

## INTRODUCTION



# Still Transforming Knowledge

THERE IS NOTHING “merely academic” about how we think and what we think we know. We are creatures and creators of meaning. Among the many meanings that interweave our varied worlds, the meanings of *human being* are central. They can sustain us in peaceful, caring, just relation with others and with the earth we share. They can divide and rank us within systems of dominance. They can open us to love, friendship, respect, justice, nurture. They can enable us to enslave, exploit, rape, kill those who have been defined as less than fully human. We are called by inspiring and by disturbing meanings of *human being* to keep thinking, to hold horizons open. We, who are conscious creatures and creators of meaning, remain responsible.



THINKING:  
AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Thinking about *Women*, or,  
"Women's Work Is Never Done"

THIRTY YEARS AGO, when I began thinking with some colleagues and friends about *women* as an under-studied subject, I discovered that a remarkable number of other colleagues responded to this topic—so evidently, it seemed to me an exciting call to rethink what we thought we knew about meanings of *human being*, to look hard at tired old clichés—with thoughtless jokes, awkward silences, and other defensive reactions. Some colleagues with whom I tried to share my excitement thereafter avoided me as if I had revealed myself to be not just unsound but contagiously so. Some allies in various causes, from academic politics to the Civil Rights Movement—people who had hitherto accepted me—became suspicious of my loyalties. I was subjected to patronizing lectures to the effect that I was at risk of taking a politically dubious as well as career-threatening turn. And I noticed, too, that where—like it or not—I had drawn attention as a female, once I became marked as a woman interested in women (a characterization in which “interested in” was charged quite differently from, say, “interested in philosophy,” my academic field), I repelled not a few. I could hardly fail to notice such reactions: the question that fascinated and hooked me was what they meant. After all, if we do not study women, with all our differences, how can we believe that our studies adequately concern humankind? However we have made meaning of the diversities of humankind, however those meanings have themselves differed through time and across cultures, where they exist they are real in their effects.

In the first edition of this book (1990), I wrote about what I had learned during the personal, moral, political, philosophical quest I had taken up well before I sat down to write: the quest to figure out how meanings of humankind could exclude the majority of us and still stand as sound, adequate, and truthful. How, I kept asking, could so many of us not see what was so obvious? What ways of thinking kept us from making changes even when we did see that they needed to be made, and even when we genuinely wanted to make them? Now,

after fifteen more years' work in this time of extraordinarily fruitful scholarship and ongoing progressive activism (in stark counterpoint to horrifying repression, exploitation, wars, sexualized violence, and genocidal regimes around the globe), I am grateful for the chance to rethink and rewrite.

Having started this work because I encountered weird difficulties in thinking about women and, in trying to think those through, recognized the obvious need to rethink meanings of humankind, I still believe we need to keep focusing on women. It worries me that women's studies is yet again under attack as intellectually unsophisticated and "politically correct." I cannot but notice that today's attacks on women's studies—however different the terms in which they are cast—are still aimed at its intellectual adequacy and political purposes. If nothing else, this seems to suggest that thinking about women remains a disturbing exercise. I stubbornly take that to indicate that we should keep it up.

Thinking about differing women disturbs most systems of dominance (including, it must be said, all too many regimes that emerge from revolutions against dominant orders). We cannot reframe meanings of *human being* without remembering the many meanings of *women* that continue—as Alice Kessler-Harris wrote in 2001—to inform "gendered ways of thinking that stretched into every nook and cranny of the public imagination."<sup>1</sup>

## Thinking as Philosophical Fieldwork

During the years of work on transforming courses and curricula to make them adequately inclusive—work that I took up after my initial discovery of the revelatory power of thinking about women—I was not aware that I was using any kind of method. Now, however when people ask, I respond that what I do is fieldwork philosophizing. This works rather nicely to make it clear that I do not pretend to be doing social science research while suggesting a different kind of legitimacy (there are traditions here, of course) for free-range thinking as philosophical. I do believe thinking that is stung awake by encounters with people whose certainties appear untroubled by questions about the meanings that inform their knowledge and their actions is philosophical. I remember and still love Socrates, who reminds us of the gadfly effect of thinkers, of the need for intellectual midwifery to discover whether our ideas are babies or only "wind eggs." He also said that thinking is like a wind that blows everything down. We honor Socrates now; Athens put him to death for corrupting its youth. It is helpful to remember that, as long as one also recognizes that

being charged with corrupting anyone is always a call to the most serious self-examination and by no means proof that one is a Socrates.

So, philosophical fieldwork—thinking with others out and about in the *agora* and then reflecting in solitude with them in mind—is not about learning philosophical systems and then applying them, nor is it about trying to derive a theory from experience. It is neither deductive nor inductive, nor is it held within any other single logic. Rather, it is about listening and hearing, looking and seeing, taking in and trying to comprehend without rushing to interpret, to translate into familiar terms, to explain. In Simone Weil's sense, it is about being *attentive*. Such attentiveness is philosophical also because it entails listening for *meanings* and, as philosophers do, for *moves*—for what is being done conceptually, as well as for what someone is wanting to mean.

As in reading philosophy, one is then trying to comprehend a (re)framing of available meanings, a task that requires attention to each word, each line, each section within the context of the entire work, itself read within its own multiple contexts. In this process of reading, listening, opening to take in *what is going on here*, philosophical readers, like effective political actors, attentive parents, good teachers, artful psychological and pastoral counselors, listen for how what is said coheres, and does not; how it is familiar, and strange; how it invokes and suggests, and suppresses things not directly said. They listen for recurring images and for what sorts of relations those images privilege (mechanical? organic? rigid? fluid? oppositional? transactional?). They pick up on language use and what it suggests: why the colloquialism here, the technical term there? Why that rhythm in those sentences, another in these?

We do all of that—and more, of which we are rarely aware—to be fully present within a conversation as it is happening here and now, with these particular people. We can do that because and insofar as we also always hold in mind other, differing conversations. Making sense with one another—which is both enabled and limited by culturally framed interactions—is an ongoing project that can never be completed. It is a transactional process that has no products but does have crucial effects. And those effects are of great importance: through them, we can be deformed as well as informed, and sometimes even transformed.

There is nothing trivial or 'only' theoretical about how people in their daily lives make sense together, and this ongoing process is particularly significant when we are trying to make sense of who and what "we" are, of who and what "they" are. In doing so, we are making and remaking our lives and possible relations with others and with the earth we share. So, calling on every

art of listening I have learned or found myself to possess, and trying always to practice it better, I do philosophical fieldwork to locate where and how efforts to connect with others are distorted into prejudicial—preformed, unreflective, and so potentially dangerous—forms.

I certainly do not claim that this project is original; on the contrary. Sophisticated as well as unreflective daily methods and methodologies for making particular kinds of sense abound. These methods characterize and delimit all professions and established practices related to all sorts of conventions. But no one formalized method can or should lead us to renounce, disable, or scorn the arts we possess and practice whenever we engage fully in the effort to comprehend each other and to make sense together. Formalized methods are necessary to protect us from imposing what we think we already know (even without realizing it) on that which we seek freshly and more fully to understand. But the informal arts of being together that we also have are necessary to protect us against the thoughtlessness that trained technical and theoretical proficiency, as well as other internalized conventions, can lead to. The danger lies in mis-taking what is before us by forcing it into frames of meaning within which it cannot reveal its unruly uniqueness.

Recently, I found this in Foucault's *Fearless Speech*:

The history of thought [in contrast to the history of ideas] is the analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience, or a set of practices, which were accepted without question, which were familiar and “silent,” out of discussion, becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behavior, habits, practices, and institutions. The history of thought, understood in this way, is the history of the way people begin to take care of something, of the way they become anxious about this or that.<sup>2</sup>

This is helpful: Foucault's “archaeological” and “genealogical” methods can be powerfully illuminating, particularly—as I am confident he would have agreed—when they are taken to call us into recurrently fresh thinking, instead of being adopted as yet another method to be learned and applied.

Some aspects of ethnomethodology are useful as well. They can remind us to watch, in particular, for how meaning systems deal with being disrupted—how they readjust themselves to neutralize, absorb, and/or recast challenges as mere additions, thereby maintaining themselves at base just as they were. At such moments, systems are showing us not so much what they are as how

they do what they do. Psychoanalysis, as a highly honed way of listening for the most elusive meanings that are nevertheless sustaining dysfunctional meaning systems, also comes to mind as useful. So do some other methods developed in social psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy, cultural studies. Each of these, among other fields, offers a plethora of helpful methods for trying to figure out, as I am trying to do, how dominant systems do their work and are legitimated by knowledge. I find all these fields and their methods fascinating and suggestive; I consider them also, along with social conventions and personal beliefs, subject to critique. Methods, too, can be rooted in old errors, which they will perpetuate if we do not dig them out.

In practicing such critiques, I recognize, of course, that I am personally implicated within some of the systems about which I think most. I remember very well one of the moments that crystallized my interest in this work. It came when I realized that in all my years of study, clear through the doctorate in philosophy and despite growing up in a family long committed to working for equality, *I had not noticed* the eloquent absence of women and some ‘kinds’ of men from what I was studying. This first amazed, then appalled, and then *interested* me. It struck me as a philosophical issue of the first order, like bumping into the walls of the fly bottle (as Ludwig Wittgenstein put it), or, by Toni Morrison’s analogy, like noticing the fishbowl in which I had been swimming. It was, it seemed evident to me, a call to philosophize, which is to say, to think.

Many have been doing so in recent years, stung awake by their own disturbing moments and thinking them through in many differing ways. We are not out of the fishbowl yet, but yes, it has indeed been changing.

## Thinking in the New Academy

Higher education is both shaped by and influential in defining and responding to ongoing struggles over knowledgeable responses to crucial questions. What has it meant to be human? How have these meanings changed through time and across cultures? How can and should we live together not despite but with all our differences? Who are “we”? How should we think if we wish to think together? How, by whom, and to what effects is knowledge legitimated? How do thinking and knowledge relate to “the real world”? Why do such questions matter; why should we care?

Over the past thirty years, I have seen transformations in education designed to increase its inclusiveness and its depth begin, and begin to take. Around many campuses today there are old houses with neatly printed signs set out front or propped in windows: Women's Center; Center for Intercultural, Interracial Communication; Conflict Resolution and Mediation Institute; Center for the Study of Social Change; Black Culture Center; Institute on Technology and Human Values; Diaspora and Nationalism Research Center; Disability Studies Center; Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Student Center; Distance Learning Center; Center for Multicultural Research; Ethnic Studies Institute; Native American/Indian/Indigenous Peoples' Culture and Research Center; Service Learning Office; Community/Campus Coordinating Office. . . . No campus has a complete set; most campuses have at least a few. The names for these centers and institutes, gathering places for people and resources, vary, and there are ongoing discussions, often impassioned, about the names neatly printed on the signs that identify them.

Some of today's students already take these hard-won provisions for granted. Some understand their fragility as well as their importance. Some resent them and the passionate discussions they invite as distractions from or even perversions of the 'real' business of education.

Still, there they are, these outposts of the academy spreading into the community. People go through campus gates, cross busy streets around campuses, to get to them. On campus, faculty teach in classrooms and lecture halls (many still with seats bolted to the floor, precisely lined to face the lectern, the screen, the stage) in larger, more solid classroom buildings. But some of the same faculty also teach in the liminal houses, around round tables, in somewhat shabby living rooms with a few overstuffed armchairs among awkward folding chairs and footstools.

Growing numbers of faculty in all fields also now teach "distance learning" courses, reaching students sitting in their own chairs, sometimes with friends and family members, who can (invisibly, for free) join them. A woman taking a women's studies course that way told me that her male partner started checking out what she was doing, and now they are having some of the best discussions they have ever had. Simultaneously, a movement for "engaged learning" is spreading, taking students and faculty into communities to discern what all can learn by studying and acting together.

Clearly, cross-fertilization is going on, and hybrids are developing, some of which will prove hardy, others unable to thrive. On campus, a remarkable

number of courses and some faculty appointments (often joint appointments) now correspond to those neatly lettered signs set out not so long ago on those houses' lawns. Literature and history and philosophy and biology and psychology and mathematics and economics and history of art are of course still there, naming and claiming groups of carefully planned, sequenced courses, minors and majors, and so also job slots, tenure lines, budget and administrative units. But what all those established provisions support increasingly includes courses, materials, and analyses developed in women's studies, peace studies, disability studies, Native American/Indian studies, inter- and multi-cultural studies, queer studies, many ethnic studies, gender studies, environmental studies and ecology, science studies, postcolonial studies, critical legal studies, cultural studies, white studies, Holocaust studies, acoustic ecology . . . and more. The list is long and getting longer. It is also changing: the names of these areas, too, are being hotly contested. For good and for ill, few of us are quite as sure as we once were of who and what "we" are.

Things have changed.<sup>3</sup> Chaos and conflict and faddishness and divisiveness, declare some. Behind closed doors at a meeting of influential educators, an eminent scholar whose works are often cited in these new fields called them "the academic equivalent of talk radio"—a clear slam, in his view. But scornful critics are fewer than they were. "Interdisciplinarity" and "engaged scholarship" are, if not established, no longer out of bounds. Their achievements make it hard not to see them as legitimate.

Students look different, too. More of them are over twenty-one; more of them are people of color; more of them are visibly women of all groups (on faculties, too, and in administration); more of them are differently abled people using government-mandated ramps and other badly belated provisions for accessibility. Administrators and faculty go to meeting after meeting to discuss "diversity issues," "multiculturalism," "globalizing the curriculum," "differing learning styles." Local, regional, national, and now international projects for and studies of service learning and civic engagement are taking on the task of "preparing citizens for a more interrelated and diverse world." On many campuses there are now "learning communities," and differing modes of assessment are being designed to recognize and support collaborative as well as individual and/or competitive learning.

Our campuses—the virtual as well as the physical—are lively, less tightly disciplined places. All sorts of ideas and bodies and identities and issues and works once excluded and devalued are making their presence felt in transformative ways.



But forms—both new and old—of “top-down” power persist and in some cases are increasing. Corporatized boards of trustees and some legislatures are applying pressure to undo faculty powers. More and more administrators are happy to encourage this trend; they tend to think of themselves as CEOs and CFOs (and as deserving equivalent pay). These “executives” and “officers” see themselves as pressed to be responsible not for educational leadership but for raising money, lobbying legislators, marketing the ‘product’ of their ‘industry,’ and generally holding education “more accountable to the bottom line.” Pressures to standardize in order to measure “output” and “outcomes” and “deliverables” so as to be able to ‘prove’ accountability in terms appropriate to businesses are growing concomitantly. Aggressively for-profit schools are springing up, further blurring what is left of the business–academy boundary, even as the broader business–public realm distinction also blurs in favor of the former. Public universities are taking funds from corporations to support research, which those corporations then control lest potentially profitable findings leak to competitors. As a result, some scholarly gatherings and peer-reviewed journals are seen not as guardians of sound scholarship for the public good, but as threats to future corporate profits (in which universities increasingly yearn to share).

In the United States today, it can seem that capitalist fundamentalism—whose devotees practically worship the “free market” and take the “bottom line” to be an unquestionable moral imperative—has been conflated with democracy and with freedom. Schools are now being pressed to serve not the conservation and creation of knowledge, the reflective life, the public good, but economic growth and competitiveness. Professional faculties—whose members have been supported and protected in giving their lives to thinking, learning, questioning, and creating—are under assault, and little is being done to preserve them and the invaluable contributions such lives make possible. Tenured positions are being cut or allowed to disappear with retirements while more and more part-time and adjunct faculty are being hired. Faculty are becoming part of a “flexible, market-responsive delivery system,” and as such are being reduced to fungible, easily replaceable functionaries. There are superstar faculty at one extreme of the academic world; at the other extreme (with little in between) are grossly underpaid, uninsured “instructional personnel” with no job security and little professional standing, however good they are. As Lyotard put it: “One thing seems certain. . . . [T]he process of delegitimation and the predominance of the performance criterion are sounding the knell of the age of the Professor: a professor is no more competent than memory banks in transmitting established knowledge.”<sup>4</sup>

In academe, too, the rich have gotten richer, and the poor have gotten poorer—and increasingly vulnerable. Meanwhile, those in the middle, as a reaction to their more and more precarious position, are becoming either more docile or more defiant (or, spasmodically, both). Women and men of some groups among the more recently hired suffer these changes along with and often more than others; they are also, weirdly, charged with responsibility for causing them. Mutters a white man: “I’d have gotten that job they gave to a woman if it weren’t for affirmative action,” or “That Black man took my job.” It may feel safer to be angry at the more vulnerable rather than the more powerful, but it leaves untouched the dynamics—and the interests—that are actually pitting us against each other for ever less secure jobs. (“Crabs in a barrel don’t even need a lid,” says a friend of mine. “If one scrabbles toward the top, the others pull it back down.”)

## Some Reframings of Thinking from the New Academy

From the new fields that are nevertheless taking root in higher education today, new ways of thinking are indeed emerging. In the hope that it will help you read what follows in today’s context, here is a kind of bird’s-eye view of shifts that have become possible.

### **From the One to the Many—Abstract Singulars to Plurals**

We have been learning to pluralize terms so that we are less likely to forget—or to collude in devaluing—the complex differences among us that remain hidden by singular terms. In particular, plurals such as “citizens” rather than “the citizen,” “students” rather than “the student,” help us avoid reducing differences to lowest common denominators or denying their relevance while we dream of transcendent unity. We speak more commonly and carefully now, for example, of sexualities, genders, races, ethnicities; of histories, cultures, societies; of truths, meanings, faiths, logics. We remember more readily that “woman” is a changing and enormously complex construct that includes people from vastly different traditions as well as multiple, even contradictory, overlapping meanings.

To ‘pluralize’ in this sense is not just a call to iteration—to list, say, under the singular “woman” Kenyan women and lesbians and blind women and

queens and some transgendered people and Victorian women and poor women and indigenous women and working women and mothers and abused women and cross-dressers and prostitutes and migrant women and revolutionary women and Roma women and bearded women and Brahmin women. Such a list can neither be completed nor a source of any one adequate abstraction: there are too many crucial differentiations really at play. Issues of categorization, of multiple and/or co-constructing identities, of differing levels and kinds of cultural (and national, and individual) meanings, and, with them, differentials of power, make such lists almost as problematic as singular terms. It is not enough for us to become collectors of examples (of what?). We cannot think better about all of us if we simply tack “and women,” “and disabled women,” “and minorities,” “and other people of color” onto the same old exclusive meanings.

To pluralize is to hold open the question of whom we really mean to include, and why. It is a beginning, no more, no less, like holding that women everywhere must have the vote without knowing how they will exercise that power or what may emerge to reconfigure political life as a result.

### From Nouns to Verbs—Static to Active

We have also begun to see what turning nouns into verb forms—“race” into “racializing,” “gender” into “gendering”—may be able to do for us. Perhaps it may help us remember human agency (and so responsibility) by focusing our attention not on static things, products, abstractions but, rather, on the processes, histories, and complexly interrelating systems that create and sustain so much of our world. Some scholars are now studying why and how some people(s) *became* white after they arrived in the United States, while others, enslaved or not, became no longer Ashanti or Ibo (for example) but “Negro” or “Black.” We can also now try to deal with problems of “sexualized violence,” and not ‘only’ “trauma” but also “traumatizing experiences” and “retraumatizing situations.” And we can work to promote “democratic practices” rather than the static, singular “democracy.”

We may then realize that changing our language practices entails changing epistemologies and ontologies. When we try using active rather than static terms, we are shifting toward asking not what “knowledge is,” but how it “*becomes* knowledge,” and what difference that makes. Foucault, who thought not about “problems” but about “problematizing,” said: “The question I raise is this one: How and why were different things in the world gathered together,

characterized, analyzed, and treated as, for example, ‘mental illness?’”<sup>5</sup> Throughout this book I will be asking, “Why and how were, and recurrently are, the *kinds* of humans that have been thought of as singular, static, and unchangeable created?” “Kind,” I cannot resist saying now, is a word that English etymology relates at root to *gender*, which is related to “engender”—that is, “to birth” and “to produce.” On this, more later.

### **From External (Additive) to Internal (Transactional) Relationalities**

Singular, static entities (people, categories, problems, things, modes, constructions, fields/disciplines, systems) can only be externally related, iterated, added, juxtaposed. Being singular, they are defined by what they are not; being static, they are defined as if they could not be otherwise. Locked into their separateness by such definitions, things, people, events, systems seem able to be related and held together only by rules, laws, or some other kind of imposition from without. Thus that curious phrase, “the laws of nature,” which seems to imply that patternings of relations that scholars and observers have discerned (or postulated) within nature are, like human positive law, imposed by fiat and take on a moralistic tone.

But sex/gender, race, able/disabled, ethnicity, nation, and class/caste can be, and often now are, recast as complex, ongoing, historically created processes that we can study not as separate things or identities or qualities but, rather, as mutually and intimately co-constructing. For example, a female who is marked as “disabled” by the culture into which she is born will be gendered differently from another girl from the same culture whose body is judged to be “normal” and so also “normally” female. What it *means* to be “Black” differs for males and females; so does what it means to be Chinese or Chinese American. These identities are imposed, internalized, and more or less freely chosen; they are woven of many strands, sustained, and challenged through many sorts of daily interactions. They are not ‘kinds’ that we simply *are*, one by one, additively, nor do they intersect only at some points.

Using analyses that reveal such mutually co-constructing phenomena, the historian Linda K. Kerber writes about “rethought histories” that reveal relations among “asymmetrical education of men and illiteracy of women, the ways in which understanding of male honor and respectability are shaped by placing boundaries on women’s choices, how the globalization of sweatshops rests on the employment of women in harsh industrial conditions, and the vast

transnational flow of traffic in women,” as well as “sexual assault on women as central to the way conquering armies have established control.”<sup>6</sup>

## From Divided to Mutually Formative Theory and Practice

When we focus on transactional relations—on processes rather than solely on static ‘things’—we are also enabled to see the practical, applied, and political dimensions of abstractions and theories. Generalizations, which theories relate on a still more abstract level, are intellectual abstractions from and of concrete, historical particulars. Which particulars are selected to be generalized about and abstracted from, by the few who are legitimated as scholars at a particular time and place, has effects on the subsequent theory. Any theory is thus already related to, and carries within it, past practices; if a theory is then applied, it may implicitly confirm and continue what it was supposed to explain or help improve. For example, a theory about the behavior of “the labor force” in a particular country at a particular time in history deals with preestablished generalizations about *labor*. Since those generalizations were made from a variety of gendered and racialized class/caste prescriptions that shaped who does and does not “labor,” the subsequent theory may fail to illuminate the socioeconomic injustices that preceded and continue to support exclusions from “the labor market.”

Theories have their own histories of implication in the particular social realities from which they arose. Remembering that, we are better prepared to use them effectively; to choose not to use them when they are inappropriate; and to keep expanding and refining the practices of theorizing and the theorizing of practices.

I CANNOT RESIST noting here, as an example of how against the grain much of the new scholarship still is, that my computer’s word-processing program has highlighted a fair number of the words I have just used: racialized, racializing, gendered, gendering, narrativizing, ethnicities, significations, pluralize, logics. Wrong, says the programmed red pen. I resent being intruded on that way, but I must also say that I, too, resist some wrenchings of language that I nevertheless value precisely *because* they go against the grain. Dominant languages can require the linguistic equivalent of physical therapy (which I have undergone, so I know how painful it can be). Living languages must remain

limber, must at times be realigned to correct twists and bends that have locked in. But the purpose of such changes is not to substitute a new rigid posture for the old. On the contrary: it is to get our minds moving, to get us thinking more flexibly and more responsively.

## Questioning "Theory"

Today, the value (and even the possibility) of thinking about women is again in question, and so, too, is women's studies. Among those raising the questions are postmodernists, to use a shorthand. This complex school of thought has convinced many scholars (if far fewer people outside the academy) of its usefulness. That it has done so means that its challenges cannot be ignored without losing professional credibility as well as the real benefits of the (initially wrenching) rethinking such challenges entail. At the same time, women's studies and feminist scholarship in general have come under attack by anti-feminists and by some anti-"gender ideology" scholars who still claim to be feminists.

I should say right out, then, that I have some disagreements with postmodernist feminists as well as—although less than—with anti-feminists and anti-"gender ideology" feminists.<sup>7</sup> I do not "do Theory," and I remain uncomfortable with the appropriation of theorizing by any one example thereof. I do read and admire some of postmodernism's key theorists and works. (I have quoted a few already.) I respect its analytical power, and I recognize that it has brought with it what some feminists and other cultural critics have craved as I do not: a thoroughgoing, philosophically grounded, coherent theoretical/ideological approach capable of yielding often startlingly telling insights. I drew my sketch of shifts in thinking characteristic of the new academy from experiences I have had primarily with people who have not engaged with postmodern "Theory," but of course I recognize how consonant they are with it.

I can hardly argue that "postmodern" is not a broadly descriptive term that may loosely cover a great deal. But "postmodern Theory" arose in these times along with, and not as the source or warrantee for, many other schools of thought, analysis, and action. I value many of these (from "old left" analyses to highly local movements that focus on reclaiming, not dissolving, identities, such as those in Ecuador and Colombia). I do not want to see any thoughtful, courageous struggles against real oppressions discredited and silenced yet

again, whether by entrenched interests or by allies who believe their theory is or should be universally applicable (even if denying universals is part of their creed).

So, I have refrained from conversion to postmodernism, just as I have to any other single school of thought. To give all my reasons would require more discussion than I can offer here. But I will say that, at this point (I continue to read, to listen), there are some things that trouble me, not so much about “the postmodern” as it reaches to provide a name for this age or as it relates to movements in art and architecture, but in its guise as a curiously singular, capitalized “Theory.” That this “Theory” appears to be leading some of its adherents to denigrate women’s studies certainly concerns me, but that derives from and suggests other problems as well.

I am uncomfortable with some of the philosophical roots of postmodernism, and especially with its evident adoption of key Heideggerian moves, terms, and, in my view, dangerous contradictions.<sup>8</sup> I see the effects or echoes of these moves and related contradictions in a worrisome aspect of postmodernist “Theory” that Chandra Talpade Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander describe this way:

Postmodernist theory, in its haste to dissociate itself from all forms of essentialism, has generated a series of epistemological confusions regarding the interconnections between location, identity, and the construction of knowledge. Thus, for instance, localized questions of experience, identity, culture, and history, which enable us to understand specific processes of domination and subordination, are often dismissed by postmodern theories as reiterations of cultural ‘essence’ or unified, stable identity.<sup>9</sup>

If we dissolve the category of race, for instance, it becomes difficult to claim the experience of racism.<sup>10</sup>

Such undercutting of grounded political realities and experiences, and so of some actions—which I do trust that many postmodernists do not intend—may correspond to a contradiction in Heidegger, whose focus on developing a method that would “let Being, be” blinded him to the realities of the disastrous political events of his murderous era instead of illuminating their meaning. Heidegger read the rise of the Nazis as a “withdrawing” of Being that would sweep away deadening old forms of life, just as he intended his philosophizing to do. And so, briefly but influentially, he moved out into public life

to serve the Nazis as rector of the University of Freiburg. Faced with the same historical realities, Hannah Arendt saw them more clearly. Early on, she recognized the deadly threat of what she called the opening of the gutters of Europe (which, we must also recognize, were fed by and spread back to the United States—as, for example, in the eugenics movement—as well as other countries). I believe that Arendt's actions then and throughout her life, as well as her many works of political philosophy, need to be taken fully into account when assessing both Heidegger and the postmodernism he so profoundly influenced. Arendt provides us with antidotes we need to avoid their tendency to obfuscate (or, worse, substitute themselves for) rather than illuminate the very realities they are meant to help us see.<sup>11</sup>

Foucault, in whose thinking Heideggerian influence can readily be seen, was sometimes criticized for “a form of ‘historical idealism’” of the sort that can blind adherents to concrete realities. Late in his life, he responded: “When I say that I am studying the ‘problematization’ of madness, crime, or sexuality, it is not a way of denying the reality of such phenomena. On the contrary, I have tried to show that it was precisely some real existent in the world which was the target of social regulation.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, he recognized the validity of this criticism even while responding to it: “real existents” such as racist practices should not disappear into, or be cast only in terms of, discourses, philosophical ideas, historical logics, or anything else.

Unfortunately, in some postmodern writings it is hard not to fear that that is exactly what is happening to “real existents” and our actual experiences of them—as when someone speaking about and for women's experiences in our still highly gendered world is charged with “essentialism,” with “reinscribing” that which she claims to be critiquing. In such cases, “Theory” seems to be taking on the role of arbiter of what is real, and of imposing only one way of speaking to that reality, for allies as well as opponents. In denying that they play that role, postmodernists too often disappear into a cloud of inky dicta. Chris Hables Gray, whose work I respect, uses a postmodernistic juxtaposition of quotes to ‘define’ his simultaneously powerful and elusive subject (non-subject?): “Postmodernism is whatever you want it to be, if you want it bad enough,” and “Postmodernism is the intellectual equivalent of nervous laughter.”<sup>13</sup>

I am all for increasing the latitude of thinkers. But “Theory” does not reliably work to do that, I fear. Too often, I have found myself troubled by the wholesale adoption and subsequent autopilot use of postmodernist language by some of its adherents, and too many graduate students seem to have been



taught few alternatives to that language. I worry about the intolerance I have encountered among some postmodernists for those who do not “speak post-modern.” One example: I encountered such intolerance at a conference in Budapest at which I spoke. Having heard nothing but postmodern-informed papers before mine, I started by saying that I was not going to speak post-modern. I was later told by several participants that I was “very brave”: this from women living through the turmoil of Eastern Europe. Of course, post-modernists are not the only ones who are guilty of secular dogmatism; it is the temptation, the risk, the threat of any powerful theoretical engine. This is one reason I continue to value philosophizing in the field rather than “doing Theory” of any kind: what interests me is what theories as well as other kinds of systems take for granted, take off from, create, foreclose, make possible. I have not found that I need to adopt any one technical language to do that work. On the contrary: I have found that I need to be able to hear and draw on as many as possible. In this, I should find allies among postmodernists, and I sometimes do. As Jane Flax writes: “Contemporary feminists join other post-modern philosophers in raising important metatheoretical questions about the possible nature and status of theorizing itself.”<sup>14</sup>

But some postmodernist feminists question whether women’s studies is sustainable at all. This doubt apparently derives from the radical avoidance of “essentialism” that Mohanty and Alexander discuss. For example, Wendy Brown writes:

Women’s studies as a contemporary institution . . . may be politically and theoretically incoherent, as well as tacitly conservative—incoherent because by definition it circumscribes uncircumscribable ‘women’ as an object of study, and conservative because it must resist all objections to such circumscription if it is to sustain that object of study as its *raison d’être*. . . . [Women’s studies] consolidates itself in the remains [left it by “Critical Race Theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, and cultural studies”], impoverished by the lack of challenges from within, bewildered by its new ghettoization in the academy—this time by feminists themselves.<sup>15</sup>

This troubling depiction has some truth to it. But there is not to my mind anything *necessary* about it. The women’s studies programs I know do teach “Theory” along with other theories. They do take care to complicate understandings of “women.” They do draw on the scholarship of, and form various kinds of relations with, the other new fields (which for some reason Brown

apparently does not see as similarly self-contradicting). And they also insist, rightly in my view, on speaking with students in multiple ways, starting with them where they are—which usually includes a sense of themselves as women, living in a highly gendered world as they do. Instead of teaching one theory, capitalized or not, most women's studies faculty are working hard to encourage students to find their own differing voices in conversation with many. To do so beyond the circle of a few scholars, they need, as we all do, to be able to speak far more than (if also) "postmodern."

Furthermore, that the subject, women, is "incoherent" makes it no different from any other field: all fields work with subject matter that has been, and not infrequently still is, seen quite differently, and incompatibly, from differing angles and stances. There are multiple schools of history, of philosophy, of psychology, of economics even in one culture and certainly among many, and not a few of these constitute refutations, rather than additions to or variations, of each other. No field or theory possesses the essence of its subject, but few therefore reject useful, historically derived names that gesture toward subject matter. Why, then, should the subject *women* be seen as less legitimate than any other? And why should being "incoherent" constitute a problem for a postmodernist, anyway? Perhaps what we see here is a suppressed premise: that the only acceptable ground of "coherence" derives from one kind of theory. That would be a suspiciously hegemonic move on the part of those who do so much good work questioning hegemonies.

So although I agree that there are risks and anomalies in establishing women's studies, I see similar risks and anomalies in establishing any discipline, any interdisciplinary or antihegemonic method. And if women's studies is aware of and troubled by such issues (as indeed it is), that marks it as more trustworthy, not less. May it remain so, and may more others become so. Whatever is done with the category *women* in theories, in academe, people marked as, and/or choosing to identify as, women continue in the real world both to be oppressed and to resist as women. Our cause is not a distraction but a necessary corrective, constituent of and correlative to all others. We cannot renounce thinking and speaking as, about, and for women just because "essentialism" is now taboo among some theorists any more than we can believe that we are beyond race and racism because geneticists have finally rejected as incoherent the category of race.

Politically, there can be a pincer effect to questioning feminism and women's studies today. Conservatives want us to stop focusing on injustices that they claim are now past; they want to dismantle all aspects of affirmative action so

we can get “beyond such divisiveness.” They do not want us to speak about women; they want us to show loyalty to ‘higher’ causes by speaking about humans (as if speaking about women were not doing so). Simultaneously, others want us to stop studying women because doing so is conceptually “incoherent” in terms of what they take to be a more radical epistemological and political perspective. Both groups seem to want to define women yet again out of order. I do not entirely reject either of these views, but I do believe that we should continue to observe how all such critics, including the most progressive, themselves define *women*, to what purpose, and to what effect, because none of us, and no theory, suffices to get it right.

As Lyotard has said, we should avoid “zero-sum games.” He believes that this is possible, even in a world of many closed “games” that would seem to be able only to contend, because “the reserve of knowledge—language’s reserve of possible utterances—is inexhaustible.”<sup>16</sup> Yes, and not only “language’s reserve,” but the reserves of actual examples across times and cultures; of human imaginations; of the possibilities that cooperation across all the old divisions enables; and the reserves of emotionally courageous thinking that clears a space of freedom at the heart of the most sedimented experiences, the most dominating knowledges, the most unjust political systems. No “game” is entirely closed as long as someone is still thinking, because—as Heidegger and Arendt agreed—“thinking is out of order.” There is always also a great deal to be learned with those with whom we sometimes disagree.

## Returning to the Field

To take us back out into the field with the new scholarships in mind, I close this section of the introduction with 1) two contrasting statements by powerful U.S. public figures; followed by 2) reflections I recently heard (and am reporting from notes and my memory) by activists about their participation in the Civil Rights Movement. I will also mention, as one exemplary resource among many that help us make theoretical sense of these examples, 3) an anthology of papers by women activists/theorists from around the globe who draw more explicitly from, even as they challenge, feminisms and women’s studies. Together, these differing voices suggest why we do need to keep thinking for ourselves with many others if we really wish to comprehend and to change our worlds, and how relevant for that calling is remembering to hold women, with all our differences, in mind.

1. IN SEPTEMBER 2002, the White House issued the Bush administration's National Security Strategy statement, an annual event mandated by Congress. Authored by Condoleezza Rice, National Security Adviser, it began by "asserting that there is 'a single sustainable model for national success'—America's—that is 'right and true for every person, in every society.'"<sup>17</sup> In proclaiming the rightness of one nation, one view of history, one kind of success, the statement assumed that the Bush administration's understandings of *nation* and of *success* are not particular to itself, or one among others, but that those understandings are inclusive and define the only legitimate meanings, norms, and ideals for all. All other nations, all other understandings of success, if judged against this proclaimed standard, can be seen only as lesser, their differences marking their failure to be what they ought to be.

In stark contrast but at about the same time, on September 13, 2002, an article titled "A Network of Global Solutions" appeared. In it, Jean-François Rischard gave his views on the world situation. Rischard, vice-president for Europe of the World Bank, spoke of a "crisis of complexity" and suggested as a response *not* the dominance of a single superpower justifying its unilateral stance by proclaiming itself to be the only true and right model for all but, rather, a system of global "networked governance." He took this transnational, active, plural, relational approach to be appropriate for the following reasons:

- I. Hierarchical organizations will be unable to respond quickly or nimbly enough to the changes taking place. . . .
- II. Nation-states, committed to the idea of territorial sovereignty, will struggle because most of the pressing problems—among them, global climate change, the spread of diseases, the control of electronic commerce—have no geographical boundaries.<sup>18</sup>

Here we have, in the most public, worldwide arenas, an example of thinking premised on a domination-serving mono-vision countered by an alternative that proposes changes deriving from thinking that is remarkably similar to that which has been developing in the new academy. I find the White House statement terrifying, threatening, and outrageous; this whole book constitutes an effort to dig out the roots of that kind of thinking about others, about differences, about "us" not only *versus* but *above* "them." The Rischard statement offers hope that thinking attuned to complex interrelations rather