

DEATH OF THE ARMCHAIR ACTIVIST: PRAGMATIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF
FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE

by

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Engaging in the development of feminist thinking is an act of self-creation and world-creation. Because feminism is fundamentally a socio-political project, feminist thinking ought to be immanent in feminist practice and action, thereby inverting traditional hierarchies which understand theory as guiding practice. An inclusive feminism needs to be inclusive in practice, not theory, and requires the maximization of democratic, grassroots participation in the decisions, activities and practices that structure feminism. I argue that the academic institutionalization of feminist theory exacerbates the growing gap between theory and practice within feminist movements in the U.S. by creating a class of feminist knowledge specialists who produce hypertheoretical discourses. These discourses, instead of arising out of particular socio-political problems and needs, develop out

of the framework of existing academic discourses, and are difficult for non-specialists to access and assess. The proliferation and normalization of hypertheoretical discourses both raises questions about the types of power relations they produce, and serve to distance academic feminist theory from feminist politics and practice.

I argue that instead of attempting to ground feminist practice and action in knowledge, feminist knowledge projects should arise out of, be situated within, and guided by attempts to work through socio-political problems. I suggest that feminists abandon commitments to particular epistemological approaches and proceed pragmatically, that is, begin within the context of concrete social, cultural, and political situations and problems.

Pragmatic understandings of epistemology would permit feminists to be free to select or develop the epistemological approach best suited for the needs and goals of specific socio-political projects. Assessments and judgments about approaches to knowledge cannot be established a priori to, or outside of, particular projects because these evaluations are always relative to what needs to be known and why. The key to proceeding pragmatically is that, in very important ways, practice precedes theory. It is more a way of preaching what you practice, than practicing what you preach.

Pragmatic approaches to feminist knowledge mark the end of the armchair activist because they require that feminist theorists become involved in feminist communities and networks that are to give direction and form to knowledge projects.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: DEATH OF THE ARMCHAIR ACTIVIST

"Feminist theory has become elitist and useless to ordinary women," a white, working class woman said from the audience. "The only women who understand it are the ones who write it!"

I was on a panel entitled, "What Does Feminism Mean to You?" consisting of feminist campus activists. Fellow panel members, colleagues and friends looked to me, as the "resident" feminist philosopher, for a response. I had no response, no answer, no excuse, no defense.

"Every time I try to read some new feminist theory I feel alienated," another woman said. "It makes me feel stupid--like I just don't understand what is going on in feminism anymore."

These types of comments were not new to me. I am frequently questioned about the political relevance of contemporary academic feminist theory. Students and friends often ask, "What does this have to do with anything?" or "How does this relate to the lives of women?" Sometimes it's just a matter of explaining connections the person has not yet come to understand. Most of the time I am hard pressed to formulate a satisfactory answer, or I find that a

theory explains how to get across the street by a route that sends them around the block first. It seems to me that the more difficult it is to understand the relationship between theory and practice, the less meaning the theory has.

What was striking to me the day of the panel was not the anger about academic feminist theory, but the realization that the most empowering, hardworking, dynamic feminist activists in the room did not know very much about feminist theory. In fact, academic feminist theory had very little relationship with most of the work we had been doing.

Judith Grant describes a feminist conference during which she had a similar realization. "I felt that academic feminist theory had gotten very out of touch with activism, that it was out of touch with any concrete sense of female power."¹ As an activist, I rarely have doubts that the work I am doing changes the lives of women. As a feminist theorist, especially a feminist philosopher, I am not always so sure. I find it troubling that feminist theory has become a strange and difficult thing, practiced by intellectuals, professional philosophers, and academic theorists.

During a conversation about the esoteric nature of feminist theory, a friend said to me, "My real concern is that we're talking to ourselves." Then jokingly, "The administration would appreciate it if the feminists would

speaking in a way that no one can understand so that they no longer create problems in the university."

Feminism needs theories. It needs theories that explain how underlying mechanisms produce the structures and patterns that serve to oppress women. It needs theories that provide alternative understandings of ourselves and the world, so that we may begin to experience the world in new ways, become empowered. It needs theories that provide visions and dreams for the future so that feminists know for what we are working. If feminism is to touch the lives of people and motivate them to want to work to change the status quo, it must speak to them in ways that they understand. As bell hooks has said, we need theories that create reinvigorated interest in feminist struggles and renewed commitment to ending sexist oppression.²

Where are these theories to come from? Who will write them? Who will they be about? Whose needs and interests will they serve? It seems that many academic feminist theorists have unwittingly fallen victim to a hierarchical order which values and privileges theory. According to this hierarchy, theory must guide practice. It is the task of theorists to provide analyses and strategies to the activists who will implement them.

In the chapters that follow, I show that this relationship between theory and practice is problematic for

feminism and ought to be replaced by a pragmatic approach, one that marks the death of the armchair activist. The suggestions I make in this dissertation can only be understood in the context of a larger political goal: renewed interest and commitment to building a grassroots feminist movement in this country. In order for a feminist movement to be grassroots, the very people who are oppressed should be directing the activity and direction of the movement. My focus on feminist knowledge is motivated by two simple, related ideals: 1) feminist knowledge should be empowering to everyday women; 2) everyday women should have the opportunity to participate in the production of feminist knowledge. My contention is that an inclusive feminism cannot be grounded in theory because feminism is fundamentally a socio-political, not a theoretical, project. Ending race, class, and gender oppression requires a change in both consciousness and in socio-political structures. Both of these require that feminist theory be a tool the average person can hold in her/his hand. If we approach the production of feminist knowledge pragmatically, grounding it in political commitments, theory then becomes a part of problem solving or goal oriented processes, and not a starting point.

Dominant feminist theory has been attacked for its exclusionary nature, stemming in part from the false

universalization of white, middle class women's experiences. White feminist theorists have treated the problem of exclusion as a theoretical problem, and have responded by either attempting to construct epistemologies with robust understandings of "women" or "feminist standpoint," or by deconstructing women's experiences and arguing that epistemology be abandoned due to its exclusionary tendencies. One of the underlying causes of the problem of exclusion--that a diverse population of women have not been empowered to structure feminist inquiry--has been neglected. The simple fact is that an inclusive feminism needs to be inclusive in practice, not in theory. Inclusive theories written by white, academic feminists do very little to ensure that feminism is inclusive in practice. In fact, theoretical attempts to solve the problem have led to the production of more abstract, jargonistic theory, which only serves to perpetuate the problem.

In chapter II I argue that the institutionalization of feminist theory and the resulting creation of an elite class of feminist knowledge specialists functions to produce and maintain privilege among those feminists most empowered to write highly abstract theory. The production of this hypertheory increases the gap between theory and practice because it makes feminist theory difficult to access and evaluate, and results in increasing the gap between feminist

theory and the emancipatory processes the theory is to serve.

The proliferation and normalization of difficult, complex, jargonistic, abstract, and erudite theory restricts the number of women enabled to participate in its production. This means that fewer women are able to participate in the empowering processes of redefining and revisioning their subjectivity and their understandings of the world. Furthermore, the highly abstract and jargonistic nature of hypertheory decreases its educational potential, and affects the possibility for critical and practical evaluation.

In chapter III I review the feminist debates on epistemology. Though feminist discourses of epistemology began as critiques of the traditional, Anglo-analytic, masculinist forms of epistemology, some feminist epistemologists have come to believe that it is necessary for feminists to develop specifically feminist epistemologies. What feminist epistemology should consist of and if feminism even needs epistemologies has become a point of debate and has consequently led to the development of at least three perspectives on feminist epistemology: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint epistemology, and feminist postmodernism.

I discuss these perspectives in order to show that continuing these debates serves no political purpose. Attempts to create an epistemological framework robust enough to account for diverse situations and diverse knowing subjects, attempts to promote one perspective over another, and attempts to argue that epistemology is a bankrupt modernist project have diverted feminist energy from the socio-political activity feminist knowledge is supposed to serve. Academic feminists have become so absorbed in these internal, theoretical struggles that they have lost sight of the political struggles of feminism. My contention is that these debates should be abandoned and that feminists be free to select the approach that best suits the conditions of inquiries associated with particular social problems, in other words, that the production and evaluation of knowledge be approached pragmatically.

In chapter IV I argue that giving up commitments to particular epistemological frameworks will free feminists to choose or develop approaches that suit particular socio-political projects. I use the perspectives of three feminist philosophers as starting points for understanding pragmatic approaches to knowledge: Sandra Harding suggests that the analytic categories of feminist theories remain unstable; Lorraine Code finds a middle ground between the project of constructing feminist epistemologies and the

postmodern project of deconstructing epistemology by suggesting the idea of "taking a position"; and Gail Stenstad suggests that feminists rely on anarchical thinking. These three views see plurality as an advantage, recognize that changing social, political and cultural circumstances play a role in how and what kind of knowledge is produced, and emphasize the need for feminist knowledge to be flexible and open to revision.

In the second part of the chapter, I develop what I mean by "proceeding pragmatically." I discuss links between feminism and the American pragmatist philosophical tradition, and focus on five features that play a key role in proceeding pragmatically: 1) understanding pragmatism as a process; 2) an emphasis on context, particulars, and consequences; 3) the use of experience for theorizing; 4) the production and evaluation of knowledge arising from communities; 5) a focus on education. I argue that by proceeding pragmatically, the legitimacy of a theoretical perspective is established by practical efficacy, determined in part by the ordinary people whom the knowledge affects. By situating knowledge in the context of a larger political project, knowledge production is no longer an individual endeavor, but a group or community endeavor. This requires that knowledge be understood as arising out of communities which share goals and values, and produce criteria and

standards according to their needs and goals. Pragmatism requires that approaches to knowledge be tested in practice. Assessments and judgements about knowledge then can be made with respect to what needs to be known and why. Whether or not an approach "works" is determined with respect to the goals and values of the community who will use it. Furthermore, engaging in attempts to bring about practical change can better inform theorizing. The failure or success of an approach can play a role in the revision and development of a perspective.

In chapter IV I choose early radical feminism as a model for understanding pragmatic approaches to knowledge. Early radical feminism both embodies some of the most important ideals of feminism and serves as an example of proceeding pragmatically. To begin with, for radical feminism, the production of knowledge was situated within the context of a larger social, political movement, with its purpose being to serve the movement. Secondly, radical feminists actively sought to dissolve the gap between theory and practice. Consciousness raising was used as a means of both organizing a movement and producing theory, an approach in which theory and practice were intertwined. Third, the knowledge produced did not arise from academic specialist groups, but from the ordinary women who participated in consciousness raising, thereby giving

knowledge a grassroots characteristic. Radical feminists went out of their way to prevent the construction of a group of knowledge specialists. They saw all women as potentially equally authoritative generators of knowledge. The production of knowledge did not occur exclusively in academia. The very women active in working on particular issues: rape, domestic violence, contraception, abortion rights, took part in writing and distributing pamphlets, newsletters, booklets, and essays. Lastly, radical feminism served to educate and empower large numbers of ordinary women. Theory was written in an accessible, easy-to-read manner. As a result, radical feminism was successful in changing the consciousness of and politicizing large numbers of women.

Radical feminism aspired for a mass-based movement that would lead to a feminist revolution. I argue that though it may not have been successful in achieving this goal, some of the ideals and characteristics of radical feminism merit reconsideration and rejuvenation.

In chapter VI I attempt to provide ideas for doing theory differently--for proceeding pragmatically. In the first part of the chapter I discuss two examples of knowledge production. The first is the project of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. The process used by the collective has been successful in producing and

evaluating knowledge in a manner that integrates different perspectives, embodies the values of feminism, and involves the participation of many women.

The second example is concerned with safe sex discourses associated with female-to-female HIV transmission. Because this is an area in which very little knowledge has been produced, it serves as a good example for exploring what it would mean to proceed pragmatically. I show that none of the three approaches to epistemology outlined in chapter III seem adequate on their own, and in many ways, the distinctions between approaches do not make sense. Proceeding pragmatically allows us to avoid lengthy academic, theoretical debates and allows us to develop theoretical perspectives within the context of actual problems, ensuring that the gap between theory and practice remains at a minimum.

In the second part of the chapter, I discuss the role of academic feminist theorists in feminism as a social, political, and cultural movement. I argue that it is the responsibility of feminist theorists to help shape the contexts in which feminist knowledge is developed. This responsibility includes making clear the ways in which feminist theory is useful to feminist practice, presenting theory in a manner that is accessible to those who will be affected by the knowledge, and, given that there is a

commitment to an inclusive feminism in practice, attempting to facilitate grassroots participation in knowledge projects. In an attempt to understand how these responsibilities may be fulfilled, I discuss the role of the theorist as an activist and an educator. I explore the ways in which both of these roles may enable academic feminist theorists to produce theories that are directly linked to specific, concrete, social and political problems.

I was four years old when the now legendary, exciting energy of the 1968 youthful radicalism took place. By the time I had a rudimentary understanding of politics, Reagan began his dynasty of conservatism. By the time I identified as a feminist, the entire country was wallowing in happy Reaganite idealism about the "American Way." I thought it could not get any worse. Then Bush was elected. Clinton provided a glimmer of hope until Newt Gingrich and his puppy-dog, freshman Republican congressional representatives took over the House.

The period, 1980-95, has marked the increasing depoliticization of domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, and feminist health centers. Supported in part by local, county, state and federal government funds, political organizations that were a result of radical organizing around specific issues are in danger of unwittingly becoming

apolitical social service organizations. The advantage is that these organizations have become stable support services. The disadvantage is that they are less apt to serve as important focal points for political organizing and sources of empowerment for women.

The old radical feminist battle cry "We're taking our bodies back!" barely makes sense in a time in which women willingly spend billions on liposuction, plastic surgery, breast implants, and diet aids. Sexist, hyper-sexualized, objectifying images of women have multiplied in all forms of media. Violence is eroticized and sex is made violent. Meanwhile, one of the best kept secrets is that one out of every nine women is diagnosed with breast cancer.

The civil rights of gays and lesbians have been, and continue to be contested in many states and cities. Abortion rights are being chipped away as I type this. Single, welfare mothers are being blamed for the extraordinary violence of our youth, while support programs are being undermined. Women still suffer from racist and sexist discrimination in education and in the work force. Women and children constitute the majority of the country's poor.

This period has also marked, on one hand, the slow death of feminism as an active, socio-political movement, and on the other hand, the flourishing of academic feminist

theory. As feminist theory becomes more academic, more hypertheoretical, more apolitical, the Christian Right is taking over the country in leaps and bounds.

Feminism has lost its grassroots characteristics. Whether or not a feminist revolution is possible is not a question I am interested in entertaining. But I do believe that it is possible for feminism to regain grassroots characteristics, and this time without replicating the exclusionary practices and false universalization of the past. In other words, I believe it is possible to build a feminist movement that is inclusive in practice and not simply in theory. In order for this to happen, people need to make it happen. Part of the process of making it happen includes changing how academic feminists "do" theory. Because many academic feminist theorists have no specific social political goal, their energy has turned to debating amongst each other. By relocating the production of feminist theory in the actual practical contexts, both academic and non-academic women have an opportunity to participate in the production and evaluation of feminist knowledge in a way that might effect change of socio-political structures. Understanding knowledge pragmatically, as being produced and evaluated in the context of particular practices and political projects ensures that feminist knowledge is serving feminist projects

for change and is not simply responding to academic problems. Ultimately, this means that feminist theorists can no longer be armchair activists.

This dissertation has been a strange and difficult project. I find that when I read portions of it to academic audiences I get a patterns of similar responses. These responses seem more like misunderstandings than objections. I want to address these concerns here in order to make my position clear from the beginning.

My first concern is that my critique of the institutionalization of feminist theory is often mistaken to be a form of anti-intellectualism. I argue that the more feminist theory is exclusively produced within academia, the higher the risk of it being elitist--that is, of it serving the interests of those empowered to produce it. This critique of academic feminism is often taken as form of anti-intellectualism. My point is not that feminism would be better off without intellectualism, but that we live in a political, socio-economic system that constructs academic feminists as the authoritative feminist intellectuals. I argue that more feminists should play a role in producing feminist theory. In effect, I am saying that we need more intellectualism.

My second concern is that I am mistaken for advocating an anti-theory position. This is most common response I

receive even though I at no time or place state that feminism does not need theory or should reject theory. For reasons unclear to me, the idea that practice should be emphasized over theory is taken to mean that we should no longer do theory, or that theory is not important. I cannot help but recognize the similarities between this response and the response that people have to the idea of being women-identified. People often misunderstand "women-identified" to be anti-men, even though the concept of "women-identified" says nothing about men. Attempts to make central and give value to the devalued, non-dominant term in hierarchical dualisms (man/woman, theory/practice) is often taken as a rejection of the dominant term. To be honest, I find this "leap" of reason to be inexplicable.

The third concern focuses on my position about different approaches to feminist epistemology. My argument is that commitments to particular approaches ought to be abandoned and feminists ought to be free to select the approach most compatible with the goals of specific projects. I also argue that debates about the advantages and disadvantages of certain approaches should not take place outside the context of specific problems. Audience members often respond by arguing that empiricism or standpoint or postmodernism have merits and are useful. My suggestion that commitments to one approach be abandoned and that feminists be free to

select the approach most compatible with the goals of specific projects is not a rejection of all existing epistemological approaches.

On a more personal note: As far as I am concerned, I wrote my magnum opus the first three years of graduate school. It consisted of ten pages of poetry about the gap between traditional Western philosophy and the realities of every day life. I felt philosophy attempting to pull my attention away from the realm of the practical and into a world of discourse complete with its own language and rules that had nothing to do with daily life. I also felt that the required form for philosophical writing was stifling, asphyxiating my ability to express myself creatively. I wanted to write my dissertation in a nonlinear, creative form, but realizing that that would be too difficult and risky, I was committed to inserting creative interludes into the linear text. But the pressures of writing linearly, of reviewing and analyzing arguments, of coming up and supporting my own arguments forced me to abandon such a task. The tension and struggle of living in two worlds, of seeing things in two ways in so many aspects of my life exhausted me. Traditional philosophy and feminist theory, teaching in women's studies and philosophy, highly abstract feminist theory and feminist political activity, tediously boring philosophy paper readings and local women's coffee

houses. Different worlds with different rules, values, modes of interaction. Compromises had to be made. So much of this dissertation was originally written in poetic aphorisms which were slowly reshaped and restructured into the linear, non-creative form in which it now exists. That process required the deletion of many lines of poetry and creative expression. That task was accomplished begrudgingly with much regret and resentment. Academia perpetrates an ugly injustice against philosophy by taking the art out the love of wisdom.

Not only did I give up creative expression to finish this dissertation, I also minimized my participation in political activism. I turned down many requests and opportunities to participate in activities that may have made a difference in the lives of women, and gays and lesbians.

I am guilty in many ways of perpetuating the problems with academic feminism that I point out in this dissertation. I use difficult language. I have become engaged by purely theoretical problems. And, I have focused valuable time and energy writing something that I'm sure will change very little, when I could have been involved in activities that would certainly have led to improving women's lives. To legitimate this behavior would be a

mistake. Instead, I am committed to returning to activities that I know are more likely to make a difference.

Notes

¹ Judith Grant, Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12.

² bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," Yale Journal of Law and Feminism 4, no. 1 (1991): 12.

CHAPTER II

ABSTRACTION, ERUDITION, AND ELITISM: EXCLUSION IN ACADEMIC
FEMINIST THEORY

Audre Lorde has written that for women poetry is not a luxury. It is necessary for our survival. Poetry is the light by which we form our dreams, hopes and visions toward survival and change.¹ Ruth Ginzberg has taken this a step further by arguing that philosophy is not a luxury. The traditional view places philosophy at the top of a hierarchy of needs. According to this view, only after basic survival is assured does philosophy have the opportunity to develop. Philosophy, along with literature and art, constitute human flourishing which is possible only after physical, community, psychological and spiritual needs are met.²

Ginzberg rejects the traditional view by arguing that instead of separating survival from flourishing, we need to break up the androcentric hierarchy by conceiving of philosophy as part of our survival. Insofar as the oppressor needs the oppressed, the meeting of a few basic needs are "allowed." If we perpetuate the hierarchy of needs, we will forever be stuck attempting to meet only the most basic needs for survival. For feminists, philosophy cannot be what occurs after survival is assured. Survival

should be immanent in philosophy. As Antonio Gramsci puts it, engaging in philosophy means working out 'consciously' and critically one's own conception of the world as well as taking part in the creation of the history of the world.³ Insofar as engaging in the production of feminist philosophy is an act of self-creation--part of the process by which women empower themselves through both developing and articulating worldviews and changing their social and political circumstances--feminist philosophy is necessary for the survival of women.

Continuing on this path, I argue that if survival is to be immanent in philosophy, feminists must work against the construction of hypertheoretical academic feminist theory as the dominant form of feminist theory.⁴ My contention is that the institutionalization of feminist theory⁵ and the resulting creation of an elite class of feminist knowledge specialists not only functions to produce and maintain privilege among those feminists most empowered to write highly abstract theory, but also that the production of this hypertheory increases the gap between theory and practice because it makes feminist theories difficult to access and assess, consequently distancing feminist theories from emancipatory processes.

Understanding theorizing as an integral part of survival is a common theme among feminists of color.

According to bell hooks, theorizing when done by those in oppressed groups, is a liberatory practice. Because it involves engaging in activity that has not taken place before, it is a form of rebellion, a subversive act.⁶

Expressing what has been silenced, covered, buried--a local truth, a subjugated knowledge, experience which reveals the falsity of the dominant perspective--when expressed by group or collectively, is an instance of theory as political practice.

Theorizing can also provide a visionary or healing function. For hooks, theorizing is "a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently." ⁷ Both Gloria Anzaldúa and Barbara Christian echo these sentiments about the liberatory and visionary potential of theory. Christian admits that her concern for theory and literature is a passionate one because for her it is a part of survival⁸ and, according to Anzaldúa, creative acts are a form of political activism. "Our survival depends on being creative."⁹ Because theory helps us imagine how the world could be different, it provides hope and inspiration. Theory itself can also play a liberatory role in the lives of women. Certainly feminist thought has changed the lives of many women. Theories can change the way people see and experience themselves in the world by helping them name, understand or rethink their experiences

and perspectives. This revisioning is part of the process of changing how we act, react and interact within the world.

But, theory is not inherently healing, liberatory or revolutionary. In fact, dominant feminist thought has had to grapple with its exclusionary tendencies. As Elizabeth Spelman puts it, "It is not news that dominant Western Feminist thought has taken the experiences of white, middle class women to be representative of, indeed normative for, the experiences of all women."¹⁰ In an attempt to discuss the experience of "woman," the condition of one group of women has been conflated with the condition of all women. Because gender identity has been dealt with as if it exists in isolation from race and class identity, white feminist theorists have discussed sexism as if how one is affected by sexism does not include how one is affected by race and class.¹¹ As the essays in This Bridge Called My Back make clear, the additive analysis of racism and sexism (i.e., saying all women are oppressed by sexism and some women are further oppressed by racism) has been inadequate because it does not account for the differing contexts within which white women and women of color experience sexism, classism and racism.¹²

Problems about the exclusionary nature of feminist theory have been treated mainly as theoretical problems, that is, as problems about theory. According to María

Lugones, white women have been more concerned with the harm that the "problem of difference" creates for theorizing than the harm that the theorizing has done for women of color.¹³ Attention has been focused on the content of theories: on false universalization of experiences, on essentialist uses of "woman," but not on the racist and classist socio-political structures that underlie the problem¹⁴ --the fact that a diverse population of women has not been empowered to produce knowledge.

The problem of exclusion is not fundamentally a theoretical problem, solved by deconstructing and discursifying women's experiences, or by constructing robust understandings of "woman" or of "feminist standpoint." The fact is that a diverse population of women has not been empowered to structure feminist inquiry.¹⁵ Theoretical attempts to solve the problem of exclusion have only led to more abstract, difficult theorizing, and hence in important ways, have perpetuated, if not exacerbated the problem.

Instead of focusing on the ways that the central concepts and categories of academic feminist theories made some women's experiences invisible, I want to ask a different question: what are the implications of the production of an elite class of feminist knowledge specialists for feminist movements? Given that the production of feminist theory is now established and

organized almost exclusively within academic institutions and only a few are empowered to participate in its production, we must ask ourselves: what kind of theory is being generated out of this particular organization and what forms of power does it legitimate? It has been the task of feminism to challenge dominant discourses produced and maintained by the dominant institutions in the U.S. Now that dominant feminist theory has become an institutionally produced, legitimated knowledge with its own justified boundaries that serve to exclude, it should be viewed with the same suspicion and undergo the same scrutiny.

Currently, the most articulated theories of feminism come from privileged white women.¹⁶ This, of course is a result of the racist and classist systems within which academia is embedded. Not only is it financially, emotionally, and intellectually challenging for women of color and working class women to attend college, those who do attend usually attend public institutions. Furthermore, if/when women of color and working class white women get hired, they are usually hired by non-research institutions where they do not have access to the time and resources necessary for publishing. As a consequence, women of color and working class white women are less likely to become part of networks that produce feminist knowledge.¹⁷

Though this may be true, I believe it is a mistake to view feminism as a white middle class phenomenon simply because the majority of published feminist work has been written by white, middle class, academic feminists. The heart of feminism is constituted by all the women who do the hard work of organizing protests and demonstrations, of working with legislators, school boards, city councils and corporations to change policies and laws, of volunteering time and energy to local feminist organizations and projects. For the most part, these are not the women who publish articles and books. If the majority of women enabled to participate in the processes of feminist inquiry, self-definition and articulations of world views are white, middle/upper class, highly educated women, the knowledge produced does not properly constitute feminist thought in the inclusive sense. If philosophy is to be a part of the process of survival and not a luxury enjoyed after survival is ensured, the production of feminist philosophy should not replicate the exclusionary tendencies of racist, classist, masculinist thought nor lose sight of the political ends of feminist movements.

In the words of Joseph Wu, "As a member of a profession one has to follow the professional code, or conventions, as set up, supported, and unconsciously enforced by the majority of the profession's members."¹⁸ This has put

academic feminist theorists in an awkward position. In order to establish feminist theory as a legitimate area of study within academic institutions, academic feminist theorists have had to define and delineate the boundaries and limits of academic feminist theory and to a certain extent, satisfy the norms, values, and standards of traditional, masculinist scholarship. This has resulted in the feminist production of standards and criteria which serve to define what is theoretical, important, insightful, valid. In this way, academic feminist theory sanctions some forms of theorizing and devalues and discounts others.

Though academic feminists deserve credit for struggling to resist masculinist standards and criteria, academic feminist theorists have been empowered to produce new, feminist standards which nonetheless function to exclude from the academically defined realm of the theoretical, work which falls outside the parameters of academic standards and norms. In other words, academic standards become the measuring stick for all feminist theory. Academic theory is considered of a higher order and non-academic theory is characterized as "pop" theory. In the early days of the feminist movement, poetry, fiction, activist writing held center stage; but now that feminist thinking is contained within an institution where highly abstract theory is most prized, (academic) feminist theory is claiming center stage.

Within recent years, difficult, complex, jargonistic, abstract, erudite theory has become the norm. As a result, narratives, prose, poetry, first hand experiential accounts and other forms of writing that are theoretical are perceived as not being rigorous enough by academic feminist theorists.¹⁹ This is problematic for feminists who choose to theorize in these forms. According to Barbara Christian, "People of color have always theorized--but in forms quite different... often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language..."²⁰ As Anzaldúa notes, what counts for theory in dominant academic communities is not necessarily what counts as theory for women of color.²¹

The proliferation and normalization of hypertheoretical feminist theory has resulted in several other interrelated problems. The highly abstract, academic and jargonistic nature of the theory restricts the number of women enabled to participate in its production, limits the potential audience, decreases its educational potential, and affects the possibility for critical and practical evaluation.

Though a good deal of the focus of academic feminist theory has been on language--on sexist language, semiotics, discursive formations--the most simple reality about language, that how we speak and how we use language is a result of our socio-economic class, has been put on the back

burner. Choosing to express feminist ideas, categories, insights and concepts through hypertheoretical discourses neglects the realities of the direct connection between class and educated literacy, and reinscribes hierarchies of understanding instead of breaking them down. For example, in order to fully understand Judith Butler's work, one must understand Irigaray and Kristeva, and in order to fully understand Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, one must understand Jacques Lacan. The point is not that feminists should not be well read, but that each of these theorists is difficult to read and only the most educated feminists will fully understand Butler's work.

Admittedly, special circumstances may arise for which a technical discourse is necessary and legitimate, but too often, the assumed audience of academic feminist theory is other academics of the same discipline, even if the subject matter may be of general interest. If feminists intend for feminist theory to be socially and politically useful, we must be attentive to how we choose to communicate our ideas and assume an audience as large as possible. As hooks notes, "Theory that cannot be shared in every day conversation cannot be used to educate the public."²² Anzaldúa echoes this sentiment: "'high' theory does not translate well when one's intention is to communicate to masses of people made up of different audiences."²³ Put

more simply, you cannot communicate with a population in language they do not understand. According to Anzaldúa, feminist writing that is written jargonistically, in a "hard-to-access language ... blocks communication (and) makes the general listener/reader feel bewildered and stupid."²⁴

It may be argued that it is legitimate for academic feminist theory to be written for other academics. Changing academic perspectives will have a trickle down effect. We can impart feminist perspectives to our students, who then join the work force and institute changes. If this is the strategy we choose, the more sense these perspectives make, the easier they are to share and the more useful they will be. But there is another way, and what I suggest is a better way, to write feminist theory--one that allows for multiple strategies, including the one above--and that is to write feminist theory for everyone. The idea of having a people's feminism means that theorists must always ask themselves what ideas would encourage and motivate change and which would facilitate this change? If feminism is to touch the lives of people and motivate them to want to change the status quo, it must speak to them in ways that they understand.

Hypertheoretical discourse also prevents feminist ideas from being practically evaluated. The only qualified

evaluators become those who can understand the discourses, limiting the potential audience to other academics, and in many cases only academics of a particular discipline, and most likely excluding non-academic politically active people and the general public. An academic feminist can write a paper and the only ones who have access to it and give her serious feedback are other academics who hear it at a conference or read it in an academic journal or book. Not only is this type of feminist thinking inaccessible to those whose lives might be most changed by feminist thought and those interested in political changes, but its inaccessibility prevents it from being evaluated, tested and critiqued by almost everyone outside the specialist group. Because critiques and challenges will be made by those most enabled to understand it, the criticism and feedback comes from a homogeneous audience. Almost certainly excluded from this audience are all non-college educated women.

It seems that many academic feminist theorists spend more time and energy attempting to justify the hypertheoretical nature of contemporary feminist theory than examining the power relations that have led to this development and the consequences this type of theorizing, along with associated power relations, have on feminist movements. At a recent lecture given by a well-known feminist theorist, an audience member expressed the

alienation and frustration that she and many other women experience when encountering highly abstract, complex feminist theory written in jargonistic language. The comment was dismissed with a joke, "... my elitism begins where other people's understanding ends." The idea behind responses such as this is that women must not sell themselves short. They should take the time to struggle and learn difficult theory because it has much to offer. Women have been socialized to believe that they are not capable of difficult theorizing and overcoming this social perception is a form of empowerment. I want to maintain that there is a difference between understanding hypertheoretical, difficult discourses and replicating and perpetuating them. It is important for feminist theorists to know and understand dominant discourses and thought structures so that they can be resisted, but this does not mean that the elitist nature of these discourses should be replicated in feminist work.

The continued institutionalization of dominant feminist theory, complete with the construction of an elite group of knowledge specialists, functions to segregate feminist thought from the socio-political practices it is supposed to serve. As the production of feminist theory becomes segregated from the general population of active, non-academic feminists, it loses its grassroots interests.

Whereas grassroots production of knowledge is focused on problems generated out of community and public concern, the problematics and inquiries of dominant feminist theory are now often generated out of the theoretical and philosophical problems of academic disciplines or existing feminist theories. It is often difficult to trace the practical significance of these problems. Caught in an institution which promotes the myth that knowledge-seeking is good in-and-of-itself, and fascinated by contemporary theories which center on discourse, it is easy for academic feminist theorists to lose sight of the necessity for feminist theory to be explicitly concerned with problems and issues generated out of social and political situations and for theory to be clearly directed toward liberatory ends.

The more exclusive an activity feminist theory becomes, the more feminist activity falls into a masculinist hierarchical order which privileges theory over practice.²⁵ According to the hierarchy, thought must guide practice. We begin with thought, then apply it to practice. Theories come first. After things have been figured out on paper, the practical work can begin. Historically speaking, women have been permitted access to practical aspects of disciplines and professions, but not the theoretical or experimental. Nursing and social work, for example, is understood as women's work, while research and theorizing

has traditionally been male dominated. Philosophy remains a male dominated discipline with less than fifteen percent women and minorities. Furthermore, not only is theory gendered as masculine, and practice as feminine, theory is more highly valued. The contemplative life is the noble life.

It seems that many academic feminist theorists have fallen victim to this hierarchy, and though it is very likely that if asked, academic feminist theorists would deny that they believe that theory should come first, they proceed as if it is the task of theorists to provide analyses and strategies to the activists who will implement them. This hierarchy does more than perpetuate masculinist structures. It also perpetuates classist and racist structures. For example, I have heard some feminists argue that highly abstract feminist theories are useful, despite the difficult language in which they are written. This argument is followed by the suggestion that academic feminists serve as translators for activists and for the general public. This not only reinscribes hierarchical power relations that construct academic feminists as knowledge specialists and non-academic feminists as practitioners, it also constructs a "middle class" of translators. Given, as I have already noted, that working class women and women of color are more likely to be hired

by institutions that focus on teaching, instead of research institutions,²⁶ feminists with working class backgrounds and women of color are most likely to find themselves in this translator group. Not only do these feminists find themselves in positions that do not facilitate their taking part in networks that produce knowledge, they are further bogged down by having to read and translate hypertheory. A quote by hooks provides a useful illustration of this point: "It is interesting that a lot of privileged white women have appropriated the discourse on race, but in fact they are writing about it in ways that even the average academic woman cannot necessarily understand."²⁷

If feminist theory is to continue to be about survival --the survival of all women, the replication of the hierarchical arrangement between theory and practice must be actively resisted. While theorizing is still an act of survival for some groups of women, it has become a means for legitimating a lack of activism for some academic feminists. The idea that theorizing is a form of social or political action has been misused to provide justification for social and political inactivity by those most empowered to theorize. Oftentimes, academic feminists behave as if theoretical insights will lead to social and political change, even though they do nothing to practically initiate the change. "What is troublesome about the ideas of theory

as political resistance to hegemonic discourses and of theory as political action is the possibility that we will come to see re-descriptions of women's lives as the end of politics. It is the danger that we will imagine problems to be solved if we merely change interpretations."²⁸ This is not to deny that theorizing is a form of practice, but it does not, on its own, provide the radical revisioning and restructuring necessary to actually break down the hierarchy and the power relations associated with it.

Academic feminist theorists should not rely on the idea that if we are thinking and writing, we are doing our political part. Instead of searching for ways to understand theorizing as a practice, ultimately serving to justify the highly specialized, overly abstract, non-pragmatic path feminist theory is currently taking, academic feminists need to begin to explore ways of breaking down the hierarchical arrangement between theory and practice, approaching theory production in ways that maximize mass participation, and by becoming more socio-politically active.

Too often academic feminists operate as if the purpose of feminist thinking is to solve theoretical problems, even though if asked, very few would claim this should be the goal of feminist thinking. Beginning feminist inquiries with the problematics of other theories distances feminists from the reality of politics. Instead, theorizing should

arise out of specific, concrete social and political problems. In this way, academic theory can be contextualized as part of a specific problem solving or goal-oriented processes. This would ensure not only that the problematics of academic theories would be immanently linked to socio-political practices and ends, but also that evaluations and critiques of theories be tested in practice.

Trying to work things out through activity, interaction and practice ensures a more sound critique of thought than the perpetual elaboration and banter of theorizing. It is through practice that problematic aspects of an idea are revealed. Academic work is usually critiqued by other academics, a restricted, homogenous audience. The more we are socially and politically involved in attempts to bring about change, the more useful our analyses, critiques, and theorizing will be. Thinking about social change by reading theory, or even by reading the experiences of activists and organizers is not the same as learning about change from attempting to make it happen. Through participation one learns which problems and struggles are central. Problems and issues that require immediate attention can be addressed directly. Trying to work out ideas within communities, organizations or political systems provides more possibilities of direct contact with more diverse

populations of women and critical evaluation is more immediate and pointed.

I have been arguing that by establishing themselves as authoritative sources of knowledge, those who are privileged enough to access the production of theory, de-authorize non-specialists. What makes this configuration problematic is not that the accumulation of knowledge is an accumulation of power, but that the production of certain forms of knowledge are linked to the legitimation of certain forms of socio-political power. In other words, the way we arrange and organize the production and construction of feminist theorizing has political consequences. The type of theory produced and the manner in which it is produced functions to create hierarchies that create divisions and exclusions among feminists, and this development is self perpetuating. Because there is a relationship between accepted definitions of reality and socially legitimated power,²⁹ the production of knowledge provides the ground for social control, and in turn, particular forms of social control make certain forms of knowledge possible. In this way, the development of academic theorists as knowledge specialists becomes the condition of continued oppression for other women.³⁰

Considering that feminism has been completely incorporated in the market economy of the academy,³¹ the question of co-optation seems only natural. Because the

production of academic knowledge has historically served, and for the most part continues to serve, the interests of certain privileged classes of people, and has produced and continues to produce standards and norms which function to exclude work that is not academically sanctioned, the academization of feminist theory seems to put feminist thought on the wrong side of the inside/outside configuration.

Less than 30 years ago, the production of feminist thought was clearly located outside the bounds of academia. Although many of the "first generation" of mid-twentieth century (early second wave) feminists were college educated, the theory and knowledge produced was not sanctioned by academic institutions. Because many of these feminists were not attempting to accumulate publications considered scholarly by a white, male dominated institution, and did not have to worry about offending male colleagues who would vote on their promotion or tenure, they wrote more freely from a vantage point outside the system of masculinist values. Radical feminists, for example, produced short, issue-oriented, action-oriented analyses and critiques.³² Production and circulation of the printed word had a grassroots feel to it.³³ Where have all the little, radical local newspapers and newsletters gone? And why does the "history" of the feminist movement focus on the activities

and writings of white, middle class women? The point is not that academic feminists should promptly leave the academy in order to desktop publish radical pamphlets and newsletters (though some of this kind of publishing might not hurt), but that the normalization and proliferation of feminist hypertheory may be a warning that academic feminist theorists are being co-opted.

It has been argued that academic feminist theorists adopt hypertheoretical styles in order to gain and maintain recognition, status and positions within the academic world. Many intellectuals of oppressed groups find themselves situated between the oppressed groups to which they belong and the ideals of the dominant groups within academia. This means that in order to get a position within the institution from which change can be implemented, intellectuals from oppressed groups may have to compromise their values and/or participate in the very structures that perpetuate the oppression of their group. As Messer-Davidow has put it, "We have built an academic apparatus that has enabled and constrained feminist inquiry."³⁴ Academic feminists have had to operate within the academic system of valuation, and often this presents politically committed feminists with a dilemma because, as hooks notes, work that is accessible to larger audiences is delegitimated academically.³⁵

One standard reformist political approach holds that change comes about from having "comrades" both on the inside and the outside. There must be people on the inside that take those protesting on the outside seriously, otherwise those on the inside will say, "What's all that commotion out on the lawn? Close the window, I don't want to hear it." Those who make it to the inside need those on the outside to watchdog, making sure that they don't become co-opted. The question is: are there grassroot feminist forces outside the university, challenging it? The real fear is that the institutionalization of dominant feminist theory may indicate that the bulk of the feminist movement has been appropriated and co-opted. While there may be many politically active feminists that work within the bounds of the university to promote change, they stand in a space that is being co-opted. Academic positions present the possibility to reinscribe and perpetuate existing oppressive relations, especially since those who do not resist are most rewarded. We must admit, as hooks notes, "There is an elite group of feminist theorists who are paid way above scale and who benefit from the production of feminist theory in a way that allows them to lead more privileged lifestyles."³⁶ And, as Mary Childers has put it, "many feminists have been distracted by the toil of building careers instead of the toil of building a movement."³⁷ I share Susan Bordo's fear

that the masculinist institutions of knowledge/power still threaten to "harness and tame the visionary and critical energy of feminism."³⁸

This is not to say that that feminist theory should not be institutionalized in any way. According to Messer-Davidow, "We must avoid characterizing universities and colleges as we did in the 1960's. We envisioned them as social structures that 'housed' people and believed that we, as agents for change, had to position ourselves on the margins. If we were inside them, movement leaders warned, we would be co-opted."³⁹ To believe that working for change from positions within universities necessarily leads to co-optation is overly pessimistic and presents a distorted view as to how power relations can be changed in this country. It seems only natural that some feminist theory be produced within universities because, after all, one of the roles of universities is to produce knowledge. Social movements require theoretical analysis and some degree of academic institutionalization is a necessary and advantageous development. Positions within academic institutions facilitate the construction of detailed analyses of the social, political, historical and philosophical mechanisms that function to oppress women. In addition, since education and scholarship play a large role in structuring our perspectives and society, and since traditional academia

has historically been androcentric and masculinist, a certain degree of institutionalization of feminist knowledge provides legitimacy to critiques that challenge masculinist discourses and frameworks. As Michel Foucault has made explicit, institutions constitute us as we constitute them. As they use us, we can use them to create social change. To the extent to which practices, processes and structures of universities are available to academic feminists, we can influence them to create social change.

It cannot be denied that the need to meet academic standards in order to maintain academic positions presents academic feminists with a dilemma, and this dilemma can only be solved through a commitment to change. If in part, feminism means to empower women to control and change their social and political circumstances, then feminism must help provide the means to do so. Only those empowered to get into the master's house can use the master's tools. And to be honest, I'm not sure what changes will come about from stealing the master's tools to build houses that resemble the master's house. While who has access to an education is not under the direct control of feminists, the nature of feminist knowledge and the way that it is produced is.

If self-understanding is an act of self-creation, that is, a reconstruction of subjectivity through liberatory practices, and if we believe that knowledge produced by

oppressed groups indicates an attempt to gain power over their own situations, an inclusive feminism must maximize the democratic participation in the production of knowledge.⁴⁰ As Spelman puts it, "The end of privilege means the end of institutional support for one's concerns above those of others."⁴¹

Notes

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¹ Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984).

² Ruth Ginzberg, "Philosophy is Not a Luxury," in Feminist Ethics, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 126.

³ Antonio Gramsci, Selections From the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, ed. & trans. Quinton Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 323.

⁴ I'm excluding from my definition of "(hypertheoretical) academic feminist theory" what seems to be the exception to the rule--work consciously created as the exception from the rule--for example, the work of Marilyn Frye, bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldúa.

⁵ Throughout this paper I am referring specifically to U.S. feminist theory.

⁶ bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," Yale Journal of Law and Feminism 4, no. 1 (1991): 5.

⁷ hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," 2.

⁸ Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," in Making Face/Making Soul, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), 344.

⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, Making Face/Making Soul, xxiv.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Spelman, Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), ix.

¹¹ Spelman, 3.

¹² This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa & Cherrie Moraga (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981).

13 María Lugones, "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism," in Feminist Ethics, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 41.

14 Hazel Carby, "The Politics of Difference," MS, Sept/Oct, 1990, 85.

15 Anzaldúa, Making Face/Making Soul, xvii.

16 bell hooks, "A Conversation about Race and Class," with Mary Childers, in Conflicts in Feminism, ed. Marianne Hirsch & Evelyn Fox Keller (NY: Routledge, 1990), 62.

17 Maxine Baca Zinn, Lynn Weber Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham, & Bonnie Thorton Dill, "The Costs of Exclusionary Practices in Women's Studies," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture 11, no. 2, (1986): 292-3; also, Gloria Anzaldúa notes in the introduction to Making Face, Making Soul, (p. xvii) that there has been little publication support for women of color.

18 Joseph Wu, "Western Philosophy and the Search for Chinese Wisdom," in Invitation to Chinese Philosophy, ed. Arne Naess & Alastair Hannay (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1972), 3.

19 Though I believe that there are some exceptions--Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), for example--it seems that the exclusions outnumber the exceptions.

20 Christian, 336.

21 Anzaldúa, Making Face/Making Soul, xxv. A great deal of work by Chicana writers, for example, is in the form of narrative prose/poetry.

22 bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," 5.

23 Anzaldúa, Making Face/Making Soul, xxvi.

24 Anzaldúa, Making Face/Making Soul, xxiii.

25 Theory/practice can be added to the standard list of genderized, hierarchical dualisms or dichotomies: rational/irrational, subject/object, culture/nature, objective/subjective, reason/emotion, mind/body, knower/known. In the first element of each set is associated with the masculine and systematically privileged over the second element of each set which is associated with the feminine.

- 26 Zinn, et al, 292.
- 27 hooks, "A Conversation about Race and Class," 74.
- 28 Judith Grant, Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory (New York: Routledge, 1993), 150.
- 29 Sandra Harding, "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory," in Feminist Theory in Practice and Process, ed. Michelene R. Malson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 286.
- 30 White, middle class women profit from the exclusion of women of color and working class women and from analyses which do not integrate race, class, and gender. "Foremost among these advantages is the elimination of direct competition for the few 'women's jobs' in universities; for the limited number of tenure-track jobs; for the smaller number of places for women among the higher professorial ranks; for the meager number of pages devoted to research and writing on women in the mainstream professional journals," Zinn, et al, 298.
- 31 hooks, "A Conversation about Race and Class," 80.
- 32 See, for example, Radical Feminism, ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine and Anita Rapone (New York: Quandrangle, 1973).
- 33 Very early versions of Our Bodies, Ourselves are good examples.
- 34 Ellen Messer-Davidow, "Know-How," in (En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe, ed. Joan Hartman & Ellen Messer-Davidow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 283.
- 35 hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," 4.
- 36 hooks, "A Conversation about Race and Class," 80.
- 37 Childers, "A Conversation about Race and Class," 80.
- 38 Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism," in Feminism/Postmodernism, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 136.
- 39 Messer-Davidow, 282.

40 hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," 7.

41 Spelman, 172.

CHAPTER III

THE EPISTEMOLOGY BATTLE: HOW DO WE KNOW WHO IS WINNING?

Part of the process of bringing about feminist change involves thinking about how we think, how we see ourselves, how others see us, how we see others and how we understand the world. How do we know, what do we know, and how do we prevent perpetuating oppressive structures when we come to know what we know? This is where we turn to epistemology. Or maybe not. As the epistemology debates have dragged on, I've wondered what the political significance of these debates have been for women. Though "real" academic feminists can use the term in casual conversation, most women in the U.S. do not even know what "epistemology" means. That doesn't necessarily make the subject irrelevant, but questions do arise about what is politically at stake.

It seems that if I find hypertheoretical, academic feminist discourse problematic, the last thing I should want to discuss is epistemology. Admittedly, my first impulse is to refuse to be one of the trendy academic masses and not contribute to all the attention it's getting. Continued debates about epistemology direct feminist energy and time away from the social and political issues that women face

every day. I'm torn between believing that the best way to move beyond discourses on epistemology is to not give them air time, and believing that ignoring the epistemology debates is not going to make them go away. According to the unwritten rules of philosophy, if you want to do away with something or look beyond it, first you must critically engage it. Unfortunately some of us have brushed against the epistemological web, and have no choice other than to find ways of untangling ourselves from the sticky threads.

My purpose in discussing the epistemology debates is not so much to re-articulate the differences, advantages and disadvantages of each position, but to characterize the road the feminist study of knowledge has taken so that we can begin to consider ways of refocusing feminist energy. Much time and energy has been consumed in trying to decide how feminists ought to construct and evaluate knowledge. This process has included the construction of distinctions that may help theoretical understanding, but have little effect on practice. Discourses about how and what feminists know and debates about which perspective is better often happen in the abstract and take an academic form. These debates do not generally arise from particular, practical socio-political projects that activists have undertaken. This raises questions about the role these theories play with respect to political activity.

As Jane Duran has noted, there are two different uses of the term "epistemology": the traditional, analytic use, and the contemporary, non-analytic use.¹ The traditional use of the term is associated with determining whether knowledge is possible. The term "epistemology" was first used in the nineteenth century during the period in which the empiricist tradition was working to discredit the Hegelian system. Epistemology is not concerned with directly examining reality, substance, or God, but is instead a study of the nature of human knowledge itself. It assumes that knowledge seeking is disinterested: it is not concerned with why we want to know. For both the rationalists and the empiricists, epistemology arose out of a desire to understand knowledge and its foundations as a way of justifying their belief in science. This, for the most part, has involved answering the skeptical challenge by attempting to provide theoretical justification for the conditions and foundations of knowledge.

The contemporary, common use of "epistemology" is more similar to the way Patricia Hill Collins defines it: "The study of philosophical problems in concepts of knowledge and truth."² The contemporary use assumes that we have knowledge or can have knowledge, so it does not involve answering the skeptical challenge. It is more concerned with how we acquire knowledge.³ Because feminists who are engaged in

articulating feminist epistemologies seem to be interested in establishing frameworks and criteria for legitimating and evaluating knowledge claims, I feel that they fall somewhere between these two definitions. The attempt to construct frameworks for knowledge is not a response to the problem of skepticism, but Collin's definition is one that postmodernist feminists who deny "doing epistemology," but nonetheless write about knowledge, would take issue with.

Within the last forty years, feminist theorists have revealed varying levels of sexism and androcentrism within modernist thinking in general, and modernist theories of knowledge in particular.⁴ Androcentrism, misogyny, and sexism was first found in the content of knowledge claims. Many philosophical works contain explicit misogyny and hostility directed at women, as well as discrimination which privileges men and masculinity over women and femininity.⁵ A review of traditional texts reveals that women have been mischaracterized, denigrated, degraded and reduced to helpmates (per Aquinas), babymakers (per Aristotle), and sex objects (per Sartre). As objects of Enlightenment reason and observation, women have been characterized as overly emotional, mysterious, unpredictable, and most importantly, as irrational, which implies not fully human in a system that considers rationality the basis for personhood.

Feminist work which uncovers masculinist bias in traditional philosophy has provided feminist epistemologists with the groundwork for challenging the framework of dominant, traditional epistemology. The masculinist bias of the modernist tradition does not necessarily have to be carried out through explicit misogynist or sexist statements. The same effect is achieved within Enlightenment structures and fundamental categories of thought by the devaluation of the qualities or characteristics associated with the feminine and by using the masculine as the standard. Feminists have shown that the conceptual schemes of modernist epistemology have been generated exclusively out of male experience and not only fail to reflect women's experiences, they provide a structure which serves to legitimate female exclusion.

Enlightenment epistemology has several important defining characteristics which have presented women with very difficult political and philosophical circumstances. To begin with, Enlightenment epistemology takes a rational, objective, disinterested knower as its subject. This is problematic for women because not only have women been cast as less than fully rational, historically reason has been associated with the masculine and non-reason with the feminine.⁶ It has been claimed that women are less capable of abstract and systematic thought. As Jaggar and Harding

note, modern philosophers such as Hume, Kant, Rousseau and Hegel doubted that women are fully rational,⁷ or believed that women have a lesser, immature, or defective rationality.⁸

Secondly, Enlightenment thought has promoted the myth of the disembodied, disembedded, dispassionate knower. Objective observation and reason have been defined as the only appropriate faculties for the study and acquisition of knowledge. At the same time, Enlightenment thought holds that women are closer to their bodies, more ruled by emotions, passions and appetites than men, making them more susceptible to more subjective and less objective assessments. Within a framework that holds that the ideal knower is dispassionate and objective, women become construed as inadequate subjects of knowledge.

Furthermore, within a system that holds rationality as the defining characteristic of human (man is a rational animal, the story goes, and it is rationality which separates man from the rest of the animal kingdom), and women as less than fully rational, women fall short of the standard for the ideal human, and therefore less capable to participate in all aspects of public human life.

Though feminist discourses of epistemology began as critiques of the traditional, Anglo-analytic, masculinist forms of epistemology, some feminist epistemologists believe

that it is necessary for feminists to develop feminist epistemology. Most feminists agree that the continued use of traditional epistemology to evaluate knowledge would only serve to perpetuate its exclusionary, masculinist, and oppressive tendencies. But what feminist epistemology should consist of and if we even need feminist epistemologies is a point of debate.

Discourses on feminist epistemology are for the most part more or less the same. People reiterate/regurgitate/reinscribe the three feminist discourses on epistemology originally outlined by Sandra Harding: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theories, and feminist postmodernism.⁹ Feminist empiricists find it important to remain within the parameters of empiricism and are interested in reworking and redefining the fundamental concepts that play a role in empirical inquiries. Feminist standpoint epistemologists, coming from Marxist frameworks, are concerned with developing an epistemology which gives voice to the knowledge of the marginalized and the oppressed, and are interested in using this knowledge as a critique of dominant knowledges. Many postmodern feminists argue that attempts to articulate epistemologies replicate oppressive, exclusionary justificatory strategies of dominant, masculinist epistemology and should be abandoned altogether.

This type of categorization has allowed feminists writing in epistemology to identify with an approach and defend it, and find the others problematic. In other words, it has led feminists to set up camps and engage in "battle." The peacemaking, bridge-building types, have sought some sort of compromised middle ground which contains the best features of two or three perspectives. Still others, those who do not want to join one of the three teams or even mediate, are simply excluded from the dominant feminist discourse on knowledge. I am going to review these three developed discourses in order to show that academic debates about the advantages and disadvantages of each approach, carried on outside the context of specific political problems, divert feminist attention away from practical ends and leave little space for the development of alternative approaches. I will argue that feminist discourses about knowledge should be refocused to more pragmatic ends.

According to the original outline of feminist approaches to epistemology, Sandra Harding described feminist empiricism as an epistemological approach which attempts to correct masculinist bias in empirical inquiries.¹⁰ Harding now refers to these earlier feminist empiricists as spontaneous feminist empiricists¹¹ because this form of feminist empiricism was a result of attempts made by feminists working in the sciences to identify and

eliminate sexist bias in scientific research. According to Harding, spontaneous feminist empiricists believed that science had been practiced badly. Masculine bias in problematics, theories, concepts, observation, interpretation and method of inquiry distorted results. In order to correct the problem, these early feminist empiricists believed that scientific methods and standards needed to be followed more rigorously. In other words, what we needed was more objective science.

Both feminist standpoint theorists and feminist postmodernists have found spontaneous feminist empiricism problematic. Feminists who argue that the very framework of Enlightenment thought is masculinist, find the approach of correcting bias and adding women where excluded without disturbing the fundamental framework problematic because it fails to challenge the standards and criteria which have historically served to devalue, dismiss, and exclude women's perspectives. The empiricist acquisition of knowledge through the opposition of a knowing subject and a known object perpetuates the historical objectification of women. In an attempt to gain feminist knowledge, the feminist subject continues to treat women as objects of knowledge, only now women have become the objects of more empirical, more rigorous knowledge. The empiricist knower is also problematic. Empiricism posits a neutral, objective, ideal

knower who is impartial, dispassionate, and divorced from historical, social or political circumstances. Feminist standpoint theorists and feminist postmodernists have argued that the ideal of an objective, dispassionate knower creates a false dualism between reason and emotion, holding that only reason leads to knowledge. And since the process of coming to know is an individual, solitary project, with no necessary social preconditions,¹² the individual feminist subject is on her own, armed with no more than her capacity to reason (and perhaps the scientific method). In short, it has been argued that spontaneous feminist empiricism simply reinscribes thought patterns that devalue women and the feminine, and function to keep women oppressed and silent.

A more interesting argument has been made by Sandra Harding. She holds that the attempt to correct the biases of science and Enlightenment empiricist epistemology and to add empirical women knowers as men's equals has begun to unwittingly reveal that there is no theoretical space for women's inclusion, as women, within Enlightenment frameworks. The fundamental categories of Enlightenment thought are patriarchal and androcentric, and their very structures serve to exclude women and anything associated with the feminine. Harding argues that feminist empiricism inadvertently subverts empiricism. She highlights three ways in which this happens. First, empiricism holds that

the social identity of the observer is supposed to be irrelevant. But, feminist empiricists have shown that male researchers have had consistent androcentric bias and have made the case that feminists are more likely to uncover such bias and produce less biased results. Feminist empiricists are in effect revealing that the social identity of the observer is not irrelevant. Secondly, feminist empiricists hold that the selection of problems for inquiry and definitions of these problems are at the heart of androcentric bias. This calls the adequacy of the scientific method into question. And finally, feminist empiricists have revealed that following the logical and sociological norms of inquiry oftentimes results in androcentric bias. According to Harding, the criticisms of feminist empiricists have led us to question science as we know it.¹³

Most feminists have challenged the claim that there is a standpoint of a neutral, objective observer. They have argued there is no point outside the world where we can stand and observe reality. Instead, our historical and social situations construct the way in which we perceive the world. We are born into systems of knowledge, and our knowledge of the world comes to us through our interaction with people in our communities, and not primarily by inferring things based on sensory experience. Some feminist

empiricists (referred to as philosophical feminist empiricists by Harding) have come to understand the problems that arise from the relationship between feminism and empiricism and propose a radical restructuring of empiricism. Both Helen Longino and Lynn Hankinson Nelson identify the individual, solitary, disinterested knower as a problematic characteristic of traditional empiricism. Their response has been to suggest ways of understanding feminist empiricism that emphasize the communal nature of knowing.

Longino suggests that a reconceptualization of empiricism involves replacing the individual knower with an interactive dialogic community because, according to her, scientific knowledge is not created by individuals, but by individuals in interaction with one another. The idea of a dialogic community rejects the idea that if we transcend our conditioned subjectivity we can take the position of universal objectivity. Instead, knowledge produced by a dialogic community would involve including alternative points of view to ensure that critical dialogue takes place. Though a rejection of universal objectivity entails a rejection of universal standards of justification, communities must operate according to their own publicly developed standards, providing criteria for determining between competing claims.¹⁴

Nelson defines epistemology as the process of constructing accounts of how knowledge is produced and what constitutes evidence for that knowledge.¹⁵ Doing this, in part, includes understanding the role that social and historical relations play in the production of knowledge. According to Nelson, communities are epistemologically prior to individual knowers because what counts as evidence is socially constructed by communities.¹⁶

Though both Longino and Nelson recognize the social and historical nature of knowledge and consequently radically redefine empiricism, they both believe that feminist epistemology need not be abandoned. According to Longino, though the criteria may change in response to changes in social need,

by appeal to standards adopted and legitimated through process of public scrutiny and criticism, it is possible to set aside as irrelevant positions such as New Age 'crystalology' or creationism. To the extent that these satisfy none of the central standards operative in the scientific communities of the cultures, they indeed qualify as crackpot.¹⁷

Nelson suggests a naturalized epistemology, one that is "radically interdependent with bodies of things we know."¹⁸ A naturalized epistemology neither provides justification for knowledge nor is it merely descriptive. Instead, it recognizes that standards of evidence are culturally produced and in that manner are open to revision or challenge. These standards are necessary for both empirical

and political reasons: empirical because feminists need knowledge they can rely on when attempting to make sense of the world, and political because beliefs and knowledge claims have political consequences.

Feminist standpoint epistemologists¹⁹ also recognize the situated nature of knowledge and argue that women's historical social positions provide a potentially special epistemological standpoint. Women have access not only to the dominant perspective of the world, but also to perspectives that reflect the interests and values of the oppressed--perspectives that are not represented by the dominant standpoint and that can provide alternatives to the dominant standpoint. In other words, since the oppressed can better see both the rulers and the oppressed and the relationship between the two, they can provide a less distorted, more impartial, and more comprehensive understanding of society as a whole. Of course this standpoint is not expressed directly by women's unreflective perceptions. "Instead, the standpoint of women is discovered through a collective process of political and scientific struggle."²⁰

Feminist standpoint epistemology is generated from a Marxist perspective and makes use of Hegel's discussion of the master and slave. The master or ruling class is empowered to represent reality. Consequently, in any

historical period, the dominant world view will reflect the interests and values of the ruling class. Since the ruling class has an interest in concealing the ways in which it dominates, reality will be presented in a distorted way and theories that justify the status quo will be privileged.²¹ As Harding puts it, "because the master dominates the slave, he can force the slave to exhibit for the master's observation precisely the regularities the master takes to justify his theories."²² Put into more Marxist terms, the vision of the ruling class structures material relations and since material life prescribes the parameters and limits of social understanding, the vision of the ruling class structures the social understanding of the underclass.²³

People from oppressed groups have the potential to perceive reality differently from those in dominant groups and their differing perceptions are potentially subversive because they call the dominant world view into question. In general, both members of the ruling class and the oppressed class will be convinced by the dominant ideology, but the suffering of the oppressed motivates them to find out what is "wrong," to develop criticisms of the dominant systems of conceptualization, to uncover bias, falsehoods and distortions. Unfortunately, the perspectives of the oppressed classes are generally discredited or suppressed.²⁴

Standpoint epistemologists, such as Nancy Hartsock, Hilary Rose, and Dorothy Smith, rely on women's experiences and activities as starting points for building epistemological frameworks. In contemporary capitalist societies, the labor and activity of women differs from that of men. The labor of women involves them in caretaking activities ranging from physical caretaking of bodies (childcare, cooking, cleaning, nursing) to support work (clerical, secretarial, emotional). The labor of women involves them in concrete relations with others and with their surroundings. The sexual division of labor provides women with different and unique perspectives of the work, and according to standpoint theorists, these experiences should be used as starting points for inquiry.

According to Hartsock, women's experiences based on concrete relations can serve to expose the partiality and perversity of abstract masculinity from which dominant, masculinist epistemology arises.²⁵ Most standpoint theorists do not posit the feminist standpoint as a given, but as a potential that must be developed. Its development will reveal the distortion and partiality of the dominant (masculinist) structures of thought which have been touted as universal and objective, and can provide standpoints from which a less distorted epistemology can be constructed.²⁶

Standpoint theory is attractive in several ways. First, it rejects the possibility of the Enlightenment's disinterested, individual knower. The notion of a socially situated standpoint emphasizes both the communal nature of knowledge and the link between knowledge and human interests. It recognizes that social factors such as gender, race, class and sexual orientation necessarily structure our understandings of reality and therefore inform all knowledge claims. Second, it makes good out of a bad situation. It actually argues that women's oppression potentially provides them with a privileged epistemological perspective. The potential legitimacy it offers to subjugated knowledges provides a sense of empowerment for marginalized people who have been historically silenced. Third, it emphasizes the activities and experiences of women. Instead of remaining gender invisible members of class, race and cultural groups, standpoint theory insists on the importance of the social experience of women as women.²⁷

Feminist standpoint epistemology has been challenged on two levels. One set of criticisms is concerned with the notion of epistemic privilege. The second set of criticisms come from feminist postmodernists who believe that attempts to articulate a feminist epistemology ought to be abandoned.

One of the problematic features of standpoint epistemology is the idea of the existence of a margin and a center. According to Bat-Ami Bar On, the existence of multiple marginalized groups presents a problem for feminist standpoint. Furthermore, the complex relationship among race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religious heritage make epistemic privilege difficult to gauge in individuals. If all marginalized groups are equally epistemologically privileged, questions arise about the "privilege" of marginality. If the claim is that one group is more marginalized, and consequently more privileged than others, a way of making and justifying this determination must be established. Usually this is done by "measuring" the distance of marginalized groups from the center.²⁸ These problems reveal that oppression is more complex than a two-class (margin/center) schema allows. Not only does the existence of multiple identities present a problem when theorizing on the margins, but so does the assumption that there is one center. Bar On also finds that, socially and politically, the legitimacy of this privilege is problematic. As Bat-ami Bar On puts it, "A socially marginalized group does not have the power to exclude, silence, and command obedience from a dominant group. Its claim for epistemic privilege, lacking a social power on

which to base them, cannot yield the same results as the self-authorizing claims of a dominant group...."²⁹

Harding offers a version of standpoint theory that responds to these concerns. She contrasts the idea that the oppressed have a unique ability to produce knowledge, with her suggestion of "starting off thought" from the lives of marginalized people. According to Harding, dominant groups fail to systematically and critically analyze both the advantaged social situation in which they are embedded and the knowledge claims that result from this situation. Since one's social situation enables and sets limits on what one can know, "some social situations--critically unexamined, dominant ones--are more limiting than others in this respect, and what makes these situations more limiting is their inability to generate the most critical questions about received belief."³⁰ In other words, the advantaged social situation is, ironically, an epistemologically disadvantaged one. On the other hand, because the experience and lives of marginalized people involve problems that need to be explained, the activities, lives and experiences of the marginalized provide starting points for inquiry--"for everyone's research and scholarship."³¹

Harding argues that those who have made the case that inquiry should start from the lives of the oppressed have not been oppressed themselves (e.g. Hegel, Marx, Lukacs),

and feminists who argue we should start from the lives of women do not necessarily mean their lives.³² This means that the oppressed are not necessarily the subjects (i.e. producers) of knowledge. Instead, the lives and experiences of the oppressed provide critical questions, research agendas, and scientific problems.³³ According to Harding, the subject of knowledge is primarily communities, not individuals, and therefore the subject is multiple, heterogeneous, and incoherent.

Harding's articulation of standpoint, which differs from earlier versions of standpoint which attempted to explain what women had in common, responds to the concerns offered by Bar On about epistemic privilege. It also attempts to avoid essentialism by stipulating that the subject is multiple. On the other hand, it raises another set of concerns about the construction of knowledge experts as discussed in chapter II. In other versions of standpoint, standpoint theories potentially offer the marginalized a voice, a position from which to challenge dominant perspectives, an opportunity to articulate their needs and interests. It is not clear in Harding's account how and when the voices of the marginalized are to play a role in the construction of knowledge. Are they to be in dialogue with privileged researchers who will then take up their cause? If so, how is this different from the status quo?

their cause? If so, how is this different from the status quo?

To be fair to Harding, I believe that her argument for standpoint is an appeal to the privileged to not begin inquiry from their own advantaged position, but to educate themselves about the lives and experiences of the oppressed and advocate for them. This may not be a bad idea, but the question remains as to how the oppressed are to become subjects of knowledge, especially when the privileged continue to do the questioning, scholarship, and research.

Feminists who advocate an association between feminism and postmodernism argue against feminist projects to construct a feminist epistemology because such projects risk replicating the essentialist tendencies of Enlightenment thinking. Though it is often difficult to characterize American postmodernist feminism, one of its dominant features is that it challenges the tendency to essentialize gender differences, and the tendency to falsely universalize the experiences of Western, white, middle class, heterosexual women.³⁴ Feminists such as Susan Hekman, Judith Grant, Linda Nicholson, and Nancy Fraser hold that because both feminism and postmodernism challenge the central notions of Enlightenment thought--objectivity, transcendent reason, knowledge, truth, subjectivity, and reality--postmodernism and feminism can mutually inform each

other.³⁵ Feminism provides a corrective to postmodernism by providing analyses of how gender is embedded in Enlightenment structures, and postmodernism can serve as corrective to essentialist tendencies of contemporary feminism.³⁶

Postmodernist feminists have charged that contemporary feminists who have attempted to identify the cause of women's oppression have relied on essentialist assumptions about human nature and social conditions, and have falsely universalized historically and culturally particular features of class, culture, race, and sexual orientation. Supposedly cross-cultural practices associated with mothering, reproduction, or sexuality have been used to ground explanations of women's oppression and sex differences. Postmodernist feminists hold that these approaches falsely universalize experiences and practices that are better understood genealogically, that is, historically and culturally.³⁷

Postmodernist feminists have also taken issue with early versions of standpoint theory that attempted to construct one, unitary woman's perspective. They have argued that attempts to provide a unified concept of Woman as the subject of feminist theory are doomed to replicate the essentialist and exclusionary features of Enlightenment thinking. Postmodernist feminists suggest that the unitary

subject be replaced by a concept that allows for plurality and multiplicity of identity and perspective.³⁸

Later versions of standpoint theories that hold that women's labor gives a unique perspective from which feminists can begin to construct an epistemology (articulated by feminists such as Nancy Hartsock and Hilary Rose)³⁹ have not been immune to criticism from postmodernist feminists. Though later standpoint theories are not attempting to construct a unitary subject, they are still involved in the project of attempting to use women's experiences as a basis for theorizing. According to most feminist postmodernists, such as Judith Grant, Susan Hekman, and Joan Scott, feminist thought should not be generated from women's experiences because it risks falsely universalizing, idealizing and essentializing woman's point of view.

Generally, the project of standpoint theorists to construct a feminist epistemology is considered problematic by postmodernist feminists. As Nicholson notes in the introduction of Feminism/Postmodernism, postmodernism entails a dismantling of Enlightenment thought. Since epistemology is produced by Enlightenment attempts to justify the criteria by which claims to knowledge are legitimated, a rejection of the Enlightenment's hierarchical dualist patterns of thought and masculinist ideals includes

notions of objectivity, truth, reality and reason indicate that feminists must abandon epistemology as part of the rationalist discourse they challenge.⁴⁰ Insofar as standpoint theorists are involved in constructing an epistemology for legitimating knowledge claims, they are still rooted in the modernist project of searching for truth and constituting (false) universals in an attempt to produce truer knowledge.⁴¹ According to Hekman, "The desire to find 'truer knowledge' will inevitably lead to the establishment of a new orthodoxy to replace the old, a new orthodoxy that will produce its own truths and its own hierarchies."⁴² Hekman argues that the epistemology of modernism is a unitary whole and must be displaced wholesale.⁴³ Attempts to construct a feminist epistemology will serve to replicate the masculinist elements of Enlightenment thinking.

As I have said, "epistemological categorization" has allowed feminists writing about epistemology to identify with an approach and defend it, and find the others problematic. It has led feminists to set up camps and engage in "battle." As I indicated in chapter II, feminists cannot afford to be unreflective about knowledge projects. Not only is it necessary to evaluate the practical efficacy of knowledge projects, it is also necessary to consider in what ways the production and construction of knowledge is associated with power relations.⁴⁴ It is legitimate and

necessary to consider in what ways the production and construction of knowledge is associated with power relations.⁴⁴ It is legitimate and necessary for feminists to ask how such things as sexual assault, racism, ethnic hate, domestic violence, homophobia, beautification, ableism, and domestic violence can be understood in ways that are both practically effective and don't perpetuate oppressive relations. Can this be accomplished without constructing epistemologies? Can feminism afford to do without epistemology? What would happen if feminists stopped engaging in epistemological projects? Would feminist political activity suffer?

Arguments for and against epistemology have been couched within the framework of academic debates about modernism and postmodernism. Those with modernist leanings believe that insofar as epistemology establishes criteria for legitimating and evaluating knowledge claims, the idea of developing explicitly feminist structures and frameworks as a way of determining which knowledge claims are more accurate or more truthful seems appealing. As Harding puts it, "...we wonder how we cannot say the way things really are to our 'rulers' as well as to ourselves, in order to voice opposition to the silences and lies emanating from patriarchal discourses and our own partially brainwashed consciousness."⁴⁵ Similarly, Nancy Hartsock argues that

there is a need for marginalized and oppressed groups to understand the world systematically, to know how the system that oppresses us works, so we can make systematic changes. Feminists must have a standpoint by which judgements can be made.⁴⁶ The fear is that without a feminist epistemology, all knowledge claims would have the same value and feminist knowledge would not be more valid than Nazi or white supremacist knowledge.

On the other hand, those with postmodernist leanings argue that if epistemologies are, as Harding describes them, historically situated strategies for justifying belief,⁴⁷ then feminist epistemology becomes another legitimating discourse, complete with its own hierarchies, systems of justification, and exclusions. Feminists who want to hang on to epistemology are struggling to construct epistemological approaches that are not only inclusive of all women, but also recognize themselves as socially, culturally and historically situated.

Instead of fueling these debates, I believe a pragmatic question should be asked about differing epistemological approaches: how much practical difference does it make if a feminist considers herself an empiricist, standpoint theorist, or a postmodernist? Though it seems that these three perspectives have significant theoretical differences, responses to criticism and recent revisions have resulted in

increasing overlap of feminist empiricism, later versions of standpoint, and versions of feminist postmodernism.⁴⁸ All three have replaced the individual subject with concepts that allow for multiple identities and perspectives within and among knowers. All three recognize the interested nature of knowledge. In many respects, the distinctions between these perspectives no longer make sense. For example, philosophical feminist empiricists have radically redefined empiricism to account for community values. Nancy Tuana has argued that by recognizing the socially situated nature of knowledge and knowing, feminist empiricists such as Lynn Nelson provide us with a view that potentially builds bridges among feminist postmodernists, standpoint theorists, and empiricists.⁴⁹ The recent work of standpoint theorist Sandra Harding serves as another example. Harding has redefined objectivity, a key notion in empiricism, by distinguishing it from objectivism, and has borrowed it to defend standpoint theories. Ironically, she has argued that feminist standpoint is more objective,⁵⁰ when the original purpose of standpoint was to challenge the notion of objectivity. Finally, though both philosophical feminist empiricists and standpoint theorists have responded to postmodernist critiques of a unified subject, feminist postmodernists have argued that feminism cannot completely do away with the subject, but must instead redefine the

subject. As these examples show, the distinctions between these three approaches are becoming less clear.

This leads to a series of additional pragmatic questions about the relationship between academic feminist discourses and activism. What does it mean for feminism to have an epistemology? Or even two or three epistemologies? Does it mean that feminist activists are to use them to produce and evaluate knowledge? Let us consider an example (I will provide a more complete analysis of this example in the conclusion). Insufficient knowledge has been generated concerning women and HIV transmission, especially woman-to-woman transmission. The possibilities of woman-to-woman transmission, except for direct exchange of blood, remains unclear. As a result, lesbians are confused as to what should constitute safe sex practices. Which approach should we use to undertake the project of evaluating existing knowledge on woman to woman transmission, and the project of generating new knowledge? This question cannot be answered without asking a number of other questions. Who is undertaking these projects? Scientists? Health care professionals? Activists? What are the goals of those undertaking the projects? Toward what end will the knowledge be used? To educate lesbians? To obtain grant money for further bio-medical research? Standpoint theory might be useful for evaluating existing knowledge and for

understanding lesbian experiences concerning safer sex practices. Empirical evidence though, would provide a more clear and convincing understanding of which specific practices are high risk. Feminist postmodernism might keep researchers on guard against the false universalization of experience or uncritical uses of objectivity, but provides no positive program for proceeding.

The point of this example is that social and political problems indicate that approaches to the development and evaluation of knowledge may differ depending on circumstances. It is difficult to make sense of epistemologies outside the context of who wants to know and what purposes the knowledge is to serve. The point I hope to make is that feminist discourses about knowledge should be refocused to more pragmatic ends. Academic debates about the advantages and disadvantages of each approach have been carried on outside the context of specific social and political problems. Socio-political problems are usually complex. But more sophisticated and complex theories do not necessarily ensure that the knowledge produced plays a role in solving the problems we face. For this reason, I suggest that feminists give up commitments to particular approaches and begin their theorizing in the context of particular problems. In this way, they will be free to choose or

develop the approach best suited for the circumstances of the problem.

It may seem that by suggesting feminists give up commitments to particular epistemological approaches that I am advocating for the postmodernist position. Certainly, this suggestion is not incompatible with the spirit of postmodernism, but I am reluctant to identify my position as postmodernist. While my focus and commitment is in addressing socio-political problems, postmodernist commitment and focus has been on challenging Enlightenment categories of thought. The attempt to integrate postmodernism and feminism has led feminist energy even further away from particular socio-political problems by focusing on and privileging language and discourse, instead of specific institutionalized power relations. To illustrate this, I will discuss postmodernist challenges to the use of experience for theorizing and to the use of the category "woman."

In her book, Fundamental Feminism, Grant argues that three core concepts, 1) woman, 2) experience, and 3) personal politics, are shared by all (non-postmodernist) feminist theory. These core concepts, developed in early political pamphlets, became the rudimentary basis for theory and are responsible for the ethnocentrism and continued problems of feminism.⁵¹ In Grant's view, contemporary

feminist theories are, in part, attempts to deal with problems of the central concepts. Experience has played a fundamental role in feminist thinking. The idea behind such things as consciousness raising groups and speak outs were for women to share experiences that had not been fully articulated or defined. These shared experiences, then, were to provide the groundwork for early feminist thinking.

Grant argues that since there are no universal features of women's existence, grounding theory in women's activities or experiences, even if (as Harding suggests) the grounding consists of nothing more than using these experiences as starting points for inquiry, would entail either essentializing features of Woman or falsely universalizing women's experience. Grounding epistemology in experience necessarily lends itself to essentialism because experience merely explains one's reality and is always contaminated by ideology.⁵² Theories of knowledge based on women's experiences are not reflections of women's lives because there are no universal features of women's existence prior to feminist theory and politics.⁵³ In other words, female experience is created by feminist discourse. She further argues that feminist standpoint is based on a tautology. Feminist principles are used to both interpret women's lives and serve as the basis for feminist principles and theory. "Feminism cannot simultaneously be the lens through which

experiences are interpreted, and also find its grounding in those experiences To ground feminism in women's experiences and then to look to feminism to interpret those experiences is a tautology."⁵⁴ For this reason, "woman" and experience cannot be used as a starting point for feminist thinking. Grant suggests a move toward postmodernism because it will be a move away from the core concepts.

Joan Scott also argues against the use of experience as a foundation for feminist thinking. According to Joan Scott, historians ought to move away from "making experience visible" and instead engage in the project of historicizing experience. Making experience visible has been common practice among oppressed groups because it breaks the silence and challenges the prevailing notions of the hegemonic discourse.⁵⁵ Despite this, Joan Scott finds the use of experience as the origin of knowledge problematic. In her own words, "Appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation ... weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference."⁵⁶ In fact, she goes on to make an even stronger claim: "The project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself."⁵⁷ Making experience visible reveals the existence of repressive mechanisms, but does not tell us how they are constructed, or by what logic they work.

The alternative Scott suggests is to replace the notion of individuals who have experience with subjects who are constituted by experience. With this reconceptualization, experience can no longer be used as a foundation for knowledge and instead becomes the very thing we seek to explain. By historicizing experience, experience and language are not treated as distinct or separate, and as a result, subjectivity is best understood discursively. In other words, Scott is suggesting that instead of considering experience as authoritative evidence and using it as the foundation for knowledge, we should try to understand the discursive processes by which subjects and identities are constructed. In this way, we reveal the logic and operations of oppressive mechanisms so that we can avoid replicating them. At the end of her essay, Scott regrets that we cannot abandon the use of the word "experience". "Experience is so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion."⁵⁸ She suggests a re-definition of experience, one that views experience both as interpretation and in need of interpretation.

Feminist postmodernists have also challenged the use of the category woman. I want to suggest that this challenge is more appropriately understood as a conflation of two challenges to the subject of dominant feminism. One

challenge came from poor/working class women, women of color, and lesbians who rightly challenged the false universalization of the experiences of white, heterosexual, middle class women. The point of these critiques was not to question the legitimacy of gender as a category of analysis, but to point out that it is a category that cannot be considered in isolation from other factors such as race, class, and sexual orientation. In this case, the category "woman" underwent scrutiny to reveal that the false universalization of the experiences and perspectives of white, middle class, heterosexual feminists have resulted in classist, racist, and heterosexist bias in mainstream feminist theorizing. This challenge arose, in part, from social and political activity which made it clear that race, sexual orientation, and class were complicating factors that could not be neglected. The second challenge to the subject of feminism was the result of feminist appropriations of postmodernism and the importation of French "feminism"--theoretical works which call to question the use of the category "woman" because its use essentializes gender. Unlike concerns about the false universalization of experience, the concern with essentialism arose out of the theoretical realm, not the socio-political arena. The worry is that continued use of "women" posits some essential characteristic that all women share.

These two challenges, not unrelated to each other, occurred simultaneously, and created a "crisis" in feminism --one that has been reinforced, even bolstered by feminist postmodernism. The effect has been continued concern and reluctance about speaking of women and about the use of experience for theorizing, and a challenge to the very project of feminism. If we hold that every woman's experience is different, we cannot say anything meaningful about women, their lives, or their interests. "Driven to its logical terminus, acknowledgment of the myriad differences among women's experiences seems to undercut the possibility of making any meaningful statements about interests that are in common."⁵⁹ In other words, feminism can no longer speak of women. How can we have feminism if we can no longer speak of women?

As a result of this "crisis," feminists have spent and continue to spend a great deal of time and energy attempting to preserve or recover "women" as the subject of feminism. I put 'crisis' in scare quotes because it has been a crisis for those working within the realm of theory. Feminists involved in non-theoretical aspects of feminism have no choice but to continue speaking of women and their experiences. It makes little sense to those involved with sexual assault survivors or single mothers living in poverty that to use "women" is to posit some ahistorical, essential

characteristic that all women share. Unlike white, academic feminists, most women of color have not challenged whether we could use "women." The challenge has been to white feminists' uncritical use of the category. Instead of meeting the political challenge implicated in the criticism (ensuring that a diversity of women are empowered to participate in the activities and thinking that structure feminism), a lot of time has been wasted attempting to meet a purely theoretical challenge.

The cumulative effect of postmodernist critiques about the use of women's experiences make it appear as if all but postmodernist feminism is riddled with false universalism, uncritical uses of experience, and essentialist uses of "woman." I believe this misrepresents the case. This does not mean that some feminists are not guilty of using "women's experiences" in a falsely universal manner. Second wave feminism has been marked by the perpetual tension between those who want to make grandiose, universal claims (women's love for their children gives them an anti-war disposition) or essentialist claims (women are naturally more peaceful, nurturing, and in tune with the earth), with those who understand gender systems in terms of social factors (most women have been socialized to behave in more nurturing and non-aggressive ways). Complaints about essentialism and false universalism focus around the work

Chodorow, Hartsock, Ruddick, and Daly. These works represent strands of feminist theory and have always been in tension with strands that have been on guard against false universalism and essentialism.

From the outset, many feminists have been careful to point out that much of women's experience has been defined by patriarchal thought and practice. Before coming in contact with feminism, some women say such things as wearing make-up and high heels makes them feel sexy; that their body wants to have a baby; or blame themselves for being sexually assaulted. Not all feminists have taken these experiences as simply existing. It is experiences such as these that have led feminists to be critical and skeptical about taking experience as a given, have led to feminist reflection on how and why these experiences come to be, and have led to the redefining of these experiences. For many feminists the feminist redefinition of "woman" has been taken to be part of the feminist project. Unless we take the works of Chodorow, Hartsock and Ruddick as paradigmatic for all feminism, (which would be an ironic incident of false universalism itself), it is a false criticism to say that feminism has wallowed in essentialist uses of "woman."

On a common sense level, there seems to be something absurd about theoretically problematizing the category of woman. Though feminist politics have revealed that the

false universalization of women's experiences has excluded groups of women, feminist political activity has not suggested the need to do away with the category of woman. In fact, a great deal of feminist organizing associated with women's centers, women's studies, women's health, women's safety, and (still) women's rights continues to take place. The questioning of the category of "woman" becomes an altogether absurd project if one takes a break from the postmodernist discourse and goes to the rape crisis center, the welfare office, the Jenny Craig weight loss center, or the mall, (places where for all practical purposes many real live women seem congregate, preoccupied with women's issues: sexual assault, feeding their children, and problematically, looking attractive). "Excuse me, but did you know that philosophically speaking you're not a woman?" It might be argued that I'm missing the philosophical point: these "people" find themselves at these places because they have the socially constructed experience of being women. But my point is a pragmatic point. Of what use is the problematizing of the category "woman" when it will simply strike the majority of the women in this country as nonsensical. The amount of time consumed on problematizing "woman" seems strange to me, and I say hesitatingly, borders on the misogynist. Once again being a woman is a problem.

Feminist politics must deal with one undeniable fact: almost the entire population, including feminist women, experiences and understands itself as being a woman or a man (even, for the most part, transsexuals and transgendered individuals). Revealing the groundlessness of gender in theory may work for those who understand and agree with the theory. But since this population is small (miniscule), this strategy is extraordinarily limited, and this cannot be emphasized enough. Understanding our subjectivities and experiences in terms of discursive formations excludes those who cannot come to know these formations. The manner in which these discursive formations are presented prevents using them to change the world-understandings of the general public.

If theorizing is situated within the context of practical problems, projects, and struggles, the use of "woman" can be particularized and localized. Constructions of subjectivity do not need to rely on essentialist notions of womanhood or on falsely universalized experience. The reconstructing or deconstructing of subjectivity and experience, if it is to serve socio-political ends, is a practical project. A priori rules against the use of experience or subjectivity may not serve political ends. In fact, it is difficult to imagine not using these concepts in

the process of communicating and organizing on a socio-political level.

As I have said, use of women's experiences in feminist discourse does not always rely on essentialist meanings of "woman," and continued discussions of women's experiences do not necessarily have to assume there is something essential or universal about women. In fact, it is the postmodernist feminists who assume that the use of "woman" assumes a common essential feature. If I may borrow from Wittgenstein, it is most likely that the ordinary use of "woman" relies on a family resemblance meaning: there are no universal features of woman, but there are many possible overlapping features of womanhood. Given this more pragmatic understanding of "woman", the meaning of "women's interests", "women's lives", "women's problems" must be situated with respect to political or practical contexts. Use of the term within a context will reveal if detrimental universalizations are being implied. The bottom line is that even if the ground is shifted from epistemology to socio-political practices, feminism still needs to talk about women, their lives, interests, needs, problems and experiences.

In her essay "Whose Language?" Alessandra Tanesini provides another approach for understanding the use of "woman" without being committed to any form of essentialism.

According to Tanesini, gender theorists take "woman" to be a term that describes arrangements of social relations, when it is primarily a normative concept that indicates how one ought to behave. Gender theorists have made the mistake of assuming that the meaning of "woman" explains how it is used, and that its use functions as an endorsement of its meaning. "To discover that there are no facts about being a woman should not be taken as showing that there is no meaningful notion of 'woman,' but only that the point of having the concept is not that of describing anybody."⁶⁰ What follows from this is that feminists are in the position of appropriating the notion by using it in subversive ways in order to change its normative role. Instead of abandoning the term, feminists can construct new emancipatory uses for it, and in this way, change its meaning for those for whom the term is taken to apply.⁶¹ Tanesini's approach is compatible with a pragmatic approach because it allows for contradictions and tensions associated with different uses of the term. Furthermore, it makes no theoretical claims about the meaning or use of "woman," but holds that these are things that are to be worked out in practice.

Whether feminists ought to focus on deconstructing or reconstructing subjectivity and experience is a practical question. To begin with, it is difficult for people to

even those who understand the notion, still experience themselves as fundamentally gendered.

Secondly, though I firmly believe that feminism ought to be organized around shared political commitments and goals, it may often be the case that these commitments and goals arise out of shared experience. Furthermore, if we start our thinking from particular social problems and practical attempts to solve those problems, it is also often likely shared experience will play an important role in understanding particular problems. There may also be problems with which we want to deal in a more universal way. Pragmatically speaking, there is no a priori reason why, when necessary, feminist questions and projects cannot arise out of women's experiences. Clearly, attempting to abstract experiences which all women have in common and using them as a foundation from which to build theories is problematic. On the other hand, mandating anti-universalism leads us to devalue and neglect what we have in common.

In attempting to develop understandings of ourselves and our world, the experiences we share are as important as the differences that give us insight to the experiences of others. There is a difference between saying that we should not begin from falsely universalized experience and denying experience as a possible starting point for thinking (it doesn't have to be the only possible starting point). For

others. There is a difference between saying that we should not begin from falsely universalized experience and denying experience as a possible starting point for thinking (it doesn't have to be the only possible starting point). For example, if many women on campus begin complaining that they fear going to the library at night because they must pass a dark, wooded area, shared experience may very well become the motivating force for feminist organizing around this particular issue. Theorizing from this issue would only be problematic if the theorizing failed to present the pluralistic nature of this experience. Whether experience can provide an adequate starting point for feminist theory depends on how one understands theory and experience. If we operate on a universal truth/knowledge/reality understanding of theory, we will run into problems. If we understand theory pragmatically, we make no claims about the validity of the theory outside the context of the problem it is to solve. What is shared experience in one context may be insignificant in another. Experience is not something stagnate and determinate. It is dynamic. Understanding experience pragmatically entails that experience is always open to reinterpretation and is not in and of itself the final word.

Postmodernist challenges to the use of "woman" and experience has not only led feminist energy astray, it has

also exacerbated existing problems in creating solidarity. Feminism has been based on the idea that shared experience among women can serve as the basis of solidarity among feminists. Depending on the problem being addressed, feminists have learned that this is not always the most practical or fruitful route. Falsely universalistic uses of "women's experiences" have proven to not be very pragmatic for creating solidarity. They have served to alienate women and perpetuate oppressive power structures. But instead of spending time trying to understand how different social problems affect different women, how communities, networks, and coalitions can organize around shared political commitments and/or interests, how to build bridges in an attempt to challenge institutionalized oppressive power structures, postmodernist feminists have spent time tearing apart and attempting to put together conceptions of "woman." Continued focus on differences among women contributes to the atmosphere of distrust and fragmentation among women when what is needed are productive strategies for promoting and developing solidarities, coalitions, and communities.

It seems that the perpetuation of hypertheoretical debates among "camps" diverts our attention from the feminist practices knowledge is to serve. Even though the distinctions may no longer make sense, theorists continue to identify with a certain approach and defend it. It's almost

as if they can not help expressing their allegiance or "leaning". As I have shown, theories about feminist knowledge have been largely shaped by the debates among empiricist, standpoint and postmodernist feminists. These debates have arisen from academic, theoretical contexts, engaging and responding to existing academic discourses about knowledge. They have not arisen from the projects of activists.

Instead of attempting to work out the details in theory, feminist energy could be better focused on facilitating this process within the context of particular social and political problems. If we understand knowledge pragmatically, we give up particular theoretical commitments, consequently putting an end to the epistemology debates, and hopefully, appeals to theoretical commitments as a form of making determinations about certain approaches. Continued attention to epistemology on the hypertheoretical level focuses feminist energy on trying to work things out on paper and in our heads instead of working them out through practice, action, and activity.

Notes

¹ Jane Duran, Toward a Feminist Epistemology (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1991), 80.

² Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (Cambridge: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 202.

³ Duran, 81.

⁴ E.A. Grosz offers a more detailed discussion of this in her essay "The In(ter)vention of Feminist Knowledges," in Crossing Boundaries: Feminisms and the Critiques of Knowledges, ed. Barbara Caine, E.A. Grosz & Marie de Lepervanche (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1988).

⁵ A compilation of what philosophers have said about women can be found in Martha Lee Osborne's edited collection, Woman in Western Thought (New York: Random House, 1979).

⁶ For a full discussion see Genevieve Lloyd's The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁷ Alison Jaggar, Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 36, n. 22.

⁸ Sandra Harding, "Is Gender a Variable in Conceptions of Rationality? A Survey of Issues," in Beyond Domination: New Perspectives on Women and Philosophy, ed. Carol Gould (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld, 1984), 43.

⁹ Sandra Harding, "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory," in Feminist Theory in Practice and Process, ed. Michelene R. Malson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) and The Science Question in Feminism (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Harding, "Instability".

¹¹ Originally identified as Ruth Hubbard, M.S. Henifin, Barbara Fried, Marian Lowe and Ruth Bleier by Harding, "Instability," 289, n. 7.

¹² Jaggar, 355.

- 13 Harding, "Instability," 290.
- 14 Helen Longino, "Subjects, Power, and Knowledge," in Feminist Epistemologies, ed. Linda Alcoff & Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 15 Lynn Hankinson Nelson, "Epistemological Communities," Feminist Epistemologies, 127.
- 16 Nelson, 124.
- 17 Longino, 118.
- 18 Nelson, 125.
- 19 Standpoint theorists include Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Sandra Harding, Hilary Rose, and Nancy Hartsock
- 20 Jaggar, 371.
- 21 Jaggar, 370.
- 22 Sandra Harding, "Is Gender a Variable," 45.
- 23 Nancy Hartsock, Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism (New York: Longman, 1983), 232.
- 24 Jaggar, 370.
- 25 Hartsock, Money, Sex, and Power, 243.
- 26 Hartsock, Money, Sex, and Power, 246.
- 27 Harding, "Instability," 291.
- 28 Bat-Ami Bar On, "Marginality and Epistemic Privilege," Feminist Epistemologies, 89-90.
- 29 Bar On, 96.
- 30 Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: 'What is Strong Objectivity'?" Feminist Epistemologies, 54-55.
- 31 Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," 55.
- 32 Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," 58.
- 33 Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," 62.

³⁴ Linda Nicholson, Feminism/Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1989), 5.

³⁵ Judith Grant, Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory (New York: Routledge, 1993), 135; Susan Hekman, Gender and Knowledge: Elements of Postmodern Feminism (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 1, 188-189; Nicholson, 6.

³⁶ Hekman, 189.

³⁷ Linda Nicholson & Nancy Fraser, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism," in Feminism/Postmodernism, 29-31.

³⁸ Nicholson and Fraser, 34-35.

³⁹ Nancy Hartsock, Money, Sex, and Power; Hilary Rose, "Women's Work: Women's Knowledge," What is Feminism, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (New York: Pantheon, 1986).

⁴⁰ Grant, 100; Hekman, 1-3.

⁴¹ Hekman, 128.

⁴² Hekman, 128.

⁴³ Hekman, 7.

⁴⁴ see Michel Foucault's The History of Sexuality (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), and Power/Knowledge (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

⁴⁵ Harding, "Instability," 286.

⁴⁶ Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women," in Feminism/Postmodernism, 159.

⁴⁷ Sandra Harding, "Is There a Feminist Method?" in Feminism and Science, ed. Nancy Tuana (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 24.

⁴⁸ Nancy Tuana, "The Radical Future of Feminist Empiricism," Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy vol. 7, no. 1, (1992); Grant, 128.

⁴⁹ Tuana, 100.

⁵⁰ Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," 56.

⁵¹ Grant, 5.

⁵² Grant, 100.

⁵³ Grant, 127.

⁵⁴ Grant, 100-101.

⁵⁵ I find Scott's use of the metaphor of vision strange since most feminists use the metaphor of voice, i.e. giving voice to experience; e.g. Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde.

⁵⁶ Joan Scott, "Experience," in Feminists Theorize the Political, ed. Judith Butler & Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 24.

⁵⁷ Scott, 25.

⁵⁸ Scott, 37.

⁵⁹ Timothy Kaufman-Osborne, "Teasing Feminist Sense from Experience," Hypatia 8, no. 2, (Spring 1993): 127.

⁶⁰ Allesandra Tanesini, "Whose Language?" in Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology, ed. Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford (New York: Routledge, 1994), 212.

⁶¹ Tanesini, 213.

CHAPTER IV

PRAGMATIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE

In his essay, "What Pragmatism Means," William James recounts a philosophical dispute in which his friends were engaged while camping. A squirrel is on a tree trunk. A man is on the opposite side. The man cannot catch a glimpse of the squirrel because the squirrel moves around the trunk as fast as the man moves around the tree. Does the man go around the squirrel or not? As James tells it, "Everyone had taken sides, and was obstinate."¹ Upon reading this, I decided such disputes were a waste of time and resolved to never go camping with philosophers.

But one does not need to go camping to find philosophers engaged in hypertheoretical debates. After five years of studying feminist epistemology while at the same time working as an activist in a women's center, I began wondering if academic feminist epistemologists were not becoming engaged in a less severe sort of squirrel-on-the-tree problem. As I said in the last chapter, theories about feminist knowledge have been largely shaped by the debates among feminist empiricists, feminist standpoint theorists, and feminist postmodernists. Like the campers, feminists interested in epistemology have taken up sides and

spend a great deal of time and energy promoting one view over another. These debates, carried on outside the context of problems arising from the lives of ordinary women, have diverted energy and attention away from practice.

In this chapter, I will propose that feminist philosophers go about developing and evaluating feminist knowledge differently--that theorizing about knowledge begin in the context of particular socio-political problems. Instead of attempting to create epistemological frameworks that are robust enough to account for many ways of knowing and many kinds of knowers diverse situations require, feminists ought to proceed pragmatically. Instead of attempting to establish theoretical frameworks and criteria for legitimating and evaluating knowledge claims, feminists ought to be free to select the approach that best suits the conditions of inquiries associated with particular social problems. Constructing arguments for and debating the theoretical advantages of a certain approach does not ensure that it will prove to be useful in social and political contexts. Only testing it will affirm its advantages and disadvantages, and best indicate areas in need of revision. Judgements about what may be better and worse ways of knowing cannot be established a priori to, or outside of, particular projects because these evaluations are always relative to what it is that needs to be known and why it

needs to be known. In other words, how we go about gathering/producing knowledge, what counts as knowledge, and how knowledge is evaluated is relative to the purposes the knowledge is to serve.

To their credit, some feminists have made attempts to create roadways out of academic debates about epistemology. Sandra Harding, Lorraine Code, and Gail Stenstad offer views that provide good starting points for understanding how pragmatic approaches allow us to situate knowledge projects as part of the process of specific, larger political projects, and provide the opportunity for reflection without losing sight of political ends. My purpose in reviewing these three perspectives is neither to challenge or to contrast them to my own, but to add to them, to take them one step further, so that I may emphasize my notion of practice preceding theory.

In a frequently cited essay, "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory," written in the early stages of the epistemology debates, Harding discusses the difficulties feminists face in attempting to free feminist thought from androcentric paradigms and structures, while at the same time avoiding essentialist, universalistic constructions of "woman" as a subject. According to Harding, feminists feel that they are caught between the demand for a single, totalizing voice that says how things

really are and an absolute relativism that says anything goes. Attempts to provide a unitary feminist perspective risks replicating the exclusionary and false universalistic tendencies of masculinist theories. On the other hand, feminist need to be able to theorize about the oppression women experience. For these reasons, Harding argues that feminist analytical categories should be unstable at this historical moment.

It would be a delusion for feminism to arrive at a master theory ... and methodological assumptions that we presume all feminists accept. Feminist analytical categories should be unstable--consistent and coherent theories in an unstable and incoherent world are obstacles to both our understanding and our social practices.²

Harding suggests that instead of perceiving this lack of solid framework as a disadvantage, we can use it as an opportunity to develop contextual thinking and decision making, and perhaps create a new kind of theorizing. Feminists do not need to assume that coherent theory is a desirable end in itself. In other words, we can use the instability as a desired mode of proceeding.

Another approach has been to preserve the best features of standpoint and postmodernism. Lorraine Code's view arises out of an attempt to find a middle ground within what she calls "a forest of absolutes: the exigencies of objectivism, the fervor of ideology, the quietism of extreme relativism, and the hegemony of universal truth."³

According to Code, attempts to escape pre-established frameworks are commonly referred to as cop-outs by those who insist that everyone play the game by their rules, and the search for a middle ground gives the impression of being too wishy-washy to make a decision or take a position, "a feeble form of fence sitting."⁴ Refusing to take a single position is not so much a rejection of purpose or order, but a refusal to participate in a developed debate which presents and forces one to choose between dichotomous positions. As Code puts it, "This is 'chaos' of plurality, ambiguity, and differences: plurality of methods and methodologies; ambiguity in theoretical conclusions; differences that refuse the reductionism of universality and univocity."⁵

Code suggests that feminist approaches to knowing can be characterized as "taking a position"—one that is not only explicitly socially and politically situated, but also revisable, provisionally based on the best understanding at the time and open to negotiation.⁶ Code borrows this concept of positionality from Linda Alcoff⁷ who uses it to describe subjectivity. Alcoff suggests that a subject's identity be understood as relative to a constantly shifting context of social, cultural, and political conditions, practices, and discourses. Because subjectivity is conceived as a relational construct, positionality resists

using one position as a referent, but does provide a location from which political activity may arise.⁸

Gail Stenstad also suggests a type of instability, but one that feels more open, less controlled. In her essay "Anarchic Thinking," Gail Stenstad suggests that feminists practice anarchic thinking. For Stenstad:

...thinking which would be both subversive (of patriarchal theory and practice) and creative would be wild thinking: thinking which goes beyond conventional boundaries, deviates from expected goals and methods, and is not accounted for or predicted by any theory.⁹

Stenstad describes several important characteristics of anarchic thinking.¹⁰ First, anarchic thinking is atheoretical insofar as it does not posit universal truths or an objective reality, and does not demand a unitary voice. Instead of establishing, producing or operating within a set of legitimating criteria it is ruleless and breaks rules.

Second, anarchic thinking is fluid, always in motion. Through its persistent questioning of established views and perspectives, anarchic thought deliberately maintains unresolved tension. Because feminists are not looking for theoretical solutions, thought that remains in motion through tension, that resists settling on one explanation or perspective, keeps women listening to each other.

Third, because anarchic thinking is persistent in its questioning and maintains tension, it is open to ambiguity

and multiplicity of meaning and possibility which arise from differing experiences of women.

Fourth, in contrast to theory-making, which makes the strange familiar by assigning it a place within the totality, anarchic thinking looks for the strange within the familiar in order to decenter the familiar. In this way, boundaries are tested, pushed, stretched, broken.

Stenstad points out that anarchic thinking is not sloppy thinking. It is careful thinking, attentive to historical and linguistic contexts and to possibilities and implications. She offers Susan Griffin's Woman and Nature as an example of anarchic thinking because it is atheoretical, multivoiced and decenters the familiar by juxtaposing and arranging familiar ideas by traditional male philosophers in a way that makes them appear strange.

While she admits that anarchic thinking does not provide a basis for deciding between two value questions or arguments, she says this is not sufficient reason for rejecting anarchic thought. According to Stenstad, we do not need to assume that feminists must take a uniform political stance. Since anarchic thinking builds community by embracing multiplicity of meaning arising out of differing experiences and by allowing multiple voices to be heard, difference does not need to be divisive.

In short, anarchic thinking is a way of thinking that affirms a plurality of perspectives, voices and possibilities for action. Through constant questioning, an openness to ambiguity and multiplicity, and by decentering the familiar, voices of all women can be heard and understood.

The positions I have described give form, in varying degrees, to attempts to escape the pre-established categories, and to a move toward more pragmatic understandings of knowledge. All three recognize that changing social, cultural and political circumstances, as well as a diversity of possible subjects, play an integral role in the construction of knowledge. In addition, Code and Stenstad especially, emphasize the need for flexibility and openness in feminist knowledge so that revision, change, and movement is always possible. Though these feminists do not develop the idea of proceeding pragmatically, their perspectives can be understood as initial gestures toward that end.

All three thinkers also respond to concerns about relativism. Concerns about relativism usually arise whenever pre-established principles for knowledge are abandoned. Rampant relativism would make it impossible to assert that any one view has any more legitimacy than another. This would reduce any feminist perspective to a

matter of opinion. According to these theorists, relativism need not necessarily run rampant and unchecked. Both Harding and Code argue that relativism and absolutism are complementary, not contradictory.¹¹ As Harding puts it, "I think we should argue against the idea that one story of the world is true (and) for the idea that some stories of the world are definitely less false than others."¹² Code refers to the idea that any degree of relativism means "anything goes" as absolute relativism. Absolute relativism is a product of dichotomous thinking that denies the possibility for a middle ground.¹³

Code recommends a mitigated, critical relativism that "affirms that there is something there, in the world, to know and act on."¹⁴ Mitigated, critical relativism recognizes the situatedness of knowledge without denying the reality of social structures and institutions which produce and perpetuate oppressive ideologies and practices.

Stenstad also denies that anarchic thinking need be rampantly relativistic. We can, she claims, as feminists be motivated by the normative position that oppression is wrong.¹⁵ And while Stenstad's position on relativism may appear to be weaker, her view more appropriately describes the one thing that almost all feminists can agree upon, that oppression is wrong.

Though understanding knowledge pragmatically allows for pluralism, it is not akin to an "anything goes" approach. Sharing a political end does not necessitate sharing an epistemological framework, not to mention that it is strange to proceed politically, deciding what action to take, according to epistemological commitments. Most people become actively involved in bringing about change according to need, interest, or ethical commitment. Assuming that feminists share the position that oppression is wrong, and are committed to ending racist, classist, heterosexist and sexist oppression of women, I hold that if approaches to knowledge are pragmatically grounded, allowing approaches to be constituted in many different ways without being committed to one way is not akin to saying that every approach to knowledge is legitimate. As Nicholson and Fraser put it, when we abandon attempts to create epistemological foundations, "Instead of hovering above, legitimation descends to the level of practice and becomes immanent in it."¹⁶ As I will show later in this chapter, pragmatic "tests" of knowledge can serve as legitimating criteria for knowledge.

Recently, a body of literature has emerged that attempts to link feminism and the American pragmatist philosophical tradition by both recovering historical connections and developing new connections.¹⁷ These

projects are useful for understanding how feminist knowledge could be understood pragmatically. In a special issue of Hypatia focusing on pragmatism and feminism, feminists such as Jane Duran, Phyllis Rooney, and Charlene Haddock Seigfried outline the existing similarities between feminism and pragmatism. I will use some of the existing similarities as launching points, or points of expansion, in order to fully develop what I mean by "proceeding pragmatically." I will focus on five features that I believe should play a key role in understanding knowledge pragmatically. In doing this, I want to emphasize that my proposal of proceeding pragmatically is not an philosophical idea that needs to be expanded through further theorizing, but a practice that needs to be put in action.

I fear that unless caution is exercised, projects which call upon the insights of the pragmatist tradition will result in the development of another hyphenated feminism: pragmatist feminism. One of the points I have been making is that the very nature of feminist thinking requires that it be pragmatic. By saying that I believe all feminism should be pragmatic, I do not necessarily mean that it should adhere to the American Pragmatist tradition, but that its approach and method should be pragmatic, in the ordinary language sense of "pragmatic." This does not mean that the American Pragmatist tradition cannot or should not inform

feminist thinking and practice, but that feminists should not fall into the trap of coupling feminism with yet another existing tradition. With respect to an ordinary language understanding of "pragmatism," hyphenated couplings of feminism and pragmatism, then, would simply be redundant.

I have also been arguing against the development of hyphenated feminisms in feminist thinking. The development of hyphenated feminisms, of linking feminism with an existing tradition or school of thought, predisposes people to identify with and defend a certain kind of feminism, thereby creating distinctions, attacks, and defenses which fuel academic debates and divert attention from practice and action. Furthermore, a proliferation of pragmatist feminist philosophical discourses would be to misunderstand the spirit of pragmatism. Pragmatism is a method, an approach, a way of proceeding. There is no great, complex philosophical scheme to work out and spell out. The real work lies in the practice.

As an approach, pragmatism takes as a starting point "live" questions associated with our experiences and socio-political circumstances. My fear is that the development of another hyphenated feminism will result in additional feminist theorizing arising out of academic concerns. I want to provide the following three questions as examples of this: 1) Is feminist x's notion of experience more like that

of James or Dewey? 2) Is Rorty a feminist? 3) Is anti-abortion legislation incompatible with a pragmatist notion of democracy? The first example is most clearly an academic exercise--one so blatant that it is unlikely that any feminist involved in the pragmatist tradition would indulge in it. I include it here to remind us that as academics we become so entrenched in the discourses with which we are familiar that we begin to find these questions "interesting," sometimes forgetting that they have little impact on those not immersed in the scholarship. The second example seems to have more relevance. Rorty writes about feminism, and some might be concerned that he has misconstrued feminist ideas. A case for its relevance would have to be made. Is it a "live" question? How much practical difference would it make if the answer was yes, or no? This would also require a response to a question feminists frequently ask: who wants/needs to know? As I will discuss shortly, both feminists and pragmatists understand the production of knowledge as arising out of communities. Is it a problem perplexing thousands of Americans? Does it even perplex one hundred Americans? The third example definitely seems to have political relevance. A Deweyian notion of democracy might be useful in attempting to persuade people that anti-abortion legislation is not democratic. But there is a difference between using a

Deweyian notion of democracy to persuade others that anti-abortion legislation is not democratic, and arguing that anti-abortion legislation is incompatible with a Deweyian notion of democracy. Using a Deweyian notion of democracy to persuade in this case still requires that we appeal to people's social and political values. These values are contextual and changing. This approach understands the work of the pragmatic tradition as a way of proceeding, and not as a tradition which can be used to authorize particular perspectives.

I have used these examples to illustrate the difference between developing feminist pragmatism as an academic discourse and using pragmatist understandings as a method, an approach, a way of proceeding. It is this notion of proceeding pragmatically that I hope to develop here. That pragmatism it is not so much a view or perspective, but an approach, a way of doing and thinking, a way of proceeding is the first and most important feature of pragmatism I want to discuss. Pragmatism places emphasis on practice and consequences.¹⁸ It is the practice that gives meaning to thought, that helps us understand. William James compares it to Vedantism,¹⁹ "You do not reason, but after going through a certain discipline you see...."²⁰ The key to proceeding pragmatically is that in very important ways, practice precedes theory. It is more a way of preaching

what you practice, than practicing what you preach. James says, "Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process."²¹ Given this, understanding feminist knowledge pragmatically means that feminist theories are made meaningful through practice. They make little sense in and of themselves. Their legitimacy, meaning, "truth" is established through practice, through use.

The second feature of pragmatism is that attention is focused on particulars, facts, concreteness, and consequences.²² In the words of James,

The pragmatist turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reason, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power.²³

This emphasis on context and consequences plays a key role in revisioning the production of feminist knowledge. One of the most important similarities between the pragmatist tradition and feminism is the connection of philosophy with social action.²⁴ A pragmatic approach to philosophical analysis can be used to increase political awareness, and also provides the possibility for new understandings and strategies for action to be developed.²⁵ In her essay, "Feminist-Pragmatist Revisionings of Reason, Knowledge, and Philosophy," Phyllis Rooney emphasizes the relationship between knowledge and action. According to

Rooney, both feminists and pragmatists "are essentially futurists in philosophy. Both believe that humanly motivated change is possible, that such change matters, and that philosophy has an important role to play in effecting that change."²⁶

For feminists, it is imperative that knowledge is connected to acting responsibly and effecting change. In fact, it is the explicit purpose of feminism to play a role in bringing about feminist change. Academic debates involved in promoting one view over another, carried on outside the context of particular socio-political problems do not serve this purpose well. Proceeding pragmatically challenges the hierarchical structure which understands political activity as arising from theory. Pragmatism means that the ends, in part, determine the means. Purpose helps structure the inquiry. What you need the information for determines how you will go about collecting information, which terms, concepts, and theoretical structures you will use, and what counts as an answer. Ideas are evaluated with respect to how well they work. Both meaning and truth value are understood in terms of practical efficacy.

Pragmatism realizes that no theory is an absolute representation of reality. Theories are human-made instruments to help us understand the world.²⁷ Pragmatism relies on facts and experience in a world that is changing

and growing. Practical activity involves specific situations which undergo change. Unlike dependence on fixed principles and eternal universals, the success of practical action is never completely under our control. It cannot guarantee the absolute predictability of abstract principles.²⁸ For this reason, knowledge is understood as incomplete and partial, and theories as flexible and always open to revision.²⁹

As a method for understanding the world, pragmatism is friendly to pluralism. It provides a way of proceeding that does not demand unity or coherence. The contextual nature of practice requires that different approaches be used at different times, or as a result of different circumstances. Attention to context and consequences make us aware that changing social and political events may require changes in positions.³⁰ This means that feminists should be free to decide which approach or criteria should be used depending on practical goals. Pragmatic production of knowledge involves questioning that arises out of practical concerns and is devoted to finding answers that facilitate and inform practice and action. A diversity of approaches better equips feminists for facing a diversity of problems and allows for a multiplicity of strategies and possibilities for action.

Emphasis on context and particulars also makes it more difficult for differences to be neglected. Resisting the impulse to develop and fine tune theories in the abstract forces feminists to keep listening to the differing concerns, needs, and experiences of women. Working things out in practice allows tensions and conflicts to arise and be acknowledged. Though this may seem to be an unwelcome attribute, the attempt to ignore differences and conflicts, or conceal them through abstraction often leads to more serious conflicts and tensions. Proceeding pragmatically increases the possibility that conflict and difference be negotiated and worked out, not simply through theory, but through practice and action, or stand unresolved.

The third feature of proceeding pragmatically is the use of experience as a starting point for theorizing. Both feminism and pragmatism have conceptions of truth and knowledge that are anti-foundationalist.³¹ The rejection of universal foundations to knowledge leads both to turn to experience for understanding the world.

Experience has played a fundamental role in second wave feminist thinking. Early second wave feminists practiced consciousness raising as way for women to share experiences that had not been fully articulated or defined. These shared experiences provided the groundwork for much early feminist thinking. Experiences of sexual assault,

discrimination, objectification, child sexual abuse, compulsory heterosexuality, and sexual harassment were defined and analyzed, providing fodder for feminist theorists.

The emphasis on experience is important to the production of feminist knowledge for two reasons. The first is that attention to experience ensures that theorizing remains connected to the concerns of daily life. In her essay, "Validating Women's Experiences Pragmatically" Charlene Seigfried discusses the role of women's experiences in feminist thinking. Following Dewey, she argues that thinking should begin with life experiences and the practical problems of daily life.

Traditional theories of knowledge have privileged pure thinking and have denigrated making and doing. This subordination of practice to theory is associated with power relations which provide the privileged the leisure time for intellectual work and assign the less privileged physical work. In an attempt to dismantle this hierarchical dualism, Seigfried challenges the authority of the philosopher over the ordinary person. The pragmatist goal is to give validity to the experiences of non-specialists. "The monopoly of more specialized forms of knowing can be broken by turning to the ways that welfare mothers, artists, students, daughters and untold persons in everyday life

manage to solve problems and thereby extract knowledge from their daily concerns."³²

The second reason that the use of experience is important to the production of feminist knowledge is that the practice of reflection provides the opportunity for redefinition and reinterpretation of experience. Pragmatists do not take experience as a fixed given. As Duran puts it, "Practice precedes the articulation of it." She goes on to say, "The core area of intersection between pragmatism and feminism then, seems to be that they both remind us of the ways in which we experienced life before talking about the experience became more important than the having of it."³³ Experience, understood pragmatically then, both informs theorizing and is constituted by theorizing. Because experience is in part constituted by reflection, it is always open to revision and interpretation. Experience is not taken as raw data to be used to explain reality. Instead it presents the possibility for constructing new understandings and strategies for action. Because theorizing from experience provides the opportunity to construct new understandings of ourselves and the world, the practice of reflection is something that should be encouraged, supported, and facilitated for everyone.³⁴

The idea that reflection should be practiced by everyone leads us to the fourth feature of proceeding

pragmatically--understanding knowledge as being produced by communities, not individuals. One of the similarities of the pragmatist tradition and feminism is that both challenge the notion of the ideal, objective knower.³⁵ Enlightenment epistemology posits a neutral, disembodied knower that is divorced from historical, social, and political circumstances. Both feminism and pragmatism have found this ideal knower problematic for several reasons. To begin with, pragmatists have taken issue with the false distinctions between subject and object, reason and emotion, and fact and value that are associated with Enlightenment knowing. Instead of neglecting the role emotion, body, and values play in knowing, pragmatists have engaged in the project of dissolving these distinctions. Feminists have understood these hierarchical dualisms as the result of androcentric structures. Not only are these dualisms gendered, but the masculinist term in each set is privileged as the appropriate path to knowing. Secondly, both take issue with the asocial character of the knower. Both understand knowers as historically and culturally situated. According to feminists, the assumption that the social identity of the knower is irrelevant if the knower remains objective and neutral functions to leave sexist and racist bias undetected.³⁶ Finally, Enlightenment thinking assumes we approach the task of knowing as solitary individuals.

According to the pragmatist tradition and feminism, this sort of epistemological individualism neglects the social aspects of both humans and knowledge. It fails to acknowledge that individuals are members of historically changing societies and that knowledge of our world comes to us through our interaction with people in our community. For both, how we give meaning to our experience is not an individualistic, private matter, but a social matter.

This notion of community is at the heart of my proposal to proceed pragmatically because under this view, communities provide frameworks for knowledge. According to James, truth is what is in harmony with the purposive and meaningful ordering of lived experience. Understanding what is in agreement with experienced reality is not a solipsistic endeavor. Individual understandings must be, in part, in agreement with community understandings.³⁷ Members of a community decide on which explanation best suits their experiences, and their goals.³⁸ As communities change and develop, and ideas are tested, perspectives are revised. This process remains open ended.

Lynn Hankinson Nelson offers a view of knowledge as arising out of communities that is helpful for understanding how evaluatory criteria are produced. Nelson, a feminist empiricist, argues that the production of knowledge is not an individual affair, but is generated by communities. What

needs to be known and why cannot be determined by individual feminists, but by diverse groups of feminists in dialogue with each other. Understanding knowledge as arising out of communities means that the standards of evidence and criteria for evaluation are produced by the community who is to use that knowledge.

According to her view, communities are not static entities. They are "multiple, historically contingent, and dynamic: they have fuzzy, often overlapping boundaries; they evolve, dissolve, and recombine; and they have a variety of 'purposes' and projects."³⁹ Particular communities of people working for feminist change share and negotiate values and goals, and these motivate what kind of inquiries are undertaken and what form they will take.⁴⁰ Those who need to know x in order to carry out specific projects, should be included in deciding and determining how they can come to know x , and what perspective or approach should be used because they have an understanding of what kinds of answers will suit their projects. Because our purposes affect how we gather knowledge and what counts as an answer, the goal-oriented nature of the socio-political realm helps provide boundaries and criteria for knowledge

According to the pragmatist tradition, especially the work of John Dewey, knowledge ideally not only arises out of communities, but more specifically, is the result of

democratic participation by members of a community. This takes us to the fifth and final feature that plays a key role in constituting my notion of "proceeding pragmatically."

I have been operating under the assumption that the spirit of feminism demands women speak for themselves. As I said in chapter II, participating in the production of feminist knowledge is part of the process of self-creation. The second wave feminist focus on self definition has been a crucial theoretical and political project. To quote de Beauvoir, "Humanity is male and defines woman not in herself but as relative to him He is the Subject, he is absolute--she is the Other."⁴¹ And Mary Daly has said, "It is necessary to grasp the fundamental fact that women have had the power of naming stolen from us."⁴² They both agree on the solution: that to exist humanly is to name the self and the world. It is the exclusion from groups involved in conversations and activities that define humanity that mark the oppression of a people. Because knowledge often benefits the people who produce it, the development of knowledge specialists (as described in chapter II) conflicts with the spirit of feminism and increases the gap between theory and practice. That feminism was to be structured by the democratic participation of women was an ideal of early radical feminism that has somehow been lost or buried.

Feminists who share this understanding about the spirit of feminism should be committed to resurrecting this ideal. I believe that proceeding pragmatically offers us the opportunity to recover this ideal and put it into practice.

In order for the process of feminist self-definition to be meaningful, it must not only arise out communities as already described, but must also take place in the form of practices. In chapter II I discussed the problem of exclusion that resulted from the false universalization of experiences and perspectives of white, middle class women. Many white feminists have treated the problem of exclusion as a theoretical problem and have attempted to address it by "fixing" theory, by deconstructing categories, discursifying experiences and/or creating theoretical frameworks that are robust enough to account for diversity. I argued that the heart of the problem, that a diverse population of women has not been empowered to structure feminist inquiry, has not been adequately addressed. If feminist theorists are committed to developing theories that are inclusive, maximizing democratic participation in the processes that structure feminism will ensure that problems of exclusion are solved in practice, not in theory.

As John Stuhr puts it, "To the extent, then, that a given person does not participate consistently and fully in the consideration, formation, and implementation of social

the consideration, formation, and implementation of social values, decisions, and policies, democracy as an individual's self-determining and self-realizing way of life simply does not exist."⁴³ Likewise, a knower does not become a knower until he/she engages in the practice of knowing. However broadly or diverse a knower is constructed in theory, an inclusive feminism requires that concrete diverse feminists engage in the project of knowing. According to Dewey, democracy requires that people express their needs, desires and how they believe social problems ought to be handled. In the words of Stuhr: "This means that all persons involved in and affected by social practices should participate in their formation and direction."⁴⁴ For feminism, this would entail that all feminists affected by projects for change, not just "theorists," engage in the processes that structure feminism.

In order for participation to take place, ordinary people must be in a position to understand in what ways they might participate and have the knowledge necessary to engage in discussions and decision making processes. In his essay, "Democracy as Cooperative Inquiry," James Campbell reminds us that for Dewey there is a strong and necessary connection between democracy and education. Education motivates people and prepares people to participate more intelligently and

more fully. As Campbell puts it, "Education can help people find more value in involvement.... Serious efforts need to be undertaken to make cooperative inquiry more attractive to potential participants."⁴⁵

Increasing democratic participation in the processes that structure feminist inquiry is certainly no easy task. Fortunately, education is a means that is familiar and readily available to philosophers. According to Dewey, education should be the practice of the philosopher.⁴⁶ If feminist philosophers understand this to be their role, they are in a position to help ensure that non-theorist feminists are educated in a manner that facilitates their participation in the activities that structure feminism. Education allows people to better understand in what ways they can participate, what needs to be done, how they can become involved, what the problems are, and what needs to be changed. In turn, participation leads to further education. In short, the very process of participating in the structuring of feminism will lead to the empowerment and betterment of women.

In this chapter I have outlined five features that play a key role in constituting what I mean by "proceeding pragmatically" with respect to the production and evaluation of feminist knowledge. At this point I want to address to possible concerns about the development of my notion of

proceeding pragmatically. The first has to do with my treatment of the theory/practice distinction. The tradition of pragmatism challenges the tendency of analytic philosophy to create dualisms. This includes a challenge to the subordination of practice to theory by calling into question the practice/theory dualism. Traditional pragmatists have been involved in the project of attempting to dissolve the distinction. I, on the other hand, have been not only maintaining the distinction, but also inverting the hierarchical structure of theory over practice by placing emphasis on practice. The decision to maintain a distinction, and emphasize practice over theory has been conscientious and particular to my project. My point has been that academic feminist theorists cannot rest on the assumption that if they are writing feminist theory, they are fruitfully involved in feminist practice. Feminist theorizing is a form of political practice only if the theorizing arises out of and is guided by particular practical projects. When this takes place, the distinction is dissolved ("really" dissolved in practice). Understanding feminist theory in this manner directly challenges the hierarchical dualism which privileges theory over practice. As academic feminist theory increasingly becomes more apolitical and hypertheoretical, it is harder to understand how it serves larger feminist projects. By

inverting the relationship between theory and practice, the burden is on feminist theorists, as politically committed feminists, to show in what ways academic feminist theory serves larger political projects.

The second concern I want to address is the possible misconception that I am holding an anti-theory position. An emphasis on action in no way indicates that theory is not important or necessary. In fact, it is not my intention to devalue, denigrate, or disparage theory. As I have said, feminism cannot do without theory. Theory plays an integral role in reconstructing understandings of ourselves and the world, and in transforming the institutions and practices that structure society, culture, and politics. Another possible misconception may be that I am opposed to "abstract" theory, finding only "concrete" theory suitable. The core of my complaint about hypertheory is not that it is abstract, but that it does not arise from practical concerns, and that its relationship to practice is unclear. By proceeding pragmatically we might find that particular circumstances and ends might be best suited by abstract theory. In other words, it may be the case that the more abstract theory works better in a certain situation.

What I have been proposing is that feminists engaged in projects of knowledge abandon commitments to particular approaches and proceed pragmatically. Proceeding

pragmatically means that the legitimacy or grounding for a perspective cannot be determined by discourse, by incessant academic banter, but by practical efficacy determined in part by those who must rely on that knowledge. I have suggested that whether or not a perspective "works"--that is, whether it helps meet the goals of particular political projects, and is in harmony with the political commitments, values, and ethics of those who are engaged in the project--serves as the legitimating criteria. The pragmatist emphasis on consequences means that a view is evaluated in terms of how well it works. Pragmatic understandings of knowledge require that views, perspectives, methodologies and methods be tested in practice. Oftentimes, in academia "how well it works" means how well it works theoretically; in other words, does it make sense within the framework of an existing, specialized, academic discourse, does it solve a theoretical problem or dispute; not does it work in practice. The notion of "working" that I am using is not akin to theoretical correctness, but practical efficacy, that is, does it solve a practical, social, cultural, political problem. Theories do not provide answers or solutions. The solutions are a result of practice and action.

I have also suggested that pragmatic understandings of knowledge provide the opportunity to develop new

perspectives or further develop existing perspectives. New forms of knowledge production may arise out of certain projects. The success, difficulties, and failures of the practices or politics the knowledge is to serve will inform the revisioning of the perspective (or the abandonment of the perspective). Testing a perspective in practice provides clues as to how or why it does not work and needs to be revised. If we understand theories, not as solutions, but as instruments,⁴⁷ we come to understand how our instruments might best be modified to suit the type of work we intend to undertake. The new and improved perspective is subject to the same scrutiny, ensuring that the construction of knowledge and theory production remain dynamic and inextricably linked with social and political practices and action.

Finally, proceeding pragmatically provides the possibility for democratic participation by those who will be affected by the knowledge produced. Proceeding pragmatically aims at the ideal that political action, instead of depending on the work of theorists, should depend on the good judgement of ordinary people. According to Dewey, philosophy gets its value from its association with the purpose of human life. This purpose cannot be imposed by experts, but must be decided by all who are affected. Inherent in both pragmatism and feminism is the idea that

both are "in some sense a way of life--a set of practices embodied in a way of life, not divorced from it."⁴⁸ John Stuhr reminds us in his essay "Democracy as a Way of Life," that according to Dewey, the goal of philosophy is not practical theory, but intelligent, meaningful practice.⁴⁹ Proceeding pragmatically not only places priority on practice, but understands feminism as the practice of ordinary people, living every day lives. Feminism is a way of living first. Through the transformation of daily living come insights to further inform theorizing.

Pragmatism makes no promises. Whether or not any of this occurs cannot be determined through writing about it, only by attempting to make it happen. As James says, proceeding pragmatically "appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work."⁵⁰

Notes

¹ William James, Pragmatism (1907, reprint Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), 25.

² Sandra Harding, "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory," in Feminist Theory in Practice and Process, ed. Michelene R. Malson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 287.

³ Lorraine Code, What Can She Know: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 317-318.

⁴ Code, 318.

⁵ Code, 318.

⁶ Code, 317-318.

⁷ Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," in Feminist Theory in Practice and Process (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁸ Code, 180.

⁹ Stenstad, Gail, "Anarchic Thinking," Hypatia 3, no. 2, (1988): 86.

¹⁰ Stenstad, 86-90.

¹¹ Sandra Harding, "Who Knows: Identities and Feminist Epistemology," in (En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe, ed. Joan Hartman & Ellen Messer-Davidow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 113; Code, 319.

¹² Harding, "Who Knows," 112.

¹³ Code, 319.

¹⁴ Code, 320.

¹⁵ Stenstad, 97.

¹⁶ Nancy Fraser & Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism," in Feminism/Postmodernism, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 23.

¹⁷ Hypatia: Journal of Feminist Philosophy, vol. 8, no. 2, (1993), Special Issue on Feminism and Pragmatism, edited by Charlene Seigfried; also Charlene Seigfried, "Where Are All the Pragmatist Feminists?" Hypatia vol. 6, no. 2, (summer 1991).

¹⁸ James, 29.

¹⁹ Vedantism is a tradition of Indian thought based on the Upanisads.

²⁰ James, 70.

²¹ James, 92.

²² James, 34.

²³ James, 28.

²⁴ Phyllis Rooney, "Feminist-Pragmatist Revisionings of Reason, Knowledge, and Philosophy," Hypatia 8, no. 2 (1993): 18.

²⁵ Rooney, 16; also Jane Duran, "The Intersection of Feminism and Pragmatism," Hypatia 8, no. 2 (1993): 160-161.

²⁶ Rooney, 18.

²⁷ James, 30.

²⁸ Charlene Seigfried, "Validating Women's Experiences Pragmatically," in Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture: Pragmatic Essays after Dewey, ed. John Stuhr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 114.

²⁹ James, 77.

³⁰ Charlene Seigfried makes a similar point in "Validating Women's Experiences Pragmatically," 114.

³¹ Duran, 164-165.

³² Seigfried, "Validating Women's Experiences Pragmatically," 114.

³³ Duran, 167-168.

³⁴ Seigfried, "Validating Women's Experiences Pragmatically," 119.

³⁵ Rooney, 19.

³⁶ See the work of Sandra Harding, especially The Science Question in Feminism (Ithica: Cornell U. Press, 1986).

³⁷ Charlene Seigfried, "Shared Communities of Interest: Feminism and Pragmatism," Hypatia 8, no. 2 (1993): 2; Rooney, 234.

³⁸ Seigfried, "Shared Communities of Interest," 2.

³⁹ Lynn Hankinson Nelson, "Epistemological Communities," in Feminist Epistemologies, ed. Linda Alcoff & Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 125.

⁴⁰ Naomi Scheman makes a similar point in "Who Wants to Know? The Epistemological Value of Values," in (En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe, ed. Joan Hartman & Ellen Messer-Davidow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 179.

⁴¹ Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), xviii-xix.

⁴² Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 8.

⁴³ John Stuhr, "Democracy as a Way of Life," in Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture, 45.

⁴⁴ Stuhr, 43.

⁴⁵ James Campbell, "Democracy as Cooperative Inquiry," in Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture, 21.

⁴⁶ Seigfried, "Shared Communities of Interest," 2.

⁴⁷ James, 28.

⁴⁸ Duran, 166.

⁴⁹ Stuhr, 41.

⁵⁰ James, 28.

CHAPTER V

WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO RADICAL FEMINISM?

Consciousness raising groups. Abortion rights marches. Radical feminist collectives. Creative feminist political actions. The emergence of radical lesbians.

While this was all happening, some of us were still on the playground, planning strategic take-overs of the boy-dominated jungle gym. Even though I was not old enough to experience the early days of radical feminism, I get the feeling that those involved in the beginning sensed that something exciting was happening, that they were not participating in just a trend, but a Movement, that history was being made.

By the time I was old enough to understand politics, the essentialist and anti-porn strands of radical feminism were in full swing. And though I identified as a radical feminist, I had the distinct feeling that I had missed the real party. It's not just that I had missed the beginning, when radical feminism was young, uncompromised, jagged, raw, exciting--like a garage band--but that radical feminism was no longer a movement. It had lost its grassroots potential.

At a time at which postmodernist feminists dismiss radical feminism in a paragraph, and at the risk of sounding

like I'm caught in some sappy, Reaganite, nostalgic yearning for days of old, I believe that some of the best features of radical feminism should be reconsidered.

In this chapter I would like to consider the ways in which early radical feminism can serve as an example for proceeding pragmatically. I have chosen early radical feminism because it embodies some of the most important ideals of feminism, the very ideals which I outline in the last chapter as constituting the process of proceeding pragmatically. I will focus on four features in particular.

The first is that for radical feminism, the production of knowledge was clearly situated within the context of a political movement for change. Early radical feminism was, first and foremost, an action-oriented movement that attempted to address problems arising out of women's experiences, concerns, and interests. This focus on action and practice did not mean that feminist thought was neglected. On the contrary, the radical feminist movement produced rich and insightful analyses and critiques which have come to serve as part of the foundation of second wave feminism.

Second, radical feminists actively sought to dissolve the gap between theory and practice. Using consciousness raising as a means to both organizing a movement and producing theory, radical feminism provides an example of a

rare instance in which theory and practice were intertwined. Ideas were tested in practice, and in turn, practice informed thinking. That radical feminism lacked a unified, cohesive theory, and was pluralistic in nature was understood by some as potentially advantageous for building a non-hierarchical, mass based movement.

Third, early radical feminists attempted to get as many women as possible to participate in the activities that structured feminism, including the production of knowledge. The production of knowledge through consciousness raising allowed a great number of ordinary women to take part in the development and formulation of the inquiries, analyses, and critiques that have structured feminism.

Finally, though the technique of consciousness raising did not politically mobilize the masses to create a revolution, it did serve to educate a large number of women, and at minimum, empower them to make lifestyle changes.

Radical feminism is almost always neglected or quickly dismissed in contemporary academic theory, especially in reviews of the different forms of feminist epistemology. Radical feminism is often mischaracterized by contemporary feminist theorists who take the writings of a particular strand of feminist theory, one that includes Mary Daly, Susan Griffin and Adrienne Rich, and consider it

paradigmatic; or it is ignored--it somehow slips through the cracks.

Many feminists admit that characterizing radical feminism is a difficult task because it has grown in many different directions. Though radical feminists have contributed a great deal to the political analyses of women's oppression, they have written very little about radical feminism itself. In other words, radical feminists, especially early radical feminists, did not theorize about their theories. Even the most cited, characteristic feature of radical feminism: the tenet that "all women are oppressed", was taken to mean very different things to different radical feminists.¹

Because early radical feminism did not have an articulated epistemology it is easily either ignored or mischaracterized and dismissed in contemporary discussions and debates about feminist knowledge.² In two recent anthologies on feminist epistemology: Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology (1994); and Feminist Epistemologies (1993), not only are there no essays on radical feminism, "radical feminism" is not even listed in the indexes.

The absence of a definitive, unifying theory has permitted critics of radical feminism to select essentialist strands as characteristic of the whole. Radical feminism is

often accused of positing an ahistorical feminine nature, and of perpetuating Enlightenment dualisms (e.g. rationality/ irrationality) by simply reversing the terms of valuation, but leaving the gendered dichotomous structure intact.³ Casting radical feminism in this manner seriously misrepresents the diverse and rich complexity of radical feminist thinking and permits the wholesale rejection of radical feminism. These types of mischaracterizations are a result of conflating earlier and later forms of radical feminism. According to historian Alice Echols, radical feminism was eclipsed by "cultural feminism" after 1975. She uses the term "cultural feminism" in order to highlight the very different characteristics of early and later radical feminism.⁴ Early radical feminism (1967-75) focused on social transformation through challenging male supremacy. For the most part, early radical feminists explicitly denied that feminine and masculine traits were essential to women and men, respectively. They held that gender traits were not natural or biological, but were social, a result of the sex role system.⁵ Cultural feminism (after 1975) focused on personal transformation and the creation of a women's counterculture. By attempting to give value to feminine characteristics, some cultural feminists lapsed into essentialism by assuming these traits as inherent in women. The shift from early radical feminism to later radical

feminism or cultural feminism also marks a move away from the activist politics of earlier radical feminism. According to Echols, feminist activism, for the most part, became the domain of liberal feminism after 1975.⁶ For this reason, I will only be referring to early radical feminism as defined by Echols throughout the rest of this chapter.

The first characteristic that radical feminism shares with the notion of proceeding pragmatically outlined in the last chapter is an emphasis on practice and action. Instead of aligning itself with an existing theoretical framework, **radical feminism takes as its starting point the conditions and experiences of ordinary women.** Unlike first wave suffrage feminists whose goal was to gain equal rights within the liberal political structure, early radical feminists were motivated by the ambitious goal of starting a revolutionary movement that, in order to create a different society, would challenge the political structures of the country. And, unlike liberal and socialist feminism, and later, psychoanalytic and postmodernist feminism, radical feminism did not develop out of an existing masculinist discourse or movement. Though many early radical feminists were initially members of the New Left, or had participated in the Black Civil Rights movement, they felt that the structures of Marxism and liberalism did not necessarily entail women's liberation, and that women needed their own

movement that focused specifically on women's oppression. With this came the burden of attempting to construct analyses of women's condition that could serve as tools for liberation. For radical feminists, analyses had to serve the dual function of educating women about the patriarchal system and providing direction for political action.

As neither a new version of Marxism or a faction of an existing male-defined, male-created group, radical feminist thought was not obliged to appropriate central tenets of the "father" discourse, nor did it feel a duty to provide a corrective to the "father" discourse.⁷ Instead, it sought to create a new politics and philosophy arising out of women's experiences.⁸ This did not necessarily entail engaging in or responding to masculinist discourses.

This "freedom" is what permitted radical feminists to explore many paths and many issues in insightful, creative, visionary, and unique ways.⁹ In short, early radical feminists were free to experiment with new ways of knowing and attempted to produce knowledge in new ways, especially in forms of consciousness raising. Speak outs, for example, functioned to allow women to testify about experiences that had traditionally been relegated to silence, especially rape, domestic violence and abortion. By speaking out, either during consciousness raising sessions or at speak outs, women not only gave articulate form to their

experiences, they helped other women identify and name similar experiences, and in addition, served to educate those who had not shared those experiences. In short, consciousness raising generated ideas and analysis about women's conditions and liberation, and consciousness raising became the dominant approach to producing knowledge. The processes involved in consciousness raising were to play a central role in the construction of feminist theory.¹⁰

This leads to the second characteristic that makes radical feminism a good example of proceeding pragmatically: the integration of theory and practice. As the editors of Radical Feminism put it, "Unlike some other political movements, feminism has not been burdened by early, narrowly defined theoretical structure. Rather, there has been a much more organic relationship between analysis and activity; theory evolves from and contributes to the growth of the movement."¹¹ Though the integration of theory and practice occurred in several ways, including experimenting with living arrangements and organizational structures in order to understand power relations differently, consciousness raising groups stand out as a striking attempt to meld theory and practice.

The function of consciousness raising was multifaceted. CR groups potentially helped women come to understand their condition, provided feminists substance for theorizing, and

served as a basis for political organizing. Consciousness raising was guided by the simple idea that the personal was the political. This idea enabled individual women to realize that individual experiences and problems were not idiosyncratic, but the result of a political system of male domination. The idea that the personal is political challenged the liberal distinction between the private and public realm and revealed how the liberal notion of the private realm had functioned to keep women alone, isolated, and silent. It was in part a reaction to liberal feminists' focus on women's integration to public life.¹² It was also a response to the males of the New Left who felt that women's problems were apolitical.

In her essay "Free Space" Pamela Allen describes how feminist thinking is to arise out of consciousness raising.¹³ She proposes that consciousness raising involves four group processes. The first is opening up which involves getting in touch with feelings, admitting them, and having them validated by the group. This enables women to get support and helps build trust in the group. The second process is sharing experiences. The intention is to understand how personal experiences and situations are a result of the social order.

The last two processes described by Allen, analyzing thinking and abstracting, are most important for

understanding how consciousness raising was to play a role in theory building. The analyzing stage is one of inquiry and re-interpretation. According to Allen, "our thinking must grow out of our questions," that is, the questions that arise as a result of sharing experiences. Structuring theory according to the questions that arise out of women's experience ensures that theory is tied to practices that concern ordinary women. It's important to note that in the process of theorizing, women's experiences are not taken uncritically as givens, but are re-interpreted. As MacKinnon has put it, it involves the "critical reconstitution of the meaning of women's social experiences."¹⁴ Analyzing involves a new way of looking at women's conditions and a new way of looking at reality. Jo Freeman describes consciousness raising as "structures created specifically for the purpose of altering the participants' perceptions and conceptions of themselves and society at large."¹⁵ Phenomena that were already defined in masculinist terms were redefined from the perspective of women. Experiences rape, domestic violence, and incest were reformulated to reveal the victim blaming constructions that underlied masculinist definitions. Experiences of beautification, sexual relations, housework were also analyzed. Sharing experiences about compulsory practices allowed women to understand how these practices were

implicated in the construction of femininity and the perpetuation of the sex role system.

The final stage, abstracting, is described by Allen as a process of evolving theory by using the concepts formulated in the analyzing stage to build a vision. These last two phases of theorizing from experience are most important because it is the re-interpretation of experience that allows us to see ourselves, our past, our possible options, and our future in a new light. Re-interpretation and vision are key aspects to empowerment. On the other hand, the last stage is also one that could potentially lead to problems. As I will discuss shortly, attempts to abstract universal experience to use as a foundation or structure for theorizing resulted in the exclusion of at least the experiences of women of color and lesbians. Abstraction that relies on universals or the construction of closed systems is not most compatible with proceeding pragmatically.

Ideally, after the processes of consciousness raising had taken place, groups were to begin focusing on taking action. It was thought that the issues that arose out of consciousness raising sessions could provide direction for political action. Kathie Sarachild, one of the most prominent promoters of consciousness raising, believed that a situation needed to be studied before taking action, and

that consciousness raising sessions would provide the opportunity to create and analyze plans for political action.¹⁶

Radical feminists aspired for consciousness raising to produce thought and action in an integrated manner--for political organizing and theory building occurred simultaneously.¹⁷ Sarachild's suggestion was to "put all theories to the test of living practice and action."¹⁸ Radical feminists provided groundbreaking critiques of patriarchal institutions such as the family, church, military, education, normative heterosexuality, the media, mainstream medicine, and marriage, as well as analyses of rape, domestic violence, contraceptives, abortion, and sexuality. Many of these ideas were elaborated in practice: in terms of group process, the development of collectives, lifestyle changes, public actions, and the development of alternative institutions such as domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, feminists health clinics and women's resource and referral centers. And, in turn, born out of these practices and institutions were more analyses and critiques. "Finding a solution to a problem takes place through theory and action both. Each leads to the other but both are necessary or the problem is never really solved."¹⁹

The third and most important feature radical feminism shares with the notion of proceeding pragmatically is the

attempt to generate knowledge in a grassroots manner, involving as many women as possible in the activities that structured feminism. Radical feminism aspired for the women's movement to be a grassroots movement with mass participation²⁰ and consciousness raising was thought to be part of the strategy for organizing a mass based movement.²¹ Indeed, consciousness raising did become a wide-spread practice. As MacKinnon notes, CR groups were grassroots, "spring[ing] up spontaneously in the context of friendship networks, colleges and universities, women's centers, neighborhoods, churches, shared work or workplaces."²² The goal was to liberate and empower all women and to have as many women as possible participate and consciousness raising was a kind of recruitment strategy--a wake up call that served to get women motivated and involved.

Part of the effort to involve as many women as possible included seeing all women as being, at least in theory, as equally authoritative in the generation of knowledge. For Sarachild, consciousness raising was a way for women to decide what they wanted to be, that is, how they wanted to define themselves. Women were to do this for themselves collectively instead of relying on experts and authorities.²³ As the editors of Liberation Now! state in the introduction, by women's definitions, all women are

experts.²⁴ "By an equal sharing of knowledge and skills, we break down inequalities and destructive competition."²⁵

Women did not need a Ph.D. to participate in the production of knowledge. "From our consciousness raising meetings was coming the writing which was formulating basic theory for the women's liberation movement."²⁶ The production of knowledge occurred in many ways and on many different levels. Different collectives, centers, and CR groups put out pamphlets, manifestos, newspapers, newsletters and booklets. The operational assumption behind constructing feminist theory through consciousness raising was that, because experience was the building block for theory and politics, every woman was a potential contributor. The groups had no leader or authority figure. Women themselves were the experts, the authorities.²⁷ "It sought to create a small piece of the world in which [the] experience of women mattered, had authority, and was directly useful to other women."²⁸

In fact, non-authorized speaking for the group was met with much resentment.²⁹ Writers were often mistrusted because they were the only ones who could make a name for themselves by selling their ideas. Literature produced often bore the name of the collective, not the names of the authors. For example, the editors of the anthology, Liberation Now! Writings from the Women's Liberation

Movement, decided to omit their names from the cover of the book so as to not call special attention to any one woman.³⁰ The role of spokesperson was rotated. As Echols notes, the radicals of the 60's had "enormous interest in creating political processes that would maximize individual participation and equalize power."³¹

Finally, one of the most successful features of radical feminism is its attempt to educate, empower and politicize a vast number of women. A mass movement requires mass education and change of consciousness. Consciousness raising served to recruit, educate, and motivate women. Consciousness raising functioned to not only allow women to share experiences, but to give these experiences new meaning. By allowing women to understand how the process of sex-role socialization had shaped their lives and their dreams, women became aware of the effects of male domination. Women realized that their experiences were a result of a patriarchal system. Consciousness raising groups provided women the opportunity to come together, share their experiences, needs, desires, and dreams, and support and learn from one another.

The change in consciousness also functioned to empower and politicize women. At the very minimum, as Freeman notes, once women have gone through the resocialization associated with consciousness raising "their views of

themselves and the world are never the same again even if they stop participating actively in the movement."³²

Moreover, women who have undergone a transformation of consciousness are in a position to influence others. But generally, radical feminists saw the link between education and action as more direct. The educational characteristic of consciousness raising was understood as a motivating force for bringing women to political action. The idea was that coming together to understand their condition and the condition of all women would provide the necessary motivation and empowerment for political organizing and action. According to Sarachild, consciousness raising leads to an understanding that action is necessary. "With greater understanding, one discovers new necessity for action."³³

The role of feminist theory was clearly to be educational, visionary, motivating, or inspirational. Because the goal of radical feminist writing was to educate, liberate, and empower all women, writers took all women to be their audience.³⁴ Early radical feminist writings compiled in anthologies were usually short, written in plain language, easy to read and understand, and explicitly political. Women's presses and feminist collectives provided more women the opportunity to see their ideas in print. Great efforts were made to make written materials

affordable and accessible, and to distribute them as widely as possible.

What I have been trying to show is that when practiced well, consciousness raising serves as an example of a pragmatic approach to the production and evaluation of knowledge. It situates theorizing within the context of a social movement for change; it understands experience as playing a fundamental role in the formulation of inquiry; it tests and evaluates ideas and theories through practice; it facilitates participation of large numbers of ordinary women; and it educates women so that they may be empowered and motivated to participate in feminist social and political activity.

As a method for proceeding pragmatically, consciousness raising is not without problems. I will focus on two criticisms of consciousness raising that have arisen with respect to the way it practiced by radical feminists. The first problem, that consciousness raising does not necessarily lead to action, is a problem inherent in consciousness raising. The second problem, that some experiences articulated through consciousness raising were falsely universalized, is a problem associated with how it was practiced.

One of the frequent criticisms of consciousness raising is that despite its political purpose, some CR groups never

reached the level of political action. Many early radical feminists expressed frustration with what seemed to be the endless telling of personal experiences, at the expense of a more action focused course.³⁵ Radical feminists were clear that consciousness raising was not group therapy³⁶ but an attempt to find social causes for their experiences. This does not mean it did not have therapeutic effects. It gave women the opportunity to share painful experiences and realize that other women had similar experiences. It empowered women and helped build self esteem. Nonetheless, it seemed that for many CR groups, consciousness raising became an activity that resulted in more consciousness raising, not action.³⁷ Carol Williams Payne, in a 1971 essay, explains how her CR group failed to make the connection between personal insights and political structures, and that the members did not attempt to make changes beyond personal lifestyle changes.³⁸

Some radical feminists believed that consciousness raising would provide a comprehensive theory and strategy for the movement. According to Allen, out of the processes of consciousness raising, "will come a program grounded in a solid understanding of women's condition that will have its roots, but not its totality, in our own experience."³⁹ This plan was never successfully carried out. Perhaps it was too utopian or too ambitious to believe that through

consciousness raising groups occurring in women's living rooms across the nation, feminists could generate a comprehensive theory and plan of action based on the experiences of ordinary women. Though no comprehensive theory, political program, or large scale organization emerged, this "experiment" in the production of knowledge resulted in a great deal of fundamentally important feminist analyses and critiques.

Determining the success or failure of consciousness raising depends on the context in which it is being used. Its potential uses are limited with respect to both producing theory and motivating action. As a technique for producing theory, it is, taken by itself, inadequate and insufficient for providing theoretical frameworks in all cases. As I will discuss in the next chapter, some problems require more complex analyses and feminists may need to appropriate existing or develop new theoretical frameworks in order to give meaning to experience or solve problems. As a tool for motivating action, the motivating effect of consciousness raising should be understood as a potential, not a guarantee. Depending on how it is practiced, it may or may not provide direction for action. If political action is an explicit goal, as it may be for a group or organization, then it should be practiced in a manner that

emphasizes action. Developing or providing strategies for action should be integrated into the process.

The second criticism often leveled at radical feminism is that the attempt to theorize from experience resulted in the false universalization of the experiences of white, middle class women. As I will show, the problem of false universalization is not inherent in attempts to theorize from experiences shared in consciousness raising, but is due to the operating assumption which, at the time, structured the practice of consciousness raising: that there existed experiences which all women shared.

In an attempt to develop solidarity among women, to create a a sense of sisterhood, radical feminists emphasized commonalities among women. This emphasis took several forms. Some radical feminists believed that sex is the primary oppression.⁴⁰ Feminists who held this point of view were reacting to Marxist analyses that held that class was the fundamental oppression. They pointed out that male supremacy is historically prior to capitalism. Some went as far as to argue that it pre-dated and underlied all other forms oppressions. Other feminists understood radical feminism to mean that sexism was a fundamental oppression, in the sense that all women were oppressed, and this seemed to be a cross-cultural, transhistorical phenomenon. Since "radical" means going to the root of things, some radical

feminists understood their radicalism more generally, as an attempt to get at the root of sexism,⁴¹ or as an attempt to bring about radical change.⁴²

Regardless of how the commonality was conceived, the practice of consciousness raising was often guided by the assumption that by focusing on commonalities among women, universal aspects of women's experience could be revealed. These supposed universals were then to provide the foundations for theoretical frameworks. Since the goal was to realize similarities of experience, women were discouraged from discussing their differences, resulting in the neglect, and even concealing or silencing of differences in experience. Furthermore, since similarities in class, educational level, sexual orientation, and race often played a role in the exclusion or inclusion to groups, consciousness raising groups were often homogeneous, making the exploration of differences more difficult.

The emphasis on commonality at the expense of a careful analysis as to how race, class, and sexual differences played a role in women's lives resulted in theorizing and organizing that functioned to deny differences in experiences. In other words, the experiences of lesbians, women of color, and working class/poor women often did not fit into the frameworks that were constructed. It's not that white radical feminists didn't realize that race and

class differences played a role, but that little work was done to account for how these differences affected women differently.⁴³ Emphasis on women's commonalities, that women had more in common with all other women, regardless of ethnicity, race, class, sexuality or nationality, due to the fact that they were women, made invisible the power relations involved in women's differences.

If we understand knowledge as being produced by communities and serving those communities, knowledge produced by homogenous groups will serve, not a diversity of women, but the homogenous group. Though in comparison to contemporary academic discourse, the knowledge produced by radical feminists appears to be grassroots, it was not as diverse and pluralistic as it had hoped. Early radical feminists believed that without a mass political movement to liberate all women, individual liberation was not possible. For this reason, they emphasized commonality to promote solidarity for the goal of collective liberation. On the other hand, the failure to recognize and account for differences among women resulted in theory and practice that excluded and served to alienate many women. In retrospect we can say that for a mass-based feminist movement to be successful in the U.S., differences of class, race and sexual orientation needed to be integrated, not ignored, in the production of dominant feminist thought.

As I have said, though the use of experience arising from consciousness raising led to problems, these problems are not characteristics inherent in the process of consciousness raising. The process of consciousness raising is just as amenable to exploring the differences among women as it is to exploring the similarities.⁴⁴ Consciousness raising can be used in many ways. For example, consciousness raising groups with heterogeneous members can be constructed for the very purpose of exploring differences.

Theorizing from experience does not have to be problematic either. There are at least two ways to theorize from experience. One is to attempt to use "universal" experiences to build theoretical frameworks. This approach has proven to not be very pragmatic. Pragmatic approaches shy away from building systems and frameworks which rely on universals. In this case, the reason why is clear--because they serve to exclude and alienate women who do not share the "foundational" experiences.

A second way to theorize from experience is to start theorizing from questions that arise from experience. This approach is more pragmatic because it does not begin with assumptions about experience. By not relying on assumed universal experiences as a "foundation" or anchor, the process of analysis, interpretation and reinterpretation of

experience remains open. Theorizing can provide new understandings of experience, and as experience changes, new questions and new theorizing emerges. In this case, consciousness raising can be used as a method for both reinterpreting experience and giving form to new inquiries.

I have been attempting to show that early radical feminism provides some ideas for developing pragmatic approaches to knowledge production. Consciousness raising was an attempt to integrate theory and practice. It was an experiment in which political organizing and theory building were united--practicing and theorizing at the same time. Because political practice and action was to occur in conjunction with theory-building, the distinction between knower and doer dissolved. As a method for participation in both theory building and political organizing, consciousness raising was accessible to large numbers of women and was indeed successful in bringing feminism to the lives of many women.⁴⁵

As a method of theory building, consciousness raising undoubtedly provided feminists with the bulk of the substance of feminist theory from 1968-75.⁴⁶ The substance and ideas for theorizing did not come from academic discourses,⁴⁷ but from the very women involved in attempting to bring about change. The issues that emerged from consciousness raising--rape, incest, domestic violence,

illegal abortions--led to new and provocative analyses of women's situations and society. Moreover, I believe it is indisputable that radical feminists provided the groundwork for much of second wave feminist theory. For example, Jaggar says, "The work of all those theorists whom I have characterized as socialist feminist is clearly a development of radical feminist insights and show how great is the debt that socialist feminism owes to radical feminism."⁴⁸ And Echols notes that by 1975, liberal feminists had adopted much of the radical feminists ideas.

It seems that the days of radical feminism have come and gone. Many of the characteristics of early radical feminism can be understood as youthful stages in a movement that has now matured. Nonetheless, some of the ideals of early radical feminism which functioned to glue theory and practice are ideals that should be maintained, or rejuvenated, as the case may be. They are the very ideals that are inherent in the spirit of second wave feminism. Early radical feminists made serious attempts to develop an inclusive feminism that emerged from and addressed the problems that ordinary women faced. Extraordinary efforts were made to produce knowledge in a manner which afforded as many women as possible a voice. Radical feminism aspired to be a movement by and for women. The focus on action and education ensured that theorizing was closely linked to

politics of empowerment and social change. Radical feminism may not have been completely successful in carrying out these ideals and goals, but we are now in a position to learn from its successes and its mistakes.

One may charge early radical feminism with being utopian and visionary. The political project of radical feminists was to radically change the socio-political structures of the country. The leaderless, non-authoritative, non-hierarchical structure of CR groups reflected the ideals feminists pursued. They served as both the model and the process for a new society. The women who participated had the feeling that they were doing something important and powerful. In analyzing the movement, Echols wrote, "I suspect that what people find most incomprehensible, objectionable, or embarrassing about the 60's is its utopianism."⁴⁹ But, as Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech has shown, there is great power in working for a vision. Impetus for political activity comes from dreams and visions, not dry, academic theories. If we are interested in a feminism that is about how ordinary women live their lives, some of the features of early radical feminism merit reconsideration.

Notes

¹ Alison Jaggar & Paula Rothenberg Struhl, eds., Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of Relations Between Men and Women (New York: McGraw Hill, 1973), 186.

² This is not to say that contemporary radical feminists/lesbian feminists do not write about knowledge. Furthermore, to their credit, their discussion of knowledge are usually in the context of concrete social problems. See, for example, Marilyn Frye, Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983); and Sara Hoagland, Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value (Palo Alto: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1989).

³ For example, Hekman often takes Daly and Griffin as paradigmatic cases of radical feminism: Susan Hekman, Gender and Knowledge: Elements of Postmodern Feminism (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 40-2, 46, 137. As a result, she characterizes radical feminism as holding that women's nature is different from men's and as positing an essential link between women and the natural world by emphasizing women's reproductive capacities. This link woman has to nature through her reproductive capacity puts her in a position to resist male domination of the natural world (137). It is the project of radical feminists to valorize feminine irrationality (40-2, 48).

⁴ Though I agree with Echols analysis, I hesitate to use the term "cultural feminism" to describe later radical feminism for two reasons. First, "cultural feminists" identified as radical feminists, and second, the term "cultural feminists" was originally used by a critic of radical feminism in order to make the case that it was apolitical; Alice Echols, Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 7. The seeds for essentializing sexual difference and privileging the feminine were planted in the early days of radical feminism (Echols 160-166, 172), and reached full bloom in later stages of radical feminism. Though the shift from primarily a social construction analysis of gender to an essentialist analysis of gender is notable, it is not marked by a chasm. Nonetheless, the distinction that Echols makes between earlier and later forms of radical feminism is extremely useful.

⁵ Barbara Burris, "The Fourth World Manifesto," 355; Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone, "Editorial:

Notes From the Third Year," 300; "Congress to Unite Women: A Report From the New York November, 1969 Meeting," 315; Bonnie Kreps, "Radical Feminism 1," 239; all in Radical Feminism, ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine & Anita Rapone (New York: Quadrangle, 1973); also, Echols, 6, 9.

⁶ Echols, 5; Hester Eisenstein makes a very similar point about the shift in focus between early and later radical feminism in her book, Contemporary Feminist Thought (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1984).

⁷ Radical feminists were committed to radical social change, a total "revolution" of social structures. They didn't believe that this was possible through traditional liberal means, neither did they believe that women's liberation would necessarily occur as a result of a socialist revolution. In order to understand the breadth of radical feminism, it should be noted that many radical feminists did not reject the Marxist critique of capitalism. They didn't believe that women's liberation would necessarily occur as a result of a socialist revolution, but neither did they believe that capitalism was compatible with women's liberation. Generally, liberation for radical feminists did not mean equality within the liberal system. But this doesn't mean that some radical feminists didn't work within the existing system to make changes. See Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone, "Editorial: Notes From the Third Year," 301; also, the introduction to Liberation Now! Writings From the Women's Liberation Movement (New York: Dell Publishing, 1971), 4.

⁸ Robin Morgan, ed., introduction to Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings From the Women's Liberation Movement (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), xvii; Kathie Sarachild, "Consciousness Raising: A Radical Weapon," in Feminist Revolution, Redstockings (1975, reprint New York: Random House, 1978), 145.

⁹ The production of new ideas, new perspectives, new ideologies is noted by many feminists. See for example, Jo Freeman, Women: A Feminist Perspective (Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing, 1975), 454; Alison Jaggar, Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 83; Eisenstein, 37, 40.

¹⁰ Eisenstein, 37.

¹¹ Koedt, et al, introduction to Radical Feminism, viii.

¹² Echols, 15.

¹³ Koedt, et al, "Consciousness Raising," Radical Feminism, 272-278.

¹⁴ Catherine MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 83.

¹⁵ Freeman, 451.

¹⁶ Sarachild, 144.

¹⁷ Sarachild, 147; Morgan, xxiv.

¹⁸ Sarachild, 145.

¹⁹ Sarachild, 148.

²⁰ Echols, 186; Koedt, et al, 300; Pamela Allen, "Free Space," Radical Feminism, 271.

²¹ Sarachild, 145.

²² MacKinnon, 84.

²³ Sarchild, 145.

²⁴ Liberation Now!, 1.

²⁵ Liberation Now!, 4.

²⁶ Sarachild, 146.

²⁷ Eisenstein, 37; Sarachild, 148.

²⁸ Eisenstein, 41.

²⁹ Echols, 149, 151, 204-210.

³⁰ Preface to Liberation Now!.

³¹ Echols, 16.

³² Freeman, 452.

³³ Sarachild, 148.

³⁴ bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 6.

³⁵ Echols, 61, 143, 148.

³⁶ Allen, 278; Echols, 87; Eisenstein, 36.

³⁷ Echols, 148.

³⁸ Carol Williams Payne, "Consciousness Raising: A Dead End?" in Radical Feminism, 282-84.

³⁹ Allen, 278.

⁴⁰ For example, Eisenstein (xx), characterizes radical feminism this way. Also Robyn Roland & Renate Klein in the introduction of Part 4 of Reader in Feminist Knowledge, Sneja Gunew, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 305.

⁴¹ Carol Anne Douglas, Love and Politics: Radical Feminist and Lesbian Theories (San Francisco: Ism Press, 1990), 2; Sarachild, 144.

⁴² Kreps, 239.

⁴³ "Congress to Unite Women," 309.

⁴⁴ For example, I once was a member of a CR group focused on sexual identity. The identity of the participants ranged from lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, and confused. The purpose was to come to understand the different experiences and identities of members of the group. I know of other groups who have come together on the basis of different religions, and of different races and ethnicities for the purpose of coming to understand differences in experience. Members of these groups have reported that the process is difficult, but the result is increased awareness.

⁴⁵ Eisenstein, 35; Freeman, 452.

⁴⁶ Eisenstein, 37.

⁴⁷ Morgan, xviii; Sarachild, 145-146.

⁴⁸ Jaggar, 377.

⁴⁹ Echols, 18.

CHAPTER VI

TAKING THE ARMCHAIR TO THE STREETS

As a feminist
I came to philosophy
primarily as a doer
not as a thinker.
My interest in thought
is fueled by my passion for doing.
As a philosopher,
what I do is what I think,
not what I do is think.

Writing about pragmatism is difficult. My project has been somewhat ironic. The gap between theory and practice is not a problem that can be solved in theory, that is, writing a dissertation about it. "Death of the Armchair Activist" requires that we get out of our armchairs. I have had to be abstract and theoretical in order to say that we should focus first on practice, not abstraction and theory. In all honesty, writing a conclusion has been a formidable task. To stipulate in writing "what should be done" seems in conflict with everything I have been saying. I hesitate to offer suggestions for new techniques because new strategies are not things that can arise out of armchair theorizing. New strategies should arise out of concrete contexts. Their form will depend on the situation, geographical location, material conditions, general political climate, needs, interests, and values. What needs

to be done, in many ways, remains to be seen. It will be determined, in part, by attempting to do it. I suppose one can still ask, "What are we supposed to be attempting to do?"

I will address this question in two ways. In the first part of this chapter, I will discuss two knowledge projects which help us explore and understand the possibility of proceeding pragmatically. In the second part, I will discuss the role of the academic theorist in feminism as a social, political, and cultural movement. In addressing this question, I hope to show that proceeding pragmatically provides the opportunity for tying theory to practice by beginning in the context of social problems; for the production and evaluation of knowledge to arise from community needs, interests, values, and purposes; to educate women and to motivate and empower women to resist oppressive forces and take an active role in the socio-political practices that shape their lives. I say that proceeding pragmatically only presents the opportunity for these things to happen. In other words, it presents possibilities in the form of ideals. I am using "ideal" here as Dewey does. According to Dewey we should not understand ideals as independent of the possibilities of the material and physical, but as aims that are formed by an understanding of the situation.¹ The extent to which an ideal is met depends

on the success of those involved in a particular knowledge project in incorporating these features into the process.

Two Knowledge Projects

The first example I will discuss is a historical one which lends credence to the idea that the production and evaluation of knowledge can happen in non-academic settings and in a manner which involves the participation of many women. In the last chapter, I offered early radical feminism as an example of the production of knowledge arising from the participation of many ordinary women. Because national movements are not exactly events which occur overnight, I want to consider a smaller scale example. The knowledge produced by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective is one of the best examples of proceeding pragmatically that I could find.

Health collectives and organizations that developed out of the feminist health movement provide a good example of knowledge production that arose out of the experiences and problems of ordinary and diverse women. The women's health movement of the 70's, coinciding with the feminist movement, was a grassroots movement involving a diversity of women and dealing with some of the issues that most directly affected the lives of women: birth control, abortion, gynecological health, pregnancy, understanding sexuality, menopause, low

cost health care. As Claudia Dreifus put it in the introduction of Seizing Our Bodies, "It's a remarkable thing, this women's health movement: females of all ages, races, and classes, brought together by a unanimity of negative experience with the American health-care system. Radical, anarchic, sometimes leaderless, sometimes not, the women's health movement cannot be defined as one set thing."² By 1973 thousands of groups and projects associated with women's health had sprung up.³ The knowledge and activity of feminist health movement transformed the way women understood their bodies and health, and the way the medical establishment treated women.

Feminist health collectives and organizations were able to both produce knowledge and engage in social and political activity. "Experimental, activist, unorthodox, the women's health movement is also a constant source of printed material; it's as if organizers travel the country with a speculum in one hand and a typewriter in other Books. Pamphlets. Mimeosheets. They all proliferate."⁴ The feminist health movement created self-help groups which in some cities developed into feminist health centers. These centers have also contributed to production of feminist knowledge on health. For example, How to Stay Out of the Gynecologist's Office was put out by the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers and contains analyses and

critiques of the mainstream medical practices and knowledge, as well as how to understand those practices and knowledge when they must be relied upon. The knowledge produced arises directly out of the experiences of feminists involved in providing health care to women.

Because race and class radically affect the quality of health care a person receives, the knowledge produced did not (could not) focus exclusively on the concerns and needs of white, middle class women. In fact, much of the knowledge produced focused on low income women and women of color. For example, discussions of abortion, pre-natal care, and birth control were generally discussed in terms of affordability and availability.⁵ Racist practices of the medical industry, such as the prevalence of coerced tubal-ligation on Hispanic women in hospitals in Chicago and L.A., and the pharmaceutical industries, such as the testing of the birth control pill on uninformed women in Puerto Rico, were exposed.⁶

The process used by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective is a particularly good example of the production and evaluation of knowledge arising out of and meeting the needs and interests of a diversity of ordinary women. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective has put out several revised editions of the now classic book on women's health, Our Bodies, Ourselves. The title of the preface of the 1976

edition is "A Good Story,"⁷--an appropriate title for what is a good story about an alternative form of knowledge production and evaluation. What makes it such a good story is the continuing process which has given shape to the book.

To begin with, the collective began as a CR-type group which emerged out of a discussion groups which took place during a women's conference in 1969. Members of the group, experiencing similar feelings of anger and frustration about mainstream medicine, decided that they had much to learn about women's bodies. Members decided to research health topics and write papers to presents as a course. Members of the collective are self-described as ordinary women. Their coming together was not based on a shared profession, academic or otherwise, but a shared interest and concern for understanding women's health.

The second notable feature is how the information presented in the book was gathered and compiled. Initially, information from traditional sources--medical professionals, books, journals--was integrated with information provided by women in their courses. Each time the book was reprinted, a larger number of women had played a role in contributing information.

The preface of the 1984 edition begins:

In 1969, there was practically no women's health information easily available, and every fact we learned was a revelation. Our first publication of Our Bodies, Ourselves helped spark

many women to explore the health issues most important to them. Since then, women throughout this country and the world have generated such a wealth of information and resources--research papers, books, health groups and centers, newsletters and journals--that this time around we turned to them for help in rewriting the book.⁸

The 1984 edition illustrates the rich variety of sources from which the information comes. Critiques of the mainstream medical system, alternative forms of healing, excerpts and narratives about women's experiences are alongside detailed explanations of mainstream medical approaches and information. Portions of the book were developed with the help of women outside the collective. For example, the chapter on international issues grew out of correspondence and discussions with women in other countries. The chapter on growing older was written in conjunction with older women who felt strongly that there is life after menopause. The chapter on lesbianism was written by another collective. The process of writing the book has truly been a collaborative process.

The third notable feature is that the knowledge presented has been evaluated by ordinary women and has been revised according to their needs and interests. "The thousands of women who contact us in person, in letters and by phone have opened up whole new subjects and issues for revisions."⁹ Critiques of information, warnings about treatments, and requests for further information have played a fundamental role in the revisionings of the book.

Finally, the goals of the collective embody the values that I have assumed are inherent in the spirit of feminism. To name a few, "to let women's different voices and experiences speak on its pages; to reach as many women as possible with the tools which will enable them to take greater charge of their own health care and their lives, deal with the existing medical system and fight whenever possible for improvements and changes."¹⁰ From the very beginning, raising consciousness and educating women was one of the primary goals of the collective. The first activity of the collective was to teach courses on women's bodies. Royalties from the second edition were used to support health education work done by the group and in conjunction with other women's health groups. Members continue to give workshops and public lectures around the country, and maintain a health information center which makes information available to women.

What does all this have to do with feminist epistemologies--with theories of knowledge? One might argue that the information in Our Bodies, Ourselves is first order knowledge. It contains facts, data, and personal accounts. Feminist theories of knowledge are second order, i.e. knowledge about knowledge. Theorizing about knowledge involves evaluating the patterns, categories, and distinctions used to organize and present facts. Theories

of knowledge ask about the validity and legitimacy of the knowledge produced/gathered. Do our methods for producing/gathering knowledge provide us with legitimate conclusions?

The distinction between first and second order knowledge is a false distinction which should be used sparingly and judiciously by feminists. As a cousin of the theory/practice distinction, it serves to perpetuate masculinist hierarchical structures of thought which privilege abstraction over concreteness. Though the production and evaluation of knowledge contained in Our Bodies, Ourselves does not seem to be guided by any one theory of knowledge, the book began as and continues to be a critique and evaluation of mainstream medical knowledge, as well as an attempt to give structure to knowledge about women and health. Because each revision is based on the evaluation of the previous editions, as well as continuing to serve as a critique of mainstream, medical knowledge, each new edition embodies knowledge about knowledge without reference to a specific theoretical framework.

That the knowledge in Our Bodies, Ourselves has been produced and evaluated without reference to specific theories of knowledge provides us mixed results. It seems, on the one hand, that explicit use of theories of knowledge are not necessary for knowledge production and evaluation.

As this example has shown, knowledge can be produced and evaluated out of the concerns and experiences of large numbers of women. All this can be achieved without too much theorizing.

On the other hand, the knowledge in Our Bodies, Ourselves does seem to lack the type of comprehensive critique of mainstream medicine and suggestions for strategies that would empower women to resist and initiate change in an organized manner in a system that is sexist, racist, heterosexist, classist and exploitative down to the core. As is noted in the preface, "It is clear that the same forces which created the need for Our Bodies, Ourselves twelve years ago exist today as strong as ever. The medical system is a vast business, now tied more closely than ever to other business in this profit-oriented economy."¹¹ It seems that the book could do more by way of providing tools necessary for challenging and resisting the system in a manner that would lead to fundamental change.

What is important is that there is nothing in the process used that precludes the development of such critiques and strategies. In this case, it may be that the lack of comprehensive critique and suggestions for strategies is more a failure of focus than failure to use theories of knowledge. If the Boston Women's Health Book Collective were to develop and include such critiques and

strategies, it is very likely it would continue its eclectic style, relying on a variety of theories of knowledge.

In many respects, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective is an ideal example, an ideal exception to the rule. But there is much to be learned by such an example. One is that the hard work of a small group of women can give voice to the experiences, concerns, and interests of a large number of women. Second, the very act of doing so empowers, motivates, and enables large numbers of women to do the same. Third, one 645 page book can touch the lives of women every where. The book has been put into braille, translated into Spanish for Spanish speaking women in the U.S., and has been published in at least Japan, Italy, France, Holland, Sweden, Denmark, Greece, and Great Britain. The work of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective provides us with a concrete example of how proceeding pragmatically can affect the lives of many, ordinary women.

One of the most notable advantages of collectivist organizations is that they can be started anywhere and can involve many different kinds of women without restrictive regard to skill or special training. It is possible to have concerned community members, professionals, grassroot activists, established politicians, and academic feminists all working together. The possibility of a diverse group of women working collectively holds a great deal of promise for

producing knowledge that arises out of concrete socio-political problems and serves the needs and interests of diverse populations of women. The one thing that is necessary for participation in a collective is shared values and goals. Though it is true that homogeneity is more likely to ensure shared values, this does not necessarily mean that members must be homogenous. Factors such as geographical location and socio-political circumstance often determine which values and political ends diverse people share. A search for commonality in values and desired ends makes for more effective organizing strategies than simply shared identity, which does not always indicate shared goals. If diversity is a shared goal, the burden is on members of a collective to recruit diverse members.

Though the organizational structures of collectives can serve as models for developing alternative strategies and approaches that are conducive to getting theorists out of their armchairs, I hesitate to consider the Boston Women's Health Book Collective a paradigmatic case. Rather, it should be understood as one of many types of possibilities of proceeding pragmatically. The very nature, and historical and social context of a knowledge project will help give shape to the development of creative possibilities. The project of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective is in important ways shaped out of the

nature of collectives and the historical context from which it arose. The organizational structure of collectives, non-hierarchical management, consensus decision-making, and task sharing, embody the values and ideals of feminism. The knowledge project began in a historical moment marked by a virtual lack of information by and for women about their bodies and health, and a time in which active consciousness raising groups were a popular. Proceeding pragmatically reminds us that there is no one way that we can come to the understandings necessary for differing political programs for change. The nature of feminist political activity in the U.S. requires both that a variety of sources techniques for producing knowledge be available, as well as an openness to the development of new techniques.

The second example I want to consider is a contemporary one: the production and evaluation of safe sex discourses for lesbians. I have chosen this example because the knowledge produced seems inadequate and the production of more "convincing" knowledge seems necessary. What I will show is that taken on its own, no theory of knowledge seems adequate and in many ways the distinctions between the different theories do not make sense. Proceeding pragmatically gives meaning and shape to theories and helps mediate between conflicts that would otherwise provide fodder for lengthy academic, theoretical debates.

The black humor joke among some lesbian circles has been, "If AIDS is God's punishment, then lesbians are his chosen people." Lesbians continue to be characterized as one of the lowest risk groups for HIV transmission. This "low risk group" status has given shape to the myth that lesbians are practically immune to HIV. As a result, lesbians have not incorporated safe sex practices into their sexual activity. This has brought concern to health care professionals and sexperts, who coming in contact with lesbians with HIV perceive the lack of caution among lesbians as a potentially dangerous phenomenon.

Since about 1990, health care professionals and sexperts have been producing safe sex discourses for lesbians. These discourses take the form of presentations, workshops, discussions, and pamphlets. Lesbians have been slow, reluctant, and even resistant to adopting these practices. Despite these discourses, a great number of lesbians, for the most part, do not practice safe sex as suggested. The myth of lesbian immunity lives on. I believe there are several reasons for this.

First, there is no scientific, medical evidence which shows the ways female-to-female transmission occurs (may occur).¹² As Goldstein points out, information about HIV risk for lesbians is produced without substantial basis in medical research.¹³ Lesbians are still waiting for a body

of evidence that conclusively shows that female-to-female transmission can and does occur if one engages in particular sexual activities. That conclusive evidence does not exist does not mean that it cannot or does not happen, but without evidence, many lesbians remain unconvinced.¹⁴

This complete lack of research on female-to-female transmission is situated within the context of a health care system which does not seem to care about lesbian health in general. The mainstream medical system makes it perfectly clear to lesbians in a variety of ways that it does not care about lesbian health. Because the traditional medical establishment has systematically failed to understand and address lesbian health issues, mainstream medicine knows very little about lesbian health.¹⁵ There have been extraordinarily few large scale national research projects focusing on women's health, and practically none focusing on lesbian health.¹⁶ Furthermore, due to economic and social reasons, lesbians are among the groups that have low access to medical services. Not only are lesbians less likely to have insurance, but the homophobic and heterosexist responses and attitudes of the medical system decrease the frequency and quality of health care services received by lesbians.¹⁷ Not only is the health care system ill equipped to provide lesbians with the information and services they need, it is a system lesbians do not trust.

Secondly, there has been a conflation of sexual identity and behavior by medical researchers and health care workers when discussing risk.¹⁸ Centers for Disease Control (CDC) which compile national surveillance data on persons infected with HIV, do not include female-to-female transmission as a risk exposure category in case reporting or data collection.¹⁹ Not only has this made it practically impossible to ascertain the risk of female-to-female transmission, but it has perpetuated the myth that lesbians are immune to HIV.

In an effort to combat the myth that lesbians are immune to HIV, lesbian health activists have responded by reporting that there are many lesbians who have HIV. This "lesbians are not immune; x number of lesbians have HIV/AIDS" response has only functioned to further conflate behavior and identity, contributing to the skeptical reaction of lesbians to safe sex information. Lesbians want to know how lesbians with HIV contracted the virus. In almost all cases, heterosexual sex, IV drug use, or a blood transfusion is a possible cause. Lesbians already know that engaging in these practices puts one at risk.²⁰ Because they are interested in knowing about the risk involved in lesbian sexual activity, many lesbians find the "lesbians can and do get HIV/AIDS" approach misleading. This only serves to

create further skepticism and mistrust in safe sex discourses.

Third, most of the information about safe sex discourses does not address the specific sexual practices of lesbians. Safe sex discourses focus on same-sex male sex, or heterosexual sex. The few safe sex pamphlets that include lesbian sex usually refer to only two specific sexual practices: the use of sex toys, and oral sex, as if these are the only two sexual practices in which lesbians engage. Lesbian sex is much more complex than these pamphlets suggest. For example, unlike semen, vaginal fluid is not present at a discreet period or even at a discreet location. Lack of details leave lesbians with many specific, unanswered questions. Furthermore, these discourses completely ignore the fact that latex barriers decrease/make difficult the possibility of orgasm. Because most health care professionals are not familiar with the full range of sexual activities generally accepted as standard by lesbians, they are unable to discuss safe sex with lesbians in a manner that lesbians find applicable to their lives. This is compounded by the fact that lesbians seem reluctant to talk about their sexual practices with health care professionals whom they perceive as homophobic.²¹ The bottom line is that a detailed understanding of lesbian sexual practices is necessary for producing safe sex

discourses that lesbians feel are applicable to their sexual practices.²²

The fourth factor involved in creating an atmosphere of skepticism is that transmission of HIV among lesbians is not within the realm of lesbian experience. As Patton points out, "Very few lesbians know another lesbian who is HIV positive and even fewer have the experience of knowing someone who had contracted HIV from their female lover."²³ The reality of this experience cannot be underestimated. For lesbians who are not in contact with lesbian IV drug users, lesbians who test positive for HIV are not part of their reality. Unlike gay men who regularly witness male friends and acquaintances testing positive and dying from same-sex sexual transmission, it is rare for lesbians to know a woman who contracted HIV from same-sex sexual transmission.

Given the state of knowledge about female-to-female transmission, and the fact that many lesbians do not practice safe sex, how do we go about "using" feminist theories of knowledge for evaluating the existing knowledge and producing new knowledge? Much of the existing literature on female-to-female transmission takes the form of evaluation of existing knowledge. With the exception of Patricia Stevens who refers to feminist empiricist methods in reporting the results of the Lyon-Martin Project²⁴ (discussed later in this chapter), the analyses that are

available are not written by self-identified feminist empiricists, standpoint theorists, or postmodernists, nor self-consciously depend on these theories. Nonetheless, the critiques of existing knowledge are insightful and include elements of each of these theories.

The bulk of evaluation of existing knowledge on female-to-female transmission falls within the realm of feminist empiricism. This is understandable since the issue is socio-culturally defined as a scientific medical issue. Critiques point out that discourses on HIV are riddled with sexist and heterosexist bias. The main criticism has been that existing categories and methodologies have excluded women, and even more dramatically, have excluded lesbians. Sexist bias of scientific medical research is well documented. Feminists have long recognized young, white males as the normative subject of scientific medical research and have pointed out the false universalization of findings associated with this normative subject. With respect to AIDS research, women are severely under-represented, thereby perpetuating underlying androcentric bias.

Many writers criticize the methodology of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Certain aspects of these critiques seem to fall within the framework of feminist empiricism. According to Goldstein, the CDC's AIDS case-reporting "bars lesbian/bisexual women entirely from its

risk categories, employs hierarchical and mutually-exclusive categories... and makes no distinction between sexual orientation, behavior, and identity."²⁵ The CDC has used four categories for classifying exposure for women: 1) IV drug use, 2) recipient of blood products, 3) heterosexual contact with HIV-infected or potentially infected partner, 4) no identified risk. If a woman has more than one possible exposure, she will be categorized by the highest risk only."²⁶ Female-to-female transmission is not classified as a possible exposure category. This categorization has made it impossible to ascertain the prevalence of female-to-female risk of transmission. Due to the lack of documentation, it is impossible to ascertain how many women contracted HIV from sexual activity with other women.

In general, the evaluation and production of knowledge has suffered because lesbians have not been enabled to play a central role in defining what it is they need to know and in what form they would find that knowledge convincing. In an interview Cindy Patton says, "the first lesbian debates on AIDS often circulated around strangely esoteric questions about scientific data." As an example, she recounts a question asking whether a study had been done on getting vaginal fluid on warts on hands when inserting fingers in the vagina.²⁷ What strikes me as strange is that Patton

finds this to be an esoteric question, rather than a legitimate question. In the very same interview, Patton complains that lesbians seem reluctant to discuss their sexual practices. Most analyses reveal that lesbians do have specific, detailed questions about possible transmission. Because they lack specific, scientific information, the general response from health care professionals and sexperts usually seem to be akin to "wrap yourself in latex." That safe sex discourses lack details about lesbian sex and that lesbians continue to find these discourses unconvincing reveals that lesbians as a group have not played a central role in defining safe sex and evaluating and producing knowledge about lesbian transmission. As I have pointed out, discourses about safe sex practices require detailed understanding of lesbian sexuality. Moreover, without scientific medical data, lesbians will continue asking questions that experts find "esoteric" because they cannot answer them. Empirical research then depends on these discourses on sexuality, which if they are to be useful, need to be produced from the standpoint of lesbians.

There is at least one study which has attempted to do this and it serves as a powerful example of proceeding pragmatically. Lyon-Martin Women's Health Services, a well established and trusted health care organization which

provides services to lesbians, funded a community intervention project which attempted to both gather information and offer HIV prevention education to lesbians and bisexuals in San Francisco. The goal of the project was to "abolish the rampant and destructive myth that lesbians and bisexual women are not at risk for HIV and thus save lives of women in these communities."²⁸ What is most notable about this project is that it attempted to educate lesbian and bisexual women during the process of collecting data. The knowledge gathered is to be used for further research and more effective community education.

The project relied on peer-based, face-to-face, open-ended, informal interviews which took place at community sites (women's bars, dance clubs, and sex clubs) where sexually active lesbian and bisexual women congregate. Researchers acknowledged that peer interviews were well suited for collecting information, distributing knowledge, and prompting behavior change. What the restrictive empiricist-type language of the report falls short of saying is that the knowledge project was initiated, developed, and carried out by bisexual women and lesbians. The explicit purpose for collecting the knowledge was to educate bisexual women and lesbians. By understanding the behaviors, experiences, knowledge, and strategies for prevention of HIV in lesbians and bisexual women, researchers could better

determine what the population needs to know and how to present the information in order to reach diverse groups within the population.

Many of the available analyses point out that there are methodological problems associated with data collection in lesbian communities. According to Vallerie Wagner, co-chair of the Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum, it makes a difference who is going into lesbian communities of color and asking questions. What questions they are asking and what they are looking for also makes a difference in evaluating the accuracy of statistics.²⁹ The same is also true of white lesbian communities. Lesbians in general are distrustful of the medical establishment, especially men from the medical establishment. This distrust makes it less likely that lesbians will disclose the necessary information to make accurate assessments.³⁰

The issue of the social identity of the knower could be understood as falling within the realm of either feminist empiricism or feminist standpoint theory. Feminist empiricists have recognized that the social situatedness and identity of the knower plays a fundamental role in affecting what is known, and acknowledge that in undertaking empirical research about HIV transmission in lesbians, it is a factor to which they must attend. Though none of the literature on lesbian safe sex or female-to-female transmission has been

written by a self-identified standpoint theorist, this problem could also be understood within the framework of standpoint theory. According to standpoint theory, the social identity of the knower needs to be taken into account.

Though the nature of the Lyon-Martin study most appropriately can be characterized as falling within the framework of feminist empiricism, its approach is difficult to distinguish from standpoint theory. In this study the activity, perspectives, and experiences of lesbians and bisexual women are understood as central for providing a framework for the knowledge produced. Distinctions between feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory make very little sense with respect to how knowledge on female-to-female transmission is being evaluated and produced.

Three arguments might be made in an attempt to distinguish empiricism from standpoint in this case. One is that, as a theory, feminist standpoint epistemology serves as a critique of dominant constructions of HIV transmission knowledge. The knowledge produced by the standpoint of lesbians reveals the partial and distorted nature of dominant knowledge. At the risk of sounding pedestrian, do we need a theory to tell us this? Every single analysis I have read includes a commentary on the inadequacy of the dominant knowledge. From the perspective of lesbians, that

mainstream medicine is sorely inadequate and partial is a simple observation.

The second possible argument is that standpoint theory poses a greater challenge to masculinist empirical frameworks and norms. Feminist standpoint does more than reveal that the existing knowledge is partial and incomplete. It calls into question the assumptions that underlie empiricism: value neutrality, objectivity, and dispassionate and disinterested knowledge seeking. By understanding the knower and knowledge claims as socially located, standpoint epistemology displaces the myth of the dispassionate, neutral, objective knower.

The unorthodox methodology (as compared to traditional empiricism) of the Lyons-Martin Project does serve to challenge the norms of empiricism. Not only is the selection of inquiry and identity of the knowers consciously socially and culturally located, the researchers did not purport to be disinterested. The researchers did not simply gather information. They engaged in an exchange of information. Part of the purpose of the project was to provide safe sex information, education, awareness and materials to the participants of the study. In other words, they had an interest in the safe sex practices of the participants. What is particularly insightful about this is that the researchers' interest in changing behavior does not

necessarily have to have an effect on the knowledge gathered. That the second part of the interview involved an educational component, does not seem to affect the knowledge gathering in the first part. Furthermore, by engaging in an exchange of information, the empiric distinction between knower and known was also challenged. By including an educational component, the "object" of study was treated as a subject, a knower. Though these characteristics of the study differ from the challenges standpoint epistemology poses to empiricism, they nonetheless serve to challenge the norms of empiricism in fundamental ways.

The third possible argument is that as a theory, standpoint epistemology legitimates the knowledge produced by the standpoint of lesbians. Obviously, this legitimation is not necessary for the very people who constitute the standpoint, in this case lesbians. This legitimation is necessary to convince members of the dominant group that the knowledge produced from the standpoint of the marginalized is legitimate. In other words, feminist epistemology provides a theory which makes legitimate the claim that the knowledge of mainstream medicine is partial and inadequate for women and lesbians. Again, I want to ask, is a theory necessary for this persuasion to take place? I ask this not as a rhetorical question, but an open question. I do not want to preclude the possibility of circumstances in which a

theory is necessary. On the other hand, in many cases a presentation of the standpoint perspective itself, if the audience is open to being persuaded, will be sufficiently convincing. In other words, a theory is not necessary to persuade members of dominant groups that research on female-to-female transmission does not exist, and that this exclusion is an extension of mainstream medicine's failure to adequately meet the needs of women in general. Members of dominant groups are in a position of privilege from which they may or may not choose to take the perspective of marginalized groups under consideration. There is no reason to believe that a theory will make the knowledge claims of the marginalized more legitimate than 20, 40, or 1000 reports from the marginalized, all claiming that the dominant perspective is partial, incomplete, distorted, or less true.

That the social identity and location of the knower plays an important role in knowing is also a characteristic of postmodernist thinking. Empiricist-type analyses on lesbians and HIV transmission share at least another feature which some might characterize as postmodernist: a focus on the social construction of identity. Empiricist critiques point out that there has been confusion between lesbian identity and same-sex sexual activity in determining risk. This has led to the construction of lesbians as a no-risk or

low-risk group. The confusion is prevalent among both health care professionals and lesbians.

The CDC's practice of risk group categorization has led people to focus on identity instead of behaviors. The CDC constructs hierarchical, single factor categories, making it impossible to construct an HIV-infected person with a complex or multiple identity. Furthermore, because female-to-female transmission is not included in the CDC's risk categories, female-to-female transmission falls under the "no identified risk" category.³¹ This has led lesbians to believe they are a no-risk or low-risk group. "If the CDC tracked the exposure risks of HIV-infected people using more behaviorally focused, inclusive, and non-hierarchical methods, their findings might dispel the myth of 'coherent' or 'low risk' social or sexual identity forever."³²

Lesbians themselves also confuse identity with behavior. Some lesbians, assuming themselves to be in a no-risk group, believe they are immune to HIV regardless of the behaviors in which they engage.³³ Some make judgements about risk according to gender or sexual orientation, believing that sex with women is safe, sex with men is not, or that sex with lesbians is safe, and sex with bisexual women is not.³⁴ Some IV drug users believe they are safe if they share needles only with lesbians.³⁵

Sexual identity is not a reliable factor for ascertaining risk. Self identification with respect to sexual orientation depends on a number of factors, including ethnicity, class and race. Women who engage in sexual activity with other women may not identify themselves as lesbians. Reliance on self-identification as a lesbian serves to exclude women who engage in same sex activity, but identify as heterosexual, or choose to not identify in terms of their sexual orientation or practices. In addition, women who identify as lesbians may have sex with men.³⁶ Sexual identity does not reveal how lesbians are getting HIV. Many lesbians contract HIV through prostitution, IV drug use, or heterosexual sex. HIV transmission has the potential to occur during high risk same-sex sexual activity with any infected partner.

The Lyon-Martin project also involved the deconstruction of experience. The experiences and perspectives of the lesbians and bisexual women were handled in two ways. Some were understood as providing groundwork for further research on lesbians HIV, and some were deconstructed in order to dispel the myth that lesbians are a no-risk or low-risk group. In the report, the common assumption that women who have sex with other women cannot get HIV was termed the "cultural construction of immunity."³⁷ Experiences of safety associated with monogamy, feelings of love, intimacy or

trust³⁸ were not taken as uncritical pieces of raw data, but were understood as constructed by a social myth, perpetuated in part by CDC's failure to include female-to-female transmission category, and mainstream medicine's failure to do research on female-to-female transmission.

These critiques are in accord with postmodern critiques of hierarchical constructions and postmodernist critiques of identity which focus on the socially constructed nature of sexual identity. It has been the task of postmodernists to reveal the construction of identity and experience and to challenge false universalism. Postmodernists have been very critical of empiricism. Strangely enough, the deconstruction of identity is being discussed within the framework of doing better empirical research. Once again, I want to examine the role of theory. In this case, the deconstruction of identity and experience did not require the explicit use of a postmodernist theory full of jargonistic language and references to Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, or Butler. What this shows is that when theorizing remains close to practical problems, there is less need for specialized language to make sense of the situation. Furthermore, the deconstruction of identity and experiences did not occur without an important, practical, in fact, lifesaving reason, and was limited to the

deconstruction of the (false) no-risk/low-risk group identity.

As I have made clear several times, I am not taking an anti-theory position. There exist situations in which theory is helpful. As an off-the-cuff example, theories about the male gaze and the male spectator are very useful for explaining and understanding the power relations associated with contemporary TV, movies, mainstream pornography, and male produced visual art.

The point I am making is that whether we need theories, which theories we decide to use, and how we decide to use them is fundamentally context dependent. It is difficult to determine which theory will provide the knowledge necessary to accomplish feminist goals, whether they be educating lesbians or attaining research funds, outside of a particular context. Furthermore, pragmatic use of these theories requires that we be free to use different pieces and characteristics in different combinations.

Academic arguments about which theory is better make less sense when applied to concrete cases. For example, empiricism and science have been heavily criticized by feminists, and as I discussed in chapter III, many feminists criticize feminist empiricism for failing to challenge the fundamental framework of science. Harding for example, says, "So while everyone thinks empirical research is

is important for finding out how nature and social life are organized, one can nevertheless criticize empiricism (and feminist empiricism) as a theory about how to do research and to justify its results."³⁹ She goes on to list the virtues of feminist empiricism, but calls these virtues "conservative".

I believe such criticism is misleading when it is applied to a particular case such as the one under consideration. To begin with, feminist empirical critiques of existing HIV transmission knowledge share characteristics of standpoint theory and postmodernism. As I have shown, even as a theory of knowledge, it is capable of challenging traditional empiricist assumptions about neutrality and subject/object distinctions. It is difficult to understand feminist empiricism as conservative in this case.

Secondly, because empirical scientific medical research is so critical in convincing lesbians they should practice some form of safer sex, it is difficult to understand criticisms which claim that "it is not the most satisfactory one to use in understanding feminist research."⁴⁰ How are we to understand which theory is most satisfactory for understanding feminist research? Obviously, one that both challenges established masculinist structures of thought and fulfills practical goals is better than one that only accomplishes one or the other. But how are we to weigh

these two criteria in a theory that accomplishes both? It is difficult to make this determination outside the context of a particular problem. Lesbians want accurate medical statistics and scientific research so they can make informed decisions about safe sex practices.⁴¹ As it is, discourses about safe sex practices are not grounded on solid scientific evidence. Lesbians are interested in knowing about documented cases of female-to-female transmission, and exactly which sexual practices led to the transmission. This fact plays a fundamental role in determining whether feminist empiricism is the most satisfactory theory to use in the evaluation and production of knowledge. This does not mean that there may not be cases in which the values and goals of those who want to know may make feminist empiricism not the most satisfactory theory.

One of the benefits of proceeding pragmatically is that it leaves feminists free to choose the theory, theories or parts of theories they determine as useful for a particular knowledge project. In this case, while empirical research is necessary for providing specific information about transmission, it is not on its own sufficient for producing comprehensive understandings of safe sex practices. Standpoint theory and postmodernism have potentially important contributions to make.

With respect to the evaluation and production of knowledge, there is no single theory of knowledge that is adequate for dealing with all aspects of this issue. Each theory of knowledge can potentially make important contributions. Furthermore, it is difficult to distinguish between feminist empiricism, standpoint and postmodernism because practical evaluations and production of knowledge are not always easily framed by these categories. There is no reason to believe that fancy theories better equip us to solve the problems that women face. Fine tuning theories through academic debate does not necessarily make them more user friendly. Putting them to work reveals their validity.

Role of the Academic Theorist⁴²

I have taken as my audience academic feminist theorists. This dissertation is an appeal to academic theorists to evaluate their role in feminism, and for some, to consider doing theory differently. Emphasizing activity and practice forces us to ask questions about the role of the theorist. Should academic feminist theorists give up theorizing altogether and take to the streets? What are the theory types to do?

Whether we like it or not, academia is a bureaucratic, masculinist, racist, classist institution that is embedded in the power structures of capitalism. It perpetuates the

features of bureaucratic capitalist organization: hierarchy over collectivity, individualism and self-interest over community. Unlike members of feminist organizations, academic feminists find themselves in a system whose goal is not explicitly political, let alone devoted to ameliorating the conditions of American women. As far as academia is part of a larger capitalist, masculinist, racist, classist, and heterosexist network of structures, this potentially puts academic feminists in a position that leads to problematic power relations. Using patriarchal organizations to promote change is often criticized for not challenging the structure of the institution. The system already benefits members in some ways, but members want to ensure that they are benefitted as much as male counterparts. Academic feminists have made many courageous and creative attempts, especially within women's studies, to resist replicating the hierarchical power structures of academia. On the other hand, because the authority of academic feminists is often questioned, they need to adhere to the established structure in order to be authoritative within their discipline, limiting the possibility and extent of success.

To suggest that academic feminist theorists stop theorizing is an unreasonable position. To begin with, to finally have feminists within the ranks of academia puts

feminist in positions in which feminist change, on many levels, can be brought about in large-scale ways. Secondly, it has been my position throughout this dissertation that feminism cannot do without theorizing. What I have been saying is that some forms of theorizing, especially hypertheoretical, academic theorizing, risk replicating oppressive power relations. To suggest that feminists abandon their computer keyboards for a hand-painted protest sign is something very few people would take seriously.

While I believe theorists are necessary, and I am not suggesting that if we all spend all of our time rallying, protesting, lobbying and politicking we would be much better off, I do believe that feminist theorists ought to understand certain responsibilities as part of their role. It is the responsibility of feminist theorists to help shape the contexts in which feminist knowledge is developed. This means, first, that it is the burden of feminist theorists to make clear in what ways their theorizing is useful to feminist practice. To assume that it is the task of others, either activists or other academics, to figure that part out, to decode and decipher--"I'll come up with the insights, you figure out how to put them at work,"--only perpetuates the historical privilege associated with theorizing as the noble activity. Secondly, I believe it is the responsibility of academic theorists to present their

work in a form that will make it accessible to as many people who will be affected by it as possible. There are reasonable limits to this responsibility. These limits can only be understood with respect to particular issues and projects. For example, it is more important that theories evaluating medical knowledge be understandable to more people than theories evaluating quantum physics. Finally, if academic feminist theorists are committed to an inclusive feminism in practice, they should make every attempt to maximize and facilitate "mass" and grassroots participation in knowledge projects.

In what follows, in an attempt to understand how these responsibilities may be fulfilled, I will discuss the role of theorist as an activist and an educator. I consider the ideas presented and the suggestions I make to be among the many possibilities for proceeding pragmatically.

As I have said, academic feminist theorists need to explore ways of producing feminist theory that are directly linked to specific, concrete, social and political problems. The most obvious way of ensuring that theory is linked to practice is to have theorists be familiar with activism, whether it be advocating for policy changes within a large corporation, or radical actions taken by the guerrilla girls or the lesbian avengers. Becoming involved in the non-academic activities which structure feminism allows academic

feminist theorists to participate in activities they might not have the opportunity to experience in academic settings --activities which may provide insight and grounding for theorizing. Actually taking part in practical aspects of a project provides the best opportunity for constructing pragmatic theories. Theorists come to understand, first hand, what problems are facing women today and in what ways these problems might be best addressed. Being involved provides understandings of problems in all their practical complexities. It also provides a sense of which types of solutions or directions are most likely to be workable. Participation also puts theorists in contact with a number of people who share concern for particular issues. Interactions, relationships, discussions, and meetings can provide differing perspectives or validation of perceptions.

How theorists are involved in feminist activities can and does vary widely. Volunteering to answer phones for three hours a week at a domestic violence shelter can be understood as participation. Even such minimal activity puts one in touch with the day-to day nitty-gritty realities of working for feminist change. The Lyon-Martin Project on educating lesbians about safe sex is an example of more complex participation. The attempt to change the practices of community members provided researchers with information

and insight about the needs, practices, and experiences of lesbians and bisexual women.

Hands-on participation puts academic theorists in the best position to enable and facilitate participation by ordinary women. Even three hours a week at the domestic violence shelter puts one at once in touch with social service workers and women who are affected by a persistent social problem. These people can be called upon to recruit, motivate, and survey others.

I do not want to give the impression that every knowledge project, regardless of its nature, requires participation of the masses, or that feminist theorists should spend hoards of time attempting to organize large scale recruitment strategies for every project undertaken. Academic feminist theorists find themselves in a position in which they must constantly juggle personal career advancement, which is necessary to maintain academic positions, with socio-political goals and ideals. Time spent participating in non-academic activities is time away from the academic activities which lead to personal career advancement.

But this does not necessarily have to be the case. To be realistic, participation in activities must be negotiated and balanced with activities which are necessary for maintaining an academic position. Participation in non-

academic activities and organizations may offer special opportunities for academic feminists to develop, when necessary, specialized discourses that arise out of community concerns and are tailored to meet particular ends. By producing specialized discourses that are directed by the needs and purposes of organizations or communities, the authority of the theorist is decentered. Because ordinary people do not understand specialized discourses, they must have faith that these discourses serve their interests. If the need and purpose of specialized discourses be directed and understood by the communities involved in the political projects that the discourse is to serve, the leap of faith can be minimized. This is especially true of discourses that function to establish criteria for the evaluation of knowledge. Evaluatory criteria are of concern to those who are to make use of the knowledge and those whom the knowledge affects. On the other hand, since the authority of the academic is recognized socially outside the organization, the organization may choose to make strategic use of this fact to meet particular goals. The benefit of proceeding pragmatically is that the role of the theorist is not set in stone. It can change according to the needs and purposes of a certain situation. By serving the needs of an organization, the theorist and the theory produced become located in a larger, concrete project in which theory is

only a component and not the central guiding force. Producing specialized discourses for the purposes of an organization or a community can be a way of balancing the requirements of maintaining an academic position and political goals.

In addition to becoming involved in non-academic feminist activity, feminist theorists are in an excellent position to strengthen the link between theory and practice through education. Though academia seems like the obvious arena for this to take place, education need not be restricted to the academic system. In fact, feminist change in a patriarchal, racist, heterosexist society requires that education be part of the lives of ordinary women.

As it stands, the link between women's studies and feminism as a movement is not always clear. This is revealed by a large scale study examining the link between women's studies and the women's movement in Canada conducted by The Canadian Women's Studies Project. Researchers surveyed and interviewed professors who taught feminist and women's studies classes in Canadian universities. They concluded that the respondents generally felt that the relationship between the women's movement and women's studies is unclear, uneasy, and strained, but that it is crucial that one be maintained. "What is remarkable is the feeling that comes through that if academic feminists are

not involved in politics, they should be, which expresses itself in the need to excuse oneself if one does not engage in political action beyond the university."⁴³ It is interesting that the relationship was examined from the perspective of academics, not activists; nonetheless, it seemed that the professors were honest about the relationship between the two. Many professors expressed regret and guilt for the low level of involvement in feminist activism.

As I have already discussed, participating in non-academic feminist activity is one way to forge a link between theory and practice. But I believe it is also important to ascertain the ways that feminist activity within the academic system can contribute to large scale feminist change. Feminist activity associated with academic positions such as teaching, curriculum development, policy changes, and recruitment and retention of older than average women students should all be properly considered feminist practices (which differ in significant ways from theory production, as I point out in chapter II). Because the academic system is masculinist and androcentric, it is structured to facilitate the advancement of men, particularly white, middle/upper class men. Because higher education is crucial to the advancement of marginalized groups, feminist activity which facilitates, encourages, and

supports the education of oppressed groups is an invaluable component of the feminist movement.

This said, I believe it is important to recognize that only about 20 percent of the population completes three years of college. To restrict educational activity to the academic system is to miss a large portion of the population of women. Feminist theorists can play important roles in contributing to the education of women both in and through organizations and communities. The Lyon-Martin Project, for example, can serve as one possible model for producing knowledge and educating at the same time. In addition to making fifteen scheduled (and often advertised) safe sex presentations at the bars and clubs in which they held interviews, interviewers provided each participant with safe sex information.

With respect to working within an organization or community, feminist theorists may provide understandings of historical background, existing research, and theories about an issue. They can participate in the development of methodologies, help carry out procedures, and train non-academic women to take part in projects. Furthermore, academic theorists are familiar with the economic and political realities of knowledge production. They may know how to secure grant funds or have established relationships with journal editors or presses. They can serve as

important resources for undertaking knowledge projects at all levels.

Most importantly, as members of organizations or communities, feminist theorists are in a unique position to facilitate participation in knowledge projects by raising consciousness and motivating ordinary people. Having an inclusive feminism means that the issues most pertinent to the survival and well being of diverse populations of women are being addressed. Theorists must always ask themselves what ideas and theories would encourage and motivate people to participate in processes to change the status quo. By participating in community outreach and education, feminist theorists have the opportunity to raise consciousness and motivate people to participate in the structuring, defining and evaluation of knowledge. Workshops, presentations, public talks and events, and performances motivate people to learn more and to become involved. For example, researchers from the Lyon-Martin project used the safe sex presentations to motivate people to participate in the study. As I said in chapter IV, education provides people the means to better understand the problems they face and empowers them to participate in feminist activities in an informed, intelligent manner.

Finally, I want to address an issue that I consider to be of central importance: the problem of language. I have

been operating under the assumption that an inclusive feminism requires that diverse populations of women be empowered to structure the production and evaluation of knowledge that is to affect them. Furthermore, if feminism is to touch the lives of people, provide them the opportunity to redefine themselves and their experiences, empower them to resist oppressive power relations, it must speak to them in ways that inspire and motivate them to take action. For this reason, I argue that feminist theory, as much as possible, be written by and for diverse populations of ordinary, everyday people.

In an essay reflecting on the relationship between academic feminism and feminist activism, Lorraine Greaves, an activist and a faculty member at a community college says:

I often feel a great distance from 'academic feminism'.... Part of this distance stems from the inaccessibility of the work of academic feminists. By this I mean not just whether or not the words get out, but what kind of words they are. Are they big words, and if so, why? Are they words that are working on many presumptions of prior knowledge, and, if so, are those presumptions explained? Are the words set up in ways that invite only argument, imply answers, or draw limits to women's involvement? Or, are the words set up in ways that encourage spiralling discussion and what I call the 'freeing of speech' among women?

Further, are the words representing ideas that are relevant to activist feminists, and are those words placed where activists will ever read them? Do these words ever turn into multiple forms of communications such as video, or audio tape, theatre, music, dance, Braille, film, or pamphlet

that are accessible to more women, whatever their language or location? And finally, do the ideas that academic feminists develop have their roots in the movement?⁴⁴

Greaves urges academic feminists to proceed in a manner that will include the participation of all women in the development of feminist theory. This entails working with activists. According to Greaves, the failure to do this renders academic feminism irrelevant and incomplete.⁴⁵

As Seigfried puts it, because pragmatists worked toward democratic inclusiveness, they "fought the development of a specialized disciplinary jargon inaccessible except to a specialist elite."⁴⁶ Academic feminist theorists are skilled at coming up with clever justifications for jargonistic, overly abstract, difficult, and complex theorizing, such as, for example, arguing that theorizing is a form of practice. Another justification has been that "high" theory is necessary to respond to the complexities of existing theoretical perspectives. It would not be pragmatic to preclude the possibility of such cases. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that responding to existing hypertheories only serves to reinscribe the original hypertheory and perpetuates the continued production of hypertheory. It is important in such cases to ask how feminist energy, given the problems women face, is best spent. Academic feminist theorists are in a position of power and privilege to choose how they will spend their

energy, how they will go about "doing theory," and what kind of theory they will produce. Mandates against such choice will accomplish very little. The only recourse is to appeal to academic feminist theorists' sense of political commitment, that is, their commitment to addressing the problems ordinary women face without perpetuating oppressive forces.

Cases for specialized discourse can be justified when the specialized discourse is necessary for the purposes of a specific socio-political project. When necessity is determined by a community, the justification seems most valid. There is one case in particular I want to mention here as legitimate because it is linked to education as a practice, and that is discourses which reveal the masculinist and androcentric nature of canonized or classic discourses. I have made a distinction between the practice of teaching and the practice of theorizing in an effort to prevent the latter from being used as justification for producing hypertheoretical discourse for which the connection to practice is unclear. The continued, uncritical teaching of masculinist and androcentric perspectives, theories, and literature is a practice that serves to perpetuate oppressive perspectives and relations. Feminist theories which challenge dominant, masculinist/androcentric classics, canons, frameworks, and methodologies

are crucial for changing curriculum--that is, the practice of what is taught. Theories of man as the creator of civilization, androcentric and masculinist theories of animal behavior, and theories on the natural superiority of the human male, are all obvious examples. But it must be noted that the effectiveness of these challenges is dependent on how understandable these challenges are to students and other academics, including academics in other disciplines who were originally schooled within the framework of the masculinist perspectives.

I have been understanding feminist epistemologies as theories for producing and evaluating knowledge. I have been arguing that the production and evaluation of knowledge is a project in which democratic participation of diverse populations of ordinary people ought to be facilitated if we aspire for an inclusive feminism. I suppose one could argue that I have misunderstood the purpose of feminist epistemologies--that feminist epistemologies are specialized discourses about science. They are not written for the everyday person, but instead are geared for audiences engaged in research projects.

That feminist epistemologies are written for other academic researchers and philosophers does not require an argument. It is in fact, for the most part, a description of the status quo. For example, in her book, Whose Science?

Whose Knowledge? Harding treats theories of knowledge as theories that mainly researchers and academics are concerned with. Professional researchers need them to justify their claims to other professional researchers. Despite the fact that in one place in her book Harding says that knowledge seeking requires democratic, participatory politics,⁴⁷ Harding constructs both the feminist knower and the audience as professional researchers (scientists and social scientists), and academics (i.e. philosophers). I choose to focus on Harding for two reasons. One, she is a central figure in feminist epistemology. She is one of the most cited feminist epistemologists and her work is often used to frame continued work in feminist epistemology. Second, because she argues that feminist theorizing ought to begin from the lives of women, her position seems to resemble mine. I want to show that because I hold that ordinary women ought to be empowered to participate in projects of knowledge, our positions differ in a very significant way.

In her essay, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," Harding asks who is the subject of knowledge for standpoint theories. She reminds us that early "standpoint" thinkers, Marx, Hegel, and Lukacs, were not themselves proletarians.

What is the role for marginalized experience in the standpoint projects of members of dominant groups? And what are the special resources, but also limits, that the lives of people in dominant groups provide in generating the more objective knowledge claims standpoint theories call for?

.... marginalized lives provide the scientific problems and the research agendas--not the solutions--for standpoint theories. Starting off thought from these lives provides fresh and more critical questions about how the social order works that does starting off thought from the unexamined lives of members of dominant groups. Most natural and social scientists (and philosophers!) are themselves members of these dominant groups, whether by birth or through upward mobility into scientific and professional/managerial careers.⁴⁸

I quote Harding at length because it clearly reveals the construction of the knower with which she is operating. Instead of understanding "starting theory from the perspective of the marginalized" as the practice of empowering the marginalized to speak for themselves and theorize for themselves, she understands it as fodder for new research projects to be undertaken by members of dominant groups. A quote from Whose Science? Whose Knowledge reveals much the same:

It is less confusing if it is put in terms of what can be seen if we start thinking and researching from the perspective of the lives of oppressed people. The understanding that they are oppressed, exploited, and dominated ... reveals aspects of the social order that are difficult to see from the perspective of their oppressors' lives⁴⁹ (emphasis is mine).

In "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," Harding explains that "the subjects/agents of knowledge for feminist standpoint theory are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory or incoherent."⁵⁰ By this she does not mean that a great number of real, diverse people will be empowered to participate in projects of knowing. She

distinguishes her version of standpoint from what she calls "a social history" of standpoint theory--that is, an explanation of feminist knowledge as historically starting off from many women's lives. Instead, Harding's standpoint is a prescriptive way of proceeding that understands multiplicity in terms of a theoretical position held by researchers. "The logic of the directive to 'start thought from women's lives' requires that one start one's thought from multiple lives that are in many ways in conflict with each other, each of which itself has multiple and contradictory commitments."⁵¹ From this theoretical standpoint, the subject of knowledge must also be "the subject of every other liberatory knowledge project," and "men's thought, too, will begin first from women's lives in all the ways that feminist theory ... has helped us all--women as well as men--to understand how to do [i.e. begin from women's lives]."⁵² What all of this shows is that Harding understands the feminist knower, not as an ordinary person, but as a theorist, scientist, or social scientist. While Harding's knower may be more liberatory than the masculinist knower of traditional theories of knowledge, it is not adequate for a feminism that aspires to be inclusive and about the lives of ordinary people.

Harding also constructs the audience of theories of knowledge as professional researchers. Feminist knowledge

needs to be convincing first, to researchers. One of the "conservative" virtues of feminist empiricism is that it is convincing to conventional scientists and social scientists. Her target audience for her arguments for standpoint is, for the most part, these same researchers. By arguing that standpoint is more objective, she appeals to the values of this group. She makes no mention of the virtue of either feminist empiricism or feminist standpoint with respect to audiences of non-professionals, whether they be working class black mothers, drug addicted, white prostitutes, or lesbian factory workers. Are not these the people, under her terms, for which we are ultimately doing the research? These are the very people who need to be empowered to evaluate research for themselves. For feminism, it cannot be the business solely of researchers to evaluate knowledge. It must be the business of everyone.

Harding admits the reality that most researchers are members of dominant groups, but instead of focusing on attempting to change this social reality, she appeals to members of dominant groups to start theory from the lives of the marginalized. Furthermore, her appeal to the dominant group is not an appeal to their sense of ethical and social responsibility to the oppressed. Instead she argues that starting theory from the lives of the marginalized can produce better (more objective) theories. Because these

theories start from the lives of the marginalized, they presumably will help the marginalized. This is most likely true to a certain extent, but they will not help as much as if the marginalized were empowered to theorize for themselves. It is the latter that is fundamental to challenging oppressive power structures.

This is not to say that Harding's argument does not have merit. Members of dominant groups do find themselves in positions from which they can and do produce theories. Producing theories from the problems of the marginalized, instead of concerns arising from their privileged social position, decreases the perpetuation of elitist and oppressive tendencies. There exist particular problems, due to their immediacy or complexity, for which this is the best short term strategy. This strategy though, cannot serve as the ideal for feminism. Harding herself emphasizes that women have not been historically enabled to produce theories of knowledge, and when they do, the result is radical revisionings of frameworks and systems of thought. The same is true of all marginalized groups, so that the ideal must be, first, the empowerment of marginalized groups to theorize for themselves.

The point I have been making is that it is problematic to understand feminist epistemologies as specialized discourses about science, written not for the ordinary

person, but for professionals engaged in research projects. If ordinary people are not empowered to evaluate knowledge for themselves, they have no way of determining whether it serves their needs and interests. I believe there is an additional problem: by understanding feminist epistemologies mainly as discourses about science we perpetuate the traditional view that only science plays a central role in knowing. Feminists have spent a great deal of time challenging the traditional view that science is the path to real knowledge. To understand feminist epistemologies, that is feminist theories of knowledge, as about science, only perpetuates the centrality of science to knowing.

This said, I believe that even if we were take a strong case and assume feminist epistemologies are written for social scientists and scientists, the problem of language persists because they fail to reach important audiences. I will describe three cases in which feminist epistemologies, taken as specialized discourses about science and how science is done fail to reach audiences which they could potentially greatly benefit. The first case is students. In their senior year, when they finally have the time to take a few electives, feminist students from the sciences have taken classes in which I introduce critiques of science. As emerging feminists who had planned on

continuing studies and careers in science, they have a crisis and question whether they should pursue science since it seems incompatible with feminism. I try to convince them that it is possible to attempt to do science differently. It would seem that feminist epistemology would be a wonderful source for providing them with an understanding of what is wrong with science and to do science differently. Unfortunately, these students have trouble understanding these epistemologies. Becoming graduate students in science (spending more time doing specialized lab work) does not put them in a better position to understand feminist epistemology. This is in part a failure of our educational system to provide science students a well-rounded education. But this is also a failure of feminist epistemologists to communicate with a population, who would greatly benefit from such perspectives, in the formative stages of their thinking.

The second case is an example of the failure to communicate with existing women in science. I met a well established woman geologist and professor who had considered herself a feminist since the late 60's. She told me that she did not know how to integrate feminist perspectives into her work in science. She realized that she could potentially learn much from feminist epistemologies, but her attempts to read the literature were not successful.

Because she was usually busy heading major scientific projects, she did not have the time to "decipher" the literature, a task for which she was not trained. Those of us at the table who were knowledgeable about feminist epistemology could not point her to an "easy read" in feminist epistemology.

In the third case, a graduate student doing work in environmental studies was telling me of a group of women farmers in the Midwest who were experimenting with approaches to farming in a non-scientific way. She was going to use discourses in feminist epistemology in an attempt to understand the knowledge they were producing. I asked if the farmers knew feminist epistemology. "Well, no, they're farmers. They know a lot about agriculture and agricultural techniques." What is significant about this example is that the farmers, although engaged in the production of knowledge, do the farming, and the academic does the theorizing. Of course we can believe that everyone is simply fulfilling their role and there is nothing wrong with that. If farmers had wanted to theorize, they would have become academics. But would it not be revolutionary if the farmers were empowered to theorize for themselves, or at least in conjunction with the theorists? (I am by no means criticizing the graduate student in this case, who, given the realities of the current academic system, is engaged in

a valuable project). Would the farmers be benefitted if they could understand the literature in feminist epistemology? If the answer is no, then the worth of feminist epistemology is in question. If the answer is yes, then feminist epistemologies need to be presented in manner that the farmers could understand. This is true of all the cases I have presented.

If not for the every day, ordinary feminist, the student in science, the scientist who is a feminist, or women engaged in alternative farming, who then are feminist epistemologies written for? The answer seems to be academic feminist theorists. This answer is legitimate in one respect. Academic feminist theorists are engaged in the production of feminist knowledge. But academic feminist theorists are not the only group who feminist and non-feminist scientific knowledge serves and affects. If we understand these epistemologies as serving only academic theorists, they are not feminist in the inclusive sense, and fail to address the full range of feminist knowledge.

What can be learned from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, the Lyon-Martin Project, and the discussion on the role of the theorist is that there is a difference between doing for and doing with. If we are to have an inclusive feminism, academic feminist theorists cannot be the knowers for the movement. The production and evaluation

of feminist knowledge is part of the process of feminist change. For the academic feminist theorist, participation in this process, should, as much as possible, take the form of knowing with, not knowing for all the women whose lives are to be affected by feminism.

When feminist theory becomes a strange and difficult thing, produced and understood only by a specialist group, it is no longer empowering to everyday women. If the processes of redefining and revisioning subjectivity and worldviews are to be empowering to everyday women, feminist theory must be brought back to the ordinary, the grassroots, so that it can more properly reflect the diversity of the people it is to serve.

When we say that thought must be part of our practice, we must come to thought as doers, not thinkers. This requires that theorists also be activists, and activists be theorists. Proceeding pragmatically necessarily involves doing the dancing. Situating theorizing in direct attempts to change social structures and practices, ranging from the local to the national and even global level, grounds and informs theorizing.

Proceeding pragmatically provides the opportunity to end armchair activism. Ultimately, "Death of the Armchair Activist" requires that we get out of our armchairs. As Greaves puts it, "Of course, what we do with our energy is a

political choice."⁵³ We can continue to produce hypertheory in which the relationship to practice is unclear, contrived, or minimal, or we can decide to do theory in a way that is sure to bring about feminist change.

Notes

¹ John Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, (Henry Holt & Co., 1920; reprint, New York: Mentor Books, 1950), 112.

² Claudia Dreifus, ed., introduction to Seizing Our Bodies: The Politics of Women's Health (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), xxiv-xxv.

³ Dreifus, xxv.

⁴ Dreifus, xxix-xxx.

⁵ See for example, the film Taking our Bodies Back: The Health Care Movement, 1974.

⁶ Claudia Dreifus, "Sterilizing the Poor," in Seizing Our Bodies; the film La Operacion, 1982

⁷ Boston Womens' Health Book Collective, Our Bodies, Ourselves, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).

⁸ Boston Womens' Health Book Collective, The New Our Bodies, Ourselves (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), xi.

⁹ The New Our Bodies, Ourselves, xi.

¹⁰ The New Our Bodies, Ourselves, xiii.

¹¹ The New Our Bodies, Ourselves, xiii.

¹² Patricia Stevens, "Lesbians and HIV: Clinical, Research, and Policy Issues," American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 63, no. 2 (1993): 291.

¹³ Nancy Goldstein, "Lesbians and the Medical Profession: HIV/AIDS and the Pursuit of Visibility," Women's Studies, 24 (1995): 531.

¹⁴ Patricia Stevens, "HIV Prevention Education for Lesbians and Bisexual Women: A Cultural Analysis of a Community Intervention," Social Science and Medicine, 39, no. 11 (1994): 1573.

¹⁵ Goldstein, 531.

¹⁶ Goldstein, 531.

¹⁷ Goldstein, 542; Stevens, "Lesbians and HIV," 291.

- ¹⁸ Goldstein, 531.
- ¹⁹ Goldstein, 531.
- ²⁰ Christopher Guly, "The Invisible Lesbian Face of AIDS," The Advocate, Sept. 6, 1994, 45.
- ²¹ Goldstein, 545.
- ²² Sue O'Sullivan, "Mapping: Lesbians, AIDS and Sexuality: An Interview with Cindy Patton," Feminist Review, 34 (Spring 1990): 121-122; Guly, 45.
- ²³ O'Sullivan, 122.
- ²⁴ Stevens, "HIV Prevention Education for Lesbians and Bisexual Women."
- ²⁵ Goldstein, 532.
- ²⁶ Goldstein, 532.
- ²⁷ O'Sullivan, 121.
- ²⁸ Stevens, "HIV Prevention Education," 1565.
- ²⁹ Goldstein, 537.
- ³⁰ Goldstein, 547.
- ³¹ Stevens, "Lesbians and HIV," 290.
- ³² Goldstein, 535.
- ³³ Stevens, "HIV Prevention Education," 1569.
- ³⁴ Stevens, "HIV Prevention Education," 1571-1572.
- ³⁵ Stevens, "HIV Prevention Education," 1569.
- ³⁶ Goldstein 533; Stevens, "HIV Prevention Education," 1572.
- ³⁷ Stevens, "HIV Prevention Education," 1569.
- ³⁸ Stevens, "HIV Prevention Education," 1571.
- ³⁹ Sandra Harding, Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1991), 112.

⁴⁰ Harding, Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?, 114.

⁴¹ Goldstein, 534.

⁴² While I have primarily focused on epistemologists, this last section refers to academic feminist theorists in general.

⁴³ Margrit Eichler, "Not Always an Easy Alliance: The Relationship between Women's Studies and the Women's Movement in Canada," in Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States, ed. Constance Buckhouse & David Flaherty (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 127.

⁴⁴ Lorraine Greaves, "What Is the Interrelationship Between Academic and Activist Feminism?" in Challenging Times, 151-152.

⁴⁵ Greaves, 154-155.

⁴⁶ Charlene Seigfried, "Where Are All the Pragmatist Feminists?" Hypatia 6, no. 2 (1991): 6.

⁴⁷ Harding, Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?, 124.

⁴⁸ Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: 'What is Strong Objectivity'?" in Feminist Epistemologies, ed. Linda Alcoff & Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 62.

⁴⁹ Harding, Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?, 126.

⁵⁰ Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," 65.

⁵¹ Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," 66.

⁵² Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," 66-67.

⁵³ Greaves, 154.

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