

Lying in  
a Room  
of One's  
Own

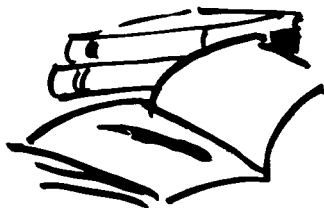
*How  
Women's  
Studies  
Textbooks  
Miseducate  
Students*

CHRISTINE STOLBA



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BY CHRISTINE STOLBA

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#### ABOUT IWF

The Independent Women's Forum, founded in 1992, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational organization. IWF provides a voice for women who believe in individual freedom and personal responsibility, and who embrace common sense over divisive ideology. IWF also supports a campus program consisting of SheThinks.org, a webzine written by and for students, and a speakers bureau.

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# I. Introduction

In “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf persuasively argued that the reason civilization has produced so few fine female artists, particularly writers, is that women have lacked the central requirements for honing one’s craft—freedom from the drudgeries of domestic life and the financial resources to achieve their artistic goals. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, at the birth of Women’s Studies, many feminist academics made a similar argument, claiming that society’s—and the academy’s—past hostility to women required the embrace of a wholly new academic discipline devoted to the study of women.

Today, colleges and universities support a cadre of women academics who not only have achieved the freedom of rooms of their own, but now enjoy the benefits of a proliferating number of academic departments as well. Women’s Studies can boast of conferences, journals, and a national organization with over 3,000 members; endowed chairs, graduate programs, and visiting lectureships. The field has even spawned its first wave of histories with titles such as *Disciplining Feminism: How Women’s Studies Transformed the Academy and Was Transformed by It*.

But how has Women’s Studies transformed the academy? What have Women’s Studies scholars done with the “rooms of their own” that they’ve had for a generation?

There is little love lost between advocates of Women’s Studies and its critics. Both sides trade barbs about the value of Women’s Studies for a liberal education. Often, critics are accused of setting up “straw women” by focusing only on

the most extreme examples of Women’s Studies pedagogy to criticize the entire enterprise. Rather than look to the extremes, this report seeks to examine the solid mainstream by assessing something produced only by programs that have become full-fledged members of the academy: textbooks. By examining five of the most popular textbooks used in introductory courses in Women’s Studies, we can come to some conclusions about the usefulness of Women’s Studies as an academic discipline and as an intellectual outgrowth of the feminist movement.

Feminism seeks to change society through activism and social change, usually by lobbying for new laws and social policies. Women’s Studies has a slightly different mission—it seeks to “transform knowledge.” Because “traditional systems of knowledge” have often ignored women, the argument goes, Women’s Studies must reconstruct knowledge altogether. Metaphors of transformation dot the pages of Women’s Studies textbooks. The authors of *Gender & Culture in America*, a popular textbook for introductory courses in Women’s Studies, claim that the purpose of Women’s Studies is to “challenge students to consider that addressing gender inequality in America involves not just activism or new laws and policies, but new modes of thought, a rethinking of our deepest, most accepted premises about the world.” Another textbook, *Thinking About Women*, describes how Women’s Studies is engaged in “challenging some of the basic assumptions in existing knowledge.” “Women’s Studies scholarship,” the author avers, “is transformative.” A third, *Wo-*

*men's Realities, Women's Choices*, states that “radical reconceptualizations” are required “to overcome the bias that has been built into what has been taken to be ‘knowledge.’” The scare quotes around the word *knowledge* are meant to drive home the point that what we think we know is really a chimera. The authors of the textbook urge readers to engage in what they call an “intellectual revolution.”

The purpose of Women’s Studies is not simply the transformation of knowledge, we are told. Out of that transformation should come a new worldview, one ever vigilant of sins against the status of women. As one textbook notes, “once you begin to recognize these patterns, you may be astounded at how pervasive they are.” Indeed, the authors get a bit carried away in describing this experience; readers are warned that “as the unequal status of women becomes more apparent, you might feel overwhelmed by the vast extent of a problem most people have never acknowledged.”

The process of “transforming knowledge” presupposes that students who enter an introductory course in Women’s Studies have some to begin with. That is not always the case. And unfortunately, as we will see, the “knowledge” transmitted by Women’s Studies textbooks is often factually and interpretively at odds with reality. Rather than offering young men and women exposure to knowledge, these texts foster a cynical knowingness about women’s status in society, one that consistently emphasizes women’s supposedly subordinate position. The danger of such a worldview, particularly for a generation of young men and women who enter the classroom already steeped in popular myths about women’s place in society, is that it will ripen into a form of anti-intellectualism. Why question if you already know? If practitioners of Women’s Studies hope to launch an “intellectual revolution,” they would do well to remember that revolutions often end up devouring their own children. 📖

## II. Errors of Fact

Since textbooks are an effort to cull a large amount of information into a single, coherent narrative, they are a medium that almost always contains factual errors, regardless of subject matter. Even granted that dispensation, however, Women's Studies textbooks support a large number of factual inaccuracies. Many of these are deliberately misleading sisterly sophistries.

This is not surprising when one considers the “transformative” mission of Women's Studies. As the authors of *Women's Realities, Women's Choices* note, “understanding that cultural attitudes and beliefs about women have often been based on false premises and faulty observations, feminists are working to replace ignorance and fantasy with views that have greater validity.” Note that they are replacing “ignorance and fantasy” not with facts, but with “views that have greater validity.” Valid views, in this case, are those that conform with feminist thought. Other textbooks state this more vividly. The author of *Issues in Feminism* says: “Feminist theoreticians in every field . . . are convinced that no purely factual studies exist,” since facts have “all developed within a framework of male bias.”

Following is a partial list of factual inaccuracies in the Women's Studies textbooks surveyed in this report.

### WAGE GAPS AND GLASS CEILINGS

All of the Women's Studies textbooks surveyed for this report uncritically repeat two of the most popular myths of the feminist

movement: the idea that the wage gap between men and women is the direct result of discrimination in the labor market; and the notion that women in America face an impenetrable glass ceiling, also caused by discrimination, that prevents them from advancing in the workplace. Margaret L. Andersen's *Thinking About Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender*, begins by warning readers that, although many people “conclude that women now have it made,” in fact, “women college graduates who worked full time earned, on average, 70 percent of what men college graduates earned” and “despite three decades of policy change to address gender inequality at work, women and minorities are still substantially blocked from senior management positions in most U.S. companies.” Later, she calls it a “social myth” that “women are achieving economic parity with men.”

*Women's Realities, Women's Choices* offers a similar assessment: “If we work for pay, we tend to work in gender-segregated sectors of the economy . . . and to receive less wages than men in comparable jobs.” Later, the textbook notes, “women earn less and have fewer opportunities for choice and advancement than men. In 1890, a woman earned 46 cents for every dollar a man earned. A century later, we still earn only 69 cents.”

This is a deliberately misleading presentation of the wage gap and a predictable reiteration of a favorite feminist myth: that the average gender wage gap is evidence of discrimination. In fact, as a number of economists, including June O'Neill, have demonstrated, the average wage gap tells us very little, for it fails to take



into account important factors such as age, education, consecutive years of experience, and type of job; when these factors are considered, women and men earn about the same. In addition, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 guarantees equal pay for equal work.

Equal pay for equal work does not satisfy the authors of Women's Studies textbooks. They are staunch supporters of "comparable worth," or centralized wage-setting based on categories of comparable skill levels. *Thinking About Women* states that "comparable worth is an important concept for women workers," and claims that "it has been resisted by businesses, probably because they recognize the economic cost that would come from reassessing and increasing the worth of the work that women do." Yet this offers only one side of a very complex debate. Within academia alone, many competent scholars from various points on the political spectrum have criticized comparable worth as poor economics. Academic criticism of comparable worth aside, Women's Studies textbooks fail to answer the most serious question raised by comparable worth: Who decides what the intrinsic worth of any particular job is? Is a waitress' work more "valuable" than a garbage man's?

In a similar vein, Women's Studies textbooks uncritically repeat the standard feminist myth that women face a glass ceiling. In *Women's Realities, Women's Choices*, for example, the authors claim that "those few women who have begun to reach the top of middle management jobs in corporations have found a 'glass ceiling' that makes it difficult to break through to top corporate positions." Later, the authors claim that women "are viewed as less serious about our work. We tend to be tracked into associate and part-time positions and not to be considered for partnerships and choice assignments. Male-dominated values about women's traditional roles undermine the belief that a woman can be a professional and a good wife and mother." Left unmentioned is evidence that women often eagerly pursue flexible work arrange-

ments. Time and control over their schedules is more valuable to them than climbing the corporate ladder.

## OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION

A similar flaw in reasoning hampers Women's Studies textbooks' discussions of occupational segregation. The authors of *Women's Realities, Women's Choices* complain, "many occupations are still identified only for or largely with men. . . . Not only have men guarded the custom and privilege of the professions as their 'right,' but women have been socialized to agree with them." Worse, for a textbook whose own title alludes to women's choices, there is no recognition of the choices women actually are making in the working world, including part-time and flexible work arrangements. As for the tendency of men and women to go into certain fields, the textbook authors claim "segregation of genders between and within the professions is in part the result of gender discrimination in education."

*Thinking About Women* also views occupational segregation as something imposed on women, to their detriment. "It is in the professions where women have made some of the most dramatic numerical gains," the author writes, "yet they are still concentrated in the lower ranks and less prestigious specialties." The author cites the fact that women physicians are more likely to work in pediatrics or family medicine, and that women lawyers tend to go into real estate and trust law, or into public service law, as examples of this phenomenon. The only concession made is done so with a caveat: "Although many women choose to work in historically women's work or some choose to put their priorities on personal and family matters rather than career mobility, even more women than in the past perceive that there is discrimination against women in the workplace."

*Issues in Feminism* offers a similar interpretation, one in which "discrimination is every-

where” and “women workers are channeled into occupations that are seen as ‘appropriate’ for women.” Worse, the textbook presents women as dupes when it comes to issues such as job flexibility. “To meet home demands, [women] may settle for part-time shifts (such as ‘Mommy Tracks’), poor hours, or local jobs, all of which can be terribly exploitative.” Yet, as years of opinion research reveal, women do not find flexible work arrangements exploitative; on the contrary, many women (and an increasing number of men) rate job flexibility high on their list of priorities for achieving work/family balance. It is feminists who dislike flexible working arrangements and Mommy Tracks—largely because women’s preference for them means that they don’t climb the corporate ladder at rates similar to men.

The textbooks also discuss female-dominated occupations in wholly negative terms. “Women who work in pink collar jobs rarely have any significant opportunity for promotion,” states *Women’s Realities*, *Women’s Choices*, and the work they perform “is often highly impersonal and routine, as in a typing pool.” No mention is made of the safety and flexibility of many pink collar jobs, nor of the fact that skill sets for these jobs deteriorate slowly, allowing women to move in and out of the workforce in these jobs without their skills becoming obsolete.

The authors of Women’s Studies textbooks would do well to listen to the reasoning of their own students on the issue of occupational choice. Based on surveys they conducted among their students, the authors of *Gender & Culture in America* found that “nearly all of the women, but none of the men interviewed, plan to curtail or cease their paid employment after their children are born.” One student, a biology major named Susan, could boast of a perfect grade point average and prospects for a successful career as a genetic counselor. Yet, as she told the textbook authors, she personally feels that “children suffer if their mothers work outside the home” and so evinces “a strong career orientation up to but not encompassing reproduction.”

Other young women interviewed expressed similar feelings about temporarily stepping out of the workforce to fulfill family obligations.

One could interpret these young women’s attitudes as intelligent and pragmatic planning for their futures; looking ahead, they envision having different priorities at different points in their lives and hope to have families. What do the authors of Women’s Studies textbooks see? They see victims, women who “are apparently unaware that in these decisions they are following traditional gender stereotypes.” They are also at a loss to explain the clear evidence that “for many young college women, most of the feminist message is irrelevant or unwelcome.” Thus, even *Gender & Culture in America*—one of the more fair-minded and less hyperbolic of the Women’s Studies textbooks surveyed here—presents women’s career choices as decisions linked to gender stereotypes rather than the individuals’ own preferences.

## WOMEN’S HEALTH

All of the Women’s Studies textbooks surveyed for this report contain chapters or lengthy sections on “Women’s Health.” Unfortunately, their diagnosis of the state of women’s health, like their assessment of women’s progress in the workplace, is seriously flawed. Women’s Studies textbooks are riddled with errors about women’s access to health care and about the causes and consequences of many women’s health issues.

One of the favorite myths repeated in Women’s Studies textbooks is that women have not been adequately represented in clinical trials for new medical treatments. The authors of *Women’s Realities*, *Women’s Choices*, for example, claim that “medication and treatment for medical conditions not specific to women, such as heart disease, have been tested and norms established primarily on men.” *Thinking About Women* asserts, “several reports published in medical journals and reported in the national press documented the exclusion of women from major

national studies of heart disease, lung cancer, and kidney disease.” Later, the textbook begins its chapter on health by claiming that news of new medical breakthroughs shouldn’t be heartening to women, since “you might well find out that all the subjects in the study were men and that the same insights or procedures that medical researchers are heralding as advancing medical science have not been at all considered for their implications for women’s health.”

**B**ut these textbooks are incorrect. The claim that women have been shortchanged in medical research has been debunked by numerous scholars, most thoroughly by Sally L. Satel in her book, *PC, M.D.: How Political Correctness Is Corrupting Medicine*. In fact, drug companies and government agencies such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) routinely include women in clinical trials that test the effectiveness of medications. As long ago as 1979, over 90 percent of all NIH-funded clinical trials included women.

Other textbooks claim that women’s unique health risks do not receive adequate attention from the medical research establishment. *Women in American Society* tells readers that “many experts point to the shocking lack of research on women’s bodies and health as one of the most serious health care problems for women.” *Thinking About Women* urges its readers to “consider the attention given to Viagra, the drug that treats male impotency and for which the scientists who did the basic research underlying its functioning were given the Nobel Prize. Would fewer women be dying from breast cancer if such resources were poured into its study?” This is pure hyperbole, as the facts clearly show. For example, beginning in 1985, when the NIH’s National Cancer Center began keeping track of specific cancer funding, it has annually spent more money on breast cancer than any other type of cancer research. Currently, women represent over 60 percent of all subjects in NIH-funded clinical trials. Moreover, if the authors of Women’s Studies textbooks want to argue that

the money invested in drugs such as Viagra is not well directed, shouldn’t they also question the hundreds of millions of dollars spent (by women) every year on things such as plastic surgery and diet pills?

Several of the Women’s Studies textbooks surveyed also repeat the falsehood that silicone breast implants cause serious health problems in women. *Issues in Feminism* reprints the statement of Merle Hoffman, who wrote, in the wake of congressional hearings on silicone implants, that it was difficult to understand why “women so eagerly make life-threatening decisions to fit someone else’s definition of being sexually acceptable.” In fact, as subsequent research proved, and as scholars such as Sally L. Satel demonstrated, the silicone breast implant scare was a textbook case of “junk science” run amok. Only one textbook, *Women in American Society*, concedes this, noting that “as of 1997, the research had shown no large increased risk of traditional autoimmune disease” from implants.

Other misinterpretations appear in discussions of women’s health. In stark opposition to their concern with biological differences in medical research (where Women’s Studies textbooks emphasize biological differences between the sexes), in other contexts they downplay these realities. For example, one textbook correctly notes that hormone levels can be affected by factors in the environment, as when women who live together find that their menstrual cycles synchronize. But the textbook draws an incorrectly broad conclusion from this fact to suggest that biology is, in fact, socially constructed: “Increasingly similar living and working environments for women and men may create greater similarities between the sexes.”

Issues regarding men’s health—including serious disparities such as the fact that, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, men are less likely to have medical insurance than women—are glossed over quickly or attributed to what Women’s Studies textbooks view as the real sickness: masculinity. “Mortality differences between men and women are determined by

men's greater risk of death by accident," says *Thinking About Women*, but this is "itself a function of men's engagement in risky behavior, violent activity, and alcohol consumption."

Another health-related myth oft repeated in Women's Studies textbooks is that oppression is the cause of many health problems in minority groups. To be sure, rates of alcoholism, heart disease, hypertension, and other ailments are higher among certain groups in American society, but behavioral choices also play a role. The issue of individual responsibility in health is ignored by these textbooks, which instead proffer claims such as "racial-ethnic and class oppression in U.S. society further complicate patterns of health in men and women" and "Native Americans' health is also affected by the degree of oppression they experience." Again, as scholars such as Sally L. Satel have demonstrated, such sweeping claims of oppression in the health care system are insufficient explanations for disparities in health. Finally, some textbooks also demonstrate a notable bias for a nationalized health care system. *Women in American Society*, for example, states that "the United States is one of the few countries in the world in which basic health care needs are not provided as a basic right, and that failure helps contribute to the relatively high rates of maternal, fetal, and infant mortality." The arguments against nationalizing the health care system are not presented in the textbooks.

It is no surprise that Women's Studies textbooks distort the facts about women's health; the discipline of medicine—and indeed, of science in general—is viewed with suspicion by Women's Studies advocates. As one textbook stated, "these people—scientists—are like all human beings, products of their culture . . . their investigations and conclusions about female and male characteristics necessarily reflect the perspectives and expectations of the dominant male culture." In other words, science's guilt is presumed because it is an outgrowth of "male culture." *Issues in Feminism*

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describes the process thus: "Without women's own perspectives to balance the historical fund of ignorance and superstition surrounding our lives, conventional (misogynist) wisdom has been carried into research by so-called authorities on the subject, has hardened into accepted theories, and has ultimately become 'science.'" Later, the author of the textbook introduces an essay, "Patriarchy, Scientists, and Nuclear Weapons," by noting that the writer "shows that the present 'masculinity of science' may very well kill us."

Other textbooks dismiss entirely the notion of objectivity in science. *Thinking About Women* states matter-of-factly, "despite the strong claims of neutrality and objectivity by scientists, the fact is that science is closely tied to the centers of power in this society and interwoven with capitalist and patriarchal institutions."

Science is not the only suspect field. Other textbooks describe the health care system as one that "has evolved during the past century into an entrenched hierarchy that expresses pervasive sexism, classism, and racism." *Thinking About Women* claims, "the most immediate context in which power relations can be seen in medicine is the doctor-patient relationship. Because women are more likely to make physician visits and

the overwhelming majority of doctors are men, this doctor-patient relationship is likely to reflect the gender roles in society.” No evidence for these sweeping indictments is presented.

Even nurses are portrayed as victims of an oppressive healthcare hierarchy. The authors of *Women’s Realities, Women’s Choices* write that “nurses are treated as inferiors by physicians,” and they “earn a very small fraction of the income that the physicians they serve earn.” Of course, nurses *are* objectively “inferior” to physicians in terms of their medical training and skills, a fact that would also explain their lower salaries, but this is left unmentioned in the textbook’s tirade against “the professional exploitation and oppression of nurses.”

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Statistics are contested terrain, and nowhere more so than in the realm of domestic violence. Social scientists continue to debate the validity of such statistics, although you will not find mention of this fact in Women’s Studies textbooks. Instead, you will find ambiguous statements such as “a fairly large proportion of women who show up in emergency rooms of hospitals for treatment of injuries are victims of a phenomenon known as wife battering” and “in the United States, every 15 seconds a woman is beaten.”

What students won’t read in their Women’s Studies textbook are the results of two widely-regarded government studies, one published by the National Center for Health Statistics in 1992 and another by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics in 1997 (“Violence-Related Injuries Treated in Hospital Emergency Departments”) that placed the percentage of women treated for domestic violence injuries in emergency rooms at closer to 1 percent. As Christina Hoff Sommers outlined in detail in her book *Who Stole Feminism?*, the portrait of domestic violence painted by Women’s Studies professors and feminist activists is a far cry from reality.

In addition, Women’s Studies textbooks such

as *Women in American Society* claim that “most research agrees that even when both partners engage in violence, men tend to be the primary perpetrators.” In fact, agreement on this issue does not exist. The textbooks ignore research by respected social scientists such as Richard J. Gelles and Murray A. Straus, perhaps because it reveals that women are just as likely to initiate violence against men (although women are more likely to suffer injury as a result of violent encounters). A study by Terrie Moffitt, Richard Robins, and Avshalom Caspi published in the journal *Criminology and Public Policy* in 2001 found that women were just as likely—and in some cases, more likely—to initiate violence. They concluded that the “male-dominance model guiding feminist-oriented intervention programs” is not correct. Rather, both men and women should be treated as potential instigators of violence in the home.

Besides repeating incendiary statistics, Women’s Studies textbooks also make sweeping claims about male violence that offer the reader no perspective for measuring the accuracy of the claims: *Women’s Realities, Women’s Choices* states that “physical violence, rape, wife and child battering, and incest have been found to exist far more commonly than ever acknowledged in the past.” *Thinking About Women* claims that “these once-hidden problems now seem disturbingly common.” The book then notes, “studies indicate that the overwhelming amount of domestic violence is directed against women.” In fact, as noted above, many solid scholarly studies indicate the opposite—that women initiate violence as often as men. These alternative studies are never assessed outright; rather, the textbooks trivialize or ignore them. *Thinking About Women* claims that women’s violence against men is “a phenomenon that has been exaggerated in the media.”

Other textbooks make sweeping claims about family violence that do little to inform readers of the complexity of the issue. Tacked onto a discussion of pregnancy in the textbook *Women’s Realities, Women’s Choices* is the unsub-

stantiated claim that “some men feel not only envy but rage [about their wife’s pregnancy]; the ‘battered wife syndrome’ may start with pregnancy.” In *Thinking About Women*, students are told—again without evidence—that “clearly, wife battering emerges from institutional arrangements that isolate women in the home and give men authority over them” and that “feminists have pointed to violence as the logical result of both women’s powerlessness in the family and a male culture that emphasizes aggression, domination, and violence.”

Women’s Studies textbooks even extend their sweeping and unsubstantiated claims about violence to young men on college campuses. In *Thinking About Women*, readers are told that “fraternities . . . often have an organizational culture that is ripe for sexual violence. As social groups, fraternities are based on an ethic of masculinity. When masculinity is associated with competition, violence, and alcohol abuse and is further coupled with gender stereotyping of women, sexual violence is likely to occur.” Although women have been the victims of violence in a fraternity setting, the absence of any data that place these sweeping claims about masculinity in perspective (for example, reliable statistics on rates of violence among members of fraternities) leaves the reader with the impression that gang rapes on fraternity row are a regular occurrence.

#### EDUCATIONAL BIAS AGAINST WOMEN

Without a doubt, the story of women’s educational achievement in the U.S. is one of enormous progress. One hundred years ago, women were barred from entering most universities; today, they receive the majority of bachelor’s and master’s degrees, and within a decade are projected to receive the majority of PhDs.

Yet even this decidedly good news is not emphasized in Women’s Studies textbooks. Typically, when statistics about women’s educa-

tional achievement are presented, they are followed by a negative caveat. For example, the authors of *Women’s Realities, Women’s Choices* note women’s “significant gains” in education, but state, “while more of us are obtaining doctorates and professional degrees, we remain underrepresented at the highest levels.” *Thinking About Women* summarizes women’s educational opportunities by arguing that “subtle and not-so-subtle messages still track students according to gender. Girls learn to devalue themselves in some fields in school.”

Even the curriculum is suspect, as the textbook *Women in American Society* reminds us. Lurking behind the “overt curriculum” in schools is a “hidden curriculum” that “still supports traditional gender roles and, more specifically, discourages girls who might otherwise stretch themselves beyond traditional boundaries in intellectual skills and interest.” *Thinking About Women* makes a similar argument, stating—without evidence—that “educational curricula are nested within the traditional culture and therefore reflect the same sexist, racist, cultural, and class biases that are found in the dominant culture.”

Why do these textbooks ignore the obvious progress women have made educationally? In large part because they unquestionably embrace politicized research produced by feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women’s Legal Defense and Education Fund and the American Association of University Women (AAUW). In *Women’s Realities, Women’s Choices*, for example, readers are told that the AAUW’s report “How Schools Shortchange Girls” offers definitive proof of “unequal treatment girls receive in a wide range of areas, including curricula, materials used in classrooms, testing, and teacher attention.” Another textbook, *Women in American Society*, also uncritically repeats the claims made in the AAUW study as well as the AAUW’s accusations of gender bias in standardized testing.

The authors of *Women’s Realities, Women’s Choices*, for example, state, “as compared to

boys, girls receive less attention and praise from teachers; request less help; and are less dominant in class. . . . Even at the college level, teachers pay more attention to male students than to female students.” Later, they begin their chapter on women and education by arguing that “women’s educational choices continue to be limited” and even claim that “the same social conventions that hindered the acquisition of learning by women in earlier centuries still limit our educational opportunities.” Nowhere does one find mention of the thorough critiques of these studies produced by scholars such as Christina Hoff Sommers—who debunked the AAUW’s report in her book *Who Stole Feminism?*—and Judith Kleinfeld, among others.

#### WESTERN CIVILIZATION AND THE CANON

Since Women’s Studies sees itself as playing a “transformative” role in scholarship, it is, as a discipline, generally hostile to efforts at preserving the canon of Western Civilization. Women’s Studies textbooks reflect that bias. Describing the birth of Women’s Studies as an academic discipline, the authors of *Women’s Realities, Women’s Choices* note that “resistance” to Women’s Studies is pervasive: “The vocal opposition and national attention given to Stanford University’s decision in 1988 to replace its core course in Western Civilization, which emphasized ‘classic texts’ by primarily male contribu-

tors, with a new course on ‘Cultures, Ideas and Values’ that requires students to read works by ‘women, minorities, and persons of color’ is indicative of this process.” The authors conclude that proposals to save the canon “are demands that students continue to be exposed largely to the expression of Western, white, male authors, and that the humanities be kept from fostering new social changes.” While rejecting the canon, these same authors recommend, among other questionable texts, books such as *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, which scholars have proven to be fraudulent.

In a similar vein, *Thinking About Women* suggests that criticism of Women’s Studies stems from insecurity about its transformative power: “Resistance to these more inclusive studies has been fierce and indicates the extent to which new knowledge from women’s studies and the different racial ethnic studies programs challenges existing ways of thought.” No truck is given to the many issues critics have raised about such programs over the past several decades. This goes back to Women’s Studies’ view of itself as a discipline that must transform knowledge. *Thinking About Women* argues that “academic knowledge is created within specific institutional structures. Because the production of research and scholarship is tied to the setting in which it develops, the noticeable absence or invisibility of women in these settings has contributed to the invisibility of women and their distortion in research.” 📖

### III. Errors of Interpretation

“Bias—which means prejudice, the absence of objectivity—derives from a term that means oblique, slanted, not standard or true, off-center.” So begins a section on “Bias in Academe” in the popular introductory Women’s Studies textbook *Issues in Feminism*. As we will see, Women’s Studies textbooks are themselves purveyors of bias—skewing information, telling only part of the story, and failing to include facts that might inconvenience their arguments. Although different from blatant errors of fact, these many errors of interpretation are nonetheless pernicious.

#### WOMEN UNDER SIEGE

It is a truth universally acknowledged in Women’s Studies textbooks that women have been and continue to be the victims of oppression. Sheila Ruth opens her textbook *Issues in Feminism* with the claim that the twenty years her book has been in print “have not been good for women or for progressive social activism in general.” She argues, “in almost every culture, the tools and conditions necessary for learning and analysis, the means of communication, and the forms of legitimization of knowledge have been jealously and effectively kept from women.” Another textbook claims, “as women we experience social restrictions regarding education, choice of work, mobility, forms of cultural expression, and political participation.” *Thinking About Women* sets a slightly more dramatic scene, imagining how readers might awake to the reality of women’s subordinate

position in society. “Perhaps at school you see that most of the professors are men . . . or perhaps at work you notice that women are concentrated in the lowest-level jobs and are sometimes treated as if they were not even there. It may occur to you one night as you are walking through city streets that the bright lights shining in the night skyline represent the thousands of women—many of them African-American, Latina, or Asian American—who clean the corporate suites and offices for organizations that are dominated by White men.”

This attitude of women-under-siege seeps into discussions of history as well. Unable to paper over the fact that a majority of Western civilization’s greatest poets happen to be men, for example, one textbook petulantly suggests that “powerful female poets already exist in the Western tradition,” but they have not been appreciated “by students whose teachers are prejudiced by sexist values.” *Thinking About Women* states that “traditional systems of knowledge have ignored women altogether or frequently portrayed them in stereotypical or demeaning ways.” In this rendering, the entire Western intellectual tradition is suspect; the same textbook approvingly quotes feminist sociologist Marcia Westkott: “When women realize that we are simultaneously immersed in and estranged from both our own particular discipline and the Western intellectual tradition generally, a personal tension develops that informs the critical dialogue.” Women’s Studies textbooks encourage their readers to embrace this “outsider” status with regard to the Western intellectual tradition.



More common are sweeping and unsubstantiated statements about women's subordination. For example, nearly every chapter in the textbook *Women's Realities, Women's Choices* opens with an obligatory oppression roll call: "All women suffer discrimination by virtue of our gender in jobs and social benefits." "The law still acts to oppress women and treat us unfairly in many ways." Margaret Andersen writes, in *Thinking About Women*, that a "matrix of domination" that includes sex, class, and race works to oppress everyone but white men. Similarly, the authors of *Gender & Culture in America* argue that "the overall effect of the twentieth century on women was neither liberation nor gender equality as much as it was change in the nature and meaning of their fragmentation." One of the central oppressors was the state itself. As *Thinking About Women* reminds readers, "although we have had some gains in the last thirty years, women—feminist or nonfeminist—still live in a hostile environment. We live within a struggle."

But hasn't that struggle led to gains for women—gains clearly visible in levels of educational and workplace achievement? Not according to Women's Studies textbooks. They describe the oppressive conditions of bygone eras and then equate them, incorrectly, with modern times. Thus we read, in *Women's Realities, Women's Choices*, that Aristotle believed that neither women nor children had the capacity for rational thinking and that this belief "was reflected in a society system wherein women and children were excluded from public life." True enough. But the next sentence gives pause: "In modern America we often find similar attitudes."

Another tactic is to assume that discrimination is the cause of all differences between the sexes with regard to public achievement. In a chapter on "Women, Power, and Politics" in the textbook *Thinking About Women*, the author asks, "Why are there so few women elected officials?" Her first response? "One explanation is that sheer prejudice has taught people to think that women are not well suited to politics." Her next reason? False consciousness. "A second explana-

tion of the small number of women in politics is that gender-stereotyped socialization does not encourage women to see themselves as potential political candidates."

Of the five Women's Studies textbooks surveyed here, none described women's success without caveats. Even in *Women in American Society*, one of the more reasonable textbooks, author Virginia Sapiro notes that "the American public is less prejudiced against women than it used to be, and people (especially women) hold fewer gender-based stereotypes than they used to hold." But she follows this by invoking a "modern sexism" that "incorporates denial that women still face any discrimination, antagonism toward women's demands, and a lack of support for policies designed to help women overcome historical prejudices and discrimination."

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The intense focus on women under siege is a key justification for Women's Studies pedagogy. In this drama, Women's Studies professors are depicted as the first group to launch a thorough scholarly challenge to these supposedly limited social roles for women. In her forward to the first edition of *Women's Realities, Women's Choices*, a textbook produced by the Hunter College Women's Studies Collective (and the first introductory Women's Studies textbook ever published), Donna Shalala, then-president of Hunter College, wrote that the book "symbolizes the coming of age of the Women's Studies movement. Indeed, the substance of this book

represents years of struggle by courageous scholar-teachers, to be taken seriously by their more traditional colleagues.”

#### VICTIMS OF FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

How does a movement convinced of its own correctness and intent on transforming society deal with dissidents among its own flock? As we learn from Women’s Studies textbooks, women who don’t recognize their own oppression really aren’t to blame. As the authors of *Women’s Realities*, *Women’s Choices* remind us, “We have not been taught to use our critical faculties, and we have little self-esteem and few ways to develop it apart from society’s narrowly approving means.” Our only recourse to “survive in a world dominated by men” is the “internalization of society’s views” and surrender to the impulse to “shape ourselves according to this demeaning imagery.”

Indeed, if these textbooks are any guide, a vast force called “internalized oppression” haunts the female of the species. “As individuals within an oppressed group,” we are reminded, “we tend to accept the stereotypes of ourselves formulated by the dominant group in society, setting up a pattern of low self-esteem and isolation.” The textbook *Issues in Feminism* notes that “strong forces both within institutions, and within women, impel many women to be absorbed into the male worldview rather than to create a new one.” And we learn such things at our mother’s knees, “mothers who themselves were bent to the yoke as we are meant to be.” In a later chapter we find an extended section on “mind control as an instrument of patriarchy,” wherein women’s place in society is described as a form of slavery: “An even more perfect form of slavery was one in which the slaves were unaware of their condition, unaware that they were controlled, believing instead that they had freely chosen their life and situation. The control of women by patriarchy is effected in just such a way, by mastery of beliefs and atti-

tudes through the management of all the agencies of belief formation.” The author goes on to indict education, the media, social science, and religion for encouraging this bondage.

The media is a favorite villain in Women’s Studies textbooks’ discussions of false consciousness, for it constantly bombards women with negative images. As *Thinking About Women* tells us, “advertisements convey the message that women should be afraid—afraid of aging, afraid of food, afraid of being alone.” Even innocent condiments are not spared. The author of *Thinking About Women* calls the Native American woman kneeling on the Land O’ Lakes butter package a “gender and race stereotype.” Overall, “women tend to be portrayed in roles in which they are trivialized, condemned, or narrowly defined, resulting in the *symbolic annihilation* of women by the media.” Referring to content analyses of television programs, for example, the textbooks criticize a broad range of entertainment, particularly soap operas, where “strong, successful women are depicted as villains and ‘good’ women are seen as vulnerable and naïve.” The one quandary Women’s Studies textbooks doesn’t resolve is why so many people watch and enjoy these demeaning programs—and why the overwhelming majority of those people are women.

Finally, Women’s Studies textbooks urge their readers to combat false consciousness by working toward the formation of group consciousness. The author of *Women in American Society*, for example, writes that “women without a group consciousness simply regret their personal fault for their situation and do whatever they can as individuals to better themselves. When the system is rigged against them, such solutions are doomed to failure. Women with a group consciousness work to change the situation of women as a group.” Of course, the claim that the “system is rigged against” women is a strong assumption, one that should, at the very least, be buttressed with factual evidence. In sum, it is disquieting to see the ease with which Women’s Studies textbooks jettison notions of

individual responsibility in favor of an amorphous false consciousness.

### THE ROLE-MODEL MYTH

Although the media supposedly bombards us with negative images of women, history has also come up short when it comes to role models. Women's Studies textbooks assume that, in order to succeed, young women require female historical role models. Surveying the world of art, the authors of *Women's Realities*, *Women's Choices* ask, "How can subsequent generations of women avoid being discouraged by the assumption that there have been no important women artists?" They cite approvingly the work of feminist theorist Helen Vendler, who claims, "no woman can fail to hope for the appearance of a woman poet of Shakespearean or Keatsian power." But this assumes that women can't or shouldn't draw inspiration from male artists, who have, after all, produced some of civilization's most outstanding artistic work. Why shouldn't we encourage young women to emulate Shakespeare as well as Sappho—the latter a perennial favorite in Women's Studies textbooks?

Linked to the notion that women need their own personal pantheon of "herstorical" heroines is the idea that only women can speak to the experience of women at the level of theory. The author of *Thinking About Women* claims that "theories of social life centered in White men's experiences are unable to explain the experiences of women and people of color," surely news to the generations of white, male sociologists, psychologists, and theorists who have made important contributions to the study of human behavior.

### SEXUALITY

Women's Studies textbooks evince a special confusion on the issue of human sexuality. *Thinking About Women* begins its exposition

of human sexuality by claiming that we have all been ensnared in a web of "phallogocentric thinking," here defined as "that which assumes women need men for sexual arousal and satisfaction." Linked to this is "compulsory heterosexuality," a phrase coined by feminist theorist Adrienne Rich and frequently deployed in textbooks, to describe the "institutionalized practices that presume that women are innately sexually oriented toward men" and to explain how "heterosexuality is maintained by social control."

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Contemporary courtship comes under fire in textbooks as well. The authors of *Gender & Culture in America*, for example, fret about a "culture of romance" on college campuses. The culture of romance is the "world of flirtations, boyfriends, thoughts about marriage, and women's concerns about their physical attractiveness" that they believe "effectively subverts the career development of many young women" by drawing their energies away from pursuing professional success and toward ensnaring men. "It is clear that the culture of romance entails male privilege," the authors write, so "why don't more [women] resist?"

Although there is nothing wrong with studying the many manifestations of human sexuality, Women's Studies textbooks tend to empha-

size the exceptions rather than the rules. The facts are clear: A majority of the human population is heterosexual, and most people identify with one sex or the other. Yet *Thinking About Women* encourages readers to imagine a society with more than one gender: “Many cultures consider there to be three genders, or even more,” the author notes approvingly. Readers are then treated to a discussion of transgendered folks like the berdaches of Navajo society and the hijras of India—both cases of special classes of men who live as women. The author’s conclusion? “These examples are good illustrations of the cultural basis of gender” and suggest “how the dichotomous thinking that defines men and women as ‘either/or’ can be transformed.” Later, the textbook suggests that we should be “doing gender,” which means “rather than seeing gender as a fixed or learned set of roles, this framework interprets gender as an ongoing and fluctuating series of behaviors that is created through social interaction.”

In addition, sweeping claims such as “for women, sexuality seems to be more diverse, in contrast to the phallic-centered sexuality of men” and “lesbians, like heterosexual women, prefer romance, physical closeness, and intimacy—sex is less ‘goal-oriented’” offer readers no perspective on the many interesting and scholarly debates surrounding sexuality.

## MARRIAGE

Imagine you are a college freshman, enrolled in an introductory Women’s Studies course. You’ve learned about women’s oppression and have become comfortable with words such as “phallicentric” and “patriarchal.” But what about issues that hit a little closer to home? What does Women’s Studies have to say about things like marriage, children, and other questions on the minds of young women?

Not a lot that is positive, evidently. At the beginning of their chapter on “Wives,” the nine authors of *Women’s Realities*, *Women’s Choices* admit that “our experiences, whether or not we

were involved in stable, ‘happy’ marriages, led us to take a uniformly critical stance on this institution, to regard it as an instrument of social oppression.” A few pages later, they aver: “The institution of marriage and the role of ‘wife’ are intimately connected with the subordination of women in society in general. It is the constraints on women to engage freely in various social activities, whether in sexual intercourse, economic exchanges, politics, or war, that make us ‘dependent’ on men, that oblige us to become ‘wives.’” The authors’ use of scare quotes around words such as *wife* and *happy* in the passages above suggest an overwhelmingly cynical and pessimistic attitude toward marriage.

The author of *Thinking About Women* offers a similarly grim vision. “Although intimate relationships—whether sexual or not—are formed, in part, by the individual attitudes and attributes of those within them, they are significantly shaped by the institutional and historical context in which they develop. Thus, patriarchy, heterosexist institutions, the class structure, and racism all have a strong influence on the formation of intimacy.” This is a vision of intimacy that replaces “How do I love thee?” with “How do I love thee, let me count the heterosexist, patriarchal ways.” Later, the same textbook discusses in detail the “promise and disillusionment” of the “marriage myth.”

Women’s Studies textbooks also enjoy repeating the helpful statistic that “married women have higher rates of mental disorder than do married men, but single, divorced, and widowed women have lower rates of mental disorder than do similarly situated men,” as *Women in American Society* notes. Yet the fact that more married women suffer from mental illness than do single women doesn’t tell us anything about whether or not marriage *caused* their mental illness. Correlation is not causation.

Not everyone who enters the married state loses, of course. According to Women’s Studies textbooks, men are greedy benefactors of the institution. The authors of *Women’s Realities*, *Women’s Choices* state, “on balance, it would ap-

pear that husbands gain much more than wives. They not only gain domestic servants, sexual companions, and producers of children but also political assets and instruments for acquiring allies." *Issues in Feminism* suggests a similar arrangement, one where men "benefit considerably from marriage, whereas women lose a great deal." This should "come as no surprise," we are told, because "in terms of emotional exchange, economics, work, independence, freedom and mobility, autonomy and authenticity—traditional marriage offers to women and men a double standard, and women's part of that standard is truly the less advantaged."

It is only after the laundry list of charges against marriage is read that Women's Studies textbooks grudgingly admit that it is not a universally reviled institution. *Women's Realities*, *Women's Choices* admits, "not all marriages are glum and terminally doomed. Many women enjoy being married." Nonetheless, the authors conclude that "today's economic and social climate, in which many women earn our own incomes and have choices concerning whether and when to have children, favors experimentation with new forms of commitment and family life."

#### DOMESTICITY

Women's Studies textbooks are also nearly universally critical of domesticity. The topic is introduced with an obligatory nod to its assumed oppressiveness: In *Women's Realities*, *Women's Choices*, for example, the authors cite the obscure short stories of a Japanese woman named Yamamoto Michiko, whose work "gives a glimpse of the hidden frustration, guilt, and boredom of housewives." From this one example, the authors go on to claim that "Yamamoto's stories speak for millions of women of all nationalities." What upsets the authors of Women's Studies textbooks is not the fact that women do work around the house; it's that they end up doing more than men, on average. *Thinking About Women* begins with a litany of examples of women's oppression in contempo-

rary society. Included on the list: "employed women work, on average, an additional 33 hours per week on household tasks, not including child care; the average for employed men is 20 hours."

The textbook *Issues in Feminism* is a bit more blunt: "Because women do the 'shitwork' of society (as the movement refers to all the work men do not wish to do) men are free to spend their time on socially valued activities for which they receive all kinds of material and psychological rewards." Later, the textbook makes plain its vision of the domestic life as one of tiresome and tedious drudgery: "The tasks of housekeeping are themselves no joy," the author writes. "However glorified in the media, housework in the real world is boring, ugly, tiresome, repetitive, unsatisfying, and lonely work." Yet what of the spate of recent books that attempt to reclaim the domestic realm as a place of creativity and interest for women? Domestic goddess Martha Stewart has built an empire on this theme, while former lawyer and philosophy professor Cheryl Mendelson, author of *Home Comforts: The Art and Science of Keeping House*, has shown, as the subtitle of her book suggests, that domesticity is both an art and a science, not a conspiracy by a patriarchal cabal.

The stay-at-home mother comes in for withering criticism in Women's Studies textbooks as well. *Women in American Society* states that "women who take traditional gender norms at face value and become full-time mothers and homemakers are rewarded by being the most economically and psychologically vulnerable of all women." The authors of *Gender & Culture in America* take a swipe at the "Father Knows Best" 1950s in their textbook. "Hidden away in many of those suburban homes of the 1950s were drinking problems, bickering spouses, abusive relationships, and bored wives." The "glorified cultural ideal" of the 1950s, they argue, is incorrect and harmful to women. The author of *Thinking About Women* doesn't waste time thinking about women who care for their families full-time. "Research finds that they tend to hold

social and political beliefs that emphasize the natural basis and moral superiority of gender differences; they definitely see motherhood as more satisfying than paid work.” As a result, the author claims, “some view employed women as selfish and dangerous to children, but they also frown on men who shirk responsibility for their children’s support.” The problem here is not that stay-at-home moms are presented as sometimes resentful of working women; it is that similar feelings of ambivalence and stereotypes exist among working women about stay-at-home mothers as well. Yet the textbook author chose not to mention that fact.

Other textbooks present complicated questions about women, work, and childrearing in simplistic ways meant to encourage the view that women should work outside the home—and that working in the home, by implication, is bad. The author of *Issues in Feminism* writes that “evidence shows a slightly higher inclination to autonomy and adaptability in children whose moms work, not bad traits altogether. But how much guilt have women suffered and are still suffering because ‘science’ scared them to death?” In fact, social science research on the effects on children of having working mothers is much more complicated and contested terrain than this summary suggests.

The closest any of the textbooks surveyed came to offering a more complicated view of domesticity was in *Thinking About Women*, which reminded readers that “it would be a mistake to see the housewife role as totally oppressive, for many women find this work both creative and satisfying, especially when compared with the jobs most women occupy in the paid labor force.” Yet, later, the same textbook describes domestic tasks as potentially toxic: “the work women do in the home exposes them to a wide variety of toxic substances; moreover, none of these substances is subject to the control systems advocated for use in industrial settings,” facts that lead the author of the textbook to sense a conspiracy, though one noticeably free of factual substantiation—“because housework

is seldom considered to be real work, little public attention has been given to the carcinogens and toxic substances used, nor has the high death rate by cancer among housewives been widely discussed.”

Finally, it is worth asking where the voices of women who have written compellingly about domesticity are in these textbooks. Writers such as F. Carolyn Graglia, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Danielle Crittenden, among others, have described the joys of domestic life. Why don’t Women’s Studies textbooks include their points of view?

## MOTHERHOOD AND THE FAMILY

Motherhood has always been a fraught issue for feminists; it is for avatars of Women’s Studies as well. On the whole, Women’s Studies textbooks err on the side of portraying motherhood as a burden for women, something to be overcome. The authors of *Women’s Realities*, *Women’s Choices*, for example, spend time deconstructing eighteenth-century artwork—or “painting as propaganda,” as they call it—for the hidden messages it supposedly sent about motherhood. The “clear moral message” is that “women should be ecstatically happy in the home making babies.”

Modern motherhood fares no better. In *Thinking About Women*, readers are told that “in U.S. society, motherhood is typically characterized by its isolation” and that, because of that isolation, “the experience of motherhood then becomes a mixture of satisfaction and pleasure plus anger, frustration, and bitterness.” Worse, childcare becomes another obstacle for women to overcome. The same textbook notes peevishly that “although it is more and more impractical to do so, mothers usually have the major responsibility for the everyday care of their children.”

Even the process of childbirth itself is suspect. *Thinking About Women* sums up the situation thus: “Although some reforms are being introduced, feminists argue that the process of

childbirth still remains one of the fundamental ways in which women's reproductive abilities are subordinated to the definitions, practices, and controls of men."

A noticeable bias in favor of daycare is also present in Women's Studies textbooks. *Women's Realities*, *Women's Choices*, for example, complains that "the United States in the 1990s stands almost alone among industrialized societies in having a very limited national family policy with regard to such social supports as family allowances, mandatory parental leaves, and child care facilities." No mention is made of the fact that survey data reveal that Americans find institutionalized daycare settings the least desirable forms of childcare. In general, Women's Studies textbooks advocate more government intervention in family life. *Women in American Society*, for example, notes that "U.S. policy now mandates the availability of parental leave for new parents, but it is the stingiest such program among the leading industrialized nations." The textbook goes on to argue that "there has been inadequate effort to provide care for the children of working mothers."

The nuclear family is also not favored with a great deal of space or rave reviews in these textbooks; like marriage and motherhood, the nuclear family is treated as a suspicious patriarchal institution. When it is mentioned at all, it is usually to outline its many deficiencies. In *Gender & Culture in America*, for example, a page and a half is considered sufficient to cover the "companionate family," while eight pages are given over to a detailed description of gay and lesbian life. *Thinking About Women* serves up a very critical portrait of the nuclear family; a typical sentence reads: "The assumption that families are based on a harmony of interests is also challenged by research on the power that men and women have within families." Yet, several pages later in a discussion of cohabitation, only a single allusion to the sociological data on the instability of such arrangements (compared to marriage) is made ("some [researchers] also find higher rates of violence among cohabitators than among

spouses") but the section ends with what is essentially an endorsement: "those most likely to cohabit [are] more likely to have favorable attitudes toward gender equality and nontraditional gender roles."

Women's Studies textbooks also tend to offer feminist critiques of the family uncritically; absent the voices of critics of this worldview, students take from the textbooks a very jaundiced view of family life. One textbook noted that "the modern form of the family leads women to be economically and emotionally dependent on men, and, as a result, the traditional family is a source of social conflict and a haven only for men."

## FATHERHOOD

Women's Studies textbooks reach a particularly distressing level of bias in their discussions of fatherhood. In *Women's Realities*, *Women's Choices*, for example, the authors spend two pages outlining the supposed ubiquitousness of incest and child abuse perpetrated by fathers. It is only after laying out their case against fathers (a case not supported by any hard data, it should be noted) that the authors grudgingly concede: "Fathers can, of course, be very supportive." They end their discourse on fatherhood with this: "At present, it appears that domineering fathers may provoke reactions in their daughters that release our feminist impulses and creative potential." Or consider this description, also from *Women's Realities*, *Women's Choices*: "Our relationships with our fathers can be fraught with tension and instability. Daughters often find ourselves in league with our mothers against the foreign male element represented by the father."

What is galling about these textbooks' portraits of fatherhood is that they assume that bad fathers are the rule rather than the exception. Later, while noting the obvious—that fathers in the U.S. are often very involved in the rearing of their children—the textbook states, "getting fathers to make an equal contribution to child care is still a distant goal for most women."

## STICKS AND STONES: GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

All of these textbooks point to the gendered quality of language as a culprit in women's oppression. *Women's Realities*, *Women's Choices* claims that the use of non-gender neutral language "tends to reinforce sexist behavior and organization in our society, to promote stereotyping by gender, and to perpetuate inequality." Gender-biased language effectively silences women. The authors of *Women's Realities*, *Women's Choices* tell us that "women, raised in a world where the dominant model of reality is male-created, may characteristically be less articulate because we must express ourselves through the dominant, male-oriented discourse." *Thinking About Women* reminds us that language issues are not trivial; "the practice of using the word *man* to refer generically to all people makes women invisible."

This is not merely a matter of replacing "human being" wherever one finds the word "man." One textbook went so far as to indict the words "input," "plugs into," "thrust," and "penetrate" as phallic interlopers. Worse, they present caricatured versions of male speech in order to prove their point. One textbook offered this example: "Women's Language: Oh dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again, haven't you? Men's Language: Shit, you've put the damn peanut butter in the refrigerator again." Evidently the Y chromosome leads to excesses of profanity, though no source for this exchange or evidence of men's propensity for profanity is presented.

## POLITICAL BIAS

If one were to sum up the prevalent theme in Women's Studies textbooks' assessment of recent politics, it would be: Ronald Reagan as the root of all evil and affirmative action as the answer to all prayers. "Many of the gains women achieved during the late 1960s and 1970s were reversed under the Reagan administration," we

are told by the authors of *Women's Realities*, *Women's Choices*, although the only concrete example provided is the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's decision to reject comparable worth—a decision that received the imprimatur of the federal courts. Statements that are clearly a matter of opinion are presented as fact, such as: "When the Reagan administration eliminated the right of abortion for Medicaid recipients and opposed abortion globally, it was a loss for all women's rights."

Affirmative action is presented uncritically in the textbooks as well. For example, in *Thinking About Women*, at the conclusion of a chapter on "Women, Work, and the Economy," readers are offered a description of affirmative action as "bringing new opportunities to women and racial minority groups" and told that "as the evidence in this chapter would support, that, as long as the society is structured (even in less-visible ways) along gender-, class-, and race-stratified lines, seemingly 'neutral' or color-blind policies cannot transform the institutional structures." Not surprisingly, critics of affirmative action are not given a hearing; instead, they are referred to simply as "white males" who make untenable charges of "reverse discrimination."

Second only to Reagan as villainous representative of the patriarchy is former Vice President Dan Quayle, who will forever be pilloried by feminists for his "Murphy Brown" speech—wherein he criticized the notion that single parenthood was a glamorous and harmless lifestyle choice. *Women's Realities*, *Women's Choices*, for example, begins its chapter on family by mentioning Quayle's speech—though, predictably, the textbook did not mention that Quayle was, in fact, correct in his assertions about the dangers for children of growing up with a single parent; his conclusions were buttressed by a lengthy *Atlantic Monthly* article, "Dan Quayle Was Right," written by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead.

Other textbooks prefer straightforward political screeds, as in *Issues in Feminism*. By the sec-



ond page of the preface, we are told: “Anti-feminist, antiwoman forces on the right have whittled away at our demands for human parity, for reproductive autonomy, and for economic justice, and today they promise continued assault. The 1990s have given us the Contract on America [sic], the virulent racism and misogyny of the religious and political right, attacks against the poorest and most vulnerable among us.” The litany continues, indicting “anti-woman pseudo-feminists, to patriarchy-worshipping ‘Promise Keepers,’ to social ‘scientists’ suddenly discovering and suddenly becoming concerned about absent fathers and negative (or nonexistent) male role models.” This is the very same textbook that, five pages later, says without a trace of irony, “most of us [in Women’s Studies] try to encourage and be open to ideas even when they are very different from our own.”

Anything remotely linked to the political “Right,” never thoroughly defined in the textbooks, is suspect. Even the more moderate authors of *Gender & Culture in America* can’t resist taking a few gratuitous swipes at conservatives. Describing reformers concerned about the family in the early twentieth century (who engaged in things such as opposition to birth control and stricter divorce laws), they write, “like the New Right movement today, this was an attempt to turn the clock back to an earlier tradition.”

#### CRITICS OF FEMINISM

Women’s Studies textbooks have not, for the most part, followed the injunction to “know thine enemy.” Rather, they offer myopic and often inaccurate summaries of the views of their intellectual opponents. Some books do not even bother to present the views of conservatives; they state, without citing a single specific source, that “conservatives nearly always undermine their credibility by upholding economic as well as social privileges at odds with the moral principles they espouse,” as the authors of *Women’s Realities, Women’s Choices*

claim. *Thinking About Women* is satisfied with stating that “feminism is threatening to those who want to protect the status quo.”

When they are discussed, conservatives are portrayed as either a vague menace or a cartoonish crowd. They are described as people who have “claimed to be concerned about many aspects of life important to women,” but who in practice are not. *Issues in Feminism*, for example, includes a selection from a *Ms.* magazine article by Susan Faludi called, “I’m Not a Feminist, but I Play One on TV,” wherein she portrays critics of feminism as “Pod Feminists” hellbent on destroying women’s opportunities. The author of *Issues in Feminism* introduces the selection by arguing that Faludi’s piece is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the backlash, which includes “a spate of very visible women, educated and successful, popular with the media and antifeminist conservative groups.”

Needless to say, Faludi’s is a less-than-objective assessment of these women (and of the Independent Women’s Forum, which is included as a member of the Pod). Although it is not necessarily unreasonable to include such an article in a debate about feminism and its critics, the piece is paired with a critical essay by University of Massachusetts professor Daphne Patai called “What’s Wrong with Women’s Studies,” that is introduced as “within the genre” of the backlash outlined by Faludi. Later, in an introduction to a selection, “Antifeminism,” by Andrea Dworkin, the author of *Issues in Feminism* notes that “antifeminism supports the present abusive gender system as natural and desirable; it opposes women’s freedom and it denigrates our selfhood.” Thus the textbook positively prejudices readers when selections support feminism, but negatively prejudices them when they do not.

In these scenarios, Women’s Studies and feminism are portrayed as the correct cause, as, for example, when the author of *Thinking About Women* writes that “the right-wing attack on being ‘PC’ (*i.e.*, ‘politically correct’) has thus been strongly directed at women’s studies programs and scholars, as well as those who pro-

mote more democratic, antielitist, and multicultural education.” Thus, critics of Women’s Studies and related area studies are juxtaposed with people promoting good things such as democracy and antielitism, unfairly tarring critics of women’s studies as opponents of these things.

In *Issues in Feminism*, without offering even a summary of critics’ views, the author claims that opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment made their argument “on grounds both hysterical and spurious.” Later, she notes that “the minority opposed to ERA were apparently entrenched in the power structure, better supported financially, and better organized” than supporters. No mention is made of the fact that a woman, Phyllis Schlafly, spearheaded the opposition, or of the successful arguments she made.

The closest any textbook came to offering a fair assessment of the views of feminists’ conservative opponents was in a section on women and work in *Issues in Feminism*, where the author notes that “several of the New Right think tanks have begun to push the notion that because the percentage of women in professional schools has climbed and because there are women earning high salaries at the top, equality has been achieved and affirmative action is no longer necessary.” Although a crude summary that fails to take into account the central issue of women’s individual choices in the workplace, this is accurate so far as it goes—although the author can’t resist reminding her readers that it is a “current myth” that women have equal opportunity in the workplace. Nevertheless, readers are not provided with the name of a specific think tank engaged in such research in either the text or the notes for this section.

Conservative religious values are belittled as well. The Promise Keepers, an evangelical Christian movement founded in 1990 that seeks to strengthen men’s role in families as fathers and husbands, comes in for especially harsh criticism. *Issues in Feminism* informs readers that “the men of the ‘Promise Keepers’ are not friends to feminism. . . . Their intention is to reassert the

traditional relations between the sexes, to rebuild the patriarchal system under the rubric of ‘family values,’ and to restore the power of men over women, of husbands over wives.” Another textbook, *Thinking About Women*, states: “Although appeals to family values at times stem from genuine concern about troubled families, they also represent a conservative view that regards many new family forms as symbolic of all that has gone wrong with the traditional values in the society.” Later, in a larger chapter on women and religion, the author claims that “the religious right” perceives “feminism, liberalism, and humanism as threatening to Christian values” and goes on to argue that “they support prayer in the public schools, preferred tax status for Christian schools, and other policies that would ensure women’s subordination to male authority.” Many Christian conservatives would take issue with the claim that they are opposed to liberalism and humanism; others would note that there is no evidence to support the claim that giving tax breaks to parochial schools ensures women’s subordination.

On the whole, the authors of these textbooks seem positively baffled that any woman would consider herself politically or religiously conservative. *Thinking About Women* notes that “one of the puzzling features of the religious and political right is that many of its activists are women. How can women be so numerous in a movement that to many seems so antagonistic to women’s interests?” The author of this textbook chalks it up to a form of “status anxiety,” one hinging on women’s fears of threats to their traditional arrangement of dependence on men.

#### OTHER BIASES

Several of the textbooks also demonstrated deep suspicions about capitalism. The authors of *Women’s Realities*, *Women’s Choices*, for example, state approvingly that “many contemporary social critics point out that the modern corporation is an extraordinarily undemocratic institution and that the vast disparities of wealth

and income and inherited position between rich and poor in an economic system such as that of the United States are incompatible with the spirit and principles of democracy.” No mention is made of the contributions corporations make to the economy, nor is space given to the views of those who have written persuasively, from a different perspective, about wealth disparities.

Similarly, the same textbook praises feminists for advocating “units of economic activity in which a concern for the environment and for providing satisfying work is more important than either profits or high salaries. We seek work arrangements that will encourage cooperative and egalitarian rather than hierarchical and coercive interaction among members.” The potential problems posed by nonhierarchical organizational structures are not discussed.

War also raises the hackles of Women’s Studies textbook authors; *Women’s Realities*, *Women’s Choices* says that one of its goals is to “change the culture,” to one that “fosters mutuality and respect, and in which disputes are settled without violence or war or imperialistic ventures.” War is viewed as a negative outgrowth of masculinity. *Issues in Feminism* asks querulously, “Who creates weapons and marches off to war? Who hunts and kills living creatures for fun? Who fights for kicks? Who pillages the earth for profit? Who colonizes and exploits? What destruction could [women] have wrought that even nearly compares?”

Similarly, textbooks offer a one-sided view of contentious issues such as women in combat, falling back on pat statements such as “wars today no longer depend on physical strength, which disqualified most women previously.” *Thinking About Women* claims that “the exclusion of women from full participation in the military has been justified by the belief that women need protection by men and that they can best carry

out their womanly duties as wives and mothers.” Debates over the effects on military readiness, morale, and unit cohesion in gender-integrated training and deployment situations are ignored altogether, as are readiness-related questions regarding women’s ability to meet certain physical standards in training. This is not surprising considering the overall tone Women’s Studies textbooks adopt regarding the military. *Thinking About Women* notes that feminists are often stern critics of “militaristic values,” summarizing their position as follows: “The military is a perfect example of a gendered institution in that it is characterized as a most masculine institution, one emphasizing hierarchy, force, violence, and aggression.”

Guns are a sore subject too. The author of *Women in American Society* reveals her bias when she says, “It is unfortunate, but perhaps not a surprise, that the number of women interested in buying guns doubled in the 1980s. . . . The NRA [National Rifle Association] has worked hard—and successfully—to recruit women, using newsletters, a web page, and a series of seminars called ‘Refuse to be a Victim.’” Whatever one thinks about the issue of gun ownership and gun control, this presentation of the subject is heavily biased against people who favor gun ownership.

Ultimately, the myriad errors of interpretation in Women’s Studies textbooks stem from the authors’ unwillingness to engage with critics. One author wrote frankly, “feminism is perceived as a skewing of reality. Feminists would argue, however, that it is the traditional male-defined image of reality that is skewed.” Unfortunately, because they are in the business of “transforming knowledge,” the authors of Women’s Studies textbooks give themselves plenty of leeway with regard to those pesky things that make up reality: facts. 📖

## IV. Sins of Omission

Besides errors of fact and interpretation, Women's Studies textbooks suffer from sins of omission—they often present only one side of a question, omitting arguments or facts that are relevant but that prove an uncomfortable fit with their feminist agenda.

### MISSING PERSONS

In spite of their complaints about women's exclusion from so much of history and social science ("women have generally tended to be excluded from recorded public discourse and confined to the domestic sphere"), and their concern that "women's point of view" gain an adequate hearing, Women's Studies textbooks are remarkably effective at ignoring their critics. "Women's point of view" evidently does not allow for much diversity of opinion.

Conservative women leaders, when mentioned at all, are usually depicted as traitors to their sex. Margaret Thatcher can be found in only two of the five books surveyed here. But she and other more conservative women rulers are described thus: "The movement suffers when successful women disavow women's struggles, fail to encourage and admire other women, and are not proud of our female heritage. We have all seen women of great accomplishments disavow women's causes, as though they themselves were not women. Florence Nightingale, Helene Deutsch, Golda Meir, and Margaret Thatcher are all examples of women who turned from other women."

Similarly, in the one book where she is mentioned specifically (*Women in American Society*)

anti-Equal Rights Amendment crusader Phyllis Schlafly's name is misspelled. Otherwise, in discussions of the failure to pass an Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, blame is laid at the feet of "ultraconservatives" whose views are neither individually identified nor given an honest airing.

World leaders whom the Women's Studies crowd admires are given the kid glove treatment. "It is a courageous defiance on the part of Benazir Bhutto to break through these constructed images" of womanhood in her country, we are told in *Women's Realities, Women's Choices*, with no mention made of the corruption charges that plagued her tenure as Prime Minister of Pakistan. And when it comes to power behind the throne, Women's Studies textbooks are no more bipartisan. In *Women's Realities, Women's Choices*, for example, a discussion of the power wielded by First Ladies in American history yields praise only for the wives of Democrats (Edith Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Hillary Rodham Clinton are the favored trio). Whatever one thought of their style and tactics, both Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush surely warrant a nod in terms of their influence. The textbook *Thinking About Women* paints former First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton as a long-suffering heroine, someone "publicly ridiculed and hailed as out of line for trying to share power with her husband." The lesson the textbook author draws from this experience is that "some women can move into politics, but it is still a man's world—where women are not expected to exercise equal power." Another lesson that could be drawn is that much of the criti-

cism of Hillary Clinton's role as First Lady was not that women shouldn't exercise power, but that they should first be *elected* to exercise it, particularly when it comes to complicated and divisive public policy issues such as a national health care system.

Scholars who refuse to toe the feminist line are also ignored. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese is mentioned only once, in passing, in *Gender & Culture in America*, despite her groundbreaking work in books such as *Feminism Without Illusions* and *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life*. Otherwise, she and other more conservative theorists are not discussed. The iconoclastic Camille Paglia appears once as well, in *Women's Realities, Women's Choices*, and is described as someone who "assails feminists for what she regards as dull rhetoric." Women such as Clare Booth Luce and Ayn Rand don't warrant a mention. Sins of omission are also evident in textbooks' tendency to edit out uncomfortable facts about some of their heroines. Only one of the textbooks surveyed mentions that early twentieth-century birth control crusader Margaret Sanger harbored racist and eugenic views; similarly, while praise is heaped on suffragists such as Susan B. Anthony, the more conservative elements of their philosophies (such as their opposition to abortion) are ignored.

Of course, compiling a textbook requires making choices about who will and who won't be included. But the choices made by the authors of Women's Studies textbooks suggest a great deal about the limits of their worldview.

#### TELLING ONLY PART OF THE STORY

Women's Studies textbooks are also riddled with statements meant to obscure facts that might mar the image of women as victims of oppression. Take the issue of occupational hazards. Women's Studies textbooks such as *Women's Realities, Women's Choices* glibly note, "although men get injured at work more often than women, women suffer illness related to

work conditions that are harder to detect and less often reported." What this statement glosses over is the vast difference between men and women when it comes to the likelihood of injury or death on the job. U.S. Department of Labor's 1997 "Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries" revealed that 92 percent of all job-related deaths are male.

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A similar myopia plagues textbooks' discussions of eating disorders. *Thinking About Women* indicts our "culture of thinness," devoting two pages to a discussion of anorexia and bulimia. "One consequence of this cultural obsession with weight and thinness is the high rate of anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and compulsive eating among women." The textbook even contains several paragraphs about the special eating problems of racial and ethnic minorities, approvingly citing the work of a feminist theorist who studied African American, Latina, and white lesbian women and argues that "compulsive eating, bulimia, and anorexia are not so much linked to women's obsession with appearance as they are responses the women have developed to soothe the distress they feel as the result of poverty, sexual abuse, racism, and/or homophobia." Yet, unmentioned in this discussion (whose heading is "Women, Weight, and Food") are the skyrocketing rates of obesity in the U.S.—far higher than rates of anorexia or bulimia—that create serious health problems for women, particularly African American women, whose rates of obesity are among the highest of any group.

on the issue of body image. *Issues in Feminism*, for example, offers a section on “Our Bodies: Negotiable Chattel,” that claims, “it is men who determine not only how we must behave but also how we must present ourselves. Through fashion, through law, through ‘science’ or religion, we are told how we ought to appear. . . . It is men who design fashions and control the media, the advertising, the magazines, the films, the cosmetic firms, and the department stores, and who ultimately manipulate women into believing that it is we who set the trends.” Of course, factually, this is incorrect; many women work in the media, advertising, magazine, and cosmetics industries. Additionally, women are

the editors of the fashion magazines that serve as the arbiters of these changing body image styles. Are we to believe that Anna Wintour, editor in chief of *Vogue*, is a tool of the patriarchy, and her legions of female readers merely dupes?

### *An Aside: Errors of Taste*

Women’s Studies textbooks also suffer from serious errors of taste. Graphic photos of women performing do-it-yourself pelvic exams; fishnet-clad drag queens; a naked woman embracing her equally naked mother—ostensibly to represent generational differences—are typical. 📖

## V. Conclusion

Women's Studies textbooks often remark on the positive, transformative experience of their students. After taking an introductory course, one student told the author of *Issues in Feminism* that she “finally found me.” Another said, “I have more pride. I am more confident in myself as a woman.” But what have these women actually learned?

In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, historian Gerda Lerner argued, “women have for millennia participated in the process of their own subordination because they have been psychologically shaped so as to internalize the idea of their own inferiority.” She claimed that if women learned their own “history of struggle and achievement,” they would no longer so easily accept that subordination. Similarly, many Women's Studies textbooks decry the marginalized position women experienced educationally for so much of history and quote admiringly from the work of Helene Cixous, a contemporary French feminist theorist, who urged women to find their voices and speak out, claiming that they “shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem.”

But Women's Studies has encouraged this process of internalizing subordination and inferiority by promoting a message of women-as-victims, albeit one coated more palatably as empowerment and overlaid with tones of self-righteousness. It has turned itself into Cixous' marginalized harem by endorsing a worldview based on fiction, not fact.

Women's Studies textbooks teach that patriarchy is a pervasive force—that “sexism is built into almost everything that women do or that is

done to us. It is lodged in the most personal facets of our lives as well as in the most public,” as the textbook *Thinking About Women* describes it. As a result, the textbooks explain, women need to be reeducated along the lines proposed by Women's Studies. Yet there is more than a whiff of condescension in the tone of these textbooks, as we are led down the primrose path of patriarchy to the realization that we are all, indeed, members of a subordinated group who, heretofore, have been victims of false consciousness.

Women's Studies textbooks also take as their measurement of equality a misguided notion of statistical parity between men and women. The authors of *Gender & Culture in America*, for example, argue that “gender equality” is “the degree to which men and women have similar kinds or degrees of power, status, autonomy, and authority.” *Thinking About Women* complains that “women are underrepresented among those who are responsible for interpreting and exercising the law” and states baldly that “we contend that the socialization process and the structure of society, not ‘natural’ capacities, account for the different levels of achievement and motivation in women and men.” This rigid notion of parity assumes that women and men can and should pursue the same things. Complementarity of the sexes is rejected.

As we have seen, these texts also teach Women's Studies students that dismissive—even contemptuous—and shoddy summaries of their opponents' work is an appropriate intellectual response to ideas that challenge one's own.

Finally, Women's Studies textbooks encourage a form of groupthink that does a disservice to the mission of a liberal arts education: to encourage the development of students as individuals and to expose them to the widest array of knowledge possible. In *Thinking About Women*, Margaret Andersen writes that "anthropologists study social myths to gain an insight into the culture and social organization of a people. Myths provide an interpretation of social truths, beliefs and relationships that guide a society in its vision of the past, present, and future. They establish a 'universe of discourse' that integrates and controls its members; gives them a common reality; and creates structures for what is said, done, and believed." Women's Studies engages in much myth-making; unfortunately, myth-making is not scholarship.

In the end, practitioners of Women's Studies

have become like the "projectors" in the Academy on Laputa, the Floating Island in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The projectors work mindlessly on perfecting wholly misguided ideas such as making clothes by means of trigonometry and extracting sunbeams from cucumbers. Women's Studies textbooks present the views of their own "projectors," whose "truths" are stranger than fiction. By limiting the scope of intellectual inquiry, by misrepresenting or ignoring their critics, and by ignoring facts in favor of myth, Women's Studies textbooks encourage students to embrace grievement, not knowledge. As its textbooks demonstrate, the field of Women's Studies has turned "rooms of their own" into narrow intellectual prisons presided over by matriarchs of mediocrity who mistake ideology for learning and scholarship. 📖



## A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This is not a comprehensive assessment of every Women's Studies textbook on the market. Rather, a smaller number of books were chosen based on the frequency with which they appeared on syllabi for introductory Women's Studies courses. (The syllabi were drawn from the Women's Studies database at the University of Maryland, College Park, and those posted on-line by individual Women's Studies departments.) Additionally, an informal survey of reviews of Women's Studies textbooks in journals such as the *National Women's Studies Association Journal* and *Signs* was made. When possible, the most recent edition of a textbook was examined. It should also be noted that some introductory courses in Women's Studies do not assign textbooks; rather, instructors compile "readers" of material—usually feminist essays and articles—from which assignments are drawn. Such readers are not easily available for public purchase.

### TEXTBOOKS

Andersen, Margaret L. *Thinking About Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender*, 5th edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

Hunter College Women's Studies Collective. *Women's Realities, Women's Choices: An Introduction to Women's Studies*, 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Ruth, Sheila. *Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women's Studies*, 4th edition. California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1998.

Sapiro, Virginia. *Women in American Society: An Introduction to Women's Studies*, 4th edition. California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1999.

Stone, Linda, and Nancy P. McKee. *Gender & Culture in America*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999.

### SYLLABI SURVEYED

Syllabi from introductory Women's Studies courses (or similar courses) were examined from the following schools:

Allegheny College  
Boston University  
Central Oregon Community College  
Clemson University  
College of Charleston  
Colorado College  
Dartmouth  
Gettysburg College  
Iowa State University  
Kenyon College  
Lexington Community College  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
New Mexico State University  
Oberlin College  
San Diego State University  
Syracuse University  
Tulane University  
Union College  
University of Arizona  
University of California, Los Angeles  
University of Connecticut  
University of Maine, Farmington  
University of Maryland, College Park  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
University of Michigan  
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill  
University of Rhode Island  
University of Wisconsin, Madison  
Vassar College  
Virginia Tech







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