
WHITESTREAM FEMINISM AND THE COLONIALIST
PROJECT: A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY
FEMINIST PEDAGOGY AND PRAXIS

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INTRODUCTION

I feel compelled to begin by stating that I am not a feminist — rather, I am *Indígena*.¹ Accordingly, this review begins at the intersection of my subjectivity as an indigenous woman and the contemporary feminist project. While, like other indigenous women, I recognize the invaluable contributions that feminists have made to both critical theory and praxis in education, I also believe their well-documented failure to engage race and acknowledge the complicity of white women in the history of domination positions “mainstream” feminism alongside other colonialist discourses. Indeed, the colonialist project could not have flourished without the participation of white women; therefore, as M. Annette Jaimes notes, some American Indian women continue to hold white feminists in disdain because they are perceived first and foremost as constituents of the same white supremacy and colonialism that oppresses all Indians.² Thus, like other indigenous women, I theorize and act in public life from a standpoint that presumes *decolonization* (not feminism) as the central political project. In contrast to dominant modes of feminist critique that locate women’s oppression in the structures of patriarchy, the project of decolonization begins with the understanding that the collective oppression of indigenous women results primarily from colonialism — a multidimensional force underwritten by Western Christianity, defined by white supremacy, and fueled by global capitalism.

One of the central assertions of decolonization is that the heterogeneity of experience, though significant, does not preclude the power and existence of “grand narratives” (such as colonialism, global capitalism, and the Enlightenment). According to Henry Giroux, grand narratives provide for the historical and relational placement of different groups within some “common project.”³ Thus, while indigenous

1. Though indigenous women share with other women a position of marginality and the experience of structural subordination, I believe their distinct subjectivity as colonized people and members of tribal “domestic dependent nations” places the historical materiality of their lives more on par with indigenous men than with any other subcategory of woman.

2. M. Annette Jaimes, *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* (Boston: South End Press, 1998), 311–344.

3. Henry Giroux, “Crossing the Boundaries of Educational Discourse: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Feminism,” in *Education: Culture, Economy, Society*, eds. A.H. Halsey, Hugh Lauder, Phillip Brown, and Amy Stuart Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 113–131.

women may differ in everything “from blood-quantum to skin color,” they share a common experience of being historically and relationally placed within the “common project” of conquest and colonization.⁴ Furthermore, this placement connects the lives and experiences of indigenous peoples (the colonized) to each other while it distinguishes them from whites (the colonizers).

Generally speaking, such “binaries” (colonizer/colonized) are anathema to “mainstream” feminism, dismissed as everything from essentialist and universalizing to masculinist and coercive.⁵ Among other things, indigenous women view this dismissal as a convenient rhetorical device that not only relativizes difference but that also allows white women to deny their shared complicity in the colonialist project (including the benefits they reap from its mandates and imperatives). Indeed, rather than recognize their participation, “mainstream” feminists have historically presumed a universal sisterhood among all women, erasing important differences in power and social status. As a result, indigenous, “third-world,” and other marginalized women have long taken issue with “mainstream” feminists, documenting their failure to acknowledge both the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality and the historic dispensations of whiteness.

As a result, what has long passed as “mainstream” feminism is perhaps more appropriately termed “whitestream” feminism — that is, a feminist discourse that is not only dominated by white women but also principally structured on the basis of white, middle-class experience; a discourse that serves their ethno-political interests and capital investments.⁶ Other characteristics of whitestream feminism include a heavy dependence on postmodern/poststructuralist theories, a privileging of “academic feminism” over the feminist political project, and an undertheorizing of patriarchy as the universal oppression of all women — all features that have been critiqued by feminists of color and other radical scholars.⁷

Postmodern and poststructural theories have greatly contributed to the project of “radical democracy”: by advancing our knowledge of the “hidden trajectories of power within the processes of representation”; the formation of subjectivity and

4. Devon A. Mihesuah, *Native Americans and Academics: Researching and Writing About American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 38.

5. See Patti Lather, “Critical Pedagogy and Its Complicities: A Praxis of Stuck Places,” *Educational Theory* 48, no. 4 (1998): 487–497.

6. Adapting from the feminist notion of “malestream,” Canadian sociologist Claude Denis coined the term whitestream to connote the idea that, while society is not white in sociodemographic terms, it remains principally structured around the basis of white, Anglo-Saxon experience. See Claude Denis, *We Are Not You: First Nations and Canadian Modernity* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 1997). Leading proponents of whitestream feminism include Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Gilles Deleuze, Jane Gallop, Elizabeth Grosz, Felix Guattari, Donna Haraway, and Patti Lather, among others.

7. The critique of whitestream feminism has been led by women of color, including Jacqui Alexander, Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Trinh Minh-ha, bell hooks, M. Annette Jaimes, Cherríe Moraga, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Chela Sandoval, and Barbara Smith, among others.

identity; and the relations among “difference,” language, and cultural configurations. Nevertheless, radical and revolutionary scholars have developed trenchant critiques of the failure of postmodern and poststructural theories to move beyond the discursive/cultural/textual and their displacement of “a politics grounded in the mobilization of forces against the material sources of political and economic marginalization.”⁸ Peter McLaren challenges the “questionable assumptions” and dangerous implications of such a discourse:

[Postmodernists/poststructuralists] view symbolic exchange as taking place outside the domain of value; privilege structures of deference over structures of exploitation, and relations of exchange over relations of production; emphasize local narratives over grand narratives; encourage the coming to voice of the symbolically dispossessed over the transformation of existing social relations; reduce models of reality to historical fictions; abandon the assessment of the truth value of competing narratives; replace the idea that power is class-specific and historically bound with the idea that power is everywhere and nowhere — they end up advancing a philosophical commission that propagates hegemonic class rule and reestablishing the rule of the capitalist class.⁹

Feminist theories that operate under these assumptions have been defined by Teresa Ebert as “ludic feminism” — theories that, following dominant postmodern theories, rearticulate politics as almost exclusively a cultural politics of representation that not only replaces radical critique with “assumptions about linguistic play, difference, and the priority of discourse,” but that also separates feminist theory from feminist struggle and practice.¹⁰ In other words, ludic feminists redefine politics as a purely academic exercise. As bell hooks notes, unlike earlier forms of feminist theory, the contemporary production of feminist theory is sequestered behind the ivy walls of academia, where the growing social distance between whitestream academics and the lived experiences of “real-world” women has enabled “high status feminists” to build lucrative careers by theorizing the lives of “other” women — a situation that replicates the relation between colonizer and colonized.¹¹

In addition to exacerbating the fissure between feminist theory and practice, the discursive tactics of postmodern/poststructuralist theories allow whitestream feminists to distort the material significance of their privileged position. Following Michel Foucault, whitestream feminists understand power as “diffuse, asystematic, contingent, and ‘aleatory’ — that is marked by chance and arbitrariness” rather than as something historically and materially determined.¹² In a discourse that reduces politics to a “language effect...aimed at changing cultural representations,” it becomes possible to reduce the emancipatory project to one simply concerned with

8. Valerie Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and Peter McLaren, “The Strategic Centrality of Class in the Politics of ‘Race’ and ‘Difference,’” in *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 3, no. 2 (2003): 148–175.

9. Peter McLaren, “Revolutionary Pedagogy in Post-Revolutionary Times,” *Educational Theory* 48, no. 4 (1998): 442–443.

10. See Teresa Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); and Teresa Ebert, “For a Red Pedagogy: Feminism, Desire and Need,” *College English* 58, no. 7 (1996): 795–819.

11. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 62.

12. Ebert, “For a Red Pedagogy,” 795.

"giving voice" to the "silenced desires" of (white) women — a pedagogy primarily concerned with how white women feel and whether they are free to express and act upon how they feel.¹³ According to Ebert, this discourse routinely equates the pleasure and desires of "first-world," white, bourgeois women with those of "third-world" and other colonized women; by extension, in the realm of feeling, experience, and cultural representation, it becomes possible to equate "the oppressed" with the "distressed." Thus, just as the discursive tactics of postmodernism privilege the indeterminacy of the subject, they also construe power as indeterminate and diffuse.

Ironically, while whitestream feminists employ the postmodern indeterminacy of power to absolve themselves from the colonialist project, at the same time they revert to modernist readings of power in their assertions of patriarchy as a universal and totalizing system. Women of color have taken issue with this undertheorizing of patriarchy. On this point, hooks is worth quoting at length:

[The universal assumption of patriarchy] is an argument that has led influential Western white women to feel that the feminist movement should be the central political agenda for females globally. Ideologically, thinking in this direction enables Western women, especially privileged white women, to suggest that racism and class exploitation are merely an offspring of the parent system: patriarchy. Within the feminist movement in the West, this has led to the assumption of resisting patriarchal domination as a more legitimate feminist action than resisting racism and other forms of domination. Such thinking prevails despite radical critiques made by black women and women of color who question this proposition. To speculate that an oppositional division between men and women existed in early human communities is to impose on the past, on these non-white groups, a worldview that fits all too neatly within contemporary feminist paradigms that name man as the enemy and woman as the victim.¹⁴

The critique that feminism is a field dominated by white women and whitestream theories has come to be viewed as a historical problem, a relic of the difficult transitional period between second- and third-wave feminism. Along with this relegation to history comes the implicit (or sometimes explicit) assertion that the argument, "feminism is a whitestream discourse," is passé, a well-rehearsed argument that no longer holds validity. The current plurality of "feminisms" operating in the field is often cited as evidence of the death of whitestream feminism. I agree that liberal, postmodern, Marxist, critical race, socialist, lesbian, womanist, and transnational feminisms, among others, do all occupy a proper and legitimate place in the feminist diaspora. But this apparent eclecticism can be deceiving.

In preparation for this review, I embarked on a tour of contemporary feminism; and while I found a remarkably diverse terrain, I also perceived an uneven playing field where whitestream feminists commandeer "the center" and women of color occupy the margins. Thus, while multiple feminisms clearly operate in the field, it seemed to me that a persistent whitestream discourse continues to define the public face of feminism. This implicit structure marks the feminist terrain as not simply "pluralistic" but, more critically, ghettoized — indicating that whitestream feminists merely perform multiplicity, continuing to resist any significant attenuation of the racial divide.

13. *Ibid.*, 805.

14. Bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 19–20.

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

Insofar as they reflect the profound plurality of the field, the texts at the center of this review provide a representative sample of the literature: Amanda Coffey and Sara Delamont's *Feminism and the Classroom Teacher*; Frances Maher and Janie Victoria Ward's *Gender and Teaching*; Frances Maher and Mary Kay Tetreault's *The Feminist Classroom*; and Kathleen Weiler's *Feminist Engagements*. Indeed, the only common theme that emerges among these books is the examination of the relation between women and education. Beyond that, they have little in common. For example, not all of the texts employ feminist analysis, and those that do engage different and even contradictory feminist theories.

As such, one of the primary aims of this analysis is to test my own perceptions by examining whether whitestream feminism has indeed given way to more complicated readings of gender and power that work not only to "include" the voices of women on the margin but also to incorporate their frames of intelligibility into feminist theory and practice. More specifically, given that the constructs of "race" and "whiteness" evolved in the context of colonialism and imperialism (which is to say the emergence of capitalism and industrialism), I look at whether the feminist project is theorized through a historical-materialist framework — that is, one that engages the intersection of race with questions of capitalism, labor, and economic power. I also look for a feminism that moves beyond textual analysis, providing "a pedagogy of critique that enables us to explain how exploitation operates in the everyday lives of people" for the express purpose of engaging in collective struggle to change exploitive relations.¹⁵ A feminist discourse that engages all of these issues would provide hope and possibility to indigenes and other colonized women, serving as the basis for revolutionary theory and struggle and as the pedagogical home for the project of decolonization.

*FEMINISM AND THE CLASSROOM TEACHER: RESEARCH PRAXIS AND PEDAGOGY*¹⁶

SUMMARY. In this text, Coffey and Delamont draw together a "critical mass of literature" in order to "explore the relationships, histories and futures of feminism and teaching" (*FCT*, 2). While the authors draw most heavily on North American and British literature, they work to "employ a variety of research modes and theoretical perspectives...drawing together the polemical and empirical, the cited and the more diverse and scattered bodies of material," to serve as the basis for a feminist analysis of the "everyday realities" of the classroom teacher (*FCT*, 2).¹⁷

They begin the first chapter with a discussion of feminisms, postfeminisms, and postmodernism in order to situate "the place of feminist analysis in a postmodern

15. Ebert, "For a Red Pedagogy," 816.

16. Amanda Coffey and Sara Delamont, *Feminism and the Classroom Teacher* (London and New York: Routledge Falmer, 2000). This book will be cited as *FCT* in the text for all subsequent references.

17. More specifically, the authors report that they use "liberal feminist theory" in their analysis of the myriad "imbalances" between men and women in teaching and "radical feminist theories" in their critique of "malestream" epistemologies dominating educational research.

intellectual climate"; in the following chapters they examine different aspects of teachers' work, including "the practical contingencies of the classroom," the "intellectual knowledge work of the teacher," the "teaching career path," and the "day-to-day biographies and experiences of teachers" (*FCT*, 2). Based on the evidence presented in these chapters, Coffey and Delamont conclude that women teachers continue to struggle in school systems defined by patriarchy, where prevailing notions of masculinity continue to dominate management strategies, disciplinary practices, the distribution of power, and the school curriculum.¹⁸

Moving from an analysis of the working life of teachers, the authors explore feminist contributions to the history of teaching, examining the material realities of the profession's "foremothers." Women teachers of "the pioneering days" are depicted as courageous early champions of both feminism and education, advocating for structural improvements and curricular innovations in schools. Following this era, women teachers are depicted as persisting and resisting through times of economic depression and ideological oppression, tirelessly campaigning for the extension of educational opportunity, equal pay, and an end to the "marriage bar" (*FCT*, 105). Coffey and Delamont conclude their historical analysis with an examination of the advent of coeducation and its negative effects on women's careers, asserting that the career structures of women were disrupted as men usurped top management and supervisory positions and thus displaced both women and women's authority.

In the final chapter of *Feminism and the Classroom Teacher*, the authors return to "the feminist project in education," addressing feminist epistemology and research praxis. In this analysis they "demystify" research as objective and neutral and recast it as socioculturally situated (that is, "personal, emotional, sensitive, [and] reflective"), concluding that "feminist research" is more determined by its application and context than by its method.¹⁹

ANALYSIS. Insofar as this text examines women, feminism, and the feminist project in essentialist terms (that is, where women and feminism are positioned in contrast to men and patriarchy), without any consciousness of how such constructs are informed by race, it sits squarely in the whitestream tradition. Indeed, Coffey and Delamont's examination of sexuality represents their only substantive effort to complicate gender.²⁰ Furthermore, while they examine issues of class, they do so in a manner that treats class as another form of individual difference, not as a historically determined social construct.

18. Due to this climate, the authors report "many self-identified feminist teachers resist being openly identified as feminist in the same way that lesbian teachers often resist or actively mute a lesbian label, fearing it 'dangerous' or a catalyst for further ridicule" (*FCT*, 73).

19. They note, for example, that even surveys in the positivistic tradition (once seen as the "antithesis" of feminist research) can be constructed in ways that provide valuable data for feminist research.

20. More specifically, the authors examine the different experiences of lesbian teachers, particularly their struggles with managing the disclosure of sexual identity, teaching sexuality, and "queering the curriculum."

For example, while the authors recognize the existence of a class-tiered system in education, they do not discuss the implications of such a system for a democratic society. Rather, they are only concerned with the mitigating effects of class structure on the careers and professional opportunities of individual (white) women. Their historical analysis of “the feminist influence” on working-class elementary schools and fee-paying secondary schools for middle- and upper-class girls exemplifies this problem: The schools are discussed only in terms of the role they played in opening avenues to higher education and professional training. According to Coffey and Delamont, middle-class schools created jobs that were “socially respectable and paid a sufficient salary for a woman to live independently without the economic support of her father, or a husband” (*FCT*, 95). In contrast, working-class schools were notable for their relatively poor employment opportunities and “harsh” working conditions. The authors bemoan that white middle-class women teaching in working-class schools were subjected to “Spartan” living accommodations and were expected to do “domestic” work:

Teaching in the elite schools was hard work, but the salary and status made it a reasonable choice. The pupils and students taught, and their parents, came from a similar class and there were common values. The lives of those who taught the working classes were harder. Salaries were lower, saving less possible, the status lower, and the conditions of work much worse. Classes of forty, in dreadful buildings, with children who would smell, refuse discipline, and exhaust their teachers meant that staying in the job was a brave decision (*FCT*, 98).

Apparently, from the authors’ perspective, a “feminist analysis” of the history of teaching looks only at the working conditions of white women and the impact of such conditions on their opportunities for social and economic mobility. Missing is any structural analysis of a capitalist system that exploits members of the working class or of a colonialist system that privileges white women and their desires for equality and social mobility over the democratic imperative of extending access and equity across class and racial groups. Instead, members of the working class appear only to represent undesirable (“smelly” and “undisciplined”) impediments to the feminist pursuit for adequate careers and equal pay for equal work.

Moreover, by failing to mention the struggles of people of color to gain access to education, the authors disregard the concerns of racially disfranchised groups, treating them as immaterial to the employment opportunities of white, middle-class women teachers. One of the most egregious examples of privileging white women’s experience appears in Coffey and Delamont’s concluding thoughts on “the foremothers” of today’s teachers: “the women who taught in the ‘Wild West,’ in the virgin territory of Australia, and in the pioneering girls’ schools like Wycombe Abbey were heroines and deserve to be remembered, not least because of the struggles they overcame and the legacies they left” (*FCT*, 105). The use of such language as “Wild West” and “virgin territory” to describe Indian and Aboriginal territories in the United States and Australia reveals the authors’ racist construction of indigenous peoples as either savage (“wild”) or invisible. Moreover, their concomitant construction of the white teachers as “heroines” fails to account for the complicating fact that such women were first and foremost colonizers: middle- and upper-class missionaries working to “civilize” and claim indigenous lands, cultures, minds, and bodies.

Indeed, such women do “deserve to be remembered for the legacy they left” — a legacy that includes the deculturalization and colonization of indigenous lands and peoples.

Coffey and Delamont’s work, therefore, epitomizes whitestream feminism. They not only fail to problematize gender by examining its intersections with race and class, but they also maintain the distortions and aporias of a whitestream logic that privileges the desires and fantasies of the dominant class over the experiences and concerns of the culturally marginalized and politically disfranchised.

*GENDER AND TEACHING*²¹

SUMMARY. In comparison, Maher and Ward theorize gender as a more complex and fluid category, one that engages race, class, and sexuality. They identify their theoretical approach as “radical social reconstructionist,” taking into account the “larger cultural, social and political dynamics” of both school and society, and examining how such dynamics operate to marginalize poor, working-class, gay/lesbian, female, and nonwhite students.²²

The authors examine this interplay in part I of the text by presenting four case studies, which are essentially classroom scenarios in which a teacher is forced to negotiate a situation that involves issues of race, class, gender, or sexuality.²³ The presentation of each case study is followed by “reader reactions” solicited from prospective and practicing teachers and administrators. These reactions are intended to represent “some of the many and diverse ways in which people both in and outside of school systems tend to act and deal” with issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality (*GT*, 110). Finally, Maher and Ward provide a summary and a set of follow-up questions to conclude each case study.

In part II of *Gender and Teaching*, the authors engage a broader theoretical discussion of gender in which “conservative,” “liberal progressive,” “women-centered,” and “radical multicultural” frameworks are discussed as the prevailing “public arguments” that guide perspectives on gender and educational policy.²⁴ The case studies are then reconsidered through each of these frameworks. The discussion ends with a set of questions intended to encourage readers to consider the

21. Frances A. Maher and Janie Victoria Ward, *Gender and Teaching* (New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002). This book will be cited as *GT* in the text for all subsequent references.

22. Though they recognize the interplay of gender, race, class, and sexuality, Maher and Ward clearly foreground gender as the central lens through which difference is negotiated. See, for example, *GT*, 110.

23. Case 1 portrays a “Hispanic” teacher faced with negotiating sexism within her own community and classroom; case 2 concerns two teachers with differences of opinion regarding the behavior of one African-American boy and the societal phenomenon of disproportionate numbers of black boys being referred to special education; case 3 focuses on recurring instances of sexual harassment and homophobia in one high school class; and case 4 explores “the gendered, racialized, and sociocultural aspects of the teaching profession.”

24. To summarize, the conservative argument is defined as that which supports maintenance of women’s “traditional” roles in the family and the importance of discipline, character building, and “the basics” in the classroom. This position simultaneously delegitimizes group identity, multiculturalism, and the ostensibly “water-downed curriculum” it engenders. The “liberal-progressive” argument is defined as that which promotes recognition of gender equality (not difference) as the central feature of democratic and

implications of each line of argument and to determine their own location on the ideological/political spectrum. Finally, in part III of the text, the authors define their own perspective, "radical social reconstructionist," which they describe as being most similar to the radical multiculturalist model with "admixture of all the others" (*GT*, 110).

Overall, Maher and Ward recognize the importance of analyzing gender through its intersections with race, class, and sexuality, as well as the need to examine school as a site of social struggle where asymmetries of power are played out. They also stress how important it is for teachers to play an active role in reimagining school and society along democratic aims: "teachers must work to challenge the social inequalities that operate in each and every classroom...[making] sure the curriculum contains explicit references to inequality and resistance" (*GT*, 117).

ANALYSIS. Though Maher and Ward promote a radical politics of difference and social change, they ultimately adhere to a "liberal progressive" epistemological frame that privileges individual choice, objectivity, and impartiality over social transformation. At several points in the text they remind the reader that the book is simply a tool intended to assist the development of their own viewpoints. This approach is particularly apparent in the section where "public arguments" are articulated. First, a menu of arguments is provided with each being delineated as equally tantalizing and legitimate. Among the offerings is the "conservative" argument, which views feminists as anti-family, multiculturalism as the politics of victimhood, and schools as being taken over by "a host of anti-white, anti-male, anti-family, and anti-religion fanatics" (*GT*, 76). Next, the reader is invited to make their selections, guided by such questions as "What aspects of this viewpoint are appealing to you?" and "What aspects do you disagree with?" While this approach may encourage development of the reader's point of view, it also ignores the ways in which such liberal approaches to pedagogy, cloaked in veils of objectivity and rational discourse, contribute to the maintenance of dominant paradigms by presenting them as equally legitimate alternatives.

Marxist feminist Ebert argues that such discourse legitimates, among other things, "a pragmatic pluralism that tolerates exploitation as one possible free choice" and ultimately privileges the importance of individual choice over radical social transformation.²⁵ Thus, while Maher and Ward articulate a "radical politics of

student-centered education. Liberal-progressives resist the "male-versus-female trap" by focusing on the individual, working to right past discrimination through the equal inclusion of all voices. The "women-centered" argument is defined as that which recognizes the importance of gender differences and the need to give more attention to "women's perspectives on the world." Emphasis on "women's ways of knowing" and "women-centered classrooms" are advocated as a means of rethinking education in order to prepare students for the productive as well as reproductive aspects of society. Finally, the "radical multiculturalist" argument is positioned in contrast to all others: it rejects the conservative aim of preserving the economic and political status quo, the liberal focus on equality and individualism, and the essentialism inherent in women-centered pedagogies. Radical multiculturalists construct gender, race, class, and culture as interlocking categories of discrimination, oppression, and potential empowerment and advocate for equity in both school and society.

25. Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After*, 17.

difference" that examines gender through its connections and intersections with the "structural dynamics and practices" of race, class, and culture, their presentation of material fails to assert this agenda as a democratic imperative. Rather, they position the need for social transformation as merely one option among many, including the maintenance of social control by the dominant class. While there is pedagogical value in engaging students in critical reflection and decision making, the authors should consider the costs of academic feminism, particularly if it comes at the expense of feminist struggle and social change.

Finally, their failure to analyze gender as one of many different power relations that emerge through the projects of global capitalism and colonization tethers their analysis to the imperatives of these projects. In other words, when not explicitly tied to a politics aimed at dismantling capitalism and decolonization, feminist struggles for equal access and power are suspect, covertly operating as struggles for equal access to material resources and for the power to consume and, ultimately, to dominate.

*THE FEMINIST CLASSROOM: DYNAMICS OF GENDER, RACE, AND PRIVILEGE*²⁶

SUMMARY. This text is essentially an account of its authors' examination of feminist pedagogies in action. Specifically, Maher and Tetreault study practitioners working at several different institutions who have been identified by their feminist colleagues as "well known for their commitment to women's studies and to fine teaching" (*FC*, 4).²⁷ Next, they analyze the data through four analytic themes — mastery, voice, authority, and positionality — that cut across differences in pedagogical style as well as classroom and institutional demographics (*FC*, 22).²⁸

In this second edition of *The Feminist Classroom*, Maher and Tetreault not only provide documentation and analysis of their original findings, but they also revisit their initial analysis, adding new reflections, insights, and commentary. In particular, they acknowledge that one of the major aporias of the first edition (as noted by readers and reviewers) was an insufficient analysis of race, especially in terms of how "the workings of unacknowledged whiteness" shapes classroom discourse: "like other white feminists [we] focused on the situations and experiences of women as

26. Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, *The Feminist Classroom: Dynamics of Gender, Race, and Privilege* (Lanham, Massachusetts: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). This book will be cited as *FC* in the text for all subsequent references.

27. Initially, five schools with nationally visible projects in gender and women's studies were chosen: three liberal arts colleges (one of which was a historically black women's college), one research university, and one state university. A sixth school (San Francisco State University) was added midstream when the racial homogeneity of the initial five schools presented limitations to their study. The six schools included in their final sample were University of Arizona, Towson State, Lewis and Clark, Wheaton College, Spelman College, and San Francisco State.

28. Mastery refers to the myriad ways in which feminist praxis entails "struggle for control" (over construction of knowledge, research procedure, and methodology). Voice refers to student subjectivity and the power of voice to shape classroom knowledge. Authority is examined in terms of how the professors perceive and exercise authority in their classrooms and how the researchers perceive and exercise authority in the processes of their study. Positionality refers to the knower's sociocultural location in terms of "gender, race, class and other socially significant dimensions," and the ways in which this positionality influences the construction of knowledge.

victims of oppression," downplaying the complex relations of power presented by race (FC, 8). To address this issue, the authors have added a new chapter that focuses specifically on how assumptions of whiteness influence classroom discourse.

It should be noted that the authors' struggle to understand the implications of race are not mirrored in their treatment of sexuality. While the concerns of lesbian feminists and considerations of queer theory were not explicit aims of their analysis, such issues surfaced through the lives and narratives of participants who, in one form or another, struggled with sexuality and its impact on the formation of knowledge and classroom discourse. The authors also seemed to anticipate the effects of sexuality in ways that they did not anticipate (or even exhibit consciousness of) in their analysis of race.

Nevertheless, in *The Feminist Classroom* Maher and Tetreault work to articulate the distinctive challenges presented by the myriad and intersecting aspects of subjectivity and the error of constructing "woman" as a homogenous category, explicitly distancing themselves from forms of "cultural feminism" that engage such simplistic analyses.

ANALYSIS. While the authors demonstrate adeptness at *theorizing* the intersections of gender, they do not always synthesize their understandings into their conceptualization of feminist praxis. In the real world of classrooms, the authors tacitly adhere to a rather essentialist notion of feminist pedagogy, one that relies upon classroom practices that are student-centered, nonauthoritarian, and collaborative/cooperative in nature. Similarly, pedagogical practices that are decidedly teacher-centered, authoritarian, and individualistic are implicitly categorized as nonfeminist or patriarchal.

More significantly, while individual practitioners problematize the values of "student-centered," "nonauthoritarian," and "cooperative" as being raced and classed, these values are, by the end of the text, still assumed to be universal characteristics of "feminist" praxis and "women's" ways of knowing. While it could be argued that feminist pedagogy requires adherence to some abiding values and structures, Maher and Tetreault never make this argument explicit.²⁹ On the contrary, they persist in their construction of "the feminist classroom" as a space in constant flux, where all things are continually negotiated. The contradiction inherent in characterizing feminist pedagogy as both indeterminable and finite is not examined, particularly in terms of its implications for the political project of feminism and the ways in which postmodern feminisms may inhibit broad-based political action and social change.

The authors' failure to consider the connection between postmodern/academic forms of feminism and the political inertia of the feminist project is evident in their dismay over the current divide between generations of feminist scholars: "another clue about the unfinished business of feminism in the academy comes from

29. In other words, if feminist pedagogy is a space in which all approaches are equally valid, there would be nothing to distinguish it from nonfeminist forms of classroom teaching and organization.

observations our older informants made about the new generation of feminist scholars" (FC, 272). One of these observations was that younger faculty do not share the same commitment to feminism, instead "see[ing] feminism as a theoretical position, not a political agenda" (FC, 273).

While the political apathy of young feminists is indeed distressing, Maher and Tetreault, rather than thoroughly examining its origins, facily indict the patriarchal nature of the institution and its resistance to change as the force behind young feminists' disenchantment with politics. The possibility that the "new generation" of feminists might be disenchanted with whitemain feminism's privileging of textual analysis over a politics of engagement is not even considered.

*FEMINIST ENGAGEMENTS: READING, RESISTING, AND REVISIONING
MALE THEORISTS IN EDUCATION AND CULTURAL STUDIES*³⁰

SUMMARY. This edited collection is significantly different from the other texts reviewed here in that it is primarily theoretical and aimed at defining the relation between feminist theory and the "intellectual heritage of men" (FE, 3). Editor Kathleen Weiler acknowledges that, while education feminists have been profoundly influenced by "classic male theorists" (such as John Dewey, Foucault, Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, and Stuart Hall), the relation between feminist theory and "critical, democratic male theorists" is uneasy. At the outset, she poses the following critical question: "[though] our ultimate goals may be very similar... what do we take on if we imagine ourselves as the inheritors of these 'gender blind' theories and... apply them to our concerns as feminist women?" (FE, 3).

The text essentially unfolds as a collective response to this question, with different feminist scholars articulating their particular intellectual relation to male theorists. Though the authors define a wide variety of approaches, Weiler roughly categorizes their responses as follows: (1) those that employ "negative engagement" or use "critique as a point of departure for feminist analysis"; (2) those that engage "appropriation and application" or apply "the ideas of male theorists to feminist concerns with little or no critique"; and (3) those that employ "critical engagement" — that is, subject the conceptual frameworks of male theorists to feminist analysis — engaging in strategic readings that make use of the theories for "defined political goals" (FE, 5–6). Weiler recognizes the legitimacy of both "negative engagement" and "appropriation and application," but she clearly privileges critical feminist theory as the most potent approach, identifying it as the "stance most frequently taken by writers in the collection" (FE, 6).³¹ According to Weiler, critical feminists are committed to "alliances across race and ethnic lines" and to putting forth complex readings of male antiracist theorists who articulate goals of liberation and human

30. Kathleen Weiler, *Feminist Engagements: Reading, Resisting, and Revisioning Male Theorists in Education and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3. This book will be cited as FE in the text for all subsequent references.

31. In correspondence with Weiler's own estimate, five of the nine authors explicitly claim to write from a "critical feminist" perspective, indicating that the majority of authors work to disrupt the whitemain discourse.

rights in “powerful and poetic rhetoric” but ignore “women’s concerns” in the process (*FE*, 6). Through this approach, they explore the dangers of “using a male intellectual tradition that has objectified or ignored women” as the theoretical foundation of a feminist critique of that same tradition. In addition, critical feminists perceive themselves as “speaking directly to white and heterosexual women about their blindness to their own privilege and their ignorance of the profundity of differences among women” (*FE*, 4–5).

ANALYSIS. Despite Weiler’s initial proclamation, most of the essays in *Feminist Engagements* do not demonstrate consistent adherence to the principles of critical feminism. First of all, only two of the nine authors are women of color — one self-identified black-Jamaican woman and one African-American woman — indicating that critical feminists’ “commitment across racial and ethnic lines” begins and ends at the black–white divide.³² Moreover, while some of the white women address race in their essays, it is clear that the race question is relegated to the women of color. In other words, Cally L. Waite (who writes about W.E.B. Du Bois) and Annette Henry (who writes about Stuart Hall) have clearly been designated as the theorists of color “assigned” to write about black male theorists and to confront the question of black women and education. In addition to the theoretical deficiencies that result from examining race in terms of color and culture, the majority of contributors also fail to problematize race through its intersections with class and its connections to capitalist exploitation and colonization. Rather than examine gender–power relations through the historical and socioeconomic structures in which they are embedded, most of the authors extend an analysis grounded in simplistic readings of a universal and abstract “patriarchy.” Thus, only two authors — Weiler and Jane Kenway — actually engage a “critical feminist” analysis as Weiler defined it in her introduction to the collection. Since these two essays represent the kind of (anti-whitestream) feminist discourse I am calling for, I provide a more detailed account and analysis of these works.

In her essay “Rereading Paulo Freire,” Weiler begins by acknowledging feminism’s grounding in both racist and patriarchal (Western) theories:

The social and political goals of U.S. feminism were originally framed around liberal, Enlightenment conceptions of rights and justice for women; it has subsequently condemned patriarchal desires and practices using the Western discourses of psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. This grounding in the Western tradition has been a profound limitation for feminism, as the work of women of color and feminists outside the dominant Western tradition have so forcefully made clear (*FE*, 67).

Weiler goes on to acknowledge the dangers and limitations of feminist theories that operate on essentialist constructions of both men and women, noting that “such approaches tend dangerously toward recasting the same old story of Western patriarchy, in which rationality is the province of men, and feeling and nurturance that of women” (*FE*, 70).

32. While it could be argued that this divide is the most significant in terms of the intellectual history of U.S. feminism, such an argument is not provided, and the voices of Asian-American, Latina, indigenous, and other marginalized women are ultimately excluded in both theory and practice.

What makes Weiler's analysis unique, however, is that it moves beyond a mere critique of whitemstream feminism and integrates a more complex analysis of racial and class difference into the foundation of her own theory. She begins by recognizing the privileges inherent to her own positionality (as a white middle-class woman) and examines the ways in which her "social and historical location" (as outside "the oppressed") shapes her work and, in this instance, her critique of Freire. She cautions against "women" positioning themselves "on the same side" as the oppressed without any regard for the differences in power and privilege among women: "the fallacy of assuming there is a single category — woman — hides the profound differences among women in terms of their race, class, nationality, and other aspects of their identities" (*FE*, 75).

Ultimately, the power of Weiler's critique lies in the parallels she draws between whitemstream feminists' failure to theorize race and class and male liberatory theorists' failure to theorize gender. Unfortunately, her analysis loses some ground when she turns to the specifics of Freire's work, holding him accountable in a tone and manner that she does not take with her feminist colleagues. Nevertheless, Weiler extends a powerful critique of any form of liberatory scholarship that does not theorize the intersections of race, class, and gender — including feminism. Though she does not write specifically about the connection between liberatory political projects and the imperatives set in motion by global capitalism and colonialism, her work leaves open the possibility of engaging this analysis.

Where Weiler merely alludes to the importance of historical-materialist critique, Kenway expressly calls for critical feminists to undertake this project. In her essay "Remembering and Regenerating Gramsci," Kenway argues that a firm grounding in materialist analysis is essential to the feminist project. She notes that feminist scholars of the mid-1980s (such as Madeleine Arnot, Sandra Kessler, and Patti Lather) were committed to defining the ways Gramsci's work could inform feminism; she argues that, as a result, scholarship of this era developed a "nonclass reductionist reading of Gramsci" that blends "the small scale with broader questions about how the social order reproduces itself in complex and contested ways through education" (*FE*, 59). Kenway observes that, since the mid-1980s, partly due to the influence of postmodernism, Gramsci is no longer considered a "fashionable theorist" among feminists. She itemizes the ill effects postmodern discourse has had on emancipatory projects:

This [postmodern] theoretical move has seen an eroded interest in the economy and social class, an intensified concern with discourse, difference, and subjectivity and with consumption rather than production. Throughout this period there has been much more interest in mini-narratives rather than metanarratives, multiple identities rather than political identities, positioning rather than repositioning, discourse rather than politics of discourse, performance rather than poverty, inscription rather than political mobilization and deconstruction rather than reconstruction. Culture has been much more the focus of analysis than the economy — even its cultural elements — and notions of difference and plurality have held sway over the trilogy that emerged in the 1980s of class, race and gender (*FE*, 60).

According to Kenway, the net effect of postmodern feminism is that a "politics of recognition" is privileged over the "politics of redistribution," signaling a retreat from engagement in "practical political activity" (*FE*, 59–60). She finds such a retreat

intolerable and seeks to reinvigorate feminist theory with “matters economic” and theories of difference with an understanding of subaltern groups as those subject to economic exploitation, marginalization, and deprivation (*FE*, 61).

Most important, however, Kenway insists on re-grounding feminist theory in historical-materialist analysis, maintaining that such a Gramscian view of feminism would require “serious empirical attention to the relationships among the ideological processes and economic and political arrangements of contemporary, globalized times” (*FE*, 61). More specifically, she calls for feminist studies that examine “present forms of economic colonization” and the new material conditions of alienation and exploitation that they engender. Such new forms of “feminist class analysis” would theorize the ways in which struggles over meaning and identity articulate with struggles over other resources, highlighting “the multiple registers of power and injustice” (*FE*, 61).

Above all, Kenway is confident that a renewed commitment to historical-materialist analysis would reinvigorate the feminist political project, rendering it “better prepared” to engage “the big issues” of our time (*FE*, 62). The advocacy of such an agenda places Kenway’s analysis squarely at the intersection of race, class, and gender, as well as “on the same side” as analyses generated by women from subaltern groups. Unlike Weiler, who registers her unease with women positioning themselves “on the same side as” the oppressed, Kenway avoids enacting the presumptions of whiteness by developing an analysis that accounts for the complex intersections of power. In terms of its ability to theorize these intersections and to offer an analysis that accounts for the effects of colonialism and global capitalism, Kenway’s essay not only stands apart from the rest of the articles in *Feminist Engagements* but also from the other texts examined for this review.

While Kenway’s work represents the antithesis of whitestream feminism, Lather’s “Ten Years Later, Yet Again: Critical Pedagogy and its Complicities” stands in stark contrast, (re)committing all of its original sins.³³ In her essay, Lather works to undermine the legitimacy and relevance of historical-materialist analysis for feminist work, seeking instead to “sensitize” the discourse of radical critique to the issues raised by poststructuralism” (*FE*, 184).³⁴ According to Lather, critical pedagogy’s concern with a conscious unitary subject, economic materialism, “totalizing categories,” and positions of closure all derive from a patriarchal view of the world, creating an inherent tension between critical and feminist pedagogies. Though this tension was previously aired in a series of exchanges between education feminists and “the

33. “For the purposes of economy and concentration,” Lather limits her critique of critical pedagogy to the analysis of *one essay* by Peter McLaren. As a school of thought, critical pedagogy spans at least seventy years and McLaren’s work alone spans more than twenty years. To limit a review of critical pedagogy to one essay by one author seems highly reductionistic, ironically violating one of the principles of the kind of feminist analysis Lather endorses.

34. For a more extensive discussion of Marxist and Marxist-feminist responses to Lather’s critique of historical-materialist analysis and Marxism, see Dave Hill, Peter McLaren, Mike Cole, and Glenn Rikowski, eds., *Marxism Against Postmodernism in Educational Theory* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002).

boys" of critical pedagogy nearly ten years ago, Lather regards the problems as still relevant, producing "the truth of critical pedagogy as a 'boy thing' and the use of poststructuralism to deconstruct pedagogy as a 'girl thing'" (FE, 184). She explains, "this is due not so much to the dominance of male authors in the field as it is to the masculinist voice of abstraction, universalization, and the rhetorical position of 'one who knows'" (FE, 184).

In contrast to the "certainties" presumed by critical pedagogy, Lather proposes a feminist praxis of "not being so sure," or one in which "questions are constantly moving and one cannot define, finish, close" (FE, 184). She further asserts that "rather than return to historical materialism...my interest is in a praxis in excess of binary and dialectical logic, a praxis that disrupts the horizon of already prescribed intelligibility" (FE, 189). Ultimately, she calls for a feminist praxis that attends to the "poststructural suspicions of rationality, philosophies of presence, and universalizing projects," that embraces undecidability and the unforeseeable (FE, 189–190).

At base, it seems that Lather calls for feminism to move away from standing for something (as in being *against* exploitation and *for* emancipation) to nothing, the unknown, the undecidable, the unforeseen. Ironically, she levies this call for uncertainty and incompleteness with a great deal of certitude, adopting the voice of "one who knows" to argue that poststructuralism is "the one right story."³⁵ In so doing, Lather writes in the dominant voice of whitestream feminism — a post-Marxist, postmodern, poststructural voice that rejects the so called patriarchal and "masculinist" theories of Karl Marx and other emancipatory theorists, taking issue with the goal of emancipation itself as "messianic."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The aim of this analysis has been to determine where contemporary forms of feminism have maintained their adherence to whitestream logic and where they have moved beyond this logic to engage in historical-materialist analyses that account for both the intersections of gender and power (as specifically expressed through race and racism) and the forces of global capitalism and colonization. The texts under review here ultimately reveal a discourse that, by and large, is unconcerned with or merely genuflects to race; that remains fundamentally "academic" and stubbornly resistant to more complicated analyses of gender and power; and that ignores the issues of production, labor, and economic power — the machinery of capitalism and colonization. In other words, these texts simply theorize race as color and culture; gender as white, female, and middle class; and class as just another form of difference.

Such analyses are not only deeply insufficient, erasing the "real historical, material, specificity of bodies" and their struggles over "the relations of production," but they also work to obfuscate feminism's implication in the larger social contradictions of colonization and global capitalism.³⁶ Indeed, the whitestream feminist

35. Lather, "Critical Pedagogy and Its Complicities," 488.

36. Ebert, "For a Red Pedagogy," 808.

dismissal of emancipatory theories that take the issues of economics, labor, production, and exploitation seriously — treating them as little more than ventures in masculinist discourse and “messianism” — is voiced so adamantly that it begs the question: Who gains from abandoning the problems of labor? One response is that it allows white middle-class women to ignore the fact that the gains they have made in terms of power and resources have come at the expense of poor women and women of color both nationally and internationally. In this sense, Ebert draws a distinction between *emancipatory pedagogies*, which explain how exploitative relations operate in the everyday lives of people so that they can be changed, and *liberatory pedagogies*, which privilege the desiring subject at the center of their politics, protecting the material interests of the powerful and propertied classes. In this light, Lather’s resistance to “totalizing” and “universal” categories (and her subsequent assertions of indeterminacy) is revealed as a “legitimization of the class politics of an upper-middle-class Euroamerican feminism obsessed with the freedom of the entrepreneurial subject.”³⁷ In other words, the “master discourses of liberation” (such as whitestream feminism) ultimately work to privilege the desires of the white, bourgeois, female subject over the collective emancipation of all peoples.

Based on the texts considered for this review, it appears that whitestream feminism’s failure to engage more substantive analyses of power can mainly be attributed to the emergence of “ludic” postmodern and poststructural feminist theories. The capriciousness of such theories enables whitestream feminists to disregard the political imperatives of radical critique and to replace them with “poststructuralist assumptions about linguistic play, difference, and the priority of discourse.”³⁸ As a result, academic feminists have virtually transformed the feminist project into a textual practice that isolates language and ideas from their historical and materialist frames of reference.

The writings of whitestream feminists reviewed here provide various rationales for privileging the personal world of text over the so-called patriarchal world of social transformation. They claim that writing in an intimate voice, about local knowledges, and with partial understanding is an act of resistance against the “masculinist voice” of universalization and truth, which depicts oppression in “essentialist” terms. Despite such claims, the rejection of “totalizing” narratives, particularly those that depict “oppressor” and “oppressed” in a binary relation, ultimately enables difference to be relativized and the power and ubiquity of totalizing projects such as colonization to be diminished. Indeed, it becomes impossible, if not profane, in whitestream feminism to speak of the relations of colonizer/colonized and oppressor/oppressed, as such language is viewed as the “residue of modernity” and patriarchal oppression.³⁹ Although they claim that they use postmodern tactics to put “emancipatory agendas under suspicion for their coercion, rationalism, and

37. Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After*, 31.

38. *Ibid.*, 3.

39. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore, *Feminism and Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 45.

universalism," these tactics ultimately serve the whitestream quest for absolution and desire more than they serve the projects of emancipation or decolonization.

In the final analysis, feminist pedagogies that merely assert the equality of female power and desire are accomplices to the projects of colonialism and global capitalism. As an indigenous woman, I understand such discourse as a "theory of property holders," of privileged subjects unwilling to examine their own complicity in the ongoing project of colonization. Until feminism's participation in the forces of domination is widely acknowledged, indigenous and other colonized women will continue to resist its premises.