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LIVES

*perspectives*

Gwyn Kirk

Margo Okazawa-Rey

# Women's Lives

*Multicultural Perspectives*

Gwyn Kirk

Margo Okazawa-Rey

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*To those who connect us to the past,  
our mothers,  
who birthed us, raised us, taught us, inspired us, and took no nonsense from us  
Edwina Davies, Kazuko Okazawa, Willa Mae Wells  
and to those who connect us to the future  
Charlotte Elizabeth Andrews-Briscoe  
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Camille Celestina Stovall-Ceja*

# Preface

An introductory course is perhaps the most challenging women's studies course to conceptualize and teach. Depending on their overall goals for the course, instructors must make difficult choices about what to include and what to leave out. Students come into the course for a variety of reasons and with a range of expectations and prior knowledge, and most will not major in women's studies. The course may fulfill a distribution requirement for them, or it may be a way of taking one women's studies course during their undergraduate education out of a personal interest to broaden their knowledge of women's lives. For women's studies majors, the course plays a very different role, offering a foundation for their area of study.

Several factors related to the wider university setting and societal context also shape women's studies in the late 1990s. There is increasing awareness of the difficulties of what it means for mainly White instructors to teach about the broad diversity of women's experiences in the United States. Women's studies programs continue to build their reputations in terms of academic rigor and scholarly standards. Outside the academy, a range of economic changes and government policies have made many women's lives more difficult in the United States—a loss of factory and office work as jobs continue to be moved overseas or become automated; government failure to introduce a health care system that will benefit everyone or to introduce an adequate system of childcare; cuts in Aid to Families with Dependent Children and other welfare programs; greater restriction of government support to immigrants and their families; and a dramatic increase in the num-

ber of women now incarcerated compared with a decade ago.

This text started out as two separate readers that we used in our classes at Antioch College (Gwyn Kirk) and San Francisco State University (Margo Okazawa-Rey). Serendipitously, as it seemed at the time, we were introduced to each other by a mutual friend. We began to talk about our teaching and discovered many similarities in approach despite our very different institutional settings. We decided to take what we thought were the best parts of our readers and combine them into a book that would work for an introductory course.

## What We Want in an Introductory Women's Studies Book

Several key issues concern us as teachers. We want to present a broad range of women's experiences to our students in terms of class, race, culture, disability, age, and sexual orientation. We assume that hierarchies based on these factors create systems of disadvantage as well as systems of privilege and that women's multiple positions along these dimensions shape our life experiences in important and unique ways. Although the national discourse on race, for example, is presented in Black/White terms, we want teaching materials that do justice to the diversity and complexity of race and ethnicity in this country. We also want materials that address the location of the United States in the global economy. Students need to understand the economic forces that affect the availability of jobs in this country and elsewhere.

They also need to understand the significance of U.S. dominance abroad in terms of language and popular culture, the power of the dollar and U.S.-based corporations, and the prevalence of the U.S. military.

In our introductory courses, we both included some discussion of theory because a basic understanding of various theoretical frameworks is a powerful tool not only for women's studies courses but for other courses students take. Another shared concern we have is women's activism. As women's studies has become more established and professionalized, it has tended to grow away from its roots in the women's liberation movement, a trend that greatly troubles us. As we talked about our own lives, it was clear that we both value our involvements in political movements. This activism has taught us a great deal and provided us with vital communities of like-minded people. Currently, there are myriad women's activist and advocacy projects across the country, but many students do not know about them. In our teaching, we make it a point to include examples of women's activism and urge students to think of themselves as people who can make a difference in their own lives and in the world around them. Much of the information that students learn in women's studies concerning the difficulties and oppression of women's lives can be discouraging. Knowing about women's activism can be empowering, even in the face of daunting realities. This knowledge reinforces the idea that current inequalities and problems are not fixed but have the potential to be changed.

### **Linking Individual Experiences to National and International Trends and Issues**

We are both trained in sociology. We have noticed that students coming into our classes are much more familiar with psychological explanations for behavior and experience rather than structural explanations. They invariably enjoy first-person accounts of women's experiences, but a series of stories, even wonderfully insightful stories, leaves us unsatisfied. In class, we provide a context for the various issues students study. Taking a story about a woman with cancer, for example, we add details about how many

women in the United States have cancer, possible explanations for this, the effects of age, race, and class on treatment and likelihood of recovery. The overview essay for each chapter provides some broader context for the personal accounts. We have tried to integrate the many aspects of women's lives. We abandoned our earlier sections on aging and disability in favor of threading these aspects of women's experience through each chapter. We've included readings that reflect the complexity of women's identities, where the authors wrote, for example, about being Chinese American, working-class, and lesbian in an integrated way. We added a section on crime and criminalization in response to the great increase in women caught up in the criminal justice system in the past decade, and added a chapter on women and the environment.

### **Challenges for the Twenty-First Century: Security and Sustainability**

We find ourselves thinking about the challenges facing women and men in the twenty-first century: challenges concerning work and livelihood, personal and family relationships, violence on many levels, and the fragile physical environment. These issues pose major questions concerning the distribution of resources, personal and social values, and the definition of security. How is our society going to provide for its people in the years to come? What are the effects of the increasing polarization between rich and poor in the United States and between rich and poor countries of the world? Genuine security—at personal, community-wide, national, and planetary levels—is a key issue for the future, and, similarly, sustainability. These themes of security and sustainability provide a wider framework for the book.

As teachers, we are concerned with students' knowledge and understanding, and beyond that, with their aspirations, hopes, and values. One of our goals for this book is to provide a series of lenses that will help students understand their own lives and the lives of others, especially women. The second goal is that, through this understanding, they will be able to participate in some way in the creation of a secure and sustainable future.

## Acknowledgments

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We are grateful to everyone at Mayfield who so thoughtfully worked to put our manuscript be-

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We continue to be inspired by the cultural work of Sweet Honey in the Rock, whose blend of music and politics touches the head, heart, and hands, and also by the "sociological imagination"—C. Wright Mills' concept—that draws on the need for complex social analysis in order to make change.

Our very sincere thanks to all of you and to each other.

*We have chosen each other  
and the edge of each other's battles  
the war is the same  
if we lose  
someday women's blood will congeal  
upon a dead planet  
if we win  
there is no telling  
we seek beyond history  
for a new and more possible meeting.*

— AUDRE LORDE



# Contents

Preface xvii

## INTRODUCTION

---

### The Framework of This Book 1

The Focus of Women's Studies 1

The Framework for This Book: Collective Action for a Sustainable Future 2

An Activist Approach 2

A Sustainable and Secure Future 2

The United States in a Global Context 3

Linking the Personal and the Global 3

A Matrix of Oppressions 3

Feminisms: Tangling with the "F" Word 4

Myth 1: Women's Studies Is Ideological 4

Myth 2: Women's Studies Is a White, Middle-Class Thing 5

Myth 3: Women's Studies Is Narrowly Concerned with Women's Issues 5

Scope of the Book 5

CHAPTER 1

---

## Theory and Theorizing: Integrative Frameworks for Understanding 7

Definition of Theory 7

Theory, Theorizing, and Ways of Knowing 8

The Dominant Perspective 8

Alternative Perspectives 9

Feminist Theories 12

Liberal Feminism 12

Radical Feminism 12

Socialist Feminism 12

Ecofeminism 13

Post-Modern Feminisms 13

Integrative Feminism 13

1 Charlotte Bunch, "Not by Degrees: Feminist Theory and Education" 14

2 Abra Fortune Chernik, "The Body Politic" 18

3 Ruth Hubbard, "Science, Facts, and Feminism" 22

4 Aída Hurtado, "Theorizing by Feminists of Color" 30

5 Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement" 32

6 Sonia Shah, "Presenting the Blue Goddess:  
Toward a National Pan-Asian Feminist Agenda" 37

7 Anne Fausto-Sterling, "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough" 42

8 Kalima Rose, "Taking on the Global Economy" 47

CHAPTER 2

---

## Identities and Social Locations: Who Am I? Who Are My People? 51

Being Myself: The Micro Level 52

Community Recognition, Expectations, and Interactions: The Meso Level 53

## **Social Categories, Classifications, and Structural Inequality: Global and Macro Levels 54**

Maintaining Systems of Structural Inequality 55

Colonization, Immigration, and the U.S. Landscape of Race and Class 56

## **Multiple Identities, Social Location, and Contradictions 59**

9 Carol Tarlen, "White Trash: An Autobiography" 60

10 Merle Woo, "Letter to Ma" 64

11 Joanne B. Mulcahy with Mary Peterson, "Mary Peterson: A Life of Healing and Renewal" 68

12 Jewelle Gomez, "Transubstantiation: This Is My Body, This Is My Blood" 76

13 Aurora Levins Morales, "Immigrants" 81

14 Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Boundaries: Arab/American" 83

15 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Defining Genealogies: Feminist Reflections on Being South Asian in North America" 92

16 Maijue Xiong, "An Unforgettable Journey" 97

## CHAPTER 3

# **Body Politics 103**

## **The Beauty Ideal 104**

The Beauty Business 104

Commodification and Co-option 105

Whites Only? Forever Young? Always Able? 106

## **Resisting Beauty Stereotypes 107**

## **Feminist Perspectives on Body Politics 108**

## **The Sexual Body 110**

Exploring and Defining Sexuality 110

Sexuality and Power 111

Body Politics and Activist Groups 111

17 Maya Angelou, "Phenomenal Woman" 112

18 Meredith Lee, "Outrageous Acts" 113

19 Nellie Wong, "When I Was Growing Up" 114

20 Toni Morrison, "The Coming of Maureen Peal" 115

- 21 Barbara Macdonald, "Do You Remember Me?" 120
- 22 Ernestine Amani Patterson, "Glimpse into a Transformation" 121
- 23 Donna Walton, "What's a Leg Got to Do with It?" 123
- 24 Marge Piercy, "I Am a Light You Could Read By" 125
- 25 Lisa Orlando, "Loving Whom We Choose" 125
- 26 Surina A. Khan, "The All-American Queer Pakistani Girl" 129

## CHAPTER 4

---

# Relationships, Families, and Households 132

## Defining Ourselves Through Connections with Others 132

### Theories About Personal Relationships: Living in Different Worlds? 133

Men and Women: Sex Versus Love 133

Cross-Cultural Communication — Speaking a Second Language 134

Inequalities of Power 134

### The Ideal Nuclear Family 135

Cultural and Historical Variations 135

Marriage, Domestic Partnership, and Motherhood 136

A Haven in a Heartless World? 138

Juggling Home and Work 140

Breaking Up, Living Alone 140

Immigration and the Family 141

### Feminist Perspectives on Marriage and the Family 141

Challenging the Private/Public Dichotomy 141

The Family and the Economic System 142

Policy Implications and Implementation 142

### Toward a Redefinition of Family Values 143

Relationships Between Equals 143

Shared Parenting 143

Teaching Children Nonsexist, Antiracist, Anticlassist Attitudes 144

- 27 Miriam Ching Yoon Louie and Nguyen Louie, "The Conversation Begins" 145

- 28 Naomi Wolf, "Radical Heterosexuality" 151
- 29 Carolyn Reyes and Eric DeMeulenaere, "Compañeros" 154
- 30 Lynore B. Gause, "Unimagined September" 157
- 31 Andrea R. Canaan, "Girlfriends" 163
- 32 Anne Mi Ok Bruining, "To Omoni, in Korea" 164
- 33 Ann Filemyr, "Loving Across the Boundary" 165
- 34 Carol J. Gill and Larry A. Voss, "Shattering Two Molds:  
Feminist Parents with Disabilities" 173
- 35 Grace Caroline Bridges, "Lisa's Ritual, Age 10" 176
- 36 Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Reading Maps: One" 176
- 37 Deanna L. Jang, "Asian Immigrant Women Fight Domestic Violence" 179

## CHAPTER 5

---

# Living in a Global Economy 182

### The Global Factory 182

- The Profit Motive 183
- Consumerism, Expansionism, and Waste 184
- The Myth of Progress 184
- Emphasis on Immediate Costs 184

### The Global Economy 184

- Complex Inequalities 184
- Legacies of Colonialism 185
- External Debt 187

### Implications of Global Economic Inequalities 189

- Connections to U.S. Policy Issues 189
- International Alliances Among Women 190

### The Seeds of a New Global Economy 191

- 38 María Patricia Fernández-Kelly, "Maquiladoras: The View from Inside" 192
- 39 Cynthia Enloe, "The Globetrotting Sneaker" 201
- 40 New Internationalist, "Life or Debt?" 206

- 41 Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action,  
“The Debt Crisis: Who Really Owes Whom?” 208
- 42 Saskia Sassen, “Immigrants in a Global Economy” 210
- 43 Leslie Marmon Silko, “The Border Patrol State” 213

## CHAPTER 6

---

# Work, Wages, and Welfare 217

## Defining Women’s Work 217

## Women in the U.S. Workforce 218

- Women’s Wages: The Effects of Gender, Race, Class, and Disability 219
- Discrimination Against Working Women:  
Sexual Harassment, Age, and Disability 220
- Balancing Home and Work 221
- Organized Labor 222

## Pensions, Disability Payments, and Welfare 223

- Pensions and Retirement 224
- Disability Payments 225
- Welfare 225

## Feminist Approaches to Women’s Work and Income 225

- Comparable Worth 225
- Feminization of Poverty 226
- Impact of Class 226
- Policy Implications and Activist Projects 227

## Promoting Greater Economic Security for Women 227

- 44 Jeannine Ouellette Howitz, “Reflections of a Feminist Mom” 228
- 45 Alisa L. Valdés, “Ruminations of a Feminist Aerobics Instructor” 231
- 46 Barbara Garson, “Tuna Fish” 234
- 47 “He Works, She Works, but What Different Impressions They Make” 241
- 48 Hattie Gossett, “the cleaning woman/labor relations #4” 242
- 49 Harilyn Rousso, “Carol Ann Roberson: Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor” 243

- 50 Ruth Milkman, "Organizing Immigrant Women in New York's Chinatown: An Interview with Katie Quan" 247
- 51 Mimi Abramovitz and Fred Newton, "Challenging AFDC Myths with the Facts" 256
- 52 Chrystos, "Dear Mr. President" 257
- 53 Marion Graham, "Working Your Fingers to the Bone" 258
- 54 Janet Zandy, "Liberating Memory" 259

---

CHAPTER 7

---

**Women's Health 265**

**Causes of Death for Women: Effects of Race and Class 265**

**Reproductive Health 266**

    Infant Mortality 267

    Controlling Fertility 267

    Medicalization of Reproductive Life 269

**Health and Aging 270**

**Mental and Emotional Health 270**

    Mental Illness in Women: Difficulties of Diagnosis 270

    Feminist Perspectives on Mental Illness 271

**Medical Care: Business As Usual? 272**

    Paying for Medical Care 272

    Managed Care 273

    Other Barriers to the Use of Medical Services 274

    Gender and Race Bias in Medical Research 274

    Caring for People with Disabilities  
    and Chronic Illness: A Labor of Love? 274

**Health As Wellness 275**

    Requirements for Good Health 275

    Feminist Approaches to Wellness 275

55 Kat Duff, "Towards an Ecology of Illness" 277

56 Lois Lyles, "Cancer in the Family" 281

- 57 Rita Arditti with Tatiana Schreiber, "Breast Cancer: The Environmental Connection" 286
- 58 Eileen Nechas and Denise Foley, "Fallen Women: Alcoholics and Drug Abusers" 294
- 59 Annette Dula, "The Life and Death of Miss Mildred: An Elderly Black Woman" 300
- 60 Frederica Y. Daly, "Perspectives of Native American Women on Race and Gender" 308
- 61 Sara Ruddick, "Educating for Procreative Choice: The 'Case' of Adolescent Women" 320
- 62 Joy Harjo, "Three Generations of Native American Women's Birth Experience" 321
- 63 Marsha Saxton, "Reproductive Rights: A Disability Rights Issue" 324
- 64 Daphne Scholinski, "Human Rights Violations Based on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation: Testimony to the International Tribunal on Human Rights Violations Against Sexual Minorities. Oct. 17, 1995. New York City" 328

## CHAPTER 8

---

# Women, Crime, and Criminalization 331

The National Context: "Get Tough on Crime" 331

Women in the Criminal Justice System 332

Characteristics of Incarcerated Women 333

Offenses Committed by Women and Patterns of Arrest 334

Sentence Length and Time Served 334

Race and Class Disparities 334

Women Political Prisoners 335

Theories of Women and Crime 337

"Equality with a Vengeance": Is Equal Treatment Fair Treatment? 338

The "Prison Industrial Complex" 339

Inside/Outside Connections 339

65 Mary Bennett, "Cells" 340

66 Shannon Murray, "Shannon's Story" 341

67 Teresa Loftus, "Teresa's Story" 342

68 Nancy Kurshan, "Behind the Walls: The History and Current Reality of Women's Imprisonment" 343



- 69 Elizabeth B. Cooper, "When Being Ill Is Illegal:  
Women and the Criminalization of HIV" 354
- 70 Silvia Baraldini, Marilyn Buck, Susan Rosenberg, and  
Laura Whitehorn, "Women's Control Unit: Marianna, FL" 358
- 71 Rita Takahashi, "U.S. Concentration Camps and Exclusion  
Policies: Impact on Japanese American Women" 362
- 72 Wendy A. Young, "Three Chinese Women  
in Search of Asylum Held in U.S. Prisons" 368
- 73 Anonymous, "I wake in middle-of-night terror" 375

---

CHAPTER 9

---

## Women and the Military 376

- The Need for Women in the Military 376
- The Military As Employer 377
- Limitations to Women's Equal Participation in the Military 377
  - Women in Combat Roles 378
  - Officer Training: Storming the Citadel 378
  - Sexism and Misogyny 378
  - Racism 379
  - Sexual Orientation 379
- The Impact of the U.S. Military on Women Overseas 380
  - Militarized Prostitution 380
  - Mixed-Race Children Fathered by G. I.s 380
  - Crimes of Violence Against Women 381
  - Atomic Testing 381
- Women's Opposition to the Military 382
  - Early Peace Organizations in the United States 382
  - Feminist Antimilitarist Perspectives 382
  - Redefining Adventure, Power, and Security 384
- 74 Monique Corbin, "Looking for New Opportunities" 385
- 75 Melinda Smith-Wells, "The Women in Blue" 386
- 76 Jean Grossholtz, "The Search for Peace and  
Justice: Notes Toward an Autobiography" 388