American Feminist Theory


Abstract:

This essay is a survey of some issues that have invigorated theoretical contests among American feminists, especially in the last two decades. I review these debates and suggest that American feminist writers are contemplating deep and important matters that have arisen, or can emerge, in contemporary American society. Counter-arguments to the project of contesting and the general feminist engagement with postmodernism, presented by both feminists and non-feminists in America, are also surveyed. One can note, on the whole, that for many American feminists, the so-called "theory-wars" have been worth fighting for they are being perceived as contributing to an evolving feminist culture and politics.

Introduction

Recent trends in American feminist theory constitute a huge project with two main thrusts so far. In the first place, by means of vast retrievals and redeployment in historical, anthropological political, philosophical and literary-cultural studies, the map of researchable factors relevant to women, the given as it were, has become multivariate. The objects or subjects of oppression themselves are seen and acknowledged to be more diverse, such that the phenomena being investigated and theorized are far more complex than they were thirty years ago. Since that historical launching of second wave feminism in the United States, American feminists have had to acknowledge the wider universe of women on American soil, as including women of color, women of border-cultures, women of different sexual preference, women of lower economic classes. It has been shown that oppression and differential treatment as experienced by these women differ considerably from that of, for example, white, middle class heterosexual women. This recognition has created problems for generalizing and theorizing the condition of women in American society. The whole project of theory-formation itself--in traditional parlance, what it means or has meant, to observe, read, analyze, generalize-predict--is up for grabs for American feminists.

In the second place, in the new ways of thinking that characterize American feminist theory, in calling for identifiable perspectives or standpoints to replace the points of view from nowhere the so-called objective stance, the feminist theorizing project(s) has altered the conceiving and therefore the perceiving of the phenomena. Which is to say that both ways of seeing and ways of conceiving are undergoing radical revisions by American feminist theorists. They are reopening hard philosophical questions about what it is to perceive, to infer, to know and to say or speak. In so doing, they are challenging not simply epistemological norms and traditions, but also ontological
and metaphysical theories of the self subjectivity, identity. A favorite concept of feminism, namely "gender" has been vigorously critiqued; the concept of "woman" has never been more elusive than it is now.

It has been remarked that in 1980, "there was no professional or indexical category called 'feminist theory'; rather there were (a few) people `doing theory,' and doing it as feminists."(1) Since then, feminist theory has appeared or is emerging in practically all disciplines in the colleges and universities of the United States, where, according to Catherine Stimpson, it has "matured quickly" but now "tends to adhere to a specific academic discipline, especially literature, history and philosophy."(2) The phenomenon of the so-called "academization" of American feminist theory has evoked enough skepticism among feminists in and out of the academy as to constitute a contentious issue among them. A frequent argument has it that the academy can insulate feminist ideas from the wider popular culture and consciousness thus limiting the practical impact of feminism on institutions of power. Some feminists view this as a betrayal of the political goals of the feminist movement. For others the academy is a site of politics, therefore theory developed there need not be irrelevant to practical interventions in the wider social formation.(3) This is an issue that might very well engage American feminists for many decades to come especially as they continue to review the past and future of women's studies in American universities.(4)

Another contentious issue among American feminists is the defining and developing of theory, itself. There appears to be little agreement about how to "do" theory, whether theory can or should be done in the first place, and what its practical uses are or can be, for feminist strategies in the academic disciplines as well as in the wider American social formation. In her book, Theory in Its Feminist Travels: Conversations in US Women's Movements, Katie King asks, "Feminist theory is my `field'; but what sort of field is it with its central object in such dispute?"(5) These disputes have been situated within a larger philosophical context in the encounter between feminism and postmodernism where feminists have raised, in the words of Jane Flax, "important metatheoretical questions about the possible nature and status of theorizing itself."(6) The questions posed by the editors of the anthology, Feminists Theorize The Political, Judith Butler and Joan Scott, are characteristic:(7)

What qualifies as "theory"? Who is the author of "theory"? Is it singular? ... What are the political implications of using "theory" for feminist analysis considering that some of what appears under the sign of "theory" has marked masculinist and Eurocentric roots? Is "theory" distinct from politics? Can any politics be derived from "theory"?

American feminists addressing all or some of these issues have produced interesting accounts of what feminist theory can be, ought to be, and what it can achieve. The published material on issues puzzling and troubling the nature and status of theory has grown exponentially in recent years exposing the multiple valences of American feminist theorizing, whose many-travels and openendedness are at once a source of strength for some, and puzzlement or cynicism for others. Some of the debates, which may or may not be over, will be reviewed here.
But it is not just the concept of "theory" and the methods of theory making that are in dispute. A possibly more contentious issue is the subject of feminist theory itself, namely the notions of "woman" and "gender". At the beginning of the second wave of American feminism, in the late sixties and early seventies, the notions of "woman" and of "woman oppressed" were not seen as problematical. The critical aim of feminist analysis was to provide an account of paradigmatically "oppressed woman". In the last two decades of the twentieth century, however, the concepts of "woman", "sex", "gender" and "oppression" have all been revisited, revised, reconceptualized by American feminists, yielding a multiplicity of identity debates at the heart of feminist theory's so-called "paradigm wars". From these debates there emerged also a gender-skepticism that some feminists have found paralyzing both for theorizing and political action. American feminists continue to be divided on the problem of the subject which according to Seyla Benhabib is "the most important theoretical issue to emerge from the feminism/postmodernism debates of the 1980s."(8)

The analytical work that has gelled, as it were, in the last decade of the twentieth century constitutes what could be called "contrapuntal feminism", in so far as it consists of themes and counter themes about what feminists were doing and how better to do what needed to be done. The last decade of the twentieth century has been a period of deep reflexivity about the content and uses of theory with feminists divided in often acrimonious debates on a number of issues that seemed settled in the 70s through the mid 80s. There are also questions about the place where most theory is occurring, namely the academy.

The recently (de)constructed house of American theoretical feminism is full of contentions which I shall be discussing here. Since the literature published in the last two decades alone is vast, this must be a highly selective review. It is not simply the proverbial limitations of space that impose selection but more truly the limits of one's own knowledge.(9) It is important to acknowledge that there is, finally, too much in American feminism to capture it all in one essay. This is an achievement of the last two decades and can be taken as a positive sign of the flourishing of feminist thought. The fact that the literature is packed with debates and disagreements, however, has caused many to wonder about what it is feminist analysis has achieved. The often feisty contestations among feminist theorists and activists have evoked mixed responses in feminists themselves as well as in the wider, largely non-feminist, dominant culture of the United States. Even feminists clearly sympathetic to what has been called the "postmodern turn" and the use of poststructuralist approaches for the analysis of gender have expressed wonderment about the contests and differences among feminists. The outspoken advocate of poststructuralist thought, Joan Wallach Scott, expresses doubts about some feminist polemics. Commenting recently on Mary Hawkesworth's essay "Confounding Gender" Scott notes that the often violent theoretical polemics among feminists could be, pessimistically speaking, a "correlate of political impotence, the last gasps of a movement ... about to be subsumed into the mainstream". Skeptically speaking, "one could say that these 'critiques' are nothing more than the signs of an intense careerism," and she refers to the scarcity in resources and positions in the area of feminist studies which requires that one either publish or perish. At the same time, she observes more optimistically, feminist contentions may be "a sign of the growing pains of a maturing field"(10)
This essay reviews some theoretical developments in American feminism in the nineties, a period of great contestation among feminists. Narratives of feminism's fall continue to be told by those who see "feminism ... lured from its true goals by internecine squabbles". For some, possibly the majority of feminists in the academy, it is still possible to see in these debates the evolution of "a more sophisticated stage of theoretical consciousness." There are, arguably, specific factors that figure persuasively in defense of this view. Contestation in general could be viewed as a good thing. The editors of Conflicts in Feminism, Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, observe in their Introduction that "the activity of `doing theory'--in feminism as elsewhere--reflects many different starting points, and many different goals ... it is not obvious that consensus is either necessary, desirable or even possible."

There is also the fact of the brief life of American feminist theorizing. For, whether one locates its beginnings in the nineteenth century in the first wave of the women's movement, or in the twentieth century with the publication of academic texts, or creative literature compared to the long life of western philosophy and science, feminist theory is a newcomer. Whatever the moment of the rise of feminist theorizing--a historical-normative issue that continues to be contested among feminists--as newcomer it undertakes a two-pronged critique. There is first the critique of mainstream modes of concept and theory formation in the so-called hard and soft sciences, and, second, of traditional conceptions of the relation of theory to practice. Judging from the history of western philosophy and science, such foundational critique evokes multiple points of view, that is, consensus at the start may be taken to be secondary to the expression of the critique(s) or perspectives--whose soundness can be determined only after they are articulated. Thus the more optimistic view expressed by Scott, as noted above, might be closer to and more descriptive of, the "newcomer" position of feminist theory. It may be possible to argue in defense of the "varieties of feminist theory", to rephrase William James, as a measure of theoretical maturity. In any case, the view that contesting may mean greater theoretical consciousness deserves a fighting chance given that the doubters and skeptics of American feminist theory have inundated the media and the culture in American society pronouncing feminism either dead or of interest only to older, established professional women.

Before reviewing some of the ways the notions of theory, woman and gender, subjects and politics, have been developed and contested among American feminists in the nineties it might be well to look briefly at the uneasy place of feminist thought in American culture and the academy itself. It is not the specific problematic of women's studies that I shall address here which deserves a review of its own, but rather the more general discomfort with recent feminist thought in contemporary American society, evidenced in a wider cultural symbolic or structure of feeling. I draw on diverse feminist critiques of feminist theory, as well as the media representation of American feminism which in the main has been unfriendly to feminism in recent years.

Feminist Theory in the Academy and in American Culture

1. Academization of feminist theory: critics within and without
Skepticism about feminist theoretical projects differs in important ways between feminists and non-feminists in America. The latter are skeptical mainly because they are dubious about feminism tout court in American culture (e.g., feminism is rejected as a hopelessly utopian program), the former worry mainly about the uses of theory to feminism's political programs, and its academic distance from a wider social consciousness. Many feminist nonacademic writers, novelists and poets would endorse the recently expressed impatience of science-fiction novelist Joanna Russ: "far too much recent academic feminist theory has totally left behind any concern with anyone's real experience and consists largely of people theorizing from other people's theories about yet more theory." (15) But, as already noted, feminists working in the academy have expressed a similar discomfort associated with the "academization" of feminism in the United States and the "professionalizing", as it were, of feminist thought.

In the seventies, interdisciplinary women's studies programs in American colleges and universities provided a home for a maverick feminist theory. For so-called radical feminists, theorizing also occurred in the active, loosely organized consciousness-raising groups of the 60s and 70s where women's varied voices were heard and women's experience became a source of knowledge. According to Catherine MacKinnon, the "Women's Movement ... remains more practice than theory. This distinguishes it from academic feminism ... We know things with our lives, and live that knowledge, beyond anything any theory has theorized." (16) That theory-making today arises largely out of a specific academic discipline is seen as having a further negative consequence. To quote Catherine Stimpson: "each discipline imposes its own regulatory pattern of rewards and punishments, its own criteria of 'good' and 'bad' work". As a result, feminist theory's "connections with artists, 'crazies,' spiritualists, and 'nonacademic' feminists are far more tenuous than they were in the 1960s", which means that the voice of feminism in popular culture and consciousness may be lost. (17) Stimpson expresses her worries but does not succumb to gloom or a rejection of feminist theory. For some feminist scholars, however, like MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, academic theorizing marks the failure of the theory and politics of feminism. Doubts are expressed, indeed receive an imprimatur, by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese who announces sharply in the title of her book: Feminism Is Not The Story of My Life: How Today's Feminist Elite Has Lost Touch with the Real Concerns of Women (1996).

Sara Evans also comments on what she calls the "town-gown gulf"(18) According to Evans, the proliferation in recent decades of journals, women's caucuses and committees in every professional association while indicating a growing sophistication of American feminism, "has created distance between `academics' and `activists'," they do not seem to speak the same language (193). At the same time, Evans acknowledges that the in the last decade of the twentieth century the model of consciousness-raising by whose means women regained their voices in the 60s and 70s, is no longer sufficient as a mode of public interaction. Women's voices must be linked to "public conversational voices" and feminists must theorize the "interaction of voices" both in the classroom and more widely, (195). She remarks that conversations may be contentious, but this noisiness in the classroom and elsewhere--listening with empathy and responding to different voices, allows the exercise of political skills and converts the classroom from a "safe place" to a "free space". She
envisioned a "moving from safety to freedom,"(197) as a necessary step in American women's studies in the twenty-first century.

Openness and freedom in feminist academic women's studies, however, have been variously understood. There are disparate views, among younger American feminists trained in the '80s and '90s interdisciplinary women's studies programs, about what sophisticated feminist studies can yield.

2. Postfeminism and the media

Calling themselves "third-wave" feminists some younger American feminists have come to embrace the term "postfeminism" to indicate the need for a good (as opposed, presumably, to a bad) "viable feminism". The work of Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe and Rene Denfield, argues, in different ways, for a reclaiming of "good" feminist practice that does not focus on women as "victims" but on their achieved power. In her review of these popular authors, "Reading between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a 'Postfeminist' Moment", Deborah Siegel, herself a younger feminist, distinguishes between two different invocations of the term "postfeminism". She writes in a note that when the term "postfeminism" is invoked in the academy it refers to the challenging ways poststructuralist, postmodernist and multiculturalist modes of analysis have informed feminist theory and practice. When the term is invoked in the popular press, however, it "most often describes a moment when women's movements are ... no longer moving, no longer vital, no longer relevant ... are embarrassingly out of touch."(19) Siegel suggests that younger feminists could face up to these challenges, or yield to providing a product for wide consumption. She remarks that in their discussions of feminism, Wolf, Roiphe and Denfield seem to be dealing "with a product rather than a process",(20) something complete and finished rather than ongoing. "Product-feminists" as they may be called, are making it in the media, while "process-feminists" are projected in the media, whenever they are, as laboring towards dead-ends. This is an important issue for American feminism and its place in American culture, the question that is, of what material, what contests, what symbols, the media and culture in America can handle, project or celebrate.

It is a well known fact that American feminists do not appear on talk shows (with few exceptions, e.g., Gloria Steinem), do not usually publish in popular periodicals, do not, in fact, have a favorable public image. It has been suggested by Catherine Stimpson that feminism goes beyond the flame of the media: "The stony truth seems to be that the TV camera, in ordinary times, best captures monoliths, two-sided conflicts (football, mud wrestling, presidential horse races), and celebrities."(21) As feminism in the United States became a multisided phenomenon, embracing and theorizing diversity and differences among women, engaging in theoretical conflicts and polemics, the mass media pronounced its death (most recently again by Time, June 29, 1998, which features on its cover the query "Is Feminism Dead?). One wonders whether feminism in its theoretical varieties has become too controversial for mainstream media in American society and culture. It is worth pondering the matter not least because it may help to explain the almost total retreat of American feminist theory to the academy in the last two decades where, however, life is no bed of roses. If Stimpson is right about the limited frames of American media, especially the
most ubiquitous of them all, television, then it may be the case that the academy, for all its limitations, is the only relatively open space in the semiotics of American culture.

3. American feminist theory in the Academy

For many feminists, to repeat, academization remains both strength and weakness. Clearly while theory remains solely in the academy it cannot have the practical, political impact that remains one of the major goals of feminism. On the other hand, the academy provides forums for debate and Socratic-type erethismata, i.e., questionings and controversies.(22)

That American feminists are theorizing largely in the academy today, and that many nonacademic feminists are kicking about this, should be examined in terms of the place of feminism in the wider culture. For, whether it is a matter of resistance to, or failure to be recognized by, the wider culture or a bit of both, we surely do have a question about where radical critique and dissent can stand in American society today. To the extent that American feminist theory is in the main pursuing such radical critique of American society it does not appear to "fit" comfortably in what counts generally as debatable or worthy of contest. There is also impatience with too-much theory, period, in the cultural symbolic of the nation. When feminists proclaim the priority of their practical concerns with social transformation, yet do not hesitate to enter simultaneously into the imbroglio of theory, they are viewed with double suspicion. First, for theorizing about the conditions for radical social change without immediately and automatically providing the engineering blueprints for this change, and second, for making social reversal and personal flourishing deeply contestable and problematical matters, thus reinforcing the need for further conceptual and theoretical analysis. Thus, feminists appear to offend on multiple grounds. They analyze and theorize and make proposals that evoke, and often ride on utopian thinking, they try to devise strategies for radical social change, a new politics and a more just society, without providing definitive blueprints. And here the offense appears and is preserved in the violent contentions among feminists themselves as to the ways and means of achieving these goals. Ironically, perhaps, American feminist theorists themselves, even the tenured professors in universities, could or should be counted among the "crazies" in American culture.

Throughout its brief life so far in academia American feminism has faced a problem of description, finding a word or stance to describe, locate, accept or tolerate what feminist theorists in various disciplines are doing. In a nineties forum on feminism and pragmatism, the eminent American philosopher Richard Rorty suggested the term "prophecy" to describe, indeed praise what feminist theorists working in the domains of philosophy and political theory were all about. In response to Rorty in the same forum, Nancy Fraser aptly remarked, "I don't know of any universities with departments of prophecy in which we might be gainfully employed and tenured as prophets."(23) Rorty is and has been among academic "postmodern" philosophers claiming to be sympathetic to feminism, but his calling it "prophecy" puts it safely away and removes or weakens its potential sting. Surely, feminists must continue to wonder who their friends are in the academy. In departments of philosophy throughout US universities, feminists have challenged traditional concepts, modes of theorizing, the teaching of philosophy itself, raising questions that have marked
the open-endedness of the discipline of philosophy in the best of cases. Yet, as Andrea Nye notes in a recent review essay, the charge brought against them is that "It's Not Philosophy" (Nye's title) they are doing.(24) At the turn of the nineties, Thomas McCarthy observed that it is feminist thinkers "who have called into question ... taken-for-granted categories, assumptions, problems and practices ... however, feminist criticism has had less of a transformative effect in philosophy than in most other areas of the humanities. This is perhaps due to analytic philosophy’s scientific ethos: there can no more be fundamentally different ways of doing philosophy than there can be of doing physics."

That American feminist theorists working in a variety of disciplines are attempting to redefine, resignify, reclaim an ethos of knowledge and awareness suitable to political practice is a fact; that they have not succeeded so far is also a fact. The issues raised by feminist skeptics and doubters, the abiding concern with the relation between theory and action (too much theory for some means political impotence), and the question of the sources of theorizing itself (laboratory and/or poetry?) have provided grist for the mill of feminism. These issues constitute an important part of feminist contentions today in the United States and, as many American feminists have argued, contentiousness is a virtue in the study of persons and human events for it prevents dogmatism, facile generalization and the hegemony of one interpretive model. Susan Bordo has remarked that while dogmas "once reigned in feminist theory" the difference today between feminist theory and other scholarly cultures lies perhaps in its "responsiveness to challenge and its willingness to change."(26)

If feminism encourages and sustains the practices of contesting and controversy then, it is for the sake of avoiding the reductionism and exclusions that tend to pervade mainstream theorizing in the human sciences. The contests and contentions aim to forestall a theoretical conciseness that excludes and reduces the multiple phenomena of women’s experience. As argued so often and persuasively by feminist writers, women, all over the world, have been misinterpreted and misplaced by the "theories of human nature" that have surfaced throughout western intellectual thought from Plato to Marx. But there is a further move in feminist contesting which evokes discomfort in a culture that responds to the quick, clear, decisive imaging of a problem and to its equally quick, clear pursuit of a solution. Feminist contests are neither clear nor decisive in the ordinary frames of clarity; they are about ground level rethinking and even making fuzzy what was once assumed to be clear. "What is at stake in these contests," Kirstie McClure argues," is a matter neither of explanatory adequacy nor of political efficacy as conventionally understood, but a matter of breathing room for the articulation of new knowledges, new agencies and new practices."(27)

Feminists have found this room in the academy but almost none in the wider popular culture of America. This is a potential contest in which feminists will have to engage in decades to come, using all the theoretical ammunition they have developed in the academy. For a common ground among American feminists continues to be the belief in the practical efficacy of theory.

The Travels of Theory: going from the general to the specific

1. Epistemotogical issues in American feminist theory
In her comprehensive study of feminist political theories, Feminist Politics and Human Nature (1983), Alison Jaggar observed that, "feminist theorists have no characteristic disagreement with non-feminist theorists about the general desiderata for an adequate political and/or scientific theory." They differ even among themselves about the "interpretation and application of such theoretical desiderata as impartiality, objectivity, evidential confirmation, comprehensiveness or completeness and explanatory power."(28) Since that writing the differences and debates have gone beyond just interpretation and application and have eroded the traditional criteria of theory-formation. Such criteria as comprehensiveness and universality, impartiality and objectivity have been put through the sieve of feminist epistemologies as well as alternative views of what constitutes theory. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, American feminists have become wary of any definitive or closed accounts of the concept of "theory"; rather, as Teresa de Lauretis suggests, they are viewing theory either as a "growing number of feminist critical discourses--on culture, science, subjectivity, writing, visual representation, social institutions, etc.--or more particularly, the critical elaboration of feminist thought itself and the ongoing (re)definition of its specific difference."(29)

Do women know in different ways from men? Do they want-seek to know in different ways? Do they perceive differently? What is the cognitive stance of women, their interest and work in science? These questions are among the epistemological issues American feminist philosophers have addressed. Key questions about the concepts of "truth" and "objectivity" hover around these issues. Few feminists today bow to the norm of "objectivity" which evokes, according to some philosophers, "the absolute conception of the world", or as Donna Haraway has called it, "the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere."(30) Knowledge, for feminists, is "situated", historically generated, a genealogical project; it does not arise out of the shedding of the interests and needs of the investigator. Haraway writes: "So, with many other feminists, I want to argue for a doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing."(31) The question often raised is whether this conception of knowledge makes truth wholly relative. While Haraway counsels against "easy relativisms and holisms", the matter of truth remains troublesome in feminist epistemology, especially among feminist theorists who admit to having "absolutist leanings" with respect to truth.

In her article "Quine as Feminist" (1993) Louise Antony looks at the phenomenon of bias and remarks that "What makes the good bias good is that it facilitates the search for truth, and what makes the bad bias bad is that it impedes it."(32) Antony believes in truth and does not understand why those concerned with justice have given truth "such a bad rap." She admits that getting at the truth is complicated not least because "powerful people frequently have strong motives for keeping less powerful people from getting at the truth," and it is imperative that distortions be exposed or made transparent. Thus, a critical epistemology requires some working conception of the truth and facts in order to determine what is bad about what she calls the Dragnet theory of knowledge (205), while not falling victim to a false battle about whose "version" of truth is to prevail. A feminist epistemology must be a theory that is likely to be true, i.e., explaining the facts about the
"long-ignored experiences and wisdom of women" (191). Ultimately what animates Antony’s discussion is her belief that while feminists should argue with each other for there are philosophical differences among them, which should be respected, the arguments should be about which "view is more likely to be true" and not "which view is more feminist" (219). This is a highly charged issue among feminists, however, the matter, that is, of "who speaks for feminism" or "what is the paradigmatic feminist stance". It remains an issue in spite of the wide recognition among American feminists that feminist voices are multiple, diverse, non-reducible to a common denominator--very much there, and all seeking to be heard and recognized.

Generally, the stakes in the feminist reconceptualizing of the ways of perceiving and knowing are whether perceptual and cognitive experience can enable or disable, empower or weaken, bestow dignity and creative possibilities for action or entrench acceptance of the existing norms in science and philosophy. This stance has animated the work of American feminists working either in the sciences or the philosophy of science and epistemology, Evelyn Fox Keller, Donna Haraway, Helen Longino and Sandra Harding to mention a few. Harding argues in the widely anthologised essay, "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory" (1987), that feminists can find in this instability "a resource for our thinking and practices."(33) In a later essay, "Feminism, Science and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques" (1990) Harding urges further that feminism cannot be rid of its internal pulls for the disputes among feminists are themselves "generated ... [by] ... tensions and contradictions in the world in which feminists move."(34)

American feminists were alerted to the risks of theoretical generalization and facile assumptions of a universal and univocal subject, by women who challenged the feminist "dream of a common language", once celebrated by poet Adrienne Rich. Almost at the beginning of second wave feminism in the United States critical voices were raised to contest some dominant accounts of women's oppression, subordination, inequality--in general, women's experience in the American social formation. What was perceived to be a too restrictive theoretical model of oppression and liberation, based exclusively on the experiences of middle-class, white, heterosexual, women, was critiqued by feminists of color--African American women, Chicanas/Latinas, Native American and Asian American women. In the words of Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldua, "What is considered theory in the dominant academic community is not necessarily what counts as theory for women-of-color ... By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space".(35) Barbara Christian has observed that, "people of color have always theorized--but in forms quite different from the western form of abstract logic." This different kind of theorizing appears "in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas are more to our liking."(36)

Two early anthologies, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (1981), and All the Blacks Are Men, All the Women Are White, But Some of Us Are Brave (1982) are among the well known, frequently cited works in which feminists of color address issues of exclusion. The so-called "common denominator" was critiqued since, in homogenizing the differences between women, it functioned to bypass the theoretical efforts of mainly nonwhite, non-middle class, non-heterosexual women living and working in the United States. It was argued
that these women were "doing theory" though different from that emerging largely among white feminists in the academy. Thus their challenge was twofold: first, to the form and structure of theory and second, to its hitherto closed sources. American feminist theorizing in the decade of the eighties was indeed transformed. It became the site of the grand plurality of the nation's cultures, of the agon of voices, of texts against texts, always securing these in the problematic of its theorizing. Many feminists today prefer the terms "theorizing" or "theory-making" to the term "theory" as more closely descriptive of an ongoing process that has replaced a structurally fixed domain of generalizations.

The main thrust of recent American feminist theoretical projects could be said to be the analysis of "difference". Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick takes the statement "People are different from each other" to be axiomatic and notes: "It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact."(37) In the last decade of the twentieth century American feminist theory has tried to develop such conceptual tools, linking these to another abiding feminist concern, namely, securing the substantive equality of women.(38) Debates about how differences among women should be conceptualized and theorized have become the substantive stuff of feminist discourses.

2. Feminism and postmodernism

One dominant trend in the last two decades has been the feminist critique of the universalism and essentialism found in various western philosophical theories. Describing and explaining phenomena in ahistorical terms, and claiming to have located an unvarying trait--taken to be essential--to which the historical and cultural diversity of phenomena can be reduced, are integral to universalizing frameworks. Metaphysical "grand narratives", of which the philosophy of Hegel is an instance, were scrutinised and critiqued in the writing of postmodernist philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, among others.(39) Some American feminists found the so-called "postmodern turn"---developed in different ways by Michel Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida--valuable for their theorizing, others were sceptical and even hostile. From the late 80s into the 90s the feminism/postmodernism debates dominated American feminist thought. These debates have been significant for a feminist conceptualization of "theory", for the relation of theory to practice in feminist politics, and for feminist theorizing of "woman" or the "subject".

In an article "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism' (1990) Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson undertook a vigorous attack on what they called "an overly grandiose and totalizing conception of theory," building on the critique of Lyotard.(40) According to the authors, American feminist theorists themselves presumed in the 1970s to theorise "in terms of a putatively unitary, primary, culturally universal type of activity associated with women." Theory "was understood by them as the search for the one key factor which would explain sexism cross-culturally and illuminate all of social life," (1990:29). Feminists such as Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex (1970), and, Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering (1978) assumed basic similarities among women, and claimed "to have identified a basic kind of human practice found in all societies" (31). The trouble with essentialism, or
establishing a unique, unchanging, "natural" trait, and universalism, or claiming that an analysis applies cross-culturally, is universally and objectively true, is that they are conceptually incompatible with the multiple historical conditions and cultural diversity of women. If women do not compose a unified whole, do not exhibit, in the manner of sub-atomic particles, certain recurrent movements which can be measured and generalised in a universal theory, then such universal theory will not illuminate their condition. Women's lives, throughout the centuries of intellectual thought, have been treated as invariant from those of men, automatically included in the purportedly generic "Man" as occurring in the sentences of political declarations and philosophical analysis. This has been the focus of the feminist critique of western philosophy and social theory--a critique of certain dominant discourses in the making of philosophical social and political theory, the discourses of an "essential human nature" and discourses of a "universal human rationality" that typically emerge in the Enlightenment. The history of western philosophy, social and political theory, with few important exceptions, is a record of large normative claims of human subjectivity, reason and endeavour. The feminist critique must begin, Fraser and Nicholson urge, with the recognition that none of these theories is socio-historically independent, free of local societal and historical factors that inform the perception and understanding of any theorist. It thus aims to undermine their claims to universality. For feminists to attempt any kind of universalizing theory is to court the reductionism and exclusions marring the very theories they critique.

It is against the covert universality of some feminist theories that the writing of U. S. third world feminists in the eighties and nineties was aimed. African American bell hooks, Latina American Maria Lugones, and Asian Americans Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Trinh T. Min-ha, to mention a few names--all raised questions and problems about any kind of totalizing, essentialist feminist discourse. Their abiding question to "mainstream feminist theory" has been who are included, who are excluded, by a theoretical framework that purports to account for the multiple and different experiences of women's oppression and subordination. In other words, how are differences being theorized, if they are? According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "The crucial questions in the 1990s concern the construction, examination ... of difference within feminist discourses."(41) The feminist movement within the United States alone, has had to embrace the multiplicity and diversity of its own "house of difference", and as Fraser and Nicholson urge become more attentive "to the theoretical prerequisites of dealing with diversity." But equally important is the fact that "as the class, sexual, racial, and ethnic awareness of the movement has altered, so has the preferred conception of theory" (33).

Given the rejection by postmodern feminists of monocausal narratives and foundational frameworks, the question has been raised about the possibility of doing theory at all. Linda Nicholson has asked most recently whether abandoning belief in encompassing frameworks meant for feminists writing in the 1990s the "abandonment of theory altogether." If it was the case that any analysis venturing beyond particular descriptions into a more general account risked suppressing other alternative accounts, how was any kind of general critical statement possible?(42) For some feminists of colour to raise the question of the possibility of theory is to be ensnared still in what Barbara Christian has called a "western form of abstract logic." Others are puzzled; their arguments
aim to attenuate the postmodernist verdict that theory is impossible. Many feminists are urging that smaller, more humble, narratives are possible, indeed needed, trying to find in specific, historically based accounts a candidate for theory or theory-making.

3. American feminist alternatives to the problem of theory-making

According to Wendy Brown, feminists need not dizzy themselves "reeling" in the pendulum of postmodernity. It is possible to theorize within "postmodern parlance" by recognizing for starters that "theory", as connoting universalization is a recent invention. Brown writes, "The Greek theoria from which our term descends promises only the vision of perspective achieved by corporeal, cognitive or spiritual travelling." Thus, "perspectival rather than Archimedean" theory can be entertained, theory situated in history rather than above it, not pretending to universality.(43) Brown's recall of the Greek term theoria, is felicitous for its first meaning is looking at, viewing, observing. When Greek mathematics began, arguably with Archimedes, "theoria" acquired its axiomatic, essentialist, universalist thrust. Western science and philosophy, developing in the seventeenth century, adopted this concept of theory in the work of Galileo who emphasised a mathematical model of theory. But it is still an open question whether people and human events can or should be theorised in the ways numbers and their formal relations are. Feminists, who have attempted to theorise about "theory" as it were, have tried to define a working conception of theory that works for living women and their experiences.

Iris Marion Young argues for a feminist theoretical orientation that is "pragmatic", where explanation is of specific practical and political problems, and "where the purpose of this theoretical activity is clearly related to these problems." The emphasis here is on the specific and the practical. Young observes, "Pragmatic theorizing in this sense is not necessarily any less complex or sophisticated than totalizing theory, but rather it is driven by some problem that has ultimate practical importance and is not concerned to give an account of the whole."(44) Others have used the metaphor of "lenses "to signify feminist theoretical activity. Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg, remark: "few feminists any longer insist on unswerving loyalty to a single theoretical framework ... feminists recognise that different theoretical approaches are likely to be useful in different circumstances. The metaphor of lenses ... suggests the flexibility of feminist conceptual tools and the openness and contingency of our theoretical choices."(45) Fraser and Nicholson argue for a "postmodern feminist theory" that would be "pragmatic and fallibilistic", looking more "like a tapestry of many threads and hues than one woven in a single colour" (35). They remark that "feminist scholars have come to regard their enterprise more collectively, more like a puzzle whose various pieces are being filled in by many different people than like a construction to be completed by a single grand theoretical stroke" (32).

Commenting on Anzaldua's much cited book, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987), Susan Stanford Friedman remarks that its status as "theory" is "hybridic, complicating the explanatory, system-building function of a generalizing theory with the rich allusiveness and unsystematic uniqueness of an imaginative text".(46) American Chicana feminism thus projects yet another conception of theory. In the words of Chela Sandoval, theory is "mestizaje as method", a method of "borderlands theorizing ... that is reforming disciplinary canons", and she links this to theory making in U.S. third world feminism, as articulating oppositional consciousness that is always
emerging on a border. Shane Phelan considers this understanding of theorizing a "giant leap ... that must be developed and extended by white women. What looks, from the position of traditional theory, like a step backward from 'theory' to 'description' ... is in fact a move forward ... to a more concrete, more local, but also more specific and comprehensive way of doing theory". Other accounts exist in the literature, the discourses are manifold and nuanced in the "travels" of American feminist theory, as Katie King so felicitously calls it, but all speak to the varieties of theoretical approaches that feminist thought can or should, entertain. Clearly American feminist thought is not looking for its Archimedes, Newton or Einstein, and this is a mark of its real deviation from the usual philosophical and scientific modes of theory-formation. On this matter there appears to be wide agreement. More contentious, however, remains the issue of the relation of any critical theoretical account of women's experience to feminist practice and politics.

Teresa de Lauretis has written that the "condition of possibility and effective elaboration of feminist theory" is a tension, a pull in contrary directions of the "critical negativity of its theory and the affirmative positivity of its politics". While some feminists welcome this tension, indeed view it as encouraging critical thinking, others are more skeptical, finding this "critical negativity of theory" inimical to political agency and feminist politics. As already noted, American feminists are divided between those who find philosophical kinship with a postmodernist perspective and those who find this debilitating for feminist political agency and action.

4. Feminist theory and political action

The central question raised by feminist critics of postmodernism is what sort of political action can feminists design and pursue in the absence of a systematic, general, theoretical account of the condition of women? In denying that such accounts are possible, does not feminist postmodernism undermine feminist goals? Nancy Hartsock has been an outspoken critic of postmodernist theories arguing that, "For those of us who want to understand the world systematically in order to change it, postmodernist theories at their best give little guidance." In effect, these theoretical approaches silence more than they enable, and she finds it suspicious that just when marginalized groups are emerging and engaging in redefinitions, postmodernism raises questions "about the possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, about historical progress". For Marxian Nancy Hartsock, feminists are blocked in "talking about changes that we want" by postmodernist doubts cast on "ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society." According to Christine Di Stefano, "the postmodernist project, if seriously adopted by feminists, would make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible." In her article, "Dilemmas of Difference" Di Stefano also raises questions that have been at the center of feminist critiques of the "postmodern turn." Evoking the work of Nancy Hartsock, Di Stefano asks, "Why is it, just ... when previously silenced populations have begun to speak for themselves and on behalf of their subjectivities, that the ... possibility of discovering/ creating a liberating 'truth' become suspect? In other words, is postmodernism merely a sophisticated version of the sour grapes phenomenon?" Susan Bordo estimates that the dangers to feminism are not so much, totalizing theories as postmodern feminists have argued but rather the "endless debates about method" which destabilize human knowledge. She writes, "We need to consider the degree to which this serves,
not the empowerment of diverse cultural voices and styles but the academic hegemony (particularly in philosophy and literary studies) of detached metatheoretical discourse." Going from "the view from nowhere" to "the dream of everywhere" deconstructionist postmodernism cannot deal with the question of how "the human knower is to negotiate this infinitely perspectival, destabilized world" it posits.(52) Seyla Benhabib has expressed her strong skepticism in "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance" (1995) asking, "Can feminist theory be postmodernist and still retain an interest in emancipation?" Addressing the proposals of Fraser and Nicholson that feminists engage in social criticism without philosophy (capital P) Benhabib argues that this is impossible. She writes, "Social criticism needs philosophy precisely because the narratives of our cultures are so conflictual and irreconcilable, that even when one appeals to them, a certain ordering of one's normative priorities and a clarification of those principles in the name of which one speaks is unavoidable."(53) The problematic of feminist critics of postmodernism is multivariate as different questions have been raised in finely nuanced philosophical discussions. But, there have been as well charges that the multiplicity and indeterminacy of meaning to which postmodernists subscribe has created a cult celebrating obscure writing. It has been claimed that, "postmodernists write obscurely on purpose so that no one outside their cult can understand them."(54) American feminists working in the area of literary studies have commented on this matter.

In the late 80s African American feminist Barbara Christian charged that there was a "race for theory" in the literary world. She claimed that "the new emphasis on literary critical theory is as hegemonic as the world it attacks ... the language it creates as one which mystifies rather than clarifies our condition, making it possible for a few people ... to control the critical scene."(55) Christian was arguing against the almost incomprehensible linguistic jargon (drawn in many cases from postmodern psychoanalytical theory in feminist readings of imaginative texts in literature, a trend that has also characterized feminist film studies and film theory) that, as she writes, "has silenced many of us." She was urging that feminist literary theory has operated to exclude, often restricting "the definition of what feminist means." Feminist postmodern and deconstructive analyses of both literature and film have posed problems for the complex feminist tasks of reading and teaching literature. A recent essay by Susan Gubar, "What Ails Feminist Criticism" (1998) reflects on poststructuralist feminists like Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler and Donna Haraway in order to "highlight some unfortunate linguistic consequences of verbal eccentricities that have become faddish and divisive." These feminists "who recycle the thinking of Foucault, Lacan and Derrida have made a particularly strong mark on feminist literary criticism" yet their prose is far from lucid.(56) She believes that feminist theory--its meaning, force and productivity--can be discerned pretty well on a level mindful of "stylistic conventions and grammatical norms" where, she argues, "much poststructuralist writing flounders" (388). The debate on writing is, however, also about reading and interpreting, about whose voices shall be heard, whose silenced. It is not solely or simply about style, but about hegemony. A critic of academic feminism, Gloria Anzaldua, has admitted to being "seduced by academic language, its theoretical babble insinuates itself into my speech and is hard to weed out." She wonders whether the marginalized women of America can afford to ignore the seduction: "I feel there is a place for us to use specialized language addressed to a select, professional, vocational or scholarly group--doctors, carpenters and seamstresses use
language that only those in their particular work can understand. We should not give up these "languages' just because they are not accessible to the general public."(57) This is a large and sobering recommendation that, however, complicates even further the already convoluted scenario of the languages of feminist theorizing in the academy.

Jane Flax has summarized the questions she believes to be at stake in feminist debates about postmodernism, some of which are quoted here:

What are the relations between knowledge, power and action? ... What are the relationships, actual and potential, between feminist theorizing and the practices of feminist politics? Is the actualization of feminist visions of the future dependent upon the production of better feminist knowledge or theories of knowledge (and in what sense is this so)? ... Can feminist theorizing (and women's studies programs) develop best in isolation from nonfeminist modes of thought? Should feminist theorists try to produce new grand theories as inclusive and self-sufficient as Marxism claimed to be?(58)

Flax observes that some feminists find postmodernism threatening "because it radically changes the background assumptions and contexts within which debates about such questions are usually conducted ... [and] radically calls into question the belief (or hope) that there is some form of innocent knowledge to be had."(59) That discovery, that is, of some truth which can direct the actions of all human beings towards the promotion of a common good. Actions based on such a truth or knowledge, since not harmful, are innocent. Such an authoritative truth reconciles knowledge and power, theory and practice, or so the Enlightenment promise and the western humanist tradition appear to propose. That is, claims to knowledge and assertions of power, where both are grounded in authoritative reason, truth, are no longer in opposition. Power becomes as neutral, transparent, and purely emancipatory as knowledge is supposed to be. These assumptions, the hope that knowledge can ever be innocent, are eroded or at least put into question by writers in the diffuse territory of postmodernism who, among things, also believe that it is power--its discourses and ruses--not knowledge, that determines the contexts of debates.

5. The issue of power in feminism and postmodernism

Judith Butler's essay "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of `Postmodernism'" tries to illuminate the often elided issue of contexts, and the ways theory, philosophy, are always "implicated in power."(60) According to Butler, the so-called feminist/postmodernist debates have been poorly understood. Describing these in terms of two exclusive sides, one defending universality and foundationalism in theorizing, the other repudiating these, is to miss the point that theoretical argument, of any kind, posits foundations. Thus, those who argue that feminist alternative political theory/action requires some critical adherence to truth, objectivity, and universal foundations, and, those who argue the contrary, that is, for the deconstruction of concepts and adherence to contingency and fallibility, are both laying foundations for discourse, research, and action. If there is a point in these debates occurring under the umbrella term "postmodern" (Butler declares an affinity to the term "poststructuralism") it is that "power pervades the very conceptual
apparatus that seeks to negotiate its terms.” (39) Claiming that founding or establishing norms is a pure innocent undertaking not implicated in power or force is, she writes, "a powerful and forceful conceptual practice that sublimates, disguises, and extends its own power play through recourse to tropes of normative universality." (39) Thus, for Butler, the task is to "interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundations authorizes, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses" (39). Any radical political project must interrogate a purported universal foundation for its ethnocentric biases, which have been increasingly exposed in contemporary postcoloniality. According to Butler, poststructuralism offers a mode of critique that "can be used" by feminist social theory to question foundations, including its own. She believes that poststructuralism has "no necessary political consequences" for such theory, but it can be used, deployed politically, that is, for engaging in "democratic contestation", which she takes to be "at the heart of any radical political project" (41).

In this essay, and elsewhere in her work, Butler attempts to redescribe the frames or contexts of the debates between feminists: it is not simply that some are theorizing under the sign of the postmodern while others are theorizing under the sign of the modern. She maintains that each position articulates its model precisely by what it selects and excludes, by what each displaces for that position to take hold. The question then becomes which speaks in the name of feminism, what makes a position a position to begin with? For Butler, it is "a matter of a certain authorizing power" that "does not emanate from the position itself" (42). Questions must always be raised about this "authorization" and the interrogation is in effect a political, not a theoretical move. It is not about which position is more "feminist" or, counter the argument of Louise Antony as noted above, which position is "more true", but which is being empowered and what other possible positions are being left out. Thus, for Butler, the "theory wars" among feminists are very much political contests, not simply theoretical debates about modernity and postmodernity. In an important sense then for Butler, doing theory is doing politics, taken as a domain of constant contestation, a "politics of discomfort". Butler's own "position" may have ambivalent consequences she acknowledges, but she urges that it has the virtue of clearing feminist discourse of false antitheses, and opening it to "more capacious, generous and `unthreatened' bearings of the self in the midst of community."(61) Questions of social and economic justice in which feminist projects have invested much thought and action must be raised in the domain of power relations, according to Butler. Feminists must "develop a way of adjudicating political norms without forgetting that such adjudication will also always be a struggle for power."(62) To recall the remarks of Jane Flax, there is no innocence here or there for American feminists.

6. Summary

The debates in the '80s and '90s between American feminists embracing aspects of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, and American feminists who have been critical or wary of these stances, may or may not be over. On the one hand, the deep reflexivity about their theorizing efforts by American feminists in recent decades has evoked skepticism, even cynicism about feminist theory both among feminists and non-feminists. On the other hand, it has encouraged alternative research methods in academic disciplines and revised notions of theory and concept-formation. It has raised questions about the neutrality of knowledge; it has tried to politicize
theory and knowledge. Whatever their divisions and wars, however, it is fair to say that American feminists are all still struggling to examine, understand and change the situation of women. This, to repeat, is still a fledgling enterprise—whether one takes it to be 180 or 30 years of age. For many women in America, and for many others throughout the world, the theory wars have been worth fighting.

The Problem of the Subject, Identity, Woman and Gender

1. The attack on essentialism

Who are the women that feminism—as analysis, theory, explanation, etc., talks about? Who are the "we" a feminist writer refers to in articles and books? Very deep philosophical issues around this question have been raised by French feminists from de Beauvoir on to Wittig on to Irigaray and Cixous. American feminists grasped this question initially not so much from its philosophical base but from the political claims raised by multi-ethnic women and women of color, living and working in the United States. What is woman, what is the sex and gender of woman? On the one hand, this is the ontological question, if you will and has evoked the philosophical essentialist-nominalist debate addressed by many American feminists. On the other hand, and related to the aforementioned debate, the question, "what is a woman" has led to deep theorizing about the subject, subjectivity, and identity.

If "theory" has been in dispute, the "subject" of feminist theorizing has been and still is, in greater contestation. Seyla Benhabib, has very recently remarked that in the 1980s the feminist movement underwent a "hermeneutics of suspicion":

Every claim to generalization [and] every attempt to speak in the name of `women' was countered by myriad differences of race, class, culture and sexual orientation that were said to divide women. The category `woman' itself became suspect; feminist theorizing about woman or the female of the species was dubbed the hegemonic discourse of white, middle-class, professional heterosexual women. We are still reeling from the many divisions and splinterings. (63)

She acknowledges, however, that the problem of the subject is the most important issue to emerge from the feminism/ postmodernism debates. In fact this issue which is all about the identity of "woman" or women, the self and subjectivity, the subject's (women's) agency—originally fuelled the theory debates on essentialism and universalism. It certainly brings into dramatic focus some of the key tensions and contentions between American feminists.

In an article, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory" (1988), Linda Alcoff argues that feminists need to develop a conceptualization of the subject that is neither essentialist nor nominalist. (64) Two groups of feminists have tended towards either one or the other of these conceptualizations. One group, so-called cultural feminists argue for an essential female nature, and their politics aims at securing in the words of Alcoff, "a healthy environment--free of masculinist values and all their offshoots such as pornography--for the female principle." (408)
Alcoff refers to the work of Alice Echols, who has identified such writers as Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Janice Raymond and Robin Morgan among others, as preoccupied "with defining the female sensibility". They imply "that this identity is innate rather than socially constructed." (411) While the position of cultural feminism is not homogeneous, integral to it is the universalizing conception of woman in an essentialist way (413). Against this essentialist conceptualizing and theorizing, Alcoff cites the documented evidence in the literature of biology and anthropology, for example Anne Fausto-Sterling, Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Women and Men, that seriously undermines any claim to innateness of gender differences in personality and character (413-4).

The other group is wholly opposed to any kind of essentialist discourse. So-called post-structuralist feminists argue that there is no essential core "natural" to women or men for that matter; human identities are constructed socially and linguistically. A major aim of continental poststructuralist theorists has been to deconstruct the concept of the subject. With respect to the subject, according to Alcoff, they take what in philosophy is called the position of nominalism, that is, the denial of essences of any kind as Thomas Hobbes argued in the seventeenth century. In American feminism, what I would call a near-Hobbesian stance of nominalism, is captured by Gayatri Spivak when she argues in "Feminism and Critical Theory" that "no rigorous definition of anything is ultimately possible," definitions are always provisional. She writes, "The only way that I can see myself making definitions is in a provisional and polemical one. I construct my definition as a woman not in terms of a woman's putative essence but in terms of words currently in use" (77).(65) A nominalist theory of "woman", therefore, is a matter of words, for the commonalities such as they are exhibited by women, do not evidence the "essence" of women, but rather a conventional decision to apply a term, a word, to the common and recurrent within the particulars at any given time. Such is nominalism as traditionally understood in western philosophy. Alcoff's quarrel with this position is that it makes the category "woman" "fundamentally undecidable", and, since not immune to deconstruction, this undecideability has the negative effect of making gender invisible. Not surprisingly, Alcoff also cited the ongoing charge against the postmodernist-poststructuralist feminist stance, namely that, "If gender is simply a social construct, the need and even the possibility of a feminist politics becomes immediately problematical" (420).

Generally, as it appears, "gender," has become a strange word in feminist writing, lacking at this point a common meaning or use. In the next section I review some of the conceptual troubles this critical concept has been undergoing in American feminist theory. It is important to note again that feminists have not hesitated to reexamine even their most favorite notions.

2. The trouble with gender

The formulation of the category of gender as separable from, that is, not definitionally coextensive with the category of sex was considered by many feminists a major theoretical breakthrough. It enabled an analytic distinction between what was taken to be biologically given, namely, sex, and whatever was socially constructed, namely, gender. Distinctions based on sex were not grounded in nature but rather reflected the social norms of any historical period, the gender relations that were contingent and variable. "Gender" was used by American feminists to alleviate worries about a
possibly too narrow focus of women's studies scholarship. In connoting a relation between men and women, the term appeared to have more breadth and width and could satisfy what was perceived early on to be a goal of feminist inquiry. The study of women implied the study of men, the worlds of gendered subjects are not separate spheres but mutually implicated, in investigating men and women we are looking at socially constructed ideas about so-called appropriate roles for women and men. The concept of "gender" steered research attention to the social, historical and cultural origins of human identities and appeared to confer scientific legitimacy on the study of women. There was another factor that fueled the wider usage of "gender studies" in the academy, and this was the "political acceptability" of feminist scholarship. The term "gender" while often used synonymously for "women" did not carry the same political weight, as it were, especially for feminist historians who proclaimed a political stance when they argued that women are worthy historical subjects of investigation. As the term "gender" does not name women, it was not as threatening to mainstream academia; in fact it secured the academic acceptance feminist scholarship was seeking in the 1980s.(66)

The problematization of gender relations came to be the focal point of feminist inquiry into women's subordination and oppression. As an analytical category it seemed to allow and enrich the analysis of differences between men and women that would illuminate the social subordination of the latter. In widely circulated studies fundamental gender differences in behavior and experience were located. Carol Gilligan's highly regarded study In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (1982)elaborated a thesis about the moral perspectives and moral development of women in contrast to those of men. She wrote in response to a theory of moral development advanced by Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kolberg who studied the responses of a group of males to moral dilemmas. On the basis of these responses, the author developed a theory of how the individual, generally, develops the moral point of view which he sees as the increasing adoption of abstract principles. Gilligan challenged the purported universality of Kolberg's theory arguing that women respond differently, exhibiting in their moral development an ethics of care. Her work was appreciated as a correction of the constant theoretical skewing found in mainstream psychology in which the lives and experiences of women are occluded in the cause of a false universality. Acknowledging the importance and innovation in Gilligan's work, many feminists nonetheless identify an essentialist strain precisely in Gilligan's description of a different voice that characterises women's moral development cross-culturally. The idea of a (read: singular) women's voice that is different from that of men can be taken to encode an essential difference between women and men. Moreover, Deborah Rhode argued that "Gilligan's data drew on small unrepresentative samples, and most empirical studies of moral development do not disclose significant gender distinctions."(67)

Gilligan's work and that of cultural feminists cited by Alice Echols and Linda Alcoff, noted above, have come to be viewed as formulating a "feminism of difference". In "Interpreting Gender", Linda Nicholson argues that this work "uncovered many important social patterns of gender", and served to provide ammunition against the dismissal of the import of gender when the claim that we are all just persons or human beings was considered unquestionable.(68) Thus, at a certain moment in the
development of feminist inquiry, feminism of difference served a certain set of needs associated
with the recognition and eradication of sexism, taken to be the common form of women's
oppression. However, when other "isms" besides sexism--most notably racism---came to be
analyzed as forms of oppression in the theoretical inquiries of American women of color, warnings
were sounded against using a foundational as opposed to a relational concept of gender. Elizabeth
Spelman mapped the problems in her book, Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist
Thought (1988).

Spelman drew heavily on the eloquent critiques articulated by women of color and U.S. third world
women in the decade of the eighties. She argued that taking gender as a variable independent of
other factors that compose identity, such as race and class, obscures the interplay of these factors
on each other in individual cases, and more insidiously, effectively ignores or reduces differences
among women themselves. Even when feminists have acknowledged different kinds of oppression
linked to race, class, sexualities, ethnicity or nationality, there seems always to be the assumption
that "gender can be isolated from other elements of identity" and women "can be talked about `as
women'" since they are oppressed "as women."(69) Isolating gender as an independent variable
and then simply "adding on" the other factors constitutive of identity--a sort of "coat rack" view of
identity, has effectively disguised, according to Spelman, the model of "woman" that has been
operative in much gender analysis. This has been a paradigm drawn from only one segment of
American society, namely, white, middle-class and mostly professionally elite women living and
working in the United States, a mode, perhaps of feminist ethnocentrism. For feminists of color, the
model was all too clearly exclusive as was its "politics". According to African American feminist bell
hooks, the model of gender was not simply narrow and exclusive it also functioned as closure to an
investigation of the varieties of oppression: and a radical political vocabulary. Indeed, it seemed to
contain the wider and more deeply radical politics originally sought by a resurgent movement in the
United States.(70)

3. The problematic of American women of color

Feminist gender analysis was simply not advancing new knowledge of American women. In fact, it
was reproducing, perhaps unintentionally, the generalizing, exclusionary practices of western
political and philosophical theories whose focus on purportedly generic "man" and a cross-cultural,
universal "human nature" effectively made the investigation of women in the eyes of male theorists
historically and philosophically redundant. In reducing or homogenizing the varieties of women's
experiences, gender analysis had resulted in "making women inessential in a number of ways". If
women bear an "essential womeness" in virtue of which they experience and are oppressed as
women, then "we needn't know anything about any woman in particular, as" Spelman argues.(71)
Thus, a question for feminists is "whether we can generate new visions of gender that retain what
has been positive in `a feminism of difference' while eliminating what has been negative."(72) The
negative lies in assuming that women are an already constituted group with identical interests and
needs, and experiences of oppression. A fixed conception of gender applied cross-culturally, and
analysis deriving from such a conception has to be replaced by more empirical investigation, more
questioning about how women in particular times and places suffer discrimination. That is, "claims
about women as such" must be replaced by "claims about women in particular contexts."(73) This is a call for a more historical and culture-specific study of gender and women, which has especially characterized the work of U. S. "third world" feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Uma Narayan as well as the poetical essays and films of Trinh T. Minh-ha. Narayan has most recently sounded tendencies towards what she calls "cultural essentialism" in feminist efforts to avoid gender essentialism.(74)

The conceptual problematic of "gender" is but a piece in a huge theoretical puzzle that has challenged American feminists in the last two decades. Pieces link the conceptual forms of "gender," "identity," "subjectivity" in an attempt either to compose "woman/en," or to demonstrate that this concept must be decomposed or deconstructed: that is, the puzzle, when put together, is always to be taken apart. Both kinds of attempts and their variations, however, are in aid of generating feminist politics. Arguably--to pursue the puzzle metaphor--the really tricky pieces, the ones that are usually difficult to fit because of their multiple shapes are those designed in the writings of American feminists of color, feminist post-colonial critics and lesbian feminist and/or queer theorists.

In the United States, the subversion of a constricted gender analysis and a univocal conceptualization of "woman", indeed the subtle complicating of the whole notion of "difference" and its range, has been and continues to be, the main thrust in the work of American feminists of color. Tania Modleski has remarked, "Women of color have ... played a vanguard role in reconceptualizing the notion of identity, so that it becomes a more flexible term, capable of including the experience of people who ... possess multiple cultural allegiances and, often, suffer multiple kinds of oppression."(75) Donna Haraway makes a further distinction arguing that the "positionings of African-American women are not the same as those of other women of color; each condition of oppression requires specific analysis that both refuses the separations and insists on the non-identities of race, sex, sexuality, and class. These matters make starkly clear why an adequate feminist theory of gender must simultaneously be a theory of racial and sexual difference in specific historical conditions of production and reproduction" (Italics in original).(76) Hortense Spillers has seen the task of African American women as making "a place for this different social subject ... less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject."(77) The rich literature which has emerged since the decade of the 1980s among American women of color projects generally an interventionist, oppositional theorizing and conceptualizing, rising from the margins to enrich and problematize the center of largely white, American feminist academic theory. One of the great strengths of American feminist theory-making lies precisely in the fact that its issues did not arise simply as abstract contests in concept and theory-formation but were felt and articulated in a "guts" manner through the raging voices of marginalized women of color in American society. That is to say, the problems of sexism were "enriched" as it were, by the problems of racism, still a major fountain of disorder and aversion in the United States.

Two concepts or models, widely discussed among and used by American feminists today can be mentioned as examples, among others, of the "guts" and the rage: the "borderland" articulated...
mainly by Gloria Anzaldua, and "curdling" as analyzed by Maria Lugones. Both writers evoke ambiguity and transition as characterizing the lived life of many women. That is, within a given particular woman's life there may be ambivalence and unrest, a constant crossing, a living on the border as Anzaldua reckons. Extrapolating from her own experience of having to integrate the semiotics of at least two cultures, American and Mexican, and further negotiate her own lesbian sexuality, she generates the notion of the "borderlands" and the symbolic of mestiza and mestizaje, borrowed from Mexican culture. Her aim is to argue for "a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity."(78) In her article, "Purity, Impurity and Separation", Maria Lugones entertains the various forms of mixing, the contrast between purity and impurity, separation and curdling as with eggs and their yolks, to theorize brilliantly, as has been acknowledged, the notion of fragmentation so central to feminist thought and politics. She rejects the logic of fragmentation that seeks transparency in the thickness and multiplicity of women and opts for a "logic of impurity" that looks for oppressions that are "interlocked" curdled, as it were. Separating these out, as the egg from its yoke, for the sake of transparency creates fragmentation. But individual women are not so separated, not so fragmented. She writes, "If a person is fragmented, it is because the society is itself fragmented into groups that are pure, homogeneous. Each group's structures of affiliation to and through transparent members produces a society of persons who are fragmented as they are affiliated to separate groups."(79) The logic of impurity, on the other hand according to Lugones, can sustain multiplicity and thickness without fragmentation.

The analytical work of Latinas Anzaldua, Lugones, Chela Sandoval, as well as the poetical-creative work of African Americans Audre Lorde, June Jordan and Toni Morrison (again to mention only a few names) all raise questions about the subject, about who women are and how they can be. Theirs is the point of view of "thick members" who will not yield to "transparency," or fragmentation, to use the terms of Lugones. Their work inspires the thought that concepts like "gender," "identity," "woman" are like eggs in any recipe, that is, useful and necessary according to what is being "cooked up." This could be an appeal to a pragmatist criterion (many American feminists have taken theoretical leads from American philosophical pragmatism as developed by Charles S. Pierce and William James in the late nineteenth century), but it is also and perhaps more importantly an evoking of, an intervention in, political struggle. That is, the "cooking" is about politics and power. Here it is well to remark even if briefly on the gender analysis of feminist, queer theorist, Judith Butler, who has consistently viewed theorizing and conceptualizing as activities implicated in power.

4. Gender analysis as performative politics: Judith Butler and her critics

Studies by Butler, notably Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990) and Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (1993) have problematized the concepts of "gender" and "sex," "identity" and "subjectivity" in further radical ways. She argued in effect that these are fictive concepts that function mainly to secure certain dominant normative discourses and practices. With many French feminists theorists she takes the term "woman" to be a "false substantive" which, if used as a univocal signifier "disguises and precludes a gender experience internally varied and contradictory."(80) Raising troubles for the concept of "gender" in, for example, Gender Trouble, Butler proposes to show that sex has been "gender all along."(81) That is, she tries
to explode the assumed ontological "given" of sex, of two clearly distinct or discrete sexes and of two clearly separate genders where this given posits a fixed subject or agent—a "doer behind the deed."

For Butler, the subject, whether taken analytically as sexed or gendered, is a production of, and constituted by, itirerability and performative acts—a notion she attempts to clarify and develop in Bodies that Matter. She writes, "Gender is in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time..., instituted through a stylized repetition of acts."(82) As against what she calls "expressive models of gender" she offers a "performative model" which conceives the subject and its identity as constituted by its repeated performances in language, where the utterances of the subject are neither descriptive nor expressive but a doing, an action of some kind. She acknowledges her debt to British philosopher of language, John Austin for the notion of the performative utterance—an idea or theory of the variety in the uses of language that can be traced, in fact, to the eighteenth century Anglo-Irish philosopher George Berkeley. Her main aim in so re-conceiving the concept of the "subject" is to argue that the subject of feminism is neither stable nor coherent, but this does not mean that the term "women" cannot or ought not to be used. If the term designates "a field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category," then the term is open-ended and resignifiable. For Butler, the contests among women over the content of the term "ought to safeguarded and prized". Thus deconstructing the subject is in effect "to release the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it ... from the ontologies to which its has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear."(83) In a recent interview she has stated that she is not arguing to prohibit the use of ontological terms "but, on the contrary, to use them more, to exploit and restage them, subject them to abuse so that they can no longer do their usual work."(84)

She recommends that, as we are all constituted by and in language, in subverting discourses we achieve agency. "To be constituted by language is to be produced within a given network of power/discourse which is open to resignification, redeployment, subversive citation from within, and interruption and inadvertent convergences with other such networks ... 'Agency' is to be found in the possibility of resignification opened up by discourse."(85) Butler's work has been critiqued heavily by other feminists especially on the grounds that she appears to deny agency when in the development of her performative model she claims "there is doer behind the deed." She has responded that she is not getting rid of the doer (agency) but rather the position where the doer has been placed. Since the deed is, on her account, the reengagement of conventions, "the `doer' will be the uncertain working of the discursive possibilities by which it itself is worked"(86) The doer, the agent, the subject, then is as much in process as the acts that constitute it.

Aligning her work tout court with social constructionists of gender and continental French deconstructionists, feminist critics of Butler's work in America have read her as effectively depriving feminist thought of the concepts of "gender", "woman", "subjectivity", "identity" "autonomy". These have been the good working concepts-ammunitions that have helped women to investigate and analyze their experience of oppression and envision their liberation. Acknowledging that Butler's
views "are among the most original and provocative writings by feminists on the crisis and question of subjectivity," Seyla Benhabib yet finds problems in Butler's "privileging of linguistic metaphors."(87) She further argues that Butler's performativity model bears within it a highly deterministic view of the development and socialization of the individual, a view unconfirmed by "social-scientific reflections on the subject."(88) Rosemary Hennessy has argued that in limiting the social to the discursive, "Butler unhinges identity from the other material relations that shape it." Hennessy writes in an emerging discourse of queer theory and politics from the point of view of a Marxian left. She praises the work of Butler as well as Diana Fuss and Teresa de Lauretis as shaping the new queer theory but critiques it as well for ignoring the social and economic conditions that "foster the slipping and sliding of signification."(89) According to Nancy Fraser, Butler's approach offers a great deal to feminists but has severe limitations in so far as it "privileges the local, the discrete, and the specific." It provides, therefore, no way of theorizing "the relation of embodied individuals, with their relatively enduring dispositions (habitus), to the dispersed subject positions they successively occupy."(90) Most recently, in an article published in The New Republic (February 22, 1999) Martha Nussbaum has characterized Butler's work as virtually incomprehensible and "quietist" for feminist politics. On the other hand, Butler is among the pristine feminist rebels as Ian Hacking notes in Lingua Franca, (May/June 1999:67).

Butler's aim, as she has asserted many times, is to find-found ways of releasing the utterances of those who have been excluded, those whose bodies "do not matter" according to a so-called universal norm. As a queer theorist, wondering about the place and rights of gays and lesbians in the heterosexual consensus of American society, she questions the norm of heterosexuality and its implications for analyzing gender relations. She is thus raising questions about who speaks for whom. In her most recent book, Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative (1997) she raises questions about what is "speakable" today in American society. In America, judicial decision by the courts defends free speech. But, as Butler argues, it is the courts as machinery of the state that define the speech that is protected under the First Amendment as well as that which is not protected. In short, and in practice, not all speech comes under the rubric "free" and yet this is what the "universal" of the Constitution declares. She pursues in this book as well, her abiding critique of "universalality", of so-called "foundations" as grounding through exclusion. Among American feminists, queer theorists and social critics, Judith Butler has been in the forefront of those whose skepticize and ambiguate claims to universality and foundations in theory and cultural-political criticism. The largest question within American feminist thought remains the politics--the action feminists can take--in an America that is not always open to radical critiques of its institutions, practices, language frames. It has to do not simply with the toleration of diverse sexualities, feminist political visions and points of view. It is about whether the trends of the dominant universalist-foundationalist ways of thinking and feeling in American society today can be subverted. Drucilla Cornell reads Butler as arguing that "there cannot be a final form given to our humanity by any one people or culture because that form can always be morally contested in the name of the very universality upon which rests its privilege."(91)

But other questions are being raised which challenge the on-going contested analysis of "gender" In
"Confounding Gender" Mary Hawkesworth critiques the concept of gender as having become too loose and variable. In this article she reviews several studies of the 80s and 90s, including the work of Butler, which have attempted to undermine the "natural attitude", which she views as maintaining "that there are two and only two genders [and] gender is invariant."(92) Among feminists, terms for the "natural attitude", though not always equivalent, have come to include "biological determinism", "biological foundationalism" and "essentialism", among others. Examining various uses of "gender" in studies that have appeared in the last two decades, Hawkesworth wonders whether the concept has been made to do too much work. She raises the question whether in the four books she reviews there has been, as she writes, "a subtle shift from using gender as an analytical tool to attributing to gender explanatory force", which is for her, a grave mistake. (681) She argues that gender as an analytical category can and should be used to illuminate facets of social existence; what it cannot do, except by definitional fiat, is explain these facets. Thus, according to Hawkesworth, the various deployments of the concept of gender have not yielded the explanations of why in fact the roles and symbolic structures of gender operate as they do in social relations between men and women. She concludes that the concept by itself, whatever its refinements, cannot erode the "natural attitude".

5. Summary

Generally, the life and use of the concept of "gender" within American feminist thought has not been untroubled. If it solved one set of problems, it created others such that the concept itself lost its analytical force. By the late 1980s "gender-skepticism", to quote Susan Bordo, had set in to "delegitimate ... the exploration of experiential continuity and structural common ground among women", a theoretical move about which she herself is extremely skeptical.(93) She remarks that "Too relentless a focus on historical heterogeneity, for example, can obscure the transhistorical hierarchical patterns of white, male privilege ... can obscure the dualistic, hierarchical nature of the actualities of power in Western culture."(94) Iris Marion Young has also raised questions about the "exclusively critical orientation" of feminist theorizing that quite rightly, in her opinion, wants to avoid excluding some women from its analysis or freeze social relations as necessary rather than contingent. Important lessons can be drawn from this work (she mentions Spelman, Butler, Mohanty) whose arguments, however, she also finds "paralyzing". Are these feminists, she asks, implying "that it makes no sense and is morally wrong ever to talk about women as a group, or in fact to talk about social groups at all?" If this is not being implied, then "what can it mean to use the term `woman'?" In the light of these critiques, she asks further, "what sort of positive claims can feminists make about the way social life is and ought to be?"(95) Feminist critiques of the concept "woman" has generated a "political dilemma", according to Young--in effect the pragmatic problem of social and political action, which she tries to solve by conceptualizing women as a collective. She argues that "gender" be viewed as "seriality", a concept she borrows from Jean Paul Sartre, which she maintains "avoids both the problem of essentialism and the problem of identity that have plagued efforts to define what it means to be a woman" (31). In a vein similar to that of Young, that is adopting a non-totalizing pragmatic approach, Linda Nicholson recommends that the concept of "woman" be viewed in terms of Wittgenstein's concept of a "game" ("Interpreting Gender", 1995).
Young and Nicholson borrow these philosophical concepts but do not merely reproduce them, rather they redeploy them in the context of feminist analytical and practical concerns. Their aim is to render useful, operational, a concept that appears to have gone amok in the theoretical world of American feminism. As is the aim of Linda Alcoff with whose article the review in this section began. Negotiating a way between what she considers the two extreme positions of essentialism and nominalism, she argues for a conception of the subject as "positionality", where the subject is "nonessentialized and emergent from a historical experience." "Woman" then is not defined by "a particular set of attributes but by a particular position ... the very identity of women is constituted by women's position." (96) Defining woman or the subject as positionality highlights "historical movement and the subject's ability to alter her context," and allows for the "assertion of gender politics." (97) In "Moral Responsibility and Social Change: A New Theory of Self" (1997), Ann Ferguson presents a "social materialist, decentered theory of subjectivity" which she hopes can contribute to a "transformational theory of identity politics."

As I have tried to show here, the concern among most feminist writers on the thorny issues of gender, woman, subjectivity has been precisely with the relevance, use and effectiveness of these concepts for political action. For the problem of woman as subject is not just theoretical or a matter of clarification for the sake of clarity. The various positions reviewed above all attempt to produce a concept of the subject that works for group empowerment and coalitional strategies in the absence of an "essence" that unites women. Feminists can agree to disagree on any number of issues that do not yield to consensus without undermining their political efforts towards greater democratization of the American community. They are demonstrating this possibility.

Conclusion

1. The "bandita" in American feminist theory

Without reviewing the practical social and political achievements of the American woman's movement, looking only at some theoretical concerns of American feminists one can still confirm that the feminist aim is not simply to understand the world but to change it. Doing theory is for feminists doing normative ethics and politics; contention, controversy and polemics are unavoidable. In an American society where distributions of power (and other good things like money, services, opportunities, etc.) are heavily skewed, and where as has been observed, "the law of equality and the law of freedom ... are on a collision course", these discourses are bound to be evolving, contested and ruptural. (98)

In their seeking of concepts that work both for analysis, explanation and political use a seeking that takes feminists to the wide reaches of philosophical thought, both the so-called canonical writers as well as the mavericks, recent and past, feminists plumb, take or borrow in bandita fashion. This is a term used by the late Linda Singer, and most recently by Iris Marion Young to characterize her own philosophical borrowings. (99) Contrary to a common misconception that sees feminists as simply trashing male dominated western philosophy in particular, and men in general, (100) it is more true to say that feminist theorists review the writings of male theorists and philosophers for their
pragmatic use, "taking what's needed and leaving the rest. The bandita recycles these remains [which] make a different map and mark new intersections between discourses, disciplines, forms of 'knowledge'," as Singer wrote in Erotic Welfare.(101) The power in the trope of the bandita lies in the image of wandering far and wide but finding her own way even where others have been before. Recycling, redeploying, reconceptualizing all mark the theorizing of American feminists such that the development of theory has meant, among other things, covering--going over either well-worn ground or relatively new paths and still looking for another way.

2. In search of a place in American society

Typically, feminism as a moral and political stance, as a social movement, as informing disciplines in the academy, is both "in" and "out", as are the subjects of these diverse efforts, women themselves. Ann Snitow's essay, "A Gender Diary" speaks eloquently to the "mixed form" that is feminism, and a "common divide" that splits feminists in the often uneasy encounter between building a solid, political identity--`woman', and the projects that dismantle this solidity.(102)

For American feminist theorists it is a large and anxious project that enters the twenty-first century, still in its pristine problematic and conceptual reformulation. The project of continuous reconceptualization disturbs because it is perceived as sustaining a distance between theory and practice, between feminist academic theorists and movement women. My aim in this essay has been to sound out, to appreciate and record the narratives of American feminist theory in some key areas where, in my judgment, the theorizing has been especially fecund for the production of new knowledge and the seeking of a place for feminism in American society and culture.


(4) See the issue of the journal differences vol. 9 3, 1997 which is devoted entirely to a critical reassessment of women's studies in America. The guest editor's introductory essay is titled, "Women's Studies on the Edge" precisely to focus on what the author, Joan Wallach Scott, calls "an indeterminate sense of the future." ii.


(9) I have chosen certain pieces--articles and books--which are frequently cited in the literature. I make no judgment on their "canonicity"; I do not think such an evaluation is possible or, in a feminist framework, desirable. See Shane Phelan, Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 31, where Phelan argues that "the lack of a feminist canon of great works" contributes to the strength of feminist theory. The writings I look at share one commonality at least: they, directly or indirectly, raise conceptual problematics about the concepts of "theory" as well as "gender" and "woman". That I focus on this site, rather than another, can be attributed perhaps to my own training in philosophy, a paradigmatic domain of conceptual analysis, but also to the fact that many related issues converge on these topics.


(11) Unless otherwise noted, the work I review in this essay is that of feminists living and working in the United States. I have not tried to address the commonalities and/or differences between American and British feminists or between so-called Anglo-American and continental feminism. The great and it appears irreducible diversity of American feminist theorists composes a complicated enough narrative for one review.


(14) See especially the remark of Katie King, (1994): "What does it mean for Teresa de Lauretis to say in 1988 that the seventies was `a time when the very term "feminist theory" did not yet exist,' when in 1970 Pamela Allen writes a pamphlet describing the group production of theory in women's liberation ..." In her first chapter, titled "What Counts as Theory?" King queries various purported "beginnings" of theorizing as well as the locution "feminist theory", expressing her preference for the term "theory building" as more appropriate to the "overwhelming flux" of "feminisms". 28.

(15) Joanna Russ, What Are We Waiting For (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1998) 435.

(16) MacKinnon, "From Practice to Theory, or What is a White Woman Anyway?" in Radically Speaking" Feminism Reclaimed edited by Diane Bell and Renate Klein (North Melbourne, Australia, Spinifex: 1996) 46.

(18) Sara Evans, "Afterword", in Hewitt, O`Barr and Rosebaugh, editors, Talking Gender: public images, personal journeys, and political critiques. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 190-97. All page references are to this text.

(19) See Deborah R. Siegel, "Reading between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a 'Postfeminist' Moment" in Third Wave Agenda, Being Feminist, Doing Feminism edited by Leslie Haywood and Jennifer Drake (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 55-82. The epigraph of Siegel's article, however, is "For it will not be time to speak of postfeminism until we can legitimately speak of post-patriarchy." (1997:5) Nancy Fraser is credited for the quote but the latter has acknowledged borrowing the line from British-Norwegian feminist Toril Moi. See Fraser, Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections of the "Postsocialist" Condition (New York: Routledge, 1997) 170, n40.


(22) What I believe bears more pondering is this: the academy may be a cloister as many have charged, but so too, in different ways, is the purportedly wider space of the media and politics in American culture. As feminist critiques have urged, democratic pluralism is not actually working in the United States even while lip service is paid to the principle of pluralism and its virtue, tolerance. American feminists, along with others, have frequently sounded the contradictions in the heart of the American social formation.

(23) See Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism" and Nancy Fraser, "From Irony to Prophecy to Politics: A Response to Richard Rorty" in Michigan Quarterly Review, 30, 1991:260


(30) See Hilary Putnam, Renewing Philosophy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, 5r printing 1998) 80-107, for a discussion of the "absolute conception". Haraway's much quoted characterization appears originally in her "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" in Feminist Studies, 14, no. 3 (Fall 1988) 579-99, an essay that has been widely anthologized in whole or in part since its publication in 1988.


(36) See Christian, "The Race for Theory" in Radically Speaking edited by Diane Bell and Renate Klein (North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex, 1996) 312. Christian's essay appeared originally in Cultural Critique, 6 spring 1987: 335-45. It has been widely anthologized since then. A main concern in the essay is with the "academic hegemony" of theory and "its inappropriateness to the energetic emerging literarures in the world today." (312) Christian struck a number of sensitive chords especially among feminists working in literary studies.


(38) It should be noted here that the debates between so-called "equality feminists" and "difference feminists" have been fuelled in the main by a misconceptualization of "equality" as "sameness"--a notion which has rendered the moral and political ideal of equality almost vacuous. See Nancy Fraser, "Multiculturalism, Antiessentialism, and Radical Democracy: A Genealogy of the Current Impasse in Feminist Theory" in Justus Interruptus (1997) pp. 173-188.

(40) In Feminism/Postmodernism edited and with an introduction by Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990) 19-38. Page references in the text are to this article.


(50) Hartsock, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" in Nicholson (1990 pp. 157-175) 159. Page references are to this text.

(51) Di Stefano, "Dilemmas of Difference" in Nicholson (1990 pp. 63-82) 75

(52) See Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism" in Feminism/Postmodernism (1990 pp. 133-156) 142.


(54) See Jane Flax, "The End of Innocence" in Butler and Scott (1992) 446.


(57) See Anzaldua, "Haciendo caras, una entrada" in Making Face, Making Soul (1990, pp. xv-xxviii) xxiii-xxiv.

(58) Flax in Butler and Scott (1992) 446.

(59) Flax (1992) 446.

(60) Judith Butler in Feminist Contentions (1995, pp.35-57) 38. Page references in the text are to this article, unless otherwise noted.

(61) See Butler, "For a Careful Reading" in Feminist Contentions (1995, pp. 12%143) 140


(64) Widely anthologized, Alcoff's article was first published in Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society 1988, vol. 13, 3, pp. 405-436. All page references here are to this publication.


(70) See bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (Boston: South End Press, 1984) 5-6.


(72) Nicholson, "interpreting Gender" 58-59.

(73) Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender" 59


(76) Haraway, "Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post Humanist Landscape" in Feminists Theorize the Political, pp. 86-100, 95.


(80) Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault" in Feminism as Critique, edited and introduced by Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 pp. 128-142) 141.


(83) See Butler, "Contingent Foundations" in Feminist Contentions, 50.


(85) See Butler, "For a Careful Reading" 135.
(86) Butler, "For a Careful Reading" 135.


(88) Benhabib, "Subjectivity, Historiography and Politics" 110.


(90) See Fraser, "Pragmatism, Feminism, and the Linguistic Turn" in Feminist Contentions, pp. 157-171, 163.


(93) Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism" in Feminism/Postmodernism, pp. 133-156, 142.

(94) See Bordo, 149.

(95) See Young, "Gender as Seriality" in Intersecting Voices (1997, pp. 12-37) 17.


(99) See Young (1997) 22.

(100) This view has pervaded, and arguably diminished thereby, the work of Christina Hoff Sommers. See especially Sommers, Who Stole Feminism (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).


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