

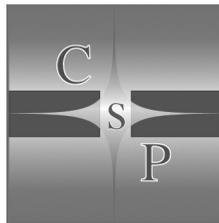
# Representing Culture



Representing Culture:  
Essays on Identity, Visuality and Technology

Edited by

Claudia Alvares



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Representing Culture: Essays on Identity, Visuality and Technology, Edited by Claudia Alvares

This book first published 2008 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-84718-686-6, ISBN (13): 9781847186867

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

### UNDISCIPLINING CULTURAL CRITICISM TODAY

CLAUDIA ALVARES

The essays collected in this book are polyvocal and multifarious in nature, obeying no single, cohesive narrative that defines a particular disciplinary field. If the boundaries between disciplines compartmentalise and contain knowledge within particular camps, the essays here presented serve precisely to critique the traditional confinements of disciplinary mappings. Indeed, such articles situate themselves 'between camps' (Gilroy, 2000) due to their interdisciplinary nature, a characteristic that is connoted with cultural studies.

In effect, 'cultural studies' is an 'undisciplined' discipline due to lacking a defining methodology or pre-established corpus of theory that it can call its very own. This liberty to experiment with a wide variety of theories and methodologies is both its greatest quality and defect, for if on the one hand 'cultural studies' manages to escape the restrictive frameworks of pre-established discourse, engaging in new and fruitful combinations of theories and methodologies, it simultaneously can be criticised for lacking the rigour of a specific academic practice that makes it immediately recognisable.

Cultural studies' main preoccupation is with the analysis of the power and knowledge nexus that frames cultural practices. By being attentive to the multiple manifestations of this relationship in everyday life, it is heir to the Enlightenment legacy of critique, namely the capacity of the individual to transcend contextual specificities by exercising independent judgement. Kant's definition of the Enlightenment as 'man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity' by daring 'to think for himself' (Kant, 1996: 51) survives in contemporary cultural criticism. Foucault's critical ontology of the self is rooted in the Kantian conception of the enlightened subject capable of adopting a critical attitude towards the spatial-temporal context

that moulds his subjectivity. Foucault claims that from the very moment that humanity makes free use of reason, without subjecting itself to external authority or guidance, critique becomes necessary (1984: 38). The role of criticism is therefore that of defining the conditions in which the exercise of reason is legitimate, an objective which entails probing the field of possible experience in 'actuality'.

The essays in this volume have a common denominator in that they seek precisely to explore the field of current 'experience' through the exercise of critique. The current post-9/11 social and political context demands that we reflect on the ubiquitous fear of terrorism on the development of 'cultural studies', if the latter is to survive, albeit in a different form from that which characterised the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies. Whereas the major preoccupation of traditional British cultural studies revolved around the redefinition of orthodox Marxism and the inclusion of feminist and racial issues (Hall, 1992), the prevalent socio-political climate appears to be hostile to the plurality which is at the heart of a 'discipline' that permanently sought to resist totalisation of any kind.

The present context, then, begs prescient analysis of the impact of a ubiquitous securitising discourse on 'modern cosmopolitanism' and 'multiculturalism', both of which are gaining an increased connotation of risk and impending catastrophe in the wake of 9/11. By cosmopolitanism, I am evoking, to use Gilroy's words, 'the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life ...' (2004: xv) in some large metropolitan centres of the West. Gilroy points to the failure of multiculturalism as a pre-condition for the triumph of securocracy (2007: 178). The risk is that 'natural communities of origin', which were once regarded as potentially destructive of national collectivity, may now be considered the source of 'meaningful identities' and 'meaningful ways of life' (Bauman, 1996: 84). Zygmunt Bauman alerts us to the possibility of this danger resulting from the nation-state's failure to perform the task of replacing individual rights with the national interest.

The yearning for meaningful choice can be interpreted as a search for roots in an epoch of postmodern insecurity. Ulrich Beck's concept of risk points towards the growing uncertainties patent in the process of modernisation and the ensuing diffusion of anxiety as a global phenomenon (2000: 49). The implosion of identity and the emergence of fragmented subjectivities entail the acceptance of risk. According to Bauman, because there is no such thing as a risk-free freedom, the current dilemma of individuals is

their 'resentment' of the fact that risk and freedom go hand-in-hand (1996: 85). The resurgence of communitarian ideals thus presents a safe-haven for postmodern insecurities, appealing to traditional values and behavioural rules as a technology of control destined to curb the anxieties of risk-taking.

The recontextualisation of cultural studies that this book attempts occurs along the vectors of identity politics, visual culture, and technology. These areas appear to be the ones in which the hegemony of a certain definition of cultural studies is negotiated due to the prevalent power/knowledge relationship that surfaces in media discourse. Indeed, media studies and cultural studies intertwine to the extent that it is through the media that much of the socially regulated terrain of subjectivity on which cultural studies operates becomes visible.

The affirmation of identity, which risks the recuperation of essentialist categories such as sex, class, and race so as to write back against them, is the subject of the first four essays. Hostile to universal humanism, the postmodern celebration of identities can be accused of defending a decontextualised, 'extra-worldly' realm of difference, thus eliminating recourse to transformative projects that rely on the concrete classification of societies as 'capitalist', 'patriarchal', or 'totalitarian'. Moreover, while acclaim for utopian differences relies on the decentring of the subject, this very decentring – or affirmation of 'otherness' – presupposes an aspiration to a cohesive identity freed from social constraints. As such, the postmodern subject can only reflect on the social discourses that constitute it by seeking recourse in a rooted identity that can be 'routed' in experience (Soper, 1990: 149-52; Lash, 1996: 271-2).

In the opening article, titled 'Identity Politics and the Attack on Knowledge', Daphne Patai takes issue with the emphasis on the politicisation of education in North American universities, a manifestation of which is the pervasive attack on humanistic values patent in identity politics. This has allegedly led to situations in which reasoned argument has been replaced with personal attacks on opponents of those who can lay claim to an 'oppressed' identity. My essay 'Feminist Communitarianism: Recuperating an Ethics of Care' provides a positive take on identity politics by arguing that the liberal feminist values of autonomy and equality are grounded in communitarian feminist ethics. A preoccupation with relationships, with being in connection with others, provides the basis for a communitarian theory that privileges the collective – woman as subject – over the individual. Chris Weedon's 'Constructing the Muslim

Other' 'revisits' Said's analysis of the politics of representation of Islam by the West, examining how the British press portrays Islamic alterity in the wake of the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks. She argues that the media camouflage a wide panoply of social exclusions under the signifier 'Muslim', which preferentially connotes 'political ideology' and 'religious difference' to the detriment of 'much more politically significant social issues'. David Moscovitz's 'Confronting Whiteness', in turn, explores the extent to which the rhetorical invention and cultural production offered by performances of 'postassimilatory Jewish heroism' can facilitate the process of 'cultural recovery' and the repudiation of 'dominant ideology'. Performance is thus depicted as 'resistive' in that it helps 'mitigate' the effects of Althusserian interpellation on the 'policing' of cultural identity. In the past, performative techniques were used by Jews to assimilate into the American way of life, just as in the present such techniques often serve the purpose of negotiating a move away from that very assimilation.

Visual culture and its relation to cultural politics is the theme that inspires the next three essays. Iconic codes of perception are, according to Stuart Hall, more susceptible to being 'read as natural' due to being 'less arbitrary than a linguistic sign': where the link between a linguistic signifier and its signified is purely conceptual, an iconic signifier resembles the thing represented. The ideological value of visual culture thus appears as 'strongly *fixed*'. However, iconic signifiers acquire further ideological connotations by intersecting with 'the deep semantic codes' inherent in a particular culture (Hall, 1996: 132-3). In "'Our disgust will make us stronger": UK Press Representations of PoW's in the 2003 Iraq War', Katy Parry analyses the dominant framing of news photography, arguing that its symbolic role transcends the objective of keeping readers informed on any particular conflict. The fact that a 'recognisable template' is applied to war images confirms their symbolic use for ideological purposes, namely the reinforcement of 'moral and political justifications for war'. Frank Möller also examines the social framing of media images on international relations, in the article 'Public Frames: Security, Persuasion, and the Visual Construction of the International'. Claiming that images are used to either legitimate or criticise politics, he defends that the discipline of International Relations should pay more attention to its own intersections with visual cultural and pictorial memory. In Ana Mendes' 'Heritage Revisited: The Cultural Politics of Heritage in *Goodness Gracious Me*', the focus on visual culture is displaced from the stage of international conflicts to that of British *show biz*. By charting the disruption of heritage work through the narrative strategies patent in the British sitcom *Goodness Gracious Me*, the article attempts to explore how

this series hybridises stereotypes of British Asians, appealing both to a minority British Asian audience as well as to a mainstream one. Mendes evaluates the extent to which the 'trans-ethnic' approach to cultural difference effectively challenges 'nostalgic screen narratives with empowered representation'.

Technology and its relation to disciplinary control is the vector that orients the next two essays. Having provoked changes in the way man relates both to himself as well as to the surrounding world, technology has not only altered man's faculties of perception but his very capacity for control over the immediate environment. The impact of media as 'the extensions of man' (McLuhan, 1999) may serve as the basis for an attempt to redefine the contemporary human condition. In "'It's For You": The Cellular Phone as Disciplinary Technology', Joseph Tighe analyses the effects of the ubiquity of the mobile phone on subject constitution. Transcending the limits of space and time, the cell phone allows for 'perpetual contact' and permanent 'accountability'. As such, the disciplinary reach of technology makes it increasingly difficult to draw a strict boundary between public and private space. José Miranda's 'The End of Distance: The Emergence of Telematic Culture' charts a genealogy of the redefinition of distance and proximity that has been brought about by telematic culture. He argues that while in medieval times the real was structured in relation to that which was distant yet omnipresent – God – in actuality contemporary teletechnologies organise the real on the basis of a reduction of distance and a prevalence of absolute proximity.

Positioned at the end of the volume due to exemplifying the intersections of the diverse vectors that allow cultural studies to reflect on its own practice today, Howard Caygill's article, 'Mnemosyne and the Arcades: Warburg and Benjamin's Legacy', draws attention to the 'vulnerability' of theory in this field of research. Caygill attempts to recuperate the Germanic tradition of cultural science – *Kulturwissenschaft* –, which was lost with the rise of National-Socialism, by situating Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin's work within that very legacy. In keeping with the objective that 'cultural analysis of whatever epoch reflect on its location within modernity', Warburg and Benjamin ultimately point, in a Weberian move, to the intersections between 'religion, politics, and economics' as expressing themselves through the commercial culture of everyday life. Modernity thus appears to be deprived of Enlightenment secularism and invested by the ubiquity of divine presence, haunted by 'sacrificial' and 'self-destructive' manifestations of energy that preside over the conversion of Christianity into capitalism.

Probing the field of possible experience in 'actuality' implies analysing the specificity of the present in light of the legacy of modernity. Caygill's essay shows that the vectors along which I have chosen to organise the articles here collected, namely those of identity politics, visual culture, and technology, consist not in delimited 'camps' but rather in axes that intersect with each other at each instance. The general aim of the book is to indicate new perspectives for the exercise of cultural criticism on the basis of the major issues that confront us today, rather than articulate any canonical viewpoint on traditional cultural studies. In this sense, this body of work is hybrid in that it is preoccupied with accommodating the centrifugal tendencies of postmodern deconstruction, whilst maintaining roots in modern criticism.

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# IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE ATTACK ON KNOWLEDGE<sup>1</sup>

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The use of group identity to push forward political claims for the benefit of all those claiming a particular identity, is, obviously, an entirely legitimate thing to do when it aims at acquiring full political and civil rights that have been denied to individuals because of their perceived or ascribed identity. When, for example, women are denied the vote because they are women, protesting this injustice *as* women is an appropriate response. Similarly when a white-dominated society legally discriminates against blacks because they are black, it makes sense for people to protest against this *as* members of a group. However, it's important to note that something other than naming a group and its suffering is needed for identity politics to work – and that is some strategy by means of which to convince non-group members (who may hold all or most of the power) of the wrongness of the deprivation or discrimination suffered by particular groups. But in our time, identity politics has moved well beyond the arena of gaining rights that have previously been denied. It is now a game constantly played, not least in educational settings. In this essay, I want to address in particular the role of identity politics in education and describe what happens when identity politics is applied to knowledge. My argument here will be that the way in which identity politics is enacted in the academy constitutes an attack on knowledge, an attack that ought to be rejected.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is adapted from two recent essays of mine, 'Speaking as a Human ...', in *The Liberal* # 6 (London, September/October 2005), and 'Feminist Pedagogy Reconsidered', in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Practice*, edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications, 2006), pp. 689-704.

A currently significant form of identity politics in education can be summarised as: ‘Do you have to be one to teach it?’.<sup>2</sup> This dilemma has beset higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences, for some years now, most intensely in ‘identity’ programmes. Aspiring to be a human being learning about other human beings and the world we all live in is simply no longer on the agenda. Instead, we must all declare – with pride or shame – our identities, for it is assumed that there is a direct relationship between our personal identity and our intellectual work (which, moreover, has been redefined as inherently political). Between these two forces – identity on the one hand, and the conscious politicisation of education on the other – academic life has changed profoundly in North America (and I’ll confine my comments to that geographic area, though I am aware, of course, that these issues occur as well in many other parts of the world, where we can see them culminate in hatred and violence).

I want to focus now primarily on the role of identity politics in academic feminism. Having just come out of yet another debate on a women’s studies e-mail list, on the subject of ‘teaching and politicisation’, I am more convinced than ever of the inherent flaws of a feminist pedagogy profoundly rooted – as it explicitly is these days – in identity politics. Why? Because matters of personal identity have a way of driving out reason while inflaming passions. Identity politics in the academic world has produced endless blame cast at the contaminated identity of formerly dominant groups, and genuflection and downright grovelling before those with a claim to being oppressed. This is matched, not surprisingly, by a tireless attempt to ferret out some oppressed identity of one’s own, perhaps to compensate for one’s own ‘complicity’ – the self-criticism is frequently heard in academic circles – with power.

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<sup>2</sup> *Teaching What You’re Not: Identity Politics in Higher Education* (1996), explores these issues in terms primarily of what the editor, Katherine Mayberry, calls ‘credibility’. Mayberry’s definition of identity politics is: ‘the negotiation of and for power derived from minority group affiliation’ (1996: 2). She also affirms that identity must not be endlessly ‘problematized’, since to do so makes it irrelevant (1996: 17). Race, sexual preference, and gender seem to be the identity markers this volume is most committed to respecting. Women’s Studies programmes, by contrast, increasingly use terminology relating to the ‘integrated analysis’ of various identities – though this analysis seems to exist more in the naming than in actuality, and the range of identities covered has a way of expanding. But in the present essay, I am more concerned with the effects on knowledge of identity politics, rather than the issue of classroom dynamics and expertise (or credibility).

These days, an identity as a member of an oppressed group is used as both a bludgeon and a badge: a badge to be relentlessly displayed if you've got it; a bludgeon against those with identities more privileged than your own. But no one can win at the game of identity politics, for the simple reason that we are all vulnerable in our identity, to some degree or other. No one has an unassailable identity. Furthermore, as Jenny Bourne argued years ago when identity politics was on the upswing, we are neither right nor wrong because of 'who we are', or what our ancestors did or did not do, but rather because of 'what we do'.

Unfortunately, it is not Bourne's vision that has won out in academe (or perhaps anywhere else). For feminists by and large continue to stake out the high ground of victimisation, utilising scare statistics – many of our students really believe that 'one in every two women in America will be raped in her lifetime' – as well as hyperbolic and even fraudulent characterisations of male dominance and female oppression. Despite the ever-expanding acquisition of rights and even privileges for women, feminists in the English-speaking world insist on their fragile and demeaned status.

And, in fact, this is understandable as a political tactic. For what happens when one writes or speaks 'as' a member of this or that identity group? The immediate claim, obviously, is to the possession of an authority and credibility that others should not challenge. When I speak as a woman, men had better shut up. When I speak as a heterosexual woman, lesbian women can trump me, but if they're white, they in turn can be trumped by non-white women, lesbian or not. No one has actually articulated the proper rankings of oppressed identities. They seem to shift, responding to the necessities of particular settings and situations. (Noretta Koertge and I, in our book *Professing Feminism*, referred to this as the 'oppression sweepstakes'.) What academic has not had the experience, in the past few decades, of being denounced or lionised for identity reasons? We're all keeping track these days of who we are. And this leads to self-identifications such as one I recall from a feminist anthology, an autobiographical blurb that read: 'I am a white lesbian mother of a biracial handicapped child.' Nearly all bases covered; such a writer's work, presumably, is not to be questioned. Though, on second thought, perhaps she could be attacked on the basis of class.

The role of such statements in political and civil discourse generally I will leave to others to appraise. But it is my conviction that this is no way to conduct academic life or teaching, and that identity politics has a

pernicious effect on education. Much has been written about the resurgent descent into tribalism, and the present historical moment is hardly one in which we can lightly ignore this issue. Why, then, does identity politics continue to have such a profound hold on academic institutions?

Perhaps it's partly a kind of cognitive economy. We sort and categorise all the time. How else could we deal with a confusing and complex reality? But the categories behind that sorting can and do change. Are we better off staffing our faculties with a one-of-each approach? I doubt it. Expertise is acquired through experience, certainly, and our personal identities have some bearing on our experience, but – and this is a crucial point – they are *not* in themselves qualifications. In arguments about affirmative action, the usual line one hears from academic supporters of it is that there's nothing wrong with using it to favour minorities, because in the past 'white men' had the monopoly and this too was a form of affirmative action. But the fact is that those white men were in fierce competition with one another.

If there's a shortage (as there is) of qualified minority men and women to match their percentage among the population at large, there'll be an absence of competition, and the few available people will be much sought after, regardless of their qualifications. What, then, will be the effect on colleagues and students? What happens as others note their relative lack of qualifications and feel obliged to say nothing for fear of being labelled racist or sexist or Eurocentric? Does this help decrease actual discrimination? I doubt it. And so the process of academic hiring and promotion becomes more and more degraded, and the few challengers who emerge can be readily dismissed as reactionaries defending their own 'privilege'. Discussions uncontaminated by the extortion implicit in identity politics fall by the wayside.

Consider the case that occurred in January 2005 of Harvard president Lawrence Summers. At a conference on diversifying the science and engineering workforce, Summers had the audacity to wonder if innate differences might be one reason why fewer women than men pursue careers in science and maths. This conjecture was so distressing to one science professor in the audience that – so she later recounted – she had to flee the room before vomiting or blacking out. And who was this woman? She was biology professor Nancy Hopkins, of MIT, who one hopes can keep a cooler head in the lab. In the late 1990s, Hopkins had complained about discrimination against women scientists at her own university. MIT promptly responded to this complaint by forming a committee to

investigate the charges – with Hopkins herself chosen to chair it. When the committee’s ensuing report confirmed her accusations, the university confessed to institutionalised gender discrimination against its female scientists and made lavish amends. The Dean of the School of Science described the study as ‘data-driven’ – yet refused to release the data. The Dean moved on to the presidency of the University of Toronto, while Hopkins – well acquainted with the identity game – half a dozen years on preferred to play it again, rather than take a more cognitive approach to conjectures she didn’t like to hear.

What is most telling about the Harvard episode is the power of feminists to force not only an apology from Summers but a pledge of \$50 million to make the Harvard faculty more ‘diverse’.

The messiness of this identity game should point to the need for it to be done away with altogether. Yet few people have dared even to imagine such an outcome. One who has is philosophy professor Louis Marinoff who, under the pseudonym Lou Tafler, published a novel, *Fair New World* (1994), designed to offend all possible identities. Drawing on Huxley, Orwell and Plato, Tafler crafted a series of deliciously parodic scenarios. Set in 2084, the novel details the workings of two societies: Masculinist Bruteland, and its opposite, the feminist society of Feminania, each as obviously absurd as the other, and each with its own distorted language designed to suit its politics. Against these extremes, Tafler sets the society called Melior, committed to principles of equality and a way of life governed by reason. Hiring procedures in Melior – Tafler describes the application and interview process in a university philosophy department – are subject to an Employment Quality Act, which disguises the candidate’s personal identity and makes discrimination impossible. No personal information unrelated to job qualification is allowed. Instead, the committee examines data necessary for selecting the most qualified candidate for the department’s needs. The interview, conducted at a distance via a VIDAT (a Voice Interpreter, Digitiser and Transmitter), prevents gender, race, appearance, or any other personal characteristic not relevant to the job, from having any influence on the hiring process. Finally, the search is completed and the chosen candidate accepts the job:

‘Only then did the committee learn that it had engaged an albino bulimic bisexual genetically-challenged troll of corpuscularity and whiteness, with twelve toes and apparently limitless dandruff. But the committee was

delighted, for it had hired the best-qualified philosopher it could find to suit its needs, which lay primarily in metaphysics and epistemology.' (1994: 167)

When I first read this novel, I found it a little tougher on feminist idiocies than on masculinist ones. But over the years it has come to seem justified for Tafler to have erred in that direction. It is simply not the case that a denizen of Bruteland would be hired today in an academic setting, while it is obvious that aspiring inhabitants of Feminania are pushing their claims as never before. Melior's employment proceedings are nowhere on the horizon, and further off today even than they were forty years ago, as revealed by my university's recent hiring in the social sciences of a lesbian professor (whose supporters also acknowledged that she wasn't the best candidate for the job), on the grounds that 'our students need a lesbian teacher'. And in language and literature departments, there has been a steady increase of faculty members who 'are what they teach' in quite specific ways, a policy that will backfire one of these days.

Today, as I and others have documented at great length, many feminist educators don't shrink from making tendentious and often ill-supported arguments about science and biology, which they pass on to uninformed students. If this can occur in scientific fields, it should be obvious how vulnerable other fields are to feminist endeavours to reshape education.

It should be – but isn't – needless to say that the integrity of education is always in danger when politics or ideology supersede rational inquiry and the careful consideration of evidence. Twentieth-century history has demonstrated this peril in abundance, and it is distressing that academic feminists have not taken these cautionary instances to heart.

Still, one may ask: Does it really matter that virtually all feminist teachers believe teaching to be invariably political? That they hold fairness and claims of objectivity in research to be mere illusions, if not outright frauds? I answer: Yes, definitely it matters, because teachers who hold these beliefs are left incapable of even attempting to recognise their own biases, let alone transcend them. Worse, they are programmatically committed to propagating their biases, which is exactly what they do in the 'feminist classroom'. Thus Women's Studies teachers openly declare their objective to make students confront their 'privilege' or recognise the

‘institutional’ causes of their unprivileged status.<sup>3</sup> And, in the name of multi- or interdisciplinarity, they pass on to their students all manner of research the merits of which they (the faculty) are not able to evaluate but which is accepted or rejected on political grounds. In such classes, students rarely encounter criticisms of feminist-inspired work, nor are they encouraged to develop the capacity of independent judgement and appraisal that might challenge the feminist presuppositions on which their courses rest.<sup>4</sup> Women’s Studies prides itself on constantly challenging Western society – but the one thing it shrinks from challenging is its own pet ideas. So much so that one well-known feminist scholar actually suggested expanding anti-harassment politics to include what she labelled ‘anti-feminist intellectual harassment’ – which, in her description, basically meant any criticism made of women or feminist ideas.

A recent report by the National Women’s Studies Association, entitled *Women’s Studies Program Administrators’ Handbook*,<sup>5</sup> actually has an article on ‘Responding to Right-Wing Attacks on Women’s Studies Programmes’ in which they name an organisation (with which I’m involved) whose sole function is to defend First Amendment rights on campus. That is, it defends the rights to freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom of religion. To defend free speech, in the United States these days, is to be labelled ‘Right Wing’.

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<sup>3</sup> These examples can be found on the WMST-List’s discussion of ‘poverty activities’ in the classroom. As one professor put it: ‘The beauty of the “Life Happens” exercise is that privileged students can see how they’ve benefited from their privilege and those who have struggled with these issues can get beyond the self-blame/self-doubt instilled in them by the individualistic notion of the “American Dream”. When students are shown how institutional forces control more of their life circumstances than often their own efforts, it is very freeing for them – I’ve also seen this exercise promote a lot of social activism from students’ (J. Hatten to WMST-List, August 24 2005).

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting example of a Women’s Studies reader that does register a bit of criticism of the field, see Sheila Ruth’s *Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women’s Studies* (1998). Ruth includes my essay ‘What’s Wrong with Women’s Studies?’ and positions it between one by Susan Faludi about ‘pod feminists’ and ‘pseudofeminists’ and one by Suzanne L. Cataldi dismissing charges of ‘male bashing’ in Women’s Studies. Even so, she does not trust students to draw their own conclusions: Her introductory comments to my essay alert students that my critiques ‘fit within the genre delineated in the previous selection by Susan Faludi’. By contrast, her agreement with Faludi and Cataldi is evident in the phrasing of her introductions to their essays.

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <http://www.nwsa.org/PAD/downloads/WSHandbook2006.pdf>

Why? Because identity politics has created a reality in which *who says what to whom* counts more than what is said – thus one wants to protect the speech of some while suppressing the speech of others. At my own university, a high level administrator a few years ago explained that the speech code the university was at that time embracing aimed at protecting the right to free speech of historically oppressed groups but *not* of the historically powerful groups: in other words, blacks could call whites names, but not the reverse (Patai and Koertge, 2003).<sup>6</sup>

As scholars who formerly devoted years to the advancement of feminism in the academy express their dissatisfaction with where politicised teaching and the identity politics that is an essential component of it have taken us, they too can expect to be vilified by the feminist academics still defending their turf. Though what such scholars really want is to see research and teaching liberated from feminism's (and other identity groups') political advocacy, deviation from the feminist educational agenda is enough to have one's writing dismissed out of hand and one's character impugned.

Despite this predictable response, some well-known senior scholars closely associated with feminism in the academy have in recent years felt moved to object to the politicising of education. In the Summer 2000 issue of *Signs*, devoted to dozens of essays on feminism and the academy, Elaine Marks, a widely-recognised feminist critic (who until her death in late 2001 was Germaine Brée Professor of French and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison), complained that she was beginning to feel 'isolated in Women's Studies', where she had come to be perceived as 'a closet conservative'. Why? Because she deplored the prevalence of identity politics in literature courses and now agreed with Harold Bloom who wrote that 'to read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgement, to read at all'. Marks confessed that she herself used to have politically correct responses, the kind that seek, in any work of literature, traces of the dreaded -isms (sexism, racism, etc.). But she was no longer satisfied with such approaches. Hence her decision to air in public some of what she considered to be 'feminism's perverse effects' in the academy.

'It is no simple matter,' Marks concluded, '... to criticise certain tendencies in Cultural Studies or Women's Studies or Ethnic Studies

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<sup>6</sup> See Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Professing Feminism: Education and Indoctrination in Women's Studies* (2003), for a discussion of this episode.

without being accused of participating in a conservative political agenda' (2001: 1163). And she is right. In the topsy-turvy world of academe, to call for an education not bound to a political agenda *is* tantamount to being 'conservative'. Moreover, the fact that 'conservative' has become a label of instant dismissal in academe exemplifies the ideological rigidity that now disfigures the one arena that was supposed to fearlessly and openly explore ideas and knowledge claims on their *own* merits.

The philosopher Susan Haack is one critic whose work should be indispensable reading for every feminist who aspires to scholarly integrity. Her 1998 book *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* is filled with challenges to the notion that a 'feminist' perspective strengthens intellectual work, the sorts of challenges routinely ignored in Women's Studies classrooms. To Haack, 'the politicisation of inquiry ... whether in the interests of good political values or bad, is always epistemologically unsound' (1998: 119).<sup>7</sup> Haack considers that '[t]he rubric "feminist epistemology" is incongruous on its face, in somewhat the way of, say, "Republican epistemology"' (1998: 124).<sup>8</sup> She explains:

'The profusion of incompatible themes proposed as "feminist epistemology" itself speaks against the ideas of a distinctively female cognitive style. But even if there were such a thing, the case for feminist epistemology would require further argument to show that women's "ways of knowing" ... represent better procedures of inquiry or subtler standards of justification than the male. And, sure enough, we are told that insights into the theory of knowledge are available to women which are not available, or not easily available, to men.' (1998: 126)

Dismissing 'the egregious assumption that one thinks with one's skin or one's sex organs', Haack in another essay stresses that

'this form of argument, when applied to the concepts of evidence, truth, etc., is not only fallacious; it is also pragmatically self-undermining ... For if there were no genuine inquiry, no objective evidence, we couldn't know what theories are such that their being accepted would conduce to women's interests, nor what women's interests are.' (1998: 118)

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<sup>7</sup> For an example of work that incorporates critiques of science without falling prey to what she calls the 'New Cynicism', see Haack's recent book *Defending Science – Within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism* (2003).

<sup>8</sup> See also Noretta Koertge's essay, 'Critical Perspectives on Feminist Epistemology', in Hesse-Biber's *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Practice*.

In recent years, I have not seen any evidence that Women's Studies teachers have modified their antagonism towards claims to positive knowledge and to scientific reasoning in general.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, they are now finding themselves in some company they may not choose to keep. As 'creation science', recast these days as 'intelligent design', extends its reach and threatens the teaching of basic science (reduced to a competing ideology) in the United States, its defenders make comments about the status of evolution – that it is 'just a theory', for example, though one that claims for itself a privileged status – which are remarkably similar to the feminist depreciation of science.<sup>10</sup> Like creationists, many feminists have shown contempt for evidence – when it did not support their preconceptions. They may misunderstand science (perhaps intentionally), denounce its procedures, and ignore its commitment to self-correction – all in order to be able to characterise it as ideology, and not as honest a one as their own feminist ideology which acknowledges its political interests.

But the rejection of the ideals of objective knowledge (however imperfectly attainable), and the deployment of the admitted limitations of knowledge as a weapon against past knowledge, to be dismissed as the product of patriarchal dead white men, along with the disdain for standards of evidence and logic, gain feminists only an illusory victory. It

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<sup>9</sup> In July 2005, in response to negative comments made on the WMST-List to a query of mine regarding 'Darwinian feminism', I received an interesting private message from a student of bioinformatics in Oregon, who had encountered hostility in Women's Studies students to any discussion of evolution: 'As a biologist/computer scientist-in-training I am deeply concerned by the near total absence of women in my classes. In fact, the more rigour required the fewer women are interested in the courses. To wit, in some of the more 'woody' biology courses I've taken there was, what seemed to me, a reasonable representation of women. In my calculus, programming, and the more mathematical of my biology courses (like population genetics) there are far fewer women. The issue concerns me because I believe that, without realising it, some feminists are actively discouraging women from studying scientific subjects and then encouraging young women (I am nearly forty, returning to school) to hold forth on subjects that they know nothing about – or in many cases would be better off if they didn't know anything about the subject than the wild inaccuracies they hold now.'

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, PBS' NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, 'Evolution Debate', March 28, 2005. For a thorough analysis of the flaws of the controversy surrounding the teaching of 'intelligent design', which has implications for the feminist attack on 'positive' knowledge generally, see Jerry Coyne, 'The Faith That Dare Not Speak its Name', *The New Republic*, August 22 2005.

may leave them free to defend and promote their agenda, but it also renders them vulnerable to ignorant or politically-motivated calumnies directed against them. For how will feminists respond when, with the next cultural turn, we are once again told that the blood of menstruating women causes milk to curdle? Aren't standards of evidence and objective investigation crucial to all women (to all people) as they attempt to combat prejudice and ignorance, regardless of who displays it?

I have not seen Women's Studies teachers rush to protect academic freedom and uninhibited class discussion for those whose views contradict their own. Quite the contrary, as I have documented at length (Patai, 1998).

As many commentators have observed, feminism itself could not even have got started without embracing claims resting on *objective* conditions and drawing on supposedly *unbiased* research said to accurately assess the situation of women *vis-à-vis* men. In light of feminism's path, therefore, the present assertions of feminist pedagogy seem not only tendentious, but disingenuous. The feminist promotion of subjectivity, of 'standpoint epistemology' and of the paradigm that 'everything is political' is, thus, at best situational. It hardly justifies the pedagogy that has grown up around it.

Of course Women's Studies is not alone in promoting these habits. Postmodernist fashions have made a variety of vulnerable intellectual and pedagogical approaches acceptable and widely used. And this is the case even among feminist critics of postmodernism who while decrying its alienating and pretentious vocabulary as well as its distance from everyday political struggles, nonetheless adopt its practices whenever they prove convenient. Postmodernism's indiscriminate rejection of significant distinctions, its obsession with power, and its habit of dogmatic assertion (the very thing, ironically, that postmodernism claims to 'interrogate') have influenced feminist academics' own critiques, though of course this at times contravenes their activist agenda, which would be meaningless without some firm convictions about the world and our ability to communicate reliably knowledge about it.

What all this means in practice is that there prevails an opportunism at the heart of feminist pedagogy today. To me, the evidence for this conclusion is utterly convincing. I also believe, however, that the many failures of this state of affairs are becoming more and more evident. Thus, feminist pedagogy, if it wants to have any credibility outside its own clique-like

circles, will have to begin to hold itself to a higher standard. Only professors dedicated more to their teaching than to their politics – and able to tell the difference – provide us with reason for hope.

To commit oneself to fostering the intellectual development of one's students is no small or unworthy task. And, contrary to what many feminists believe, this task requires something other than political advocacy based upon identity. There are vital distinctions to be drawn between informed and conscientious teaching and attempting to persuade students to sign on to a particular political vision replete with identity politics. The important role of educators is precisely not to deny but to embrace these distinctions, to observe them, indeed to cherish them.

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# FEMINIST COMMUNITARIANISM: RECUPERATING AN ETHICS OF CARE

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## I. Introduction

Inspired by ethics, feminist writing grapples with issues that relate to the improvement of human relationships and respect for alterity, seeking to avoid the totalising logic that Adorno considered to distinguish the dialectic of the Enlightenment. Feminist ethics thus implies the will to combat assimilation of alterity by an identity logic that would annul ‘difference and singularity’ (Cornell, 1995: 78), pointing to ways of implementing the Aristotelian ‘good life’ in the form of a non-violent relationship with the Other. A preoccupation with relationships, with being in connection with others, provides the basis for a communitarian theory that privileges the collective – woman as subject – over the individual. However, feminist ethics is also disputed as an area inherent in liberal feminism, sponsoring the values of autonomy, equality, and individual rights as the foundation for a just society. From a liberal perspective, communitarian feminist ethics would draw close to the imposition of morality, that is, a system regulating ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ forms of behaviour. The reason for this parallelism between communitarianism and morality resides in Kantian contractarianism, which holds the social contract to obligate ‘every lawmaker to frame his laws so that they might have come from the united will of an entire people’ (Kant, in Hampton, 2005: 286). Echoing the Kantian dictum according to which one ought to act only on that maxim which could at the same time be willed as universal law, the ‘practical defence of public reason’ (Cornell, 1995: 79) thus risks, from a liberal perspective, annihilating the very right to freedom of free will.

This chapter defends a communitarian approach to feminist ethics, arguing that the liberal values of autonomy and equality are grounded in ‘relationship’ within the context of feminist theory. The affirmation of self

through independence in the public and private spheres, namely through financial and professional autonomy, as well as the struggle against discrimination in favour of justice are rooted in a desire for recognition by alterity that characterises 'being in relationship'.

Liberal feminism argues that a 'person's right to the self-representation of her sexuate being' ensues from 'the recognition of us all as free and equal persons' (Cornell, 2005: 417). Although this right is incompatible with any form of moral imposition by the State or social institutions regarding 'correct' forms of behaviour, it nevertheless requires 'a representational device that postulates all persons as free and equal' as the basis for a just society (Cornell, 2005: 417). Because certain modes of behaviour appear to contradict the foundations of justice, such a representational device alerts people to the need for change.

'... these kinds of changes would take time. More important, no one would be legally, let alone violently, forced to change. Supposedly, the fear of feminism has been that it forces people into one sexual model because that is the only way to end male domination. But the imaginary domain insists, on the contrary, that as a matter of right we should not impose any model of sexual life but rather that people should be allowed to craft their own. To give people this freedom does not mean that they have to use it in any particular way.' (Cornell, 2005: 416)

Understood as a utopian ideal of collective life which attempts to demonstrate the 'reasonableness' of living according to that principle, Cornell's 'imaginary domain' seeks to uphold freedom as a supreme value. As such, it draws away from 'legal definitions' of femininity, subordinating the existence of any legal regulation of sexual conduct to the recognition of freedom and equality as values distinctive of all persons. It is difficult to accept, however, liberal feminism's criticism of morality, which distances any utopian ideal of freedom from an imposition of 'correct' modes of behaviour on others. In effect, by adopting the principle of freedom as universal law, human beings cease to be free. By placing the law before the spontaneity of relationship, the liberal argument integrates the particular into the impersonal order of the totality. As such, it cannot make space for ethics, comprehended as the particularity of each instance, in opposition to the universal concept of the law (Rose, 1997: 115). The implications are that the liberal viewpoint regulates relationships through the criteria of justice.

‘I will contend that distributive justice, understood in its deepest sense, is inherent in any relationship that we regard as morally healthy and respectable – particularly in a friendship.’ (Hampton, 2005: 281)

By postulating the necessity to establish a connection between feminism and John Rawls’ theory of justice, liberal feminism allegedly is indebted to Kantian contractarianism. As such, it advocates the concepts of ‘universalisability’ and ‘reversibility’ as an integral part of (moral) judgement.<sup>1</sup>

‘The decider is to initially decide from a point of view *that ignores his identity* (veil of ignorance) under the assumption that decisions are governed by maximising values from a viewpoint of rational egoism in considering each party’s interest.’ (Kohlberg, in Benhabib, 1997b: 160)

Benhabib questions the idea that thinking from the perspective of the other can further the concepts of ‘reciprocity, equality, and fairness’, equated by Rawls with ‘reasoning behind a “veil of ignorance”’ (1992b: 160). In fact, those concepts are allegedly converted into the abstract and decontextualised perspective of the generalised other as opposed to that of a concrete other.

Carol Gilligan’s attempt to distinguish between a feminine ‘ethics of care’ and a more masculine ‘ethics of justice’ on the basis of interviews with children and adults regarding issues centred on morality has sparked a great deal of debate between liberal and communitarian feminists. While an ethics of justice is centred on ‘the human being’s right to do as he pleases without interfering with somebody else’s rights’, an ethics of care privileges a sense of responsibility and obligation to oneself and to others (Gilligan, 1997: 148-9). Arguing that women tend to perceive morality in ‘interpersonal’ rather than autonomous terms – a characteristic that leads them to equate goodness with ‘helping and pleasing others’ – Gilligan defends a scale in moral development that would cease to consider individuation and the ideal of justice as corresponding to a higher stage than that of ‘care and sensitivity to the needs of others’. She criticises Lawrence Kohlberg’s description of the development of moral judgement

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<sup>1</sup> Rather than connoting the absolutism of the categorical imperative, the ‘universalisability’ and ‘reversability’ sponsored by liberal feminism would presumably be guided by the relativism of aesthetic judgement. Rooted in Kant’s ‘enlarged mentality’, aesthetic judgement implies ‘the ability to see things not only from one’s point of view but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present’ (Arendt, 1961: 220-1).

for implying that women are ultimately more immature than men, due to their greater preoccupation with ‘responsibility and relationships’ than ‘rights and rules’ (1997: 147). Due to women construing their biographical narratives on the basis of alterations in their ‘understanding and activities of care’, their mode of moral judgement is considered to be more intercontextual than normative. From this viewpoint, an ethics of care allows for the definition of a moral problem by contextualising the ‘motivations’ and ‘history’ of the concrete individual as opposed to a ‘generalised other’ (Benhabib, 1997b: 160).

The ethics of justice inherent in liberal feminism is premised on equality and fairness, drawing close to morality in the imposition of a ‘correct’ form of behaviour on all persons. This perspective considers that an ethics of care cannot be ethical, because it is ‘born of self-abnegation rather than self-worth’ (Hampton, 2005: 283). As such, relationships which contain an element of exploitation cannot be just and are therefore unethical.

‘However, by requiring that a policy be one that we could all agree to, the contractarian doesn’t merely ask each of us to insist on our own worth; he also asks us ... to recognise and come to terms with the fact that others are just as valuable as ourselves.’ (Hampton, 2005: 291)

If liberal feminism thus appears to distance itself from Hobbesian contractarianism and utilitarianism, according to which human beings cooperate only for instrumental purposes, that is, for furthering their own desires and self-interest, it nevertheless appeals to a Kantian substitutionalist ethics of placing oneself in the place of others. In the process, the other is ‘disembedded’ and ‘disembodied’ from a life narrative that would shed light on her moral understanding (Benhabib, 1997b: 160). Further, by advocating an ethics of justice, liberal feminism reproduces Kohlberg’s highest stage in the scale of moral development that privileges the masculine values of individuation and separation as synonymous with maturity.

## **II. The Essentialism-Anti-Essentialism Debate**

Postmodern feminism’s hostility to an ethics of care ensues from its opposition to essentialism. The idea that the propensity towards care and nurturing remains a characteristic distinctive of women is considered a mode of ideologically reproducing socially conditioned gender roles. A solid, coherent definition of gendered identity can only be defined oppositionally against characteristics one lacks. As such, so the argument