

OBJECT LESSONS

ROBYN WIEGMAN



OBJECT LESSONS

NEXT WAVE: NEW DIRECTIONS IN WOMEN'S STUDIES

A series edited by Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, and Robyn Wiegman

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Robyn Wiegman

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INTRODUCTION

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How to Read This Book

If *Object Lessons* accomplishes what I want, it will offer readers a way to see both inside and across the critical habits and political ambitions of identity knowledges in their current institutional and intellectual formations in the contemporary United States.¹ It will orient them—and you, I hope—toward understanding the overlapping and divergent distinctions that attend the study of race, gender, sexuality, and nation. The book will not

1. I use the phrase “identity knowledges” to reference the many projects of academic study that were institutionalized in the U.S. university in the twentieth century for the study of identity. The scholarship that analyzes the history of these formations, along with the debates that have challenged their institutional coherency and political import, is vast. For a selective review, see Champagne and Stauss, *Native American Studies in Higher Education*; Kidwell and Velie, *Native American Studies*; Ono, *Asian American Studies after Critical Mass* and *A Companion to Asian American Studies*; Gordon and Gordon, *A Companion to African-American Studies*; Bobo et al., *The Black Studies Reader*; Poblete, *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies*; Flores and Rosaldo, *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*; Chabram-Dernerseasian, *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Reader*; Kennedy and Beins, *Women’s Studies for the Future*; Scott, *Women’s Studies on the Edge*; Maddox, *Locating American Studies*; Pease and Wiegman, *The Futures of American Studies*; Radway et al., *American Studies*; Rowe, *A Concise Companion to American Studies*; Abelow et al., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*; Corber and Valocchi, *Queer Studies*; and Haggerty and McGarry, *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*.

make sense as a compendium for such knowledges, no matter how much it comments on the academic entities that have emerged as a consequence of the rise of identity as a social force in the twentieth century.² It is not an encyclopedia of what various identity-based fields are doing, nor a status report on their current political authority or institutional health. It is not comprehensive, as numerous identity-based fields of study are not taken up at all, and some are recurrent much more often than others. My uneven attention to the terrain of identity knowledge is not an “oversight”—I have sought to be neither inclusive nor representative—nor is it a statement about the value I attribute to some fields over others. But it does reveal a core belief that travels throughout these pages, which is that the legitimacy of any study of identity is not finally contingent on the legibility of all identity forms within it. This remark is pointedly set against the demand of intersectional analysis, which calls for scholars in identity studies to offer cogent and full accounts of identity’s inherent multiplicity in ways that can exact specificity about human experience without reproducing exclusion.³ In its broadest stroke, *Object Lessons* aims to interrupt faith in

2. There are multiple names for these entities. A survey of institutional projects for the study of *race and ethnicity* reveals: Ethnic Studies, Comparative Ethnic Studies, African American Studies, African and African American Studies, Black Studies, African Diaspora Studies, Africana Studies, Asian American Studies, Asian/Pacific/American Studies, Asian and Asian American Studies, Chicano/a Studies, Chicano/Latino Studies, Puerto Rican/Latino Studies, Latin American and Latino Studies, Hispanic and Latino Studies, Mexican American Studies, Native American Studies, American Indian Studies, Native Studies, First Nations Studies, and Indigenous Studies; for *sexuality*: Sexuality Studies, Gay/Lesbian Studies, Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Studies, Sexual Diversity Studies, Queer Studies, and Multicultural Queer Studies; for *gender*: Women’s Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Critical Gender Studies, and Feminist Studies; and for *nation*: American Studies, American Cultural Studies, Critical U.S. Studies, and North American Studies. Universities have also combined these fields into singular administrative units, as in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, Critical Cultural Studies, Culture and Theory, Liberation Studies, and Justice Studies.

3. The critical genealogy for intersectional analysis is often traced to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” and “Mapping the Margins.” Today it is ubiquitous in identity-based fields of study and across the disciplines. But as Julie S. Jordan-Zachery writes, “Researchers employ the term in myriad ways and oftentimes inconsistently and ambiguously” (255). Some researchers, including Jordan-Zachery, locate intersectional commitments in the discourse of political rights by and for black women in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, well

just such a critical leap in order to attend to the daunting hope that underlies it: that if only we find the right discourse, object of study, or analytic tool, our critical practice will be adequate to the political commitments that inspire it. Intersectionality is not alone in posing and then providing an answer to this, the fundamental conundrum and animating question of identity studies. Other keywords—transgender, diaspora, transnational, normativity, interdisciplinary—have all been used in recent years to evoke the possibility of doing justice to and with objects of study or the analytics developed to name and explicate them. But while each of these terms can tell us something specific about how the question has been answered, it is the first—indeed the singular—task of *Object Lessons* to study the answer’s ardent pursuit.

In the chapters that follow, I explore a range of identity knowledges—Women’s Studies, Ethnic Studies, Queer Studies, Whiteness Studies, and American Studies—in order to consider what they have wanted from the objects of study they assemble in their self-defining critical obligation to social justice.⁴ I focus on identity fields of study not because they are absolutely

before Crenshaw’s theoretical use of the term. See Jordan-Zachery, “Am I a Black Woman or a Woman Who Is Black?”; and Brah and Phoenix, “Ain’t I a Woman.” Others differentiate the analytic origin of the concept from its articulation as a method or theory. See especially Yuval-Davis, “Intersectionality and Feminist Politics”; McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality”; and Davis, “Intersectionality as Buzzword.” For a discussion about the intersectional metaphor, see Brown, “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies”; Villarejo, “Tarrying with the Normative”; and Valentine, “Theorizing and Researching Intersectionality.” For an important consideration of the nonanalogous status of identity, see Barrett, “Identities and Identity Studies.”

4. Throughout this study, I use the phrase “social justice” as a generic figure of the political destination of identity knowledges, knowing that its meaning is precisely what is at stake in the different disciplinary and critical relations that generate identity-based scholarship. For some scholars and in some disciplinary traditions, social justice will always be measured by a state-oriented outcome, with the transformation of laws and policies signifying its political resolution. In others, the juridical solution is absolutely rejected, along with the terms by which dissent is managed in a liberal social order, such that justice is always excessive of constitutional orders and governmentality of any kind, being the eternally postponed figure of what is to come. While each chapter pays close attention to how justice is configured in a specific field-forming debate, *Object Lessons* is ultimately less interested in measuring the strength and weaknesses of different understandings than in exploring the way that identity knowledges take their commitment to some version of justice as a self-constituting fact.

different from other academic domains, but because they invest so much in making explicit what other fields do not explicitly name by framing their modes and manners of analysis as world-building engagements aimed at social change. All of the fields that I write about identify themselves in both historical and theoretical terms according to their proud avowal of political intentions. Each field thus engages in intense debate over the ways in which its objects of study, methodological practices, and theoretical discourses foster (or don't) contemporary political transformation. In some contexts, as in Ethnic and Women's Studies, transformation is figured by claiming for minoritized subjects the right to study themselves and to make themselves the object of their study.⁵ In other fields, justice is sought by refusing identification with the field's primary object of study, as when scholars set out to "unmake" the universalism of whiteness in Whiteness Studies or to expose and contest the imperial nation in American Studies. In all of these fields, political claims are routinely attributed to methodological priorities. Interdisciplinarity, for instance, is often forwarded as the means to transcend the proclaimed limitations and fragmented perspectives of the disciplines while live subject research is taken to undermine objectification by emphasizing the subjectivity and agency of the object of study. While the relationship between American Studies and minoritized identity forms will be addressed in due course, the resonant point here is that identity knowledges are animated by powerful political desires, and that each has sought quite explicitly to know itself and to assess its self-worth by situating its object relations as a living habit of—and for—social justice.

The first questions that frame my inquiry, then, are these: What has enabled or emboldened, allowed or encouraged scholars to believe that justice can be achieved through the study of identity?⁶ How have identity

5. In using the word "minoritized" instead of "minority" throughout this study, I want to indicate social processes, not statistical populations. Both women and people of color as groups—each statistically a global majority—are minoritized within patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist formations, and only in some contexts do either of these categories indicate a numerical minority.

6. In *Object Lessons*, the "study of identity" is intended to reference the scope of approaches that have accompanied identity's academic sojourn, whether affirmative or critical of identity. This means that those trajectories that limn the antihumanist impulses of postmodern thought and have been understood to be anti-identitarian are part

objects of study been imbued with political value, and what does “the political” mean in those academic domains that take critical practice as the means and measure for pursuing justice? What kind of power is invested in the act of thinking, and what kind of thinking is considered most capable of acting, such that the political commitments and critical itineraries of identity knowledges can be fulfilled? On what critical terms, with which cultural materials, methodological priorities, and theoretical discourses has the study of identity been given disciplinary shape, and how has belief in its political agency been produced and sustained? While it is hardly possible to answer such questions comprehensively, *Object Lessons* sets out to address them by foregrounding the diversity of aim and ambition that attends the ways in which objects of study are politically arrayed across various identity knowledge domains. By considering the epistemological and affective force of political claims, I meditate in each of the following chapters on the object relations at stake and on the critical subjectivities honed by and for them. My attention thus turns to the rhetorical forms of critical argument as much as to the object content of various fields to explore not only the kinds of questions that motivate critical practices but the forms their answers take, along with the modes of reading and interpretation they simultaneously invite and prohibit. As readers will see, nearly all of the chapters of *Object Lessons* dwell on the political investments and aspirations of identity knowledges by attending to the disciplinary practices that comprise and define them.

While other essays and books on the topic often act as a defense of identity studies, my project explores the shape of the conversations they stage and sustain—or deflect and avoid—about themselves from within. Hence this book expends no effort on amassing evidence for the legitimacy of identity as the focus or foundation for academic study, nor is it a deconstructive exercise propelled by a covert intention to dissuade their ongoing generation. Instead, *Object Lessons* proceeds from the assumption that identity studies as we currently know them emerged into critical legibility in the U.S. university in the second half of the twentieth century through the convergence of various social forces, such that new practices of governmentality, social protest, and institutional attachments rewrote the discourse

of identity knowledges. Indeed, as I will discuss in chapter 2, the ongoing critique of identity helps sustain the disciplinary reproduction of identity-based fields.

of the university's responsibilities, constituencies, and function. I write from the position of those who entered the rank of full professor in the past decade who never experienced a university culture devoid of identity knowledges and the social concerns that attend them. As we carved out academic positions, my generation fought less for the emergence of our fields than for their extension and expansion, for more institutional legitimacy and power, and for the right to self-governance and self-assessment. We sought to more fully institutionalize what had been tangential or tentative or underorganized or unresourced. While some have been tempted to take the story about the founding of identity knowledges as the most important—or only—story to be told, I am interested in the distance traveled from the inaugural moment to the languages, affects, and debates that comprise its contemporary form. Let “multiculturalism” speak volumes about the scope and tenor of the divergences in historical contexts and institutional politics that have accompanied identity's arrival, and let “globalization” foreground the current epistemological challenge of revising the politically powerful but at times nationally focused horizons in which identity studies were largely born.⁷ While it is certainly naive to assume that there is no ongoing inaugural struggle, *Object Lessons* positions its investigations on the side of institutionalization that takes it as an established fact.⁸ By institutionalization, I do not mean departmentalization

7. In the early 1990s, Gayatri Spivak referenced the terms of a debate that has become increasingly heated in recent years by saying, “The United States is certainly a multiracial culture, but its parochial multicultural debates, however animated, are not a picture of globality. . . . [W]e must negotiate between nationalism (uni- or multicultural) and globality . . . by keeping nation and globe distinct as [we study] their relationship” (279). Spivak's comments were not directly aimed at identity knowledges, but similar charges have been made against what I call their “democratic nationalism,” by which I mean their rhetorical invocation of numerous tropes, histories, and horizons of U.S. national political life. Today, of course, every identity studies domain is being rewritten by the internationalizing imperative that is now reshaping the U.S. academy. On the internationalization of the U.S. university, see Kolasch, *The Internationalisation of the Higher Education Industry*, and Li, *Globalization and the Humanities*; and on the impact of postnational frameworks for U.S. identity knowledges, see Cherniavsky, “Subaltern Studies in a U.S. Frame.” For Spivak, see “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Cultural Studies.”

8. The inaugural struggle is certainly not over in Arizona, which banned Ethnic Studies classes in public schools in 2010 because they “are designed primarily for pupils of a

per se, no matter how often this administrative structure is a favored connotation. Institutionalization points instead to the generative influence of identity knowledges across the disciplines and to the many courses, conferences, publications, and academic organizations that now comprise their intellectual and organizational formations.

This side of institutionalization is where it becomes possible, then, to consider how identity knowledges have been transformed by their transit through the university, such that today's dilemmas might rightly be said to have been inconceivable at the start. Take the problem of the coherency identity knowledges have had to confer on themselves and their objects of study under the auspices of taking representation and speech as the founding notes of political value. How strange it is that in closing the distance, itself conceived of as epistemic violence, between the subject and object of knowledge, identity studies are now sworn to an increasingly unsettling convergence: that to legitimately speak for an identity object of study one must be able to speak *as* it, even as such speaking threatens to strip subjects of epistemological authority over everything they are not. The price of the gain in self-representation is often paid by the service that follows, as one is repeatedly asked to appear dressed in identity clothes. It is sometimes easier, of course, to forgo resentment when you know your role on a committee is simply to be its black, gay, brown, or female member—that familiar representative function that has little purchase on who you actually are. But it is often harder to bear the psychic burdens of maneuvering between the aspirations and disappointments that accompany critical practices understood as political acts of self-defense. How much goodness, after all, must one attribute to her identity objects of study to withstand what it means to both represent and be represented by them? Given that subjects of knowledge are never fully commensurate with the objects they seek to authorize, what tactic is on offer from within identity knowledges to handle the contradictions between the educated elite and the subalterns we study and represent? *I* will always speak for more people than it has a right to, even when its right is conferred by being one among the very group of people *I* cites. And then there are other compelling problems that arise,

particular ethnic group,” “promote resentment toward a race or class of people,” and “advocate ethnic solidarity.” See Weiner, “Arizona Bans Ethnic Studies—Update” and “Fox News Defends Arizona Ethnic Studies Ban.”

from speaking for myself—what does that mean?—to thinking that I can control everything that *I* will be taken to mean.

The implications of these matters are taken up in the chapters that follow as I attend to the critical and institutional complexities that have shaped identity's academic sojourn. By focusing on the political animations of various academic fields and the institutional contexts that attend them, each chapter explores a specific object relation in order to consider how it shapes a field's political pursuits: in Women's Studies, gender; in Queer Studies, antinormativity; in Whiteness Studies, antiracist whiteness; in American Studies, internationalization; and in nearly all of the fields I write about, intersectionality. As readers will see, the object relations at stake in these discussions do not operate in any collective coherence to address or adjudicate the multiple registers in which identity functions as a coordinate of power, social formation, mode of interpellation, discourse of state and self-designation, political horizon, analytic concept, interpretative practice, field of study, or institutional emblem of difference. This list is incomplete, but such incompleteness is easily harnessed to the point I wish to make, which is that "identity knowledges" are so mired in ongoing social and institutional relations that their analytical capacities are inseparable from the projections, attachments, and affects that propel them. For this reason, *Object Lessons* emphasizes those affects—anxiety, love, fear, and faith—that accompany, whether acknowledged or not, the political desire that attends both our relationship to our objects and analytics *and* our relationship to that relationship as well. Let's not pretend then that objects of study matter only because of what we want from them, or that what we want from them is adequate to the ways in which they inhabit and transform how we grasp the world. The issue at stake is more simple, if confounding: What am *I* without them? In its various explorations of identity knowledges, *Object Lessons* takes shape as both an answer—"nothing"—and a proposition: that the work going on is as fantastic and incalculable as the belief we generate from it.

Getting Here

Each of the chapters to follow began as an individual performance bound to its own occasion, whether as a conference talk, keynote lecture, or invited essay. Their deeper ecology—what I think of as the psychic life of this book—arises from their relationship to relationships of various kinds, aca-

demic and non: between my own identity investments and the objects of study that reflect and extend them; between geopolitical histories and the local worlds of family, region, and nation that named and claimed me; between habits of learning formally passed on to me and the ones I was lucky enough to cultivate from people and places I found on my own. Disciplinarily, the forthcoming conversations evolved from the study of literature and the humanities more generally, and from cultural studies and critical theory most specifically. They primarily involve Feminist, African American, Queer, and U.S. Studies, along with the interconnections and non-coincidences in which these fields and their objects of study and critical analytics have diverged. My personal attachments to these fields have many origins, but I am most eager to cite a string of vibrant English teachers in public schools in Miami, Florida, where the work of daily life was bound to the complex negotiations that attend identity's cultural sojourn.⁹ It was in one of those schools, Horace Mann Junior High, that I had my first mature inkling of what white skin privilege meant and when and how it could be deployed or not in the shifting allegiances of the schoolyard, as black, Cuban, and white kids learned lessons the classroom could never adequately teach. Surely this is neither the only nor best reason to account for the fact that the first piece of *Object Lessons* to be drafted was about the academic emergence of Whiteness Studies as a project of antiracist knowledge production. But it would be a major misunderstanding of the force of identity to dismiss it as inconsequential altogether. People drawn to identity knowledges have often been forced—by circumstance, history, pride, anger, or the sheer arrogance of those around them—to attend to what seems so massively obvious: that, to cite Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's stunningly sparse first axiom in *The Epistemology of the Closet*: "People are different from one another."¹⁰

9. My thanks especially to Mrs. Williams in second grade, who set me on this path by making me a "T.O.T." (Teacher of Tomorrow); Mrs. Grant in seventh grade, who taught me a serious love of the well-diagrammed sentence; and Mrs. Kranick in ninth grade, who made sure I understood the difference between reading and interpretation.

10. "It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact," writes Sedgwick at the outset of the book that would for many years stand as the origin of queer theory, until scholars began to claim Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, published the same year (1990), as a foundational contribution to the emergence of the field. Sedgwick's book, like Butler's, did

That junior high school was also the place in which other kinds of identity knowledges took vernacular shape, as when my best friends refused to vote for me for class president because I was a girl, or when Louisiana Fuller held my hand and the exhilaration and fear of it prompted my mother to explain the sad plight of “homosexuals” and why we should pity but not hate them. To say that identity studies would arrive much later to provide analytic purchase on the social emergencies created around these passages in and out of identities—the calling forth into a girlhood quite different from the one I had known, no less than the specter of the kind of person my mother was sure I would not become—is to recognize why students continue to describe themselves as transformed or transfixed by fields that offer counternarratives of self and social possession. Identity studies work as sites of social, political, and intellectual engagement because they emphasize the needs they exist to represent, making treasures out of the insights, analyses, and theories that have been crafted to describe and ameliorate the general incapacity for difference to register on the scale of social value.

But what happens if the need is too great for the theory to sufficiently feed it, or if the object that represents the need becomes diminished by the worldly limits in which it is forced to live? What happens when what you once loved no longer satisfies your belief that it can give you what you want? These questions are what led me from the study of whiteness to that of *gender* and the standing ovation it has received in the last decade as the critical means to rejuvenate the optimism once signified by *women* in the field inaugurated in that name. This optimism is fascinating to me not because I discount its authenticity or want to argue with its future-generating authority, but because of the political belief it sustains in critical practice as an agency of social change.

Other chapters were first drafted under the influence of different affects and affiliations. “Critical Kinship” began as an exploration of the methodological difficulties of interdisciplinary research—a focus that had its own

not use the term “queer theory,” but its pursuit of antihomophobic inquiry and its cascading performance as well as theorization of the difference between identity and identification are hallmarks of what would be narrated retrospectively as the origin of the field. My discussion of the impact of the discourse of normativity in the final chapter of this book offers one gloss on how Butler’s work has traveled from its primary engagement with feminism to become a founding queer theoretical text. See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 22.

experiential basis when I took part as the sole humanist in an interinstitutional project on race and nature.¹¹ Resisting suggestions by colleagues that ethnographic method would rescue my analysis from the tourist sensibility they found in its travels through an incongruent archive (from legal cases to popular film to feminist analyses of reproductive technology), I wrote instead about method as an idiom of intimacy while trying to account for the intertwined logics of race and gender that served methodologically as both my map and compass. This framework allowed me to reflect on the antiparadigmatic work of humanistic scholarship, along with its devotion to “dead” texts, living political contexts, and representation as the privileged venue for considerations of culture. “Refusing Identification” was initially drafted for a Fulbright visit to New Zealand where I wanted to deliver a keynote that could track the ways in which the internationalizing project of American Studies in the United States was incommensurate with the circulation and sign of “America” as it traveled across different university systems, political economies, regional histories, and social formations around the world. “Telling Time” was written as an invited response to Ian Halley’s “Queer Theory by Men” and used his primary combatants, feminism and queer theory, to detail the critical dilemmas that ensue when social movement discourses and academic itineraries are critically converged. The final chapter of this book, “The Vertigo of Critique,” began as a contribution to conversations about gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity and was first delivered in Norway, which helped to bring home to me the specificity of the U.S. university as both the context and the limit of my understanding of identity formation and academic knowledge politics in general.¹² It was later revamped for inclusion

11. For the most comprehensive discussion of the history of interdisciplinarity in the U.S. university, see Klein, *Interdisciplinarity* and *Crossing Boundaries*.

12. In making a point about the U.S. university, I am not necessarily consolidating it into a homogeneous entity, though the scale in which I seek to mark it is more transnational than domestic in scope. I readily agree that the U.S. university is deeply hierarchical in structure, that the class system that mediates its practices of hailing students to its very different doors is the effect of social organizations and governmental rationalities that it reiterates and reflects, even when it purports to be the agency of their transformation. But class differences within the U.S. university constitute, in part, its institutional form in a global context, adjudicating divisions of knowledge, skill, and labor, and managing certain kinds of state and economic interests across boundaries that dissolve or solidify in ways we cannot always predict.

in a Blackwell volume aimed at assessing the state of Queer Studies, where it became more fully engaged with the ways that *gender* has achieved critical priority in a field purportedly devoted to *sex*.¹³

All of these critical forays have been substantially revised for inclusion here, but none was rewritten to generate a line of thought that it did not at least insinuate. Properly speaking, then, *Object Lessons* is not a collection of previously published essays but an assemblage of critical conversations shaped and reshaped by both my belated monographic intentions and the wishes of readers who engaged the challenge of helping me sort through its separate and collectivized forms. These readers have been differently arrayed across the fields that concern me, being specialists in some, initiates in others. All have had a personal, institutional, or intellectual commitment to identity as the means for apprehending the relationship, broadly speaking, between human beings and their social worlds. Few have needed to be convinced that identity is irreducible to a single politics or that its most crucial questions arrive after agendas have been made. While other academic projects might stage identity debates to intervene in the critical practices of their home disciplines, *Object Lessons* hopes to recruit and sustain readers who share an interest in using identity to travel toward the affects, political horizons, and critical limits of the fields of study that have been established in its name. On behalf of these readers, my purpose is twofold: to inhabit identity's aspirations in the critical trajectories, discursive practices, and methodological priorities that it has so profoundly inspired, while exploring how various fields reach or exact a limit, become disciplinary instead of interventionist, and mimic radicality instead of teaching us how to become radically undone. Let me emphasize that this itinerary is not a response to what right-leaning cultural warriors have tagged disparagingly as "political correctness," nor is it an argument against any of the straw dogs that would emerge if I gave them their turn. *Object Lessons* is motivated instead by the desire to exist somewhere—if not a social world, political movement, or institutional space, then at the very least a

13. In "‘Oh, the Fun We’ll Have,’" Heather Love argues that current attention to *gender* in Sexuality Studies arises from the emergence of trans criticism. But as I argue in the last chapter of this book, the field's founding gesture to disarticulate gender and sexuality has never been fulfilled, raising the possibility that *gender* has been its central object of study all along. Certainly the retrospective nomination of *Gender Trouble* as a foundational queer theoretical text offers evidence to support this suggestion.

textual environment, an argument, even a series of words—in which identity and its knowledges are encountered in ways just as surprising, unnerving, and conflicted as we are.

Yes, *we*. That towering inferno of universalism. That monstrous display of self-infatuation. That master stroke of white-woman-speech. Voices warn me away from the danger. Hit backspace. Rephrase. Take comfort in grammar's singularity. But how can I not want this tantalizing hallucination? Or more to the point, why must I ignore its pulsing heat when identity knowledges are nothing without the haunting specter and affective traction of *we*? If the protocols of critical speech have taught us to avoid the risk, it is just as true to say that identity knowledges rarely take political or critical aim without some measure of hope that *we* will struggle into existence—partial and contingent to be sure, but resonant and agential. In the taut space between the *we* that must be disciplined and the *we* that is desired, *I* presents itself as the desiring subject's safest bet. But how safe is any *I*—indeed, how safe am I?—when the descriptive content no less than the protocols in which I come to speech are bound to histories and scripts that are given credit for knowing me at the start? My strategy in the pages that follow is to inhabit the error, not to avoid it, and certainly not to take refuge in the small cave of the *I*, even as I mobilize it in order to help specify the tense and longed-for translations that mark the distance I am trying to travel from me to *you*—the preamble to whatever can be made to stand for *we*. I anticipate *your* resistance, but here's the truth: *I* am not legible to myself without it. In this state of constitutive dependency, where the contingencies of grammar refract the identitarian dilemmas on which identity knowledges are staked, *Object Lessons* engages not only how and why *we* has been so harshly condemned but the hope that our struggle with it reveals. What, after all, fuels the fierceness of our objection to *we*: the wish it reveals or the fact that the wish has yet to come true?

Field Work

Generally speaking, *Object Lessons* is organized around the assumption that identity studies are distinguished from other areas of contemporary knowledge in the U.S. university by their acknowledged attachment to the political. I say *acknowledged* because of the importance of situating this book in the territory between two connected but not identical claims: between the familiar observation in identity studies that there are political

stakes to all knowledge production and my own insistence, borne from the investigations that have brought me here, that a critical perspective on the operation of the political within identity-based fields has not been sufficiently engaged. This last statement might strike you as counterintuitive if not downright contradictory, as I have already emphasized how profoundly identity knowledges identify themselves as practices of social justice. But deliberating on a field's political discourse is not the same thing as deliberating on the operations of the political that constitute it. The former entails examining a field's political rhetorics and the way these are staked to critical relationships of various kinds, including the constitution of the object and the methods that are made congruent with it. While *Object Lessons* is explicitly engaged in just these kinds of maneuvers, it does so as part of its larger task to unravel the meaning and critical implications of the operation of the political as it generates the affective force that constitutes the psychic life of a field or what Donald E. Pease calls in the context of American Studies the "field-Imaginary."¹⁴ For Pease, the field imaginary denotes "the disciplinary unconscious"—that domain of critical interpellation through which practitioners learn to pursue particular objects, protocols, methods of study, and interpretative vocabularies as the means for expressing and inhabiting their belonging to the field.

How does one study a field imaginary? As Pease defines it, the field imaginary is only accessible from a critical position produced outside of it, as those within the field "can neither reflect upon its terms nor subject them to critical scrutiny."¹⁵ From this perspective, *Object Lessons* cannot possibly proceed to read the field imaginary of identity knowledges because its author is too enmeshed in that which she seeks to decipher, too indebted to their critical ecologies, and far too attached to the ideas and histories that have called them forth to stand a chance of getting outside of them, no matter the fact—and indeed it is a fact—that she has experienced wave after wave of ambivalence at precisely those moments when identity's truth serums were being most liberally served. But Pease's account underestimates the implications of the psychoanalytic model he is wed to, in that there can be no outside perspective unencumbered by disciplinary obligations and field-forming injunctions of its own. While academic culture has

14. Pease, "New Americanists," 11.

15. Pease, "New Americanists," 12.

enshrined the rhetorical methods that allow scholars to claim an uncontaminated authority, it is hardly the case that anyone can travel very far without dragging more of herself along than she can possibly know. In other words, the scholar in pursuit of discerning a field's imaginary has unconscious disciplinary attachments too.

But the deeper problem in Pease's formulation comes from the opposite direction, as we are asked to imagine a subject so disciplined by a field imaginary (or by laws, governments, or the slaps that follow parental displeasure) as to be completely ignorant of any of the rules. Which subject is that? Not me and, I venture, not you. Run a red light, steal candy, kill a bird, refuse to wear a dress, change your pronoun, marry your brother, lie to customs, cheat, live on the streets. These are not equivalent cases, but their differing affective registers might work to graphically suggest that the fevered pitch of critical debates over agency in the ongoing volley between humanist and posthumanist theories of the subject have little heat if we take seriously the idea that it is precisely because we are inside of ideology, subjected to its work, that we can know anything about it.¹⁶ All of this is meant to say that being shaped by the field imaginary one seeks to explicate is not grounds for critical dismissal. In this study, it is the life blood that makes it possible to inhabit the affective contours and critical conundrums of U.S. identity knowledges today.

It is, then, from within a field that one is most instructed on how best to abide by its rules, as no practitioner becomes legitimate to herself or to others without acquiring fluency in the skills a field offers, including how to recognize and read the objects of study prioritized by it. These skills amount to more than technical training in the citational forms, critical traditions, and major figures that accompany field narration; they are also lessons in the value forms and belief structures that accompany critical practice, where visionary and belligerent critics can be found, and moral judgments (whether admitted or not) accompany nearly everything we touch, from critical rubrics, research topics, and objects of study to methods

16. This acknowledgment would seriously undercut current faith in critical practice as the means for discerning the political operations of what others cannot see. Much more will be said throughout *Object Lessons* about how the rhetoric of the political circulates in academic culture in ways that commodify politics for professional advancement.

and arguments as well.¹⁷ Critical predilections do change of course—what was once a field’s most prohibited object of study (masculinity for Women’s Studies, say, or whiteness for Ethnic Studies) can become central to its itinerary. These transformations are not simply about the latest academic fashion, no matter the fact that commodification is always a decisive factor in shaping the publication value of politically oriented academic work. The pursuit of the new is also crucial to the ongoing work of field formation, as it enables practitioners to engage, revise, and extend a field’s critical and political significance by compulsively debating it. Don’t be distracted by the anxious tones of critical dissent or the high drama that ensues in field encounters with university administrations or toxic legislatures or, more benignly, by the rush to embrace the latest critical thing (once it was postmodernism and cultural studies, now it is globalization and speciesism). Such exercises do not undermine the field imaginary so much as generate and sustain it by providing the occasion to defend the critical authority it hones.

Threats to the existence of the field are formative, then, even constitutive of the field imaginary, serving as the means for evoking and evincing the political value it simultaneously produces and proclaims. This is as true of the field imaginary of American Studies in its current postnational formation as it is of those academic knowledge domains coordinated around minoritized identity. All find their critical authority at odds with their public influence—and all take their abjection in the public political

17. I use the word *moral* as a provocation toward considering how political desire is bound to evaluations and optimisms that collate in various ways around *the good*. Sometimes this “good” can be pointedly set against the moral order of dominant formulations as when it is politically good to be a bad subject, or when bad social subjects become good objects of study (as in the case of sex workers for pro-sex feminism or pedophiles for Queer Studies). But most often it operates as the implicit position occupied by the left critic herself.

In her compelling discussion of celebratory accounts of racial hybridity, Sandra K. Soto offers an example of the critical production of “good subjects” that I am highlighting here: “What the key terms used to mark racialized difference as inherently transgressive have in common is their indelible dependence on what can only be a fantasy of a normative center inhabited by homogenous, static, racially pure, stagnant, uninteresting, and simple sovereign subjects. The celebration of hybridity not only helps reify the fantasy of the sovereign subject but also threatens to transmute marginality itself into a form of authenticity.” See Soto, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer*, 3–4.

sphere as evidence of their political value. One expects nothing less of a discourse aimed at left political intervention, of course, but what are the implications *within* the field of such a relationship between critical authority and political value? Or, more to the point, what does it mean that practitioners are taught to read, generate, and evaluate critical practice according to the status of the field's discourse outside the material locus of its production—that is, outside the accumulation of professional capital that attends the reproduction of critical hegemonies within the field? What kinds of affective and analytic expectations and, yes, regulations are thus required to ensure safe passage between the field's self-defining hegemonies and the modes of critical world building it attaches to them? And what can the field *not* afford to know in order to guarantee its reproduction in the disciplinary terms on which its commitment to the political turns?

These are the kinds of questions that generate my ongoing attention to the field imaginary of identity knowledges, as they foreground the crucial difference between a field's discourse of the political and the operations of the political that constitute it. By considering these questions as distinctly disciplinary ones, I am not aiming for a broad condemnation of the seeming reduction of identity's radical potential to academic institutionalization nor am I lamenting the fact that professionalization circulates particular critical discourses as political ones in a capital-generating nexus of critical authority and prestige. Social movements, as far as I am concerned, are no less disciplinary than academic fields of study, just differently so. Each of the chapters of *Object Lessons* thus seeks to explore some of the ways—startling, optimistic, angry, and belligerent—in which identity knowledges perform their hope that critical practice will be commensurate with both the political desire that incites it and the world it describes and seeks to transform. If in the process we are prone to considering ourselves outside of disciplinarity altogether, it is not because we are unaware of the rules. On the contrary, we find them comforting and alluring. This, then, is the consequence of the labor that *field work* performs, as practitioners find relief in the belief that the value of critical practice is its political value and that the political agency the field generates is ultimately the critic's own.

It is surprising to find myself traveling so intensely with the language of psychoanalysis in this book, as I would characterize the genesis of my own intellectual formation as collated around discourses that sought distance from the seemingly overdetermined domains that psychoanalysis has traced: the personal, intimate, familial, domestic, experiential, fantastical, imaginary, and purportedly unreal. My earliest introduction into identity forms of analysis in both African American and Women's Studies were drawn from materialist genealogies, with ideology critique a prime focus as it was introduced to me through cultural studies in the early 1980s. Of course, psychoanalysis was everywhere—especially in feminist film theory and in the trans-Atlantic migrations of French feminism—but I see now that I was particularly deaf to its genealogical specificity. Today, I suppose it is true to say, I remain deaf to psychoanalysis still, in the sense that the conversations in this book remain disengaged from many of the debates that have long concerned scholars whose primary interpretative attachments lie there.¹⁸ At no point in the chapters that follow do I review, argue, or align myself with specific psychoanalytic authorities, whether Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, Jean Laplanche, or Frantz Fanon; I stake next to nothing on sorting through the different traditions of psychoanalytic thought that are at the heart of contemporary psychoanalytic controversies in those academic domains (the humanities and interpretative social sciences) that are most resonant for identity knowledges today.¹⁹

18. For those interested in a study that traces the object through psychoanalytic theory with great rigor, see McCallum, *Object Lessons*. When I first encountered McCallum's *Object Lessons*, I had just submitted an essay to *Signs* for publication under the same main title. There are great overlaps in our mutual interest in desire, belief, and knowledge, but the itineraries of our critical endeavors are decidedly different. I hope Erin will forgive me for persisting with the title, and that my readers will see in her book the debt of influence that I continue to owe.

19. The amount of scholarship that does this work is impossible to cite in even a sufficiently representative way, but important projects that are pertinent for the conversations in *Object Lessons* include: Abel et al., *Female Subjects in Black and White*; Dean and Lane, *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*; Khanna, *Dark Continents*; Lane, *The Psychoanalysis of Race*; Fuss, *Identification Papers*; Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction*; Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects*; and Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now."

How, then, does a book emerge to claim no primary theoretical investment in psychoanalysis that nonetheless cultivates whatever self-identity might be said to describe it by focusing on the antimaterial ephemera that psychoanalysis so lovingly engages: affects, impulses, and wishes, along with the critical force of desire? How can I return, repeatedly, to the language of objects, identifications, and attachments without imagining myself in debt or duty to psychoanalysis, and why is it that I would choose to defend myself—here and now—against the expectation that, for credibility’s sake, I should plot my travels carefully, giving my reader a clear indication of how I move from the founding texts and theoretical precepts of psychoanalysis to the conversations about the identity knowledges collected here? Indeed, why would I invite what I know to be a strategy of academic intellectual dismissal by refusing to authorize *Object Lessons* according to the habits of critical authority that currently invest academic discourses with the power to speak—power cultivated by arming ourselves with an interpretative practice that we offer as more capable, productive, and enabling than any other? You recognize the motion: “only X analytic” will provide the nuance, perspective, explanation, or solution that *this* inquiry needs; “only Z authority” will lead us out of the critical morass that registers the poverty of now.

The conversations staged in this book move in different ways across these issues of authority and interpretative practice, but without amassing critical determination for signature theories or signature theorists. To be sure, no mode of thinking that is accessible to me is far afield from the transformations in humanistic inquiry that mark the history of my construction as an academic subject, dateline the late 1970s and 1980s, in the province of the United States. These transformations, as is now well known, pushed to the foreground problems of representation, language, and discourse, which also engendered new kinds of struggles over conceptions of power, human agency, and the possibility of social change. In the long view, my academic sojourn was framed by the dimorphic genealogies of Marx and Freud, whose competition for authority occupied a great deal of the language of the U.S. Left, especially feminist, in the decades of academic training that formed me. While it might be true to say that, like most U.S. scholars of my generation, I turned to Foucault as a way not simply to split but to overcome the difference, I am more infatuated today with what happens in proximity to critical theory’s ambitions than in the detail that is generated in debt or obligation to any specific figure or strand of it. This is not to

say that the ensuing chapters share no theoretical project, but it does explain why I have not used my introduction to map the theoretical debates and legacies of the critical vernacular that I use. To put this another way, let me simply say—because I have been asked this before—that I offer no overarching theory of desire from which I have derived my use of the phrase *political desire*, nor do I delineate a specific theoretical understanding of what psychic processes are engaged and performed by attachment and investment. For me, their importance is not conceptual, at least not in the way that theoretical discourses live and die according to the value conferred on the concepts derived from them.

As antithetical as it is to the generation of critical authority, let alone to the cultivation of expertise, this book resists the magnificent lure of anchoring its inquiries in the epistemological privileges accorded to distinct theoretical traditions and a genealogical excavation of their central terms. My use of *object relations* is not, then, a theoretical commitment to a distinct body of psychoanalytic thought, but a reflection of my interest in the simplest idea the phrase helps to deliver: namely, that objects of study are as fully enmeshed in fantasy, projection, and desire as those that inhabit the more familiar itinerary of intimate life, such as sex, lover, parent, sibling, friend.²⁰ By object, I mean to designate targets of study that reflect a seemingly material existence in the world (as in people, goods, laws, books, or films) and those that do not reveal such materiality in any immediately graspable way (as in discourse, ideology, history, personhood, the unconscious, and desire itself). By relation, I mean the constitutive dependence of one thing on another, such that no critical practice can be considered the consequence of its own singular agency. In this loose conceptual framework, I view the very attempt *to know* as an intimate relation, crafted within and from the sociality and materiality of a world we inherit; and I take the proposition that *knowing is a means to do justice* as an attempt to transform that intimacy into reinventing the world. The foremost stakes of

20. The two most important figures in object relations theory are widely regarded as Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott. See Klein, *The Collected Writings of Melanie Klein*, Vols. 1–4; Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* and *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World*; Winnicott with Khan, *Holding and Interpretation*; and Winnicott et al., *Babies and Their Mothers*. Recent engagements with object relations include Phillips, *Winnicott*, “Winnicott’s Hamlet,” and *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*; and Sedgwick, “Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes.”

this project are to be found here, in the interpretative interplay between social life, critical practice, and political commitment. My title, *Object Lessons*, is meant to capture the force of this pedagogical point—that identity knowledges are bound to much more than what we use them to know—in order to license attention to the impulses that keep us enthralled to them.

Still, something must be said about psychoanalysis itself, especially given the fact that it has no established relation to identity knowledges per se. Indeed, some of the fields that concern me have been decidedly torn about the utility of psychoanalysis, while others have little formal relationship to it at all. Contemporary U.S. academic feminism was born in the 1960s in its longing to reject Freud, which was countered in passion only by its concurrent hope for reconfiguring Marx, and is sustained today by its use, transformation, and ambivalence toward both. American Studies, in its interdisciplinary leanings toward history and literature, spent most of the twentieth century trying to amass archives it could call its own, only to have them undone in the post–Cold War era by critiques launched from identity and postcolonial domains. Psychoanalysis has mattered to some key figures in the New Americanist iteration of the field, but not often, though the current cultivation of affect as a frame for thinking about political feeling in the unfolding of empire bears a psychoanalytic genealogy that is sometimes named.²¹ Queer Studies has perhaps been marked more decisively by an affirmative relation to psychoanalysis than other domains of identity studies, which is of course a development with much queer irony given the long-standing historical antipathy in lesbian and gay communities and in the early formation of LGBT Studies to medical psychiatry's pathologizing account of homosexuality and transgender identifications. But in the critical emergence of queer theory as a project that simultaneously disarticulated acts from identities and imagined political affiliation in practices aimed at contesting heteronormativity's unconscious force, psychoanalysis joined ideology critique to effect a fascinating recalculation of various productivities, including most pointedly desire, representation, embodiment, sex, labor, and kinship. Current efforts to

21. There is now a lengthy archive on affect. See especially Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and “Collective Feelings”; Berlant, “The Subject of True Feelings”; Hemmings, “Invoking Affect”; Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*; Hardt, “Affective Labor”; Giardini, “Public Affects”; Clough, “Affect and Control”; and Clough with Halley, *The Affective Turn*.

situate the study of sexuality transnationally and as a means to rethink race both within and against the earliest configuration of the queer theoretical enterprise are varied in their investments in psychoanalysis, with one signature essay making explicit its rejection of psychoanalysis while other scholarly projects, often elaborated under the trope of racial melancholia, move quite distinctly in the opposite direction.²²

What is collated under the sign of psychoanalysis is inconsistent across the disciplines. Humanistic scholarship is far more interested in psychoanalysis as a genealogy of interpretative practice originating in Freud than is work in the social sciences, where psychology is itself a fully formed discipline whose analytical priorities favor other traditions of clinical practice, most prominently those focused on behavior and cognition. To a great extent and for reasons that go well beyond my brief explanation, it is humanistic inquiry that keeps alive the interpretative legacy of Freud and his heirs by engaging psychoanalysis as a specific historical and theoretical discourse. The disciplinary divisions described here—humanistic psychoanalysis on one hand and social scientific psychology on the other—have made it difficult for interdisciplinary traffic, as the two frameworks harbor vastly different understandings of subjectivity, psyche, affect, the individual, and the social. Recently, Antonio Viegó has traced the path of these disciplinary divisions as they have shaped conceptions of racialization and racialized subjectivity in Ethnic Studies. Crafted as a protest against the rejection not just of psychoanalysis but of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Viegó's book, *Dead Subjects*, takes aim at the long-standing dominance of ego psychology in the twentieth century and its repeated assimilation (often in the guise of antiracism) of racialized subjects to a fully socialized and idealized "conscious" subjectivity, a subject divided not within herself but against a social world whose exclusion she must seek to

22. In "Global Identities," Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan write, "We want to argue that the study of sexuality in a transnational frame must be detached from psychoanalysis as a primary method in order to resist the universalization of the Western body as sexual difference. Psychoanalysis is a powerful interpretive tool, but it has become a form of biomedicine and cannot be utilized in ignorance of its own power structures" (667–68). Other scholarship that considers the transnational formation of sexuality routes much of its inquiry through a rethinking of both psychoanalysis and the psychic. See especially Eng and Kazanjian, "Introduction: Mourning Remains"; Eng and Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia"; and Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

master.²³ Beginning his study by reading documents on the treatment of mental illness in African Americans in the nineteenth century, in which doctors were surprised to “discover” that these patients had (literal) dreams, Viego elaborates a much longer story about the complexity of conceptualizing racialized subjects as fully human—which in Lacanian terms means as subjects formed in language, shaped by unconscious life. For him, it is the disavowal of the workings of the unconscious and of language that continues today to condemn racialized subjects to the not-yet or almost human.

Readers of *Dead Subjects* will be surprised and some, no doubt, will be irritated by the reclamation of Lacan for Race and Ethnic Studies, given how little Lacan set his gaze directly on the issue of racialization.²⁴ But for those immune to the lure of siding for or against Lacan, Viego’s challenge to the epistemic equations made within the field imaginary of identity knowledges is as timely as it is courageous, as he asks practitioners to forgo the pleasure of desiring a subject who can fully know, not just herself but the conditions of her own and the world’s making. While I carry no brief for Lacan, I think it possible to say that Viego and I share a commitment to

23. See Viego, *Dead Subjects*. For a general sense of the different disciplinary dispensations shaping *race* as an analytic in Latino Studies, see Darder and Torres, “Mapping Latino Studies”; Lugones and Price, “The Inseparability of Race, Class, and Gender in Latino Studies”; and Viego, “The Unconscious of Latino/a Studies.”

24. The critical challenge of *Dead Subjects* lies precisely in Viego’s appropriation of a theory that fails to attend to racialization to theorize race. In doing so he challenges a certain expectation in identity knowledges that inattention to racialization is a tacit subordination of race, if not the condition on which white supremacy is founded and forwarded. But the double bind for contemporary critics is that the signifying value of race is overdetermined simultaneously by hypervisibility and invisibility—by both presence and absence. Hence work on “race” that aligns it solely with the racialized subject always risks reproducing the elision between race and racialized bodies that inaugurates the analytic pursuit of race, while work that eschews either the racialized subject or the direct address to race risks being read as a continued investment in white universalism. In the process, as I discuss in chapter 3, the minoritized racial subject keeps returning in critical practices as the figure required to signify antiracist political commitments. Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* evokes some of the complexity at stake here in its demonstration of the ways in which canonical U.S. literature reflects a discourse of racialization precisely through the absence of one, while that absence is figured as the haunting specter of an “Africanist presence.” For a genealogical account of the dynamic of visibility in U.S. discourses of embodiment, see my *American Anatomies*.

interrupting projects that not only fantasize the subject's liberation into autonomy and coherent self-production but imagine the possibility of doing so as the singular goal of interpretative practice as a whole. Perhaps this is why I am drawn to psychoanalysis as an idiom for considering the relational practices of knowledge production, because in the very form of its practice lies a commitment I share not to the analyst's expert ability to discover the "truth" of the subject or to shore up the subject's "own" truth but to the relational encounter itself, without which there is little that interests me. If this relationality is structurally artificial—manufactured as it is by enormous expense—the practice it proposes nonetheless insists that that there can be no self-production without others. (From this perspective, it is truly strange to consider the repeated critique that psychoanalysis is fundamentally a privatizing, individualist, and antisocial form.) Indeed, what compels me toward psychoanalysis is the relational practice that generates it. This means, paradoxically, that what is most important for me is not its interpretative acumen or analytical validity but its "inspiration," as Leo Bersani has put it, "for modes of exchange that can only take place outside of psychoanalysis."²⁵ *Outside of psychoanalysis* is the space of all kinds of complex, rewarding, and unnerving encounters, including those that have no overt traffic with psychoanalysis as such. In the chapters of this book, it is the inspiration of psychoanalysis that I most consistently follow as I read identity knowledges in relational terms, repeatedly sacrificing psychoanalysis per se "for the sake," in Bersani's words, "of its most invaluable lesson."²⁶

My hope is that readers will follow me there, insinuating themselves into the relationships that *Object Lessons* describes, analyzes, and performs without feeling deprived that there is no systematic rendering of the scholarly content, theoretical scope, or national practice of U.S. identity knowledges waiting for them at the end. What I offer instead is a series of critical encounters, a kind of stage setting or, better yet, scene making: with a variety of identity objects of study (women, whiteness, "America," sex), analytic practices (gender, race, intersectionality, the queer theoretic), and fields of study (American Studies, Whiteness Studies, Women's Studies, Queer Studies, Ethnic Studies), along with considerable attention to the

25. Bersani and Phillips, "The It in the I," 4.

26. Bersani and Phillips, "The It in the I," 4.

emergent aspirations of the transnational, international, and global that might be said to characterize the humanities and interpretative social sciences in the new century as a whole. In doing so, I hope that readers will become interested in the resonances as much as the contradictions that arise between what I say and what they want, such that the object lessons that attend this project multiply not only from your identificatory refusals but from the investments and insistences that make you feel most secure. The conversations in each of the following chapters are offered in this context, as a provocation to be sure, but also as a constitutive recognition: these words have no meaning without you.

Inhabitations

How, then, does one study a field imaginary? Where is it to be found? On what critical terrain can it be convincingly deciphered? These questions are not easily answered, which is why the best approach comes in offering a deeper description of what is at stake in reading *Object Lessons* as a whole. The book begins with “Doing Justice with Objects (Or, the ‘Progress’ of Gender),” which uses the battle between *women* and *gender* as the keyword for naming feminist field domains in order to explore the congested terrain of representation that identity fields so often configure.²⁷ By reconstructing

27. Other identity-based fields have not been quite as riven as Women’s—and now Gender—Studies by the crisis of their self-nomination, though there has been considerable debate across all of the fields that concern me about their primary object of study and its status in generating the research agendas of field domains. In American Studies, the debate has collated around the audacity of using “American” as a signifier for North America alone and especially for the United States (see especially Radway, “What’s in a Name?”). In African American Studies, scholars have taken up the transnational turn through the primary critical rubric of diaspora, paying attention to the uneven development of the study of the African diaspora across the institutional fields that comprise it. Tina Campt and Deborah Thomas’s ongoing project on “diasporic hegemonies” attends to the overlapping intellectual agendas of African American, Afro-Caribbean, African, and Black European Studies. In their introduction to a special issue of *Feminist Review* on the topic, they describe how “the dominance of US-based cultural and intellectual discourses on diasporic relations, origin stories, and authenticity narratives can privilege paradigms that stress community solidarity at the expense of analytic attention to key differences within and among populations that might be understood as diasporic” (3). See Campt and Thomas, “Editorial: Gendering Diaspora.” See also Hartman, *Lose Your*

a genealogy of the process through which *women* and *gender* have lost their mutual referentiality, I am interested in the “progress” now attributed to the differences they stand for, such that *gender* is taken to bear none of the faults that have accrued to *women*. In this story of disappointing love objects and optimistic new ones, it becomes possible to discern certain core beliefs that structure the field imaginary, including two of the most powerful ones: first, that justice is best served by stitching field domain and object of analysis into representational coherence and, second, that the critical utility of an object of study is born in its commensurability with the political desire invested in it. My chapter takes shape around the supposition that commensurability is an impossibility, in part because political desire is always excessive—excessive to the conditions, imaginations, and objects that are used to represent it. Hence I structure the chapter around the simple prediction that *gender*, like *women*, will come to fail. What category will replace it? I end by deliberating on one likely heir, *women of color*, and the challenge the transnational now presents to scholars hoping to sustain their belief in the political capacity of an analytic investment. By explicating the convergentist and realist representational demands that attend the field imaginary of Women’s Studies, “Doing Justice” examines the field-generating belief that an object of study materializes both the worldly referent it is used to name and the political desire that wields it for change.

In the second chapter, I approach the justice-object relation by thinking more directly about time, as a progress narrative is nothing if not a temporal emplotment. It is one of modernity’s surest ways of convincing its subjects that the future can be grasped with conscious intention.²⁸ This is

Mother. In counterpoint, a major conference in 2004 at the University of Illinois, Beyond a Boundary: Area, Ethnic/Race and Gender Studies and the “New” Global Imperative, highlighted the concern that U.S. Ethnic Studies was losing both institutional support and intellectual priority in the shift from national to transnational and global frameworks.

28. Even in those venues of identity studies most absorbed in antihumanist traditions, it is difficult to pretend that the future’s security is not the resonant goal—Lee Edelman’s *No Future* being the stunning objection that might be said to confirm the rule. See Edelman’s various attempts to demonstrate why queer critique should refuse a politics of progression: *No Future*, “Antagonism, Negativity, and the Subject of Queer Theory,” and “Ever After.” Other takes on the question of the future include: Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, especially 160–61; Halberstam, “The Anti-social Turn in Queer

not to say that critical practices devoted to the future's transformation are merely complicit with modernity, as if there is some space from which we can think beyond the historical embeddedness that such an accusation disdainfully glosses. *Object Lessons* expends no energy on such "exposure," pursuing instead the claim that there is no objective outside from which to assess what we can know. In "Telling Time (When Feminism and Queer Theory Diverge)," I take up the question—to be developed across the chapters of the book—of what it means to say that all our thinking and speaking comes from *within* by considering the different temporalities within which identity knowledges speak, not simply to the disciplines but to one another and to the public sphere in which their claims to do justice are routinely aimed. My main concern is to differentiate social movements from the institutionalized projects founded in their names in order to appreciate their incommensurabilities as political projects, social phenomena, interpellative forms, and historical entities. The chapter is organized as a response to Ian Halley's polemical argument that in order to have a pro-sex, shame-affirmative queer theoretic, critics must "take a break from feminism"—that is, refuse the convergentist thinking that would insist that every analysis of sexuality serves as a cogent analysis of gender as well. By siding with Ian's call for divergence, I explicate the nonequivalence between his two key opponents—feminism and queer theory—in order to consider how divergence is not simply central to the process of institutionalization but definitive, indeed constitutive, of it. The pedagogical force of this point refracts across *Object Lessons* in numerous ways, as convergence is a primary syntax in the field imaginary of identity knowledges, underlying both the demand that an object of study be commensurate with the political desire that calls it forth and the attendant assumption that critical practice is an act of justice. By considering divergence as foundational to the migration of identity from its orientations in social movements to its generation of academic knowledge forms, I trace the multiple transformations in identity's critical and affective operations that accompany its academic sojourn. In the end, I argue that Halley does not take divergence far enough, which would require situating the contestations between feminism and queer theory in their different temporalities and affects from the start.

Studies"; and Muñoz, "Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique" and *Cruising Utopia*.

Read together, the first two chapters offer a meditation on the work of identification as central to identity's academic knowledge production. In the opening chapter on the progress of *gender*, identification is the disciplinary force that weds field domain and object of study into representational coherence, with justice being the effect of methods and interpretative practices that conform to the field imaginary's primary disciplinary demand. This is a convergentist project, in which the political commitment that generates the field imaginary is demonstrated by pursuing coherence, synchronicity, inclusion, and equivalence between the objects, analytics, and methods it institutionally arrays. In the second chapter, identification works not through an affective or rhetorical convergence of social movement with academic knowledge production but on the grounds of attachments that live on this side of institutionalization where posthumanist critiques of representation and agency have generative authority in the anti-integrationist field imaginary of queer theory. This project is aimed at privileging asynchronicity, nonequivalence, incommensurability, and irreducible difference in order to wed critical practice to the political aspirations that attend it. In each of these cases, which speak to the disjunctive temporalities at work within identity knowledge domains, the field imaginary is staked to identificatory grounds, as good and bad objects abound to navigate the relationship between critical practice and social justice. While Ian resists identifying with feminism's convergentist agenda, his queer theoretic invests nonetheless in the field imaginary's golden rule: that objects and analytics of study can be made to deliver everything we want from them.

But what about the function of disidentification in generating identification's allure? After all, *gender's* critical promise is secured by mobilizing disidentifications with *women* just as the demand to take a break from feminism serves as precondition for igniting the queer theoretic's political ambition. The third and fourth chapters of *Object Lessons* plumb this aspect of identity's object relations by considering the structure and affect of refusing identification with the figure that founds the field, as in Whiteness Studies and American Studies. In both cases, the field domain is oversaturated by the geopolitical power of its primary object of study, requiring various kinds of critical strategies to answer the call for justice. In "The Political Conscious (Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity)," I explore the optimistic claim that making whiteness an object of study undermines the disembodied universalism on which white supremacy in

Western modernity depends. Through various readings of white particularity in critical and popular discourses alike, the chapter argues against the assumption that white supremacy operates through universalism alone in order to make sense of the elasticity of white power as a transforming historical form. One of my main points here is that white disaffiliation from white supremacy in its segregationist formation *is* the hegemonic configuration of white supremacy in the post-Civil Rights multiculturalist era—a point that Whiteness Studies must subordinate in order to establish disidentification as the strategic mechanism of white antiracism. Such disidentification banks enormously on the status of white self-consciousness and hence on consciousness itself as an antiracist political instrument. But the idealism that Whiteness Studies bestows on knowing and on a fully conscious subject reiterates the constitution of the humanist subject whose white particularity is submerged by the universalizing dictates of white privilege that travel under the guise of rational man. The “paradox” in the chapter’s title has to do, then, with the problem of making consciousness the centerpiece of a project aimed at undoing the very subject whose privileged consciousness is the universalized condition of whiteness under Western epistemological rule. The massive hope invested in a white subject who can produce the right kind of agency to bring down his own political overordination is surely inspiring, but it hardly predicts a future in which white-on-white preoccupations are deferred.

As many readers know, Whiteness Studies faltered quite quickly on the contradictory entanglements of its own political aspirations, as seeking to dismantle the power that an object of study holds in the world by refusing identification with it is no easy feat, especially when a field bears the name of the entity it seeks to oppose and the power the object holds clearly exceeds one’s critical identification with it. Add to this the sheer fact that dismantling the iconic status of a critical object is a far cry from dismantling the geopolitical power the object stands for, and one can see how genuinely vexed is the deconstructivist move to attend with rigor to the master term. It might even be harder than trying to collate power for an object of study that is routinely subordinated in the regimes of everyday life since the very act of paying attention to it confers value. In chapter 4, “Refusing Identification (Americanist Pursuits of Global Noncomplicity),” I consider these issues in the context of American Studies where the current critical demand to internationalize the field is bent toward securing a perspective uncontaminated not only by the global authority the object

wields but by the critical priorities that dominate its practice in the United States. Djelal Kadir calls these practices “American American Studies,” which I contextualize less disparagingly as the New American Studies, whose investments in disentangling critical practice from imperial complicities have already been traced through my explication of the concept of a field imaginary above. By exploring how internationalization tropes the discourse of the “outside” that is central to New American Studies, my chapter argues that internationalist proclamations participate in the same field imaginary that their identificatory refusals otherwise condemn. This argument is not made in order to relish the grand ah-ha, as if learning how to expose someone else’s implication in what they protest is an inoculation against revealing my own. I’m more interested in the critical force of the charge and the assurance it routinely delivers that critics are not only in control of their object attachments but that what we say about them is the surest truth of what they mean. The point here is that objects of study are bound to multiple relationships, such that the conscious attempt to refuse an identification is in no way a guarantee that one can, let alone that one has done so.

In the fifth chapter, “Critical Kinship (Universal Aspirations and Intersectional Judgements),” I move the conversation about the ideal of non-complicity and the critic’s avowedly conscious intentions to the terrain of intersectional investments in order to consider one of the major lessons the project of this book has taught me: that objects can resist what we try to make of them. The chapter focuses initially on a fascinating case involving a fertility clinic mistake and the two couples—one black, one white—who seek legal custody of the same child. The juridical setting of the story is germane to the itinerary of the chapter, as it is the link between this case and the centrality of “the case study” in intersectional theory that allows me to plot the juridical imaginary that intersectionality relies upon and the consequences of this for feminist commitments to the study of race and gender. Crenshaw’s inaugural work on intersectionality was chiefly concerned with employment discrimination and violence against black women, whose “intersectional identity as both women *and* of color” engendered their dual marginalization “within both” feminist and antiracist discourses.²⁹ In recent years, intersectionality has been given a life of its

29. Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1244.

own, becoming an imperative to attend evenly and adequately to identity's composite whole: race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, nation, religion, and increasingly age and ability. Such an insistence builds on Crenshaw's own concern for political and legal amelioration and seeks to forge not only analytic bridges but convergences between the political projects engaged by identity politics and the academic domains they name.

The case that I bring to the conversation features a white woman who gives birth to a black child whose embryo was not her own. While feminist scholarship has routinely sided with the birth mother in disputes arising from reproductive technologies, often by claiming it as an antiracist position, my discussion situates the case in the historical context of white racial theft of black reproduction, where it is hardly an easy decision to privilege gestational labor—but just as difficult, I contend, not to do so when one considers the way that prioritizing genetics risks reinscribing essentialist understandings of both race and kinship. By reflecting on the way race and gender are incoherently arrayed in the case, such that adjudicating the dispute renders the analysis of its complexity woefully incomplete, the chapter approaches intersectional analysis more as a political aspiration than a methodological resolution to the multiplicities of identity that incite it. In doing so, I track the incommensurabilities that accompany its travels from, first, the specific province of law and, second, the particularity of black women's occlusion in U.S. discourses on race and gender.³⁰ “Critical Kinship”

30. The 2009 National Women's Studies Association conference call for papers foregrounds a familiar narrative about intersectionality as the composite figure for yoking method, theory, and politics:

A multiracial feminist approach to gender equity and liberation necessarily begins at the intersection . . . of systems of domination. Intersectionality accounts for simultaneous privilege and oppression and refuses any hierarchy of oppressions or of identity. Intersectional feminist politics are coalitional and focus on a collective approach to freedom. In the United States, what we now call an “intersectional” model of feminist analysis and politics has a long trajectory: a complex genealogy of intersectionality as concept and practice can be traced among women of color feminisms in particular. Yet, has W[omen's] S[tudies] changed enough? Is there still a tendency toward gender universals? Are there still claims that intersectionality isn't viable or that one can't “do it all” or “account for everything” without being incoherent? Whose notions of coherence and incoherence hold sway in the field of WS? (www.nwsaconference.org/cms/sites/default/files/NWSA_CFP2009.pdf)