

*Feminist Interventions in Ethics
and Politics*, eds. Barbara S. Andrew,
Jean Keller, and Lisa Schwitzman,
Rowman + Littlefield, 2005, 41-58.

2

Categories in Distress

Marilyn Frye



The Women's Center at San Francisco State had applied for (modest) funding to bring me in for Women's History Month. But the group controlling Student Activities tried to withhold money, telling the Women's Center director that "Women are not a group."

—Max Dashú, feminist historian and independent scholar (2003)

I

Feminist theory early in the "second wave" insisted on categories of gender as salient in any theorizing about society, politics, individual being, or identity, perhaps in theorizing about anything at all. Breaking the monism of covertly masculine humanism, feminists recognized the category WOMEN and made it a central category of inquiry, theorizing, and the arts. But then feminist theorists put gender categories, and the category WOMEN in particular, into question—problematizing them in ways that have led some to suspect that they are utterly unusable, even pernicious, in feminist theorizing: "Woman is just a construct, indeed a construct of phallocentrism"; "Anything anyone says about women will exclude some women"; "Woman is an essentialist notion"; "Gender is a fiction."¹

The problems feminists have with the category WOMEN are bound up in philosophical problems—that is, tangles of thought rooted in entrenched presuppositions that are borne and reinforced by habits of language and culture. In this case, some of those are habits of thought about categories, what categories are. I want to locate and critique philosophical pictures that lock

us into paradoxes and quandaries about the category WOMEN, as it is worked in feminist theory. Although related troubles may well bother feminism as it is articulated in other cultural/linguistic environments, I am engaging with a specific problematic that I encounter in, and take to be indigenous to, Anglophone domains and in the shadow of an Anglo-European cultural and intellectual history, though one need not be a white Anglo-European to have been caught up in it.²

II

In mundane operations of perception, cognition, and linguistic usage, we are always using categories of many sorts with a habitual and unreflective ease. But for almost all the concepts or categories we use, we are stopped dead in our tracks when called upon to define them. It is daunting to try to say what grief is or what *accidentally* means; it's only a little easier to say what a pillow is. Put a little pressure on a concept, category, or word, and it becomes mercurial—resisting confinement in slippery ways. There is a lot of weight on the central analytic categories of any theory, and they will be troubled until or unless the theory becomes so widely accepted that it is integrated into a widely shared "common sense"—until, in other words, the troubles are submerged in habit and familiarity. This is, by itself, no reason to abandon them. If the category MEN seems less troubled to us than WOMEN (and it certainly has occasioned much less anxiety among feminists), it surely is because its troubles are both submerged in habit and familiarity, and camouflaged by being dressed up as Eternal Philosophical Problems.

There is another interesting example of theoretical novelty and a troubled category that both reminds us that category troubles are not unique to feminism and reinforces the suggestion that troubles with a particular category can be troubles about what categories are. The example is that of evolutionary theory and its central analytic category SPECIES. When Darwin and Wallace delivered their theories in the late 1850s, there was already a well-developed and cogent-seeming category SPECIES in the repertoire of the scientific and literate community: species were understood to be originally and permanently distinct kinds of living things, and there was a clear and sharp distinction between species and varieties, one taxonomic level down from species. In Darwin's new theory, species have histories, and they come into and go out of existence, and in some cases varieties become species. This transformation of a theologically natural category into a category of natural history was disturbing. The new category has been problematic for a century and a half, and the problems still provoke intense academic papers and fuel careers.³ Possibly it can console feminists to note that evolutionary theory survived

and developed in spite of, perhaps partly because of, all the contention about the category SPECIES.

Both of these categorical innovations, Darwin's SPECIES and the feminists' WOMEN, unsettle prior conceptions of what kinds and categories *are*. The word *species* is almost a synonym of the word *kind*, and at least since Aristotle species have been paradigm cases of categories. The shift to mutable species in a frame of natural history generated not just critique but hostility rooted in people's defensiveness of their world and their place in that world and in particular the place and primacy of men. The category MEN, sometimes in free variation with the sacred, transcendent, and nonempirical category MAN, has *also* been paradigmatic of categories. (Man is a rational animal.) The feminist category WOMEN doesn't fit in the picture of categories in which the category MEN has this status. Nor was it introduced by authorized males of the appropriate race/class for presenting scientific papers. It and its unauthorized authors impossibly occupy ontological space that is foreclosed by the prior picture of categories and of the category MEN. And, unlike the evolutionists' category SPECIES, the feminists' mutant category, though historical, does not have the natural historicity of biological evolutions. It is an artifact. All this unsettles our sense of what there is and what it is to be something and stirs critique that is defensive of the critic's world and his or her place in it. It is also simply confusing and a possibly daunting challenge to the imagination.

III

Feminist critique of the feminist category WOMEN has largely taken shape as various versions of antiessentialism.⁴ Virtually all academic feminists reject essentialism, and yet like paranooids, we find it everywhere in each other's work and are prone to diagnosing every ill as "essentialism" (Frye 2000). Also, we celebrate and defend the differences among us, but any cognitive or political recognition of a vector of difference (among us, or between us and any other group), any systematic marking of difference—that is, any *generalization*—is highly suspect of being "exclusive" and "essentialist." All this has made me suspect that the essentialism is not being discovered in all these places but is being imported by the critique. That is, the critique presupposes a picture of categories that makes the use of categories, any use of categories, look like essentialism. That's overly simple. Actually, most of our thinking about social categories has been shaped, simultaneously, by the received image of a *species*, the idea of a *set*, the *container metaphor*, and a kindred picture of linguistic meaning—a positivist referential picture. All of which severally and jointly support the intuition that categorizing, per se, is essentializing.⁵

IV

One reason feminists have had for being antiessentialist is that as a philosophical position in the domain of social ontology, essentialism just seems wrong. But the more politically significant reason is that we want to steer clear of biological determinism. Throughout most of the second wave, feminists in the humanities and the social sciences have commonly practiced and taught as though accepting any claim in a biological register is a commitment to biological determinism, which, we assume, is essentialism. Any use of the English word *female* as a noun or adjective in articulation of any bit of theory is deemed inadmissible because the category FEMALE is a biological category.⁶ The word *female* has been virtually banished from the discourse of Anglophone academic feminist theory. I think it has occurred to almost no one to wonder why we think biological categories are necessarily essentialist categories and why we think that generalization on biological categories can only be universal generalizations grounded in rigid causal determination by an essence. What picture of biological categories are we carrying around in our back pockets, and where did we get it?

In most contemporary contexts outside the biological sciences, the dominant model of a biological category is a species. We think of an exemplar of a species as being of *that species* in virtue of deeply "internal" physical structures installed at the moment of its individuation as a discrete organic individual, structures whose features determine causally the features, tendencies, capacities, and behaviors by which the individual is identifiable as being of that species. In this picture, it is because of their genes that organic individuals are what they are and do what they do. Feminists resisting what we call "biological determinism" are on the surface resisting the picture of women and men as being two species each with a nature as distinctive as the natures of cats and wombats, causally determining within quite narrow limits their typical morphologies, behaviors, capacities, aptitudes, and so on, distinctive to each and making each "fit" in certain physical and social niches and not in others. We object that being a woman, or a man, is not like that. And we are right so to object. But I want to note here that the picture to which we object does not do justice to cats and wombats. They don't have essences, either. That "biologically determinist" picture of women and men metaphorically or analogically assimilates the categories WOMEN and MEN not to something biologically given but to an ideological and metaphysical construct. This image of biological categories, of species, is also at least in part a back formation from a masculinist construction of the category MEN—a construction of a category as pure, unitary, and ontologically independent.⁷ Conceptions of living kinds are tailored to permit the pure and self-sufficient category MEN to be the paradigm case of a living kind and to permit and support the justification of man's authority and privilege—of his status as para-

digm. Neither in cultural history nor in cognitive order are conceptions of biological categories, or living kinds, separable from or prior to conceptions of the king of categories: MEN. A biologically determinist, essentialist concept of species or living kinds is a presupposition of the male-supremacist category MEN (or MAN). That is part of how male superiority, and male supremacy, is conceptually locked in.

It seems to me not a good idea for feminists to try to purge conceptions of women and men of their oppressiveness by prizing them off biology, leaving the biological behind and in disrepute, but uncritiqued. We are spooked by the idea that if we ever acknowledge our bodies, our animal-ness, our birth, we will fall from grace into essentialism and biological determinism. This encourages a tendency to somatophobia and tends to make our constructionism a form of idealism; it interferes with our ability to think of ourselves as embodied subjects. Instead of resisting any perception of us in a biological frame, we should resist essentialist constructions of biological kinds, thereby freeing our imaginations for pluralist ideas of what categories are *and*, *inter alia*, kicking a pin out from under the masculinist category MEN.

I don't have time and space in this context to do more than barely sketch an alternative picture of species. But I want to quickly summarize a picture given by John Dupré in several of his works (Dupré 1981, 1986), because I think there is no chance of abandoning one picture unless one can consider another, an alternative to it. Dupré suggests that the world is lumpy, not homogeneous. He invites us to imagine a multidimensional quality space, like a three-dimensional graph of Cartesian coordinates multiplied to as many coordinates as there are qualitative dimensions by which we describe and recognize living things. To get this picture, you can begin by thinking of a three-dimensional object located in a three-dimensional space by locating the point corresponding to its height, width, and depth in that space, or locating the object in a four-dimensional space by graphing its height, width, depth, and weight. Analogously, one can imagine locating each individual living thing in a multidimensional quality space by graphing all of its values in the multiple dimensions that we mark in language or by our repertoires of recognition. Dupré says that when every living thing has been mapped into that space, the space will not be occupied homogeneously with equal spaces in all dimensions between individuals but will be characterized throughout by densities and discontinuities. Some of the discontinuities will be sharp; most will be graded, and among the latter there are variations in how sharply the density drops off and how uniform the gradation is. As I understand Dupré, he is saying that the fact that there are those densities and discontinuities is the fact that there are living kinds. In Dupré's picture, the densities can be understood as webs of correlations which empirically support inferences from the presence of one feature to the presence of another. Such inferences are empirical and contingent. That one can

make them with a reasonable record of their being observationally confirmed is simply a corollary of the clustering of individual, in "hills" or "denisities" in quality space, not sanctified by the deterministic efficacy of inferior microstructural features (i.e., essences).

The feminist distinction of sex and gender, which was a salutary development in its time, was made to quarantine a realm of essentialist determinism and keep it distinct from a realm of contingency that was open to political analysis, critique, and intervention. But we do not have to construe the former realm as a realm of essentialist determinism. Other images are possible—an image of a correlational density in a multidimensional quality space, for instance. If we were to think of ourselves, in a biological register, as concrete individuals located in correlational densities in a multidimensional quality space, we might be able to make generalizations over the kinds we are exemplars of—generalizations that are contingent and revisable, observationally supported, neither trans-temporal nor atemporal, generalizations that permit the existence of some individual variation and exceptional individuals. Dupré (1986) claims that the relatively strong empirically supported correlations across one sex of any sexed species but not across the whole species are in fact pretty few and pretty boring, the only fairly strong ones in the case of *Homo sapiens* being about a limited range of morphological features. If that is so, it would be better to say that than to deny that there are any empirically supported correlations because we are afraid of biological determinism. (My own guess is that this rather limited dimorphism is actually quite consequential, though contingently so and very much by cultural mediation.)

The biological register, so understood, is by no means adequate to all of the kinds of generalizations we make and need to make, many of which cannot be reduced to correlations of observed attributes or behaviors, and many of which are not *in* the biological register. But having *an* image of living kinds that has arisen within the domain of biological science and is *not* an image of defining and determining interior *essences* can free up our imaginations and may help us move toward the ability to think of biological kinds and generalizations as *not always* and *not necessarily* essentialist constructs and processes. Then we may be able to be less biophobic, and then, since biological kinds have served as a sort of touchstone for how we think of categories generally, that may help us to be less category-phobic.

V

Feminists have been antiessentialist because they/we are resisting biological determinism. Feminist antiessentialism also expresses resistance to habits of thought that individuate men but "mass" women, as though women are all "essentially" the same while men are individuals with a variety of aptitudes,

characters, jobs, roles, races, classes, and so on. We have tended to understand this phenomenon as one in which an essence is attributed to women, in virtue of which we are all alike in all our significant traits, tendencies, and aptitudes. But I suspect that our diagnosis of this "massification" as a manifestation of essentialism is a little off; it is not complex enough. I want to suggest a different reading of it.

One of the models of the category MEN makes it the A side of an exhaustive and exclusive dichotomy: A/~A. Such a dichotomy organizes a domain in such a way that everything in the domain either is A or is not A: nothing is both; nothing is neither. It also casts everything that is not A as an undifferentiated background against which A is defined. The universal reach, the exhaustiveness (or totality), of the A/~A sort of category is accomplished by what has been called "the infimitation of the negative."⁸ If "vanilla" is assigned as the A, then ~A includes not only strawberry, chocolate, and peppermint ripple but also triangles, the square root of two, the orbit of Haley's comet, and all the shoes in the world. So far as the category VANILLA is concerned, the category NOT-VANILLA is an infinite undifferentiated plenum, unstructured, formless, a chaos undelineated by any internal boundaries (i.e., it is in fact not a category). To be A is to be something; ~A is not a "something" that a thing can be.

When women are "massed," the situation is not as simple as our being constructed as all alike, presumably because of a common essence. Things that are not A are all alike, but only vacuously so, in that they are not differentiated. When the category MEN is working as an A/not-A category, women are not only "like" each other—we are like children, like nature, like chattel, like cars and ships, and shoes and sealing wax. Beyond the circle of the category MEN there is just . . . everything else . . . where everything is like and unlike everything. Indifferentiation is not the same thing as the sameness.

Misreading indifferentiation as an imposition of sameness, feminists in both high theory and the vernacular have resisted it by marking, affirming, displaying, celebrating our variety. This is, I think, half right. There are many differences among us—indeed, indefinitely many differences on infinitely many vectors of description—but that does not differentiate us from ships and shoes and sealing wax. Nor does it support any politics. To precipitate out of the infinite undifferentiated plenum a cluster or complex that is a distinct category—something that is something one can *be*—we have to weave a web of both difference and, well, something that will work as we thought sameness would work, namely, some kind of principle of coherence (Frye 1996). Except for attempts to work out the idea of "being similarly situated" (Alcoff 1988; Young 1994),⁹ which have their own problems about likeness-of-situation, feminists have shied off working out the "sameness" or coherence side of this because we are afraid of being committed to an essence. It seems worth asking why we think that the only alternative to

indifferentiation would be essential sameness. It is, I think, because we buy the idea that if we are going to be *something*, we have to be-something the same way that dominating A is-something.

What A is, is a set—that thing represented by a circle on a blackboard that one encountered in introductory logic courses. Sets are defined by a list of properties or attributes that are the necessary and sufficient conditions of membership in the set. Each property is required for membership, and only those with all of the properties get in. Set membership imposes the condition that all members of the set are alike with respect to that in virtue of which they are members of the set. The concept of a set is the reduction of multiplicity to unity. The “sameness” involved in the coherence of a set is total, in the sense that every single member of the set is like every other in having exactly the attributes that are definitive of the set. When we think of a social category as a set, we will think that its coherence requires a sameness that has this kind of totality about it, a kind of totality that we have associated with the notion of essence. No wonder we back off.

But social categories are not sets and thinking of them as sets is disastrous. One thing it leads to is the belief that there aren't really any social categories: that social categories, such as WHITE PEOPLE, WOMEN, JOURNALISTS, SOCIAL MOMS, ITALIANS, and LESBIANS, are fictional, imaginary, unreal. The reasoning goes like this: Thinking of social categories as sets leads to thinking that the only thing that can count as a “definition” of a category is a rack of necessary and sufficient conditions. So, when we find that we cannot provide a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the category WOMEN, we declare that it is indefinable. And then we conclude that it cannot be permitted to operate as an analytic category of feminist theory.¹⁰

Another mind-binding consequence of conceptualizing categories as sets is its encouragement of the idea that the function of categories is *sorting*. Thinking of categories as sets, and thus as defined by necessary and sufficient conditions, one sees those conditions as constituting an algorithm for sorting individuals into members and nonmembers; using categories comes to look like chucking pieces of mail in cubby holes or sorting laundry or silverware. This mirrors and is mirrored by an obsolete theory of linguistic meaning, whose grip on our imagination it reinforces. On that theory of meaning nouns like *chair* or *pickle* or *woman*, or adjectives like *red*, denote sets; the meaning of the word is a rule defining that set; to know the meaning of the word is to know the rule and be able to use that rule to sort things in the world into those that are in that reference set and those that are not. It was in the era of this theory's dominance that Anglo-American philosophers exercised themselves trying to come up with the necessary and sufficient conditions for terms like *person*, *good*, *language*, *voluntary*, *know*, and so on. On this theory of meaning, we don't know the meaning of the word *woman* if we don't know the rule for sorting women out from nonwomen. I

therefore cannot have a cogent thought about women, make any theoretical statement pertaining to women, or organize a women's caucus of a political organization unless I have a rule that draws the boundary around the category WOMEN. If I do not know such a rule, then any intellectual or political moment that apparently requires me to draw the boundary will be a moment of embarrassment.¹¹ And since there is no such rule, all of these consequences of not knowing the rule will indeed befall me. So I had better not talk about women or organize a women's caucus.

The observation that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in social categories should not be taken to demonstrate that social categories are unreal and the words for them meaningless; it should be taken to demonstrate that *social categories are not sets*. (Indeed, living kinds and other natural kinds are not sets, either. At this point, I'd venture to say that none of the categories that are empirically, socially, or politically interesting are sets.) It should be taken as showing that *however social categories work* in perception, cognition, behavior, social processes, and operations of power (both appropriate and oppressive), *they do it without having boundaries fixed by necessary and sufficient conditions and consequently without having any absolute sameness as their principle of coherence*, and not by an operation of sorting.

One of the main reasons, in my view, that feminist theory has found its central analytic category WOMEN so persistently and irresolvably troublesome is that it has been surpassingly difficult to shake off the habit of thinking of categories as sets. The majority of us have in fact not deliberately *tried* to shake it off, it never having occurred to us explicitly that we were assuming categories are sets or that we should stop assuming it.

VI

It seems to be part of the burden of the inheritance of what is called Western history of ideas and culture that we conceive categories and kinds through the twin images of species and sets, which are in a way the same image in two different modes, material and abstract. They blend into the metaphor that in this culture dominates almost all direct thought about categories and kinds outside some specialist enclaves in cognitive and biological sciences: the container metaphor—that is, the picture of a bounded space whose boundary is constituted by a mechanism that guarantees the homogeneity of what's inside the space and sets the contents off apart from everything else. A jar of olives with a perfectly clear label and nothing but very, very similar olives inside. A metaphor that embodies the worst of both images, sets and species (even on a nonessentialist construal of species). Like the image of a species, it blocks thinking of one individual as a member of more than one

category; like the image of a set, it locks in the picture of a fixed and fixing boundary.

In the history of troubles with the category SPECIES in the era of evolutionary theory, many of the disputants have persistently believed that there *must* be a unitary definition of the term *species* that provides a single decisive "sort" of all living individuals into discrete kinds,¹² or there are no species, and evolutionary theory along with much of the rest of biology, if not all of it, is at bottom incoherent. Quite similarly, in feminist theory, when it becomes clear, which it so easily does, that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions of being a woman (or a man) "given" by biological nature, or by the meanings of the words in English (or their kin in other natural languages), or in feminist discourse, it has looked like the only options were to become gender abolitionists or "strategic essentialists."¹³

There are some fairly compelling independent reasons for seriously considering a politics of gender abolition—reasons that have been obscured and spared the trial of real political debate by claims to the effect that the words *woman*, *man*, *girl*, *boy*, and so on, are meaningless and that "really" there *already* are no gender categories—indeed, there *couldn't* be any. Such claims presuppose the picture of categories as containers and make the politics of gender abolition in a sense irresponsible; they relieve it of accountability to experience and of the obligation of constructiveness. The other option, which has been called "strategic essentialism," also wholly buys the olive jar metaphor for categories and then, in lieu of any biological, linguistic, or theoretical "given" to fix boundary conditions for the social category WOMEN, recommends providing the boundary conditions "strategically," drawing boundaries where convenient, as needed, for particular political purposes. Besides being *unnecessary*, since categories do not have to have boundaries to "work," this strategy is politically problematic. The difficulties have to do with the agent and her powers. When someone sets up the necessary and sufficient conditions (or, in Heyes's work, when someone draws the line), by what authority are they doing it? And in whose interests? As interpreted by whom? And for what period, spatial scope, and political situation is this going to be the boundary? If she is legislating or regulating, who is she to do that?

These are very sticky questions in the context of a movement as deeply anarchistic, democratic, decentralized, and intercontinental as the WOMEN'S movement.¹⁴ But also, strategic essentialism, which is a version of what philosophers have called "nominalism," works within the same logic as that within which essentialism works: the logic of the container. It says, "There is no rule fixing a boundary and sorting what is 'in' and what is 'out'; so I must (at least in some situations) institute one . . . albeit temporarily, only strategically." The fact that the "strategic essentialism" approach can appear to be the only way to continue having the category WOMEN available as an analytic

category of feminism seems to me one of the worst consequences of feminist theory's proceeding for years without having gotten around to seriously and critically reviewing our assumptions about categories—about biological and other natural kinds, social kinds, and the intimately related theories of meaning. It is my view that all the urgency feminist theory attaches to antiessentialism is more appropriately attached to liberating our conceptions of categories from the confines of the container metaphor.

VII

Other, nonobjectivist, theories of meaning are available. Wittgenstein made the point decades ago that most working categories are not sets and do not have boundaries. He noted that one can draw a boundary for a particular purpose, but he definitely thought categories work most of the time without a boundary. He displaces the container metaphor with the metaphors of a spun thread and, more famously, family resemblance. Both of these are images of something that hangs together but not by virtue of some single principle of global reach or some distinctive homogeneity. Wittgenstein thus invokes a sort of anarchist's conception of unity or solidarity, as opposed to a totalitarian conception. This is certainly an improvement. I won't go into a fuller discussion of family resemblance here, but I want to note that it is often explained in his terms of "overlapping and crisscrossing similarities," and similarity is then often understood as shared attributes. When family resemblance is understood in this way, it readily invokes a substance-attributive ontology. For example, empirical work on categories in cognitive psychology, which is otherwise very interesting, invokes the notion of family resemblance, constructs categorized objects as substances with attributes, and reduces everything subjects say about their categories to *attributes* of those objects. For instance, in the case of the category CHAIRS, "you can sit on it" shows up in the list of "common and typical attributes" evoked from experimental subjects (Rosch and Mervis 1975). "You can sit on it" is indeed a central vector of meaning or identity with respect to the category CHAIRS, but it is a distortion to treat "can be sat on" as an *attribute* of the concrete object in question.¹⁵ That kind of move is standard in translating ordinary language into the first-order predicate calculus and the language of elementary set theory. Everything is reduced to the form " x is P " or the set-theoretical " $x \in \emptyset$." This throws us back into a more or less Aristotelian ontology, and, worse, it is the kind of thinking that permits, even requires, the move from recognizing that women are subject to male predation to making "subject to male predation" into an attribute of women, that is, treating that complicated placement in others' repertoires of behavior as an attribute belonging to, as something "proper to," the individual concrete exemplars of this category. In

sort of picture of meaning as a matter of relations and contrasts among all of the multiple elements of the symbolic system, but to the view that meaning is a matter of hierarchical binary opposition (a picture that makes it look like the structure of meaning is the structure of domination). The only way I can see that one can get from a Saussurian starting point to this latter picture is by sleight-of-mind that reduces multiplicity to unity. I believe that trick goes as follows:

- (1) You note that each element M is constituted as the element it is by its relations with every other element.
- (2) You note that each of these other elements is not identical with M.
- (3) You sum up (1) and (2) thus: *What M is, is constituted by M's relations with things that are not M.*
- (4) You then construe things-that-are-not-M as the undifferentiated negative of M and recast your conclusion as: *To be an element of a symbolic order (to be a signifier), M depends on relation to its negation, not-M.*

And bingo,

- (5) the structure of meaning is that of the (totalitarian) oppositional binary: M/~M. It is also a hierarchical binary; M is logically prior to not-M.

Thus can one reduce the idea that meaning is a matter of relations and contrasts to the idea that meaning is a matter of hierarchical binary oppositions. Such oppositions are, though, actually a limiting case of "contrast" since they reduce all contrasts to one and that one is devoid of semantic content. The "binary" relation is of M to its negation, which really is not a binary at all, since the "second" element is only the first combined with an operator.¹⁸

It appears to me that this reduction of multiplicity to unity is a flimflam that is supposed to make a particular male-supremacist construction of the category MEN look like it is nothing but what a category *must be*. (Which takes us back to a point I made at the beginning of this essay: that the phallographic category MEN serves as the paradigm of what a category is.) As a matter of actual usage in living discourses, the category MEN *does* sometimes cast this structure on situations, and perhaps almost all usages of this category at least in the Anglophone culture I inhabit invoke this structure at least as a shadow over the situation. But such usage is *not* the ineluctable consequence of a "given" nature of meaning or of the ontologically necessary structure of what it is for an *x* to be a \emptyset .

IX

I have suggested here that images of species, sets, and containers, an obsolete positivist theory of meaning, and a curiously illogical interpretation of a structuralist understanding of meaning have together been vehicles carrying essentialism and binary totalism into feminist readings of the category WOMEN that then claim to find the essentialism and "exclusion" in the category and in theory or politics that invoke it. I think that this helps account for the sense one can get from texts that problematize the category, that the maligned essentialism is pervasive and unavoidable.

To achieve a serviceable understanding of social categories—what they are, how they work both cognitively and politically—we need a greatly enriched imagination for how categories can be structured, internally and in relation to other categories. I think there is not one thing categories *are*, any more than there is one thing language *is*. We need to think categories simultaneously through multiple and mixed metaphors. It is a good thing to add the metaphors of a spun thread and family resemblance to our repertoires and to have lodged there also the image of correlational densities in multidimensional quality spaces. Elsewhere, I offered the image of a social category as an organism, unified by a web of relations among quite unlike parts, and set apart from other things by a permeable membrane which is simultaneously one of its organs (Frye 1996). Crista Lebens (in conversation) has suggested the image of category membership as integrated residence in an ecosystem. I now suggest the image of a concrete sound or mark being a token of a type in a linguistic relational system as a model of a concrete individual being a (multiply ambiguous) social "something." And, in parting, I invite others to join me in the pleasures of continuing the permanent and collaborative project of inventing more, and more liberating, conceptions of being the many things we are.

NOTES

1. I believe there is a profound and complicated politics to this reactive development, but I am addressing here only one thread of the intellectual and conceptual matrix that sustains it. Many others have provided useful summaries of the complaints against the category WOMEN. See, for example, chapter 1 of Heyes (2000).
2. Thanks to Allison Wolf for remarks that made me realize I needed to make these points quite explicit, for my own sake as well as for my readers'.
3. Feminism, like evolutionary theory, is tangled with other troubles. One thing that has troubled both is their service as terrains for the play of racist and racialist anxiety. In the nineteenth century, champions of white race purity were interested defenders of a definition of species as reproductively isolated groups. Such a definition,

combined with figuring races as species, could give credence to their views that cross-race mating was an unnatural "miscegenation" (see Young 1995:11–13). Rival definitions of species, and even definitions that were only more nuanced and qualified versions of the reproductive isolation definition, were, then, threatening to that agenda. In the mid- and late twentieth-century academy, white racial anxiety is usually very covert, so it is much harder to track. But I believe that the phallogocentric category *WOMEN* is a construct that subserves (among other things) white women's racial loyalty to white men and I believe that feminist mutations of the category *WOMEN* threaten that bond, even if the threat has so far been realized politically in ways only rarely, and barely, perceptible. (See Frye 1983:121–26 and Frye 1992:160–65.) If I am right about that link *and* about white race anxiety being very much repressed in many settings where feminist thought is explicit, this would suggest interesting readings of the ways themes of race weave in confused, tortuous, and sometimes destructive ways through the problematic of the feminist category *WOMEN*.

4. . . . And antirealism. Those two have sometimes been taken as pretty much equivalent, as though you can't be a realist without being an essentialist. I reject that equivalence: I think it is essentialist to think you can't be a realist without being an essentialist. See Frye (1996).

5. Some theorists working in a postmodernist frame do, it seems to me, end up claiming that any invocation of any social categories is essentialist. I think they thereby reveal the positivist and objectivist presuppositions of their thought.

6. So, for instance, many readers could not read Mary Daly's use of the term *female* energy otherwise than as committing her to biological determinism (i.e., to essentialism). Her strenuous and explicit arguments *against* essentialism were not granted the power to put that reading in doubt. (See Suhonen 2000.)

7. "Pure," as in "the logic of purity," as explicated by Lugones (2003:121–48).

8. John Dewey, cited in Jay (1981:45).

9. Another way of thinking about something like "similar situation" is described later in this essay.

10. For a perspicuous example of this, see Bornstein (1994:56–58). She sees the failure of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a woman or being a man as grounds for "question[ing] the existence of gender."

11. Whenever a situation is so constructed that one is under great pressure to "define" the boundary of a social/political category, one should carefully scrutinize the politics of that situation.

12. Hull (1965) gives a definition of *species* that strikes me as a rather desperate attempt to force the multiplicity of that notion into a unity defined by necessary and sufficient conditions. In effect, his definition says that a population is a species if it is (1) A, or (2) B, or (3) neither A nor B but hasn't diverged appreciably from ancestors that were A or B, or (4) is none of the above but is analogous to populations that satisfy at least one of (1), (2), or (3).

13. The term *strategic essentialism* goes back to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1987) claim that the Subaltern Studies group was strategically adhering to the essentialist notion of consciousness. Heyes (2000) adopts a sort of "strategic essentialist" view in the form of an account of "line drawing"; she does address, in careful detail, the sorts of problems with such a view that I mention here, but I would argue that she does not distance her views enough from a substance-attributed ontology.

14. See Mohanty (1991). Also, resistance to construction of women-only spaces or projects routinely exploits the tension between the anarchic democratic character of feminism and the doctrine of "strategic essentialism" by challenging the authority of the line drawer to draw the line, even only strategically and for the nonce.

15. When Wittgenstein introduced the notion of family resemblance, he used language like "the phenomena [we call 'language'] are *related* to one another in many different ways" (§65). In talking about games, he speaks of "characteristic features" showing up in some examples, dropping out in others (§66). And he speaks of "similarities" and "resemblances," saying they "overlap and criss-cross." *Similarity* can be read as "having the same attribute," but it can be left more open than that.

16. Young's (1994) attempt to adapt Sartre's notion of seriality is an interesting attempt to work out a picture of this.

17. One may take terms like *patriarchy* or *racism* or *colonialism* or *beterosexism* each to refer to a distinctive pattern of distributive and contrastive relations in which each element is related to a multiplicity of other elements.

18. That such so-called binaries are not binary at all but monary is, of course, a significant theme in Luce Irigaray's work.

REFERENCES

- Alcoff, Linda. 1988. "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13, no. 3 (Spring): 405–36.
- Bornstein, Kate. 1994. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*. New York: Routledge.
- Dashú, Max. 2003. "Women's Studies beyond Academia." *off our backs*, September–October: 20.
- Dupré, John. 1981. "Natural Kinds and Biological Taxa." *Philosophical Review* 90: 66–90.
- . 1986. "Sex, Gender, and Essence." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 11: 441–57.
- Frye, Marilyn. 1983. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Freedom, Calif.: Crossing.
- . 1992. *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism 1976–1992*. Freedom, Calif.: Crossing.
- . 1996. "The Necessity of Differences: Constructing a Positive Category of Women." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 21, no. 4 (Summer): 991–1010.
- . 2000. "Ethnocentrism/Essentialism: The Failure of the Ontological Cure." In *Is Academic Feminism Dead? Theory in Practice*, ed. Social Justice Group at the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies, University of Minnesota. New York: New York University Press, 47–60.
- Heyes, Cressida J. 2000. *Line Drawings: Defining Women through Feminist Practice*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Hull, David L. 1965. "The Effects of Essentialism on Taxonomy—Two Thousand Years of Stasis I," and "The Effects of Essentialism on Taxonomy—Two Thousand Years of Stasis II." *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 16, nos. 60 and 61.

- Jay, Nancy. 1981. "Gender and Dichotomy." *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 1: 38–56.
- Lugones, María. 2003. *Pilgrimages/Peripetrias: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1991. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 51–79.
- Rosch, Eleanor, and Carolyn B. Mervis. 1975. "Family Resemblances: Studies in Internal Structure of Categories." *Cognitive Psychology* 7 (October): 573–605.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1987. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography." In *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen.
- Suhonen, Marja. 2000. "Toward Biophilic Being: Mary Daly's Feminist Metaethics and the Question of Essentialism." In *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Daly*, ed. Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Marilyn Frye. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 112–31.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1994. "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 3: 713–36.
- Young, Robert C. 1995. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge.