

## Cover Girls

### Toward a Theory of Divine Female Embodiment

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#### Abstract

Martha Reinke has argued that the body, as an intimate source of boundaries, has been used to reflect back on a smaller scale the issues of the social structure. This essay argues that women's bodies function as an inscriptive surface of power and knowledge for patriarchal society. This function is related to the inmate in the Panopticon who is surveyed and then internalizes the gaze of the surveyor. A cultural phenomenon such as "cover girls" demonstrates how women's bodies are locations for the incarnation of the male gaze. Luce Irigaray's strategic mimesis, Rosi Braidotti's theory of female embodied materialism, and bell hooks' oppositional gaze are possible sites of strategic resistance for female subjectivity against the male gaze. In feminist theology "Being-a-woman" provides a strategically essential identity location to think about God/dess, especially as it relates to female embodiment and incarnation. Women become able to reject dominant modes of representation and incarnation, such as "cover girls," and become subjects of divine identity. Feminist theorists' and theologians' work destabilizes patriarchy's incarnational notion of women's bodies and then constructs a notion of divinity that valorizes *all* women's experiences and aids in a formulation of an epistemology of embodiment.

#### Introduction: Cover Girls, Sexual Difference, and Female Embodiment

[1] What's the *matter* with women's bodies? Why have women, and female bodies, been viewed as bearers of the divine, but not as embodiments of the divine? Traditional Christianity's view that women are secondary in the order of creation and prone to sin tends to reinscribe aspects of female disembodiment and objectification in popular culture. One such example is "cover girls" on women's fashion magazines. What is represented, or re-presented in this facet of culture? Do women have subjectivity on the cover of these magazines, or are they merely objects of representation for "the male gaze?"<sup>1</sup>

[2] This essay will analyze women as *incarnations* of the male gaze in patriarchal society, and will thereby consider their relegated inability to be locations for the divine. A theory of *embodiment* will be constructed that demonstrates how the language of "women as subjects are

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<sup>1</sup> For background of the "male gaze," I am drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of the "Look." He describes his looking through a keyhole uninterrupted or watched. But suddenly, he is aware that someone is looking at him watch another. His behavior modifies his entire being, and he is aware that he has been modified. This awareness is what Sartre calls "shame" in recognizing that he is indeed the object which the Other is looking at and judging. The Other, then, is he who sees without being seen and he is the only real "I" from which all others are merely others with a small "o." According to Beauvoir, the Other then becomes the Subject, and the One, and the sexed female becomes the Other as incidental, or inessential. Through the gaze, the woman is defined and differentiated according to man. This is important for the male gaze is embodied in the female. Women are aware that the gaze makes them an object and strips them of freedom. Yet when women look at each other, they perceive their incarnated beings often with the same lenses of the male gaze, and possibly deny their own subjectivity (see also Melville).

still strategically essential at this juncture of the women's movement."<sup>2</sup> In the current postmodern debate we are encouraged to move past subject-object relations that reinforce dualistic hierarchies and participate in phallogocentrism (see Butler, especially her critique of Luce Irigaray's notion of mimesis). This may be valid; however, it is more likely that women need a place of subjectivity in a society that (still) constructs women as object *for*.

[3] The first section of this paper will explore Foucault's notion of an embodied sexual subject as a location for power relations. For this, his theory of the Panopticon as a creator/enabler of the male gaze in society and its relationship to "cover girls" will be analyzed. The question is, who stands in the tower watching and surveying whom? Traditionally, it has been the white, male, heterosexual who surveys his domain. As Braidotti summarizes accurately, "'being-a-woman' is always already there as the ontological precondition for my existential becoming as a subject. The same could and should be said about 'being-a-man,' but the male subject has historically chosen to conjugate his being in the universalistic logocentric mode" (187-88). But, what if women stood in the tower? Is that enough, or would one simply re-cast the look of the male onto others, especially oneself? Assuredly, in a patriarchal culture the gaze will almost always be male, even when incarnated in a female body. As Bordo states, if in a dualistic society the body is the negative term and women are the body, then women are the negative which are the "distractions" from whatever category (5). Is it then hopeless? Can women ever look at, upon, or with other women as subject to subject?

[4] The second part of the paper will interpret Luce Irigaray's notion of mimesis and sexual differentiation, Rosi Braidotti's theory of embodied female materialism, and bell hook's "oppositional gaze," in order to construct a theory of female embodied divinity. As Braidotti says, "I have paid in my body for all the metaphors and images that our culture has deemed fit to produce of 'Woman'" (187). Whether one agrees theoretically or not, females are [always already] sexed as "Woman" in culture.

[5] Ironically, there is something alluring to women when they gaze at "cover girls." Our looking evokes a menagerie of feelings - envy, longing, pride, dismay, shame, desire - that are linked both with the male gaze and with our own struggle to be identified subjects. It then becomes a question of how to embody the "feminine," and not "normative femininity." Braidotti states:

The "feminine" is that which "women" invent, enact, and empower in "our" speech, our practice, our collective quest for a redefinition of the status of all women. It is up to us, gathered in the feminist movement, to redefine this signifier in terms of how "I, woman" fasten on the presence of other female subjects (188).

[6] The third part of the paper, then, will flesh out the doctrine of the incarnation with relationship to this female embodiment by looking at myths of women's propensity for "evil," most notably the myth of the Fall. The traditional notion of incarnation where God became

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<sup>2</sup> I differentiate incarnation from embodiment in that I view incarnation as a flat inscriptive surface of objectivity that is a mere enfleshment of the dominant power system of patriarchy. Embodiment, rather, is a location of subjectivity that does not incarnate powers of oppression, but seeks instead to destabilize and dismantle such systems by active discourses of resistance.

enfleshed in the world to save humanity is not as intriguing as John Cobb's notion of the Logos<sup>3</sup> or Elizabeth Johnson's female images of the Divine used to destabilize phallogocentric thought that has silenced women as objects of the gaze. These scholars' theories enable women to see themselves as locations/identifications of the Divine, as thresholds of transcendence, and embodiments of immanence.

### **Policing the Body: Foucault's Theories of the Body as Inscriptive Surface**

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men.

The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. . . And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another (Berger: 46).

[7] Michel Foucault states that the body is "acted upon, inscribed, peered into; information is abstracted from it, and disciplinary regimes are imposed upon it" (quoted by Grosz: 146). Yet the fact that it is a form of materiality enables it to be a source of resilience against dominant modes of power. For Foucault, power, and its ability to inscribe discipline on bodies is crucially linked to knowledge (1977b; 1978). He does not settle on an ontological status of knowledge, but considers it more a socio-historical function of culture. Knowledge, then, is what culture agrees to be knowledge and what functions as such in society (Grosz: 147).

[8] Knowledge and power are linked in a symbiotic relationship. For Foucault, knowledge is one of the major instruments of power; what is considered "true" in society is regimented through practices of power and discipline on the body (1977: 92-93). Assuredly, power is gendered in a patriarchal society. The female body, which must become a "docile body," willing to relinquish agency of sexuality and subjectivity, becomes a site of the dominant male gaze. This gaze uses the relationship of power and knowledge to produce its patriarchal knowledge in the inscriptive surface, namely female bodies. Thus, women's bodies, as seen on the cover of fashion magazines as "cover girls," are often flat, objective, incarnated/ "enfleshed" *surfaces* that reflect/mirror the male gaze. Women's bodies re-present back to the onlooker, whether male or female, the politics of patriarchal power, which then is used to reinforce the mode of knowledge in such a society. In a patriarchal culture, women's bodies are often the medium (mediator?) through which knowledge and power is reinforced.

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<sup>3</sup> Cobb understands the Logos as the ordering power of the past, present, and future, and of all significant order. Christ is the manifestation of the Logos in all living and nonliving things. It is contained in the organic and inorganic, but Cobb asserts that it is primarily among human beings that he [sic] is found. Jesus was the Christ that is the Logos incarnate as immanent, not as transcendent. He reasons that the Logos was incarnate in Jesus as it is in all human beings and creation.

[9] Erving Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* is a key text for understanding women's bodies as an inscriptive tool. Goffman asks a disturbing and thought-provoking question in relation to advertisements: "Why do most advertisements not look strange to us?" (25). He answers that advertising, especially of women's bodies, does not look strange to us because it rarely portrays conditions that we have not constructed as part of dominant society. As Goffman affirms, advertising stylizes what is stylish, but most importantly, conventionalizes what is conventional, such as hierarchical gender roles. Advertising makes ideal what is stereotypical and vice versa. Advertising as a part of culture does not create situations *ex nihilo*, but abstracts from the constructs of reality created by humans. How we read women's bodies, and what we define as a "real woman," or as normative femininity, are based in part on how they are represented in the media. Like the intertwined relationship between knowledge and power, advertising abstracts from reality, and is also a location of constructed reality that teaches and defines our social relationships.

[10] We see this aspect of bodies as inscriptive surfaces and locations for cultural forces more fully elaborated in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, where he gives a critique of modern society and the disciplinary practices used to regulate and control the body. Such practices are linked to the structure of the army, schools, hospitals, and prison, most notably in Jeremy Bentham's model prison, the Panopticon. This is a creation that reinforces the manipulation of bodies and their surveillance. The Panopticon consists of a peripheral structure with a tower at the center. The tower has large windows that look on the inner part of the area. The edifice is divided into cells with two windows, one facing out and the other facing the tower. This is used to create an effect of backlighting so that the person in the tower can see everything and everyone in the cell. Further, the person in the cell is always aware that he/she is being watched because of the lighting and the two windows. The person is also shut off from all communication with others, and is constantly visible from the tower. The effect of this constant gaze is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (1977a: 201). As Sandra Bartky states, "each becomes to himself [sic] his own jailer" (65). Thus, not only does this discipline affect the body, but it is used to socialize the mind as well. Holistically, the person is brought into abeyance with the social order that the Panopticon represents. As Foucault states

The Panopticon, on the other hand, has a role of amplification; although it arranges power, although it is intended to make it more economic and more effective, it does so not for power itself, nor for the immediate salvation of a threatened society: *its aim is to strengthen the social forces* - to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply (1977a: 208).

[11] The male gaze functions in our society as an inscriptive modification of women's bodies into mere incarnations of the gaze. To be sure, "cover girls" function as flat, objective enmeshments of what is deemed appropriately feminine by a male culture. Like Foucault's inmate, they are the "objects of information" for the male and for the male surveyor of women (if one agrees with Berger). For example, on the cover of a *Cosmopolitan* magazine supermodel Cindy Crawford is wearing a string bikini. She has one hand tugging teasingly on the bottom string. Her lips are

slightly open, as if in a dumbfounded, childlike manner. Thus, she is both sexualized and childlike which represents two stereotypical forms of women's incarnation according to the male gaze. *Cosmopolitan* is a women's fashion magazine. For whom is the cover? Most of the readership, though not all, is female. In a compulsory heterosexual society, the cover seeks to allure the approval of the male gaze both within male bodies and incarnated in female bodies. Knowing that the male gaze functions as the dominant form of approval and power in society, and that the gaze is ever roving, women may be likened to the inmate in the Panopticon. She is always aware that she may be observed from the "tower" at any given time, so she takes over the job of surveying herself and modifying her behavior. She internalizes the gaze of the surveyor and the structure, which is patriarchy. "Cover girls," then, are a tool in patriarchal culture that seeks to produce self-policing female objects that internalize the male gaze.

[12] Another example is the cover of a *Marie Claire* magazine. The captions around the "cover girl" are "Men get naked and tell all," "Your best body ever," "The morning after - what men really think," and "Men who choose a wife from a catalog." It is odd that on the cover of a woman's fashion magazine there are so many captions about men and their thoughts and desires, unless of course the magazine, its contents, and its readers are ultimately designed to incarnate the male gaze. And what the male gaze is incarnating is normative femininity. Bartky states that woman's bodies are increasingly becoming the sites of normative femininity in a presumed heterosexual society (80). But, even more interesting is the powerful ways in which visual media is used to construct a body of objectivity. Bartky argues that a "panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment" (72). Thus, the Panoptical power structure represented in modern technology is a disciplinary practice used to regulate women's bodies and minds to reflect normative femininity. The woman who buys a complete makeup regimen, invests in numerous hair products, pays for entrance to a fitness program, wears the latest fashions is akin to the inmate. She is committed to self-surveillance under the watchful eye of patriarchy who then through capitalist consumer society deems what the appropriate products are to please the male standard.<sup>4</sup>

### **Embodied Subjectivity and the Oppositional Gaze**

[13] Most women would not deny that our bodies are locations for the objectification of the male gaze, but the pertinent question is, do we realize that we are susceptible to incarnating the gaze within ourselves? That the surveyed and the surveyor exist within us? Are we aware of the fact that when we look at media representations of women's bodies, such as "cover girls," we look through the lenses of the dominant other? Acknowledging this, let us look at two "oppositional gazes" which take seriously the "embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject" (Braidotti: 199).

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<sup>4</sup> For an informative look into the fashion and beauty industry's part in normative femininity, see Faludi: 200-226.

[14] But first, what does an “oppositional gaze” mean or look like?<sup>5</sup> Let us concede that it is not merely a reversal, or replacement of the gender of the person in the tower of the Panopticon. This would only reify the hierarchical objectification of human bodies, and be another incarnation of other types of gazes. The best way to deconstruct the male gaze is to dismantle the function of the Panopticon. This means that the dominant mode of gazing at women’s bodies (and all bodies) from a white, male heterosexual location is destabilized. At this juncture, Irigaray’s strategic mimesis, Braidotti’s theory of nomadic subjectivity, and bell hooks’ “oppositional gaze” are helpful.

[15] First, for Irigaray, mimesis is the act of claiming the position of the “feminine” in classical philosophical texts and unreading the phallogocentric discourse according to her own notion of the “feminine” instead of “normative femininity” (1985b: 76). She uses the image of a speculum, a curved mirror reflecting back on itself, instead of the flat Lacanian mirror that is used to reflect or mirror back the gaze of the person holding it (see Lacan; Irigaray: 1985a; see also Fuss for a good explanation of Irigaray’s theories).

[16] John Berger speaks of the idea of the mirror and its association with female embodiment and male inscription.

The mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of woman. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical. You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight (51).

Thus women, determined culturally to be more vain than men, were given a mirror to indulge this inscription, and then blamed and mocked for being vain. Men have told women that they are more vain, and represented their bodies in such a manner as to perpetuate this ideal, and then women have incarnated this identity location. However, Irigaray offers the image of the speculum as a means to shatter the “male” mirror and allow women to hold onto their own reflection that curves and reflects back to them their own identity, their own subjectivity, and enables them to be a sight/site for themselves. Irigaray points out that in another time the speculum was a metaphor for depicting the truest picture of reality. She refers to the *speculum mundi*, the “mirror of the world,” which was used to emphasize “not so much the reflection of the world in a mirror as the thought of the reality or objectivity of the world through a discourse” (1996: 60). In this way, Irigaray is deconstructing the Lacanian mirror and all mirrors that perpetuate the male gaze by stressing the original meaning of speculum as discourse.

[17] Braidotti argues for a “nomadic movement of strategic mimesis” in the Deleuzian and Irigarayan sense and for a “female embodied materialism.” Strategic mimesis for Braidotti is the act of replacing the standard, universal subject - white, middle class, male, heterosexual - with one

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<sup>5</sup> For this term, see bell hooks’ definition: “Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality. Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens us to the possibility of agency” (116).

that is “structured by other variables, such as gender or sexual difference but also ethnicity or race,” thus exposing the previous subject, or “universal” for its particular and specific approach (98-99). Second, “Being-a-woman” is the starting point for a new female materialism.<sup>6</sup> It is recognizing sexual difference as a sociological fact, and not necessarily an ontological statement of reality. By using the term “woman,” one must be careful not to mold all women into the great universal “woman” signifier which congeals/unifies multiple women’s experiences into one homogenous being. We have then merely accomplished what we seek to avoid: replacing the phallogocentric gaze in the tower with a different gender, and keeping the male gaze still incarnated.

[18] bell hooks offers an insightful critique of the male gaze and how it is used to construct white womanhood as object and dislocate black womanhood. By looking at cinema construction of black women’s bodies she puts into practice strategic mimesis and female embodied materialism by resisting the gaze and constructing one’s own identity of subjectivity.

Looking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema’s construction of white womanhood as object of the phallogocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator. Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallogocentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” was continually deconstructed. As critical spectators, black women looked from a location that disrupted, one akin to that described by Annette Kuhn in *The Power of the Image*:

. . . the acts of analysis, of deconstruction and of reading “against the grain” offer an additional pleasure - the pleasure of resistance, of saying “no”: not to “unsophisticated” enjoyment, by ourselves and others, of culturally dominant images, but to the structures of power which ask us to consume them uncritically and in highly circumscribed ways (122-23, and quoting Kuhn).

To consume uncritically is to condone, is to be the surveyor within a female body. As Anne Friedberg states, “identification can only be made through recognition, and all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo” (quoted in hooks: 119). hooks claims black women’s spectatorship as a location for destabilizing white womanhood as object of the phallogocentric gaze, and relocates black women’s sight as a location for resistance against the dualistic nature of mere surveyor and surveyed, or subject and object. That is, she exposes women’s bodies as the object of the male gaze when she investigates the manner in which racism, and its use of black women’s bodies, has functioned to create and sustain “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” through stereotypical roles, such as “mammies,” “hot bitches,” or “castrating black matriarchs.” She then gives instances in film - Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*, and Sankofa’s *Passion of Remembrance* - as alternative embodied sites of resistance and

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<sup>6</sup> Braidotti defines “materialism” as an emphasis on the “embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject” (199).

representation that support black female spectatorship and dismantle the racist and sexist stereotypes of the white, male gaze. This identity location invites black women to see themselves in film, (and other areas of culture also) “not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are” (Stuart Hall, as quoted in hooks: 131).

[19] hooks’ analysis, and the cited films, are sites of “strategic mimesis” and “embodied female materialism.” She dismantles the phallogocentric/racist logic of dominant culture by affirming African American women through an embodied notion of black female spectatorship turned inward in a specular gaze. This theory can be helpful to understand the doctrine of the incarnation, and to construct women’s bodies as sites for the Divine.

### **Constructing Divine Female Bodies**

[20] Thus far, this paper has argued that women’s bodies function as an inscriptive surface of power and knowledge for patriarchal society. This function was related to the inmate in the Panopticon who is surveyed, and then internalizes the gaze of the surveyor. Like the inmate, women tend to have a “patriarchal connoisseur” inside them that polices their bodily moves and presentations. The cultural phenomenon of “cover girls,” demonstrated how women’s bodies are locations for the incarnation of the male gaze. Finally, Irigaray’s strategic mimesis alongside Braidotti’s theory of female embodied materialism, and hooks’ oppositional gaze were analyzed as possible sites of strategic resistance for female subjectivity against the male gaze. This is not merely a reversal of gazers and genders, but a destabilization and deconstruction of the male gaze itself.

[21] Let us shift now from feminist theory to feminist theology. “Being-a-woman” provides a strategically essential identity location to think about God/dess,<sup>7</sup> especially as it relates to female embodiment and incarnation. One of the aspects of the traditional doctrine of the incarnation is the inability for women and their bodies to be sites for the Divine. In other words, women could generally give birth to divine beings, or God, but could never be God. As Irigaray states so succinctly:

In many traditions, the god is engendered by means of a woman, means that are not simply the practical ones of procreation. Women take part in the divine becoming, in the engendering of ‘God.’ But that mediation is often forgotten. Women serve the apparition of the god but do not appear themselves as *divine*. As *mothers* of God, as *servants* of the Lord, yes. As consorts of the god, as incarnations of the divinity, no (1993: 106).

The question of who gets to incarnate God/dess is pertinent to female embodied materialism and its oppositional resistance to the male gaze. This does not mean that there is a “feminine side” to

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<sup>7</sup> I use the term “God” to refer to a masculine deity and the prevailing patriarchal structures that support only a male image of God the Father, whereas the word “God/dess” is used to encompass the fullness of both male and female and neither male and female.

a God who can only be fully expressed in a male body, but rather there should be a fuller notion of divinity embodied and revalorized in a female body (Ruether: 135).

[22] Foucault sees the effects of the Panopticon in society when he states, “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” (1977a: 228). The church could also be added to the list as a structure that seeks to regulate and control bodies. That is, the Christian tradition has participated in society’s use of women’s bodies as surfaces of power and knowledge, and has legitimated this process through “God’s approval” and biblical witness to reinscribe that identity onto women. The male gaze is not just seen in a cultural phenomenon such as “cover girls” but in the reification of the male body as Divine over against that of the female body.

[23] But why has religion used the body? Martha Reineke has argued that in society the human body is a site for order and meaning, as well as for chaos and confusion. The body, as an intimate source of boundaries, has been used to reflect back on a smaller scale the issues of the social structure. Women’s bodies, because they have been inscribed as a source of mystery and danger, carry the meaning and potential for disorder and chaos more than do men’s bodies. Because women’s bodies have been seen as “having the potential for the procreative life force,” and religion chooses symbols that control and affect order and chaos, women’s bodies have been locations for the assertion of control and power.

[24] This desire to control order and chaos points to another problem with constructing and embodying God/dess in a female body. In our North American context, it has been the white, middle class male body that has been used as the paradigm from which others emanate. In a sense, this faulty generalization<sup>8</sup> is a type of essentialism that makes the white male the essential component or building block for all humanity. He is the core, or norm by which other races and genders are measured. Faulty generalization is a key concept for feminist theologians because it is this argument that has been used to justify the male embodiment of God and the subordination of women in traditional Christianity.<sup>9</sup> In order to understand this justification, it is important to look not at incarnation stories necessarily, but at myths of female evil as they are found throughout history.

[25] One such myth of women’s propensity towards evil is the creation of Pandora. As a punishment for Prometheus stealing fire from the gods and favoring humanity, Zeus creates Pandora along with her box of woes to torture humanity. Prior to her creation, humanity had been living in a society free from pain and evil, but once her power had been unleashed she brought misery into the world, and kept hope hovering beneath the lid of her box.

[26] Another story found in the pseudepigraphical writing of 1 Enoch has been used to explain the origins of gendered evil. This myth focuses on Genesis 6:1-4 where the sons of God mate with the daughters of humanity and produce giants, which were later interpreted as demons. The

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Minnich defines faulty generalization to be the assumption that humans of a certain kind or gender are the only ones viewed as capable of representing all humanity (51).

<sup>9</sup> Obviously, there are now many denominations who ordain women, such as the liberal/moderate wing of the Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches, to name a few.

story claims that the beauty and adornment of the women were the seductive reasons that elicited the demonic powers (see Prusak).

[27] The most prevalent myth that has been used to justify the male embodiment of God is the traditional interpretation of the story of original sin as read in the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures. Because Eve gave the fruit of the tree to Adam, she is viewed as the one who caused the downfall of humanity, and he as the one who merely “went along” out of his affection for her.<sup>10</sup> Adam was then placed as ruler over her (Genesis 3:16), and since “then” history has accorded her the status of the “weaker sex,” and described her as “easily deceived” (1 Timothy 2:13-14).

[28] To be sure, as Rosemary Radford Ruether states, it is not until the dualistic theology of Paul, and the adoption of the Hebrew Scriptures into Christianity that the story of the Fall takes on theological seriousness (166-67). For Judaism, the primary reason that evil existed among Israel was because of the sin of apostasy from God by seeking other gods. Even the Gospels ignore Eve’s role in the story and point to the human ability for rational choice as that which holds the capacity for good or evil. Yet, as seen in the text of 1 Timothy, Eve *became* the scapegoat for all women as the one who brought evil into the world and even caused the death of Jesus (Ruether: 167-68).<sup>11</sup>

[29] In later Christian tradition, the story of the Fall gets fleshed out in relation to society’s evolving gender roles. One such example is Augustine of Hippo. Admittedly, he is not the only authority in the Christian tradition that attempted to interpret the Fall. It is important to note the influence of Origen, Clement, and Chrysostom, and of course, Augustine’s opponents, Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum on the history of interpretation for this text. Yet, Ruether has described Augustine’s theology as the prototype for patriarchal anthropology (94-95). His theological and societal understanding of the myth of the Fall maintains the view that woman possesses the image of God secondarily. Eve’s work, therefore, was to aid the man in procreation. In essence, her biological and creative purpose was to bear children. For Augustine, Eve’s secondary creation was an explanation of a Divine order of hierarchical domination and subordination of all women. He warns that if this social and gendered rank is not preserved, “nature will be corrupted still more, and sin will be increased” (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 9:5, ACW 42, 75). Unfortunately, Augustine, as one of the most important theologians of Christianity, continues to shape and influence society with his views of women as subordinate in creation to men.

[30] Yet, Augustine’s argument seems a bit tenuous. Women are inherently defective as humans, because they are born as women and not as men; men are the fullest creations in the image of God, so that they reflect the *true* image of God. The reasoning is that God created man in “his” image, and created woman out of the image of man. Therefore, women do not alone embody the image of God. Because only man embodies the image of God, only men’s bodies can be used to

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<sup>10</sup> For this interpretation see 1 Timothy 2:14 and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Book 9, 11: 901-60.

<sup>11</sup> Not to allow Judaism an escape, Ruether relates the story of Lilith, Adam’s first wife who refused to submit to him and fled into the desert. Lilith was then regarded as a source of evil and misery for the family and its values.

incarnate God. The male body is understood as an *essential* aspect of the incarnation of the Logos and not an historical accident, so to embody God as female would not be a true reflection of the divine nature. The problem is that God's maleness is given ontological status, and is not understood as a metaphor, or a limitation of anthropomorphized God-talk. As Bishop C. L. Meyers said in opposition to the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church, "A priest is a 'God symbol' whether he likes it or not. In the imagery of both the Old and New Testaments, God is represented in masculine imagery . . . Christ is the source of Priesthood. The sexuality of Christ is no accident nor is his masculinity incidental. This is the divine choice" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, October 25, 1971, as quoted in Stone: ix).

[31] Mary Daly, one of the most prominent feminist theologians, disagrees with this "divine choice." Her argument in a succinct statement is, "If God is male, then the male is God" (19). She "castrates" the ontology, language, and images of God as male and Father, and views the entire system of theology and ethics as that which has been developed under a patriarchal society, and thus reflects the interest of males and patriarchy. She chooses to de-objectify or de-reify God and locates the divine as a verb - an intransitive verb that does not require an object (xvii). In this, God is never essentialized (except as a verb) into an object or property. The Divine is that which is continually being and becoming, and is something different for each individual. It is considered to be in dialogue with the human struggle against oppression. Daly's "plumb line" for God language is, "Does this language hinder human becoming by reinforcing sex role socialization?" And conversely, can it "[e]ncourage a human becoming toward psychological and social fulfillment, toward an androgynous mode of living, toward transcendence?" (21).

[32] Elizabeth Johnson, a Catholic feminist theologian, also argues against Bishop Meyers' prescribed "divine choice" (46). She recognizes the word "God" as one that is heavily laden with history, from the high holy pinnacles to the expletives on the streets. This is a word that is not easily reappropriated and embodied. The idea of God and who gets to embody God permeates our culture from the most sublime to the most wretched. Johnson also recognizes that God as a "gendered" term is a powerful exemplar for the way the ruling class has dominated an entire metaphysical worldview. God as He, Father, Lord, all incarnations in a male body, reinforce the hierarchy of gender and the subordination of women's bodies. These metaphors have been used to limit the imagination of what God is in relation to human embodiment. Johnson states that God is ultimately a divine mystery, so that all language and imagery of God is limiting and incomplete. But, in order to stretch our imagination and to destabilize the existing oppressive structures of patriarchy, we need to imagine the Divine in female symbols of embodiment so that women can realize that they participate in the mystery of the Divine as well as men.

[33] Johnson is careful not to essentialize when she asks, "Is it not the case that the very concept of the "feminine" is a patriarchal invention, an ideal projected onto women by men and vigorously defended because it functions so well to keep men in positions of power and women in positions of service to them? Masculine and feminine are the most culturally stereotyped terms in the language" (49). Thus, Johnson is not merely advocating replacement of God's typical male body with a female one. This would be the same as replacing the surveyor in the Panopticon tower without addressing the issues of power and knowledge that use female bodies as inscriptive surfaces. Johnson desires the equivalent images of God as male and female, which

would enable women to see themselves as created in the image of God and capable of embodying and representing God/dess.

[34] Sallie McFague, in *Models of God*, presents another type of metaphorical theology concerning the Divine and how it has been imaged in our society. McFague believes the traditional metaphors that have been used to express the relationship between God and the world are no longer adequate for doing theology in our time. She agrees with Johnson that the metaphors for God as patriarchal, imperialistic, and triumphalistic are exclusionary and idolatrous metaphors that are “opposed to life, its continuation and fulfillment” (ix). She certainly recognizes that anything humans can say about the Divine is a construction from our own reality and our androcentric tendencies. She believes there is a possibility for an ontological existence of categories, but we can never know it apart from human history and social construction.

[35] One of these categories is obviously God. She wishes to “re-mythologize” the relationship between God and the world by “trying out” different metaphors for God - mother, lover, and friend - but she never states that these are conclusive categories. One of the main problems that she finds in the present patriarchal metaphors for God is that they have remained ontologically static in a dynamic world. She offers her metaphors as one method by which to understand the relationship of God and the world, but also desires for them to evolve as they should through time.

[36] McFague’s re-evaluation of the metaphors for God are indeed helpful, but there are some problems. The metaphor of God as mother can fall into an essentialized category of women as nurturing, life-giving, and sacrificial. To be sure, not all women are mothers - a typical description of the gendered female. The dualistic notions of father and mother often divide the genders into functions that are based on essential notions of male and female. For example, men are normally described as strong, distant, independent, powerful, removed from emotion, whereas women are seen as nurturing, weaker, dependent, emotional. These are false categories based on the dominant meaning system’s understanding of a hierarchical gender stratification. McFague’s metaphorical theology, as does any metaphorical theology, runs the risk of being misunderstood in these terms. God as mother is helpful to shock a complacent society out of its male metaphors for God, but care must be given not to participate in this same society by falling back on stereotypes of the mother. In order to avoid an essential understanding of mother, one must allow for a diverse heterogeneous understanding of what mother is to various types of women. There is no essential woman, thus there is no essential mother.

[37] As noted above, feminist theologians such as Daly, Johnson, and McFague are assuredly trying to reimage the Divine in terms that reflect and re-present our own embodiment, and which are empowering for women. Based in a society that has used the female body as a site for patriarchal power and knowledge claims, feminist theologians draw upon female embodiment for the Divine because it reflects our own gender as sacred. But the other side of this argument is that gender is a construct created to subordinate women in a patriarchal system. Are feminist theologians being ‘essentialist’ when they choose to employ female bodies as locations for the Divine? I think the key to understanding this issue is power. Women who wish to image the Divine in a female body and who draw from women’s experiences stand in the subject-position

of a subaltern community.<sup>12</sup> That is, “women’s experiences are not a function of entrenched power” (Grigg: 55).

[38] This constructive shift is what Gayatri Spivak calls “strategic essentialism.” One takes what one knows to be a construct created by a hegemonic society, revalues it according to how it may empower those for whom there is little power. She states that

[w]e have to choose again strategically, not universal discourse but essentialist discourse. . . [s]ince the moment of essentializing, universalizing . . . is irreducible, let us at least situate it at the moment, let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it (11).

For example, race is considered by some scholars to be a construct, but during the Black Power movement of the 1960s and early 1970s it would hardly be acceptable to say to those who posited the “Black is Beautiful!” slogan that the source for empowerment was merely an essentialized construct created by the dominant meaning system. Instead, what was pivotal and transforming was that which had been devalued as ugly or less than human was valued over and against that which had been oppressed. It was this strategic use of essentialism which empowered those who had been, and still are being subjugated and exploited.

[39] The term “strategic” is the key to understanding essentialism as it relates to feminist theologians imaging of the Divine as female. Susan Thistlethwaite reminds and critiques white feminist theologians of the possibility of participation in the dominant meaning system by assuming an essential female experience of God as oppressive male or father (109-25). There is a tendency to unify God into a Goddess without allowing for a rich diversity of living, while ignoring the possibility of participation in a reversed reified gender dualism. This is the conundrum of the whole essentialist/constructionist debate as it relates to feminist theology. How does one assent to a notion of gender and race dualism when one asserts a white, female image of the Divine? Thistlethwaite asserts that white feminist theologians who wish to image God as female must not assert a cultural imperialism over other women, especially women of color. That is, white feminist theologians must be careful not to posit an essential woman’s experience of God as oppressive patriarch, and then project that onto all women’s understanding of the Divine. If this were to happen, the surveyor in the Panoptical tower remains just as tyrannical. Again, the Panopticon’s dominant meaning system itself must be destroyed.

[40] In conclusion, through specular discourse and seeing, female embodied materialism becomes a location from which to construct an identity of subjectivity. Women become able to reject dominant modes of representation and incarnation, such as “cover girls” and become subjects of divine identity. In other words, feminist theorists’ and feminist theologians’ work destabilizes patriarchy’s incarnational notion of women’s bodies and then constructs a notion of divinity that valorizes *all* women’s experiences and aids in a formulation of an epistemology of embodiment.

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<sup>12</sup> On Spivak’s use of “subaltern,” see the discussion at <http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Glossary.html>.

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