

*Fifth Edition*

# FEMINIST FRONTIERS

*Laurel Richardson*



*Verta Taylor*



*Nancy Whittier*

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# **FEMINIST FRONTIERS 5**

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## FEMINIST FRONTIERS

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# A B O U T   T H E   A U T H O R S

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LAUREL RICHARDSON has multiple attachments to The Ohio State University. She is Professor Emerita of Sociology, Adjunct Professor of Women's Studies, and Visiting Distinguished Professor of Cultural Studies. She has published seven books and over 100 articles. Her most recent book, *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* (Rutgers University Press, 1997), tells the story of her strategies to create a university that is more inviting to women and minorities. The book has been multiply honored, including being the recipient of the prestigious C. H. Cooley award.

VERTA TAYLOR is Professor of Sociology and a member of the Graduate Faculty of the Center for Women's Studies at The Ohio State University, where she teaches courses on gender, women's studies, and social movements. She has won numerous teaching awards at Ohio State, including a University Distinguished Teaching Award, and a multicultural teaching award. She also received the Sociologists for Women in Society's Mentoring Award and served as Feminist Lecturer for Sociologists for Women in Society. In addition, she has served as chair of the Section on Sex and Gender, the Section on Collective Behavior and Social Movements, and the Committee on the Status of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Sociologists of the American Sociological Association. She has written and co-authored many books, and her writings have appeared in numerous scholarly collections and in journals such as *Signs*, *Gender & Society*, *The American Sociological Review*, *Social Problems*, and the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

NANCY WHITTIER is Associate Professor of Sociology and a member of the Women's Studies Program Committee at Smith College. She teaches courses on gender, social movements, queer politics, and research methods. She is the author of *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement*, which traces the evolution of radical feminism over the past 25 years and examines intergenerational differences within the women's movement. Her work on the women's movement, social movement culture and collective identity, and activist generations has appeared in numerous scholarly collections and journals. She is currently working on a book about the gender politics of the movement against child sexual abuse and its opponents, co-editing a volume on new directions in social movement theory, and co-editing (with Verta Taylor) a book on gender and social movements.

# P R E F A C E

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The first edition of *Feminist Frontiers* was conceived in the late 1970s, at a time when many women inside and outside academia were beginning to recognize and challenge male domination. At the time of its publication, only a handful of books and anthologies written for classroom use presented a feminist perspective on women's status. The evolution of this book through five editions reflects both the successes of the women's movement and the development of feminist scholarship over the past three decades. Women's studies courses have blossomed and spread to campuses in even the most conservative regions of the country. Feminist scholars in the meantime have refined and enlarged our understanding of how gender inequality operates and how it intersects with other systems of domination based on race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and sexuality. There is no doubt that the situation of women has changed since the publication of the first edition of *Feminist Frontiers*. Gender inequality has not, however, disappeared.

With pride and excitement we write this preface to *Feminist Frontiers 5*. We are proud to be part of the continuing women's movement; we are excited by the burgeoning of knowledge about how gender is connected to race, class, sexuality, nationality, and other differences. We feel fortunate to be writing, teaching, and learning at a time when feminist thought and research are flourishing and deepening. It is simultaneously a time to enjoy the bounty of feminist scholarship and to sow new feminist seeds. We are proud as well that this book is the collective effort of scholars from two different feminist generations. We have enjoyed our collaboration across intellectual and generational perspectives, and we think that it has enriched the book.

We developed this book for use as the major or supplementary text in courses on the sociology of women, women's studies, gender studies, or sex roles. In addition, because the book offers a general framework for analyzing women's status, it can be used as a supplementary text in introductory sociology courses and in courses on social problems, foundations of society, comparative studies, and American studies. Although we have retained some of the articles from previous editions of *Feminist Frontiers*, particularly writings that have become feminist classics, the book has been comprehensively updated to include the most recent scholarship on gender; approximately half of the readings are new to this edition. We have selected readings that continue to emphasize the diversity of women's experiences and multicultural perspectives, while strengthening several sections and bringing in the most current issues in feminist scholarship, including more thorough coverage of men and masculinity.

*Feminist Frontiers 5* is organized into four parts, each introduced by a sociological-feminist analysis. Part One, "Introduction," begins with a section representing the diversity of women's experiences and gender systems. Its section on "Theoretical Perspectives" presents engaging and accessible feminist theoretical approaches. Part Two, "Gender, Culture, and Representation," has two sections, "Representation, Language, and Culture," and "Socialization." The five sections of Part Three, "Social Organization of Gender," provide readings on work, families, sexuality, bodies and medicine, and violence against women. Part Four, "Social Change," includes articles on politics and the state and on social protest and the feminist movement.

The new edition has considerably strengthened coverage of culture and representation. The expanded section on "Representation, Language, and Culture" contains many new selections that improve our coverage of television, mass media, intersections of race and gender in representation, and beauty standards. We have also added a selection by Judith Butler in Section Two ("Theoretical Perspectives") that covers performative theories of gender, which will be useful to instructors who want to cover representation at a more theoretically sophisticated level. This selection is easily omitted for lower-level courses.

Throughout the book, we have added new selections that reflect the most current research on such topics as racialized masculinity, cosmetic surgery, talk shows, media images of Asian Americans, child-raising in egalitarian families, affirmative action, women in the trades, peer marriage, men and sexuality, medical treatment of intersexual children, rape prevention, boys and violence, electoral politics, sweatshop labor, queer politics, men's movements, and third-wave feminism. We have added many new boxed inserts that keep the text lively and raise important issues not dealt with in the regular selections. Although the book's core focus remains on women and gender, we have added articles in every section dealing with men and masculinity and/or both men and women.

In addition, we have updated the book to reflect the activism and perspectives of third-wave feminism. We have added coverage of third-wave organizing in the last section ("Social Protest and the Feminist Movement") and have added throughout the volume pieces by third-wave authors and pieces dealing with the experiences of recent generations.

As we set about selecting articles for this edition, we found an abundance of excellent pieces. We used the following criteria for choosing what to include: First, we wanted each selection to be engagingly written and accessible in style and language to readers from different disciplinary backgrounds. Second, as a testament to the tremendous growth in depth and understanding of feminist scholarship, we sought selections exploring a wide range of theoretical and

substantive issues. Third, we wanted the anthology to reflect a diversity of racial, ethnic, generational, sexual, and cultural experiences. Fourth, we sought to capture the cross-disciplinary nature of gender research. The result is a collection that links well-written and significant articles within a general feminist sociological perspective.

We gratefully acknowledge the support, skill, and help of many people. We extend thanks to contribution authors, not only for writing the selected pieces but also for allowing us to reprint them here. At McGraw-Hill, we especially thank our editorial director, Phil Butcher, for believing in and supporting this project; Sally Constable, our sponsoring editor, for her encouragement and help in shaping the book; and Kathy Blake, developmental editor, for shepherding the book through its development. We also thank Mary Conzachi for overseeing the final manuscript through editing and production, and Fred Courtright, permissions editor. Amber Ault was instrumental in shaping some section introductions for the third edition of the book; we appreciate her contributions. Nicole Raeburn provided invaluable research assistance on earlier editions of the book, and we continue to be grateful for her work on revising the Instructor's Manual. Rose Foster, Betsy Kaminski, Meg Chilton, and Morgan Lynn provided clerical support and feedback from students' perspectives. In addition, Mary Margaret Fonow and Claire Robertson have given us valuable feedback on their teaching experiences with earlier editions of *Feminist Frontiers*. Finally, we express our appreciation to students in our classes on the sociology of women, sex and gender, and women's studies at Smith College and Ohio State University. They have contributed to the development of this anthology by their thoughtful responses to proposed articles.

The following scholars served as reviewers for *Feminist Frontiers* 4 or 5, and we thank them for their expert and generous comments: Kal Alston, University of Illinois; Lisa Brush, University of Pittsburgh; Mary Ann Clawson, Wesleyan University; Naomi Gerstel, University of Massachusetts; Tace Hedrick, University of Florida; Elizabeth Higginbotham, University of Memphis; Valerie Jenness,

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*Laurel Richardson  
Verta Taylor  
Nancy Whittier*

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# PART ONE

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## Introduction

**What is gender?** Consider your answers to that question now, and again at the end of this course. To answer the question requires thinking about what it means to individuals to be men or women and how these meanings affect the ways we interact with each other, the kinds of relationships we form, our positions in our communities. It also entails thinking about the institutions that distribute power, resources, and status among various groups of women and men.

What does it mean to be a woman? Thinking about women's experiences is a complicated task because women have as many differences from each other as commonalities. On the one hand, women everywhere suffer restrictions, oppression, and discrimination because they are living in patriarchal societies. Yet gender is not the sole influence on any woman's life. Differences of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, nation, region, and religion shape women's experiences. Moreover, these differences intersect with each other. For example, Asian-American women of various ages, sexual orientations, classes, and ethnic and national origins, have different experiences.

The experience of being a woman may be quite different for distinct groups of women. For a white, upper-class, heterosexual American woman, for example, femininity might entail being economically dependent on her husband, perfecting a delicate and refined physical appearance, and achieving social influence through child-raising and volunteer work. Womanhood for a middle-class African-American woman might mean providing financial support for her children, holding influential and respected positions within her church and community, yet being stereotyped by the dominant white culture as sexually promiscuous or unintelligent. For a Mexican immigrant to the United States, femininity might mean being a good mother—which, as Denise Segura suggests in Reading 29, may mean working long hours in order to support her children.

The experiences of men are similarly varied. Although men benefit from power and privilege over women, some groups of men also exercise power over other men, while other men are excluded from economic or political influence. To understand the position of a particular man, we must consider his gender, race, class, sexuality, age, and so forth, in order to understand the particular advantages and disadvantages he faces.

In short, gender is defined in various ways for different groups. Gender definitions bring with them a distinct set of restrictions and disadvantages for members in each group, as well as privileges and sources of power or resistance. The task for you, as students, as for scholars of gender, is to recognize the patterns and persistence of male dominance while simultaneously recognizing these variations.

As if matters were not complex enough, feminist scholars also recognize that individuals have unique constellations of experiences. Each of us has our own story to tell. Each of us has multiple alliances and identifications with groups that shift through time and social context. The religious identity of childhood may be shunted aside during young adulthood, for example, only to be reclaimed in

later years. Self-definitions as heterosexual may give way later in life to new identities as lesbian or bisexual. As biracial or bicultural or mixed-religion daughters, we might identify with the heritage of either parent or both. Social forces such as sexism, racism, heterosexism, and class inequality shape our biographies, but it is as individuals that we experience and make sense of our lives. Individuals do not easily attribute our experiences to class, race, or gender as *separate* or *separable* entities. We rarely see our own biographies as sociohistorically situated.

The task of feminist scholarship, and of this volume, is to illuminate the social and structural roots of our gendered experiences while simultaneously recognizing the complicated and unique factors that shape our lives. Feminist research builds upon and links two levels of analysis: structure and biography. The *structural* level looks at social institutions and cultural practices that create and sustain gender inequalities and links those inequalities to other systems of oppression, such as racism, ageism, and homophobia. The *biographical* level honors each individual's expression of her own experience. It pays attention to how individuals represent themselves and recognizes personal voice. As a result, we can learn how difference and commonality are structurally rooted and personally experienced. We can see how larger social forces affect our own and others' lives.

Feminist research is not just about analyzing the ways that social structures shape and restrict the lives of women. Of course, it is important to document the inequalities faced by various groups of women and to examine the ways that women have been oppressed and victimized based on gender. Experiences such as discrimination in hiring and pay, sexual violence, and legal subordination, for example, are undeniably central to gender. Yet feminist scholarship also emphasizes the sources of power that women find: how they define themselves, influence their social contexts, and resist the restrictions that they face. The articles in this volume view women not as passive victims of patriarchal social structures but as actors who exercise control over their own lives, find pleasure and fulfillment, and resist social constraints.

Further, feminist research is not just about documenting women's experiences. It is about recognizing the ways that gender shapes the lives of both women and men and analyzing a broad system of gender. By documenting the influence of social structures and highlighting individuals' complex mixture of domination, resistance, and complicity, feminist scholarship leads us to rethink the structural changes needed to meet the needs of actual women and men.

Feminist theory and scholarship on gender, then, face a broad set of questions. The approaches to answering these questions vary enormously; we hope that you will recognize disagreement and debate, as well as cooperation, in the readings that follow. There are, however, some shared assumptions that run through the chapters in this book.

First, feminist scholars view gender as *pervasive*, as part of every feature of social life and individual identity. It is impossible, therefore, to analyze any part of social life as if it were gender neutral. As a result, feminist scholars challenge the male bias hidden under claims of scientific objectivity in academic research. As you read these articles and those in other classes, ask yourself how the social conditions and practices of doing research reinforce or challenge gender inequities.

Second, feminist researchers understand systems of oppression as *interlocking*. Race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other systems of domination affect how one experiences gender. Therefore, although gender is a basic fact of social life, women and men in different positions in society experience their gender and the power or oppression that results from it differently. Just as feminist researchers challenge knowledge claims about "people" based on research on men, they question knowledge about "women" based on research on white, middle-class women.

*Third*, feminist scholars experiment with new ways of doing research, rethinking the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Scientific research assumes that there is a separation between the scholar and the subjects of research and that this separation is necessary to produce “objective” and “valid” research. Feminist researchers challenge this tenet. Treating women as “objects” of research contravenes feminist goals of equality by elevating the researcher’s agenda and perspective above those of the researched. One of the major questions of feminist thought is how to do research that empowers both the researcher and the researched. How do we create social research practices in which researcher and researched collaborate in the process of interpreting the world? For some, the solution has been to write about their own lives; some acknowledge directly how their own biases affect their work; some study groups of which they are a part; others do “participatory” or “action” research in which the researcher and the researched determine together the topics, methods, goals, and political action to follow from the project, so that the scholar is a participant in the project, but not its leader.

These are not only theoretical concerns; they are important *ethical* questions. What right does a scholar have to write about another woman’s life? How should scholars write about the lives of those women and men who are different from themselves? How can feminist scholars use the skills and privileges of academic practice to diminish social inequality?

We invite you to engage in reading, thinking about, and doing feminist research. We hope that you will consider some of the central questions that run through this book. What are the commonalities and differences among women (or among men)? What, if anything, do women of different classes, races, or sexualities share in common? We hope you will reflect on the complicated balance between oppression and resistance, between the pervasive influence of the society and the ways that individuals and groups find to define themselves and carve out meaningful lives. We encourage you to discuss your ideas, to debate the issues this volume raises with your friends and classmates, to agree or disagree with the authors here, and to come to your own conclusions. We hope that through this engagement, you will consider how gender has shaped your life and how gender intersects with the other systems of inequality that affect you. We hope that you will share your understandings with others, becoming a researcher yourself and a theorist of your own and others’ lives so that you might help empower us all and transform society.

# Diversity and Difference

Conducting research about women has been the focus of feminist scholars from the 1960s to the present. In recent years, researchers have looked especially closely at the differences and commonalities among women and have also begun to examine how men's lives are shaped by cultural expectations of masculinity. Scholars are interested in learning about the rich complexities of how gender shapes women's and men's lives and in discovering ways of knowing that stand true to these experiences and also offer the prospect of effecting positive change. Women everywhere live with a ubiquitous "monotone" of male advantage, in all its manifestations. Yet differences among women arise from factors like race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, geographic region, and religion. Further, not all men possess the same advantages or social power. Men of subordinate racial or ethnic groups, classes, or sexual orientations may have power relative to women in their own group but are subordinate in some ways to other men and to women in more powerful groups.

Recognizing that women are not a homogeneous group raises questions about the basis of comparison and the grounds for affiliation among women. Can we even speak of "women" as a meaningful category, or is the diversity among women too great for any generalization? The readings in this section discuss points of similarity and difference among women and among men. They illustrate the vast range of meanings that gender has for women and men in different groups.

One source of commonality that has attracted and shaped feminist understanding is the idea of

*oppression*. As a concept, oppression has a long history in contemporary feminist scholarship. What does it mean? Why is it important to think about? The first selection, "Oppression," addresses these questions and raises some others. In that article, Marilyn Frye defines oppression as "living one's life confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction."

The multiple sources of interrelated oppressions make it difficult for people to recognize how the systems of oppression impinge on their lives or the lives of others. Knowing about the larger social forces helps one to understand the shape of one's life and the difference between "suffering" and "suffering from oppression." As you read the other articles in this section, can you use Frye's concept of oppression to think about the experiences they describe?

Whereas Frye emphasizes how structures of oppression constrict all women, the remaining readings in this section examine the distinctions among women's experiences. Rosalinda Méndez González discusses the history of the western United States from the point of view of women of various classes and ethnicities in "Distinctions in Western Women's Experience: Ethnicity, Class, and Social Change." She suggests that the traditional history of westward expansion across the frontier is the story of only one group of women, the "pioneer" settlers of European descent. Considering the lives of Indian, Mexican, and Chinese women means reconstructing

our understanding of the development of the West. This article illustrates the task of contemporary feminist researchers: to examine the experiences of diverse groups of women, consider the impact of class and race inequalities, and rethink the biased assumptions and histories that scholars have long taken for granted.

Paula Gunn Allen, similarly, suggests that assumptions about what it means to be a woman in Anglo-European culture do not hold in American Indian cultures. In "Where I Come From Is Like This," she draws on her bicultural experiences to explore the incongruity of the images of women embedded in Anglo and American Indian cultures. The images of American Indian women she grew up with are images of "practicality, strength, reasonableness, intelligence, wit, and competence," in contrast to non-Indian ideas about women as "passive and weak." Again, we see the difficulty of generalizing about women's experiences. What are the assumptions about women embedded in your own culture?

The next selection emphasizes the difficulties of accurately analyzing how systems of oppression affect peoples' lives. In "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Audre Lorde argues that feminists must critically examine their own use of dominant concepts in their analyses of women's lives. She suggests that academic knowledge is based in an institution that historically has excluded women and people of color, and asks whether academic knowledge can undermine the inequalities on which it is based. Do you think that the "regular" methods of scholarship and science are adequate to the task of understanding the diversity among women? Will new tools be necessary? Lorde argues that encouraging women to relate to each other at the points of their differences promotes growth, creativity, and social change. Do these conversations across differences happen on your campus?

In "Confessions of a Nice Negro" Robin D. G. Kelley shows that just as gender varies for different groups of women, men also are not an undifferentiated group. He examines the complex constructions of African-American masculinity, describing how the myth of Black men as hypermasculine justifies Whites' fear and repression of them. Kelley's mild-mannered intellectual persona means that he is perceived as a "nice Negro," accessible and safe to Whites, but is simultaneously defined as less than fully masculine. Despite his commitment to a gentle, nonsexist masculinity, Kelley describes his pleasure when others perceive him as dangerous after he shaves his head. Although the power to make Whites afraid is a false power, Kelley suggests that its appeal stems from the larger overlaps between masculinity and race. What are the varieties of African-American masculinity? What are some of the varieties of masculinity for White Americans, and how are these different? Can you think of examples of other racialized masculinities?

Peggy McIntosh describes "White Privilege and Male Privilege" as part of invisible systems of domination that not only penalize women and people of color but privilege men and whites. Documenting her own largely unrecognized white privilege helps her understand how she benefits from this system. She argues that members of dominant groups are taught to see themselves as individuals and to attribute their successes to merit. In fact, McIntosh argues that she benefits in her job and daily life from advantages due to race, not merit. How does her list of benefits from white privilege change your understanding of racism? What might a similar list for male privilege look like? If you are a member of a dominant group, can you construct a list of the benefits you receive by virtue of your race, gender, sexual orientation, or class? If you are a member of a subordinated group, can you list some of the ways you are disadvantaged?



## Oppression

MARILYN FRYE

It is a fundamental claim of feminism that women are oppressed. The word "oppression" is a strong word. It repels and attracts. It is dangerous and dangerously fashionable and endangered. It is much misused, and sometimes not innocently.

The statement that women are oppressed is frequently met with the claim that men are oppressed too. We hear that oppressing is oppressive to those who oppress as well as to those they oppress. Some men cite as evidence of their oppression their much-advertised inability to cry. It is tough, we are told, to be masculine. When the stresses and frustrations of being a man are cited as evidence that oppressors are oppressed by their oppressing, the word "oppression" is being stretched to meaninglessness; it is treated as though its scope includes any and all human experience of limitation or suffering, no matter the cause, degree, or consequence. Once such usage has been put over on us, then if ever we deny that any person or group is oppressed, we seem to imply that we think they never suffer and have no feelings. We are accused of insensitivity; even of bigotry. For women, such accusation is particularly intimidating, since sensitivity is one of the few virtues that have been assigned to us. If we are found insensitive, we may fear we have no redeeming traits at all and perhaps are not real women. Thus are we silenced before we begin: the name of our situation drained of meaning and our guilt mechanisms tripped.

But this is nonsense. Human beings can be miserable without being oppressed, and it is perfectly consistent to deny that a person or group is oppressed without denying that they have feelings or that they suffer. . . .

The root of the word "oppression" is the element "press." *The press of the crowd; pressed into military service; to press a pair of pants; printing press; press the button.* Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gases or liquids in them. Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict, or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce.

The mundane experience of the oppressed provides another clue. One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind—situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation. For example, it is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry, or dangerous. This means, at the least, that we may be found "difficult" or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one one's livelihood; at worst, being seen as mean, bitter, angry, or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating, and murder. One can only choose to risk one's preferred form and rate of annihilation.

Another example: It is common in the United States that women, especially younger women, are in a bind where neither sexual activity nor sexual inactivity is all right. If she is heterosexually active, a woman is open to censure and punishment for being loose, unprincipled, or a whore. The "punishment" comes in the form of criticism, snide and embarrassing remarks, being treated as an easy lay by men,

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