Gender and Women’s Studies in Canada
This map represents Indigenous territories around the time of European contact in what is now Canada. As our book is rooted most firmly in the Canadian context, we wish to begin by acknowledging and honouring Aboriginal peoples who were the original inhabitants of this land.
Gender and Women’s Studies in Canada

Critical Terrain

Edited by
Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice

Women’s Press
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Edited by Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice

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Dedication

To the prior generations of feminist thinkers and activists who have made this project possible;

To Carla’s faux daughters, Claire Dion Fletcher and Vanessa Dion Fletcher; Marg’s nieces and stepdaughter—Laura Harris, Emily Harris, and Genevieve Sweigard—and our students whose insight and energy continue to instruct and inspire us;

To the succeeding generations who will carry the struggle, and the vision, forward.
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Introduction

Mapping the Terrain of Gender and Women’s Studies in Canada

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.

The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn.

As we thought about this introduction, we were reminded of these two quotes, the first by Arundhati Roy, who describes herself as an “Indian novelist, activist, and world citizen,” and the second by American feminist activist and journalist Gloria Steinem. Roy opens us up to the transformative potential of social justice and solidarity by prompting us to hold fast to the belief that another world is possible, that there are alternatives to inequalities that are deepening the new global world order. We have to keep alive visions of gender and economic justice; they can move us, inspire us, sustain us, and galvanize us as thinkers and activists, as global citizens and as members of local communities, working for change. Steinem’s words signal that the road ahead is not easy, that it involves a process of critical examination of many of our most taken-for-granted truths and belief systems about the world around us. It is through unlearning as much as learning that we begin to see how inequalities have been created and, hence, how they can be challenged and undone. Unlearning and learning are intertwined in a continual, connected process: the unpacking of prior knowledge and assumptions is important in making space for new versions and visions of social realities.

This volume engages with these practices: unlearning/learning and envisioning change. We aim to offer a broad selection of writings from a range of authors and perspectives to help introduce you to a field that is at the forefront of critical thinking about inequalities and social justice. This introduction provides students with an entry point to consider what women’s studies (or gender and women’s studies) involves, how it has changed in recent years, and why it continues to be a meaningful and socially relevant area of inquiry. In what follows, we focus on gender and women’s studies in the Canadian context, outlining some of its main goals, explaining some current theoretical developments, and highlighting key features of this book. We conclude with some thoughts about the process of critical thinking and how it might apply to your reading of the writings in this book.
What Is Gender and Women’s Studies?

As students coming into gender and women’s studies introductory classes, you will have different ideas of what to expect. While some of you may have been introduced to women’s studies perspectives through a course or extracurricular involvement at high school, or possibly through conversations with family and friends, for many of you this is your first conscious engagement with this field. You likely have many questions: What is this field variously called “women’s studies,” “women’s and gender studies,” “gender and women’s studies,” or other similar names? How does what I learn here differ from and add to what I am studying in my other courses? How relevant is gender and women’s studies to my own life and to my future? Will these perspectives be useful to me in the workforce? Will the topics and approaches introduced in this class reflect or revise my understanding of local and global social relations and structures? How might my values and world view be enriched? What is feminism and do I have to be a feminist to take this course?

As you begin this journey, you should know that women’s and gender studies is not one thing. It is not one perspective or one analysis but many, expressed differently by scholars and activists whose ideas and approaches differ from one another, shaped by their own backgrounds, interests, training, experience, and understandings of the world. Not surprisingly, then, introductory courses in this field are also diverse. Some professors might choose to introduce you to the field through a few specific themes, perhaps highlighting gendered analyses of popular culture or recent writings from the “third wave” of feminism. Some might engage more with international contexts and others with North America, and some focus mainly on the present while others explore women’s historical experiences as well. Most introductory courses, however, aim for a fairly broad fare, taking you through gender and women’s studies across a range of themes, issues, and contexts.

Despite the differences in our approaches and perspectives, there is considerable overlap in what instructors in Canadian universities and colleges are trying to accomplish as they introduce you to what has been, and continues to be, a powerfully influential and transformative field. We recently conducted an informal survey of course outlines and website descriptions of introductory gender and women’s studies courses across Canada. The following list highlights some commonly shared goals guiding the teaching of entry-level courses in women’s studies or gender and women’s studies:

- To introduce students to women’s/gender studies as a broad, dynamic, interdisciplinary, and global field of inquiry, and to familiarize students with some of the major issues, debates, and approaches in gender and feminist scholarship and activism
- To complicate commonly presumed understandings of concepts such as “women,” “sex,” “gender,” “race,” and “disability” by examining how these categories have been “constructed” (or created by society) and how they shape ideas and experiences of human difference
- To analyze and challenge hierarchical and intersecting relations of power influenced by gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, ability, and other categories of difference
- To understand how power relations are embedded in institutions and in everyday, taken-for-granted social relations, practices, and values
- To highlight affinities and differences among women, both within North America and worldwide, and to analyze intersecting social, cultural, political, and economic systems that shape their lives and agency
• To explore the multiple pathways and forms of women’s individual and collective resistance to injustice and inequities in the past and the present, and to analyze their creative visions and strategies for change in local and global contexts

• To inspire and empower students to develop their knowledge of feminist scholarship and to engage critically in their communities at local, national, or global levels

• To develop students’ skills in critical thinking and analysis, reading, and writing, and to create classroom environments that support learners’ respectful debate and disagreement

These goals reflect a vision of women’s and gender studies grounded in knowledge that is continually shifting as the field develops and its insights deepen. Feminist scholars in the past and present have explored how ideas about gender work at interpersonal and institutional levels to shape social relations and the lived experiences of diverse women and men. Their explorations of gender, in relation to other social categories of identity and other axes of power, have been transforming the so-called traditional disciplines such as history, philosophy, politics, psychology, and sociology, while also producing new syntheses of knowledge that we call interdisciplinary or even trans-disciplinary.

When women’s studies courses and programs emerged in North America in the 1960s and 1970s, a period of widespread protest against social and economic injustices, they joined other scholars—for example, in Canadian studies, Native studies, and labour studies—who were similarly interested in pressing beyond the limits of the older disciplines. Like these other interdisciplinary fields informed by critiques of social inequalities and visions of social justice, women’s studies aimed to understand social relations in order to change them. You will notice from the goals summarized above that gender and women’s studies scholarship continues to offer tools, wisdom, and perspectives enabling a critical engagement with the world and its power structures. At the same time, gender and women’s studies offers pathways through which we can better understand ourselves, our diverse experiences and identities, and our relationships with others in the wider world.

Current Trends in Gender and Women’s Studies

Gender and women’s studies courses, and indeed this textbook, have been shaped in important ways by recent debates and new insights emerging from feminist scholarship. The ideas and the tools they suggest also come out of women’s and social justice movements, from diversely positioned and especially marginalized people and grassroots communities, locally and globally, at the forefront of feminist thought and action.

Below we describe four of these major trends that together are making gender and women’s studies perspectives more relevant than ever before in the critical task of understanding the world in which we live and the major challenges we face as a human community. This list is not exhaustive; there are many other trends shaping the field and the curriculum itself, but we think it is crucial for instructors and students alike to reflect upon and engage with these four distinct, though overlapping, challenges:

1. The concept and practice of intersectionality
2. Gendering and queering women’s studies
3. Indigenizing and decolonizing women’s studies
4. Globalizing, internationalizing, and transnationalizing women’s studies
xx Introduction

1. The Concept and Practice of Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a concept and an approach to understanding the lives and experiences of individuals and groups of people in their diversity and complexity. Emerging as a theoretically important and challenging term in feminist scholarship, intersectionality is often used to describe the idea that women and men live multiple layered identities and simultaneously experience oppression and privilege. The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, in an article included in this book, explains an intersectional approach as attempting “to understand how multiple forces work together and interact to reinforce conditions of inequality and social exclusion” (CRIAW, 2006, p. 5).

Intersectionality is not a new concept. The term itself was conceived in the early 1990s by African-American feminists and critical race scholars Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1994), and the ideas associated with it have since been adapted and developed by feminist scholars, activists, and organizations in Canada and elsewhere. Intersectionality critiques the limitations of perspectives that look narrowly at social relations through a gender lens alone, encouraging a wider view focused on the multiple components of identity and intersecting “axes” of power that constitute individuals’ experiences in the world (Karpinski, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Intersectional theories and methods work, for example, to explore the specific ways in which factors such as gender, sexuality, aboriginality, class, race, disability, geography, refugee and/or immigrant status, size, and age interact to shape people’s social positioning. Such differences are also examined in the context of the larger social and political forces and institutions that create unequal access to power and privilege. Colonialism, capitalism, neo-liberalism, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and social welfare policies are all important examples. By examining the complexities and specificities of identities and social locations, intersectionality explores how women and men occupy many different and contradictory positions in social relations of power.

2. Gendering and Queering Women’s Studies

Recent developments in gender, queer, and trans theory and activism across North America have placed a spotlight on gender and sexuality as socially created constructs. In response, women’s studies, which initially placed women squarely—some say narrowly—in the centre of analysis, is broadening its focus, and engaging more fully with issues and explorations of masculinities, queer and sexuality studies, and “transfeminism.” At their heart, gender and queer theory involve critically analyzing the binary (either/or) categories of woman/man and femininity/masculinity by calling into question “the notion of two discrete tidily organized sexes and genders” (Scott-Dixon, 2006, p. 12). This rich theory base has arisen out of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual (GLBT) studies, itself a fairly new area of academic inquiry that seeks to understand and contextualize gendered and sexed bodies/identities and erotic desires and practices in different times and places (Meem et al., 2010; Stombler et al., 2010). GLTB studies, along with gender studies, has done much to explore sexual diversity, showing how dominant ideas and “norms” about sexuality, sexed bodies, and sexual practices and identities are not rooted naturally in the facts of biology, but are socially constructed in various ways by different societies. Queer theory goes further, aiming not only to interrogate sexuality norms, but also to turn upside down the very idea of “the normal,” namely, “everything in the culture that has occupied a position of privilege, power, and normalcy, starting with heterosexuality” (Bacon, 2007, p. 259). Adding another layer of nuance and complexity, transfeminism has emerged at the intersections of feminist and trans...
ideas as a vibrant gender-inclusive field dedicated to ending the oppression of all gender-crossing and gender-divergent people (Scott-Dixon, 2006).

3. Indigenizing and Decolonizing Women’s Studies

The increased attention to decolonization and indigenization in women’s studies comes from the proliferation of Indigenous scholarship and activism, and the critique of the historical marginalization of Indigenous perspectives in much North American feminist thought and practice. “Indigenizing” involves the integration of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into what counts as knowledge. As such, it goes well beyond the additive approach of writing Aboriginal women into existing Western theories, or squeezing their experiences into one or two classes. Instead, the challenge for gender and women’s studies teachers and students is to centre aboriginality more fully by weaving it through and across studies of particular themes and issues; by valuing Indigenous knowledge forms; by analyzing colonialism and its continuing legacies for Aboriginal women and their communities; and by understanding the diversity of Indigenous women’s lives and perspectives.

The closely related concept of “decolonizing” refers to the anti-colonial project of critiquing Western world views and challenging oppressive power structures that they uphold. According to Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwi Smith (1999), decolonizing, “once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power,” including in the academy (p. 98). For Davis (2010), decolonization of women’s studies means displacing white, Western subjectivities from the centre of course texts and topics, and disrupting Eurocentric, First World privilege through an examination of colonial relations from the perspectives of colonized others. Aboriginal feminists, including Andrea Smith (Cherokee) (2005), Emma LaRocque (Métis) (2007), and Joyce Green (Ktunaxa/Cree-Scots Métis) (2007), see such anti-colonial feminist approaches as critical to grasping urgent issues faced by Indigenous women today. For example, Andrea Smith (2005) argues that because sexual violence has been used as a weapon of colonialism to destroy and assimilate Aboriginal peoples into a white, racist, sexist hierarchy, anti-violence and anti-colonial struggles cannot be separated if feminists hope to end violence against all women.

4. Globalizing, Internationalizing, and Transnationalizing Women’s Studies

These terms themselves, as well as the practices they entail, are the subject of considerable debate. Sometimes they are used interchangeably. Increasingly, however, the language of global feminism, and hence calls for “globalizing” the curriculum, is giving way to the politics of “internationalizing” and/or “transnationalizing.” For most, the term “global” in relation to feminism is too reminiscent of the condescension and denial of differences evident in past Western feminists’ scholarly and activist approaches to women in the “Third World” (Grewal & Kaplan, 2006; Mohanty, 1991; Shohat, 2001). Internationalization is often employed as a broad umbrella term encompassing various practices and methods, extending feminism’s focus beyond the Western world. Such endeavours, however, if not accompanied by a self-reflective critique of the limits of Western world views, can produce knowledge that reinforces, rather than challenges, dominant cultural stereotypes and misunderstandings.

Mohanty, for example, describes three models for internationalizing women’s studies. She critiques the “feminist as tourist” approach, which simply adds “Third World” and Indigenous
women into existing analytic frameworks, stereotyping them as either hapless victims or romantic heroines (2006). The “feminist as explorer” model can be problematic by focusing on women’s lives in specific geographic contexts (through courses such as “Women in India,” “Third World Women,” etc.) without a sustained analysis of structural power relations. Mohanty (2006) instead encourages a third alternate approach, “feminist solidarity,” which recognizes differences and hierarchies of power within and across borders while building on affinities and common interests. Increasingly, a transnational lens (as opposed to an international one) is promoted as a richer way to “teach students how to think about gender in a world whose boundaries have changed” (Kaplan & Grewal 2002, p. 79). Transnational approaches emphasize the movement of capital, labour, information, and culture across national borders; they draw out how histories of colonization and, more recently, globalization structure inequalities; and they explore the possibilities for solidarity among women and social movements organizing across geographic boundaries. In a transnationalized women’s studies curriculum, Canada and the US can still be examined, but they are not centred (Mohanty in Dua & Trotz, 2002).

These theoretical and political shifts have challenged gender and women’s studies to develop more nuanced theories and methods for understanding social relations and differences. Many instructors and students have taken up that challenge by becoming more inclusive of gender and queer theory (see Wilchins, 2004, in this volume); by better integrating Indigenous feminist thought, issues, and activism (see St. Denis, 2007, this volume); by focusing on the gendered genesis and impacts of colonization and globalization in Canada and around the world (Mohanty, 2006); and by questioning their own positioning and implicatedness in current conditions (Blyth, 2008; Dion, 2009). Most feminist educators believe that a sustained focus on sexism is still necessary in gender and women’s studies classrooms, especially in the face of deepening global gender inequities. At the same time, the theoretical insights offered by gender and queer theory, Indigenous feminism, and transnational feminist thought and activism have led many to radically rethink the subject and focus of women’s studies. In this book we invite you to engage with new knowledge and methods emerging from the field and contribute to conversations about the challenges we face in our local and global communities.

Features of This Book

*Gender and Women’s Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain* grew out of a familiar annual ritual for many introductory course instructors: the quest to find the perfect text that will engage and inspire students while guiding them skilfully through the dizzying array of concepts, theories, issues, approaches, histories, and contexts that is contemporary feminist and gender scholarship. We have a confession: we have never really liked textbooks. As undergraduate students, we had many occasions to throw our textbooks against the wall—once we awoke from the snooze induced by boredom. What, then, are we doing collaborating on our own introductory textbook in gender and women’s studies?

Over time, we have come to appreciate how a textbook can help instructors and students navigate the dynamic and swiftly changing terrain of gender and women’s studies. A text provides students with a concrete tangible work that they can hold in their hands as a guide. At its best, it can provide intellectual glue that makes more readily apparent the themes and flow of the course, as well as the interconnections between topics and the context within which particular pieces should be read. A textbook can include important learning and research aids such as guiding questions, relevant websites, and definitions of key terms. Textbooks that include a diversity
of feminist authors introduce learners to multiple perspectives and current debates about topics related to women, gender, feminism, and social justice. We believe it is valuable for students, beginning in their first year, to sharpen their analytic skills and develop their own positions in relation to a multiplicity of ideas and arguments.

Of course, the perfect text does not, and cannot, exist. Even with a more modest goal in mind, our own attempt at an introductory textbook has proved challenging, and certainly humbling. One of the most difficult parts of the process has been trimming to a reasonable size our initial wish list of wonderful feminist writings. By editing many pieces for length, we have been able to assemble a broadly representative sampling of works. Critical Terrain contributes to the growing list of innovative texts on the Canadian market by offering what we hope you will find to be an appealing collection with several unique characteristics and tools for students and instructors. We present below some of the main features of this volume. These were inspired by a wide reading of existing textbooks, an appreciation for both classic insights and new theoretical developments shaping the field, and a recognition of the diversity of readership.

• Multiplicity of disciplines and fields: Since women’s studies is a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field, we provide writings that give you, as students, exposure to feminist scholarship from across the disciplines as well as within the newer interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary women’s and gender studies stream. Sociology, psychology, history, philosophy, Indigenous studies, literature, cultural studies, biology, science studies, Canadian studies, political economy, and anthropology are some of the areas represented in this text.

• Historical and contemporary contexts: Many women’s studies texts lean heavily on present-day concerns and circumstances. We chose selections that balance contemporary analyses with historical ones. To address broader society’s historical amnesia, we aimed for readings that build a strong foundation in the history of women and other marginalized groups (such as Indigenous and racialized people, people with disabilities, and sexual minorities).

• Diversity of authors: We think that it is important to feature work by a broad range of authors from various social, economic, and geographic identities and locations. Different viewpoints from diversely located writers can generate critical debate about issues such as the relevance of gender and women’s studies, men’s relationship to feminism, gendered and racialized beauty ideals, impacts of globalization on women workers, reproductive technologies, and so on. Thus, we highlight the richness of the literature and the diversity of gendered experiences, perspectives, and analyses. We include voices from the margins as well as the centre.

• Current and classic selections: While it can be tempting to showcase the newest writing that is stretching the boundaries of feminist ideas and actions, there is great value in revisiting some of the classic works. We have incorporated older and newer selections to honour the powerful contributions of multiple generations of feminist thinkers, to recognize the interconnectedness of the past and the present, and to acknowledge the indebtedness of contemporary insights to the work, knowledge, and struggle of those who came before.

• Canadian and Aboriginal content: When we started thinking about this textbook, American collections dominated the market, but there are now an increasing number of Canadian-oriented contributions available. We believe that in Canadian gender and women’s studies classrooms, there should be some focus on Canada, partly to challenge commonly voiced assumptions that gender and other inequalities exist mainly beyond our borders (over “there”). Consideration of the specificity of issues in Canada
provides you with critical perspectives on the immediate political, social, economic, and geographic context, where you can also begin to untangle the multiple and complex relations of power between “the West and the rest.” We have tried to integrate a focus on Indigenous women and colonial histories within Canada and North America, not merely in a few separate sections of the book, but as sustained themes throughout. There is an exciting and growing body of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women’s writing, including work by Indigenous feminists, and incorporating this work across the themes builds breadth and depth of understanding.

- **Global/transnational content:** Although it is useful to emphasize Canadian specificity, we make links to broader global trends and to the diversity of women’s experiences within and between different parts of the world. We hope to encourage you to think about the local and the global as mutually constitutive. Analyses of global systems and institutions of power are introduced, and material by and about women in various locations is included. Throughout this volume, we try to avoid the “feminist as tourist model” so aptly critiqued by Mohanty (2006), where women from other countries are merely added into existing Eurocentric frameworks. By foregrounding Canada, we do not take up fully Mohanty’s challenge to internationalize women’s studies curriculum in accordance with the “feminist solidarity” model that she promotes. Yet our approach still draws on her insights and those of other transnational feminist scholars.

- **Multiple genres and styles:** As instructors, we appreciate materials that vary genres and styles, exposing students to the numerous forms in which feminist ideas are created, sharpening learners’ skills at reading across disciplines, and celebrating variety in ways of learning and knowing. In addition to standard scholarly articles, we include reports, news clips, fact sheets, website materials, short fiction, poetry, interviews, and personal narratives. Personal stories and literary works can teach different truths and move audiences in different ways, and often more intimately, than straight scholarly pieces. Popular works by activists or activist organizations ground the material in practice and let students in on strategies and debates from inside the ranks of social justice movements. We hope these works also inspire you to see the relevance of gender and women’s studies, and generate ideas for action-oriented praxis.

- **Tools and insights for education and action:** To enhance the learning process, we have added several tools to this volume. Students and teachers will find useful learning aids in the form of text boxes, activist insights, illustrations, charts, lists, fact sheets, graphs, newspaper articles, maps, and activist campaign materials. We have chosen materials and teaching aids with attention to the wide variation in identities, ages, backgrounds, interests, literacy levels, and other academic skills among the student body.

- **Balance of bad news/good news:** Women’s and gender studies instructors are well aware that students can be overwhelmed with the “bad news” about gendered and other socially created inequalities. This is particularly evident when we examine indicators such as growing disparities between the wealthy and the poor within and among nations in contemporary neo-liberal times. The optimism that fuelled second-wave feminists is not as accessible for a host of different reasons, yet we want to teach, learn about, and build on signs of hope. Throughout this reader, we highlight diverse examples and case studies of women’s resistance in order to dispel lingering myths about women’s powerlessness; challenge gendered, classed, racialized, and ablest stereotypes; and convey a sense of the vibrancy of human agency. Since organized and collective activism, as well as individual actions, can create
change, we have included selections that introduce and analyze the limits and possibilities of resistance in its various forms. Many students and instructors yearn to explore and share ideas about what we can do—as individuals and in groups of our own making and choosing—to participate in social justice projects.

Critical Thinking for Change

As professors in gender and women’s studies for a combined 30-plus years, we believe that a grounding in the theories, methods, and values of our field is critically important in an historical moment marked in many ways by pessimism, uncertainty, and austerity. Feminism has made significant strides toward gender equality, yet women’s movements in Canada and around the world have faced enormous challenges in recent decades—the rise of economic globalization and the neo-liberal erosion of social welfare, equality rights, and economic security for women, racialized people, people with disabilities, and the poor are only a few egregious examples of troubling trends. In 2004, well-known Canadian feminist Judy Rebick commented on some of these setbacks in Canada:

The triumph of neo-liberal/neo-conservative politics has dealt a mortal blow to a feminism that seeks economic and social equality. The gains we have made are threatened by the increasing impoverishment of women, even as a few climb the heights of corporate, professional and political success; by the shocking degradation of women in international sex slavery; the overwhelming burden of the double day; longer, rather than shorter, work times; the rise of racism, militarism and the security state; the monopoly of men on power; closer ties, especially military ties, with the United States; and the continuing scourge of war and violence against women and children.

Critical problems require critical thinking. The theories, tools, and worldviews found in women’s and gender studies build our capacities for thinking our way through pressing social problems and for beginning to imagine more just alternatives. Beyond introducing students to vitally important content, the field offers vibrant learning opportunities that teach critical thinking for both personal and social transformation.

But what, then, is critical thinking? Feminist theorist and educator bell hooks writes that “thinking is an action” (2010, p. 7). Thinking is active because it involves asking questions and seeking answers in order to understand how the world works. hooks argues that students’ passion for knowledge often gets undermined when educational institutions value the consumption of information over the teaching of skills needed to think critically. People commonly assume that being critical means responding negatively and often dismissively to others’ ideas. Critical engagement, however, does not just mean fault-finding. Instead, it involves learning to think carefully and skillfully to analyze and evaluate the truth, value, and meaning of an idea or position. It is active and participatory. It is also hard work. Critical thinking is a process of discerning what is significant about an issue or topic; analyzing and evaluating other people’s thinking about it; questioning the merit and consequences of different positions, including our own; and working to create new knowledge (hooks, 2010). Critical thinking provides a way to expand our consciousness and strive for greater understanding across differences. Because of this, many progressive educators see it as a tool for fostering freedom, democracy, and equality (Freire, 2000, 2005; hooks, 2010).
Conversation is integral to critical thinking. hooks (2010) insists that it enables students to find their voices, identify the issues that matter to them, discover new ways of seeing and knowing, and better remember the ideas exchanged in the classroom. As students taking gender and women's studies, you have opportunities to engage in many kinds of conversations: with instructors, other students, and, importantly, with the authors of the texts you read. At the same time, like many learners in introductory classes, you may have come to university perplexed about how to read assigned texts, listen to lectures, or enter into conversations about what you have read and heard. We must remind ourselves that people engaged in respectful conversation are not passive; rather, participants are alive, open, reflective, and reaching for understanding to deepen, strengthen, and communicate knowledge.

In any learning situation, teachers and students enter a relationship. Lecturers have significant responsibilities, but so too do students. The first is listening—again, an active, participatory process. Listening does not mean you stop thinking. Rather, it means striving to make meaning of the speaker's message by working to digest and understand, and from there to analyze and reflect on what they are saying. At the same time, pausing to listen does not mean that you must agree with what is being said. Remember that teaching and learning are processes and that knowledge is always changing and evolving. As listeners, it is your responsibility to acknowledge what you are learning, but also what remains unclear, underdeveloped, or open to question. Careful listening can also lead to well thought-out disagreement and dissent, which are vitally important to critical thinking.

A second set of responsibilities involves self-reflection, or examining your responses to others' ideas and questioning how your preconceptions and social positioning may be implicated in your hearing. We each bring our personal histories, identities, social relationships, commitments, values, and politics to our listening. Rather than the common knee-jerk reaction of rejecting new ideas outright, particularly those that challenge dominant thought and the status quo, how can you take seriously unfamiliar ways of thinking? What do your immediate responses to these ideas teach you about yourself and, possibly, your own positionality? Your job is to look for points of connection that can aid in meaning-making while opening yourself to the possibility that the new ideas and vantage points might actually change you. They might take you someplace else, to transport you to new understanding.

A third challenge is speaking up and articulating your thoughts, ideas, and positions effectively and respectfully. While speaking in groups can be nerve-racking, finding your voice and figuring out how to use it is a valuable skill whether you continue in academe, pursue a professional degree, or enter the workforce. Both generosity and intellectual rigour are vital to creating an ethical space for sharing ideas and learning from each other. But how can you contribute to creating that space? Before and as you speak, keep reflecting: What is the point of my question or comment? You might also be thinking about your position in relation to the subject under discussion by asking yourself: Who am I in relationship to this topic? What do I bring that can give a unique perspective on this topic? How does my position influence my understanding?

This brings us to the fourth challenge: critical reading. The core elements of critical thinking discussed above are also foundational to critical reading. Engagement with written texts similarly demands listening, self-reflection, and even speaking, since you are entering into dialogue with the author. The Academic Skills Centre at our university encourages students to ask questions of the text, to respond to it and to evaluate it—in short, to “make it mean something to you” (Academic Skills Centre Handout, http://www.trentu.ca/academicskills/online_StudySkills.php; emphasis ours). Reading requires different approaches to understanding and meaning-making, depending
Questions for Critical Reading

- How and where does this selection fit into the parts and sections of this text and of your course? How does it relate to the main themes examined in this part and section?
- Is the subject matter new to you or do you have some familiarity with it?
- What are the main ideas? How are these ideas presented? How do they relate to what is being addressed in this part of the textbook and in your class?
- If you are reading a scholarly article, what is the central argument or thesis? What information is used as evidence to support the argument? Is the argument persuasive?
- How might this selection relate to key concepts emphasized in this part of the textbook and in your class?
- Is the piece trying to challenge and change dominant thinking about something, deepen and transform your understanding, encourage personal reflection, and/or mobilize you to action?
- Does the piece resonate with your own experiences and/or analyses of the issue or topic? Are there elements that you are questioning? What remains confusing, unclear, or underdeveloped?
- Why is this piece significant? Why do you think it was included as one of your readings?

The Critical Terrain of This Book

We have organized this book into six thematic parts:

Part 1: Foundations: Why Gender and Women’s Studies? Why Feminism?
Part 2: Constructions of Sex and Gender
Part 3: Gendered Identities
Part 4: Cultural Representations and Body Politics
Part 5: Gendering Work, Globalization, and Activism
Part 6: Organizing for Change

Within each part, there are between two and six sections that develop the topics and address some key debates in feminist scholarship and activism.

The “critical terrain” signalled in our title has multiple meanings for this volume and for the future of gender and women’s studies. Certainly the theoretical trends we have outlined, and that are taken up throughout the book, constitute critical shifts in a field that is continually being re-mapped. Marginalized peoples around the world are facing critical problems requiring critical thought and action by all of us as members of local and global communities. We are at a critical juncture where systems of power and political ideologies are heightening divisions between people, pushing certain groups further to the margins. In this context, feminism offers critical insights and tools for transforming landscapes of inequalities.
As we pass this volume over to you, we hope that you will be informed, engaged, challenged, and inspired by the content and the range of selections. Each piece offers its unique wisdom, and we hope that you will discover your own treasures in these pages. We also hope you will attend to the diversity of voices, issues, identities, and perspectives, taking care to reflect on their meanings and their contributions to feminist critical thought and action. Finally we hope that this textbook facilitates your social justice consciousness as it also fosters your intellectual and creative capacities to appraise and envision different avenues to change. We invite you into the conversation, and like to imagine you discussing, sharing, and debating the ideas with others in various forums and contexts.

Note: Portions of this introduction were adapted from two articles we co-authored: “Rethinking Women’s Studies: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and the Introductory Course,” published in Atlantis: A Woman’s Studies Journal (2011a) and “Reading Women’s and Gender Studies in Canada: A Review of Recent Introductory Textbooks,” published in Canadian Woman Studies (2011b).

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