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"Women's Studies vs. Tradition: New Directions for Academics"

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Talk by Gloria Kaufman, November 16, 1984
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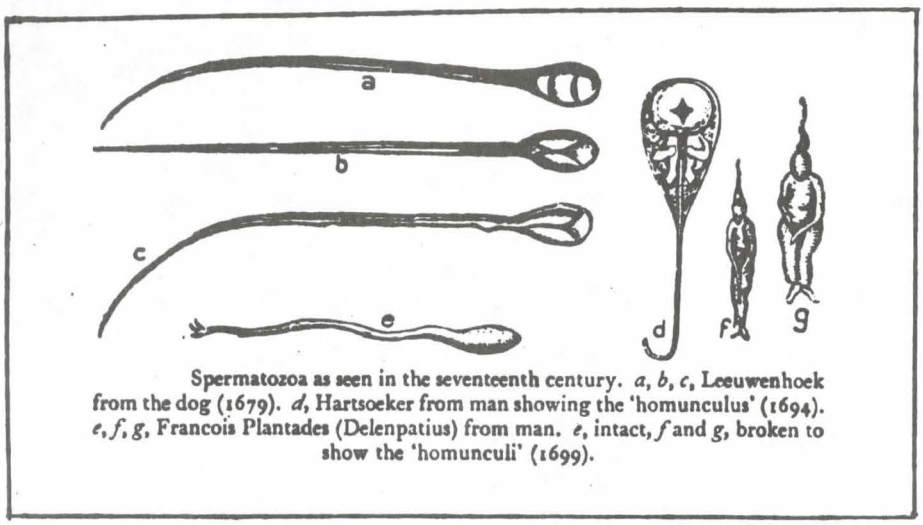
What is happening in Women's Studies programs around the world is deeply significant for the university as a whole. A wealth of new material now exists, thanks to feminist scholarship of the past 15 years--new material that casts old perceptions in very different lights, and new material that will change our perceptions of ourselves and our world. Additionally, feminist scholars are introducing new methods and new ways of thinking that will inevitably have profound impact on the scholarly world as a whole.

One of the most important and obvious ways in which feminists propose new ways of thinking relates to traditional ideas of objectivity. Although many traditional scholars have perhaps known that objectivity does not exist, they have decided to pretend that it does. Feminist scholars identify that pretense as an impediment to understanding. Let's see how the concept of objectivity has operated in the sciences.



Spermatozoa as seen in the seventeenth century. *a*, *b*, *c*, Leeuwenhoek from the dog (1679). *d*, Hartsoeker from man showing the 'homunculus' (1694). *e*, *f*, *g*, Francois Plantades (Delenpatius) from man. *e*, intact, *f* and *g*, broken to show the 'homunculi' (1699).

Diagram from A History of Biology by Charles Singer (Abelard-Schuman, 1959).

When Leeuwenhoek invented the microscope, some of the scientists who placed spermatozoa on their slides saw a little man, the homunculus, in the head of the sperm, and they even drew it, as the diagram shows. The drawings of homunculi are scientific, i.e., objective evidence that homunculi exist. Of course today we know that sperms do not carry homunculi, but the question remains, how did Hartsoeker and Plantades manage to see them under the microscope? They saw them because they believed they were there. Aristotle in the 4th century B.C. proposed that man is the perpetrator of the child (and that woman is little more than the incubator). Why did Aristotle propose so unlikely a theory? We cannot of course know. Greek intellectuals in 5th century B.C. Athens were terribly upset that inferior women had been singled out, rather than men, to give birth. Their views were neatly satirized by Euripides in his Hippolytus. A century later Aristotle mollified continuing male distress by stating, in Generation of Animals, that the male "provides the 'form' and the 'principle of movement'" for offspring whereas the "female provides the body, in other words the material." He later introduces the analogy of a carpenter (the male) making a bedstead (the child) from wood (the female). (Aristotle, 101, 103, 109, 113). For Aristotle the male is the creator in the birth process. There is no scientific or objective reason why Aristotle should be considered an authority on this (and on other matters), but I assure you that my academic career as a student is studded with incidents in which august professors have admonished me that it is unbecoming and unacceptable to question the authority of Aristotle. "Unbecoming" I can see, but "unacceptable"? From Aristotle onward, men comfortably knew that they provided the form of the child, while the woman provided only the gross material. Aristotle's hypothesis was taught as science, as fact. Far from being objective,

however, his notion was determined wholly by gender politics. The scientific drawings of the homunculi also came about because Hartsoeker and Plantades saw what they wanted to see. The homunculus is not exceptional. It is paradigmatic of scientific research.

Scientists begin by designing experiments to test out or to verify their hunches and theories. Those hunches and theories are far from objective. The scientist is, moreover, usually quite passionate about his theories, and as we see with epicycles in astronomy, the last thing he will do when evidence refutes a theory is to abandon it. The Ptolemic theory in astronomy proposed that the sun and the other planets revolved around the earth. For more than 1,000 years, as that system held sway, astronomers gathered data contradicting it. Rather than abandon the theory, scientists kept adding more epicycles to their charts to explain variations and to make the numbers come out right. That is typical of the scientist, his attitude toward fact, and his idea of objectivity. By the time of Copernicus the astromonical charts were so turgid and unwieldy that it was impossible to continue adding epicycles. Long after evidence refuted an obsolete theory, scientists (subjectively committed to it) had continued to market it as objective truth supported by data. We see the same thing happening today as physicists keep proposing new particles to explain inconsistencies in the atomic theory.

When scientists deal with data on gender, their biases are particularly pronounced: "There is no doubt," said James Hunt, President of the London Anthropological Society in 1863, "that the Negro's brain bears a great resemblance to a European female or child's brain and thus approaches the ape far more than the European, while the Negress approaches the ape still nearer." (Bleier, 49-50). Hunt's hypothesis--for which he harbors "no

doubt"--is clearly the product of his own biases about black people, women, and children. In her new study, Science and Gender, Ruth Bleier demonstrates again and again how scientists discover evidence to verify prevailing prejudices about male superiority. Bleier writes:

> During the last half of the nineteenth century, neuroanatomists believed that the frontal lobes of the human brain accounted for the highest mental and intellectual human functions. Scientists then reported that the frontal lobes of men were more highly developed than those of women, who had relatively larger parietal lobes. Near the turn of the century, newer calculations of neuroanatomists pointed to the parietal lobes, rather then the frontal lobes, as the seat of the intellect. It did not take long for the leading anatomists of the period to "discover" that women's parietal lobes were not really larger and their frontal lobes smaller than men's, as had been thought, but quite the reverse.... (Bleier, 50).

The 'discovery' that science is not objective is not new. First-rate scientists have always known this, and indeed I was taught so much by Geneva Sayre[1] with whom I studied the history and philosophy of science in the late 1940s. What is new about the feminist critique is its insistence that the subjectivity of scientists be taken into account because it affects their research in many ways.

In discussing scientists' attitudes toward the material they investigate, Evelyn Fox Keller identifies a "preoccupation with power and dominance in scientific discourse." (Keller, 18). She writes: "Problems, for many scientists, are things to be 'attacked,' 'licked,' or 'conquered.' ... In the effort to 'master' nature, to 'storm her strongholds and castles,' science can come to sound like a battlefield." She quotes Ernest Schachtel, who wrote in 1959, "Perception ... may become almost an act of aggressive violence in which the perceiver, like Procrustes with his hapless victims, cuts off those aspects of the object which he cannot use for his purposes." (Keller, 20). Other feminist scientists have noted that attitudes of dominance and control pervade laboratory science. The scientist must master and control the inferior objects he uses in his

[1] Now at the Farlow research laboratories, Harvard University.

experiments. "My argument," states Keller, "is that the particular kinds of aggression expressed in scientific discourse reflect not simply the absence of a felt connection to the objects one studies, but the actual subjective experience of attempting to secure the separation of self from the more immediate objects of one's emotional world." (Keller, 21). Feminist scientists argue that the traditional pretense that the scientists are unrelated to the objects they study impedes vision.

I am focusing on science for the moment, but it is important to stress that feminist scientists, like other feminist scholars, are cross-disciplinary intellectuals. Thus Keller, in her discussions of the philosophy of science will quote Catherine A. MacKinnon, a law professor, and Hester Eisenstein, a feminist theorist, who asked, "Is objectivity a codeword for male domination?" (Keller, 18). The emphasis on context--social, political, personal, intellectual--that we find in feminist scholarship exists in feminist scientists.

Perhaps the most exciting part of the feminist critique of science is found in suggestions for new methodologies. Evelyn Fox Keller suggests that we use a "dynamic objectivity..., a pursuit of knowledge that makes use of subjective experience in the interests of greater objectivity." While traditional scientists in their analyses separate things OUT, the truths they are seeking may involve the very elements they exclude. Feminist science proposes more complex, often highly complicated procedures that will be more responsive to the intricacies of the world as it actually exists. In Keller's words, we must "actively draw on, rather than reject, the sense of commonality between mind and nature as a resource for understanding" (Keller, 20). She is thus proposing a new way for scientists to think.

I have dwelt on the non-objectivity of science because even though most scientists (i.e., the good ones) do not pretend to be objective, other intellectuals and scholars mistakenly believe that science is objective, and that their disciplines can similarly be objective and scientific. If pure science itself has not been, and cannot wholly be, objective, where does this leave the social sciences and the humanities? In humanistic disciplines, scholars deal constantly with materials we call 'evidence' and we teach our students--rightly, I think--that they must come to terms with evidence.

One of the troubles with presentations of evidence, from a feminist perspective, is that all available evidence is rarely considered much less presented. Scholars make judgments and choices as to what evidence is interesting and important. "Interesting" should not be a criterion, but it has been. "Important" is a legitimate criterion, but it does raise the question, important to whom? The history of scholarship shows that male scholars have been largely disinterested in evidence related to women (and to men who profess views they disagree with), and it also shows that evidence about contributions of major women artists, thinkers, and civil leaders to civilization has been considered unimportant. On the basis of personal interests and biases, they have excluded women from what they claim is human history.

In 1976 Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris organized an exhibition entitled "Women Artists: 1550-1950." The exhibition presented irrefutable evidence that women artists had indeed been painting from Renaissance to modern times and that they indeed had made notable contributions to art and to art history. Until the time of the Nochlin exhibitions, art historians in the U.S. had taught that there were essentially no significant women

artists. The next thing they said, once evidence belied such a contention, was that women were followers, and that they were never the cutting edge of new movements in art. Patricia Mainardi laid that false claim to rest when she pointed out that women's quilts were formidible works of art that predated 20th century "abstract expressionism." (Mainardi, 1973). In contemporary art, many male artists are following their female counterparts by working in soft sculpture. Marisol Escobar is nothing if not "cutting edge," and while the art establishment has recognized her as a major contemporary sculptor, I have not noticed that art historians during the 50s and 60s rushed to proclaim her as the major innovator that she is. I hope I am wrong.

The contention that there have been no important women composers is now being successfully challenged by feminist musicologists. During the past five years, there have been a sizeable number of concerts presenting works of women composers of both past and present. Recordings are coming out in increasing numbers also. Here is the evidence, we say. The establishment can no longer ignore or deny our facts.

This kind of activity is happening in most disciplines, as feminist scholars do REVISIONIST work, correcting the historical record. Many traditional scholars have greeted our work with interest and delight. To learn is, after all, one of the greatest of human pleasures. Those of us trained in traditional programs have been unaware of the biases of our teachers and unaware that we have absorbed them ourselves. It is truly exciting to discover that our knowledge has been radically delimited by narrowness in our training and then to transcend those limitations.

In Women's Studies we have found, however, that revisionist work is not enough. What we call the "add-women-and-stir" approach is merely a

necessary FIRST step for arriving at a total picture. ("Add-women-and-stir" also implies that we must add children, add minorities, and add other major groups that have been excluded from concern.)

Revisionism is not enough because modes of thinking and methodologies must also be changed or in some cases abandoned. In literary studies, for example, notions of hierarchy taint the thinking of traditional scholars and critics. The idea that the epic is a greater literary form and more important than a sonnet sequence or than lyric poems is arbitrary and delimiting. The idea that a novel is more important than a book of essays and that a collection of essays is more important than a journal is similarly arbitrary and nonsensical. A great writer may express her or his most important ideas in any literary form, journal as well as short-story, essay as well as novel, and the contents of the work, along with its artistic execution, will determine how good and how important the work is--not the form the writer chose$.

In literature courses, we teach students how to analyze all kinds of materials, literary and otherwise. In the past, those of us who have taught Platonic dialogues have, for the most part, uncritically accepted the Socratic method displayed there as a sound method of analysis. Now is the time for all good feminist critics to come forward and state that the method is highly flawed because of its exclusionary nature. The paradigm is, in dialogue between Socrates and Crito: "Well Crito, if you believe A, then you must also believe B or C. Which is it, B or C?" When I started reading Plato at the young age of 18, I immediately responded, "No. If I believe A, then I might also believe B or C or D or E or F or perhaps other things." My intelligence was offended by an arbitrary (and usually) dualistic restriction to B or C. My professors, however, had no possible way to

accommodate my objection, because the dialogue could not continue if, at the outset, its method of analysis ~~was~~ were judged inadequate. That method was and is both inadequate and invalid, no matter how greatly traditional scholarship admires Plato.

One contemporary consequence of Socratic narrowness can be seen in our legal system and its court procedures. On the witness stand an attorney often poses questions that must be answered "yes" or "no," either of which is misleading. The witness who tries to explain, i.e., to tell the truth, is interrupted, and often the judge collaborates with the examining attorney by directing the witness to respond yes or no. The attorney (prosecuting or defense) then builds upon a misleading or untrue response to serve his or her own ends. The method is invalid and should be unacceptable in court systems supposedly designed to serve truth and justice.

When feminist scholars question modes of thinking (as I have done about the Socratic method of analysis), the implications are far-reaching and (on the academic scene) certainly cross-disciplinary. Another impact of feminist scholarship, therefore, is to increase interest in interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary programs. The nature of women's studies today is so cross-disciplinary that our basic courses no longer fit in any department. It is therefore necessary that Women's Studies design methods of dealing with diverse kinds of evidence from various disciplines, and we are doing so. Deborah Rosenfelt has put forth a persuasive argument that Women's Studies "is in the process of constituting itself" as a separate discipline. (Rosenfelt, 167). Yet at this juncture Women's Studies faces formidable tasks. New feminist scholarship, albeit in its infancy, has already produced so much material of major import and consequence for almost every traditional discipline, that those disciplines cannot remain

solid without incorporating the new scholarship. Women's Studies scholars are therefore involved in introducing their materials into traditional cirricula. No less urgently, however, women's studies must go forward with its own agendas, as a separate discipline, in many new and exciting directions. How to do both is a major challenge.

To what extent are traditional disciplines affected by the new feminist scholarship? It varies, but in many areas the impact is major and profound. In psychology, for example, feminists have called into question a substantial amount of research done prior to 1970. To state the problem crudely, in seeking to understand human nature, psychologists for the most part studied white males (women were regarded as unreliable informants), and the results were generalized to describe human nature. The method is no longer regarded as sound, but there is still an enormous amount of uncorrected literature that is cited and used in the profession. Thus in a 1984 essay, Miriam Lewin observes:

> "I myself...have done an analysis of the Femininity Scale on the widely used Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. The Femininity scale was originally 'validated' on thirteen gay men! (Yes, really.) Of course, it is not valid." (Lewin, 8).

A good summary of the feminist critique of psychology is given by Arnold Kahn and Paula J. Jean:

> When psychology first became the object of feminist inquiry, there was widespread agreement about its faults: that women were infrequently studied; that theories were constructed from a male-as-normative viewpoint and that women's behavior was explained as deviation from the male standard; that the stereotype of women was considered an accurate portrayal of women's behavior; that women who fulfilled the dictates of the gender stereotype were viewed as healthy and happy; that differences in the behaviors of women and men were attributed to differences in anatomy and physiology; and that the social context which often shapes behavior was ignored in the case of women. (Kahn and Jean, 659-660).

The impact of feminist research and analysis on psychology has been considerable, and it will be dealt with by another presentation in this series.

The greatest resistance to women's studies is perhaps in the area of language. Wendy Martyna writes: "The media still haven't gotten the message: the case against sexist language was not constructed as comic relief for critics of women's liberation," and, "Despite the acceleration of academic attention to feminist concerns, the same misinterpretations of the sexist language issue often characterize the reactions of both Harvard professors and advice columnists." (Martyna, 25).

Feminist concern with language grows out of the political observation that language is being used to legitimize male supremacy. For example, in a traditional Roman Catholic liturgical passage declaring that Christ sacrificed Himself "for you and all men," it was proposed in 1979 that the Church change the word "men" to "people." The American bishops voted to retain "men." Kenneth A. Briggs wrote in the November 15 New York Times, "The decision by the American Roman Catholic bishops to retain the word 'men' in official church liturgy has stunned and saddened many elements in the church...." The bishops, however, wanted to signify by their language that Christ preferred male to female, and that Roman Catholic women were not equal to men in their church. They did so signify.

Even though much of academia ignores or resists work done on language in the 1970s, language studies are pushing forward with ambitious and exciting new projects for the 1980s and beyond. A good summary of the work of language scholars can be found in the introductory essay to Language, Gender and Society by Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley (1983). It also provides an annotated bibliography of language studies in which there are hundreds of

entries showing how language helps to define, deprecate, and exclude women. (166-215).

Language allows us to conceptualize woman-hating by having a word for it--misogyny--whereas language makes it difficult to conceptualize man-hating by having no word for it. (Joanna Russ has obligingly coined a word--misandry--for man-hating. Wouldn't it be edifying if both words died from lack of use?) Although societies have for centuries promoted the double sexual standard and have encouraged men to be sexually promiscuous, a 1977 study by Julia Penelope Stanley records 220 words for a sexually promiscuous woman and only 22 terms for such a man. (Thorne et al., 9). In her study of thesauruses, Marilyn French shows the repeated associations of positively charged words with the concept of masculine and the repeated association of negatively charged words with the concept of feminine. For "strength" and "weakness" in a 1937 Thesaurus, some of the entries we find are:

Strength: -mighty, vigorous, forcible, powerful, potent, valid.
-irresistible, invincible, impregnable, indominitable.
-manly, manlike, masculine, male, virile, able-bodied.

Weakness: -feeble, impotent, powerless, weakly, flaccid, nervous.
-soft, effeminate, feminate, womanish.
-frail, fragile, brittle, flimsy, crazy, sickly, infirm.

(French, 336).

It is natural and necessary for feminist scholars to protest such blatantly political use of language. Women are neither weak nor powerless. The feminine principle is not impotent nor is it fragile.

The dispute is profoundly centered in the power of definition. Who has the power to define? And the dispute also centers on the definition of "power," which feminists regard as something different from the exercise of control and the exhibition of dominance. Thus Nancy Hartsock refers to "power understood as energy and initiative" (Hartsock, 17), and she

discusses power in terms of collective strength used for constructive activity. The ability to negotiate and to bring people to agreement is another important kind of power that recent studies show (however rightly or wrongly) is valued and possessed by women to a greater degree than by men. A feminist view of power proposes that the individuals in a group of people can all share power, under good circumstances, without having anyone in the group in control. Feminism further raises the question as to whether people who dominate have meaningful power over those they oppress.

The power to define and to classify is something we must address. "Classifications and categorizations of groups of people by other groups have always been for the benefit of the group who is doing the classifying and to the detriment of the classified group." (Lindsey, 85). Struggle over language is inevitable in that language is a primary tool in definition. Antifeminist language is not value free. It is another powerful mode of repression and oppression. Language studies in the 1970s have established so much beyond doubt.

Who, then, is to define women? Today, women are claiming the right and the power to define themselves, and we thus stand in opposition to traditional definitions of women that have been established by male thinkers with clearly biased beliefs in male superiority and supremacy. Is woman, as Aristotle said, a "deformed" male? (Generation of Animals). Not likely. Is she, "defective and misbegotten" as Thomas Aquinas defined her? (Summa Theologica). Not likely. Is she "the devil's gateway" as Tertullian defined her? (De Cultu Feminarum). The profusion of negative definitions of women by men has led to a language in which it is easy and natural to denigrate women. It led Otto Jespersen to observe, in his introduction to The Growth and Structure of the English Language that English is "the most

positively and expressly masculine" of all languages he knew, and that it "is the language of a grown-up man, with very little childish or feminine about it." (Jespersen, 1).

Jespersen's diction in describing the English language is not neutral or objective, but highly colored with bias against women and children. His usage is not properly discursive but improperly metaphorical. "Feminine," "childish," and "masculine" are imprecise terms inappropriately used to describe language. Traditional scholars who enjoy privileges of male supremacy at the academy and who insist on their own objectivity do not call to question highly charged imprecise language when it is used to express biases against women. There is thus a double standard in language usage and a double standard in objectivity. Traditional scholars want feminists (who do not claim to be objective) to use language that is neutral, whereas they freely use biased language that excludes or that denigrates women, and they do so on a regular basis.

The feminist stance in attacking the double standard of objectivity is complex. On the one hand, we are obligated to point out that traditional scholarship is neither objective nor value-free, as it claims to be. But we do not accept its assumption that it can or that it should be objective. We believe that each of us has biases and agendas (sometimes hidden), and that we should be <u>aware</u> of our biases so that we can see how they affect our work. When they affect our research negatively, when they obscure reality and delimit our accuracy, then we must strenuously work against our biases to arrive at results that move <u>in the direction</u> of truth. In many cases we thus strive toward the traditional stance of objectivity, although we know we cannot wholly achieve that stance. In other cases, however, feminists find that a feeling relationship to the people or the phenomena they

investigate is preferable to a cold and disengaged (objective) view. Thus to appreciate and scientifically to describe the survival problems of the Mataco Indians, it can be useful to have our emotions engaged to a degree. If we care, we are likely to pose questions we might otherwise overlook. When we care, we tend to be better listeners and observers. This is what Keller means, in part, when she advocates "dynamic objectivity" as using "subjective experience in the interests of greater objectivity." (Keller, 20).

Let us be clear that traditional objectivity is a matter of politics. Whom and what we study is based upon personal choice. The decision to study male leaders rather than male followers, women, and children--the decision to study the destruction of wars rather than the rebuilding that follows--those are choices that affect society's perceptions about significant human activity. Thus traditional scholarship makes political selections to start out with, and in spite of its denials, it has been as political in its decisions not to study women as feminist scholars are political in our decision to study women. The difference is a matter of proclamation--the traditionalist claiming neutrality, the feminist admitting the politics or biases that lead him and her to chosen concerns. The stance of the feminist scholar in the classroom is therefore sometimes very different from that of the traditionalist.

Yet traditional scholars claiming objectivity can be, in my experience, quite emotional and unabashedly passionate (before students and elsewhere) when they rise to the defense of current language use and particularly the use of generic "man." There are many studies that put generic man in disrepute. Ten years ago the American Anthropological Association advised its members that the generic masculine was "conceptually confusing." (1974

January NEWSLETTER, 12). Evidence does show that people who use it suffer from conceptual confusion. In the New York Times Magazine (February 17, 1972), Erich Fromm describes generic man's "vital interests" as "life, food, access to females," etc. Clearly he does not include woman in his sense of generic man. Indeed, many men who think they are using generic man, display the Fromm-paradigm. For them humanity is man, is masculine, and women truly do not count. The persistence of such a viewpoint then leads such thinkers to conceive neutral words like "people," "citizens," and "persons" as referring to adult males. Thus in a TV commercial on the TODAY show, Frank McGee said, "People won't give up power. They'll give up anything else first--money, home, wife, children--but not power." McGee's words exhibit the common linguistic pattern in which women and children are not people. Such thinking allows the U.S. Supreme Court to make decisions effectively denying equal protection of the laws to women--protection granted to "citizens" and "persons" in 14th Amendment language. Yet "women" are held to be excluded from those categories. One consequence of the use of generic man, then, is our thinking that generic is masculine and our using inclusive words like "people" to mean only men. Thus in 1915, Alice Duer Miller published a book entitled "Are Women People?" In 1982, things were no different. A women's studies student innocently asked a professor if women could really vote in a country described as having "universal" suffrage. "Of course not!" the professor responded with uplifted eyebrow at so stupid a question. "Universal" obviously excluded women. Women who want equal legal rights must concern themselves with language. It is in no way a trivial issue.

Women's Studies began with the simple idea that it was important, in considering questions about humanity, to include all of humanity. In

pursuing that end, however, it discovered the including women was not enough, that we also have to think in different ways. As women's studies researchers seek out both new materials and new modes of thought, we are closely in touch with the exhilarating curiosity about ourselves and our world that stimulated the entire enterprise of higher education. We invite our traditional colleagues to join us, in the spirit of high adventure that has always characterized the pursuit of truth, to share our new-found exhilaration and thus to revitalize their own.

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