FEMINISM and Method

Ethnography, Discourse Analysis and Activist Research

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This book is dedicated to
Lionel Cantú
October 7, 1965–May 26, 2002
A generous and insightful soul whose kindness
and lively spirit are sorely missed

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Preface

The work presented in *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research* represents more than twenty years of investigations, self-reflection, and dialogue with other feminist scholars and community activists. As a consequence there are many to thank. First, my special thanks to Emily Clark for her willingness to participate in a dialogue about our work together that is discussed in chapter 10.

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Throughout the book, I include excerpts of my dialogue with many courageous women and other community members in New York, Philadelphia, and Iowa who shared with me their experiences, fears, hopes, and dreams. I am most grateful to them for their willingness to participate in my research with little to gain from it. I also want to acknowledge the many feminist scholars and teachers whose work influenced my development as a feminist researcher, most especially Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding, Nancy Fraser, Myra Marx Ferree, Marilyn Gittell, Judith Lorber, and Gaye Tuchman.

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Conclusion

Feminist reconceptualizations of knowledge production processes have contributed to a shift in research practices in many disciplines, and require more diverse methodological and self-reflective skills than traditional methodological approaches. Postcolonial, postmodern, and queer theoretical critiques of the practice of social scientific research raise a number of dilemmas that haunt feminist researchers as they attempt to conduct research that makes self-evident the assumptions and politics involved in the process of knowledge production in order to avoid exploitative research practices. Feminist sociologists have responded to the challenges posed by critics of traditional social scientific approaches by developing alternative strategies that remain sensitive to the dynamics of power evident in social research. *Feminism and Method* is my contribution to the ongoing efforts by feminist social researchers interested in producing knowledge for social change and generating research strategies that can help counter inequities in the knowledge production process.

Throughout this book I seek to demonstrate the usefulness of my materialist feminist standpoint epistemology and reflective research strategies for feminist research. The methods I highlight include ethnography, oral narrative and textual analysis, and activist and participatory research. My goal is to move beyond abstract principles and theoretical critique to foreground the feminist epistemologies that undergird different methods and to provide empirical examples that explicate themes central to feminist epistemology of methodologies. The illustrations from my case studies of women's politicization and community activism, racialization and rural economic development, construction and implementation of social policy, and activist research provide a window into some of the many dilemmas I encountered in my journey as a feminist sociologist and the practice-oriented solutions I developed over twenty years of research.[28] In the next chapter, I provide an overview of the feminist epistemologies that inform my work.

CHAPTER 2

Epistemology, Feminist Methodology, and the Politics of Method

Feminist theoretical perspectives were developed in the context of diverse struggles for social justice inside and outside the academy. In their various formulations, feminist theories emphasize the need to challenge sexism, racism, colonialism, class, and other forms of inequalities in the research process.[1] Following the powerful insight of the women's movements of the 1960s that "the personal is political," feminist scholars called for research methods that could challenge "the dualities between 'theory' and 'praxis,' researcher and researched, subject and object" (Richardson 1997, 55).[2] Like many feminist scholars, I address questions in my research that are simultaneously personally, politically, and academically significant. From my earliest memories I have been concerned with understanding and fighting inequality and injustice. Not surprisingly, my academic work focuses on examining the reproduction of, and resistance to, inequalities in different communities, as well as identifying strategies that foster social and economic justice. My growing sensitivity to the formal and informal ways domination is manifest in different research settings helped me negotiate discrimination, sexual abuse, and the relations of ruling that infuse my own life.

In light of my activist goal of challenging inequality in all its complex guises, I was drawn to feminist efforts to conduct research that minimizes exploitation of research subjects.[3] My engagement with different feminist epistemologies led me on a journey from socialist feminism to materialist feminism, and from so-called modernist to postmodernist frameworks. The theoretical frames I have used in the course of diverse investigations over almost twenty years of research are infused with different meanings. What it meant to claim an identity of *socialist feminist* or *materialist feminist* in the early 1980s contrasts significantly with the meanings attached to these theoretical formulations in the first part of the twenty-first century. For example, in reviewing this manuscript, one reviewer commented on my use of the term "socialist feminist" and wrote that "I haven't seen that term used since the early 90's actually." Yet socialist feminist theories were extremely influential for my early engagement with academic feminism. For younger feminist scholars, this framing

may not be as salient; however, it remains central to the story I tell of my development as a self-reflective feminist researcher. To deny this category of analysis would be to misrepresent the multiple frames that inform the work I present in *Feminism and Method.*

The categories of feminist theory I draw on to tell my own "origin story" as a feminist scholar overlaps to some extent with the historical shifts in what is said to count as feminist theory. The story I tell in this book illustrates how I engaged with, as well as reformulated, different feminist epistemologies in the context of my own empirical investigations. My story also reflects a process of academic socialization as well as my efforts over time to find the most useful theoretical framework to match what I actually did when I conducted research. In shifting identities from socialist feminist to materialist feminist, I was especially influenced by the work of feminist theorists Patricia Hill Collins, Nancy Fraser, Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding, bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty, Chéla Sandoval, and Dorothy Smith. In this chapter, I discuss the epistemologies that inform the empirical investigations to follow and discuss some of the debates that surround their theoretical interpretation, especially in terms of the so-called modernist/postmodernist divide.

In responding to different debates in feminist theory and feminist challenges to social scientific practice, I was pushed to define myself in categories that were seldom of my making. In this regard, I found Dorothy Smith's (1987) origin story of feminist standpoint theory, a powerful illustration of how a "collective story" unfolds:

> Feminist standpoint theory, as a general class of theory in feminism, was brought into being by Sandra Harding (1986), not to create a new theoretical enclave but to analyze the merits and problems of feminist theoretical work that sought a radical break with existing disciplines through locating knowledge or inquiry in women's standpoint or in women's experience. Those she identified had been working independently of one another and have continued to do so. In a sense, Harding created us. (P. 392)

As this quote indicates, the stories we tell about our epistemological journeys are always *interested* stories and form a significant dimension of what I call the "politics of method."[4]

The process of naming my theoretical orientation involved becoming aware of the epistemological assumptions I held about how knowledge is produced and what counts as evidence as I engaged in diverse research projects. I also worked to make self-conscious and articulate the ethical stance I took in the "field." This, in turn, influenced how I conducted and interpreted interview transcripts and other ethnographic resources. These reflective processes also informed the questions that guided my research. My efforts to articulate my epistemological grounding was accomplished in the context of training graduate students to work with me on different research projects and guiding the design and implementation of their own research agendas. In this sense, my movement from identifying as a socialist feminist to a materialist feminist engaged in conversations with postmodern and poststructuralist theories is also a *collective story.* Feminist sociologist Laurel Richardson (1997) defines "a collective story" as one that "tells the experience of a sociologically constructed category of people, in the context of larger sociocultural and historical forces" (p. 14). My students and I are situated in the vibrant and ever-changing field of feminist theory and the development of diverse interdisciplinary formations. It may no longer be necessary to emphasize the plurality of feminist theories and the contestations over the naming, redefinition, and interpretation of each theoretical perspective.[5] However, it is important for my goal in this book to locate myself within certain strands of feminist theorizing in order to explicate my approach to feminism and method. In this introductory chapter, I offer an *interested* overview of the frames that are implicated in the epistemological and methodological stories to follow.

Socialist Feminist Theories of the State

My materialist feminist approach was initially built in dialogue with the work of socialist feminist analysts of the state who drew on Marxist theory to examine how the welfare state helps maintain women's dependence on the family and on low-paid positions inside and outside the home (Pascall 1986). I began graduate training in sociology following a short career as a social worker employed by the YWCA of New York City. I quickly found the arguments posed by socialist feminists of the state useful for understanding some of my experiences as an advocate for pregnant teenagers and adolescent mothers during the 1970s and the shifts in state welfare provision over that decade.[6]

Socialist feminist frameworks focused on the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy in the welfare state.[7] Socialist feminist scholars who examined the gendered implications of the welfare state argued that the state promotes capitalist interests by facilitating women's role as reserve labor and as caretakers to reproduce the labor force.[8] They also explored how the welfare state serves the interest of patriarchy by promoting women's unpaid labor in the home (Miller 1989). However, these are contradictory tendencies.[9] Socialist feminists stressed the contradictions of welfare policy including those emanating from the implicit as well as explicit structuring of gender and racial inequality.[10]

My interest in exploring the contradictory role of the state (broadly defined) in women's lives led me to examine how social policies are constructed and inequalities are contested over time. In 1998, I published *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty,* which presents findings from my longitudinal study of women community workers hired in Community Action Programs (CAPs) during the War on Poverty. Through an analysis of the experiences of women community activists from low-income neighborhoods in New York City and Philadelphia, I examined

how the state shaped their lives—as workers employed by the state, as unpaid community caregivers who linked others access state resources or gain state protection, and as beneficiaries of state welfare programs. *Grassroots Warriors* illustrates the limits as well as the progressive possibilities of social policy. By emphasizing democratic implementation strategies and grassroots community-based activities, many programs established by the War on Poverty helped expand citizenship for low-income residents in concrete ways that went beyond individual-level practices such as voting or paying taxes.[11] Whether designers of the War on Poverty were conscious or not of the political consequences of community action for low-income communities, the political conflict that followed its implementation led to the termination of support for maximum feasible participation of the poor in community based programs and increased pressure towards professionalization and bureaucratization.

The contradictions of the state identified by socialist feminists include expending resources to counter the consequences of the structural inequities in the economy without challenging these inequalities. The welfare state is constructed as a temporary support for the poor which includes primarily short-term policy solutions that fail to address the underlying problems of poverty. Women reliant on state programs for income assistance, child care, housing, or health care experience the contradictions of the state in every area of their lives.[12] Socialist feminist analysts of the state also note the contradiction between the need to support families where the male breadwinner is absent and the desire to protect "the male breadwinner model" of the family creates an inherent tension in welfare policy from the Progressive Era to the present (Sarvasy 1988, 255).[13] Furthermore, the state's "preference" for the two-parent male and female household, as sociologist Rose Brewer (1988) points out, has historically discriminated against the extended kinship and informal networks established in the Black community.[14]

Underlying the state's reluctance to support "poor adults" is the assertion that the two-parent male and female family and the family wage provide the solution to poverty (Christensen et al. 1988). The emphasis on the two-parent male and female household form in social policy reproduces the gender division of labor inside and outside the home.[15] The family wage kept women's wages low and many families in poverty (Pascall 1986, 26). The structure of social support programs such as social security and child care prevent women from choosing their relationship to paid labor and the family. This contradiction continues in contemporary workfare legislation like the Family Support Act and the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) where women lose welfare benefits if they fail to perform the required work, education or training.[16] In the 2002–03 welfare reform debates surrounding the reauthorization of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the goal of forcing women on public assistance to marry is fostered through financial incentives as well as legislative discourse. In President George W. Bush's plan, states would be required to include marriage promotion strategies in their plans.[17]

In a review of socialist feminist analyses of the welfare state in the early 1990s, I identified additional strategies that were understood to enhance women's oppression and impoverishment: the use of gender and race neutral language to mask the sexist and racist assumptions of social policy; maintaining women in paid and nonpaid care taking roles which are devalued both ideologically and economically; legislating morality; and fragmenting social life in state policy.[18] The "point-of-viewlessness" (MacKinnon 1989, 163) of the state includes the production of supposedly gender- and race-neutral policies and law. For example, the term "unemployment," as Gillian Pascall (1986) notes, "belongs to a male working life rather than a female one" and the gender of the perpetrators of "child sexual abuse" is conveniently hidden (p. 4). Women's differential needs and experiences are masked in discussions of "households" and "families" or the "family wage." Since women are most closely linked to the work associated with households and families, women's labor is hidden within the notion of the family wage.[19] Socialist feminists analyses demonstrate how the state frequently utilizes the ideology of the "deserving" or "truly needy" and "nondeserving" or "abled bodied" poor to justify cutbacks in social welfare.[20]

Feminist scholars of the welfare state also emphasize that racist assumptions are incorporated into the design and implementation of social policy.[21] For example, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, passed in 1996, rendered both legal and illegal immigrants ineligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the program that replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). While the language of welfare policies masked some of the most egregious forms of welfare racism that were apparent in previous versions of the bill and in legislative debate, socialist feminist analysts argued that the concern about the "lazy welfare queen" who reproduces "welfare dependency" in her children was not far beneath the surface.[22]

The use of welfare programs for social control is one of the oldest objectives of social policy.[23] The fear of crime and delinquency has often been used as a justification for intrusive methods of state supervision of the poor.[24] The third contradiction of patriarchal social policy noted by socialist feminists refers to the legislative concerns about the "morality" of the mother versus the economic needs of the child.[25] From the poorhouse to the settlement house, reformers were concerned that the poor adopt "proper" middle-class values, especially as they related to "the work ethic" (Katz 1986). Amendments to the Social Security Act in 1940 incorporated the notion of the "suitable home" to control low-income women's sexual behavior and commitment to work. Public assistance could be withheld if women were not performing in ways acceptable to the local welfare officials.

Socialist feminist analysts drew on historical, comparative, and political economic methods to conduct research on gender and the state. Feminist re-

searchers were especially interested in exploring the design, implementation, and changes in social policy formation.[26] Many feminists examined the themes woven into state policy through historical analyses of texts such as congressional legislation, welfare care records, and law.[27] While socialist feminist analyses revealed how assumptions of gender, race, class, and heteronormativity are inscribed in social policy and how these assumptions contribute to the reproduction of inequalities, they have been somewhat constrained in their analytic power by assuming a somewhat totalized view of patriarchy, capitalism, and racism (see G. Joseph 1981). Consequently, socialist feminist frameworks have been unable to offer an epistemological foundation for exploring "scattered hegemonies" (Grewal and Kaplan 1994) or multiple capitalist, patriarchal, colonialist, and racist formations.[28] Since earlier constructions of feminist analyses of patriarchy and Marxist analyses of class remained central to socialist feminism, it theoretically precluded effective responses to more complex theoretical challenges posed by third world, postmodern, and postcolonial scholars. However, by deepening the analysis of the state to incorporate an intersectional understanding of gendered, racialized, and class-based processes, socialist feminists of the state paved the way for more complex intersectional analyses that also incorporated attention to the heteronormative assumptions of gender and family embedded in social policy.[29]

The conceptualization of a unified state has also been problematic for analysis of different state formations and governing practices as they vary over time, place, and space. The "state" is not a unified phenomenon or institution. Varied manifestations of state formations and practices are observable throughout areas of social life that may or may not have any direct or obvious link to formal state structures. For example, state projects of social control can also be taken up by actors who may not hold formal positions within the state. Critics of socialist feminists constructions of the state as a self-evident and unified formation argue for the necessity of locating and specifying the multiple ways the state appears and shifts over time. They also emphasize the importance of examining the different sites of the state-in-action (for example, in legal practices, tax law, state mental institutions, and corporate welfare).[30] Critics of the unified view of the state also argue that oppressive aspects of the state are often in tension with the progressive possibilities of governing practices. Along with the goal of incorporating a more complex intersectional approach to theorizing and a shift from urban policy research to ethnographic research in the 1990s, I developed a greater appreciation for the insights offered by feminist standpoint epistemology.

Feminist Standpoint Epistemology and Racial Formation Theory

Feminist standpoint theory developed in the context of Black feminist, third world and postcolonial feminist challenges to the so-called dual systems of patriarchy and capitalism approach that was associated with socialist feminist

theory. Broadly defined, feminist standpoint epistemology includes Nancy Hartsock's (1983) "feminist historical materialist" perspective, Donna Haraway's (1988) analysis of "situated knowledges," Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) "black feminist thought," Chéla Sandoval's (1991, 2000) explication of third world feminists'[31] "differential oppositional consciousness,"[32] and Dorothy Smith's (1987, 1990a, 1990b) "everyday world" sociology for women.[33] Many theorists whose work has been identified with standpoint epistemologies contest this designation. Dorothy Smith has been particularly vocal about the limits of this classification. She writes: "If I could think of a term other than 'standpoint,' I'd gladly shift, especially now that I've been caged in Harding's (1986) creation of the category of 'standpoint theorists' and subjected to the violence of misinterpretation, replicated many times in journals and reviews, by those who speak of Hartsock and Smith but have read only Harding's version of us (or have read us through her version)" (Smith 1992, 91).

Standpoint epistemology, especially as articulated by Hartsock (1983), draws on Marxist historical materialism for the argument that "epistemology grows in a complex and contradictory way from material life" (p. 117). I find the most useful aspect of standpoint analyses in Hartsock's emphasis on "feminist standpoint" as achieved through a reflective and collective process of struggle and analysis.[34] In her critique of standpoint theory, Katie King (1994) notes the "difficulties with conceptualizing the feminist standpoint as a constructed and mobile position"[35] (p. 71). Other critics of Hartsock's approach point out that she "tends to operate with an overly global conception of women's practice and experience and thus to obscure differences and power inequities among women" (Kruks 2001, 112). Political scientist Sonia Kruks defends the project of standpoint theory against its critics, arguing that: "Because it begins from the social division of labor and from accounts of social reality that emerge from different social practices, there is nothing intrinsic to the theory that would preclude developing an account of a multiplicity of women's standpoints, which would perhaps overlap in some aspects and diverge radically in others" (p. 112–13). Kruks points to Haraway's work on "situated knowledges" to demonstrate the usefulness of "certain postmodern sensibilities" for "acknowledging a multiplicity of different epistemological locations for a nondominative feminism" (p. 113).[36]

By arguing for the development of multiple standpoints that derive from what she terms the "matrix of domination," Collins's (1990) approach to standpoint epistemology evokes Donna Haraway's notion of "situated knowledges." Collins reaffirms her standpoint analysis of Black feminist thought as follows:

> In developing a Black feminist praxis, standpoint theory has provided one important source of analytical guidance and intellectual legitimation for African-American women. Standpoint theory argues that group location in hierarchical power relations produces shared challenges for

> individuals in those groups. These common challenges can foster similar angles of vision leading to a group knowledge or standpoint that in turn can influence the group's political action. Stated differently, group standpoints are situated in unjust power relations, reflect those power relations, and help shape them. (P. 201)

She also stresses the importance of *praxis*, the interaction of knowledge and experience, for Black feminist thought. Collins's work, in particular, has influenced Nancy Hartsock to revise her earlier formulation to account for "multiple subjectivities," although critics like Katie King (1994, 87) continue to find that Hartsock's approach lacks an "understanding of the shifting, tactical, and mobile character of subjectivities" found in work by Chéla Sandoval and others influenced by postmodern perspectives (p. 87).[37]

From the perspective of feminist praxis, I found that standpoint epistemology provides a methodological resource for explicating "how subjects are constituted by social systems" as well as "how collective subjects are relatively autonomous from, and capable of acting to subvert, those same systems" (Weeks 1998, 92). However, standpoint theorists utilize different constructions of "standpoint." From my review of the diverse approaches to feminist standpoint epistemology, I identified several major connections among them, as well as some important differences which I detail in chapter 5. One of the most salient themes that link the different perspectives on standpoint is the emphasis on the importance of experience for feminist theorizing and the connection to the women's movement's method of consciousness raising. The second significant theme is the assertion of a link between the development of standpoint theory and feminist political goals. In Harding's (1986) formulation of this connection, "Feminism and the women's movement provide the theory and motivation for inquiry and political struggle that can transform the perspective of women into a 'standpoint'—a morally and scientifically preferable grounding for our interpretations and explanations of nature and social life" (p. 26).

Feminist ethnographers who begin analyses from women's diverse social locations have "contributed significantly to reconceptualization of sociological categories—especially, 'politics,' 'work,' and 'family'—typically used to analyze social life" (Naples 1998a, 3). In my research with urban community workers hired by the War on Poverty, I analyzed the extent to which women's militancy has been masked by the traditional categories used to assess political action.[38] Since much of their efforts occurred outside the formal political establishment, traditional measures of political participation would have underestimated their activism. My analysis of the community workers' oral histories, revealed "a broad-based notion of 'doing politics' that included any struggle to gain control over definitions of self and community, to augment personal and communal empowerment, to create alternative institutions and organizational processes, and to increase the power and resources of the community workers' defined community—although not all of these practices were viewed as 'politics' in the community workers' terminology" (Naples 1998b, 179). I conceptualized their community work as "activist mothering" which I defined as "political activism as a central component of mothering and community caretaking of those who are not part of one's defined household or family" (p. 11). This analysis offered "a new conceptualization of the interacting nature of labor, politics and mothering—three aspects of social life usually analyzed separately—from the point of view of women whose motherwork historically has been ignored or pathologized in sociological analyses" (p. 112–13).[39]

Mareena Wright (1995) also uses standpoint analysis of rural women's everyday experiences to reconceptualize models of work that are limited by the separation of unpaid household labor from paid labor. She develops a "multidimensional continuum model of women's work" (p. 216) that "contradicts old [dual spheres] notions that household work is somehow different or less significant to society than is waged work" (p. 232). By substituting the dual spheres model, Wright's multidimensional continuum model reorients how we understand (p. 232) such as women's labor decision-making processes, women's life course patterns, and our current social policies, especially those regarding the care of children and the elderly.[40] Virginia Seitz (1998) also draws on standpoint theory for her examination of white, working-class Appalachian women's understanding and practice of class struggle. Seitz examines how women from southwestern Virginia successfully "challenged the coal company, the state, and, eventually-working-class men" (p. 213) and contested taken-for-granted constructions of gender and working-class politics. As Seitz emphasizes, however, "sharing the same . . . set of experiences does not necessarily translate into shared political analyses, organizational strategies, and leadership style" (p. 213). In illuminating the "powerful ways in which these women drew upon their gender, class, and racialized ethnicity as 'Appalachians' to help wage a successful strike against the powerful Pittston Coal Company," Seitz illustrates the partiality of standpoints as they intersect in and through different women's political understandings and self-expression (p. 213).

Feminist ethnographers emphasize the significance of locating and analyzing particular standpoints in differing contexts to explicate relations of domination embedded in communities and social institutions.[41] For example, Christina Gringeri (1994), in her examination of rural development from the diverse perspectives of women home-workers and rural development officials in two Midwestern communities, helps explain how rural development strategies are perceived differently by planners and by those who pay the costs of development (also see Naples 1997). Even when they do not directly evoke standpoint epistemology in their work, feminist ethnographers such as Ruth Behar (1993), Sondra Hale (1991), Lila Abu-Lughod (1993), Suad Joseph (1988), Dorrine Kondo (1990), Susan Krieger (1983), and Maria Mies (1982)

demonstrate the value of *positionality* for developing strong self-reflective research strategies as well as for ethnographic analysis.

The concept of *positionality* foregrounds how women can strategically "use their positional perspective as a place from where values are interpreted and constructed rather than as a locus of an already determined set of values" (Alcoff 1988, 434). As I argue in Part II of this book, reflective practice informed by standpoint analyses of positionality encourages feminist scholars to examine how gendered and racialized assumptions influence which voices and experiences are privileged in ethnographic encounters.[42] Since the conceptualization of "standpoint" has multiple meanings depending on which approach to standpoint epistemology is referenced, I prefer the term *positionality* when referring to subjectivity and subjective knowledges. The notion of positionality provides a conceptual frame that allows one to "say at one and the same time that gender is not natural, biological, universal, ahistorical, or essential and yet still claim that gender is relevant because we are taking gender as a position from which to act politically" (Alcoff 1988, 433). In my approach, the "position" from which one acts politically is also subject to investigation. I simultaneously take as the starting point, the intersection of gender, race, class, and political context in social actors' political praxis.

Another conceptual resource I draw on for my ethnographic research approach is found in the theory of racial formation developed by sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986). Their conceptualization of *racialization* counters certain analyses of standpoint that treat it as fixed in time and space and unproblematically attached to specific and identifiable individuals or groups (Hennessy 1993). According to racial formation theory, race is "a constituent of the individual psyche and of relationships among individuals, . . . an irreducible component of collective identities and social structures" and "contested throughout social life" (p. 23). Winant (1994, 43) defines racialization as "a repertoire of coercive social practices driven by desires and fears, as a framework for class formation, or as an ideology for nation building and territorial expansion, to name but a few" (p. 43). Racialization is also evident in global processes and racial projects that circumscribe "the political terrain upon which racially defined groups could mobilize within civil society, thus constituting these groups as outside civil society" (Winant 1994, 43). In my view, racialization processes are salient in all dimensions of standpoint analysis. Therefore, the concept of racialization is useful for analyzing the shifts in racial-ethnic constructions and interactions over time. Analyses of racialization processes can be extended to incorporate sensitivity to class, sexuality, and gender as well as other dimensions upon which difference is constructed and domination operates.

My development and elaboration of different dimensions of standpoint epistemology revealed a tension between theorists who considered standpoint theory to be firmly grounded in the modernist concerns of feminist political

goals and those who viewed standpoint epistemology as anticipating many of the postmodern calls to avoid grand narrative constructions of identity and construct power as multiple and productive. Using a Foucauldian articulation of power, education theorist Jennifer Gore (1992) analyzes power "as exercised, rather than as possessed" (p. 59). This approach, she argues, requires more attention to the microdynamics of the operation of power as it is exercised in particular sites" (p. 59). I view standpoint epistemologies as powerful tools for exploration of the "microdynamics of the operation of power" and find in some strands of standpoint theorizing, sustained attention to the way power infuses investigation and the textual products of such efforts.[43] Therefore, the power of standpoint theorizing can be enhanced by incorporation of insights from postmodern and postcolonial perspectives on power, subjectivity, and language.

Postmodern, Postcolonial, and Third World Feminist Challenges

Postmodern feminist scholars emphasize the ways disciplinary discourses shape how researchers see the worlds they investigate and how "without critique of the metanarratives that theoretically and practically sustain the structures and discourses of" (Luke 1992, 37) academia, research operates to reinsert power relations, rather than challenge them.[44] Many feminist ethnographers have grappled with the challenges posed by postmodern critics and are "divided about the merits and shortcomings of postmodern theorizing" (D. Wolf 1996b, 6). Sociologist Diane Wolf explains that some feminist scholars "have found useful the sensitivity postmodernism demonstrates toward a greater multiplicity of power relations. Postmodernist theorizing has created opportunities for further innovation in research methods and the post-fieldwork process, particularly representation and writing" (p. 6). However, many other feminist scholars "are concerned that the overly textual focus of postmodernism renders the lived realities of women irrelevant" (D. Wolf 1996b, 6). For example, anthropologist Margery Wolf (1996, 215) is concerned that feminist ethnographers "are letting interesting critical positions from outside feminism weaken our confidence in our work; perhaps we are taking too seriously the criticisms of our process by those who have never experienced it" (p. 215).

Rural sociologist Carolyn Sachs (1996) fears that a postmodern emphasis on "fractured identities" and "the multitude of subjectivities" could lead to "total relativism" that precludes political activism (p. 19). Concerns about the depoliticizing consequences of postmodern theories are a consistent thread in feminist debates on the value of postmodernist theories for feminist praxis. Women's Studies scholars Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (1997) express concern that

> postmodern theory, in its haste to dissociate itself from all forms of essentialism, has generated a series of epistemological confusions regard-

> ing the interconnections between location, identity, and the construction of knowledge. Thus, for instance, localized questions of experience, identity, culture, and history, which enable us to understand specific processes of domination and subordination, are often dismissed by postmodern theories as reiterations of cultural "essence" or unified, stable identity. (P. xvii)

Postmodern analyses of power have destabilized the practice of ethnography (Clifford 1990). If power infects every encounter and if discourse infuses all expressions of personal experience, what can the ethnographer do to counter such powerful forces? This dilemma is at the heart of a radical postmodern challenge to social scientific practice in general. As sociologists Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (1997) note, "Postmodernist inquiry tends to veer away from how members of society interact to produce their lives and experience, turning more toward the representational practices used by those claiming the authority to offer 'true' representation" (p. 76).[45] Many social scientists committed to empirical investigation worry that postmodern theories of representation undermine their research enterprise, leading not only to neverending self-criticism but also, and more troubling, to "empirical nihilism" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997,109).

In attempting to generate "a new language of qualitative method" for the social sciences, Gubrium and Holstein combine the diverse theoretical traditions of naturalism, ethnomethodology, "emtionalism" (which focuses on "the affective, visceral, and subjective dimensions of experience" and postmodernism (p. 56). They adopt Pauline Rosenau's (1992) articulation of "a more affirmative variant of the idiom" of postmodernism and bracketing it from skeptical postmodernism which, they note "is enamored with a nihilistic vision of a world of ungrounded representation" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 79). Yet, even with such "bracketing" strategies, the fundamental premises that undergird divergent perspectives combined under the rubric of one approach to methodology, if brought to the surface, could destabilize the coherence of the internal set of meanings of the resulting epistemological stance.[46]

My strategy for negotiating these challenges has been one of praxis, namely, to generate a materialist feminist theoretical approach informed by postmodern and postcolonial analyses of knowledge, power, and language that speaks to the empirical world in which my research takes place. By foregrounding the everyday world of poor women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds in both the rural and urban United States and by exploring the governing practices that shape their lives I have worked to build a class conscious and antiracist methodological approach (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xxxiii).[47] While acknowledging the limits of my own angle of vision and reflective practice to disrupt the power imbalances inherent in the research enterprise, my feminist praxis led me beyond the modernist/postmodernist divide to draw on some of the many valuable insights of Marxist, postcolonial, and postmodern perspectives on power and knowledge.

While postcolonial and third world feminist scholars point to the myriad of ways relations of domination infuse ethnography,[48] they also offer some guidance for negotiating power inherent in the practice of fieldwork. Postcolonial feminist scholars charge that the practice of ethnography among marginalized groups is historically tainted by ethnocentric biases in traditional ethnographic practice as well as feminist research.[49] Further, as philosopher Sandra Harding (1998,12) emphasizes, ethnocentrism is more than a set of "false beliefs and bad attitudes" held by individual scholars; it is structured into the institutional and academic practices so as to produce relationships oppressive to indigenous cultures in the so-called first world as well as third world countries. Harding (1998) asserts:

> What is most startling, and disturbing, from such a perspective of institutional, societal, and civilizational eurocentrism is to realize that even individuals with the highest moral intentions, and with the most up-to-date, state-of-the-art, well-informed, rational standards according to the prevailing institutions and their larger cultures, can still be actively advancing institutional, societal, and philosophic eurocentrism. (Pp. 14–15)

Feminists are not exempt from "assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality, on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the 'third world' in the context of a world system dominated by the West, on the other" (Mohanty 1991a, 53). Unfortunately, as Chandra Mohanty emphasizes, these factors "characterize a sizable extent of Western feminist work on women in the third world" (p. 53).

Mohanty calls for "careful, politically focused, local analyses" to counter the trend in feminist scholarship to distance from or misrepresent third world women's concerns.[50] She draws on Maria Mies's (1982) work on lace makers in Narsapur, India, to illustrate this ethnographic approach:

> Mies's analysis shows the effect of a certain historically and culturally specific mode of patriarchal organization, an organization constructed on the basis of the definition of the lace makers as "non-working housewives" at familial, local, regional, statewide, and international levels. The intricacies and the effects of particular power networks not only are emphasized, but they form the basis of Mies's analysis of how this particular group of women is situated at the center of a hegemonic, exploitative world market. (Mohanty 1991, 65)

Furthermore, Mohanty remarks, "Narsapur women are not mere victims of the production process" (p. 65). Instead, they resist, challenge, and subvert the process at various junctures" (p. 65).[51]

Alexander and Mohanty (1997) recommend "grounding analyses in particular, local feminist praxis" as well as understanding "the local in relation to larger, cross-national processes" (p. xix). The authors contributing to *Women's Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles with Transnational Politics* (Naples and Desai 2002) show the diverse strategies women have developed to "organiz[e] against the gendered, racialized, and regionalized processes of global capital expansion" and militarization and for sustainable agriculture (Naples 2002b, 13). As coeditor Manisha Desai argues:

> Many resistance strategies embody a radical critique not just of global capital but also of preexisting social inequalities based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality among others. Many activist women's efforts focus, to varying degrees and in various ways, on developing concrete economic alternatives based on sustainable development, social equality, and participatory processes though such economic initiatives have not been as successful at the transnational level (Basu 2000). These "counter hegemonies" have succeeded in transforming the daily lives of many women at the local level. This, in my view, is what gives women's agency immense potential. (P. 32)

In assessing the power of transnational feminist networks for struggles against "existing inequalities," Desai points out that these activist associations "are forged not on preconceived identities and experiences but in the context of struggle and as such are more reflexive about these inequalities" (p. 33).

Despite the valuable efforts of feminist ethnographers to produce more balanced accounts of third world women, some postcolonial critics fear that "a 'non-colonialist' (and therefore non contaminated?) space remains a wish-fulfillment within postcolonial knowledge production" (Rajan 1993, 8). In my own ethnographic practice, I have found that materialist feminist theory informed by standpoint epistemology offered methodological strategies that can serve as effective responses to postmodern and postcolonial challenges to ethnographic practice. While I continue to hold deep reservations that any of the major dilemmas inherent in ethnographic practice can be consistently overcome, I remain optimistic that with a commitment to strong reflective strategies, especially ones that include, whenever possible, dialogue and respectful engagement with the subjects of our research, the context and form of the dilemmas can be brought to the surface and become part of the ethnographic story. This contrasts with more traditional ethnographic accounts that deny the power of the ethnographer as well as the subjects of ethnographic encounters and ignore how ruling relations infuse all our research efforts, regardless of method. Taking up the poststructuralist[52] insight of the inherent link between "language, subjectivity, social organization, and power" (Richardson 1997, 88), I turn now to discuss another method for feminist research, discourse analysis, and highlight the power of a materialist feminist appropriation of Foucault for social policy research.

Materialist Feminism and Discourse Analysis

Materialist feminism, in its more recent formulation, engages with historical materialist and postmodern theories of self, agency, and discourse.[53] For example, in their introduction to *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*, Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham (1997) describe materialist feminism as "the conjuncture of several discourses—historical materialism, marxist and radical feminism, as well as postmodern and psychoanalytic theories of meaning and subjectivity" (p. 7). Materialist feminists view agency "as complex and often contradictory sites of representation and struggle over power and resources" (Hesford 1999, 74).

Materialist feminism, as I reconstruct its intellectual history, has its roots in socialist feminist theory and has been particularly influenced by the theoretical critiques of African American, Chicana, and third world feminists[54] who, in turn, contributed to the development of diverse feminist standpoint epistemologies as discussed above.[55] I found the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, and Cherríe Moraga especially helpful for broadening the intersectional framework of feminist standpoint epistemology. For example, in the preface to *This Bridge Called My Back*, Moraga passionately ties the political consciousness of women of color to the material experiences of their lives. This "politics of the flesh" (Moraga 1981, xviii) does not privilege one dimension and artificially set it apart from the context in which it is lived, experienced, felt, and resisted. In fact, literary scholar Paula Moya (1997) argues that Moraga's "theory in the flesh" provides a powerful "non-essentialist way to ground . . . identities" for the purposes of resistance to domination (p. 150).[56]

Contemporary formulations of materialist feminism[57] are also informed by Michel Foucault's analysis of discourse. For example, Chéla Sandoval (2000) argues that "the theory and method of oppositional and differential consciousness is aligned with Foucault's concept of power, which emphasizes the figure of the very *possibility* of positioning power itself" (p. 77, emphasis in original).[58] However, Foucault is an unlikely resource for feminist praxis given two features of his work: his neglect of the dynamics of gender in his analysis of power and his displacement of the subject as a central agent for social change.[59] However, as Vikki Bell (1993) argues, "Foucault's politics . . . has its emphasis on local resistance and the questioning of discursive categories that surround us"—two political projects that have much in common with feminist praxis (p. 55).[60] Foucault argues that "power is not overt domination of one group by another, but the acceptance by all that there exists 'an ideal, continuous, smooth text that runs beneath the multiplicity of contradictions, and resolves them in the calm unity of coherent thought'" (Foucault 1972, 155,

quoted in Worrall 1990, 8–9). Discourses are defined as "historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth—what is possible to speak of at a given moment" (Ramazanoglu 1993, 19). They are not merely "groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but [are] practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972, 49).

Foucault's work is especially relevant for social policy research given his interest in issues of governance and "governmentability" (Foucault 1979). Drawing on Foucault's notion of "governmentality," science studies scholar Nancy Campbell (2000) demonstrates how conventional approaches to "[p]olicy analysis typically misses the cultural assumptions . . . which then exert unacknowledged effects on the policymaking process and policy outcomes."[61] To understand how, what she terms *governing mentalities* affect policymaking and policy implementation, Campbell argues for "a mode of analytic attention that does not divide social structure from discourse, and proceeds with a historical contextualization of our political rationality" (p. 54). In her exploration of the "gender-coded and racially marked" U.S. state policy on illegal drug use, Campbell reveals how "notions of dependency, femininity, and sexual deviance" (p. 36) are mobilized to "target the behaviors of the 'dangerous classes' but excuse those of the dominant" (p. 9). As mentioned in my discussion of socialist feminist theories of the state, women, especially women of color, are particularly disadvantaged by cultural constructions of morality that are formed within a white, middle-class cultural ideal. As Campbell (2000, 7) demonstrates in her analysis of drug policy, "cultural values are installed in public policy in ways that do not always yield policies that are practical, ethical, or just," and, I would add, seldom achieve the goals they are explicitly designed to address. In order to examine how "cultural values" are woven into public policy as well as social movement frames designed to make claims for social justice, I developed a materialist feminist approach to discourse analysis. I illustrate the value of this approach for policy analysis in Part III of *Feminism and Method.*

Discourse analysis of policy explores what can be said and what can be heard within the legislative arena. Legislators and others who participate in the policy formation process must draw on recognizable discursive frames in order to enter discussions about welfare reform or other social policy. Such a process is illustrative of what Foucault describes as discursive strategies. However, as philosopher Gary Gutting (1989) points out, Foucault's "archaeology turns away from the subject and toward the conditions that define the discursive space [or discursive field] in which speaking subjects exist" (p. 244). Feminist critics of Foucault caution that the turn from the subject undermines the political agency of women and others who are interested in contesting the dominant power relations (McNay 1992; Ramazanoglu 1993). Foucault's approach also masks the important feminist insight that social policies target gendered and racialized subjects. By utilizing discourse analysis within a materialist feminist epistemology, I argue that the dynamics of gender, race, and class are brought into the frame more effectively than is possible with a nonfeminist Foucauldian approach.

Embedded in both the processes that generate a legislative outcome are the *relations of ruling* that structure the daily lives of those who are the objects of legislative discourse (Smith 1990a, 1990b). In Smith's materialist feminist approach, "the objectified forms, the rational procedures, and the abstracted conceptual organization create an appearance of neutrality and impersonality that conceals class, gender, and racial subtexts" (1990b, 65). Foucauldian discourse analysis offers an explicit methodology to reveal the discursive strategies that reinforce as well as reveal the limits of power. As Michel Foucault (1978) explains: "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (p. 101). However, Dorothy Smith differentiates her materialist feminist approach from Foucault's in significant ways. Smith (1987) argues for a feminist sociology that will reveal "the actual practices of actual people" that abstractions both "express and conceal" (p. 213). As she explains: "Those of us who have written what Sandra Harding (1986) has explored as 'standpoint epistemologies' learned that there are indeed matters to be spoken and spoken of that discourse does not yet encompass" (1993, 183–84).

Materialist Feminism, Institutional Ethnography, and Activist Research

In Part IV of *Feminism and Method,* I foreground my efforts to conduct activist and participatory research. In chapter 9, I utilize *institutional ethnography,* Smith's (1987) materialist feminist methodology, to examine how relations of ruling are infused in the everyday life of women college students on public assistance. The practice of institutional ethnography focuses on how women's actual everyday experiences are mediated and defined by text-based sociological and other institutionally related discourses. Those who adopt an institutional ethnographic approach link their work to a variety of traditions including phenomenology and ethnomethodology as well as Marx's historical materialism and poststructuralism.[62] Institutional ethnographers examine how ruling relations are woven into the production of texts used to organize people's activities in various locations such as schools or government agencies or professional offices.[63] A materialist feminist institutional ethnographic investigation makes it possible to disclose to those we work with (for example, in a particular institutional setting like education) how their daily lives are organized by processes of ruling and how these processes can be contested. It is this aspect of Smith's "institutional ethnographic" approach that contributes to its power for feminist activist research. The institutional and political knowledges that feminist researchers uncover through their investigations illustrate the link between institutional ethnography and feminist activism. In the context of activist research, analysts explore the institutional forms and procedures,

informal organizational processes, as well as discursive frames used to construct the goals and targets of the work that the institution performs. Smith's approach ensures that a commitment to the political goals of the Women's Movement remains central to feminist research by foregrounding how ruling relations work to organize everyday life.[64] With a "thick" understanding of "how things are put together" it becomes possible to identify effective activist interventions. However, as Devault (1999, 53) explains, "using research results effectively to promote change requires the pragmatic evaluative and strategic skills of activism, honed through more daily participation in front-line work than most researchers can manage . . . These comments point to a final element of institutional ethnographic investigation: to be fully realized, such inquiries should be conducted with an eye to their use by specific groups."

In one of the most poignant examples of the power of institutional ethnography for activist goals, Ellen Pence (1996) created what she termed "the safety and accountability audit" to explore how criminal justice and law enforcement policies and practices can be enhanced to ensure the safety of women who are the victims of domestic violence and to ensure the accountability of the offender. Pence (2002) developed the safety audit to examine the process by which "workers are institutionally organized to do their jobs by the forms, policies, philosophy, practices, and culture of the institution in which they work." Pence's safety audit has been used by police departments, criminal justice and probation departments, and family law clinics in diverse settings across the country. Pence asserts that her approach is not a "performance review of individual employees." Instead, "It examines the institution or system and how it is set up to handle domestic violence cases. Safety and Accountability Audits involve mapping the system, interviewing and observing workers and analyzing paperwork and other text generated through the handling of domestic violence cases."[65]

Institutional ethnographic research is not designed to focus primarily on the content of specific social actors spoken experiences. Dorothy Smith (1999) explains that she resists providing content to the standpoint of social actors because "I want it to function like the arrow you see on maps of malls that tells you 'you are here! The metaphor of a map directs us to a form of knowledge of the social that shows relations between various and differentiated local sites of experiences without subsuming or displacing them" (p. 130). Smith's map-making strategy helps an investigator map the activities that coordinate and reproduce oppressive systems and provides a useful tool for activist research. It also helps capture the nuances, contradictions, and less formal processes, institutional processes that intersect in particular social or institutional locations. This knowledge can be used as a resource for social change efforts, providing an assessment of how power operates in local practices of ruling and where activist interventions might be most successful.

The social maps generated from institutional ethnographic investigations are "through and through indexical to the local sites of people's experiences, making visible how we are connected into the extended social ruling relations and the economy." Since the "product could be ordinarily accessible and usable, just as a map is," it offers a guidepost for activist interventions (Smith 1999, 94–95). The goal of activist research is to produce an analysis that retains the integrity of political processes, specific events, diverse actors, and social context while revealing the broader processes at work that may not have been visible to the individual participants or even to the researcher at the time they were engaged in the struggle or when they conducted the research (Naples 1998a).

In an effort to democratize the research process, many feminist researchers argue for adopting participatory strategies that involve community residents or other participants in the design, implementation, and analysis of the research.[66] This analytic process can be further deepened when dialogic reflective strategies are adopted. This form of reflective practice is a collective activity involving ongoing dialogue between and among participants and co-researchers. Sociologist Susan Stern demonstrates in her activist research with parents from the predominantly African American high school her daughter Sarah attended, that conversational strategies can become an integral part of daily life, and politicization, and ethnographic analysis. In small groups or as conversation partners, participants in the conversational research project can assess findings and refocus research questions.[67] Stern (1998) points to the significance of friendship in providing grounds for more egalitarian conversation-based activist research and demonstrates how "[c]onversation-based research builds on ordinary friendship conversations in which exploration of the personal realm grows to include investigation of shared social conditions" (p. 110).[68] Dialogue among participants in an activist project helps in the development of grassroots analyses of personally experienced problems that are inevitably politically constituted.[69]

Analysis of community activism or the process of politicization can be deepened by making one's activist experiences and standpoint visible. Activist researchers have been ambivalent about writing themselves into the narrative record. On the one hand, this strategy can lead to a more honest account of the social movement activities or activist organization in which they participated. Incorporating one's activist experiences and positionality into the analysis can result in a deeper understanding of the political strategies chosen and the process of politicization (Naples 1998a). On the other hand, such a strategy may be viewed as an attempt to create a more "true" or "authentic" depiction of the field encounter, thus once again privileging the researcher's voice over others whose lives were the subject of the inquiry. In addressing this dilemma sociologists Kathy Charmaz and Richard Mitchell (1997) find a middle ground

between "deference to subjects' views" and "audible authorship" and stress that they "do not pretend that our stories report autonomous truths, but neither do we share the cynic's nihilism that ethnography is a biased irrelevancy" (p. 194). They offer a strategy for writing an ethnographic account where "the writer remains in the background and becomes embedded in the narrative rather than acting in the scene. The reader hears the writer's words, envisions the scenes, and attends to the story, not the story teller" (p. 214). In chapter 4, I present a similar writing strategy that enriches both the presentation of the ethnographic findings and the reflective analysis.

In addition to the value of reflective practice and dialogic strategies for collective action and activist research, they can also enrich the practice of ethnographic research more broadly. These interrelated processes are especially useful for making conscious what's at stake for us as feminist researchers in the work we do and how our investments inform what we can know about the processes that shape our lives and those of our respondents. In order to render visible what is at stake in the knowledge production process, reflective practices provide valuable tools throughout the research and writing process. The goal of reflective practice is "to avoid creating new orthodoxies that are exclusionary and reifying" (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 18). The next chapter explores some of the reflective strategies developed by feminist ethnographers who have been influenced by standpoint epistemologies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the theoretical strands that have influenced my approach. I described the challenges posed by postmodern and postcolonial scholars and discussed how feminists have participated in these debates and responded with innovative methodological strategies such as reflective techniques, standpoint epistemologies, feminist discourse analysis, and activist and participatory research. My materialist feminist approach to research was developed in dialogue with socialist feminist theories of the state and was subsequently transformed by incorporating the insights of feminist standpoint epistemologies and postmodern and postcolonial feminist perspectives. More specifically, my epistemological stance was enriched by "conversations" and practical application of the work of Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, Nancy Fraser, Patricia Hill Collins, Donna Haraway, Chéla Sandoval, Chandra Mohanty, and Michel Foucault.

Every research study I have conducted or have been fortunate to participate in required both personal and professional resources, and often it was difficult to separate one type of resource from the other. Along with greater understanding of the phenomena I was investigating, I also came away with greater self-awareness that in turn improved my skill as a researcher. Each research project and research site posed new challenges and offered different lessons. In the

next three sections of *Feminism and Method*, I present the lessons I learned in three different methodological approaches: ethnography, discourse analysis, and activist and participatory research. The themes I address include how to negotiate the multiplicity of approaches to feminist standpoint epistemology and to assess their relevance for feminist ethnographic practice; how to generate a materialist feminist analysis of discourse; and how to negotiate the tensions between feminist activist goals and research strategies.