

**reflections on imagination  
and embodiment in the work  
of moira gatens, 1983-2008**

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In 1983 Moira Gatens published ‘A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction’ (hereafter, ‘Critique’).<sup>1</sup> Subsequently reprinted in a variety of feminist anthologies and in her own *Imaginary Bodies*,<sup>2</sup> this article questioned the uncritical adoption of ‘gender’ as the preferred conceptual category of feminist analysis. Whilst scholars were eagerly abandoning discussions of sexual difference, Gatens sought to interrogate this move. At the time, ‘gender’ (following Robert Stoller) was seen to have “psychological and cultural rather than biological connotations,” and was thought to have deep explanatory power by extension, providing the best avenue for understanding women’s oppression.<sup>3</sup> And, if women are oppressed because of their gender—that is, because of *socially shared ideas* about women—then a seeming-solution presents itself: let us degender society by changing culture and mind. We must learn that there is nothing innate about Woman (or Man); it is a social construct. In short, we must learn that there is nothing about the female sex—the capacity to birth and feed a child, the presence of female genitalia and secondary sex characteristics, and so on—that entails Woman’s subordination to Man, nor her limitation to certain social roles (such as mother, wife, etc.), nor even that a person so-sexed *is* a woman. Such perceptions of Woman are fictions created amongst and perpetuated by social actors and institutions. To the extent that this basic understanding persists in our general collective consciousness, women’s liberation still seems to point to this ‘obvious’ solution; we can and should degender our societies, treating all persons the same no matter their physical form.<sup>4</sup>

Gatens' crucial observation is that such degendering arguments are predicated on an unconvincing assumption that mind and body are separate, and ignores the historical and contextual fact that people *are* oppressed because of the cultural meanings that attach to their morphologically sexed specificity. But the argument was controversial. In an interview with Mary Walsh, Gatens recalls initially presenting the piece at conferences in 1981 and 1982, explaining that "it wasn't well received at all," and "there was a lot of confusion about it... it got a very aggressive reaction from people."<sup>5</sup> One of the reasons for this controversy follows from the mistaken tendency to attribute essentialist commitments to difference feminism, despite Gatens' explicit articulation of her intention to demonstrate that difference feminism need not fall afoul of this objection.<sup>6</sup> Yet, one can see how it is possible to make such a mistake. Consider, for instance, Gatens' statement: "I would suggest that some bodily experiences and events, though lacking any fixed significance, are likely, in *all* social structures, to be privileged sites of significance."<sup>7</sup> Since this occurs in all social structures, sexed bodies might then appear to have a certain inherent nature. But close attention reveals the nuance of the claim. As Gatens explains, the body with which she is concerned is "the situated body," "the body as lived," "the body's morphology"—in other words, "the imaginary body."<sup>8</sup> Gatens does explicitly challenge the belief that social meanings are made manifest by a neutral consciousness and that masculine and feminine behaviours are arbitrarily linked to male and female bodies. But this is not to posit an essence which fixes the identities of males as Men and females as Women; rather, it is an attempt to take seriously the fact that "we *are* historically and culturally situated in a society that is divided and organized in terms of sex."<sup>9</sup> This observation remains important as ever in contemporary western societies, for, as Gatens explains, people still "don't want to acknowledge that biology is also involved in culture," nor that culture produces biological knowledge.<sup>10</sup> I assert that the insights advanced in Gatens' 'Critique' remain both radical and important, and that the extension and nuanced articulation of the themes of imagination and embodiment throughout Gatens' oeuvre are crucial for ongoing feminist analysis, activism, and cultural (r)evolution.

## A CRITIQUE OF THE SEX/GENDER DISTINCTION

The aim of 'Critique' is to demonstrate that the two premises underscoring the degendering proposal are unconvincing. They are:

1. the body is *neutral* and *passive* with regard to the formation of

- consciousness... [and]
2. one can definitively alter the important effects of the historical and cultural specificity of one's 'lived experience' by consciously changing the material practices of the culture in question.<sup>11</sup>

Against the rationalist view (premise one), following Freud, Gatens argues that subjects are perceptual beings. The important insight here is that perception is an active rather than passive process, and that much of what is perceived by the body “never even enters consciousness but remains preconscious or unconscious.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, if the body were passive, then it could be trained to respond appropriately to certain stimuli and relied upon to consistently react in a certain way. But this is not what bodies do; bodies are actively and flexibly engaged in the world. Because subjectivity is not passive, it cannot be reduced to the mere body (as the behaviourist would have it), and because most of what is perceived through the body never makes it to the level of consciousness but *does* orient the subject in the world, subjectivity cannot be reduced only to mind either. This takes care of the claim that the body is passive with regard to the formation of consciousness, for the body is always in an active and creative engagement with its environment. To the point of neutrality, Gatens states bluntly: “let me be explicit, there is no neutral body, there are *at least* two kinds of bodies: the male body and the female body.”<sup>13</sup>

To the second premise, Gatens charges that it is ahistorical itself; it fails to “consider the resilience of expressions of sexual difference along with the network of linguistic and other systems of signification that both constitute and perpetuate this difference.”<sup>14</sup> Those who desire (or presume we can achieve) a degendered society miss the point, stated above: we *are* historically and culturally situated in a society that is divided and organised in terms of sex. What is required is an understanding of the body as lived for the subject, given that subjects always exist in cultures with a particular historical trajectory, as embodied, and where particular features of bodies have particular meanings and will always have *some sort of meaning*. As Gatens later explained, the aim here was “to offer a critique of the [sex/gender] distinction using the notion of the *imaginary body*.”<sup>15</sup> It is to this concept, and to ‘social imaginaries’, that I now turn.

## IMAGINARY BODIES AND SOCIAL IMAGINARIES: DEVELOPING THE CONCEPTS

While Gatens' notion of bodily imaginaries has developed over time, in this first elaboration much of her critique was influenced by insights from psychoanalysis and (to a lesser extent) phenomenology.<sup>16</sup> Use of the term in psychoanalytic circles can be traced back to at least the 1930s—it emerges, for instance, within Lacan's articulation of the mirror phase, which was, in turn, developed from Freud's account of the narcissistic ego.<sup>17</sup> The narcissistic ego is always mediated by others, and to the extent that it can invest its own libidinal tributaries to its own image or to parts of its own body, it must come to see itself as not only a subject but also an object (-as-seen-by-others). Thus, the narcissistic ego is an alienated ego; “the subject that takes itself as its own object is fundamentally *split*.”<sup>18</sup> So, the ego is “the psychical representation of the subject's perceived and libidinated relation to its body [as object-ified].”<sup>19</sup> The mirror phase is thus designed to explain the emergence of the narcissistic ego or unified ‘self’ which cannot be separated from the body.

For Lacan, the preconditions of this genesis are the child's awareness of a distinction between itself and the (m)other or mirror-image, an absence of instant gratification of need, and the beginnings of a displacement of the child's dependence—the mirror stage “provides a promise or anticipation of (self)mastery and control the subject lacks” at present.<sup>20</sup> This external perception of ‘the self’ is adopted wholesale and the body-image comes to organise the subject's own experience of its body.<sup>21</sup> As Elizabeth Grosz puts it, the ego (one's conception of ‘the self’) is an *imaginary anatomy*: “a psychical projection of the body, a kind of map of the body's psycho-social meaning” that is invested with affect.<sup>22</sup> It is organised not by “the laws of biology,” but by “a culture's *concepts* of biology,” and thus of “parental or familial significations and fantasies about the body.”<sup>23</sup> This explains how each subject has its own unique body image, but also how patterns emerge across the body images of similarly-(em)bodied individuals (e.g. those who share specific sex characteristics). Put another way, the imaginary body is a *threshold concept*, it is neither natural nor cultural, neither mind nor body, neither individual nor social, but always inescapably and simultaneously both.<sup>24</sup> In ‘Critique’, Gatens saw this liminal concept as one from which politically productive theorising about equality could emerge.

Feminist understandings of the imaginary body such as Gatens' also go beyond the psychoanalytic conception, acknowledging the relationship of imaginary bodies to social imaginaries. Social imaginaries ultimately produce certain sorts of subjects; as Gatens says, "it is misleading to explain the imaginary in terms of the creative subjective imagination because without the instituting social imaginary there would be no subjects."<sup>25</sup> But subjects also have the power to (collectively) shape the social imaginaries in which they invest and to which they conform. In short, the relationship between the two is co-constitutive. For Gatens, social imaginaries—i.e. our repositories of collective imaginings, including those which underscore what Lacan labelled 'the symbolic'—are understood more readily as a cause rather than the effect of thoughts by individual subjects, even though subjects nonetheless remain capable of imagining themselves and their worlds anew.<sup>26</sup>

The importance of the social imaginary can also be located in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. For him, our social life is a manifestation of the (dominant) social imaginary, which is "our most basic ontological category," and is inclusive of our capacity to generate and modify "networks of interconnecting symbols that give meaning to our existence."<sup>27</sup> Yet, while Gatens' own work on the imaginary shares similarities to Castoriadis' work, her focus on the material difference of bodies (in the development of individual subjectivity via imaginary bodies) distinguishes her insights. Indeed, she has been described as "drawing together the concerns of broadly psychological conceptions of the imaginary with those of theorists of the social imaginary [e.g. Castoriadis]" and bringing them to bear on the issue of embodiment.<sup>28</sup> Also influential for Gatens were insights on the body arising out of the phenomenological tradition (as mentioned above), particularly in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. So, for her, the imaginary includes elements of both the "conscious, imagining, and imaging, mind," as in the phenomenological tradition, and the "unconscious, phantasying mind," as in psychoanalysis,<sup>29</sup> as well as to the stock of images that social collectives are deeply, *affectively* invested in,<sup>30</sup> which ultimately and inevitably shape our own bodily morphology—our experience of embodiment—and our understanding of the world as meaningful.

Given this understanding of imaginary bodies, we are now well-placed to understand what Gatens' hoped to achieve by contesting the sex/gender distinction via appeal to this concept in her seminal article. Her argument is not that sexed specificity entails a *specific* cultural interpretation that would invariably shape subjectivity in a fixed way. Rather, her argument is that certain bodily features and

functions will not escape cultural conceptualisation *whatever that may turn out to be*. Moreover, since there is no ahistorical nor neutral body, we would do well to explore the impact of *the body as lived* for subjects who find themselves born into patriarchal societies—such as subjects born into western societies—if we want to address oppression as it effects real people. For Gatens, the imaginary body is not the physiological, anatomical, nor biological body. And it is “not simply a product of subjective imagination, fantasy or folklore.”<sup>31</sup> It is constituted in part by shared images, symbols, metaphors, and representations, which means the imaginary body is inherently, inescapably *social*. But it is also always *affective, embodied*; there is no separation of body and mind.

To summarise: we employ ready-made images and symbols from the social imaginaries into which we are born, including our shared cultural meanings of biology, to make sense of and (e)value(ate) the subjects we encounter, including our own embodied experiences. We do this based on cultural conceptions of biology which, though contingent, are not arbitrary.<sup>32</sup> This has an important implication. Since we call upon “ready-made images and symbols to make sense of social bodies,” including one’s own body, to determine what constitutes appropriate treatment of, and value for, certain subjects, we come to find that “it is not what is done or how it is done but *who* does it that determines social value.”<sup>33</sup> In short, it is not so much the activity that generates social value, rather it is the type of person who engages with that activity that is so-valued within the social imaginary.<sup>34</sup> This allows us to make sense of Gatens’ statement: “it is not masculinity *per se* that is valorized in our culture”—as proponents of degendering would seem to suggest—“but the *masculine male*”:<sup>35</sup> a claim which still holds true today. And in a patriarchal social context, this is what must be challenged.

## THE SPINOZISTIC TURN

Following the publication of ‘Critique,’ the Spinozistic influence in Gatens’ approach to the imaginary and embodiment—in her feminist effort to understand human subjectivity and becoming—moves to the foreground. The feminist appeal of Spinoza is vast (though his philosophy was not particularly prominent at the time Gatens began to engage with it).<sup>36</sup> He does away with the mind/body substance dualism of Descartes, and his is an embodied monism: *a* mind is the idea of *a* body, and bodies are always already in a social context, bearing traces of their own past. In Gatens’ words, “the body is the ground of human action,” and “the mind is constituted by the affirmation of the *actual* existence of the body.”<sup>37</sup> There

is no clear reason/passion split in his philosophy either, since, according to Gatens' interpretation, his notion of reason is that of an active emotion. Moreover, reason is *embodied* "precisely because it is the affirmation of a *particular* bodily experience."<sup>38</sup> There is also no clear dichotomy between nature/culture, since human beings are a part of (rather than separate from) nature.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, "the human body is radically open to its surroundings," and is "in constant interchange with its environment."<sup>40</sup> Spinoza further sees subjectivity in part as "an awareness of the body as it is impinged upon by other bodies."<sup>41</sup> Thus, it is inherently social and, crucially, always becoming and always in process.

Importantly, for Spinoza, the imagination is "a form of bodily awareness,"<sup>42</sup> and the imagination is never transcended. What makes his account of the imagination ripe for mining by feminist philosophers are three observations: the imagination is inevitably material, it is inherently social (i.e. tied to collectives), and it is suffused with emotion and affect.<sup>43</sup> His insights on the imagination and its importance for feminism are summed up by Gatens as follows:

Imagination necessarily involves both mind and body—and a body that is already inserted into a context in which it has certain values and meanings. These may well be false, but, if so, that is completely irrelevant, because it is through these meanings and values that a body becomes whatever it is. So for me, the notion of the imaginary *embodies, specifies, historicizes, and contextualizes* the experience of individuals and groups.<sup>44</sup>

Gatens marries this with psychoanalytic and phenomenological ideas about the imaginary body in order to produce an account of individual and collective growth and change that is both contextualized and particular.

We can also retroactively trace these insights back into a reading of Gatens' 'Critique' to see once again why it is politically misguided for feminists to abandon the material body in favour of analysis of gender (where gender is understood as the social construction of a mind that bears no trace of the material form in which it is embodied).<sup>45</sup> The point is that the cultural meanings of biology are tied up in relations of domination and oppression (because bodies are never outside of a context), so feminism must fight for different social relations between *embodied* beings that are *specific* to time and context. And while feminism cannot ignore the polarization of men and women that is a part of our socio-political histories, a feminism which is attentive to embodiment is not subsequently shackled to rec-

ognising bodies as always and only either male or female and subsequently Men or Women. We can, drawing inspiration from Spinoza, “begin the exploration of other ontologies which would be developed hand in hand with a politico-ethical stance that accommodates *multiple*, not simply dichotomously *sexed* bodies.”<sup>46</sup> We avoid essentialism too, because we understand that the body is always a body in process, in changing contexts, and so its capacities and meaning are always varied and variable. By eliciting insights from Spinoza, as well as psychoanalytic and phenomenological insights into the subject’s imaginary body that were drawn upon in ‘Critique’, Gatens is able to press the importance of embodiment in the constitution of the subject in a historical and contextualized way which endures throughout her research. She avoids reducing discussions of difference to mere biological essentialism by advancing an account which stresses the morphology of bodies as produced within interconnecting and temporally extending social imaginaries.

Taking on and adapting such frameworks also allowed Gatens to make good on another central feminist commitment as she grew her body of scholarship: recognition of intersectionality—acknowledging the fact that sexual difference is not the only embodied difference, nor is it a difference which can legitimately be privileged over others in the struggle for liberation.<sup>47</sup> Importantly, the dominant, overarching, interconnecting stock of images in contemporary western societies attaches greater value to certain sorts of bodies and the activities those bodies undertake—namely, white, male, cisgender, heterosexual subjects—and less to others. The question is: how do we move beyond oppressive social imaginaries (which substantially produce specific morphologies of sexed, raced, desiring bodies and thus affect the body as lived) to a world in which our cultural meanings and normative practices are instead *enabling* for a great variety of subjects? We must collectively produce new ‘stocks of images’<sup>48</sup> (or alter our old ones) in a process that is never closed: always contextual, but open ended and always unfinished.

#### ‘CAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACCOMMODATE WOMEN’S RIGHTS?’ SOCIAL IMAGINARIES AND IMAGINARY BODIES IN PRACTICAL CONTEXT

The insights articulated by Gatens in ‘Critique’ have endured throughout her writing and have grounded her analysis of contemporary matters of social justice. For instance, she repeats her point that the value of social activities is dependent upon *who* performs them in her 2004 article ‘Can Human Rights Accommodate Women’s Rights?’ (hereafter, ‘Women’s Rights’):



The meaning of normative behaviour will vary depending on whose behaviour it is. The links between various imaginaries and gender norms crucially involve the body and bodies are of at least two kinds: male and female... Meaning *depends* upon how specific norms attach to types of bodies.<sup>49</sup>

In short, we cannot understand gender-based oppression unless we take the body-as-lived into account. Gatens then extends this insight by working through the rights-based concerns raised by the practice of arranged child marriage within some indigenous Australian communities.

Gatens explains that “normative behaviour cannot be understood, perhaps not even judged, without seeing how it fits within the relevant social context.”<sup>50</sup> In the case discussed by Gatens, the arranged child marriage was defended by the man accused by appeal to traditional or customary law. Here the contexts are dual: a dominant Anglo-Australian imaginary developed in the historical context of settler colonisation, and an Indigenous imaginary with various practices comprising customary law. Thus, child marriage could be seen on the one hand as child abuse, and on the other an important way of solidifying kinship ties. Gatens maintains that the rights of indigenous women must be understood by paying attention to competing social imaginaries as well as the place of specific imaginary bodies within them. Thus, we see that the traditional practice of arranged child marriage is complicated by the intersectional experiences of indigenous women: when one lives across two social imaginaries which mark out one’s place and role as an embodied subject in sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory ways, how is one to act? How is one to become (recognised as) an agent, as a subject? How does one navigate and alter the normative expectations placed upon subjects such as herself? This question is critical, given that “women are the most visible and significant embodiments of culture,”<sup>51</sup> which is complicated further by the fact that “women who speak out in support of institutional change and women’s rights are often portrayed as rejecting their culture in favour of ‘Westernization.’”<sup>52</sup> Yet, it is crucial to recognise that the privileging of Aboriginal men’s accounts of customary law by the Anglo-(masculine-) Australian legal system in fact *distorts* such law so as to ‘justify’ the harms experienced by women and girls.<sup>53</sup>

So, we see that the fact of sexual difference emerges as central in discussing “whose imagination, whose innovations, [and] whose challenges to convention have had the force to shift the way we imagine our political communities.”<sup>54</sup> In

Gatens' words,

At base, the normative problem is the very fact of sexual difference, that is, the fact that human life is double: man and woman. Yet, in all cultures, it would seem, one half of humanity, man, has had by far the major say in how and why this fact should be made socially, ethically and politically meaningful.<sup>55</sup>

But so, too, is race a central factor that cannot be abstracted away from, and this is precisely Gatens' point: these minority women's identities "are constructed at the intersection of two of the most fundamental social and political divisions: sex *and* race (or ethnicity)."<sup>56</sup> As she explains in *Imaginary Bodies*:

Social imaginaries 'link up.' They link up, however, not to form a coherent unchallengable front. On the contrary, different aspects of contemporary liberal sociabilities jostle against each other, create paradoxes of all kinds, and present opportunities for change and political action.<sup>57</sup>

In sum, it is precisely by paying attention to our intersections that we may become alert to contradictions and articulate our reasons for demanding change. These insights thereby retain a connection to her argument against ahistoricity in her 'Critique'—she maintains that "there is no universal Woman" and that "the spur to fight for social change is endemic to the places and times in which actually existing women fight for historically and culturally specific causes;"<sup>58</sup> thus, if we want to change the material conditions of our lives, we must first make the meanings behind our specific normative practices visible, but we must also acknowledge that our history cannot be abstracted away from. Though social imaginaries and imaginary bodies are "the always present backdrop to meaningful social action," *presentness* does not entail a subject's conscious awareness, and so, to change these imaginings, we must bring them (and our history) to the foreground.<sup>59</sup> This is no simple feat, since the ways we imagine ourselves and our place within the world—our rationale for what we do and how we do it—"may be long forgotten."<sup>60</sup> In short, justice requires a twofold response: we must make our imaginaries visible—we must re-member them, and we must also endorse that women, as much as men, are entitled to participate in the reshaping of their cultures and societies—to reshaping the social imaginaries that make their lives meaningful.

## STRIVING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: ENUMERATING SOME TOOLS

For Gatens, imaginaries—both bodily and social—require “working through”:<sup>61</sup> imaginaries work at the threshold of a collective affective preconscious that is always embodied, which is why they prove so stubborn to shift. As mentioned above, we must collectively produce new stocks of images in an open-ended manner to reshape the possibilities for understanding ourselves and our proper place in the world. But *how* can this occur? It is perhaps here that Gatens’ ongoing commitment to historical specificity, embodiment, and the need to illuminate our preconscious commitments is most evident. The role of affect and its relationship to reason is crucial. In her words,

*Disaffection* with one’s circumstances may result in a radical social disorientation which, though painful, obliges one to take stock of where one is, where one would like to be, and the most likely means of successfully reaching one’s desired destination... To acknowledge one’s disorientation, one’s lack of (proper) place, and that one is not alone in this, is to acknowledge the need to collectively create new maps.<sup>62</sup>

Despite Gatens’ explicit statement that “I am not proposing a theory of the imaginary,”<sup>63</sup> and Susan James’ statement that “there is no recipe for success,”<sup>64</sup> there are nonetheless tools which can be found in Gatens’ discussion in ‘Women’s Rights.’ I extract six for consideration: power, time, contradiction between imaginaries, desire for change, critique, and resonance—though none of these is a necessary nor sufficient condition which can guarantee the desired outcome.<sup>65</sup> Rather than offering us a methodology, I believe that what we can extract from Gatens’ scholarship is a provisional lot of strategic approaches that offer us some hope for generating change. In short: our tools to elicit changes in our dominant imaginings may not prove sufficient but they can have *some* effect, and perhaps this is the most we can expect when deriving strategies to interrogate and transform what has become individually and collectively ‘second nature.’<sup>66</sup>

First to power: though the point is implicit, I believe that when Gatens asks “who has the authority to define tradition? Who is invited to participate in the reinvention of tradition across time?”<sup>67</sup> this very clearly indicates that bringing relations of social power to explicit attention will be a crucial stage in strategizing over how one will develop their critique of the social imaginary and create new maps (or stocks of images). Next, to time, contradiction, and desire: in Gatens’ words,

“competition between different imaginaries”—as in the competing imaginaries of white Australia and indigenous groups—“inevitably generates contradictions over time.”<sup>68</sup> This is what permitted the young girl in the case Gatens discusses in ‘Women’s Rights’ to articulate her desire *not* to be placed in an arranged child marriage. Indeed, Gatens explicitly states that “contradictions within and between social imaginaries, coupled with human desires, are the motors of social change.”<sup>69</sup> On the importance of critique, we see Gatens stipulate that “deliberate collective resistance to norms, and the imaginaries that support them, will involve pushing [the ambiguities of social meanings] to their limit through the reinvention or reinterpretation of aspects of those imaginaries.”<sup>70</sup> This ties into the final factor: resonance. As Gatens’ explains, “if particular normative constraints are to be justifiable they will have to be more or less consistent with broader social meanings and narratives”<sup>71</sup>—thus the critical move must be *constructive* rather than *destructive*. It must evolve meaning, not eradicate it.

#### ‘CONFLICTING IMAGINARIES IN AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURALISM’: RETURNING TO INTERSECTIONALITY AND WOMEN’S HUMAN RIGHTS

We are left with a niggling question: how to ensure that the changes one seeks to bring about are in fact enabling (i.e. *permit agency*) for a great variety of subjects, including those who historically and contemporarily face oppression, and particularly for those who find themselves located at the intersections of oppressions? This question caused Gatens to return to the example of arranged child marriage in her 2008 article, ‘Conflicting Imaginaries in Australian Multiculturalism’ (hereafter ‘Conflicting Imaginaries’).<sup>72</sup> The concern remains that rights for minority cultures “may support discriminatory treatment of individual girls and women within the relevant groups.”<sup>73</sup> But, as Gatens rightly asks, “where is the Archimedean point from which one confidently could rank cultures from the most to the least patriarchal,” or the most to the least oppressive, and from where one might suggest directives for how less-egalitarian groups might achieve equality?<sup>74</sup> One cannot assume that western liberal feminism provides such a platform of judgement, for it would imply “that [this] feminism’s norms are culturally ‘neutral’,” which, of course, is not the case.<sup>75</sup> As Gatens already emphasised in ‘Critique’, we are *all* historically and culturally located subjects<sup>76</sup>—and “the line between the embodiment of one’s [multiple, overlapping] cultural norms and one’s capacity for agency is difficult, if not impossible to draw” when this is taken into account.<sup>77</sup> For this reason, Gatens acknowledges Robert Post in his criticism of Susan Moller Okin: “distinguishing between enabling and oppressive cultural norms is a fun-

damental challenge of liberal multiculturalism, a challenge that has yet to be successfully confronted.”<sup>78</sup> Gatens’ own endeavour to take up Post’s challenge starts from the observation that “agency *must* take different cultural—and historical—forms.”<sup>79</sup>

In the context of multicultural, (post-)colonial Australia at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, debate as to whether a behavioural norm or social practice is constraining or enabling for a given actor “will depend on the nature of the cluster to which the norm is attached and how that cluster figures in broader imaginaries.”<sup>80</sup> With regard to the specific practice of child marriage, it is crucial that women in indigenous communities are also consulted about what constitutes customary law.<sup>81</sup> As Gatens makes plain, the struggles of indigenous women are specific to a context where colonization and its aftermath have (perhaps irreparably) damaged the imaginaries of indigenous communities, such that “for some indigenous women the concern is not that their culture...will become extinct. It is rather that traditions and laws are being passed on to the next generation in a distorted form that is deeply damaging to the interests of women and girls.”<sup>82</sup> Thus, attempts to preserve *or* return to *or* to change one’s culture should not be seen as a product of false consciousness on the one hand, or cultural abandonment on the other, but as a valid expression of agency.<sup>83</sup> It is the practice of engaging the historically oppressed in consultation and negotiation which is central: whether a practice or overarching imaginary is *enabling* or *constraining* for certain subjects cannot be determined in advance, abstracted from history and context.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

Today, as we continue the social project of women’s liberation, one cannot deny that ‘gender’ rather than ‘sex’ is the term with the most social purchase. One also cannot deny that nowadays people use the term differently than they did 1983; ‘gender’ is frequently used as a synonym for ‘women.’<sup>84</sup> Gatens argues that this is “connected to the original problem” analysed in ‘Critique.’<sup>85</sup> Culturally, we have not yet overcome the unconvincing mind/body distinction against which Gatens’ ‘Critique’ argues vehemently, yet which still implicitly associates the body and difference with women alone. Indeed, the fact that ‘gender’ has become synonymous with ‘women’ only signifies further that it remains Man who is posited as the ‘normal’ human subject, as though he has no sex (nor race, nor orientation, etc.) of his own. Subsequently, we are not well-enough equipped to attend to the deep conceptual roots which perpetuate women’s (and other forms of) oppres-

sion in a lasting way. This is why the observations made in Gatens' 'Critique' remain crucial for feminist theory and activism, and why the central insights Gatens argued for in 'Critique' continue to reappear throughout her oeuvre, sometimes in flashes, and sometimes explicitly. The following statement from 'Conflicting Imaginaries'—published a full 25 years after 'Critique'—demonstrates that this is so:

Inattention to contextual meaning assumes the existence of an ahistorical, acultural, 'essential' individual, whose desires and 'nature' may be distorted, or illegitimately constrained, by her insertion into a specific place and time. This posits 'woman' as a 'universal' whose freedom may be secured by replacing distorting and oppressive local cultural norms with universally appropriate human rights. But there is no universal 'woman' and no 'acultural' individual. This means that the spur for normative change is endemic to the places and times in which actually existing women fight for historically and culturally specific causes.<sup>86</sup>

The fact remains: bodies are not neutral, they are not ahistorical, nor acultural, and they are not passive in relation to their environment. It is through adopting the notions of the imaginary body and social imaginaries that we are able to see that this is so. While Gatens' scholarship shifts its primary focus from bodily imaginaries to social imaginaries over time, the two never come apart. Embodiment remains a crucial fulcrum around which her investigations into liberation, social justice, and human rights spin. Gatens' scholarship not only offers insights into the ways injustice perpetuates (and develops) in contextually specific forms over time, she also offers us (some of) the tools we need in order to attempt social (r)evolution.

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## NOTES

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2. Gatens, Moira. *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*. London: Routledge, 1996.
3. Stoller, in Plumwood, Val. “Do We Need a Sex /Gender Distinction?” *Radical Philosophy* 51 (1989): 2.
4. As Plumwood points out, what one means by ‘degendering’ matters. It might mean “removing all structure of social difference and meaning attached to male and female biology and bodies” (“Sex/Gender Distinction,” 10, original emphasis)—which Gatens believes is impossible and distracts from attempts to address injustices between men and women. But, alternatively, it might mean something more akin to regendering: “the liberation of gender from the shackles of a dualistic (and dimorphic) system” (“Sex/Gender Distinction,” 10). This is a fair statement, but couched as a critique of Gatens’ argument, it is misguided for two reasons. 1. While it *may* be true that scholarly advocates for ‘degendering’ really mean ‘regendering’—the implication being that Gatens has created a straw man—this says nothing of how *activists* were in fact coming to understand ‘gender,’ nor what they intended when they advocated a program of ‘degendering.’ 2. Gatens’ argument problematizes a particular notion of gender as predominantly understood at the time (as Gatens saw it). But she does not deny that the concept can be reimagined and put to good use as a feminist concept. This is supported by her later research. In *Imaginary Bodies*, she offers one such alternative account of ‘gender’: it may be understood “not as the effect of ideology or cultural values but as the way in which power takes hold of and constructs bodies in particular ways” (*Imaginary Bodies*, 70). In other words, “gender is a material effect of the way in which power takes hold of the body rather than an ideological effect of the way power ‘conditions’ the mind” (*Imaginary Bodies*, 66). And even if gender can (and should) be saved, Gatens’ critique still retains crucial insights for feminism today, especially concerning imagination and embodiment.
5. In Walsh, Mary. “Twenty Years Since ‘A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction’: A Conversation with Moira Gatens.” *Australian Feminist Studies* 19 (2004): 213—214.
6. In this author’s view, Val Plumwood (“Sex/Gender Distinction”) makes this error in her critique of Gatens.
7. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 9, emphasis added.
8. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 11. I note that Plumwood also misunderstands the ‘imaginary’ in the sense intended by Gatens. She states, “It is the body as experienced as well as imagined, and as seen and felt, and what is believed about and to follow from the body, which is relevant, not just as imagined in mental imagery” (“Sex/Gender Distinction,” 7—8). The critique is redundant because this is precisely what Gatens means, and Gatens’ analysis is aimed at disrupting an easy separation of ‘the mental’ from ‘the physical.’
9. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 11.
10. Walsh, “A Conversation with Moira Gatens,” 214. Whilst this insight has become much more commonly accepted in academia, it would be a stretch to assert that this is a commonly shared belief in western societies more broadly.
11. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 7.
12. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 8.

13. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 8, emphasis added.
14. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 10.
15. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 3, emphasis added.
16. For example, in a footnote to 'Critique' she expresses that "Merelau-Ponty has an interesting account of perception as an activity of the body-subject in *The Phenomenology of Perception*" (Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 19, fn 29).
17. Grosz, Elizabeth. *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1990, 15; Gatens, Moira. "Imaginarities." Included in *50 Concepts for an Intersectional Phenomenology*, edited by A. Murphy, G. Salamon, and G. Weiss. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming.
18. Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 31, original emphasis.
19. Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 31.
20. Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 32.
21. Gatens, "Imaginarities."
22. Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 43.
23. Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 44, original emphasis.
24. Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 46.
25. Gatens, "Imaginarities," n.p.
26. Gatens, "Imaginarities."
27. James, Susan. "Freedom and the Imaginary." Included in *Visible Women: Essays on Feminist Legal Theory and Political Philosophy*, edited by Susan James and Stephanie Palmer. Oxford: Hart, 2002, 181. Publishing.
28. James, "Freedom and the Imaginary," 185.
29. Whitford, Margaret. *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*. London: Routledge, 1991, 54. This distinction is uncovered by Whitford in reference to the work of Luce Irigaray, who is another influential thinker for Gatens. However, Gatens departs from Irigaray's ascription of primal importance to the *sexual* imaginary. Gatens' own political theorizing is much more intersectionally robust when it comes to thinking through identity and justice (see especially Gatens, Moira. "Can Human Rights Accommodate Women's Rights? Toward an Embodied Account of Social Norms, Social Meaning, and Cultural Change." *Contemporary Political Theory* 3 (2004): 275—299 and Gatens, Moira. "Conflicting Imaginarities in Australian Multiculturalism: Women's Rights, Group Rights, and Aboriginal Customary Law." Included in *Political Theory and Australian Multiculturalism*, edited by Geoffrey Brahm Levey. New York: Berghahn Books, 151—170).
30. Gatens' later engagement with the philosophy of Michèle Le Dœuff also clearly informs this position. While Le Dœuff is interested in "the stock of images you can find in philosophical works," it is her broader observation that we tend to 'think in images' which matters here, as well as the fact that "the particular imaginary employed...tends to organize the fundamental values of that system." See Gatens, Moira. "Polysemy, Atopia, and Feminist Thought." Included in *Michèle Le Dœuff: Operative Philosophy and Imaginative Practice*, edited by Max Deutscher. New York: Humanity Books, 2000, 45, 46.
31. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, viii.
32. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 13. The cultural variation between activities which are normatively expected of men and women is well documented (see, for example, Rosaldo, Michelle Zimbalist.



“Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview.” Included in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere. 17—42. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974, 17—42). This shows that what we collectively make of appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour as it relates to biological differences is not fixed or unchanging. Nonetheless, it is impossible to deny that human reproduction is of vast importance in human societies, and thus, because this activity is so important, it is not arbitrary that the categorisation of humans into sexed types occurs in some way. This by no means requires a dimorphic understanding of sex. It requires only that we acknowledge the different capacities of different bodies.

33. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, vii, 15, original emphasis.

34. Empirical evidence backs up this claim. As Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo (“Woman, Culture and Society”) demonstrates, whatever activity it is normative for men to perform, these are the activities which are attributed the most social value.

35. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 15.

36. One of the reasons Gatens was drawn to his work was precisely that there was a dearth of authoritative secondary texts written about his philosophical insights (see James, Susan. “The Power of Spinoza: Feminist Conjunctions. Susan James Interviews Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens.” *Hypatia* 15 (2000): 46—47).

37. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 57, emphasis added.

38. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 57, original emphasis.

39. See James, “The Power of Spinoza,” 44, 47.

40. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 110.

41. Lloyd, in James, “The Power of Spinoza,” 48.

42. Gatens, Moira and Genevieve Lloyd. *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*. London: Routledge, 1999, 12.

43. Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, 12.

44. Gatens, in James, “The Power of Spinoza,” 56, emphasis added.

45. I believe such a retroactive reading is justified, given that Spinoza was a central figure in Gatens’ doctoral thesis, which she was writing at the time ‘Critique’ was published (personal communication).

46. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 56, original emphasis.

47. Other ‘difference feminists’ have been interpreted as privileging the morphology of sex over and above other forms of embodied differences, notably Luce Irigaray (e.g. Stone, Alison. *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexuate Difference*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Gatens has argued directly, “insistence on ontological sexual difference leads into the *cul de sac* of essentialism, where sexual difference is privileged over all other difference,” which is to be avoided (*Imaginary Bodies*, x, original emphasis).

48. The term comes from Michèle Le Dœuff (see Gatens, “Polysemy, Atopia, and Feminist Thought,” 50).

49. Gatens, “Can Human Rights Accommodate Women’s Rights?” 283, emphasis added.

50. Gatens, “Can Human Rights Accommodate Women’s Rights?” 283.

51. Rao, in Gatens, “Can Human Rights Accommodate Women’s Rights?” 119.

52. Gatens, “Can Human Rights Accommodate Women’s Rights?” 277.

53. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 164.
54. Gatens, "Can Human Rights Accommodate Women's Rights?" 279.
55. Gatens, "Can Human Rights Accommodate Women's Rights?" 280.
56. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 162, emphasis added
57. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, xi.
58. Gatens, "Can Human Rights Accommodate Women's Rights?" 286.
59. Gatens, "Can Human Rights Accommodate Women's Rights?" 277.
60. Gatens, "Can Human Rights Accommodate Women's Rights?" 279.
61. James, "Freedom and the Imaginary," 176.
62. Gatens, "Polysemy, Atopia, and Feminist Thought," 56, emphasis added.
63. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, viii.
64. James, "Freedom and the Imaginary," 187.
65. I have written on these in more detail elsewhere (see Richardson-Self, Louise. *Justifying Same-Sex Marriage*. London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2015; Richardson-Self, Louise. "Same-Sex Marriage and the 'No' Campaign." *Humanities Australia*, 9 (2018): 32–39.
66. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, xi, xiv.
67. Gatens, "Can Human Rights Accommodate Women's Rights?" 293.
68. Gatens, "Can Human Rights Accommodate Women's Rights?" 287.
69. Gatens, "Can Human Rights Accommodate Women's Rights?" 287.
70. Gatens, "Can Human Rights Accommodate Women's Rights?" 287.
71. Gatens, "Can Human Rights Accommodate Women's Rights?" 286.
72. In conversation, Gatens once recounted that she was dissatisfied with her first attempt to wrestle with the issue of women's rights across multiple conflicting imaginaries, hence the second treatment of these issues.
73. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 153.
74. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 158.
75. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 158–159.
76. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 11.
77. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 159.
78. Post, in Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 160.
79. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 160, original emphasis.
80. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 165.
81. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 166.
82. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 166. See also Wohlan, Catherine. *Aboriginal Women's Interests in Customary Law Recognition*. Perth: Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, 2005; and Watson, Irene. "Aboriginal Women's Law and Lives: How Might we keep Growing the Law?" *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 26 (2007): 95–107.
83. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 165.
84. Gatens, in Walsh, "A Conversation with Moira Gatens," 214.

85. Gatens, in Walsh, "A Conversation with Moira Gatens," 214.

86. Gatens, "Conflicting Imaginaries," 158.