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DEFINING FEMINISM, DEFINING FEMINISMS

REGINALD OH*

It is fitting that the first chapter of this wonderful Symposium is entitled "Defining Feminism." That is because the struggle of subordinated persons and groups is, at its heart, the struggle for subordinated persons and groups to be able to define the reality and truth of their lived experiences, to be able to define and validate the truth of one's reality in the face of pervasive racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic messages.

Why? Women, people of color, the poor, and gays and lesbians are constantly having their experiential reality discounted, devalued, rejected, and ignored. They are constantly being told that their problems with racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, are just "all in their head." For example, women are told by men to stop "complaining" about gender inequality because women need to accept that inequalities between the sexes flow from natural differences between the sexes. People of color are told by whites that they are being racist and "playing the race card" whenever they identify patterns of institutionalized racism. Within such a context, to be able to define one's own reality is the first step in the process of constructing a contextualized identity that can enable and empower subordinated peoples in their struggle for liberation and recognition as autonomous human beings.

The harm of having one's life defined through the experiential lens of another is to be treated as an "It" in theologian Martin Buber's terminology.¹ Buber contrasts what he calls an "I-It" relationship with an "I-Thou" relationship.² In the "I-It" relationship, one person treats another person as an "it," an object to be categorized and controlled to advance the self-interests of the "I."³ Within an "I-It" relationship, a person fails to acknowledge, recognize, and honor the autonomous being that stands across from him or her. The person refuses to see the other person except but in

* Assistant Professor of Law, Appalachian School of Law. I want to thank Maria Grahn-Farley for having invited me to participate in this symposium. I am also grateful to David Butle Richie for his very helpful comments. Finally, I want to give special thanks to Anthony Paul Farley and Phyllis Goldfarb, my mentors and teachers on race and gender issues.

¹ MARTIN BUBER, *I AND THOU* (Ronald Gregor Smith trans., Charles Scribner's Sons 2d ed. 1958).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

his or her own pre-defined image of what the other person is or should be.

In contrast, Buber describes an "I-Thou" relationship as one in which a person recognizes and treats the other person as the free, autonomous human being that she or he is.⁴ In an "I-Thou" relationship, the "I" does not attempt to make or recreate the "Thou" into the "I's" image of who the "Thou" should or should not be. In an "I-Thou" relationship, the "I" lets go of trying to judge and control the other person's beliefs, thoughts, and emotions, and tries to learn and accept the other person's experience, her truth, her reality.

W.E.B. Dubois has articulated and described with intense clarity the insidious psychic harm of having one's self constantly defined by others through the lens of racism.

[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. . . .⁵

In articulating the insidious harm of "double-consciousness," Dubois was describing the painful feeling and experience of a being viewed as a racialized "It" by white society.⁶ Dubois' notion of "double-consciousness," the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," describes the inner reality and mindset of a person who lives in a society where he or she is pervasively treated as an "It."⁷

Several decades after Dubois talked about "double-consciousness," Martin Luther King Jr. theorized about how the "I-It" relationship between whites and blacks manifested itself in institutional, systemic form through the practice of racial segregation.⁸ In his *Letter from A Birmingham Jail*, King wrote,

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ W.E.B. DU BOIS, *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK* 5 (Penguin Books 1996) (1903).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *WHY WE CAN'T WAIT* 85 (Harper & Row Publishers 1964).

All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of . . . Martin Buber, substitutes an "I-It" relationship for an "I-Thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.⁹

Thus, both King and Dubois understand that whites, in viewing African Americans as racial inferiors and in segregating and invidiously discriminating against African Americans, were treating African Americans as objects, as "Its."¹⁰

The "It" consciousness is one that all subordinated groups have experienced. Historically, with regard to gender relations, the "I-It" relationship has paradigmatically taken the I (Man) - It (woman) dynamic, a dynamic that still continues to repeat itself with consistent persistency to this day, although this dynamic now continues within the superficial structures of a formalistic "equal opportunity" society that is equal mainly in terms of law but still unequal when the concrete reality of the experience of women is examined. Thus, a woman experiences "double-consciousness" when she self-consciously experiences the feeling of looking at her self through the eyes of men, and ends up judging and condemning her self through those same external eyes. In short, a person experiencing double consciousness ends up treating him or herself as an object, as an "It."

To move towards full substantive equality and liberty for all, it is necessary for members of subordinated groups, to paraphrase Dubois, to "merge his or her double self into" an integrated, autonomous self.¹¹ To that end, a first step for subordinated peoples is to first realize that racist and sexist messages that they have heard all their lives do not define the true essence of their selfhood.

Hence, Feminists urgently need to define Feminism and to construct feminist theories that validate and affirm the truth of women's lived experience, in all their multiplicity and diversity. Because feminist theories are forged through the diverse experiences of differently situated women, it is respectfully suggested that the title of this Chapter may and can be seen as the call to define Feminism and Feminism(s). Defining feminism(s) means, in spirit of the "I-Thou" relationship, being mindful and respectful that individual Feminists will define Feminism in alignment with the truth of their unique experience, in alignment with the truth of their unique reality.

Viewing the call to define feminism as the call to define feminism(s), we can better understand the call for anti-essentialism in feminist and critical

⁹ *See id.*

¹⁰ *See id.*; DU BOIS *supra* note 5, at 5.

¹¹ *Id.*

race theory.¹² The call for anti-essentialism is a recognition that attempts to declare one experiential perspective (*this issue is about racism!*) as being the correct perspective over another perspective (*therefore, this issue is not about sexism!*), is an attempt to assert privileged status and in the process, is treating fellow autonomous humans as "Its," as objects. The desire to define and essentialize others, therefore, is simply another manifestation of racial and gender hierarchy and domination.

Too often, however, the consensus that we need to hear and understand subordination from multiple perspectives gets lost in territorial fights to claim an experience as the exclusive or primary experience of one group over another. Such territorial in-fighting occurs when people are locked in an "I-It" relationship. In an "I-It" relationship, one group seeks to impose its definition and understanding of a situation or issue upon others. In this situation, it becomes impossible to construct and create inter-subjective knowledge through a mutual exchange and sharing of differing personal, experiential, emotional, and cognitive perspectives. On the contrary, people stuck within an "I-It" relationship end up stifling the construction of a truly inter-subjective knowledge that incorporates the full range of human experiences and perspectives.

What does it mean to go about the task of defining Feminisms? It means, for one thing, that we ought to ask what we can learn about systems of subordination by viewing such systems from multiple perspectives. Jacqueline Mertz's essay, for example, discusses the Yvonne Wanrow case from both a feminist and Native American perspective, without attempting to define one perspective as the "true" perspective, and the other perspective as a subordinate or tangential perspective.¹³ From this inclusive, multiple orientation approach, Mertz asks us: What can and do we learn about one another by viewing this issue from the perspective of feminist theory? What do we learn about one another by viewing this issue from the perspective of a Native American? What do we learn about one another by viewing this issue from the perspective of a Native American woman? In reading her article, one wonders whether it is possible for defense attorneys to construct legal defenses that take the perspective of Native American women, taking into full consideration the multidimensional subordination¹⁴ Native American

¹² See generally Elizabeth V. Spelman, *INESSENTIAL WOMAN: PROBLEMS OF EXCLUSION IN FEMINIST THOUGHT* 19 (1988); Trina Grillo & Stephanie M. Wildman, *Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implication of Making Comparisons Between Racism and Sexism (or Other -isms)*, 1991 DUKE L.J. 397 (1991); Angela P. Harris, *Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory*, 42 STAN. L. REV. 581 (1990).

¹³ See Jacqueline Mertz, *Women of Color—What Their Voices Teach Us*, 9 CARDOZO WOMEN'S L.J. 205 (2003).

¹⁴ The term "multidimensional subordination" is borrowed from Professor Darren Hutchinson. See Darren Lenard Hutchinson, *Identity Crisis: "Intersectionality," "Multidimensionality," and the Development of an Adequate Theory of Subordination*, 6 MICH. J. RACE &

women have experienced in the United States.

Similarly, Kimberly Charles, based on her experience and perspective, seeks to construct a Feminism rooted in the teachings of Christianity.¹⁵ She insightfully deconstructs the sexism in Fundamentalist Christian beliefs, to help show that sexism is not an intrinsic aspect of Christianity. In doing so, she opens up the possibility of developing a Christian theology that seeks to end the subordination of women, and opens up the possibility of speaking to and raising feminist consciousness among women and men of Christian faith.

This Symposium is an insightful step in the process of defining Feminism(s). I have learned much in reading these articles, and I hope to engage in future dialogue with these Feminist legal theorists.

LAW 285 (2001).

¹⁵ See Kimberly Charles, *Sexism is a "Family Value,"* 9 CARDOZO WOMEN'S L.J. 255 (2003).



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