
**Abstract:**

Feminists who debate the meaning of fragmentation sometimes blur the lines between certain kinds of trauma. The trauma felt by incest survivors and rape victims causes fragmentation to a greater degree than felt by other women.

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In the past several years, a number of discourses--among them cultural criticism, psychoanalytic theories of the self, trauma research, and avant garde art--have arisen to discuss the fragmentation of the self, and these discourses can be quite contradictory. In literature departments, Lacan's critique of the ego and his dictum that the self is essentially fragmented were taken over into culture criticism in the seventies. Early on, in work such as that of Screen theorists, this criticism focused primarily on the pain of fragmentation. A core assertion of Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking Lacanian film criticism was that film and other apparatuses of culture conspire to allow a male subject to fantasize that he is not essentially fragmented, allow him to take an imaginary unified ego for the whole of his being. While maintaining this fantasy guarantees that he not have to face his pain, the price of his unity and sovereignty is paid by women and other Others, whose subjectivity goes unrecognized. The theory, which posits male narcissism as a societal norm, suggests that the only way to assure respect for difference and diversity is to acknowledge that we are fragmented beings, that no one has the Phallus (Rose 1985; Silverman 1992).

Recently, other strains of poststructuralist thought (such as Derrida's and Barthes' notions of the free play of signifiers) have crossed with Lacanian theory or with British Cultural Studies to produce cultural criticism that celebrates diversity, ambiguity, and fragmentation. Theorists as different as Judith Butler, Constance Penley, E. Ann Kaplan, and Ellen G. Friedman posit the fragmentation of the subject as a strategy of resistance and/or a guarantee of indeterminacy, especially gender indeterminacy. Whereas Mulvey and Rose argue that the symbolic system violently fragments the female subject, in much recent cultural criticism the pain of this fragmented subject is forgotten or bracketed and she is rather figured as able to subvert the system by enjoying, rearranging, and playing with her fragments.(1)

Much of contemporary Anglo-American psychoanalytic theory focuses on self disorders (see, for example, Kohut and Kernberg). So, in psychology departments, too, people are discussing fragmentation (although, to my knowledge, they are not discussing Lacan). Here, fragmentation is not posited as a feature of normal development. And the agent of fragmentation is neither metaphysical nor linguistic systems, but rather specific interactions with other people, primarily early caretakers.
In Kohut's work, the self fragments when not properly mirrored or when traumatically disappointed by an idealized other. In Kernberg's work, the self fragments when frustrated in its attempts to negotiate needs for independence and dependence, separateness and attachment. The mechanism central to fragmentation is splitting, an early defense that operates to keep separate good and bad affects, good and bad self-representations, and good and bad object representations. In an environment that is not too unpredictable or harsh, a child comes to integrate good and bad experiences, can tolerate ambivalent feelings, ambivalent cognitions, can experience the self and other as primarily good though at times disappointing. If the environment is harsh, particularly with regard to interactions around dependence and independence, the child continues splitting in order to preserve enough of a sense of a good object to keep developing. In this situation, the child's inner and outer world fragment, become black and white in all arenas. There are rigidly good and rigidly bad self representations: the person oscillates between self-deprecation and grandiosity. There are rigidly good and rigidly bad object representations: the person alternately idealizes and devalues the other. Cognitions tend to be black and white. Good moods alternate with very dark bad moods, and each seems to come out of the blue. When in one state about the self or other, the person can barely remember having ever felt differently.

High correlations have been found between diagnoses of self disorder and histories of abuse (Herman, Perry, and van der Kolk). The literature on those who have been repeatedly traumatized describes an internal world peopled by victims, abusers, and saviors, of expectations of the world that can only echo what exists in the internal world, and of a life marked by splitting and fragmentation. Judith Herman writes of victims of child abuse: "... under conditions of chronic childhood abuse, fragmentation becomes the central principle of personality organization" (107).

The focus of the work discussed above is the pain suffered and inflicted by those who do not feel cohesive, who feel always threatened by a loss of self. Repeated narcissistic and abusive interactions are the designed causes of fragmentation. In this discourse, the norm posited as both desirable and possible is a norm of mutual interdependence, in which each person recognizes the other as a separate (that is, diverse) center of initiative (see, for example, Mitchell; Benjamin). A clear focus on relationship distinguishes this conversation from the Lacanian one where the primary relation is between the subject and the Phallus.

Because of the different ways these two discourses figure fragmentation, I find that, often, after reading a brilliant piece of cultural criticism, my clinician self feels very uncomfortable. For in this work fragmentation is essentialized, universalized, and celebrated in a way that seems not to acknowledge what it feels like to experience fragmentation. Fragments are not seen as arising from specific relational interactions or specific historical circumstances but rather are seen as the condition of selfhood.(2) While such texts demean any notion of a unified self, any wish for an integration of fragments, they paradoxically leave the reader with the sense that their protagonists are in total control of their fragments, that they are auteurs who pick and choose how they wish to represent themselves at any given moment (see Harris). In this work, the unconscious is evoked when convenient and ignored when not.

Often, the protagonists of these texts--the lesbian, the transvestite, the sadomasochist, the hermaphrodite--are made emblems of a third space, a space outside of various forms of cultural oppression. In this status, they perform an important cultural service--they challenge heterosexism, reified notions of gender identity, repressed forms of sexual expression, the hypocrisy of a puritan, yet violent, culture. At the same time, when these figures become postmodern heroes and heroines, the pain of fragmentation, of marginality, of indeterminacy is often overlooked or glossed over. Discussions of the film Paris is Burning are a case in point. While most critics were aware of the fascinating way that the film's subjects made of their oppressed position a creative and celebratory experience, few critics spoke of the ways that these creations were marked by pain and by the terms of the oppression. For example, few voices
wondered why people whose experience of family is so devastating would choose to form nuclear-styled families. Paris is Burning clearly suggests that there is more to parody than ironic distance and critique; there is also longing. (3)

Writing about Foucault's study of the hermaphrodite Herculine, Judith Butler has also observed this tendency to gloss over pain (1990a). She notes the way Foucault romanticizes Herculine's multiple pleasures, all the while knowing that sexuality cannot lie in a safe realm outside of power. Butler's own reading of Herculine compels her to write: "In the place of univocity, we fail to discover multiplicity, as Foucault would have us do; instead, we confront a fatal ambivalence, produced by the prohibitive law, which for all its effects of happy dispersal nevertheless culminates in Herculine's suicide" (99). Because power and sex are coextensive, because the law generates sex, there is no way that Herculine could be in a limbo of heterogeneous pleasure. (4) What Butler locates in her critique of Foucault is the postmodern critic's wish, despite his/her knowledge, that the Other or the unconscious be the unproblematic antidote to our pain (see Rose, 1987). As a clinician, these texts make me uncomfortable because every day I sit face to face with people for whom fragmentation is torment.

Unlike the cultural criticism discussed above, pain is everywhere in such avant garde texts as Kathy Acker's Blood and Guts in High School, and the pain is avowedly a product of trauma. Acker's protagonist, Janey Smith, has been fucked by her father since early childhood, and the whole book is about how women are fucked and fucked over by men. Janey's fragmentation is rendered in the book's fragmented style. At first glance, this seems the very opposite of what I have been discussing. Acker's text in fact mirrors the way many of my clients experience their fragmentation—as divorced from affect, as irreconcilable, as inevitable, as sometimes their fault, sometimes someone else's, sometimes consensual, sometimes driven. But in texts like Acker's, the pain of fragmentation is universalized and aestheticized in such a way that, before long, one either forgets that Janey is an incest victim or one assumes that all women in a materialist society are incest victims. By suggesting that Janey's pain is woman's condition, Acker blinds the reader to the fact that Janey's fragments and Janey's relational capacities are reified in certain distinct ways that result from her being an incest victim. Acker's Janey, for example, can only figure her sexuality in two ways, either as pure pain and exploitation or pure wildness and freedom. In this text, as in many of the texts of contemporary culture criticism, sexuality is reified either as a mystical free space or a space of pure power struggle. In both discourses, fragmentation is universalized and essentialized in such a way that our choices boil down to complete despair or joyous celebration, choices symptomatic of the black and white thinking that is a product of fragmentation.

As the above suggests, various contemporary discussions of identity center on fragmentation, but they radically differ in how they talk about it. How and whether these disparate discourses on fragmentation can be brought into relation is the question I want to raise. To begin, I want to look at how my clients describe their experience of fragmentation and what they and researchers say about the nature of the fragments. Although fragmentation can follow from many kinds of early childhood experiences, I want to focus on sexual abuse because its consequences stand in a distorted mirror relation to the gender indeterminacy and sex radicalism celebrated by culture critics. I will therefore draw on the case material of one of my clients, Sheila, a woman who was sexually abused in childhood by multiple perpetrators and who feels she always had a fluid gender identity. (5) Her therapy has dramatically revealed both the pain and promise of fragmentation.

At the very beginning of therapy, Sheila revealed that she had coded different parts of herself male and female. Sheila identified her voice, size, tomboy activities, intellect, and hardness as masculine. She had not felt at all feminine until her first lesbian relationship; she identified her femininity as a "marshmallow" self, totally vulnerable and "weak." Early in treatment, she claimed that at a very early age she had rejected things feminine because of her proclivities (you can't be
athletic in a dress and Mary Janes; Sheila never wore a dress after first grade) and because she wanted to be like her older brothers, who appeared to have all the family privileges. This "masculine" identification drew upon her the taunting and even violence of peers who clearly did not allow a space for gender indeterminacy.

Sheila claimed she consciously chose a masculine identity, but in an autobiographical novel that begins with the description of her first sexual abuse, she appears as a sexy, wild, longhaired, alluring seven year old girl. This, as well as many of her dreams, suggests that Sheila unconsciously came to associate a certain vision of femininity with something that draws abuse. Her choice not to wear a dress at age seven was thus in part a rejection of a femininity she deemed dangerous; the choice was clearly overdetermined. As Sheila grew older, she distanced herself from the vulnerable little girl and came to experience herself as rigidly gendered: she identified her intellectual self as male, her rageful, sadistic self as an abusive male, and all her vulnerability and compliance and pain as female. Her wish in therapy was to integrate her "masculine" and "feminine" selves.

According to researchers, Sheila's rigidly gendered identifications are typical of abuse victims. Margo Rivera, a clinician who specializes in multiple personality, writes: "It is very common for their vulnerable child personalities and their seductive and/or compliant personalities to be female and their aggressive protector personalities to be male . . ." (1989, 27). The alter egos, she asserts, usually reflect extreme cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

Sheila's story illustrates that when the experienced trauma is sexual abuse or rape, splitting and fragmentation operate on gender identity. As psychologist David Lisak has argued in his work on male victims of sexual abuse, the process of male gender identity development itself is traumatic (1991, 244-46), itself enforces a process of splitting, and this is of course true of female identity development as well (see Brown (1991) on the traumas of "normal" female development). Lisak (1992) cites a story told by one of his subjects who, as a young boy, was humiliated for crying when he saw a moth killed. Here was a case of one-trial learning: boys don't cry, at least not in front of others. I agree with Lisak that each gender undergoes a "self-mutilation," for, as he puts it, each is forced to extirpate from the self characteristics that are experienced as part of the self yet coded by the culture as belonging only to the other gender. The tomboy and the effeminate male are only the most obvious sufferers of the trauma of gender identity development. When sexual abuse is added to the first trauma, splitting is intensified, fragmentation guaranteed.

In cases of sexual abuse, gender identity fragments and fragments in somewhat predictable ways. Sexually abused girls show significantly greater gender identity conflict than those who have not been abused (Aiosa-Rarpas et al., 1991). Rather than the flexibility postmodernists might see in a person whose gender identity is indeterminate, what I and other therapists and researchers see are fragments rigidly coded with cultural stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. Each identity is split between highly negative and highly positive traits; identifying with either is fraught with anxiety and pain because each has complex associations to the abuse and the gender of the abuser. Thus, gender indeterminacy usually reflects severe conflict about taking on a gender identity.

For Sheila, femininity feels dangerous and dirty, though longed for and alluring. Masculinity is sadistic, ugly, and violent, though at times this identity makes her feel safe, smart, invulnerable to hurt. Sheila can go back and forth between the two gender identities but each is so rigidly constructed that it engenders pain; she cannot flexibly inter-weave these identities, nor can she modulate the extreme way that she experiences their traits. Thus, Sheila's problem lies not in missing masculine and feminine identifications but in the rigidity with which each is encoded, in the dangers that attend identification with any one of the fragments, in the incapacity to integrate the marshmallow woman and the man of steel. Further, some of her identifications are, against
her conscious wishes, split off from what she calls herself, such as the young girl, and others are kept at a distance because they are felt to be shameful. One task of therapy is thus to deconstruct the rigid masculine/feminine dichotomy.

Sexual abuse creates rigid binaries not only in its victims' gender identifications but in their relational style as well. Sheila, like all of us, developed her relational style within a particular matrix of relationships; her conflicts and current relational patterns reflect, as Stephen Mitchell has put it, her commitment and deep allegiance to past modes of connection. A core experience for Sheila, both as an abuse victim and as the only daughter of her particular family, is that others find her unacceptable and try to coerce her to be different from what she is. Sheila's relationships are marked by her longings to be overpowered by an other who will teach her how to be acceptable. What usually occurs in these relationships is that Sheila soon feels coerced, overrun, and misunderstood, and she then sadistically and self-destructively retaliates. Relational conflicts intensify feelings of fragmentation, and these play themselves out in conflicts about desire and about sexual orientation, in volatile moods, and in her split off, but frequently experienced rage.

The victim of repeated abuse tends to split the world into victims, abusers, and rescuers, who are locked in a dialectical dance. S/he enacts and reenacts relational patterns wherein s/he is sometimes the victim, sometimes the abuser, and sometimes the rescuer. Trauma thus splits the experience of power and powerlessness, domination and submission in extremely marked ways, as recent research by Joan Liem and colleagues indicates. Liem et al. note that the literature on women sexually abused as children suggests that they are preoccupied with issues of power. These women exhibit a heightened desire or need for power as well as a need to see themselves capable of exerting power. But, at the same time, they are frightened of power. In Liem's research, women construct stories from pictures on TAT cards. Preliminary results showed that women who had been abused created stories about unequal power relations significantly more often than did women who had not been abused. Liem and other researchers find that power becomes an organizing theme of the relationships that women with an abuse history enter into, and the need for/fear of power is central to how they engage in and provoke particular kinds of interactions.

Margo Rivera's work with multiple personalities shows that power/powerlessness is the axis along which alter egos congeal. She notes that for every personality that identifies with, for example, a compliant girl, there is one "who ferociously resists that position" (27), such as the anti-social boy. Sheila's relational patterns, like her gender identity, are fragmented in these predictable ways because of her abuse history. Power and powerlessness, domination and submission is the central axis around which her interactions occur—not only with lovers and parents, but with bosses, friends, and, of course, with me. Sheila seeks powerful people to heal her; the tragedy is that those drawn to her usually have little capacity or desire to heal or understand, but rather are drawn to her because they need to dominate.

The lack of historical and personal specificity in avant-garde and postmodern critical texts often makes it seem that all of us fragment our relations with others predominantly along the axis of domination and submission. While all of us certainly have experiences of helplessness and powerlessness, while all of us constantly negotiate and renegotiate our needs for dependence and independence, it is not evident to me that power and powerlessness are the primary organizing feature either of most people's sexuality or of their relationships. The terms with which Sheila codes her fantasies and experiences are dramatic and particular to people who have consistently been rendered powerless—her core waking fantasy, where she is Joan of Arc saving hordes of innocents from sadistic rapists, is not in my experience a typical core fantasy. Nor are frequent feelings of rage common to most people; rather, these feelings are generated, I think, from traumatic scenarios of power and powerlessness.(6)

In this moment of our ongoing therapy, Sheila is writing the stories of her internal characters, and
each story brings her closer to various gendered split-off parts of her self; each story not only makes these parts more known, but makes them more acceptable to her. Currently, I see her as oscillating between a painful fragmentation, in which she cannot recognize an overarching self that could claim the fragments, and a kind of flexibility that brings pleasure and enrichment, wherein she can see herself in each identity and thus feel each is part of her. A goal of therapy is to create an atmosphere that erodes shame so that the fragments of self become available, less reified, and can be claimed as parts of the self. My recognition of her and all her parts as subjects allows the various parts to recognize and dialogue with each other as subjects, which perhaps erodes the power/powerlessness, subject/object axis (see Benjamin). Simultaneously, the act of writing itself seems to provide Sheila a longed-for sense of consistency. At first startled to find that certain images keep repeating in her work, she has come to find this comforting, an antidote to her painful awareness of inconsistencies that plague both herself and those with whom she is involved. Sheila's longing to be consistent is a longing that postmodern discourse cannot accommodate, that it in fact condemns as immanently oppressive.

Sheila’s oscillation recalls for me Judith Butler’s sense that we need a “typology of fragmentations” (1990b), so that we can distinguish between the kind of fragmentation caused by oppression—in Sheila’s case, by sexual abuse, peer homophobia, and parental narcissism—and the kind of fragmentation lauded in postmodern theory, the kind that is meant to challenge the equally oppressive drive of Western culture towards silencing the diversity within us and around us. We must recognize, however, that even our experiences of diversity are rife with pain because there are so many external and internal attempts to silence them. The omission of that pain in much of postmodern theory is meaningful and needs to be explored.

At the moment, I feel torn between commitment to a humanist paradigm of a cohesive self and a postmodern paradigm of fragmentation (see Flax 1990). I think the two can be reconciled at some points or at least held in tension, and I conclude by looking at the work of two theorists concerned with a similar problematic, Joel Whitebook and Margo Rivera.

In Whitebook’s “Reflections on the Autonomous Individual and the Decentered Subject,” he argues that Freud saw the project of the scientific age to be not mastery over internal and external nature but rather the need to renounce omnipotence. Linking Freud’s and Kant’s notions of the maturity of the autonomous subject, Whitebook writes that the path to mature autonomy is one that requires decentration, or, one might say, the surpassing of a narcissistic position. Whitebook’s concern is with the subject who frees himself from the dictates of the authoritarian other. As Jessica Benjamin has argued, however, domination and the subject-object dichotomy from which domination ensues is not incidental to the Western version of the autonomous subject but rather constitutive of it. In her intersubjective frame, the relinquishing of a narcissistic position requires recognition of and by an other experienced as a separate center of initiative—a relational event.

Whitebook criticizes Lacan for essentializing fragmentation, and he questions why the state of fragmentation that precedes development of the ego should be hypostatized into the true state, why the later developmental dimension is dismissed as fictive and violent. Whitebook calls on Winnicott and Kohut, for whom “the integrating experience of the mother’s smile, far from situating the child on an alienated trajectory, provides him with hope in a future when he would no longer suffer the pain and anxiety of infantile helplessness” (103). I agree with Whitebook’s assessment; Lacan is not specific enough about what kinds of relational patterns constitute our fragments, he presumes falsely that our first relationship is narcissistic, and he privileges fragmentation over cohesion. Flax’s argument, that Lacan describes not human development but narcissistic development, is compelling (1990).

Margo Rivera has also wondered about the relation between the subject of postmodern theory, particularly its political feminist versions, and the question of, as she puts it, a central
consciousness that integrates the fragments of the self. Rivera writes about severely abused people who become multiple personalities. Noting that the multiple personalities clinicians see are about 90% women, Rivera calls attention to the cultural causes and sequelae of fragmentation, primarily to gender inequality. As I noted above, Rivera writes that splitting for the trauma victim leaves not arbitrary fragments but fragments gendered in starkly stereotypical ways. Rivera and Liem both make it clear that the fragments are organized around the axis of power and powerlessness.

Clinical data suggests that fragmentation is one moment in a dialectic that also must include integration. Rivera writes that clinicians have found that those patients with multiple personality who did not move toward integration, who continued "to guard their separations jealously were much more likely to lapse into their earlier state of dysfunctional dividedness and acute suffering. . ." (28). She contrasts this to the poststructuralist imperative, where "concepts such as a unified self and a well-defined individual identity are not only not viewed as ideals but are considered to be dangerous ideological fictions used to erase the awareness of differences within and between human beings" (28, see also Flax 1987 and 1990, 218-20). I agree with Rivera that what is necessary is some way of recognizing the self in these fragments, or, as she puts it, a growing ability to call each voice "I." What one calls this "I" has all kinds of ramifications; but some experience of a cohesive "I," of a sense of sameness that unites even the most disparate fragments, seems to be necessary to relieve suffering. This sense of sameness that one identifies as a core self may be no more than a cultural artifact, but it is one that is necessary to good mental health. Whether it is because our culture forces us to constitute ourselves as agents to be recognized at all, politically and personally, or because there could be no morality without an agentic subject (see Greifinger), or because the alternative to feeling cohesive is the painful state of psychosis or emptiness, a sense of identity and agency are crucial components of the ability to be good both to the self and to others. Perhaps an error of postmodern theory is to assume that the experience of a core self precludes the possibility that one experience this self as evolving and changing in its interactions with the world and with others. A core self is not necessarily stagnant; nor is it necessarily narcissistic. (7)

Rivera feels that we can learn a lot about development unimpeded by major trauma from looking at what happens to trauma victims. She sees those who have not been traumatized as "capable of pretending to a unified, non-contradictory identity and denying our complex locations amid different positions of power and desire" (28). Aiosa-Karpas et al. (1991) found that females who were sexually abused were more aware of the constructed and contextual nature of sex roles than those not abused. They write that the abused female adolescents in their study "acquired an expertise for modifying sex roles values and attributions according to the circumstances of the external environment. What is feminine in school is very different from what is feminine at home, and the sexually abused adolescent is acutely aware of the difference. It is this ability to present a variety of roles that helps maintain the secret of the victimization" (270). The implication here is that a non-abused person who does not experience identity in a fragmented way may have a harder time seeing what there is to see about the social construction of gender, gender identity, and sexuality.

Is the trauma victim the person most able continually to reinvent the self? Is she the quintessential postmodern figure? Perhaps so, but the above study suggests a parallel between the problem facing the trauma victim and the problem I find with postmodern criticism: yes, the trauma victims are aware of being socially constructed, but their enactment of a variety of roles is defensive and meant to keep the trauma secret. So the pain of fragmentation--its roots in trauma--is erased. In denying the unhappy moment of fragmentation, this criticism sometimes reads like the high theory analogue of the Reagan-Bush happy years.

But what does it mean that those who have not been abused may be less aware of the
constructed nature of identity, the fragments that make up the self? While these people may suffer less, postmodern critics point to the political ramifications of their blindness, for example compulsory heterosexuality; their blindness becomes part and parcel of the social reality that inflicts trauma. It is clear that culture criticism that constructs marginalized people as victorious outsiders occupying a third space serves the important political function of challenging mainstream blindness and violence. But I also think it has the effect of healing trauma, and the way that it does so feels more modern than postmodern to me. This criticism, I think, lends people who are usually stuck with only the pain of marginality an avant-garde positioning that brings pride and pleasure. The humanist moment lies in the fact that to achieve this the criticism performs the very unifying function of which it is critical, for it endows its subject with a sense of an essential “we” (e.g., the lesbian, the hermaphroditic) and suggests even more rigorously than bourgeois criticism that this subject is in control of how she represents herself.

Sheila is white and middle class; her trauma of sexual abuse fragmented her gender identity and sexuality. Recent research suggests that this level of trauma is not rare. For example, a demographic study of a random sample of young adults in Detroit showed that 39.1% were exposed to post-traumatic stress disorder-level stressors and 23.6% developed PTSD (Breslau et al.). The authors concluded that PTSD is among the most common disorders of young adults, surpassed only by phobia, major depression, and alcohol and drug dependence. Trauma is thus very prevalent in the culture.

As we have seen in Sheila’s case, developmental traumas also arise from the abuses of a racist, sexist, heterosexist culture (see Brown). Feminist critics, such as Patricia Waugh, have written about the decentered status of women and the strategies women adopt to deal with the fragmentation caused by oppression; Afro-American critics, such as Henry Louis Gates, have written similarly about the signifying strategies of decentered Afro-American subjects. Some of the best postmodern criticism captures the specificity of cultural sources of fragmentation and the effect on an individual psyche; these demonstrate that fragmentation is not merely an existential given, but rather that it is inflicted relationally (see, for example, Patricia Williams; Minnie Bruce Pratt). Indeed, the decentered subject of much of postmodern cultural criticism and art is a victim of culturally imposed trauma. As one of my abused clients recognized, if the mirror of the world does not reflect your smile back to you, but rather shatters at the sight of you, you, too, will shatter. These victims are agents, too, making meaning out of their traumas. Nonetheless, trauma restricts the possible domain of self-expression and relational expression and restricts them in particular ways.

Thus, I conclude that theory must find some way of holding the modern and the postmodern in tension. The tendency in certain uses of postmodern theory to split off pain from pleasure is what enables a theorist to celebrate a fragmented subject or claim the fragmented subject as the authentic subject. But fragmentation arises historically, from private and public developmental traumas. These traumas lend particular specificity to the fragments, which tend to be coded in rigid binaries, in stereotyped ways that are the opposite of the fluidity longed for by postmodern theorists. Therapy deconstructs these binaries; the process of doing so creates a sense of cohesion in the client that does not obliterate diversity and is not oppressive, but rather is liberating. Most important, a different experience of the other, one that is consistent and predictable and does not repeat the sadomasochistic or narcissistic dynamics of early development (or, if it does, subjects the event to analysis) enables the client to see the “self” in each of her parts and thus to undo the rigid boundaries between them. At this point, these parts can no longer be called fragments.

It seems to me that both therapists and culture critics need not only to identify the fragments that make up identities but to examine their historically specific nature and origins. Further, therapists and critics alike need to be aware of both the defensive and transformative uses to which these
fragments are put in various self-representations. More attention needs to be paid to the tension between cohesion, which yields a sense of agency, and fragmentation, which does not. (8) And finally, many postmodern thinkers would do well to question their unspoken assumption that relations between self and other, self and systems are always narcissistic and grounded along an axis of power-powerlessness; this assumption perpetuates an ahistorical way of figuring fragmentation and results in strategies of subversion that can only be highly individualistic. (9) For it is indeed narcissistic self-object relations that cause fragmentation. But such relations do not exhaust either political or individual experience, and theories which presume that they do work within a narrow and distorted range of human possibility.

Notes

(1.) Teresa Ebert has recently labeled the bulk of this work "ludic feminism," by which she means cultural criticism that "tends to focus on pleasure . . . as in and of itself--a form of resistance" (7-8). In celebrating difference, this criticism, she argues, glosses over how difference comes about within systems of exploitation, how differences are valorized unequally in the culture. Tania Modleski has also criticized the pluralism inherent to many versions of British Cultural Studies (1986). And, in later work (1991), she has pointed out that the separation of sex from gender in so much contemporary feminist culture criticism leads to a celebration of diversity that does not take into account real power inequalities between men and women, gays and heterosexuals, blacks and whites.

Butler (1990a), Kaplan (1987, 1993), and Penley (1992) would fall under Ebert's "ludic feminism" rubric (she also includes Donna Haraway and Jane Gallop); Ellen Friedman, who associates fragmentation with women writers' refusal to constitute an identity in accord with patriarchy, is not a ludic feminist; I include her because her essay evaluates fragmented style as a strategy of resistance and shows little regard for the social and personal roots of the painful state of fragmentation that produces such a style, a style that reveals as much oppression as resistance. I cite Ebert because the celebration of fragmentation and the celebration of diversity (internal and external), while not the same thing, stand in relation to one another, as the ensuing discussion will demonstrate. (2.) In this essay I am commenting on a trend in cultural criticism, but I am not arguing that it is impossible to have a culture criticism mindful of the experience of fragmentation. Indeed, cultural critics Patricia Williams, Cindy Patton, Jane Flax, and, at times, Judith Butler do seem able to synthesize psychoanalytic and postmodern views of fragmentation, precisely because of their focus on the historical specificity of fragmentation and on the pain engendered by those cultural traumas that fragment the individual. These authors accommodate both the pain and possible pleasures of marginality, and, in part, they are able to do so by holding agency and fragmentation in tension. Likewise, in the realm of experimental writing, I would place against Acker's work, to be discussed below, Toni Morrison's Beloved, where historically specific, cultural traumas induce fragmentation and the text centers on agentic selves struggling to integrate their fragments without disavowing them. Nonetheless, in doing my own work on Madonna, for example, I have read numerous postmodern feminist essays that belong to the trend I describe here (Layton, 1994). (3.) I have encountered similar problems doing research on Madonna. Critics who want to make of her a postmodern heroine simply omit all the textual evidence that shows her pain (for example, E. Ann Kaplan and C. Schwichtenberg, 1993). These critics laud her continual reinvention of self, seeing in it her refusal to be bound by cultural definitions of the feminine, and they are right to do so. This is one of Madonna's cultural meanings, one way that she is read by such varied groups as young girls and postmodern academic theorists. At the same time, her longings for unity, her abusiveness to herself and others, and the pain that is everywhere in her work are ignored. It is in fact the exclusion of her pain that makes celebration possible. If we were to acknowledge it, we would notice how domination and submission inform everything she does, we would wonder whether Madonna's continual reinvention of self is a product of joyful choice or of painful and driven necessity. (4.) Ebert focuses on pleasure as central to the "ludic feminism"
she critiques; the heart of her criticism is the suggestion that only a class that does not have to worry about the body as a source of labor could so focus on the body as primarily a source of pleasure. Here I am arguing that this focus on pleasure entails not a safe haven from pain but a denial of it. That is, I assume that even the class position from which the ludic feminists speak must be marked by its own dialectic of pleasure and pain; for this reason, the omission of pain or labor is not just a sign of privilege but is in some way defensive. (5.) In this paper, I will call this client Sheila, protecting her privacy and the confidentiality I offer her. I speak about her with her knowledge and her permission. (6.) Within our cultural matrix, which condemns the infliction of pain and humiliation, sadomasochistic desire will necessarily have conflictual multiple meanings, and these demand exploration rather than either facile celebration or condemnation. See Tania Modleski's essay "Lethal Bodies" (1991) for a discussion of sadomasochism that transcends simplistic pro and anti positions. (7.) I am here extending to the experiential psychological level Amanda Anderson's political/ethical argument in "Cryptonormativism and Double Gestures." Anderson argues that, to maintain a feminist politics, postmodern political theorists have had to perform a double gesture, that is, allow for essentialism or identity politics in practice while asserting what they consider to be a superior antifoundationalism and antihumanism in theory. Anderson presents an intersubjective ethical theory (based in Habermas) in which subjects are constituted not by dominating systems but by ongoing relations with others. In this view, the systemic informs intersubjective relations but does not define them, and domination is no more endemic to communication than is mutual respect. What I want to suggest here is that because we are constituted to experience ourselves as substantive and agentic, psychological theory also must hold in tension the notions/ experiences of both a constructed and a substantive self. (8.) Butler (1992) argues that there is no necessary contradiction between the assumption of a socially constructed subject and the experience of agency: "We may be tempted to think that to assume the subject in advance is necessary in order to safeguard the agency of the subject. But to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency" (12). (9.) The intersubjective stance (versus the narcissistic subject-object stance) obviates the need for what Anderson calls the double gesture. I am arguing that a non-narcissistic subject experiences the self not as continuous and coherent but as constituted in and by its relations to others, others also conceived as separate centers of initiative. A breakdown in these relations is what leads to the experience of the other and the self as primarily dominating or submissive (see Benjamin). And it is in this situation of breakdown that agency and cohesion (and thus ethics, politics, etc.) become problematic.

References


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