

# Introduction

## *Perspectives through Age*

My sons all grew up, and I “gave” all their weddings. All of them have their own families, and now to whose do I belong? Now whose am I? I am no longer anyone. Now one son is saying, “I came from a hole in the ground.” Another is saying, “I fell from the sky.” Another is saying, “I came from God.” And yet another is saying, “My hands and feet came on their own; I grew up on my own.” Who am I now? I’m speaking the truth. What kind of thing is a mother?

Billo’s Ma, elderly widow

A mother, a grandmother is like a deity.

Hena, unmarried young woman

I’m still embarrassed to say that I live in a “home.” But what can I do? . . . Affection and compassion no longer exist as they did.

Masima, old age home resident

We place so much importance on the body; we think of it as a very valuable thing. But this is an erroneous, deluded belief. When age happens, the body gets worn out like old, worn clothes; and when we die it is discarded. All things of this world are perishable, transitory. It is only God and the soul that are lasting.

Gurusaday Mukherjee, middle-aged man

This book explores aging as a means of gaining perspective on notions of gender, the body, kinship, and the forces of culture. It does so in West Bengal, India, because of the rich understandings of aging found there, as suggested by the passages quoted above.

One common image of older women in India is that of powerful matriarchs who have finally come into their own as elderly mothers, mothers-in-law, and grandmothers, revered in some ways, as Hena reports, as deities. But when older women, like Billo’s Ma, describe their own lives, they more often speak not of power and reverence but of losses and waning powers, of being forgotten by sons and their wives, of having poured out love, breast

milk, and effort to raise their children and serve their families all of their lives—and in the end never receiving as much as they have given.

Another common image is voiced by Gurusaday: that old age highlights the perishability of the body and all earthly matters, signaling a time to focus on God, the soul (*ātmā*), and the heavenly sojourns or rebirths that will take place after this evanescent life. But for Masima, old age is a time when she is forced to break her family ties and seek an institutional refuge in a “modern,” secular city. The multifaceted lens of aging is used in this book for viewing the varied ways social ties may be formed and taken apart, and bodies and genders transformed.

Several theoretical concerns emerge out of this ethnography, having to do with recent initiatives within anthropology and gender theory to rethink notions of culture, gender, and the body. When I first began to study the experiences of aging among those I knew in West Bengal, what struck me immediately was how different the shape and feeling of social relations and gender constructions looked to me through the eyes of the elderly women and men I sought out. The accounts I had read of South Asian social life had been based predominantly on the perspectives of younger and middle-aged adults.<sup>1</sup> For instance, South Asian women are commonly depicted as requiring veiling and modesty; but I saw white-haired women who left their homes to roam village lanes, not only with their heads and faces uncovered but bared to the waist on hot days, without regard for showing their long-dry breasts. I had read younger adults’ views of older women as having the power to limit a daughter-in-law’s movements, to interfere with a son’s marital intimacies, and the like; yet the older women I knew spoke of feeling that *they* were losing in the contest for a son’s affection, loyalty, and favor. Studies of Indian widowhood rarely distinguished between the consequences of widowhood for a woman in her youth and for a woman past menopause, although I found striking differences. And what of all the people who told me that older women were, in important ways, “like men,” implying that what differentiates a “man” from a “woman” is not constant over the life course?

In attempting to find ways to think and write about these competing discourses on social practices, I found some legitimation and guidance in recent shifts in both anthropology and feminist studies toward viewing “culture” and “women” as multivocal, contradictory, and inconsistent. I also came to realize that perspectives surrounding aging in Bengal could be used to push these theoretical innovations even further and could address ongoing problems in our thinking, especially about gender and the body.

## CULTURE, GENDER, AND MULTIVOCALITY

The concept of "culture" has had many identities. Current anthropological discussions reflect significant change over recent years, from a concept that stressed coherence and systematicity to one emphasizing heterogeneity and open-endedness.<sup>2</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, during what many now label as the "modernist" period, culture was generally understood as a more or less publicly shared, internally homogeneous and distinctive system of patterns, symbols, or meanings.<sup>3</sup> Such a perspective, critics now argue, assumes that all members of a culture more or less agree with each other, just as people of one culture are also set off, uniquely different, from people of other cultures.<sup>4</sup> An ethnographer taking such a viewpoint need not attend to the particular voices, experiences, and perspectives of specific members of a culture or society, since all (presumably) share in its values, visions, and ways of thinking. As Renato Rosaldo (1989:32) comments, "In this [earlier anthropological] tradition, culture and society determined individual personalities and consciousness; they enjoyed the objective status of systems. Not unlike a grammar, they stood on their own, independent from the individuals who followed their rules."

Such critiques themselves are often exaggerated and oversimplified. Robert Brightman (1995:541) points out with justice, "Neither in earlier disciplinary history nor as deployed in recent anthropological writing does the culture concept consistently exhibit the attributes of ahistoricism, totalization, holism, legalism, and coherence with which its critics selectively reconstitute it." Indeed, some passages from leading "modernist" anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski or Edward Sapir sound as if they might have been written today. Malinowski asserted in 1926 (p. 121) that "human cultural reality is not a consistent logical scheme, but rather a seething mixture of conflicting principles." In 1938 Sapir concluded that anthropology is concerned "not with a society nor with a specimen of primitive man nor with a cross-section of the history of primitive culture, but with a *finite, though indefinite, number of human beings*, who gave themselves the privilege of *differing from each other* not only in matters generally considered 'one's own business' but even on questions which clearly transcended the private individual's concern" (Sapir 1949:569–70, qtd. in Brightman 1995:533; my italics). By the mid-1960s Victor Turner was arguing that "[a symbol] is alive only in so far as it is 'pregnant with meaning' for men and women, who interact by observing, *transgressing*, and *manipulating for private ends* the norms and values that the symbol expresses" (1967:44, my italics). We are witnessing, then, not a total transformation or

revolution but a change in emphasis, a shifting of discursive paradigms, in how we think and talk about anthropological analysis. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that coherence, totality, and systematicity did largely characterize the view of culture and society I received in my early years of graduate training at the University of Chicago in the mid-1980s.

I remember going into anthropology to study *people* (having completed an undergraduate major in religious studies that focused more on texts, abstractions, and generalities than on real people's everyday lives). Several months into the required graduate theory course appropriately labeled "Systems," however, I wrote a perplexed letter home; although I was learning fascinating things about "social wholes," "total social wholes," "social facts," "total social facts," "social structures," "social systems," "cultures," and so on, I had yet to encounter any recognizable persons (with unique, divergent experiences and perspectives), or any of the ambiguities, contests, or messy edges that I thought sociocultural—*human*—life was filled with.

I was to discover that many of my generation shared these concerns. By the late 1980s, when I was embarking on my dissertation research in West Bengal, India, works began to appear that argued for the importance of heeding particular voices, lived experiences, and contests. Actually, these paradigm shifts began to emerge even earlier, rooted in many of the theoretical innovations and endeavors of the 1970s and early 1980s. The interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz (1973) and Paul Rabinow (1977), for instance, began to emphasize that a culture is not a fixed and complete (and entirely systematic, integrated) whole, but rather something emergent and co-created in dialogue, both among members of a culture and between informants and anthropologists. The practice theory of the late 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Ortner 1984) was also influential in bringing the individual actor or person to center stage and emphasizing individual agency (cf. Knauf 1996:105–40). The highly influential political philosophers Michel Foucault (e.g., 1979, 1980b, 1980c) and Antonio Gramsci (1971) scrutinized the inescapable technologies of power that shape social relations and forms of knowledge. Feminisms, gay and lesbian liberation, and civil rights movements also questioned the apolitical nature of culture and representation, along with anthropology's previous universalizing tendencies—making us heed the "differences" of class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexuality. By the late 1980s, one could say that postmodernism (incorporating a *mélange* of these perspectives) had burst into anthropology, bringing with it a profound wariness of generalizations and totalizing theories, and emphasizing divergent perspectives, particularities, difference, and power.

Theories of culture also had to accommodate the changing demograph-

ics of a contemporary transnational world. People, ideas, and goods flow now with increasing profusion and speed across borders, making any idea of a neatly bounded, separate, and unique "culture" implausible.<sup>5</sup> This is true in rural West Bengal (where BBC programs play on the radio, *Oprah* is a favorite on television, and people, including social scientists, tourists, and kin, come and go across national borders), just as it is true in New York City. As Bruce Knaft (1996:44) puts it: "Culture is now best seen not as an integrated entity, tied to a fixed group of people, but as a shifting and contested process of constructing collective identity."

This view of the fluid, multivocal, and contested nature of culture has in fact become so widely accepted that, as E. Valentine Daniel (1996:361–62) notes, "Contestation itself has become a cliché, . . . an obliging mannerism, part of a higher-order consensus [among anthropologists]." Yet such a view does not imply that we can no longer say that anything is shared or distinctive about a culture. In fact, some shared ground must exist even to make disagreement, contest, and resistance meaningful (see chapter 2 and afterword, and E. V. Daniel 1996:361). Nonetheless, it is no longer tenable to think of culture as a *neatly* shared, stable, and bounded system. Rather, most see it now—if they continue to accept the idea of culture at all (see, e.g., Abu-Lughod 1991)—as an ongoing process of creating collectivity out of the divergent and shifting perspectives and voices of those who make its conversations.

Around the same time that social theorists were refashioning the concept of culture to include the disparate voices and contests of its members, feminist theorists were endeavoring to rethink, de-essentialize, and fragment the concept of "woman."<sup>6</sup> This was not true, however, when the anthropology of women, or feminist anthropology, first emerged in the early 1970s. Consistent with the modernist tendencies of the times, early feminist anthropologists had sought grand theories that could answer vexing questions—in particular, the basis for the "universality" of female subordination. Two highly influential theories were those of Michelle Rosaldo (1974) and Sherry Ortner (1974). Each argued that the meaning, shape, and value of being a "woman" is profoundly variable (and thus not the result of a simple, universal biology); nonetheless, certain universally found cultural phenomena, such as women's association with "domesticity" (Rosaldo) or "nature" (Ortner), result in the subordination or devaluation of women in all societies. Thus, although ostensibly arguing for variety, Rosaldo and Ortner both posit a universal core or base defining women, tied especially to notions of female physiology, sexuality, and reproductivity. Because women everywhere menstruate and bear and raise children (and are in other

ways associated with their bodies, sexuality, reproductivity, and domesticity), we can find a commonality to the notion of "woman" cross-culturally and we can discern an underlying logic as to why women are everywhere, in crucial ways, subordinate to men.

Such universalizing theories were not long-lived. They came under fire from Rosaldo (1980) and Ortner (1996) themselves, as well as from others who critically reinterpreted the notion of a universal category of women by incorporating issues of race, nation, class, and sexual orientation, as well as cyborg imagery.<sup>7</sup> Women, Chandra Mohanty (1991:55) argues, cannot be assumed to be "an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location." Ortner (1996:137) similarly warns against the tendency to slip into an "assumption that 'women' in some global and sociologically unqualified sense really exist out there in the world, as a natural class of objects with their own distinctive attributes."

Gender theorists have now come to recognize that what it means to be a woman (*and* man—though to date this category has been less discussed) takes such distinct shape in specific times and places, and along crucial axes of difference (most commonly listed as the multiple racial, ethnic, class, and sexual identities of women), that it is not possible to hold up a universal category of women with a presumed common, essential significance. Furthermore, even within a particular time, place, social group, or individual, gender identity is likely to be fluid, partial, and fragmentary. As a result, *methods* of gender analysis in anthropology, like those of cultural analysis, have come to focus more and more on particularity, specificity of contexts, flux, and contradiction (see Abu-Lughod 1993; Moore 1994:11–12), while moving away from universalizing theories and generalizations.

Anthropology's new emphasis on multivocality, fluidity, and heterogeneity has certainly informed recent work on gender in South Asia. Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold (1994), for instance, explore compellingly the multiple perspectives evident in women's songs, stories, personal narratives, and everyday talk in rural north India. Against scholarly representations that have portrayed the "submission [of women] to a monolithic 'tradition,'" Raheja and Gold (1994:xviii–xix) argue that, in fact, women's speech reveals great heterogeneity and resistance: "When Indian women represent themselves in their own words, no single unitary voice is heard; we have only begun to listen to a few of these voices" (p. 9). In their study of Hindu and Muslim women's lives in north India, Patricia and Roger Jeffery (1996:19–20) similarly argue that women in rural Bijnor "did not speak with a single voice." They stress: "[W]e have . . . tried to avoid inventing a sin-

gle reality out of the complex and ambiguous realities of women's daily lives."

Yet when I turned to this literature to try to understand older women's (and men's) lives in Mangaldihi, I did not find all that I needed. Although the past two decades have seen a surge of work on South Asian women, very little has concerned the later years of women's lives.<sup>8</sup> Raheja and Gold's important study (1994) does include an engrossing narrative of "a widow in her sixties" (pp. 164–81), but the work as a whole focuses on the stories and songs of younger sisters, wives, and daughters-in-law. Although Jeffery and Jeffery make the crucial point that women's positions and interests change throughout the life cycle (1996:2), their data are also concentrated on women in their childbearing years, as their original research focused on pregnancy and reproductive histories. Stanley Kurtz's engaging study (1992) likewise centers on images of young women as mothers raising their children. The many works concerned with issues such as purdah, veiling, modesty, marriage, and sexuality also pertain chiefly to younger women, although researchers rarely feel it necessary to acknowledge and examine the significance of their focus.<sup>9</sup>

When an older woman does figure in studies of gender in South Asia, she appears most often as a villain (such as a domineering mother-in-law) in the story of a younger woman who is the writer's primary concern; or she is more generally a repository and enforcer of patrilineal kinship ideologies, dominant social norms, and "traditions" (cf. S. Vatuk 1995:290; Lamb 1997a).<sup>10</sup> Of course, we should attend to the voices of younger women who do present older women (and men) in such a way, voices that scholars have only recently begun seriously to listen to. For instance, Raheja and Gold provide a rich collection of songs from a young bride's or daughter-in-law's perspective that show how young wives can resist ideals of wifely obedience to a husband's older kin (1994:121–48). One of many gems is a dancing song sung by women gathered at home while the groom's party is congregating at the bride's natal village (p. 127):

[Bride speaking]

How can I come, how can I come near you?

Husband, your grandmother is very cunning.

She fights with me and then puts her own cot down next to our bed.

[Husband speaking]

Beautiful one, take the sword from my hand.

Come waving it, come brandishing it, come near me.

The drum will sound, the cymbals will sound, they'll sound the whole night through.

Are younger women alone in resisting, rebelling, complaining, offering alternative visions of family and social life? Raheja and Gold make the important observation that older women *join* their younger daughters and daughters-in-law in singing these rebellious songs, suggesting perhaps women's "ironic apprehension of the oppressiveness of a kinship ideology that splits their identities and pits one woman against another" (1994:148). But what would older women's (or men's) songs and stories look like if *they* were the central characters and tellers of the tales? How do *they* view the coming of a young bride? the marriage of a daughter or a son? their own changing sexuality? approaching mortality?

### THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF AGING

One place to turn for insight into these matters is writings on the anthropology of aging. Over the past two decades, interest in this new field has burgeoned forth in a series of edited volumes as well as numerous book-length explorations of old age in this and other societies.<sup>11</sup> Yet even though this area of inquiry has developed contemporaneously with investigations into the heterogeneous and fluid nature of cultures and genders, the two have proceeded on parallel tracks. Just as old people are often separated socially in the United States (in old age homes and age-segregated retirement communities), aging is also often separated theoretically in anthropological discourse and treated as a closed domain of inquiry, isolated from broader questions about how sociocultural worlds are constituted more generally. This tendency extends back to classic ethnographies (before old age had become a popular object of study in its own right), where chapters on the "life cycle" often included subheadings such as "childhood," "adulthood," "old age," and so on but seldom used these descriptions as integral parts of the analysis of other aspects of social life (cf. Keith and Kertzer 1984:23–24).<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, anthropologists concerned with the fluid and contestatory nature of cultures and genders tend to overlook processes of aging. Contemporary studies of gender, as well as other features of social life, commonly list (in a now almost obligatory practice) race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and (in India) caste as crucial distinctions that cut across all groups; but age is mentioned only rarely. Thus many of the potential advantages that attention to age can bring—by training our gaze on flux, multivocality, change, and process—have been ignored. Marilyn Strathern, in her study of women and society in Melanesia, builds on the feminist insight that "in dealing with relations between the sexes, one is dealing with social relations at large" (1988:35). I would extend this notion to our deal-



ings with age. Social relations are “aged” just as they are gendered, though of course the meanings and politics of age alter according to cultural and historical context. Processes of aging (however defined) cut across all of our bodies and lives; they play a central role in how we construct gender identities, power relations, and the wider social and material worlds we inhabit—indeed, what it is to be a person.

By overlooking age, those in women’s studies and gender theory have increased the difficulty of their task of theorizing about the ways women and men are constituted as gendered beings. In her 1985 plenary session speech to the National Women’s Studies Association in Seattle, Barbara MacDonald charged that women’s studies has made invisible the lives of women over sixty, having failed in the classroom to provide any feminist analysis of women’s aging: “Has it never occurred to those of you in Women’s Studies, as you ignore the meaning and the politics of the lives of women beyond our reproductive years, that this is male thinking? Has it never occurred to you as you build feminist theory that ageism is a central feminist issue?” (1986:21). The brief references to studies in South Asia have already shown how focusing exclusively on younger women tends to limit our understanding of the fluctuating and nuanced character of women’s lives. Freezing women’s lives in one stage—as wives, daughters-in-law, or young mothers—is even more limiting when we consider the place of “the body” in recent anthropological and feminist theory.

#### THE BODY IN POSTMODERN AND FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY

When you get old, everything becomes closed or stopped. That which happens between husband and wife stops. Menstruation stops. And then when your husband dies, eating all hot food stops as well. This is so that the body will dry out and not be hot.

Mejo Ma, older Brahman widow, Mangaldihi

Over recent years anthropology and feminist theory (like the wider academy) have focused intensely on the body, with new works pouring forth at a rapid pace: *The Woman in the Body* (E. Martin 1987), *The Body in the Mind* (Johnson 1987), *Fragments for a History of the Human Body* (Feher 1989), *Gender/Body/Knowledge* (Jaggar and Bordo 1989), *Body and Emotion* (Desjarlais 1992), *Bodies That Matter* (Butler 1993), *Bodies and Persons* (Lambek and Strathern 1998), *Body Talk* (Zita 1998), *Body Image* (Grogan 1999), and many more. I introduce briefly here some of the major trends in our current theorizing about the body, for I believe that Bengali ethno-

theories of the body—the ways many Bengalis use bodily images and processes to define old age and gender relations—can help us address some of the problems in the current anthropological and feminist literature, which has tended to present “the body” as a reified, decontextualized, somehow transhistorical and transcultural object.

Emily Martin (1992) explains this current surge of attention by pointing out that the body as we have known it (during a Fordist era of mass production) is being replaced by a new kind of body suitable for late capitalism, the postmodern era of flexible accumulation; it is precisely during such times of transition, when phenomena are coming to an end, that they draw academic and public attention. I would suggest instead that the body has become popular in the humanities and social sciences because it is tangible, particular, and located—a stone we can touch, so to speak—amid the shifting sands of postmodernism (cf. John and Jean Comaroff 1992:39–40). While the postmodern cultural theory of the past two decades has discouraged efforts to speak of general, all-encompassing (modernist) systems or principles, the body seems to provide a unique vehicle for situating perspectives and giving a particular locatedness. Focusing on the body becomes a way both to move away from overarching totalizations and *at the same time* to provide something apparently tangible, experienced, and “real” to hang on to and study. Susan Bordo observes that in a Cartesian worldview there is no place for the body, since the body, by situating and thereby relativizing any perspective, prevents the possibility of an all-encompassing, transcendent (“*object-ive*”) perspective. For postmodern thinkers, in contrast, there is no escape from human perspective: “The body, accordingly, is reconceived. . . . No longer an obstacle to knowledge[,] . . . the body is seen instead as the vehicle of the human making and remaking of the world, constantly shifting location, capable of revealing endlessly new ‘points of view’ on things” (1990:143–44; the quotation refers to Suleiman 1986).

Foucault’s extremely influential analyses of the workings of power in modern society also focus on the body (1973, 1975, 1979, 1980b, 1980c). Rather than treating power as an abstract force, he examines how forms of power are localized, inscribed on, and inflicted on individual bodies and populations (the social body) as these bodies are controlled, regulated, and disciplined within particular prisons, asylums, hospitals, psychiatrists’ offices, and universities. Michael Jackson, influenced by the earlier works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977), similarly focuses on embodied practice and knowledge in social analysis. Jackson (1989:119–55) explains his focus on bodily movement and praxis as a means of pushing away from “disembodied” and abstract theories of culture, which he, like

Bordo, sees as grounded in the Cartesian split between knowing subject and unknowing inert body. He critiques his earlier "bourgeois" conception of culture—that is, "as something 'superorganic,' something separable from the quotidian world of bodily movements and practical tasks" (p. 126)—and he argues that in order to make anthropological discourse more consonant with the practices and interests of the people we study, we must focus our ethnographic analyses on particular body movements and practices, on the embodied character of lived experience as *habitus* (pp. 119–55; cf. Bourdieu 1977, 1990).

In gender and feminist theory as well, the body has played a leading but much more ambivalent role. When social theorists developed the term "gender" in the late 1960s, they set it against "sex," depicting that which is socially or culturally constructed as opposed to that which is biologically given (cf. Nicholson 1994:79–80). Here, the body fell into the domain of sex and nature, while gender was a matter of culture. Today, feminist theorists continue to see gender (i.e., beliefs and practices surrounding male/female distinctions) as culturally constructed, but their positions diverge regarding the place of the *body* and *sex* in relation to gender.

For some, the body functions crucially (as in postmodern anthropology in general) in providing a locatedness to abstract social theory and analysis (e.g., Bordo 1990:145; Marshall 1996). Many feminist theorists take the significance of the body even further, claiming (often subtly or by implication only) that we need to recognize the specifically *female* body in order to theorize about what it is to be a woman.<sup>13</sup> This position can appear under different guises—biological determinism, biological essentialism, biological foundationalism, or feminism of difference (cf. Nicholson 1994)—but in each case it is assumed that real bodily, or biological, phenomena differentiating women and men are used in all societies (though perhaps in varying ways) to shape a male/female distinction. Here, the body and biology are taken as the *basis* on which cultural meanings of gender are constructed. Linda Nicholson (1994) calls this a "coatrack" view of the body, as the body is viewed as the common base or coatrack on which different cultural artifacts of gender are hung.

One crucial advantage of such a position is that it enables feminists to postulate both commonalities *and* differences among women. As Nicholson (1994:81) puts it: "[The coatrack view] enabled many feminists to maintain the claim often associated with biological determinism—that the constancies of nature are responsible for certain social constancies—without having to accept one of the crucial disadvantages of such a position from a feminist perspective—that such social constancies cannot be transformed."

Claiming the female body as a common ground broadly uniting the category of woman across histories and cultures is also thought to support feminism's political program. Many argue that unless we provide a clear basis defining what it is to be a woman (transhistorically and transculturally), then we cannot generate a politics around this term (e.g., Downs 1993; cf. Nicholson 1994:99–100). The body seems to provide just that necessary common ground. In these arguments—not surprisingly, perhaps—the qualities thought to distinguish women's bodies surround reproduction, motherhood, and sexuality, qualities generally associated with femininity in the West.

An equally strong counterview of the relationship between the body and gender in contemporary feminist discourse, however, is very wary of any theory that depends on a precultural or pancultural notion of the body to define women and gender. Thus Ortner (1996:137) remarks: "Personally, I thought the whole point of feminism was to bring about a situation in which women were *not* seen as a natural class of being, defined primarily by their bodies." Many are justifiably resistant to ideas that seem to assert an unalterable, essential female nature; critics often challenge the original formulation of the sex/gender distinction, arguing that the body, or sex, itself is *part* of the social construction of gender. Even when a social group recognizes distinctions between male and female bodies, these are always interpreted through a cultural lens. A society not only shapes beliefs and practices around what we have become accustomed to label "gender," it also shapes the way the *body* appears and is interpreted—meaning that the body (and sex) can be best understood to be *part* of gender.<sup>14</sup> As Foucault (1980a, 1980b) has demonstrated, bodies have no "sex" outside of discourses that define them as sexed.

These theorists believe not that the body necessarily becomes irrelevant to feminist analysis but simply that it cannot be held up as a pre- or trans-cultural given. Instead it becomes, as Nicholson (1994:101) puts it, "a historically specific variable whose meaning and import are recognized as potentially different in different historical contexts." She persuasively argues:

Most societies known to Western scholarship do appear to have some kind of a male/female distinction. Moreover, most appear to relate this distinction to some kind of bodily distinction between women and men. . . . [But] "some kind of male/female distinction" and "some kind of bodily distinction" include a wide range of possible subtle differences in the meaning of the male/female distinction and of how the bodily distinction works in relationship to it. . . . In short, while all of these societies certainly possess some kind of a male/female distinction

and also relate this distinction in some important way or another to the body, subtle differences in how the body itself is viewed may contain some very basic implications for what it means to be male or female. (p. 96)

This brings me to what I want to say about the body in relation to my work on aging and gender in West Bengal. Those I knew in Bengal used rich imagery of the body to define, practice, manage, and control processes of aging and of gendered identity. They were highly body- and material-oriented in their constructions of social identity. Aging was defined in Mangaldihi, for instance, largely in terms of “cooling” and “drying,” processes that were at once somatic and social, emotional, and spiritual (see chapters 2, 4, and 6). Dominant discourses defined gender identities, too, in terms of bodily natures: women were often spoken of as more “open” and “hot” than men (somatically and socially)—at least until their postmenopausal and post-marital years, when their bodies became cooler and more self-contained, and their practices and social identities in some ways more “like men’s” (chapters 6, 7).

However, in striving to think and write about this material, I found that much contemporary theorizing about “the body” in anthropology and feminist discourse could not work in Bengal, because many of the “body” theorists have failed to recognize the historicity and cultural particularity of their own insights. Taking very specific Euro-American notions of the body and assuming these to be universally valid, they have tended to reify the body as an individual, material place—an isolable thing. This tendency, I should note, is one that extends back to the pioneering work of Mary Douglas (1966, 1970), who assumed the body to be “a model that can stand for any *bounded system*” (1966:115, my italics). Of course, from a phenomenological point of view, we *can* reasonably assume that all people more or less experience some sense of a unique body-self (Mauss 1985 [1938]). But there are also many societies (and some contexts within our own society) where other perceptions, experiences, and constructions of the body are highlighted—ones that do not (wholly or even predominantly) assume the body to be local, tangible, bounded, stable, or individually experienced, as current theoretical discourses on the body presuppose.

For instance, as the following pages will show, much of what the Bengalis in Mangaldihi perceived and discussed as their “bodies” included wider processes and substances than those directly tangible or limited to their own bodily boundaries. Properties of one person’s body existed in others’ bodies, in the places they lived, and in the objects they owned and handled (chapter 1). It may make more sense, then, to assume bodies to be (like persons) open,

composite, and “dividual” (Marriott 1976). Bengalis spoke of a body or person as materially and emotionally *part* of other bodies, persons, places, and things; a body was said to belong to a “family” (*saṃsār*) rather than to a single person (chapter 2).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, when they described the bodily changes that are part of aging—such as cooling and drying—they were speaking just as much about social-relational processes as somatic ones: for to become cool and dry in the body means to become increasingly (substantially *and* socially) self-contained and noninteractive (chapters 4, 6). So, although I believe that a focus on some form of locatedness and positioned subjectivity is itself a salutary move in contemporary sociocultural theory, it may not be appropriate to assume that “the body” (as a kind of precultural materiality) can provide us this subjectivity (cf. T. Turner 1995; Pollack 1996).

Furthermore, the body is not “male” or “female” in any constant, trans-historical, or transcultural way, as presumed in so much feminist theory grounded on a notion of female bodiliness. We certainly think about gender in terms of essential bodily differences between the two sexes, in this particular historical moment,<sup>16</sup> and thus we (many Americans) have great difficulty looking past such an assumption. I find that the idea of the cultural construction of *gender* (as roles, beliefs, practices, etc.) is easy for my students to accept, but the notion that the *body* itself (the ways it is used to signify maleness and femaleness) is also a cultural construction runs into much more resistance.

The ways the Bengalis in Mangaldihi used the body in their constructions of gendered social identities particularly illuminate this problem of the relationship between body and gender, partly because gendered and bodily identities shifted for them in specific ways during their lives. Gender was not a constant determined by dichotomous physical differences between women and men. The Bengalis I knew definitely used the body to define gender differences, but not in terms of a fixed, binary male/female distinction; instead, they often explained the biologies of the two sexes in terms of differences in the relative amounts of qualities, such as “heat” and “openness,” that all bodies and persons possess. All bodies (male and female, young and old) possess relative amounts of heat (or coolness), fluidity (or dryness), and openness (or boundedness). Women, in general, were commonly described as being more open and hot than men (features that distinguished their female gender). But these qualities fluctuated significantly over the life course, with important somatic as well as social, political, and spiritual implications. Women after puberty, particularly during their married and reproductive years, were taken to be the most “hot” (*garam*) and “open” (*kholā*), especially because of their involvement in menstruation, marriage,

sexuality, and childbirth—all processes thought to entail, for women, substances going into and out of the (open) body, as well as the “heating” properties of sexual desire (chapter 6). However, as women went through the social and somatic processes of aging (including menopause, the cessation of childbearing, and widowhood), they were seen as becoming increasingly “cool” and “dry,” and thus, in important ways, “like men”—which brought them increasing freedom of movement beyond the home and the options to participate in inner temple life, wear men’s white clothing (dhotis), and expose the body (chapters 6, 7). It is not that older women ever precisely *become* men. But it would be nonetheless highly misleading to think here of women and men, femaleness and maleness, as binary, opposing categories, grounded in unchanging physical differences.

By paying attention to age anywhere, we could train our gaze on this kind of flux in the ways the body is used to create gendered identities. The relatively few cross-cultural studies to date on gender identities over the life course have often found that what it is to be a woman shifts significantly in late life.<sup>17</sup> For instance, Fitz John Porter Poole describes how old, no longer married, and postmenopausal women among the Bimin-Kuskusmin of Papua New Guinea are thought to be asexual and of ambiguous gender, neither exactly male or female but “betwixt and between” (1981:117). This androgynous status gives older women ritual and leadership opportunities that younger women and men do not have. Judith Brown (1982, 1992) and Karen Brodtkin Sacks (1992) observe through surveys of cross-cultural data that later life is often a time in which a woman has her greatest power, status, and autonomy, enjoying prerogatives that are often characterized as “male.” Such freedoms can come about because of a presumed asexuality (as in India), but in some societies—for example, among the Lusi of Papua New Guinea (Counts 1992), the Garifuna of the Black Carib (Kerns 1992), and the !Kung of southern Africa (Lee 1992; Shostak 1981)—middle age brings expanded freedom for women to joke about sexuality and to display sexual interest, activities that are also often seen as “male” privileges. Women’s aging bodies can sometimes evoke more negative associations—for instance, a sense of waning femininity, sexuality, beauty, or social usefulness.<sup>18</sup> Such views are especially common in reflections on aging and women in the United States (see Chapkis 1986:5–35; J. Alexander et al. 1986).

The diversity and richness of such data on changing images of bodies and genders reveal the profound limitations in focusing on only one life stage (namely, the reproductive phase) in our theorizing about what it is to be a “woman” (or a “man”), as if gendered identity were essential and fixed. Yet this relatively large, interesting set of ethnographic data on aging still has

not been widely incorporated into the level of gender *theory*.<sup>19</sup> It is striking that so much gender and feminist theory persists in focusing on sexual reproduction, motherhood, and the household. As Micaela di Leonardo (1991:26) reports, even in the postmodern era “Both feminist essentialists and conservative anti-feminists have continued to draw on the nineteenth-century storehouse of moral motherhood symbolism, stressing women’s innate identity with and nurturance of children and nature.” She adds, “[Feminists] have fallen victim to the vision of an innately nurturant, maternal womankind” (p. 27). Ortner (1996:137) similarly blames “certain problematic directions in feminist theory, which concentrate heavily on female physiology, sexuality, and reproductivity,” for the ongoing tendency to assume that “‘women’ in some global and sociologically unqualified sense really exist out there in the world, as a natural class of objects with their own distinctive attributes.”

It has been easy for many feminist theorists to think of women (transculturally and transhistorically) in relation to reproduction and motherhood, largely overlooking postreproductive life phases, because that is how we tend to define women within our own dominant popular cultural and medical discourses in the United States. Margaret Lock (1993) has done particularly illuminating work in this area. She examines assumptions made in the basic scientific and medical literature, and in popular writings, over the latter part of the twentieth century on aging women in the United States. Aging women are generally represented as “anomalies” (pp. xxiv–xxvii). For example, two leading physicians write in an article addressed to specialists in geriatrics, “The unpalatable truth must be faced that all postmenopausal women are castrates” (R. Wilson and Wilson 1963:347, qtd. in Lock 1993:xvi, 346). Helene Deutsch, in her *Psychology of Women* (1945), professes: “Women’s capacity for reproduction normally lasts as long as menstruation is regular. With the cessation of the function, she ends her service to the species” (qtd. in Lock 1993:xiv). By the 1960s, menopause had been designated as an estrogen “deficiency disease,” characterized by the failure of the ovaries to secrete the hormone taken to be the “essence” of the female. The barely concealed assumption underlying such medical views is that reproduction of the species is what female life is all about (p. xxvii). In medical research on menopause, the chemistry of women of reproductive age is taken as the standard measure for what is “normal” and “healthy,” thereby marking the aging female body as abnormal (pp. xxxii–xxxiii). These are presumably some of the reasons why menopause management and its spin-off, hormone replacement therapy, are currently such big business in the United States—the only country in the world (indus-



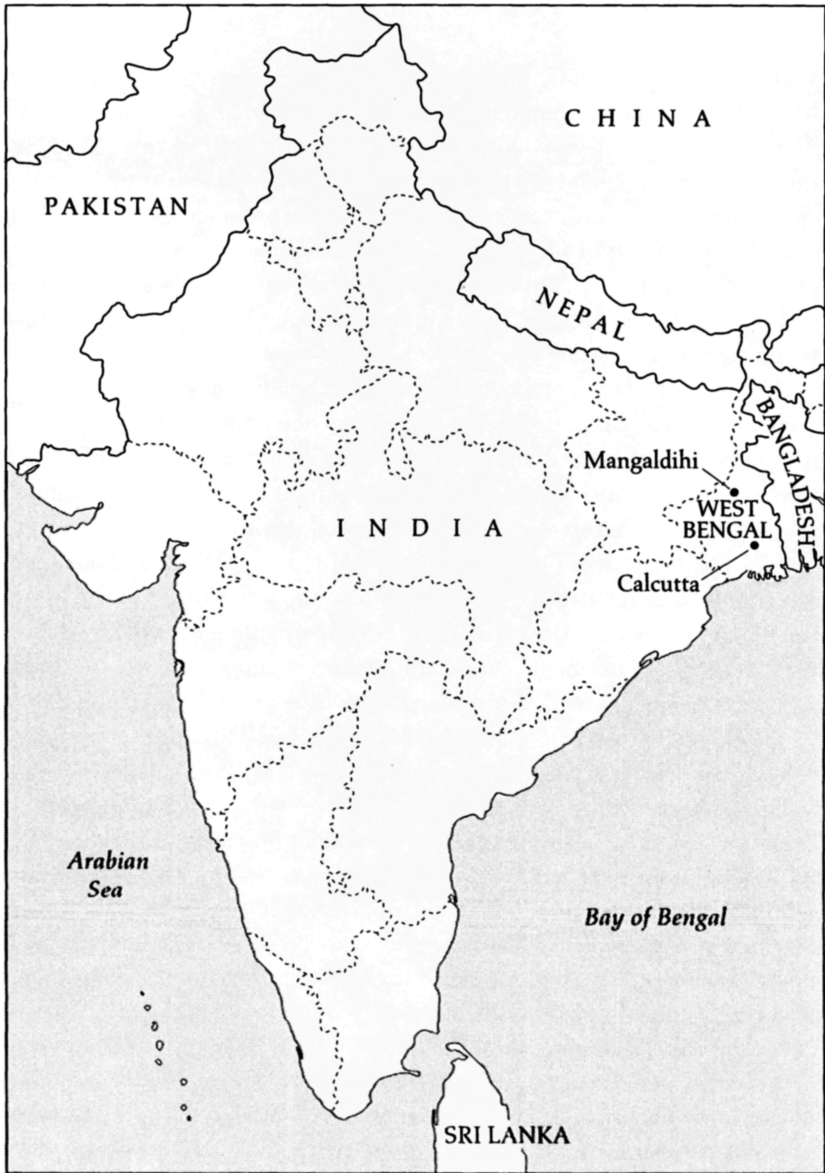
trialized or not) in which hormone replacement therapy is so widespread. Many American physicians recommend it to almost all their patients, in a seeming attempt to keep women, in some way, “young,” “normal,” and “female.”<sup>20</sup> Wendy Chapkis (1986), who also incisively examines popular American culture, finds that although all people—men and women—fight against the changes of age, it is women’s bodies especially that we feel compelled to control and preserve, resisting the “changing landscapes” of time.

Such popular and scientific assumptions surrounding aging women have permeated our theorizing about gender and the body as well; it becomes “natural” for gender/feminist theory to center on female reproductivity, as if this were the most significant, singular dimension of women’s bodies and biologies, and thus, by extension, the crux of their sociocultural identities, in all times and places. Such theories are illuminating if we use them to examine our own values. (In this way, one can use social theory as a window into the belief systems and assumptions of those who produce it.) But these same theories can lead us far astray if we import them unquestioningly to the analysis of other times and places. In addition, they perpetuate within our own society hegemonic norms, negating the identities and experiences of those women who have chosen *not* to center their lives around reproduction.

A focus on the body, or bodies, *can* be provocative and enlightening, then, if we explore the specific and multiple ways the body (and female and male bodies) is furnished meaning and significance within particular cultural-historical contexts. In this project, it is valuable to examine how variable cultural notions of the body serve specific interests within societies: how relations of power may be experienced, implemented, contested, and negotiated by alternate ways of speaking about and representing the body (cf. Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1987, Scheper-Hughes 1992). Heeding local meanings of the body may also necessitate moving beyond our current preoccupation with the body altogether. Thus, I explore in the following pages the ways specific representations of the body are used to define persons, aging, and gender, but I am not assuming the body to be already present in some sense as a starting point. Here I find Henrietta Moore’s counsel to be valuable: “In fact,” she writes, “I would suggest for the time being that we might be better working back towards sex, gender, sexual difference and the body, rather than taking them as a set of starting points” (1994:27).

## LIVING IN MANGALDIHI

Most of what I report here describes people of modest means and middle or higher Hindu caste residing in the center of the village of Mangaldihi, where



India

I lived for a year and a half from 1989 to 1990. Mangaldihi is located in West Bengal, India, about 150 kilometers from Calcutta, where I had previously lived and studied language in 1985 and 1986 (see map). The village of some 1,700 residents and 335 households comprised seventeen different Hindu caste (or *jāti*) groups, one neighborhood of Muslims, and one neighborhood of tribal Santals.<sup>21</sup>

Brahmans were recognized as being the village's "dominant" caste, as measured by landholdings, political clout, social mores, and the history of the village. Oral traditions told that Mangaldihi had been founded about 250 years earlier by Brahmans carrying figures of the deities Syamcand and Madan Galpal—forms of Krishna—from Brindaban far to the east, to protect them from Muslim invaders. Brahmans still lived in the village's central neighborhoods, and the village's major religious festivals still revolved around their ancient Vaishnavite deities. Brahmans also owned the majority of the village's land (60 percent), although their landholdings had significantly decreased over the past several decades under a series of government land reforms.<sup>22</sup> Most of the village's Brahman families still supported themselves by farming (rice was the staple crop), but only a handful of families owned more than ten acres of land. Most supplemented their agricultural income by finding salaried jobs in nearby cities and towns, working as priests, or opening small village grocery, tea, and video shops.

Numerically, the Brahmans in Mangaldihi were just about matched by the Bagdis, a lower or Scheduled Caste group occupying several village neighborhoods.<sup>23</sup> The Bagdis were much poorer than the Brahmans, owning an average of just a bit more than half an acre of land per household. They supported themselves mainly by working in Brahman households, tilling Brahman land, fishing, and cultivating small plots of their own. Bagdi representatives always secured several seats on the local *panchāyat* (government representative system), though, and they had a strong cultural and political presence in the village. Tables 1 to 3 list the other *jāti* groups of Mangaldihi, their traditional and current occupations, and size of their landholdings. Although most in the village did have enough to eat, very few were wealthy, and many families had to struggle to get by. There was a general feeling of scarcity and want in the village, which clearly seeped into the ways people structured and experienced their family relationships, their processes of aging, and the kinds of jealousy and bonds of maya, affection, and love that I describe in the following pages.

It was in a Brahman neighborhood that I settled, in the mud hut—nearly abandoned—of a wealthy Brahman family who had since moved to an adjacent three-story brick house. They later invited me to move into an up-

Table 1. *Jātis* of Mangaldihi by Number and Occupation

<i>Jāti Name</i>	<i>Number of Households</i>	<i>Traditional Occupation</i>	<i>Occupation in Mangaldihi</i>
Bagdi*	95	Agricultural laborer, fisher	Agricultural laborer, fisher, servant, cow tender
Brahman	84	Priest	Landowner, priest, salaried job, shopkeeper
Santal	34	Tribal	Agricultural laborer
Musalman (Muslim)	23	Cultivator	Owner cultivator, agricultural laborer, shopkeeper
Muci* (or Bayen)	22	Leatherworker, musician, drummer	Agricultural laborer musician, drummer
Kulu	15	Oil presser	Owner cultivator, shopkeeper, salaried job
Bauri*	14	Agricultural laborer	Agricultural laborer
Kora	14	Tribal	Agricultural laborer
Baisnab (or Bairagya)	10	Religious mendicant	Owner cultivator, shopkeeper, salaried job
Barui	6	Betel nut cultivator	Owner cultivator, shopkeeper, salaried job
Dhoba*	3	Washerman	Washerman, owner cultivator
Hari*	3	Midwife, drummer	Agricultural laborer
Napit	3	Barber	Barber, owner cultivator
Bene	2	Merchant	Shopkeeper, salaried job, landowner
Suri*	2	Liquor maker	Shopkeeper, liquor maker, owner cultivator
Dhatri*	1	Midwife	Agricultural laborer
Karmakar*	1	Blacksmith	Blacksmith, owner cultivator
Sadgop	1	Cultivator	Owner cultivator
Sutradhar	1	Carpenter	Carpenter, owner cultivator

Table 1—Continued

KEY: \* *Jātis* classified by the government as Scheduled Caste.

Agricultural laborer	Those who cultivate the land of others but own no (or very little) land of their own (see also table 3).
Owner cultivator	Those who own and cultivate their own land.
Landowner	Those who own land but do not cultivate it themselves.

stairs room of that house. So it was almost inevitable that I became closest to the village's Brahman community, and it is their voices that figure in the following pages most saliently. I also spent a good deal of time in Bagdi neighborhoods, and I strove to interact with and gather data from members of each of Mangaldihi's other caste and ethnic groups. I often found a high degree of variation in the ways the different castes or *jātis* of Mangaldihi practiced and perceived matters of gender and aging, distinctions that I highlight when especially relevant.

My research focused on older women and men. I often found them hanging out at temples, on roadsides, and in the courtyards of their homes, relatively free from the work that so engrossed most of their younger adult kin. We spent hours together talking about life, family relations and struggles, fears and hopes surrounding death, memories of childhood and romance, current television dramas, the problems of poverty, the sufferings of women, and the changing nature of modern society. I sought out men as much as I did women, for "gender" (one of the problems I was most interested in) must, I believe, include women *and* men. Indeed, gender studies done in South Asia have generally been weakened by the relative dearth of attention paid to men. In the field of gender studies, "gender" has been used largely as a code for "women."<sup>24</sup> Women and men are equally gendered beings, however, and neither can be understood in isolation from the other and from the broader social worlds in which gender identities are constituted.

One of my main aims in hanging out with these older women and men in Mangaldihi was to gain a sense of their voices, lived worlds, and everyday experiences. Lawrence Cohen (1998) has written a fascinating, masterful account of constructions of old age and senility among families and institutions in the Indian city of Varanasi, and more generally in India's gerontological and popular cultural texts. Perhaps partly because he is focusing on *senility*, Cohen largely omits old people's *own* voices and experiences. (Senile, or in Varanasi parlance "weak-brained" or "hot-minded," old people are presumably elusive informants.) I have taken Mangaldihi's older people themselves as key subjects, as I have scrutinized how they envisioned, prac-

Table 2. Distribution of Landholdings  
in Mangaldihi, 1990

<i>Size of Holding (acres)</i>	<i>Number of Households</i>
Landless	115
< 1	83
1-5	87
5-10	39
10-15	7
15-20	4
> 20	0

Table 3. Distribution of Landholdings in Mangaldihi by *Jāti*

<i>Jāti Name</i>	<i>Number of Households</i>	<i>Total Land Held (in acres)</i>	<i>Average Landholding (acres per household)</i>	<i>Percent of Total Village Land</i>
Brahman	84	406	4.8	58.4
Kulu	15	69	4.6	9.9
Musalman	23	56	2.4	8.1
Bagdi	95	53	0.6	7.6
Barui	6	36	6.0	5.2
Baisnab	10	13	1.3	1.9
Bene	2	12	6.0	1.7
Suri	2	12	6.0	1.7
Muci	22	11	0.5	1.6
Sadgop	1	7	7.0	1.0
Napit	3	6	2.0	0.9
Dhoba	3	4	1.3	0.6
Santal	34	4	0.1	0.6
Kora	14	3	0.2	0.4
Bauri	14	1	0.1	0.1
Karmakar	1	1	1.0	0.1
Sutradhar	1	1	1.0	0.1
Dhatri	1	0	0	0.0
Hari	1	0	0	0.0

ticed, and experienced their own aging, embodiment, family relationships, grapplings with love and maya, and everyday lives in the world.

But since I myself was a younger woman, recently married, in my late twenties and early thirties, I also spent a good deal of time with my “peers,” younger unmarried and recently married women. My closest daily companion was Hena, a young woman in her mid-twenties who married during my time in Mangaldihi. She shared a room and single pillow with me every night until her marriage, telling me of village gossip, her concerns and dreams, and her own visions of older people. Neighborhood girls and boys also crowded into my room daily, sharing tea and snacks with me; and the younger wives in the neighborhood, when they could free themselves from work, would also make some time for me—as we perhaps bathed together, or took a trip to town to buy a sari, or stopped to make a cup of tea in the still afternoon while others were taking their naps.

I also learned a great deal from these younger people, which highlighted for me the ambiguities, multiple perspectives, and shifting meanings inherent in what it is to be a woman, a man, and a person in this community of West Bengal. I concentrate here on these competing, ambiguous perspectives, and especially on the ways in which the women and men I knew made and remade their social worlds and gendered identities as they moved through the latter phases of their lives.

Although I went to India and Mangaldihi to seek out their stories in the pursuit of writing a dissertation and then a book, many of these older people also sought *me* out as a listener. They called to me as I passed, climbed the three flights of stairs to my home, or tapped me on my arm, saying “You haven’t taped my life story yet,” “You must write this down,” “Did you get that in your notebook?” I hope that the following pages are true to their trust in me to articulate my sense of their experiences, and understandings, of their own lives and the lives of their neighbors.