirming their privilege and dominance over “Others.” Those who are different are seen as genetically inferior, and this, in turn, is used to account for their disadvantaged social positions.

The notion of society that emerges from this conception is that society is constituted by bodies and as bodies—male bodies, female bodies, Jewish bodies, Aryan bodies, black bodies, white bodies, rich bodies, poor bodies. I am using the word “body” in two ways: first, as a metonymy for biology and, second, to draw attention to the sheer physicality that seems to attend being in Western culture. I refer to the corporeal body as well as to metaphors of the body.

The body is given a logic of its own. It is believed that just by looking at it one can tell a person’s beliefs and social position or lack thereof. As Naomi Scheman puts it in her discussion of the body politic in premodern

Europe:

The ways people knew their places in the world had to do with their bodies and the histories of those bodies, and when they violated the prescriptions for those places, their bodies were punished, often spectacularly. One's place in the body politic was as natural as the places of the organs in one's body, and political disorder [was] as unnatural as the shifting and displacement of those organs.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz remarks on what she calls the "depth" of the body in modern Western societies:

Our [Western] body forms are considered expressions of an interior, not inscriptions on a flat surface. By constructing a soul or psyche for itself, the "civilized body" forms libidinal flows, sensations, experiences, and intensities into needs, wants. . . . *The body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read, and read into. Social law is incarnated, "corporealized" [;] correlatively, bodies are textualized, read by others as expressive of a subject's psychic interior. A storehouse of inscriptions and messages between [the body's] external and internal boundaries . . . generates or constructs the body's movements into "behavior," which then [has] interpersonally and socially identifiable meanings and functions within a social system.*<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, since the body is the bedrock on which the social order is founded, the body is always *in* view and *on* view. As such, it invites a *gaze*, a gaze of difference, a gaze of differentiation—the most historically constant being the gendered gaze. There is a sense in which phrases such as "the social body" or "the body politic" are not just metaphors but can be read literally. It is not surprising, then, that when the body politic needed to be purified in Nazi Germany, certain kinds of bodies had to be eliminated.<sup>6</sup>

The reason that the body has so much presence in the West is that the world is primarily perceived by sight.<sup>7</sup> The differentiation of human bodies in terms of sex, skin color, and cranium size is a testament to the powers attributed to "seeing." The gaze is an invitation to differentiate. Different approaches to comprehending reality, then, suggest epistemological differences between societies. Relative to Yorùbá society, the body has an exaggerated presence in the Western conceptualization of society. The term "worldview," which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West's privileging of the visual. It is Eurocentric to use it to describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term "world-sense" is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups. In this study, therefore, "worldview" will only be applied to describe the Western cultural sense, and "world-sense" will be used when describing the Yorùbá or other cultures that may privilege senses other than the visual or even a combination of senses.

The foregoing hardly represents the received view of Western history and social thought. Quite the contrary: until recently, the history of Western

societies has been presented as a documentation of rational thought in which ideas are framed as the agents of history. If bodies appear at all, they are articulated as the debased side of human nature. The preferred focus has been on the mind, lofty and high above the foibles of the flesh. Early in Western discourse, a binary opposition between body and mind emerged. The much-vaunted Cartesian dualism was only an affirmation of a tradition<sup>8</sup> in which the body was seen as a trap from which any rational person had to escape. Ironically, even as the body remained at the center of both sociopolitical categories and discourse, many thinkers denied its existence for certain categories of people, most notably themselves. "Bodylessness" has been a precondition of rational thought. Women, primitives, Jews, Africans, the poor, and all those who qualified for the label "different" in varying historical epochs have been considered to be the embodied, dominated therefore by instinct and affect, reason being beyond them. They are the Other, and the other is a body.<sup>9</sup>

In pointing out the centrality of the body in the construction of difference in Western culture, one does not necessarily deny that there have been certain traditions in the West that have attempted to explain differences according to criteria other than the presence or absence of certain organs: the possession of a penis, the size of the brain, the shape of the cranium, or the color of the skin. The Marxist tradition is especially noteworthy in this regard in that it emphasized social relations as an explanation for class inequality. However, the critique of Marxism as androcentric by numerous feminist writers suggests that this paradigm is also implicated in Western somatocentricity.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the establishment of disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, which purport to explain society on the bases of human interactions, seems to suggest the relegation of biological determinism in social thought. On closer examination, however, one finds that the body has hardly been banished from social thought, not to mention its role in the constitution of social status. This can be illustrated in the discipline of sociology. In a monograph on the body and society, Bryan Turner laments what he perceives as the absence of the body in sociological inquiries. He attributes this phenomenon of "absent bodies"<sup>11</sup> to the fact that "sociology emerged as a discipline which took the social meaning of human interaction as its principal object of inquiry, claiming that the meaning of social actions can never be reduced to biology or physiology."<sup>12</sup>

One could agree with Turner about the need to separate sociology from eugenics and phrenology. However, to say that bodies have been absent from sociological theories is to discount the fact that the social groups that are the subject matter of the discipline are essentially understood as rooted in biology. They are categories based on perceptions of the different physical presence of various body-types. In the contemporary U.S., so long as sociologists deal with so-called social categories like the underclass, suburbanites, workers, farmers, voters, citizens, and criminals (to mention a few categories that are historically and in the cultural ethos understood as representing specific body-types), there is no escape from biology. If the social realm is

determined by the kinds of bodies occupying it, then to what extent is there a social realm, given that it is conceived to be biologically determined? For example, no one hearing the term “corporate executives” would assume them to be women; and in the 1980s and 1990s, neither would anyone spontaneously associate whites with the terms “underclass” or “gangs”; indeed, if someone were to construct an association between the terms, their meanings would have to be shifted. Consequently, any sociologist who studies these categories cannot escape an underlying biological insidiousness.

This omnipresence of biologically deterministic explanations in the social sciences can be demonstrated with the category of the criminal or criminal type in contemporary American society. Troy Duster, in an excellent study of the resurgence of biological determinism in intellectual circles, berates the eagerness of many researchers to associate criminality with genetic inheritance; he goes on to argue that other interpretations of criminality are possible:

The prevailing economic interpretation explains crime rates in terms of access to jobs and unemployment. A cultural interpretation tries to show differing cultural adjustments between the police and those apprehended for crimes. A political interpretation sees criminal activity as political interpretation, or pre-revolutionary. A conflict interpretation sees this as an interest conflict over scarce resources.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, on the face of it, all these explanations of criminality are non-biological; however, as long as the “population” or the social group they are attempting to explain—in this case criminals who are black and/or poor—is seen to represent a genetic grouping, the underlying assumptions about the genetic predisposition of that population or group will structure the explanations proffered whether they are body-based or not. This is tied to the fact that because of the history of racism, the underlying research question (even if it is unstated) is not why certain individuals commit crimes: it is actually why black people have such a propensity to do so. The definition of what is criminal activity is very much tied up with who (black, white, rich, poor) is involved in the activity.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the police, as a group, are assumed to be white. Similarly, when studies are done of leadership in American society, the researchers “discover” that most people in leadership positions are white males; no matter what account these researchers give for this result, their statements will be read as explaining the predisposition of this group to leadership.

The integrity of researchers is not being questioned here; my purpose is not to label any group of scholars as racist in their intentions. On the contrary, since the Civil Rights movement, social-scientific research has been used to formulate policies that would abate if not end discrimination against subordinated groups. What must be underscored, however, is how knowledge-production and dissemination in the United States are inevitably embedded in what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call the “everyday common sense

of race—a way of comprehending, explaining and acting in the world.”<sup>15</sup> Race, then, is a fundamental organizing principle in American society. It is institutionalized, and it functions irrespective of the action of individual actors.

In the West, social identities are all interpreted through the “prism of heritability,”<sup>16</sup> to borrow Duster’s phrase. Biological determinism is a filter through which all knowledge about society is run. As mentioned in the preface, I refer to this kind of thinking as body-reasoning;<sup>17</sup> it is a biologic interpretation of the social world. The point, again, is that as long as social actors like managers, criminals, nurses, and the poor are presented as groups and not as individuals, and as long as such groupings are conceived to be genetically constituted, then there is no escape from biological determinism.

Against this background, the issue of gender difference is particularly interesting in regard to the history and the constitution of difference in European social practice and thought. The lengthy history of the embodiment of social categories is suggested by the myth fabricated by Socrates to convince citizens of different ranks to accept whatever status was imposed upon them. Socrates explained the myth to Glaucon in these terms:

Citizens, we shall say to them in our tale, you are brothers, yet God has framed you differently. Some of you have the power of command, and in the composition of these he has mingled gold, wherefore also they have the greatest honor; others he has made silver, to be auxiliaries; others again who are to be husbandmen and craftsmen he has composed of brass and iron; and the species will generally be preserved in the children. . . . An Oracle says that when a man of brass or iron guards the state, it will be destroyed. Such is the tale; is there any possibility of making our citizens believe in it?

Glaucon replies, “Not in the present generation; there is no way of accomplishing this; but their sons may be made to believe in the tale, and their sons’ sons, and posterity after them.”<sup>18</sup> Glaucon was mistaken that the acceptance of the myth could be accomplished only in the next generation: the myth of those born to rule was already in operation; mothers, sisters, and daughters—women—were already excluded from consideration in any of those ranks. In a context in which people were ranked according to association with certain metals, women were, so to speak, made of wood, and so were not even considered. Stephen Gould, a historian of science, calls Glaucon’s observation a prophecy, since history shows that Socrates’ tale has been promulgated and believed by subsequent generations.<sup>19</sup> The point, however, is that even in Glaucon’s time, it was more than a prophecy: it was already a social practice to exclude women from the ranks of rulers.

Paradoxically, in European thought, despite the fact that society was seen to be inhabited by bodies, only women were perceived to be embodied; men had no bodies—they were walking minds. Two social categories that emanated from this construction were the “man of reason” (the thinker) and the “woman of the body,” and they were oppositionally constructed. The

idea that the man of reason often had the woman of the body on his mind was clearly not entertained. As Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* suggests, however, the man of ideas often had the woman and indeed other bodies on his mind.<sup>20</sup>

In recent times, thanks in part to feminist scholarship, the body is beginning to receive the attention it deserves as a site and as material for the explanation of European history and thought.<sup>21</sup> The distinctive contribution of feminist discourse to our understanding of Western societies is that it makes explicit the gendered (therefore embodied) and male-dominant nature of all Western institutions and discourses. The feminist lens disrobes the man of ideas for all to see. Even discourses like science that were assumed to be objective have been shown to be male-biased.<sup>22</sup> The extent to which the body is implicated in the construction of sociopolitical categories and epistemologies cannot be overemphasized. As noted earlier, Dorothy Smith has written that in Western societies "a man's body gives credibility to his utterance, whereas a woman's body takes it away from hers."<sup>23</sup> Writing on the construction of masculinity, R. W. Connell notes that the body is inescapable in its construction and that a stark physicalness underlies gender categories in the Western worldview: "In our [Western] culture, at least, the physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the cultural interpretation of gender. Masculine gender is (among other things) a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving, certain possibilities in sex."<sup>24</sup>

From the ancients to the moderns, gender has been a foundational category upon which social categories have been erected. Hence, gender has been ontologically conceptualized. The category of the citizen, which has been the cornerstone of much of Western political theory, was male, despite the much-acclaimed Western democratic traditions.<sup>25</sup> Elucidating Aristotle's categorization of the sexes, Elizabeth Spelman writes: "A woman is a female who is free; a man is a male who is a citizen."<sup>26</sup> Women were excluded from the category of citizens because "penis possession"<sup>27</sup> was one of the qualifications for citizenship. Lorna Schiebinger notes in a study of the origins of modern science and women's exclusion from European scientific institutions that "differences between the two sexes were reflections of a set of dualistic principles that penetrated the cosmos as well as the bodies of men and women."<sup>28</sup> Differences and hierarchy, then, are enshrined on bodies; and bodies enshrine differences and hierarchy. Hence, dualisms like nature/culture, public/private, and visible/invisible are variations on the theme of male/female bodies hierarchically ordered, differentially placed in relation to power, and spatially distanced one from the other.<sup>29</sup>

In the span of Western history, the justifications for the making of the categories "man" and "woman" have not remained the same. On the contrary, they have been dynamic. Although the boundaries are shifting and the content of each category may change, the two categories have remained hierarchical and in binary opposition. For Stephen Gould, "the justification for ranking groups by inborn worth has varied with the tide of Western history.

Plato relied on dialectic, the church upon dogma. For the past two centuries, scientific claims have become the primary agent of validating Plato's myth."<sup>30</sup> The constant in this Western narrative is the centrality of the body: two bodies on display, two sexes, two categories persistently viewed—one in relation to the other. That narrative is about the unwavering elaboration of the body as the site and cause of differences and hierarchies in society. In the West, so long as the issue is difference and social hierarchy, then the body is constantly positioned, posed, exposed, and reexposed as their cause. Society, then, is seen as an accurate reflection of genetic endowment—those with a superior biology inevitably are those in superior social positions. No difference is elaborated without bodies that are positioned hierarchically. In his book *Making Sex*,<sup>31</sup> Thomas Laqueur gives a richly textured history of the construction of sex from classical Greece to the contemporary period, noting the changes in symbols and the shifts in meanings. The point, however, is the centrality and persistence of the body in the construction of social categories. In view of this history, Freud's dictum that anatomy is destiny was not original or exceptional; he was just more explicit than many of his predecessors.

### SOCIAL ORDERS AND BIOLOGY: NATURAL OR CONSTRUCTED?

The idea that gender is socially constructed—that differences between males and female are to be located in social practices, not in biological facts—was one important insight that emerged early in second-wave feminist scholarship. This finding was understandably taken to be radical in a culture in which difference, particularly gender difference, had always been articulated as natural and, therefore, biologically determined. Gender as a social construction became the cornerstone of much feminist discourse. The notion was particularly attractive because it was interpreted to mean that gender differences were not ordained by nature; they were mutable and therefore changeable. This in turn led to the opposition between social constructionism and biological determinism, as if they are mutually exclusive.

Such a dichotomous presentation is unwarranted, however, because the ubiquity of biologically rooted explanations for difference in Western social thought and practices is a reflection of the extent to which biological explanations are found compelling.<sup>32</sup> In other words, so long as the issue is difference (whether the issue is why women breast-feed babies or why they could not vote), old biologies will be found or new biologies will be constructed to explain women's disadvantage. The Western preoccupation with biology continues to generate constructions of "new biologies" even as some of the old biological assumptions are being dislodged. In fact, in the Western experience, social construction and biological determinism have been two sides of the same coin, since both ideas continue to reinforce each other. When social categories like gender are constructed, new biologies of difference can be invented. When biological interpretations are found to be

compelling, social categories do derive their legitimacy and power from biology. In short, the social and the biological feed on each other.

The biologization inherent in the Western articulation of social difference is, however, by no means universal. The debate in feminism about what roles and which identities are natural and what aspects are constructed only has meaning in a culture where social categories are conceived as having no independent logic of their own. This debate, of course, developed out of certain problems; therefore, it is logical that in societies where such problems do not exist, there should be no such debate. But then, due to imperialism, this debate has been universalized to other cultures, and its immediate effect is to inject Western problems where such issues originally did not exist. Even then, this debate does not take us very far in societies where social roles and identities are not conceived to be rooted in biology. By the same token, in cultures where the visual sense is not privileged, and the body is not read as a blueprint of society, invocations of biology are less likely to occur because such explanations do not carry much weight in the social realm. That many categories of difference are socially constructed in the West may well suggest the mutability of categories, but it is also an invitation to endless constructions of biology—in that there is no limit to what can be explained by the body-appeal. Thus biology is hardly mutable; it is much more a combination of the Hydra and the Phoenix of Greek mythology. Biology is forever mutating, not mutable. Ultimately, the most important point is not that gender is socially constructed but the extent to which biology itself is socially constructed and therefore inseparable from the social.

The way in which the conceptual categories sex and gender functioned in feminist discourse was based on the assumption that biological and social conceptions could be separated and applied universally. Thus sex was presented as the natural category and gender as the social construction of the natural. But, subsequently, it became apparent that even sex has elements of construction. In many feminist writings thereafter, sex has served as the base and gender as the superstructure.<sup>33</sup> In spite of all efforts to separate the two, the distinction between sex and gender is a red herring. In Western conceptualization, gender cannot exist without sex since the body sits squarely at the base of both categories. Despite the preeminence of feminist social constructionism, which claims a social deterministic approach to society, biological foundationalism,<sup>34</sup> if not reductionism, is still at the center of gender discourses, just as it is at the center of all other discussions of society in the West.

Nevertheless, the idea that gender is socially constructed is significant from a cross-cultural perspective. In one of the earliest feminist texts to assert the constructionist thesis and its need for cross-cultural grounding, Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna wrote that “by viewing gender as a social construction, it is possible to see descriptions of other cultures as evidence for alternative but equally real conceptions of what it means to be woman or man.”<sup>35</sup> Yet, paradoxically, a fundamental assumption of feminist theory is that women’s subordination is universal. These two ideas are contradictory. The universality attributed to gender asymmetry suggests a biological basis rather than a cultural one, given that the human anatomy is universal



whereas cultures speak in myriad voices. That gender is socially constructed is said to mean that the criteria that make up male and female categories vary in different cultures. If this is so, then it challenges the notion that there is a biological imperative at work. From this standpoint, then, gender categories are mutable, and as such, gender then is denaturalized.

In fact, the categorization of women in feminist discourses as a homogeneous, bio-anatomically determined group which is always constituted as powerless and victimized does not reflect the fact that gender relations are social relations and, therefore, historically grounded and culturally bound. If gender is socially constructed, then gender cannot behave in the same way across time and space. If gender is a social construction, then we must examine the various cultural/architectural sites where it was constructed, and we must acknowledge that variously located actors (aggregates, groups, interested parties) were part of the construction. We must further acknowledge that if gender is a social construction, then there was a specific time (in different cultural/architectural sites) when it was “constructed” and therefore a time before which it was not. Thus, gender, being a social construction, is also a historical and cultural phenomenon. Consequently, it is logical to assume that in some societies, gender construction need not have existed at all.

From a cross-cultural perspective, the significance of this observation is that one cannot assume the social organization of one culture (the dominant West included) as universal or the interpretations of the experiences of one culture as explaining another one. On the one hand, at a general, global level, the constructedness of gender does suggest its mutability. On the other hand, at the local level—that is, within the bounds of any particular culture—gender is mutable only if it is socially constructed as such. Because, in Western societies, gender categories, like all other social categories, are constructed with biological building blocks, their mutability is questionable. The cultural logic of Western social categories is founded on an ideology of biological determinism: the conception that biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world. Thus, as pointed out earlier, this cultural logic is actually a “bio-logic.”

### THE “SISTERARCHY”: FEMINISM AND ITS “OTHER”

From a cross-cultural perspective, the implications of Western bio-logic are far-reaching when one considers the fact that gender constructs in feminist theory originated in the West, where men and women are conceived oppositionally and projected as embodied, genetically derived social categories.<sup>36</sup> The question, then, is this: On what basis are Western conceptual categories exportable or transferable to other cultures that have a different cultural logic? This question is raised because despite the wonderful insight about the social construction of gender, the way cross-cultural data have been used by many feminist writers undermines the notion that differing cultures may construct social categories differently. For one thing, if different cultures

necessarily always construct gender as feminism proposes that they *do and must*, then the idea that gender is socially constructed is not sustainable.

The potential value of Western feminist social constructionism remains, therefore, largely unfulfilled, because feminism, like most other Western theoretical frameworks for interpreting the social world, cannot get away from the prism of biology that necessarily perceives social hierarchies as natural. Consequently, in cross-cultural gender studies, theorists impose Western categories on non-Western cultures and then project such categories as natural. The way in which dissimilar constructions of the social world in other cultures are used as “evidence” for the constructedness of gender and the insistence that these cross-cultural constructions are gender categories as they operate in the West nullify the alternatives offered by the non-Western cultures and undermine the claim that gender is a social construction.

Western ideas are imposed when non-Western social categories are assimilated into the gender framework that emerged from a specific sociohistorical and philosophical tradition. An example is the “discovery” of what has been labeled “third gender”<sup>37</sup> or “alternative genders”<sup>38</sup> in a number of non-Western cultures. The fact that the African “woman marriage,”<sup>39</sup> the Native American “berdache,”<sup>40</sup> and the South Asian “hijra”<sup>41</sup> are presented as gender categories incorporates them into the Western bio-logic and gendered framework without explication of their own sociocultural histories and constructions. A number of questions are pertinent here. Are these social categories seen as gendered in the cultures in question? From whose perspective are they gendered? In fact, even the appropriateness of naming them “third gender” is questionable since the Western cultural system, which uses biology to map the social world, precludes the possibility of more than two genders because gender is the elaboration of the perceived sexual dimorphism of the human body into the social realm. The trajectory of feminist discourse in the last twenty-five years has been determined by the Western cultural environment of its founding and development.

Thus, in the beginning of second-wave feminism in Euro-America, sex was defined as the biological facts of male and female bodies, and gender was defined as the social consequences that flowed from these facts. In effect, each society was assumed to have a sex/gender system.<sup>42</sup> The most important point was that sex and gender are inextricably bound. Over time, sex tended to be understood as the base and gender as the superstructure. Subsequently, however, after much debate, even sex was interpreted as socially constructed. Kessler and McKenna, one of the earliest research teams in this area, wrote that they “use gender, rather than sex, even when referring to those aspects of being a woman (girl) or man (boy) that have been viewed as biological. This will serve to emphasize our position that the element of social construction is primary in all aspects of being male or female.”<sup>43</sup> Judith Butler, writing almost fifteen years later, reiterates the interconnectedness of sex and gender even more strongly:

It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived

merely as a cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given surface (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced.<sup>44</sup>

Given the inseparability of sex and gender in the West, which results from the use of biology as an ideology for mapping the social world, the terms “sex” and “gender,” as noted earlier, are essentially synonyms. To put this another way: since in Western constructions, physical bodies are always social bodies, there is really no distinction between sex and gender.<sup>45</sup> In Yorùbá society, in contrast, social relations derive their legitimacy from social facts, not from biology. The bare biological facts of pregnancy and parturition count only in regard to procreation, where they must. Biological facts do not determine who can become the monarch or who can trade in the market. In indigenous Yorùbá conception, these questions were properly social questions, not biological ones; hence, the nature of one’s anatomy did not define one’s social position. Consequently, the Yorùbá social order requires a different kind of map, not a gender map that assumes biology as the foundation for the social.

The splitting of hairs over the relationship between gender and sex, the debate on essentialism, the debates about differences among women,<sup>46</sup> and the preoccupation with gender bending/blending<sup>47</sup> that have characterized feminism are actually feminist versions of the enduring debate on nature versus nurture that is inherent in Western thought and in the logic of its social hierarchies. These concerns are not necessarily inherent in the discourse of society as such but are a culture-specific concern and issue. From a cross-cultural perspective, the more interesting point is the degree to which feminism, despite its radical local stance, exhibits the same ethnocentric and imperialistic characteristics of the Western discourses it sought to subvert. This has placed serious limitations on its applicability outside of the culture that produced it. As Kathy Ferguson reminds us: “The questions we can ask about the world are enabled, and other questions disabled, by the frame that orders the questioning. *When we are busy arguing about the questions that appear within a certain frame, the frame itself becomes invisible; we become enframed within it.*”<sup>48</sup> Though feminism in origin, by definition, and by practice is a universalizing discourse, the concerns and questions that have informed it are Western (and its audience too is apparently assumed to be composed of just Westerners, given that many of the theorists tend to use the first-person plural “we” and “our culture” in their writings). As such, feminism remains enframed by the tunnel vision and the bio-logic of other Western discourses.

Yorùbá society of southwestern Nigeria suggests a different scenario, one in which the body is not always enlisted as the basis for social classification. From a Yorùbá stance, the body appears to have an exaggerated presence in Western thought and social practice, including feminist theories. In the Yorùbá world, particularly in pre-nineteenth-century.<sup>49</sup> Ọyọ culture, society

was conceived to be inhabited by people in relation to one another. That is, the “physicality” of maleness or femaleness did not have social antecedents and therefore did not constitute social categories. Social hierarchy was determined by social relations. As noted earlier, how persons were situated in relationships shifted depending on those involved and the particular situation. The principle that determined social organization was seniority, which was based on chronological age. Yorùbá kinship terms did not denote gender, and other nonfamilial social categories were not gender-specific either. What these Yorùbá categories tell us is that the body is not always in view and on view for categorization. The classic example is the female who played the roles of *oba* (ruler), *omo* (offspring), *oko*, *aya*, *iyá* (mother), and *aláwo* (diviner-priest) all in one body. None of these kinship and nonkinship social categories are gender-specific. One cannot place persons in the Yorùbá categories just by looking at them. What they are heard to say may be the most important cue. Seniority as the foundation of Yorùbá social intercourse is relational and dynamic; unlike gender, it is not focused on the body.<sup>50</sup>

If the human body is universal, why does the body appear to have an exaggerated presence in the West relative to Yorùbáland? A comparative research framework reveals that one major difference stems from which of the senses is privileged in the apprehension of reality—sight in the West and a multiplicity of senses anchored by hearing in Yorùbá land. The tonality of Yorùbá language predisposes one toward an apprehension of reality that cannot marginalize the auditory. Consequently, relative to Western societies, there is a stronger need for a broader contextualization in order to make sense of the world.<sup>51</sup> For example, Ifá divination, which is also a knowledge system in Yorùbá land, has both visual and oral components.<sup>52</sup> More fundamentally, the distinction between Yorùbá and the West symbolized by the focus on different senses in the apprehension of reality involves more than perception—for the Yorùbá, and indeed many other African societies, it is about “a particular presence in the world—a world conceived of as a whole in which all things are linked together.”<sup>53</sup> It concerns the many worlds human beings inhabit; it does not privilege the physical world over the metaphysical. A concentration on vision as the primary mode of comprehending reality promotes what can be seen over that which is not apparent to the eye; it misses the other levels and the nuances of existence. David Lowe’s comparison of sight and the sense of hearing encapsulates some of the issues to which I wish to draw attention. He writes:

Of the five senses, hearing is the most pervasive and penetrating. I say this, although many, from Aristotle in *Metaphysics* to Hans Jonas in *Phenomenon of Life*, have said that sight is most noble. But sight is always directed at what is straight ahead. . . . And sight cannot turn a corner, at least without the aid of a mirror. On the other hand, sound comes to one, surrounds one for the time being with an acoustic space, full of timbre and nuances. It is more proximate and suggestive than sight. Sight is always the perception of the surface from a particular angle. But sound is that perception able to penetrate beneath the

surface. . . . Speech is the communication connecting one person with another. Therefore, the quality of sound is fundamentally more vital and moving than that of sight.<sup>54</sup>

Just as the West's privileging of the visual over other senses has been clearly demonstrated, so too the dominance of the auditory in Yorùbáland can be shown.

In an interesting paper appropriately entitled "The Mind's Eye," feminist theorists Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine Grontkowski make the following observation: "We [Euro-Americans] speak of knowledge as illumination, knowing as seeing, truth as light. How is it, we might ask, that vision came to seem so apt a model for knowledge? And having accepted it as such, how has the metaphor colored our conceptions of knowledge?"<sup>55</sup> These theorists go on to analyze the implications of the privileging of sight over other senses for the conception of reality and knowledge in the West. They examine the linkages between the privileging of vision and patriarchy, noting that the roots of Western thought in the visual have yielded a dominant male logic.<sup>56</sup> Explicating Jonas's observation that "to get the proper view, we take the proper distance,"<sup>57</sup> they note the passive nature of sight, in that the subject of the gaze is passive. They link the distance that seeing entails to the concept of objectivity and the lack of engagement between the "I" and the subject—the Self and the Other.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the Other in the West is best described as another body—separate and distant.

Feminism has not escaped the visual logic of Western thought. The feminist focus on sexual difference, for instance, stems from this legacy. Feminist theorist Nancy Chodorow has noted the primacy and limitations of this feminist concentration on difference:

For our part as feminists, even as we want to eliminate gender inequality, hierarchy, and difference, we expect to find such features in most social settings. . . . We have begun from the assumption that *gender is always a salient* feature of social life, and we do not have theoretical approaches that emphasize sex similarities over differences.<sup>59</sup>

Consequently, the assumption and deployment of patriarchy and "women" as universals in many feminist writings are ethnocentric and demonstrate the hegemony of the West over other cultural groupings.<sup>60</sup> The emergence of patriarchy as a form of social organization in Western history is a function of the differentiation between male and female bodies, a difference rooted in the visual, a difference that cannot be reduced to biology and that has to be understood as being constituted within particular historical and social realities. I am not suggesting that gender categories are necessarily limited to the West, particularly in the contemporary period. Rather, I am suggesting that discussions of social categories should be defined and grounded in the local milieu, rather than based on "universal" findings made in the West. A number of feminist scholars have questioned the assumption of universal

patriarchy. For example, the editors of a volume on Hausa women of northern Nigeria write: "A preconceived assumption of gender asymmetry actually distorts many analyses, since it precludes the exploration of gender as a fundamental component of social relations, inequality, processes of production and reproduction, and ideology."<sup>61</sup> Beyond the question of asymmetry, however, a preconceived notion of gender as a universal social category is equally problematic. If the investigator assumes gender, then gender categories will be found whether they exist or not.

Feminism is one of the latest Western theoretical fashions to be applied to African societies. Following the one-size-fits-all (or better still, the Western-size-fits-all) approach to intellectual theorizing, it has taken its place in a long series of Western paradigms—including Marxism, functionalism, structuralism, and poststructuralism—imposed on African subjects. Academics have become one of the most effective international hegemonizing forces, producing not homogenous social experiences but a homogeneity of hegemonic forces. Western theories become tools of hegemony as they are applied universally, on the assumption that Western experiences define the human. For example, a study of Ga residents of a neighborhood in Accra, Ghana, starts thus: "Improving our analysis of women and class formation is necessary to refine our perceptions."<sup>62</sup> Women? What women? Who qualifies to be women in this cultural setting, and on what bases are they to be identified? These questions are legitimate ones to raise if researchers take the constructiveness of social categories seriously and take into account local conceptions of reality. The pitfalls of preconceived notions and ethnocentricity become obvious when the author of the study admits:

Another bias I began with I was forced to change. Before starting fieldwork I was not particularly interested in economics, causal or otherwise. But by the time I had tried an initial presurvey, . . . the overweening importance of trading activities in pervading every aspect of women's lives made a consideration of economics imperative. And when the time came to analyze the data in depth, the most cogent explanations often were economic ones. I started out to work with women; I ended by working with traders.<sup>63</sup>

Why, in the first place, did Claire Robertson, the author of this study, start with women, and what distortions were introduced as a result? What if she had started with traders? Would she have ended up with women? Beginnings are important; adding other variables in midstream does not prevent or solve distortions and misapprehensions. Like many studies on Africans, half of Robertson's study seems to have been completed—and categories were already in place—before she met the Gã people. Robertson's monograph is not atypical in African studies; in fact, it is one of the better ones, particularly because unlike many scholars, she is aware of some of her biases. The fundamental bias that many Westerners, including Robertson, bring to the study of other societies is "body-reasoning," the assumption that biology determines social position. Because "women" is a body-based category, it tends to be