

# Introduction to Modes of Knowledge and Action: Working Papers from the Women in the Public Sphere Seminar, 1998-99

## About the Seminar

Since the 1997-98 academic year, the Institute for Research on Women, in close cooperation with the Institute for Women's Leadership at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, has convened a weekly interdisciplinary faculty-graduate seminar for thematic discussions enriched by research methods and insights stemming from women's and gender studies. This seminar offers the single university-wide site for scholars whose work addresses issues of women and gender to meet regularly and to explore critical intersections of their work, considering new theoretical as well as practical perspectives on their findings. An independent evaluation of the seminar revealed that participants see great benefits for both their teaching and research resulting from the ongoing, cross-disciplinary inquiries fostered by the seminar.

Funding for the seminar has come from both within and beyond the University: the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs provided crucial support at the earliest stages and have continued to invest in this vital growth area. The first successes of the seminar have been augmented with the presence of Rockefeller Resident Fellows in the Humanities (1999-2001). The generous support of the Ford Foundation has provided course releases to faculty and stipends to graduate student seminar members while sparking greater collaboration and communication among the members of the Institute for Women's Leadership (which includes the Women's Studies Department, the Center for Women and Work, Douglass College, the Center for the American Woman and Politics and the Center for Women's Global Leadership in addition to the Institute for Research on Women).

The 1998-1999 seminar fellows continued the previous year's focus on "Women in the Public Sphere" with a special focus on "Modes of Knowledge and Action," considering instances of how women's roles have been understood, how the category "Woman" has functioned across historical periods and geographic regions, and how post-colonial

and post-structuralist critiques have infused awareness of gender into ongoing discussions of citizenship, agency and representation. The abridged versions of the seminar papers which comprise this volume provide an overview of the depth and range of work being done at Rutgers on women and gender in disciplines ranging from Communications to Anthropology to Visual Arts, from the Faculty of Arts and Science, Mason Gross School of the Arts, and the School of Communication, Information and Library Studies.

## About the Working Papers

Although this volume is divided into three sections, all of the essays represent a shared engagement with how gender shapes and is shaped by cultural institutions as varied as art and theatre, government agencies and policies. In addition, while they have been grouped in this volume as an aid to readers, those organizational corrals should be seen as both provisional and fictive, for many if not all of the essays could as easily be listed under one of the other rubrics, or under new ones.

Papers in the first section, *Public Women*, treat women's social roles and entry into the public sphere from the impact of Guatemalan government regulation on midwifery, that most traditional of women's work, to Canadian national employment trends and gender differentiation, examine how specific women's battles to address poorly administered international adoptions created an informal transnational public sphere between the U.S. and Canada as well as how individual Jewish women came to a shared desire for a "two-State solution" to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict despite their very different personal and political backgrounds. Her longitudinal study of midwifery in a rural Guatemalan community (1974-1996) grounds Sheila Cosminsky's discussion of the increasing medicalization of childbirth and the concomitant increase in state regulatory powers over midwives and their relationships with their clients as the midwives administer national policies regarding birth practices and registrations. Leah Vosko traces some fifty years

of Canadian government policies as she relates gender to increases in non-standard forms of employment, arguing that it is a dangerous oversimplification to posit that women are benefiting in the labor market at the expense of men. Karen Balcom describes how, in the feminized governmental and private social welfare agencies of Canada and the United States, the top women administrators used personal friendship networks and professional associations to advance needed correctives to the scandalous cross-border "traffic in babies," 1930-1960. Finally, Sherry Gorelick's oral history research with 16 Jewish women illustrates how they variously negotiate their individual histories and senses of self while arriving at a shared political viewpoint.

In the second section, *Gender and Citizenship*, contributors consider how individuals navigate the intersections of gender, nationality, culture and religion as well as the production and consumption of these aspects of identity. Judith Gerson, Kathie Friedman and Laura Liu examine the experiences of specific U.S. immigrant populations to understand how immigrants create new places for themselves within and against the homogenous ideal of U.S. nationalist ideology. Judith Gerson focuses on adaptations in the everyday practices of German Jewish immigrants to the U.S. during the period 1933-1945 and how those practices reflected and shaped the immigrants' changing understandings of their histories and identities. In pointing to the need for further studies of post-Soviet era Jewish immigration to the U.S. and Israel, Kathie Friedman draws on examples of one family's experiences to illustrate generational differences in how seemingly contradictory religious and national identities are reconciled or resolved. Laura Liu exposes internal contradictions in U.S. policies and practices around immigrant labor through her discussion of Chinese immigrant garment workers in New York City. Rupal Oza and Joanna Regulska describe the global and, for Oza, nationalist, forces and structures that are constricting women. The production and consumption of the 1996 Miss World Pageant in Bangalore, India provides the basis for Rupal Oza's examination of how the "intertwined discourses of gender and sexuality . . . redefin[e] the nation." Joanna Regulska critiques the quasi-Orientalist construction of the East European

"Other" woman in counterpoint to the "liberated" Western woman of French-Anglo feminist myth.

The final section, *Women and Representation*, provides an overview of how depictions of women have been understood in a variety of contexts, concluding with issues of representation innate to feminist research. Summarizing her research on contested visual depictions of prominent 19th century U.S. women, Barbara Balliet describes the legal battle attendant to a family's attempts to quash the public exhibition of a statue honoring a female philanthropist who worked to advance the education and employment of women artists. The next two discussions are concerned with the reproduction and reception of cultural codes that render social identities visible. For Kathryn Hansen, theatrical cross-dressing in the Parsi theatre of Bombay (1860-1930) was a key factor in the widespread adoption of a new form of middle-class Indian womanliness rooted in virtue and suffering. Beth Hutchison echoes Kathryn Hansen's attention to performer and spectator, performance and social meaning in her systematic mapping of how depictions of the U.S. lesbian subject positions "butch" and "femme" are performed and understood. Cynthia Daniels notes how assumptions of men's wholeness and power are threatened by current scientific research documenting increased levels of abnormal sperm caused by toxic workplaces and environmental hazards and how longstanding systems of masculine privilege operate to deflect and absorb those threats. Psychoanalyst Margaret Carr reviews recent interdisciplinary scholarship to document the simultaneous exclusion of women as rational subjects from the public sphere even as symbolic types of women are invoked in political discourse. Situating her insights and questions about the appropriate practice of feminist scholarship in the context of her field work in India, Radha Hegde engages feminist and post-colonial theory as she negotiates situated identities and the multivariate differentials (and silences) that complicate research inquiries. Radha Hegde's meditation on the responsibilities and dangers of practicing feminist research—the mode of knowledge and action which shapes the collection—provides a fitting and provocative conclusion to the collection.