**Paper code: MCL081116**

## Legacies of poststructural feminism in education

Julie McLeod
Melbourne Graduate School of Education,
The University of Melbourne
Victoria, 3010,
Australia
jemcleod@unimelb.edu.au

**Paper presented as part of the symposium 'Reconsidering 'gender and education: Questions from and about the field'**
**Annual conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, QUT, Brisbane, November 30-December 4th 2008,**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

[G]ender is regarded (and lived) by contemporary young scholars and activists raised on poststructuralism as something that can be bent, proliferated, troubled, resignified, morphed, theatricalised, parodied, deployed, resisted, imitated, regulated…but not emancipated.
Wendy Brown, (2005) *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Power*, p.111.

No normative conclusion – this is bad, this must be overthrown – can legitimately be drawn from the fact that something is discovered to be socially constructed; for by the logic of deconstructive thought everything is; which doesn't mean that a social construction cannot be criticized, only that it cannot be criticized for being one.
Stanley Fish (2008) 'French Theory in America', *New York Times*, April 6th

This paper explores the status and implications of poststructural feminism in education, addressing the contemporary state of play by initially considering some of its antecedents.[1] The aim is to identify characteristics and effects of this

---

[1] A version of this paper will appear as Julie McLeod (2009) ' What *was* poststructural feminism in education?' in . Apple, M. W., Au, W., & Gandin, L. A. (2009). *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education*. New York: Routledge.

body of work rather than provide an extensive review of the vast range of theoretical and methodological material written under the sign of poststructuralism/ feminism/education, or an in-depth discussion of how it has informed empirical studies in educational research – of which there are many. Instead, I began thinking about this topic by posing the question: 'What *was* poststructural feminism in education?' This question, in equal parts serious and tongue-in-cheek, was prompted by a small magazine, one now almost hidden away at the far end of my bookshelf, entitled *What was postmodernism?* and published in 1991 (Frow 1991). I would ponder this title as I first read my way through the sometimes exciting, sometimes predictable accounts of how feminism and poststructuralism did or did not go together. I was bemused by the way the simple gesture of the past tense so quickly and deftly deflated ambitions and historicized a 'cultural turn'.

Recalling this now, I approach questions about the status of poststructural feminism and education in a somewhat quizzical and historical mood. I attempt to interpret these ideas not only as a group of theories that challenged thinking and research practice, but as a kind of historical phenomenon that has represented a particular zeitgeist about 'theory', about feminism, and about educational reform.  These observations are developed via two main routes: first, in relation to emphasised themes and ambitions in the recent history of poststructural feminist thinking in education; and second in response to contemporary re-assessments of the purpose, legacy and history of 'Theory' in the post 1960s humanities and social sciences. Within an overall view that looks historically at the formation and characteristics of the field, I draw out two significant features. First, I argue that one of the most significant impacts of poststructural feminism on educational research was its attention to subjectivity and I examine how an emphasis on identity construction and de/re-construction has played out in gender equity reform and policy. Second, I document influential 'founding' debates about definitions and the proper purposes of poststructural feminism, marking out the major points of disagreement and convergence. I show how such debates constituted the field along polarised lines of 'good' or 'bad' and note some of the sticking points in these disputes. In my final comments, I compare these earlier debates with more recent discussions regarding the purposes and 'future' of feminist theory in the wake of

poststructural interrogations of the subject and a sense of a radically disrupted present.

As a member of the generation whose coming of age paralleled the rise of poststructuralism in educational and feminist research, it is not surprising that my writing was and continues to be influenced by a range of ideas falling within that ever-widening category. My engagement has been accompanied by an interest in the history and effects of poststructuralism, an attempt to extend the spirit of its deconstructive, anti-essentialist, anti-teleological critique to understand its own formation, and the historicity of its moment and truth claims (McLeod 1998; 2001b).  I am someone, then, who in various if provisional ways has thought of my work as located within the territory of poststructuralism and feminism; and I hear myself hailed by others, my researcher subjectivity interpellated as such. But I have also always felt some ambivalence about that identification, not because of the ideas and ways of seeing that it encompassed but because of what felt like the cementing in place of an identity that aligned with a research formula. In an earlier discussion of poststructuralism and education, I argued that it felt dangerously close to becoming another orthodoxy, a normalizing discourse that was not always reflexive about its own truth claims (McLeod 2001a). Reflecting now, I find a certain irony in writing about a body of theory so much shaped, heralded, reviled and embraced as the 'new' but which now seems so familiar, so 'old', so much part of educational research – in conference programs and presentations, in graduate dissertations, in scholarly and informal discussions, This is not to say that it is completely mainstream and domesticated, or that it has lost its analytical edge. It is merely an observation about how theoretical agendas are historically embedded. And this is particularly striking for agendas that have a history of being oppositional and of being strongly defined by differentiation from the old and 'the past', in this case, from humanism or modernism or the Enlightenment.

Of course, neither poststructuralism, nor feminism, nor any alliance between the two represents a homogenous body of theory or practice or politics. Nor has been it taken up in educational research in a single or monolithic way, even if it is sometimes characterised, or caricatured as such. There are variations in theoretical emphasis and differences in the type of practices to which it is linked – across research, teaching, history, policy, pedagogy, methodology.

Nevertheless, there are identifiable terms and questions that signify a particular theoretical perspective, including a suspicion of grand narratives, a focus on questions about subjectivity, on partial and multiple meanings, on discourse, on processes of becoming and on construction and deconstruction (Dillabough 2001; St Pierre and Pillow 2000; Lather 1991; 2007a)). Within this, there remain diverse disciplinary and national inflections and different emphases according to allegiance to different key figures. One can claim a poststructural feminist identity and be a follower of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, or Butler, or one can take up a more diffuse and eclectic poststructuralist interest in, for example, discursive constructions or performances of identity, or anti-foundationalism.

The ordering of descriptors has itself been significant: Is it poststructuralism and feminism in education? or feminist poststructuralism in education? … – and whether one uses the terms as nouns or adjectives also signifies differences in emphasis and political nuance. Is feminism a noun modified by a poststructural perspective, or is it the other way around?  Further, is it about 'importing' ideas to education or has educational research generated a particular take on feminism and poststructuralism, linked to its status as a field of research, policy and practice. In the introduction to their influential edited volume on *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* (1992) Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore situate the book 'within poststructuralist feminisms'. Yet, they describe their primary allegiance as feminist: 'as women in education, our positions are feminist. Poststructuralist or postmodernist theoretical tenets have been helpful to the extent that they fit with our feminist political project(s) and out attempts to construct pedagogies' (Luke and Gore 1992:4, 5). Debates about the order of affiliation were a feature of what I discuss below as definitional and authenticity struggles within the field; and they were a key part of how the politics of theory was negotiated within feminism more broadly.

**Proliferating discourses**
Since the mid-to-late 1990s a proliferation of writing and research has grown up under the umbrella category of poststructuralism/feminism/ education. This includes overviews or introductions to the field, methodological texts written under its aegis, and empirical studies guided by named feminist and poststructural concepts – frequently those of subjectivity, discourse, power, femininities/masculinities. What counts as feminist and as poststructuralist has

also diversified, reflecting theoretical developments and directions in the respective fields, showing, for instance, the impact of post-colonial and whiteness studies, or queer theory or new forms of class analysis – all of which in different ways are able to claim an affiliation with an increasingly broad theoretical identity. At the same time, discussions have become more specialised, more commonly focussed on debates or tensions within a particular area of poststructural feminist inquiry and where it is heading, rather than debates about what poststructural feminism is and whether such an alliance is fruitful.

Even a decade ago, it seemed possible to entertain the idea of writing a comprehensive review of the field of encounters between feminism and poststructuralism, and what this could or did mean for education. And there were many attempts to provide definitions and useful guides, showing how different debates and trajectories came together, or were in tension, and how they could be pursued in educational enquiry (e.g. St. Pierre 1999; Francis 1999; St Pierre and Pillow 2000). Because of the combined histories of feminism and of education, questions about politics and practice were a frequent feature in such discussions (Francis 1999; Dillabough 2000) – even when not the site of anxiety – and these remain recurring tropes in assessments of poststructuralism more generally.

So far, I have been writing of poststructuralism and feminism as if they were a kind of joined entity, and in some uses this has indeed become the case. The explosion of research that claims allegiance to both strands has produced a sense of a combined project, suggesting that 'the relationship between the two bodies of thought and practice in not inimical but invigorating and fertile' (St.Pierre 2000: 477). It is equally important, however to not overlook the history of tensions in this alliance, and how it was, by turns, understood – by feminists, and by educational researchers – as signalling both possibilities and dangers (Francis and Skelton 2001).

During the 1990s especially, much was written on the tango between feminism and poststructuralism and while these debates are more muted today, they continue to echo through exchanges, their traces forming part of the field. If we imagine a continuum of responses, at one end poststructuralism is positioned as antithetical to the feminist political and intellectual project, representing an

5

annihilation of the subject and of political agency. At the core of this criticism lie concerns about the implications of a radical anti-essentialism and historicization of subjectivity, and the associated challenge to foundational discourses. While such criticisms were made of poststructuralism broadly, they were perceived by some as particularly significant for feminism because the critique of the subject (or the judgement of it as a fiction, frequently characterized as the death of the subject) was seen to occur at precisely the time when women's voice and agency gained political strength and social presence through the liberatory power of feminism (Nicholson 1990; Ramazanoglu 1993).

While some feminists lamented that poststructuralism was bad for women and bad for politics, other feminists challenged the very formulation of such a view of (feminist) politics and of subjectivity. Judith Butler argued, for example, that 'the critique of the subject is not a negotiation or repudiation of the subject, but, rather, a way of interrogating its construction as a pregiven or foundational premise' (Butler 1990: 9). Here poststructuralist arguments were brought to challenge some of the foundational narratives of feminism itself.

At the other end of an imagined continuum, feminism and poststructuralism were seen as pursuing potentially complementary lines of analysis, both posing sceptical and deconstructive questions to normalising practices and working to destabilise taken for granted truths — of gender subjectivity, of gender relations and relations of power, and so forth (McNay 1992; Lather 1991; Sawicki 1988). More recently Elizabeth St. Pierre and Wanda Pillow argued that 'Feminists and poststructuralists have worked together and separately during the last half of this [twentieth] century to facilitate structural failures in some of foundationalism's most heinous formations – racism, patriarchy, homophobia, ageism, and so forth – the ruins out of which they now work' (St. Pierre and Pillow 2000: 2). A diffusion of poststructuralist conceptions of identity in educational discourses has been one of the consequences of this 'working in the ruins'.

**Identity de/constructions**

In a review of the uses of Foucault in educational research, Bernadette Baker and Katy Heyning (2004) identified three main types, and there are some parallels with the range of scholarship conducted in the name of poststructuralism and feminism in education. The three types of use of Foucault were:

6

1.  historicization and philosophizing projects with relativization emphases
2.  denaturalization projects without overt historical emphases and with diversity emphases and
3.  critical reconstruction projects with solution emphases (Baker and Heyning 2004: 29)

In a subsequent discussion of this classification, Bernadette Baker observed that 'while orientations to Foucault varied tremendously, both within and across particular pieces of research, most deployments fell within the second approach', which she characterizes as 'more "sociological"' than the other two categories, with category one 'more "problematizing"' and category three 'more "administrative"' (Baker 2007:78-9). 'Denaturalization' projects with a sociological bent and 'diversity emphases' also describe the most common form of poststructuralist feminist research in education though, given feminist political and theoretical concerns, there is a more marked and deliberate engagement with 'diversity' and difference than in the literatures surveyed by Baker and Heyning. Much important work is of course conducted within the other categories and this work sometimes intersects with 'denaturalizing projects'. This includes historical studies of gender and of women teachers (Tamboukou 2003; Middleton 1998) and 'reconstruction' projects that examine, for example, school and policy analyses oriented to changing practices (Blackmore 1999; Kenway and Willis 1997). With 'denaturalization projects', the tasks of deconstructing, demystifing, and destabilising truths, practices and identities dominate analyses. This intersects with other currents in ethnographic and cultural studies research that similarly expose the historicity and construction of phenomena and social relations. In poststuctural educational research the overall orientation has been towards studies that denaturalize what appears as normal, such as standard classroom practices, or curriculum constructions, or conventional gender identities.

One of the most significant consequences of poststructural feminist work in educational research has been the prominence given to the concept of 'identity' and to the social and discursive processes of identity construction and de/construction. I have examined elsewhere how poststructuralist and neo-constructivist ideas about identity have been particularly influential in Australian gender equity policy and research (McLeod 2001a). I return briefly to

these arguments in order to provide an example of the impact and diffusion of poststructuralist ideas and to foreshadow questions about identity deconstruction within feminist political and theoretical projects.

There are many stories to tell about the recent history of feminism in Australian education. One is a policy and school reform story which typically begins with the second-wave of feminism in the 1970s, and the development of equal opportunities and non-sexist programs in schools that sought not to distinguish on the basis of gender difference, to challenge sex-role stereotypes. This was then followed in the 1980s by attention to essential gender differences and how these played out in pedagogy and learning styles. These shifts in emphasis from equality to difference paralleled wider shifts in feminist theorizing and this continued in the 1980s and 1990s, with a focus on identity and on gender as a social construction, paralleling the rise of encounters between feminism and poststructuralist ideas. (Yates 1997; McLeod 2001a).

Since the 1970s, the nature and formation of children's gender identity have been central issues for Australian research and policy on gender and education. While in the 1970s, the problem of subjectivity was most often articulated (and resolved) through the language of the sex role and socialisation, since the 1990s identity has been represented in a poststructuralist-inspired language as a 'construction', a discursive and social category that is 'made' and open to change. The *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls* (1993), the national *Gender Equity; A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) and numerous commissioned reports identified schools as places where the process of identity construction takes place, and advised schools, teachers and educational systems to promote pedagogical practices that enabled pupils and teachers to examine the process and effects of that construction. One of the purposes of this examination was to de-construct the prevailing normative ideals of masculinity and femininity. This strategy, it was believed, would help young people to see the many possible ways in which they could be male and female, thereby helping to break down constricting gender identities.

During the 1990s, attention to gender identity expanded from a predominant focus on femininity to encompass masculinity (Lingard and Douglas 1999). In the educational policy arena and in popular and media discussion, heated debate

8

over the question of 'What about the boys?' was typically framed in terms of the content and form of masculine identity. The 'boys debate' condenses a number of anxieties about gender and education, including concerns that girls are now 'outperforming' boys, that boys' needs have been neglected as well as concerns about the reported difficulties many young men have with their emotional lives; from being prone to aggressive and abusive behaviours, to having poor skills in inter-personal relations. The common policy and research response to such concerns has been to urge schools to examine the construction of masculinity, to encourage boys to consider other ways of being 'male' and to challenge rigid gender stereotypes or subject positions.

Much more could be said about this focus on identity in schools and gender equity programs, including its convergence with both neo-liberal individualism and a reflexive and therapeutic culture of the self. But for the purposes of this discussion the salient point is that the manner in which practices of identity construction were normalized via policy through a process of translation and re-inscription can be traced to the influence of gender and feminist research informed by poststructural ideas (McLeod 2001a). Second, the focus on identity was taken up in the boys' education movement in a profoundly individualizing manner that was largely dis-embedded from a wider analysis of socio-cultural context, and that also, paradoxically, opened the way for a re-assertion of natural masculinity. That is, the radical critique of identity construction implicit in the earlier feminist deployments was subsumed by and transformed into a focus on how boys become boys, and the obligation of schools and pedagogies to accommodate boys' natural learning styles and ways of being. This deployment of 'identity construction' re-engaged notions of the natural child which good teaching could unleash, and re-articulated natural, fixed gender difference.

A mass of educational research exposes the various ways school practices, student identities, curriculum programs and so forth are constructed. In most respects, this observation no longer surprises, as the epigram at the start of this chapter from the US literary critic Stanley Fish suggests. If, as he argues, identifying something as a social construction does not in itself provide the basis for normative judgements – either negative or positive – then it is equally the case that simply asserting and noticing constructions – everything is one – might have a 'use-by' date as a political and theoretical project. As the example of

gender equity reform suggests, a more useful object of critique could be what is reconstructed, its effects and the circumstances in which that happens.

**Definitional and authenticity struggles**

From once occupying a relatively marginal position of critique, poststructuralist feminism has become a recognisable field of enquiry, with an informal canon, and texts and authors with citational authority (eg Lather, 1991; St.Pierre and Pillow 2000; Luke and Gore 1991; Walkerdine 1990). Overviews of research methodology note its impact (Somekh and Lewin 2005), and reviews of gender-based research in education acknowledge if not elaborate its evolution and influence (Francis and Skelton 2001; Skelton, Francis and Smulyan 2006; Arnot and Mac An Ghail 2005). A number of 'originary narratives' circulate. In one version, feminism rescues poststructuralism from gender (and other) exclusions and brings an embodied and more politically-engaged perspective to poststructural studies of education; in another version poststructuralism sets feminist and educational theory free from the shackles of essentialism, naïve accounts of power and subjectivity, and the 'ubiquitous dominance' of humanism (St. Pierre 2000: 479)

Discussions about the rise and influence of theoretical traditions characteristically invoke the name of an 'originary person', such as Foucault or Derrida or Butler, to stand in for a body of theory whose claims always exceed the person. In the 'isms' of poststructuralism and feminism there are many potential authors and many lines to pursue, yet there has been a common style of grounding its formation negatively. Initial explanations of what the field represented often proceeded by spelling out what it was not, how it was a reaction against or a critique of stifling modernity or the shadow of the Enlightenment, or humanism – often used interchangeably – but all construed somewhat negatively/repressively and standing as the contrast to a poststructural feminist world view. The task of poststructural feminist inquiry was to identify the 'boundaries, limits and grids of regularity and normalcy [of humanism]' and, 'once intelligible', they were to 'be disrupted and transgressed' (St. Pierre 2000: 479).

One of the hallmarks of feminist poststructural writing, particularly in the 1990s, has been a pronounced concern with definitions and preferred or even proper

10

ways of reading and with delineating strands and allegiances within the field. Discussions abounded of 'key concepts' and the translation of ideas from feminism, and from poststructuralism into education. The arguments of US educational researcher Elizabeth St Pierre capture one influential line of analysis and concept definition. Writing in 2000, St Pierre provided a detailed overview of 'key philosophical concepts – language; discourse; rationality; power, resistance, and freedom; knowledge and truth; and the subject – and examines the ways they are typically understood in humanism and then their reinscription in poststructuralism' (St. Pierre 2000: 477). She advocates the possibilities that poststructural critique opens up for feminist and educational research, arguing that its 'reinscriptions' and critiques of all that has been taken for granted in humanist thinking and 'explanatory fictions' have relevance for educators and feminists: 'the feminist poststructural critique of epistemology is one of ongoing questioning; a scepticism about the relation of women to power, truth, and knowledge – a permanent political critique that has no end. This critique has been particularly useful for educators who work to produce different knowledge in different ways and to trouble what counts as truth' (St. Pierre 2000: 500).

British gender researcher, Becky Francis, while still concerned with clarifying terms and parameters, articulated a quite different, but equally influential, position from the one taken by St. Pierre in the US. Francis argued that '"pure" poststructuralism is incompatible with the feminist emancipatory project' and 'certainly not practicable in educational research' (Francis 1999:381-82). The incompatibility resides in the 'clash between modernist (feminist) and post-structural positions' and in 'the poststructuralist aim of deconstruction compared to the feminist need for a system to explain the socio-economic reality of gender difference' (Francis 1999: 385). According to Francis, the limitations and dangers of poststructuralism for feminist education arise from the way 'it pleasures in the deconstruction of current discursive practices, but suggests or builds nothing in their place' (Francis 1999: 388-89), a task which is a pre-condition for the emancipatory/modernist project of feminism. Definitions about poststructural feminism in education were thus also the occasion for defending particular understandings of what properly constituted feminism.

A concern with truth and getting-it-right characterized a frequently-cited exchange (eg. reprinted in Skelton and Francis 2005) between two feminist

11

researchers on the topic of teaching poststructural feminist theory in education: the litmus test for this was teaching 'subjectivity'. In 1997, New Zealand feminist researcher Alison Jones published an article in the journal *Gender and Education* in which she reflected on the difficulties she had encountered in teaching education students some of the concepts associated with poststructural feminism particularly to do with the humanist subject and notions of subject positions and deconstructions. She refers to the writings of Australian feminist researcher, Bronywn Davies as an example of how poststructural ideas had been taken up and conveyed in educational and gender research; and this work was an initial source for both Jones and her students.

Jones found that many of her education students struggled with understanding 'ideas increasingly popular in feminist education studies' in part due to their lack of knowledge of 'relevant aspects of structuralism, and, evident in their difficulties with the concepts of agency, the subject and socialisation (Jones 1997: 261-62). While they grasped a critique of socialisation processes which position girls in particular ways, they retained a sense of the 'irreducible "real person"'; and this is the crux of Jones' concerns. At the heart of students' reception of post-structural theory, lies a 'humanist subject', which sits at odds with the anti-humanist subject of poststructuralism (262). Jones attributes this confusion to the complexity of poststructuralism, but also suggests there is a paradox in how feminist scholars themselves have approached this issue. As an example, she cites a discussion by Bronwyn Davies on how subjects are both positioned by discourses but can also make choices. Jones' students found this an attractive argument because it 'seems we can have our cake and eat it too; we are both constituted [by discourses] and yet can choose what we might constituted as'.. This argument, however, served to foster students' misunderstanding as it encouraged them to 'take seriously the anti-humanist language of "post-structuralism" whilst simultaneously invoking a humanist subject (a choosing agent)' (Jones 1997: 266). Moreover, for Jones, this paradox subverts the truth and meaning of poststructruralism, betraying the remnants of unreconstructed humanist thinking.

In response, Davies suggested that Jones was stuck on working out a mistaken sense of 'correct post-structuralist usage', and that she had got the topic of

12

agency and the humanist subject wrong. Davies then provided her own 'correct' account of this matter.

> I redefine agency as lying in the inscription of some forms of the humanist self (if you are constituted as a powerful agent you may well be able to act powerfully), and *more* significantly, as lying in the reflexive awareness of the constitutive power of language that becomes possible through post-structuralist theory. I have struggled to reclaim this concept for use in post-structuralist theory precisely because, as a feminist, I am not willing to forgo the possibility of conceptualising and bringing about change. So, yes, I want my cake and I want to eat it. And as a poststructuralist I do not find that problematic. Linear forms of logic are too constraining for those of us who wish to embrace the rich complexity of life lived through multiple and contradictory discourses. (Davies 1997: 272)

This is a fascinating exchange, and the rhetorical strategies employed by both authors to make their case and establish their authority warrant further analysis. It will suffice to note here that both articles assert their proper readings and engagements with poststructural ideas by doctrinally defining key concepts and their relation to them. Claims and counter-claims for authenticity are made via elaborate arguments that turn on the meaning of subjectivity, the extent to which the proper post-structuralist will or can transcend humanism and what it means to deconstruct subjectivity. In addition, both discussions represent a tendency to moralistic and – despite protestations to the contrary – dualistic thinking, a tendency that has, Baker (2007: 80-81) argues, characterized much educational research. That is, there is a right way – and conversely a wrong or problematic way – to be a poststructuralist teacher, and better and more fine-tuned knowledge of theoretical intricacies will assist in the realization of this identity.

Such debates, and others in similar vein, involved arbitrating what counted in the field, and what constituted an authentic and authoritative poststructural feminist position. These struggles perhaps sit oddly alongside a poststructural scepticism towards final and foundational knowledge claims and the provisional and partial status of truth. In more recent discussions, doctrinal definitional battles, although not completely absent, appear to have receded. In part, this is likely to be because of the diffusion and familiarity of ideas. But it is also in part to do with a different set of questions emerging about feminism – and feminism

13

and education – to do with reviewing what various theoretical turns have amounted to and how feminism represents and understands itself in the present. Before elaborating these points, I make a brief comment on the history and impact of 'Theory' in the humanities and social sciences. This is offered as a backdrop for considering the rise, influence and current status of one articulation of that Theory in a specific disciplinary field.

### Re-assessing 'Theory'

This has been a time of heightened interest in accounting historically and sociologically for the rise and effects of a particular kind of theory, operating under the sign of Theory, which flourished across the humanities and social sciences in the Euro-Anglo world from the 1960s. Although experienced differently in distinct national and disciplinary contexts, some generalizations about its characteristics are possible. Theory (large' t') typically refers to ideas identified by an allegiance to structuralism but particularly to poststructuralism, postmodernism or deconstruction, and in some instances is designated in nationalist terms as the influence of French theory on the Anglo-American academy (e.g Fish 2008). While what inaugurated these reflections will remain an open question here, their questions invite attention because of the perspectives they suggest for thinking about the impact of theory – poststructuralism and feminism – in a particular field of social inquiry and practice.

Three strands in these discussions are particularly relevant for our purposes here. The first is an historicizing move; the second a deconstructive move and the third a re-assessment of the aims of theory along with calls for new directions. 'We are now living in the aftermath of what might be called high theory' observed the British literary critic Terry Eagleton (2003: 2). He added, despite the legacy of thinkers such as Barthes, Derrida and Althusser that 'the world has changed dramatically since Foucault and Lacan first settled at their typewriter'. He asked: 'What kind of fresh thinking does the new era demand?'(ibid). In a special issue of the US journal *Critical Inquiry* (2004) on the topic of rethinking theory and criticism, an array of contributors called for a radical theoretical overhaul and for new ways and tools for theorizing. The present in these discussions seemed to be a kind of liminal time, a time 'after theory' or 'post deconstruction', one also repeatedly noted as a time when theory and critique were marked by – and needed to be responsive to – the events of 9/11 and the

repositioning of US international and national politics. But the present was also characterized as a time of uncertainty about what the needed theoretical innovations might be, where they might lead, and the relationship between theory and social and political change.

Re-assessments of theory were often accompanied by critical reflection on one's previous intellectual work. In a self-critical gesture, Bruno Latour wondered whether it was 'really asking too much from our collective intellectual life to devise, at least once a century, some *new* critical tools?' (Latour 2004: 243) In the same issue, Teresa de Lauretis, reflecting on stalemates in feminist theory and her frustrations with the 'militantly critical theories I have contributed to articulate' (de Lauretis 2004: 365), concluded that: 'it may now be a time for the human sciences to reopen the questions of subjectivity, materiality, discursivity, knowledge, to reflect on the *post* of posthumanity. It is time to break open the piggy bank of saved conceptual schemata and reinstall uncertainty in all theoretical applications, starting with the primacy of the cultural and the primacy of its many "turns": linguistic, performative, therapeutic, ethical, you name it' (de Lauretis 2004: 368).

Even authors hostile to Theory, denouncing both its 'grandiose ambitions' and those who have been held in its thrall (Patai and Corrall 2005: 2), acknowledge its powerful reach, yet argue change is underway and that the hold of such theory is diminishing. Some debates concerning theory's end are motivated by doubts about its political engagement and utility (from questions of was it ever politically engaged to whether it has become increasingly depoliticised), others by doubts about whether it is continuing to generate the best, or most useful questions and insights for contemporary times (Mitchell 2004). Yet other reflections on the heyday and eclipse of theory note its failure to be sufficiently reflexive about it is own knowledge claims, such as the analytical power of deconstruction alongside tendencies – in both proponents and opponents – to overstate its normative and political contribution (Fish 2008). These various assessments rest on an implicit or explicit historical view about the rise and status of theory.

We need 'an historical account of the moment of theory' Ian Hunter (2007) has argued. His particular interest is in developing a Foucauldian genealogy of the

15

moment of theory, a history that attempts to turn 'away from the big dialectical processes that are supposed to determine what we must become, and focuses instead on the historical contingencies that make us what we happen to be' (Hunter 2007: 5). In such a genealogy, 'theory' would be 'constituted as the name of a specific ensemble of intellectual arts that began to undergo intensive dissemination in the Anglo-American humanities academy from the 1960s onwards'. 'Constituting theory in this way', he continues, 'entails suspending the question of its truth or falsity'. My interest here is less in the detail of Hunter's elaboration than in his call to historicize theory, to view it as the 'object of an empirically oriented intellectual history', and to employ a genealogical approach in this endeavour (Hunter 2007: 6) – that is, to use modes of analysis which are part of poststructuralist thinking to study the diffusion and effects of that cultural theory.

It is not possible in this paper to consider the many different ways in which a history of theory could be or has been written. My simple point is to insist on the importance of taking an historicizing view on Theory, and on the particular theories that have been most influential in our own work. The second related point is the broadly genealogical one to examine theories not in terms of absolute truth, but as claims to truth or 'systems of reason' (Popkewitz 1998?) that have practical effects and that are socially and historically embedded. My questions here have also been informed by Bourdieu's injunction to place perspective itself under reflexive scrutiny. 'To each of the [disciplinary] fields there corresponds a fundamental point of view on the world' argued Bourdieu (2000, p.99). He offers the example of sociology to argue that it produces its own intellectual dispositions and it is these and the 'epistemic history' and 'unconscious of the field' (Bourdieu 2000, p.99) that must be interrogated, rather than the apparently idiosyncratic view points of the individual researcher. I have been arguing that poststructural feminism represents a perspective, a particular way of seeing, thinking about and explaining things as much as a set of a concepts that aspire to expose or elucidate phenomena and social relations; and I have offered a preliminary outline of the concerns that have characterized this perspective. And the third point to take from this brief sketch of theory debates is the heightened concern with re-assessing theory's aims and claims, and a mood of doubt and questioning of where things are heading in a perceived new historical era.

16

Similar questions and re-assessments are evident in contemporary feminist
theory, generally as well as in feminist educational enquiry.

To draw these points together, this chapter has not been about whether
poststructuralist feminism is inherently 'true' or 'false,' good or bad, or about
making definitive judgements on whether the alliance of the two represents a
diminution or expansion of political possibilities. These matters have been
considered as they are part of the history of debates and practices that constitute
this field of enquiry, and continue to nag at its edges. But the focus of this
discussion was on how poststructuralist feminism in education has been
constituted and defined as a field of educational enquiry and some of the effects
this has had in regard to conceptions of identity. In the final section, I briefly
consider current re-assessments of the purpose and future of feminist theory and
speculate on the implications of such questioning for feminist, and
poststructural, research in education.

**New subheading where to now**
I have argued that examining earlier debates and disputes within poststructural
feminism offers one way of understanding the history of this field of enquiry, not
as a bounded, fixed-in-time transcendental theory, but as a shifting, socially and
temporally embedded system of reasoning, that generates particular ways of
thinking about education and about feminism – its political project, the topics
that warrant 'new concepts', and its sense of history and possible futures. Two
trends in current feminist theorising are relevant here. One is represented in the
language of mourning, of lost dreams, and of persistent attachments to past
wounds and injustices. And the second, and related, concerns both an urgency
and uncertainty about the present, a sense of radical rupture with the past and
the need to re-conceive or at least question feminism's project in light of this.

The US feminist political theorist Wendy Brown has written compellingly on the
dangers of feminism's narratives of its own history, in which injuries of the past
are perversely defended in that they provide the basis for identities and a
rationale for politics in the present (Brown 1995). Reflecting on the purpose of
contemporary Women's Studies, Brown declares that it is confronted with the
conundrum of what comes after the critique and deconstruction of 'core'
concepts, such as sex and gender, and what 'comes after the loss of revolutionary

feminism; it [Women's Studies] figures itself as a non-utopian enterprise with more than minor attachment to the unhappy present'. Can feminism and feminist scholarship live 'without a revolutionary horizon?' (Brown 2005: 99). The question that intrigues is:

> Not how we may thrive in the aftermath of the dissemination of our analytical objects, but *what are we* in the wake of a dream in which those objects were consigned to history? What does it mean for feminist scholars to be working in a time after revolution, after the loss of belief in the possibility and viability of a radical overthrow of existing social relations? What kind of lost object is this? (Brown 2005: 99).

Responding to these questions involves rethinking the relation between past and present – how the past is apprehended in the present, and vice versa – which, in turn, shapes how we imagine the future. Brown characterizes these relations in Foucaultian terms, so that 'History is figured less as a stream linking past and future than as a cluttered and dynamic field of eruptions, forces, emergences, and partial formations. As the discontinuities and lack of directional laws in history are pushed to the foreground … [history is} conceptually wrenched from temporal ordering – and the political possibilities of the present are thereby expanded' (Brown 2001: 116-17).  Following the epigram at the beginning of this chapter, Brown suggests that possibilities for emancipating the subject have been eclipsed by 'poststructural insights [which] were the final blow to the project of transforming, emancipating, or eliminating gender in a *revolutionary* mode' (Brown 2005: 111).

What then is feminism to do in this uncertain time, this time after modernity and the possibility of revolutionary politics? What is the task of feminist theory, and of feminist politics?  Questions about the purpose and future of feminism, poststructuralism, and Theory are much debated from a variety of angles – as noted above. These reconsiderations are marked by a sense of ruptured time, of a break with the past alongside a sense that new theoretical resources are needed to navigate the present and think the future. There is for some a kind of theoretical stalemate, or what the literary critic Lauren Berlant describes as 'concept fatigue', in the meaning of concepts having to bear too much weight (Berlant 2004: 446). For Brown, responding to this uncertainty requires 'dwelling in that state of mourning in which a seemingly unendurable loss is also the

18

opening of a possibility to live and think differently' (Brown 2005:115). Uncertainty then can generate a more hopeful outlook, a time for destabilising the old and forging something not yet imagined. For others, recalling the words of Teresa de Lauretis (2004) quoted above, the response is a more cautious hope for still unused concepts that could rescue us or existing concepts that could be revived. Reflecting on feminist research in education, Patti Lather, in more optimistic voice, calls for feminist research to guard against becoming 'routinized, static and predictable' and to engage in the process of undoing its own orthodoxies: 'Displacing fixed critical spaces enacted in earlier practices to which we are indebted, we move toward an "iterative productivity"[] that is open to permanent dynamism' (Lather 2007b: 1).

Solving the problem of theory, or finding a future for feminist politics or poststructural feminism in education, is clearly beyond the ambition of this paper. But these current re-assessments of theory and feminism in changed and uncertain times speak to the challenge of working out how to negotiate and re-imagine feminist education, in a time when there appears to be certain stalemates and cemented verities, alongside imperatives always to seek the new, to be at the cutting edge, even if we are not quite sure what that means, or where it is. Perhaps to look forward we need also to look back, to look more historically at how ideas have formed. Poststructural feminism has clearly had a profound effect on many dimensions of educational research, theory and practice. It also has its own orthodoxies and blindspots. My aim has been to develop an historical account of poststructural feminist perspectives in education, to document 'founding narratives' and emphasised concerns and to point to some sources of change. Through engaging with currents in contemporary cultural and feminist thought, I have also, in the long view, tried to open up ways of thinking about the uses and histories and promises of 'theory' in educational research.

**References**:

Arnot, M. and Mac An Ghaill, M. eds (2006) *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Gender and Education*, Routledge, London.

Australian Education Council (1993) *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97*, Curriculum Corporation, Melbourne.

Baker, B. (2007) 'Normalizing Foucault? A rhizomatic approach to plateaus in Anglophone educational research', *Foucault Studies*, No.4, Feb. pp.78-119.

Baker, B. and Heyning, K. eds (2004) 'Dangerous coagulations? Research, education and a travelling Foucault', in B. Baker and K. Heyning eds *Dangerous Coagulations? The Uses of Foucault to the Study of Education*, Peter Lang, New York, pp.1-79.

Berlant, L. (2004) 'Critical culture, affirmative culture', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.30, no.1, Winter, pp.445-451.

Blackmore, J. (1999) *Troubling Women: Feminism, Leadership and Educational Change*, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK.

Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Pascalian Meditations,* Polity Press, Cambridge.

Brown, W. (1995) *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Brown, W. (2001) *Politics out of History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Brown,W. (2005) *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York.

Davies, B. (1997) 'The subject of post-structuralism: a reply to Alison Jones, *Gender and Education*, vol.9, no.3, pp.271-283.

De Lauretis, T (2004) 'Statement due', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.30, no.1, Winter, pp.365-68.

Dillabough, J. (2001) 'Gender theory and research in education: modernist traditions and emerging contemporary themes' in B. Francis and C. Skelton. eds  *Investigating Gender: Contemporary Perspectives in Education*, Open University Press, Buckingham, pp.11-26.

Eagleton, T. (2003) *After Theory*, Basic Books, New York.

Fish, S. (2008) 'French Theory in America', *New York Times*, April 6th 2008

Francis, B and Skelton. C. eds (2001) *Investigating Gender: Contemporary Perspectives in Education*, Open University Press, Buckingham.

Francis, B. (1999) 'Modernist reductionism or post-structuralist relativism: can we move on? An evaluation of the arguments in relation to feminist educational research', *Gender and Education*, vol.11, no.4, pp.381-393

Frow, J. (1991) *What Was Postmodernism?* Local Consumption Papers, Sydney.

Hunter, I. (2007) 'The time of theory', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol.10: 1, pp.5-22.

Jones, A. (1997) ' Teaching post-structuralist feminist theory in education:
student resistances, *Gender and Education*, vol.9, no.3, pp. 261-269.

Kenway, J and Willis, S. with Blackmore, J. and Rennie, L. (1997) *Answering Back:
Girls, Boys and Feminism in Schools*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

Lather, P. (2001) *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the
Postmodern,* Routledge, New York.

Lather, P (2007a) *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double() Science*, State
University New York Press, Albany, NY.

Lather, P. (2007b) '(Post) Critical Feminist Methodology: Getting Lost', Paper
presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research
Association, Chicago, April.

Latour, B. (2004) 'Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to
matters of concern', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.30, no.1, Winter, pp.225-248.

Lingard, B, and Douglas, P. (1999) *Men Engaging Feminisms: Pro-feminism,
Backlashes and Schooling*, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK.

Luke, C. and Gore, J. (1992)  'Introduction' in C. Luke and J. Gore eds *Feminisms
and Critical Pedagogy*, Routledge, New York, pp.1-14.

McLeod, J. (1998) 'The promise of freedom and the regulation of gender—
feminist pedagogy in the 1970s', *Gender and Education*, vol.10, no.4, pp.431-
445

McLeod, J. (2001a) 'When poststructuralism meets gender,' in *Governing the Child
in the New Millennium*,  (eds) Kenneth Hultqvist and Gunilla Dahlberg,
Routledge, New York, pp.259-289.

McLeod, J. (2001b) 'Foucault forever', *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of
education*, April, vol 22, no. 1., pp.95-104

McNay, L.(1992) *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*, Polity Press,
Cambridge.

Middleton, S. (1998) *Disciplining Sexuality: Foucault, Life Histories, and Education*,
Teachers College Press, New York.

Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (1997) *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*, Canberra Aust.

Mitchell, W.J.T. (2004) 'Medium Theory: Preface to the 2003 *Critical Inquiry* Symposium, *Critical Inquiry*, vol.30, no.1, Winter, pp.324-335

Nicholson, L.ed (1990) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Routledge, New York.

Patai, D. and Corral, W. H. (2004) *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Popkewitz, T. (1998) *Struggling for the Soul: The Politics of Schooling and the Construction of the Teacher*, Teachers College Press, New York.

Ramazanoglu, C. ed. (1993) *Up Against Foucault*, Routledge, London.

Sawicki, J (1988) 'Feminism and the power of Foucauldian discourse', in J. Arac ed *After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, pp.161-178.

Skelton, C. and Francis, B. eds (2005) *A Feminist Critique of Education: 15 years of gender education*, Routledge, London.

Skelton, C., Francis, B. and Smulyan, L. eds (2006) *The Sage Handbook on Gender and Education*, Sage, London.

Somekh, B. and Lewin, C. eds (2005) *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, Sage, London.

St. Pierre, E. A. (2000) 'Poststructural feminism in education: An overview, *Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 13, no.5, pp.477-515

St. Pierre, E. A. and Pillow, W. (2000) 'Introduction: Inquiry among the ruins' in E. A. St. Pierre and W. Pillow eds *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education,* Routledge, New York, pp.1-24

Tamboukou, M. (2003) *Women, Education and the Self: A Foucauldian Perspective,* Palgrave, Macmillan.

Walkerdine, V. (1990) *Schoolgirl Fictions*, Verso, London.

Yates, L. (1997) 'Constructing and deconstructing "girls" as a category of concern', in A. Mackinnon, I. Elqvist-Saltzman and A. Prentice (eds) *Feminism into the 21st Century: Dangerous Terrain for Women?,* Falmer Press, London.