



# Taking a Stand in a Postfeminist World

## *Toward an Engaged Cultural Criticism*

**Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe**

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Cultural Criticism

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Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by  
State University of New York Press, Albany

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Cover photo: Toulouse-Lautrec in his Studio, courtesy of the Musée Toulouse-Lautrec.

For information, address State University of New York Press,  
90 State Street, Suite 700, Albany, N.Y. 12207

Production by Diane Ganeles  
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Mascia-Lees, Frances E. 1953–

Taking a stand in a postfeminist world : toward an engaged cultural criticism / Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-4715-4 (alk. paper). — ISBN 0-7914-4716-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Feminist theory. 2. Feminist criticism. 3. Feminist anthropology.  
I. Sharpe, Patricia, 1943– II. Title.

HQ1190 .M376 2000

305.42'01—dc21

99-059783

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For our mothers*

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*Rose Mascia  
and  
Rusty Langenbach Jamison*

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## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Francis C. Lees for his generous and enthusiastic support including, but certainly not limited to, his technical assistance and photography and Alex Lees for helping us in the final stages of manuscript preparation. Colleen B. Cohen was the coauthor of the articles on which chapters 2 and 8 are based. We thank her for graciously allowing us to draw on them for this volume. Deanna Scarfe, author of the poem which appears in chapter 10, worked closely with us on the research and conceptualization of the material in that chapter; we appreciate her frankness, her patient and thoughtful comments and criticisms, and her willingness to share her work.

Over the years, we have frequently been awarded support from the Simon's Rock College Faculty Development Fund, enabling us to present and receive stimulating responses to our ideas. We have benefited greatly from these opportunities. We are also grateful to the colleagues and students there, at Bard College, and at the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking who have discussed our work with us.

Awards from the National Endowment for the Humanities have also nourished our collaborative work: the seminar on women and representation in nineteenth-century literature and art led by Naomi Schor at Brown University in 1986, the institute at Harvard University on the future of the avant-garde in a postmodern age directed by Alice Jardine and Susan Suleiman in 1989, the institute at the University of London on postcolonial literature and theory led by Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Desenbrock in 1998 in all of which Patricia Sharpe participated, as well as three seminars for school teachers which she directed at Simon's Rock College in 1988, 1990, and 1992. Comments and ideas from participants in all these groups, as well as in the Woodrow Wilson Institute on interpreting

the humanities led by Tamar Marsh at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in 1986, have pushed our thinking in new directions.

We also wish to express our gratitude to the Five Colleges Women's Studies Research Center for supporting us in our writing of "An Oblique Look" when we were visiting scholars there in 1991–92 and to our student Matthew Cohen for his useful feedback on that chapter. As we describe in our conclusion, the invitation in 1993 from the Southwest Institute for Research on Women at the University of Arizona to participate in their beautifully conceived conference, "Making Worlds: Metaphor and Materiality in the Production of Feminist Texts," gave us the initial prod to reflect back over the themes and development in our work that led to the conception of this book. Finally we would like to thank Diane Ganeles for her kind attentiveness which spared us many embarrassments in print.

The following chapters and photographs are reprinted by permission:

Chapter 2: The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective ["The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15 (1): 7–33, Fall 1989. Reprinted by permission. Copyright © 1989 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.]

Chapter 3: The Anthropological Unconscious ["The Anthropological Unconscious." *American Anthropologist* 96 (3): 649–660, September 1994. Reprinted by permission of the American Anthropological Association.]

Chapter 7: Piano Lessons: Jane Campion as (Counter)Ethnographer ["Piano Lessons." *American Anthropologist* 97 (4): 763–769, December 1995. Reprinted by permission of the American Anthropological Association.]

Chapter 8: The Female Body in Postmodern Consumer Culture: Subjection and Agency at the Mall. [The Female Body in Postmodern Consumer Culture: A Study of Subjection and Agency." *Phoebe: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Feminist Scholarship, Theory and Aesthetics* 2 (2): 29–50, 1990, by Frances E. Mascia-Lees, Patricia Sharpe, and Colleen Ballerino Cohen. Reprinted by permission of *Phoebe*.]

Chapter 10: Body as Text: Young Women's Negotiations of Subjectivity ["Women Writing [and] Their Bodies: Exploring the Conjunction of Writing Difficulties, Eating Disorders, and the Construction of Self and Body among American Female Adolescents." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 41: 167–81. Reprinted by permission. Also

thanks to Deanna Scarfe for permission to reprint her poem, “Stark Raving Naked” © 1988, along with her remarks.

Chapter 11: Interpreting Charges of Sexual Harassment: Competing Discourses and Claims [“Always Believe the Victim/Innocent Until Proven Guilty/There is No Truth: The Competing Claims of Feminism, Humanism, and Postmodernism in Interpreting Charges of Harassment in the Academy.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 66 (2): 87–98, April 1993. Reprinted by permission of *Anthropological Quarterly* and Catholic University of America Press.]

Chapter 12: Locked In, Locked Out, or Locked Up? [Portions of this chapter draw on our article “Locked In or Locked Out or Holding Both Ends of a Slippery Pole: Confusion of Metaphors, Collaborations, and Intellectual Travesties.” *Making Worlds: Gender, Metaphor, Materiality*. Aiken, Susan Hardy, Ann Brigham, Sallie A. Marston, and Penny Waterstone, eds. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1998.]

# Introduction

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# 1 On Shaky Ground: Shifting Terrain and the Predicaments of Postfeminism

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## The “Post” Context

This book is about the contemporary postfeminist moment, and what it means to position oneself within it. By “postfeminist” we mean a context in which the feminism of the 1970s is problematized, splintered, and considered suspect, one in which it is no longer easy, fun, empowering, or even possible, to take *a* feminist position.<sup>1</sup>

Feminism lost its separate, if illusory, singular identity in the political and intellectual context of the 1990s, making it both difficult and, often, undesirable to distinguish it from endeavors with close affinities: poststructuralism, cultural studies, critical theory, and postcolonial or subaltern studies. At the same time, flamboyant women calling themselves feminists have found a friendly ear in the popular press by positioning themselves not against “patriarchy,” but against other feminists.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, feminist discourses have been appropriated by consumer culture: explanations for oppression are routinely subsumed and depoliticized within the rhetoric of self-help, and it has become stylish in the mall to invite the woman buyer to reach feminist goals through her consumer choices.

The essays in this book represent our efforts over the past decade not to give up our desire for a critically engaged scholarship in the face of the personal, intellectual, and societal challenges to the feminism that empowered us to become scholars in the first place. Each chapter arises, at once, from a set of particular circumstances that has influenced the nature of our efforts and from the larger political and intellectual moment. But this book is not an attempt to recapture and recuperate feminism, nor a call to keep its boundaries distinct. Indeed, we argue for the utility of a self-conscious critical



position as compass in this new territory, a constantly recalibrated one, recreated and reformulated as the magnetic fields of ideology and institutions are negotiated.

Neither is it our intent to use the term *postfeminism* primarily as a nostalgic periodizing concept, even though this book is in many ways an ethnography of American culture in the 1980s and 90s, its politics, trends, events, and fashions. Instead, we use it to signal the space from which we write, a space coincidental with the end of the twentieth and the opening of the twenty-first century when, as Homi Bhabha has suggested, cultural critics must necessarily struggle to write from the realm of the “beyond.” This beyond, indicated by the use of the prefix “post,” Bhabha explains, “is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past” (1994:1). It is, instead, “a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (Bhabha, 1994:1).

We have chosen to position ourselves in the realm of the postfeminist, rather than in the postmodern or postcolonial, because our earliest attempts at an engaged scholarship were rooted in feminism, one that recognized not only gender, but also race, class, and cultural location as complexly constitutive of difference and identity, inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, we frequently position ourselves *against* the postmodern in order to interrogate its effects, whether on anthropological theory, tourism, film, cross-cultural representation, students’ choices in the academy or women’s at the mall. We struggle to keep one foot outside of these effects to give us the critical distance necessary to offer an “anthropology of the postmodern.” We do so even as we acknowledge the difficulty of completely transcending them, since, as critics such as Jameson (1984) and Ross (1988) have argued, “the postmodern” is synonymous with the culture of the late 20th century, the period with which the chapters in this book are most centrally concerned and in which we are ourselves immersed. Positioning ourselves within the postfeminist also allows us to acknowledge our commitment to a feminism that contributed in significant ways to the reconfigurations of power that have given rise to the “post” moment and to a scholarship that grapples with the gender inequalities that continue to plague women’s lives globally. We position ourselves here even as we reach beyond some of feminism’s tried-and-true prescriptions to find a revised basis for engaged cultural criticism.

Our chapters constitute a set of rhetorical strategies we employ, and shifting positions we take up, to help us make sense out of and navigate a postfeminist world. They represent our interest in un-

derstanding and theorizing interactions across cultures, races, and genders, and the complexities of identification with “others” in a “post” world. Each chapter investigates sites where these interactions have been highlighted and under inspection. In Parts I and II, we turn to anthropology, tourism, and both fictional and documentary film, focusing on questions this context raises for cultural criticism: Who can speak for or write about “others”? What are the problematics and possibilities of identification across lines of difference? How must such questions themselves be reconfigured in a world of hybrid identities? Our primary focus in these sections is on analyzing the efficacy of a number of theoretical formulations that have been offered over the last decade to address such questions.

Parts III and IV are more ethnographic, emphasizing dilemmas of this “post” context within particular institutional settings, especially consumer culture and the academy. Here we explore the predicaments posed by the competing discourses, irreconcilable claims, fragmented subjectivities, and commodified identities that have proliferated within these contexts. Much of our engagement in our scholarly work is motivated by our desire to make sense out of the world directly around us. Our ethnographic sites—shopping malls and the college where we taught in the 1980s and 90s, for example—are, thus, often local. Our analyses of these sites are constrained by their location in a predominantly white, middle-class, rural Northeast, although our attempt is to reveal their larger significance. Whether focused on the local or the global, the cinema or photographs, popular books or ethnographic writing, the mall or the academy, the essays in this book question and analyze the contemporary “post” context, seek to depict it, and map it, all at the same time.

The contemporary context is one in which once dominant ideological systems have lost their hold and a reformulation of the nature of power relations and of interactions among groups has become a pressing concern. Poststructural ideas, which are complexly related to postfeminist ones, have been central to attempts to retheorize these relationships, making the assessment of these ideas crucial for a full understanding of the contemporary context.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we analyze a number of poststructuralist claims in our essays: these range from the assertion that new forms of writing can resolve past problems with cross-cultural representation to the idea that orality can displace the hegemonic “politics of looking” of Western culture. We problematize the new terminology of self and “other,” West and non-West, so pervasive in current theory, and question poststructural ideas of subjectivity and subjection. We turn to questions

that have preoccupied a wide range of “post” scholars, questions of the body, the unconscious, and the aesthetic, questions of pleasure and desire, assessing them as potential sites of political struggle.

However, poststructuralist insights have had a profound effect on our own thinking and have repeatedly raised questions for us about fundamental assumptions underlying earlier ideas and commitments. Many of our chapters can be understood as attempts to grapple with and mutually interrogate, without necessarily resolving, irreconcilable assumptions between different “post” discourses. For example, we focus on the understanding of subjectivity as “always, already constructed in language” in some “post” discourses and a commitment to political change and belief in human agency in others. We assess a theoretical assertion in terms of its ability to provide a new, and hopefully better, way to understand the relations that constitute its context and the world it helps construct. The efficacy of any theoretical formulation necessarily alters given the conditions of the intervention being deployed. It is not surprising, then, that contradictions appear in our “position” throughout these chapters, as we purposely and necessarily eschew any fixed one. In this way, our positionings are best understood as arbitrary closures, the kind that any enunciation necessarily entails. At the same time, we struggle to elude this inevitability, trying to avoid simple closure by leaving many of the questions that our analyses raise open or unanswered and by doubling back self-reflexively on our own conclusions.

Many “post” scholars interested in cross-cultural representation have turned their attention to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the first period in which broad access to other cultures made attempts to theorize cultural and physical difference a dominant theme. Literature, anthropology, art, and photography of this period have been exhaustively scrutinized for their role in this “primitivist project,” an undertaking that depicted the native “other” as simultaneously desirable and repellent in its exoticism. Our focus on this moment is more concerned with theorizing the contemporary fascination with it, whether anthropologist Michael Taussig’s plumbing of the theories of Walter Benjamin, or filmmakers’ mining of the lush material world of the Victorian period for effect.

We show that the turn to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is complex. On the one hand, as we suggest in chapter 2, it can give the contemporary cultural critic who highlights its colonial power relations a field of study about which it is possible to have a critical and ethical position, just as it offers the contemporary consumer of Arts and Crafts furniture an aesthetic with a socialist

politics, as we describe in chapter 9. However, this is not unproblematic: the cultural critic risks recuperating a time when the Western white male was paramount, while the consumer risks a simplistic celebration of cultural difference without acknowledging the element of appropriation involved in the cross-cultural exchange of design features.

The period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is central to our investigations because of the chain of signification it established between woman/native/other, a collapsing we interrogate most fully in chapter 4 and to which we return at the end of this introduction. This flattening of difference continues to be a tricky one to negotiate for the contemporary cultural critic seeking a politics that does not reproduce the power relations of that earlier period. But such flattening can be used strategically, if not altogether without risk. Thus, in chapter 2, we use anthropologists' traditional identification with the "others" they study to urge them toward an engaged scholarship, while in chapter 3 we use our own problematic identification across lines of difference as a starting point for a self-reflexive analysis that recognizes the seductiveness of this identificatory process, even as we vigilantly resist it.

The collapsing of difference among "others" that characterized turn-of-the-nineteenth-century thinking parallels, and is complexly related to, the effacement of the "real" and the image found in film. In this sense, the film screen foreshadows the contemporary moment's celebration of surface, a link we investigate in a number of chapters. In "Courting the Nineteenth Century," in particular, we turn to films of the early and mid-1980s, analyzing their fascination with the nineteenth century, setting up a contrast between these earlier films and those of Jane Campion, whose more recent turn to this period for insights we explore in chapter 7.

## Strategies

Critical response to Campion's *The Piano* was similar to reactions to feminism in the 1990s. Both were contested from within feminism, even as both paradoxically found success in the institutional context of the "academy," both collegiate and filmic. Ironically, as women's studies classes have proliferated and as feminism has increasingly turned to internal debates, its insights have too often been dismissed as predictable, seriously diminishing its ability to offer powerful criticism and making it harder to say something interesting and vital.

In this context, we have searched for strategies, methodologies, and approaches that allow us to be provocative, while at the same time we remain committed to an engaged scholarship.

In our essays, we experiment with fictionalization, personal narrative, self-reflexivity, and dialogue. Our use of such textual strategies is meant not only to disrupt the classic norms of cultural description that are insufficient for capturing the flux which characterizes the contemporary cultural moment, but also to jostle expectations. We are equally concerned, however, with assessing the sufficiency of such textual approaches for transforming the social relations of research, exposing the strengths and limitations of each as we struggle toward a politically engaged scholarship.

We also set a variety of discourses against each other to expose the assumptions of any one of them and to approach a critique that does not unwittingly reproduce hidden suppositions. In a foray to the Yucatan, for example, we use personal story and the rhetoric of tourism to reveal the blind spots of anthropological prescriptions about how one might best enter Mayan culture. Fictionalized accounts are used in chapter 11 to mutually interrogate humanist, postmodernist, feminist, and self-help discourses to highlight the strengths and deficiencies of each in appealing to students seeking empowerment in the academy.

Our approach is peripatetic, our style transgressive. We move from the female body in the mall to contemporary anthropological theory in the field, from popular film to eating disorders, from the rural private college where we have taught in New England to archaeological sites in Mexico, playing with the boundary between high theory and popular culture, mixing up theoretical categories, and refusing to obey traditional academic decorum. Thus, we question in chapter 3, "The Anthropological Unconscious," how the recent fascination in American culture for erotic piercing, body paint, and rods-through-the-penis can help us see points of self-delusion in contemporary academic pieties. We wonder in chapter 7, "Piano Lessons," how the recent penchant for sign language in Hollywood movies like *The Piano*, *The River Wild*, and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* reflects or challenges theoretical fascination with semiology. And in chapter 10, "Body as Text," we ask whether focusing on the flesh-and-blood bodies of adolescent anorexic women and their writing can illuminate Foucault's abstract claim that writing "obliterates the self."

As we show throughout this book, there is no rhetorical strategy or representational practice that can escape the larger power rela-

tions in which it is embedded, or the disorienting slipperiness and tangle underfoot entailed in trying to get anywhere with language. But while stylistic or methodological innovations cannot guarantee more accurate or politically enlightened and effective representation, that does not mean that they cannot be eye opening, revealing both new territory and new perspectives.

## **Taking a Stand**

In our work, we look for ways to get a hearing for our ideas in the unsettled context of postfeminism where conceptualizations of identity and difference have radically called into question the authority to speak. Our title “Taking a Stand” is a statement about the current condition of entitlement: in the “courtroom of ideas” no one has clear standing to make a claim. It is not only white feminists’ pretensions to speak for “women” that have been challenged. Frank Chin accuses a writer like Maxine Hong Kingston of not being a real Chinese-American writer. He claims she panders to a white feminist readership by reinforcing stereotypes about the Chinese (Roof and Wiegman, 1995), just as black women writers were questioned by Ishmael Reed in *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986) for their portrayals of the black community (see Sharpe, Mascia-Lees, and Cohen, 1990 for a discussion of this debate).

Today, it seems, everyone must make a case for the right to speak. Our title implies that we have to fight our way into the witness box and earn our right to be heard. By contrast, Christina Hoff Sommers’s eye-catching title, *Who Stole Feminism?* (1994), expresses an antithetical conviction that there is rightful ownership of positions. Sommers’ metaphor exposes her as border guard intent on arresting feminist thieves before they go too far. The crime? Usurping the agenda of more “mainstream thinkers” like herself to whom feminism should rightfully belong. And what are her credentials? She advances her commitment to accurate reporting and statistical validity as opposed to what she characterizes as feminism’s inflated and hysterical claims to victimization.

Without presuming to challenge all of her claims, we can clearly question her brief account of the incident we describe in detail in chapter 11, “Interpreting Charges of Sexual Harassment: Competing Discourses and Claims,” about a case which arose at the college where we taught in the 1980s and 90s. She gets the name of the person involved wrong, the name of the place wrong, fabricates a class

which never existed, and lends credence to unclaimed and unsubstantiated sources on our opinions, while failing to consult our published account or to substantiate her characterization of us as radical feminists who misled students with a passionate and extreme “gender feminism.”

Clearly, then, we can call into question her *bona fides*. Ironically, our original impulse to write in response to the incident came when radical feminists from the community’s rape crisis center were granted standing by the local newspaper as *the* feminists qualified to opine about the incident, although they, too, had made no efforts to investigate. Their claim that the faculty could not police itself envisioned “the faculty” as monolithically male and condoning of lechery, erasing any feminist presence. This is a situation where it was easy to see that we could, and needed to, take a stand. At the same time, our analysis of this incident strives to keep ambiguity alive and to call into question any simple notion of what it means to position oneself in such a complex circumstance.

Our tension in chapter 11 between our desire to construct an ethnography in which we are situated and engaged and our wish to reflect our multiple and shifting sympathies and commitments is emblematic of our struggle throughout this book to take a stand while problematizing positioning. The situation evoked by the charges of sexual harassment brought by our students required that we make consequential judgments and choices, disrupting our easy celebration of multiplicity in collaborative writing. We have typically used collaboration as a strategy to fracture notions of unitary subjectivity, to resist the myth of scholarship as a lone (and heroic) search for “truth,” to problematize any simple notion of positioning, and to deflect any absolute characterization from outside that might too readily construct our position as absolute or unitary (see Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen, 1991). But our collaboration was strained in the midst of our students’ claims of sexual harassment given the differing interpretations we made of their accusations, partly because of our different histories and partly because of the different roles we were asked to play within the college. Thus, writing this chapter involved a complex effort to include irreconcilable perspectives in a framework that would make reconciliation possible, as our separate stories in this chapter suggest. Dissatisfied with even our very tentative conclusions in this chapter, we have sought to problematize its assertions even further when delivering it publicly by enacting it in performance. This is a technique we have used in presenting much of our writing over the years to underscore the fact



that scholarship is always embodied, and thus never disinterested, unpositioned, or simplistically definitive.

Taking a stand in any circumstance is enabled and constrained by one's motives, and by the particular character of the situation being analyzed and the institutional structures within which it is embedded. For example, the angle of our paper "The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective," reprinted here as chapter 2, changed as it was transformed from a short conference paper delivered to an audience of anthropologists entitled "The Subversion of Subject in the New Ethnography," to its published form. Requested to submit it by the feminist journal, *Signs*, we felt licensed to be more overtly feminist in arguing that postmodern theory might not be the best place for anthropologists to turn in their desire to reform their traditional relationship to non-Western people.

To do so we self-consciously constructed a binary opposition between feminism and postmodern theory, concerning ourselves primarily with those tendencies in postmodern thinking that threatened to subvert valuable contemporary political projects. In anthropology, postmodern insights were drawn on to assert that new forms of writing could address the ethical issues inherent in anthropological fieldwork and ethnographic representation. To protest this assertion, we constructed this opposition between feminism and postmodernism strategically, not because we believe that there is a fixed dichotomy between all feminist and postmodernist thinking, but in order to create an instructive opposition that could then be deconstructed. Too many anthropologists at the time saw feminism simply as what women do, or as "merely" adding the study of women or gender relations to their traditional concerns, while seeing postmodern theory as challenging their central assumptions.

To break down this pernicious and hierarchical opposition, we set up the epistemological challenges underlying feminism as an alternative body of theory on which they might draw. We did so, not because we were unaware of the common ground that some feminist and postmodernist theory share, but to highlight it in order to persuade anthropologists to understand what feminism could offer them more broadly. Dissatisfied with even the feminist prescriptions we offer in chapter 2, we question them in chapter 3, "The Anthropological Unconscious." In that chapter we openly acknowledge the difficulty, if not impossibility, of ever completely controlling representations in the name of a more progressive politics, given the complex workings of desire. Part I, entitled "Shifting Stance: Strategic (Re)Positioning" records our repositioning, first of feminism in



relationship to postmodernism in chapter 2, and then of our own stance in chapter 3.

As the 1990s drew to a close, more and more anthropologists acknowledged the drawbacks of some "postmodernist" insights, especially the ones that underlay the offer of innovative forms of writing as a corrective to traditional anthropological practices. Many anthropologists have, instead, turned to an examination of the complexities of new intercultural relationships, ones that have increasingly arisen in a world characterized by globalization and transculturalism: dispersed communities, hybrid social identities, transnational populations.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, many of the writers who have shifted attention to the complexities of intercultural relations at the end of the twentieth century have abandoned the ethical and political issues that fueled the "feminist/postmodernist debate." This has inaugurated yet another moment in anthropology in which business goes on as usual (see Spivak, 1990:121). We, however, continue to "take a stand" on these issues. Thus, rather than ignore the lingering problems with cross-cultural representation, we focus on them in several chapters in this book, asking how the reconstitution of intercultural relations fostered by such factors as globalization and social hybridity are linked to them.

Constraints on the positions one can take are literalized in film theory. Thus, we turn to the analysis of films in Part II, "Taking a Seat at the Movies: Assessing Theories of Representation and Identification," to make visible the paradoxical position of the spectator: at once constrained in one's view of events by the filmic apparatus and liberated from one's circumstances by identification with events on the screen. Even though much of recent film theory has been feminist, we have found it restrictive. It imposes limitations itself, focusing and framing one's analysis, and constraining what can be said. By setting it in the larger context of intercultural relations and extending its application beyond the theater, we at once draw on and interrogate its assumptions.

In Part II, we are interested in how film articulates with other cultural discourses such as self-help philosophies and anthropological theory, and with such cultural practices as shopping and masquerade. This focus allows us to set discourses against one another to interrogate hidden assumptions and to think broadly about not only film's appeal and meaning, but also its potential for revealing or informing analyses of less popular forms of cultural representation. Thus, we are more concerned with how film might be used as an analytical tool and assessing the strengths and limitations of dif-

ferent approaches to filmic analysis than we are with how any particular audience constructs a movie's meaning.

Part II opens with "An Oblique Look" which interrogates feminist film theory, but, at the same time, uses some of its insights to question recent trends in cross-cultural representation. Assessing the documentary film *Paris is Burning*, as well as depictions of "others" on magazine covers and in ethnographies and popular books, we analyze the complexities of identification at play in viewing cross-cultural representations, focusing specifically on the interplay of text and image in constructing them.

Each of the next three chapters focuses on a specific moment in the last two decades of popular film. We analyze the different ways in which desire has been piqued in each period, and the implications this presents for analyzing gender and racial hierarchies. Comparing films from the early 1980s to those of the mid-1980s and the 1990s in chapter 5, "Courting the Nineteenth Century," allows us to assess how a Victorian aesthetic has been employed both to critique and reinforce idealizations of domesticity, and how the linkage of sexual and commodity fetishism works within films to construct desire.

Focusing on a spate of early 1990s' films in chapter 6, "Self-Help Hollywood Style," we once again question conventional feminist film theory's adequacy for illuminating our understanding of them. Such films as *Regarding Henry* and *Grand Canyon*, by drawing on the pervasive discourse of self-help that redirected so much attention from the political to the personal in that period, offered certain viewers a reconstituted white male masculinity. We analyze whether standard models of spectatorship are sufficient for explaining the appeal of such films.

Returning to questions of cross-cultural representation and the use of the nineteenth century in "Piano Lessons," we focus on how recent trends in some popular films of the 1990s have converged with those in anthropology in interesting ways. We suggest that film may be the very place for cultural critics to turn to overcome the inadequacies of some contemporary theorizing, but with due caution. For taking a stand at the movies requires illuminating the complex ways in which we are positioned as viewers both in our seats and in the larger culture, so that we are not left in the dark.

We are taught that the way to take a stand in global consumer culture is through buying one thing rather than another. We are led to believe that the consumer's choice between virtually indistinguishable products is the choice that matters. In Part III, "On Display: Style and (Ad)dress in Consumer Culture" we struggle to