A PASSION FOR DIFFERENCE
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Essays in Anthropology and Gender

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Polity Press
In memory
of
my mother
Josephine Moore
(1934–1993)
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INTRODUCTION

A Passion for Difference

Difference exerts an uncanny fascination for all of us. Contemporary social and cultural theory exhibits an obsessive concern with issues of difference, and such is the malleability of the term that almost anything can be subsumed under it. This passion for difference seems to be linked to its unspoken and under-theorized pair, 'the same' or 'sameness'. This is not implied, of course, in the deconstructionist notion of différence, but it is implicitly there in much feminist and social science theorizing, as well as in contemporary political activism. Deciding on differences is one way of delineating identities. Difference(s) from others are frequently about forming and maintaining group boundaries. The brutal and bloody nature of this maintenance work is everywhere in evidence.

Thinking about difference entails, then, thinking about identity and/or sameness. However, these latter terms are not themselves identical. Within the academy, establishing an understanding of the relations between difference and identity has been a complex and sometimes explosive task. Feminist scholars, in particular, have been struggling with the question of how or to what degree women might be the same or similar without being identical. What is it, if anything, that we share? This book is concerned with questions of difference, sameness and sharing. It also addresses the various rhetorical forms of 'we' at work in feminist and anthropological writing. Who or what does 'we' refer to in the contemporary moment? Problems of reference here are connected to issues of belonging.
Identity and difference are not so much about categorical groupings as about processes of identification and differentiation. These processes are engaged for all of us, in different ways, with the desire to belong, to be part of some community, however provisional. Belonging invokes desire, and it is in this desire that much of the passion for difference resides.

In terms of my own writing the question of where and to what I belong involves, as it does for others, a consideration of position and location. If I belong somewhere, then I speak and write from there, and the specifics of that location matter. But all locations are provisional, held in abeyance. One is never truly anywhere and if locations or positions are to be specified, they will always be in the plural. The crisis of location is a productive, but personally terrifying one. Both the label 'anthropologist' and that of 'feminist' remain under radical interrogation, and as a feminist anthropologist I find my relations with these terms to be strenuous, nuanced and unrelentingly complex. However, I am passionately committed, and this is what provides the energy and the propulsion for my work. The essays in this collection represent my attempts to come to grips with the questions of difference and sameness that being a feminist and an anthropologist raise.

Bodies and identities

The provisionality of positions reminds us that when we consider questions of location we are not simply trying to reinscribe an essentialism of place. Positionality is too often reduced to individual experience and/or to representation: 'I know because I've been there' and 'I know because I am one'. These slippages are particularly troublesome when linked to grounds for authority. Anthropology and feminism share a tendency to assert that experience acts as an ontological given. This issue has been discussed in many times and places, but what worries me here is the way in which experience is sometimes reduced to its linguistic and cognitive elements, to what I know and to what I can talk about. This process of reduction encourages a view of experience which sees it as ontological, singular and fixed. Experience can and does act ontologically for all of us, but it does so through a technique of construction. This process of construction involves a recognition of
the role of physical presence in establishing dialogue between individuals and groups. What is at issue is the embodied nature of identities and experience. In subsequent chapters I propose a notion of the ‘lived anatomy’ and of bodily praxis as a mode of knowledge that draws on an understanding of experience as a form of embodied intersubjectivity. The very fact of being present as an embodied subject gives a particular character to the ontology of experience which emphasizes the degree to which social interactions are embodied ones taking place in concrete space and time.

Intersubjectivity and dialogue involve situations where bodies marked through by the social, that is, by difference (race, gender, ethnicity and so on), are presented as part of identities. The uses of the body, the particular circumstances of interaction and the readings made by others are all involved in the taking up of a position or positions that form the basis for the enunciation of experience. Experience is thus intersubjective and embodied; it is not individual and fixed, but irredeemably social and processual.

The experience of being a woman or being black or being a Muslim can never be a singular one, and will always be dependent on a multiplicity of locations and positions that are constructed socially, that is, intersubjectively. The intersubjectivity of experience is not confined, of course, to physical appearances, to actual dialogue and to the concrete nature of sociological circumstance. Intersubjectivity is also about identifications and recognitions. It is about desire and the projection and introjection of images of self and others. One of the major questions here, addressed in chapter 3 through issues concerning sexuality and violence, is the problem of how we construct and acquire identities, and how well these processes are captured by current theories in the social sciences.

The individual and the social

One of the major themes running through this book concerns the relationship between anthropology and psychoanalysis. I take anthropology to task in several ways for its failure to theorize the acquisition of gender identity and the multiple nature of subjectivity. One puzzling feature of the development of feminist anthropology has been its relative neglect of the debate concerning the deconstruction of the humanist subject. Chapter 2 suggests various
ways in which cross-cultural data might be used to illuminate and contribute to feminist theorizing in this area.

My discussions of gender identity and gendered subjectivity work over a series of old, but unresolved themes about the relationship of the individual to the social and vice versa. Anthropology's emphasis on the social at the expense of the individual accounts in large part for its failure to develop a theory of the subject. However, the problem raised by cultural difference and its relation to gender difference is one about how processes of identification and recognition work. What makes the cultural discourses of gender powerful and how well do they regulate/constitute/represent people's experience of gender in any given context?

Post-structuralist theories of the subject and of positionality are useful here because they create a space in which it is possible to talk about the different subject positions proffered by various discourses. Thus, gendered subjectivity does not have to be conceived of as a fixed and singular identity, but can be seen instead as one based on a series of subject positions, some conflicting or mutually contradictory, that are offered by different discourses. This would be all very well were it not for the problem of how to account for the fact that individuals do not always take up the subject positions offered to them. One obvious point is that the existing discourses on gender in any given context are hierarchically organized, that is, some are more powerful and have greater social sanction than others. In the United Kingdom, for example, some forms of masculinity are perhaps much easier to identify with than others because they are socially valued and accepted. Oppressed groups frequently develop their own discourses that work in contra-distinction to dominant ones, but the questions are, can people actively recognize and choose the subject positions they take up, and to what degree are they able to resist the terms of dominant discourses? Much of the debate here turns on the use of the terms 'choice' and 'resistance', and their suitability for analysing processes that are not always conscious or strategic; these issues are discussed in chapters 3, 4 and 5.

What is clear is that individuals are able to bring a considerable amount of self-reflection to bear on the practices and discourses of day-to-day living. In chapter 4 I discuss the ways in which bodily praxis can act as a form of self-reflection that does not always enter the discursive. This clearly raises issues of intentionality and
agency, and a number of chapters address the question of agency and its relationship to social determinations. One problem here is how to integrate people's self-images and self-representations with dominant cultural ideologies and/or discourses. Any approach to the analysis of agency must include a consideration of the role of fantasy and desire, both with regard to questions of compliance and resistance and in connection with the construction of a sense of self. These points are elaborated further in chapter 3.

Chapter 5 addresses the politics of identity and its relationship to notions of rights and needs. Rhetorical strategies that draw on categorical and/or stereotypical identities are put into play in circumstances where political and economic resources are at stake. I discuss the redistribution of household resources and how resource flows are determined by a field of power within which identities are constantly being reformulated in categorical terms. The power to define reality is an economic and political power. The experience for individuals of such external definitions has consequences not only for their self-images, but for the material circumstances they find themselves in. I also discuss the way in which notions of agency are predicated upon theories of rights and needs that are implicated in certain identities, and how this varies for persons of different race, gender and class.

Language and the imagination

The construction of a self in relation to other selves involves the enunciation of a series of speaking positions. The taking up of a position on an issue that directly concerns one is always difficult, but it is possible to maintain a critical reflection on one's own experience and on the various positions/locations one chooses to adopt. The position of the anthropologist has always been ambiguous and uneasy because it has depended on a stable division between 'us' and 'them'. This should not obscure the fact, however, that the anthropological 'we' has always been an imaginary category. In chapters 2 and 6, I discuss the fact that at the present time anthropology has at least as much trouble with the unstable nature of the category 'us' as it does with the category 'them'. When cultural theorists and colonial discourse theorists discuss anthropology and its representations of the other, they frequently conflate
many complex issues, not least because they appear to assume that all anthropologists are Euro-Americans. This effectively silences what many anthropologists have to say about these problems, and it erases the real difficulties in moving between the poles of a contrastive pair in order to demonstrate where the lines of difference solidify and where they break down. These points are discussed more fully in chapters 1, 2 and 7.

One issue that is raised immediately is the question of where anthropologists get their models from. I suggest in chapters 6 and 7, where I discuss writing and the anthropological imagination, that we do not spend enough time attending to the fantasies and imaginative images of the anthropologists themselves. The anthropological self, like other selves, is one made up through projection and introjection, through identification and recognition and through a desire to belong. How do we construct images of ourselves as anthropologists; and how do the resulting images mark our work and our writing?

This question finds particular force at various times in the book when I address the problem of language and, in particular, the construction of theoretical language. One problem here concerns the degree to which a certain way of conceiving of and talking about gender difference which is prevalent in the social sciences is appropriate for discussing alternative ways of modelling sex/gender difference. This issue is raised in chapters 1 and 2, where I argue that social science and psychoanalytic models are themselves based on local folk models, and the view they produce of sex/gender difference is thus a very ethnocentric one.

Difficulties in this area are compounded because anthropologists and feminists, and indeed different groups of feminists, habitually use a set of terms that they imagine have a common meaning. The terms ‘sex’, ‘gender’, ‘sexuality’, ‘gender relations’ and ‘social relations’ are used in a number of quite distinct and very different ways. The result is that, even within the feminist and anthropological communities, we spend a great deal of time talking past each other. Part of the problem can be traced to different intellectual and linguistic traditions, but the rest is probably due to the fact that our use of these terms and the metaphorical resonances they set up for us are grounded in our own bodies and our own experiences. Since we are all gendered individuals, and since we can only speak the social through our selves and through our bodies, it is clear that these terms can never refer to pure concepts.
When writing this book, I constantly came up against the limits of my language and the limits of my imagination. What these texts are about is the struggle to develop a specifically anthropological approach to feminist post-structuralist theory. They are also an attempt to provide a radical critique of anthropology from a feminist perspective. In my writing I change my position and location many times. I have tried, where possible, to reveal the lines of fracture and ambiguity in my own thinking because I have wanted to try to show how much my theorizing is marked through with the specifics of a particular feminist anthropological self.