

**Im/Proper Subjects?  
An Inquiry Into Social Differences as Knowledge and Pedagogy in  
Women's Studies**

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
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by Susanne Luhmann

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## ***Abstract***

This dissertation studies questions of subject formation in women's studies and attends to the role and function of social differences (race and sexuality) in conflicts of the field. This study is organized by two distinct but related sites of inquiry. The first part studies discourses of differences, particularly race and sexuality, and traces how these circulate within the field of women's studies. It argues that race and sexuality are signifiers of difference in discourses of knowledge that exceed social identities. For example, I investigate the ways that race and sexuality are invoked and figure in conversations constitutive of women's studies. These concern its self-definition, history, location in the university, commitment to interdisciplinarity, as well as questions of epistemology and pedagogy. I also take differences to be central to the histories of learning of those involved in the field. The second part of this study works with interviews in which faculty and students speak of their experiences of learning and the attachments they make to knowledges about race and sexuality within women's studies.

The dissertation focuses on these two sites – knowledge production within women's studies and histories of learning – in order to explore the dynamics between the demands that knowledge places on teaching and learning subjects, and the psychic demands that teachers and learners bring to their own teaching and learning. The study explores the psychical dynamics of teaching and learning and brings psychoanalytic questions to the study of differences, namely: how does difference within affect

difference between the subjects of women's studies? How do subjects, who produce and are produced by the demands of women's studies, answer to disciplinary and psychic desires? How do symptoms of learning such as identification, resistance, and ambivalence become sites of interest when disciplinary and psychic dynamics meet? Drawing upon both Judith Butler (1997) and Foucauldian genealogy, I suggest that this dual approach – the consideration of disciplinary demands and psychic desires – allows insight into the complex dynamic of subject formation, of both the formation of the subject of study and the studying subject in teaching and learning in women's studies.

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In many sleepless nights, I imagined the moment when I would finally be writing this page. Now that I have reached that point, I am delighted to acknowledge the support that my family, friends, colleagues, and teachers have afforded me over the years by variously inspiring, encouraging, listening, and believing in me, and by demanding more.

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## Introduction

What happens when we understand race<sup>1</sup> and sexuality as central to the field of women's studies?<sup>2</sup> How would making race and sexuality central shape and change our understanding of what women's studies is about? What role do social differences, particularly race and sexuality, already play in the field and the way it thinks about itself?<sup>3</sup> How do those involved in women's studies make sense of social differences? And more specifically, how do they make sense of their own learning from and about social differences? How are race and sexuality mobilized in both the discourses of the field and in the ways its participants talk about their learning? These questions stood at the beginning of this project. They articulated my search for ways to incorporate questions of social differences in my teaching and learning in women's studies. The need to find other ways to engage questions of social differences emerged both in response to how these had been addressed in my own learning in women's studies as

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<sup>1</sup> Among critical race theorists, it has become customary to put race into quotations marks ('race'). Barbara Johnson (1998: 11) explains that, "the use of the quotation marks moves the concept of race away from an essential or biological category and into the domain of historical and social constructedness. This expression of epistemological ungrounding does not make race into a 'mere' fiction, but signals its *political* status." I decided against the use of quotation marks because throughout the dissertation race is discussed not as a sociological but theoretical or discursive category. Similarly, sexuality in this work refers to "a historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies, and affectivity" (Butler 1990: 92).

<sup>2</sup> After much consideration, I decided to use "women's studies" rather than "Women's Studies" to signal the non-noun or non-subject character of the field. The use of capitals (Women's Studies) emphasises the disciplinary character of the field, not unlike "English Studies," "Philosophy," or "Sociology." The lower-case spelling of women's studies signals the activity at stake in the field and my desire to think of women's studies as not yet constrained as a clearly demarcated and identifiable new discipline.

<sup>3</sup> I prefer the term "social differences" to others such as "diversity" or "multiculturalism." I want this term simultaneously to flag the historicity of differences (such as race, class, gender, sexuality), to insist that they are discursive constructs, constituted within relations of power that hold deep social effects, to signal the endless difference within differences, and to point to the central function of difference in the construction and maintenance of identities.

well as in response to debates within women's studies over the past decade. The questions were motivated by my own histories with encountering social differences during my undergraduate and graduate work in women's studies in Germany, the U.S., and Canada.

My first encounter with questions of social differences among women reaches back to when I was studying for my first degree in Germany in the late 1980s. In a situation uncannily reminiscent of the history of North American feminism, white German feminists were caught by surprise when women of colour, Jewish women, immigrant and refugee women began to question critically for their own lives the relevance of (white) feminist analyses of women's oppression and women's studies' teaching. Being witness to the largely defensive responses by my white feminist teachers when faced with a critique of a feminism that only insufficiently attended to race and racism motivated me in the early 1990s to undertake a graduate degree in women's studies in the U.S. In the "motherland" of women's studies, I hoped to find a more developed feminist practice of engaging questions of race and racism as feminist issues.

Having quite accidentally landed in the "deep South" of the U.S. for my M.A. studies, I found myself in a seminar entitled "Women in the South" where descendents of formerly enslaved people sat next to women who traced their heritage back to the slaveholding classes. This added new urgency to understanding the pervasiveness of racial inequalities as a question of feminism. My Ph.D. studies brought me to Canada where questions of "diversity" are addressed differently again, now within the context

of nation building, state multiculturalism, histories of racist immigration policies, and diasporic immigrant experiences.

In Canada, I had the good fortune to be among the very first students pursuing a degree in a newly created, freestanding Ph.D. programme in women's studies, one of the first of such programmes worldwide. Being part of the first cohort of doctoral candidates in a still evolving Ph.D. programme afforded me the rare opportunity to both witness and participate actively in a new era of institutionalizing women's studies in the university. A central concern for me became the question of how social differences figure in this process by which women's studies becomes more fully a part of the academy and a site for training future women's studies scholars and teachers.

The unique perspective that I offer in this study is closely related to the fact that my work is exclusively the product of women's studies training. With the exception of two years of undergraduate studies in education, my academic training, though spread across two continents and three countries, has been exclusively within interdisciplinary women's studies programmes. This affords me, perhaps even demands from me, a unique perspective, one that sees women's studies, to echo Robyn Wiegman (2000: 4), "not as an addendum to . . . disciplinary commitments but as an intellectual project in its own right." Given that all my training is in women's studies, women's studies is my "discipline" at the same time that I am vehemently opposed to its disciplinarity. Because of the exclusionary effects inherent in the construction of a discipline, I remain opposed to the suggestion, championed by many in the field, that women's studies should model itself as closely as possible after other disciplines. Yet, at the same time,

women's studies already functions *like a discipline* in my own intellectual development, as it is through a confrontation with its disciplinary modes that my dissertation project emerged. In part, then, my project is about my fear that a discipline of women's studies might not welcome the kind of intellectual work that I and many others presently training within the field are committed to. At the same time, this work would not be possible without women's studies. The fact that I have no disciplinary home outside of women's studies to which I could return makes more urgent my struggles with the tensions that I and other participants encounter in the field.

My work is also the product of women's studies in another way. My dissertation is a symptom of both my deep attachment to women's studies and my refusal to be fully subsumed by it and the demands it makes on its participants. This dynamic of ambivalence belongs to the study of subject formation recently explored in feminist theory (Butler 1997) and in the study of education (Britzman 1998). Judith Butler explores the tensions between a Foucauldian view and a psychoanalytic view of the subject. One of Michel Foucault's extremely productive contributions to contemporary theory is his suggestion that subjects do not just produce knowledge as a means to describe and explain the world around them. Instead, he suggests that knowledge produces the very problem it seeks to explain and solve. Another suggestion is that subjects, now understood as produced through knowledge that claims to be merely descriptive, are simultaneously subjected to and restrained by such knowledge. This approach to subject/knowledge flies in the face of conventional feminist wisdom that is invested in the emancipatory potential of knowledge and regards it as key to

setting subjects free from the shackles of ignorance. Taking Foucault's assertion seriously, one central question for my study emerges: how and where does women's studies not only produce me and other women as subjects but also subjects and restrains us at the same time? This is not an easy question to ask about women's studies, given the field's largely unquestioned self-understanding as champion of women's rights and freedoms. But the question of the dual force of becoming "subject of" and "subject to" women's studies does confront the questioner with ambivalent views on the very meaning of what knowledge can promise.

To complicate matters further, recently, theorists interested in questions of subject formation have begun asking some critical questions of Foucault. Butler (1997) is interested in how subjects come to attach to the knowledges that ultimately subject and limit them. Her important intervention into Foucault's theories of subjection argues that the attachments we make to the knowledges that both make us subject and subject us to our identities are never complete. Instead, reminders of earlier attachments, prohibited by these new knowledges and thus repressed, resurface and interrupt the totality of subjection.

Returning to my earlier suggestion about the disciplinarity of women's studies, I suggest that my project is closely related to this dynamic. Women's studies has been central to my formation as subject (i.e., as a feminist, theorist, academic, and teacher). Yet at the same time, the critical engagement with the field and its dynamics in this dissertation is also a sign of my refusal to completely attach and subject myself to the field and the demands it makes upon me. Another speculation, then, concerns the role

that social differences play in this dynamic. I suggest that they come to symbolize refusals within the field. To understand ambivalence (the dynamic of both attachment and refusal) as lack of loyalty or of commitment, however, would be a mistake. Instead, the central concern of this dissertation is to show how ambivalence is an important dynamic in any attachment and plays out in learning. My motivation for this project and my attachment to poststructuralist theories has led me to study how others attach to the field, how they engage the “disciplinary force” of women’s studies, and what kinds of associations they offer in relationship to the study, status, and role of differences within the field.

This dissertation, then, considers the intellectual project called women’s studies, how it is produced and produces itself through discourses of knowledge, and how these are taken up, engaged, and refused by those involved in and committed to the field. Central to this investigation is the question of how differences – racial and sexual, but also others – function in these engagements. I offered above a narrative of how my interest in questions of race emerged. There is a parallel autobiographical connection to my commitment to questions of sexuality. This story also begins in Berlin, during my undergraduate years in women’s studies. The very suggestion that sexuality could be a topic of feminist education and its primary concern with gender occurred to me relatively late, when I read a newly translated version of Adrienne Rich’s (1986) “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Rich’s essay proved highly provocative and challenging, and ultimately, quite formative. While lesbian separatism was an interesting and viable experiment for young, urban university students in Berlin

in the late 1980s, it clashed intensely both with lesbian and gay life as I encountered it in Tuscaloosa, Alabama (where I earned my M.A.) as well as with emerging American queer theory at that time. In the early 1990s, many American lesbians and gays, not only in the southern U.S., insisted on the naturalness of homosexuality (“We are born that way”). This argument was marshalled to counter a condemning religious discourse that casts homosexuality as sin, perversion, and an immoral life-style choice, thus undeserving of human rights protection.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, emerging American queer theory, to which I was introduced through my feminist theory courses at the University of Alabama, focussed on deconstructing the hetero/homo binary through Foucault’s theories and emphasised the discursive quality of all sexualities and genders. Both the essentialist discourse of an “inborn” homosexuality and the understanding of sexuality as a historically and culturally specific discursive formation were initially antithetical to my own sense of self, which was crafted, following Rich’s (1986) suggestion, as a chosen homosocial political identification. Yet, my travels from an urban lesbian-identified university community in Germany, to a vibrant but largely underground lesbian and gay culture in the openly homo-hating American South, to a flourishing queer community in Canada, as well as the complexities and contradictions within, among, and between these different geographic spaces, made queer theory highly

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<sup>4</sup> See Whisman (1996) for an extensive discussion of the implications of a polarized discussion that can conceive of homosexuality only in terms of choice vs. biological determination.



productive for my own thinking.<sup>5</sup> Its radical anti-normative stance opened up ways to think differently about the force of gender, sexuality, and desire.

With this sketch of my geographies of learning, I hope to offer a sense of how race and sexuality as knowledges and practices emerged out of, and at times against, feminist teaching and learning in women's studies. My engagement with these social differences also continuously challenged me as a feminist learner (and teacher) and, by extension, my thinking about learning, teaching, and women's studies curricula. Similarly, discourses and knowledge of race and sexuality posed, then and now, intellectual, political, and, often, pedagogical challenges and crises for women's studies. Discussions of these debates are a central part of this project and I seek to understand the crises – here understood broadly as that which challenges the stability of the status quo – that knowledge of social differences pose both for the field and its learners. The various ways in which meaning is made from and of social differences and how these are mobilized differently within women's studies also produce differences between those committed to the field. These differences can be understood in terms of political and epistemological differences, historical and cultural differences, generational differences, differences of identities, and so on. My study takes a particular interest in the effects of epistemological differences. I ask how we come to attach to epistemologies differently. One notion this study explores is that our histories of learning shape, in important ways, our intellectual attachments and desires. I

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<sup>5</sup> Rich was highly productive for a queer sense of subjectivity as I later came to understand. See the excellent genealogy provided by the late Kathleen Martindale (1995). See also Butler (1994a) and Sedgwick (1991) for a discussion of Rich's influence on queer subject formation.

speculate about social differences as one of the sites where the complete subjection to the knowledges of women's studies is interrupted. In my own learning, encounters with differences were the sites where I came to question my attachment to particular theories central to subject formation.

The encounter and engagement with differences, whether they are social, political, cultural, or historical, asks of the learner (but also of the field of women's studies) to consider herself in relationship to those differences. Encounters with differences thus can be important and productive sites for learning. And, in order for differences to become sites of learning, the learner (here understood both as the field and practitioners within the field) must engage with the crisis that is required in learning, most of all the crisis of incoherence from the vantage of the self and the other. By posing a connection between crisis and learning (Felman 1992), I also suggest a different approach to the "crisis of women's studies." One central site of the women's studies crisis we presently encounter in debates about the field arises around the question of the "proper subject" of women's studies. This concern emerges in the ongoing debates over what women's studies is and what it studies. Another way to consider this question is to ask: what does women's studies want and what do its desires set into motion? This is the topic of my first chapter.

The crisis of the "proper subject" arises from the role that gender and other social differences play in women's studies knowledges. Some women's studies practitioners have argued for the need of a coherent and identifiable subject in women's studies: "women." Others fear that the insistence on women as a unifying and

unmodified category impoverishes the field, because within a framework that focuses on gender, the discourses and knowledge that study differences other than gender continue to be marginalized. Some view discourses that challenge the coherence of the subject of women's studies ("women" or gender) – such as theories of sexuality, critical race theory, Black feminism, and feminist anti-racism<sup>6</sup> – as disruptions to the field. Others fear the consequences for women's studies if, due to its less-than-welcoming attitude towards knowledge that challenges the coherence of its subject, scholars who might ally with the field will go elsewhere and thus leave it impoverished and isolated (Brown 1997: 84). This prognosis, however, is quite different from suggesting that differences are the cause of the crisis. Instead, the crisis emerges if differences are expelled.

My study traces the genealogy of the present crisis in the field of women's studies. I consider debates about the status quo of the field and its future direction, the desires of the field, and the crisis related to learning itself. At the beginning of this project, I understood the crisis in women's studies exclusively in terms of the field's ambivalent relationship to issues of social differences such as sexuality and race. As we know, women's studies began with the study of gendered identities. It has been instrumental in positioning gender as a legitimate subject of study in higher education.

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<sup>6</sup> Various terms are used to describe the work that makes race central. In the U.S., important conceptual work has been produced by legal scholars who prefer the term "critical race theory." Here see two important anthologies: Matsuda (1993) and Olmsted (1998). Another body of work has been published under the heading of Black feminist theory. Important here are Collins (1990) and (1998), who emphasises the identity of Black women, as well as Lorde (1984), and hooks (1981; 1984). In Canada, the term "anti-racist feminism" has more resonance, as Dua (1999: 9) points out. Even more recently, Calliste and Dei (2000) join Canadian anti-racist feminism with critical race studies into "critical anti-racist discourse" (12) as way to emphasise both the intersecting and interlocking oppressions and the relational aspects of difference.

A crisis emerged early on in the field's institutional and intellectual history as soon as the capacity for gender to account for sexual and racial experiences began to be questioned. Women of colour and lesbians (and these groups, of course, overlapped) questioned the capacity of the term "woman" and a gender-only analysis to account for their specific experiences with racism and the social hatred of homosexuality.<sup>7</sup> The debates about the limitations of a sole focus on gender in women's studies continue today in the realms of feminist theory, epistemology, methodology, and pedagogy. My dissertation contributes to this ongoing debate by studying specifically the role that race and sexuality play in the knowledge and pedagogy of women's studies. Over the course of this project, the emphasis has also broadened to include a wider encounter with how the concept of differences challenges the idea of a coherent subject.

### **Chapter Overview**

Chapter 1 explores the tensions arising from the desire to define women's studies as centred upon a coherent subject, and analyses how social differences are theorized within diverging views of the field. Chapter 2 pursues the issues raised in the first chapter further by analysing the diverging desires in women's studies for both oppositionality to the university and institutional integration. I analyse these tensions first by way of reading the field's origin tales, which I argue are productive of the field itself. Here I look at how social differences are mobilized within various narratives.

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<sup>7</sup> Other axes of exclusion such as class, age, dis/ability, and so on were also discussed. My work, however, will focus specifically on the dynamics that discourses of race and sexuality bring to the field. For early critical attention to these exclusions, see, for example, Anzaldúa (1990), Dill (1983), Frye (1980), Hull (1982), Moraga (1981), Smith (1980 and 1983), as well as Zinn (1988).

Second, I locate the desires for oppositionality and institutional acceptance in the context of the university, and broader arguments about the university's shifting role in a transnational economy, with a view to how social differences become articulated.

Chapter 3 returns to the narratives of women's studies. There, I analyse four positions on women's studies and interdisciplinarity. I analyse texts for how they situate the field in relationship to the university and other disciplines and for how social differences are invoked in these discussions. Chapter 4 turns to problems in methodology and epistemology, a central site within women's studies for debates on the status of the subject. I consider the ways that different feminist epistemological positions conceive of social differences – as between women and men, as among women, and as within the subject. Chapter 5 turns to questions of pedagogy, another central site in women's studies. Given the field's investment in the distribution of knowledge, teaching and learning become a site for facilitating social change. Here, I analyse arguments within feminist pedagogy about learning and teaching social differences by way of psychoanalytic theories of identification. Chapter 6 turns to the narratives that participants offer on their attachment to the field of women's studies and how they imagine its difficulties. I focus on stories of learning about and from social differences offered in interviews of women's studies students and faculty. I examine how participants imagine social differences in women's studies in relation to their own histories of learning.

Another way to describe this study's organization is to distinguish between its two distinct but related sites of inquiry. On the one hand, this study is interested in the

discourses of difference, particularly race and sexuality, and how they circulate within the field of women's studies. It argues that such discourses are sliding signifiers that say more about social identity than the concept can stabilize. For example, I investigate the ways that race and sexuality are invoked and figure prominently in the self-understanding and production of the field. On the other hand, I take difference as central to the histories of learning of those involved in the field. The second part of this study works with interviews in which teachers and students speak of their experiences of learning and the attachments they make to knowledges about race and sexuality within women's studies.

The dissertation focuses on these two sites – knowledge production within women's studies and histories of learning – in order to explore the dynamics between the demands that knowledge places on teaching and learning subjects, and the psychic demands that teachers and learners bring to their own teaching and learning. As we will see, this other history that tries to grasp the psychical dynamics of teaching and learning brings psychoanalytic questions to the study of differences, namely: how does difference within affect difference between the subjects of women's studies? How do subjects, who produce and are produced by the demands of women's studies, answer to disciplinary and psychic desires? How do symptoms of learning such as identification, resistance, and ambivalence become sites of interest when disciplinary and psychic dynamics meet? I suggest that this dual approach – the consideration of disciplinary demands and psychic desires – allows insight into the complex dynamic of subject formation, of both the formation of the subject of study and the studying subject in

teaching and learning in women's studies. It also makes central questions of affect and learning.

### **Overview of Conceptual Themes**

The beginning chapters of the dissertation are indebted to insights into the performative effects of knowledge offered by theorists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. I consider the stakes of their critiques of knowledge and of the subject in terms of the constitution of the field of women's studies. Performativity theory, or more generally, poststructuralist work, argues that representations and knowledges that propose the truth of the subject produce the very subject they claim to represent and know (Butler 1993; Butler 1994b; Sedgwick 1994). Foucault's work on the regulatory effects of knowledge suggests that instead of setting us free or leading toward emancipation, the subject becomes subjected to the very knowledge that claims to represent and liberate it (1977a; 1977b; 1977c; 1990). The tension is that in becoming the knowing subject, the subject also becomes known. For Foucault (1977b) the truth of the subject, or that which makes the subject intelligible, is established through "regimes of truth," which can best be described as sets of rules that determine what counts as true and false, what counts as legitimate and what as transgressive.

This literature challenges widely accepted "truths" that ground women's studies, namely that its scholarship uncovers a prior existing subject and makes visible women who have been excluded, marginalized, or repressed. In doing so, the story goes, these recovered characters become (complete) subjects of knowledge and capable

of self-representation. The assumption that (women) subjects and (feminist) knowledge are repressed is central to the critical impulse of women's studies where scholarship is linked to emancipatory claims. Foucault, however, asks us to consider how the subject of study becomes established by way of the knowledges of the field. Foucault (1990) views these procedures as normalizing knowledges, that is to say that they are operations of power that establish, promote, and maintain norms. Chapters 1 to 4 trace the discursive constitution of the subject in women's studies, especially in the present debates over the role of women's studies and "its future" in the academy. I pay special attention to the role that discourses of race and sexuality play in these debates. I consider how women's studies constructs itself by way of speaking about itself in relationship to its disciplinary and institutional "outsides," such as the university, disciplines, and critics of the field.

To position knowledge as articulating regulatory regimes with normalizing and disciplinary effects seems to suggest a determined subject: a subject that cannot escape the processes of its own subjection because it is only through those processes that the subject recognizes herself. Recent writings on pedagogy, however, suggest a far more unruly subject (Britzman 1998; Ellsworth 1997; Felman 1987; Finke 1993; Gallop 1995; Jay 1987; Penley 1989; Pitt 1995). Via contemporary psychoanalytic thought, the literature on pedagogy questions the force of knowledge through the view that learning is a psychic event and a site of crisis. The notion of the psyche, or more specifically of the unconscious, suggests that there are limits to what we can know, and it is in the unconscious that knowledge is resisted. The unconscious, to use the words of Butler



(1997: 86), exceeds the “imprisoning effects of the discursive demands . . . to become a coherent subject.” Essentially, the unconscious stands in for difference within the subject. Due to the logic of the unconscious – it knows no time, no contradiction, and no “no” (Freud 1915) – the efforts of subjection and normalization by way of disciplinary knowledges remain incomplete. Related discussions about the subject of and those subject to knowledge have taken place in the context of methodology debates.

The shift in methodology from a normalized to an unruly and split subject is considered in the last chapter of my dissertation, with a focus on the psychic processes at stake in the learning of women’s studies, particularly in the psychic processes of students and teachers affiliated with and invested in its bodies of knowledge. Based upon in-depth interviews with graduate students and teachers participating in women’s studies, I analyse how individuals talk about their learning and reading by way of their theories. I seek to understand how individuals (as opposed to texts) theorize their own involvement in learning in women’s studies. While qualitative in-depth interviews seek to understand an experience from the inside out, rather than generalize an individual’s experience, this method of research allows insight into how the learner thinks about her world (Seidman 1991). Thus, Chapter 6 considers subjects who study and explores how they think about their own efforts.

My assumption is that reading practices are central to learning. I define such practices as the interpretations that learners offer of their experiences of attaching and disassociating from knowledge. This orientation to the study of learning can be found

in such diverse fields as feminist education (Cherland 1994; Christian-Smith 1993; Davies 1993), cultural studies (Radway 1986), queer theory (Britzman 1995; Martindale 1997), and psychoanalytic investigations of literature (Felman 1987; 1993). Reading is often understood as the private and insular engagement of one learner with the text. However, I want to suggest that reading is the central activity of all learning. Moreover, reading understood as interpretation of the affects at stake in learning is not only about reading the text but also about reading the teacher, classroom dynamics, and the disciplinary structures of the field. Reading (both reading texts and reading the social) is a formative practice since one learns to read as one reads to learn.<sup>8</sup>

Feminist inquiry has drawn on various epistemological traditions to analyse reading practices (i.e. critical, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and ethno-methodological to name just a few). This dissertation focuses on psychoanalytic theories of reading, which have suggested that the reader is not merely an object of the text (or of teaching) and that textual positions are not merely crafted onto a ready, waiting, and rational subject (Walkerdine 1990). My study explores the view that interpretations are actively and unconsciously formed by the reader. In this sense, reading practices can be interpreted through the question of desire. I consider the relations among interpretation, desire, and identification (Crimp 1992; Felman 1987; Fuss 1995; Martin 1996; Rose 1997), where desire, or one's own desire in knowledge, is partly structured by the conflicted histories of self and learning constructed in the processes of reading. Here is yet another sense of difference within; I speculate that,

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<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Deborah Britzman for suggesting this to me.

just as one learns to read as one reads to learn, one is also engaged with the psychic conflicts this process enacts. The learner's understanding of the knowledge offered by women's studies as well as her understanding of social differences, thus, is already an interpretation of her history of desire. Yet, in the processes of reading, the fluidity and transformations of desire may be bothered and affirmed, especially when questions of difference are centred. Thus, while learning about and from social differences affects students and teachers, these conflicts are often unanticipated in the curriculum.

My exploration holds on to the insight that our learning is structured in interaction with what is being taught (Lusted 1986). More often than not, though, learning works as refusal or as resistance to knowing and is elaborated within the symptom of a breakdown of meaning (Felman 1987; Pitt 1995). To understand learning as attaching to or detaching from knowledge (Britzman 1998) is quite different from an (conservative) approach to learning as successful knowledge transmission. But it is also different from the feminist investment in the emancipatory force of (feminist) knowledge. This latter approach resonates with a view of knowledge as the property of the individual and determined by curricula.

My dissertation, while sympathetic to the wider goals of feminist education, very specifically considers social dynamics seldom considered by the feminist pedagogy literature, namely psychic dynamics at stake in learning (for exceptions to this see: Finke 1993; Gallop 1995; Penley 1989; Pitt 1995; Walkerdine 1990). Accordingly, my study focuses on how learning is structured by the triangular relations

between the teacher and text, the demands of the field of study, and the (unconscious) desires of student and teacher.

I propose that in the readings that students and teachers perform in the processes of teaching and learning about and from race and sexuality in women's studies, we may find ways to understand how normative discourses are produced, taken up, and also undermined and resisted. And we may find that when we read race, sexuality, and gender, what is at stake are not identities of selves or others or even social difference, but rather dynamics of desire – here articulated as and through the imagery of sameness and difference (Young-Bruehl 1996).

By exploring these multi-faceted relations between knowledges, reading practices, and dynamics of learning, this study contributes to an understanding of the processes of the learning and teaching of “difficult knowledge.” The term difficult knowledge signals that women's studies has a history of being troubled by the dynamics of race and sexuality, since these disrupt what seemed to some commentators as a prior “feminist consensus” (Stimpson 1988). In addition, difficult knowledge, as termed by Deborah Britzman (1998), also refers to the demands that knowledge places on the learner. These more intimate demands include the demand to rethink oneself and consider implication in knowledge as both the crisis and the heart of learning. These dual insights into the regulatory force of knowledge and the resistance of the unconscious are important to a self-understanding of women's studies. With women's studies having matured and somewhat consolidated its rightful presence in the institutions of post-secondary education, this might be precisely the moment for

extensive conversations among those invested in this field and its practices. My dissertation thus offers two important sites of inquiry: the study of the limits of knowledge and the study of the interminability of readings.

## **Chapter 1**

### ***Questions of the Field: Women's Studies as Textual Contestation***

#### **Women's Studies Then and Now**

Women's studies is a remarkable academic success story. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, programmes in women's studies can be found in nearly every university catalogue across North America. Most major academic publishers now have special women's studies sections. The study of gender in general, and women more specifically, has become a legitimate subject of academic scholarship, teaching, and learning. Indeed, for new generations of students it is at times difficult to imagine what prior universities looked like. Only three decades ago, though, university courses that took women, gender, or feminism as their focus were practically unheard of. The empirical research of women's lives, the critical inquiry into women's "social condition," and theoretical explorations of sex, gender, and sexuality so integral to knowledge production in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are, in fact, recent phenomena. Commentaries on the history of women's studies point out that it was only in the early 1960s in the U.S., which has been at the forefront of the women's studies movement internationally, that individual women, frequently graduate students, began working on what was then called "women's issues," often in the study of literature and history. Later, many of these women became prominent feminist scholars who made women's studies into what it is today (Howe 2000; Stimpson and Cobb 1986).<sup>9</sup> Individual courses first

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<sup>9</sup> For an extensive history of women's studies in the U.S., see Boxer (1982; 1998a).

sprang up in the context of the emerging women's movement and other critical social movements. In the Humanities, for example, courses focussed on women writers and artists who had been excluded from the university canon. In the Social Sciences, the focus was on sex role research (Robinson 1973; Stimpson and Cobb 1986). Similarly, the proposal for one of the first women's studies programmes in Canada at the University of British Columbia in 1970 stated that its courses would cover "the history of women in Western Civilization, the socialization of the girl child, the psychology of women, the images of women in literature, the position of women in the family, and the treatment of women under the law" as well as "the present status of women in Canada and the history of the women's movement" (cited in Kolodny 1999: 146-7). Questions of pedagogy were also discussed, as women's studies always has had an intense focus on teaching due to its explicit goal to facilitate social change through the production and dissemination of new knowledges and through creating non-hierarchical social relations in teaching and learning (Kennedy 2000). From the inception of the field, women's studies linked its agenda for social change to larger social movements, foremost the women's liberation movement but also the New Left, the Civil Rights movement, and Gay liberation. Many even understood this emerging new field as "the academic arm" of the women's movement (Boxer 1998a; Stanton and Stewart 1995; Stimpson and Cobb 1986). Others, Howe (1973) argues, saw the women's movement as a teaching movement.

Women's studies courses elicited largely enthusiastic responses among women students (Buhle 2000; Kolodny 1999; Stimpson and Cobb 1986). Initiatives were taken

to structure the multitude of courses more coherently, and the idea of women's studies' programmes emerged. While the women's studies movement only began to proliferate in the 1970s and 1980s, at the beginning of the new millennium more than 630 universities and colleges across North America include some kind of women's studies course, and women's studies initiatives continue to spring up worldwide. In North America, some institutions now offer a special emphasis in undergraduate and graduate studies, while other universities have built certificates and undergraduate minors and majors. More recently, freestanding M.A. and graduate women's studies certificate programmes have been established and at least a handful of universities across the U.S. and Canada now offer Ph.D. programmes as well. In some universities, women's studies has moved towards departmental status, and at York University in Toronto the various women's studies programmes have recently been unified into a School of Women's Studies. In a little over 30 years, women's studies, and with it the study of gender, although still under-resourced and still seen by some in the academy as illegitimate, has become an established feature of the university landscape. Yet, the kind of institutional security that women's studies has achieved is varied and differs widely across North American universities. While some programmes experience unequivocal administrative support and even encouragement to expand (Brown 1997), others, perhaps especially in the context of changing university landscapes and funding structures, face continuous or renewed threats. One prominent example here is the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Montreal's Concordia University, which in recent years, despite being the first institute of its kind in North America, faced closure. Its



survival was ensured only after supporters put national and international pressure on the university administration.

### **Women's Studies as Controversy**

Since its inception, the question of the “subject” of women’s studies has been the topic of much controversy. What women’s studies is, does, and wants, and what these desires set in motion is highly contested. The field’s ambiguity about itself is exemplified in the contestations surrounding its naming. Women’s studies literally means, “subjects studied by women” as Susan Groag Bell and Mollie Schwartz Rosenhan (1981: 541) point out. This definition for many encompasses the early feminist critique that accused traditional academic studies of being inherently androcentric and of reflecting the interests and perspectives of men only. This critique of androcentric knowledge led to the hyperbolic naming of everything that does not explicitly study women as “men’s studies.” Indeed the term “women’s studies” parallels the former polemical term and articulates the field’s goal to contravene the androcentric perspective so pervasive in academic knowledge. Hence, for many participating in the field, the name “women’s studies” signifies a genealogy of critique, directed at the parameters of traditional knowledges as well as lending legitimacy to “*women’s self-knowledge*” (Bell and Rosenhan 1981: 541). Indeed, for many, women’s studies signals knowledge based upon women’s experiences – an idea that, in the late sixties, was intensely radical.

In the efforts of naming the still-emerging field, shifting understandings of its subject as well as diverging theoretical and political orientations are articulated. For example, the first collections of American course syllabi and reading lists were published in a journal entitled *Female Studies*, which was specifically designed to assist teachers in planning courses and programmes (Buhle 2000). This title calls up associations of biology and of scientific studies of sex difference, prominent preoccupations in the early days of the field. Yet, within the pages of this early journal, practitioners were already arguing for naming the field “feminist studies” to emphasize its explicit political orientation and its goal to not only analyse but also change the existing social inequalities of women. This name was also understood as underscoring the tenuous relationship to the academy and the field’s deep affiliation with the women’s movement, exemplified in the following early commentary in *Female Studies*: “Feminist studies programs should be more closely attuned to an ongoing feminist movement than to the university proper” (Salzman-Webb 1972: 64). Others argued instead in favour of naming the field “gender studies” because “women’s studies” reproduced a hierarchal relationship in which masculinity remained the unmarked norm equated with humanity in general (Eichler 1990).<sup>10</sup> In the late 1980s,

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<sup>10</sup> Even though women’s studies has legitimated the scholarly study of women and gender, the relationship between women’s studies and gender studies is fraught with conflict. Many practitioners of women’s studies actively refuse to have their work associated with gender studies because they regard it as a de-radicalized, weakened, and purely academic endeavour (de Groot and Maynard 1993b). Ailbhe Smyth (1992) is exemplary of this position when she argues: “The proliferation of ‘gender’ and ‘Gender Studies’ is the ultimate denial of women, women’s oppression and desire for liberation, and the *unequal* power relations between women and men ... ‘Gender Studies’ ... carefully *unloads* women and women’s multiple oppressions from the programme” (335). Women’s studies, thus, signifies for many a dedication to the transformation of women’s lives through academic teaching and learning. Heated discussions

Margret Eichler's (1990) large-scale survey of the status of the field in Canada concluded that a majority of participating professors agreed that women's studies describes a subject area (about, by, and of women) as compared to feminist studies, which described an approach or perspective more consciously political.

Given this understanding and the fact that the field has overwhelmingly been institutionalized under the name of "women's studies," it is not surprising, then, that at times its name has been understood as programmatic and as an announcement of the field's desires and goals to create new forms of knowledge that do reflect the interests and perspectives of women. This bold claim to representation, however, raises other questions, such as: what kinds of knowledge would be of interest to women? What are the interests of women? From the inception of the field, a concern, then, emerged concerning whether women shared common interests. Mentioned above, the notion of common interests shared by all women has been vehemently questioned since the inception of the field, specifically by women of colour and lesbians, who protested their exclusion from the ways "women" were conceptualized and represented. This critique motivated bodies of work that grappled with how to think "women" and gender without reproducing a universal subject, and emphasised instead the cultural, social, and power differences between women. This insistence on difference between women became central to the feminist theoretical work that deconstructs not only the idea of a

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among practitioners about the advantages of women's studies vs. gender studies are documented in the archives of the United States-based internet discussion list WMST-L.

commonality among women but also the effectiveness of the concept of “women” itself, arguing that the term is a regulatory regime (Butler 1990; 1993). Together these bodies of knowledge raise the fundamental question: who are the women that “women’s studies” invokes.<sup>11</sup> And, what does it mean to pose “women” as a foundation for knowledge claims and politics?

Deconstructive, postmodern, and poststructuralist theories, and theories that bring race and sexuality into theoretical focus question the field and its self-understanding in fundamental ways because they address its very foundation. No wonder, then, that since the late 1990s the field appears worried. A survey of recent women’s studies conference announcements illustrates this worried state. The themes range from the relatively innocuous suggestion of “Re-thinking Women’s Studies,” to the more anxiety-ridden title “The Future of Women’s Studies: Is it Feminist?” and culminate in the distressed question “Women’s Studies in Ruins?”<sup>12</sup> Recent literature concerning the state of women’s studies in the academy sounds equally alarming. Here we find “Women’s Studies On the Edge” (Scott 1997) and “Feminism Beside Itself” (Elam and Wiegman 1995). Commentators further worry about women’s studies as “Disciplined by Disciplines” (Allen and Kitch 1998) and muse about its “Success and Its Failures” (Martin 1997). One critic even argues of “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies” (Brown 1997).

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<sup>11</sup> The question of what “woman” is has a lengthy genealogy in feminist thought, reaching back as far as Simone de Beauvoir (1953).

<sup>12</sup> See respective conference calls for the Canadian Women’s Studies Association (CWSA) meeting held May 25-27, 2001, at the Université de Laval, Quebec City, QC; for the NWSA 2001 conference, June 13-17, 2001, at the University of Minnesota; and the “Women’s Studies in Ruins? Theory Politics Pedagogy” conference February 9-10, 2001 at the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO.

By analysing narratives of women's studies, we can begin to understand the tensions that structure the contestation over the field's aims and desires. One central tension in these controversies emerges between the desire for a consensus on what constitutes the "proper subject" of women's studies and the belief that this desire itself produces the problems that the field presently faces. Associated is the worry of what the fate of women's studies, its disciplinary formation, its status in the university, and its political self-understanding will be if such consensus is lost or never found. Here, certainty and coherence of the subject of women's studies are thought to be reached only by way of excluding those bodies of knowledge and knowledge of bodies that undermine and threaten coherence. That is to say, in this view, coherence and a stable women's studies subject, like disciplinarity, is reached only by way of imposing boundaries and limits. And yet, women's studies as a coherent subject, then, has to be limited and, by extension, risks intellectual conservatism and institutional assimilation (Broughton 1993; Brown 1997).

In recent years, further issues became the subject of tension and contestation within the discussions of the field, for example: women's studies inter/disciplinarity; the relationship between different generations of feminists in women's studies; the diverse conceptualizations of gender; the field's relationship to both the university and the women's movement; the role that race and theories that emphasise difference (post-colonialism, queer theory, transnationalism, critical race and anti-racist theories) take within women's studies; the role of theory more broadly; and the pressures of political correctness (Wiegman 2000). When we look at the narratives women's studies

produces about itself, we also begin to see that these contestations and the differences discussed are not just about women's studies as a field of learning and teaching, but that these discourses are an important site for the constitution of knowledge, for what is legitimate knowledge in the area of women's studies.

Women's studies has faced an extraordinary amount of antagonism and criticism since its inception, from opponents both inside and outside of the academy. Recent years have seen a boom in literature by former and present women's studies' faculty and students registering their dismay at past, present, and future directions of the field, at women's studies' role in university and its response to the university's disciplinary structure, as well as at how the field constitutes its subject of study. Surveying these discussions, a range of positions emerges. Some criticism received journalistic exposure because it plays on the most common critiques of women studies, for example the suggestion that women's studies has gone "too far" and submitted too extensively to the influence of "radical" minority positions, especially racial and sexual politics, to a degree that it is at risk of losing its academic viability and rigor (Mandle 2000; Patai and Koertge 1994). This position is exemplified by the widely publicized charges of Christina Hoff Sommers (1994: 51) who opines, "much of what students learn in women's studies classes is not disciplined scholarship but feminist ideology." A different, yet common complaint claims that women's studies "no longer" represents the majority of women – thereby implying that it did before (Flanagain 1999; Hoff Sommers 1994). In these accounts, the field stands accused of speaking only to a radical and increasingly isolated fringe, which, depending on the author, includes

radical feminists and lesbians (Flanagain 1999), women of colour, critical race and/or postcolonial scholars, queer faculty and students, third wave feminists, and postmodern and poststructuralist theorists (Modleski 1991; Nussbaum 1999). Most of these critiques, and those that target the field for its methods, objects of inquiry, and its pedagogical practices are not surprising, given how forcefully women's studies questions traditional practices of scholarship and teaching. However, some of the charges hold more sway within the field because practitioners genuinely supportive of women's studies express them. Here a common charge has been that women's studies is losing its inaugural commitment to feminist politics, its close connection to the women's movement and the struggle for social change because of an increased preoccupation with inaccessible and impractical theories such as postmodernism and poststructuralism (Nussbaum 1999; Smyth 1992). In this charge, a rather broad constituency of queer theorists, postmodernists and poststructuralists, as well as scholars interested in questions of race and racialization are considered responsible for putting the intellectual and educational project of women's studies at risk, for example, through theoretical work that seeks to deconstruct "women." According to this group of critics, deconstructing women leads to the field's incoherence and division, lack of academic rigour, and, most of all, has no further relevance for the "everyday woman" (Nussbaum 1999). Charges brought forth become even more commanding when articulated by pioneers of the field, such as eminent literary critic Susan Gubar (1998), who recently voiced the following indictment: "Prominent advocates of racialised identity politics and of poststructuralist theories have framed their arguments in such a

way as to divide feminists, casting suspicion upon a common undertaking” (801). This charge of divisionary theories returns us to the desire for a coherent subject or shared commitment as the foundation of women’s studies and what makes women’s studies recognizable.

For others, the problem with women’s studies is located precisely in the hostility with which many of its practitioners have responded to theories and bodies of work that unsettle what formerly was considered its centre: “women” and/ or gender. This position is concerned with how the failure to decentre “women” will affect the field, its ability as a field to function as an innovator, and the political consequences of founding change on a regulatory category. This last point draws explicitly on the work of women of colour theorists, postcolonial theories, critical race, feminist anti-racist theories, lesbian studies, and queer theory. These challenge women’s studies to centre an understanding of gender as not only formed through processes of gendering, but also through processes of racialization and sexualization (Wiegman 1999).

Given the lines of contestation described so far, and given the field’s history, I propose that, rather than seeing the contestation of women’s studies as an indication of a problem, thereby implying that uncontested knowledges are possible, desirable, or productive, we view contestation as foundational to knowledge production and as that which is at the heart of the formation of fields of knowledge. This holds perhaps especially true for the field of women’s studies because of the ways in which it emerged in the university. Indeed, its very conception is rooted in critique and controversy. Women’s studies has always posed a challenge to existing bodies of



knowledge, institutional structures, and pedagogical practices. Simultaneously, women's studies was always challenged to prove the legitimacy of its subject, be it the study of women, gender, sexuality and/or feminism. And yet, while there may be a semblance of unity towards outside critics and obstacles, within women's studies differences, controversies, and heterogeneity structured debates about the field. Some of these debates I have alluded to already; others I explore in more detail in the following chapters. Yet, if, as I argue, heterogeneity and difference are central to conceptualizing arguments, the ways differences within the field are presently considered do not reflect this centrality. While there have been shifts in the articulation of conflicts, some prefer to see conflict and discontent within women's studies and feminism as a recent development and as a threat to the field. This view, however, involves the risk of romanticizing the past and the inside as devoid of conflict.

A romanticized version of feminism's past casts feminists in the early stages of the second wave of the women's movement as having been united by a shared political commitment or cultural consensus that is now lost. This loss is seen by some as the reason for the present crisis of the project of feminism and, by extension, of women's studies. Ann Brooks (1997), for example, locates this consensus in the collective need of second-wave feminism for a social causation theory of women's suffering and oppression. Earlier, Catherine Stimpson (1988) suggested that a cultural consensus existed among feminists prior to the arrival of postmodernism. For Stimpson, this cultural consensus was rooted in a shared understanding of representations. The agreement was that representation is about accuracy and that most depictions of women

are misrepresentations. The shared cultural consensus among feminists, then, was based in a desire to confront these misrepresentations and to generate more accurate, complete, and more “realistic” representations. Both Stimpson and Brooks locate the break-up of the feminist consensus in postmodern feminism, where representation was always in crisis. While these two commentators are careful not to blame postmodern feminism for the break-up, others do.

I suggest that the very notion of a past consensus, collective origin, or common goal, now put under threat by various difficult constituencies and their demands, is problematic. The very suggestion of an earlier consensus, which resonates in the memoirs recently produced by practitioners (Gallop 1997; Howe 2000; Mandle 2000), even though they locate this consensus very differently, invites the search for a culprit who can be blamed and held responsible for the loss. The list of the “blamed” varies in these accounts, though it is a curious mix of both people and theories: postmodern and poststructuralist feminists, women of colour, queer theory, postcolonial, critical race, anti-racist feminisms, young feminists, radical feminists, liberal feminists, neo-conservatives and so on. However, a shared earlier consensus is a wish at best. From the beginning, documents of early women’s studies conferences and the literature of that period speak clearly to existing tensions among feminists and those interested in establishing women’s studies. A good example is Lee Rae Siporin’s (1972) detailed report of an early national conference held in 1971 at the University of Pittsburgh. The conference’s goal was – not unlike that of contemporary conferences – to discuss the state and future of women’s studies. The conference report dedicates significant space

to the discontent and “factionalising” (Siporin 1972: ix) that emerged between younger faculty and students on the one side and the more established and well-known women’s studies faculty on the other. The divisions, first built along age and seniority differences, were later joined and shored up by ideological differences as the “radicals and lefts (including faculty) joined the young and issues grew from exclusion and ‘alienation’ to more political themes” (Siporin 1972: ix). The political differences, according to this conference report, were closely linked to disagreements between the different factions about the nature and goals of women’s studies. Similarly, personal narratives and memories of the first ten National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) conferences in the U.S. recount the field’s continuous struggles over issues such as racism and anti-lesbian sentiments (Frye 1980; Towns, Cupo, and Hageman 1994), which marked the field from the beginning.<sup>13</sup>

Instead of posing an imaginary past consensus, and to avoid an attendant inclination towards blaming those suspected to be responsible for its loss, I suggest that we consider heterogeneity as central to the origin story of the field. Indeed, I suggest that we stage encounters between heterogeneous positions in regard to women’s studies and see the controversies as both central and productive to the making of the field. Moreover, insisting on the heterogeneity of women’s studies – rather than the coherence of its subject – opens up possibilities for internal and self-critical modes that reflect upon the effects of women’s studies as knowledge and so as working upon its

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<sup>13</sup> See also the literature discussing the field of women’s studies in the 1980s for its abundance of conflicts and controversies surrounding questions of race and sexuality: Aptheker (1982), Bulkin (1984), Davis (1983), Davis (1981), Dill (1983), Frye (1980), Hull (1982), Lugones (1983), Moraga (1981), Rosenfeldt (1981), Smith (1983), Smith (1980), and Zimmerman (1982).

desire to be a force of social intervention. Such self-reflexivity turned inward and upon the field is not a new and postmodern turn, as some want us to believe. Nor does it risk channelling energies away from the “real sites” of feminist concerns beyond women’s studies. Indeed, the call for self-reflexivity can be found in very early speculations about women’s studies and, thus, could be thought of as one ordinary practice of the field (Bowles and Duelli-Klein 1983).

In the remainder of this chapter, I am particularly interested in the conflicts and controversies that surround differences themselves and how they figure in the views that various practitioners offer regarding women’s studies. I will outline the landscape of women’s studies through a taxonomy of the different views of the field.

### **What is Women’s Studies? Views from the Field**

A common way to describe the differences in orientation within women’s studies is in terms of the field’s chronology (Bowles and Klein 1983; de Groot and Maynard 1993a; Stimpson and Cobb 1986), linked to the development of feminist theories and changing political environment. The field’s development is described both in terms of its aims, which shifted from recuperation to reconstruction to reflexivity (de Groot and Maynard 1993a), and in terms of its preoccupations, which changed from women to epistemology to theory (O’Bar 1994). The problem with a chronological view, or any taxonomy for that matter, is that it cannot account for the messiness of the conceptual terrain (O’Bar 1994) or the mosaic quality of the field (Boxer 1998a), where various orientations coexist simultaneously and seldom peacefully. Indeed, different

orientations towards women's studies are frequently seen as mutually exclusive or adversarial by practitioners passionately attached to one vision or another of the field's goals and aims. In a chronological view, then, the conflicts between the different views are lost in favour of the suggestion of development from originary goals to present preoccupations. However, the very notion of the field's "original goals" is already contested. This contestation concerns two issues: first, the question of which goals are approved as original, and second, the kinds of claims that are made from this approval. For example, some charge that the field's recent turn towards self-reflexivity or theory is a deviation from its "original purpose." For others, the insistence on original goals is an indication that the field is hopelessly stuck in its past. Thus, for understanding the present conflicts within the field, a chronological view is important but also limited. In the following pages, I chart three different orientations, which I distinguish as the revisionist, the constructionist, and the deconstructive view on women's studies. I analyse the tensions between different orientations, particularly in regard to how they produce the boundaries of the field differently and in regard to how each orientation positions the question of social differences.

For some in the field, the project of women's studies did not just begin with a concern for the recuperation of lost women in cultural analysis, history, and social science research, but is defined by and limited to an additive or revisionary function (Mandle 2000; Patai and Koertge 1994). Women's studies, according to this view, is about the study of women and their lives. Women's studies in this view is designated, then, to revise traditional scholarship by adding bodies of knowledge (and knowledge

of bodies) that have long been excluded, forgotten, or distorted. The project here is the revision of traditional disciplinary knowledge by recovering women as sites of knowledge. For the revisionists, the name “women’s studies” is programmatic and articulates the mandate of the field as that of studying women and their lives.

This definition of women’s studies appeals in its simplicity; it is intelligible even to outsiders to the field. The fact that the name seems descriptive of what the field does is significant to women’s studies practitioners who find themselves frequently in need of an explanation and legitimation for the preoccupations in their teaching and learning. Quite a few of the participants in my interviews admitted to using this definition when describing women’s studies to outsiders, even though they were largely critical of the limitations that such a view poses.

The limitations of this orientation are exemplified by Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge (1994), who represent admittedly the narrowest interpretation of a revisionist stance and therefore find little support for their views within the field. Patai and Koertge (1994) seek to limit the field to “two *legitimate* academic objectives,” namely: “to find and publicize information about the lives and works of women who had been forgotten and overlooked, and to make women’s lives a primary focus of inquiry” (114, my emphasis). Within this view, many of the areas and activities that women’s studies presently engages or might engage in the future are deemed *not legitimate*, are marginalized and excluded.

The revisionists allow for only a very limited subject matter (women) and assume that women constitute a meaningful empirical category based in a biological

truth of women and men. For revisionists, women are a category consistent across history and, at times, across cultures. This definition reproduces the notion of “women” as a unified category and allows us to consider the differences between women only as “minor variations” within a context that is always already saturated by a preoccupation with the “major differences” between women and men. Ultimately, this approach conceptualizes women always and exclusively in relationship and comparison to men. Its concern is with what Wiegman (1999: 363) has critically called “patriarchal masculinism.” If social differences among women are considered (for example in the study of women of colour, poor women, lesbian women and so on), differences function always only as an add-on or a sub-category to the “general” study of women. As a subcategory, women who are not white, middle class, and heterosexual are continuously remarginalized as women’s studies’ minor concerns.

Given the overall compensatory stance of the revisionists’ understanding of women’s studies, it is not surprising that within this approach the standards of academic knowledge production and the disciplinary organization of the university more broadly are affirmed rather than challenged. Indeed, it seems that proponents of this view aim to approximate more established disciplines as closely as possible. Diane Elam (1995) summarizes the connection between the desire to ignore differences between women and the desire for disciplinary status pointedly: “women’s studies’ programs . . . [are] finding their disciplinary coherence in an idea of woman that is predominantly white and straight” (8). By modelling itself after other more traditional disciplines (Coyner 1983), a process that sometimes includes creating its own canon

and defining a list of its “classic texts” (Shteir 1996), both social and epistemological differences can be avoided. Given that this approach to women’s studies asks only for a change of content but not structures or epistemologies, the revisionist position is an orientation that wants to preserve most closely existing ways of knowledge production.<sup>14</sup>

Given this bounded understanding of what women’s studies is, revisionists are often critical of other orientations, particularly those that speak more forcefully to the political sensibilities of women’s studies. This second orientation, which I call the constructionist view, understands women’s studies as the academic arm of the women’s movement and regards women’s experiences as the subject matter of academic feminism, particularly those experiences that have to do with inequality and subordination, and now studied from *women’s point of view*. In this orientation, women’s studies is much more than just the study of women. Instead, the field marks an important and radical epistemological intervention into knowledge production and thus is oriented toward challenging notions of objectivity and neutrality. Indeed, this orientation is critical of the androcentric methods of knowledge production and seeks to reconstruct knowledge by closely linking it to identity, social standpoint, and experience.

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, in some places institutional constraints may make possible only such an add-on approach to women’s studies. Yet, I agree with Elam’s (1995: 9) conclusion, that “budgetary questions should not be an excuse for women’s studies to engage in exclusionary practices that reflect a desire for disciplinary uniformity.” Furthermore, more may be at stake than just budget constraints, such as the desire for institutional, scholarly, and social recognition, acceptance, and legitimacy.



This definition broadens the field significantly, as it insists on the oppositional character of women's studies knowledge (Stimpson 1990). In this view, women's studies produces knowledge that is grounded in women's experiences. However, given the social inequality between women and men, women's experiences are understood as necessarily different from men's. Centring these long-excluded experiences, this approach suggests, will produce different knowledge, namely knowledge that will lead to social change. Within this view, changing the university and the ways knowledge is produced is another goal of the field (Stimpson 1990). The appeal of this oppositional orientation lies in its clear political stance. The urgency of the political is seductive because it legitimizes women's studies' efforts and existence as crucial and relevant to women's lives. The field's self-understanding as political and directly involved in social change also benefits women's studies practitioners. It positions us on the side of political activism and consciousness. We are the ones who can critically assess the ideological powers that sway others. If women are subordinated and oppressed, the logic goes, then speaking the "truth" of women's experience and existence sets women free. However, this logic also provides practitioners with the pleasure of being both insightful and subversive. It is an orientation invested in what Foucault (1990) has critically called a repressive hypothesis of power. Within this framework, women's true knowledge of themselves is seen as historically repressed by an androcentric knowledge economy.

Women's studies' desire to be on the side of political and social intervention is strengthened by a central origin story of women's studies, where women's studies

emerges from the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Kathleen Barry (1991), for example, tells this story:

Feminism first moved in the university connected to feminist action on the streets: demonstrations, manifestos, sit-ins. In speak-outs, legislative hearings, and research feminism focused on women's lives to connect theory to politics, research to action. We found common ground . . . Revolutionary feminist knowledge was put into motion. (83)

Women's studies as the "academic arm" of the movement for women's liberation provides a clear mandate for the field, namely to function like a "think tank" for the movement. This view imagines women's studies' relationship to the institution of the university as uneasy – indeed, much of the early debates about the institutionalization of women's studies worried about the field being assimilated into the academy (Bowles and Klein 1983). Barry (1991) articulates this concern; she describes women's studies' entrance into the academy as the death of feminism: "Almost immediately reaction set in," she writes, "*feminist* studies started to become 'women's studies'" (85; original emphasis). Even though Barry is an academic, for her, academic women's studies signals the end of political engagement when she notes that: "research began to move away from a feminism rooted in women's real lives" (85). Speaking broadly, for Barry and others who share her orientation of women's studies, the university is a hostile environment for feminism. It tames feminism into the less political women's studies and thereby threatens feminism's "real" mandate. In this view, women's studies is an "outsider within" the university – a view that I return to in the next chapter.

Arguments based upon the "political nature" of women's studies, its origin within a grassroots movement, and its mandate to address "real" women's lives are

frequently mobilized to delegitimize some bodies of feminist scholarship as outside, contrary, and even a threat to the “original” mandate of feminism (Nussbaum 1997). Within this view, the changing relationship between academic feminism and the women’s movement is frequently interpreted as disloyalty or as a conservative turn for which increasingly abstract theoretical discourse is held responsible (Lenton 1990). Theoretical or analytical work that does not offer a clear link to political action, established modes of activism, or established topics of politics is frequently chastised as “apolitical” or, even worse, as disloyal to women’s studies’ and feminism’s “original” objectives. The constructionist orientation, however, risks at times a very narrow, alienating, and exclusionary approach towards what is acceptable as politics.

Another tension common to this orientation is a direct consequence of its political and epistemological demand for relevance. If the claim is that women’s studies is about and derived from women’s lives and experiences, then the appeal of this orientation lies precisely in its promise that the field is about “me” and “my experiences” and immediately relevant for “my life.” Early formulations of this orientation were based upon an understanding that women shared experiences as women, particularly experiences of subordination.

Some participants in my study confirmed the appeal that this orientation affords, namely that of seeing oneself and one’s own experiences reflected in the knowledges of women’s studies. But given the predominately white and middle class teaching bodies and the kinds of experiences that they have long deemed relevant and reflective of “women’s experiences,” other participants articulated their deep

disappointment upon finding that the experiences that women's studies reflects does not include their own. Out of sustained articulations of this unfulfilled promise grew an understanding of differences among women and, more broadly, the constructed and heterogeneous quality of "experience" (Bannerji et al. 1991; Scott 1992). For some, this meant that the field had to account more closely for the diverse experiences of inequality that women face. This recognition, however, does not question women's collective status as a subordinated group per se. Nor does it question the political goal of women's studies working against women's subordination (O'Bar 1994). For others, the sheer pervasiveness of the differences and heterogeneity of women's experiences led in a different direction, one that questioned the usefulness of the very categories of "women" and "experience" as the basis for knowledge production and political organizing (Butler 1990), given their constructed nature (Scott 1992). From this latter view, the emphasis of women's studies on studying women's subordination was also questioned, for it risked affirming the idea that "oppression" is a universal, unchanging, and/ or unifying experience that women share – what, perhaps, even makes them "women." Such emphasis on oppression also sets up a binary and "either/ or" relation between oppressed and oppressor, in which women are oppressed and men are oppressors. Within this purview, women's studies and feminism become synonymous with women's liberation. This kind of binary thinking can render invisible the very different, complex, and heterogeneous modes of women's positionality and location in relation to struggles with and against inequality. It can also make invisible the very specific local, historical, and cultural contexts and practices and the complexities of

refusal, resistance, and accommodation that shape these struggles (Shohat 1998a). A binary structure that locates women as oppressed makes it difficult to discern experiences of inequality among women. It can shut out the consideration for how women participate and are implicated in establishing and maintaining regimes of racial, class, and other forms of power (for example colonialism, class rule, racism, heterosexism, imperialism and so on) and for women's multi-positionality within shifting and complex webs of resistance. And, the adjunct suggestion that women's studies is a liberatory force makes it all but impossible to consider critically how feminist knowledge in the past, present, and future has and might participate in and contribute to discrimination, oppression, and maintenance of inequality.<sup>15</sup> Within a framework that begins from the point of view that women are oppressed (by men), it becomes difficult to understand how the various axes of power (such as race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) are mutually constitutive, how they produce different local regimes of power and knowledge, how subjects are located within them, and how these relations are negotiated in complex ways.

To further understand the different orientations within women's studies, it is useful to consider their different epistemological assumptions and investments. So far, the orientations discussed here are variously grounded in the desire for recuperation, revision, and reconstruction of knowledge, or what Susan Stanford Friedman (1997)

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<sup>15</sup> Barry, who I cited earlier as representing this orientation, is an important autobiographer of Susan B. Anthony, who has been celebrated as a critical historical figure in the fight for women's right to vote (Barry 1988). Anthony, however, has become known as a prime example of the racist imagery and discourses of white superiority that white suffragists mobilized to shore up their superiority to black men as a way to legitimize their greater claim for the franchise (Newman 1999).

names as objectivist or positivist epistemologies. These epistemologies claim to discover a formerly hidden or presently distorted “truth” in order to shatter the lies and distortions told about women and their conditions. Other orientations within women’s studies, to which I now turn, are based upon subjectivist epistemologies (i.e. constructivism and/or deconstruction), which emphasise both the interpretative and productive dimension of *all* knowledge. In Chapter 4, where I consider the epistemological stakes of women’s studies more closely, we will see that objectivist and subjectivist epistemologies are not just binary oppositions but are implicated in each other while standing in a critical relationship to each other.

The initial insight into the heterogeneity of experiences of women, discussed earlier, led to a more sustained concern with the difference, not only between but also within women. Work that considered the intersection of various axes of differences such as race, gender, class, and sexuality (Crenshaw 1995; Dahan 1992; Khayatt 1994), together with deconstructive work on gender and sexuality (Butler 1990; Butler 1993; Sedgwick 1991) and postcolonial and transnational feminist scholarship (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Heitlinger 1999; Shohat 1998b) brought to bear on feminism, and by extension on women’s studies, an orientation that takes into critical consideration the very desire for foundations.

The revisionist and constructionist orientations in women’s studies agree that women’s studies has a foundation or a proper subject: “women” and/ or “experiences.” A third and not yet fully articulated deconstructive approach to women’s studies might begin from Butler’s (1990) work and particularly from her argument of the

performative quality of both “gender” and “women.” Such deconstructive approach would be interested in the very production of women as a stable subject, now understood as the result of both regulatory ideals and the representational, within and outside of feminism.<sup>16</sup> Such an approach to women’s studies would question the usefulness of secure foundations, and together with transnational, critical race, anti-racist, and queer theories, which have produced a self-reflective orientation, challenges the very desire for foundations and their exclusionary effects.<sup>17</sup> A heterogeneous approach to women’s studies that draws upon the theories and work listed above would decentre feminism, now critiqued itself as a hegemonic practice that centres the experiences and preoccupations of western, white, middle-class, and heterosexual women. This decentring works in part through an emphasis on the polyvocal, polyphonic, and multi-positionality of the subject at stake in feminism. Within women’s studies, the response to theories that already attempt such deconstruction is mixed. Its effects, however, have been felt in the discussions of how women’s studies intersects with other fields such as gender and sexuality studies, black studies, postcolonial, and ethnic studies – both “intimately, and, at times, abrasively” as Ella Shohat (1998a: 42) has argued. This orientation intervenes into feminism by seeking to “queer” and “race” it (Shohat 1998a: 3). Importantly, within such a framework, gender, race, and sexuality are not stable social identities. Instead, these categories are thought

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<sup>16</sup> By suggesting that this approach to women’s studies is not yet fully articulated, I do not mean to suggest that individual scholars within women’s studies do not already teach and research from a deconstructive orientation.

<sup>17</sup> Alice Pitt reminded me that these challenges to the exclusionary effects of foundations, however, do not always interfere with the interlopers’ new and improved desire for foundations.

of as intensely meaningful social constructs, shot through with specific historical and cultural meanings, employed both to justify and resist social stratification, all the while shifting the social and personal production of meaning, subjectivity, and culture.

Within this framework, then, women's studies is (or would be) concerned minimally with "women" or even gender. Instead, the object of inquiry concerns the multitude of social, symbolic, and subjective processes of gendering and how gendering depends upon processes of racialization and sexualization. To begin with these assertions also means to embrace diverging theories that can reflect upon their own practices and knowledges, and to try to account for the desire for self-reflection (de Groot and Maynard 1993b). Wiegman (1999) describes this as a shift within feminist struggles away from a heterosexual paradigm, in which the women's (individual and collective) relationships to men are central, to a homosocial orientation, which articulates differences among women and, as I would to add, approaches the question of differences within "women."

In some ways, these recent shifts in – or challenges to – women's studies raise the question of the desire to define women's studies. How do we make sense of the desire of many in the field to defend its boundaries through stabilizing its subject? And what would happen if the field, instead of defining itself in a clearly demarcated subject matter, would define itself as a practice? For example, its practice could be defined as a way of rethinking knowledge production. This is how women's studies began. Women's studies is – and always has been – more than a supplement to traditional knowledge and/in the academic disciplines. It has challenged what counts as



knowledge, taken an interest in the effects of knowledge and worried over the knowledge it produces. Women's studies is an intervention into the disciplinary structure of the university and knowledge production. This, I would argue, and contrary to what some recent commentary might want us to believe, is neither a new nor even postmodern insight. Indeed, in the early collection *Theories of Women's Studies*, Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein (1983) outline clearly an orientation that understands emerging women's studies as outside the traditional disciplinary division of knowledge in the university. Women's studies, according to the authors, means, "to radically challenge the generation and distribution of knowledge" (Bowles and Duelli Klein, 1983: 3). Bowles and Duelli Klein explicitly reject an approach to women's studies as merely "adding" women to the curriculum or demanding sexual equality, precisely because these approaches do not challenge the structures of dominant knowledge production. More recently, Elam (1994) raises similar concerns, though from a deconstructive perspective.

Yet, in this context, the institutionalization of women's studies can indeed be seen as hazardous to its own well being, especially when the desire prevails to make women's studies just like any other discipline, as we saw in the first orientation towards women's studies. Indeed, Elam (1994: 101) points out, women's studies "has been known to conform to very traditional understandings of what women are supposed to be and do." Nevertheless, if part of the project of women's studies can be seen as an intervention into traditional modes of knowledge production, then the objective is precisely *not* about settling its subject. Instead, it is to reflect continuously upon not

only the question of “women,” in terms of what women are, what they do, how the very notion of “women” is culturally and historically specific, and how “women” engage, embrace, rethink, and refuse the very terms that claim to describe them. What must also be raised is the question of what kinds of knowledges are produced in the very process of resisting these traditional modes of understanding women. Alternatively, as women’s studies produces knowledge about “women,” it simultaneously needs to attend to how the field participates in the production and normalization of “women” as its subjects of study.

### **Conflicts and Differences as the Foundations of Women’s Studies**

My brief overview shows that differences in orientation play an important role in the institutionalization of women’s studies. These differences emerge largely as conflicts and internal contests. To recall, such conflictual mode is consistent with the field’s history, given that, since its inception, the capacity of gender to account for the sexual and racial experiences of women has been questioned. But other differences such as age, professional status, and ideological and political attachments, have also been important. Thus, we might want to consider differences as they relate to issues of race and sexuality as “foundational conflicts,” which play a central role in the production of the field. Similarly, while the kinds of conflicts may have changed – for example, most programmes today offer at least a nod of acknowledgement towards the

importance of race and sexuality – the very conflictual nature of these differences continues to structure current debates of the field.<sup>18</sup>

As it turns out, race and sexuality – even when these differences become at various moments erased, appropriated, tokenized, or embraced within women’s studies scholarship and teaching – are constitutive dynamics in the construction of the subject of women’s studies in terms of its scholarship goals, relation to the world beyond the university, and relation to the university. Consequently, centring racial, sexual, and gendered modes of difference has implications for the field’s conception of its knowledges and for our understanding of learning. The tension is that if difference is seen as central to knowledge in women’s studies, then knowledge cannot be self-identical, obvious, or self-evident. Knowledge, much like social differences, is constructed and always contested, unsure and unstable. This is to say, knowledge relies on its other – that which is unknown or that which is refused in knowledge. And here, we reach the limits of our three orientations. This limitation is similar to the self that always relies on some (constructed) other through which it can produce, define, and

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<sup>18</sup> Another way to consider how centrally racial and sexual differences functioned as foundational conflicts in women’s studies and feminism is by way of the difficult history of these categories within these fields. Both the first and second waves of the women’s movement are commonly understood as the political predecessors of the women’s studies movement. In both, the struggle for gender equality is embedded and closely related to the struggle for racial equality. Both the suffrage and temperance movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries can only be understood against the backdrop of the movement for the abolition of slavery. See Bacchi (1983) for the Canadian context and Newman (1999) for the racial origins of the American suffrage movement. Similarly, the modern women’s movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is closely linked to the Civil Rights and Black Power movement. Or, as one author puts it: “the struggle for racial equality became the midwife to the feminist movement” (Sara Evans quoted in Stimpson 1986: 10). (This quote, of course, inadvertently also speaks to the racialized family structures in the U.S., where many white feminists were raised by black domestic workers.) The involvement with the Civil Rights and abolition movements respectively afforded white women the intellectual and political opportunities to become aware of their own inequality as well as offering them a training ground for political activism (Newman, 1999; Simpson, 1986; Ware 1992).

understand itself. Such understanding of knowledge as tenuous, or, as Britzman (1998) describes it, as the incommensurability of knowledge/truth, has repercussions for how women's studies thinks about delineating its "proper" object of study. It also effects how women's studies understands its position in the academy at large, how it relates to its curricula and canons, and its own inter-disciplinarity. Indeed, such an understanding of knowledge as based in differences intimately shapes our understanding of learning. The orientation that I will turn to later understands knowledge as difficult, as a problem for the learner, and as staging the crisis of not knowing. Further, understanding knowledge as based in difference returns us repeatedly to the gap between the self and other, between the self and its object of knowledge. What is at stake, then, when race and sexuality as forms of social difference become central to women's studies, are larger questions of epistemology and pedagogy. Chapters 4 and 5 will explore these tensions further.

Given the tensions sketched out so far, between the desire to settle the subject of women's studies and the long history of unsettling this question, it is not surprising that the field at this historical moment experiences itself as an identity crisis (de Groot and Maynard 1993b). The site of crisis that I turn to next considers the field's ambivalent relationship to the university.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Questions of the University: Women's Studies as Oppositional Knowledge?**

In the introduction to *Feminism Beside Itself*, Elam and Wiegman (1995) think about the narrative self-production of feminism in relationship to the field's present worried state. Employing the language of both popular culture and hyperbole, they compare feminism to "an action movie hero" who likes to position herself as the liberator of women and their suppressed voices. For the authors, the question is what happens to such ambitions when the position of feminism – and so the feminist – in the university changes, when feminism becomes institutionalized, for example in women's studies programmes, and can no longer claim the role of "the heroic interloper into the institution's patriarchal business" (3). What happens "when feminism is not any longer on the outside of the institution but has made the institution its home?" (3). "Can she be in the institution but not of it – a member who subverts all membership rules?" (5). How will feminism's self-understanding be affected when it is no longer marginal to the university? How will this effect the feminist's relationship to the institution, to herself and her own identity, to other critical fields, and to the larger political and social realm?

The questions Elam and Wiegman raise about the effects of institutionalization on feminism are pertinent because they offer another conceptualization of difference. Women's studies and feminism are not identical; both are more than one or the other.

Yet they constantly invoke and slide into each other in complex ways: Women's studies, while not the only site, is central to the institutionalization of feminism in the academy. Feminism and feminist theory in particular are central to the ways women's studies is conceptualized. However, how women's studies invokes feminism varies widely. Just as there are various feminisms, there are various contested ways to think about women's studies, as shown in the previous chapter.

I have already noted that the institutional success of women's studies is troubling the field. Institutionalization and institutional acceptance affect women's studies' historical self-understanding, according to which the field is a site of resistance where oppositional knowledge is made. The ongoing tension here is between the desire for both institutional integration and the retention of a semblance of oppositionality. In this chapter, I analyse how these tensions figure in the literature. I study different narratives of the field, produced both by women's studies practitioners and by those more generally concerned with the status of oppositional knowledge in the university today. My focus is twofold: I look at the content of these narratives to explore how they make meaning of women's studies. Second, I analyse their effects through a theory of performativity.

In a strict sense, performative speech acts are those utterances of language that bring into being that which they name (Butler 1994b; Sedgwick 1994). As a function of discourse, performativity works by way of repetition, recitation, forced reiterations of norms, and ritualized productions. This kind of signifying act "produces the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification" (Butler and Scott 1992: 21).

While the term performativity has been used to analyse the production of that which was commonsensically understood as existing prior to signification, such as the body, sex, sexuality, biology etc., performativity theory implies that there is no pre-existing object outside of its utterance. Over the course of this chapter, I employ this term to attend to the productivity of discourse and knowledge. This strategy belongs to Foucault's work on genealogy and his suggestion that "development . . . is a series of interpretations" (cited in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 108). Foucault's notion of genealogy, then, charts histories of interpretations, historicizes concepts to map their historically and contextually specific meanings, and considers how their conditions of emergence become modified and allow new interpretations.

To consider the historicity of a concept is not the same as finding meaning hidden in origin, or to explain causes. Instead, a genealogical approach analyses how causes and origins, essence and tales of progress emerge as forms of interpretation and how they make claims to (historical) truth (Butler 1990; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Foucault 1977a; Foucault 1977b). I use the concepts of genealogy and performativity to suggest that the narratives of women's studies work to produce the field itself. How the story of women's studies is told matters because within that story the field is produced in particular, often strategic, ways. Accordingly, in what follows, I read present narratives about women's studies, and particularly about women's studies' origins, to understand how these narratives participate in producing women's studies as an oppositional knowledge at the same time that the field is securing its institutional

presence. I am particularly interested in the tensions of difference that open up these narratives to the shifting meanings of difference.

Earlier, I quoted Elam and Wiegman to alert us to the fact that being an outsider or being marginal is central to the self-understanding of feminism. I would add that this is for many also central to the self-understanding of women's studies. Marginality is often used to connote women's studies inherent position of oppositionality to knowledge, to "traditional" learning practices, and to the field's transformative goals. Consider for example, Friedman's (1997: 5) recent description of the field, in which she argues that "for some twenty-five years, women's studies has defined itself in opposition to the academy, dedicating itself to the transformation of the institutions of knowledge within which it operates." We have met this insistence on the field's oppositionality earlier and can safely state that, for many participating in the field, oppositionality is one of its central qualities, appeals, and mandates. Linked to the desire for oppositionality is also the profound experience of finding the endeavour of women's studies under threat.

Strangely enough, this insistence on being oppositional is reinforced and legitimated by conservative critiques of the field. These voices, not only from people who observe women's studies from the outside but also from disenchanted former participants, continue to question the legitimacy of this field, its methods of inquiry, the knowledges it produces, and especially what is taught within women's studies (Flanagain 1999; Hoff Sommers 1994; Lehrman 1993; Patai and Koertge 1994). At times, what is taught in women's studies attracts intense responses. For example, in



1997 a women's studies conference entitled "Revolting Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom" at State University of New York at New Paltz sparked a lengthy public controversy after a university trustee publicly claimed that the conference "proselytized for Lesbian, anal, and public sex, well as for Bisexuality, female masturbation, and sadomasochism" and thus marked "the erosion of American culture as a whole" (cited in Martinac 1999: n.p.). In 1999, state legislators threatened to cut funding from the women's studies programmes at four state universities in Arizona. In this case, the catalyst was a student-run performance of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (Martinac 1999; Ono 1999). Given these and other recent public attacks on the field, some have concluded, "at this historical moment . . . feminism in general and academic feminism in particular are under great attack" (Friedman 1997: 4).

Given its oppositional desires, the critique and antagonism voiced against women's studies from the outside, however, do not just threaten the field. Ironically, this antagonism also reinforces and strengthens the field's sense of self. These critiques are central to women's studies' identity of being oppositional and political just as they are important to the field and its appeal. The tension is that while seeking institutional acceptance, women's studies, at the same time, also maintains its identity as an oppositional force precisely through the experience of being opposed.

These attacks target particular areas, topics, or theories within academic feminism rather than the whole of women's studies. In the above-cited examples, what is targeted is an academic engagement with women's bodies, sexuality, sexual desire,

and sexual practices. At stake here is not all of women's studies but its queer edges. The paradox is that many of the attacks on academic feminism specifically target areas such as multiculturalism, postcolonial studies, ethnic studies, queer/gay and lesbian studies, as well as poststructuralist theories; areas of study that are controversial and, at best, marginal within women's studies. The commonality among these diverse approaches and areas of study is that women's studies' engagement with them has been marked by its own ambivalences. As recently as the 1999 the NWSA Conference, the annual meeting of practitioners in the field in the U.S., made "Feminism and (Post-) Colonialism" a plenary topic, and raised questions as to whether this body of work does "enhance or detract from the intellectual and political work" that women's studies aligns itself with (NWSA 1999). Similarly, questions regarding the field's relationship to queer studies have repeatedly been on the agenda of this and other women's studies conferences. What do we make of the fact, then, that in public attacks, women's studies is identified with areas and bodies of thought that are contested and even at times rejected by the field? What do we make of the fact that criticisms directed at women's studies associates the field with work that, though for different reasons, has often been critical of the field? I suggest that what is at stake in these public criticisms might not be women's studies per se but the deconstructive work that became, in part possible, through women's studies and academic feminism, even though, it at times is marginalized or even excluded from the field. Given the direction of this critique, I also conclude that many aspects of women's studies, for example, the revisionist work of the field, which seeks to merely add women to knowledge, is already accepted and

normalized within the academy. This normalization, however, produces another kind of crisis for a field invested in its oppositionality.

### **Origin Tales as Strategic Fictions**

Oppositionality is central to the origin stories of women's studies. How these stories are told varies. These stories lay different claims to definitions and goals of women's studies. Origin tales are thorny, especially if they link events and practices across historical and geographical spaces without accounting for such differences. Another problem of origin tales is that they are often called upon to justify claims and demands directed at the present and the future. At the same time, origin tales are fascinating when read as invested with strategic fictions and for how they organize the past in relationship to the present. Friedman (1995) has spoken pointedly to this in relation to feminist history. She argues: "History writing orders the past in relation to the needs of the present and future. The narrative act of assigning meaning to the past potentially intervenes in the present and the future construction of history" (13). Friedman's comment on the writing of history returns us to the critical ideas of performativity and genealogy and invites us to understand the histories and origin tales of women's studies as performative and productive of the past of the field. We need to deconstruct the tales of the origin of women's studies as strategic fictions of the past with an understanding of how they pressure the future of the field in relationship to the present. What are the political investments and desires at stake in particular designations of origin and cause?

In the collection of origin tales of women's studies available to us, we can identify two distinct historical approaches. One is marked by a trans-cultural and trans-historical continuity that links women's studies today back to older and earlier educational efforts by, for, and on behalf of women. A second approach understands women's studies as a recent phenomenon, as discontinuous with and a distinct break from earlier sexist and patriarchal education and politics. Within the continuity model, women's studies today has been linked to any educational initiatives by women, going as far back as Christine de Pisan's efforts in the 14th and 15th century, who insisted on women's ability and right to be "literate, learned and cultured" (Stimpson, 1986: 6; see also Stimpson, 1990). At other times, the emergence of women's studies has been dated back to the development of the education of women, for example the emergence of women's colleges in the U.S. in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This genealogy is drawn despite the fact that in the 1970s the majority of women's colleges were less than enthusiastic about the institutionalization of women's studies, finding the field variously "too aggressive," "slightly flaky," lacking in academic rigor, or a threat to "curricular seriousness" (Stimpson and Cobb 1986: 9). The continuity model is reminiscent of the revisionist orientation discussed in the previous chapter. What is common to both orientations is that the differences between women and men are highlighted, while differences among women and across history are minimized.

These attempts to link women's studies today back to the historical struggle of women for access to education are strategic and they aim at institutional acceptance. They do so by performatively producing a sense of historical continuity between

women's effort for education across time. This narrative produces the sense that women have always struggled for the right to learn and lends legitimacy to the women's studies project today as part of a broader struggle for human rights for women. The association with the right of women to learn normalizes women's studies by implicitly suggesting that just as women's education seemed a radical demand then, so may women's studies today. History will show that the radical can become the accepted norm and eventually women's studies will be a "normal" and accepted part of university education. Besides completely ignoring historic specificity, another problem with this argument lies in the ambivalent relationship that women's studies has with being normalized. While claiming normalcy is one way to support the demand to become part of the university, something else is lost. This returns us to Elam's and Wiegman's earlier questions of what becomes of women's studies once it has lost its radical and oppositional edge, once it becomes a "normal" and accepted part of university teaching. Normalization here risks a central part of the field's identity.

The strategic quality of origin tales becomes evident when we consider how they differ in different discursive contexts. The earlier examples that link women's studies to educational efforts of women and for women across history are now an accepted part of the genealogy of women's studies. More recently, I encountered a very different tale. In the foreword to Marilyn Boxer's (1998a) first comprehensive history of women's studies, Catherine Stimpson (1998), another important commentator on the development of women's studies and whose other origin tales I just cited, situates women's studies in close relationship to the struggle of African-Americans for literacy.

She constructs this link by first introducing us to an 1872 poem by Frances E.W. Harper, an African American writer. In this poem, an elderly ex-slave freed by the civil war, who against all obstacles becomes literate, celebrates the freedom that her education affords her. Stimpson then announces that this literary figure is a symbol of not only “the struggle for literacy and education of African American men and women”(xi) but “of women of all races – indeed, of anyone who must surmount obstacles in order to satisfy the thirst to read and write” (xi). Finally, she proposes that as “a great intellectual and educational movement, women’s studies is a vital part of this history” (xi).

Stimpson’s genealogy is both bizarre and strangely familiar at the same time. There is no evidence to support a claim of such connection and shared tradition between the struggle for literacy and access to education by formerly enslaved African-Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of women’s studies in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Instead, this genealogy ignores or glosses over the specificity of the unequal social relations among black and white women, particularly in the South of the U.S. after the civil war. It is also familiar and reminiscent of the long history of white women, during both the first and second wave of feminism, appropriating the potent metaphors of slavery and enslavement to describe and gain sympathy for their own plight. The difference in Stimpson’s narrative is that what is appropriated are not histories of suffering but of resistance.

Stimpson’s broad genealogy has to be read against the background of charges of racism and racial exclusion brought forth against women’s studies (Bhavnani 1993;

Carty 1991; Zinn et al. 1988). In this discursive context, the alignment of women's studies with struggles for racial liberation and equality even metaphorically, not only positions the field discursively with those fighting for freedom, but also erases central tensions within the field. Thus, Stimpson's origin tale is an exemplary specimen of a strategic fiction, as it structures the field's history according to the present needs, such as the need to locate women's studies as a member of broad coalitions across differences and as socially oppositional.

Another widely invoked yet very different origin story emphasizes the discontinuity between the newly emerging women's studies in the late 1960s and older traditions of women's education. In this narrative, women's studies marks a radical departure from the tradition of excluding women both as studying subjects and subjects of study. In this narrative, women's studies is a by-product of the women's liberation movement. The story goes that in the context of this movement, groups of women began examining their status in society and in educational institutions. From this emerged a critique of the status and treatment of women in knowledge. Besides protesting the omission of women from knowledge, this narrative posits the mandate of women's studies as a rethinking of how women are thought about. It develops new tools for analysis, re-examines theoretical approaches, and attempts to end the traditional separation between the academic and the social/political world, all from the vantage point of women. In this narrative, women's studies is described as the women's movement's "academic arm" and as radical intervention.

The historical link between women's studies and the women's movement is often mobilized in another story as continuity, this time not across history but across purposes. From locating women's studies' emergence as indebted to the women's movement, claims are made upon its present and future direction and goals. Some commentators foreground the larger context of various oppositional movements of the 1960s such as the Civil Rights Movement, the New Left, student activism, and Black Power to understand women's studies as concerned more broadly with oppositional politics that focus on gender, but not exclusively, and include other sites of injustice. From these narratives of what women's studies was "originally," claims are made upon what it should be today. In this argument, women's studies' moral obligation is to stay true to its "original" cause. To establish, then, the nature of this original cause is the performative work that memoirs and histories of the field do. Within these texts (for example, Boxer 1998a; Gallop 1997; Howe 2000; Mandle 2000), we find differing claims as to what the field's authentic cause was, which is consistent with the contentious discussions about the field's current and future direction.

There is deep contention on the relation between women's studies and the women's movement. While commentators agree that the women's movement was a fertile ground for women's studies, the precise relationship between the political and the scholarly movement is contested. Boxer's (1998a) comprehensive history of the women's studies' movement in the U.S. entitled *When Women ask the Questions: Creating Women's Studies in America*, offers this origin story:



Women's Studies began with . . . advocacy. Women's Studies came out of the women's liberation movement. Women's Studies began as part of a self-help movement that also brought women's health clinics, . . . legal reform and new employment opportunities . . . And it brought advocacy for women to higher education, to both the academic structure and curriculum. (10)

For Boxer, women's studies – not just feminism – began outside of the academy in the context of the many projects for social change central to the women's movement.

Women's studies, then, has its roots in popular forms of knowledge such as the self-help movement, advocacy, and consciousness raising rather than academic forms of knowledge production. Others, like Stimpson (1986), plant the roots of women's studies within the university. In Stimpson's narrative, women scholars already inside the academy, even if in marginal positions as adjunct, junior faculty members, or as graduate students, turned towards research on women. They became receptive to feminist activism and thought from within the academy. Mari Jo Buhle (2000: xx) offers a similar account: "the founders of women's studies more often than not *became* feminists through the process of teaching courses, organizing programmes, and developing the curriculum" (my emphasis). Stimpson (1986) describes the period and the relationship between academy and community like this:

Faculty and feminists would nourish each other: Feminists offered scholars links to a broader community of women and an agenda for research, while scholars provided activists a theoretical framework and data to form the basis for social policy and progress. (13)

In comparison to Boxer (1998a), Stimpson holds firmly the distinction between politics and activism on the one hand and scholarship on the other.<sup>19</sup> Such distinction speaks to the clearly academic roots of women's studies and to the fact that women's studies derived both from political activism outside the academy and from scholars who were already part of the academy before they became feminists. Early feminist scholars were trained within the traditions of academic knowledge production and were frequently invested in existing academic processes and practices, even though they were marginalized by them at the same time (Kolodny 1999).

In these two diverging origin tales, we find replayed another central tension that also structures present debates over the goals of women's studies; here the tension is between those women's studies practitioners who understand women's studies as closely linked and indebted to political activism for social change and those interested in women's studies as a scholarly field. In this orientation towards women's studies as an activist field and its related insistence on the field marking a radical departure from traditional models of education and knowledge production, another continuity emerges. This continuity insists that the field's present and future be modeled on its past.

These origin stories question the narrative self-production of women's studies and particularly how women's studies has produced itself - and continues to do so -

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<sup>19</sup> We might want to keep in mind the fact that Stimpson's history is part of a report that she authored for the Ford Foundation on the development of women's studies in the United States. The Ford foundation was one of the main foundational sponsors and their grants aided the academic development of women's studies in important ways. Thus, Stimpson's production of women's studies as an academic entity is part of a legitimizing strategy. Yet, the different accounts offered by Boxer and Stimpson respectively are also reflective of their own and specific histories of encountering feminism and involvement with women's studies. These distinct historical experiences shape each of their understanding and vision of the field in important ways.

from within the institution *as outside* to the institution even as it makes its place in the university. Indeed, origin tales offer us another way to read the contestations within the field and also understand how these debates inaugurate the tensions and difference that they claim to merely describe.<sup>20</sup> For example, in relation to the already cited tension over the designation of the field as either activist or scholarly, what is lost in this debate is that the difference of their practices may be one of direction rather than opposition. Wiegman (2000: 13) describes the differences in direction aptly as, “thinking about feminism as a politics” as compared to, “thinking about politics through feminism.”

In the current debates about the status and future of the field, the history of women’s studies is called upon to strengthen criticism of its direction and to corroborate the dismissal of positions the field deems as inauthentic to its history. Examples for this can be found in diverse writings such as Gubar’s (1998) earlier cited scathing diagnosis of the present ailing state of feminist literary criticism, for which she blames “prominent advocates of racialized identity politics and of poststructuralist theories” (880). Similarly, Nussbaum’s (1999) recent dismissal of poststructuralist feminist theory invokes the language of “original goals” of academic feminism, which she describes as “closely allied to the practical struggle to achieve justice and equality for women” (39), to substantiate her claim that recent developments in feminist theory have no relevance for “the real situation of real women” (38).

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<sup>20</sup> For women’s studies memoirs, see Howe (2000) and Mandle (2000). For anniversary tracts see Corbett (1998) and Towns (1994), for women’s studies history see Boxer (1982; 1998a) as well as Guy-Sheftall (1995). For reflective writings, see Gallop (1997) and Gubar (1998).

This body of literature, thus, is performative *par excellence*. In reading these narratives, we find ourselves faced with a further series of dilemmas. One of them is that various origin tales of women's studies prop up competing claims as to who holds the truth of the field's history. Given the mosaic quality of the field, to arrest women's studies in a singular history seems limiting. Another complication arises from the very claim that women's studies today and tomorrow can and should be derived from its past. The problem with such a view is, as Wiegman (2000: 13) pointedly argues, that understanding the "future of feminism as a monotheistic politic . . . is . . . too allergic to the possibility of any future that second wave feminism has not already imagined." Women's studies understood as obliged to and structured by its past, then, can be little more than its own repetition.

Another consequence of this kind of unquestioned obligation to its past is that the field has difficulty with engaging tensions in the present, for example with the tension between the desire to be oppositional and its present successful integration in the university or with the tensions that emerge between competing understandings of the field. Another set of tensions concerns the field's effects upon knowledge, or with how the very knowledges that aimed at the liberation of women might be implicated in or create precisely that which it opposes. Moreover, I argue that the present crisis of significance that can be felt within the discussions of the field, which I am calling women's studies "worried state," is related closely to the tensions between its institutional success in the present and to its histories of desire.

Given the simultaneity of the diverging desires of the field for both claiming oppositional knowledge and gaining institutional acceptance, I consider two recent treatises to situate these desires within the larger crisis looming over the *function* of the university and post-secondary education in North America. These texts help us re-evaluate the difficult or changing state of oppositional knowledge by considering the state of the contemporary university more broadly. In regard to women's studies and its role in the university, we find two different views: one theorizes the field as a "salvation" for the university. The second view regards it as a "symptom" of the present larger crisis of the university. By discussing these analyses in some detail, I read the first text to show how mainstreaming of women's studies and its accompanying institutional acceptance come at the price of exclusionary and normalizing effects. The second treatise helps us reflect upon the effects of a desire for oppositional knowledge.

### **Women's Studies as Salvation?**

In *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defence of Reform in Liberal Education* philosophy professor Martha Nussbaum (1997) sets out to evaluate and, ultimately defend, recent curricular changes in U.S. universities such as the inclusion of women's studies, and the study of "non-western people" (2), ethnic and racial minorities, and lesbians and gays. Nussbaum's account is likely to appeal to women's studies audiences because she lends staunch support to a permanent and valid presence of women's studies in the academy. Her arguments counter conservative critics who reject

any forms of curricular inclusion because of its political nature and who denounce any such changes as a threat to the overall quality of education. For Nussbaum, education includes knowledge of “others:” those traditionally excluded from both access to the institution and from representation in its curricula. Importantly, she also rejects a narrow understanding that reduces post-secondary education to vocationalism, an idea increasingly popular in the self-understanding and self-representation of the university. Her interest is in the broader democratic ideal of the American university and its emphasis on citizenship, both at the national and “world citizenship” levels. For this education, questions of race, gender, sexuality, and ethnic differences are crucial. Indeed, she argues it would be “catastrophic to become a nation of technically competent people who have lost the ability to think critically, to examine themselves, and to respect the humanity and diversity of others” (300). In true liberal fashion and tradition, Nussbaum describes the university’s role – and especially, the role of the Humanities – as “the cultivation of humanity” (9). She states this goal clearly:

It is ... very urgent right now to support curricular efforts aimed at producing citizens who can take charge of their own reasoning, who can see the different and foreign not as a threat to be resisted but as a civilization to explore and understand, expanding their own minds and capacity of citizenship. (301)

Nussbaum returns to a vision that underscores the university’s redemptive function. This vision is indebted to liberal and humanistic philosophy and grounded in an understanding of human subjectivity as rational, self-reflective, and conscious. Her educational ideals reflect the Enlightenment values and understand the role of education and knowledge as setting students free, as saving them – and society at large

– from the tyranny of un-reason, ignorance, and, its by-product, prejudice. This education makes demands on its students, requiring the development of particular intellectual and emotional capacities, for example the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's beliefs through reason-based argumentation; the capacity for compassion with humans other than oneself and the members of one's close community; and, the development of a "narrative imagination." She emphasizes the ability for empathetic understanding of people different from oneself (9). Good teaching, based in the Socratic method, develops just such capacities in students.

In Nussbaum's project of education as redemptive, women's studies, together with other interdisciplinary fields that centre sexuality, race, and non-western cultures, play an important role. Women's studies especially is praised for having played a major role in the transformation of academic knowledge by making it more complete, for example, by including the study of women in history, anthropology, literature, etc. Indeed, women's studies is also credited with a mode of multi-disciplinarity that can change the very ways in which knowledge is produced, for example, by questioning established research methodologies and by taking on research topics (such as the study of emotions, families, women's economic contributions etc.) that previously had been seen as outside, as private or natural, and thus as un-scholarly. Nussbaum endorses women's studies because it centres issues of women and gender that are of direct importance to the students themselves: Students do need to think about gender relations and women's issues both in their public and private lives. In this way, women's studies serves an important national function as it affords students with important lessons in

citizenship (214). Women's studies and the other fields whose inclusion Nussbaum endorses come to represent the Other; the Other previously excluded and misunderstood. It is through the study of the Other that knowledge and those who acquire knowledge become more complete. The study of Others is recognized as producing an appropriate understanding of an increasingly complex social world. It is credited also with providing access to a more "adequate account of reality" (220).

Nussbaum's understanding of women's studies, both its transformative role and its function in the larger project of education reflects a familiar women's studies narrative, already discussed in the previous chapter, in which the field's legitimacy derives from its compensatory and revisionist function of adding previously excluded bodies of knowledge and knowledge of bodies to the curriculum. It is a compelling narrative because of its positivity. Yet, in Nussbaum's discussion we can also further see the limitations of a revisionary and compensatory approach to women's studies. These limitations are grounded with the theories of learning and knowledge that Nussbaum subscribes to, based in rationality, and, moreover, with a one-sided theory of difference. Difference, in Nussbaum's view, is solely the property of the Other.

Nussbaum's theory of learning is grounded in what she calls a "narrative imagination." By this, she means that more is at stake than just knowledge about others. Instead, she suggests, "we must also cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbidding alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us" (85). For Nussbaum learning about



others has the effect that they become less strange, less different, and more the same. Difference signifies here something that has to be overcome or made to go away, preferably by making the Other become “like us.” This assimilative impetus runs through Nussbaum’s approach to difference. But there is also something else at stake and this concerns Nussbaum’s theory of teaching and learning, which is based in another mode of sameness. This sameness concerns representation and the idea that knowledge and communication are transparent, that representations are complete, that language is stable, and that meaning is located and fixed within the material studied rather than made from interpretation. For Nussbaum what is taught is (or should be) identical with what is understood.

Nussbaum’s vision of redemptive education is structured by a prior attachment precisely to that what she claims to reject, namely the conservative critiques of multiculturalism. She responds only within the parameters set forth by its critics, and thereby is already limited in her response. Dominick LaCapra (1998: 49), in a very different context, describes this kind of attachment as a form of transference, in which that what is critiqued is repeated and effectively strengthened rather than undermined. Nussbaum’s transference relationship to the authority of that which she opposes is discernible particularly in the ways in which she invokes “otherness.” Although, Nussbaum’s argument explicitly supports multiculturalism and encourages knowledge “about” diverse populations, her intellectual preferences stabilize and essentialize otherness by not challenging the discursive production and manifestation of the categories of differentiation. Nussbaum employs what Eve Sedgwick (1991) has called

a minoritizing perspective, in which differences such as homosexuality are only relevant to a distinct identity group instead of being relevant across the spectrum of identity. Nussbaum expands the minoritizing view to other identity categories such as race, nationality, and gender, all of which only concern minority populations which are defined by them. We can observe this, for example, in Nussbaum's use of terminology: "non-western people," ethnic minorities, lesbian and gays, and women. In Nussbaum's descriptions, these appear as distinct populations and stable sociological categories. Overlap between populations seems unimaginable. This suggests that all ethnic minorities are straight, all lesbian and gays are white, and all women are members of dominant groups. As distinct minorities, constructed in a binary relationship to the norm, complications between and within populations are lost and those deemed part of the unmarked norm remain untouched by difference.

Such binary construction lends itself to Nussbaum's further distinction between two kinds of Others, those worth studying and those not. Some "Others" are charged with irrationality and unreason. Some forms of difference, otherness, and heterogeneity are described as posing a threat to education. Those so charged include a broad constituency of poststructuralist and postmodern theorists, scholars, students, activists invested in Afro-centricism, and those invested in religiously-run education. What this broad population shares is that its members, for various reasons, do not comply with the standards of rationality set forth by Nussbaum.

Nussbaum's endorsement of diversity studies is reflective of liberal tolerance politics and all its limits. A liberal tolerance approach to difference is normative in that,

for example, limits are set forth by the dominant group as to what they can tolerate without being damaged, disturbed, or changed by these representations. A tolerance approach to difference covers up the inequalities at stake in social differences and thus contains a concrete anti-democratic impetus as, Wendy Brown (1999) has shown. The normalizing impetus of Nussbaum's reasoning displays a colonizer's gaze onto otherness, as evidenced in her moral instructions of how to approach difference. She solidifies Americanness and the "other" civilizations studied as mutually exclusive, clearly identifiable, and differentiated entities – and ignores the multicultural fabric of the U.S. and its hybrid populations. An example for this is Nussbaum's description of an underpaid and exploited adjunct instructor, who is described in ways that assert her ethnic and cultural otherness: "she [the instructor] has lived in this country for more than twenty years, she still wears a sari and speaks with a heavy Bengali accent" (300). A little later, this instructor is praised for her usefulness to Nussbaum's project: "Mallick [the instructor] has an ability our nation badly needs: the ability to generate excitement about rational debate among students who never cared about it before" (ibid.) This adjunct is clearly marked as not being part of "our nation," for example by asserting her linguistic and cultural otherness in the first sentence. Yet, honorary membership is extended to her because she is useful to "our" nation and because she accepts and has assimilated – if not in dress and language – to the epistemological standards of the nation. Citizenship in Nussbaum's project is dependent upon epistemological assimilation and sameness.

Because conservative critics accused women's studies and other efforts towards the diversification of curricula as being overtly political, ideological, and indoctrinary, Nussbaum, in her defence of women's studies and other similar curricular initiatives, tries to make women's studies look reasonable and legitimate. Yet, in these attempts to "normalize" the field and to make it palatable in the eyes of the larger institution, she effectively produces some parts of women's studies as unreasonable and illegitimate – employing very similar terms set forth by the critics that she tries to rebuke. To achieve this goal of making women's studies look reasonable, she splits the field into "good" and "bad" forms of women's studies.

"Good women's studies," if we follow Nussbaum, is driven by sound reason and democratic pluralistic debate. The tales she tells of classrooms where these principles rule diminish conflict: Ideological disagreements are debated and not acted out, reason keeps conflict at bay, students do not resist but leave the classroom with new insights, teachers hold their own preferences, biases, and partialities in check instead of using them against their students, and in turn, students can appreciate and articulate the good acts of their teachers.

Interestingly, Nussbaum splits the field into good and bad by choosing criteria that, at first glance, are unexpected. Nussbaum's scenario of "bad women's studies" carefully avoids the stereotypes of the popular imagination, which frequently picture radical feminism as bad feminism and radical feminist teachers as man-hating lesbians who are after the innocent minds and bodies of young girls in order to convert them into raging feminists. Nussbaum rebukes such conservative images through her

insistence that women's studies is rational and reasonable. She is able to make even Catherine MacKinnon's radical critique of the inherent violence in gender and gender relations look reasonable by linking her arguments to prominent classical philosophical texts such as Mill, Plato, Spinoza, Kant etc., thereby lending legitimacy to MacKinnon's polemic.<sup>21</sup> In the context of Nussbaum's discussion, "bad women's studies" is inspired by deconstructionist theories. This kind of work is charged with moral relativism and with not focusing on issues of "justice and equality" (215). Scholars of this theoretical persuasion, "teach some bad classes – empty, windy and contemptuous of argument" (ibid.) with the latter being the strongest charge thinkable in Nussbaum's rhetorical archive.<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum's disdain for poststructuralism and her, at least initially, surprising alliance with radical feminism is linked to her vision of the redemptive function of the university; a vision that radical feminism endorses and deconstruction and poststructuralist theories critique.<sup>23</sup>

Nussbaum's vision of the future role of women's studies as part of the multicultural tapestry is compelling because it ties the women's studies project

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<sup>21</sup> See especially pp. 218-9. Nussbaum employs a similar rhetorical strategy in her discussion of the other fields engaged in curricular transformation. In each case, Nussbaum sets up a dualistic structure that juxtaposes tales of reason-based teaching with portraits of extreme examples of unreason. The parts of each field deemed acceptable by Nussbaum are legitimized by their similarity to philosophical positions in classic theory and in antiquity.

<sup>22</sup> This critique of deconstruction and poststructuralism is repeated and expanded in Nussbaum's (1999) inflammatory dismissal of Judith Butler's work. She charges Butler with lack of argument and evidence to support her claims as well as accusing it of political quietism.

<sup>23</sup> Foucauldian theory, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction are central to such critical engagement with the redemptive function. In the context of feminism, Butler's (1990) groundbreaking analysis stands out. Butler comments on the feminist version of redemptive politics by pointing out how an ontologically based political project of feminism tends to repeat normative gender configurations rather than offering liberatory practices. See also Brown (1995). For critical engagements with redemptive education and educational research, see Lather (1991) and Popkewitz (1998).

permanently into something larger than itself. Nussbaum envisions the field as fully integrated into the university curriculum, a central force in the long-term survival of the university, and, even more significantly, she offers it a leading role in “the betterment of humanity.” Nussbaum thus feeds into both the feminist desire to participate in social change and to be heroic at the same time.

Yet, Nussbaum also provides us with a view of the price for such integration. Nussbaum’s project repeats some of the tensions already discussed in the revisionist orientation of women’s studies. Like the revisionist approach to women’s studies, the integration and validation of some knowledges comes at the expense of exclusion of others, namely of those that question the foundation of revisionism and redemptive education more forcefully. Racialized, national, ethnic, and sexual others become objects of study as well as subjects of equal opportunity. But those who too radically question the order of things are demonized as irrational, out of control, extreme, and worthless of inclusion. Or, to put it differently, the inclusion of Others depends upon them living up to the standards and norms set forth by Nussbaum, most of all, “they” must be “like us,” meaning that they must accept rationality as the pan-ultimate epistemology. In the end, defining the proper place and function of women’s studies within the global knowledge economy, as least as Nussbaum proposes it, does not decentre existing norms and practices. Instead, those who do not operate within similar paradigms of reasoning become intensely Othered. This fate of being aggressively Othered is shared in Nussbaum’s study by diverse groups such as poststructuralist and postmodern theorists, scholars, students and activists invested in Afro-centricism as

well as those who support religiously-run academic institutions. What these very different populations share, in Nussbaum's eyes, is inferior scholarship and intellectual inferiority.

The kinds of associations that Nussbaum invokes in relationship to differences that refuse assimilation draw upon familiar economies of racial and sexual stereotypes. Within this economy, the norm reaffirms and reasserts its own increasingly fragile and endangered position in the centre by producing others as savage, deviant, lacking intellectual sophistication, and, most of all, in need of salvation, which here is exemplified by the Socratic method of rationality. Women's studies' normalization, here in its new role as saviour of the university and of humanity, relies upon the expulsion of those parts of the field deemed too different or resistant to assimilation. What cannot be integrated is expelled as expendable.

### **Women's Studies as Symptom?**

Contrary to Nussbaum's reassertion of the redemptive function of the university and the transformative value of diversity studies, Bill Readings (1996) argues "the grand narrative of the University, centred on the production of the liberal, reasoning subject is no longer readily available to us" (9). This is because, in his diagnosis, cultural and economic globalization and the end of the nation state have altered fundamentally the function of the university. No longer playing a "role as the producer, protector and incalculator of the idea of national culture" (3), the university is now a service-oriented transnational bureaucratic corporation run by administrators. Theirs is

an “accounting model.” The fact that the university serves no longer as the ideological arm of the nation state, affects curricula to the degree that: “what exactly gets taught or produced as knowledge matters less and less” (13). Administrative demands that scholarship and teaching from whatever viewpoint give proof of its “excellence” increasingly displace battles over disagreeing ideologies, while this notion of “excellence” has no defining criteria. Indeed, Readings argues, excellence has no referent.

The loss of the central function of the university as producing national culture and the loss of the referent of national culture itself hold important implications for fields that have defined themselves explicitly against and in opposition to the ideological function of education and which see their mission in the intervention into (state) ideologies. Without an ideological centre, cultural studies – Readings’ example of choice – and other critical fields of inquiry such as women’s studies and the studies of race and sexualities can no longer claim to be oppositional or even marginal since there is no longer a centre against which these critical fields can define themselves. Indeed, with this centre of the university lost, multiculturalism is no longer a problem, and the production of knowledges resistant to a national culture can no longer be an aim. Accordingly, critical fields such as women’s studies can no longer be understood as signifiers of resistance and marginality but instead are implicated in market demands and consumer requests that appear and disappear according to changing knowledge economies. In Readings’ scenario of the university, women’s studies appears more as a symptom of the crises of knowledge and education than as radical intervention or



salvation for the university's broader identity crisis. Thus, Readings' analysis fundamentally questions the desire of women's studies to be an oppositional force. His analysis calls for a reconsideration of women's studies as a symptom of the dereferentialized university, where content does not matter any longer and oppositional efforts are without effect.

Readings traces a genealogy of the function of the university: its origins are in the production of reason. Then its efforts turned to the production of national cultures and citizenship. More recently, it became what might be called the "University of (dereferentialized) Excellence." One of the tensions with Nussbaum is that her argument is located in all these realms. In the "University of Excellence" the function of the canon, which earlier served in the making of the nation and of national identity, is uncertain. In the last couple of decades, universities have witnessed intense curricular battles, the so-called "culture wars."<sup>24</sup> Readings insists that this points not only to a crisis of representation but also signifies a larger crisis of the canon (85). With the link between knowledge and citizenship broken, the canon becomes an "arbitrary

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<sup>24</sup> Readings suggests that the culture wars raged over the question of the appropriate representation of U.S. national identity: as a rainbow of differences or as selective traditions (112), suggesting that the former position, which pronounces the "true" Americanness of diversity, is actually already entwined with the globalization project (113). (Readings' estimate is lent support inadvertently by Nussbaum's argument that diversity studies help to participate better in a globalized economy.) Readings argues, "'culture wars' . . . arise between those who hold cultural power but fear that it no longer matters and those whose exclusion from that cultural power allows them to believe that such power would matter if only they held it" (114). In Readings' understanding, both of these positions ignore that the nation state no longer exists, and, consequently, that reflection of its culture is no longer possible (115). For a variety of different positions on the culture wars in American higher education, see for example the contributions to the 1998 colloquy in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The contributions range from those urging a return to the role of the university as "the transmitter and promoter of a common culture of enduring value" (Himmelfarb 1998), to those, who in agreement with Readings, draw a connection between multicultural curricula and larger trends towards a corporate university, see for example Gitlin (1998) and Kolodny (1998).

delimitation of a field of knowledge (an archive) rather than . . . the vessel that houses the vital principle of the national spirit” (86). In the “University of Excellence,” no longer linked to nation building, no national knowledge needs to be known or related to any longer. Hence, “knowledge tends to disappear, to be replaced as a goal by facility in processing information” (86). This shift translates into an increasingly popular understanding of the university exclusively in terms of a role in preparing students for the job market – and no longer for cultural and national citizenship (87). This pressure can also be felt in women’s studies, which increasingly has to market itself in terms of how its curricula and degrees benefit graduates’ future employment. Within a view of women’s studies as oppositional, such pressures will be unacceptable. Nussbaum, a revisionist herself, demonstrates how within this orientation, market driven pressures are accommodated. While she rejects an increasingly vocational orientation of the university, her argument for the inclusion of cultural, racial, sexual others and gender relations into the curriculum is based in part upon the professional merits of such education (Nussbaum 1997: 50-51).

Readings locates the rise of identity-based movements of knowledge such as women’s studies, lesbian and gay studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies precisely in the context of the changing function of the university: for “such movements signal the end of the reign of literary culture as the organizing discipline of the University’s cultural mission, for they loosen the tie between the subject and the nation-state” (87). However, and this analysis distinguishes Readings from the

conservative critics of multiculturalism, they are not the *cause* of the decline of (national) literature and knowledge but are the *effect* of this:

Women's Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Postcolonial Studies arise when the abstract notion of "citizen" ceases to be an adequate and exhaustive description of the subject, when the apparent blankness and universality of the subject of the state is able to be perceived as the repository of privileged markers of maleness, heterosexuality, and whiteness. (88)

Readings suggests that the breaking apart of a previously unified national identity is not so much due to the successful interventions by identity-based knowledges and their critiques of the exclusionary forms of representation, a claim popular in women's studies, but instead argues that these latter knowledges become possible precisely in the moment when national identity no longer matters in education.

Women's studies and the other identity-based inter- or transdisciplinary fields seem to threaten the cultural canon because they demand its revision. Readings, however, suggests that curricular changes are not the only effect of their interventions. Beyond that, these fields

mark instead the incommensurability between reason and history as modes of legitimating for the modern state, once the notion of cultural identity can no longer serve to bridge the abyss. In an entirely welcome sense, they signal the end of "culture" as a regulatory ideal that could ... allow the analogy between University and the modern state to function. (89)

This is a significant departure from Nussbaum's position. While for Nussbaum diversity studies signal a welcome reform of the traditionally exclusionary canon and therefore are emblematic of progress, for Readings the role of the university and the role of knowledge are "ruined" more fundamentally beyond repair.

Readings' work raises the pertinent question of what can the function of the university be when the nation state is lost, when culture is no longer the site for the production of national identity, and, when teaching no longer serves the production of citizens. What is the role of the university when the university is "in ruins"? He outlines three possible responses to this crisis: first, return to a reaffirmation of national cultural identity, which is the conservative position and resembles Nussbaum's most closely; second, reinvent a cultural identity that fits the changed circumstances, which is the multicultural position; or, third, forget the notion of a missionary role of the university and redemptive education altogether (90). Readings asks us to leave behind the view that education has a redemptive goal. Admittedly difficult for both conservatives and the Left, this position would require,

relinquishing our claim to be intellectuals and giving up the claim of service to the state, even when that would involve a critical reimagination of the state, a counter-state behind which academics have masked their accumulation of cultural capital for centuries. (90)

Readings alerts us to a recognition that the desire for oppositionality is not just the desire of "the field" but of its practitioners. The claim to being producers of social change and social intervention functions as an "alibi" that allows us to have a job and simultaneously to keep alive political aspirations and the adjunct fantasy of ourselves as radical. Thus, the investment in the oppositional quality of our knowledges is central to our sense of self, but, as Readings argues, this investment depends upon significant blindness.

Readings' work, then, offers important challenges for women's studies and its practitioners. He offers a difficult knowledge because we are asked to consider how we are invested in the very ways in which we produce both women's studies and also the university through our desires. How do we negotiate the desire for oppositionality in the face of Readings' diagnosis that women's studies and other diversity fields are actually symptoms of globalization, corporatization, and bureaucratization? Women's studies, in Readings' view, is neither a sign of progress or, as Boxer (1998a) argued, part of the completion towards feminist or multicultural enlightenment, nor can it be the academic arm of a political movement reaching inside the university. Rather, and this raises significant questions for emancipatory models, women's studies is another symptom of the evacuation of content from the university, where what is taught does not matter as long as the university's accounts are full.

Given this dire analysis, Readings' symptomatic reading of critical fields such as women's studies in the post-historical university most likely holds far less appeal to women's studies practitioners than, for example, Nussbaum's suggestion that women's studies can help save liberal education and the university. Readings asks us precisely to consider our investment in such a "redemptive function" of our work and in the desire to seek to rehabilitate both knowledge and women. Whereas Nussbaum's redemptive vision is built upon exclusions and normalization, Readings proposes a decentred university where difference is made central.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Also Readings demands some long overdue critical reflection on increasingly common and unquestioned practices by women's studies programmes such as corporate and private fund-raising, the

Readings calls his model of difference a “community of dissensus” organized around diverging thoughts. The question of community, of course, has a central resonance for feminism as a political movement that has actively sought to produce both social, political – and through women’s studies – intellectual communities among women. Yet, the question of community has also always been a wound for feminism and women’s studies because “the community of women as women” has been fragile and tenuous at its best, and illusionary and regulatory at its worst. Readings’ “community of dissensus” proposes a model that is rooted in poststructuralist perspectives of difference. Its focus is on difference *within* rather than difference between individuals and between social groups.

Poststructuralist thinkers have challenged the belief in the transparency of communication, its inherent assumptions that humans can communicate and understand each other, and that culture unifies and facilitates communication for example by way of producing a shared social and cultural identity. Readings, instead of assuming and desiring communality and successful communication or understanding, locates the idea of radical difference and even dissensus at the centre of the university. He proposes the university as the very site where the community of thinkers is rethought on the basis that the very notion of community is critically at stake:

Such . . . community of dissensus . . . presupposes nothing in common, [it] would not be dedicated either to the project of a full self-understanding (autonomy) or to a communicational consensus as to the nature of its unity.

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invocation of “excellence” and the field’s vocational utility as means to justify, legitimize, and expand its presence in the university.

Rather, it would seek to make its heteronymity, its differences, more complex.  
(190)

What seems valuable in this approach is that the community of dissensus centres radical heterogeneity and differences rather than making them marginal or posing them as threat to some form of commonality such as: history, purpose, goals, identities, experiences, politics, epistemologies. In the context of the university, to make radical dissensus central would mean to create a place where “the attempt is made to think the social bond without recourse to a unifying idea, whether of culture or of the state” (Readings 1996: 191). Not only does this approach make differences central but it also seeks to disrupt simple binaries such as centre and margin, sameness and difference, norm and deviance, dominant and oppositional. Such an approach does not just stretch the margin to include the most assimilated Others, as Nussbaum seems to suggest earlier. Instead, this approach to knowledge is based upon a commitment to think and consider “what it is *not*, what it excludes . . .” (176; original emphasis).

Readings clarifies his approach in relation to questions of interdisciplinarity, which are also central questions for women’s studies and its identity. The goal for Readings is not to abandon an outmoded disciplinarity but instead he argues, “the loosening of the disciplinary structures has to be made the opportunity for the installation of disciplinarity as a *permanent question*.” (177; original emphasis). This model of interdisciplinary knowledge production does not adhere to an easy binary model that poses oppositional against mainstreamed or traditional knowledges. Instead,

it questions what it means to group knowledge in certain ways and how past grouping practices have affected knowledge.

Readings' approach to making differences central to the university returns us to the beginning of this chapter in two related ways: First, Readings' discussion helps us to think about the limits of women's studies' claim to oppositionality and its attendant attachment to redemptive efforts. Readings helps us understand how the oppositionality that is desired is already implicated in what it opposes. Studying Nussbaum's proposals opened the tensions that normalizing and exclusionary effects require of redemptive efforts. Contrary to many who mourn the lost university, Readings sees in recent trends the opportunity to decentre the university more profoundly and to centre differences instead. Second, and related, this approach to differences has impact on the consideration of sexual and racial differences, the central focus of my work. In a decentred approach to differences, race and sexuality would be one modality of difference but not the only one. These differences would not any longer function in the same way as they do in a view where marginality and centrality are considered as fixed. In this latter view, social difference can do little more than signify added dread, accepted only if sufficiently assimilated. Readings' proposal sustains a hope that new orientations towards differences are possible in which difference is not just about Others, but instead destabilises the centre. In his proposal, to consider differences and the kinds of meanings that these differences hold would be part of the very question raised.



### **From Integration and Opposition to Difference?**

I began this chapter with the claim that the narratives of the origin of women's studies are part of the production of the field and articulate its desires. I considered the tensions that emerge in the contradictory desires of the field: between the wish to be an oppositional force and to be accepted and fully integrated into the university, between women's studies signifying the break with traditional and oppressive regimes of education and the view that the field is linked to broader histories of educational progress. With Nussbaum, we were able to analyse both the appeal and the cost of full institutional integration and a continuity approach. She offered women's studies the heroic part as saviour of the university and of humanity, but the price for that is normalization grounded in the exclusion and expulsion of that which disturbs the field's normalcy and rationality, that which is "too different."

Readings' analysis shows us the futility of an investment in redemptive oppositionality, given that the centre is lost. Yet, his emphasis on heterogeneity and differences offers a promising glimpse of a model of women's studies as a decentred practice and made from difference, a view also important to a deconstructive orientation on women's studies, already briefly introduced in the first chapter.

### **Chapter 3**

#### ***Questions of Interdisciplinarity: On Sliding Signifiers***

Women's studies understands itself as interdisciplinary and women's studies insists that its interdisciplinary nature is what makes the field distinct within the university. Recently, however, Marjorie Pryse (2000: 106) offered the following critical observation: "For 30 years Women's Studies has lived with casual and unexamined understandings of interdisciplinarity." The failure of a sustained engagement with the geography of interdisciplinarity and the questions it raises for knowledge production in the contemporary university explains perhaps why interdisciplinarity re-emerges with such force as a central concern in current conversations about the field (Pryse 1998; Pryse 2000; Romero 2000).

Interdisciplinarity surfaces as a concern when such diverse issues as the women's studies' Ph.D. (Allen and Kitch 1998; Boxer 1998b; Friedman 1998), the field's status in the university (Boxer 2000; Nussbaum 1997), and its future role as a knowledge producer (Brown 1997; Martin 1997) are discussed. Interdisciplinarity becomes a concern in these areas because each is a central site where women's studies' contradictory desires, now associated variously with the structure of knowledge, its organization in the university, and its quality, are articulated as well as frustrated. In the previous chapter, I discussed the impossible dual desire of women's studies to be both institutionally recognized and oppositional. In this chapter, we turn toward the desires associated with the organization of knowledge as interdisciplinary as well as the

anxieties that this quality of knowledge raises. Here the tension is between the desire for the stability of knowledge and for knowledge as referencing the yet unknown.

In recent conversations about the field's future, interdisciplinarity figures both as something to be asserted as the marker of the field's distinct and innovative quality and as something to be overcome or bound because it threatens to make women's studies unintelligible within the disciplinary structure of the university and interrupts the field's desire for continuity. Interdisciplinarity potentially questions the ways knowledge is made, understood, and organized. Interdisciplinarity might even question what counts as knowledge in the university. Interdisciplinarity also unsettles the stability of women's studies' own knowledge claims. This instability is often experienced as a threat to the security of the field.

Given these tensions much is at stake in the conversations about interdisciplinarity in women's studies. Interdisciplinarity is central to women's studies' identity precisely because through it the field's relationship to the largely disciplinary structures of knowledge production is articulated and negotiated. Given its significance for both women's studies and the structure of knowledge, this chapter considers interdisciplinarity as a signifier in discourses of knowledge and seeks to sketch out its shifting significance. In the texts at the centre of this chapter, interdisciplinarity variously signifies hope, continuity, coherence, the ability to solve conflict, complete knowledge as well as excess, and rescue. By posing interdisciplinarity as a shifting or sliding signifier, I suggest that when interdisciplinarity is discussed often more is at stake than the organization of knowledge. Instead, discussions of interdisciplinarity

women's studies articulate larger anxieties concerning women's studies' distinctness, its integrity, coherence, and claims to authority. Indeed, we will encounter these and other worries, which belong to the structure or quality of knowledge.

The discussions in this chapter, emerged from broader reviews of the field, initiated in two special issues of prominent feminist journals – *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* in 1997 and *Feminist Studies* in 1998. The wider context for those issues is the worried state of women's studies. In this chapter, I will consider four diverging views to show how different authors consider the state of knowledge in women's studies. I distinguish two broad perspectives: One continues the tradition of seeing women's studies as under threat from the outside, from a hostile university environment, or the competing disciplines (Allen and Kitch 1998; Friedman 1998). A second perspective (Brown 1997; Martin 1997) places the threat within the field, within the limitations of its epistemologies and within the limits of knowledge itself.

Current debates on interdisciplinarity in women's studies are reminiscent of earlier conversations. Commentators of the early women's studies literature describe heated debates over how women's studies should situate itself *vis a vis* the university and its disciplinary order (Bowles and Duelli-Klein 1983; Coyner 1983; Stimpson and Cobb 1986). The tension was between different strategies of curriculum transformation and so proved fixated upon the problem of location, of whether women's studies was autonomous or assimilable: Should women's studies become an independent field, perhaps even a discipline in its own right and so establish itself as separate from the

traditional disciplines? Alternatively, should women become a central category in all disciplinary knowledge productions?

Today, women's studies is both organized as a separate entity in the university in the form of degree-granting programmes or departments and exists as an area of specialization within many disciplines. However, most degree-granting women's studies programmes created over the last three decades in North America offer only a few courses specifically designed as women's studies courses for women's studies programmes while the majority of course offerings continue to draw on existing resources in the various disciplines. Most teaching positions as well as research projects are still tied closely to specific disciplines. This points to the overall additive quality of interdisciplinary women's studies and seems to confirm rather than question the disciplinary organization of the university. This may be changing, however, as more and more faculty members are hired into designated women's studies positions. This, together with interdisciplinary Ph.D. programmes may open up the possibility to change the field. Whether such change will happen cannot be predicted at this moment. Instead, the field's presently overwhelming multi-disciplinary (rather than interdisciplinary) approach might prevail.

In the more prominent multi-disciplinary mode, programmes still are largely made up of disciplinary-based courses and faculty (Allen and Kitch 1998; Pryse 2000). One concern with a multidisciplinary orientation is that women's studies does not change the disciplines from which resources are drawn nor the concept or structure of knowledge. Consequently, women's studies may leave the disciplinary organization of

the academy intact or even strengthen it, for example by insisting on its own disciplinary status. This, however, raises problems for women's studies' desire for oppositionality and may well sustain Nussbaum's (1997) vision of the liberal university discussed in the previous chapter rather than Readings' (1996) more fundamental questioning of knowledge as "ruined."

Tensions regarding the quality of interdisciplinarity are also played out in recent special issues of *Feminist Studies (FS)* and *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* dedicated to the interrogation of the status quo of women's studies. Questions of interdisciplinarity figure prominently, though they differ in perspective and scope related to the different theoretical orientations of the journals. The contributions to *FS* are driven by anxieties over institutional pressures bearing down upon women's studies and its interdisciplinary ambitions. The contributions to *differences* contemplate the effects of interdisciplinary knowledge upon the ambitions of women's studies.

*Feminist Studies*, founded in 1972, is the older of the two journals. Patrice McDermott (1994) points to the activist past of *FS*, which was founded in close proximity to the women's movement. Its original vision of bridging community and academic feminism is signalled in its title and in the fact that the early issues feature many contributions from community activists. It is only through its later affiliation with the Berkshire History Conference that *FS* garnered a more academic orientation and subsequently shaped its identity as a feminist academic publication that addresses social history and materialist feminist analysis (McDermott 1994). Today, these influences are still discernable in the journal's editorial mission statement – itself a

variation of a prominent Marxist axiom – that describes the journal’s goal as: “to not just interpret women’s experiences but to change women’s conditions” (*Feminist Studies*, 24:2, 1998: 232). As one of the oldest and most established feminist journals, together with *Signs* and *Frontiers*, *FS* is often considered representative of “traditional,” or perhaps even “hegemonic” feminism (Spivak cited in McDermott 1994: 164), which speaks to the tensions that emerge when activism and scholarship meet.

*Differences* was founded in 1989 in the middle of the “theory wars.” Its inauguration responded to the tensions surrounding feminist theory and feminist engagements with social differences as at the heart of feminist discourses. The name of the journal is programmatic. It offers theoretically informed investigations of difference, particularly commentaries on feminist issues of multiple subjectivities. The journal, as the editors describe it, is interested in the “dilemma of difference” as a form of cultural criticism (cited in McDermott, 1994: 167). In its explicit interest in feminist theoretical investigations and poststructuralist theories, *differences* distinguishes itself from other feminist journals in that feminism is one body of theory among many considered. It provides a “more fundamental challenge to established feminist academic journals,” as McDermott (1994) sees it, “because they [the editors] intentionally decenter the category of ‘woman’ as defining criterion for feminist scholarship” (167). In a poststructuralist economy, gender functions no longer as an accepted synonym for women, hence, *differences* refuses women as its central theme

and instead theorizes gender “as a primary way of signifying relations of power” (Scott cited in McDermott 1994: 168).

Compare this to the editorial criteria of *FS*. Its editorial guidelines stipulate that submissions must make gender a primary category of analysis, emphasise the relations of unequal power between women and men, and centralize the experiences of women without objectifying, victimizing, romanticizing, or over-generalizing women. Moreover, submissions must contain an argument interested in affecting social change (McDermott 1994: 124). The epistemological orientations of these two journals to feminism and feminist scholarship differ significantly. For *FS*, women are an empirical and sociological category with great political importance. For *differences*, “women” and gender are signifiers that get mobilized differently in different contexts. These different epistemological orientations towards “women” and gender also shape the ways that these journals’ special issues take up questions of the status quo of women’s studies and its interdisciplinarity.

*differences*’ deconstructive approach to gender, along with the journal’s emphasis on a wide spectrum of social differences and their intersections, is part of a larger poststructuralist transformation in feminist theories. These feminist theories and their intellectual/political projects share an interest in self-reflexivity, or, as Patti Lather (1991: 119) describes it, an understanding “that our discourse is the meaning of our longing.” Wiegman (1999: 363) explains self-reflexivity in terms of feminist theory and feminist criticism “turning onto themselves.” This shift towards a reflexivity of feminism’s desires and effects, as already mentioned in Chapter 1, belongs to the third



or deconstructive orientation in women's studies. This turn towards more complex analyses of the workings of social difference has political and epistemological repercussions for the larger feminist project, and for the narratives that feminists tell about feminism and women's studies.

Elam and Wiegman's (1995) edited collection *Feminism Beside Itself* explores feminism's turn towards self-reflexivity further. They relate feminism's self-reflexive turn to the further institutionalization of women's studies and feminism in the academy, to the self-questioning that black feminist and anti-racist feminist analyses brought upon academic feminism as well as to broader theoretical shifts motivated through feminist engagements with thinkers such as Louis Althusser, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Michel Foucault. The theories of these thinkers begin the destabilization of the notion of a self-determined and unified human subject that long predominated in western thought.

Althusser's (1971) neo-Marxist theories posit the subject as produced through ideology or interpellation. Psychoanalysis undermines the notion of intentional knowledge and a unified subject through the discovery of the unconscious as a psychological dimension inaccessible to us. This inaccessibility to a central realm of the self questions the notion of the purely rational human who is in control of herself. Instead, the subject is understood as inherently split between the capacity for both rationality and irrationality. The subject feels desire but misrecognises its meaning.<sup>26</sup> Semiotics

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<sup>26</sup> Psychoanalysis, though, also raises questions of what self-reflexivity is if the self is not available? In other words: what are we reflecting upon – our limits, aporias, incommensurability? And how does psychoanalysis press against knowledge and research? I will return to these questions in Chapter 6.

and de Saussure contribute the notion of language as not reflective but productive of reality. Drawing upon these ideas, feminist poststructuralism has taken an intense interest in the decentering of subjectivity and in exploring its implication for feminist knowledge and practice.

The different theoretical and epistemological orientations of the journals provide an intellectual context in which to situate discussions about the current crisis of knowledge in women's studies generally, and the role of interdisciplinarity in the field specifically. In the following, I read selected contributions to the two journals for how interdisciplinarity figures in them as a shifting signifier through which larger concerns of the field get articulated. The idea is that the signifier interdisciplinarity has no stable meaning but shifts in what it comes to represent. As a shifting signifier, interdisciplinarity variously is articulated as a threat to the coherence of a disciplinary grounding for women's studies, as a means to generate feminist knowledge that is more complete, and as an opportunity to rethink the status of knowledge more broadly. I analyse each shift in significance and discuss how different epistemologies and theoretical affiliations play out in perceptions of women's studies. I also trace how social differences figure in the debates about interdisciplinarity.

Both the editorials of *differences* and *FS* contribute to the theme of women's studies at risk when they ask whether women's studies can live up to its ambitions as a force of resistance and whether it can withstand being assimilated into the academy without becoming supportive of the status quo. The editors of *FS* ask: "Will women's studies . . . and its values . . . transform or be transformed by traditional disciplines?"

(Hewitt and Lanser 1998: 240). Joan Wallach Scott (1997), founder of *differences* and editor of its special issue on women's studies, similarly wonders whether women's studies is "a symptom of these changes [as outlined by Readings (1996)] or a place of resistance to them?" (iii). For the editors of *FS*' special issue on women's studies, in the context of emerging *graduate* women's studies, the anxieties over whether women's studies is transformed or transformative become especially pertinent. This question can be analysed by way of Foucault (1990). It is a symptom of the repressive hypothesis to suggest that power is either one or the other. The same observation applies to another binary posed in the preface, of whether women's studies is "an 'interdisciplinary' discipline, with theories, methods, and professional regimes of its own" or understands itself as "strategic forays that disrupt and reconfigure existing disciplines?" (Hewitt and Lanser 1998: 236).

"Women's Studies on the Edge," the special issue of *differences*, takes a distinctly different tone. Scott (1997), well known to the wider audience of feminist theory and history as a post-structuralist feminist, is ambivalent about women's studies' successes. Scott places its development within larger and recent discursive, theoretical, and political landscapes, such as the feminist critique of identity politics, the end of master narratives of social progress, the end of affirmative action in the U.S., and the restructuring of American academic life into what Readings (1996) has called a market-oriented transnational bureaucratic corporation. Scott elaborates on the ambiguous title of this issue: "'Women's Studies on the Edge' . . . connotes identity in crisis, a loss of certainty, of bearings – an indeterminate sense of the future" (Scott

1997: ii). This loss of certainty is linked to the critique of identity politics and the diverging understandings of how to change knowledge production and representations of women in the academy. Scott closes by elaborating on the complex disposition of women's studies' as "on the edge":

Millennial expectations aside, this is a time of transition for women's studies. An edge is not only a point of transition, but also site of contestation, a place where differences become apparent and are erased, where lines divide and converge, and where new configurations emerge – a place of anxiety and irritability, to be sure, but also one of great energy and vitality – a cutting edge, in other words, in the worst and the best sense of the term. (iv)

*Differences'* special women's studies issue poses questions such as: is women's studies still needed? Have its goals been achieved? Is it still on the cutting edge theoretically and politically? The above quotes signal that the complexities of women's studies' present theoretical, epistemological, institutional, and political dis/position are queried. Scott highlights the shift away from an identitarian project of women's studies to an understanding of identity as the site of the field's crisis. This also refigures the role of differences from a sociological to an epistemological category. Women's studies is contested terrain and differences figure as conflict, yet also as a site from which knowledge can be made. Scott also alludes to the affective dimension of the metaphor of "edge," and the potential of women's studies to be not only transgressive but also wounding. Difference is reconfigured as conflict and contestation but also as productive tension.

The contributors to *Feminist Studies* are more concerned with institutional issues and the pragmatics of developing graduate and specifically Ph.D. programmes in women's studies. In this way, their assumptions ground themselves in disciplinary matters such as drawing boundaries to secure knowledge, authority, and coherence. In contrast, the *differences* issue speaks to losing faith that women's studies has the

potential to re-imagine the production of knowledge itself. Contributors take issue with the political justification used to make the case for women's studies and doubt whether appeals to the political make for sufficient reasons for its existence. This is the crux of the matter. In the constructionist approach to women's studies represented by *FS*, knowledge signifies variously hope, mastery, completeness, and resolution of social ills. In a deconstructive approach, knowledge is a symptom of crisis.

So how is this hope for a changed production of knowledge tied to the question of interdisciplinarity? What dreams about knowledge are bound in the tradition of women's studies? How have these dreams become more complicated, lost, and disappointed? It is precisely this hope for different knowledges and different forms of knowledge production that fuelled the field in the beginning. It is around this hope and its disappointments that the contributors of these two special issues diverge. The contributors to the *FS* issue hold onto the dream of women's studies as producing new knowledge that represents the empirical world. For them, women's studies is part of an unfinished project of feminist enlightenment. The contributors to *differences*, however, raise the very problems inherent in knowledge such as its normalizing effects and its limitations, thereby suggesting that knowledge itself has become suspicious.

### **Coming Apart: Interdisciplinarity as the Threat of Getting Lost**

As part of the *FS* issue, Susan Stanford Friedman's (1998) "(Inter) Disciplinarity and the Question of the Women's Studies Ph.D." is ambivalent about the recent push for Ph.D. programmes in women's studies. For her, the debate over the women's studies Ph.D. poses the crucial question of "whether women's studies is a discipline or an interdisciplinary field anchored in the disciplines" (311). If a new discipline, then women's studies would indeed need and deserve doctoral programmes

in order “to train and certify its own specialists” (311). As “an interdisciplinary field,” however, women’s studies “should combine interdisciplinary feminist perspectives with discipline-based knowledge and methodologies” as it “ feeds off of, juxtaposes, integrates, and fuses the more specialized inquiries within existing disciplines” (311). Friedman prefers the continuity approach and the disciplinary-based training of women’s studies teachers and researchers. She insists that women’s studies produces “its exciting transformations of knowledge through dialogic engagement and transgression of disciplinary boundaries, which to be crossed, must still exist” (322).

Friedman’s scepticism towards the idea of women’s studies as a viable new discipline that trains a new generation of academics in doctoral programmes is rooted, as she readily admits, in the specific structures and traditions of the U.S. system of higher education. It is for practical reasons, such as the lack of jobs for interdisciplinary trained Ph.D.s, the financial burden that new Ph.D. programmes might impose on already existing undergraduate programmes in women’s studies, and the difficulties that might occur when disciplinary-schooled faculty train graduate students heading for interdisciplinarity, that she is reluctant to endorse women’s studies Ph.D. programmes. However, in my view, something else is at stake in her critical stance toward the Ph.D. in women’s studies. Her concerns are rooted in her understanding of what (good) knowledge is, how it works, and what feminist knowledge should be about. Moreover, she is more invested in the legitimating powers of disciplinary regimes than she is perhaps ready to admit.

Friedman is not convinced that the vastness of women’s studies’ knowledge allows the field to become intellectually viable and manageable. The very success of women’s studies knowledge production turns out to be problematic. The prolific production of knowledge over the last 30 years within the disciplines has made it, so

she argues, impossible to “know” (or even to understand) any longer all that has been written even in one discipline, let alone to understand and know everything related to women’s studies in the Humanities, the Social Sciences, the Sciences and the Arts (317). Thus, women’s studies as an interdisciplinary discipline, of which Ph.D. programmes are emblematic, might pose a threat to the rigor of its scholarship. The “intellectual bricolage” (312) that might emerge as an effect of interdisciplinary programmes is worrisome to Friedman since, for her, good knowledge is deep knowledge.

If the danger of disciplinarity resides in the over specialization, the danger of interdisciplinarity rests in potential superficiality. Disciplinarity offers depth but also insularity; interdisciplinarity offers scope but also rootlessness. Each counters the excesses of the other. (312)

Underlying this concern are quite traditional ideas about knowledge. Friedman worries what happens when knowledge becomes unmoored from its object and wonders whether interdisciplinary knowledge can do more than gloss surfaces. More pointedly, Friedman supposes that if excess is the result of both disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, they must balance each other or authority and coherence will be lost.

Friedman seems to believe that interdisciplinarity is a problem because it cannot be contained. Consequently, she sees the need to restrain, bound, and limit interdisciplinarity. Only small dosages are conducive to rigorous academic work and so the choice is either interdisciplinarity within the disciplines (intra-disciplinarity) or multi-disciplinarity. This latter model, which Friedman approves, is provided by the Sciences, where multi-disciplinary collaboration brings together researchers trained in traditional disciplines (320). The endorsement of these particular kinds of intra- and

multidisciplinary work seems shaped by a rather staid but still potent belief of the Sciences' intellectual superiority and rigor over the Arts and Humanities. Once she begins drawing upon the Sciences as a model, Friedman reverses her earlier position against the excessive nature of interdisciplinarity and acknowledges that, "no discipline requires its members to know all the sub-fields and methodologies within its boundaries;" and that, "perhaps the new discipline of Women's Studies will devise specializations that follow intellectually manageable requirements" (321). Suddenly, bounded by specialized subfields, the vastness of women's studies knowledges, earlier depicted as only overwhelming, becomes manageable.

In Friedman's text, feminist knowledge is revisionary. It derives its function from being a corrective to non-feminist knowledge production. In order to accomplish this task rigorously, persuasively, and acceptably, one has to know not only the feminist critiques themselves that women's studies has produced in and of each discipline. One also needs to know the traditional disciplinary knowledges. While the demand for solid and grounded knowledge is appealing, and while feminist work often has been revisionary, and, has "brought feminist questions to existing knowledge and methods as a way of producing new knowledges" (Friedman 1998: 315), this demand limits feminist knowledge.

As I suggested in Chapter 1, the recovery and revisionary project founded the field and set into motion the very debates on difference that render women's studies as crisis. Friedman's orientation to interdisciplinarity limits and reduces women's studies to a field of critique of androcentric knowledges. But women's studies today is much



more than rethinking and reacting to established knowledge. An understanding that reduces interdisciplinary women's studies to critique makes difficult a self-reflexive orientation towards the knowledges that women's studies produces. Such a view of women's studies' knowledge as corrective and revisionary assumes the field can be the site of truth. This view makes it difficult to critically reflect on the grounds of possibility that make women's studies an incitement.

Feminist interdisciplinarity means not only transgressing traditional disciplinary boundaries and bringing together a multitude of disciplinary approaches. It also shifts the very boundaries that demarcate non-feminist from feminist knowledge. Interdisciplinary feminist work does not only rethink traditional knowledge but also the traditions and limitations of feminist knowledge itself to open up ways to think what is yet not thinkable within either boundaries of traditional disciplines or feminist interdisciplinarity.

The limits of a binary construction of knowledge as either "traditional" or "feminist" become even clearer when we consider Friedman's critique. Here we meet again the demand for rigor already encountered in Nussbaum (1997) and Gubar (1998). It is within the demand for rigor and the threat of losing it, that social differences need to be considered. For Friedman, for example, the proliferation of knowledge unmoored by disciplinary rigor becomes insurmountable:

The need to complicate the categories of *woman* and *gender* by understanding their co-implication with other systems of alterity compounds the problem of disciplinary coverage and methodology. It is not enough to know about women within a single discipline; it is also necessary to know how systems of racial, ethnic, class, religious, national, and sexual stratification, and privilege interact

with gender. In short, the knowledge revolution in women's studies has meant the expansion of women's studies far beyond the boundaries of gender alone. This multifaceted analysis is difficult enough for feminists to achieve at the advanced level within a single discipline; to do so in all areas of women's studies is impossible. (316)

This description is so excessive that it poses the question of why anyone should want to achieve this. We begin to understand how questions of interdisciplinarity and social differences are connected. In Friedman's account, they both signify the threat of excess and unruliness. Yet, I would argue that therein lies precisely their potential:

Interdisciplinarity and attention to social differences thought together profoundly threaten the disciplinary and disciplining order of the university, which is based upon a coherent and clearly delineated stable subject of study. An engagement with differences and with interdisciplinarity both questions and dismantles such a stable subject and its authority to know.

Friedman's discussion of interdisciplinarity thus is emblematic of an ambivalent attachment to the ordering technology of the disciplines and to its promise of mastery. Earlier in her essay, Friedman expresses this attachment as she expands upon the positive connotations of the term "discipline" such as "the word's resonance with systematic, sustained, and highly skilled labor, even craftsmanship . . . academic disciplines not only regulate and certify but also enable expertise and depths of knowledge" (309). Disciplinarity here signifies order, control, and mastery. Friedman does have a sense of the historicity of disciplinarity and its constructed quality. She describes the disciplines as:

somewhat arbitrary categories for organizing knowledge and inquiry, they are cultural formations with historically specific conditions of origin, expansion, change, transformation, decline, and demise – all processes that necessarily engage the power relations of the academy, itself an immensely significant institution with the larger society for the production and dissemination of knowledge. (309)

But power for Friedman is only located within the institutions and its practices, not within knowledge itself, which is Foucault's assertion and which is also a central idea of performativity. If power is only outside to knowledge or related to how it is used, then knowledge itself is not a problem. Accordingly, Friedman sees the disciplines as merely organizing devices or "as a professional guild" (309). Disciplines establish boundaries of what counts as acceptable knowledge and thereby permit the development of some knowledges but "close doors to other kinds of knowledges" (311). This however, returns us to the problem of exclusion from which women's studies was made. Given that women's studies began as a protest against the exclusionary practices of knowledge production in the university, already discussed earlier, its interdisciplinary approach then is a response to the disciplining or exclusionary effects of disciplines. The role of interdisciplinarity lies in the opening of doors onto knowledges that are closed shut by the disciplines.

I do not mean to produce interdisciplinarity as unproblematically transgressive while disciplinarity becomes coercive. Instead, as Friedman rightly points out, interdisciplinarity relies on the disciplines as that which is to be transgressed; as such interdisciplinarity is not so much outside to disciplinarity but defined and dependent upon the disciplines. Yet, within the framework to which Friedman is attached, which is multidisciplinary, disciplinarity continues to remain the measuring stick for interdisciplinary rigor. The problem is that interdisciplinarity, the way Friedman imagines it as made from the collaboration of several disciplines, cannot transgress or

challenge effectively its disciplinary grounds. Instead, it effects its own stability and reassures the authority of disciplinarity.

A similar strategy of containment is repeated throughout Friedman's essay. In the beginning, she discusses her hesitations in relationship to an interdisciplinary women's studies Ph.D., which I have outlined above. Her hesitations are organized around the threat of incoherence that interdisciplinarity signifies. This threat is contained in two ways: by understanding women's studies purely as revisionary of disciplinary knowledge and by dismissing it as not rigorous. In the second part of her essay, Friedman comes to endorse an interdisciplinary women's studies Ph.D.. Now, however, interdisciplinarity is turned into a new "discipline" with designated sub-fields of study. Friedman's attachment to the security that disciplines purport to promise is stronger than she is ready to acknowledge. She effectively disciplines the unsettling potential of interdisciplinary feminist inquiry.

Her understanding of interdisciplinarity as a threat to coherence is closely tied to her attachment to the disciplines. Understanding them as professional guilds, alluding to craftsmanship, skill, and the notion that disciplinary boundaries work as certifying forces, subscribes to, or at least leaves unquestioned, the very wish for knowledge to designate mastery. Friedman subscribes to an understanding of learning as a form of knowledge acquisition, as a progression from apprentice to master of the trade. This ignores the lengthy debate about the complicated processes at stake in learning as well as the very politicality of knowledge.<sup>27</sup> Feminist knowledge production

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<sup>27</sup> The pedagogy literature speaks to these kinds of difficulties. For the complicated processes at stake in learning see especially the psychoanalytically informed discussions of learning, foremost Britzman (1998), Felman (1987), Finke (1993), Pitt (1995) Todd (1995) as well as Ellsworth (1997). The politicality of pedagogy is the topic of critical pedagogy, in this context see especially the literature on feminist pedagogy such as Briskin (1992), Luke (1992), Manicom (1992), Stone (1994) to name just a few.

has been at the forefront of work that, over the last few decades, has pointed to the contested nature of what constitutes knowledge and what does not. Feminist work has made major interventions here by pointing, for example, to non-expert sources of knowledge (for example oral history, life writing, and experimental writing as research method). So to refer to the disciplines as the measuring stick for what counts as knowledge seems to limit the ways that knowledge has been reconstituted in the last few decades. The unacknowledged dilemma interdisciplinarity raises concerns how it challenges not only what knowledges are attended to and which knowledges are legitimated, but also what becomes of knowledge when it is no longer secured by disciplinary rules? Or, to change the direction of this argument, can the threat that interdisciplinarity poses to coherence be a chance for rethinking knowledge itself?

Friedman adds another dimension to my discussion of the problem of a coherent subject of women's studies by showing us how the fear of a subject becoming unsettled by difference and interdisciplinarity is an articulation of the worry of being lost and not in control of one's knowledge. What kind of knowledge can be imagined and what possibilities open up when knowledge can be made from getting lost. To put it differently: what else is lost when we cannot get lost?

### **Interdisciplinarity: Healing the Wounds of Feminist Research?**

Judith A. Allen and Sally Kitch's (1998) contribution to the special *FS* issue advocates creating freestanding departments and Ph.D. programmes in women's studies. They propose that women's studies must establish itself as the site for interdisciplinary gender inquiry, not only in its teaching but also in its scholarship and thus close the gulf that presently exists between its largely interdisciplinary teaching

and its overwhelmingly discipline-based research. Without such a move towards the further institutionalization of women's studies as a true *interdiscipline*, the authors caution us, its future existence in the academy may be under threat.

In some ways, it is the very success of feminist scholarship, in the authors' view, that threatens women's studies as a field since this scholarship has effectively mainstreamed gender to such a degree that it has become not only a legitimate but also an indispensable category in discipline-based knowledge production. Thus, women's studies' transformative successes pose a different threat: what should academic women's studies be and how might it legitimize its continued presence in the academy? Rather than suggesting that women's studies' original mission – to make gender a central category of knowledge production – has effectively been fulfilled, and therefore is no longer needed, Allen and Kitch point to the inherent limitations of discipline-bound feminist work. They argue that while gender has infiltrated many disciplines and has effectively become an accepted sub-field of inquiry, such work is limited and cannot fully account for the complexity of women's lives – suggesting thereby that interdisciplinary studies can. The authors maintain that frequently the most important questions cannot even be raised within disciplinary parameters. A prime example, according to the authors, is the issue of violence. Its ongoing social toleration requires an interdisciplinary analysis that transcends what any single discipline can offer. In this argument, interdisciplinarity turns to sustain the original insistence of women's studies and comes to signify both more complete knowledge and knowledge that has the power to end suffering. This view returns us to Nussbaum's (1997) arguments on the role of

the liberal university as well as to revisionist and constructionist perspectives on women's studies.

Allen and Kitch insist that the institutional standing of women's studies is weakened when not organized as an interdiscipline with department status. As long as research grants for feminist scholarship, tenure assessments of feminist scholars, and related business are handled through the existing disciplines, women's studies effectively does not exist or its institutional existence is at best tenuous. Hence, Allen and Kitch align themselves with those who push for the departmentalization of women's studies. They suggest that those women's studies programmes that have departmental or quasi departmental status flourish and, associated with this autonomy, have institutional decision making powers in hiring, in establishing a research profile, in granting graduate degrees, and in enticing financial support through foundations and endowments. Given their argument that women's studies is too much *in the disciplines* and not enough of an *interdiscipline* in its own right, they conclude that, "the resistance to conformity with established institutional parameters . . . [on the part of women's studies practitioners] contributes to the continued *disciplinary* [or disciplined-based] character of the field" (290). In anticipation of the often-voiced fears about the potential negative effects of the departmentalization of women's studies, such as institutional isolation and disciplinary regimes, Allan and Kitch argue:

Departmentalization does not necessarily equal either isolation or narrow disciplinarity; departments are *simply* the organizational structure chosen by universities for the generation and dissemination of knowledge, the affiliation of faculty, and the distribution of resources. (291; my emphasis)

Yet, given the politicality of the organization, generation, and dissemination of knowledge to which feminist work has long pointed, how can departmentalization be merely an organizational structure with no larger effects as the authors argue? Yet, the authors' pragmatism or their desire to gain more institutional clout for the field demonstrates a particular form of disavowal, namely of effects of power at work in institutional practices in general and in the process of generating and disseminating knowledge in particular. Clearly, Allan and Kitch are not oblivious to these struggles, yet their argument is embedded in a long history of positioning feminist knowledge and feminist institutional practices as innocent, as outside, or as inherently subversive to the workings of (patriarchal) power. Theirs is a popular understanding of feminist spaces as utopic, either immune to the workings of power or capable of pure resistance to it. Such a "dream of exteriority," to borrow from Annemarie Jagose (1994: 2), risks forgetting how power effects "simple organizational structures" such as the generation and dissemination of knowledge, the affiliation of faculty, and the distribution of resources within the university and women's studies programmes. Moreover, to minimize these powers at work within the field denies differences among women all over again.

In addition, Allen and Kitch consider the intellectual reasoning for the existence of interdisciplinary women's studies. They distinguish disciplines as, "domains of inquiry that share objects of study, problems to investigate, values, terms, concepts, methods and assumptions, governed by a general set of rules and categories guiding the pursuit of knowledge" (276) Thus interdisciplinarity is understood as not just the use of



one or more disciplines but as “the *integration* of disciplines to create a new epistemology, to rebuild the prevailing structures of knowledge; to create new organizing concepts, methodologies, or skills” (276; original emphasis).

Interdisciplinarity, moreover, as a process, is posed as changing all the disciplines through mutual interaction. By this, interdisciplinarity distinguishes itself from what the authors call a “multidisciplinary collaboration” where one borrows from a variety of disciplines. Instead, interdisciplinarity questions the very territory of knowledge itself:

In evaluating whether a field is genuinely a new ‘interdiscipline,’ then, we must ask whether it has created a new, intellectually coherent entity built upon a common vocabulary and requiring an understanding of the epistemologies and methodologies of various disciplines. (277)

The problem with this is that now it becomes difficult to distinguish disciplinarity from interdisciplinarity. What is lost is the question of how this new interdiscipline differs from traditional and established disciplines. It is unclear how this new and separate interdiscipline will continue to effectively change the other disciplines, which is, after all a central marker of interdisciplinarity according to Allen and Kitch. Given the authors’ suggestion that women’s studies develop as an “intellectually coherent entity” with a “common vocabulary” precisely what seems lost is the question that interdisciplinarity raises, namely how knowledge is disciplined into coherence. An interdiscipline, I fear, will not pose, as Readings (1996) suggests, the question of disciplinarity. What we also see here, though, is the difficulty of pinning down interdisciplinarity, precisely because interdisciplinarity is about refusing to be pinned

down. This refusal to settle its subject matter is the strength of interdisciplinarity, yet this seems to be a challenge to Allen and Kitch.

Their argument for interdisciplinarity draws on epistemological needs: no single discipline can adequately speak to the requirements of feminist knowledges.

Accordingly, they suggest, “women’s studies needs a discipline-transcendent command of the full array of knowledges that have shaped conventional understandings of women, gender, and sexuality in an international and cross-cultural frame” (278). In this definition of need, something else is also formulated implicitly, namely, the boundaries of the field of women’s studies. This reasoning supposes a definition of what women’s studies is and is not, of what constitutes the subject of study at stake in this field – which is not only a marker of disciplinarity but, as I have been arguing, is also a key tension in the genealogy of women’s studies. This formulation of what women’s studies does settles the subject in a way that makes this field a coherent entity. Yet, there is still the dilemma of difference that works to challenge the grounds of coherence. The problem is that both interdisciplinarity and social differences disrupt the very desire for coherence.

Instead of working through the tensions between the desire for coherence (Allen and Kitch), the desire for mastery (Friedman), and the normative effects that emerge when these desires become institutionalized, which is what Readings (1996) advises, these accounts offer us wishes articulated as interdisciplinarity. For example, Allen and Kitch hope that interdisciplinarity will produce more complete knowledge that will help us to solve problems we have not yet been able to work out. (Friedman longs for

increased continuity with existing practices and structures of knowledge.) Kitch and Allen's desire for interdisciplinary knowledge as solution becomes most clearly expressed in their discussion of the limitation of disciplinary-based violence research. They propose that only,

an interdisciplinary approach to violence reveals its most urgent dimensions – that it is the very synthesis of historical, sociological, psychological, legal and representational studies of violence directed at women that reveals the broad and enduring nature of this problem, including hidden aspects that render violence against women immune from scrutiny, often erratically policed or punished, and covertly tolerated across nations and cultures and throughout recorded history. (280)

It is no accident that the authors here resort to the example of violence to make their case. The topic of violence against women holds a particular place in feminist arguments, analysis, and imagination. Unlike any other topic, the issue of violence against women lends immediate legitimacy to feminist knowledge production in research and teaching. The existence of violence against women shores up the urgency of feminist inquiry as an intervention.

Unquestionably, confronting the extent of violence against women has been one of feminism's greatest influences. At the same time, violence is where the limitations of knowledge and its production have become most painfully apparent. One of the greatest frustrations is that knowledge does not always live up to its promise, namely to produce change. Knowing about violence such as date rape, domestic violence, and abuse does not mean that women will not suffer from them, as Laurie Finke (1993) has pointed out. Therefore, violence is actually a complicated site for feminist knowledge. Violence against women demonstrates most clearly the continued need for feminist

knowledge; at the same time, violence is also the site where the limits of knowledge become most readily discernible. One way to avoid this deeply unsettling notion that knowledge might actually not be as powerful as we, as educators and scholars, may hope is to argue that we still do not have the right kinds of knowledges. Allan and Kitch follow this line when they insist that the right kind of knowledge can only be produced in interdisciplinary women's studies. Thus, feminist interdisciplinarity figures here as a promise, or as a signifier of hope: once we can overcome the limitations imposed by discipline-based knowledges – which so far have failed to end women's suffering – we will also be able to overcome the limitations of knowledge and feminist research itself.

This investment in interdisciplinary women's studies encapsulates the hope for knowledge that is more complete, a hope once associated with gender inquiry itself. The inclusion of gender was once heralded as leading to knowledge that more completely represents the social world and thus would lead to more social justice. This hope is the basis of the revisionist position in women's studies and for Nussbaum's (1997) argument. In this version of interdisciplinarity, a continuity is made to earlier feminism and women's studies' founding arguments.

Allen and Kitch's elaboration on the potential of interdisciplinary research on violence is followed by an interesting shift in argument and potentially points to another function ascribed to interdisciplinarity in women's studies. After arguing that interdisciplinary research contributes both to disciplinary and multidisciplinary inquiry, the authors turn to the intersectionality of race and gender. They cite authors such as

Patricia J. Williams and Toni Morrison as scholars whose interdisciplinary work is valued in the disciplines, and then make the following claim:

Scholars in all fields have assumed a responsibility for expressing their understanding that, rather than being separate or additive characteristics, race and sex are subject positions that create one another both in personal identity formations and in relationships with social institutions and structures. There is now widespread acceptance of the idea that a woman's race constitutes her particular gender identity, and her sex constitutes her racial identity. (281)

This argument is curious for two reasons: First, the authors present one of the most contentious issues in women's studies (and in the university) today – the role social differences play in teaching and research – as resolved and as no longer a problem. Second, this (imaginary) resolution is tied to the enabling function of interdisciplinarity. The authors present us with a harmonious picture of the debates around social differences. Interdisciplinarity is linked to the promise of curing two of the greatest wounds of feminist scholarship: to produce complete knowledges that will provoke social change and to have already solved a central issue of discontent within the field.

In these discussions, interdisciplinarity figures as both excess and rescue, as threat and hope. Similarly, differences figure both as added dread and as no longer a problem for feminist knowledge. So far, arguments relegate the current problems of women's studies to outside the field and to tensions with hostile institutions and competitive disciplines. In the next section, we will encounter another set of explanations, which situate the crisis of women's studies within the field and within tensions related to its own knowledge claims.

### **Women's Studies as Impossible Knowledge?**

In their contributions to the *differences* issue, Wendy Brown (1997) and Biddy Martin (1997) argue that women's studies poses a threat to itself. That threat lies within the field, within its inherent paradoxes and, within the inherent paradoxes of knowledge. Drawing on her background in critical legal studies, Brown in particular offers a bleak and controversial reading of the tenability of the field of women's studies as an institutionalized domain of academic study. This pessimism is brought into play in her essay title, which categorically states: "The Impossibility of Women's Studies."

Brown credits women's studies for its achievements, such as producing important critiques and challenges for academic research, curricula, canons, and pedagogies as well as infusing political importance and intellectual creativity. She concludes, however, that "Women's Studies as a contemporary institution . . . may be politically incoherent, as well as tacitly conservative" (83). Women's studies is incoherent because by definition it insists on "circumscribing uncircumscribable 'women'" (83). In addition, women's studies is conservative because the field must object to all interventions into the definition of its subject if it is to sustain this subject of study as its reason for being. In Brown's assessment, which is contrary to Allen and Kitch's, women's studies has not responded favourably to theories, such as critical race theories or theories of sexuality, that destabilize the category of woman – even though, as I argued earlier, they emerged both within women's studies and women's studies was shaped by their conflicts. Consequently, each of these theories and fields was

compelled to go elsewhere. Such desertion threatens to leave what remains of women's studies impoverished and isolated. The loss of these critical voices, in turn, leads to an emerging conservatism in the field as women's studies becomes more similar to other disciplines, begins guarding disciplinary boundaries, defines exclusive territories, and stabilizes its subject of study. All of these steps are central to the making of a discipline, as I have already suggested.

Compared to other disciplines facing challenges to their subject/object of study, women's studies is, in Brown's estimation, more vulnerable in challenges to the boundedness or coherence of its subject of study. This vulnerability is located in the very complexity of subject formation<sup>28</sup> as well as in women's studies' goal over the past decades to simultaneously centre gender analysis and to understand the imbrications of gender in other forms of social power (88). Brown argues that the theoretical models widely used in women's studies to grapple with the complex layers of the construction of subjects along the lines of race, nationality, sexuality, gender, caste, class etc. are problematic since subjects are not made up of discrete and yet overlapping identity intersections nor of degrees of privilege. Instead, Brown argues that different forms of subjection require distinct theories of power. Since various theories of power would need to be at work at once, no single theory can suffice and explain the complexity of subject construction entirely. Women's studies faces the

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<sup>28</sup> Brown thus alerts us to a second understanding and dimension of the notion of the subject. The subject is both what is studied (i.e. bodies of knowledge such as women's studies) as well as who studies (i.e. women, students etc.). By way of the term subject formation, which draws both on psychoanalytic as well as Foucauldian theory, the relationship between knowledge and subjection is addressed. Subjects come into being through knowledge and are simultaneously bound by that knowledge (Butler 1997).

dilemma that despite good intentions no singular model of power can account for the complexity of subject formation except by dissecting the subject into discrete and discernible layers of race, class, gender, and sexuality. This means that women's studies' work can be focussed on gender, and thus be forever driven by a guilty compensatory stance for neglecting other social differences. Alternatively, women's studies can transform itself and take up the complex process of subject formation in the multitude of its forms. In this case, however, it will have "no longer gender at its core and . . . in that sense, [will] no longer be Women's Studies" (95).

For Brown, the coherence of the subject in women's studies is put under threat not, or not only, from a hostile (institutional) outside but from the very complexity of the subject herself. In other words, to make differences central to the field might actually produce a very different field.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, such change of focus may be widely resisted as many may worry that it is the death sentence of women's studies and the end of feminist politics. Brown's estimation of strong resistance to this kind of change is confirmed by some of the critiques of the field discussed earlier. Brown concludes that the complexity of the subject at stake in women's studies puts those who refuse the disciplining of women's and gender studies (for example by insisting on a non-normative and self-reflective category of gender and/ or the intellectual/institutional radicality of the field) at odds with the desire to affirm

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<sup>29</sup> Attempts in this direction are already under way in some places, for example in the development of gender studies programmes, the expansion of women's studies programmes into joint programmes for "the study of women, gender, and sexuality." Some programmes sought out strong cooperations with programmes and centres that focus on the study of other differences, such as race etc. On the collaboration of the Centre for Gender Studies with the Centre for Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago see Auslaender (1997)



women's studies as a coherent field of study (86). For Brown, there is no solution to the problem that women's studies faces.

Brown points out what the field must attend to: the tensions that social differences and their epistemological effects produce. Interdisciplinarity is important for this effort but is not a solution. It is a strategy for constituting knowledge that might well frustrate our wishes for authority and coherence. The consideration of social differences has a similar effect. Consideration of their destabilizing dual forces has been a profound omission from earlier discussions of women's studies. Yet, if we follow Readings' (1996) earlier cited arguments, interesting knowledge may be made from destabilizing effects.

### **Interdisciplinarity as Intellectual Curiosity: Thinking the Unthought**

Martin's (1997) contribution to *differences* considers the larger question of the need for a re-organization of knowledge and learning in the academy, and more specifically, the role that women's studies might play in this process. In "Success and its Failures," Martin takes the success of women's studies as a starting point to suggest that, ultimately, women's studies might be too settled, might have become too much like any other discipline. Entrenched in its disciplinary and political positions and methodologies, perhaps the field has become too preoccupied with accepted truth and intra-disciplinary turf wars to be the site for intellectual curiosity, to be still interested in what is not known, and to treat this search creatively.

Having delimited a proper object and carved out particular domains, having generated and disseminated specific analytic practices, having developed

consensus about at least some key political problems, and having been institutionalized on equal footing with other academic and administrative units, Women's Studies has lost much of its critical and intellectual rigor. Women's Studies has now settled in. (Martin 1997: 103)

Martin maintains that having once re-invigorated the disciplinary debates and methodologies, women's studies has become much like any other discipline in that it has succumbed to both insularity and disciplinary warring. Thus, intellectual change and challenges are stifled into routinized exchanges of accepted truths, into the repetition of familiar arguments and positions. As a way out of this dilemma, and to regain the intellectual charge that it once held, women's studies would need to assume a leadership role in transforming university curricula into interdisciplinary scholarship and learning (103). However, given its present scholarship, organization structures, and institutional attachments, Martin is sceptical.

Where Friedman (1998) as well as Allen and Kitch (1998) see a project of unfinished feminist Enlightenment, Martin (1997) finds women's studies too finished, unable to take a leading role in the much needed re-thinking and re-defining of knowledge itself. Where Friedman finds women's studies not enough *of* a discipline and Allen and Kitch find it too much *in* the disciplines, Martin declares it too much *like* a discipline and thus no longer interested in what is not yet known.

While for Friedman and Allen and Kitch, women's studies knowledge production is ultimately limited by institutional and intellectual demands that are brought to bear on its knowledges from the *outside*, for Martin, as well as for Brown, women's studies is limited from the *inside* by its own practices, theoretical

assumptions, and pedagogical habits. Different from many other women's studies commentators, Brown and Martin shift the focus away from the institutional demands brought to bear on the field from the outside to the *inside* of the field itself. Both consider not only the inside of the field of women's studies, but beyond that, the inside of knowledge. Martin suggests a model of knowledge that no longer relies on such distinctions as inside/outside and margin/centre dichotomies. She thinks of a model of knowledge that is distinctly different and argues for a new epistemology whose grounds are what is yet unknown.

All the authors cited so far agree that the success of women's studies is not just a reason for celebration but also a problem. However, whereas for Friedman as well as for Allen and Kitch, the success of women's studies both threatens and requires its further development into an "interdisciplinary discipline," for Martin its very formation threatens its interdisciplinary potential. Remember, for Friedman the success of women's studies and its dangers lie in the insurmountable amounts of knowledge that have been produced, which make this field potentially unknowable but also may make specialization within the interdiscipline palatable. For Allen and Kitch the success of feminist and women's studies' scholarship in the disciplines threatens the future of a freestanding interdisciplinary field of women's studies. They fear it may become permanently a mere addendum, a sub-field to the disciplines. This threat lends urgency to their demand for the formation of an interdiscipline if we want women's studies to have a future in the academy. Hence these authors, if somewhat ambivalently, endorse the formation of an interdisciplinary discipline of women's studies.

For Martin, the problem of success takes a different turn: it is the success of women's studies in integrating itself into given academic structures and organizational forms as well as its very success in modeling itself after already existing disciplines that troubles women's studies. This success makes it an unlikely candidate for leadership in the re-formulation of academic knowledge production. But she sees this re-formulation as necessary and as part of the earlier promise of this field.

Martin ignores the discontinuous developments of the field across North America, where some universities might just be beginning to establish and institutionalize women's studies, while others might already have reformed its women's studies programmes several times over or even might be thinking of abandoning this field altogether. These local conditions surely have an influence on how the various writers theorize and conceptualize the field. However, regardless of how specific local conditions and circumstances shape the view of the authors on the inter/disciplinary status of the field, Martin's view of institutional security leading to assimilation deserves consideration. For her, the biggest threat to women's studies is the danger of becoming boring and predictable instead of being innovative and challenging. Being threatened by its *inside*, its practices, assumptions, and methodologies rather than by a hostile *outside* flies in the face of conventional wisdom in the field, and undermines its heroic tales that tell stories of the field overcoming institutional adversity against all odds.

The shift towards interdisciplinary work figures for Martin, like for Allen and Kitch, as a way out. However, while for Allen and Kitch interdisciplinarity

consolidates the place of women's studies in the academy, for Martin interdisciplinarity holds the promises of a new edge. But this notion of edge is also something that Scott (1997) cautions. The earlier discussed authors envision interdisciplinarity within the confines of the defined and demarcated object of study (the study of women, gender and sexuality). Martin, however, uses interdisciplinarity to signify something larger, something like a journey into the unknown, a trip beyond the dogmas of confined methodologies or subject matters. For her, the organization of knowledge and learning in universities are at stake and it is the insularity of both intra- and interdisciplinary exchange that prohibits intellectual vision and integrated education. Martin credits women's studies with having re-animated many traditional disciplines by putting women at the centre of inquiry. This centring was initially transformative: centring women made it possible to trouble existing (and non-existing) images of women in canon and curricula; it made it possible to add women writers to the curricula, and opened up ways to question the sexist premises of both conservative and progressive social and cultural theories (Martin 1997: 106).

However, by defining women as the proper object of study, feminist scholarship is ultimately limited, according to Martin. She writes:

The exclusive focus on "women" and "the feminine" . . . constrained feminist work. Significant developments in the fields that have no immediately apparent relationship to "women" or gender receive little attention from feminist scholars with the result that both feminist criticism and larger theoretical debates have been impoverished by ignorance of each other. (106)

The larger and important suggestion that Martin offers to the question of interdisciplinarity in women's studies is a different method of knowledge production,

one that radically engages the unthought, the not-yet-known. In ways, her essay is less a discussion as it is an enactment of this method. Throughout her essay, Martin brings to bear upon each other texts that in some ways fundamentally disagree with each other. For example, she juxtaposes Readings' (1996) postmodern response to the transformation of the academy with Nussbaum's (1997) liberal educational reform. Martin finds limited both Readings' postmodern model and its emphasis on impossibility as well as Nussbaum's reason-based model and its belief in easy resolution (120). Yet, she does not reject either work, but, instead, sees how these two diverging approaches may work productively upon each other. This enacts and foreshadows Martin's suggestion for an epistemologically based model of interdisciplinarity that seeks to find ways to converge "apparently opposed or mutually exclusionary discursive domains" (129) as a way to challenge dogmas and accepted staid truth. For Martin, interdisciplinarity signifies curiosity, that which is not known yet, and perhaps the chance of getting lost and finding something unexpected in the process.

Thus, the associations that Martin offers us of interdisciplinarity differ from those articulated earlier by Friedman and Allen and Kitch respectively. For these authors, interdisciplinarity signifies alternatively the worry of getting lost and the hope for more complete knowledge. While these associations on first view look diametrically opposed, they are also implicated in each other and depend upon each other: the wish for more complete knowledge is the opposite of not being lost any longer. These two worries are not separate but implicated in each other as one always

invokes the other. These associations belong to the epistemological orientations of the journals in which these texts are published and they also return us to the genealogy of women's studies offered in the first chapter. The publishing guidelines of *FS* suggest that we already know what women are and need, and that feminism and women's studies is about responding to these pre-established needs, for example by producing more and better research on violence. Contrary to this certainty, *differences* is a journal that poses the very question of women.

An "epistemology of certainty" that guides *FS* is easily shattered by interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity as the encounter between knowledges and methodologies initially "strange to each other" produces questions, approaches, theories, and views that may help us to challenge what we already know. Thus, the interdisciplinarity that I privilege signifies the interruption of certainty, authority, and mastery of knowledge. Interdisciplinary encounters, for example, may challenge the initial view of a stable and universal woman subject that is unchanged and unchanging across time and culture. Here we also find difference, now based in something else: difference then signals not excess (in need of restraint as Friedman argued earlier) nor is difference settled (as Allen and Kitch suggested). Instead, in Martin's view, difference signals precisely that from which new knowledge can be made. New knowledge, in her view, is made between knowledge or in the encounter of knowledges that are different and even disagreeing with each other. This also returns us to the genealogy of women's studies offered earlier in this dissertation. Here we juxtaposed views that already know what "women" are with those that still try to figure out what

“women” signify, how this signification shifts and varies, how the signifier “women” is produced through knowledge. Earlier we also found that certainty was thrown into crisis by differences, this time the differences among and within women, which made “women” an impossible category.

These orientations to both social and disciplinary differences and the ways differences were addressed (as in need of restraint, as already settled, as the site for new knowledge) in the selected texts discussed in this chapter are related to the conflicting theoretical and epistemological attachments that inform *FS* and *differences*: for *differences* – as the name suggests – how differences work and intersect is a central object of investigation. For *FS* difference is something that adds to, expands, makes more complex, and thus can either make more difficult or potentially improve the subject already assumed at stake. In all cases, interdisciplinarity may either complete or open up inquiry.

What we encountered again in these discussions about interdisciplinarity is the ongoing tension between the desire for a stable and coherent subject of knowledge as the foundation of the field, now bothered by both interdisciplinarity and social differences, and views that begin from the assumption of the subject’s incoherence, her fluidity, and the belief that any sense of coherence is performative, produced by the very knowledge that claims to merely describe and represent her. This tension emerges from diverging epistemologies, which in turn offer us very conflicting perspectives on the relationship between knowledge and the subject.



When we consider how interdisciplinarity is currently approached in women's studies in the context of its further institutionalization in the university, the notion of a sliding signifier allows us to understand that both the ordering of knowledge as well as something else is at stake. In the discussions of interdisciplinarity in this chapter, we encountered anxieties related to the structure of knowledge. These anxieties relate to desires for authority, coherence, mastery, and intelligibility threatened by both interdisciplinarity and social differences. Other worries associated interdisciplinarity with concerns such as what makes women's studies distinct, particularly if its signifiers cannot be stabilized. The potential that both interdisciplinarity and social differences bring to women's studies – their capacity to unsettle what is already known and taken for granted – is also what is feared about their force.

## **Chapter 4**

### ***Questions of Epistemology: Between Knowledge and the Subject***

Women's studies began as an intervention in knowledge. Indeed, pioneers of the field described its wish "to radically challenge the generation . . . of knowledge" (Bowles and Duelli Klein, 1983: 3). But while women's studies is a deeply epistemological project, it is also one without consensus in terms of the direction of its intervention. Indeed, we find competing theories on the uses and qualities of knowledge, which in turn are reflected in the different orientations on women's studies as revisionary, constructionist, or deconstructive. In the previous chapter, we already explored how different epistemological orientations offer diverging views of interdisciplinarity. A central point of dissensus among different feminist epistemological orientations concerns how each theorizes the relationship between knowledge and the subject. Sometimes this question is articulated in terms of methodology, which, if we follow Sandra Harding (1987b: 2), describes how a method of inquiry is employed, to what end, and with what kinds of theoretical considerations in mind. Methodology, a term used to articulate theories of knowledge and of how knowledge is produced, however, intertwines closely with epistemology. In a critical definition, Alessandra Tanesini (1999: 95) thinks of epistemology as "a normative account of the justification of theory." This chapter takes a closer look at conversations concerning women's studies' methodologies and epistemologies to analyse these for how they differently articulate the relationship between knowledge and the subject.

In the context of the further institutionalization of women's studies, recent debates concerning epistemology and methodology have intensified (see for example Collins 1997; Harding 1997; Hartsock 1997; Hekman 1997a; Hekman 1997b; Pryse 1998; Pryse 2000). For some, the problem lies with the lack of a shared methodological language among women's studies practitioners and this becomes a key concern in the training of doctoral candidates in freestanding women's studies programmes (Friedman 1998). For Sylvia Walby (2001), however, the issue lies with the very notion of a different epistemology, one that can distinguish women's studies from other disciplines. In her estimate, "the search by early women's studies for an epistemology of its own is perhaps best understood in terms of a search for certainty. But that is no longer needed" (504). Walby is particularly critical of feminist standpoint epistemology, which she understands as women's studies' central theory of knowledge, because standpoint's central claims are no longer tenable. Instead, she urges feminist knowledge producers to (re)turn to improved forms of scientific inquiry. Contrary to this, Pryse (2000) argues for a new methodology specific to women's studies, one that emphasises the field's central commitments to interdisciplinary knowledge production and to knowledge of social difference, or, to what she calls, "cross-cultural inquiry." Pryse responds to Friedman's (1998) concern with methodological chasms. According to both Friedman and Pryse, methodological chasms are the result of different disciplinary-related attachments. Because women's studies faculty can be deeply attached to the methodologies of their home disciplines, they find dialogue across methodologies difficult and a hindrance to interdisciplinarity:

Most of us are far too committed to the superiority of the methodologies we learned in graduate school, and despite attempts within Women's Studies to support diversity among faculty and curricula, we have rarely extended the concept of diversity to include tolerance for and understanding of each others' disciplinary methodologies: how we work and how we have learned to think. (Pryse 2000: 110)

Pryse's important contribution to the discussion of women's studies' methodology is that she begins from a point of both interdisciplinarity and social difference. However, within her view, the chasms between women's studies practitioners belong exclusively to disciplinary attachments. While different disciplines do favour different methodologies, this view cannot account for the intense epistemological differences and different theoretical attachments *within* disciplines. Indeed, shared theoretical perspectives can minimize disciplinary divisions and make communication across the disciplines possible. Each epistemology responds differently to questions such as what counts as knowledge, what does knowledge do, and how it works in the world – questions that consider the nature of knowledge. Different epistemologies also theorize the subject and its relationship to knowledge in ways that clash. What we face within women's studies, then, is not just a lack of tolerance across the disciplines. Instead, we face a lack of tolerance for conflicting epistemological commitments.

In this chapter, I explore two central feminist epistemological directions for their conflictive views on knowledge and the subject. I begin with a discussion of the central commitments and views of feminist standpoint theory, and I compare them to postmodern and poststructuralist theories, focussing on Foucault's theory of subjection

and contemporary problems of the subject by way of Butler's work. This discussion returns us to the genealogy of women's studies offered in earlier chapters through the question of the proper subject matter of women's studies. By tracing the tensions between two prominent epistemological orientations, this chapter returns us to new variations of an old conflict within women's studies. Regarding the question of its proper subject we are faced with various possibilities, such as: is women's studies about women's experiences, studies of patriarchal culture, or questions of signification, such as language, power, and genealogy? And where are social differences in these debates?

### **Feminist Standpoint Epistemology as a Claim to Truth**

For some such as Walby (2001), standpoint theory is women's studies' central epistemology. This assessment speaks to how profoundly standpoint epistemology has shaped the ways feminist knowledge is produced and thought about. In turn, standpoint theory has been particularly resistant to and suspicious of postmodern epistemologies, because these call into question truth as a function of knowledge. Postmodern epistemologies question the liberating effects of knowledge, while liberatory knowledge is what standpoint epistemologies claim to produce. Nevertheless, standpoint epistemology with its suggestion of knowledge as partial and linked to social location – despite itself – is not completely detached from those epistemologies

that, under the influence of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, destabilize claims to truth.<sup>30</sup>

Feminist standpoint theory has to be credited with an important intervention into earlier methodologies that considered detachment, objectivity, and a “view from above” as a prerequisite for knowledge production. Feminist standpoint methodologists pointed not only to the inevitability of biases but, indeed, developed a theory of knowledge that sees partiality, here understood as a limitation of knowledge, as linked to the social location of the knower and as central to knowledge production (Collins 1990; Harding 1986; Harding 1987a; Hartsock 1987; Smith, 1986). Standpoint methodology has been highly productive because it assigns epistemological value to everyday life and everyday experience in a way that few other theories had done before (Hartsock 1987; Smith 1986). In turn, producing knowledge of the everyday and studying “women’s experiences” as sites of knowledge became *de rigueur* for feminist scholarship and closely linked it to its political mandate. Dorothy Smith (1997) reviews the emergence of feminist standpoint epistemology from within feminism in the following way: “. . . such epistemologies and methods came out of and were dialogically implicated in a women’s movement that offered a profound challenge to established discourses in almost every region of the political, artistic, and intellectual

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<sup>30</sup> In the following, I use the terms of postmodern and poststructuralist at times interchangeably since there is no common agreement about the usage of these terms (Lather 1991: 4). One frequently offered distinction differentiates poststructuralism as the term for the theoretical terrain of postmodernism. Postmodernism signifies the historical context of these theories (McWilliam et al. n. d.). Different disciplines prefer different terminologies: Postmodernism tends to be the preferred term in the Social Sciences, while writers based in the Humanities tend towards poststructuralism. Given my interdisciplinary orientation, I will use both terms.

discourses” (Smith 1997: 394). As an “experiential methodology” (Smith 1997) that systematizes political methodologies, feminist standpoint epistemology originates in the women’s movement, and is grounded in women’s lived experiences. Smith locates standpoint methodology within a particular social, historical, and intellectual moment and as a response to dominant knowledge practices, which devalued and excluded the everyday from becoming the grounds for knowledge.

Smith allows us to understand the initial appeal of standpoint epistemology and its continued importance for feminist knowledge production, particularly for the work of those in Social Science and their empirical research of women and their lives. Standpoint theory offers women a privileged access to knowledge. Or, as Smith argues, the aim of feminist standpoint theory is “to undermine social science’s embedding of the standpoint of white men” (394). In this way, standpoint theory sustains women’s studies’ identity as oppositional.

If we follow Smith, however, the knowledge that is produced by way of standpoint theory is also seen as outside, prior to, and untouched by discourse and ruling knowledge:

Beginning with women’s experiences told in women’s words was and is a vital political moment in the women’s movement. Experience is a method of speaking that is not preappropriated by the discourses of relations of ruling. This is where women began to speak from as the women’s movement of our time came into being. When we assembled *as* “women” and spoke together *as* “women,” constituting “women” as a category of political mobilization, we discovered dimensions of “our” experience that had no prior discursive definition. (Smith, 1997: 394; original emphasis)

Within this, we also see that standpoint theory continues to be invested in women as a stable signifier that describes an intelligible and clearly circumscribable group or collective of individuals brought together by shared experiences. Yet, while asserting the stability of this category, Smith also acknowledges that what is deemed foundational to standpoint is constituted within it: women become constituted as “a category of political mobilization” by women speaking of themselves and their experiences as women. Thus even the possessive indicator of “our” must be surrounded by scare quotes.

This also points to why standpoint has lost its appeal for many feminist scholars today for whom “women” is a complex or even problematic category because its genealogy, claims to membership within this category, and right to representation are not universal in experience or meaning. For those for whom “women” no longer has stable meaning, standpoint theory is not a very useful framework because it does not inquire into how the very category of “women” is constituted, maintained, and mobilized in the social, the symbolic, and the subjective.

Michèle Barrett (1992) enters these discussions by introducing another conceptual vocabulary. She notes a shift in feminist knowledge production, which she describes as a “turn to culture in feminism [in which] the social sciences . . . lost their purchase and the rising star lies with the arts, humanities and philosophy” (112). The shift from the sociological to the cultural is linked to changing methodological and epistemological preferences, those that belong to textuality, discourse, and representation. Standpoint theory focuses on a determinist model of social structure and



its causal effects: how patriarchy, capitalism, the gender segmented labour market, and other material practices affect women and knowledge. The turn to culture signifies a shift in interest to questions concerning the psyche, subjectivity, and the self as sites of the very production of the category “women.” Investigating culture requires methodologies that analyse processes of symbolization and representation. Among those interested in questions of cultural representation, standpoint epistemology is, to use Hekman’s (1997b: 341) somewhat inflammatory phrasing, “often regarded as a relic of feminism’s less sophisticated past.” Reasons for the declining interest in standpoint epistemology according to Hekman include the discrediting of Marxist theory and practice as the basis for standpoint epistemology, the seeming incompatibility of standpoint theory with the study of differences, and its opposition to postmodernism and poststructuralism.

While disputed and perhaps even insufficient for studying questions of culture, representation, and the symbolic, feminist standpoint theory continues to be a touchstone for feminist methodology, in part because it grants epistemic privilege to women as producers of knowledge and possessors of experience. Many of its central assumptions have achieved truth-value within feminist research. However, standpoint epistemology also works, despite its own intention, as an entry point into postmodern methodology and epistemology. As Judith Grant (1993: 91) aptly states: “Standpoint theory is a kind of conceptual bridge between Anglo-American feminist theories and postmodernism.” Noting even a conceptual overlap of standpoint epistemology with poststructuralism, Grant argues that both reference perspective and interpretation,

although standpoint theory emphasises historical and material factors as shaping forces. Despite these commonalities, most of the main theorists associated with standpoint epistemology such as Nancy Hartsock (1998; 1997) and Dorothy Smith (1997) vehemently reject any affiliation with postmodern influences.

Regardless of its protestations, these refusals may be already a form of affiliation. Like standpoint theorists who vehemently refuse postmodern influences, postmodernists and poststructuralists reject standpoint theories. Yet, each can produce itself only by invoking the other. In that sense, standpoint epistemology and postmodernist/poststructuralist epistemologies, rather than presenting the break of the latter from the former, are set in a reluctant relation of continuity, much like postmodernism represents not so much a break from modernism but a continuous re-invocation of it. Borrowing from Zygmunt Bauman who speaks of postmodernism as a “modernism without illusion” (cited in Schmuckli 1996: 16; my translation), postmodern epistemologies can perhaps be best described as disillusioned standpoints.

To fully appreciate both the connections and divergences between standpoint and postmodern epistemologies, I want to take a closer look at both. Feminist standpoint theory stresses the material foundations of knowledge, yet it began as an intervention into the discursive qualities of knowledge production. In 1974, sociologist Dorothy Smith (1986) in a groundbreaking essay commented critically on the abstract ways in which sociological knowledge is produced. Here Smith argued that such knowledge is “based on and built up within the male universe” (86) and it effectively excludes women’s lived experiences from the realm of knowledge. Moreover, learning

to become a sociologist means for women a process of alienation, as they learn not only abstract sociological categories, but also have to fit their work into the conceptual framework given by the discipline, the “sociological perspective” (88). This process demands that the budding sociologist divorce herself from the body of knowledge under investigation in order to maintain “objectivity.” Smith offers an important and early critique of one of the central staples of scientific inquiry, suggesting that,

the ethic of objectivity and the methods used in its practice are concerned primarily with the separation of what is known from any interests, “biases,” etc. which he or she [the sociologist] may have which are not in the interests and concerns authorized by the discipline. (Smith 1986: 88)

She continues, “I must emphasize that being interested in knowing something doesn’t invalidate what is known” (88).

Refusing to divorce herself from her values and interests, Smith suggests undoing the separation between the self and what is studied to acknowledge the situatedness of knowledge – a practice that is also important to postmodern thought. Such reorganization involves “first placing the sociologist where she is actually situated” and “making her direct experience of the everyday world the primary ground of knowledge” (91). Smith suggests that the only way to know is “knowing from within” and to begin from where we are located bodily (92). For Smith, the body and bodily materiality are the basis for knowledge and truth – and this is where postmodern and standpoint epistemologies disagree most radically as we will see later.

In another founding essay of standpoint epistemology, Nancy Hartsock (1987) argues for the epistemological consequences of a different kind of materiality, the

sexual division of labour. Relying on Marxist theory, she outlines some basic assumptions that consequently have come to be identified centrally with standpoint methodology: how we experience and understand the world is structured by the material circumstances of our lives. Yet, she adds, the power of dominant groups affords them the ability to make their (limited) knowledge stand in as truth, even though their standpoint, in comparison to the potentially more complete view of the subordinate groups, is only partial and perverse. In Hartsock's words,

women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point which can ground a powerful critique of the phallogocentric institutions and ideology which constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy. (Hartsock 1987: 159)

Standpoint theory exceeds an analysis of scientific or androcentric bias in knowledge production and offers a revisionist stance. This epistemology insists that social location determines our views and perspectives and, consequently, that we have to acknowledge, "that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible" (Hartsock cited in Hekman, 1997b: 343). Material reality structures and limits one's understanding of the social. Different social groups live specific materialities and these groups and what they know are in an "inverted relationship to each other" (Hartsock 1987: 159). The subordinated have the potential of a more complete and truthful vision of reality. This counter-vision is the result of both political struggle and education, moreover, as "an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed, the adaptation of a standpoint exposes the real relations

among human beings as inhuman . . . and carries a historically liberatory role” (160). Hartsock assumes the following relationship between knowledge and the subject: knowledge is produced by the subject grounded in her material experiences, and knowledge can also be a liberatory force for the subordinated since they are potentially in possession of a less distorted and more complete view of reality. The subordinated are assumed to know more because their perspective necessarily entails not only their own but also the reality of the dominant group. This view is supported by and lends support to bell hooks’ (1984: iv) prominent claim that black folks as part of their survival must know the ways of whites:

Living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular view of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the centre as well as on the margin, we understood both. (iv)

Standpoint theorists, thus, grant subordinate groups epistemic privilege. Yet this theory of knowledge also acknowledges the need for consciousness raising, since the subordinate are likely to accept the world view of the dominant group as true, given the latter’s hegemonic power over truth claims and their ability to suppress opposing perspectives. Thus, standpoint epistemology, while assigning the potential for greater knowledge to the subordinate group, also understands the subordinated as in need of education. Not surprisingly, such view holds appeal among feminist researchers and teachers because it grants feminist education and research an important function. It also locates both educators and researchers as critical to the process of liberation. We already encountered similar claims and arguments in the founding of women’s studies.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) both intervenes in and affirms standpoint epistemology by developing a specific Black feminist epistemology that is cognisant both of the traditional devaluation of Black women's intellectual traditions and of the exclusion of Black women from white feminist thought. She considers both Black women's particular location in the labour market as well as their unique grounding in traditional African-American culture. The unique Black women's standpoint on self and society is shaped by the experiences of Black women as an "outsider-within" within both black (male) intellectual traditions and (white) feminist thought. Black feminist standpoint theory conceptualizes inconsistencies that exist between the ideologies of femininity and the experiences of devalued Black womanhood and formulates them as resistance rather than internalized oppression (12). The knowledge of Black feminist standpoint is rooted in the traditional intellectual endeavours of Black women who have always produced knowledge and insight but have rarely been granted status as knowers outside of their own communities. Hence, Black feminist standpoint challenges gendered notions of knowledge production and the very definition of what counts as knowledge and intellectual discourse (15). Collins offers to standpoint theory an understanding of the complex matrix of oppression in women's lives. She attends to multiple axes of power, with the goal of moving

from an additive, separate system to approaches to oppression . . . toward . . . the more fundamental issue of the social relations of domination. Race, class, and gender constitute axes of oppression that characterize black women's experiences within a more generalized matrix of domination. Other groups may encounter different dimensions of the matrix. (226)

In her formulation of a specific Black women's standpoint, Collins draws on Donna Haraway's (1991) important intervention into standpoint theory and particularly on the latter's argument that knowledge is always partial and situated. Here we encounter another understanding of partiality, this one speaks to limits within feminist thought. By referencing partiality and situatedness, Collins challenges the initial claim of feminist standpoint that its knowledges are superior because they are more complete than dominant knowledges. She clearly does not endorse the superiority of one singular standpoint; still, she also rejects a "relativist view," in which all groups have specialized yet equally valid views. Collins situates standpoints in specific experiences of domination and foregrounds power differentials between different groups. She therefore proposes "a situated, subjugated standpoint of African-American women in order to understand Black feminist thought as a partial perspective on domination" (Collins 1990: 236). Collins assumes distinctive standpoints shared by various groups, understands knowledge as "unfinished," and insists that groups know that their knowledge is partial. Knowing their own partiality makes a group "better able to consider other group's standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other group's partial perspectives" (236). Collins intervenes into classic standpoint theory's claim to complete knowledges, its tendency towards totalization, and argues instead for recognizing partialities and limits as a new strategy of knowledge.

Standpoint theory as articulated by Smith, Hartsock, and Collins is based upon the idea of a collective and stable subject grounded in shared material experiences. The

premise that shared or similar material conditions produce similar subjects has subsequently been scrutinized, in part, because the very notion of a collective subject requires that social differences can be only marginally considered. To focus on the differences within collectives and groups appears to threaten the very existence of groups. An emphasis on difference may cause the collective subject to fall apart, as long as its basis is grounded in some kind of commonality or identity. This tension can be found in Collins (1990) who breaks apart the collective subject of women to replace it with another collective identity based in multiple axis of difference. Accordingly, partiality, first associated with the limits of patriarchal knowledge, then with feminist knowledge that favours women's point of view, is now linked to differences and different viewpoints between women.

Due to its grounding in shared subjectivity, some critics have charged standpoint epistemology with a universalist and essentialist viewpoint. Nancy Fraser (1990), for example, has argued that rather than reflecting women's experiences, standpoint theory is a projection of the views of the theorist's own society onto others. Similarly, Jane Flax (1993) has been critical of the suggestion that the view of the oppressed is undamaged by subjugation and that the oppressed thus have an unmediated or more authentic relationship to truth and reality. Christine Crosby (1992: 137) reviews the standpoint assumption that ontology determines epistemology: The idea "that who I am determines what and how I know" assumes a subject that is both stable and clearly identifiable, that knows who she is, or, at least can know her identity.



Standpoint theorists have repudiated some of the above-mentioned charges in recent work. For example, Hartsock (1998) calls the charge of essentialism a misidentification based on a misreading. Where her critics understand feminist standpoint as derived from being woman, she insists that such standpoint is achieved through processes of analysis. Similarly, Collins (1997) goes to great lengths to point out that not all African American women take an African American feminist standpoint but that such a standpoint is the result of political work. Smith (1997) seeks to distinguish between feminist standpoint, which is her formulation, and women's standpoint, which she dismisses as a common misreading of her work.

Besides charging standpoint theory with essentialist gender constructions that are no longer maintainable when social differences among women and the constructed nature of gender are taken into consideration, commentators have also critically interrogated its notion of an inherent epistemic privilege. Bat-Ami Bar On (1993) argues eloquently that the epistemic privilege granted to the oppressed repeats the very process against which it protests. Given the multitude of socially marginalized groups, Bar On asks: "is any one of these groups more epistemically privileged than the others, and if that is not so – if they are all equally epistemically privileged – does epistemic privilege matter?" (Bar On 1993: 89). She concludes that the very notion of epistemic privilege is problematic and should be abandoned:

The theorized dispersion of power among multiple centers makes it hard to attribute epistemic privilege to just one of the many socially marginalized groups cohabitating in one society. And the problems of grounding epistemic privilege in the practices of socially marginalized subjects suggest to me that even if it were possible to identify one socially marginalized group as special, it

would be hard to make an attribution of epistemic privilege to this group that does not idealize its practices. (Bar On 1993: 94)

Bar On describes epistemic privilege as a justification for the claim of authority, such as the authority to speak for oneself, to define oneself, and to demand respect for hitherto excluded voices. She writes: “Western second-wave feminist claims for epistemic privilege entangle feminists in the Enlightenment socio-political liberatory project of legitimizing the voices of the many, as narrowly as this might have been understood in the specific historical times and places” (95). Much like the Enlightenment project, this is an “add-on approach” of equality, in that more and more groups become authorities on something. This strategy of “authorizing” marginalized voices, central to standpoint theory’s intervention into the “silencing of women,” is both normalizing and normative. The process of gaining voice usually requires those who seek access to model themselves after those who already possess it, thereby risking normalization. Since marginalized groups cannot make the dominant group obey their attempts of authorizing the marginal, claims for epistemic privilege end up becoming normative and are only followed by those who feel compelled by them, usually members of the group who might find these appeals empowering:

Although the empowerment of its own members is an important goal for every marginalized social group, by claiming an authority based in epistemic privilege the group reinscribes the values and practices used to socially marginalize it by excluding its voice, silencing it and communing its obedience to the voice of the dominant group. (Bar On 1993: 96)

As a way to avoid the dilemma of normalization, Bar On suggests giving up the desire for having one’s voice authorized. Voice is a tool of the dominant, a tool that is based

on the rule of silence, a rule that need not be obeyed, and that more often than not produces in turn the silencing of others.

These critical arguments regarding epistemic privilege return us to the core of the dilemma in women's studies. They challenge a central orientation towards women's studies, which I called constructionist, that, grounded in standpoint epistemology, understands women's studies "as the study of women's experiences from the perspective of women" and believes that knowledge made from experience is a powerful intervention in hegemonic knowledge. If we follow Bar On's arguments, to assert the voices of women as authoritative is both normalizing and normative. To centre and assert women's voices, women's studies has to model itself after the very practices that it seeks to protest. Earlier, we already discussed the disciplinary pressures working presently upon women's studies to define its proper subject, its methods of inquiry, and its overall purpose. Thus in the process of becoming an authority on women, women's studies also risks becoming authoritative towards women and those who study within the parameters of the field.

These dilemmas open the fissure between standpoint and postmodern strategies of knowledge. Standpoint theories believe that they can produce better and more complete knowledges that make visible, audible, and authoritative what has been unseen, unheard, and dismissed before, for example women's experiences. Standpoint epistemologies are convinced of their positive and progressive effects. Critiques of standpoint theories analyse how these methodologies resemble that which they oppose

and how these methodologies are implicated in that what they resist, namely: normalizing, authoritative, universalizing, and exclusionary claims about “women.”

Feminist postmodern epistemology offers a very different view of the subject. Lorraine Code (1998) describes the difference in the following way: For standpoint epistemology, subjectivity is “performed by embodied subjects whose specific experiences have to be taken seriously” (183). Postmodernists’ radicality lies in their insistence “on the opaque often contradictory, incoherent features of subjectivity”(ibid.). To push this difference even further, standpoint epistemology assumes that subjects exist outside of and prior to the discourses through which experiences are interpreted. Subjects can be distinguished from the stories told about them. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is interested in how the subject comes into being through the discourses that claim to represent it. Different ideas about materiality, reality, representation, and truth distinguish these different epistemological orientations. Anna Yeatman (1993: 13) has suggested that postmodernism revolutionizes the idea of representation as the (true) representation of an a priori truth; in postmodern thinking, reality does not precede representation but is constituted within it.

### **Situated Knowledge and the Stitched Subject**

The work most representative of the threshold of standpoint and postmodernism and the ambivalent link between the two is Donna Haraway’s (1991) classic text “Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial

Perspective,” initially conceived as a response to Harding (1986). Haraway is dedicated to feminism, socialism, and materialism, yet takes seriously the inescapability of the “postmodern condition” diagnosed by Frederic Jameson (1984). She affirms the general goal of standpoint epistemology to account for social positions yet refuses to think standpoint in the singular, “because our maps require too many dimensions” (196). For Haraway (1991) the problem is how

to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world . . . (187)

Her response to this problem is postmodern in that she signals the contradictory nature of her wishes: Her postmodern understanding of knowledge as “situated” is linked by way of an italicized “*and*,” which highlights contradiction, to quite modernist assumptions about representation and reality, only to signal the impossibility of the ‘real’ by use of quotation marks. Haraway, like standpoint theorists, challenges objectivity and those who insist that knowledge demands detachment and distance, impartiality and neutrality, as well as generalizability and universality. Indeed, Haraway offers a provocative and radical redefinition of objectivity. For Haraway, objectivity accounts for the particular and the specific, rather than the distant transcendence of subjectivity. For her, “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (190). Contrary to standpoint theories, Haraway makes no claim to new generalizations. Instead, her self-reflexive bend urges others to take responsibility for partial vision, to

elaborate specificity, and to learn to see from somebody else's point of view. These indicators produce locatable knowledge claims.

Haraway's suggestion of "situated knowledge" as objective knowledge is related to the (postmodern) understanding of the subject as multidimensional: it reclaims the notion of objectivity and rethinks it beyond recognition. Here we find also a different sense of partiality from, for example, Collins (1990). Partiality is no longer outside the subject or between subjects but is part of the subject and her non-unitary being; as is difference. Haraway describes this partial subject in the following way: "the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original . . . always constructed and stitched together imperfectly" (193). Partiality as a condition of subjectivity means that the subject's imperfection and provisionality needs to be accounted for in all knowledge claims. Like standpoint theorists, Haraway prefers subjugated knowledge, yet, such knowledge is not pure, innocent, or more complete. Quite the contrary, subjugated knowledge, "in principle at least," might be more willing to account for its non-innocence and might be less likely to deny "the critical and interpretative core of all knowledge" (Haraway 1991: 191).

Haraway refuses to totalize or privilege any knowledge perspective as more complete, since nobody can claim a fully subjugated or privileged position. Similarly, she refuses relativism "which is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally" (191). Relativism, like totalization, is a "god-trick" of knowledge that claims transcendence, limitless knowledge, and freedom from responsibility. Haraway favours an always-partial perspective instead, which is about limited location,

responsibility for what one sees, or a structured vision. Haraway emphasises interpretation, contestation, deconstruction related to “the multiple subject with (at least) double vision” (195). Her aim is to “elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another’s point of view” (190). Hence, for Haraway, collectivity is not based on a shared ontology. Instead, collectivity, like solidarity, is an accomplishment, achieved in and through conversation, and linked to situated knowledge. Connections and collectivity have to be made from partiality and, like the subject herself, are always “stitched.”

Compare this version of knowledge and subjectivity to standpoint epistemology, which assumes a collective and stable subject that something is done to. For example, it may be silenced or excluded from knowledge. This view of a silenced or repressed subject has also been foundational to the emergence of women’s studies, which began from a critique of the exclusion of women from academic knowledge. Within both women’s studies and standpoint epistemology, the subject has been imagined as potentially resistant and able to speak back, especially after having been exposed to educational and political conscientization, for example through women’s studies teaching. The idea of a resistant subject is appealing since it suggests that we can free ourselves and others from the harm done to women and that we can maintain our oppositionality. At the root of standpoint epistemology, and large parts of women’s studies, is a humanist premise, which is very different from Haraway’s “stitched” or “cyborg” subject. In standpoint theory, difference is located between women and men or between women. Haraway addresses the profound difference of the subject to

herself. Postmodern and poststructuralist theories explore this kind of difference further.

Postmodernist studies of the subject, to which I now turn, take a deep interest in the constitution of the subject and reconceptualize the relationship between subject, knowledge, and truth. What unites the multiplicity of postmodern approaches is that the subject cannot be separated from knowledge: from social (mis)interpretation, (mis)representation, from desire, and from the discourses that work upon the subject. The poststructuralist subject is the subject of and subject to knowledge and representation. Indeed, for poststructuralist feminists the very description of the subject as a rational, self-possessed individual that exists outside and separate from knowledges, representations, interpretations, and subjections, which is how standpoint theory describes the subject, is already the product of the history of (humanist) discourse.

The poststructuralist subject is made in and through processes of subjection and is inseparable from discourse because it emerges through, and attaches to, the very same discourses that claim to represent it (Foucault 1990). For poststructuralist theories, knowledge and the subject are inseparable. The subject is made through knowledge and through her subjection or attachment to knowledge. Hence, knowledge is neither simply oppressive nor liberatory but productive and performative.



### **Trouble With the Subject: Postmodern Epistemologies**

Postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist theorists interested in questions of knowledge and the subject have found, among other theories, both psychoanalysis and Foucauldian theory productive. Psychoanalysis is central to poststructuralist thought because it understands the subject as internally divided and as desirous – thus difference is now located within the subject rather than between subjects. Foucault describes the subject as historical invention, constituted in and through various matrixes of power/knowledge. Both of these bodies of theory have animated feminist poststructuralism, yet, Foucault's genealogy is also the grounds for insisting psychoanalysis produces subjects of knowledge.

Foucault's contribution to a theory of the subject rests in his analyses of subjectification at the heart of knowledge and power. One of his clearest formulations describes his interest as trying to "get out from the philosophy of the subject, by studying the constitution of the subject across history which has led us up to the modern concept of the self" (Foucault 1997:176). This constitution of the subject takes place in the field of knowledge, which is why Foucault is interested in its history: "All practices by which the subject is defined and transformed are accompanied by the formation of certain types of knowledges, and in the West . . . knowledge tends to be organized around forms and norms that are more or less scientific" (Foucault 1997b: 177).

The formative powers of the scientific incite the social demand for self-knowledge and the private desire to know the self fully. According to Foucault

(1997b), in our society, “one of the main moral obligations for any subject is to know oneself, to tell the truth about oneself, and to constitute oneself as an object of knowledge both for other people and for oneself” (178). Here the tension between Foucault’s approach to knowledge and the role of knowledge in women’s studies emerges. Women’s studies is to a large extent invested in the liberatory and transformative capacity of knowledge and in the idea that self-knowledge equals empowerment. (We encountered these convictions particularly in the Chapter 1 and will meet them again in Chapter 6 where students and faculty offer us their views of learning in women’s studies.) But this quest for self-knowledge subjects the subject to new discourses of science such as psychology, education, and government. The more one tries to know the truth about oneself, the more one is tied to the desire for stability, transparency, and control. These desires, for Foucault, are an effect of knowledge and nowhere is the effect more shattering than in discourses that produce the body.

For Foucault, the history of knowledge is central to the genealogy of the subject. His project develops a theory of the “different modes by which . . . humans beings are made subjects” through knowledge (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 208). Foucault’s understanding of the subject as subject of and to power/knowledge disrupts the link that other critical theories (like Marxism and standpoint epistemologies) see among consciousness, self-reflection, and freedom (Soper 1986: 138). He also challenges the idea of the autonomous subject and of human agency, both central concepts for standpoint theories and women’s studies.

In "The Subject and Power," Foucault (1983) announces that the interest of his works lies not so much in the study of power but that the subject itself is the general theme of his research. In his ongoing project of writing a genealogy of the subject, Foucault develops an understanding of the subject as constituted in the interaction of truth, power, and ethics. Over the course of his work, he offers a series of different modes of subject formation. His earlier work is on the humanist discourses, especially on what we call the "sciences," and how they bring the subject into being through practices of normalization, for example in the scientific studies of sexuality and madness (Foucault 1972; 1990). Normalization relies on the binary division of normal and abnormal, between the sane and the insane, and between sexual normalcy and sexual perversion. In his study of the prison, Foucault (1979) investigates the habitual compliance with norms through self-surveillance, exemplified in the panopticon as a central disciplining technique.

Subsequently, Foucault shifts his attention to the interrelationship between power and knowledge, more precisely, to the discourses that produce knowledge about people and systems of government, which he calls the "dividing practices" (Foucault 1983: 208). It is through relations of power, for example through disciplining techniques, that humans are turned into subjects, techniques which Foucault terms variously "governmentality," "normalization," "discipline," and "bio-politics" (Foucault 1991; 1977b; 1979; 1990). In stark contrast to standpoint epistemology, Foucault argues that these disciplining techniques do not just forbid who we are, they are not solely repressive, but instead are highly productive of anything ranging from

normal society and abnormal offenders to the very production of truth, knowledge, and nature. (Disciplining techniques thus produce difference as ontology.) His later work is increasingly interested in how people exercise power over themselves, through ethics and the demand for ethical behaviour, or how people turn themselves into subjects (Foucault 1988a; 1988b; 1988c).

Since all of these forms of producing the subject are forms of subjugation and are linked to knowledge, Foucault argues, unlike standpoint epistemology, that no knowledge is liberatory, not even so-called “reverse discourses” (Foucault 1990) such as feminism. Instead, he rejects the knowledge that produces individuals as subjects (for example humanist philosophies and scientific knowledge), modern forms of government, and even the definitions that we use to define ourselves. This position of refusal is epitomized in his frequently quoted suggestion that,

maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political “double bind,” which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures . . . to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us. (Foucault 1983: 216)

An earlier version of this suggestion to refuse old forms of subjectivity and identity speaks more clearly to the refusal of positivity and advocates making the formation of ourselves a political question. In 1980 Foucault elaborates,

Maybe the problem of the self is not to discover what it is in its *positivity*; maybe the problem is not to discover a *positive self* or the positive foundation for the self. Maybe our problem now is to discover that the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history. Maybe the problem is to change those technologies . . . to get rid of those technologies, and then, to get rid of the sacrifice which is linked to those technologies. In this

case, one of the main political problems nowadays would be, in a strict sense of the word, the politics of ourselves. (Foucault, 1997a: 231; emphasis added)

This suggestion to refuse, or at least make political, all forms of identity and subjectivity, has found great resonance with and is echoed in diverse works, for example in Stuart Hall's (1996) argument for a non-essentialist politics of race and anti-racism, in Brown's (1995) meditations on a renewed politicality in feminism, and in Readings' (1996) strategies for the university in ruins. However, within women's studies, the refusal of identity and positive representation challenges the pedagogical and epistemological commitments of many of its practitioners and therein signals a crisis for feminism and women's studies.

Indeed, Foucault's refusal of certain forms of subjectivity, and particularly his refusal of a "positive self," has provoked some feminist commentators to reject Foucauldian analysis, and by extension postmodernism, altogether. Commentators such as standpoint theorist Hartsock (1990) insist that women and feminism still need to claim subject status, to produce women as subjects, and to develop forms of positive subjectivity. After reviewing Foucault's theory of power, Hartsock insists that "we need to sort out who we really are" (171) and engage in the "historical, political, and theoretical process of constituting ourselves as subjects . . . of history" (170). For a large part, women's studies has seen it as its task to accomplish just that.

While Hartsock and many others reject Foucault, other feminists have found his work productive, particularly for an analysis of disciplinary regimes that limit female subjectivity (Bartky 1988). Similarly, Martin (1988) argued for important convergences

between feminism and Foucault's work, especially in relationship to feminist political/theoretical projects. Martin points out that Foucault's methodological provocations have resonance in the feminist rejection of the expert's power over the female body, in feminist critiques of male sexual liberation, and the feminist analysis of heterosexuality as discursively produced. Other feminist attempts to rescue Foucault from criticism were less successful. Jana Sawicki (1991), for example, argues that Foucault does not eliminate subjectivity and, by extension, agency altogether, but rather "points to its limits" (103). Sawicki's assertion that Foucault presupposes "the existence of a critical subject, one capable of historical reflection, refusal and invention" (104) seems to overstate the case. She writes, "This subject does not control the overall direction of history, but it is able to choose among the discourses and practices available to it and to use them creatively" (104). Sawicki concludes that "Foucault's subject is neither entirely autonomous nor enslaved, neither the originator of the discourses and practises that constitute its experiences nor determined by them" (104). This analysis seems to miss a focal point, namely, that there is no outside to the very discourses that produce and constitute the subject. Indeed, Sawicki seems to presuppose a subject outside of discursive bounds that is autonomous enough to engage and reject the discourses of her own intelligibility. The notion of choice is inconsistent with Foucault's assertions.

In feminist engagements with Foucault's work, questions of subjectivity and the possibility of choice and agency, continue to be a touchstone, separating those who insist on the continued need for women's subjecthood from those who want to

investigate the normalizing effects in the very production of subjectivity. The former position is exemplified in Kathi Weeks' (1998: 37) commentary on Foucault's early work, in which she argues that "the problem with Foucault's approach . . . is that he only succeeds in replacing the autonomously constituting subject, the humanist subject, with its opposite: a subject that is utterly determined, a subject that is only subjected." This, according to Weeks, leaves little room to imagine an alternative to the subjugated subject.

Weeks, thus, points to another dimension in the feminist discussion of Foucault, namely, how to imagine resistance. Critics of a Foucauldian analysis tend, like Weeks, to focus on how Foucault's work lacks a political vision for resistance and social change and thus denounce his work as entirely negative. Commentators inclined towards Foucault disagree with such an estimate. Jon Simmons (1995), for example, argues that the Foucauldian subject is:

neither wholly subjected nor entirely self-defining and self-regulating. The subject is indebted to the limits, however, oppressive, imposed on him or her for the possibility of being anyone at all, having an identity and capacities to act. Paradoxically, such subjective capacities include those of resisting the power that has made us what we are. However, only under certain circumstances can the subject successfully resist power in a way that does not also reinforce it or reinstall it on another plane. If the resistant capacities of the subject are combined with fortuitous conditions, if the subject works on the limits to which he or she is partially indebted and fashions new forms of subjectivity, then the subject attains unstable and undefined freedom. (4)

Foucauldian analysis does not begin from a binary of oppression and resistance, subjection and liberation; instead, it suggests a complex matrix of power and knowledge in which the subject is implicated. Foucault's work on the nexus of subject,

power, and knowledge does raise some questions in regard to women's studies as a site for knowledge production and its desire for epistemological and political intervention. Rather than accepting the field's claim to be a force for change, Foucault's work asks how women's studies is implicated in the production of knowledges to which women are subject? How is the field implicated in the construction of women and gender and the very problem that it seeks to solve? And, how are those in women's studies animated by its discourses and strategies of knowledge?

Foucault's critical work on knowledge supports a self-reflexive approach to women's studies, one which continuously considers the effects of the knowledges that the field produces, for example the exclusionary but also deeply normalizing effects in its limited engagement with social differences. This self-reflexive engagement with Foucault differs from the earlier cited examples of feminists embracing Foucault. These earlier cited examples focussed on how Foucault's theories analyse the regulation of women. Now we are employing Foucault to investigate the regulatory powers of feminism and women's studies.

Another question, one that Foucault leaves unanswered, is: how do people become attached to knowledge that ultimately subjects them? Standpoint theory suggests that knowledge that promises liberation is inherently superior, persuasive, and thus appealing. Hence, we attach to standpoint theories once we can grasp their promise of liberation, resistance, and freedom from repression. This also implies that those who do not attach to standpoint theories lack consciousness and knowledge and thus fall for oppressive ideologies. But, if we follow Foucault's suggestion that all



knowledge of the subject is implicated in its subjection, how do we then explain attachment to knowledge without returning to the notion of lack of consciousness?

I want to explore this question of attachment to knowledge further through Judith Butler, who has been an important figure in the ongoing feminist debate about questions of subjectivity, subjection, and agency through her groundbreaking theorization of gendered and sexual identities as regulatory regimes (Butler 1990; 1993). In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Butler (1997) continues her investigation into the question of subject formation by considering the subject at the intersection of psychoanalysis and Foucault. Frequently, these two bodies of theory have been regarded as oppositional to each other or as mutually exclusive. Whereas Foucault's work is understood as concerned with questions of power in the realm of the exterior, the public, the social, the political, psychoanalysis is thought to be preoccupied with instinctual drives and the development of interiority. A central contribution of Foucault to postmodern critical theory is, as already discussed, the suggestion that the social produces bodies of knowledge through which bodies are produced and become intelligible, which Foucault (1979) calls "docile bodies." Central for this production of bodies are the discourses of sexuality (Foucault 1990) and race (Foucault 1993). Contrary to this, psychoanalysis and its inquiry into the psyche is interested in internal, unconscious, and private dynamics of the individual. Butler, however, intends to disrupt this staid opposition of the internal and external, the private and public by asking, "how we might rejoin the discourse of power with the discourse of psychoanalysis" (Butler 1997: 18).

The question that Butler finds missing in Foucault's work is: how does the subject become attached to knowledge and how does the subject come to accept the discourses that subject her? This question of attachment to knowledge is also central to women's studies because the field lays claim to be representative of women's lives and asks students to identify with or attach to feminist representations of women. Butler (1997) asks,

If forms of regulatory power are sustained in part through the formation of a subject, and if that formation takes place according to the requirements of power, specifically, as the incorporation of norms, then a theory of subject formation must give an account of this process of incorporation, and the notion of incorporation must be interrogated to ascertain the psychic topography it assumes. How does the subject of desire require and institute the desire *for* subjection? (19)

By way of psychoanalysis, Butler theorizes attachments to knowledge and to subjection, but without blaming the subject for its own subjection since the subject cannot escape what is inescapably required for her social existence. Butler returns to a primal site to explain this attachment. Much like the child needs to attach itself and come to love the people that raise it in order to exist and survive, so, too, do we need to attach to discourses as a precondition for joining the social. We cannot go outside of knowledge and discourse. That love, however, both the love of the child for those who raise it and the attachment of the subject to the discourses that give her a social existence, is ambivalent. Butler argues that the existential dependency that structures child/parent relations (and that also structures the subject/knowledge relationship) is ultimately too much to bear, and thus needs to be repressed. Similarly, the need to attach to that which subordinates the subject cannot be recognized and must be denied

and repressed. What is so unbearable about the knowledge that makes us subject is our dependency upon it as well as the demands that knowledge makes upon us in turn. Notably, Butler offers us a theory of ambivalence. To think of our relationship to knowledge as ambivalent allows for the questioning of how we attach deeply to theories that contradict each other, how we both love and hate an idea, and, how we feel passion for knowledge, even if it ultimately subjects us.

Butler returns to a point central in the standpoint vs. postmodernist dispute – the question of agency. Butler asks what we are to make of this agency, considering that this agency is tied to subordination, or, is an effect of subordination. Given that in the process of opposing its subjection, the subject reiterates her subordination, the question arises how can the subject be a subject of resistance? This resisting subject is important to women's studies and its desire to intervene in the existing social relations of inequality. Postmodern and psychoanalytic theories locate the subject as deeply entangled in the social relations it seeks to resist, and this makes theorizing resistance, at least in the psychoanalytic sense, much more complicated than, for example, the sociological explanations of standpoint theory. Butler wonders whether one strategy for resistance would be to always presuppose subordination, as one way to not reiterate it. This solution is grounded in Foucault's assertion that we need to refuse identity because in the process of opposing one's subordination (for example in the fight for the social recognition for women as knowledge producer), the subject effectively reiterates its own subjection. What would this mean for women's studies, if the field were to

refuse identity, presuppose subordination, and assume participation of its knowledge as regulatory power?

Attachment to knowledge gives access to relations of power, but this access is tied to the conditions of subordination. This is the tension of ambivalence: power is both resistant of and resists subordination. Power is prior to the subject and the willed effect of the subject. Butler (1997) writes: “The subject is *neither* fully determined by power *nor* fully determining of power” (17; original emphasis). Given that the very status of being a subject is implicated in the power that she opposes, the question of pure opposition – which is so central to standpoint thinking – is further unravelled. Butler turns thus to the question of how the formation of the subject involves the regulatory formation of the psyche. She asks how we can account for the incorporation of norms.

Internalization is the process by which something is not only brought inside, but Butler argues, along the lines of psychoanalysis, it is also the process in which the distinction between interior and exterior life is produced. Butler (1997: 86) offers an important distinction between the psyche and the subject; the latter is conditioned on the exclusion of the unconscious, while the former begins in the unconscious, and, more importantly, “the psyche is precisely what exceeds the imprisoning effects of the discursive demand to inhabit a coherent identity, to become a coherent subject” (86). The psyche forms in and through repression, motivated by normative demands in the processes of subject formation. Hence, it is within the psyche that the regulatory effects of normalizing discourses are resisted. Psychic remainders signify the limits of

normalization. Resistance emerges from the incommensurability between psyche and subject.

To assert that the repression required in processes of normalization produces an unsocialized remainder that opposes the very processes of subordination in subjection, however, does not suggest that such psychic resistance offers us a way to rearticulate the discursive demands that it resists, or the normalizing demands itself. Nor is this resistance without its own ambivalence. Butler (1997) concludes:

To thwart the injunction to produce a docile body is not the same as dismantling the injunction or changing the terms of subject constitution. If the unconscious, or the psyche more generally, is defined as resistance, what do we then make of the unconscious attachments to subjection, which imply that the unconscious is not freer of normalizing discourse than the subject? If the unconscious escapes from a given normative injunction, to what other injunction does it form an attachment? What makes us think that the unconscious is any less structured by the power relations that pervade cultural signifiers than is the language of the subject? If we find an attachment to subjection at the level of the unconscious, what kind of resistance is to be wrought from that? (89)

Thus, even if unconscious resistance produces failure for the injunction to fully constitute the subject, this does not change the injunction itself. Butler then asks, how good is a resistance

that can only undermine, but which appears to have no power to rearticulate the terms, the symbolic terms . . . by which subjects are constituted, by which the subjection is installed in the very formation of the subject? (89)

Butler's theory of the subject speaks thus to the limits of resistance, understood as a re-articulation of the terms of power, which is the bad news of this theory. But we are also reminded of the limits of any efforts to produce a subject by disciplinary means. Thus, we find the unconscious is the site of limitations, of both resistance and

disciplinary compliance. Psychically, the subject never fully complies with normative injunctions and never completely complies with the terms set forth in her formation since these terms require her to repress her desires, which, however, do not disappear, and thereby also encapsulate resistance to the demands. In this way, the fears of standpoint theories that postmodern/poststructuralist methodologies conceive a determined subject seem unfounded. Yet, the subject proposed here is not the heroic resisting subject that we find in standpoint theories either. Indeed, the postmodern subject may psychically attach to the means of its own subordination, yet never fully, and remainders of old desires are articulated in and as symptoms (such as incoherence, ambivalence, contradictions). What this theory leaves us with is insight into an unstable, incoherent, and unreliable subject, one that might “mis-recognize” and “mis-read” its own interpellation. In the context of a psychoanalytic notion of the subject, we also encounter a different sense of partiality, one that speaks to fragmented and shattered experiences with unclear meanings. We are also left with, as Butler (1997) puts it, “the incommensurability between the symbolic demand . . . and the instability and unpredictability of its appropriation” (96). This incommensurability is important in the context of learning in women’s studies, because it articulates the grounds of interpretation. We will return to the question of interpretation as central to subject formation and learning in more detail in Chapter 5 and 6.

Through a discussion of the tensions between different feminist epistemologies, we further understand the differences between the various orientations within women’s studies. These are less related to different disciplinary traditions, conventions, and

practices than to different epistemological and theoretical commitments. Within a standpoint epistemology, women's studies seeks to understand how women are negatively affected by the social and material conditions under which they live. Here difference is located between women and between women and men. This framework seeks to produce knowledge that can further explain and change social conditions as well as liberate women from the distorted ideologies that govern their lives. According to postmodern epistemologies, "women" themselves are constituted within both androcentric and feminist knowledge. A postmodern or deconstructive women's studies would focus on the nature of this discursive construction as well as its shifting and inconsistent quality. It would also seek to understand how "women" engage the knowledge that constitutes them inconsistently and in a multitude of different and contradictory ways. For postmodern women's studies, the very production of its subject through discourse, interpretations, and symbolization becomes the site of knowledge. But this knowledge is no longer capable of securing a sense of stability or even settling questions of authority. Psychoanalysis in particular, offers a view of difference as within and foundational to the subject. And while a discussion of epistemology affords us a view of different approaches to knowledge, the subject, and (social) differences, we still need a more complete theory of attachment to understand the force of epistemological difference lived as conflict in women's studies.

## **Chapter 5**

### ***Questions of Pedagogy: Identification and Social Differences***

My previous chapter considered theories of knowledge in women's studies by way of debates between standpoint epistemology and poststructuralist thought. There, I sought to understand the diverging interests of these two approaches in knowledge. In the background of these debates are questions of learning – learning to become a subject and learning from the field's own knowledge. This chapter, then, highlights theories of learning and teaching. It does so through a more intimate crisis, what Shoshana Felman (1992) calls the crisis of education. Questions of pedagogy have been critical for women's studies because of its investment in social change through education. Feminism itself is a pedagogical project because one avenue by which it seeks to achieve social change is through changed knowledges and changed practices of learning. Given the diversity of views on women's studies, however, which in the last chapter were explored in terms of epistemological differences, this chapter will seek to understand differences of attachment. This chapter, then, explores not what there is to learn in women's studies, but how learning is imagined within feminism and particularly within women's studies when social differences are at stake.

Initially while conceiving of this chapter, I assumed it would be a very straightforward task: I would sketch out and analyse how feminist pedagogy discourse has shifted from a preoccupation with identity, to differences, to the more recent move toward questions of identification. I anticipated tracing this shift to illustrate how



thinking about learning as complex identifications would help us to understand why learning about and from differences is so difficult both for women's studies, for those learning within the field, and why it leads to such differences within views of the field. In the process of writing this chapter, however, I became increasingly preoccupied with how to theorize learning and with the question of how feminist pedagogy and teachers in women's studies think students learn. I became interested in how students are thought to attach to ideas and knowledge, particularly when these challenge, quite fundamentally, how students think about themselves, the social world around them, social injustice, and the relations between women. My concern became more and more with the limitations of a view that confines learning to a rational process and a view in which students are imagined as variously modeling themselves after curricular representations, deriving self-esteem from becoming the subject of knowledge, coming to critical consciousness about the workings of political, social, economic, and/or cultural issues in their everyday lives, and/or identifying with the suffering of women less privileged than themselves (Briskin 1990; Culley and Portuges 1985; Lewis 1992; Maher 1985; Maher and Tetreault 1994; Rich 1979a; Schniedewind 1987; Shrewsbury 1987). My concern with these approaches to learning is that they assume both stable studying subjects and stable subjects of study. They also assume that meaning, or what there is to learn, can be known in advance.

In some ways, the previous chapter already staged an encounter with questions of pedagogy, particularly when we understand pedagogy as not only concerned with the transmission of knowledge but with how knowledge is produced in the interaction

of teacher/text and student (Lusted 1986). Butler's (1997) theory of the subject as formed through ambivalent attachments to discourse can be approached as a theory of learning. She revisits Foucault's notion of attachment to knowledge as subjection by way of psychoanalysis and suggests that the subject cannot avoid attaching to knowledge and discourse because these inaugurate and make her socially intelligible. Knowledge and discourse, though, also subject her. Different from theories that see learning as role modelling, self-esteem building, or consciousness raising, in Butler's theory, the subject is not separate or outside of the discourses to which she attaches. From this we can suppose that learning is performative in that education functions to produce the subject it claims to educate. However, the subject's attachments to knowledge and discourse are not stable and complete. Nor is the subject fully conscious because the subject cannot completely give up older desires that interrupt and conflict with new attachments. So already, we have encountered a theory of learning that exceeds the notion of a (unproblematic) distribution or transmission of knowledge or, for that matter, of knowledge as unambivalently emancipatory. Butler's theory of unstable attachments resonates with recent discussions of pedagogy that draw upon psychoanalysis (Britzman 1998; Ellsworth 1997; Felman 1987; Pitt 1996) and which defy other popular approaches to feminist teaching, particularly those that understand feminist learning as centrally structured by curricular representations, consciousness, and consider the identification of students with the material studied as the mark of success.

This latter definition of student identification as successful teaching is captured in the following sentiment of an early women's studies' student who enthuses, "because Women's Studies course material addresses the experiences of women in our society, women students have to strain *not* to identify" (Rutenberg 1983). On a more cautious and critical note, Alice Pitt (1996: 32) suggests that in women's studies, "female students' capacity to recognize themselves as women within the terms of the course is a significant measure both of the course's success and of students' success in the course."

The very idea that students will be able to understand themselves reflected in the curriculum or in the terms of the course assumes that students identify with the material studied and that they recognize the representations proffered. This causal model supports standpoint epistemologies. Such recognition is already an act of interpretation on behalf of the students, however, since the curricular representations on offer are not literally of them but of ideas or other women who, at most, can be regarded as "like them." For example, the suggestion that students will identify with the efforts of 19<sup>th</sup> century women to win the right to vote assumes that students are able to do the intellectual and affective work that allows them to transcend differences of not only history, but also of culture, social class, age etc. in order to be able to conclude that the efforts of suffragists have any bearing upon their own lives. Thus, any kind of identification that students make with curricular material is based not on the accuracy by which representations match their own self, experience, or identity. Instead, identification is an interpretation made to slide over difference.

Already, we have encountered two different modes of identification: to *identify as* a woman and *with* other women. Within feminism and women's studies, allo- and auto-identification, to use Sedgwick's (1991: 62) helpful terms, tend to get conflated: women's studies both wants students to *identify as* women or gendered beings *with* other women who are similarly or differently socially located. Or, to put it differently: to *identify with* the material studied in women's studies should lead to *identification as* a woman and as a feminist in the terms laid out by the curriculum, and in turn lead to *identification with* other less privileged women. Even if it proposes a solution, what women's studies asks of students is a complex psychological process of subject formation.

Within feminism and women's studies, the notion of identification looms large because it is an early term by which feminism and feminist education sought to unite women *as women* who are otherwise separated from each other in every other aspect of their lives. One of the central premises of feminism has been that to *identify as* a woman *with* other women is empowering because it strengthens and affirms a sense of the female self as not alone and helps her strive and survive in a misogynist and androcentric culture. In this logic, identification is deemed both the consequence of knowledge and that which makes knowledge possible. Given our earlier discussions, we can apply Foucault and the critiques of normalization to such formulations. Implicit in such strategy of *identifying with/as* are normative and normalizing assumptions about femininity. For example, can one *not* identify as a woman and be a feminist? Can one *not* identify with other women and be a feminist?

Indeed, we may want to think about identification as a demand that runs through most feminist attempts to politically and pedagogically unite women. Earlier, within the context of feminist identity politics and pedagogy, the demand was to ignore differences between women and to identify on the bases of women's similarities. Differences among women were relegated to the outside and so were seen as the effect of patriarchy. More recently, within the framework of a politics and pedagogy of difference, the demand is to see and honour differences, and to still identify with each other.

I pointed out the two different modes of identification (*as/with*) or auto- and allo-identification (Sedgwick 1991). Sedgwick examines the conflation of these forms in the context of feminism:

For a politics like feminism . . . effective moral authority has seemed to depend on its capacity for conscientious and nonperfunctory enfoldment of women alienated from one another in virtually every relation of life. Given this, there are strong political motives for obscuring any possibility of differentiating between one's identification *as* (a woman) and one's identification *with* (women very differentially situated - for bourgeois feminists, this means radically less privileged ones). The cost of this pressure towards mystification - the constant reflation, as one monolithic act, of *identification with/as* - are, I believe, high for feminism, though its rewards have also been considerable. (Its political efficacy in actually broadening the bases of feminism is still, it seems to me, very much a matter of debate.) (62)

Sedgwick alerts us to the fact that the conflation of gender identity (to identify *as* a woman) with social and/or political identification (to identify *with* other women) is constitutive of feminist identity politics, and has been productive of new social relations between women, but at the same time, has also been problematic. The limitations of this conflation and the effects of its mythic proportions within feminism

are that “intimate dissonances” (Sedgwick 1991: 61) between and within one’s gender identity and social/political identifications with others are lost or even denigrated. Indeed, this conflation of identifying *as/with* runs the risk of re-inscribing singular and normative notions of female gender identity and politicality/sociality, instead of posing both and the relationship between them as the very questions that feminism seeks to explore.

Thus, such conflation raises serious problems for those learning in women’s studies. These problems relate closely to social differences of gender, sexuality, as well as race. My concern is, that even if we stay within the logic of identification set forth by women’s studies and feminism, which I will critically analyse later, these identificatory demands marginalize anyone who does not fit into the normalized genders, sexualities, and racial identities assumed by the curriculum. Perhaps the only reason that women’s studies does work is because identifications do not work as imagined in feminist pedagogy; identification is not or not just a conscious form of affiliation, as feminist “consciousness raising” suggests.

This notion of identification as a conscious affiliation and its conflation of *identifying as/with* is perhaps most influentially formulated in Adrienne Rich’s (1986) well-known 1980 attempt to unite women across the widening divisions that emerged over charges of homophobia and racism within the women’s movement. Rich poses identification between women as an act of political resistance. In her discussion, identification between women figures simultaneously as an achievement or consciously made choice, and is authentic and original to the relations among women. Drawing

critically on Nancy Chodorow (1978) who discusses how women come to mother, she reasons that women's first experience of emotional and physical nurturing is overwhelmingly with a woman. But in a patriarchal society, this original bond between women is severed and instead women are pressed into identification with men and sexual, emotional, and social servitude to them. Rich, thus, articulates identification as a conscious and political act, as a choice that women can and must make, if they are to resist the forced identification with men. The suggestion that to *identify as* a woman *with* other women is a strategy of resistance resonates through feminist writing for the following decade, particularly as feminists try to find ways to address divisions and differences among women.

Rich's deep investments in conscious and chosen identifications must be understood within the context of a stringent rejection of psychoanalysis and Freud by large numbers of feminists at that time. Following Kate Millet (1971), psychoanalysis was characterized for decades, as Code (1993: 33) describes it, as "a form of brainwashing designed to keep women quiet, passive, and in their place – especially sexually." As a means to ward off psychoanalysis, feminists drew upon sociological theories of identification and socialization theories instead. Rich (1979b) expands the understanding of identification as a conscious attachment to others in a 1978 essay, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia," the title of which resonates critically with Freud's (1929) study, *Civilization and its Discontents*. Rich situates conscious identification in relationship to love:

love [is] experienced as identification, as tenderness, as sympathetic memory and vision, as appreciation . . . a non-exploitative, non-possessive eroticism, which can cross barriers of age and condition, the sensing our way into another's skin, if only in a moment's apprehension, against the censure, the denial, the lies and laws of civilization. (307)

Rich equates love between women with identificatory relations and with a (political) act of disloyalty to (patriarchal) civilization.

Within a view that understands feminist learning as successful identification as/with women, we understand the intense attention in women's studies to curricula that reflect women's experiences, and more recently, to curricula that reflect women's diversity. The idea is that students navigate a complex terrain in which they can learn from the representations and the experiences offered to them to change their lives, for example, to end violent relationships, and to become empowered politically. But the assumption is also that to identify with the suffering of others would lead to a change in behaviours and attitudes harmful to others, such as racist and homophobic behaviours. Feminist pedagogical practices, even those that emphasise and embrace difference, frequently continue to assume that students should and will identify with the representations on offer (Britzman 1995). Underlying this pedagogical aim is the assumption that identifications follow neatly from social identities, i.e. Black students will recognize themselves in the images and representations of Black women. Similarly, lesbian students are supposed to find their experiences validated in the curricular representations of lesbians.

Within a view that regards identification as the mark of successful teaching and learning, the refusal of certain identifications on the part of the students is seen to be a



problem. The refusal to identify signifies failure on the part of the student, the teacher, and/or the text. Two suggestions emerge from this. One is that given this understanding of refused identification as failure, we might say that the identifications in the curriculum are not just offers but are demands directed at the students. I will explore this suggestion a little later. The other suggestion is that identification, while certainly central to learning, is a complex process that exceeds the realm of the sociological and that of consciousness. For example Sedgwick (1991: 61), invoking psychoanalysis, describes identifications as “sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal.” Sedgwick articulates the aggressive side of identification that, in the common feminist and sociological usage of the concept, is ignored. I follow Sedgwick’s lead here by suggesting that some of the difficulties at stake in teaching and learning from social differences are not located in the teacher, text, or, the student. The difficulties of identification cannot be completely explained through hegemonic forces of racism, homophobia, and heterosexism that hinder identification across differences. Instead, the difficulties of teaching and learning about and from social differences are, at least in part, related to the ambivalent, partial, and contradictory qualities of identification.

Conflict within identification returns us to the instability of both the studying subject and the subject studied. The unstable subject was theorized in the previous chapter; the instability of the subject studied is brought to the fore, for example, by Sharon Todd (1998), who, by way of critical media analysis, reminds us that representations and images always allow for multiple readings and multiple sets of

interpretations. This is in part because, as Valerie Walkerdine (1990: 89) points out, texts do not just meet “cognate and waiting subjects who can easily be changed,” but instead texts “provide a fantasy vehicle, which inserts the reader into the text,” in particular ways. What is at stake in reading about others is often the phantasy<sup>31</sup> of the self, produced through the phantasy of another (Todd 1998). Representations appeal to “an imaginary self and community that individuals then identify with, disavow, or desire” (Todd 1998: 441). This important insight into the relationship of self and other as produced through phantasy helps us to pose anew the question of desire in learning about and from social differences.

The difficulty in learning about and from social differences, then, is neither a problem of curriculum or of finding proper representations. Nor is it a problem of social identification across divides of privilege. Instead, it is a problem of and for the subject and her desires.

With the help of current pedagogy scholarship committed to contemporary Freudian psychoanalysis, I argue that most learning poses a crisis in and for the subject, interferes with her desires and, thus, learning itself is difficult. The work of learning is not only difficult but also potentially dangerous to both the subject and the object of learning. We will see later that this is a psychological danger and is related to the worry that the self will fall into bits and pieces. The tension is that learning requires a rethinking

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<sup>31</sup> I will use “phantasy,” unless I cite authors who use a different spelling. The psychoanalytic concept of phantasy is important to an understanding of the dynamics of identification. Phantasies are creative and unconscious activities of wish-fulfilment. The subject creates imaginary scenes with herself as the main actor. The wish that is fulfilled here is distorted by defensive mechanisms (LaPlanche and Pontalis 1973: 314).

of the self and a confrontation with otherness that is variously related to the otherness of thought, of incomprehension, and of incoherence within the self before, during, and after the encounter with knowledge (Felman 1987). A central premise for this chapter is that for learning to begin, the integrity of the subject has to and will shatter. The subject has to risk self-understanding in order for learning to take place because the central dynamics of learning are such that the very dynamics that allow us to learn also threaten both the self and its object of study. Thus learning constitutes a crisis both for the subject and for its object.

This is, of course, a very different theory than that of the humanistic pedagogic tale of acquiring positive role models that help build self-esteem. This orientation is grounded in the sociological understanding of identification discussed earlier. For example, earlier in this chapter I discussed the goal of teaching women's history as one of learning from the past through identification with women who came before us. The moment of identification occurs when their struggles are imagined as similar to our own. But a psychoanalytic model of learning shatters such idealization. It suggests instead that the very understanding of women in the past as "like us" (or the reverse, that we are "like them") is based upon a phantasy of ourselves produced through the phantasy of these historical figures. Thus, this view of the phantasy of self within identification opens up a new understanding of the crisis of representation, discussed in the previous chapter.

The notion of education as crisis returns us to the subject because learning itself is a problem for the subject. This again is a very different view from the popular one in

women's studies that believes feminist learning and knowledge compose power and empowerment. Within a psychoanalytic view, the distinction between empowering and disempowering learning is no longer maintained. Instead, the crisis of learning is related to the subject's history of having to learn (Britzman 1998) and to an inaugural violence that constitutes subjectivity in learning, if we understand learning as structured by a series of identificatory demands (Butler 1997). While this cannot be avoided, at least theoretically, we can attend to it and work through it. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I suggest that psychoanalytic theories offer us important conceptual tools to consider the difficulty of learning about and from social differences in women's studies anew, and from a different angle. In part, the new insight that psychoanalysis brings to bear on teaching and learning about and from social differences is that differences are now thought of as foundational and inaugural to the subject. We also now move from a view of differences as the social differences between women to the psychical difference within the subject. The angle suggested by psychoanalytic theory regards crisis, as well as violence, as part of learning itself. The suggestion is that learning puts subjects into crisis.

Understanding the very process of learning as difficult interferes with the liberatory premise of feminist and other radical pedagogies. It suggests also that in our thinking about pedagogies that attend to social differences more is at stake than just what kinds of material and which discourses are taught. Instead, the crisis that feminist education must consider is a crisis that also organizes its own central tensions: the problem of attachment itself. We must consider "how one comes to be susceptible to

the call of ideas” (Britzman 1998: 5) and what happens for us once we try to respond.

Two conceptual insights of psychoanalysis are of central importance to my discussion: first, the notion that education is both a demand made on the subject and poses a crisis for the subject; and second, that learning means attachment to knowledge or identification with an object (Britzman 1998; Felman 1987). Processes of identificatory attachment are difficult for the subject because, as we shall see, they pose a threat for the subject since, at the level of phantasy, identification means losing one’s self. Yet, the subject necessarily has to attach to knowledge and objects in order to become a subject and in order to learn. Moreover, attachment and identifications may seem to put the objects to which we attach at risk, for identifications, at the level of phantasy, may seem like acts of (psychic) violence. The violence at stake in women’s studies might seem like the (psychic) appropriation of the other.

My turn to psychoanalysis does not suggest that this body of theory will come to the rescue of feminist education, nor does it suggest psychoanalysis as a “successor regime” (Harding 1998) or final approach to the teaching and learning of social differences. Instead, what psychoanalysis offers to our concern is the notion of an unconscious – a difference within – that, with important exceptions, feminist pedagogy, ignores.<sup>32</sup> The unconscious challenges us to conceptualize teaching and learning as more than settled by social reality, reason, rationality, and intellectual capacity. Instead, the unconscious allows us to consider dynamics of desire in teaching and learning that

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<sup>32</sup> These notable exceptions are for example Finke (1993), Gallop (1995), Penley (1989), Pitt (1995; 1996), and Walkerdine (1990).

do not go away even when we refuse to attend to them. Related to this, psychoanalysis suggests that controversies, conflicts, and disruptions are symptoms; they mark the return of some repressed psychic events in teaching (Britzman 1998: 19).

### **Education as Demand**

Recent literature in pedagogy interested in psychoanalytic theory has argued that education is structured by an outside demand that the student must negotiate psychically. To rethink feminist education as a demand is difficult within a framework in which women's studies and feminist teaching are considered purely liberatory forces that claim to liberate women and children from coercive patriarchal education. Yet, both Foucauldian and psychoanalytic theory suggest a different understanding of education. For example Britzman (1998), following Anna Freud, describes all education, even education that claims to be emancipatory, as forms of "interference," meaning that education always makes demands on the learner that interfere with her innermost desires. Education, as Britzman reminds us, demands from the learner activities such as to listen to the teacher and to other students, to pay attention, to work quietly or in groups, to read a text, to come up with ideas, to produce answers to questions that may be of no or little interest to her. (This notion that women's studies teaching may be of no interest to some women students is also a difficult suggestion for the field.)

Yet, all education requests not only that students engage in potentially unwanted activities, but asks much more from the student, namely to reconsider herself

anew in light of the material studied. By definition, education is “not the accumulation of knowledge but . . . a means for the human to use knowledge, to craft and alter itself” (Britzman 1998: 4). To demand that knowledge affect the learner requires that one differentiate learning *about* from learning *from*. Learning from signifies “more than a series of encounters with knowledge,” as Pitt (1995: 298) explains, and, instead, “entails . . . the messier and less predictable process of becoming implicated in knowledge, that is, the process of interpretation.” Britzman (1998), following Freud, distinguishes further:

Whereas learning about an event or experience focuses upon the acquisition of qualities, attributes, and facts, so that it presupposes a distance (or, one might even say, a detachment) between learner and what is being learned, learning from an event or experience is of a different order, that of insight . . . Learning from requires the learner’s attachment to, and implication in, knowledge. (119)

Education demands of students not just to know information about something, but, moreover, to learn from the content in order to “craft and alter” themselves in profound ways. This demand to “craft and alter” the self is central to women’s studies. Here the demand is that the student move from subordination to political and self-consciousness. Such a demand, however, makes it likely that the feminist ideas students of women’s studies encounter “may not just be unfamiliar but appear at first glance as a criticism of the learner’s view” (Britzman 1998: 11). Given that in women’s studies the studying subject is (at least theoretically) also the subject studied, I suggest that new ideas may feel not only like a criticism of the views of the learner but, at times, they can feel like criticism of the learner herself. This may be especially the case in the learning from social differences in women’s studies, which asks students not

only to consider new information of present and historical processes of racial and sexual formations of inequality but also asks them to question how they individually and collectively are implicated in these structures differently. Consideration of these racialized and sexual structures of inequality may be especially difficult for practitioners of women's studies because it interrupts the ideal of a feminist collective that is able to transcend differences among women. Considering differences among women is also difficult, as we have already seen in earlier chapters, because it locates conflict inside women's studies.

When we think of education as demand directed at students, conflicts inherent to learning become apparent. Given that ideas related to feminist knowledge and knowledge of social differences can be experienced by the subject as forms of self-criticism, learners' resistance to these ideas become quite understandable. This opens up a view onto students' resistance to the women's studies curriculum and to theories of resistance that are different from seeing refusal as moral, intellectual, political, or pedagogical failures on part of student, text, or teacher. Locating conflicts as inherent to the work of learning is very different from seeing students lacking consciousness, as for example standpoint theory would suggest.

One of the earliest studies to problematize understanding students' resistance in women's studies' and of liberatory curricula solely in terms of "false consciousness" is Patti Lather's (1991) *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/In the Postmodern*. Both a study in methodology and pedagogy, Lather's work is directed at women's studies from the inside of the field. Lather seeks to understand students'



resistance through a self-reflective approach to research and teaching. Inquiring into the desires at stake in liberatory efforts as well as into their effects, Lather asks, “How do our very efforts to liberate perpetuate relations of dominance?” (16). “How [do] we contribute to dominance in spite of our liberatory intentions . . .” (15). And, how can we escape technologies of “regulation and surveillance?” (15). Lather encourages an “inquiry into the processes by which students may accept, integrate and/or reject oppositional knowledge” (151).

Most important for my own thinking about the complexities at stake in learning feminism and in learning about differences within and through women’s studies is Lather’s approach of a deconstructive pedagogy, which encourages us to engage rather than shut down the different ways that texts may be read. Focusing on the multiplicity of meaning making allows differences in reading integral to teaching (145). Thus, difference becomes central to meaning making in women’s studies. The central work of this pedagogy is to “begin to critically interrogate our own unexamined techniques of sense-making . . . [and to] explore the relation between ourselves and how we negotiate the search for meaning in a world of contradictory information” (Lather 1991: 146).

Another important study of students’ resistance is Pitt’s (1995) *Subjects in Tension: Engaged Resistance in the Feminist Classroom*, which critically analyses the subject positions made available to students in women’s studies and how students engage these complexly to make meaning of themselves. Pitt understands students’ resistance of/in women’s studies as conflictual forms of engagement and identification with, not against, the subject positions offered in the curriculum. Using psychoanalytic

theory, Pitt speaks to the complex processes at stake in identificatory processes, which exceed an easy binary of acceptance and refusal, identification and disidentification, particularly when the complexities of ambivalence are considered. Moreover, and this resonates with Lather's (1991) concern, Pitt worries about the danger of normalization at stake in feminist pedagogy when women's studies desires positive identifications with the material studied (117). Both of these studies begin rather than end with differences, now the differences of interpretation and attachment.

Besides differences of interpretation, of which Lather (1991), Pitt (1995), and Todd (1998) remind us, Anna Freud (1974) draws our attention to the differences of desire at stake in teaching and learning. Expanding upon the idea of education as demand, she offers a vivid illustration of the tension that she sees arising between the one who demands change and the one upon whom such demands are placed. The relationships among the teacher, text, and learner are structured by both the demand of the teacher/ text for learners to change themselves and the learners' desire to stay the same, and thus Anna Freud detects a "never-ending battle" among teacher/ text and learner (101). This view of a battle between those involved in education is quite different and a far less harmonious image than the idealized view that populates the imagination of early women's studies pedagogy texts in which the feminist teacher is variously described as helper, facilitator, midwife, role model (Shrewsbury 1987), and/or nurturing mother (Culley et al. 1985).

Anna Freud has more to offer on the inherently conflictual quality of education. "Step by step," she writes, "education aims at the exact opposite of what [the student]

wants, at each step it regards as desirable the very opposite of the [student's] inherent instinctual strivings" (A. Freud, 1974: 101).<sup>33</sup> This opens up the question of what desires structure and are structured by learning and teaching about and from social differences. What is the subject demanded to give up when she is asked to consider differences as central to women's studies? In earlier chapters, we have already begun considering this by asking what difference "difference" makes for the field. In Chapter 3, I discussed the ways that differences figure in the discourses of interdisciplinarity and argued that making differences central would mean variously to give up the desire for mastery and (gender) coherence, as well as to rethink the view that women's studies is inherently liberatory and progressive. Thus, learning about and from social differences raises tensions for how women's studies and its practitioners like to think about the field and themselves. To consider differences means to confront the conflictual nature of the field and its practitioners' implication in relations of power, privilege, and domination. But it also requires learners to attend to their inner or psychic reality. In the next chapter, we will explore further, how individuals attached to the field struggle with the demands that the encounter with differences in women's studies makes upon them and their sense of self. There, we will encounter a range of tensions and analyse how individuals negotiate these tensions and their desires such as the desire for non-ambivalence, the wish to disavow or master difference, the search for similarity when difference signals loss, as well as the ability to live with conflict and

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<sup>33</sup> While Anna Freud speaks about the relationship between "children" and teachers, I take liberty here to suggest that her observations are relevant to all teaching relationships.

ambivalence. We will also begin to see how the subject, who signifies otherness for the white majority of women's studies, can negotiate and survive the ambivalence forced upon her.

When we begin to consider the workings of desire in education and learning, we also begin to encounter conflict of a different order. Freudian psychoanalysis offers us a theory of learning that is rooted in conflict. This conflict is located not on the outside of women's studies but within the student and is made from the diverging desires of the learner and the teacher/text. The conflict is within the subject, because as Butler (1997) suggests, she is formed through her ambivalent attachment to knowledge, which in turn always requires her to give something up. Thus, what we find in this theory is that learning is tied to the fear of loss. Both conflict and loss in learning are missing in a humanist understanding of learning as self-consciousness, empowerment, and liberation.

### **Learning as Crisis: Knowledge and Trauma**

Psychoanalytic literary critic Shoshana Felman (1992) emphasises crisis and conflict as fundamental to learning and teaching. She brings to our attention the insight that conflict and crisis are not signs of the failure of learners, teachers, and/or curricula. Instead, she regards conflict and crisis as necessary, without which learning cannot take place. She posits crisis as an inherent and necessary condition for learning and thus essential to teaching:

teaching . . . takes place precisely through crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the

explosivenesses of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not *truly taught*. (Felman 1992: 53, emphasis in original)

Felman, who also understands teaching as more than the transmission of knowledge, situates crisis at the level of affect. Even though Felman's insights are developed on the background of teaching about trauma, they can be extrapolated onto learning more broadly. The crisis emerges for the learner because new information is not congruent but dissonant with what she has already learned. This is not only a cognitive problem for the learner. Dissonance also poses a problem for the self. For the learner, encounters with new ideas might be experienced as negative affects such as: feeling lost or drowning, confused, overwhelmed, anxious, inadequate, or being criticized, as Britzman suggested earlier. (This affective domain of learning becomes particularly palatable in the interviews I conducted with students and faculty in women's studies, here in the form of incoherence, contradictions, and loss of words.) An engagement with new ideas can make the learner vulnerable to experiencing the limits of her knowledge, to experiencing herself as not being in control of her own thoughts and ideas. Learning challenges the secure sense of self as it returns the learner to earlier experiences and old vulnerabilities, reminiscent of being the child or, more precisely, the human infant who is not in control of her environment. This confrontation with new knowledges and ideas reminds the learner of an earlier lack of control and primal helplessness, especially, of the earlier dependency on others for survival.

Beyond the suggestion that new ideas pose a conflict to a sense of self and of control over one's understanding, Felman alerts us to another dimension of crisis, one

that seems pertinent especially to the engagement with traumatic and difficult knowledge. This is the dimension of trying to consider knowledge of injustice and suffering. Traumatic knowledge, as Felman (1992) elaborates, adds two aspects to the crisis of knowledge: The first aspect concerns the “crisis of truth” as a condition of knowledge in our time, “when facts are not clear, when accuracy is in doubt” (5). Secondly, and yet related to the more general crisis of truth, Felman highlights the crisis of encounter, that is, the crisis of encountering the trauma of injustice and the trauma of crimes against humanity. Knowledge is profoundly difficult here because these events cannot just be apprehended through the arrangements of their facts. Indeed, knowing trauma and suffering as facts and as historical events may be a way of avoiding knowledge, and thus, may be a defence mechanism. Felman, for example, differentiates “texts that testify” from those that account facts. The former, she explains, “do not simply *report* facts but, in different ways, encounter – and make us encounter – strangeness” (Felman 1992: 7). Thus within the context of feminist teaching, encountering the suffering of other women must not be reduced to knowing the facts of their victimization; indeed, that is one form of holding the encounter with trauma in check. Instead, Felman’s suggestion of “encountering strangeness” speaks to knowledge of a different order and a different order of knowledge that is related to learning as getting lost, discussed earlier, and a different understanding of knowledge; not as mastery of facts but as encounter in the realm of affect.

Felman’s reconsideration of knowledge and learning difficult things resonates with the work of Toni Morrison. In the recent “Afterword” to the new edition of her

first novel *The Bluest Eye*, a traumatic story about the devastating effects of racialized and racist notions of beauty, worthiness, and normalcy on a young Black girl and on Black families, and communities, Morrison (1994) elaborates on the writing/teaching strategy chosen for this difficult text. She describes aiming for an “immediate intimacy” between the reader and the text. This intimacy begins on the very first pages of the text, in which the reader encounters the secret thoughts and reflections of one of the young protagonists who will be enfolded in traumatic events. This aim for an immediate intimacy between reader and text is essential for the reading of the book, because, “this is a story about things which one would rather not know anything about” (Morrison 1994: 213). Given the desire not to know and to ignore, Morrison ponders: “I did not want the reader to have time to wonder, ‘what do I have to do, to give up, in order to read this? What defences do I need, what distance maintain’” (212). Morrison does not want to give the reader time to build defences against the traumatic knowledge that she is about to encounter; however, her text also does not aim at empathetic identification. Instead, she wants her reader to encounter the crisis that the encounter with traumatic events, as a form of witnessing, will evoke. Morrison’s writing strategy, here understood as a pedagogical strategy, aims at the unexpected: the reader’s vulnerability to the effects and affects of reading/learning. Morrison produces a text that Felman might name as one of the “texts that testifies” and that does not teach through facts but that “make[s] us encounter – *strangeness*” (Felman, 1992: 7; emphasis in original). The strangeness relates to the loss experienced in reading and in an encounter with knowledge that exceeds facts. The strangeness relates to the loss that

the reader experiences in the encounter with the trauma that this text seeks not to represent but to enact, for example, by way of “facts [that] are not clear, . . . accuracy [that] is in doubt” (Felman 1987: 5) and by way of implicating the reader, making her a witness rather than a benevolent bystander.

Both Felman and Morrison develop their pedagogy for social transformation and social justice in the context of severe trauma. This trauma is a crisis that cannot be studied by merely learning about it, for example by learning about the history of racism, anti-Semitism, or gendered violence. Instead, both Morrison and Felman suggest as crucial the encounter with trauma and the crisis that this produces for the reader. This kind of pedagogy is quite different from a pedagogy that aims at empathetic identification with the pain and the suffering of others, which is, for example, what Nussbaum (1997) offered us in an earlier chapter when she suggested empathetic identifications with those deemed other or less privileged. In empathetic identification, the crisis can be left safely within the experience of the other. Indeed, as Dori Laub (1992: 73) suggests, empathetic identification may actually be a form of defence. In the pedagogic encounter with trauma, in the way that both Felman and Morrison suggest, the reader or learner has to live through crisis. This is a new question for women’s studies in that we need to presuppose learning as a crisis, yet also must acknowledge the utter difficulty of encountering this learning.

Here we also encounter difference in a different register, now not just the social difference between individuals structured by racial, class, gendered stratification, but the difference that the encounter with self difference makes for the learner, when the



reader becomes strange (or different to herself). Before I move into a discussion of the dynamics specific to learning about and from social differences in women's studies more closely, I want to consider how two structures of education – the demand for self-transformation and the necessary crisis at stake in learning – work together. I do so because to consider differences as central to women's studies, poses not only an epistemological but also a pedagogical dilemma. This concerns the dynamics of learning as dynamics of self-difference. I suggest that we begin from a more complex understanding of learning if we want to look at how subjects learn, engage, refuse, and mobilize difference in women's studies learning.

### **Learning as Attachment: Knowledge and Love**

In the beginning of this chapter, I referred to the importance of conceptualizing the psychical geography of attachment. I suggested that learning is learning to attach to knowledge, and following Britzman (1998: 117) argued that this attachment requires implication in knowledge. I now turn to Martin's (1996: 2) discussion of the centrality of "attachment, investment, even love" in the work of theorizing and learning. Martin offers another important aspect to an understanding of affect in learning by suggesting that one's attachments exceed one's political convictions and that one's knowledge is structured by emotional attachments, by love but also by hate. Thus, Martin helps us further to analyse the standpoint assertion that identification is structured exclusively as a conscious and political attachment. But moreover, we will also begin to see how

attachments to theory/ knowledge can survive the aggression, hate, and violence that are also a part of identification.

Martin's (1996) collection *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* represents over twenty years of writing on lesbian and feminist studies, spanning her graduate student days in the late 1970s to essays written during her tenure as the chair of the German studies department at Cornell University in the 1990s. Not only do these essays represent important interventions in and engagements with the shifting feminist perspectives of the time, but, significantly for this chapter, they also chronicle Martin's own processes of learning.

In her introduction, Martin explicitly links each of the essays and their intellectual and theoretical project to her emotional history. She proffers a view of both the intellectual and the emotional landscapes in which she writes theory, and importantly turns our attention to "the intersections between . . . my intellectual and emotional attachments" (2). By tracing the history of her attachments both to people she loves, here primarily members of her family of origin, and texts formative for her learning, Martin demonstrates her argument for the interrelatedness of the intellectual and the emotional and the idea that love is central in learning. Martin's love, both of texts and family, is inevitably punctuated by disappointments, and deep losses, as well as returns and continuity. She writes about her experience of estrangement and of having to distance herself from her family due to her intellectual, political, and sexual difference from them. Distancing herself is both a way to deal with the homophobic responses of her family as well as the result of the unintelligibility that her academic

life poses to them. Yet, the potency of love and attachments is brought to the fore through illnesses and death in her family. These difficult events are the backdrop for an exploration of the force of her attachment across difference, incompatibility, incomprehension, and even hostility. From this, she then formulates a larger intervention in current theorizing and the totalizing view that privileges detachment over attachment, resistance over implication, and radical construction over any sense of interiority. Martin reads the losses and crisis she suffered as reminders of what she calls “the incalculability of the subject” (14) and of her attachments that “are not necessarily politically consistent” (14). She concludes that attachments *do not* adhere to the demands and logics of politics, a view that is also axiomatic in my chapter. The important suggestion that Martin offers to my inquiry is that intellectual interests are structured by or stand in for some kind of relationship to older attachments and previous experiences of love. These older attachments, as history, structure our present relationship to knowledge. The structure of this kind of ‘older love’ is played out in present learning. In this way, there can be no learning without transference, new editions of old conflicts, matriculated by present conditions. Again, Martin reminds us that in our knowledge more is at stake than just politics or convictions. Indeed, identifications across differences are not just driven by political choices, but Martin asserts that our attachments are structured by older experiences in the affective domain. Thus, when we consider our own learning about and from differences older attachments are always at stake too.

To consider love in learning, we need to consider the transference, which Felman (1987: 85), with reference to Freud, defines as “the compulsive unconscious reproduction of an archaic emotional pattern.” Transferences, in the words of Freud are “new editions or facsimiles” (Freud 1905: 116) of older phantasies or impulses that structure present social relations. In a much-cited passage, Freud makes specific reference to how earlier attachments to parents structure future engagements with others and especially with teachers. Reflecting upon an encounter he had as an adult with a teacher from his childhood days, Freud concludes,

psychoanalysis has taught us that the individual’s emotional attitudes to other people . . . are . . . established at an unexpectedly early age. The people to whom [the child] is in this way fixed are his parents . . . His later acquaintances are . . . obliged to take over a kind of emotional heritage; they encounter sympathies and antipathies to the production of which they themselves have contributed little. (Cited in Felman, 1987: 85)

Felman, in turn, credits Lacan with expanding transference to the realm of authoritative knowledge itself. Lacan defines transference as “love . . . love directed toward, addressed to, knowledge” (cited in Felman, 1987: 86).

The suggestion that love (as well as hate) is central to learning, has also been explored in recent efforts in education theory to reclaim psychoanalytic theory (Britzman 1998). Like Martin’s, this work offers provocative interventions into dominant feminist theorizing. It specifically interrupts an exclusive focus, prevalent in current feminist theorizing, on how our behaviours, feelings, actions, and thoughts are overwhelmingly governed from the outside. Such focus on the normative regards the subject as purely constructed through norms and thus runs the risk of losing any view

of interiority, “as though the process of subjectification created normalcy without remainders,” as Martin (1996: 15) critically remarks.

A counter strategy to understanding both the subject and processes of subjectification exclusively in terms of normalization is for Martin located in a study of our attachments that are always at stake in learning and reading. In a very different context, Helene Cixous has similarly noted, “one never reads except by identification” (cited in Diamond, 1992: 390). In a way that echoes Lather’s (1991) argument for a deconstructive pedagogy discussed earlier, Martin underlines the need to attend to our own processes of attachment and detachment because these psychical processes centrally structure and shape our understanding and learning. Thus, knowledge can be made from how we make knowledge, how we relate to knowledge, as well as from how we refuse knowledge. Here, we are offered a very different sense of education, one that cannot predict its outcomes, one that cannot foresee how students will engage representations of women and/or social differences such as racialized images or knowledges that focus sexuality. The ways these representations will be engaged may both expand and challenge what we want students to learn, because their “pleasures, fascinations, and curiosities . . . do not necessarily reproduce, reflect, or line up neatly with political ideologies or oppositional movements” (Martin 1996:14) or with curricular goals in women’s studies. Martin’s reflection on her own history of learning and attachments in her learning allows for the strangeness between the outside and the inside world, and how both come to matter in relationship to each other. A

consideration of identificatory process allows us to speculate on significance, or on how subjects, things, ideas, values, practices, knowledges etc. come to matter to us.

### **Identification**

Given the centrality of identification to the feminist project and given my critique of how identification has figured in feminist pedagogy, I now want to turn to the efforts in recent feminist theory that rethink the concept of identification. The renewed and sustained interest in identification in feminist theory is based on the concept's capacity to help us reconsider how difference is established internally and within groups. However, we need to distinguish the different ways identification has been mobilized recently because some of the work draws on the psychoanalytic literature to discuss identification (Chow 1993; Diamond 1992; Fuss 1995; Pellegrini 1996), while Shohat (1998a), for example, uses identification as an alternative to "identity." The latter work emerges from the extensive feminist debates over a politics of differences that began in the late 1980s and that continue today.<sup>34</sup> Here, identification works as an intervention into what Shohat (1998a: 8) hyperbolically characterizes as a "salami-style identity politics and the infinite slicing of identity in a Zenon-like search for the minimal units of self-definition." To avoid both an "atomizing fracturing" (9) that seeks to find "true identity" underneath all these differences, and a return to a universalizing discourse ("we all globally"), recent

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<sup>34</sup> Texts that contributed to the critical consideration of "differences," first initiated by feminist theorists of colour many of whom I cited earlier, are Crosby (1992), DiStefano (1990), Trinh (1990), Rutherford (1990), and Young (1990). See Crenshaw (1995) for the notion of intersectionality of different differences, Hurtado (1992) for a discussion of difference as degrees of privilege.

discussions have proposed a shift away from identities to questions of identification and affiliation. According to Shohat (1998a: 9), this latter approach is “less concerned with identities as something one has than in identification as something one does.”<sup>35</sup> This very important shift both resonates with and expands earlier formulations of coalition politics (Reagon 1983) or cross-over politics (Caraway 1991) that imagine strategies for politically working across differences.

While this feminist usage of identification largely refers to the social experience of identifying with others, psychoanalysis is interested in the psychic and unconscious experience of identification. In women’s studies, and in classrooms more broadly, the psychical and the social meet. This makes the different understandings of identification offered in psychoanalytic literature relevant to questions of learning in women’s studies. Psychoanalysis understands identification also as related to identity but, in the psychoanalytic sense, identification is neither a possession nor a deed.

Psychoanalytic work focuses on identification as a process of unconscious affiliation, a process that is therefore much more volatile and less benign than the kinds of social associations suggested both in those feminist theories and pedagogies that try to mobilize identification as a way to overcome and transcend differences. Psychoanalytic theories offer a less hopeful perspective on politics and pedagogies. Instead of relying upon identification as the prerequisite for social transformation, psychoanalytic work looks at the aggressive underbelly of this psychic process. Significantly, identification is a way of thinking difference from within. In

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<sup>35</sup> See also Crimp (1992).

psychoanalysis, the subject is inherently split within herself. Moreover, for psychoanalysis identification is always partial (because the subject is split), ambivalent (structured by both love and hate), as well as contradictory (LaPlanche and Pontalis 1973).

The notion of a subject inherently split has become a central tenet of postmodern feminist thought as elaborated in the previous chapter and refers us back to Freud and his discovery of the unconscious. According to Freud (1915), the unconscious is formed through repression of early infant experiences such as the experience of profound ontological dependency on caregivers that structure the child/parent relations and the baby's polymorphous perversity. Because the life-and-death dependency of the helpless human infant on being fed and cared for is ultimately too much for the human infant, and probably even for the caregiver to bear, it is repressed, as are pleasures and desires that eventually become deemed socially inappropriate. Yet, according to Freudian theory, the traumatic origins and forbidden pleasures and desires are not given up easily or entirely. Instead, they are kept well alive within the realm of the unconscious. The unconscious, moreover, is both formed in this process of repression and emerges as the result of repression. The content of the unconscious, the traumatic experiences as well as the memories of the forbidden desires, remain inaccessible and forbidden to the conscious and yet find other forms of expression. The repressed returns, for example, as slips of the tongue, mistakes, dreams, jokes, and unintelligible speech.



The notion of an unconscious also alludes to the indeterminable difference *within* the subject, which is quite different from understanding difference as social and located entirely *between* subjects. The difference within the subject is captured in the term of the “split subject” (Grosz 1990), of a subject that is continuously betrayed by her unconscious, which she cannot know, cannot understand, and thus cannot master. The unconscious “dethrones” the mastery of the ego and “the ego is no longer master of its own house” (Freud cited in Grosz 1990: 13) because it makes impossible the idea that a subject will ever know and understand herself, her actions, her motives, her experiences, and her feelings fully. Consciousness can be understood as a form of self-deception or defence. The unconscious poses a barrier to perception. The ego is formed through psychical defences such as denial, disavowal, and resistance, but also from the ego’s capacity to love. The notion of a split subject unable to truly know herself and never quite in control of herself also has wider repercussions for a conception of knowledge. If the subject cannot know herself, how can she ever know anything else with certainty?

What then does ontological uncertainty do to the self’s relation to knowledge? Feminist theories of knowledge have tended to either focus on the liberatory potential of knowledge for women and its potential to end women’s suffering, or, following Foucault, have shown interest in how normative discourses and knowledges produce, construct, and subordinate the subject. Feminist theorists interested in psychoanalysis, such as Butler (1997) and Martin (1996), have questioned this line of inquiry. They have sought to extend Foucault’s work by asking how exactly the subject becomes

attached or comes to accept the discourses and knowledge that subject herself. Butler, as already mentioned in the previous chapter, suggests that the human subject has no option but to attach to knowledge, and yet, this attachment is always also part of her subjection. Like the child needs to love and attach itself to the people that raise her in order to exist and survive, the subject needs to attach herself to the discourses that allow her existence in the social. Yet, according to Butler (1997), this attachment is always ambivalent.

Granted this ambivalence, or that attachment to knowledge and to others is both the prerequisite for a social existence and the site of the subject's subjection, we need to ask how this ambivalence is played out when students learn about the self and/from others. This question returns us to the beginning of this chapter and the question of the relationship of the student to the curriculum. On the one hand, the transformation of self requires the students' attachment to the material, and yet, what kind of attachment students will make is not predictable as it is shaped not only by the material itself but also by the psychic dynamics that the student brings to the curriculum. Psychoanalytic theory allows us to consider these dynamics more fully.

### **Considering Identification Psychoanalytically**

Psychoanalytic theory understands identity not as preceding identification but instead identity is made from the identifications of the subject. Similarly, the subject's attachment to knowledge is not only made from her identity but from her ambivalences, desires, repressions, and so on. In Diana Fuss's (1995: 2) words: "every identity is

actually an identification come to light.” Considering identity as formed through processes of identification allows for a less oppositional understanding of self and other and breaks down the too rigid division between the psychical and the social world. Instead, we can appreciate more fully how the realms of the self and other as well as the psychical and the social are interrelated. In turn, an engagement with dynamics of identification might help us to understand how the subject negotiates the demands made upon her as well as the demands the subject brings to bear upon education and knowledge. Identification also speaks to the complex role that others play in the making of the self and demonstrates that identity is founded upon difference. In the following, I focus on the injunctions that bear down on the subject, the tension between the demands and desires of the individual and the social, as well as the tension between assimilation and resistance to social norms. A psychoanalytic engagement with questions of identification might help us to understand why identities are neither just restrictive nor liberatory but instead pose both a problem for the subject as well as offer a much longed for refuge. Moreover, the idea of identification preceding identity once more questions the assumption that undergirds much feminist learning that social identities wholly correspond to identifications. Instead, an engagement with the complex processes of identification opens our view to the gaps, fissures, incongruities that exist between our socially ascribed, personally enacted, and politically embraced identities on the one hand and our psychic and emotional identifications on the other.

Psychoanalytically, the subject is produced and shaped through processes of identification. Yet, given the complexity of identification, the political and social

identities that we embrace, while they suggest something about our attachments, cannot be the totality of subjectivity. LaPlanche and Pontalis (1973) describe identification as “the process whereby a subject assimilates an aspect, property, or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified” (205). Identification is a central term in psychoanalysis because it is the very process by which the subject comes into being. Moreover, the subject not only comes into being but also is changed continuously through processes of identification. Identification, thus, for Freud is not just *one* among many but is *the* central process by which the subject is constituted. It is through identification that the subject takes on aspects and attributes of others such as gestures, facial expressions, and behaviours but also ideas and values and assimilates these aspects of the object into the self. LaPlanche and Pontalis distinguish the two different directions of identification: to identify *as* and to identify *with*. We already encountered this distinction by way of Sedgwick (1991). The psychoanalytic understanding of identification seems to focus particularly on the “intimate dissonances” that Sedgwick found missing in the feminist project of identification. For psychoanalysis, to identify *with* is the process by which an individual begins to understand herself as similar to somebody else. While Freud uses both understandings of identification, to identify *with* is his primary concern.

LaPlanche and Pontalis (1973) offer us a useful overview of the various ways in which Freud has conceptualized identification as central to subject constitution. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900) describes identification as a kind of

hysterical contagion that exceeds mere imitation but makes possible the speculation that his patients assimilate the suffering of others. Hysterics, so Freud writes, are able

to express in their symptoms not only their own experiences but those of a large number of other people; [hysterical identification] enables them . . . to suffer on behalf of a whole crowd of people and to act all the parts in a play single-handed. Hysterics . . . imitate any symptoms in other people that may have struck their attention. (Freud 1900: 149)

Later he adds the important suggestion that “this identification is not simple imitation but *assimilation* . . .: it expresses a resemblance and is derived from a common element which remains in the unconscious” (Freud 1900: 319). This common element is a phantasy.

In “On Narcissism,” Freud (1914) introduces the notion of historicity of identification. He explains that the object is chosen on the model of the subject’s earlier loves (such as parents or other people around her). This is further elaborated in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), where identification is understood as a substitution for a lost love. The subject takes the lost love object in and this becomes the model of its future identifications, i.e. the subject is made through lost or impossible loves and is a relic of those incorporated lost/impossible loves. Identification understood as the process of substitution of past love, points again to the historicity of identification. This lets Elin Diamond conclude that we need “to conceptualize a subject in the process of identification . . . [as always engaged], however, consciously, with the history of her identifications, which is at least partly the history of her psychic life with others” (Diamond 1992: 396). This little overview offers us some insight into why identification is hazardous: When one searches for

similarity, one is enacting anxieties of loss. We will meet this dynamic again in the next chapter.

With this overview, we can also further appreciate the differences between the psychoanalytic understanding of identification as an unconscious process and the notion of a chosen political identification that has been central to feminist thought and pedagogy. The processes that Freud describes are different because for him identification is an unconscious process that is based in phantasies. The notion of unconscious identification means that the attachments and their introjections that transform and change the ego, and which shape subsequent processes of identification, are themselves not easily accessible to the subject herself. Nor can the subject exert any steady control or influence over them. This returns us to Butler (1997), discussed earlier, who led us to a similar conclusion. Given that we are necessarily attached to that which subjects us, purely liberatory education becomes unthinkable. But it also means that because of the partial, ambivalent, and contradictory quality of our identifications, we are never completely subjected. For women's studies, this means that not only are students not completely subjected by dominant discourses and practices but also that teaching and learning within women's studies has to grapple with ambivalent attachments to emancipatory discourses, as well as with the instability of the learning subject. Moreover, and I will return to this question toward the end of this chapter, this also demands we ask how we think about the ambivalent attachments that students display in teaching and learning about and from social differences. This question needs to be considered in the context of the field's tendency to marginalize

and subsume differences under the categories of woman and gender, while bearing in mind that making social differences central is a compensatory gesture that continuously harks back to the field's history of marginalization and exclusion.

The suggestion that identifications are inaccessible and unconscious, structured by earlier love relations, which are repeated over and over again, linked to both the trauma of loss and the fact that psychically no love is ever completely lost, has profound ramifications for the subject's identity. Identity becomes quite incoherent, unstable, and continuously changing. Indeed, if identity follows from psychical identification, identity also contains the repetition of traces of love, of attachments made, lost, and refound. Identity then is the outcome of both loss as well as love, or, at the least a way to preserve impossible attachments and desires. Thus, the subject's identity may or may not exceed her body and may or may not be incongruent with the identity assigned to her socially. Another way to think about identity, as made from repetition, love, and trauma, returns us to the earlier parts of this study and asks us to consider if and how these dynamics may also be played out in women's studies debates and tensions. How are impossible attachments and desires preserved and repeated in the conflicts and debates that are lived within women's studies?

This view of identity is distinctly different from a sociological understanding. The incoherence of identity in the psychoanalytic view is not linked to the hybrid nature of all our identities or the fact that we have to negotiate multiple identity categories all at once. Psychoanalytic views of identity resonate with trauma and loss: of past and impossible loves and with the longing for what is lost. This also means,

however, that to identify with others, when understood psychoanalytically, is neither an expression of empathy nor of an understanding of the suffering of others. We will encounter this dynamic again in the next chapter. Identification is not altruistic. Instead, it is quite aggressive in its quality because it is a projection of the self and her suffering onto others. In some ways, identification is also deeply self-centred, prone to misreading, and in phantasy capable of annihilating the other because the other is replaced by the self and her suffering. Identity both harks back to and is interrupted by the processes of identification. Identification reaches back and repeats aspects of past relationships and loves. Thus, the ego is – as Freud writes in “The Ego and the Id” (1923: 29) – “a precipitate of abandoned object choices and . . . contains the history of those object choices.”

This formation of the subject, if we follow psychoanalytic theory, works through the other. It is, however, not just the engagement with the other that is at stake in identity. The subject is constituted both through desire or love for the other and the impossibility of that desire. Identity thus resonates with both the failure/impossibility of love and the demands that social norms place upon the subject. Social norms prohibit certain loves. Identity emerges as a form of mourning or a melancholic response to the loves that are socially prohibited or made impossible (Butler 1997). Identity understood, at least in part, as wavering between melancholia and mourning, also suggests that while the subject might adhere to social norms, a psychic remainder of her desire is kept alive. These dynamics are important when we try to study how



discourses of social differences are engaged and lived by students and faculty in women's studies.

The suggestion that norms participate in the making of the subject is quite different, though, from an understanding of the subject as purely the result of assimilation to outside demands. A psychoanalytic account speaks to the conflict that ensues when prohibitive social norms meet the subject, her desires, and attachments. Social norms describe who may love whom and, by extension, social norms are formative of social identities by way of prohibition. This formative process, though, is very unruly and prone to failure. A prime example here is the formation of gender identity. Butler (1997) describes heterosexual masculinity in its quality as melancholic and shot through with disavowal: the man becomes the man who he claims to never have loved. Similar dynamics are formative of racial, racialized, and racist identities. Morrison (1992) argues that white American identity is formed through the simultaneous centrality and disavowal of African-Americans. One question that emerges is: what is feminist identity made from?

Identity, we know, echoes trauma and the repression demanded of the subject for the sake of being socially intelligible. Identity is formed through the complex processes of identification, shaped by love and loss. This mapping of identity is much more unruly than social and political discourses of identity politics and the politics of differences would have it.

### **Identification: Pedagogies and Politics in Crisis?**

Given how volatile, unpredictable, and out of reach of the conscious processes of identifications are, questions have been raised as to whether it is wise or viable to ground a politics and a pedagogy in them (Fuss 1995; Pellegrini 1996). Feminism – and other social movements invested in social identities – clearly trusted in the capacity of the subject to identify with previously abjected others and insisted on the political and pedagogical benefits of identification. As already discussed in this chapter, this pedagogical reliance is grounded in an understanding of identification as a rational choice well within the reach of the will and decision-making power of the subject. This is another version of standpoint theory. The feminist investment in identification as a political strategy was based in a belief in the empathic and ultimately empowering quality of identificatory processes, when guided by knowledges of recognizing injustice and overcoming suffering.

By the 1990s, however, feminist theorists interested in the psychoanalytic dimension of identification were much less optimistic about the politically and socially transformative powers of pedagogies and politics based in identification. We already encountered Sedgwick's (1991: 62) concern with the conflation of *identification with/as*, which is frequently invoked as the very foundation of feminism. We met this demand earlier when differences in social, political, and theoretical attachments were blamed for ruining women's studies. Also feminist theorists and cultural studies scholars like Rey Chow, Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, and Ann Pellegrini, to name a few, begin to highlight the dangers associated with politics or pedagogies based upon

identification. These theorists discuss extensively the political effects of subjugation that are part of the psychic events of identification, especially its appropriative powers and its assimilative demands. Their critical discussions challenge, in important yet also ultimately limiting ways, the popular belief that identification is a way to foster social and political bonding between women who are socially located in different ways. These authors link identifying with an other to an imperialist gesture and consequently denounce identification as an “appropriation in the guise of an embrace” (Sommer cited in Fuss, 1995: 9). The argument is that the dangers of identification involved in the political and academic engagement with others are too great. In the following, I will outline these theorists’ objections before I elaborate the tensions that their claims raise.

One central charge brought forth against politics and pedagogies based upon identification is grounded in the violence that is a necessary part of identification, for example, in the ways that the self comes to displace the other it claims to identify with (Chow 1993). Diamond (1992: 390) names this “the Violence of ‘We.’” She argues that the self might find herself becoming the other through identification and thus feel destabilized. Diamond is, however, not only concerned with the destabilizing effects that identification has on the self. Indeed, she finds more frightening the appropriative side of identification where the other becomes an extension of the self, thereby producing a violent and exclusive ‘we’ that eliminates any difference between the self and the other, and in the process loses sight of any historical, political, and power contingencies that might differentiate the self from the other. The problem with this critique of identification is that it seems to return us again to a sociological view of

identification, by suggesting that individuals can choose to identify or not. But the psychoanalytic observations offered to us by Freud, Butler, Martin, and Felman point out that identification is not voluntary or within the control of the individual.

Identification can neither be avoided nor fully controlled because it is by way of identification that the subject not only reads and engages the world and others but also becomes subject. The view offered by Diamond and Fuss seems to chastise the unconscious for her politically unconscious attachments.

Pellegrini (1996) speaks of the “necessary failure of identification” because identification is “narcissistic recognition of the same in the other and aggressive disavowal of the other in the same” (34). She also argues that identification can function as a ruse of transgressive and socially impossible desires (56). Similarly, Fuss (1995) concludes that psychoanalytically “every identification involves a degree of symbolic violence, a measure of temporary mastery and possession” (9).

Given the spectre of identification that the above authors lay out, Fuss asks how knowledge involving the other can be possible or “how can the other be brought into the domain of the knowledgeable without annihilating the other *as other* – as precisely that which cannot be known?” (4). This is a central question when we think about learning about and from differences, namely, how can learning about and from difference be more than appropriating the other for the production of self and, I would add to that, without turning the other into a spectacle of exotic otherness? However, the prior question is can identifications and their aggressive underside be avoided? Can the learner make an attachment to others without losing herself and without assimilating

the other? The assimilative demand inherent in identification is another concern of Fuss who compares it to a colonial gesture. According to Fuss, the colonial subject or racial other is demanded to identify with the colonizer and to assimilate to the values, philosophies, practices, behaviours, patterns of life etc. of the colonial force. Fuss concludes, "identification . . . is itself an imperial process, a form of violent appropriation in which the Other is deposed and assimilated into the lordly domain of the Self" (145). The dynamics that Fuss names here are reminiscent of the description of education I offered in the beginning of this chapter when I described the demands that education places upon students. This repetition raises the question: is education itself a colonial process? Is it useful to think about education as a form of colonialism?

The question that identifications raise is one that is at the heart of teaching and learning about and from social differences: How can other and self become the subjects of knowledge without becoming annihilated and assimilated in the process? The above cited authors offer us important critical reflection upon a feminist investment in identification by attending to its aggressive quality, something which is forgotten in the humanistic approach that understands identification solely in terms of empathy and as an expression of positive feelings, as does the Freudian understanding of identification that I discussed earlier. The authors cited here insist upon the complexity of psychological responses, which includes violence, aggression, as well as the suppression of difference. Thus, they allow us to lift the repression or the prohibition against speaking the negativity of identification. Yet, at the same time the authors seem to produce

another form of conflation. Earlier, feminists conceptualized identification solely as a social response, made from rational and political consideration, and refused any suggestion of a psychic dimension. Recently, Diamond, Fuss, and Pellegrini, while alluding to the violence at stake in identification, and spoiling it as viable strategy for social change, seem to forget that these violences are psychic responses rather than social enactments.

We must remember that when we think about identification as the attachment to knowledge and objects, we are in the realm of phantasy. Here, even the wish for the annihilation of the other in the process of learning is an act of psychic not social aggression, at least initially. Though, of course, as some of the above cited examples have shown, psychic annihilation – especially when repressed – may lead to social annihilation. Yet, we are also faced with the dilemma of insight, namely psychic aggression, which we fear to be also at stake in social aggression, is central to learning, if we understand learning as made from both love and hate. The question then is perhaps not so much about how to avoid the aggression at stake in learning, which is what early feminists such as Rich unsuccessfully attempted, but about how we can survive the kinds of psychic dilemmas inherent in learning.

For a pedagogic engagement with identification to happen, we have to understand that the classroom is a different site than for example the workplace, the legislature, or courts of law. The classroom is a place where mistakes must be tolerated. This approach to the classroom means that no classroom is “safe,” neither for the learner, whose self risks being shattered by an engagement with new knowledge nor for

the object of knowledge, at risk of being eradicated in the process of learning. This notion of learning as risking self knowledge returns us to the suggestions offered earlier by Felman, Martin, and Morrison. Felman lent support to the notion that learning works through crisis. Morrison suggested that learning requires an encounter with strangeness. And Martin offered us both the view that the structure of our attachments are made from our libidinal histories and afforded us with an example of how one can hold onto the ambivalence of love and hate in learning. All of these writers seem quite capable of holding onto the qualities of identification as partial, ambivalent, and contradictory. This distinguishes them from, for example, Fuss. While Fuss pays critical attention to the identificatory violence, and thus offers a useful antidote to the uncritical investment in identification as a political and educational strategy for dealing with differences, she does not differentiate sufficiently between psychic and social violence. The mistaken assumption is that identification works neatly in accordance with existing social and political structures of power rather than also against them, alongside of them, or even in ignorance of them. In Fuss' neat structure, the very qualities of identification that LaPlanche and Pontalis (1973) bring to our attention seem lost – namely, that identification is always partial, contradictory, and ambivalent.

With further consideration, it also seems that the assimilative and appropriative modes of identification and the differences between them, which Fuss, Pellegrini, and others bring to our attention, are not so clearly distinguishable. Instead, they are in flux or constantly interacting with each other and perhaps even counterbalance each other's force. What these authors name as the “colonial” demand to identify, for example,

carries in itself also the risk of inciting violence against the “colonizer” in return. The demand “identify with me” also is a near guarantee that the colonizer or the self will become the object of violent, hostile, and aggressive appropriation by the other in return.

The insight that learning about and from others might always entail forms of violence, or at least aggression, which might seem to endanger both the learning subject and its object, returns us to the earlier discussions on the crisis in learning. In the beginning chapters of this study, I resisted the notion that differences produce a crisis for the field of women’s studies. Now, I return to the notion of crisis to argue that it is central to learning and (feminist) education. The crisis, however, that is at stake in this chapter is not a crisis made from disagreeing points of view but is an affect within the learner. Granted that the very psychical processes that allow us to learn also make the subject vulnerable to the pain of learning, we need to reconsider the mandate of women’s studies, specifically the mandate that feminist learning is liberatory and will empower students. It seems now that we can neither insist upon nor refuse identification, since these attachments are what knowledge is about. But we also cannot promise any longer that this process will be painless or even liberating, at least not in the time in which the learner confronts otherness. We even need to reconsider the very claim of learners that new knowledge is felt to be liberating. Perhaps this claim is another defence strategy against considering our own implication in our learning.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The notion that a complete embrace of knowledge might be a defence mechanism is a speculation on my part, derived from the list of possible defensive responses that Laub (1992) provides. The defensive quality of a complete embrace of knowledge lies in the fact that the learner can mimic knowledge here



I think, however, that learners cannot be blamed for their identifications and appropriations because, for one, psychoanalysis shows us that appropriation is part of the identificatory process itself and not the choice of the individual. Psychoanalysis tells us that reading and learning necessarily work through identification, and thus might entail appropriative and assimilative demands on part of the subject, the learner.<sup>37</sup> Yet, part of the mandate of a feminist pedagogy that takes seriously the psychic dimensions of identification is to critically engage and to question the exclusionary and violating effects of this process as well as to work with students through them, to help us all understand the aggressions at stake here and to help us survive them. This returns us both to Lather's (1991) description of a deconstructive pedagogy, Pitt's (1995: 286-311) "Pedagogy of Psychoanalytic Listening," and what Elisabeth Ellsworth (1997: 70-73) calls "Teaching through the Other." What these models share is that students are encouraged to be curious and attentive to their own processes of learning, to how they attach to knowledge and representations, to what kinds of identifications and interpretations they make in the process, and to how crises are lived and survived in the process. This is very different from either a prohibitive or affirmative approach to identification. Understanding the risk that identification poses for the studying subject (the risk to shatter and lose the coherence of self) and the subject studied (appropriation and assimilative demands directed at her) means not that

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without having to work through the complications of her own implication and without working through the difference between herself and knowledge. See also Pitt (1996).

<sup>37</sup> This also suggests that the demand at stake in learning is not just a demand made on the student, but that the student also makes demands on the others involved in learning: the teacher, the text, the subjects studied, and her fellow learners.

identification should be stopped or avoided but that we need to reflect upon the processes by which we learn. However, as the following chapter will show, there are also limits imposed upon what the subject can know about her own learning.

## **Chapter 6**

### ***Questions of Learning: Narrating Difference – Enacting Sameness?***

Initially when I conceived of this chapter, I was interested in understanding how those committed to women's studies experience their own learning concerning race and sexuality. I was particularly interested in the relationship between the changing discourses of race and sexuality, the continued lack of extended address of social differences in women's studies teaching, and the ways that those attached to the field negotiate the tensions that differences have come to represent. In the process of studying these questions – as the previous chapters demonstrate – the understanding of social differences in this study changed dramatically. Rather than thinking about sexuality and race as stable sociological categories and signifiers of identity, I became more interested in the fluid relations that they represent as modes of difference. This is particularly the case when identification rather than identity is considered.

My shift in understanding differences is also related to my interest in psychoanalysis, which tells us that the content and the dynamic of differences are not the same. Given the dynamic between the conscious and the unconscious, as discussed in earlier chapters, we must assume a difference between the manifest content of the narrative and the psychical meaning that it holds for the individual. The latter is expressed indirectly within the former, for example by way of exaggerating or minimizing differences. We also already acknowledged that differences are constitutive not only of knowledge but also of the self, who makes herself through phantasies of

(the otherness of) others. What is at stake in the stories that participants offer of their experiences of teaching and learning in women's studies is also a story of the self and the worry about incoherence. By way of the stories that we tell about ourselves, we seek to produce a coherent identity and narratives of self are part of our identity formation (Pitt 1995). However, the narratives that participants tell also exceed their meaning. The stories of encounters with differences are not unlike dreams and are similarly structured by both manifest and latent dynamics and conflicts. The manifest content, or the story line, of conflicts between subjects and ideas is already an articulation, interpretation, and symbolization of the latent dynamics and conflicts within the subject.

Asking participants to reflect upon their experiences of teaching and learning about and from social differences thus invites narratives of meaning making made from the encounter not only with differences on the outside but also with differences within. The narratives told in the interviews are the attempts of the subject to make meaning from the often-conflictual encounters between ideas and affect. The stories that participants tell of how they experience differences within women's studies draw upon discursive repertoires such as theories, beliefs, and convictions to tell us something else that escapes representation, namely how conflicts are lived psychically. Thus, the explanations and theories offered are an expression of something else that both seeks and escapes articulation. The narratives of experiences are interpretations that symbolize something for the narrator that exceeds her own knowledge. One way to think of the manifest story is as a decoy, an alibi, or a blinder that conceals the latent

(or real) grievances of the individual. The latent content is resonant of other and earlier scenes of learning, of love and loss that education cannot master. In the previous chapter, I cited Martin (1996), for example, as speaking eloquently to how earlier love experiences structure learning.

Learning understood as attachment to knowledge and centrally structured by the ambivalence of love and hate, desire and anxiety, the wish for coherence, and the fear of subjection was already discussed in the previous chapter. We will find these dynamics also structure the narratives of differences. Narratives of attachment thus contain both conscious and unconscious dynamics; indeed, we might find that narratives of experiences offer us stories in which the affective dynamic of attachment collides with the demands that ideas and theories make upon the subject. Here we meet another crisis of representation. In Chapter 4, the crisis of representation was related to the performative or productive quality of knowledge and the fact that representations are implicated in what they merely claim to describe. In this chapter, representation is in crisis due to the interplay of conscious and unconscious dynamics in the construction of a narrative of experience and because these narrative representations of experience are “made from an argument between the wish for coherence and the anxiety over what coherence excludes” (Pitt and Britzman, 2000: 1).

Thus, in the work with interviews, we encounter a series of tensions, for example, between the manifest and latent content, between new and old ideas, between thought and affect, and between demands and desires. These tensions make the work with interviews so valuable, because, different from the more disciplined written

narrative, the spoken word surprises the speaker. It is in the spoken text that these tensions and the struggles between them are most readily encountered.

**Postmodern Methodologies: “Research in Ruins”<sup>38</sup>**

Given the interests outlined above, my research works both within and against dominant feminist research postulates. I seek to bring into representation something often excluded from view. By considering unconscious dynamics, I seek to represent the approximations of psychical conflicts and dynamics of difference within the subject, now brought to bear upon an engagement with social differences between subjects. My study begins, however, also from a point of view that is entirely sceptical of representations, particularly of an investment in representations as liberatory devices. Instead, as outlined in previous chapters, my research is premised upon the understanding that any representation of the subject – even those produced within feminism, women’s studies, and feminist research – is always already enmeshed in strategies of normalization and the exorbitant production of the subject at stake. My study, hence, engages the crisis of representation that postmodern theories have identified (Fontana 1994; Lather 1991). By doing so, my study is also sceptical of the desire for recognition, or for making “invisible populations visible, allowing the silenced to speak” (Duggan 1998: 9), that underlies, for example, standpoint epistemology. This desire for recognition and visibility in and through representation also returns us to the field of women’s studies and its inaugural claim to represent lost

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<sup>38</sup> I borrow this conceptualization from Lather (1997).

or forgotten voices. Contrary to finding solace in the liberatory work of representational strategies, my study takes seriously the perils of the representational, namely, that representations function as techniques of normalization and that their performative effects exceed intention. This scepticism relates to both the representations that I produce in my readings of the interviews and also to the representations offered within the stories of learning told by my participants.

One way to work this crisis of representation is to study precisely the performative work of knowledge and its normalizing effects, and to study representations for how they participate in normalizing regimes (Butler 1993; 1994b; Foucault 1977b; 1977c; 1990; Sedgwick 1994). This is what the first part of my dissertation seeks to accomplish. In the first four chapters, I analysed self-representations of women's studies as sites from where the field is produced discursively and I traced how these productions invoke, draw upon, subscribe to, and participate in the normalization of social differences. In this chapter and in the work with interviews, I seek to explore problems of representations in a different register. I study representations of psychical dynamics and conflicts at stake in the learning of women's studies, particularly when students and teachers affiliate with and invest in bodies of knowledge and knowledge of bodies. Here the normative is not located outside of the subject but within, for example, in the desire of the subject to produce a coherent self by way of telling stories about encounters with others and otherness.

My study is informed by recent debates in postmodern ethnographic research. Although not an ethnographic project, the debates within postmodern ethnography are

relevant to my thinking in that they wrestle with questions of how to imagine research in post-foundational and post-representational times, when all representations are understood as flawed, partial, ruined, and perhaps even dangerous (Lather 1997). Making acute postmodern critiques of representational strategies, these debates seek to re-imagine the research process by bringing into critical focus the very role of research and “truth” seeking more broadly (Dickens and Fontana 1994; Fontana 1994; Lather 1991; 1997; Scheurich 1997; Visweswaran 1994). Like standpoint methodologies, postmodern ethnography encourages awareness of research practices. In contrast to standpoint, it also understands the limits of such “awareness.” Postmodern ethnography scrutinizes the role of the researcher as author differently, experiments with new practices of reporting findings, and revisits questions of validity (Fontana 1994; Lather 1991; 1997; Scheurich 1997). In short, postmodern ethnographic research is self-reflexive and looks again and anew at the very practices of knowledge production, not to set up a superior practice but to understand the inherent failure of this process. Playing on the “post” in postmodernism and poststructuralism, some have called this the “post-approach” to research or “post-scholarship.” Both of these terms signal “that all that research can ever be is a *ruin* – ruined from the start because it appeals to foundations that we cannot rely on, assumptions that we dare not make . . . [And] truths [that] are in tatters” (McWilliam et al. n. d.: 10). Post-scholarship takes into consideration the conditions of post-foundationality, the fact that knowledge, certainty, and truth have become problematic.<sup>39</sup> As a practice, it is hyper-attentive to its own

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<sup>39</sup> See for example the special issue of *Qualitative Studies of Education* 10:3, especially Lather (1997),



normative productions and to the normalizing effects of its strategies of meaning making.

A central thinker in these debates is Patti Lather who describes, “working the ruins of knowledge” and the self-reflexive turn in research methodologies in the following way:

To situate inquiry as a ruin/rune is to foreground the limits and necessary misfirings of a project, problematizing the researcher as ‘the one who knows.’ Placed outside of mastery and victory narratives, inquiry is a kind of self-wounding laboratory for discovering the rules by which truth is produced. Here we attempt to be accountable to complexity. Thinking the limit becomes our task and much opens up in terms of ways to proceed for those who know both too much and too little. (Lather 1997: 300)

Psychoanalysis is a wonderful example of a practice of knowledge that “knows both too much and too little.” Like other postfoundational practices, it questions the role of the researcher and her function as author(ity). For psychoanalysis, the authority of the researcher is questioned by way of the unconscious because knowledge is not something that can be mastered as it exceeds the intentions of the subject.

Postfoundational ethnography highlights that knowledge is made somewhere and by somebody. Thus, what I present here as “findings” are the product of my interpretation and my desire. My findings produce knowledge filtered through my eyes, my theoretical affinities, my preoccupations, and the limits of my own understanding. One strategy to account for my partialities as the researcher – here understood as both formed from attachment and structured by limits – is to make myself “public” and to make visible my role as the researcher, to make apparent that my findings are

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Leach (1997), McCoy (1997), Pillow (1997), St. Pierre (1997a; 1997b) as well as McWilliam (n. d.).

interpretations rather than a truthful representation (Fontana 1994: 213). And, returning to the previous chapter, interpretations are always shot through with dynamics of identification.

Practices of accountability, of making the author public, and of acknowledging the limits of knowledge are a double-edged sword for the beginning researcher who is still in the process of establishing her authority and the validity of her claims. To publicly declare the limitations of her findings and the overall tentative quality of her claims feels strange in the context of a dissertation, the purpose of which, as a qualifying work, is to establish and lay claim to voice, authority, and expertise – at least performatively. This dilemma is, of course, reminiscent of the profound chasm that divides standpoint from postmodern feminists, which I discussed in Chapter 4. My worries here echo the argument with which many feminists have rejected postmodernism. They argued that women, having been denied subject status for so long, still need to lay claim to authority, agency, and subjecthood rather than refuse and deconstruct it. I do experience a similar desire in response to the demand of post-scholarship to de-authorize my research. Yet, I also have a deep attachment to the postmodern troubling of the stable knowing subject and, more broadly, the desire for mastery, precisely because it emphasises incoherence, ambivalence, uncertainty, and provisionality – all of which are also the affects of the beginning researcher, and, as I argued in the last chapter, of any learner. At the same time, to think of these kinds of ambivalences and uncertainties as exclusively the property of the beginning researcher would reduce complex attachments and contradictory desires to lack of experience

alone. Instead, I understand it as the task of the researcher to make productive the tensions between her ambivalent desires, for example for mastery, authorship, and authority, and for the deconstruction of normalizing regimes that the former effect.

Questions of authority and power have been raised frequently in relationship to the interview process itself, both by standpoint and postmodern methodologies. My approach to the complex web of authority and power, particularly in the context of interviewer-interviewee relationship is to emphasise a notion of reading practices. By this I mean that the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is comparable to that of text and reader, which returns us to a second meaning of the already mentioned author-function, one that postmodern ethnography considers. The triangular relationship between interviewer, interviewee, and data here is not structured by simple unequal power dynamics. Instead, the text that the reader reads is both produced by the author and the reader's reading practices. Like the reader, the interviewee is not simply trapped in an unequal relationship where the interviewer has power and the interviewee does not. Interviewees, like readers, do not just go along with the research process but have their own ways to resist or negotiate the demands made upon them by the researcher since they are active participants in the process.<sup>40</sup>

What I offer as a writer and researcher are interpretations or readings of the interpretations that participants offer of their encounters with social differences within women's studies. All readings are interlaced with dynamics of identification, negation,

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<sup>40</sup> See Visweswaran (1994: 60-72) for an intriguing story of refusal and subversion in the interview process by one of her participants.

and ambivalence. Part of my role as a researcher is to account for those dynamics, both within the readings that the participants offer and within my readings of their readings. Similarly, my readers will need to negotiate reading this text, will need to work through their own processes of identification, resistance, and repression to account for their readings. This is the work of reading practices. It is to account for the dynamics at stake in the production of readings upon readings. This also brings us back to Haraway (1991) and Morrison (1994), invoked earlier, who urge us to consider accountability for our interpretations. Yet, we also have to acknowledge the limitations of such accountability, given that we read through our unconscious, which is another reminder of the crisis of representation.

Understanding reading practices as at the heart of my interviews, on the part of the participants, me, as well as the readers of this text, is not about forfeiting power, since that is impossible – as, for example, Kamala Visweswaran (1994: 79) points out. She suggests, “it is this level of the negotiation of impossibility that deconstructive ethnography adopts as method.” The concept of reading practices tries to confront what is at stake in one’s interpretation and to “emphasize not what we know, but how we think we know” and “to emphasize how we think we know what we know is neither transparent nor innocent” (Visweswaran 1994: 80). Adding to this complexity of the social relations at play in the interviews is the fact that only parts of the interaction are decipherable, since reading happens both in the realm of the conscious and the unconscious, and the unconscious can only be read indirectly through interpretations of the symptoms.

Another way that discussions of “post-scholarship” help us make sense of these complications is by acknowledging the complexities of language, both within the interview process itself and in the process of writing about the interviews. Arguing for the indeterminability of language and meaning and its contingency to individuals, place, and time adds to the fact that meaning is “contextually grounded, unstable, ambiguous, and subject to endless reinterpretation” (Mishler quoted in Scheurich, 1997: 62). The “reality” of the interview itself is ambivalent and ultimately indescribable: it captures a particular moment that is shaped not only by what is actually said. What is said is always shaped also by what is not said, due to lack of words, due to the fact that the participants might be thinking about one thing and yet say something else. They might say what they ought to say, and, thus, the interview might reflect censored statements. Similarly, the interviewer might say or ask one thing, but desire to say, ask, or write something else (Scheurich 1997).

Given this complexity of reading practices, my readings do not lay claim to an adequate description of reality: of women’s studies or of the participants’ experiences and knowledges. Such a claim would be incongruous with the methodology and epistemology outlined above. My research does not claim to bring to light some hidden truth about either women’s studies, the participants’ experiences, how differences are engaged by women’s studies practitioners, or the psychical make up of individuals. A study of reading practices suggests that at stake are not the inadequacies of the individual nor the ideological positions that they embrace or refuse but how individuals engage and wrestle with conflicts within the field. Even though I work with four

individual interviews and four specific histories of learning, my interest does not lie with the individual and her psychic make up. Instead I wish to engage and attend to complications seldom considered that are central to the learning about and from self and others.

I am interested in beginning to explore the affective domain of knowledge, particularly of knowledge that is difficult and conflictual. Thus in my reading of the interview transcripts, I choose passages that seem to offer insight into how conflicts in learning and teaching, now associated with social differences in women's studies, are negotiated and lived by the individual and what kinds of learning positions open up in the interaction of structure and experience.

### **The Interviews**

Between February 1998 and May 1999, I conducted nine interviews with graduate students (both M.A. and Ph.D.) and faculty in women's studies at a large university in Canada. The interviews were structured loosely by a set of questions that I invited participants to consider.<sup>41</sup> These questions tried to understand how the participants came to women's studies, how they encountered discussions and theories that address issues of race and sexuality, and how they made meaning of encounters in classrooms and texts.<sup>42</sup> Each interview lasted between one and two hours.

Student participants were recruited through announcements on the student-run electronic mail discussion list. Some who participated in the study mentioned as their

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<sup>41</sup> See appendix.

<sup>42</sup> See Seidman (1991) for this approach to in-depth interviews.

motivation that these topics were insufficiently addressed in their programme of study. Other participants felt they wanted some time and conversation to think through their own concerns with how women's studies addresses questions of difference, a question that had emerged as a contentious issue not only within the student population but also between students and faculty. I approached individual faculty members because I knew them or because they were closely involved in the women's studies programme. With the interviews, I do not aim at being representational or making claims about broader populations. Instead, I am interested in exploring and drawing out dynamics that emerge within conversations to give us a sense of the affective landscape in which students and faculty seek to make meaning of their encounters with differences in women's studies. This chapter is another kind of text-work. It works with transcripts of conversations about experiences and is a way to begin thinking about how ideas are lived both socially and psychically.

As already outlined above, initially in my research, I was particularly interested in questions of attachment to ideas. I wanted to understand further how those committed to women's studies negotiate the force of ideas, particularly ideas that relate to the conflictual terrain of social differences within the field; I was interested in the force of these ideas upon the subject and her sense of self and how subjects negotiate this psychically. In the process of working with the transcripts, something else, less structured, happened. I found that I could only write about these interviews through my own attachments, questions, preoccupations, and concerns. Narratives emerged in the process of writing about the interviews. What I present here are my own attempts at

coherence in the face of the incoherence of interviews. The question that this raises concerns the normalizing force of my interpretations: what is the force of my desires, for example, for understanding, for good and bad answers, for intelligibility? How do these affect the texts that I produce?

The interpretations I offer in this chapter draw upon theories of knowledge and learning developed within contemporary psychoanalytic theory. I try to understand how people in women's studies learn what has been called "difficult knowledge." I already gestured toward this term and its dual meanings earlier. On the one hand, "difficult knowledge" signals the history of the field being troubled by the dynamics of race and sexuality, since these disrupt what seemed to some commentators as a prior "feminist consensus" (Stimpson 1988). On the other hand, difficult knowledge, as termed by Britzman (1998), refers to the demands that knowledge places on the learner, such as the demand to rethink herself and to consider her implication in knowledge and the crisis at the heart of learning.

In reading the interview transcripts, I focus on how race and sexuality figure in the interviews and what kinds of associations are made with them. Moreover, I locate these associations in the context of how individuals describe their relationship to women's studies and particularly their history within the field and their histories of learning. One of my assumptions is that of a relationship among the history of one's own learning, one's theories of teaching and learning, and the theories of self and differences to which one is attached. I try to understand this relationship further by looking at the associations offered when differences are invoked: what do differences



do; how do participants configure race and sexuality; what do differences mean for them; what do they stand in for; what do they come to signify; how do they function; what do they produce; and, what are their distinguishing features? I also asked: how are discourses of difference mobilized and with what effect for the self?

The difficulty with trying to read narratives of learning by attending to the psychological conflicts that they represent is that the conflicts at stake may be very old and located within earlier experiences of love and conflict that reside outside the scope of this study. All we can seek to understand is that something more is at stake in the tension over differences in women's studies. To work from this premise seems productive because it allows for a different understanding of the conflicts. Difference is no longer exclusively between individuals but also within them. We also already acknowledged that differences are constitutive not only of knowledge but also of the self, which has to make herself and her phantasy of self through phantasies of the otherness of others. Thus, what is at stake in these stories is always a story of the self and her worry about her own incoherence. This insight returns us to the notion of performativity addressed earlier and furthers our understanding of the performative self, made from attachments to ideas, and yet bothered by ideas, in need of constant repetition of herself, and worried about falling apart. The self thus emerges as a citational practice, in Butler's (1993) sense, that is repeated compulsively in the stories it tells.

Out of the nine interviews that I conducted with faculty and graduate students in women's studies, I choose four to work with closely. The interviews I chose to work

with for this study seem to offer the richest narratives for my purposes; they offered stories that I was able to read, write, and interpret. In working with these narratives, I also noted that two of the narratives seem to represent the most positive endorsements of women's studies, while two others articulate more critical relationships to the field. In my readings of these narratives, thus another question emerged: what is the relationship between positive views toward women's studies and the consideration of differences?

### **Interview 1 – “To just change everything, everything”**

The involvement of this faculty member in women's studies reaches back to her graduate student days in the 1970s, when she first began teaching in the field as an adjunct. During her academic career, she has been involved with both disciplinary and interdisciplinary women's studies. She offers the following definition of women's studies, which echoes the revisionist orientation discussed previously:

Women's studies for me is about focusing on women, then doing all the mind maps that go out from there, then introducing people to the range of contexts that shape the work that women have done in the past, the present, and then it all is ultimately future-related for me because it is about change. So, the mission of women's studies is, I guess, sort of education about that past, living into the present, leading into change in the future – that's the dimension to show other possibilities. The philosophers said about the encyclopaedia that they wanted to change the general way of thinking, and I think that's it for me. That's the mission of women's studies: to change the general way of thinking. For me women's studies is an Enlightenment project. For me women's studies comes from the broader Enlightenment mandate of reengaging the world, doing a critique of institutions, coming from things from a different point of view, and doing it differently. My assumption is when we do it differently we do it better, that we do it more advantageously for the next generation. So I think women's studies for me is much about making the world a better place for the world's women.

In addition to this, earlier in the interview, she articulates her interests as in “gender more broadly,” and mentions that this has meant that she has “not gotten to the race and sexuality stuff.” She attributes this absence in her scholarship to the fact that these issues are marginal to her area of research. Like in the revisionist view discussed in Chapter 1, her primary commitment is to bringing women into view. In this project, issues of race and sexuality remain marginal or secondary concerns. These issues seem as separate areas within women’s studies, perhaps comparable to other specializations such as women’s history or feminist geography. Indeed, she offers a spatial model when she describes herself as “removed from the race end of it.”

Even though her own work does not concern itself centrally with difference, this senior faculty member speaks with generosity and appreciation of students’ contribution to the knowledge development within women’s studies through their work on questions of race and sexuality:

I am always very welcoming of students who want to take on these kinds of topics . . . there are always students who are generally trying to push at issues of lesbian identity . . . – it’s very welcome. It’s where we are all learning. We are all learning from the research that you all are doing.

She welcomes the intellectual contribution to her classes and she also welcomes this work as facilitating learning and as another useful expansion of the field. She especially appreciates women’s studies’ ability to respond with flexibility to these areas of inquiry and to expand itself in this engagement. Yet, in the appreciation, she positions herself as apart from social differences: it is students who “push at” lesbian issues and it is the work that “you” – that is people other than herself – do. In the above quote, the subject

shifts from “I” to “it” to “we”: she welcomes the students who do this work actively, while the welcoming of the ideas is articulated in the passive, leaving unclear who does this. An unspecified collective “we” learns from the scholarship that an unspecified “you” produces. The speaker seems removed and not implicated.

Being removed from issues of difference makes teaching about and learning from them difficult, particularly within an epistemology in which knowledge is understood as made from and reflective upon one’s experiences. Seeing oneself as untouched by dynamics of race and not having experiences of racialization, the following difficulties emerge when teaching about race: “I can be passionate about the vilification [of women’s bodies], but I can be uncomfortable in talking about the race part of it because that’s not me, it’s them.” Race becomes the exclusive property of others, thus making it difficult for a white teacher to address. In this epistemology, as the faculty concludes, race “is very much terra incognita.”

Yet, if race has nothing to do with a white teacher, what do we make of the metaphors (such as women’s studies as a mission and a project of Enlightenment with race as its “terra incognita”) used in the narrative of women’s studies offered here that are saturated with not only racialized but also sexualized meanings? In this employment of racialized and sexualized metaphors, I suggest the production of the (white) self is at stake. In the previous chapter, I cited Todd (1998) who argued that the self is made from the phantasies of the otherness of others. A few years earlier and in the context of literary analysis, Morrison (1992) explored the presence in and function of African-Americans to the production of American whiteness in the literary

imagination. These analyses offer the insight that even if race is refused by the individual as of no importance to her self and as an exclusive property of the other, this does not mean that race is not a force for the self. Perhaps, the opposite is also the case. The insistence upon “it is not me, it’s them” is a structure of negation. This refusal belongs to the dynamic of identification.

Also, a reoccurring self-assertion may suggest that the (white) self is not as stable as it appears. Given that whiteness is not homogenous — inclusion in whiteness is a fairly recent historical attainment, for example, for the Irish, for Southern and Eastern Europeans, for Jews, and the working classes — and given the instability of the self discussed previously, this fragility may find further expression in the suggestion that race is the “terra incognita” of women’s studies. As a colonial term, terra incognita refers to the “unknown land,” yet to be “discovered,” explored, dominated, and most of all civilized. However, the unknown land also represents the fear of disorder, of getting and being lost, and thus a potential risk to the conquering force. Anne McClintock (1995) in her reading of terra incognita describes the feminization of the unknown land as one strategy of violent containment by which “the . . . loss of boundary” (24) is disavowed. Feminization is a way by which “intruders . . . ward off fears of narcissistic disorder” (24). Terra incognita is located in the margins of the known world and these margins are considered dangerous. McClintock suggests, “societies are most vulnerable at their edges, along the tattered fringes of the known world” (25). Terra incognita represents the liminal space that explorers entered when they left the chartered seas (McClintock 1995: 24). The liminal represents the site of transition, of change, and of

danger: “Danger lies in the transitional states . . . The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger” (Douglas cited in McClintock 1995: 25). Race as the “terra incognita” of women’s studies may signal a threat the self feels because of the transitions required if new and emerging discourses of difference were to be encountered and explored for their implications for both the self and one’s attachment to the field of women’s studies. Earlier, I discussed the demand that learning makes upon the learner and the unsettling and shattering effects of new knowledge upon the self. Fears of change, instability, and disorder as the effects of new knowledges, particularly knowledges that question the existing social order, self-understanding, and one’s grounds for authority, may be articulated by way of negation and the insistence that race is outside to the self, about somebody else, and located elsewhere, precisely because race may be so central to the self.

In the interview, the faculty member articulates the profound effects that new discourses of race and sexuality pose for the stability of the field, for assumptions about its subject, but also for her sense of self as a teacher. Speaking about an earlier collaboration with a colleague on a team-taught course, she suggests that making race central in that course would have meant:

to just change everything, everything, and I didn’t want to do that work. I literally did not want to do all that work – and [her colleague] must have been smoldering – so we thought, well she could do a few lectures – that would bring the race part in in a couple of lectures. But clearly that was unsatisfactory. It was unsatisfactory to her, and I was resistant because I just didn’t want to do that complete rethink for one time only. . . . It was that sense of – to do it right, you really needed to pour so much time and effort into things, when there was so much I hadn’t even read.

The suggestion that considering race would “just change everything, everything” speaks to the destabilizing effects that knowledge of race can have for a white self, particularly within an epistemological context where race is still exclusively the property of non-white people. Within such discursive context, the new discourses of social differences that demand from all of us to see our selves implicated threaten to shatter the self. However, the frank admission of this faculty member that she did not want to do the work of rethinking herself in light of these knowledges, does raise a question. This concerns the demand that underwrites my study, that the field must make difference central. The question is: can the refusal of those involved in women’s studies to be unsettled by knowledge of difference be tolerated? When knowledge of the discourses of race and sexuality threaten to shatter everything, then the strategy of this faculty member to invite students to do this work in her courses as well as her own approach, which she describes as “to sort of touch upon issues as I [am] going through – each time I’m teaching now, I’m trying to sort of integrate things more and think about it differently” is a compromise, one that allows for change to emerge without risking the stability and authority of the self.

Of all participants, this faculty member articulates the most positive relationship to women’s studies. Perhaps such positivity is grounded in, even requires a very carefully mapped journey into the uncharted seas of new discourses that may offer new and exciting opportunities for the expansion of women’s studies (“where we all learn”) but also potentially threaten the loveliness of the field and the teacher’s role as it is known.

## **Interview 2 – “I don’t want to analyse it; I am afraid I might lose it”**

This Ph.D. candidate tells two different stories of women’s studies. One is a familiar celebratory story of profound personal change through learning women’s studies. Another story speaks to the loss and the fear of loss that is also part of learning. The story of knowledge as positive change is told with great verve. The participant credits women’s studies with her personal empowerment and particularly with her rescue from a “very traditional, stereotypical woman’s life” and, from what she describes as secondary status within both her family of origin and her first marriage. She articulates this secondary status with reference to Beauvoir’s (1953) notion of the “second sex”: “I was really the second sex in my family and I still am. I’m on the periphery. I’m superficial. I’m on the edge. I’ve always been that way.”

While being secondary and on the edge in her family, women’s studies positions her and her experiences centrally. In view of that, the narrator defines women’s studies in accordance with her own experience as personal discovery and development comparable to a spiritual conversion experience:

But to me women’s studies is not only a philosophy of how I am woman and the process of my life, but it is everything extra with it too. For me it’s very much . . . wonderful does not describe it. It’s an all-encompassing area of myself as a woman . . . To me, it’s almost like . . . a spiritual conversion.

In her narrative, women’s studies is an ideal learning environment populated with extraordinary teachers, who care deeply about her, become her mentors and friends, and who most of all recognize her hitherto unrecognized potential. Indeed, she credits the most formative of her mentors as someone who “gave me a voice.” Having



been given a voice and being heard contrasts with and repeats the formative experiences in her family of origin where she was neither heard nor seen: “my theory is that I talk so damn fast because I’ve never been listened to in my life. It was only when I got into university that people thought I was smart enough to listen to.” Thus, the university and women’s studies in particular hold a special place in her education. Women’s studies’ teachers are the first to recognize her abilities in ways that her family never has. While her family chose the education of her brother over hers, even though she was the better student, her university teachers encourage her to pursue her studies. Indeed, she credits her women’s studies mentor with sending her to graduate school, an idea she first encounters in the form of a comment on one of her undergraduate papers, which read: “you can do better than this because you are going to graduate school.” However, here we also find a repetition of her history of learning, like at home, she is told what to do, repeating passivity, a characteristic also ascribed to the “second sex.”

Telling these stories of her successful learning in the passive voice (i.e. being given a voice and being told to go to graduate school), thus may signal an ambivalent identification with both the direction of her family and of women’s studies. In her family, she experienced gender asymmetry and femininity was associated with secondary status, passivity, servitude, and compliance. To this ambition and educational success are transgressions that possibly risk loss of love. This is how she describes her family’s response to the work she does today:

it’s my family that does not want to hear what I’m doing here. They have basically told me in certain words they don’t want to hear what I’m doing here.

So, that's hard to deal with sometimes, because you do want to share. . . They are wonderful people but they have no wish to know other than what they do.

Given repeated experiences of her family not wanting to hear and know her and not wanting to know anything different from themselves, education, particularly women's studies, is more ambivalent than her enthusiasm suggests at first. She experiences women's studies as personally liberatory and empowering and as a place where she is heard but it also comes at the price of loss of love and distance from family and loved ones. By use of the passive voice (being given voice, being told to go to graduate school), however, she can negate her own involvement with the field and thus hold onto her attachment to her family as well as to women's studies. The central structure of her past learning, the ambivalence towards knowledge because knowledge is associated with risk of loss of self and of loved ones, however, is brought to her graduate education.

Knowledge is associated with loss because knowledge makes a difference. Feminist knowledge in particular changes how one understands and relates to the social world and others. The implications of knowledge makes the self different to herself and can be experienced as difference within the self, incoherence, and loss of self. The refusal on behalf of her parents to know the interviewee is intimately related to her parents' refusal of difference. Knowing their daughter would require them to rethink her and themselves. Their refusal to know her reminds us of the earlier cited suggestion by Felman (1987: 79) that teaching has to overcome the resistance to knowledge and a passion for ignorance. The passion for ignorance or the desire to not know is related to

the implication of knowledge, also discussed earlier, or the difference that knowledge makes for the learner. The effects of knowledge are not always happy, particularly when knowledge asks us to give up an attachment, for example to a loved ideal or a phantasy.

This history of learning as loss is in tension with a manifest narrative of feminist knowledge representing power and empowerment. Within the interview, this structure of ambivalence towards knowledge is repeated several times. In the following segment, the participant “in-voices” or impersonates for me an exchange between her and her students in which they complain to her about how feminist knowledge changes them. She tells me that students say to her,

“I hate you for telling me that.” And I always say, “Don’t kill the messenger.” Do you see what I’m saying? And some of them say, “I can never look at a movie again like I used to. I can never read a book. I can’t look at any of those fashion magazines anymore. My husband is driving me crazy because you’ve taught me that there’s so much in there – more than I thought there was. And now I’m questioning everything, and I’ve lost all my friends.” And I’m saying, “sorry, but that’s the way it is.”

This story repeats the tensions of the family. Just as the family does not want to hear, so is it with students. But the interviewee now sees knowledge associated with loss as something which effects others, even if her only reply is to say “sorry but. . .” There is identification with the students whose losses reference her own, of family and friends. For example, she suggests that students need to be warned of women’s studies so that they can come prepared for the dangers that the field poses. Earlier, in the context of a discussion of sexuality, she already elaborated on the transformative force

of women's studies, that "has given me the power to be who I want to be as a woman.

That is how powerful it is." However, she continues this sentence with a warning:

And I would caution students who were not sure – I want to make sure they know what they are getting into before they come into women's studies. Otherwise, they might find it too – maybe they cannot handle it. To me it just opened up so many things about myself that were there but I didn't know were there.

For the narrator the positive changes for her self seem to outweigh the losses, producing herself as resilient where others may shatter. Yet, her concern for students, particularly her wish to warn students about the hazards of women's studies might be read as part of a projective identification. Indeed, she may expel her own feelings of uncertainty associated with feminist consciousness and project them onto others. By expelling and projecting uncertainty onto others, she is able to maintain the ideal of women's studies as cure. In her wish to warn her students she also says: "I wish somebody had warned me about the effects of women's studies" and "I wish I had known what I am getting myself into." In the scenario mentioned above, she is able to articulate her ambivalences about the costs of women's studies knowledge. However, it has to work through the voice of somebody else. By way of her students' voices, she can protest the pain of her loss, which she had to split off in order to protect the ideal of women's studies as liberatory and empowering to which she is deeply attached. Speaking with her students, she can repeat her own grievance: "sorry, but that's the way it is." There is, however, a second identification. This identification is with her mother, who earlier, in the context of the participant telling her about the dissolution of

her marriage, is cited as having said “You can’t do that. You’ve made your bed. You have to lie in it.” – a statement which is another way of saying “that’s the way it is.”

Within a narrative of knowledge as cure, the costs of knowledge come without warning. The following excerpt is an example of the conflict that emerges when the ideal of knowledge is threatened by the experience of knowledge as loss. In this segment, the participant offers us a series of contradictory theories of knowledge in which knowledge is variously liberatory and a threat. In the end, these contradictory views collide and the speaker becomes entangled and lost in her ambivalence:

A lot of people deny what’s going on because they don’t want to know it, because it upsets their lives too much. I think people are really, really afraid of what they don’t know. And if you don’t know something, you’re apt to stay well away from it, where I’ve been sort of meeting it head on and saying, what’s this about. And then in understanding, fear goes. People are really afraid of that, and they’re really afraid of change. I think as a society, as individuals, as humans—I think change is something we have to deal with, but I think we’re very frightened of dealing with it. And also, you’re talking about a revolution here in terms of women’s studies and feminist work. You’re talking about a damn revolution—that’s scary stuff. You can get all those women out there, and there’s going to be a change, and we don’t want this. They don’t like it.

Within this passage, different theories of knowledge are fighting with each other and there is a tension between the narrator’s (ambivalent) approach to knowledge and that of other people. In the first sentence, the theory is that people know but don’t want to know because knowledge is upsetting as it implicates them. This is reminiscent of how her parents respond to her. In the next sentence, however, the unknown becomes the problem, to which knowledge is the solution. Here we have a prominent women’s studies’ view of knowledge. This is immediately followed by the suggestion that other people are afraid of such a head-on approach to knowledge because they fear the

change that this requires; here we are back to the dynamic seen with both her parents and her students. In this comment, we encounter again the resilient narrator who can bear what shatters others. In the following sentence, the shift is from “they” being afraid to an identification, now all “of us” are afraid of change. Toward the end of this passage, references become muddled and coherence is lost. By the last sentence, the subject is lost in her own ambivalences. It is unclear who does not want or like what and where the narrator is. However, the text continues with a quick recuperation of the subject. The passage above is immediately followed with rapid self assertions of the speaking I: “And that’s why *I’m* very careful about who *I talk* to, *I’m* very careful about suggestions *I make* with my family or anybody else. *I* certainly will speak to someone if they’ve made a sexist remark. *I* often do that. . . . *I’ll* tell them right up front, *I* don’t want to hear . . . ” (emphasis added). The ego, threatened to get lost in difficult theories of knowledge and her own identifications with what she negates, reasserts stability by repetition.

The above passages articulate an ambivalent relationship to knowledge as both a problem and a solution. This ambivalence, however, is difficult to speak within an idealized view of women’s studies as solution and liberation. Knowledge as/of loss is expelled and projected onto others so that the idea of knowledge as empowering and liberatory can be maintained. As long as women’s studies is a loved ideal, certain things cannot be known because they threaten loss of attachment.

One way to negotiate conflicting identifications and the ambivalent wish between wanting to know (because knowledge makes fear go away) and not wanting to

know (because knowledge risks loss) is by way of a compromise. Toward the end of the interview, the interviewee is asked about some conflict within the women's studies programme. She responds to this question in the following way: "OK I haven't seen that, I know what you are talking about but I chose not to see it." This contradictory statement of both seeing and not seeing conflicts is followed by a longer elaboration about a central tension in women's studies, this time between university and community feminism – even though the participant denied knowing about any conflicts. She speaks with great passion about women's studies' obligation to women outside the academy and her own social work with women who are less privileged than her. Emphasising working for social change as an original mandate of women's studies, she argues forcefully:

I really think women in academia are so damn privileged, I really feel that a lot of them have lost sight of where women really are. Not all women are here in academia; only the privileged few, because I've worked with the women. I've worked with women who are poor, who are single parents, who are drug addicts, who have been sexually abused, who have been battered, who are on the opposite end of the continuum I'm on. And those are the women I want to work with. I don't know why – I don't want to analyse it; I'm afraid I might lose it.

If she earlier insisted that knowledge is liberatory, empowering, and makes fear go away, in this passage the history of knowledge as threat to attachment (here to her own work) returns. If knowledge makes a difference and difference is associated with loss, to inquire into the motivations for one's own work becomes impossible. In order to maintain unambivalent attachments, knowledge that makes a difference and knowledge of difference need to be separated. Sometimes, the difference that knowledge makes

turns out to be too costly. However, by refusing certain knowledges, differences are also foreclosed: parents cannot know their feminist daughter and the feminist cannot know the motivations for her work with underprivileged women. When knowledge threatens to make a difference, difference at times cannot be known.

### **Interview 3 – “I wouldn’t have [that] sort of violence done to me in the classroom”**

This graduate student discusses her ambivalent relationship with women’s studies that vacillates between her deep attachments to the programme and her urgent wish to not be seen as “a women’s studies person.” During the interview, this ambivalence is related to conflictual experiences of identification. She worries about who she may become through her identifications and how she may become identified by others. She is particularly concerned with the demands made upon her from the identifications of others. Toward the end of the interview, a related question emerges. This one concerns how reading others can be done ethically and without doing harm to them. This worry about the ethicality of reading others is made from her own painful experiences of being read and, in the process, racialized.

The ambivalent relationship to women’s studies is articulated in the beginning of the interview when the participant finds herself aghast at her own attachment to the field: “I started having this thought: ‘Oh my gosh, I am a women’s studies [person]. I’m this person who cares about who’s the director of the CFR [Centre for Feminist Research]. I actually care.’” Here we encounter the idea that identity (being a women’s studies person) is made from attachment and identification. Later in the interview, this realization



is juxtaposed with the suggestion that there are “a lot of people who will never set foot into women’s studies because of the rep it has.” The contextualized suggestion is that women of colour refuse to become involved in women’s studies. Thus, the worry of being associated with women’s studies relates to questions of her own identity or to worries about who she may become through her attachment to a programme that many other women of colour disassociate themselves from.

Her struggles and ambivalence with her own attachment to the field are articulated in the beginning through negation. She claims to have no part in getting involved in women’s studies. Her involvement in women’s studies is accidental and the result of faculty persuasion. This is, for example, how she describes her undergraduate work in women’s studies: “It was just a pattern of courses I was taking although I did not think of myself as a women’s studies major. They were all just women’s studies courses. I just stumbled upon it and it looked interesting.” Later, asked about her choice to pursue a graduate degree in women’s studies, she says: “She [faculty member] suggested that women’s studies would be a good place for me.” Her undergraduate thesis in a discipline is concerned with women’s studies issues, as were many of her courses. Yet, she failed to notice that she could actually have done a double major. About the accidental nature of her involvement in graduate women’s studies, she has the following to say:

I didn’t think of myself as a women’s studies major. Then I applied to [graduate] women’s studies and they accepted. I didn’t even apply to [my discipline]. I just applied to women’s studies and they accepted me. It wasn’t one of those things that was really well thought out. I kind of stumbled.

She is in women's studies but insists that it mustn't mean anything. This negation is similar to the dynamic discussed in the previous interview. There negation functioned as a means to hold onto contradictory attachments. In this interview, negation protects racial identity. Emphasising the accidental nature of one's involvement is one form of ambivalence or of holding implication at bay. Attachments need to be held at bay if they change who we are and threaten to make demands upon us. In this interview, there is also a deep ambivalence at work:

Undoubtedly there's an interest in Women's Studies with me. Because even the work I'm planning to do, if I get accepted into the Ph.D. programme, has a lot to do with the Women's Studies programme. So ya, I'm sort of Women's Studies. I'm on the outside of it but I'm pretty involved. I'm pretty interested. Why? I don't know. It's pretty wacky. It's pretty shameful that I'm saying it.

There is a curious tension: while the interviewee does not want to be identified by others as a women's studies student, the wish allows for a semblance of being outside. Yet, there is a (shameful) pleasure in being involved. What may be shameful is that the desire to participate, even if accidentally, cannot be explained. Desire cannot be explained.

Also at stake are worries over her identity and what being a women's studies student will do to her identity. Who will she become through her attachment to the field, particularly, when the field is experienced and described as predominantly white?

The following excerpt speaks to this worry:

I'm not supposed to fall into that category [of being a women's studies student]. I don't fall in that category. No, I just can't possibly fall into that category. Because then I'd become one of them. Monolithic them that I don't like. Those people I don't agree with. So, I've become one of them in many ways. But I'm not.

In the context of women's studies being overwhelmingly white, an attachment to and identification with the field threatens the interviewee's racial identity. The threat lies in the fear of being seen as assimilated into the unmodified and monolithic subject of women's studies that the field has come to represent. We encountered this fear already in the previous chapter, in Fuss' (1995) discussion of identification as assimilative demand. One way to negotiate this dilemma of identification, particularly its assimilative demands, is to maintain a critical distance to women's studies and to position oneself as a critical presence within the programme. The interviewee describes herself as "trying to do something within the programme and make something different."

When asked to further explain her anxiety of being identified with women's studies, she makes particular reference to that which she associates with the field: the portrayal of women's studies as a safe haven for all women. She distances herself from this image by insisting that her efforts for change within women's studies are distinctly different from the desire for women's studies as a safe place.

I don't like the image of Women's Studies as this is the place where we all feel safe and comfortable and we're going to make it who hugs the best. Do you know what I mean? That sort of environment. That to me, is the image of Women's Studies that I don't like. And so I don't want people to lump me in that category of that group of folks who are involved in Women's Studies. Because I'm not. Although it's clear that I'm trying to make something happen in that space where more people can work in that space. But I'm not aiming for that space of "Let's all feel good and great everyday."

Part of her ambivalence about being seen as a member of women's studies is related to the refusal within women's studies to deal with conflict and particularly with

differences and their social effects. This leaves her in a difficult position, especially when we remember that social differences are part of a foundational conflict within women's studies. I think what is articulated here is an ambivalent desire in regard to conflict. On the one hand, the wish by some practitioners to relegate conflict safely to the outside of the field or the programme makes it difficult to articulate the conflicts that surround the differences among women. Both conflict and differences become relegated to an outside. The interviewee rejects "safety" that is conditioned on the repression of conflicts and differences. In part, she rejects this safety because she fears that she will become the return of the repressed. In this interview, the rejection takes the form of vacating herself from the very suggestion that women's studies is a safe space. On the other hand, the interviewee does have a desire to make women's studies a "safer" space, which for her means making it a space "where more women can work", where difference and conflict are not repressed but addressed and worked through. Associated with this different notion of safety is the wish that this will also allow her to keep her identity intact and that the assimilative demands made upon her will be lifted.

The interviewee's earlier voiced hesitations around her identification with women's studies and her worries about how others read her become more forceful when she tells stories of the kinds of demands that she has found brought to bear on her identity by the readings of others. The potent stories she tells illustrate how she experiences others as pressuring her into particular categories based upon their reading of her identity. The first story relates to an experience in a women's studies class in which she is asked by her

white instructor to identify herself as a feminist. When the interviewee articulates her ambivalence about naming herself in this way and suggests that sometimes she does and sometimes she does not identify herself as a feminist, she reports being told “you should really call yourself a feminist because we need you in our movement.” In the following, she describes both her emotional and intellectual response to this comment and elaborates upon her interpretation of this encounter:

I was very very quiet. Very quiet. Maybe I jumped. But I thought the implication was a little further than just “oh, you're such a radical chick, we need some radical politics in our movement.” I really think it had to do with the whole race thing. Because I wasn't speaking a heck of a lot. I wasn't saying these wonderful outstanding things and they wanted some sisterhood. Maybe they did want sisterhood. I took it as a race thing. You've got all these white people in the class and you need me? What do you need me for? Leave me alone. That was my problem. I don't even think I said that. I left that class absolutely livid. That was the whole point I was trying to say. Because I even explained to them why I had a problem with it. At that time I went through why I was feeling somewhat back and forthish about it, and then I get the comment that “we need you in our movement.” Ya, see ya. I do carry scars.

This narrative raises questions on the symbolic violence at stake in identification and both the appropriative powers and assimilative demands associated with identification in the previous chapter (Chow 1993; Diamond 1992; Fuss 1995; Pellegrini 1996). The sense of violation that the interviewee reports relates to the dual experience of being identified as somebody and demanded to identify with something in turn. The first act of “identification as” is a form of hailing or interpellation in Althusser's (1971) sense. The subject is discursively produced through the authoritative invocation or assignment of an identity. In the above scenario, the teacher hails the student as non-white. However, the student is not only demanded to take up and *to identify as* a black woman but also in turn

*to identify with feminism.* In these processes of identification, difference is asserted: the student is racialized as other. Simultaneously, difference is also refused: the student is demanded to assimilate into an undifferentiated feminist identity or sisterhood. Within the above encounter, the teacher demands from her students to give up her ambivalent relationship to feminism. However, this ambivalence is grounded in both the student's identity and the ways the field has not made the intersections of race and gender central to its knowledges and discourses.

The association of being identified with demands is further elaborated in another narrative. This one concerns her decision to attend a feminist event instead of one organized by a black student campus organization. In this scenario, she finds herself challenged by the president of a black student organization who responds to her decision to attend the feminist event by questioning her racial identity. He is reported to ask of the participant "what are you? You are black first." What this and the previous scenario both share is that people make demands upon her based upon their perception of her identity or on the way that they read her. In both narratives, the participant is demanded that she prioritise one aspect of her identity over another. Because identity in each case is thought in the singular, the only position available is ambivalence. Against this background, the interviewee elaborates upon her attachment to theories that allow for multiple and complex identities. She articulates her desire to not have her identity arrested in any singular category and concludes: "I don't want to be stuck in some box here and there."

The interviewee associates the experience of being identified by others with violence. Yet, ultimately she is able to make knowledge from these painful experiences.

Indeed, she offers a theory that suggests learning can be made from what she calls those “ugly little moments.” She has come to the conclusion that she does not necessarily have to close down upon those encounters, drop the course or leave the class, which she has done before. Instead she has learned to rework and understand the “nasty things in class” differently. She begins to be able to bear that bad things happen and is able to turn the psychic violence imposed on her into sites from which knowledge can be made.

One way she makes knowledge from experiences of being othered or included only as a token, and having her identity policed is by becoming interested in theoretical work that allows her to live her identity more complexly. She develops a concern with the ethicality of reading others and the harm that one does to others in one’s reading practices. She associates Toni Morrison’s work with ethical reading practices and is particularly intrigued by a short story called “Recitatif” (Morrison 1983). The story is about two girls, one white, one black, yet, the way Morrison invokes their racial identities makes it impossible to come to a final conclusion about which girl is white and which is black. Their racial identities are central to the story and their relationship, yet it is unclear who is who. The interviewee is intrigued by this story and by what she calls Morrison’s “undone characters . . . characters [who] didn’t have boundaries.” In the following, she elaborates on the significance of Morrison’s story:

You know it’s two people of different races. But you don’t know who’s who. I sat there reading it like a damned detective. I sat there really trying to figure out who was who, wanting to find out by the end and being highly annoyed that I didn’t know by the end which one was which. I asked the question of here I sit staring at this damn text trying to find all the racial cues, for what? To what end? I could not let that go. I guess Toni Morrison was asking us not to do harm to her characters and let them be. That’s my little fantasy of how I want to be in the

classroom. So here I sit doing the same sort of violence to Toni Morrison's characters that I don't want done to me. What does one do with that? . . . that's how I want to be in the classroom, like Toni Morrison's . . . They were actually free to be, on text anyways. You could not feel them in anything. That what would rock in the classroom for me. . . . Here I am saying I want to be like Toni Morrison's characters in the classroom and yet I'm already a body with boundaries, and so how is it possible that I could want these two things? . . . Ya. For me, in the classroom if I was like Toni Morrison's characters then I wouldn't have the sort of violence done to me in the classroom. It would be a less painful experience, not to be put in these categories where I can't move from. So that's what I want. I want that certain freedom. But you see, in that freedom also comes risk. I forgot about that.

In this experience we find conflicting desires: The wish to figure the characters and their racial identities out, which is also the desire to master identities, collides with her desire to remain undecipherable, unbound, and unrestrained. The longing is for both having an identity and not being bound by it, for both being read and understood but not harmed or bound by the kinds of readings that others produce about her.

This ambivalence returns us to the beginning of the interview, and the ambivalence of attachment that we met there, which is also the ambivalence between the desire to be known and the fear of the kind of harm that follows from knowledge, particularly within the inequitable racial economy of education and women's studies. This ambivalence also returns us to the larger theoretical concern discussed in earlier chapters, namely the notion that knowledge is both central to the formation of subject and also subjects the subject in the process. The ambivalent attachment to women's studies at stake in this interview, then, perhaps relates to the question of how to negotiate the desire for subject status in women's studies all the while seeking to escape its force of subjection. Perhaps ambivalence, and ambivalent attachments to the theories that produce us as



subject and give us social meaning, yet also threaten us with subjection, are ways to hold onto desires and keep demands, for example of knowledge, away.

**Interview 4 – “I find I am more affected by [what] I initially hate”**

This graduate student was initially attracted to undergraduate women’s studies by the rumour that its classes were “full of lesbians.” She explains, “That was my only interest. But it didn’t seem to be; I couldn’t see any lesbians.” Unfortunately, I did not inquire into what happened when she did not find in women’s studies what she was looking for. Did she find something else desirable instead? However, a similar dynamic found in interview 3 is at work here. Making do with things not being good and making knowledge from bad things is a structure that runs through this narrative of learning.

Speaking about her history of learning, she suggests that attachment can be made from hate and that learning is not lost when things are bad. She offers the following example from her undergraduate women’s studies experience: “You met a lot of people. There was a ton of in-fighting, which was kind of gross. But I liked the sense of community. I liked that about it.” Conflicts within women’s studies and between women’s studies practitioners are undesirable yet do not prevent community. Instead, they are part of its texture.

Like the previous interviewee, this participant’s relationship to women’s studies is ambivalent. This ambivalence comes to the fore when asked to elaborate on how women’s studies has changed her:

That's a hard question. There's often this sort of split, partly real and partly imaginary between academics and activists. Sometimes I think about that. So

one doesn't want to become too corrupted by the academy. Who have I become? – That's really hard to say. I increasingly worry too that the problem with Women's Studies frankly is how much it costs. It is getting to be so elitist because of the money. I think that's a problem. I worry about what that means for me and whoever else who is doing Women's Studies. What does a Women's Studies degree mean if you have to be at least middle-class to get one? Or at least have some access to money.

In response to questions of change and influence, the participant elaborates upon a series of tensions within women's studies such as the both imagined and real split between activists and academics, the increasingly exclusionary nature of a graduate degree, and the university's corruptive influences. These are common concerns within women's studies and the academy more generally. After having offered critical associations, she returns to the initial question in the following way:

But to the question, I don't know that Women's Studies has really changed me that much. Certainly in terms of critical skills and being able to write, I've learned stuff. I don't think that I'm fundamentally changed. Or maybe I am. But I can't think of a particular way.

Given her grievances against both women's studies and the institution of the university more broadly, it is not surprising that the participant finds little to say to the effect that women's studies has had on her beside equipping her with greater academic skills.

What could be learned from an institution that is exclusive of others and herself?

Indeed, she disassociates herself from women's studies and refuses the very idea of it having influence over her. However, in response to the next question, which asks about how a text or teacher has affected her thinking within women's studies, she offers the following quite detailed and lovely observation about the structure of her own learning:

I find I am more affected by the text that I initially hate, the ones that I struggle with, resist, cannot stand. One person, whose work has been important to me in

the last couple of years, has been Wendy Brown's book. I just hated it when I first read it. I found it annoying. I wanted her to have a more materialist position. Her work, plus some other people's work, some of the other anti-essentialist type writers, those scholars – though initially I reacted against their work, have really made me rethink my position on identity categories, I was very reluctant to give up on. I was very big that you had to have a label; identity politics were very essential to me. I've really changed that position but it was a hard struggle. I'd say that that's the biggest shift that I've made with my thinking around Women's Studies.

Having refused previously the suggestion of being changed by women's studies at all and having associated the question of change with corruption and exclusion, she now offers a story of profound shifts in her thinking. Texts read in women's studies made her shift her thinking from insisting on the essentialness of stable identities to finding a shifting and unstable concept of identity and self. This shift has effects upon the speaker's self-understanding, as we will see in a little while. Within the above quote, the participant also gives us a vivid impression of the struggle at stake in learning. In particular, she speaks to the struggle that erupts when one finds one has to revise an idea central to one's thinking. The participant's description of struggle and resistance in the encounter is rich: "I just hated it . . . first. . . . I found it annoying. I wanted her to have . . . I reacted against." This description speaks to the intensity of resistance and hate directed at a new idea that neither destroys the idea as the object of study nor hinders learning. Indeed, the participant is able to produce a theory of her own learning from this: that she is more affected by what she initially resists or hates. I will return later to the theory of learning that the participant offers here. For now, I want to speculate about what seems like a contradiction between the earlier insistence that women's studies has not changed her and the discussion of profound changes in her

thinking about questions of identity and politics, which also concerns how she thinks herself.

One way to think about this is to recall Britzman's (1998) suggestion that learning, here understood as attachment to discourse and knowledge, is always structured by ambivalence that emerges from the dual quality of learning of both love and hate already discussed in the previous chapter. New knowledge and new ideas both offer and demand something from the subject. They offer new subject positions as well as new intelligibilities and they also demand giving up earlier and cherished attachments and desires. The question is how this ambivalence is lived. How does one live ethically with hate and love given that they are central to learning? Here the participant negotiates this dilemma by making a distinction between the institutional context of learning and "the call of ideas" (Britzman 1998: 5). Clearly, this participant is quite sceptical about the institution of the university and even the women's studies programme within the institution. Both are cited critically for their corrupting influences and exclusionary practices. However, the participant differentiates between the bad practices of the institution and the ideas that she can encounter there. Thus, what is refused is not influence per se, but the forces of institutions and programmes. By splitting learning into the bad institutions, ideas can still be good. Thus, the participant is able to respond to the call of ideas, though not without a struggle since she makes knowledge from what she hates and dislikes initially. This structure is reminiscent of her earlier distinction between the infighting within her undergraduate programme and the sense of community still able to prevail. Refusing the institution is

part of her attachment to ideas. And in this move, she is still able to hold onto rigidity; now the rigidity of her attachment to identity politics cited earlier has moved and become a grievance against the program. This may be a good example that helps us understand how individuals do not give up structures of attachment and of desires, though content and direction may change.

In this narrative, we can see ambivalent attachment, which we also encountered in the previous interview. There, behind the acceptance of women's studies, the conflicts that women's studies posed for the subject and her other attachments were hidden. In this interview, the participant's description of her own learning makes discernible the struggle involved in attaching as she speaks to the affect at stake. The encounter with new ideas produces a conflict with the ideas that she already holds dear and that are central to her sense of self. Learning is articulated as a struggle of affects: new ideas are met with hate because they threaten beloved ideas and the self. However, influences and ideas that are initially resisted can later turn out to be quite lovely and life changing. A similar dynamic also structured the interview itself. Initially, I felt that most of what I said was rejected by the participant. Only when I looked at the transcripts, could I actually begin to see how that was not the case, that the initial refusal was a way to test whether one can be influenced and survive the force of ideas.

Asked to reflect upon how one comes to like an idea, the participant insists upon a distinction between "liking" an idea and knowing that it is important.

Not necessarily that I even like them, but I think that they are important. When I am really interested in a subject I do tend to get quite worked up about it. I like a text in a way that makes me really mad, and that I hate. That's an interesting

question. It's hard to say.

This distinction is another repetition of the structure of attachment, acceptance of an idea is disguised as refusal. By way of refusal, the force of influence can be mediated.

The participant offers more texture to the passionate and aggressive qualities of learning, namely, that one can be maddened by the ways one attaches to something to an extent that the attachment itself can be hated. This adds another layer to the intensity of ambivalence at stake in learning: one can hate how much one likes an idea. This raises the question of what is hated: the experience of liking an idea? Or, the fear that the idea may be held too dearly and that it might leave? Other strategies to negotiate the force of affect in attachment are falling asleep, forgetting, and splitting:

Sometimes I just forget 3/4 of what I read. It's a bit of a problem. That's the thing I do like about being in school, I do like discussing ideas with people. Sometimes I have this tendency to think that my interpretation is just wrong. So that's actually what I do like about seminars, you discuss ideas and find out what other people think. That's one of the ways that I learn best, is from discussion. I hate listening to lectures. But I like discussions. Although sometimes it can be boring and frustrating. If you can get a really good discussion, that's what I will remember. Just work with the ideas. There's something really exhilarating about that. You all of the sudden get it.

Given the intensity with which ideas can capture the ego, the force of ideas might be mitigated, for example by forgetting and by splitting education into (good) discussions and (bad) lectures. Acts of forgetting in education return us again to Felman's (1987) suggestion that ignorance, or forgetting, is tied to repression, as "the imperative to forget . . . Ignorance . . . is not a passive state of absence, a simple lack of information: it is an active dynamic of negation, an active refusal of information" (79). Rather than posing ignorance and knowledge in an exclusionary opposition, in psychoanalytic

thinking, ignorance becomes a part of knowledge. Ignorance is not the opposite of knowledge but an opposition to knowing. In this interview, forgetting is tied to information one does not care to know. Learning practices are also refused: the participant hates lectures, which are representative of institutional power. Instead, she enjoys the more democratic forms of class discussions – which is where she locates her learning.

The structure of refusal is repeated throughout the interview. For example, differences in women's studies are addressed first as the stupid things that other people say. This refusal, again, is not complete. Instead, the participant subsequently points out how learning can be made even from the "stupid" and "annoying things" that others say. The following excerpt is an example of this and the participant seems to be doing two things: First, she argues with herself about what kind of response is required in the encounter with the stupid things of others. This argument is made both from the (political) demand for intervention and from the anxiety that she may not have anything to say. Second, the argument is made from the worry that she will be affected but not know what to do.

The following is in response to my invitation to speak about an experience of learning something important about race and/or sexuality:

A lot of the times it's when somebody says something annoying. Recently somebody in a class that I was in then, we were talking about homophobia in the classroom, and somebody said in our Women's Studies programme there is not any homophobia because there are lots of lesbians. That really made me think. I could have died at the time. But I didn't say anything. Actually, I probably did say something. It really made me think about what we think homophobia is. Why would somebody say that? What that made me think of

was a lot more Women's Studies students were a lot more liberal than I thought they were. In addition, what kinds of model does homophobia or heterosexism give us? Clearly, it's lacking something. This idea that someone can just look at a situation and say: "that's gone away." Because I don't think it's just going to go away. So obviously the model that we've been using doesn't highlight some of the more subtle manifestations of oppression that are going on. So that's often the case; this often happens in Women's Studies classes, someone will say something just completely horrifying. Thinking about that, about why you find it horrifying, you can often learn something about yourself. Also, about how ideas are being used by other people, about how your use of these ideas are different.

This is a very eloquent elaboration of the thinking process that moves from affective shattering (articulated as a sense of her own death) to the inner demands to produce her self as responsive. She then moves into making meaning and making knowledge from this encounter and argues that what horrifies can also be a point of learning about the self. The question is, what horrifies the self? A part of learning is that the self can be horrified at helplessness.

In this segment, the participant is capable of surviving and making knowledge from homophobia. Indeed, meaning making and theorizing are forms of survival. This is further elaborated upon in the following:

Something can be quite irritating about Women's Studies. You are always talking about these issues like race and class, and sexual orientation. People say things that are annoying. Sometimes you don't want to listen to it. Teaching is a good example of that. Students say these horrifying things. But you do learn something about where people are at. That is something that I always find interesting. I don't understand why people are homophobic. It doesn't make sense to me. I'm always searching for some sort of insight about where that comes from.

The candidate describes herself as moving from what one might not want to hear to making knowledge and insight from the bad ideas and knowledges of others.



Later in the interview, the participant articulates that her graduate education has enabled her to be more open to contradiction. This is a big change and thus most forcefully contradicts her earlier insistence that women's studies did not change her. Besides describing herself as quite hostile and dismissive when meeting an idea for the first time, as she did earlier, now, she also describes herself as having moved from finding ambiguity unbearable to being more open to it, for which she makes her supervisor's influence responsible. In this context, she also speaks vividly about what changing her structure of learning felt like: "It was actually very painful to have to change that. I struggled, I cried, I carried on. It made no sense to me at all." The pain is related to having to rethink herself and the way she constructs arguments. In light of this, her earlier suggestion that women's studies taught her different writing skills becomes more meaningful. She credits her supervisor with having "pushed" her beyond "black and white" arguments, which forced her to rethink her own understanding of feminism. Having a theory of one's learning (dis)position does not mean, however, that one can change how one engages knowledge in one's learning. This raises questions for a pedagogy of reading practices that encourages learners to reflect upon their reading and learning practices. How may such a pedagogy account for the limits of knowing the self and her structures of attachment and ambivalence?

## **Conclusions**

In these interviews, practitioners in women's studies speak about their attachment to women's studies and seek to make meaning of experiences with

differences in their own teaching and learning. The narratives allow insight into learning (dis)positions, or into how the ambivalence central to learning is lived both psychically and socially. The first two interviews display seemingly positive attachments to women's studies. Here ambassadors of the field speak eloquently about the field's successes, its profound impact upon them as learners and teachers, and both participants promote its expansion and stability. However, with a closer look at these first two narratives we see glimpses of how the lack of negativity in the manifest narrative does not mean there is no ambivalence. Instead, by way of a psychoanalytic reading we begin to see that both love and hate are stake, though the negativity of attachment may settle somewhere else.

In both of these narratives, differences seem to threaten the coherence and stability of self. In the first interview, the threat is articulated as "having to rethink everything" including the self, which seems a too arduous task. Instead, the unsettling effects of differences are refused and the (authority) of the self is stabilized by a phantasy of the otherness of others and the otherness of race as not belonging to the self. In the second interview, difference signifies loss, the loss that the subject already has suffered by becoming different to herself and to loved ones, but also potential further losses, such as her love for her work if she were to explore further the differences between herself and her clients and the meaning that difference holds. When difference is associated with loss, similarity needs to be sought and insisted upon. Both of these interviews also offer compromise solutions, the teacher welcomes new knowledge of race and sexuality as long as it does not ask her to "rethink

everything” at once. And the Ph.D. candidate in the second interview maintains her contradictory attachments to both the orientations of her family and women’s studies, for example by way of attaching and insisting upon contradictory theories of knowledge.

In the third interview, we encounter the struggle that ensues for the self when her social inclusion is experienced as premised upon her assimilation into sameness. In this interview, we encounter the wish for both social recognition and the freedom to be without demands made upon identity. Here we are returned to an earlier question, raised early on in the study, of how and whether social recognition and identity without subjection is possible. The interviewee puts this dilemma as: “[with] that freedom also comes risk.” In this interview, we encounter an ambivalent attachment to that which subjects the subject, now ambivalence is a strategy for surviving the aggression at stake in social inclusion. We also encounter the idea that learning can be made from the aggressions of others and that learning is not just assimilation but can also be a strategy of survival.

This theme of knowledge made from negativity is continued in the fourth interview. Here the interviewee herself offers a theory of her learning (dis)position, namely of learning made from hate. The refusal and resistance of learners to the material studied then is not an indication that they are not learning. Quite the opposite, and this confirms a view discussed earlier, namely that disassociation, hate, refusal, and negation may actually be forms of attachment that the subject cannot bear to know. This raises questions for those who teach and learn in women’s studies: how does one

survive, work through, and learn from the aggression and hate of others, if that is part of learning (dis)positions. We also learn from this interview about the limits of knowing thyself and of self-reflexivity, since even having a theory of one's learning and knowing how one learns does not mean one can change one's structure of learning. In fact, what one knows about oneself and one's learning can easily also be forgotten and/or denied. However, interviews 3 and 4 show us that considering one's reading/learning practices, as suggested in the previous chapter by Ellsworth (1997), Lather (1991), and Pitt (1995), allows one to read critically one's own affects in learning.

There are limits to what one can know and consider about the structure of one's attachments and this is also the limit of self-reflexivity. Ambivalence may well be a symptom of self-reflexivity as we see in interview 3 and 4. Being able to bear ambivalence seems important when we consider that learning as attachment is structured by ambivalence. In interview 1 and 2 we see the efforts to overcome ambivalence and reach coherence. This desire, however, turns against others, for example by exaggerating or minimizing difference and by expelling and projecting outside what threatens unambivalent attachments to the inside of women's studies. These attempts toward coherence and non-ambivalence repeat structures of conflicts and tensions in women's studies discussed earlier, now lived in the individual. The question that both the study of interviews and the study of women's studies raise is how to live ethically (as well as epistemologically) with the aggressive impulse towards coherence both within individuals and within the field?

## **Conclusions**

This project began with three concerns. They are of theoretical, pedagogical, and autobiographical natures, and relate to questions of subject formation, the role and effects of social differences in women's studies teaching and learning, and the complexities of my own attachment to knowledge, theories, and the field of women's studies. My pedagogical concern with the marginalization and exclusion of racialized and sexualized subjects arose from my own teaching and learning in women's studies. In the women's studies curricula that I encountered as a student and as a teaching assistant, race and sexuality were treated as sociological categories of identity and experiences secondary to gender. The aim of my study, then, was to consider what it would mean for the field, its scholarship and teaching to make race and sexuality more central. I was interested in how women's studies would be changed if we were to consider race and sexuality not as additive but as intersecting (Khayatt 1994), interimplicated (McClintock 1995), or intersectional (Crenshaw 1995) with gender and as central to the field. While scholarship began to emerge that suggested this, I believed more needed to be said about how rethinking these identity categories as both mutually constitutive social relations *and* central to women's studies would affect the field, its epistemologies, methodologies, and pedagogies.

Initially, I approached this concern through theories of subject formation. These theories provide the broad structure of the dissertation as well as its initial questions: how is the subject of women's studies produced discursively, and what role do race and

sexuality as forms of social differences play in this process? And, how do students and faculty attach to this formation of knowledge and to discourses of social differences within women's studies? Accordingly, the first part of this study traces the processes by which discourses of women's studies constitute the field they claim to merely describe. Over the course of Chapters 1 to 4, I traced, through Foucault's notion of genealogy, conversations and conflicts within the field relating to its self-definitions, histories, location in the university and relationship to inter/disciplinarity, and its epistemologies. I showed how in these conversations social differences function frequently not, or not only, as markers of identity but as signifiers of discourses of knowledge that exceed the sociology of experience. Discourses of social differences are mobilized in ways that stabilize the formation of the field and shore up its insistence upon a "proper" – meaning clearly coherent, defined, and intelligible – subject. This desire for stability and coherence of the field is intimately related to the wish for its disciplinary status in the university.

In the early chapters, I not only studied the current tensions over the field's "proper subject" but also sought to intervene in these debates in a way that centres differences. I argued that rather than settling the ongoing dispute over the proper orientation of the field, its subject matter, and inter/disciplinary structure, we might want to understand contestation, difference, and, as I call it later, heterogeneity, as foundational to the field and part of its ongoing production. In regard to its narrative self-production, which I analysed in Chapter 2 by way of diverging origin stories, I also inquired into the field's contradictory desires to be simultaneously different.

oppositional, and marginal as well as central, similar and integral to the disciplinary structure of the university. These contradictory desires, to be both a force of resistance and different as well as institutionally accepted and similar to other disciplines, do not preclude each other. Yet, within these desires, normalization operates on two levels: the wish for integration defers to the disciplinary organization of knowledge as the measuring stick by which the rigor of the field is assessed. At the same time, the desire to be oppositional incapacitates the field from reflecting upon its own exclusionary and normalizing tendencies, for example, in how it employs questions related to differences. Both the wish for integration and for opposition are forms of normalization since they do not study how women's studies is already implicated in and participating in present structures of knowledge production in the changing university.

To use a Foucauldian perspective to analyse discourses central to the constitution of women's studies as a field of knowledge in terms of their "normalizing" forces is still a novel approach. So far, the field has had little practice or desire to reflect upon its own normalizing effects and to understand itself as implicated in processes of subjection. This studied lack of attention to its own force is due to a widely shared belief in a repressive hypothesis of power (Foucault 1990). Within a logic of power as only repressive – rather than also productive – the field can conceive of itself and its knowledges as resistant and oppositional to androcentric knowledge production in the academy. Both androcentric knowledge and the university are blamed for the historical repression of the knowledge of women and of women as knower – a situation that women's studies seeks to rectify. Within such logic of repressive power,

the field also understands its own institutionalization as not only an act of resistance but also as outside rather than inside and constitutive of the university. By positioning itself as outside, different, and oppositional to structures of power in institutions and knowledges, its own normalizing effects remain inconceivable.

However, such a view of women's studies as outside and different becomes increasingly difficult to maintain, especially in the context of emerging Ph.D. programmes and the further institutionalization of the field in the contemporary university. Women's studies Ph.D. programmes are becoming central sites for the formation of women's studies scholars and teachers. Thus, an inquiry into the dynamics of this kind of subject formation becomes important. Women's studies is no longer (if it ever was) a refuge from the patriarchal and androcentric structures of the university. Rather, it partakes in academic relations of power through the ordering, normalization, and regulation of knowledges and subjects within the field. Given Foucault's insistence on the interconnection of knowledge and power and his suggestion that becoming a subject of knowledge also means being subject to knowledge, my study studied women's studies as a force of subjection. It is critical that women's studies considers and reflects upon its changing status and influence if it wants to continue to be a site where progressive discourses and innovative practices can be developed.

The field's normalizing force also becomes painfully obvious in the ways that it engages or refuses to engage with those theories and bodies of work – including critical race, postcolonial, queer, and poststructuralist work – that question both its



claims to oppositionality and its foundations as an analysis of gender. Thus, the early chapters of this study traced the various ways social differences are invoked as a function of discourse and map what they come to signify: a threat to the field's coherence and consensus, and an added dread that needs to be contained. We also see how social differences are variously appropriated, marginalized, added on, tokenized, strategically employed or made out to be "no longer a problem for" and "already central to" women's studies scholarship. Within these discourses, then, we can see that social differences indeed have a central function for the constitution of the field, though they may not be central in the field and its knowledges.

A central claim of this dissertation, one that I return to repeatedly in different ways, is that the desire for coherence and the insistence upon stability (of knowledge, the subject, identity, and political identifications) that figure prominently in the present formations of the field are also central modalities of subjection and normalization. The desire for coherence and stability is a problem in women's studies that is acted out, for example, as conflict between different orientations to the field and in struggles over its political goals and epistemological approaches. We also saw that interdisciplinarity and social differences continuously risk interrupting the field's wish for stability and coherence. Thus, we find attempts to bind, limit, and restrain their force, for example, by reducing interdisciplinarity to an organization of institutional knowledge only and by limiting differences to sociological categories of experience that can be added to the curriculum. If interdisciplinarity and social differences are considered as qualities or

structures that articulate the incoherence and instability of knowledge, new and interesting insights may become possible.

This direction of argument is further explored in the later chapters of this dissertation, particularly in Chapters 5 and 6, where we also began to see more clearly that desire for stability and coherence are continually frustrated, and their insistences are ruined. In Chapter 5, the study turned away from a focus on genealogy and normalization toward the second theoretical perspective of this study, psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theories of learning. By way of a discussion of a psychoanalytic view of identification, we explored learning as a complex process of attachment to knowledge made from tension between the demands of ideas and psychic desires. This returned us to Butler's (1997) broader discussion of subject formation and her suggestion that the force of subjection and normalization inherent to knowledge is always incomplete and fraught; the force of subjection, while it cannot be escaped, is never complete. Psychoanalytic theories of learning confirm this view by arguing that subjects do not attach to knowledge without ambivalence, not even to knowledge that promises subject status. In this later part of the study, we inquired, then, into how the normalizing force of knowledge is lived and negotiated by individuals who learn and teach in women's studies.

Accordingly, the view of the subject shifted in this part of the study from an inquiry into how subjects are being produced by discourse and from the outside to an inquiry into how subjects engage discourses, are split within and conflicted from the inside. This new view considers conflict as located within the subject and central to her

attachment to knowledge and identity. Another shift occurred in my understanding of differences. This shift is most articulated in the discussion of questions of pedagogy and a psychoanalytic theory of learning in Chapter 5. Over the course of this study, my understanding of differences changed drastically. Initially, I thought of differences exclusively in sociological terms and as a property of identity. This view was complicated by a Foucauldian analysis that helped me think about difference as a figure of discourse, whose various functions I charted in the early chapters. In the context of psychoanalysis, difference changes again. It is no longer a marker of identity or even a discursive function. Instead, difference becomes a condition of subjectivity. In psychoanalytic theory, difference is no longer located between individuals or formed through knowledge but is within the subject and made from a tension between knowledge and affect. Similarly, I moved from concerns with the inside of women's studies and its relationship to institutional and discursive outsides, to the insides of the field, its structure, and then later to dynamics lived within the individual. I also moved from seeking to understand how the subject of women's studies and differences are constructed and mobilized within the field to an analysis of how subjects experience their own learning about and from differences within the field.

My earlier concern was with knowledge as a force of normalization and subjection, while in the context of questions of learning and teaching my concern is with knowledge now understood as a demand made upon the individual. Knowledge makes demands upon subjects particularly in contexts, such as feminism, women's studies, and study of social differences, where it implicates and questions the self, and

insists upon change. By way of interviews, we studied how the individual negotiates and, at times, refuses those demands, for example the demand to rethink the self in the encounter with new discourses of race and sexuality.

Psychoanalytic theories of learning understand the frequently contradictory and incoherent statements that individuals offer about their own learning as articulations of psychic conflict and suggest that knowledge about the difficulty of learning can be made from these. Psychoanalytically, learning is understood as a complex process by which the individual comes to attach to ideas. These attachments are not within the control of the individual but are lived as ambivalence within the self. Given that older desires and earlier attachments are not given up easily, we find in the stories that participants tell of their experiences of learning indications for how the force of knowledge is negotiated psychically. We also can see how knowledge as a force of normalization and subjection is never complete precisely because the individual does not give up older attachments and desires, but resists and negotiates the new demands made upon her.

A view of knowledge experienced as demand that is negotiated and resisted by the individual understands that the individual is not in control of her learning and that learning is shaped by unconscious processes. A view of learning as the psychic negotiations of the demand that knowledge makes upon the individual, however, does not allow us any longer to distinguish between “good” and “bad” or normalizing and liberatory knowledges. The unconscious does not distinguish between those directions. An understanding of learning as psychic attachment also interferes with popular

assumptions about the subject. These vacillate between a view of the subject as motivated by rational choice or as made from outside demands. Psychoanalytic theories of learning locate the conflict of knowledge within the subject made from the tension between the idea and affect and shaped by earlier histories of learning, love and hate, and desire. In the interview chapter of this study, we encountered examples of how the force of desire is lived as refusal, for example, as the refusal to rethink the self and to give up older attachments and change structures of learning. Indeed, we encountered examples where older attachments were maintained by way of changing its content but not its structure.

These observations and theories return us to the complexity of subject formation to which Butler (1997) introduced us, and the insight that subjects cannot be solely understood in terms of subjection and normalization. Indeed, Butler argues against an understanding of subjectivity as exclusively regulated and formed by an outside. Subjectivity is not the totality of a regulatory regime. Instead, Butler's focus is on the always incomplete quality of subjection. The subject's desire to hold onto forbidden loves and earlier attachments interrupts coherence and complete subordination to the demands directed at her. This also means that subjectivity is conflictual, ambiguous, and formed through crisis.

This theoretical geography was further explored in the qualitative part of this study. In my reading of the interviews, I traced remainders of desire that interfere with complete attachment to knowledge. This approach to knowledge, now understood as an always ambivalent attachment to ideas that is shaped by both love and hate, also offers

a way to understand conflicting attachments and orientations within women's studies. It allows us to begin to understand how subjects attach differently to women's studies, favour different orientations within the field, make different meaning of its knowledges, attach to different and, at times, contradictory discourses, knowledges, epistemologies, and pedagogies. It also allows us to understand why participants in women's studies engage knowledge of differences, for example, of race and sexuality, so differently. Indeed, knowledge itself is now understood as made from the interpretation of a psychic conflict.

Psychoanalytic theories of subject formation afforded me a theory that locates difference in the work of attachment and prior histories of love and hate brought to new encounters. This theoretical work both challenged (because that is what learning does) and helped my understanding of my own (ambivalent) attachments, for example to women's studies, which was a third concern in my study. I began to see how my own ambivalent attachments to the field and my theoretical and epistemological preferences are made from my psychic structures and histories of learning that I bring to bear onto my learning and teaching in women's studies and to this study. Given the theoretical attachments central to this work, it should not come as a surprise that I understand academic work, at least the kind of work that I am interested in, as a working through, more precisely as a working through of old conflicts.

Given this view of learning, conflict is another central category in my dissertation. Again, we can note a shift that began from an observation of conflict as disagreement between different orientations to women's studies and about its future

direction. I also charted conflicts that arise over the role and function of social differences within women's studies, over how to think about interdisciplinarity, as well as over disagreeing ideas about the university and women's studies role and place within it. Disagreeing theories of knowledge and the subject were also discussed.

Initially, I thought about conflict as something that emerges from different commitments to diverging theories and politics and I located the problem in a lack of tolerance for the heterogeneity of approaches and positions. Thus, I understood conflict as entirely an epistemological problem. Accordingly, I traced how different theoretical commitments produce very different ideas about knowledge and the subject, and, by extension, women's studies. In the engagement with psychoanalysis and with questions of learning, however, a different approach to conflict emerged. Now conflict is between the idea and affect within the individual. Conflicts on the outside are understood as made from the conflicts on the inside. Differing from my earlier call for tolerance for the heterogeneity of different epistemological commitments, psychoanalysis does not offer us such a way to make conflict go away, and, thus, frustrates my desire for resolution. Instead, psychoanalysis, as discussed in this dissertation, understands conflicts as a central dynamic in learning.

When studying the intimate dynamics of learning, we met again the desire for coherence and stability, now as the desire of the individual. Desires for coherence and stability are also central to the current institutionalization of women's studies as a field of academic study, as I have argued earlier. By studying the narratives of learning offered by faculty and students in women's studies in interviews, we began to see how

the demands of knowledge are negotiated psychically. We frequently found compromise formations such as, for example, negation. Compromise formations allow the subject to attach both to new ideas but also refuse them.

The work with the interviews in my study raises for me two questions. One concerns how much learning one can expect of individuals, at least the kind of learning that implicates the self, given that this is so fundamentally about changing the self. In the interviews, we see individuals refusing and negotiating the demand for change that is asked of them in the encounter with new ideas. Returning to the larger question of subject formation, this suggests that the force of subjection, which is part of any knowledge and learning, is indeed mitigated psychically by the individual and her desire to hold onto, for example, her sense of coherence, stable sense of self, or beloved older ideas and structures. These forms of refusal also apply to the encounter with new discourses of differences that were privileged in this study. New discourses of social differences and even a deconstructive orientation towards women's studies, which I began to sketch out throughout this dissertation and which I privileged, are experienced by the individual as demand, or as a form of subjection that is negotiated psychically by way of ambivalence, negation, resistance, and refusal. Thus, the ideas and discourses that I favour produce only incomplete attachments. This clearly, frustrates my wish for new knowledge to make a difference.

These kinds of insight into knowledge as ambivalent attachment also raise a second question important for the field of women's studies. These insights made in my study suggest that what is needed in women's studies is perhaps not so much, or not



only, changed knowledges, such as different approaches to differences and identity. Beyond producing another orientation to women's studies, one that privileges, for example, deconstructive knowledges and a self-reflexive approach to women's studies, the insights gained from psychoanalytic theories of learning suggest the need for a changed structure, one that takes the complex processes of learning into consideration and thinks about the institutionalization of women's studies as a problem of learning. Such a changed structure of women's studies, I would argue, would still need to make heterogeneity, incoherence, differences, and instability central because these are qualities of knowledge that also reflect the multiplicity of ways that individuals attach to discourses. Yet, a changed structure of women's studies would also need to take into consideration the limits of individuals to bear unsettlement and the compromises that individuals negotiate between their desires and the demands that ideas make upon them. Furthermore, the observations offered in this study leave me wondering whether women's studies as it is institutionalized today is also a compromise formation – similar to the compromises displayed by the interview participants.

Insights into the limits of learning also return me to my own desire for a changed field of women's studies, one that can tolerate incoherent, incomplete, provisional, or a lack of definition of its subject of study. The insights made in this study confront me with my own desires to institutionalize my view of women's studies and how this would be experienced as a demand by others.

At the same time, I desire to refuse my own insights and to hold to my deep investment in the powers of discursive and conscious change. For example, I still hope

that a discourse of difference as central and foundational to the self and the field of women's studies will open up consideration of differences, as neither problems in need of overcoming nor relegated exclusively the properties of those socially racialized and sexualized as Other. Instead, I hope that knowledge of the slippery ways of difference as both central to the individual and as located in the processes of subject formation will shift how we think about difference. I hope that knowledge does bring change, for example in form of changed reading practices as outlined earlier (Britzman 1995; Ellsworth 1997; Felman 1992; Lather 1991; Morrison 1992; Morrison 1994; Pitt 1995) that begin from the differences of interpretation and seek to make readers accountable for their readings as well as curious of different readings. But beyond developing a pedagogy of different readings, I also hope that we can develop an epistemology and ethic for the field of women's studies that begins from difference and can tolerate the limits of individuals.

### ***Appendix A: Interview Questions***

1. How did you become involved with Women's Studies (WMST)?
2. What is your work within WMST?
3. Tell me how you would describe to somebody outside the programme what WMST is about.
4. Who have you become through your involvement with WMST?
5. Tell me a story of a text or teacher who has been central to your understanding of WMST.
6. Which text(s) do you think people should read in WMST? Which texts would you call central to the field?
7. What is there to be learned from these texts?
8. Please describe to me what you do when you read.
9. What do you do when you meet a new idea, when you learn something new?
10. Tell me story of how you first learned about issues of race/sexuality?
11. Tell me about an experience of learning about/from race and or sexuality in WMST.
12. Tell me about a text, a situation, a teacher or student that made you think differently about race and/or sexuality.
13. Tell me about a situation in which learning about sexuality and race was impossible for you.
14. Tell me about a text that talks about race and sexuality and that you really disliked or disagreed with.
15. What is there to learn in WMST about/from race and/or sexuality?
16. What do you want others in WMST to understand about race and/or sexuality?
17. How would you like WMST to develop in the future?

18. If you had the opportunity to teach anything you wanted within WMST, what would you like to teach?

19. What would you like your students to learn in WMST?

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