Chicana Feminism and Postmodernist Theory

Over the past decade, a growing number of feminists have challenged the view that postmodernism is the most productive theoretical framework for feminist discourse. Barbara Christian, in her 1987 essay "The Race for Theory," and bell hooks, in her 1991 essay "Essentialism and Experience," were among the first to express reservations about the usefulness of a poststructuralist-influenced literary theory for their own critical projects. Other feminists followed close behind: as early as 1992, Linda Singer sounded cautionary warnings about the "regulative effect" that postmodernism seemed to be having on feminist theorizing; and in an explanatory note preceding her 1994 essay "Purity, Impurity, Separation," Marta Lugones made the point of dissociating her theoretical account of multiplicity from postmodernist theorizing of the same. Both Judith Roof, in her 1994 essay "Lesbians and Lyotard: Legitimation and the Politics of the Name," and Linda Martín Alcoff, in her 1997 essay "The Politics of Postmodern Feminism, Revisited," urged feminists to recognize the epistemological denial apparent in postmodernist projects that rely on unacknowledged legitimating metanarratives to establish the "truth value" of no truth. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in their 1997 introduction to Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, suggested that "postmodernist theory . . . has generated a series of epistemological confusions regarding the interconnections between location, identity, and the construction of knowledge" (xvii). Even Linda Nicholson, undeniably one of postmodernism’s staunchest supporters and the editor of the collection Feminism/Postmodernism (1990a), found it necessary, in the introduction to her coedited (with Steven Seidman) 1995 anthology...

Too many people have commented on various drafts of this article for me to mention them all. I would be remiss, however, if I did not acknowledge a few whose comments were particularly helpful to the development of my argument. I owe much to Josephine Mendez-Negrete, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Sharon Holland, Timothy Young, Saty Mohanty, and the anonymous readers for Signs. Finally, I want to dedicate this article to the memory of Lora Romero.

1 See also Sánchez 1987, which, while not focusing on Chicana feminism, succinctly evaluates the implications of postmodernist theory for liberatory political practices.

© 2001 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0097-9740/2001/2602-0004$02.00

Copyright © 2001. All rights reserved.
Social Postmodernism, to acknowledge (in the hope of remedying) some of postmodernism's political and theoretical limitations (8–9).

There have been, of course, a number of different reactions to the predicaments of postmodernism that these critics have identified—including the various reactions of the many theorists who never accepted its epistemological premises in the first place. But even among feminists who have engaged seriously with postmodernist theory and who remain wary of positivist or idealist conceptions of objectivity and knowledge, a call for a new kind of theoretical "pragmatism" that attempts to avoid the normative deficits of postmodernist theory has emerged. For instance, Nancy Fraser calls for the development of an "eclectic, neopragmatist feminist theory" that permits both decentering and normative critique even as it avoids metaphysical entanglements (1995, 167–68). Similarly, Rita Felski suggests that feminist theorists need to de-ontologize difference by "offering a re-description of the status of equality and difference that is framed in pragmatic rather than metaphysical terms" (1997, 2). Even Judith Butler—whose earlier work can be held accountable for authorizing the wholesale dismissal by a generation of young feminist scholars of any feminist project that betrays a concern for "truth," "identity," "experience," or "knowledge"—has recently acknowledged that "in order to set political goals, it is necessary to assert normative judgements" (1995, 141). Of course, like Fraser and Felski, Butler is careful not to ground her normative judgments in metaphysical commitments, preferring to base her politics of subversive citation and redeployment instead on a contingent "foundation" that moves, and which changes in the course of that movement" (141).

One of the questions I pose in this article is whether a purely "pragmatist" feminist theory is sufficient for a liberatory feminism. By a pragmatist feminist theory, I mean one that refuses to make any objective metaphysical claims—even limited ones—about the nature either of the world or of human beings and that, consequently, must justify its normative claims in purely conventional or strategic terms.² By way of an answer, I suggest that, insofar as it tacitly presupposes the same positivist conception of objectivity and knowledge that serves as a strawperson for postmodernist the-

---

² Pragmatism as a solution to postmodernist predicaments, despite the impression created by these essays, is not new. To the extent that feminists continue to eschew even limited metaphysical claims, they will reproduce the pragmatist impulses that have long been a part of postmodernist theory. Sánchez noted in 1987 that "what seems to be gaining ground among some postmodernists who reject the old forms of legitimizing reason is a new pragmatism that defends a consensus-view of truth, one determined by the dominant bourgeois discourses, one that ensures the maintenance of the status quo" (4–5). Sánchez concludes that the discourses generated by the postmodernist crisis in epistemology and ideology "are not contestatory at the economic or political level" (5).
ory, the kind of pragmatist feminist theory that these critics propose is inadequate for theorizing and authorizing effective progressive political movements. As part of an ongoing effort to reconceptualize (within post-positivist realist terms) concepts such as identity, experience, knowledge, and truth, this essay argues for the necessity of revisiting the problem of justification. I maintain that progressive feminist theorists need to acknowledge that some of our ethical and political goals might indeed be based on reliable, objective knowledge of ourselves and our world. Rather than refusing to ground our politics, we need to ask what grounds might, in fact, be worth defending.

These are the larger theoretical concerns and questions that have informed my thinking as I have explored the influence of postmodernism on Chicana feminist theory. In my quest to find the best available language for theorizing feminist—and particularly Chicana feminist—subjectivity and identity, I have examined two influential Chicana theorists whose work has been significantly shaped by, and has contributed to the shaping of, the “postmodern turn”: Norma Alarcón and Chela Sandoval. For the purposes of this article, I define postmodernism as a theoretical position that incorporates such diverse elements as the centering of the subject, the jettisoning of “grand theories,” a turn toward local and even nonrational knowledges, a textualizing of the social, a valorization of flux and mobility, and a substitution of a politics of difference for a politics of liberation. I have found that these two Chicana theorists demonstrate an ambivalent relationship to postmodernist theory even as they accept many of its presuppositions and claims. They appreciate its dismantling of the transcendent subject of reason, for instance, while remaining committed to an account of subjectivity that allows some form of identity-based (i.e., “Chicana” or “women-of-color”) agency. Over the course of this article, I show that their attempts to theorize the experience and agency of Chicanas and other women of color are not supported by the postmodernist presuppositions they employ, I expect that my position will generate some resistance among those scholars (Chicana or not) who are already committed to post-

\[1\] Nicholson 1990b and Nicholson and Seidman 1995 both provide useful overviews of what theorists generally mean when they refer to “postmodern theory.” Sánchez’s (1987) brief review of its history from the 1950s through the 1980s is also extremely helpful in this regard (see esp. 1–6). The term postmodernism, like many other theoretical designations, is contested, and not all critics who fit my definition here would identify themselves as such.

\[2\] This ambivalence toward postmodernism is one that Alarcón and Sandoval themselves acknowledge; this fact might prompt some critics to deny that their theories should be considered postmodernist. However, part of what I will show in this essay is that their key theoretical assumptions are in fact recognizably postmodernist. As a consequence, Alarcón’s attempts to avoid a “clearcut postmodern agenda” are largely unsuccessful, while Sandoval’s strongest insights are undermined by her postmodernist presuppositions.
Let me illustrate the realist theoretical point I am making. As fallible human beings with no immediate access to the world, women of color have been as subject to mystification and error as anyone else. Consequently, they may have participated in race-based organizations without attending to the interests of their gender—not because they were enacting differential consciousness but because they had not yet figured out that their gender brings with it a set of interests. Angela Davis, in a keynote address given at SUNY Oneonta in April 1996, admitted that during her participation in the black power movement of the 1960s she was largely unaware of the conflicts between the interests of her gender and the masculinist rhetoric of the black power movement. Similarly, some women who now identify as women of color may have participated in gender-based political movements without fully understanding that such organizations systematically neglected the race and class interests central to the lives of most nonwhite women. Cherríe Moraga is a case in point. During her participation in the women's movement of the 1970s and prior to her identification as a woman of color, she was not initially conscious that she was neglecting those interests. The realization came to her gradually, and manifested itself, at first, in discomfort—in the sense that something was missing, something was wrong. In the preface to *This Bridge Called My Back*, she recounts her coming to consciousness as a woman of color:

A few days ago, an old friend said to me how when she first met me, I seemed so white to her. I said in honesty, I used to feel more white. You know, I really did. But at the meeting last night, dealing with white women here on this trip, I have felt so very dark: dark with anger, with silence, with the feeling of being walked over.

I wrote in my journal: “My growing consciousness as a woman of color is surely seeming to transform my experience. How could it be that the more I feel with other women of color, the more I feel myself Chicana, the more susceptible I am to racist attack?” (Moraga 1983c, xv)

Here Moraga describes a growing awareness of her difference from white women. In the process of interacting with them, Moraga learns more about herself; she reconnects with the racialized aspect of her identity that she had previously denied. Her “transformation of experience” is thus a consequence of her reinterpretation of the things that happen/have happened to her in light of her new (and more accurate) perspective on the

---

work of human interactions and natural phenomena that constitute the totality of our (constructed and discovered) reality.
from the start, they are able to avoid the sharp opposition that structures much postmodern thought: that experience must be self-evidently meaningful or else it will be epistemically unreliable. By seeing experience as theory-mediated, realists understand that it can be a source of genuine knowledge as well as of social mystification; by seeing experience as causally related to the (social and natural) world, realists provide a way to evaluate the reliability of the knowledge that humans gain from their experiences. They propose that the truth of different theories about the world can be evaluated comparatively by assessing how accurately they refer to real features of the world. In this view, because of the presence of ideological distortion, “objective knowledge is the product not of disinterested theoretical inquiry so much as of particular kinds of social practice”; it is thus context-sensitive and empirically based, while remaining valid across social and cultural contexts (Mohanty 1997, 213). I draw on this postpositivist conception of objectivity throughout the article in order to suggest alternatives to the recognizably postmodernist positions that Alarcón and Sandoval take. For example, in response to Alarcón’s postmodernist view that Chicanas are at their most radical when they symbolize a principle of abstract oppositionality, I show how two of the Chicana feminists that she uses to illustrate her contention in fact attempt to work through the conflicts they experience in order to imagine a concrete social alternative to a substantive conception of the human good. Similarly, in response to Sandoval’s postmodernist assertion that all truth claims are complicit with oppressive authoritarianism, I suggest that when truth claims are understood in a realist way as fallible and subject to verification and revision, they can contribute dialectically to the development of reliable knowledge about the world. By rethinking, from an alternative theoretical perspective, notions of agency and truth, I hope to reinvigorate theoretical discussions among Chicana and other feminists about the relationship between theory and practice, between intellectual inquiry and our ongoing attempts to transform ourselves and our world.

I begin the article with a necessarily brief overview of the historical context from which Chicana feminism emerged. By situating historically the kinds of questions being asked and problems being addressed within Chicana feminist theory, I hope to make the point that just as Chicanas’ political activism and struggles are often based on a certain theoretical knowledge, that knowledge is frequently produced from their experiences of political struggle. So, although the works I focus on in this article can be

---

6 For helpful discussions of the theory-mediatedness of experience, see Mohanty 1997, esp. 206–16; Wilkerson 2000.

---

Copyright © 2001. All rights reserved.
seen as formal expressions of Chicana feminist theory, they are not the only, or necessarily the most important, places where the theoretical insights arrived at by Chicanas and other women of color originate or are formulated and expressed. In refusing to draw a firm distinction between Chicana feminism and Chicana feminist theory, I am following Satya Mohanty, Sandra Harding, and Richard Boyd in making the more general Marxian theoretical point that knowledge is produced not in isolation from the world but through engagement with it. My second purpose in invoking the contexts of Chicana feminism is to acknowledge the degree to which my thinking has been significantly shaped by my Chicana foremothers. I have inherited certain kinds of intellectual questions and issues that would not have been available to me without the important work of some of the same activists/theorists with whose theoretical approaches I now take issue.

In the second section of the article, I begin my theoretical argument with a discussion of Alarcón’s theory of multiple subjectivities and her attempts to remain on the margins—what she calls the “interstices”—between incompatible theoretical frameworks. I then turn, in the third section, to Sandoval’s oft-cited 1991 essay “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World” to show both that Sandoval’s postmodernist presuppositions partially undermine her project of theorizing the experiences of women of color and also that her most cogent insights are compatible with a postpositivist realist theory of identity. In the last section, I return to the question of whether a purely pragmatist feminist theory is sufficient for a liberatory feminist politics. I look to the writings of Chicana authors Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa for a more appropriate theoretical trajectory for the cultural critic concerned with representing the cultural productions and experiences of women of color. In that section, I examine Chicana identity from within a postpositivist realist theoretical framework, positing Chicana identity not as a principle of abstract oppositionality but as a historically and materially grounded perspective from which feminists can work to disclose the complicated workings of oppression and resistance.

**The emergence of Chicana feminism**

As a distinct social movement, Chicana feminism emerged primarily in response to the sexism Chicanas experienced within the Chicano civil rights

---


Copyright © 2001. All rights reserved.
movement. Together with their fathers, husbands, and brothers, Chicana civil rights workers of the 1960s and 1970s were engaged in a struggle against the various forms of oppression and discrimination that their Chicana/o communities had historically experienced. Like their Mexicana and Chicana foremothers, Chicanas active in el movimiento did not distinguish their empowerment as women from the empowerment of their families and communities. In their activism and their writings they advocated for welfare rights, government-funded (but community-controlled) child care, nondiscriminatory health care, expanded legal rights, and control over their own reproductive capacities. They struggled for better working conditions and attacked racial and sexual stereotypes, frequently articulating the connections between the discrimination they faced as women, as workers, and as members of a racial minority group. Nevertheless, Chicanas in the Chicano movement were disturbed when the rights for which they were fighting continued to be unfairly distributed along gender lines within their own communities. Accordingly, throughout the 1970s Chicanas became increasingly vocal about their dissatisfaction at being expected to defer to and serve their Chicano brothers while being expected to perform a disproportionate share of the work required for successful political organizing.

Despite their commitment to la causa, it became increasingly apparent to Chicana feminists that their interest in achieving gender equality within the Chicano community stood in opposition to a discourse of nationalism that emphasized the value of family loyalty in the project of cultural survival. In response to what they perceived as cultural genocide, Chicano cultural nationalists had self-consciously taken up a series of Mexican cultural icons in order to project an alternative, and more affirming, Mexican/Chicano cultural reality. Among these were three female icons — La

---

8 I use the term Chicana in this essay to refer to a woman of Mexican ancestry who was born and/or raised in the United States and who possesses a radical political consciousness. Historically, the term Chicano (of which Chicanas is the feminine linguistic equivalent) was a pejorative name applied to working-class Mexican Americans. Like the term black, it was consciously appropriated and revalued (primarily) by students during the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The term is generally understood to imply a politics of resistance to Anglo American domination.

9 For an excellent account of the continuity between Mexican American women's activism and feminism within Mexican American communities, see Ruiz 1998, esp. chaps. 4–6. See also Cotera 1997.


Copyright © 2001. All rights reserved.
Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona—which, taken together, shaped the boundaries of traditional Chicana womanhood. Partly because of the imagined links, symbolically conveyed by these three icons, between female sexual abnegation and cultural fidelity and between female sexual desire and cultural betrayal, attacks by Chicano nationalists on Chicanas who refused to toe the party line were often couched in terms of sexuality. Chicanas who were explicit about their feminist convictions or who dated or married white men were criticized as *venidas* and *malinchistas*. These invocations of La Malinche, the mistress of and translator for Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortes, were designed to hold “unfaithful” Chicanas responsible for perpetuating the legacy of rape handed down from the conquest of Mexico. This same standard generally did not apply to men, whose relations with white women were seen as rectifying an unjust legacy of emasculation at the hands of white men. The double standard, of course, did not escape the attention of Chicana feminists, who were quick to point out its hypocrisy.\(^{11}\) As the designated reproducers of culture, Chicanas in the movement were under greater pressure to conform to more traditional models of conduct than were men. Thus, Chicana feminists were trying to break out of traditional roles as biological and cultural reproducers at the exact moment that Chicano nationalists were attempting to reinscribe them into those roles. Although a few Chicana activists either were pushed out of Chicano organizations or left to form their own autonomous groups, most continued to struggle within Chicano movement organizations as long as those organizations remained viable. As a result, the earliest expressions of what would come to constitute the origins of Chicana feminism were initially presented as intramural criticisms designed to strengthen *el movimiento*. Chicana critiques of “macho” attitudes were thus presented as contributions to an ideological self-critique, and Chicana struggles against gender oppression were undertaken in the service of destroying “a serious obstacle to women anxious to play a role in the struggle for Chicano liberation” (Vidal 1997, 23).\(^{12}\)

Although most Chicanas placed their primary energies in the service of the Chicano movement, some began in the late 1970s to work within white women's liberation movements. But long-term coalitions never developed, largely because most white women could not or would not recog-

---

\(^{11}\) For three wonderful poems written by Chicanas active in the Chicano movement that successfully convey the hypocrisy to which I allude, see Cervantes 1977; Zamora 1977; Lucero-Trujillo 1980.

\(^{12}\) For more information about Chicanas in the Chicano movement, see Lopez 1977; Moraga 1983a, esp. 105–11; García 1989; Trujillo 1991; Gutiérrez 1993; Córdova 1994; Coeira 1997; Ruiz 1998.
nize the class and race biases inherent in the structures of their own organizations. Furthermore, white feminists often replicated, in another realm, the same kind of privileging of one form of oppression over another that had frustrated Chicanas in relation to movement Chicanos. Insisting on the primacy of gender oppression, most white feminist organizations disregarded or diminished the importance of the class- and race-based oppression also suffered by most Chicanas. Consequently, in the 1980s, Chicana feminists, together with feminists of other nonwhite racial groups who had had similar experiences within their own ethnic nationalist movements, turned to their own experience as a ground for theorizing their multiple forms of oppression. In the process, a new political identity—women of color—emerged. Chicanas joined African American, Asian American, Latina, and other “third-world” feminists in a variety of efforts to challenge both the racism of Anglo American feminism and the sexism of ethnic nationalist movements. Some of the most significant writings of the women-of-color movement include the groundbreaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983), the follow-up anthology *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (Anzaldúa 1990), and the more scholarly anthology *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991). The important development of a women-of-color identity and politics, which was seen as supplementing but not replacing a Chicana identity and politics, allowed Chicana feminists to engage in coalitional politics even as they retained at the center of their politics an analysis of the interrelationship of race, class, gender, and sexuality in explaining the particular conditions of their lives in the United States.13

**Alarcón's postmodernist feminism and the problem of identity**

Like other theorists who adopted the political identity “woman of color” in the 1980s and early 1990s, Chicana critic Norma Alarcón is justifiably wary of invoking any idealized feminist subject, such as the autonomous, self-determining, self-defining, and “unified subject organized oppositionally to men from the perspective of gender differences” (1990b, 28). She argues that this autonomous and unified “subject of consciousness” comes into being through a logic of either identification (with other women) or

---

13 For accounts of how women-of-color or third-world feminism emerged from Chicanas' and other nonwhite women's frustration with some white feminist organizations, see García 1989; Sandoval 1990; Córdova 1994, esp. 186.
counteridentification (in opposition to men), a binary model that she finds inadequate because it fails to account for the “complex and multiple ways in which the subject and object of possible experience are constituted” (1990b, 34). That is, a binary model that figures subject formation solely in terms of identification or counteridentification cannot account for the fact that, in “cultures in which asymmetric race and class relations are a central organizing principle of society, one may also ‘become a woman’ in opposition to other women” (1990b, 33). Alarcón associates this kind of binary and oppositional thinking with gender standpoint epistemology (most notably the work of Sandra Harding), and she turns instead to postmodernist feminism’s explicit deconstruction of binary oppositions and rejection of a feminine “essence” in the belief that it is better suited to theorizing the experiences of nonwhite women.14

Consistent with a postmodernist theoretical orientation, Alarcón’s most recent work conceptualizes the self as being “produced” through discourse. In “Chicana Feminism: In the Tracks of the’ Native Woman” (1990a), Alarcón describes Chicanas and other women of color as “bombarded and subjected to multiple crosscultural and contradictory ideologies” that form a “maze of discourses through which the I as a racial and gendered self is hard put to emerge and runs the risk of being thought of as ‘irrational’ or ‘deluded’ in their attempt to articulate their oppression and exploitation” (253). She asserts that “women of color are always already positioned cross-culturally and within contradictory discourses” (254; emphasis added) and that they are instantiations of the “so-called postmodern decentered subject” (252). Her key theoretical assumptions are (1) that subjects are produced entirely through discourse and (2) that the different discourses that produce women of color are fundamentally contradictory.

Why does Alarcón represent Chicanas as decentered postmodern subjects produced by contradictory discourses? Although she never fully explains her premises, we can reconstruct her line of thinking. For Alarcón, Chicanas are produced as individuals by the forces of capitalism even as they are produced as members of a community—as “mothers”—by “Chicano nationalist ‘communal modes of power’” (253–54). In other words, each discourse (capitalist and Chicano nationalist) implicitly produces an idealized subject. Chicano nationalism’s ideal subject is a dark-skinned working-class male of Mexican origin living in the United States who is

---

14 In this essay I focus on Alarcón’s theoretical work published since 1990 because my interest here is in how postmodernism has influenced her theorizing about Chicana subjectivity. While Alarcón’s political concerns have remained more or less constant, her theoretical framework has evolved as she has been influenced by the postmodern turn. See n. 16 below for a brief discussion of how Alarcón’s conception of the self has evolved.
fiercely proud of his indigenous roots, who is antagonistic to capitalism, and whose success cannot be conceptualized apart from the well-being of the Chicano community. The ideal subject of capitalism, however, is an autonomous individual bearer of rights who has no communal ties apart from those formed through economic exchange and who achieves success through his individual effort. For Alarcón, the contradiction arises when different discourses produce or construct Chicanas in different and irreconcilable ways. Thus, from her perspective, Chicanas are produced by Chicano nationalist discourse as racially marked, undifferentiated (and male-identified) “members of a community” and by capitalist discourse as individuals who sell their labor in exchange for wages. When we factor in other discourses that Chicanas are likely to be “subjected to”—such as a discourse of Anglo American liberal feminism that would produce Chicanas as female-gendered (and implicitly white) individual subjects of consciousness—we can better understand why Alarcón conceives of Chicana subjectivity as multiple and contradictory. Her key point is that the different discourses that produce Chicana subjectivity intersect in ways that preclude Chicanas from being produced as unified or coherent subjects.

Alarcón’s claim that Chicanas are “always already” produced in fundamentally contradictory ways gives rise to two problems. First, she undercuts the possibility of normative critique by making the postmodernist move of treating conflict as irresolvable and aporetic. For instance, she claims that “the figure and referent of Chicanas today is positioned as conflictively as Lyotard’s ‘differend.’” She explains, “Lyotard defines a differend as a ‘case of conflict between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy’” (1990a, 253). When Alarcón regards the discourses that constitute Chicanas as the arguments of two parties in conflict and claims that “one side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy,” she skates on the edge of relativism by disqualifying any possible means of adjudicating the claims of the disputants. She thus threatens to undermine the grounds for a normative Chicana feminist criticism by opening the possibility that there will be no adequate means for deciding between, for example, feminist and sexist discourses. At times, however, Alarcón recognizes the poverty of Lyotard’s concept for helping Chicanas figure out how to act in the service of their own empowerment. When she admits that Lyotard’s concept “cannot inform the actual Chicana differend engaged in a living struggle as to how she can seize her ‘I’ or even her feminist ‘We’ to change her circumstances” (1990a, 253), Alarcón implicitly acknowledges what other critics (even those sympathetic to Lyotard’s philosophical project) usually concede: that once one has decided in advance that all hierar-
Second, Alarcón mischaracterizes conflicts between discourses as fundamental social contradictions. By figuring the (at least two) different discourses through which Chicanas are constituted as always contradictory, Alarcón takes discursive inconsistencies as structural contradictions and thus moves too quickly to a high level of abstraction. It is evident that no one discourse can describe Chicanas in their entirety and that the different discourses that—together—describe them do so in overlapping and obviously inconsistent ways. Nevertheless, the discourses that Alarcón figures as constitutive of Chicana subjectivity are not actually contradictory in a systematic or structural way. There is no reason to suppose, for instance, that a Chicana cannot be both a member of the Chicana/o community and a feminist. It is true that she may occasionally experience conflicts that arise from differing conceptions about how she should conduct herself in relation to some aspects of her life. A heterosexual Chicana with feminist convictions, for example, may have to defend her resolution not to take her husband's name in a familial context and justify her decision not to take a better-paying job in a community away from her extended family in a feminist one, but she is a Chicana feminist in both contexts. But by assuming that conflicting discourses are inherently contradictory, Alarcón idealizes each discourse in a manner that implicitly suggests that each is internally consistent and coherent (that is, that it does not have internal contradictions that could undermine it in relation to the other) and that each is stable, fixed, and incapable of change as it comes into contact with other discourses. However, the past thirty years have seen such a transformation of both Chicano nationalist and Anglo American feminist discourses—largely as a result of each having been subjected to critiques originating from other discourses—that it is quite natural today to speak of a Chicana feminism that incorporates key precepts from each. What Alarcón does is to reify as the unchanging condition of possibility for Chicana subjectivity the conflicts engendered by discourses that describe Chicanas in incomplete and inconsistent ways. She effectively replaces an essentialism of the subject with an essentialism of discourse.

Alarcón's understanding of the "contradictory" nature of Chicana subjectivity has some paradoxical implications for the possibility of claiming an identity. Because she identifies no existing discourse through which Chicanas or other women of color can be produced as coherent subjects,
Alarcón figures women of color as "subjects-in-process" who "must take up diverse subject positions which cannot be unified without double binds and contradictions" (1994, 136). Alarcón's woman of color can have multiple subjectivities (in that she is produced as a "subject" by multiple discourses), but she cannot have an identity because "to grasp or reclaim an identity in this culture means always already to have become a subject of consciousness" (1990b, 37). The "woman of color" within Alarcón's theoretical framework is incapable of becoming a unitary "subject of consciousness" because the multiple and "contradictory" discourses that produce her construct her as necessarily fragmented. And, according to Alarcón, the woman of color cannot hope to grasp an identity innocently by synthesizing her multiple subjectivities into a coherent whole because "the theory of the subject of consciousness as a unitary and synthesizing agent of knowledge is always already a posture of domination" (1990b, 37). Alarcón thus represents Chicanas and other women of color as "postmodern decentered subject[s]" who "must move towards provisional solidarities especially through social movements" in their efforts to forge group solidarities that can help them overcome the oppressions they face (1990a, 252).

If we take seriously Alarcón's pronouncement that "to be oppressed means to be disenabled not only from grasping an 'identity,' but also from reclaiming it" (1990b, 37), and if we bear in mind that (in Alarcón's line of argumentation) the discourses that produce Chicanas reduce them to exploited laborers and unrecognized nurturers, then we understand that a "Chicana" cannot claim an identity unless she ceases to be oppressed and becomes the oppressor. In that case, however, she will no longer be a Chicana. The logic of this conclusion follows from Alarcón's postmodernist refusal to recognize the existence of subjects apart from the discourses through which they are produced. Insofar as there is no "self" that exists prior to subjection to discourse, any given self exists as itself only as long as it retains its position in the discourses through which it is produced. Thus, within Alarcón's theoretical framework, the signifier Chicana refers not to a biologically female person of Mexican American parentage who self-identifies as such but rather to a disembodied and fragmented consciousness that exists always within a position of subordination. Consequently, there is no room in Alarcón's postmodernist theoretical framework for movement by, or transformation of, the "Chicana self".16

16 Presumably, the only option for the Chicana who wishes to avoid fragmentation and subordination would be for her to transform the "sociosymbolic contract" so that she exists solely within a single discourse that truly names, marks, recognizes, and describes her in her entirety. The problem is that Alarcón's poststructuralist-influenced framework provides no practical guidance as to how she could go about doing that. I am using the term sociosymbolic
Alarcón’s approach leaves untheorized the causal connections between the social categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality, on the one hand, and subjectivity, on the other. The “subject” in Alarcón’s framework becomes a free-floating site of consciousness with an unspecified relationship to those social categories.\(^{17}\) It is significant that Alarcón never directly addresses the problem of accounting for how and why certain people, and not others, are positioned to be “subjected” to particular discourses in the first place. Because it refuses to acknowledge the existence of subjects apart from the discourses through which they are produced, her account of subjectivity cannot explain why specific “sites of consciousness” are subjected to specific discourses. Her framework thus produces some false distinctions between different kinds of people while erasing some other very salient ones.\(^{18}\) For instance, by suggesting that women of color are “sites of consciousness” who are produced as “subjects-in-process” by

---

*contract* here in the sense that Alarcón uses it in one of her early essays (1988) to describe the way young Chicanas are socialized into an Anglo-dominated patriarchal society. In that essay, Alarcón draws on Julia Kristeva’s notion of the “symbolic contract” and Pierre Miranda’s notion of “semiotic charters” to talk about how a woman’s place/meaning is overdetermined by the role (or place) she occupies under Patriarchal Law. Alarcón extends these notions to explain how a Chicana’s socialization as a wife/mother within her specific cultural context can lead to fragmentation of her self: “To the extent that the role she is socialized into works its psychological (or physical) violence on her, or to the extent her own sense of self does not correspond to her socially prescribed role, she will experience a splitting of the self” (150; emphasis added). Alarcón suggests that to be a speaking subject, the Chicana “has to position herself at the margins of the ‘symbolic contract’ and refuse to accept definitions of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ in order to transform the contract” (157). It should be noted that whereas in this essay there appears a pre-social entity (i.e., the young girl) with a more or less autonomous “sense of self” who becomes socialized into a particular cultural context, in Alarcón’s later, more post-structuralist-influenced work, this pre-social entity disappears in favor of disembodied sites of consciousness wholly produced by contradictory discourses.

\(^{17}\) Alarcón writes, “Consciousness as a site of multiple voicings is the theoretical subject, par excellence, of [*This Bridge [Called My Back]]*. These voicings (or thematic threads) are not viewed as necessarily originating with the subject, but as discourses that traverse consciousness and which the subject must struggle with constantly” (1990b, 38). The vagueness of Alarcón’s formulation leaves unclear the nature of the relationship between particular “thematic threads” (e.g., the concerns expressed in *Bridge*) and particular subjects (e.g., women of color).

\(^{18}\) When I say that some distinctions are more salient than others, I do not mean that they are “essentially” salient or that they have the same salience at all times and in all places. Thus, when I argue for the salience of race in U.S. society, I mean to indicate something important and knowable about contemporary U.S. society rather than something essential about race. Similarly, there is no necessary reason gender should be salient in precisely the way it is in our society. My point, however, is that, as long as it is, we need to have a way to talk about the difference it makes.
multiple contradictory discourses, Alarcón implies that there are other (presumably non-women of color) "sites of consciousness" who are produced by internally coherent discourses that constitute them as fully realized, coherent, and stable "subjects." Contra Alarcón, I will suggest that all people are "subjects-in-process" and that, to the extent that they are constituted by discourses, they are all multiple and (to some degree) incoherent.

Moreover, Alarcón never addresses the question of whether the differential production of "subjects-in-process" vis-à-vis "subjects" is systematic or arbitrary. This points to the crucial failure in Alarcón's theory of subjectivity. Because her theory limits itself to the discursive realm, it cannot ask what relation, if any, exists between the differential production of subjects and certain variable biological attributes such as skin color and genitalia. She thus provides no way to understand the difference that social categories of race, gender, sexuality, and class make to the realm of human experience and the production of human subjectivity. Unless we can acknowledge that embodied human beings have at least some preexisting properties that are interpreted, but not in fact "produced," by the discursive contexts in which they live, it would seem to be purely arbitrary that, for example, I, as a native-born New Mexican, have been "produced" as a Chicana, rather than as, say, a Native American or Anglo American man. In the process of figuring the "subject-in-process" as "consciousness as a site of multiple voicings" (1990b, 38), Alarcón does not get rid of the problem of identity; she merely suppresses it.

The failure to address the problem of identity—the problem of accounting for how and why certain people are "subjected" to certain discourses in the first place—is a characteristic weakness of postmodernist feminist theories of subjectivity, and Alarcón is not the only theorist to sidestep this issue. Judith Butler's concern, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), with establishing the disjunctures between anatomical sex, gender performance, and gender identity, for instance, leads her to bypass the possibility of theorizing the complex process of identity formation. Instead, she merely asserts the "contingency" of these three "dimensions of significant corporeality," without ever clarifying what they are contingent on or how they are related to one another (137). Postmodernist theories of subjectivity, like the one Butler articulates in *Gender Trouble*, cannot explain the persistent correlation between certain kinds of bodies and certain kinds of identities. While we can readily concede that one is not born a woman, we might still want to ask why a significant majority of people with anatomically female bodies nonetheless become women; while we can similarly concede that race is not biologically determined, we might still want to ask why a dark-skinned
person is more likely to identify as African American than a light-skinned one. These are the kinds of questions that postmodernist approaches such as Butler’s do not allow. Rather than addressing the influences of the social categories of race and gender on the processes of identity formation, Butler moves to disavow the ontological status—or reality—of those categories.

If Alarcón’s weaknesses in addressing the problem of identity are more obvious than Butler’s, it is only because Alarcón explicitly retains some categories of identity, while Butler attempts to promote a feminism that cannot claim to represent “women” at all. Thus, despite Alarcón’s repeated call for critics to take into consideration gender, race, and class when theorizing Chicana and women-of-color subjectivity, her postmodernist reliance on the productivity and materiality of discourse—to the exclusion of a consideration of the productivity and materiality of what is extra- or prediscursive—prevents her from providing an account of the causal (indeed causally hierarchical) relationships among biologically and temporally variant bodies, human-made structures of social inequality, and the differential production of different kinds of subjects.

Why, given her postmodernist predilections, does Alarcón remain committed to identity-based agency? Why, in light of her reluctance to allow anyone to claim an identity, does she continue to refer to “Chicanas” and “women of color” in her theoretical work? I suggest that the answers to these questions lie in Alarcón’s political commitments: she needs the sign Chicana, for example, to signify a woman who, because of the objective social location she occupies, has been racialized, gendered, and classed in a particular way. It is clear that Alarcón knows whom she is referring to when she talks about Chicanas, even if her theory cannot explain how or why they become differentiated from non-Chicanas. My point here is that Alarcón employs an unacknowledged raced-and-gendered, embodied Chicana referent for her disembodied “subject-in-process.”¹⁹ She needs the sign Chicana to signify the particular kind of embodied consciousness that her subject-in-process cannot adequately refer to. If Alarcón were uncon-

¹⁹ Alarcón’s postmodernist refusal to acknowledge that referent, however, leads her, in “Conjugating Subjects” (1994), to a somewhat awkward formulation. In the following passage, Chicanas appear, after the fact, linked to the ungrounded and discursively produced “subject-in-process” through mere textual juxtaposition: “The critical desire to undercut subject determination through structures and discourses, in my view, presupposes a subject-in-process who construct[s] provisional identities, or Sandoval’s tactical subjectivity, which subsume a network of signifying practices and structural experiences imbricated in historical and imaginary shifting national borders of Mexico and the United States for Chicanas” (135–36). What I am noting here is the awkward appending of the words “for Chicanas” to this otherwise quite abstract sentence.
cerned with the project of empowering women of color, she could do as some other postmodernist feminists have and shun the concept of identity altogether. But Alarcón is a Chicana feminist who has worked actively in a number of different venues to promote the well-being of Chicanas and other women of color. Her commitment to a feminism that seeks to empower women of color is demonstrated by her work as publisher and editor of Third Women Press, a small press that publishes creative and scholarly works by women of color; by her participation in identity-based organizations such as Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS) and the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS); by her mentorship of feminist Chicana and other women-of-color scholars throughout the United States; and by the recurring thematic concerns of her scholarship. Accordingly, Alarcón finds herself caught between the postmodernist imperative to jettison categories of identity altogether and the pragmatic need to retain them in order to specify precisely on whose behalf she is working.

The slippage between Alarcón's unacknowledged and embodied referent and her disembodied and discursively produced subject-in-process is further demonstrated by her treatment of "racialized women theorists" vis-à-vis her subjects-in-process. Over the course of the essay "Conjugating Subjects" (1994), she conflates the theoretical practice of racialized women theorists with the political practice of subjects-in-process. According to Alarcón, theorizing by racialized women theorists represents a "process of 'determinate negation,' a naysaying of the variety of the 'not yet,' that's not it" (127). She writes, "by working through the 'identity-in-difference' paradox, many racialized women theorists have implicitly worked in the interstice/interface of (existentialist) 'identity politics' and 'postmodernism' without a clearcut postmodern agenda. Neither Audre Lorde's nor Chela Sandoval's notion of difference/differential consciously subsumes a Derridean theorization — though resonance cannot be denied and must be explored — so much as represent[s] a process of 'determinate negation,' a naysaying of the 'not yet,' that's not it" (127). Similarly, Alarcón figures the political agency exercised by subjects-in-process as deconstructive and as deriving primarily from their ability to disrupt identity narratives by exhibiting themselves as examples of constitutive contradiction: "A bi- or multi-ethnicized, raced, and gendered subject-in-process may be called upon to take up diverse subject positions which cannot be unified without double binds and contradictions. . . . The paradoxes and contradictions between subject positions move the subject to recognize, reorganize, reconstruct, and exploit difference through political resistance and cultural productions in order to reflect the subject-in-process" (136). Here, Alarcón suggests
that the most salient political agency of subjects-in-process derives from their invariable status as paradigmatic manifestations of contradiction and difference. She further suggests that the subject-in-process (read “racialized woman theorist”) might be capable of affirmative agency—presumably via the process of determinate negation—through the reorganization and reconstruction of that which her difference deconstructs. This suggestion, however, is finally undermined by Alarcón’s reluctance, further on, to allow either the theorist or the subject-in-process to create a “theory” that will allow her to transcend or transform the “irreducible difference” that Alarcón sees as the constitutive condition of women of color. She writes, “The very contingent currents through which the geopolitical subject-in-process is dislocated and forced into (im)migration will retain an irreducible difference that refuses to neatly correspond to the subject’s account of herself and the theory we produce to account for her appearance” (137).

It is worth noting that Alarcón grants agency not to subjects-in-process but to the “very contingent currents” that force them into “(im)migration” and disrupt the identity narratives through which they come into being. Thus, Alarcón’s subjects-in-process possess agency, but it is an agency that derives from and is limited by the contradictory discourses through which they are produced. What Alarcón’s racialized women theorists and subjects-in-process are left with, then, is a political agency that is severely restricted and inevitably reactive: they can transgress every boundary, call into question every category, and work in the “interstice/interface of (existentialist) ‘identity politics’ and ‘postmodernism’” (127). However, they cannot claim even a minimally coherent identity, stake a preemptive political position, or act affirmatively to work through the conflicts they experience. Moreover, theory has become a substitute for politics. Alarcón’s framework implies that Chicanas and other women of color, as the paradigmatic manifestations of contradiction and difference, are at their most radical when they symbolize a principle of abstract oppositionality. What she leaves out is a way for Chicanas and other women of color living in the world to indicate (and begin to remedy) the systematic and causal links between socially produced categories of identity and the unequal distribution of power, goods, and resources.

From a realist perspective, I suggest that while Chicana and other women-of-color feminists acknowledge the conflicts they experience, they

20 The Hegelian concept of determinate negation can be distinguished from total or radical skepticism in that it implies particular or specific negation. Since determinate negation is a specific negation, such that it exists in dialectical interdependence to affirmation, it has the potential to guide our understanding in a specific direction. What Alarcón’s use of the concept of determinate negation finally refuses is the movement toward transcendence.
attempt to work through them to create a qualitatively new and better social order. Furthermore, they do so in ways that require them to stake out political positions—positions that are generally justified with reference to a substantive conception of the human good. In addition to engaging in direct political action as members and leaders of labor unions, community organizers, journalists, editors, educators, and so on, Chicana feminist activists and theorists are actively engaged in what, following Paul Gilroy (1993), I call a “politics of transfiguration”—a transformative exercise by which historically oppressed people engage in imagining “the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association,” both among themselves and between themselves and their oppressors (37). Cherrie Moraga, for example, engages in a politics of transfiguration in her essay “Queer Aztlán” (1993), in which she imagines a “Chicano homeland that could embrace all its people, including its jotería” (147). For Moraga, Queer Aztlán is not a territorial region but an imagined homeland where Chicanos and Chicanas of all colors, classes, and sexualities work together in the service of decolonization. Moraga does not reject Chicano nationalism per se, but she wants to “expand it to meet a broader and wiser revolution,” one capable of embracing a “full range of racial diversities, human sexualities, and expressions of gender” (150, 164). Implicit in Moraga’s conception of Queer Aztlán is a nonrelativist realist claim that it is wrong to discriminate unfairly against people on the basis of race, gender, and sexuality. The “wiser” revolution that she imagines is not a “strategic” or “pragmatic” approach but is based on her own deeply felt conviction about what is needed to make the world not merely different but better. Anzaldúa does something similar in her essay “La conciencia de la mestiza” (1987), in which she imagines the development of a new Chicana consciousness that turns the “ambivalence” engendered by living within contradictory frameworks into “something else” (79). Anzaldúa acknowledges, and figures brilliantly, the choque, or cultural collision, caused when two incompatible frames of reference come together, but she ultimately refuses to remain caught in a place of negativity and contradiction. She figures mestiza consciousness as a place where the self attempts to work out a synthesis between opposing frameworks, with a result that is “greater than the sum of its severed parts” (79–80). Significantly, Anzaldúa’s conception of mestiza consciousness provides her with a more accurate perspective on the world than she previously had, enabling her to see the “Chicana anew in light of her history” and to see through “the fictions of white supremacy” (87). Moreover, Anzaldúa explains, she is motivated

21 Gilroy, in turn, was inspired by Benhabib 1986.
by a quest for objective knowledge about herself and her place in the
world: "I seek our woman's face, our true features, the positive and the
negative seen clearly, free of the tainted biases of male dominance. I seek
new images of identity, new beliefs about ourselves, our humanity and
worth no longer in question" (87). While I do not claim that such imagina-
tive exercises are, in themselves, sufficient to "change the world," I do argue
that such affirmative imaginings are a necessary complement to direct po-
litical action designed to do just that. At a very basic level, efforts to imag-
ine a better world help us chart the paths down which we, as Chicana
feminists, are going: they help us to decide what actions we should take,
how we should prioritize our efforts, and whether and when we should
consider changing directions.

Epistemological denial in Sandoval's theory
of differential consciousness
In her essay "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of
Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World" (1991), Chela
Sandoval draws on the work of writers such as Moraga, Lugones, Audre
Lorde, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and Anzaldúa to describe what she sees as
a previously unrecognized kind of postmodern consciousness and political
practice employed by U.S. third-world feminists. To lay the groundwork
for her argument, Sandoval proposes a topography of "oppositional con-
sciousness" onto which all forms of oppositional thought and activity can
be mapped. She identifies five general oppositional sites, each of which
presupposes its own political program: equal rights, revolutionary, sup-
remacist, separatist, and differential. Sandoval is careful to note that these
sites of resistance are not temporally situated, and she suggests that each
position is potentially as effective as any other. However, she privileges
differential consciousness over the others because she locates it on another
register altogether. Whereas equal rights, revolutionary, supremacist, and
separatist modes of consciousness and resistance imply coherent ideologies
with fixed political programs, differential consciousness involves switching
among the other four sites as the conditions of oppression or the shape of

22 Sandoval uses the term U.S. third world feminists to refer to those nonwhite feminists
living and working in the United States who came together in the late 1970s and early 1980s
in an effort to complicate the gender- and race-based foci of white feminist and ethnic nation-
alist social movements. It is a term that is roughly synonymous and is often used interchange-
ably with women of color. In an effort to be faithful to Sandoval's text, I use her term when I
am paraphrasing her argument and women of color in my own argument to refer to the same
group of people.
power changes. Its value, according to Sandoval, lies in its practitioners' unique ability to respond to the rapidly changing conditions of the postmodern world.

Differential consciousness, Sandoval argues, implies a new kind of subjectivity developed under conditions of multiple oppression. This new subjectivity, kinetic and self-consciously mobile, manifests itself in the political practices of U.S. third-world feminists. Because nonwhite women have long been multiply oppressed, as part of their political coming-to-consciousness they have had to learn to highlight (or obscure) different aspects of themselves to be able to work effectively within political organizations. For example, if a U.S. third-world feminist wants to work effectively or feel comfortable in a group organized on the basis of race, she will have to highlight the racialized aspects of her personal identity and de-emphasize the gendered ones. Conversely, if she wants to work effectively or feel included in white feminist organizations, she will have to de-emphasize or ignore the interests generated from the racialized aspects of her identity. As a result of having to continually privilege or de-emphasize different aspects of themselves in different situations, Sandoval says, U.S. third-world feminists have become practiced at shifting their ideologies and identities in response to different configurations of power:

Differential consciousness requires grace, flexibility, and strength: enough strength to confidently commit to a well-defined structure of identity for one hour, day, week, month, year; enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requisites of another oppositional ideological tactic if readings of power's formation require it; enough grace to recognize alliance with others committed to egalitarian social relations and race, gender, and class justice, when their readings of power call for alternative oppositional stands. . . . As the clutch of a car provides the driver the ability to shift gears, differential consciousness permits the practitioner to choose tactical positions, that is, to self-consciously break and reform ties to ideology, activities which are imperative for the psychological and political practices that permit the achievement of coalition across differences. (1991, 15)

Sandoval's schema is notable for the measure of self-consciousness it attributes to political agents. She proposes that U.S. third-world feminists who participated in exclusively gender-based organizations during the heyday of the women's movement never did so naively or merely because they were caught within the all-encompassing web of ideology. Rather, they were conscious of the temporary and strategic need to privilege one aspect
of themselves over others in the service of political or social change. Their behavior was self-conscious, a strategic tactic they used to mobilize more effectively against the particular oppressive power with which they were struggling at the moment. As a result of their differential consciousness, according to Sandoval, U.S. third-world feminists were unlikely to adopt “the kind of fervid belief systems and identity politics” typically demanded by hegemonic feminist organizations operating under one of the other four modes of oppositional consciousness (1991, 13). Contrary to many white women’s assumptions, then, the fact that U.S. third-world feminists did not stay long in any particular type of women’s group cannot be attributed to disloyalty or betrayal but rather to their self-conscious activity of weaving “between and among” various kinds of oppositional ideologies and political strategies (13–14).

The significance for others (non—U.S. third-world feminists) of Sandoval’s argument derives from her claim that while nonwhite women have long lived within the conditions that enable and necessitate differential consciousness, most Americans now exist within these same fragmenting and disabling cultural conditions. Sandoval suggests that, as a result of a shift in the cultural logic of contemporary capitalism, differential consciousness—which hitherto was enacted almost exclusively by U.S. third-world feminists—is now available to “all first world citizens” (1991, 22, n. 50). She explains: “The praxis of U.S. third world feminism represented by the differential form of oppositional consciousness is threaded throughout the experience of social marginality. As such, it is also being woven into the fabric of experiences belonging to more and more citizens who are caught in the crisis of late capitalist conditions and expressed in the cultural angst most often referred to as the postmodern dilemma” (17). Sandoval thus sees U.S. third-world feminists as having generated a “common speech, a theoretical structure” that “provides access to a different way of conceptualizing not only U.S. feminist consciousness but oppositional activity in general” (1). Her theory demands a “new subjectivity, a political revision that denies any one ideology as the final answer, while instead positing a tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted” (14). The U.S. third-world feminist—the paradigmatic possessor of this tactical subjectivity—thus prefigures what Sandoval posits as the “new subject of history”: “Differential

Sandoval writes, “The differential mode of oppositional consciousness depends upon the ability to read the current situation of power and [upon] self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological form best suited to push against its configurations, a survival skill well known to oppressed peoples” (1991, 15).
consciousness under postmodern conditions is not possible without the creation of another ethics, a new morality, which will bring about a new subject of history. Movement into this realm is heralded by the claims of U.S. third-world feminists. . . . But to think of the activities of U.S. third world feminism thus is only a metaphorical avenue which allows one conceptual access to the threshold of this other realm, a realm accessible to all people” (Sandoval 1991, 23, n. 58).

The beautiful audacity of Sandoval’s project is precisely this: the here-tofore lowly and despised U.S. third-world feminist is at the forefront—political and theoretical—of present-day progressive politics. All oppositional others must now follow the U.S. third-world feminist into the realm of differential consciousness, for its enactment is “imperative for the psychological and political practices that permit the achievement of coalition across difference” (1991, 15; emphasis added). Those who do not—those who remain stubbornly committed to equal rights, revolutionary, supremacist, or separatist modes of oppositional ideology—will inevitably reproduce the oppressive ideologies and practices that they oppose. Alone, any of these liberation ideologies, Sandoval claims, “is destined to repeat the oppressive authoritarianism from which it is attempting to free itself and become trapped inside a drive for truth which can only end in producing its own brand of dominations” (14).

At this point, I want to step back from Sandoval’s argument to highlight the elements of it that derive specifically from a postmodernist theoretical framework. Her work, I maintain, is a blend of realist insights and postmodernist assumptions. Her most cogent insights are compatible with the kind of realist framework I propose, but her postmodernist presuppositions unnecessarily limit her project of apprehending and representing the experiences of women of color.

Sandoval’s first postmodernist assumption, that identities are radically unstable, predisposes her to see shifts in behavior, or changes in emphasis, as shifts in identity. A working-class mother of Mexican heritage who invests her sexual and erotic energy primarily in other women may present herself as a “Chicana” in one context, a “woman of color” in another, a “mother” in a third, a “lesbian” in a fourth, and a “worker” in a fifth. In each context, she highlights different aspects of her social identity, and, as a result, names herself differently. According to Sandoval’s theory of differential consciousness, she undergoes several successive shifts in

---

24 In fact, I do not disagree with Sandoval’s claim that women of color are at the forefront of progressive politics; however, I do disagree with aspects of her explanation of how and why they are, as will become clear throughout this article.
identity. A realist theory of identity, by contrast, would acknowledge that different aspects of the woman's social identity become more and less visible in different situations but would see that identity itself as more or less constant over the course of her movements. It should be noted that throughout Sandoval's argument, U.S. third-world feminists remain U.S. third-world feminists. In the course of enacting differential consciousness, they do not become white men, or white women, or children, or nonfeminists. They may privilege one or more aspects of their identity (gender, sexuality, race, class) over others at various times and in various situations, but they do not in fact "shift" their relatively stable social identities. Thus, the claim that practitioners of differential consciousness continually shift identities is not supported within the terms of Sandoval's own argument.

Furthermore, I disagree with Sandoval's contention that practitioners of differential consciousness shift ideologies. The measure of self-consciousness that Sandoval attributes to U.S. third-world feminist political agents precludes that possibility. If, as she intimates, U.S. third-world feminists are perfectly self-conscious about what they are doing—if they know that their alliance with any one group is strategic and temporary—then they are working from within an ideology of flux and cannot be said to be shifting ideologies. As Sandoval herself describes it, differential consciousness implies its own overriding ideology. Its practitioner participates in the activities implied by the other four oppositional sites, but she remains aloof to their ideologies, refusing to adopt their "fervid belief systems" because the overriding differential ideology denies any other ideology "as the final answer" (1991, 13–14). Thus, she remains committed to an ideology of flux and, by refusing "any one ideology as the final answer," paradoxically participates in a denial of her own particular conception of truth.

Sandoval's own epistemological denial shows up in her statement that

25 For an illuminating account of the way different aspects of the self become visible in different situations, see Hames-Garcia 2000.

26 Of course, I do not mean to suggest that women of color never change the way they identify themselves. My point, though, is that the self-designations they discard and take up tend to remain within a range of identities defensible within a realist framework. For the most part, they acknowledge the salience of gender and race as determining factors of social identity and remain cognizant of the referential and dialectical nature of social identity. For a realist account of how and why two women of color changed the way they identified themselves in response to their changed understanding of their world, see Moya 1997, esp. 138, 145–48. Moreover, although Sandoval may use the term identity to mean something different than I do, I will defend my criticism by suggesting that Sandoval's use of identity to designate the different aspects of an individual whose self-conception remains relatively stable over time is misleading and has the effect of obscuring the unequal salience of different aspects of identity.
any “drive for truth . . . can only end in producing its own brand of dominations” (1991, 14). 27 With this statement, Sandoval exhibits a readiness—characteristic of postmodernist theoretical projects—to attribute oppressive motivations or effects to any project associated with a quest for truth or the acquisition of knowledge. Postmodernist theorists typically deride epistemological projects by suggesting that anyone who wishes to avoid acting in an oppressive way will suspend judgment and refuse to decide among competing narratives about the world. Their logic proceeds something like this: everything we know about the world—including what can be considered true, beautiful, good, and right—comes to us through the distorting lens of ideology conditioned by the particular cultural and/or linguistic universe in which we exist. Because we have no unmediated access to the world, we will always be uncertain about whether or not our conception of truth, beauty, good, and right is true for everyone—particularly those cultural “others” who do not share our linguistic universe—and not just for us. Because we cannot know for sure that we are right, and because the difference between “us” and “them” appears to be “incommensurable,” we must refuse to impose “our” beliefs on “them” so as to avoid participating in colonizing, globalizing, and totalizing projects. The relativist stance I have just described appears to be an ethical one, but as many critics have pointed out, the logic on which it is based is fundamentally flawed. Judith Roof, for instance, notes that an analysis predicated on the “loss of metanarrative relies upon an unrecognized legitimating metanarrative that establishes the ‘truth value’ of no truth” (1994, 59). 28 One metanarrative is thus replaced by another; one conception of truth is dismissed in favor of one that cannot be acknowledged. 29

27 I borrow the phrase from Linda Martín Alcoff, who identifies postmodernism’s “epistemological denial” as its “unwillingness (with few exceptions) to acknowledge, take responsibility for, or indeed, to interrogate its own concern with truth, or more importantly, its own implicit invocation of some specific concept of truth by which it critiques more naïve, more realist, philosophical accounts” (1997, 12). Alcoff’s response to postmodernism’s epistemological denial, with which I concur, is that any “project of interrogation is always situated, and implies some orientation” (24).

28 Roof continues, “If we know that we cannot know, if we distrust representation and understand that the value of knowledge has become linked to its performativity, then our knowing that we cannot know becomes the point of knowing, becomes the legitimating uncertainty about knowledge that provides us with a certainty about knowledge’s uncertainty. To see [Lyotard’s conception of] paralogy as desirable—to see a lack of totality as a condition for potential change—is to inscribe uncertainty in the place of truth in the same liberating metanarratives about knowledge that see truth as human liberation” (1994, 59).

29 Saya Mohanty deepens the critique by showing that the postmodernist response to the theory-mediatedness of knowledge “turns out to reveal a disguised form of foundationalism, for it remains within a specifically positivist conception of objectivity and knowledge. It assumes that the only kind of objective knowledge we can have is one that is independent of
Sandoval, like every other theorist who makes an argument (postmodernist or not), draws on a specific conception of truth in order to criticize other accounts. A review of Sandoval’s critique of hegemonic feminist accounts of the stages of feminism reveals the following truth claims: (1) certain identifiable groups of people have engaged in the wrongful oppression and exploitation of other groups of people in systematic ways over long periods of time; (2) white (hegemonic) feminists have illegitimately appropriated the work of (oppressed) U.S. third-world feminists in such a way as to render their theoretical insights invisible; and (3) exploited and oppressed peoples (including U.S. third-world feminists) have engaged in morally defensible resistant conduct and, as a consequence of their efforts to ameliorate the painful effects of their unfair and oppressive situations, have developed successful oppositional ideologies. These truth claims and value judgments are but a few of the most important in Sandoval’s essay—without them, her argument would be incoherent and her essay meaningless. Thus, while I am not suggesting that Sandoval’s claims and judgments are wrong and should be abandoned, I am saying that they should be acknowledged for what they are—namely, truth claims and value judgments. Sandoval presents her claims and judgments in such a way as to suggest that they have the status of truth; her argument presumes that what she is saying is so not only for her, but for everyone. If it were not, Sandoval would have no grounds for her injunction that others (non-U.S. third-world feminists) must follow the U.S. third-world feminist into the realm of differential consciousness.

Despite her commitment to postmodernism, Sandoval offers some cogent insights that help reveal the theoretical and political value of U.S. third-world feminism. As Sandoval asserts, there is indeed a specific social movement—which she calls U.S. third-world feminism but which is more commonly thought of now as women-of-color feminism—whose characteristic feature is the capacity to form coalitions across difference. Moreover, she is perspicacious in her observation that the ability of women of color to work across difference (together with the underlying theoretical and political achievements implied by that ability) puts them at the forefront of present-day progressive politics. As the world’s disparate economies become increasingly linked through the circuits of global capitalism, and as previously distant societies are brought closer together by rapidly developing technological advances in both communications and travel, the earth’s citizens are more frequently confronted with their own and others’

(socially produced and revisable) theoretical presuppositions, and concludes that the theory dependence of experience is evidence that it is always epistemically suspect” (1997, 209).
"otherness." As it becomes increasingly difficult for different kinds of people to remain separate, it becomes more and more important for everyone to learn the skills involved in acknowledging, negotiating, accommodating, celebrating, and, in some cases, transcending difference. As Sandoval demonstrates, women of color, for some time now, have been perfecting these very skills. And, as she proposes, they have generated knowledge out of the experiences they have had with forming coalitions across difference. It is this knowledge and these skills that women of color have to offer a world that is only now coming to grips with the fact that confronting difference entails changing the "self" as much as it involves colonizing the "other."

**Theorizing women-of-color identity: A realist reading of la facultad**

At this point I want to propose what I think is a more appropriate trajectory for the feminist critic concerned with theorizing the cultural productions and experiences of Chicanas and other women of color. Realists argue that a crucial task of the cultural critic is to attend to the links between social location and identity by theorizing the process of identity formation. According to the realist theory of identity, identities are politically and epistemically significant because they can trace the links between individuals and groups and the central organizing principles of a society. Consequently, theorizing the process of identity formation can reveal the complicated workings of ideology and oppression. This task, however, requires a conception of identity that can account for the epistemic status—in terms of enlightenment and mystification—of identities. I approach this task by sketching out some basic premises of the postpositivist realist theory of identity before re-examining some of Sandoval's claims regarding the theoretical and political practices of women of color; I will end by providing a postpositivist realist account of those practices.

The most basic claim of the postpositivist realist theory of identity is that identities are both constructed and real: identities are constructed because they are based on interpreted experience and on theories that explain the social and natural world, but they are also real because they refer outward to causally significant features of the world. Identities are thus context-specific ideological constructs, even though they may refer in non-

---

30 By *identity* I mean the non-essential and evolving product that emerges from the dialectic between how a subject of consciousness identifies herself and how she is identified by others. By *subject of consciousness* I mean she who identifies herself and/or is identified by others as a self-conscious evolving entity existing continuously across time.

---
arbitrary ways to verifiable characteristics such as skin color, physiognomy, anatomical sex, and socioeconomic status. Because identities refer—sometimes in partial and inaccurate ways—to the changing but relatively stable contexts from which they emerge, they are neither self-evident, immutable, and essential nor are they radically unstable or arbitrary. Rather, they are socially significant constructs that become intelligible from within specific historical and material contexts.31

According to the realist theory, an individual's identity, experience, and knowledge are inextricably connected. This conclusion is based on the premises that an individual's social location (the particular nexus of race, class, gender, and sexuality in which she exists in the world) is causally relevant for the experiences she will have and that an individual's experiences will influence, although not determine, the formation of her social identity.32 Because identities are, in part, theoretically mediated constructions that refer outward to the societies from which they emerge, they provide their bearers with particular perspectives on the world. As such, identities provide people with frameworks (the epistemic value of which varies widely) for interpreting their experiences. In other words, a person's interpretation of an event will be at least partially dependent for its meaning on her self-conception—her understanding of her particular relation to the people and happenings surrounding that event.

A key postpositivist realist insight is that the epistemic status of different identities can be evaluated by seeing how well they work as explanations or descriptions of the social and natural world from which they emerge, by how well they "refer" to verifiable aspects of the world they claim to describe. To the extent that identities do not work well as explanations of the world— to the extent that they fail to "refer" adequately to the societies from which they emerge—they can help to reveal the contradictions and mystifications with which the members of those societies live.33

I turn back now to a consideration of Sandoval's arguments in order to show how her postmodernist presuppositions partially undermine her realist insights. If we look carefully, it is clear that the differential consciousness she describes is thoroughly grounded in a specific type of consciousness that she understands as being common to women of color. Quoting Moraga, she asserts that women of color have learned to "measure and

---

32 For six basic claims of the postpositivist realist theory of identity, see Moya 1997, esp. 136–41.
weigh what is to be said and when, what is to be done and how, and to whom, ... daily deciding/risking who it is we can call an ally, call a friend (whatever that person’s skin, sex, or sexuality)” (Sandoval 1991, 15; Moreaga 1983c, xvii–xix). Here Sandoval is referring to the experientially acquired knowledge that manifests itself in the “survival tactic” described by Anzaldúa as *la facultad*, a skill that is developed by marginalized people whose well-being is often dependent on the good will of others (Anzaldúa 1987, 38). Anzaldúa describes it variously as a “vestige of a proximity sense,” an “acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak,” and a “shift in perception” honed by pain and developed most readily by “those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world” (38–39). As a survival skill, *la facultad* allows such people to adjust quickly and gracefully to changing (and often threatening) circumstances. With origins in experiences of pain and trauma, *la facultad* involves a loss of innocence and an initiation into an awareness of discrimination, fear, depression, illness, and death.

Perhaps in an effort to avoid charges of essentialism, Sandoval abstracts the experientially acquired knowledge and consciousness of women of color in order to make it accessible to “all people” (1991, 23, n. 58). In order to do this, however, she must weaken the links between social location, experiences of oppression, and the development of differential consciousness.34 In the process, she covers over the pain involved in Anzaldúa’s account of the development of *la facultad* and presents an idealized portrait of the mobile subjectivity she sees as characteristic of differential consciousness:

The consciousness which typifies *la facultad* is not naive to the moves of power: it is constantly surveying and negotiating its moves. Often dismissed as “intuition,” this kind of “perceptiveness,” “sensitivity,” consciousness if you will, is not determined by race, sex, or any other genetic status, neither does its activity belong solely to the “proletariat,” the “feminist,” nor to the oppressed, if the oppressed is considered a unitary category, but it is a learned emotional and intellectual skill which is developed amidst hegemonic powers. ... In order for

---

34 Sandoval writes, “Citizenship in this political realm is comprised of strategy and risk. Within the realm of differential consciousness there are no ultimate answers, no terminal utopia (though the imagination of utopias can motivate its tactics), no predictable final outcomes. Its practice is not biologically determined, restricted to any class or group, nor must it become static. The fact that it is a process capable of freezing into a repressive order—or of disintegrating into relativism—should not shadow its radical activity” (1991, 23, n. 58; emphasis added).
this survival skill to provide the basis for a differential and unifying methodology, it must be remembered that la facultad is a process. Answers may be only temporarily effective, so that wedded to the process of la facultad is a flexibility that continually woos change. (Sandoval 1991, 22–23, n. 57)

Thus, Sandoval sees la facultad as the basis for the differential methodology she promotes. Moreover, she views the mode of behavior that characterizes la facultad as being consistent with that of differential consciousness: both involve a “tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted” (1991, 14).

Analyzing la facultad within a postpositivist realist framework rather than a postmodernist one allows us to acknowledge its non-essential nature and its epistemic significance without either severing the ties between social location, experience, and identity or idealizing la facultad’s knowledge-generating potential. The postpositivist realist would readily agree that la facultad is not “determined by race, sex, or any other genetic status” and that there are marginalized individuals who do not develop la facultad. Similarly, she would concede that the skill does not “belong” to the “proletariat,” the “feminist,” or “the oppressed, if the oppressed is considered a unitary category” (Sandoval 1991, 23; emphasis added). Furthermore, the realist would agree with Sandoval that it would be a mistake to consider “the oppressed” as a unitary (and, by implication, essential) category. Her reasons for reaching this conclusion, however, would be different from Sandoval’s. Unlike Sandoval, whose postmodernist presuppositions lead her to weaken the links among identity, experience, and social location so as to avoid the inference that they have any kind of essential connection, the realist would insist on the inextricable—but complex and variable—connections among them. The realist would point out that when we do not consider the oppressed as a unitary category—when we take into account the multiple determinations and the theory-mediated formation of social identity—we can still identify non-arbitrary experiential connections between being oppressed and developing la facultad. Furthermore, the realist would be wary of idealizing the knowledge-generating component of

---

38 The realist claim that there is a non-arbitrary experiential connection between being oppressed and the development of la facultad does not presuppose that all persons who are oppressed in the same way develop the same political consciousness. The claim is more limited and speaks to the necessary, but not sufficient, role of experience in the development of la facultad. The failure of a multiply oppressed individual to develop la facultad raises the issue of error in the interpretation of one’s own experience. Because an in-depth consideration of error in interpretation is beyond the scope of this essay, I refer the reader to the works cited in n. 33 above.
la facultad. Because an awareness of oppression or pain may lead to survival tactics that do not necessarily explain the world's social, political, and economic workings, the realist would be reluctant to use la facultad as the basis for a new feminist epistemology. As I will illustrate in an example taken from Moraga later in this essay, feelings of fear and alienation are not, in themselves, sufficient for an adequate understanding of one's social, political, and economic situation.

I should emphasize that, unlike the "ideal" postmodernist I am positing, Sandoval does not completely deny the connections among identity, experience, and social location. Nevertheless, she weakens them by minimizing the differences between the experiences of multiply oppressed people (such as nonwhite women) and "all first world citizens" caught in the crisis of late capitalism (see 17, 22, n. 50; 23, n. 58). Her refusal to take a firm stand regarding the role of multiple oppression in the development of la facultad makes her work susceptible to critiques such as mine. My point is that just as we want to avoid making the connections too secure, so we should avoid making them too elastic. Only by conducting a careful examination of how, when, and under what conditions la facultad develops—using the methodology and epistemology provided by a postpositivist realist theory of identity—will we be able to understand adequately the latent epistemic privilege of the oppressed.36

So, while I agree with Sandoval that women of color both develop and display the intuitive capabilities of the kind described by Moraga and named by Anzaldúa, I disagree with Sandoval's implication that the knowledge and skills acquired by women of color can be arrived at, in any sort of willful way, by people who do not share their social locations. Being multiply oppressed is a necessary—although not sufficient—condition for developing la facultad. Two realist premises are most relevant here: (1) as long as our world is hierarchically organized along enduring relations of domination, people occupying different social locations will tend to

36 As I use it, epistemic privilege refers to a special advantage with respect to possessing or acquiring knowledge about how fundamental aspects of our society (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) operate to sustain matrices of power. The key to claiming epistemic privilege for people who have been oppressed in a particular way stems from an acknowledgment that they have experiences—experiences that people who are not oppressed in that same way usually lack—that can provide them with information we all need to understand how hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality operate to uphold existing regimes of power in our society. What is being claimed is not an a priori link between social location and knowledge but a link that is historically variable and mediated through the interpretation of experience. Under this definition, la facultad can be understood as a partial manifestation of the latent epistemic privilege that most nonwhite women are situated to possess as a result of being subject to a multitude of oppressions.
experience the world in systematically different ways; and (2) not everyone who has the same kind of experience will react in the same way or come to the same conclusions about that experience. Taken together, these two realist assumptions allow the claim that some people are better situated than others to develop la facultad, without falling into the essentialist trap of assuming a determinative relationship between social location and consciousness.

It is worth noting that in her discussion of la facultad, Sandoval makes some claims that can be read as realist. By acknowledging that those who possess la facultad have learned it as an “emotional and intellectual skill which is developed amidst hegemonic powers” (1991, 22, n. 57), Sandoval points to the theory-mediated nature of experientially acquired knowledge. Moreover, her contention that la facultad is “a process” does not preclude the realist claim that experience has real theoretical and epistemic importance. The answers at which a woman of color arrives may be “temporarily effective” not because her answers lack some kind of truth-value but because her situation changes, or her particular understanding of the world needs to be refined, revised, or fine-tuned. Within a realist conception of knowledge, error is not antithetical to, but rather constitutive of, postpositivist objectivity.

Within a realist framework, oppositional ideologies (and the identities they engender) are more than sites of political and theoretical resistance to be pragmatically or strategically occupied or abandoned. Rather, they are the ways individuals or groups perceive, interpret, and interact with the world around them. Thus, a change in ideology or identity can represent a movement toward a better (or worse) understanding of the social world. To the extent that the ideological framework through which a person views the world adequately explains that world’s social, political, and economic workings, or to the extent that the identity she claims accurately describes the complex interactions between the multiple determinants of her particular social location, that ideology or identity will be epistemically (not just strategically) justified—it will constitute “objective” and reliable knowledge. Whether an identity has more (or less) epistemic value than a previous ideology or identity is not something that can be determined in advance; ideologies and identities must be compared with other (competing) ideologies and identities, evaluated for logical consistency, and tested empirically against the world they claim to describe. Thus, the realist claim is not that humans are always successful in their efforts to make successive approximations toward the truth but just that they can be.57

57 My claim is not that ideologies are mere lenses through which we view an already existing world but that some ideologies are better than others at describing the complex net-
Let me illustrate the realist theoretical point I am making. As fallible human beings with no immediate access to the world, women of color have been as subject to mystification and error as anyone else. Consequently, they may have participated in race-based organizations without attending to the interests of their gender—not because they were enacting differential consciousness but because they had not yet figured out that their gender brings with it a set of interests. Angela Davis, in a keynote address given at SUNY Oneonta in April 1996, admitted that during her participation in the black power movement of the 1960s she was largely unaware of the conflicts between the interests of her gender and the masculinist rhetoric of the black power movement. Similarly, some women who now identify as women of color may have participated in gender-based political movements without fully understanding that such organizations systematically neglected the race and class interests central to the lives of most nonwhite women. Cherrie Moraga is a case in point. During her participation in the women's movement of the 1970s and prior to her identification as a woman of color, she was not initially conscious that she was neglecting those interests. The realization came to her gradually, and manifested itself, at first, in discomfort—in the sense that something was missing, something was wrong. In the preface to *This Bridge Called My Back*, she recounts her coming to consciousness as a woman of color:

A few days ago, an old friend said to me how when she first met me, I seemed so white to her. I said in honesty, I used to feel more white. You know, I really did. But at the meeting last night, dealing with white women here on this trip, I have felt so very dark: dark with anger, with silence, with the feeling of being walked over.

I wrote in my journal: “My growing consciousness as a woman of color is surely seeming to transform my experience. How could it be that the more I feel with other women of color, the more I feel myself Chicana, the more susceptible I am to racist attack!” (Moraga 1983c, xv)

Here Moraga describes a growing awareness of her difference from white women. In the process of interacting with them, Moraga learns more about herself; she reconnects with the racialized aspect of her identity that she had previously denied. Her “transformation of experience” is thus a consequence of her reinterpretation of the things that happen/have happened to her in light of her new (and more accurate) perspective on the

work of human interactions and natural phenomena that constitute the totality of our (constructed and discovered) reality.

Copyright © 2001. All rights reserved.
social world within which those experiences have meaning. Importantly, Moraga does not merely choose to be a woman of color, nor does she mentally construct the racialized aspect of her heritage (her Mexican ancestry) on the basis of which she identifies as a woman of color. Of course, inasmuch as the identity “woman of color” is a political construct and is only one among a range of identities defensible within a realist framework available to her, Moraga does have a choice. But her choice is not arbitrary or idealist; it is not unconnected to those social categories (race, class, gender, sexuality) that constitute her social location and influence her experience of the world. The realist argument is this: as a result of her expanded, more accurate understanding of the social world, Moraga’s self-conception and her identity change. My claim here is that Moraga’s new-found identity, “woman of color,” is more epistemically and politically salient than her former identity, implicitly white “woman,” insofar as it more accurately refers to the complexity and multiplicity of Moraga’s social location. This is not to say that there could not be another identity that might also, or even more accurately, refer to the complex being she is. The realist claim I am making here is limited: not all identities a given individual can claim have equal political or epistemic salience.

Without diminishing the importance and relevance of la facultad, I would locate it at the level of quasi-self-consciousness, rather than the level of full self-consciousness that Sandoval implies in her theory of differential consciousness. Within the realm of la facultad, theoretical understanding is preceded by fear, alienation, and pain. All too often, nonwhite women know that something is wrong: we feel it in our gut, in our spine, in our neck. But it takes time, sometimes distance, and occasionally education or a consciousness-raising group for us to figure out what is wrong or missing. Having her consciousness raised is, in effect, what Moraga describes in her essay “La Güera” (1983b) when she relates an incident that took place in an apple orchard in Sonoma. In an effort to help Moraga understand her “total alienation from and fear of [her] classmates,” a friend said to her: “Cherré, no wonder you felt like such a nut in school. Most of the people there were white and rich” (30–31). Before her friend’s statement, Moraga had not fully realized that white and rich was something that she was not. More precisely, she had not yet come to acknowledge the salience of race or class in U.S. society—she had not come to understand how much difference those social categories make to an individual’s experience of the world:

All along I had felt the difference, but not until I had put the words “class” and “color” to the experience, did my feelings make any sense.
For years, I had berated myself for not being as “free” as my classmates. I completely bought that they simply had more guts than I did—to rebel against their parents and run around the country hitchhiking, reading books and studying “art.” They had enough privilege to be atheists, for chrissake... But I knew nothing about “privilege” then. White was right. Period. I could pass. If I got educated enough, there would never be any telling. (Moraga 1983b, 31)

In hindsight, and from the perspective of a woman of color, Moraga embeds three realist insights regarding the theory-mediatedness of experience and the epistemic status of identity into her discussion of this event. First, she realizes that a person’s social location is causally relevant to the experiences she will have. She reports that the source of her “total alienation” from her classmates was her lower socioeconomic status and her Mexican ancestry (30). Second, she recognizes that a person’s interpretation of her experience is influenced by her identity. She notes that as long as she identified with her “white and rich” classmates—as long as she did not acknowledge the socially significant ways her position differed from theirs—she was unable to understand her feelings of alienation. Moraga’s third realist insight follows from the second: if a person’s self-conception (or identity) refers inaccurately or only partially to the social and natural world from which it emerges, her interpretations of her experiences will be epistemically impoverished. She explains that “all along [she] had felt the difference” between herself and her classmates, but it was not until she reinterpreted her college experience through a different theoretical framework—one that incorporated the concepts of race and class as salient analytical categories—did her experience “make any sense” (31). When Moraga’s identity more accurately referred to her social location, her perspective on the world became correspondingly more objective. So, while it is clear that Moraga’s intuitions—her feelings of fear and alienation—were necessary to the development of her political and theoretical knowledge, it is also clear that they were not, in themselves, sufficient for an adequate understanding of her social, political, and economic situation. I submit that this insufficiency poses a serious challenge to Sandoval’s effort to develop a model of feminist consciousness based on the prototype of la juculencia.

Viewing Moraga’s coming-to-consciousness as a woman of color from a realist perspective shows that her changing political commitments are tied to her evolving conception of what her place in society is versus what it should be. At the end of “La Gitera,” Moraga articulates the desire to work through the fragmenting conditions she has faced in her own life. She writes, “I think: what is my responsibility to my roots—both white
and brown, Spanish-speaking and English? I am a woman with a foot in both worlds; and I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue. Sometimes I feel it urgently” (1983b, 34; emphasis added). Refusing to be split by her various positions, Moraga contradicts Sandoval’s postmodernist contention that women of color “shift” back and forth between competing ideologies or make an emotional commitment to the “shattering of the unitary sense of self” for the purpose of developing a mobile identity (Sandoval 1991, 23, n. 58). Moraga and the other women of color whose work I draw on understand that instability is not a comfortable or desirable situation in which to exist; life on the margins or in the interstices, while exhilarating and potentially creative, also can be difficult and exhausting. As a result, they struggle to find a way to bring all of the disparate aspects of their social identities together into synthesized, if not completely homogenized, wholes.38 Certainly, one of the major victories to date of women-of-color feminism is the ability some women of color now have to conceptualize themselves as nonfragmented beings constituted neither by lack nor by excess.

Contra Sandoval, I contend that when women of color such as Moraga change ideologies and identities, they are motivated by a genuine concern for truth and the hope of creating an objectively better world. In saying that they have a genuine concern for truth or objectivity, I am not suggesting that they are therefore naive, inflexible, or authoritarian. On the contrary, their nonrelativist commitment to truth enables their insights and facilitates the development of their cross-cultural political achievements. Moraga, for example, concludes “La Güera” by explaining her choice to practice women-of-color politics in terms that are recognizably realist. On the one hand, Moraga believes that a woman-of-color identity provides her with a better perspective from which to “recognize” and thus fight the oppressive effects of race and class “privilege.” On the other, she hopes that coming together with other women of color who are similarly willing to confront their own ideological mystifications will enable her to participate in a dialogue that will help women of color to forge a truly liberatory feminist collective. Moraga’s choice to identify as a woman of color is thus not “strategic” or “pragmatic”; it is based on her best estimation of what she must do to help create a nonoppressive world in which women of color, too, can have “joy in [their] lives” (1983b, 33–34). Women like Moraga, as individuals whose social location generally places them in a subordinate

38 See, e.g., Anzaldúa’s description of the culmination of the Coctelique state, that place of contradictions, where she describes everything “rushing to a center, a nucleus. . . . All the lost pieces of myself come flying. . . . magnetized toward that center” and where she feels “completa” and “not afraid” (1987, 51).
position within prevailing relations of domination, have a personal stake in knowing “what it would take to change [our world, and in] . . . identifying the central relations of power and privilege that sustain it and make the world what it is” (Mohanty 1997, 214). As a result, women of color like Moraga who work for social change generally do so with a great degree of seriousness, and with a steadfast commitment to discerning what is true from what is false for the purpose of perfecting their political practice.

Toward a realist feminist theory

It seems to me that the call by some critics for a “pragmatist” feminist theory is at least partially motivated by the desire to avoid the positivist versions of truth and objectivity that postmodernists have long attributed to all epistemological projects. These feminists do not want to risk the possibility of making theoretically dogmatic truth claims that might turn out to have oppressive effects. So, in an effort to avoid being “wrong,” they decide to avoid any overt commitment to what might be “right.” They thus retain a positivist conception of truth and objectivity in their tendency to oppose the possibility of error to absolute certainty. From a postpositivist realist perspective, however, it would be a mistake to assume that a commitment to truth invariably leads to theoretical dogmatism. In the course of making a theoretical argument, I regularly make a number of truth claims. I understand them, however, to be fallible claims; they are open to contestation and revision. What makes them specifically truth claims is that I understand them to be true, and I cannot abandon them until I have an experience that causes me to rethink my position, or until someone, using argumentation and presenting evidence, persuades me that I have been partially or completely in error. At that point, I will acknowledge that the truth claims I have been making need to be abandoned or revised. I will then develop a new (and hopefully more accurate) conception of truth and continue to understand my (new) truth claims as being true.

The difference between saying that my truth claims are infallible versus saying that they are fallible is an important distinction and one that bears elaboration. The first stance, which corresponds to a positivist epistemology, presupposes that truth exists and that I have unmediated access to it. It leads to naivety, inflexibility, and domination. The second stance, which corresponds to a postpositivist epistemology, assumes that truth exists and that I can make successive approximations toward it.29 I acknowledge that

29 For an account, drawn from the philosophy of science, of how objective knowledge is theory-dependent and subject to continual empirical observation and verification, see Boyd 1988, esp. 189–92.
I have no immediate access to truth and that, as a result, my ideas are subject to mystification and error. As such, I am required (if I care very much about truth at all) to consider alternative conceptions of what the truth is. I further realize that considering alternative versions of the truth may make me profoundly uncomfortable. I may—more precisely, will—have to question the very foundation of my being: my sense of self, my understanding of what is or is not beautiful, what is or is not good. I will have to reevaluate all that I hold dear, everything that makes life meaningful. Indeed, I will have to ask whether human life has any meaning at all. The advantage of a postpositivist realist framework is, thus, that it incorporates the possibility of self-critique: insofar as the realist attempts to justify her normative judgments with reference to some acknowledged metaphysical claims about the nature of the world or of human beings, she is in a better position to question and revise those claims. The postmodernist or pragmatist, by contrast, having justified her normative judgments with reference to what is strategically useful or politically expedient, is forced inevitably into a position of epistemological denial from which she is unable to question or revise her conception of truth or justice because her theoretical framework will not allow her to admit that she has one.

The radical and realist questioning of themselves and the world around them is what I see women of color doing and what I see as women-of-color feminism’s genuine contribution to the project of progressive social change.46 The women of color whose work I admire and teach understand both the contingency and the importance of cultural values; they understand that while any one conception of truth may be culturally mediated, it cannot therefore be dismissed as a mental or discursive “construct” with no relevance to those beings located outside the culture within which it is true. As people who are frequently situated on the wrong side of dichotomous constructions of truth and beauty, such women have developed a deep suspicion toward hegemonic constructions of the same. However, I have not seen that they therefore have dismissed the concepts as in themselves hegemonic.

46 I should not have to say this, but because of the potential for being misunderstood, I will. In saying that the radical questioning of themselves and the world around them constitutes the genuine contribution of women-of-color feminism to the project of progressive social change, I am not saying that this is all that women of color have to offer. Clearly, individual women of color have contributed and will continue to contribute to progressive social movements in variable and important ways. All I mean to suggest is that to the extent that we can identify a social movement that can be designated “women-of-color feminism,” the great contribution of that social movement has been to demonstrate the viability of, and methods involved in, creating coalitions across difference.
Indeed, women of color's commitment to a truth (however difficult to access) that transcends particular cultural constructions underlies their success in forming coalitions across difference. As committed as they are to the idea that they are right, women of color such as Bernice Johnson Reagon, Audre Lorde, Papusa Molina, Cherríe Moraga, Mitsuye Yamada, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Angela Davis have all allowed themselves, in one forum or another, to entertain the possibility that they may be (or may have been) wrong—they have admitted that their own culturally constructed conceptions of truth may need to be revised, complicated, or abandoned in order to make meaningful connections with women different from themselves. This willingness to question their own conceptions of truth in the service of negotiating difference is what occasions Reagon to say, "Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing" (1983, 356). It is what Lorde refers to when she says that difference must be seen as "a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativities spark like a dialectic" (1983, 99). And it is what Moraga means when she says that we have to look deep within ourselves and come to terms with our own suffering so that we can challenge, and if necessary, "change ourselves—even sometimes our most cherished block-hard convictions" (in Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983, i). These and other women of color have undertaken the task of asking and finding out the answers to the questions Why? When? What? Where? and How? In other words, they are committed to a "drive for truth." I contend, moreover, that it is precisely because they are realists, because they take truth so seriously—seriously enough to question their own truth-claims—that theirs is a process incapable of "freezing into a repressive order—or of disintegrating into relativism" (Sandoval 1991, 23, n. 58).

Within Chicana and Chicano studies, as in feminist and minority studies, scholars are currently facing what Linda Alcoff (1988) has called an "identity crisis." How we choose to accomplish the task of theorizing the identities of minority and female subjects will have decisive implications for the future of these fields. If we choose the postmodernist approach, we run the risk, for example, of theorizing Chicana identity in terms of ambiguity and fragmentation so that the Chicana becomes, in effect, a figure for marginality and contradiction in the postmodern world. From a realist perspective, I would argue that the term Chicana should not denote a principle of abstract oppositionality. Although this kind of formulation can be politically useful, it is finally too general to have significant analytical import. If we choose the realist approach, we will work to ground the complex and variable experiences of the women who take on the identity Chicana within the concrete historical and material conditions they inhabit.
Rather than a figure for contradiction or oppositionality, the Chicana would be a part of a believable and progressive social theory. I would like to suggest that only when we have a realist account of our identities, one that refers outward to the world we live in, will we be able to understand the social and political possibilities open to us for the purpose of working to build a better society than the one we currently live in.

*English Department*

*Stanford University*

References


Moraga, Cherrie. 1983a. Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios. Boston: South End.


