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# Color Me Queer: *An Aesthetic Challenge to Feminist Essentialism*

Maia Ettinger†

## I. INTRODUCTION: A FEMINIST PAGEANT

Scene:

*A panel discussion among feminist scholars on moral values and the law.<sup>1</sup> Carol Gilligan, Catharine MacKinnon, gay rights attorney Mary Dunlap and others are discussing Gilligan's concept of the woman's voice as "a different voice." According to Gilligan's research, women approach conflict with a "morality of care and concern for others,"<sup>2</sup> promoting cooperation over competition, and privileging connection, care, and interdependence over impartiality and abstract fairness. MacKinnon argues that Gilligan has identified only "the voice of the victim," that given the existing conditions of male dominance, the values articulated by Gilligan "amount to a set-up" and constitute nothing more than feminine complicity with the exercise of male power.<sup>3</sup> The debate grows heated as Gilligan charges that MacKinnon's definition of power is a male definition, and asserts that the "different voice" defines power another way.<sup>4</sup> MacKinnon counters that a woman cannot articulate her own definition of power, because the man's "foot is on her throat."<sup>5</sup> In the midst of their argument, Mary Dunlap rises from her seat on the stage.*

Dunlap:

I am speaking out of turn. I am also standing, which I am told by some is a male thing to do. But I am still a woman—standing.  
I am not subordinate to any man! I find myself very often contesting

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<sup>1</sup> This forum was held at the law school of the State University of New York at Buffalo, as part of the James McCormick Mitchell Lecture Series. Symposium, *Feminist Discourse, Moral Values and the Law—A Conversation*, 34 BUFF. L. REV. 11 (1985).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 38. See also CAROL GILLIGAN, *IN A DIFFERENT VOICE—PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT* (1982).

<sup>3</sup> Symposium, *supra* note 1, at 74.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 74-75.

efforts at my subordination—both standing and lying down and sitting and in various other positions—but I am not subordinate to any man! And I have been told by Kitty MacKinnon that women have never *not* been subordinate to men. So I stand here an exception and invite all other women here to be an exception and stand . . . I believe [gender] is mutable in many ways, our self-definitions being part of it. What I am trying to say is that the idea that any of us here, or any of you there, should decide for all of us who is a good feminist, who is a good radical, what sex is good, and who gets to talk is taking advantage of the rest of us. I am not going to take such advantage of people.<sup>6</sup>

*As Dunlap finishes speaking, MacKinnon leaves the room "by prearrangement, to catch a plane."*<sup>7</sup>

Too bad MacKinnon had a plane to catch. Dunlap's rejection of a feminism that casts all women as absolutely subordinated to men represents an important challenge to what legal scholar Angela Harris terms gender essentialism—"the notion that a unitary, 'essential' women's experience can be isolated and described independently of race, class, sexual orientation, and other realities of experience."<sup>8</sup> Harris charges that the "abstract and unitary voice" of feminist essentialism silences the voices of black and other women.<sup>9</sup>

This paper combines Harris' critique of essentialism with other arguments favoring a more particularized, individualistic analysis of gender and sexuality. I argue that Catharine MacKinnon's view of women as totally subordinated to men, as well as her wholesale reduction of women's sexuality to a mere by-product of male domination, ignores women's tenacious drive to self-discovery and self-expression. Scorning nearly all manifestations of women's sexuality as products of false consciousness or apolitical self-interest, MacKinnon silences desire—the voice of what we *want*—while propounding a rigid and prescriptive agenda purporting to express what we *need*. In MacKinnon's wholly patriarchal universe, the personal narratives of women of color, lesbians, and other rebel women who dare to search for individual identity must be dismissed as naive and delusional unless they reaffirm women's total subordination to white heterosexist norms.

Individualism is often seen as an unfashionable, if not reactionary, detraction from progressive social theory. Yet I believe that feminist essentialism's minimization of women's autonomy, capacity for self-definition, and self-knowledge threatens to disconnect feminist theory from the texts produced by women's lives. To fulfill the promise of the

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 75-76.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 76 n.26.

<sup>8</sup> Angela P. Harris, *Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory*, 42 *STAN. L. REV.* 581, 585 (1990).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

feminist method, feminist theory must constantly interrogate the gap between its own ambitions and the complicated, often contradictory realities of women's lives.

If feminism is to remain responsive to women's real-life experiences and desires, it must account for the tantalizing and precarious relationship between individual aesthetics and community politics. Individual aestheticism—the voice inside each of us that says, “I like this, I want that, I hate this, I feel that”—is both threatening and critical to the evolution of feminist thought. Feminist essentialism responds only to the threat of individualism, promising to end disunity among women and to eliminate the fragmentation and conflicts women often feel within. But the cost of essentialism is unacceptable: by suppressing dissent among women, by denying feelings or desires that deviate from feminist norms, essentialism threatens to extinguish the very flame that burns inside each woman who ever defied the patriarchal imperative.

Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton's analysis of aestheticism explores the relationship of individualism to progressive discourse and provides a useful critique of essentialist methodology. The fate of Oscar Wilde, a self-described “aesthete” devoted to purely subjective self-expression, demonstrates the danger of exalting individualism to the degree that personal identity becomes completely divorced from its social context. At the same time, Wilde's life shows that individualism is a double-edged concept that can both inspire and suppress rebellion against the dominant social order, and that cannot be dismissed by feminists committed to an inclusive politics and to genuine autonomy for women.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Prior to the publication of this article, the editors of the *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* asked me to add a section addressing essentialism in French feminist theory. I declined, but offered to explain why I felt that the inclusion of French feminism would damage the integrity of my thesis.

While all theory stands at a distance from its subject, the post-structuralist literary and psychoanalytic discourse that underlies most French feminist writing turns this distance into a chasm. As progressive academia bows to the creeping canonization of critical jargon, scholarship addressing gender, race, queerness, and class becomes increasingly inaccessible to anyone lacking the specialized vocabulary and extensive academic background necessary to penetrate its meta-critical morass, and conference invitations extended to “the grassroots” are reduced to little more than a cruel joke.

Yet, as bell hooks has written, “[t]heory is not an alien sphere” to the oppressed. BELL HOOKS, *TALKING BACK: THINKING FEMINIST, THINKING BLACK* 38 (1989). In the words of Ntozake Shange, “bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma.” NTOZAKE SHANGE, *no more love poems # 4*, in *FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE/WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF* 47, 48 (1977) [hereinafter *FOR COLORED GIRLS*]. Contrary to prevailing academic assumptions, many of our cherished epistemological complexities are ripe for popular dissemination. But as anyone who has spent time in France can attest, “French feminism” is a bit of an oxymoron: French women have yet to launch a popular feminist movement—either mainstream or grassroots. Thus, while the issues addressed by Kristeva and Cixous are far from irrelevant, their scholarship is notably unresponsive to what I consider the feminist imperative: the production of discourse that is truly *discursive*, that promotes popular dialogue and encourages self-expression among women both in and out of the academy.

As I hope this article demonstrates, feminist essentialism and women's subjectivity can be

## II. FEMINIST ESSENTIALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful,  
for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance.

Audre Lorde<sup>11</sup>

In *Feminism Unmodified*, Catharine MacKinnon argues that the unequal and violently oppressive relationship of men to women finds its primary expression—and indeed its source—in sexuality.<sup>12</sup> While men experience dominance as sexual pleasure, women realize their sexual identity through submission. “All the ways in which women are suppressed and subjected—restricted, intruded on, violated, objectified—are recognized as what sex is for women and as the meaning and content of femininity.”<sup>13</sup> The form and function of women’s sexuality is nothing more than the reinscription of male supremacy.<sup>14</sup> As a result, all women, lesbians included, participate in the oppression of women if we experience sexuality at all.<sup>15</sup>

However, MacKinnon fails to consider any multiplicity of experience among women as participants in a spectrum of human activities, ranging from victimization to the exercise of power. “[F]or MacKinnon,” writes Angela Harris, “women have been so objectified by men that the miracle is how they are able to exist at all.”<sup>16</sup>

Harris rejects MacKinnon’s view both for its erasure of women’s potential for self-definition, and for the bleak and one-dimensional role it assigns to black women. “In her search for what is essential womanhood . . . , MacKinnon rediscovers white womanhood and introduces it as universal truth. In dominance theory, black women are white women, only more so.”<sup>17</sup> In reducing black women’s experience to an intensifying signifier for white women’s lives, “feminist essentialism represents not just an insult to black women, but a broken promise—the promise to listen to women’s stories, the promise of feminist method.”<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the greatest cost of MacKinnon’s quantitative approach to suffering is her failure to recognize the qualitatively distinct conscious-

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fruitfully addressed without reliance upon a form of discourse that derives its cache in part from its inaccessibility, and that camouflages ideas of crucial import within a dense forest of theoretical jargon.

<sup>11</sup> AUDRE LORDE, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, in *SISTER OUTSIDER* 53, 57-58 (1984).

<sup>12</sup> “[T]he mainspring of sex inequality is misogyny and the mainspring of misogyny is sexual sadism.” CATHARINE A. MACKINNON, *FEMINISM UNMODIFIED* 5 (1987).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>15</sup> “[S]o long as gender is a system of power, and it is women who have less power, like any other benefit of abstract equality, [lesbianism] can merely extend this choice to those women who can get the power to enforce it. The price of this equal access to sex . . . , is loyalty to and defense of the substantive system that delivers up all women as a class to all men. Women who defend this system are, in effect, procuring women for men.” *Id.* at 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, *supra* note 8, at 612.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 592.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 601.

ness that Harris claims for black women, and her silencing of all voices that articulate what Harris terms a "multiple consciousness."<sup>19</sup> Harris posits that we are not born with a single "self," but "are composed of a welter of partial, sometimes contradictory, or even antithetical 'selves.' A unified identity, if such can ever exist, is a product of will, not a common destiny or natural birthright."<sup>20</sup>

Drawing upon the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, Patricia Williams, Toni Morrison, and others, Harris describes how, "[a]t the individual level, black women have had to learn to construct themselves in a society that denied them full selves."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, black women historically have approached issues of consciousness with "a sense of self-contradiction, of containing the oppressor within oneself."<sup>22</sup> While "women who rely on their victimization to define themselves may be reluctant to let it go and create their own self-definitions,"<sup>23</sup> Harris argues that "wholeness of the self and commonality with others are asserted (if never completely achieved) through creative action, not realized in shared victimization."<sup>24</sup>

When MacKinnon fails to acknowledge women as erotic actors who assert their identity through diverse sexual experiences and desires, she denies the experience of lesbians, women of color, and others who challenge her model of sexual oppression. Ironically, by presupposing that women cannot exercise power under patriarchy, MacKinnon insulates herself from the recognition that her essentialism operates to subordinate and silence the voices of multiple consciousness flowing from race, gender, and *sexuality*.<sup>25</sup> Asserting that "one is not socially permitted to be a woman and neither doormat nor man," she proceeds to divide all dissenters into one or the other category.<sup>26</sup> For example, women who do not oppose pornography are either being used by men, or they have been so seduced by male norms that they have appropriated these norms as their own.

For MacKinnon, "sexuality has become the fascism of contemporary America,"<sup>27</sup> and pornography represents sexuality both as America's instruction manual and as an institution central to the exploitation of women.<sup>28</sup> Women who question MacKinnon's vilification of porn are driven either by prurient interest—"the stirring between their

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 584.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 584.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 613.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 608.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 613.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 612.

<sup>25</sup> By "sexuality" I refer to the wide range of sexual experiences, personas, and preferences through which women forge their sexual identities. "Sexuality" as I use it therefore includes, but is not limited to, sexual orientation.

<sup>26</sup> MACKINNON, *supra* note 12, at 8.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 15.

<sup>28</sup> *See id.*

legs"<sup>29</sup>—or sheer imbecility. The imbeciles, the “doormats,” are women who defend pornography because they “know that men value them in terms of the sexual access they provide . . . , and [ ] identify and value themselves as the accessed just as the apple values its ability to fall from the tree.”<sup>30</sup> This harsh dismissal disallows any inquiry into the complexity of female self-definition, women’s economic realities, and the multiplicity of experiences that constitute heterosexual interactions for women. Paula Webster’s discussion of anti-porn feminists challenges the presumptions of MacKinnon’s essentialist posture:

[Anti-porn feminists] assume that women who like talking dirty, anal sex, voyeurism or even vibrators are suspect, certainly not feminists. But women are feminism’s constituency. How do we understand the differences between ourselves and the women who send their photos to *Hustler*, or write letters to *Penthouse Forum* . . . ? We cannot remain indifferent to the sexual texts and subtexts of women’s lives if we are to create a feminist discourse on female sexuality that will replace the familiar one of commiseration.<sup>31</sup>

While disdainfully reducing women’s desires to the product of a false consciousness, MacKinnon engages in a faux-populist attack on “educated women,” who oppose the censorship of pornography out of a sinister alignment with male liberalism. These “female men” interpolate themselves into male culture “as a survival and advancement strategy—reading the Nietzschean man and substituting she for he, reading the Freudian man and finding the oedipal problems more personally resonant than the electra ones—it should be no surprise if they relate to pornography more as for them than of them.”<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, interpolation into male-dominated culture is a strategy employed, to varying degrees, by countless women frustrated by the impossibly stunted roles available to us. Women who assert willpower and imagination find that they must, by necessity, appropriate male thinking. However, once male iconography is refracted through the prism of women’s transformative vision, it becomes something distinctly female, speaking uniquely to women’s needs. Furthermore, the appropriation and transformation of male thinking and iconography is hardly reserved for the educated. What fifteen year old baby-dyke hasn’t lip-synched before the mirror to Mick Jagger, proclaiming with hubris and desperation that she “can’t get no, no satisfaction”? As Joan Nestle writes of the butch lesbian tradition:

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 12.

<sup>31</sup> Paula Webster, *The Forbidden: Eroticism and Taboo*, in PLEASURE AND DANGER 385, 393 (Carole S. Vance ed., 1984).

<sup>32</sup> MACKINNON, *supra* note 12, at 12. Has MacKinnon considered the implications of adopting the electra scenario as a model for feminism? It would seem that the oedipal model—love and admiration for the mother and hatred for the father—is more appropriate to a feminist consciousness than loathing for the mother and hopeless love for the father.

Butch-fem . . . appears to incorporate elements of the heterosexual culture in power . . . , [b]ut a butch lesbian wearing men's clothes in the 1950s was not a man wearing men's clothes; she was a woman who created an original style to signal to other women what she was capable of doing—taking erotic responsibility.<sup>33</sup>

If some among the butches, the lady truck drivers and the sex kittens enjoy pornography—if pornography occupies a place in the complex realm of women's fantasies and sexual self-images, then the erotics produced by a multiple consciousness cannot be dismissed as an enemy of feminism. Not only because right-wing women—indubitably anti-porn—are hardly friends of feminism, not only because all women are feminism's constituency, but because among the doormats and “female men” are many women to cherish: women who in one electric moment saw their own infinite possibilities, donned a tie, and never took shit again, women who rent their bodies and time to men and remain fiercely proud of who they are and what they do.

Women's desires are invariably shaped by our unending negotiations with our culture, a process that differs radically depending on our class, race, sexual orientation, and personal background. But while anti-porn feminists “accuse rampant individualism of . . . encouraging us to become selfishly absorbed in meeting our own needs,”<sup>34</sup> the black woman, the hooker and the lesbian who demand a feminist discourse responsive to their experiences and needs are in fact offering to feminism the creative and subversive potential of their respective, and sometimes intertwined, legacies of struggle.

The traditional heterosexual order has, indeed, profoundly damaged and scarred women. Yet, this order is challenged daily by dissident women, queers, and other rebels. However imperfectly constructed by components both hegemonic and subversive, desire shouts and sings its resistance and refuses to assume that straight white men own pleasure.

### III. THE AMBIVALENCE OF INDIVIDUALISM

I love myself, I want you to love me,  
When I'm down, I want you above me . . . ,  
I don't want anybody else—  
When I think about you, I touch myself . . . .

—Alternative rock girl group Divinyls' hit single<sup>35</sup>

For feminism to be pertinent to women's lives, its message must be rich and inclusive, accommodating the diverse voices, both harmonious and dissonant, of individual women. If we cannot accommodate individ-

<sup>33</sup> Joan Nestle, *The Fem Question*, in PLEASURE AND DANGER, *supra* note 31, at 232, 235.

<sup>34</sup> Alice Echols, *The Taming of the Id*, in PLEASURE AND DANGER, *supra* note 31, at 50, 63.

<sup>35</sup> DIVINYLS, *i touch myself*, on DIVINYLS (Virgin Records American, Inc. 1990).



ual claims to subjectivity, we will lose the narratives of resistance—at once deeply personal and profoundly political—that describe the truths about women’s experiences, the truths that draw us together and drive our activism. Terry Eagleton has examined this relationship of individual consciousness to political commonality, and his writings provide feminists with valuable lessons on the dangers of essentialism.

Like Catharine MacKinnon, who views sexuality as a scheme of internalized directives that program women to submit to men, Terry Eagleton locates the power of the dominant social order within the body. But while MacKinnon finds dominant directives in sexuality alone, Eagleton describes the site of power more generally as the realm of the aesthetic, “the whole region of human perception and sensation,”<sup>36</sup> of human affections and aversions. For Eagleton, the aesthetic has been a site of state power since the rise of bourgeois capitalism, whose social organization depends less upon external constraints and visible exercises of authority, and more upon an ideological model of self-regulating and self-determining subjectivity.

Eagleton asserts that modern class-society required a new form of human subjectivity, one which “discovers the law in the depths of its own free identity, rather than in some oppressive power.”<sup>37</sup> Instead of relying on the coercive powers of absolutism, bourgeois society structures habits, pieties, sentiments, and affections to ensure a cooperative citizenry: “the compulsion of autocratic power is replaced by the more gratifying compulsion of the subject’s self-identity.”<sup>38</sup> Only this ideological model, he argues, could effectively regulate individuals whose economic activity necessitated a higher degree of autonomy than did prior economic structures. Unlike serfs, modern workers have to think for themselves. The task of the modern state is to ensure that their thoughts never lead to revolt.

Eagleton’s account of the aesthetic, while not specifically concerned with gender, readily supports MacKinnon’s argument that the very structuring of pleasure operates to subordinate women to men. Stated simply, Eagleton claims that Western culture and ideology structure the sensual preferences and practices—the aesthetics—of the individual so that all our likes and dislikes lead us to comply with the state. We think we are acting as autonomous individuals, but capitalism (for which MacKinnon would substitute patriarchy) is actually constructing our “individuality,” injecting it with desires and dreads that reflect the needs of the system.

Yet the outcome of Eagleton’s analysis is starkly at odds with MacKinnon’s. While MacKinnon treats the bourgeois heterosexual

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<sup>36</sup> TERRY EAGLETON, *THE IDEOLOGY OF THE AESTHETIC* 13 (1990).

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 19.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 23.

order as a totally effective, monolithic force of oppression, Eagleton reveals the ideology of the aesthetic as a two-edged, contradictory concept which can only be encompassed by dialectical thought.

Eagleton believes that to perceive a given social order "as wholly incorporative and devoid of contradiction" is to lapse into "disillusionment and 'bad' utopianism."<sup>39</sup> Such utopianism "must discover its ideal values in some sphere largely disconnected from the major social forces of a given power structure."<sup>40</sup> Like feminist essentialism, it cannot envision or promote the potential for liberation concealed within the system it despises.

MacKinnon's determination to distance herself from the sensual realities of many women's lives illustrates the pitfalls of "bad" utopianism: given the choice between MacKinnon and Madonna, a young woman with a vision of independence and self-celebration is more likely to prefer Madonna, who publicly asserts a woman's absolute entitlement to autonomy and pleasure, and privileges women's interest in self-satisfaction by simulating masturbation on stage. Hardly an unproblematic image—a pouty, white, apolitical multi-millionaire as feminist icon—but when MacKinnon declares rigorous feminist analysis incompatible with an adventurous sexuality, she practically invites popular culture to appropriate and depoliticize the remarkably hopeful elements of female consciousness reflected by Madonna's popularity.<sup>41</sup>

Problematic though it might be, the notion of individual autonomy cannot simply be dismissed, as it operates both to enforce and to undermine the dominant social order. On the one hand, Eagleton argues, by promoting an entirely self-regulating and self-determining mode of being, the ideology of individualism encourages social fragmentation and isolation instead of political organization and group resistance. Individualism also blinds us to the subtly oppressive directives emanating from our own bodily impulses and affective practices: our culture's infatuation with individual autonomy resists the dejecting notion that our vaunted free will may be operating in the interest of the state. On the other hand, by

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<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 407.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

<sup>41</sup> Proto-fascistic trendoid Camille Paglia captures some of these positive elements in her *New York Times* OpEd piece, *Madonna—Finally a Real Feminist*. "Madonna has taught young women to be fully female and sexual while still exercising total control over their lives. She shows girls how to be attractive, sensual, energetic, ambitious, aggressive and funny—all at the same time."

Rather than promoting Madonna as a role model, I see her success as a reflection of what young women themselves are asking of their celebrities. Paglia's piece greatly underestimates the power imbalance between women and men, and also reflects the danger of leaving sexuality in the hands of the post-feminists: "American feminism has a man problem. The beaming Betty Crockers, hangdog dowdies and parochial prudes who call themselves feminists want men to be like women. They fear and despise the masculine. The academic feminists think their nerdy bookworm husbands are the ideal model of human manhood." Camille Paglia, *Madonna—Finally a Real Feminist*, *N.Y. TIMES*, Dec. 14, 1990, at A39.

privileging self-determination over passive submission to authority, aesthetic ideology unleashes a potentially liberating impulse which it cannot altogether harness. In emphasizing the self-determining nature of human powers, aestheticism lays the groundwork for radical assertions of self-definition that breach the constructs proscribed by the dominant social order.<sup>42</sup>

As Eagleton points out, there are two possible responses to the hegemonic order internalized within our sensual and emotional practices. First, “the fact that power utilizes feelings for its own ends may give rise to a radical rationalist revolt against feeling itself, in which sensibility is assailed as the insidious force which binds subjects to the law.”<sup>43</sup> Like MacKinnon’s total mistrust of female eroticism, however, such a solution ultimately swallows up the very basis for revolt. The ascetic position, writes Audre Lorde, “is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility.”<sup>44</sup>

In contrast, Eagleton posits that our alternative response to internalized hegemony is “to explore the realm of affective life which authority seeks to colonize and turn it against the insolence of power itself . . . . A new kind of human subject—sensitive, passionate, individualist—poses an ideological challenge to the ruling order, elaborating new dimensions of feeling beyond its narrow scope.”<sup>45</sup> Lorde captures the very essence of Eagleton’s second response when she declares that the erotic “is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy.”<sup>46</sup> Only when we claim that capacity for joy do “we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.”<sup>47</sup>

Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, addresses the complexities of self-definition and empowerment among black women.<sup>48</sup> *for colored girls* . . . culminates in a moment that exemplifies what Eagleton terms the “genuinely emancipatory force of the aesthetic”: the movement toward “a community of subjects now linked by sensuous impulse and fellow-feeling rather than by heteronomous law, each safeguarded in its unique particularity while bound at the same time into social harmony.”<sup>49</sup> Shange’s seven characters are heard softly repeating, then joyously singing:

i found god in myself  
& i loved her/i loved her fiercely<sup>50</sup>

<sup>42</sup> EAGLETON, *supra* note 36, at 27.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 27.

<sup>44</sup> LORDE, *supra* note 11, at 56.

<sup>45</sup> EAGLETON, *supra* note 36, at 27.

<sup>46</sup> LORDE, *supra* note 11, at 56.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 57.

<sup>48</sup> SHANGE, *supra* note 10.

<sup>49</sup> EAGLETON, *supra* note 36, at 28.

<sup>50</sup> NTOZAKE SHANGE, *a laying on of hands*, in *FOR COLORED GIRLS*, *supra* note 10, at 63, 67.

"After the song peaks," the stage directions read, "the ladies enter into a closed tight circle."<sup>51</sup> The discovery of an inner self that transcends the debilitating definitions of black and female produced by a racist and misogynist society leads to a bond among the ladies, a unity forged with the strength derived from self-affirmation and self-love.

However, the focus on selfhood cannot occur in a political vacuum; there is a danger in glorifying individualism to the extent that communal ties are sacrificed. Oscar Wilde personifies the ambiguities inherent in individualism, for his unyielding pursuit of pleasure and his insistence upon the integrity of individual expression led to both his artistic success and his infamous downfall—the result of his persecution as a sexual outlaw.

As the bourgeois social order enveloped nineteenth century Western culture, mid-century England saw the rise of the Aesthetic Movement, a school of artists, writers and critics whose motto, "Art for Art's Sake" substituted sensibility for morality, and challenged the Victorian ideals of utility, rationality and realism.<sup>52</sup> The Movement is perhaps best represented by Wilde, a sensitive, passionate, individualistic man, disdainful of the vulgar commodification of creative self-expression and of Victorian sexual and class mores.

Wilde and his cohorts seemed instinctively to grasp what Eagleton would theorize a century later: our very personalities are called into service by the ascendent ambitions of capitalism, and to grasp any truth outside its ambit requires an insistence upon the autonomy of individual perception and self-expression. Such autonomy can only be attained through activity which is pleasurable to the self: "[i]t is mentally and morally injurious to man," wrote Wilde, "to do anything in which he does not find pleasure."<sup>53</sup> Wilde opposed a capitalistic system under which realizing one's personality requires having private means. Under such a system, most people cannot develop what is wonderful, fascinating and delightful in them—they miss the true joy of living.<sup>54</sup> Wilde believed that socialism would release the "great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally."<sup>55</sup>

While Wilde celebrated individual defiance against convention—proclaiming that "[d]isobedience, in the eyes of any one who has read history, is man's original virtue"<sup>56</sup>—his tragedy was that he failed to

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<sup>51</sup> *Id.*

<sup>52</sup> Regenia Gagnier, *Introduction* to CRITICAL ESSAYS ON OSCAR WILDE 1, 4-5 (Regenia Gagnier ed., 1991).

<sup>53</sup> OSCAR WILDE, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, in THE ARTIST AS CRITIC: CRITICAL WRITINGS OF OSCAR WILDE 268 (Richard Ellmann ed., 1982).

<sup>54</sup> For Audre Lorde, "[t]he principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than . . . human need . . . is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment." LORDE, *supra* note 11, at 55.

<sup>55</sup> WILDE, *supra* note 53, at 261.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.* at 258.

acknowledge that he was part of a community. Wilde mystified the sanctity of the artistic prerogative to such a degree that he blinded himself to the fact that, as a nineteenth century homosexual, he belonged to a group of social outcasts. After Wilde practically brought on his own conviction under England's anti-homosexuality statute,<sup>57</sup> he realized that his lofty and idealized notions of individualism had seduced him away from material reality. While in prison he wrote, "I shunned suffering and sorrow of every kind. I hated both. I resolved to ignore them as far as possible: to treat them, that is to say, as modes of imperfection. They were not part of my scheme of life."<sup>58</sup> Wilde kept sorrow and suffering away by insisting that he was not outside society, but above it.

Though defenses of homosexual love were common enough during the time of his trials, Wilde never made them. Instead he insisted that his relationships with other men reflected the Platonic ideal, "that deep spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect . . . . There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual . . . ." <sup>59</sup> Equally intellectual was his stance on obscenity. Few juries would look kindly upon a defendant who, when questioned as to the possible impropriety of his writing, replied: "[t]hat could only be to brutes and illiterates."<sup>60</sup> Neither would the press be sympathetic to his observation that "the criminal and illiterate classes [never] read anything except newspapers."<sup>61</sup> The uncompromising individualism which had led to his artistic success trapped him on the witness stand.

Many feminists suspect that individualism promotes self-centeredness at the expense of community needs. Furthermore, MacKinnon sees the ideal of artistic self-expression as nothing more than an excuse for men to protect their misogynist projects.<sup>62</sup> Yet women cannot realize empowerment without rejecting the self-sacrificial ideology of feminine passivity and self-denial, and women seeking empowerment hunger for the freedom to discover and express themselves. In her poem *advice*, Shange locates her power in the expressive freedom of the poet:

people keep tellin me to put my feet on the ground  
i get mad & scream/ there is no ground  
only shit pieces from dogs horses & men who dont live

<sup>57</sup> Wilde's conviction was precipitated by the libel suit he himself had brought against the Marquess of Queensberry, who accused Wilde of "posing as a sodomite [sic]." OSCAR WILDE: THREE TIMES TRIED 33 (photo. reprint n.d.) (n.d.). Not only is truth an absolute defense against libel, but the evidence collected in Lord Queensberry's defense, delivered into the hands of the public prosecutor, sufficed to charge Wilde with twenty-five misdemeanor counts. *Id.* at 185.

<sup>58</sup> OSCAR WILDE, *De Profundis*, in THE PORTABLE OSCAR WILDE 508, 526 (Richard Aldington ed., Viking Press) (1946).

<sup>59</sup> OSCAR WILDE: THREE TIMES TRIED, *supra* note 57, at 258.

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at 54.

<sup>61</sup> At the trial, the prosecution read this excerpt from a letter Wilde had written to the *Scot's Observer*, in which he criticized the publication's review of *Dorian Gray*. *Id.* at 243.

<sup>62</sup> See MACKINNON, *supra* note 12, at 15.

anywhere/ they tell me think straight & make myself  
 somethin/ i shout and sigh/ i am a poet/ i write poems/  
 i make words/ cartwheel & somersault down pages . . . .

people keep tellin me these are hard times/ what are you gonna be  
 doin ten years from now/ what in the hell do you think/i  
 am gonna be writin poems/ i will have poems/ inchin up the  
 walls of the lincoln tunnel/ i am gonna feed my children poems on  
 rye bread with horseradish/ i am gonna send my mailman off  
 with a poem for his wagon . . . .<sup>63</sup>

In a world where feelings are ordered to serve dominant interests, self-expression by the Other is inherently political. To do art is to claim entitlement to self-definition and language. MacKinnon's preoccupation with women's status and the use of law to thwart the external indicia of male dominance focuses attention on male activity—what they're doing to us—rather than on female subjectivity—what we can do for ourselves. This approach encourages feminist theory to hide behind the false simplicity of a Manichean universe, where everything is rendered in black and white.

In reality, the particularity of women's experiences and desires is uncomfortably loaded with dominant influences, with history and emotion and sensation that will not obediently coalesce into a G-rated vision of unadulterated womanhood. Yet, as women articulate their individual subjectivity, they accomplish seemingly impossible reconciliations among the disparate elements that shape their world:

shall i tell you how my country looks  
 my soil & rains  
 there's a point where the amazon meets the mississippi  
 a bodega squats on the eiffel tower  
 toward mont saint michel . . .

neruda still tangoes in santiago at dawn  
 where i live  
 jean-jacques dessalines is continually re-elected  
 the moon sometimes scarlet . . . .<sup>64</sup>

Shange's geography crosses continents and time; her consciousness recognizes kinship with foreign influences:

maybe tallulah will help me/ tho i'ma niggah  
 maybe faulkner will get out the ground  
 say cuz i'm a niggah i shd be left alone  
 maybe appollinaire will have me twirl the  
 bastille on my tongue . . . .<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> NTOZAKE SHANGE, *advice*, in *NAPPY EDGES* 129, 129-30 (1978). Reprinted with permission from St. Martin's Press, Inc., New York, NY. Copyright © 1972, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978.

<sup>64</sup> NTOZAKE SHANGE, *where the mississippi meets the amazon*, in *NAPPY EDGES*, *supra* note 63, at 25, 28-30.

<sup>65</sup> NTOZAKE SHANGE, *fame on all fours*, in *NAPPY EDGES*, *supra* note 63, at 82, 83.

However, Shange's work represents more than the individual self-fulfillment of the artist. *for colored girls . . .* teaches us that ultimate self-definition and completion is attained in the gathering together of a community. "i waz missin somethin," says the lady in red, "somethin so important," says the lady in purple.

*lady in orange*  
somethin promised

*lady in blue*  
a layin on of hands

*lady in green*  
fingers near my forehead

*lady in yellow*  
strong

*lady in green*  
cool

*lady in orange*  
movin

*lady in purple*  
makin me whole . . .

*lady in blue*  
all the gods comin into me  
layin me open to myself

*lady in red*  
i was missin somethin

*lady in green*  
somethin promised

*lady in orange*  
somethin free

*lady in purple*  
a layin on of hands . . .<sup>66</sup>

Like the lady in red, Wilde was missing something too. His belief that the artist's superior position in society entitled him to transgress its laws with impunity left him as vulnerable to the wrath of an offended social order as was the pre-AIDS white gay male elite. Organizing through ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and countless other community-based organizations, men who formerly shunned politics as an unnecessary vulgarity have finally recognized that individual success is no substitute for community action in the face of subordination by the state. Yet contrary to the stance of feminist essentialism, indi-

<sup>66</sup> NTOZAKE SHANGE, *a nite with beau willie brown*, in *FOR COLORED GIRLS*, *supra* note 10, at 58, 60-62. Reprinted with permission of MacMillan Publishing Company. Copyright © 1975, 1976, 1977 by Ntozake Shange.

vidualism and community are not an unapproachable contradiction; if addressed dialectically, they can reinforce each other by tapping into a multiplicity of forms of resistance against hegemony.

#### IV. EPILOGUE: QUEER NATION

"A new generation of activists is here," announced the Winter 1991 issue of *OUT/LOOK*, the national lesbian and gay quarterly.

They are trying to combine contradictory impulses: to bring together people who have been made to feel perverse, queer, odd, outcast, different, and deviant, and to affirm sameness by defining a common identity on the fringes . . . . These contradictions are locked in the name Queer Nation:

QUEER = DIFFERENCE  
NATION = SAMENESS<sup>67</sup>

. . . The operant dream is of a community united in diversity, queerly ourselves.<sup>68</sup>

Their method was street action—one day, three hundred Queer Nationals descended on Pier 39 in San Francisco, strolling past security guards to ride the carousel as tourists snapped photos. "[E]veryone stayed until everyone had ridden. Boys in slips and sundresses, women in leather and bras, long hair, shaved heads, pierced eyebrows and lips."<sup>69</sup>

Campy, outrageous and gender-bending, celebratory of S/M and cross-dressing, Queer Nationals were the grandchildren of the dandies, satirizing categories of sentiment, gender, power, and passivity to demonstrate their constructedness and to claim whatever is useful. Queer Nationals defied the heterosexual order, gay assimilationists, and politically-correct feminists alike, attempting to balance a claim to individual subjectivity with a unified defiance against the dominant culture.

By the winter of 1992, the San Francisco chapter of Queer Nation had dissolved. Bitter allegations of racism and sexism, and an inability to form alliances with older, more experienced gay and lesbian activists were among the reasons for the collapse of the group. The motley band of young queer renegades apparently had inherited the breezy arrogance of the pre-conviction Wilde. The break-up demonstrates that the potential for selfishness as a by-product of individualism cannot be dismissed. The rhetoric of selfhood risks devolving into a stubborn unwillingness to view a situation from the perspective of another.

Yet the legacy of Queer Nation among the mainstream gay and lesbian community amounts to far more than a wistful sigh of relief at their demise: the term "queer," for example, has acquired everyday usage with astonishing speed. For some, it represents an empowering reclama-

<sup>67</sup> Allan Bérubé and Jeffrey Escoffier, *Queer/Nation*, 11 *OUT/LOOK*, Winter 1991, at 12, 12.

<sup>68</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>69</sup> *Id.* at 16.



tion of an epithet that once crushed the spirit. For others, it bridges the gaps between lesbians, gay men, bisexual people, and others whose sexuality drives their political and social activism. Thus, individual self-empowerment and community activism re-emerge as the twin themes of the post-Queer Nation era, as the tricky balancing act that demands simultaneous attention to the claims of both the self and the community.

Without a similar balance, feminism threatens to become irrelevant to the rebels and to the queers, to the possessors of a multiple consciousness, to women who, like Mary Dunlap, live the contradiction: I am a woman, and I am standing. Dunlap's declaration resonates with the ultimate claim to subjectivity, the thundering assertion of the Old Testament God—"I AM WHO I AM."<sup>70</sup> To find god in ourselves, to find wholeness and community through acts of will and creativity—this is what women are capable of, and what true feminist practice must be.

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<sup>70</sup> *Exodus* 3:14.