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Gender Politics

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As the editors of this special section of *Men and Masculinities* note in their introduction, the topic, “Speaking of Women: Men Doing the Anthropology of Women,” was a panel session at the 2005 American Anthropological Association (AAA) Meetings. The year 2005 was also the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Rayna Rapp’s groundbreaking anthology *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (Reiter 1975). To commemorate that book and the other groundbreaking anthology on the anthropology of women, *Woman, Culture and Society* from 1974, I interviewed Rayna Rapp at that same AAA, together with Gayle Rubin—whose acclaimed article “The Traffic in Women” first appeared in that collection—and Louise Lamphere, the co-editor of *Woman, Culture and Society* (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Rubin 1974). I asked these pioneering feminist anthropologists what they thought about a panel of men talking about the anthropology of women. They chuckled and said that it would be great if more men tried it (Kulick 2007).

Given that books about the anthropology of women started appearing thirty years ago, one might perhaps be forgiven for thinking that a discussion by men doing the anthropology of women is somewhat overdue. Other disciplines have been discussing similar issues for a very long time. Over twenty years ago, in 1984, the Modern Language Association (MLA) hosted a panel titled “Men in Feminism.” A book arising from that panel was published under that name three years later—this is the book mentioned in Falen’s article (Jardine and Smith 1987). The “Men in Feminism” panel was organized during a time of fierce debates in the humanities about representation, and about provocative poststructuralist concepts like *l’écriture féminine* and *différance*. The issues that were ventilated in the various panel articles were the status of *the feminine* in critical thought, the difference between *essence* and *experience*, and the relationship between feminist and deconstructionist theory.

In many ways, the questions that get asked in anthropology are much less imaginative. They talk about *jouissance*; we talk about *access*. They ask if men can be *in* feminism; we ask if men can carry out successful research *on* women. They ask if a man can write like a woman, we ask if a man can reliably write about women. Their questions are philosophical and political; ours are largely methodological and practical.

Part of the reason for this difference is that anthropologists are field practitioners in a way that literary scholars are not. While many anthropologists do strive to convey the range of emotions, identities, strategies, and desires that are expressed by the people they work with and that circulate in social life, our knowledge of these things is based not on imaginative flights of fancy but on long-term observations and interactions. The

relevant concern in an anthropological context is that male anthropologists won't be able to write with any authority about the lives and concerns of women if they are unable to spend time with them. Access becomes critical to analysis and exposition, and for this reason, the issue of access assumes a prominence in anthropology that it doesn't have for humanities scholars.

As all four of the ethnographically based articles in this issue mention, considerations of men doing an anthropology of women proceed against the backdrop of *idées reçues* that (1) only female anthropologists can fully understand female perspectives, and (2) women fieldworkers enjoy better access to the people in their fieldsites than men, because as unattached, independent females they are gender anomalous; a status that gives them access both to what Brandes, in his contribution, glosses as "the female world" and "male society" as well.

Both those assumptions are highly contestable, and as all the articles point out, they need to be disputed. But in disputing them we need to be careful and show awareness that everything said on this topic is saturated with rhetoric. Although it is true that individual female anthropologists have proposed that women have access to a wider range of people in a society than men and have a better understanding of women than men do, it is important to keep in mind that those claims began to be formulated in the early 1970s, at the time when anthologies such as *Toward an Anthropology of Women* were appearing and when women were beginning to make up a substantial number of graduate students and newly minted PhDs in the discipline, a trend that has continued since—today in the United States, women are receiving at least 60 percent of the anthropology doctorates awarded each year (Patterson 2001, 162). Claims about women's access in the field arose as part of a more general feminist response to institutional sluggishness or resistance to women's large-scale entry into the discipline, and to male indifference about the lives and concerns of the women they encountered in their fieldsites. In this context, assertions that women have broader social access and are legitimate authorities on other women have to be heard at least in part as assertions that women can be just as good—if not better—anthropologists than men, and that women and their lives were just as viable and respectable subjects for anthropological investigation as any other topic.

It is difficult to imagine that anyone would argue with either of those claims today. But the deeper issues that the four articles address are the ones laid out by Falen. They are (1) Is gender as difference somehow more impregnable than other kinds of social differences? (2) Are women really more reliable authorities on women than men are? The articles offer slightly different answers to those questions. Baum is pragmatic: whether men can do authoritative research on women depends on the subject matter of the field research. Brandes agrees, adding that the anthropological theories of men's and women's roles will also likely influence an individual anthropologist's access and understanding. Falen and Berliner are more philosophical: they conclude by asking whether any kind of difference at all can be truly "overcome" (Falen, XX) or "fully known" (Berliner, XX).

If we care to follow Falen and Berliner and debate the epistemological status of difference in anthropological access and writing, we might profit from revisiting the discussions that occurred in the MLA's "Men in Feminism" panel. One interesting moment in the *Men in Feminism* book occurs when literary scholar Robert Scholes (1987) criticizes deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida and Jonathan Culler for their analysis of feminism. Scholes says that these thinkers' criticism of feminism proceeds by resolutely ignoring women and evaporating *woman* and *femininity* into a play of signifiers. They reconfigure female experience as it is discussed in feminism into female essence, which allows them to subject this proclaimed essence to the deconstructionist formula that proves there is no such thing as essence. This, says Scholes, is a sleight of hand. Experience, the topic of feminist concern, is not reducible to essence. "There is a difference between having an experience and not having it," Scholes (1987, 211) maintains, "and a very large and significant difference between having the same experience over and over again and never having that experience at all."

Most anthropologists would probably agree that this is an eminently reasonable objection; one that, furthermore, could arguably be seen to lie at the heart of feminist claims that gender is an irreducible and that women are better authorities on women than men are. However, most anthropologists would probably also want to ask, "Hold on, who gets to decide what *the same experience* is?" Anthropologists are usually the ones to point out that there are no grounds for believing that even such quintessentially female-bodied experiences as menstruation and childbirth (which of course all female bodies do not experience) constitute "the same experience" across cultures, especially when we have ample evidence (documented for example in Emily Martin's 1987 *Woman in the Body*, or Mimi Nichter's 2000 *Fat Talk*) that even in our own society physical processes like menstruation and fatness are experienced very differently by individual women, depending on their class, race, age, sexuality, and experience of ability or disability.

The endpoint of this kind of discussion must be a recognition that yes, physical or experiential similarity is a social fact that does indeed facilitate particular kinds of access to particular groups of people. But access and especially understanding can never be reduced to being simply about similarity. One point made even by women who claim that female anthropologists have greater range of access in the field is that women have this possibility precisely because they are *dissimilar* from local women—they are not attached, they are independent, they move differently and act in ways that local women do not.

Thus, when Berliner and Falen end their articles by challenging what Berliner (XX) calls "the instinctive view" that "only women can understand women" and what Falen (XX) says is "the belief that women are more legitimate authorities on other women," it isn't clear to me which anthropologists they regard as actually arguing that view and articulating that belief. However, if for sake of argument we were to reformulate their challenges into a question, then we would get something like:

Can we empathize or sympathize with someone else? Can a man identify with, fantasize about being, or imagine feeling like a particular female or group of women? The answer to that question, it seems obvious, is clearly *yes*. However, if the question is: Can we ever actually *be* someone else? then the answer, it seems equally obvious, is clearly *no*. Can a male anthropologist empathize with and insightfully analyze the life experiences of women in his field? Of course. Can he (or anyone else) ever “*fully* know,” as Berliner puts it, the thoughts and experiences of any other person? No.

To the extent that Berliner claims that this “instinctive view” guides the perceptions or the behavior of anthropologists, I think he exaggerates, presumably to make a similar kind of rhetorical point made by those women who claimed that only female anthropologists can ever really understand women. And just as their rhetoric was a reaction against assumptions that women anthropologists were less capable than men of gathering data that would lead to an understanding of society and culture, it seems clear that Berliner’s rhetoric is a response to the suspicion and dismissal with which men who claim to understand a female point of view are sometimes greeted. I agree with Berliner and the other authors that male anthropologists who talk or write about female experience are sometimes met with resistance. But instead of seeing this resistance as somehow reflecting an “instinctive view” of gender, I would be more inclined to see it as reflecting a politicized view of gender. And I would turn to feminist thought to help us understand it. We could take our cue from Marilyn Strathern’s (1987) well-known article “Feminism and Anthropology: An Awkward Relationship.” A main question she poses there is “As far as the impact of feminist thought on anthropology is concerned, where would one place the resistance?” (1987, 280). Strathern is concerned with issues of epistemology. However, we could just as easily use her question to focus on politics. To the extent that it is true that individual female anthropologists express resistance to “men doing the anthropology of women,” where, we might ask, would one place the resistance? How is it related to hiring practices and the politics of gender in the academy?

Having worked in universities in Europe, Australia, and the United States, I have observed that it is virtually impossible for a man to be hired for a position that is explicitly earmarked as being about gender—unless that position, these days, is not simultaneously also explicitly specified as being “queer studies.” As Falen (X) observes (correctly, in my view), *gender* is widely perceived to be “a code word for *women*.” The irony of this situation is of course that the very people who insist that a gender studies position be filled by a woman are often the same scholars who write with great eloquence about the social constructedness of gender and the limits of identity politics. This is a conceptual contradiction, as Berliner points out—one, it should be acknowledged, that the women who advocate hiring women in gender studies positions generally perceive quite clearly. It isn’t, however, necessarily a political contradiction. Like

U.S. ethnic studies departments, which provide an entryway into the academy for scholars who might otherwise be blocked from entering (and where scholars also spend much time criticizing and deconstructing the social categories that have usually led to them being hired in the first place; see, e.g., Dávila 2006), positions focused on gender are still viewed by many as strategic gateways that facilitate the entry of women into the academy. We can debate the continued need for this, at least in anthropology, which, as I noted above, is becoming a discipline in which women, not men, are in the majority. My point, though, is that the terrain on which this question of who ought to be doing “the anthropology of women,” and why, is necessarily political, and only incidentally or supplementarily epistemological.

And speaking politically, I have always found the claim that women are somehow definitionally more flexible in terms of access, or are definitionally better able to understand women, suspiciously and even ominously heteronormative. Maybe it’s because I’m a gay man—and people who know me say something of a queen—but, personally, I have always felt more comfortable with practices of femininity than with practices of masculinity. Falen (X) observes that “many male researchers gravitate towards male informants.” The key word in that sentence is *many*. I don’t know if readers of this article fantasize about potential field-sites, but I regularly do, and in my little alternate universe of imagined field sites, a beauty shop, a day care center, or even a nunnery seem much more appealing and realistic to me than does field-work among firefighters, stockbrokers, or, God forbid, any group that shows even the slightest interest in sports. Generally speaking, outside of romantic entanglements, men interest me much less than women, and in my two long-term field sites, in Papua New Guinea and Brazil, I spent as much or more time in the company of women than I did among men (Brazil is more complicated because there I worked with transgendered prostitutes, but let’s say that I was in the company of males who identified as being like women; Kulick 1998). My principal criterion for choosing a field site is that the people I work with have to make me laugh. And contrary to popular stereotypes that hold that the best comics, like the best chefs, are men, and that women generally aren’t particularly witty, I find that, on the contrary, women for the most part are funnier and more perceptive than men. We can debate whether this is so and why it might be so, but my sense of this is that women often develop a double consciousness—an ironic or parodic relationship to patriarchal social relations that I can recognize in my own experience as a gay man growing up and living in a homophobic society (Kulick in press).

Now of course just because I feel that I have an elective affinity with femininity doesn’t mean I would be admitted to a Fon birthing room or a Diola female fertility shrine. But neither does it necessarily exclude that possibility: foreignness can trump gender, as Berliner documents in his article, even as gender itself may not be the primary cause of exclusion, as Baum observes when he notes that not only men, but

also childless women, are not admitted to the most important shrines for Diola women. All this always necessarily depends on context, approach, personality, and circumstances, which means that any general claims about accessibility or understanding have to be heard as being, once again, purely rhetorical.

Since so much of the discussion in the articles in this special section is about methodology, I want to end this commentary on a methodological note. My first fieldwork took place in a small, isolated Papua New Guinean village called Gapun (Kulick 1992). Gapun is not sex-segregated by any means, but on the other hand it is not exactly a usual occurrence that an adult man who is not a close relative hangs out with a woman in her house from the moment she wakes in the morning, and stays by her side all day until she crawls into her mosquito net again at night. And yet that is precisely what I did, with different women, at least three times a week for over a year. What allowed me to do have such intimate contact with women is something that none of the articles mentions—namely, children. I was in Gapun studying language socialization, and to do so I spent whole days in the company of the small children whose language development I was recording.

Being interested in children gave me fairly unrestricted access to women. I was often the only adult male present when women made food, visited with one another, sat around chewing betel nut, or dozed off for an afternoon nap. My interest in children seemed to produce the same kind of results that some claim that women anthropologists' interest in local politics produces for women—it extended my range of access to people. In addition, my association with children seemed to affect how people perceived my gendered self—it both feminized me, and, perhaps therefore, desexualized me, so I thankfully never had any of the sexual dilemmas described by the authors of the articles in this issue.

My methodological point is that perhaps men who worry that they are not getting access to women ought to take a bit of interest in the women's children—maybe even do a language socialization study. Although this won't work in every ethnographic setting—nothing, after all, will—it could provide a means in many settings to approach women and women's concerns. If more men studied children and socialization, this would also go a long way toward moving topics that are centrally about women, their concerns and activities from the periphery of the discipline to its center. Because at the end of the day, it seems to me that even thirty years after *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, studies that focus on women are still not considered to be quite "mainstream" anthropology. In this sense, the problem of male anthropologists studying women might not be about access at all; in fact the whole issue of access may be a red herring. The problem may not be that men can't obtain access to women; the problem may be that many male anthropologists simply aren't particularly interested in women's lives. If this special issue about men doing the anthropology of women draws attention to *that* problem, then it will have contributed something to anthropology that is very valuable indeed.

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