

# **FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN**

**JOHN F. KENNEDY-INSTITUT  
FÜR NORDAMERIKASTUDIEN**

**ABTEILUNG FÜR KULTUR  
Working Paper No. 57/1993**

**Lisa Kuppler**

**Women's Cultures  
As Concept In Feminist Theory**



**Copyright © 1993 by Lisa Kuppler**

**WOMEN'S CULTURES AS CONCEPT IN FEMINIST THEORY**

by

Lisa Kuppler

Santa Fe, Museum of Anthropology, September 1989: "David and Goliath." All the spotlights are directed to the raised platform in the middle of the huge dark hall. The contrast of dark and light emphasizes the colorful clothes, rags, and masks that are draped on the six figures on the platform. The earthen ochres and reds seem almost shrill, the greens and oranges too bright to look at, and all over the scene silver and turquoise flashes like lightning. The largest figure is Devil, his mask two-sided, januslike, red to the front, black to the back. In front of him cowers Coyote, an invisible speck before Devil's bulk. Coyote's tail twitches with intense concentration, in his hands he holds a loaded sling ready to be fired at Devil's head. The other four figures dance around, pretending disinterest in the fight, but with sudden movements, growls, and howling distract Devil's attention from the tiny figure in front of him. The scene is frozen in an age-old ritual, the clothes, masks, colors, and movements handed down through generations of Mayan elders. "David and Goliath." 1

This paper deals with "women's cultures" as a concept for feminist theory, and as an approach to better understand women's experiences and "roles" in society. "David and Goliath" in some ways can help to explain this concept. It is a document that shows the "clash of cultures" between the Mayan and the Spanish Catholic missionaries. The scene became an exhibit in a museum because of the "clash" with yet another, the Anglo-American culture. It is part of a Native American ritual, but while some of its traditional meanings are still known to its people, much is lost. Imposed is the biblical story of David and Goliath, making this ritual a Christian one. The scene is thus a product of the coerced Christianization of the Maya. But clearly this is not white Catholicism. Rather to the opposite the story of David and Goliath has been "Mayasized". Maybe the elders especially chose this story of the Old Testament as it appealed to their specific situation: a defenseless people struggling against a seemingly unconquerable force. But what do we know of the old ritual? Who is Devil? Most

---

(1) This is the description of an exhibit in a Santa Fe Museum I visited on a trip through the American Southwest. I reconstructed the scene from memory, thus details are by no means accurate.

probably Devil has not much in common with Christian concepts of evil and sin. Why are Devil and Coyote fighting? Probably not to prove that the weak and helpless will win with the help of a Christian god. The names mean different things, and the stories have different meanings, even if they are the same names and similar stories.

In this paper I argue that women's cultures are constructed and work analogously to the scene of "David and Goliath". Women's cultures can be defined as specific world-views held by the women of each particular ethnic, racial and/or cultural group. These world-views are different from the views of the men of the particular group, and different from the views of women and men of other groups. They are acquired through socialization; women are not simply born into "a man's world" but also into women's worlds of female relationships. Women develop and maintain their world-views within sex-segregated groups: coffee klatsches, sport, work and religious groups, networks of female relatives, friends, and neighbors. In these places women's cultures are continuously re-created, experienced, and expressed. Traditional female art forms like knitting, quilting, cooking, and home-decoration can be products of these cultures. These female world-views permeate all aspects of women's lives. How women speak, their body languages, forms of behavior, their "ways of knowing", their ways to define, approach and solve problems, female moralities and spiritualities, all this is rooted in female cultures separate from men's. Women's cultures - as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes it - can be "visions of the world, values and ... even symbolic and cosmological systems different in highly significant ways from those of the men with whom they share sex, food and children." 2 Women's cultures are self-defined in so far as they do not represent male misogynist notions, but they are not developed outside of patriarchal ideologies. Like the Mayas did in "David and Goliath", women define and put their own meanings into frameworks and cultural constructs which are established and enforced on them by the dominant male culture.

---

2 Ellen DuBois, Mari Jo Buhle, Temma Kaplan, Gerda Lerner, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," Feminist Studies, 6/1 (Spring 1980):61.

Women's redefinition of male frameworks might often be the bridge that connects for many women the "line of fault" (Dorothy Smith) where dominant ideology contradicts women's experiences of their lives, and their knowledge about their own abilities and desires. In this way women's cultures can undermine hegemonic sexist notions. But they are not necessarily liberating for women. Even when women redefine dominant culture to grasp their contradicting experiences this redefinition is often based on sexist (and racist, homophobic etc.) notions itself. Women's cultures are not feminist cultures. The distinction between dominant culture and women's cultures is never clear, and always changing. Traditional women's cultures can only redefine dominant patriarchal cultures to a certain degree, and are often caught up in notions that feminists have shown to be harmful and abusive to women.

The analogy to the Mayan "David and Goliath" ends at this point: No matter how buried under centuries of cultural destruction, the Mayas had an elaborate culture of their own that with some effort can be reconstructed. There is a "before" and "after" in the history of Mayan culture. For women this clear grasp of their own distinct cultures does not exist. Important books from both the first and second women's movement in the United States deal with the patriarchal overthrow of a pre-historic matriarchal (or women-positive) way of life. These reconstructions of history not only reflect the attempt to place within historical times the emergence of patriarchy, but also reveal the great desire to know of the existence of historical women's cultures.

Another major difference between the Mayan culture and most women's cultures is their constant invisibility in the dominant patriarchal discourses. Traditional expressions and forms of women's cultures - women's love and friendship for one another, their networks of female relations within the family, on the workplace, in the neighborhood, in churches - have been ridiculed, trivialized, but most often simply dismissed. Women's literature has been termed "sentimental", "subjective" or "emotional", and defined as preoccupied with the everyday life without "transcending" it. Dorothy Smith pointed out how women's work is structured in a way that its very invisibility signifies its

success and accomplishment. 3 Women themselves participate in keeping their cultures invisible, for example when they talk about their coffee klatsches as "just gossiping". Nevertheless many women will maintain that the gathering with female friends and the talk about personal issues is invigorating and important to them. When women overcome the stereotyping of their activities, they not only redefine patriarchal notions, but make visible and claim cultures of their own.

### 1. The Development of the Concept of Women's Cultures The Concept of Slave Culture

In many ways the emergence of the concept of women's cultures was preceded by the discussion around the concept of a "slave culture" in the 1970's. 4 In the 1930's historians of slavery had focused mostly on exposing the racism and violence of the slave system, and concentrated on the research of slave revolts. The minute number of these historical incidents of overt slave resistance lead many historians to believe that the experience of slavery was so all-encompassingly oppressive that wide-spread slave resistance could not be expected. During the 1950's Stanley Elkins described the psychologically debilitating effects of slavery comparable to such as suffered by prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. Along with others he emphasized the totalitarian nature of the slavery "institution" that allowed slaves few forms of self-expression and no determination over their lives.

But in the late 1960's a rather different school of slavery historians emerged. Infused with the spirit and pride of the Civil Rights movement, they focused on "slave culture" as a way to understand the experience of slavery. They went back to early works on Black folk culture, like W. E. B. DuBois's The Souls of Black Folk, and used predominantly oral histories of slaves collected by Alan Lomax and others during the 1930's. These

3 Dorothy Smith, The Everyday World As Problematic: A Feminist Sociology (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), p.61-69, 84, 85.

4 For the following, see: August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, Black History and the Historical Profession 1915-1980 (1986): Chapter 4, "The Historiography of Slavery," p.239-276.

historians emphasized Black folk culture, its tradition in African tribal cosmologies and beliefs, and its transformation into an African-American slave culture. In this process the meaning of "resistance" was dramatically changed: No longer only the overt and bloody slave revolts were perceived as resistance against slavery, but also the daily sabotaging of the work process and the masters' property, the ridiculing of masters, the challenge of racist stereotypes and the denial of the inevitability of slavery in spirituals, and African-American self-expression for example in rituals and religious ceremonies. The existence of a self-determined slave culture in itself was gradually interpreted as a form of resistance. Sterling Stuckey writes in his book Slave Culture:

The slaves fashioned a life style and a set of values - an ethos - which prevented them from being imprisoned altogether by the definitions which larger society thought to impose." 5

Rich descriptions of a thriving slave culture were put forth in works by John Blassingame, Sterling Stuckey, Lawrence Levine and many others. They illustrated how especially on big plantations slaves could establish communities with self-defined living and working arrangements, formed and maintained Black churches which incorporated African traditions like the ring shout, and taught their children not only the necessary survival skills for contact with Whites, but imbued them with a sense of dignity and self-worth despite slavery.

### Radical Feminism and "Women's Cultures"

The concept of women's cultures within feminist theory emerges from a radical feminist critique of society. This is not to say that socialist or liberal feminism did not contribute to the development of the theoretical concept of women's cultures, or cannot use it in their analysis. Rather I argue that the concept of women's cultures transforms radical feminism because it answers to contradictions which are inherent especially in this feminist approach.

---

5 Sterling Stuckey, Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America (1984), quoted in Meier and Rudwick, p. 268.



Similar to the views of slavery as an all-encompassing totalitarian system, many radical feminists see patriarchy as a total system, defined as "war against women" fought with the weapon of rape symbolic of all other forms of misogynist oppression. Patriarchy's war is seen as fought on a global level, oppressing women all over the world. The second wave of feminism in the United States and Western Europe started out with the "revelation" of women's oppression. Consciousness-raising groups brought to the fore the reality of rape and sexual violence in women's lives, women's frustrations in their prescribed roles, and the legal, economic and political discrimination of women as a group. The radical feminists went furthest in interpreting women's oppression as inherent in patriarchal societies, and attacked traditional female roles and the nuclear family as institutions of oppression.

But during the mid-1970's several disturbing questions were gradually articulated: Why, if women's oppression was so severe, had indeed the dimensions of a war against women, was there so little visible resistance from women? Why, in fact, did many women maintain they were not oppressed at all, even after attempts to "raise their consciousness"?

These questions were repeatedly employed in antifeminist ideology, and while feminists could dismiss them in their political intent, they had to confront the "core of truth" in them. Antifeminists, of course, offered traditional answers, mainly that society was benevolent towards women, and that women's "natural roles" were indeed the ones of mothers and wives. Most radical feminists came to another conclusion: The fact that women could deny their oppressed status simply revealed the totality of their oppression. Women identified with their oppressors to such a degree where they gave up their own interests. They had a "false consciousness", which translated into "male-identified consciousness" in feminist rhetoric.

Two developments in the feminist movement prepared for the emergence of cultural feminism with the concept of women's cultures as yet another conclusion to the dilemma in radical feminist thought. One was the growing awareness of the voices of women of color within a predominantly white movement. Women like Audre Lorde challenged universal claims of the subordination of

women as defined by white Western feminists, and argued for an understanding of women's places in different societies and cultures on their own terms. This critique was further strengthened by a growing understanding of the prevailing anthropo- and ethnocentric views in anthropology, psychology, sociology, and history which systematically represented male, white and Western perspectives on other cultures in space and time. The second development was the emergence of a feminist, often a lesbian-feminist culture within the women's movement. The experience of building a distinct women's community despite patriarchal oppression, and within a patriarchal society gave many women a feeling of their strength and inherent self-worth. Women of color contributed immensely to this experience as they shared their ethnic cultures with white feminists.

In this context it became harder and harder to perceive women as mere victims of patriarchy. The theoretical analysis of women as entirely oppressed did not correspond to women's own experiences in the movement, and it often ignored the strength, dignity and self-determination feminists found in the biographies of women (like their mothers) who lived very traditional lives. In a first step what constituted women's "resistance" was radically redefined. Now called "male-defined forms of resistance" such as strikes, revolutions and other overtly visible signs of resistance were seen as not suitable to grasp women's resistance to oppression. Instead forms of everyday resistance were explored: boycotts, bread riots, petty theft, work slow-downs, jokes, women's gossiping. This redefinition allowed feminists to maintain an analysis of women's inferior status and oppression in a sexist, racist, homophobic and classist society. However, women were no longer seen as helpless victims and "brainwashed" collaborators to male control, but were portrayed as constant "survivors", keeping themselves sane and strong with the help of other women in a system which defined them as "insane" and powerless.

## Women's History and the Concept of Women's Cultures

Within the discourse of feminist theory the concept of "women's cultures" seems to come out of research done by historians dealing with women who had lived before and especially during the nineteenth-century. 6 Examples are the works of Julie Roy Jeffrey and Annette Kolodny on frontier women, and of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg on gender identity in Victorian America. 7 The work of these three historians is characterized by a self-conscious change in the research. While they began their work hoping and searching for exceptional women who broke out of the mold of oppressive gender roles, they had to discover instead how many women made sense out of these gender roles, sometimes rejected, but most often embraced them on their own terms. This discovery led to a redefinition of the historians' feminist identities: While they had implicitly assumed women's oppression in their earlier work, they are now studying women's experiences not only of oppression but of self-determined lives.

This change goes beyond the redefinition of women's resistance as I described it above. It is at the root of a definition of what the women's cultures concept means. Much of the sociological and historical research done on women tries to explain, describe, or end women's oppression in society. An approach towards women's cultures, as taken by Jeffrey, Kolodny, Smith-Rosenberg and others, tries to explain women's experience, part of which is oppression. This shift illustrates what Bettina Aptheker describes as "putting women at the center of our thinking." 8 A focus on women's oppression, or on women's forms of resistance to oppression, even when taking the women's points of view, leads ultimately back to male concepts of femininity and male

---

6 For a perceptive overview of this discussion, see: Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," Journal of American History 75 (June 1988): 9-39.

7 Julie Roy Jeffrey, Frontier Women: The Transmississippi West (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979); Annette Kolodny, The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

8 Bettina Aptheker, Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness and the Meaning of Daily Experience (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989):7.

definitions of women's place in society. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes "such an exclusive emphasis on male oppression of women had transformed me into a historian of men." 9 While this new kind of "men's history" still needs to be further explored, it often assumes the label "women's history" without telling the stories of women, but of women's oppression by men.

The redirection of the focus of feminist research to women's experience implies a redefinition of feminist theory. No longer is liberation seen only in terms of rejecting traditional female roles, but also in women's determination of their own lives. Often this means reclaiming notions of traditional femininity, and reinterpreting them in a women-positive (women-identified) context. This process can be one of the most creative acts of women, and fascinating for the researchers of women's lives. But it means to leave behind preconceived notions - including feminist ones - of what oppresses and what liberates women. A number of women authors have attempted to describe this process: One of the first was Adrienne Rich, who in her book Of Woman Born defined motherhood not only as a patriarchal institution oppressing women, but also as a source of female strength, and as a positive female identity. 10 Similarly, women authors of color have vehemently objected to white feminist interpretations of motherhood and family solely as places of women's oppression. Carol Gilligan's In A Different Voice defined specifically female ethics and thus exposed traditional forms of morality as male-centered. 11 Others have differentiated between women's personalized understanding of justice through care and male notions of justice as abstract equality, have examined women's relationship to nature as one of beautification rather than exploration, and discovered women's everyday worlds in sentimental fiction and day-time soap operas.

These works demand from the reader a radical redefinition, and, in fact, deconstruction of traditional notions of femininity which have been termed ridiculous and sentimental, and are often nothing less than deeply disturbing and embarrassing to the modern, liberated woman. But this deconstruction, and consequent

9 Smith-Rosenberg, "Politics and Culture", p.61.

10 Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: Norton, 1976); for a discussion in this context, see Aptheker, p.15-19.

11 Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

reconstruction of women's experience allows for a perspective which re-evaluates women's own interpretations of the worlds they live in.

## II. Women's Cultures and Feminist Theory

An approach that works with the concept of women's cultures can be called a feminist standpoint theory. As other such theories the concept of women's cultures is based on the premise that women's views of the world are different from men's. In the following part of the paper I want to discuss how the standpoint theories of Nancy Hartsock, Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill Collins and Bettina Aptheker relate to the concept of women's cultures. 12

Both Hartsock and Smith start out with women's oppression at the core of their theories. The feminist standpoint is a result of the oppression of women, and consists of a "correct" or "clearer" vision of society than the dominant view of men. Hartsock's establishment of the feminist standpoint follows closely a Marxist analysis of class positions. The relationships between women and men are seen as analogous to the relationships between capitalist and working classes. Several characteristics 13 of Hartsock's definition of a feminist standpoint distinguish it from the concept of women's cultures: Hartsock maintains that while the dominant view (of men, or of the ruling class) is not simply false - it is recreated as reality within a system of domination - but is necessarily "partial and perverse" because it represents only the view of the dominant group. The view of the oppressed group (working class or women) is thus the "correct" view of society, but it has to be achieved through "science and education", and is only created through a "struggle for change". It follows from her definition that not every worker or woman holds this "interested

---

12 Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in: Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (eds.), Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing, 1983); Smith, The Everyday World as Problematic; Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990); Aptheker, Tapestries of Life.

13 Hartsock, p.285.

and engaged position", that some are still caught up in a "false consciousness" and cannot see beyond the distortions of reality achieved through the oppressor's power to determine the "appearance" of reality. Hartsock's standpoint is thus implicitly defined as "feminist", i.e. the vision of women who have a conscious, political awareness of patriarchal oppression and are engaged in struggles for women's liberation.

Dorothy Smith's establishment of a feminist standpoint comes out of a double vision, "a bifurcated consciousness" of women, who experience a split between the conceptual frameworks and structures of the male-defined world, and the reality of their everyday experience. What Smith calls the "everyday and everynight experience of women" corresponds to what I call women's cultures, but for her a feminist standpoint is established by the awareness of the contradiction of male conceptual modes and female experience. Smith's feminist standpoint is thus defined to be "closer" to a true vision of society because women who hold it have knowledge of levels of experience that men do not have. The everyday experiences of women are defined neither as a culture nor a common viewpoint, but are connected through the experience of exclusion from the places where men produce social meaning and establish political and economic power. Smith's call for an understanding of the "everyday as problematic" corresponds with the concept of re-evaluating women's experiences on their own terms. What distinguishes Smith's view, however, is her emphasis on women's exclusion from male centers of power, while the concept of women's cultures maintains that women all along have built their own "circles" of validation and formed self-definitions outside of patriarchal discourses. Smith also centers on the "line of fault", an experience especially of women who enter the male world and are confronted with the exclusion of their everyday experiences from the very conceptualizations they have to use in their professional lives. A bifurcated consciousness is thus developed mainly by women who feel they have to deny their personal experiences to be able to identify with dominant conceptual frameworks. What Smith describes is predominantly the experience of white, middle-class women entering traditionally male professions. To survive and function well in the male-defined environment these women have to accept conceptualizations of

society which devalue women's experiences. Smith's standpoint is developed from a point of view of recognizing and overcoming identification with male modes of thinking and conceptualizing. The turn to the everyday worlds of women corrects this "male-identification".

But not all women go through this process of self-realization. Many traditional middle-class and working class white and women of color never experience a "bifurcated consciousness" because they live in environments which validate female experiences in the daily relations with other women. This does by no means challenge Smith's sophisticated analysis of how dominant modes of conceptualization are male-defined and exclude women's experiences and work. In fact, her analysis helps to explain why women's cultures have been trivialized and rendered invisible. Nevertheless, her definition of a feminist standpoint is rooted in the experiences of a very specific group of women, and does not explain how other women could achieve a thus defined feminist standpoint.

Both Patricia Hill Collins and Bettina Aptheker argue for the existence of a women's standpoint before the actual realization of a feminist consciousness. Collins states that "an everyday, unarticulated consciousness" which rejects sexist and racist notions of the dominant culture is prevalent among Black women. A Black feminist standpoint is achieved through Black feminists who articulate this already existing consciousness among Black women. Aptheker defines a women's standpoint as "women's different way of seeing reality" (p.39) which emerges from the structures and alternative meanings women give to their work and their subordinated status.

Collins's and Aptheker's standpoint theories maintain that women in their everyday lives create cultures which resist sexism, and as Black women, resist racism. Black feminists can transform Black women's experiences into an "articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint" (Collins, p.26), but this process does not remedy "false consciousness" or male identification. Thus the role of feminist thought is seen not so much as a theoretical tool to liberate women from oppressive and internalized stereotypes, but to validate and make visible to the dominant society women-



positive and Afrocentric concepts of female and Black selves and their valid place in society.

Black women's communities are seen as "alternative sites of knowledge production and validation" (Collins, p.202). Aptheker sees "the dailiness of women's lives" as the place of female knowledge production. She thus provides the logical extension of Smith's emphasis on "the everyday as problematic". Literature, music, daily conversations, and everyday behavior become prime locations for feminist research, as women's and Afrocentric cultures can be found there. These forms of human expression have traditionally been declared as either "subjective" or unimportant to an understanding of society. Precisely because of this negligible status, women's and Afrocentric cultures until recently have been invisible or not relevant to dominant inquiry.

Aptheker maintains that what constitutes "female consciousness" is defined by a gendered division of labor, and an institutionalized subordination of women by men (p. 12-13). Although very different from Hartsock and Smith, she nevertheless defines women's standpoint as established by the experience of women's oppression. Collins defines a Black feminist standpoint as being characterized not only by the oppression of Black women, but also by their heritage of "an independent, long-standing Afrocentric consciousness" (p. 27). An approach of women's cultures similarly maintains a female heritage which is not only developed as a response and redefinition of patriarchal notions. Of course this female heritage is different for every cultural group. But I will suggest at least three structures which can define women's cultures: a gendered division of labor and activities, a female definition of gender differences, and a female experience of the body. For most cultures the gendered division of labor and activities implies a devaluation of women's labor and activities, which results in the subordination of women. Also in most cultures women's views of gender differences are trivialized, and women's bodies are seen as "abnormal" and inferior to the male body. Thus the subordination of women is an experience which characterizes most women's cultures, but it is not a universal and inherent aspect. Women's cultures might even exist in a utopian society where women and men are truly equal.



Women's cultures are very much engaged in the process of deconstructing generally accepted ways of conceptualizing and valuing. Thus a theory built around women's cultures is part of the postmodern critique of society and academic curricula. However, women's cultures deconstruct through the very process of reconstructing social meanings from the perspectives of women's experiences. And, as I tried to point out, to not further perpetuate sexist (racist, homophobic, classist, etc.) oppression, the study of women's cultures often demands further deconstruction of these cultures as well. This only illustrates the tension in contemporary feminism between postmodern and Enlightenment epistemological approaches. 13

Criticism of the women's cultures approach focuses mainly on the following aspects: the re-evaluation of traditional women's cultures, the depoliticizing effects of the concept, and its seeming agenda of fostering gender dichotomy. The first group of critics are often unable or unwilling to acknowledge the reevaluation of women's cultures. Some are mainstream feminists who measure women's liberation with the scale of male-defined norms of "freedom" and "equality". Others can be found in the liberal academic establishment who will admit the need to incorporate women into dominant curricula but will only do so when male definitions of "academic worthiness" remain unchallenged. These critics perpetuate the trivialization of women's experiences.

One, admittedly more sophisticated, example of this kind of criticism is Ellen DuBois's essay in "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium". 14 DuBois argues that historically "women's rights" feminism was dialectically opposed to the women's cultures of the nineteenth-century. She writes:

"However, the dominant tendency in the study of women's culture has not been to relate it to feminism, but to look at it in isolation and romanticize what it meant for women. Another way to put it is that the concept of women's culture, the discovery of the humanity and historical activity of all those women we once dismissed as 'true women' threatens to satisfy the impulse that led us into women's history; it may

13 Sandra Harding, "Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques," in: Linda Nicholson (ed.) Feminism/Postmodernism, p. 99-101.

14 Ellen DuBois et.al., "Politics and Culture," p. 28-36.

forstall further inquiry into the system that structured women's historical activity and shaped their oppression." 15

In her article DuBois confuses the specific historical concept of "women's sphere" with what other historians have called "women's culture" in the nineteenth-century. She dismisses the attempts these historians have made to distinguish between patriarchal notions of "women's sphere" and women's reinterpretations of the terminology and the ideology of separate spheres. Women's liberation is equated with political activism, exploration of female sexuality, reproductive freedom, female self-development, and in general the struggle for "individual rights and abstract equality as man's" (p. 30). Thus the author cannot but devalue and condemn as "oppressive" the meanings nineteenth-century middle-class white (and sometimes black) women attached to the ideology of separate spheres and the cult of true womanhood, namely their belief in women's moral and spiritual superiority, their preference of sentimental homoerotic friendships with women to genital intercourse with men, and their ideology of women's special mission as mothers and guardians of "civilization". Feminist women's history for DuBois then is limited to the history of explicitly feminist movements like the women's suffrage movement, and struggles for explicitly feminist goals like birth-control.

A second group of critics claims that the concept of women's cultures leads to a form of cultural relativism where women's cultures are seen side by side with "men's cultures" without consideration for the hierarchical relationship between the two. Critics in this group often deny the possibility of establishing self-defined women's cultures within the dominant patriarchal norms and stereotypes and despite the economic, political, and social oppression of women. Dorothy Smith's rejection of the term "culture" is exemplary of these critics. She writes:

"I view the ideas, images, and symbols in which our experience is given social form not as that neutral thing called culture but what is actually produced by specialists and by people who are part of the apparatus by which the ruling class maintains its control over society." 16

Smith instead uses the term "ideology" in a Marxist sense to describe the "ideas, images and symbols" that give meaning to

---

15 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

16 Smith, *The Everyday World*, p. 54.

people's experiences. The opposition of "culture" and "ideology" - or "culture" and "politics" in Ellen DuBois's article - is at the core of this kind of criticism. The writers object to a process of depoliticization that accompanies the women's cultures approach. Clearly working with women's cultures as a theoretical concept deemphasizes women's oppression as an analytical tool to understanding women's places in society. But on the other hand, these critics often expose a rather limited definition of political action. Also, as I hope the quote by Dorothy Smith helps to illustrate, the oppressiveness of patriarchy (capitalism, racism) is seen as total, reducing the oppressed to victims with "false consciousness" or constant "survivors". I use the terms "culture" and "ideology" as interchangeable to signify social and historical constructedness. Rather than defining "ideology" as a means of the oppressor to keep control over the "minds and hearts" of the oppressed, I propose that all social meaning is ideology. What makes the oppressor's ideology oppressive and indeed a tool for control (although rarely total control) is its institutionalized claim to universality, its hegemonic character.

Nevertheless the critique of the depoliticizing consequences of working with the concept of women's cultures is justified. Not so much in its shift from male-defined forms of political action and organization to everyday forms of political resistance, but in its re-direction from women's oppression to women's experience. I find myself constantly caught between the claim that women's cultures are powerful places of women's self-determination, and the insight of how deeply many of women's cultural expressions are interwoven with sexist (racist, homophobic, etc.) notions.

An example is how white middle-class women redefined the common concern among late Victorian intellectuals about the emergence of "materialism".<sup>17</sup> The social changes of the Gilded Age - the coming of movie-theatres, the rise of commercialized prostitution, the wide-spread liberal interpretations of Biblical doctrines, the emergence of socialist and anarchist movements etc.

---

<sup>17</sup> For different aspects of the following discussion, see: Daniel Scott Smith, "Family Limitation, Sexual Control and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America," in: Mary Hartmann and Lois Banner (eds.), Clio's Consciousness Raised (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1988): 173-183.

- were seen as evidence for a "decline" of culture into "crude materialism". So-called "spiritual values" like classical education, the importance of religion and personal virtuousness etc. were believed to diminish. Many middle-class women put their own gendered framework onto this debate between the "spiritual" and the "materialistic". To explain the different cultural discourses at work within late nineteenth-century American society they employed the contemporary gender construction of men's "animalistic" and "barbarian" nature to argue for women's spiritual role as "tamers" of the mere physical, i.e. "materialistic" desires of men. This ideology was used to support women's interests for example within the Social Purity Movement, or in marital disputes about the husband's right to demand sexual intercourse from the wife. Clearly, this ideology was loaded with middle-class concepts of "High Art", "Culture", and "Civilization" as opposed to the popular art forms which emerged very much within the "materialism" of the late Victorian period. Racist, nativist and classist assumptions about the violent sexual natures of Black, immigrant and working-class men often tainted its proponents' views. I find it fascinating how women exploited the contradictions within a dominant patriarchal discourse, and used it in their own historical interests. But clearly the ideology of women's natural spiritual superiority over men was biologically deterministic, and ultimately restricting in its stereotyped understanding of women's sexuality and roles in society.

Finally a third group of critics of the women's cultures concept object to what they see as its perpetuation of the "binary opposition" between women and men.<sup>18</sup> These critics often also raise charges of inherent essentialism in the concept of women's cultures. However, while some scholars who use the concept expose essentialist viewpoints, this is clearly not inherent in it. Quite to the opposite, as I tried to demonstrate, working with "culture" implies its social and historical constructedness.

The concept of women's cultures might be unsettling for many who still look for a universal approach to the understanding of "humankind". In this it is part of an attempt to deconstruct any claim of universality as necessarily excluding particular

---

<sup>18</sup> Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," American Historical Review 91/5 (December 1986): 1065.

viewpoints, and imposing the vision of the oppressor onto other groups. It is revealing that historians who claim the existence of an Afrocentric worldview or a slave culture have rarely been accused of perpetuating racial opposition and differences.

Heterosexist notions of the priority of female-male relations and the tendency in twentieth-century feminism to define women as "equal to men", intensify concerns with a concept that gives high priority to female relations in women's lives, and is based on the assumption that not only are the experiences of women and men different, but they also have fundamentally different meanings to women and men.

Deconstructing sexual differences has been an important goal of feminist theory. Sexual difference in today's society has probably become the main cultural and social signifier and one of the important ways to structure and understand society. A concept like women's cultures is thus in many ways an expression of contemporary gender perceptions. It certainly does not help to advance the deconstruction of sexual difference. But it is important and interesting to note that especially highly sex-segregated cultures like the lesbian and gay communities are on the forefront of challenging ingrained notions of sexual difference. Gay drag queens and lesbian "bull dykes" are the extremes of a whole range of personalities through which feminine and masculine attributes are transformed into gay and lesbian identities. Maybe in a similar way we can better discover and explore the endless possibilities of what women and men can be, when we step out of norms patriarchy and some feminists alike prescribe for women's "proper" or "politically correct" behavior, and listen to how women themselves have created their particular definitions of femininity.

## Conclusions

In this paper I tried to define the concept of women's cultures in the context of contemporary feminist theory. Similar to the concept of a slave culture as the main place of slaves' resistance, women's cultures are made up of the ways women escape patriarchal definitions of their lives, and create alternative meanings and identities that are rooted in their experiences. Inherent contradictions especially within radical feminism may account for the emergence of women's cultures as a theoretical approach in the late 1970's, early 1980's.

While women's culture as a structure applies to the experience of all women, the actual cultural forms vary tremendously according to women's particular cultures of ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion, class and/or nationality. I suggested that the structure "women's culture" is defined by the gendered division of labor and activities, women's interpretations of gender differences, and women's experiences of their bodies.

At the beginning of this paper stood the description of a scene "David and Goliath" from a Mayan ritual. It was supposed to illustrate how women's cultures function within patriarchal contexts. But women's cultures can achieve more: They tell the stories of Esther and Rebecca while somewhere outside the city walls David is fighting Goliath.

\* \* \*