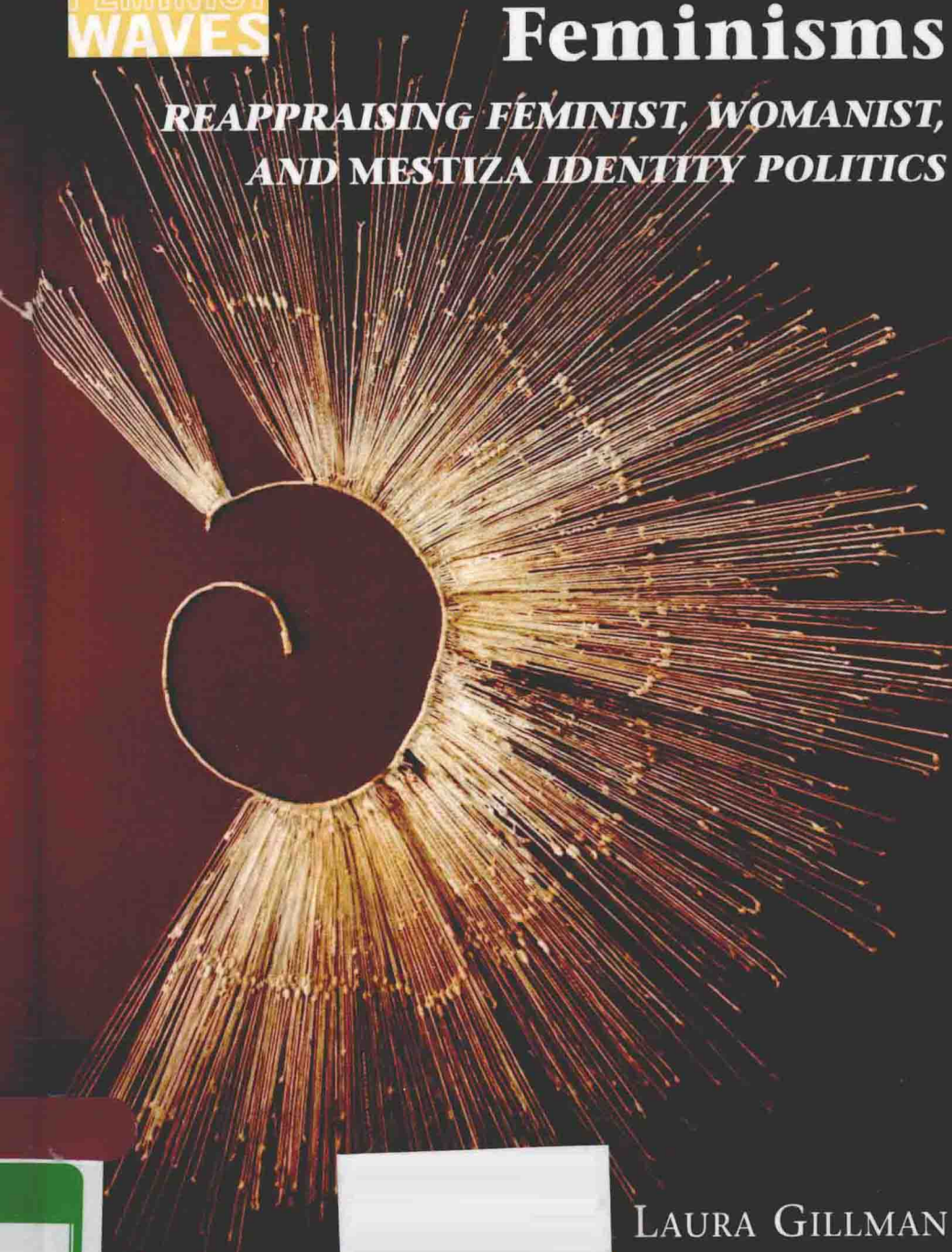


**BREAKING  
FEMINIST  
WAVES**

# Unassimilable Feminisms

*REAPPRAISING FÉMINIST, WOMANIST,  
AND MESTIZA IDENTITY POLITICS*



LAURA GILLMAN



# UNASSIMILABLE FEMINISMS

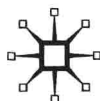
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Reappraising Feminist, Womanist, and  
*Mestiza* Identity Politics

*Laura Gillman*



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UNASSIMILABLE FEMINISMS

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Portions of chapter 2 originally appeared as "Beyond the Shadow: Re-scripting Race in Women's Studies." *Meridians* 7.2 (2007): 117–41.

Portions of chapter 6 originally appeared as "*Con un pie a cada lado/With a Foot in Each Place: Mestizaje as Transnational Feminisms in Ana Castillo's So Far from God*," with Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas. *Meridians* 2.1 (2001): 158–75. An abbreviated version of chapter 6 appeared as "Revisiting Identity Politics in Contemporary *Mestiza* Thought: The Case of *Domesticana*." In *Identity, Migration and Women's Bodies as Sites of Knowledge and Transgression*. Ed. Silvia Borrego and María Isabel Romero Ruiz. Oviedo, Spain: KRK Ediciones. 2009.

First published in 2010 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN: 978-0-230-62316-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: July 2010

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

# UNASSIMILABLE FEMINISMS

# BREAKING FEMINIST WAVES

## **Series Editors:**

**LINDA MARTÍN ALCOFF**, Hunter College and CUNY Graduate Center  
**GILLIAN HOWIE**, University of Liverpool

For the last twenty years, feminist theory has been presented as a series of ascending waves. This picture has had the effect of deemphasizing the diversity of past scholarship as well as constraining the way we understand and frame new work. The aim of this series is to attract original scholars who will offer unique interpretations of past scholarship and unearth neglected contributions to feminist theory. By breaking free from the constraints of the image of waves, this series will be able to provide a wider forum for dialogue and engage historical and interdisciplinary work to open up feminist theory to new audiences and markets.

**LINDA MARTÍN ALCOFF** is Professor of Philosophy at Hunter College and the City University of New York Graduate Center. Her books include *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* (2006); *The Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy* (co-edited with Eva Kittay, 2006); *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (co-edited with Moya, Mohanty, and Hames-Garcia, Palgrave 2006); and *Singing in the Fire: Tales of Women in Philosophy* (2003).

**GILLIAN HOWIE** is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Liverpool. She has edited *Gender, Teaching and Research in Higher Education* (2002); *Gender and Philosophy* (2003); *Third Wave Feminism* (Palgrave, 2004); *Menstruation* (Palgrave, 2005); *Women and the Divine* (Palgrave, 2008); and the forthcoming *Fugitive Ethics: Feminism and Dialectical Materialism*. She is the founder and director of the Institute for Feminist Theory and Research.

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Rivera Garza: Boob Lit*  
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*The Many Dimensions of Chinese Feminism*  
by Ya-Chen Chen

*I dedicate this book to my mother, Rosalie Gillman,  
and to the memory of my 'other' mother,  
Carmen (Cachita) Conchado Pita.*

## SERIES FOREWORD

*Breaking Feminist Waves* is a series designed to rethink the conventional models of what feminism is today, its past and future trajectories. For more than a quarter of a century, feminist theory has been presented as a series of ascending waves, and this has come to represent generational divides and differences of political orientation as well as different formulations of goals. The imagery of waves, while connoting continuous movement, implies a singular trajectory with an inevitably progressive teleology. As such, it constrains the way we understand what feminism has been and where feminist thought has appeared, while simplifying the rich and nuanced political and philosophical diversity that has been characteristic of feminism throughout. Most disturbingly, the imagery restricts the way we understand and frame new work.

This series provides a forum to reassess established constructions of feminism and of feminist theory. It provides a starting point to redefine feminism as a configuration of intersecting movements and concerns; with political commitment but, perhaps, without a singular center or primary track. The generational divisions among women do not actually correlate to common interpretive frameworks shaped by shared historical circumstances, but rather to a diverse set of arguments, problems, and interests affected by differing historical contexts and locations. Often excluded from cultural access to dominant modes of communication and dissemination, feminisms have never been uniform nor yet in a comprehensive conversation. The generational division, then, cannot represent the dominant divide within feminism, nor a division between essentially coherent moments; there are always multiple conflicts and contradictions, as well as differences about the goals, strategies, founding concepts, and starting premises.

Nonetheless; the problems facing women, feminists, and feminisms are as acute and pressing today as ever. Featuring a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, *Breaking Feminist Waves* provides a forum for comparative, historical, and interdisciplinary work, with special attention to the problems of cultural differences, language

and representation, embodiment, rights, violence, sexual economies, and political action. By rethinking feminisms' history as well as its present, and by unearthing neglected contributions to feminist theory, this series intends to unlock conversations between feminists and feminisms and to open up feminist theory and practice to new audiences.

—Linda Martín Alcoff and Gillian Howie



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a rewarding task to extend my gratitude to the many people who have provided me with help and support during the writing of this book and throughout my professional career. I was fortunate to receive an undergraduate education in Spanish at the University of California San Diego in the heyday of the *Chicana/o* movement. I want to thank two professors from that era, Ellen McCracken and Tomas Ybarra Frausto. It was in their classes that I initiated what was to become a lifelong passion for the Spanish language, literature, and culture, and learned what it meant to be a *gabacha*.

I have investigated the constructions of mistaken, imagined, and real identities in relation to values since the completion of my doctoral dissertation and first book, both of which focused on identity as a critique of humanism in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. But it was my appointment in Women's Studies and an ensuing move in 1998 from the Department of Foreign Languages to the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at my university that caused me to shift my research interests and teaching areas from Eurocentric to Americentric and global realities. Working within an interdisciplinary, ethnic studies context brought me into contact with a number of colleagues who have sustained me intellectually.

I would like to thank womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas for sharing with me the richness of her insights on the womanist identity. The collaboration that we shared in some form or another for close to a decade, culminating in the publication of her book, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (2006), allowed me to deepen my appreciation of the womanist vision. The Women and Gender Studies research group on Space, Place, Race, and Identity has encouraged me to develop a more interdisciplinary understanding of some of the ideas I developed in chapter 5 around migration, transnationalism, and identity. I thank the members of that group for revitalizing my thinking on these issues: Gena Chandler, Maria Elisa Christie, Minjeong Kim, Katy Powell, Emily Satterwhite, and Barbara Ellen Smith. Many other departmental colleagues and affiliates including

Ingrid Banks, Toni Calasanti, Gary Downey, Nikol Alexander-Floyd, Michael Herndon, Sharon Johnson, Elizabeth Struthers-Malbon, Terry Kershaw, Neal King, Karl Precoda, and Janell Watson have listened thoughtfully and provided feedback on my presentations of various portions of this book throughout the different stages of its development. There have also been numerous students over the years, whose critical questions and dissonances have helped me to hone my conceptual frameworks: Laura Agnich, Anisa Ali, Elizabeth Arnold, Megan Baumgardner, Shawn Braxton, Clarence Brown, Blair Fornville, Ashley Mannes, Alex Perez, Marie-Belle Perez Rivera, Liz Roots, Elie Smith, Lisa Tabor, Ashley Tomisek, John Walsh, and Kristin White.

I would like to thank those colleagues who have read all or some portions of the manuscript. My writing partner, Nikol Alexander-Floyd, has been instrumental in providing me with feedback on all aspects of the manuscript. I also want to thank Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez for her careful reading and feedback on several chapters. I am thankful to the Future of Minority Studies group, including Linda Martin Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia, Satya Mohanty, and Paula M. L. Moya, among others, who have read portions of the manuscript, and whose own work has inspired me to flesh out the mediated nature of experience. My graduate research assistants, Ellie Smith and Jongmin Lee, have provided important editorial assistance in the various stages of completing the manuscript. I have also benefited greatly from the support of the Palgrave Macmillan team, including the series editor, Linda Martin Alcoff and the anonymous reviewer, who have shown interest in this project, as well as Palgrave Macmillan editors Lee Norton and Brigitte Shull.

I also want to acknowledge the benefit I have gained from audience comments and questions at panels where selections of this work were presented, including the Collegium of African American Research Conferences in Cagliari, Italy in 2001 and in Tours, France, in 2005; the Ethnicity and Public Memory Conference at Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon in 2007; the Identity, Migration and Women's Bodies as Sites of Knowledge and Transgression Conference at the University of Malaga, Spain, in 2008; and *El Mundo Zurdo*: An International Conference on the Life and Work of Gloria Anzaldúa at the University of Texas at San Antonio, in 2009.

I have learned the most about theories of racialized gender and the interconnections between race and poverty when I have been able to test them out within community settings and community workshops. I want to thank the following friends and colleagues who have taken

and/or continue to take the risk to believe that we can face the challenges of sorting out the complexities of our shared social reality by confronting our conflicting perspectives on who we are as a community, the causes of inequality, and how we got here, starting from our own spaces of identity: Laura Agnich, Sandy Bernabei, Shawn Braxton, Clarence Brown, Mary Connerly, Elaine Carter, Ellington Graves, Kwame Harrison, Bob Leonard, Shewanda Marie Muhammad, Wayne Muhammad, John Ryan, Marcy Schnitzer, Tonya Smith-Jackson, and Ray Williams. I also want to thank fellow community organizers David Billings, Pat Callair, Deena Hayes, Monica Walker, and the White Caucus of the Undoing Racism Group of Greensboro, North Carolina.

I am most grateful to my partner, Don, for his willingness to listen to my aspirations and frustrations while writing this book, and for helping me understand that I could participate in non-academic activities in the process, just for pure recreation. Finally, I am forever indebted to my parents, Aaron and Rosalie, both for their unconditional love, and for the cultural legacy they have bequeathed to me, which, by necessity, has obliged me to question the issue of identity and the notion of the self as something worthy of exploration and defense. It is a legacy that not only will I continue to struggle to understand over the course of my life, but one that I have in turn passed on, for better or for worse, to my sons, Eduardo and Sean.

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## Introduction: Reconceptualizing Identity Politics in a Post Identity Politics Age

As the first decade of the twenty-first century is rapidly coming to a close, another book on identity politics might be considered anachronistic. Popular, political, and scholarly opinions have it that we live in a post identity politics age. The '80s' and '90s' debates over essentialism have long ago subsided, but not before raising important questions about the self in relation to identity that have yet to be successfully resolved. The antiessentialist view that prevailed causing those debates to come to a close at the end of the '90s provided an important insight that also came to be, ironically, the most important obstacle to the effectiveness of an ongoing feminist project. That insight consisted in the claim that universal understandings about women's physical or metaphysical nature are false; there is no fixed, universalizing biological essence, nor are there sociocultural patterns of conduct, activities, or structures of feeling that bind all women together as a group. Whether celebrating women's biological traits or social attributes in order to compensate for racist and patriarchal representations, or simply deconstructing the mind/nature dichotomy in order to dismantle Western binary thought that marginalized women in the first place, feminists, so the argument goes, had mistakenly reproduced stereotypical femininity. They had indulged either in an over-attentiveness to naturalized conceptualizations of the body or in the celebration of ahistoricized and abstract stereotypical attributes, such as nurturing and caring.

Such a fortuitous conclusion has now allowed for the possibility of raising new questions about the relationship of raced and gendered embodiment to social practices and meanings, as well as for interrogating the possibility of creating an epistemological and ontological ground, however shifting, for talking about and acting on behalf of "women." This book attempts to seriously conceptualize and

illuminate such possibilities. I highlight some of the legitimate arguments posed against identity attachments, in particular, the arguments against essentialism, and deconstruct the illegitimate ones, most especially, those that claim that identities are intrinsically oppressive. I also offer a defense of identity as a necessary mechanism for developing reliable knowledge; I posit that identities serve as the justification for our decision and meaning making procedures as well as political action.

This study takes as its starting point the bifurcation of feminist thought that developed on the heels of those debates as feminists sought to address a clear need to understand the implications of anti-essentialism on feminist thought and activism. An early essay by Nicholson and Fraser, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," noted the infelicitous coincidence of two strands of American feminist thought in the '80s: one heavily influenced by Derridean deconstruction and Foucauldian discourse analysis, and another that articulated frameworks for a micropolitics of identity and difference, effected by working-class women and women of color (Nicholson and Fraser 1990, 33). The intense theoretical reconsideration of the concept of the self as a singular, unitary, and coherent subject in both camps led to very different conclusions about antiessentialist identities, even as both borrowed conceptual insights and arguments from each other to some extent.

The most extreme version of postmodernist feminism has been fueled by certain assumptions about the deterministic nature of sexual difference, namely, that all attempts to define a gendered identity trigger normative roles or behaviors to which women must conform, and thus function as an exercise of power. I elaborate on this topic in greater detail in chapter 2. For now, suffice it to say that postmodern feminists view the category "women" as phantasmatic, having no objective basis in reality. As recently noted by Alison Stone, postmodern feminists, such as Judith Butler, Moira Gatens, and Elizabeth Grosz, among others, hold a view of bodies as so thoroughly articulated within culture, that they cannot conceive of sexed embodiments outside of social practices and discourses (Stone 2004, 7). Thus, for example, according to Judith Butler, our gendered identities do not exist except through our doing or performing of them (Butler 1990, 9). The implication of such a view is that in the absence of any natural attributes or properties that are attributable to all women, there is no longer any means to posit a feminist epistemology, that is, a better knowledge about social life that women have because of their experiences as women.

In fact, the crisis of truth that feminists evoked in raising the specter of legitimacy with regards to the patriarchal foundations of Eurocentric thought and cultural traditions led postmodern feminists to the conclusion that no truth claims—not even those discovered and sustained by feminists—can be considered to provide the conditions for absolute certainty.<sup>1</sup> Such a conclusion effectively delegitimated the notion of a ‘feminist’ knowledge that could be derived from women’s experiences and validated and acted upon by women as a means to achieve empowerment. Human agency thus became decoupled from human subjectivity, and is now seen as only being exercised as a strategic essentialism. Postmodern feminists’ underlying plea to fellow feminists has been that we must simply “get beyond” identity politics. Hence, feminist epistemology—based on the belief that our gender, at its intersections with other categories of identity, does and ought to influence our conception of knowledge—is seen by the postmodern feminists as an “impossible project.”<sup>2</sup>

For others, most notably, women of color, the emphasis on difference politics led to a very different view. They argued that because the category of “women” needed to be conceptualized more broadly in order to include a diversity of female subjectivities, it had a diverse, proliferating content. By maintaining the social construction of different gender identities and practices while still highlighting the ontological and social dimensions of racialized gendered identity, it remained possible to theorize both the different *and* shared ways in which women experience real social problems because they are women (rape and other forms of violence, reproductive restrictions, difficult access to education and work, workforce discrimination and segmentation, and, in the case of subaltern women, racism, xenophobia and homophobia).

An emphasis on difference politics, moreover, highlighted the fact that the category “women” could be retained, without subjecting those included in this category to normative understandings of sexual difference. Insofar as identities are unstable and fluid social categories, the meanings of one’s identity are discovered, adopted and/or revised as differently located embodied subjects actively engage in the process of interpreting and evaluating both the meanings of their identities and social categories to which their identities have been indexed within the social world. Within this camp, thus, it is argued that to erase identities is to forego the very possibilities for radicalizing consciousness, so that it becomes possible to become a “feminist,” a “new *mestiza*,” “*mujerista*,” or “womanist.”

This book engages these divergent forms of thought for the purpose of indicating not only the excesses of postmodernist feminism but also the deleterious impact of these excesses on minority women's thought and activism. It offers a reappraisal of the viability and value of identity politics at a juncture in which admittedly a shift in feminist thought is underway from an identity-based or feminist epistemology to a postmodernist or postfeminist, postracial epistemology. In opening up the discussion of identity, it is not my aim to resurrect the old controversies over essentialism, but to put them behind us by dispelling the essentializing depictions of identities that are brought up by neoconservative pundits as well as by those on the Left whenever one attempts to present a defense of identity politics or just simply theorize identity as a feminist practice.

Thus, a primary goal of this book is to make the claim that even while there is an attempt to submerge, render obsolete, or reessentialize them, identities are anything but anachronistic. Importantly, identities continue to drive contemporary feminist thought, as well as popular cultural and political discourses. Identities matter—particularly for those whose visible identities (of race and gender) place them disadvantageously with respect to social power, and who therefore have a stake in claiming and explaining their identity. But they also matter to those who are closest to the center of power and wish to stay that way. This only becomes evident, however, when the identity practices of subaltern groups make visible their opaque and apparently neutral identities.

The Senate confirmation hearings of *Nuyorican* Judge Sonia Sotomayor that are in progress as I sit down to write this introduction illuminate the tremendous sway identities hold and will continue to hold over people as well as how identities will be vehemently reasserted whenever there is an attempt to submerge or purposefully obfuscate them. *Nuyoricans* and Latinas/os turned out *en masse* at rallies held in cities and towns throughout this nation, in support of Sotomayor's candidacy. Democrats remained quietly pondering the stark contrast between the post-racial rhetoric that Obama had used during the 2008 presidential campaign and the overt racial-ethnic and feminist identity politics of his Supreme Court pick. In the meantime, Conservatives sought to politically use the judge's forthright expression of her identity to derail her appointment to the Supreme Court.

When asked what she meant by the 2001 remark, that "a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who has not



lived this life,” this first *Nuyorican*/Latina to be nominated to the Supreme Court shrewdly pointed to the overwhelming social facticity of identities by stating that in her entire career “no words that [she] has ever said or written have received so much attention.” Additionally, her subsequent response—that her consideration of the lived experiences of Latinas/os as resources for better understanding human needs would only enrich the rational basis of legal decision-making, not just for Latinos, but for everyone—effectively dispelled two concerns. First, her enlarged vision of objectivity offered a cogent response to the Grand Old Party’s (the Republican Party) concern with regard to the narrowness or bias of her judgment capacities. Second, in dismantling their portrayal of her as someone who encourages irrational behavior of “groupthink,” Sotomayor also succeeded in exposing their offense as a deflective strategy that aimed to keep their own subjective interests covert and intact. Ultimately, Sotomayor refused to acquiesce to the GOP condition that she “get beyond identity” politics; this refusal was overtly mandated by neoconservative Abigail Thernstrom in her commentary on the nomination, as rights of passage into the “white, male club” (2009).

The Senate Confirmation hearings are revealing of the striking similarities between neoconservatives and postmodern feminists, insofar as they both aim to drive identities underground. While their reasons might be quite different, the negative effects of their attempts to bury identities are the same. Rather than working to construct theories that aid in eliminating human suffering produced by social inequality, postmodern feminists only serve to deepen confusion around identity politics sown by neoconservative pundits as well as by the eroding politics of the Left, best epitomized in President Obama’s postracial campaign and presidential rhetoric. In so doing, this strand of feminist thought delimits our progress toward understanding the ongoing practices and effects of racism and sexism ever present in our social structures and institutions, including the academic ones of which feminism forms a part.

This book works to move beyond the entanglements posed by the dominant strands of postmodernist feminist thought through an analysis of the identity politics practiced by womanists and *mestiza* feminists. Womanism draws upon political modalities and resistance practices that are complementary to Black feminist thought. Womanist thought, however, remains distinct from Black feminism insofar as womanists labor to identify and maintain their ties to Black nationalist ideologies and discourses. There are different womanist camps, some of which are secular, but the dominant one that I focus on here