Analyzing Women’s Studies Dissertations: Methodologies, Epistemologies, and Field Formation

Women’s studies scholars often calculate how much time has passed since the first courses were offered and the first programs were developed in the field of women’s/gender/feminist studies. By those measures, our field is over forty years old. Another anniversary has passed by without much fanfare, however: the founding of the first US PhD program in women’s studies at Emory University in 1990. By that measure, women’s studies has been a doctoral field for more than twenty years. This milestone provides a good opportunity to celebrate an important achievement and to consider what doctoral programs have contributed to the production of new knowledge in the field.

This article encapsulates the results of a study we conducted of women’s studies dissertations produced between 2001 and 2008. It focuses on our deep analysis of epistemological and methodological successes and challenges revealed in twenty-four dissertations produced in eight freestanding women’s (gender/feminist) studies PhD programs during those years, but it also provides more general information about dissertations produced earlier (since the first one in 1995), including an overview of dissertation topics, themes, and methodologies as well as some information about graduates and characteristics of existing programs. The article concludes with what we hope will be helpful observations and recommendations, which we offer on the basis of our familiarity with the dissertations as well as our experience as department chairs and founders of two PhD programs—at Ohio State University and at Arizona State University.

This study would not have been possible without the dedication and insightful assistance of two graduate assistants at Arizona State University—themselves students in our gender studies PhD program. Debjani Chakravarty began working with us in 2007 and Elena Frank in 2008. The task of locating and coding the dissertations was largely theirs, and they provided invaluable assistance in developing the statistical data we needed for the study. For over a year we met together as a research team to discuss what we were finding and how to interpret the dissertations as a national group and within programs. They have also developed guidelines for writing effective dissertation abstracts, which will be published separately. We also thank Aundrea Snitker, another Arizona State gender studies PhD student, who helped with the final stages of formatting the article in 2011.
University—and as outside reviewers for PhD programs in the United States and abroad.

We envision this analysis and our recommendations as part of a larger conversation that we hope will take place about the role of doctoral education in producing new knowledge. We recognize that the field is still in transition from its multidisciplinary origins in programs composed of discipline-trained scholars to one composed of scholars who hold women’s studies PhDs or certificates. Although we are strong advocates of freestanding women’s studies PhD programs, in light of their growth in recent years (with now fourteen doctoral programs and counting) we think it may be time for women’s studies faculty and administrators to begin defining what constitutes research that is specific to the field and discussing how to translate the more familiar interdisciplinary teaching mission in women’s (gender/sexuality/feminist) studies into research agendas and methodologies. We hope this analysis will illuminate a step along that path.

Context
At the time we conducted our study (from 2007 to 2010), eleven US universities had ongoing freestanding PhD programs in women’s studies, feminist studies, sexuality studies, or gender studies (hereafter referred to as women’s studies). They were, in chronological order of their development, Emory University (1990), the University of Washington (1997), the University of Minnesota (1998), the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA; 1999), the University of Maryland (2000), the Ohio State University (OSU; 2002), Rutgers University (2002), Indiana University (2006), Arizona State University (2007), the University of Arizona (2008), and the University of California at Santa Barbara (2009).1 Seven of them—Emory, Maryland, OSU, UCLA, Minnesota, Washington, and Rutgers—had produced graduates and, therefore, dissertations.

Adding to the total number of doctorate-producing schools, making it nine, were two disestablished, freestanding women’s studies PhD programs, one begun at Clark University in Massachusetts in 1992 and one at the University of Iowa in 1997. Both schools had graduates in the pipeline as of 2008. Clark produced graduates and dissertations between approximately 1997 and 2008, and Iowa did so between 2000 and 2008.

There were also two joint or dual-degree PhD programs in women’s studies in connection with other fields that had produced graduates and

1 A freestanding PhD program in women’s studies at Texas Women’s University admitted its first cohort in 2011.
dissertations, one at the University of Michigan and one at Pennsylvania State University. They brought to eleven the total of dissertation-producing schools. For various reasons, explained below, we eliminated the dual-degree programs from our close analysis. From the disestablished schools, we included only dissertations from Clark because we could not locate any Iowa dissertations. That left eight schools in our cohort. We also limited our focus to the time period from 2001 to 2008 in order to capture the most productive period for the most schools up to that time.

Although we found few specific guidelines for dissertations on program websites or in online graduate handbooks, the published mission statements and degree requirements for the PhD programs at the eight schools created certain expectations about what dissertations in the field might be like. Primary among them was interdisciplinarity. Most programs interpret the field’s inherent interdisciplinarity via their concentrations, such as “Gender, Sexuality, Violence, and Social Justice” at the University of Washington and “Gendered Labor: Households and Communities” at the University of Maryland. Only Emory specifically aims to train students in interdisciplinary women’s studies through “careful training in relevant traditional disciplines,” including art history, anthropology, literature, film studies, and psychology, among others.

2 At Michigan, there were four dual-degree PhD programs: one with English (established in 1994); one with psychology (personality and social context or clinical areas, established in 1994); one with history (established in 1999); and one with sociology (established in 2004). Students had to be individually admitted to both programs. At Penn State, dual-degree programs were eventually established linking women’s studies with ten other departments. Those programs began in 2001, and by 2008 they included joint degrees with art education, English, history, political science, psychology, curriculum and instruction, philosophy, geography, French, and rural sociology. Students were first admitted into the non–women’s studies program and then into women’s studies.

3 The ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database was the major source for locating dissertations in the field (although at the time we searched it, the database was called UMI Dissertations Publishing). Finding relevant dissertations from that database requires more than just keywords, such as “women,” “gender,” etc., which alone produce hundreds of dissertations in multiple fields (a mark of women’s studies’ success!). It is necessary to have one or more of the following: document title, author, school, subject, document language, or manuscript type. In practice, author and school produce the best possible results, so we were most successful when programs could provide the names of their graduates or those names were available on program websites. No such information was available from Iowa, and the contact for the program was unable to provide it.

4 “Graduate,” Emory University, Department of Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies, October 27, 2011, http://wgss.emory.edu/home/graduate/index.html.
Program mission statements and guidelines suggest that faculties at each institution have determined how their particular strengths blend with compelling topics in the field. Thus, race, globalization and transnationalism, sexualities, feminist theory, power, cultural texts, and identities appear in one form or another on most lists of degree concentration areas. (Class also appears, but not as often.)

Many—but not all—mission statements and requirements mention training in methodology as part of their programs. Of those, most suggest that students will select methodology training that is appropriate to their specific concentrations or dissertation topics. Only Maryland requires students to acquire “more than one disciplinary perspective” and to demonstrate their ability to use those perspectives together prior to writing a dissertation.5

Given the programs’ missions and our own experience in program design and implementation, we expected to see dissertations on a wide variety of topics that students would situate in one way or another in the interdisciplinary categories that their programs had identified or in the field in general. Given the prevalence of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other markers of difference in those concentration areas, we also expected that intersectionality—perhaps the most important theoretical development in the field in recent decades—would feature prominently in dissertations as either topic or method.

We were less certain about how and to what extent programs were facilitating feminist and interdisciplinary research epistemologies and methodologies, and particularly about what interdisciplinarity would mean to the kind of research questions students pursued and the dissertations they produced. Given Mary Hawkesworth’s recent analysis of scholarship produced in Signs during the past five years, we expected to see some “effort to develop alternative research practices that further feminist, queer, and antiracist goals of social transformation” (Hawkesworth 2011, 511).

What we did
We began the study by identifying the total number of dissertations (117) produced between 1995 and 2008 through a search of either the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database or individual program websites and through direct contact with individual program administrators or dis-

5 “Current Students, Requirements,” University of Maryland, Department of Women’s Studies, October 27, 2011, http://wmst.umd.edu/academics/graduate-studies/current-students-requirements.
sertation authors. From this total (which we consider the study’s “universe”) we identified 106 available abstracts and found 97 available dissertations. We read all of the abstracts to identify dissertation topics and objects of inquiry, controlling theoretical or conceptual frameworks, methodologies and rationales for using them, and conclusions and findings. We coded the abstracts into sixteen topic categories and eight methodology categories. An abstract that claimed or demonstrated a focus on multiple topics or the use of multiple methodologies received multiple codes. Given the field’s emphasis on cross-cultural and transnational research we also mined the abstracts to determine whether the research focused on the United States, on other countries, or on comparisons between the United States and other countries.

From the ninety-seven dissertations available we chose an initial sample to read more carefully, distributed among the schools and across the years of production. We found that their corresponding abstracts inadequately represented the scope of the dissertations—especially discussions of methodology, key arguments, and research findings or conclusions—although reading many of the dissertations allowed us to fill in some gaps in that vital information. The reading of full dissertations also revealed the need to adjust our initial topic and methodology categories to capture distinctions that proved important to describing the dissertations. Table 1 lists the dominant topic coding categories, and table 2 lists our final rubrics for describing methodologies. Although we added “transnational” to the topic coding categories for full dissertations, it was not dominant in the universe or sample.

The final step in our research process was to narrow the study to make it more manageable and detailed by selecting a reasonable time period to study and an appropriate sample of dissertations to analyze in depth. Limiting ourselves to the period between 2001 and 2008 allowed us to focus on relatively recent dissertations in the field and reflected a reasonable distribution among the largest selection of schools; this reduced the number of available dissertations to eighty-four. Because the dual-degree dissertations skewed the representation of both topics and methodologies, we also limited our study to freestanding degree programs. Without the

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6 The disparity resulted in part from some dissertation writers’ reluctance to release their work before publishing it.

7 Together the Michigan and Penn State programs accounted for nine of the eleven dissertations (almost 82 percent) that used solely quantitative methods and seven of the twelve dissertations (58 percent) that used mixed qualitative and quantitative methods from the original group of 106 abstracts that we read and coded. In addition, the dissertations from those programs were often written to satisfy the requirements of the non–women’s
dual-degree dissertations (twenty-six at Michigan, seven at Penn State), our new universe totaled fifty-one.

Finally, because of imbalances in the numbers of dissertations produced by each school in the time period (from twenty-four at Emory to one at Rutgers), the availability of dissertations, and the uneven distribution of topics among schools, it was a challenge to construct a representative sample that reached across schools, topics, and years. Instead, we constructed a purposeful sample, balanced by topic, year, and school, that generally reflected the distribution of topics and methodologies across

Table 1. Dissertation Topic Coding Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant Topics</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity/subjectivity</td>
<td>Processes of identity formation and configuration of subjectivities; also examines the defining factors, such as power and positionality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender norms</td>
<td>Uses gender and gender norms or gendering as category and topic of analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance/activism/power</td>
<td>Studies in social change, social movements and activism, power structures, and resistance; one or more of these processes as the subject matter of the dissertation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural texts</td>
<td>Works that analyze discourses, including literature, art, performances, film, etc., as texts; also explores production of texts and meaning-making practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism/citizenship</td>
<td>National communities, imaginations, identities, and/or citizenship as crucial processes under consideration, not merely as contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Race as a chief analytical category and/or variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Causes, effects, politics, and formations of sexualities and/or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment/violence/victimization/trauma</td>
<td>Explores causes, effects, and processes of violence, armed conflict, harassment, and/or trauma in public and private spheres and every in-between place imaginable</td>
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studies discipline rather than to raise or address questions and topics that usually characterize the field of women's studies. At Penn State, for example, where students were first admitted to the other discipline and then to women’s studies, the second admission could occur a year or more after admission to the original program. Thus students were understandably more rooted in their initial discipline than in women’s studies, even if they used feminist methodologies or theories in their work. The exclusion of the joint degree programs from our study does not mean that such programs should be excluded from the field. A disciplinary focus can serve many purposes.
the universe. A measure (such as year) sometimes had to yield so that a distribution on others (such as topic) could be achieved. We finally selected twenty-four dissertations to examine in detail.

Table 3 demonstrates the consistency of topics among the sample, universe, and original abstracts. Methodologies were also consistent across

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodologies</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representational</td>
<td>Works that study the representation of persons, groups, subject positions, objects, events, social categories and relations, cultural assumptions, etc., through critical discourse analysis, semiotics, and readings of cultural productions, discursive practices, and narrative texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
<td>Events or processes in historical contexts and temporal framing; examining historiography; using methods such as archival research and oral histories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical/philosophical</td>
<td>Embraces abstract theoretical, philosophical, and/or epistemological arguments and relies heavily on theoretical texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative social science</td>
<td>Analyzes nonnumerical data gathered from sources such as documents, observations, and interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist</td>
<td>Uses expressly feminist methods rooted in feminist theory, such as standpoint theory, intersectionality, situational analysis, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed social science</td>
<td>Uses both qualitative and quantitative methods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary</td>
<td>Multiple, integrative, and/or reciprocal approaches to a topic in order to transcend disciplinary boundaries and to construct new knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>Claims to use or actually uses new and/or unconventional methods or approaches</td>
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Table 3. Dissertation Topics Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Sample (n = 24)</th>
<th>Universe (n = 51)</th>
<th>All Dissertation Abstracts (n = 106)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity/subjectivity</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender norms</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance/activism/power</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism/citizenship</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural texts</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment/violence/victimization/trauma</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
those categories; the dominant methodologies were representational and historical, with qualitative social science as a close third.

**Key findings**

**Topics and epistemology**

Primary among our findings was the congruity between the eight most prevalent dissertation topics we identified and those described in program mission statements and descriptions. That is, identity/subjectivity, gender norms, resistance/activism/power, nationalism/citizenship, cultural texts, harassment/violence/victimization/trauma, race, and sexuality dominated dissertations in both the universe and the sample in roughly that descending order, which confirmed programs’ emphases on identity, cultural texts, race, social justice, and power, although not necessarily in the order of priority suggested in program statements. There was little change in the top eight topics over time.

The dissertation study also made clear that different schools were producing differently focused degrees. Thus, despite similarities among program mission statements, in practice quasi specializations characterized and “branded” specific programs. For example, of the top eight topic areas in the study, Emory dissertations most frequently focused on identity/subjectivity, race, and cultural texts. (Patterns are most discernible for Emory because of the large number of dissertations produced during the time period we studied.) Identity/subjectivity also dominated Minnesota dissertations, although that program produced more dissertations focused on sexuality and race than either Clark or Maryland. Nationalism/citizenship dominated Clark dissertations, and most transnational dissertations were produced at Maryland (a few others were produced at Emory, OSU, and UCLA).

In addition, we found a close connection between students’ personal experiences and backgrounds and the topics they wrote about in their dissertations. The connection was evident in seventeen of the twenty-four sample dissertations. This finding was especially significant with regard to dissertations focused outside the United States, since all but two of those were written by students who grew up in the countries being studied or who had personal ties (including their adviser’s fieldwork) to those regions. By the same token, any dissertation focused on sexuality was inevitably written by a gay or lesbian student (revealed in the text), a dissertation on domestic violence in Native American communities was predictably written by a Native victim of domestic violence, a dissertation on pregnancy in film...
was written by a pregnant student, and a dissertation focused on a Midwestern town depicted a fictionalized version of the author’s hometown.

Finally, the study revealed that two key concepts emphasized in many programs’ mission statements—intersectionality and transnationalism—were not well represented in the dissertations. We found only five dissertations in the universe that could be classified as transnational (i.e., exploring cross-national or extrastate issues, alliances, social movements, etc.), four of which were written between 2006 and 2008. Indeed, almost 71 percent of universe and sample dissertations focused exclusively on the United States, and 46 percent focused on other countries. (Percentages exceed 100 because several dissertations were classified in both US and non-US categories, although they were not necessarily transnational.)

Similarly, despite programs’ emphasis on race, class, sexuality, and the importance of intersectional scholarship to the field—and despite numerous references to the importance of intersectionality in the dissertations themselves—we found few examples of truly intersectional analyses (i.e., discussing the mutual constitutiveness of social identities or their inseparability from one another). Indeed, only 51 percent of the universe dissertations and 46 percent of the sample dissertations focused on issues of race, class, or sexuality in any way. We found only three dissertations in the universe and sample that focused on class, eight sample dissertations (of twelve in the universe) that focused on race, and five sample dissertations (of eleven in the universe) that focused on sexuality. One near-intersectional dissertation did not ultimately qualify because it omitted gender as a consideration.

Methodology
We learned more about methodology from the sample than from the universe of dissertations because so many abstracts were vague or silent about methodology. Even full dissertations often required some judgment to determine their exact methodology or method(s). Our investigation ultimately distinguished between the methodologies dissertation writers claimed to be using (or failed to note) and what they actually used.

Almost two-thirds of the dissertations in the sample claimed to be interdisciplinary by our definition. That is, writers said they were using multiple, integrative, or reciprocal approaches to a topic in order to transcend disciplinary boundaries and construct new knowledge. Nearly 80 percent of the dissertations in the sample claimed to be using feminist methodology, such as standpoint theory, intersectionality, or situated knowledge.8

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8 For a full explication of the type of interdisciplinarity discussed here, see Allen and Kitch (1998).
In addition, methodologies related to the humanities—historical, representational, and theoretical/philosophical—dominated the sample and universe, while social science methods—qualitative and mixed quantitative/qualitative—were in the minority. (After eliminating the joint programs, we found no exclusively quantitative dissertations in the universe.) Again, because many dissertations in the sample claimed to employ multiple methods, a single dissertation often appeared in multiple categories.

The dominance of humanities-based methodologies matched the dominance of certain topics in the sample—identity/subjectivity and cultural texts in particular. However, topics such as race, sexuality, nationalism/citizenship, gender norms, and harassment/violence/victimization/trauma were just as likely to be explored through representational and historical methods as they were via qualitative social science. Dissertations on such topics were also likely to combine the qualitative social science methodological framework with interdisciplinary and feminist approaches. Theoretical methodologies were most often used in exploring identity/subjectivity, resistance/activism/power, and cultural texts, but they were also used with topics related to gender norms. Qualitative social science methodologies were also frequently paired with cultural texts. In several cases, a single dissertation would examine literary texts or historical narratives via feminist theory, personal interviews, census data, and/or archival material.

Of particular note was the pairing of representational methodology—examining persons, groups, subject positions, objects, events, social categories and relations, and cultural assumptions through critical discourse analysis, semiotics, and readings of cultural productions, discursive practices, and narrative texts—with topics typically associated with social science methodologies. For example, more resistance/activism/power dissertations used historical methodology than used qualitative social science, although both methodologies were applied to the topic.

A small number of writers claimed to be inventing methodologies or epistemologies. These dissertations, categorized as “innovative,” typically involved the writer’s design of a new category or approach designated by a novel term. For example, DS1 offered a new conceptual framework and methodology called “autobioexpression” for analyzing the genre of women’s autobiography in the context of their total creative expression.

To protect the identity of writers and schools, we refer to dissertations via the neutral “DS+number” designation or a code that identifies them as exemplary, “EDS+number.” Because we are not identifying dissertations by author or title, direct quotations from them are not accompanied by reference citations.
Methodology by school

As with topics, some major degree-granting schools had “signature” methodologies despite our initial impression of relatively equal distribution of methodologies across programs. Close reading of the dissertations allowed us to correct for the coding system’s equal weighting of every methodology no matter how prevalent it was in a particular dissertation. Thus, we discovered that most Emory dissertations used representational and theoretical/philosophical methodologies. Emory also produced two of the three dissertations categorized as innovative in the sample. Minnesota produced the most dissertations using theoretical/philosophical methodology, although Minnesota matched Clark and Maryland in producing at least some dissertations in most methodologies.

We concluded from the available evidence that no school in the study actually required dissertations to be interdisciplinary by our definition. Maryland required students to demonstrate knowledge of two methods, but that approach did not necessarily achieve multiple, integrative, or reciprocal approaches to research questions or topics. Nevertheless, Maryland’s dual-method requirement did make dissertation writers more explicit about their use of methods than were students from other schools.

Other aspects of the study: Publications, citations, and employment

We found that women’s studies PhD students were publishing books and journal articles from their dissertation research and that (at least during the period of our study) they were finding employment inside and outside the academy. Our search in 2009 of the ninety-seven available dissertations uncovered at least forty-six dissertation-related publications (including forty-one published books, articles, and chapters) and others submitted or under review. The majority of those publications were based on dissertations from Emory and Michigan, the two oldest programs and those that have produced the most graduates.

We tried to discover what type of jobs the graduates from women’s studies PhD programs were finding. In 2009, of twenty-seven dissertation writers, including three from the dual-degree programs, twenty-three (85 percent) had jobs in academia (including assistant and associate professors, lecturers, and postdoctoral fellows) or as program or department directors in nonprofit organizations. Twenty of the twenty-four in our final sample (83 percent) also had such jobs. Of the academically employed graduates, sixteen of the original sample that included the joint programs (59 percent) and fourteen of the final sample that did not (58 percent) had tenure-track positions as assis-

10 For more discussion about varieties of interdisciplinary research, see Kitch (2007).
tant or associate professors. Two from each sample (7 percent and 8 percent, respectively) had positions as project or department directors in nonprofit organizations.

Finally, we examined the dissertations’ citations in order to determine the extent to which the writers utilized the key interdisciplinary women’s studies journals in their research—Feminist Studies, Signs, NWSA Journal (now Feminist Formations), Meridians, Women’s Studies Quarterly, Hypatia, Frontiers, and Genders. We found that only 17 percent of sample dissertations had six or more citations from such journals, 25 percent had two to five, and one-third had none.

**Challenges**

We begin our detailed analysis of the sample by discussing the challenges we discovered in the dissertations’ design and execution. We believe that illuminating those challenges sets the stage for appreciating the exemplary dissertations that we analyze in the next section.

**Epistemological challenges**

The field of women’s studies has revolutionized knowledge construction in many ways, but none has been more important than the posing and answering of large questions about women and gender that cannot be adequately addressed in conventional disciplines. Before feminist inquiry entered academia, there were no knowledge frameworks for understanding sexual harassment, violence against women, date rape, the glass ceiling (or the sticky floor), the sexual contract, the mommy track, the male gaze, and numerous other terms and forms of analysis that are now so commonplace that we may forget how revolutionary they once were. Our findings reveal how the first generation of scholars trained in the field have conceptualized and approached their research questions and provide insight into what they considered worthy of their efforts. They also reveal the extent to which dissertation writers were concerned with questions they regarded as significant for the field and to what extent they identified themselves as contributors to the larger field’s innovative knowledge frameworks.

The relative absence of two field-significant concepts—transnationalism and intersectionality—from the dissertations might suggest that writers were avoiding questions relevant to the field and its compelling ideas. And it was the case that some dissertations did not articulate a clear research question at all, large or small. More significant, however, was the fact that many writers did pose large, field-significant questions, but their selected object(s) of inquiry were not necessarily varied or numerous enough, nor
were they given the proper contextual analysis to address those questions adequately. As we kept encountering this issue with identity/subjectivity, gender norms, and cultural texts dissertations (or combinations thereof), in most discipline-based dissertations, we recognized one limitation of such scholarship for producing field-significant women’s studies research: within disciplines, the significance of objects of inquiry tends to be assumed rather than justified.

Although several discipline-based dissertations successfully negotiated the linkage between social meaning and objects of inquiry, four sample dissertations from these topic categories illustrate the challenges. The first, DS2, sought to chart the changing relationship between pregnancy, gender, and the family in the United States over time by analyzing eleven contemporary Hollywood films from a gender perspective. Using a film studies approach, the author concluded that the films suggest that the relationship is contradictory, with nods to the constructedness of gender, on the one hand, but approval of the traditional nuclear family and its traditional gender roles, on the other.

Another film studies dissertation, DS3, set out to identify the relationship between contemporary US and New Zealand/Australian movies. It identified that connection as “hybridity,” meaning a shared postmodern understanding of cultural mobility defined by ambiguous or androgynous gender roles, mixed races, mixed political identities, and multilingualism in the six films selected. The hybrid films allegedly transformed outliers or misfits into signifiers of postmodern cultural transcendence, thereby signifying the “feminization of nation states.”

DS4 interrogated the social efficacy of weblogs by studying “cyberfeminist” discourse. The writer studied three female bloggers, one each from Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan, who used their limited access to digital technology to refashion their private discourse for the global, public space of the Internet. Using a communications framework, the author then claimed that such blog writers became “cyberconduits” for their cultures as well as members of a feminist community of practice as they navigated their gender performances in virtual spaces that are simultaneously public and private.

Finally, DS5 analyzed the meaning of the female nude by examining the work of three artists—one woman and two men. Using an art history approach, the writer claimed that the analysis challenged conventional interpretations of women’s use of nude figures as primarily a response to the objectification of women’s bodies in men’s work. Using psychoanalytic theory and feminist visual and narrative theories, the writer concluded that nudes can also signify painting patronage, the art market, and the artist’s own embodied sense of his or her gender identity.
Clearly, such dissertations were quite capable of posing field-significant questions and offered well-argued, intriguing analyses of the works in question. But despite detailed knowledge about and (sometimes brilliant) analyses of their objects of inquiry, writers sometimes faltered in moving from their chosen theoretical concept (e.g., “the gaze”) and deep readings of a limited cluster of cultural texts to the broad knowledge claims, knowledge frameworks, or significant cultural meanings the questions implied. Few explained how a handful of films or the work of a few artists or bloggers, however deeply analyzed, provided enough information to support the social or cultural meanings writers inferred from them. Even fewer examined or theorized the nature of representation and its relationship to social life and beliefs.

Large claims about the cultural significance of gendered cultural texts or gendered and racial subjectivities, identities, and norms are a key province of women’s studies that intradisciplinary analysis cannot always accomplish. To justify such claims, interdisciplinary scholars typically situate their discussions of cultural texts within an analysis of representation itself and interrogate the relationship between art forms and social and political lifeworlds. Comparing selected cultural texts or phenomena to other texts in different genres or contextualizing them within historical or cultural data, especially about their own production, was one way in which several dissertation writers in these topic areas and others (discussed below) connected the significance of cultural texts to social trends and popular attitudes.

Dissertations that we labeled “innovative” represented writers’ intentions to expand certain concepts through novel epistemological frameworks and methodologies. The “hybridity” dissertation was one. DS6 provides another example, in which the writer hoped to increase the significance of illness narratives through the concept of “treatments.” That concept both enlarged the category to include narratives written by the sick as well as their caretakers and doctors and offered a new way of reading such narratives—through analysis of the subject formation of the ill, alternative forms of medical knowledge, the role of language in capturing and failing to capture loss, and the ethics of handling loss. The treatments approach and category definitions enabled the writer to identify “politicized patients,” who challenge modern medicine, and “the art of being ill” through ironic and antiheroic attempts to establish closure rather than suffer loss.

We found the treatments innovation to be fairly successful but noted that innovations varied in their thoroughness, effectiveness, and consistency. This unevenness raises questions about when, how, and under what circumstances students should be encouraged to coin new terminology in
order to heighten the significance of their research. While developing new terminology is consistent with the aims of women’s studies epistemology, as with “the glass ceiling” and “sexual harassment,” such innovations must acknowledge their foundations in existing work and rigorously demonstrate the new term’s novelty, replicability, and usefulness in generating new understanding of the gendered world.

Another challenge revealed in our study involves students’ personal connection to their research topics. While personal connection can provide valuable motivation for research in women’s studies and honors the field’s founding belief in the importance of firsthand experience to knowledge about women and gender, it can also foreclose rather than expand an analysis. Forty years after the field’s formation, it seems to us that scholars must interrogate, rather than assume, relationships between experience and knowledge and between identity and knowledge (Kitch 2003). They must now ask what basis a researcher’s own situation or experience provides for knowing something about that situation or experience and what “insider” as well as “outsider” knowledge means for the conduct of research. Scholars’ own preconceptions should be tested and addressed and their perspectives widened as they conduct research on cultures or situations with which they are familiar.

Many dissertation writers who based their work on their own identities or life experiences cited Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge or Sandra Harding’s standpoint epistemology to justify making themselves or their experience a research topic and to provide a framework for revealing and analyzing their personal connections to the subject at hand. But too often the dissertations invoking these epistemologies overlooked the admonition to challenge one’s own subject position and adopt the positions of multiple others in order to reflect more broadly and with fresh eyes on a familiar situation or identity.

Dissertations displayed various levels of engagement with these issues. The most blatant examples of “too close” situated knowledge, primarily in the identity/subjectivity topic category, clearly limited students’ selection of objects of inquiry. A few dissertations, for example, used personal correspondence or writers’ relationships with their own families or intimate partners as subjects for analysis. In the best cases, however, writers used their insider status to identify contacts and to establish a working knowledge of a culture or identity but supplemented their tacit knowledge by interviewing people unlike themselves or examining historical materials and other sources in order to make the familiar strange.

Closely linked to this issue is the fact that so much doctoral research in the field on international and transnational topics has been conducted by
scholars from countries outside the United States. Although such students often succeeded in expanding and interrogating their own insider perspectives, this finding suggests that most US students were opting out of research not based in the United States. As a field, we should consider whether courses, methodological training, or programmatic cultures somehow convey the message that women’s studies scholars should limit themselves to studying only their own locations or milieu and leave the outsider scholarly position to budding historians, anthropologists, and political scientists. Advisers may want to help students utilize their own geographical, class, racial, and sexual identities and life experiences as a foundation for their research but also to help them stretch their interests and research capabilities beyond what they already know.

Perhaps students’ reluctance to explore unfamiliar geographic territory translates into a concern about the risk of offending cultures or identities they do not inhabit personally. If so, that may help to explain the dearth of intersectional dissertations in our study. On the other hand, it is also possible that dissertations produced before 2008 represent a first generation of scholarship in the field. Perhaps the upward trend we observed in transnational analyses after 2006 will set the stage for outsider research of all kinds in future years.

Another aspect of closely situated knowledge in the dissertations involves students’ relationship to their advisers’ work. Although 35 percent of the sample dissertations displayed little adviser influence in the selection of research questions and objects of inquiry, another 35 percent of the sample displayed strong connections to the adviser’s research interests. An additional 30 percent had slight connections to those interests, though they could be regarded as independent projects. By involvement we mean everything from the two US students in our sample who adopted their advisers’ fieldwork locales for research (perhaps one way to achieve a kind of insider status without previous connection to a place) to the larger number who heavily cited their advisers’ publications to the many who directly acknowledged their advisers’ influence on the dissertation.

Although adviser influence on dissertation research is common and even desirable in doctoral education, we wonder if that traditional pattern is entirely appropriate for the development of women’s studies scholarship, especially in programs seeking to transcend the disciplinary boundaries that might shape an influential adviser’s work. Although there can be no hard-and-fast rules about the role or value of advisers’ work or influence in the production of their advisees’ dissertations, balancing the use of important discipline-based research by established scholars with questions
and approaches that transcend that research might best fulfill the field’s larger transformative mission.

**Methodological challenges**

Methodological discussions typically explain the process of substantiating knowledge claims and of addressing research questions and designs; the rationale for and limitations of specific research techniques, methods, and interpretative strategies; and reflections on the ethical implications of the approach taken.11 We expected to see explicit methodology discussions rooted in feminist epistemology, ontology, and theory in the dissertations, and we did see this effort in many, including the exemplars discussed below. Too often, however, dissertation writers failed to specify a rationale for either the methodology or the methods chosen to address their research questions or buried or scattered their rationale(s) throughout the dissertation, leaving us to infer the matches between method, methodology, and epistemology as we coded methodology categories. In many cases, writers conflated methodology (discussions of procedure, rationale, and approach) with method (a technique for gathering evidence) or made sweeping, abstract claims about the relationship between knowledge and power without demonstrating or interrogating that relationship.

Searches of the sample dissertations for the words “methodology” and “method” turned up few references. Dissertations that hit the mark on one often missed it on the other. In some there was simply no discussion of either. Further, in the absence of explicitly stated research questions, there could be no discussion of why the method of analysis used was the best approach for the topic. For example, in the pregnancy and film dissertation, the author provided a textual analysis of the films without specifying what that analysis entailed. By the same token, the author of DS3 claimed to use psychoanalytic theory as a methodological tool for understanding hybridity but provided no detailed discussion of what that meant as a method. Similarly, DS5 presented no discussion of methods or methodology except in the context of what particular art historians have previously done, leaving the reader to infer that a similar method the author called “feminist image analysis” was being used in this study of the female nude in modern visual culture.

Regardless of the methods employed or discussed, methodological issues of reflexivity, lived experience, and agency constituted the core of feminist methodology for many dissertation writers (Chakravarty, Cook, 2005).

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11 For a review essay about newer trends in feminist methodology, see Fonow and Cook (2005).
and Fonow 2011). Reflexivity is identified in feminist methodology as a way to understand experiences of women from their own perspectives, to explain how researcher and researched are active agents in the construction of knowledge, and to consider how to represent ethically the phenomena under investigation. But just as writers relied on theorists such as Harding and Haraway to validate their own presence in constructing and justifying knowledge claims, so too did they rely on those theorists methodologically without explicating or fully engaging with what their theories might mean for the methods employed in the dissertation. When writers associated situated knowledge with uncovering and representing women’s lived experience, for example, they often assumed that certain methods alone (interviews, oral histories, participant observation) would suffice to uncover it. They rarely recognized that the subjects’ knowledge of lived experience, though admittedly partial and therefore incomplete, might also be hidden from the subjects themselves. Fewer still questioned whether subjects can accurately access and convey the meaning of their experience or fully understand the complex way their experiences as women are simultaneously shaped by race, class, sexuality, and nation. Also missing was a discussion of deeper concerns and questions about the nature of experience itself and how best to access and represent it. Was lived experience invoked as historical evidence, or did it stand in for subjective experience, feelings, beliefs, ideas, or embodiment (Scott 1991, 785–86, 796–97)? It was hard to tell.

Agency and social change are also foundational to feminist methodology and often turn up both as the purpose of research and as a research topic. Some writers in our study displayed the more nuanced understanding that (even feminist) research can reinscribe women as victims, while others subscribed to earlier, more naive notions that research findings in and of themselves provided agency or empowered women to change the world. Sometimes the dissertation topic was obviously about change agents, as in studies of women’s involvement in social movements, resistance, and revolution, but at other times agency and change were matters of interpretation.

Many writers equated the mere fact of expression with transgression. It was not clear in DS1, for example, why women’s use of writing and art to perform the self—their autobioexpression—constituted a “feminist method of resistance” just because the women were from marginalized groups. DS4 illustrates another effort to interpret self-expression as agency and resistance without deep exploration. The dissertation combined discourse analysis of blog content and readers’ comments with detailed historical and cultural analysis of Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq to explore how new communication technologies could be sites of feminist activism in war-torn
regions of the world. Yet the author did not specify the conditions under
which the progressive potential of the Internet was realized or how these
blogs established their writers’ agency. In contrast, DS6 left open the pos-
sibility that the memoirs she chose to include in her study of illness nar-
ratives could do contradictory work. The writer recognized that memoir can
transform the self, language, and institutions as well as conform to hege-
monic political and aesthetic structures.

Discussions of agency can be enhanced when researchers recognize
that women consent to, resist, and reshape the social relations of power
within what Patricia Hill Collins (1991) calls the matrix of domination
and subordination. Women can be simultaneously disadvantaged and
privileged. While we saw many discussions of how women attempt to
resist and reshape social relations of power, we did not see serious atten-
tion given to how they often consent to such arrangements. It seemed
that dissertation writers were more inclined to see resistance and agency
than complicity.

Finally, several dissertations used archival materials to excavate hidden
or invisible knowledge about women’s lives and experiences and to vali-
date women as historical actors. Given what we know about the socially
constructed nature of archives—particularly the ways in which they are
gendered—it is surprising that so few dissertations explained why they
chose a particular archive, what its contents were, or why they analyzed
particular materials within the archive. The absence of such a discussion
gave the impression that the archive is a literal repository of the past
instead of what Carolyn Steedman calls “a place of dreams . . . a place of
longing and appropriation” (Steedman 2002, 81). The archive has been
constructed for some purpose other than the researcher’s, and this should
be taken into account explicitly when using archival material, at the very
least by recognizing what might be missing.

The exemplary dissertations
In the previous section we focused on the problems we discovered with
assumptions in and execution of dissertations, particularly the lingering
adherence to disciplinary techniques, while trying to investigate large,
field-significant questions. We would like to turn now to a discussion of
five of the dissertations that we believe demonstrate well the value of
producing feminist knowledge via freestanding women’s studies PhD pro-
grams. These dissertations rose admirably to the challenge of constructing
new knowledge on well-chosen and sufficient evidence with appropriate
methodology and convincing arguments to justify their knowledge claims.
EDS7, a representational analysis of cultural texts, is an example of a dissertation that used “thick” evidence in a theoretically deliberate way to connect objects of inquiry to larger questions. The writer began with two related compelling questions: “Why do women remain in less powerful positions even when they are better educated than men?” and “Even when a society is in dire need of human resources, why are women underutilized and their economic contribution not valued?” To explore those questions, the writer selected a small society, Belize, where she tested her hypothesis about a “hidden curriculum” in schools from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. The writer concluded that such a curriculum, rooted in Belize’s colonial and missionary past, still reinforces traditional gender roles so that “feminine” work remains undervalued and women are subtly guided into jobs of lesser skill. While that hypothesis could be tested in a wide variety of cultures, the writer focused on an isolated colonial culture in which gender, race, and nation could be more manageably considered together.12

Most importantly for this analysis, EDS7 explicitly linked its hidden curriculum argument to the specific sources examined. Some sources were obvious, such as textbooks rife with “evangelical and imperialist” ideas about women’s proper domestic identities, records of missionary activities in Belize, accounts of the formal education system’s development, court cases, and other historical texts. Archival material was questioned rather than taken at face value. Other sources, including fiction and memoir, were less obvious, but the writer explained that such texts were key to understanding the hidden curriculum in colonial Belize because they discussed and reflected the impact of the biased textbooks. The writer also explained the criteria for selecting the works used, including whether the text directly discussed the effects of the hidden curriculum and whether it illuminated “small-scale interactions” among students and between students and teachers. Both the breadth of sources and the clarity with which the author explained their relevance to the argument strengthened the connection between the dissertation’s evidence and its knowledge claims and demonstrated the importance of cultural texts as both objects and generators of meaning.

EDS8 was also successful in making a strong link between evidence and knowledge claims, but we chose it as an exemplar primarily because it made appropriate use of insider knowledge, was well contextualized historically and culturally, and provided an analysis that was both intersec-

12 This dissertation was coded as citizenship/nationalism, resistance/activism/power, and race, as well as identity/subjectivity and cultural texts.
tional and transnational. The dissertation asked how the global circulation of images and representations explicitly concerned with skin color intersects with identity categories, such as race, gender, nationality, and sexuality, to promote white-centered beauty standards around the world. The case study for that phenomenon was the nonwhite/nonblack society of Indonesia. Analyzing the cultural texts that circulated globally was an obvious part of probing the central question of the dissertation, but the writer realized that a close reading of those texts was not sufficient to answer it. Therefore EDS8 also traced the reception of those texts and the shifting standards of beauty in Indonesia over time, as reflected in historical epics, novels, memoirs, leaflets, brochures, women’s magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and photographs. EDS8 applied semiotic analysis to decode the various signs located in such texts. In addition, the writer conducted in-depth interviews with forty-six Indonesian women in both the United States and Indonesia.

The primary metaphor for the investigation was a maze, which suggests the way that identity categories acquire meaning by moving through a “metaphoric passage . . . shaped by historical and geographical locations.” Thus, it has been possible for whiteness, which barely exists as an identity in Indonesia, to become a desirable though elusive mark of female beauty in a nonwhite/nonblack society. The dissertation’s novel finding, which reinforces its own theoretical framework of interconnected mazes as well as the concept of intersectionality, is that skin color need not signify race, as it does in the United States. Rather, race, nation, and gender can signify skin color. Whiteness as the marker of female beauty emerged in nationally specific ways from historically specific time periods.

The writer’s depth of analysis and conscious selection of texts to explore and compare solidified the dissertation’s analysis of the cultural texts as a foundation for the cultural meanings being claimed. Thus, readers could see, first, how skin color functioned as a transnational construction that created and justified gender discrimination in Indonesia and, second, how skin color came to dominate Indonesian beauty ideology. They could also see how the adoption of white beauty standards reinforced the categories of nation, race, and ethnicity in postindependence Indonesia and promoted gender and racial injustice as each category became a proxy for the impossible white standard.

Like other dissertation writers, the author of EDS8 situated herself within the research. In order to understand better the meaning of skin color in Indonesian beauty culture, however, she enlarged her own insider knowledge circle by conducting interviews with dermatologists and beauticians and with women who used whitening products. As a darker skinned
Indonesian woman, the writer disclosed personal experiences of shame in a culture that values light skin in order to explain how she was reading between the lines of the interviews and “listen[ing] around and beyond” subjects’ words. That resulted in uncovering various layers of beauty culture, including the value Indonesian culture places on conformity and sameness, how that conformity is manufactured and maintained through the gendered mobilization of affect, how the preference for lighter skin leads to preferential treatment in the lives of the women interviewed, and how shame, stigma, and embarrassment serve as possible sites of resistance. Thus her personal story intertwined with those of her interview subjects as a way to expose complicity and struggle within the research project.

Exemplars like EDS8 produced primarily by diasporic scholars also illustrate the use of information about the production, construction, and distribution of representations through archival research, interviews with consumers and policy makers, and deep textual analysis of artifacts, reports, photography, advertisements, and more. We found this group to be the most interdisciplinary and transnational of the dissertations. We wondered whether the writers’ own geographical dislocation might provide the kind of critical lens that allowed them to situate themselves appropriately within the text.

EDS9 not only accomplished the above but also provided a more subtle understanding of lived experience by presenting a fuller picture of the range of experiences under investigation. This allowed for a deeper understanding of agency, resistance, and complicity. The author asked how legal subjects are created by their treatment under the law in new transnational spaces, such as the United States, in which cultures clash and individuals inevitably pay the price. As a practical matter, the writer wanted to discover what constraints hamper legal advocacy for individuals who occupy those spaces. Indian women in both India and the United States were the primary subjects for that inquiry. The writer demonstrated that the women’s immigration status subjects them to new forms of violence and that US law often treats them according to stereotyped views of culturally appropriate gender roles and expectations. For example, US law tends to classify a female Indian immigrant as someone’s wife rather than as a student or a worker. The dissertation compared the legal standing of such women with their standing in their home country in order to discover how “global flows of people, culture, media, and capital test the limits of anti-violence law and what kinds of legal subjects and their advocates are being produced [and constrained] within these transnational spaces.”

Transnational feminist theory, critical race theory, and feminist legal theory provided the epistemological framework for this dissertation and
served as a bridge between the specifics of the writer’s case—developed through in-depth interviews with plaintiffs and advocates in India and the United States as well as through the analysis of their legislative histories and court cases—and the larger knowledge claims EDS9 wished to make. The dense evidence the writer accumulated gave support to a dual conclusion: first, that neither country’s laws recognize the effect of the transnational location and dislocation of subjects on violence against women; and second, that sociopolitical changes occurring in India and in the United States must be taken into account in considering a law’s functionality and in devising future advocacy strategies. Through its careful research, the dissertation reiterated how inadequate a purely legal approach can be to issues of violence against women, especially because laws echo culture and culture shapes law.

EDS9, which claimed to be using a transnational methodology, identified its methodological approach as “two-pronged”: ethnographic and historical. Understanding the production of the new subject positions the writer wished to explore required more than interviewing victims about their experiences of domestic violence. The writer combined in-depth interviews with advocates (lawyers, judges, social workers, and activists in the field of domestic violence prevention) in India and the United States with a historical analysis of court records, laws, and policies regarding domestic violence. Relying on multiple methods allowed the author to uncover gaps, flaws, and inconsistencies in the subjects’ own views of their situations and in the application of legal remedies.

EDS10 documented Nepalese women’s participation in the Maoist movement and the subsequent people’s war. The dissertation’s big question—what happens to women when social reform movements become military campaigns?—revealed a virtually unknown chapter in Nepalese women’s history. EDS10 first cataloged the gendered benefits of the initial Maoist movement—programs and policies to elevate women from their secondary status, to prohibit alcohol and gambling in rural areas, to improve reproductive rights, and to reform marriage and family laws—and then argued that those gains were completely eclipsed by the movement’s transformation into an armed insurgency.

EDS10 used a variety of analytic tools and methods (historical, discursive, and qualitative) to unpack the representations of Nepalese women in the Maoist People’s War. The author claimed that the methodology was interdisciplinary because “the subject of research rather than the disciplinary techniques takes precedence: it embraces and perpetuates but also transcends disciplinary work.” The method did not drive the topic of study, but the methodology reflected “the unholy alliance between theories,
methods, and practices that opens up new possibilities in the process of investigation.”

The author, herself Nepalese, followed the media coverage of the war and women’s participation in it for about ten years and was a participant observer in events, seminars, conferences, and demonstrations. But she expanded her insider knowledge by seeking multiple and differently situated perspectives. She interviewed a wide range of stakeholders in the conflict, including Maoist militia women, human rights activists, a police investigator, social workers, a Maoist commissar and members of her militia, housewives, domestic workers, and a female member of parliament in Nepal. The writer visited a Maoist training camp and interviewed fifteen Nepalese women who had migrated to the United States. She further examined research conducted by international and national human rights organizations and NGOs, scholarly books and articles published about the conflict, as well as the publications, websites, and blogs of the militants. Her role as a participant observer allowed her to develop a nuanced understanding of social change movements—when they succeed and when they fail.

Our final exemplar, EDS11, achieved what we consider epistemological and methodological success in perhaps the most difficult way possible. That is, the writer managed to use a single case study as significant evidence for addressing large questions essential to women’s studies knowledge production. The dissertation’s large questions were clearly stated at the beginning: “What ontological status do feminists assign to ‘woman’? . . . How does this portrayal lead to incoherent and self-defeating ethical and epistemological frameworks?” Then the writer posed a smaller question as an entrée to the larger ones: “Who was Roop Kanwar?”

Roop, a young sati who immolated herself thirty years ago in her husband’s funeral pyre, has become an international symbol and literal ground for ideas about female and feminist subjectivity and identity formation. To answer the smaller question, the writer used scholarly and popular accounts of the immolation in India and abroad, testimony by people from Roop’s village of Deorala, and her own experiences in Rajasthan to illustrate Roop’s dichotomous representations as “victim/agent,” “divine being/material being,” and “simple woman/goddess” and to figure out what those representations mean for feminist accounts of subjectivity, national identity, and resistance.

Philosophical work on “the subject” from G. W. F. Hegel to Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault, as well as knowledge frameworks and concepts from feminist, Frankfurt School, and postcolonial theorists, bridge the single case and the dissertation’s larger conclusions about “the explic-
itly interdisciplinary topos of women’s studies [and] the ethos of the western philosophical tradition, which inculcates and requires the ability to ask questions that matter.” But the dissertation is not solely philosophical, as it moves adroitly from cultural texts to identity/subjectivity to epistemology to resistance/activism to nationalism/citizenship via feminist theory.

Specifically, the writer addressed the “identitarian” tendency in women’s studies, which conflates the politics and identity of the researcher with those of the subject in order to establish the researcher’s authority to speak and analyze. EDS11 argues instead for critical thinking and the capacity to “ask the right questions” in order to advance feminist knowledge. The writer’s guide to her own role in the investigations was: “What do I owe Roop Kanwar, and why?”

EDS11 adopted a standard social science method, the case study, to address philosophical questions about subject formation and attempted to move beyond the various representations of a particular historical subject (Roop Kanwar) to an understanding of how subject positions were created in the first place. Since the writer could never encounter the voice or subjectivity of the person, the best the author could do was to identify the various sites of discourse that created sati as a subject position. The author shifted attention away from searching for the authentic “other” to the mechanics of subject formation and the constitution of a particular “other,” which entailed discourse analysis of newspapers, scholarly writing, and interviews about Roop’s immolation. Finally, in attempting to explain the inclusion of personal reflections on a visit to the community where Roop Kanwar lived and died, the writer acknowledged the argument, advanced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and other postcolonial/subaltern theorists, that there can be no unmediated representation of the other or the subaltern that is not tainted by the interlocutor’s own interest and subjectivity.

**Recommendations**

Making explicit the value of women’s studies doctoral work is particularly important at this time, as a national debate about the value of graduate education in all fields is under way and as universities, especially public ones, are being radically restructured and transformed. Women’s studies scholars need to understand both how these changes affect our field and how the knowledge we produce can contribute to positive solutions and innovations in higher education. In addition, clarifying our unique contributions to knowledge production helps us to fulfill our obligation to graduate students. If we want our knowledge to count for our field and for our students, and if we want to be taken seriously in the new transdisciplinary
configurations in higher education, we must be able to defend our scholarship in an intelligible and credible fashion.

Overall this dissertation study further convinced us that those goals can best be achieved through rigorous, freestanding doctoral programs in women’s studies. It is clear that students in those programs are asking the big questions on which future knowledge should be based, and the best of the dissertations are providing valuable models for answering those questions through interdisciplinary research. At the same time, those programs are benefiting the students. As of 2009, they were finding jobs inside and outside of academia, and they were publishing their research.

In order to expand the value of women’s studies doctoral degrees, however, we offer a few critical recommendations:

1. More emphasis on the fundamentals of research design and writing, including formulating researchable questions, constructing arguments, selecting appropriate evidence, and justifying knowledge claims; more program-sponsored dissertation writing groups to fulfill these ends.

2. More discussion among faculty and program administrators about the nature of the field, the field’s relationship to conventional disciplines, what constitutes a field-appropriate dissertation, and how to construct dissertation committees to achieve interdisciplinarity and avoid the overreliance on the research of the dissertation committee chair.

3. More emphasis on writing abstracts that represent and classify the research accurately; more attention to key questions in the field to which the dissertation contributes.

4. More explicit methodological training, especially with regard to the nature of lived experience, the value of data provided by informants, the constructed nature of archives, what constitutes agency, and the nature of representation; assigning the field’s journals, where the most robust debates occur and the richest body of critical literature about methodology and epistemology is published, as part of this training.

5. More attention to producing evidence-rich, interdisciplinary dissertation research in light of its prominence as a value for many programs; more discussion and clarification of interdisciplinarity as a methodology, epistemology, and heuristic device.

6. Greater attention to race, class, gender, and sexuality and their intersection in the projects students pursue; more specificity about what constitutes an intersectional analysis, how to conduct one, and what is achieved by such an analysis.
7. Encouragement of all students to reflect on the complexities of both insider and outsider knowledge and to consider topics beyond their own identities and geographical locations.

8. A fuller understanding of transnational analysis as opposed to international comparisons; greater definitional precision of the term and attention to transnational processes and the links between the domestic and the transnational.

We are hoping that the National Women’s Studies Association can become a site for discussing and advancing these recommendations. Many women’s studies programs are too small to provide all of the methodological training our students need. Perhaps meetings and workshops about epistemological and methodological issues from both theoretical and practical perspectives should become routine at the association’s annual meetings. The feminist methodology workshops currently held at the conference should be expanded with instruction in the use of specific methods. We applaud the exemplary dissertations’ use of multiple methods but recognize that using those methods correctly requires specific training.

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