

# I

---

## A View of Beginnings

---

Women's story begins—and begins again, and again, and again. The tellers of our tale have not had the advantage of "standing on the shoulders of giants" who preceded them. The tale is begun, developed among a courageous group that refuses to be silent, only to be erased from the "story of mankind." Discontinuity, disruption, loss mark our stones and so our self-perceptions just as surely as do discovery, achievement, and courage.

This is a book about transforming knowledge, about changing *what* and, just as important, *how* we think *so* that we no longer perpetuate the old exclusions and devaluations of the majority of humankind that have pervaded our informal as well as formal schooling. I take the curriculum that has been taught in institutions of 'higher' education, particularly those that concentrate on the liberal arts, as a focus. But to change the curriculum involves more than changing a text or two, a course or two. Behind, and within, the curriculum is a long, complex cultural, intellectual, and political tradition. We must consider the multiple contexts of the curriculum if we would understand what we wish to change in more than a narrow, superficial way.

Such changes are necessary, I believe, not only to transform what is accepted as knowledge by the dominant culture and what is passed on to new generations, but for the sake of thinking itself. We cannot think well as long as we are locked into old errors that are so familiar as to be virtually invisible. It is my particular purpose to

bring those errors to the surface, to characterize them as errors, to show how they have worked and still work to distort and limit our thinking, and so our knowledge, and so our selves and the world we share

The culture and polity in which we live, and the educational institutions that contribute to and critique them, will not change just because some of us change our minds. But it **is** also true that unless **we** change our minds as well as our actions and our institutions, no lasting transformation will be possible.

## STARTING AT THE CENTER

Let me say here, in highly condensed and abstract form, what I wish to suggest about **why** and *how* we need to change our minds—what the fundamental conceptual errors are. This sketch may seem both too simple, even simplistic, and too difficult because too **abstract**. Nevertheless, it states the conclusions I had come to when I began **to** write and that guided my thinking throughout. By the end of the book, I hope the basic insights I summarize here will be as clear and suggestive (not definitive—that is no more desirable than possible) as I can make them.

A single-sentence version of the theme of this book might go as follows:

The problem we still have today in thinking well about the rich diversity of humankind is expressed by the observation that, at the beginning of **the** dominant Western tradition, a particular **group of** privileged men took themselves to be the *inclusive* term or kind, the *norm*, and the *ideal* for all, a ‘mis-taking’ that is locked into our thinking primarily in the form of faulty generalizations, circular reasoning, mystified concepts that result from the former errors, **and** the partial (in both senses of the term) knowledge that frames such concepts.

Or, unfolding that overpleated sentence a bit:

There is a root *problem* underlying the dominant meaning system that informs our curricula. It is visible in the false universalization that has taken a **very** few privileged men from a particular tradition to be the inclusive term, the norm, and the ideal for all. The faultiness, or partiality, **of** that universalization has been hidden from **us** in part because we too often tend to express ourselves in singular terms

(especially “man” and “mankind,” but also, for example, “the citizen,” “the philosopher,” “the poet,” “the student”). Singular universals, even adequate ones, make thinking of plurality let alone diversity, very difficult indeed. It is my task to locate and define the root problem as it has created errors in our thinking, to open it up so that we may become better at thinking about humankind in its vast and wonderful diversity as well as its commonalities. Basic to that effort is the location of four kinds of conceptual errors that derive from and continue the root problem: (1) errors of faulty generalization; (2) errors of circular reasoning; (3) mystified concepts even—or especially—on the highest levels of abstraction that result from (1) and (2); and, finally, (4) partial knowledge that is not recognized as such, but, indeed, sets the standard for ‘sound’ knowledge.

Thinking about what all that means, approaching it in different ways, setting it in different contexts, and then thinking it through specifically as it works within the curriculum will take the rest of this book. And thinking it through, thinking about it, entails, I believe, changing our minds. Minds are, of course, extraordinarily complex things, as are cultural and political systems. I do not pretend for a moment to have covered or even considered all the errors that are built into the dominant tradition, let alone to be in possession of some kind of underlying truth against which error can be seen as such. What I do believe is that, in the thousands of conversations about feminist scholarship I have had on campuses, with scholarly and professional associations, in communities across this country, I have found some of the central errors that have made it difficult for many to rethink what they know so that it can be opened to women in all our diversity. And I will suggest that the very same basic errors that have worked to perpetuate the exclusion of women do the same for the men of some groups as well, albeit without erasing gender hierarchy *within* those groups.

## MORE PERSONAL BEGINNINGS

It has been working with faculty members, administrators, and students in our colleges and universities as well as with a wide variety of community groups (from women’s projects of various sorts to humanities councils) that has led me to what I wish to say, and I am profoundly grateful to all those who have talked with me, argued with me, attacked and supported what I was **trying** to say. In

particular, questions about the importance and the 'soundness' of works by and about women, questions raised by curious but unconvinced faculty members, forced me to rethink my own education, our culturally and professionally shared assumptions about knowledge, the curriculum, and education.

In the early 1970s, when I first discovered that a few women were beginning to think about what it means and has meant to live as a woman, to uncover and to create knowledge that speaks of and for us, I had a calm and uncomplicated reaction. Why not? I thought, that is very interesting. But, of course, I soon discovered that my reaction was by no means the norm, and that there was a great deal of work to be done persuading others that the effort was indeed interesting, significant, and important for those who were doing it, for their students and the readers of their work, for all of education. I began to speak publicly about the new scholarship on women, an effort that required me to think through why I found such scholarship interesting and so obviously important, and hence to think about *thinking* as well as scholarship and activism.

Initially, then, I thought in conversation with those who were raising new questions and doing new research on women (particularly Gerda Lerner, Joan Kelly, and Amy Swerdlow, who were at Sarah Lawrence College then, as was I), and also with those who were skeptical about, even hostile to, such work.

I began to give workshops for faculty members. It was through encountering their questions and exploring the ways they thought that I became deeply engaged in trying to understand what seemed to me a puzzle. Why was it not obvious that, if we do not know much about more than half of humankind, we **do** not know much about humankind? Why was it not obvious that this new (renewed, really) effort was intellectually as well as personally and politically exciting and necessary?

I wrote almost as many talks and papers as I gave workshops and presentations during those years because every time I left a conversation, on or off campus, I rethought what had seemed clear to me in order to take into account why and how some people had trouble understanding and accepting it. I became more conscious of the ways we tend to think, of the assumptions we make without knowing it, of the judgments that underlie what seems merely obvious. Slowly I began to realize that what I was finding was and is by no means restricted to scholarship or the thinking of faculty members. Through the problems faculty members have in rethinking their

courses, and others have in rethinking their work, I was seeing the working of what I have come to call the *dominant meaning system*, which is a primary expression of the dominant culture. At first I simply referred to "the tradition," as did those with whom I talked. But that, of course, indicates precisely where the root problem lies: there are *many* traditions in this country, even though there is one that is most visible, most powerful, most defining.

In a different language, I realized that the curriculum, and the ways of thinking as well as forms of knowing that created, informed, and defended it, could be taken to be a 'text' from which one could read some of the critical conceptual constructions of a whole culture.

My work became an intellectual, political, and very personal crusade of sorts for me. I wanted to be able to reach and clear up what I increasingly saw as simple errors at the root of some very complex systems, intellectual and otherwise, errors I found within every discipline, in the very construction of the disciplines, and throughout the most influential thinking outside the Academy.

This kind of analysis, the search for why and how people think and construe knowledge, carried out by extensive and very careful listening to what they say, differs in some ways from that for which I was trained as a philosopher, but in other ways it is profoundly related. I draw constantly on my years of work with Hannah Arendt, and on Dewey, Kant, and Plato/Socrates, in particular. These are philosophers who thought about thinking, who wanted to know not only what we know but how and why we can know it, and why it *matters* that we know it this way, and not that. That is, they are all profoundly political and ethical philosophers whose lives as well as work reflect the intensity of their care not only for freedom of thought, but for freedom *for* thought.

If, as these philosophers held, we are thinking creatures in a way that is profoundly and intricately related to the fact that we are also creatures of speech, and so of society and politics, then education is of critical importance. It is in and through education that a culture, and polity, not only tries to perpetuate but enacts the kinds of thinking it welcomes, and discards and/or discredits the kinds it fears. Arendt, Dewey, Kant, and Plato/Socrates played often on the lines between what was considered acceptable and what was not. They were, in many senses of the term, critical thinkers who put the quest for freedom of and for thought before loyalty to any system of any kind. That, I believe, is not only one of the expressions of their

greatness, but one of the reasons they may have understood how thinking is political in particularly acute and important ways.

As I began this work, I was, then, in direct and—it sometimes seemed—mending conversations with faculty members and community groups, and, at the same time, with philosophers who helped me think about why and how thinking is political and why it matters in the world. And, throughout, I talked with feminist thinkers and activists, sharing insights it would be impossible to disentangle any more. Thus, those who were curious about or even hostile to such work, a particular strain of philosophy, and feminist thought wove in and out of the writing, speaking, conversing, and rewriting I undertook. Still, the particularly sharp moments of focus, of illumination, came to me almost every time when I was suddenly asked a question in a faculty workshop, or after a public speech, for which I had no prepared response. I did not consider myself ready to write anything other than talks turned into papers until I found that it had been a good while since I had been asked anything new, anything for which I had no response at all. That, rather than a sense that I had read everything pertinent, indicated to me that I had done my 'research.'

It was an exhausting and largely very lonely time, for all that good talk. Such thinking takes one to one's own roots, surfaces assumptions, turns established beliefs inside out and upside down, and it must, finally, be done alone—if it is to make sense, to become coherent and consistent. I realized that the praise I sought—because one does listen carefully to praise when doing controversial work that often provokes highly personal as well as intellectual hostility—was, "That makes sense. Of course. It really is obvious, isn't it." *That* was what I wanted, not to be 'right,' but, simply, to be part of a common effort to make sense. Making sense meant that I had found and spoken *with* what people were thinking in a way that made even new thoughts their own.

That is the kind of thinking, the kind of relationship—political and moral as well as intellectual—in which I believe.

Transforming *Knowledge* is my report on the results of all that talk, all that thinking, all that effort to make sense. When I first wrote it, it contained no quotations at all. I simply reproduced the thinking that had crystallized in me in my own voice. But I do not want to present it that way now. I want the conversations to be more visible, even if it is somewhat artificial to introduce them in the form of quotations from books. But still more, I want you to know how

much good work there is out there for all of us to draw on, to think with, to join, expand, and enrich. I have pillaged my library and the libraries of my friends to find sources to weave into this thinking, not to create an artificial synthesis out of all our differences, but to weave a multihued, multitextured tapestry that celebrates the work of many without losing the coherence of a single person's thinking. I accept responsibility for my own thinking without pretending for a moment that thinking ever proceeds without contexts much broader than even the thinker may know.

## THE VOICES OF (TOO FEW) OTHERS

Let me, then, pause for a moment *to* introduce a few others whose presence I would like to invoke so that, as we begin thinking for ourselves in this complex area, we know that we do so in good and highly independent, diversified company from which many, many others could have been chosen.

Ann J. Lane writes of the American historian Mary Beard (1876–1958):

Without much support from the woman's movement, without a large body of ideas upon which to build, without models of any kind to follow, virtually alone, she audaciously placed women at the centre of history and society, and then she insisted that the world look again from her perspective. . . . Beard's life and work embody her thesis: women are neglected in the writing of history, but the effect of their existence is a reality of history.<sup>1</sup>

"The effect of their existence *is a reality* of history"—the story is indeed there, as it has always been, and it is now being told. As Joan Kelly wrote in introducing her study of Christine de Pisan (1364–1430?):

New work is now appearing that will give a fuller sense of the richness, coherence, and continuity of early feminist thought. . . . I hope to demonstrate a solid, four-hundred-year-old tradition of women thinking about women and sexual politics in European society before the French Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

There are many such efforts now, undertaken by feminist scholars with an inspiring, renewing combination of passion and the most serious sense of responsibility. Paula Giddings says in her preface to *When and Where I Enter*:

For a Black woman to write about Black women is at once a personal and an objective undertaking. It is personal because the women whose blood runs through my veins breathe amidst the statistics. They struggled north during the Great Black Migration, endured separations, were domestics and schoolteachers, became pillars of their community, and remained ordinary folks. Writing such a book is also an objective enterprise, because one must put such experiences into historical context, find in them a rational meaning so that the forces that shape our own lives may be understood. *When and Where I Enter* attempts to strike a balance between the subjective and the objective. Although it is the product of extensive research, it is not without a point of view or a sense of mission. A mission to tell a story largely untold. For despite the range and significance of our history, we have been perceived as token women in Black texts and as token Blacks in feminist ones.

In 1892, Anna Julia Cooper, recognizing the differences among us, chose nevertheless to speak of a singular "woman's voice,"<sup>4</sup> while Paula Giddings writes to claim her voice specifically as a Black woman. We come together intellectually, personally, politically—and we separate to think for ourselves, alone and with others whose voices we fear have also not been heard. Generative as well as divisive tensions continue—between the past and the present, the particular and the general, the individual and the group, the concrete and the universal, the historicized and the decontextualized, sameness and difference, research on specific groups and conclusions that might give us common ground. It has been a great struggle for women to speak with individual voices; it has also been a struggle to stand together.

To remember ourselves, our histories, separately and together, is more than to await a corrected scholarship, however crucial such an effort indeed is. In the strikingly personal yet simultaneously political and philosophical voice of feminist thought, Jeffner Allen explores remembering so that some of the richness of the term, now a central one to feminism, is revealed:

Touching, feeling, imagining, fighting, thinking, caressing, I remember myself. I remember the possibilities in my future, the actuality of my past, the openness of my present. I remember the members of my body, the actions that form my body as lived. In remembering, I am.

Remembering shapes my existence within a temporal horizon. The horizon of temporality is not neutral. Whenever the profiles of my memory, like the horizons of time, are erected by men, I cannot remember myself. At such moments, male domination not infrequently forces me to remember myself as essentially and "by nature"



the Other who "is" only in relation to men. I, dismembered, disappear into nonexistence.

Yet, quite clearly, I am here. In everyday life I undergo and envision an experience of stopping the time and memories of patriarchy and of unfolding a temporality in which I am myself.<sup>5</sup>

Such quests are more than corrective; they are in themselves transforming.

### **'LANGUAGES'**

Listening to the voices of others, we also notice the easily forgotten obvious: even when we are all speaking the same languages, there are many other 'languages' at play behind and within what the speakers mean and what we in turn understand. Becoming aware of the levels and levels of different meanings in even the most apparently simple and accessible utterance, we ~~try~~ to renounce the hegemony of "the time and memories of patriarchy" so as to hear better, comprehend better. But then we run the risk of finding ourselves in no-time, with no place that is our own to stand, and no tongue to speak that does not entrap us the minute we open our mouths. It helps then to remember that women, very different women, have indeed spoken, and if we do not wish, as I do not, to write off all that they have said and are saying as irretrievably infected by exclusive systems, we must listen carefully to them. And, supported by voices that have spoken for themselves despite the dominant systems, we can also proceed, if carefully, to make use of the very systems we wish to change.

In doing so, perhaps particularly if we are professional scholars and teachers, we tend to adopt the conceptual language that seems most promising. There are feminists who have worked within, and always also on, most if not all of the established schools of thought—including Marxism, Freudianism, object relations theory, liberal democratic theory, literary criticism, and, increasingly, the newer schools that are themselves attempting to undo much that characterizes the dominant culture and curriculum, such as post-structuralism and deconstructionism.

Emerging from the fear that we must misspeak ourselves if we speak at all because of the power of the dominant 'language,' we face the next problem, the co-existence of a veritable babble of conceptual tongues.

I have chosen no one of the available systems, or 'languages,' of conceptual analysis/synthesis for my own work, although of course

I do to some extent speak culturally from my own background. I do not believe that one can make sense, or find it, in only one theoretical, conceptual frame at a time, however valuable such particular meaning constructions are. I do believe that we can speak sensibly to each other across disciplines, through theories, beyond technical languages, including those now developing within feminist scholarship itself (to the despair of those who fear the establishment of just one more fancy, *élite*, exclusive language where many had hoped to find their voices). If we could not speak to each other across these conceptual languages, intellectual work and achievement would be a great deal more alienated and alienating than they already are. If we give up on the effort to speak across fields, theories, systems, 'sms,' and to people in many different communities, we also give **up** our responsibility as thinkers who care about as we depend upon democracy, especially in today's highly specialized, technologized, fragmented world.

Choosing to **try** to speak to many people, feminist scholars as well as those curious about feminist scholarship, philosophers and those who love to **think** but are untrained in academic philosophy, people interested in and people worried about what is happening to higher education today, scholars and readers in all disciplines and many fields of work, I risk speaking a bit to all, adequately to none. I know that, of course, **but** the effort to keep up the conversation, to widen and deepen it, is too important to me to avoid the effort. I refuse to think I have only one tongue because I am a particular kind of woman, that I have only one tongue because of my academic training and predilections, that I must speak in only one voice—whichever that **might** be—even though I recognize that everyone will find some modes of talk and of writing more easily accommodating than others.

Thinking is political because it is an ability we all share, a need **we** all have, and a responsibility we can all accept or flee. To express thinking primarily and persistently in any one language is, in my view, a bit politically irresponsible, if sometimes forgivable, sometimes important, and sometimes even liberating, as when those who are regularly silenced in the dominant culture get together to speak their own language free of the incomprehension and uninformed judgment of those who stand guard over 'standard' English, 'proper' academic writing, 'good public speaking.'

— I hope, then, that **you** will find ways to think with me through this prolonged essay in thought. To increase the openings to the

center of what I want to say, I included the multiple and differing voices in the quotations above as well as a bit of *my* own story. Now I would like to offer several different ways to move into the conceptual center by exploring some of the contexts out of which Women's Studies, like African-American and other multicultural studies, arose. I do so because conceptual analysis always takes some, if not all, of its meaning from its real contexts, even when those contexts are not apparent because the language of the analysis is abstract. If we do not at least point toward those contexts, it is far too easy to misunderstand not so much what a conceptual conclusion states as what it means, and thus to be less able to make use of it in the immediate world in which action takes place.

As there are many beginnings for any realization that is of broad significance and use, there are many contexts. But there is no need for everyone to explore all of them; we think, as we act, differently. If none of what follows engages you, or if it is frustratingly familiar and introductory (though I hope it will at least be evocative), please feel free to move from the end of this introduction to Part III, "Conceptual Approaches: Thinking Through," where I begin the exploration of the basic conceptual errors I sketched above, or to Part IV, "Errors Basic to the Dominant Tradition," which focuses on them, although there, too, there will be circlings in and out: we are exploring a whole here, not tracing a line or making an argument or proving a point.

## WHY FOCUS ON THE CURRICULUM?

Until very recently indeed, a quick way to lose the interest even of people who care about education was to announce that one was about to discuss the curriculum. The curriculum had become the purview of experts; specialists in curriculum or members of particular fields were held to be the only ones qualified to prescribe it (and were probably the only ones really interested in the topic, anyhow). Even scholars who make their salaries teaching usually think about curricular matters beyond their own courses only when they must, as a result of departmental planning and hiring needs, or when their institution draws them into discussion of, say, the desirability of a "core curriculum." But as long as we do not engage in critique and correction of the curriculum, the framework of meaning behind particular questions of what to teach to whom will continue to prove inhospitable to all those who have been excluded

from knowledge and knowledge-making, and so also from effective participation in understanding and exercising power on a basic cultural level.

I believe that unless feminist scholarship is accompanied by *on-going* work on why and how the dominant liberal arts cumculum in all its varied expressions is not and, without fundamental reconception, *cannot be* receptive to the study of the majority of humankind, it remains at risk of disappearing as it has through the centuries before this wave of the Women's Movement. As we produce "the new knowledge of women," we must continue to work to understand why it is recurrently "new," rather than a further unfolding of all that has gone before. What is it, I ask through this book, that functions so effectively in the dominant meaning system to hold women and so knowledge of, by, and about women outside that which has been and is passed on, developed, taught?

This is a curricular matter. It is also more than that. The conceptual blocks to the comprehension and full inclusion of women that we find in familiar scholarly theories and arguments, as in their institutional expressions in organizations and systems, political and economic and legal, are at root the same blocks that are to be found within the curriculum. And if we do not remove them from the curriculum, much if not all that we achieve elsewhere may prove to be, once again, a passing moment. It is, after all, to a significant extent through what we teach to new generations that we bridge past, present, and future. That which is actively excluded from—or never makes it into—the curriculum is very likely to be forgotten and is almost certain to continue being devalued, seen as deviant and marginal at best.

Our educational institutions—those inspiring, impossible, frustrating, appealing, appalling systems within which we usually try simply to find the space and time to do our work of teaching and learning—are, not alone but preeminently, the shapers and guardians of cultural memory and hence of cultural meanings. Here too, then, ~~we~~ we must do our work of critique, re-membling, creation.

As we do so, we also accept a number of risks. I am not referring only to the obvious risks of losing the privileges of participation in the Academy. As Linda Gordon puts it, "Existing in between a social movement and the academy, women's scholarship has a mistress and a master, and guess which one pays wages."<sup>6</sup> That these risks are complex and personally troubling does indeed need to be recognized. It is terribly difficult to **work** against the grain of

what, after all, stands in our culture for "the life of the mind," particularly when one has had to struggle to achieve access to the institutions that have claimed to define it and have, indeed, succeeded all too well in professionalizing it, marking it as their own. I do not mean to trivialize even for a moment the struggle for access, the continuing difficulty of 'getting in.' But I want to point out here the risks that feminist scholars have warned one another about since the beginning of the curriculum change movement.

The dangers of such projects are indicated by the difference between the term "mainstreaming" and the phrase that, I am glad to say, has superseded it, "curriculum transformation projects." "Mainstreaming" implies that there is one main stream and what we want is to join it, that we are a tributary at best, and that our goal is to achieve the 'normalcy' of becoming invisible in the big river. "Transformation," on the other hand, puts the emphasis not on joining what is but on changing it.<sup>7</sup>

Teresa de Lauretis characterizes the problem, the risk, of "mainstreaming" as "the appropriation of feminist strategies and conceptual frameworks within 'legitimate' discourses or by other critical theories" in a way that "deflect[s] radical resistance and . . . recuperate[~i] as liberal opposition," which is "not just accommodated but in fact anticipated and so effectively neutralized."\* That, indeed, would be the result of "mainstreaming." But it is something else again to work on transforming the curriculum with the full realization that women cannot be added to the present construction of knowledge because knowledge of, by, and for women is not simply more of the same; is not only knowledge of a subset of "mankind that is conceptually compatible with that of which it is a subset; is not a category of exotica that can be tacked onto courses without implications for that which remains safely 'normal'; is not, indeed, neatly separable in any way from any knowledge that is adequate to human-kind.

The belief that knowledge about women is simply additive to, or a subset of, or a complement to, knowledge about men has been and is held both by nonfeminist scholars and educators and **by** some feminists involved with Women's Studies and curriculum-change projects. I understand those beliefs and know that some good work can indeed be done by those who hold them (just as valuable work is done in Women's Studies to find the women who did what women were not allowed to do so as to "prove that we can do it," that we "have been there"). But I do not believe such work is,

by itself, adequate, because it remains within a system built on principles of exclusion and characterized by the conceptual errors those principles necessitate and perpetuate.

It is precisely to continue work on transforming the curriculum, not simply achieving access to it or joining its 'mainstream,' or providing it with an oppositional perspective that it can accommodate in the sense de Lauretis rightly fears, that this book is being written. Let me repeat here what I first wrote in 1979: what we are doing is as radical as undoing geocentrism, the notion that the earth is the center of the cosmos. If the earth—if Man—is not the center, then everything predicated on taking it/him to be so no longer stands as it has been formulated. This is not to say that there are no schools of thought with which we can join, or that there is nothing in the existing tradition we can draw on, use, and ourselves choose to perpetuate. It is not even to say that all feminist scholarship is or ought to be that radical, that it ought to work on that fundamental level. It is to say that as we do our work, we need to hold on to the radical critique, the effort to go to the root (*radix*) of the tradition that is premised on our exclusion, or we will watch helplessly as the tree of knowledge continues to grow exactly as it did before.<sup>9</sup>

But making the case for that position is what this book is about, so I will leave the point now with the statement that refusal to engage in, or at least support, work on transforming the curriculum leaves us not pure but vulnerable to being, once again, excluded, rendered marginal, or brought into and utterly lost within the mainstream that has through the ages flooded and washed away the recurrent spring growth of feminist scholarship and thought.