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Postmodern Feminism and Knowledge Production: The African Context



Philomina E. Okeke

This article examines the implications of what may now be seen as a postmodern trend in feminist scholarship regarding the study of African women. It argues primarily that the rigorous critiques emerging from postmodern feminist debates have not only failed to confront *in practice* the politics of producing feminist knowledge¹ but may push farther into the background (given the attention these debates presently claim) what remains an ongoing intellectual and political hegemony. If the African case is a reflection of the state of affairs in similar feminist constituencies, then we must call into question not only the potential of postmodern discourses to yield much-needed strategies for restructuring feminist relations but also the validity of feminism itself as a political project.

Feminism and the Postmodern Alternative

The pressures generated on a number of fronts have shaken to their very roots the basic premises that until recently sustained feminist scholarship. The dissenting voices of women of color, lesbians, and poor and working-class women, among others, have forced the realization that universal explanations of women's lives often fail to capture women's specific circumstances across time and space. These explanations may also ignore other structures of domination, thereby undermining the potential for alliances with other marginalized groups. Nowhere have these pressures raised as much controversy as in cross-cultural scholarship, in particular the literature on Third World women.² But the flurry of critiques now appears to center largely around the content and contours of postmodern discourses. It seems that the task of choosing among "alternative" models has been made easier: We have found ourselves in a "postmodern" world, at a postmodern point in time, one that offers postmodern solutions to feminist challenges.³

Postmodernism has come to characterize a uniquely complex condition in current academic discourse. Its manifestations in both mainstream and feminist forums can hardly be fit into a composite set of ideas. As Linda Hutcheon remarks, "The radically disparate interpretations and evaluations of postmodernism are in part the result of its particular politics and the curious 'middle grounds' . . . it occupies, inscribing yet also subverting various aspects of a dominant culture. . . ." ⁴ However disparate they may seem, these interpretations share a common skepticism with the totalizing "assumptions of the modern age, particularly the belief that reason and scientific enquiry can provide an objective, reliable, and universal foundation for knowledge." ⁵

Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* describes the state of knowledge in a postindustrial society that has severed its roots from Hegel, Kant, Marx, and other dominant tendencies in Western philosophical thought. Lyotard's analysis signifies the death of "science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . [whose authenticity is based on an] explicit appeal to some grand narrative." ⁶ The postmodern wave is seen to have destabilized all we have come to regard as stable. Its points of contention with the "modern" leave no illusions as to "the inhibiting effects of global, totalitarian theories." ⁷ As many postmodernists argue, the relations of power in society are closely associated with the "ability to control knowledge and meaning, not only through writing, but also through disciplinary and professional institutions, and in social relations." ⁸ Succinctly stated by one of postmodernism's major theorists, "The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power." ⁹ Difference in postmodern analyses assumes an essential currency. Where it represents diverse and oppositional others, the pluralism of discourse "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable." ¹⁰

Postmodern feminist scholarship reflects both the disparate interpretations and the common themes of its mainstream discourse. The emerging discourses promise to "sensitize us to the interconnections between knowledge claims . . . and power . . . [where] our own search for an Archimedes point may conceal and obscure our entanglement in an episteme in which truth claims may take only certain forms and not others." ¹¹ The postmodern trend has spurred rigorous critiques of feminist scholarship and practice. We have witnessed the emergence of theoretical projects that seek to "deconstruct notions of reason, knowledge, or the self and to reveal the effects of the gender arrangements that lay beneath their neutral and universalizing facades." ¹² Such critiques, as in the mainstream discourse, have also highlighted the link between knowledge and power. We are reminded that "only to the extent that one person or group dominate[s] the whole will reality appear to be governed by

one set of rules or be constituted by one privileged set of social relations.”¹³ The postmodern preoccupation with difference finds significant appeal in a feminist forum that is grappling with analytical and political frameworks that refuse to shed their essentialist legacies.

Postmodern feminism has also waded into the arena of development theory and practice. Recent debates in the field have centered around the prospects for a dialogue that places the Women in Development (WID) framework at the center, not merely to be informed by but also to inform the larger body of feminist scholarship. The flow of development expertise, critics argue, has tended to ignore (at enormous costs) the indigenous female knowledge bases. Rethinking the place of WID within feminist scholarship and politics necessarily requires a restructuring of the discourse itself, devolving agency to the subjects of discourse, and bringing their expertise to bear on praxis, especially at institutional levels.¹⁴

But the postmodern incursion into feminist scholarship is not welcome in all political and intellectual quarters. Far from this incursion holding undisputed sway, a significant degree of hesitancy exists, even among its major proponents. Essentially, the critiques center around the epistemic and political status of postmodern discourses. According to critic Sandra Harding, it is not exactly clear what postmodern critiques represent, what they articulate as “new” and “different” from claims made by those postmodernism now seeks to defend.¹⁵ After all, some critics argue, the so-called marginalized voices have made similar claims in various forms, claims that have gone unrecognized. Having legitimized the politics of knowledge claims, postmodern discourses seem poised to serve both as *the* forum for and *the* voice of excluded constituencies. As Michele Wallace puts it, the “postmodern critique . . . mirrors the outsider’s or the immigrant’s or the nomad’s sense of being in the world” but constitutes itself exclusive of its target subjects.¹⁶ Intent on defending subjugated voices, dominant voices do not seem conscious of the relations of power that position them as “gatekeepers,” defining the insider and outsider even as postmodern appropriates the voices of the latter.¹⁷

I must stress at the onset that the subject of this analysis is not postmodernism per se, the critiques of which other writers have addressed. I use the terms *postmodern* and *postmodernism* only in reference to the particular appropriations of a larger body of discourses whose terrain and specific arguments are currently being contested. These appropriations appear to have gained more salience in feminist debates on difference and representation. My primary concern here is with what has filtered down into the relevant feminist debates, especially the questions raised in the African context. Postmodern feminist critiques have renewed the emphasis on theory, analysis, and action, grounded in the specificities of plural and localized knowledge bases. But the develop-

ment of such a database on African women depends heavily on the state of African-Western feminist relations. Given the state of the latter at present, one is compelled to question the postmodern emphasis and how far it can actually change the way we approach the study of African women.

Production of Feminist Scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa

Obviously, the skepticism over the postmodern trend has more to do with its status among "Other" voices than with the validity of its arguments. As many feminists of color are wont to state, the debate on difference, diversity, and representation was not precipitated by the postmodern upsurge. Black feminists in both the United States and the United Kingdom have documented the tenuous history of feminist relations both within the movement and in academia, dating back as far as the early 1970s. These works reject in no uncertain terms a political movement for women that has largely failed to validate their experiences, denying them a forum to voice their oppression(s).¹⁸

The charges of domination and exclusion made by Third World feminist scholars do not differ markedly from the basic arguments of black feminists in the West that "racialized, gendered and class-based inequalities are embedded in the creation of [feminist] knowledge and politics."¹⁹ For many African female scholars who have followed this debate closely, the 1976 conference *Women and Development* at Wellesley College marked a decisive turn in cross-cultural scholarship and political collaboration with their white female counterparts. African and Third World delegates questioned the basis for a political alliance that was driven largely by concerns of patriarchy. They insisted that imperialist relations with the West should be placed equally on the agenda. The conference deliberations resulted in a stalemate that lasted into the 1980s. Meanwhile, indigenous feminist scholarship burgeoned, spurring the establishment of a number of research organizations.²⁰

The process by which knowledge about African women is produced has been addressed by African scholars including Philomina Steady, Bolanle Awe, Olufemi Taiwo, Tiyanbe Zeleza, and Ayesha Imam. Ifi Amadiume articulates, perhaps most forcefully, a widespread belief about the production and use of scholarship about African women in which the agenda and agency are externally determined. Rejecting the "imposition of concepts, proposals for political solutions and terms of relationship," Amadiume insists that the dominant Western tendencies in this literature must give way to the untapped indigenous expertise.²¹

But Amadiume's forceful critique of Western feminism appears to have signaled the end of an era. In the 1990s the strong and distinct

voices of the 1980s have witnessed an increasing conflation with (if not a complete subsumption into) postmodern critiques. The view has been asserted that the postmodern debate has catapulted voices at the margins into mainstream feminist thought. The postmodern turn of events, Jane Parpart argues, has “offered ammunition to women who felt excluded.”²² Obviously, a significant number of women of color in the West have gained entrance into this exclusive forum. But there is a danger in merely celebrating these works, which would only provide a convenient diversion away from the serious questions they raise. We must continue to ask these questions, among others: Has the flurry of postmodern feminist debates significantly mediated the content and agency of the scholarship? How enduring an impact can the “acknowledged” voices from the margins have on the general direction of feminist scholarship? Does this explosion of postmodern knowledge hold the potential for restructuring feminist relations, or could it end up drowning Other voices? Those involved in the study of African women need to consider these questions with regard to the major tendencies that inform this scholarship, a number of which are outlined here.

What the global community knows about African women at present is traceable largely to the writings of white female scholars. The inroads made by indigenous scholars into this database must be weighed against its racist and sexist colonial history, which these scholars must contend with. Although the covert forms of this colonial legacy may have been exorcised, the more subtle (but no less dangerous) forms continue to plague the scholarship on African women. For instance, the paternalistic streak that mediates African/Africanist intellectual relations is strongly present in the relationship between indigenous and white feminist scholars. As Tiyanbe Zeleza graphically expressed it, “Africanists often act like evangelists out to save some benighted souls. They see themselves as not simply writing about Africa and Africans . . . but [also] as seers for Africans.”²³ In a review of the historical literature on African women, Zeleza draws attention to what he perceives as covert exclusions and tokenism in many collaborative projects between white and African female scholars. Such projects, he argues, have tended to place African women in the role of data collectors. Their own stories are appropriated as raw data that necessarily invite a more systematic analysis from their Western colleagues.

The colonial advantage has long justified white women’s dominant presence in the study of African women. The fact that initially the field had few African female scholars lent some credence to white women’s position. Indeed, many of the latter admit to the limitations of a database that has little indigenous content.²⁴ At the end of her comprehensive review of the subject, Claire Robertson states that “culturally specific knowledge is essential” and admits that “subjective consciousness is very

difficult for outsiders (no matter how well intentioned) to explore effectively.”²⁵ But such a stance, however well-meaning, does not seem to have forced a serious consideration of the relations of power embedded in this scholarship—of the ways in which these relations of power undermine the emergence of indigenous voices. It is a sad commentary on the state of the scholarship that studies of African women, and indeed about the African people, are largely produced outside the continent. Indeed, feminist development discourse in recent years appears to have concentrated largely on the international exploitation of female labor, particularly in the Asian newly industrialized countries (NICs). Given Africa’s increasing marginality in the new global economic order, this shift may lower African women’s profile in current WID.²⁶

It is also the case that for those who live or identify closely with the conditions of African women’s lives, aligning these conditions with the analytical dictates of feminist theoretical frameworks is a trying experience. I remember my profound frustration as a doctoral student trying to adapt feminist theories and methodologies to the complexities of social relations in postcolonial Nigeria. I confronted what Olufemi Taiwo refers to as the “‘poverty of theory’ which manifests itself in a chronic absence or dire inadequacy, as well as complete irrelevance of theory.”²⁷ The theoretical concepts and categories I had to work with could not make visible the intricate elements of a social arrangement that shaped Igbo women’s experiences and life chances.

But African female scholars contend with more than the poverty of theory. The language of feminist scholarship itself speaks to exclusion and gatekeeping. As Marnia Lazreg contends, many female scholars outside the West are intimidated by “an imperious feminist script [so that] . . . instead of being emancipatory, writing for them is often alienating.”²⁸ If African female scholars have suffered exclusion in this respect, the profound abstraction into which postmodern critics have withdrawn makes the forum even less attractive to them. African female scholars, especially those who reside on the continent, would not be impressed by this intellectual gymnastics, given the agenda that informs their work (not to mention the trying conditions of academic work and of feminist work in particular). Their response to the state of the art is well demonstrated by a recent incident.

In January 1996, the University of Victoria, Canada, held a feminist conference that attracted delegates from West Africa. As the deliberations buzzed with postmodern critiques, I looked into the faces of my colleagues from home, sensing their reaction. We wondered aloud about the implications of postmodernism for the concerns of our primary constituency. As these delegates duly noted, the postmodern buzz is at odds with the cold realities of life for the majority of African women. But we were under no illusion as to the fact that in many respects we inherit the

scholarship generated from such forums, even when our concerns are largely outside their frame of reference.

The irony of an intellectual project that attempts to harness the diversity of female voices in such convoluted terms must not escape us. Those who are prepared to grapple with “all” of postmodernism may after all provide us with some insights into the problems with which we are currently grappling. But at this time, it is not very clear how a discourse that originates from a concern with the “condition of knowledge in the most developed societies” will address the larger female collective that exists outside that world.²⁹

Evidently, the study of African women has not quite recovered from the stalemate of the late 1970s. Even as various constituencies within seek to patch up the terms of engagement, the tremors that surface continually in academic meetings are a constant reminder of a systematic dialogue long ignored. In a recent African studies conference in the United States, a number of African women interrupted a white colleague—a panel chair—in the middle of her commentary on an earlier presentation made by an African female scholar. They expressed in very strong terms their reservations over the panel chair’s use of a Foucauldian conceptual framework to universalize and subsume what they considered a complex and unique set of social relations. As one of them heatedly explained, “If we begin with Foucault, we’ll never make it to Africa!”³⁰ It has become increasingly apparent that ignoring the problem of representation will not make it go away. A more systematic dialogue is needed, but working out the terms requires a critical look at the current state of the scholarship.

Restructuring Existing Relations

The prospects for restructuring feminist relations may seem obvious to postmodern critics, especially those at the forefront of the major theoretical debates spurred by this trend. But the issue presently at stake has to do with the terms of engagement among the various constituencies, which invariably inherit what emerges as “feminist knowledge.” The problem, Donna Haraway duly recognizes, has more to do with “ethics and politics . . . than [with] epistemology.”³¹ The rich texture of women’s lives across the globe is not likely to emerge if our politics and conversations remain one-sided. If feminist scholarship cannot offer a platform that affirms, even as it contests, particular knowledge claims, its validity as a knowledge base by and for women is threatened. It is conceivable that a more extensive engagement with postmodernism may provide more insights into the challenges with which feminism is already grappling. Indeed, its intersections with postcolonial and other poststruc-

turalist discourses cannot be denied. But these linkages are not the immediate issues this article is concerned with.

It also needs to be said that neither the insider-outsider nor the margin-center view of the debate captures the full ramifications of the problem. Some African female scholars may settle for a marginal position as insiders, guarding the only turf they can stake a claim to. But focusing merely on the insider-outsider issue only reduces the problem to a mere preoccupation with those we claim to represent. As Kirin Narayan argues, our positions, to the extent that they intersect at various points of identification with specific constituencies, will continue to shift and may even “outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status.”³² But in terms of a shared intellectual space where different knowledge bases seek representation, we are positioned differently and cannot deny the fact that relations of power mediate these positions. Besides our relations to the subjects of inquiry, we also need to consider the quality of our relations as intellectuals whose scholarship and politics are predicated upon the differences and inequalities attached to the political locations with which we identify.

In reality, many of us straddle a number of political locations by virtue of our social and intellectual ties with particular constituencies. Yet who says what still matters. If anything, postmodern critiques bring home the point that “how what is said gets heard depends on who says it, and who says it in turn affects the style and language in which it is stated, and will in turn affect its perceived significance.”³³ If the speaker’s location and mode of speaking are crucial to being heard, it becomes even more crucial that an audience be created in which knowledge claims pertaining to any constituency can seek not only to be affirmed but can also open themselves to any contestation. It will not do to relegate the study of African women to some exclusive insider territory. But it is equally crucial for African scholars to have the space to effectively share their insights.

It is not surprising that questions about the validity of insider status follow closely on the heels of debates over difference and representation. No one seems to question this status when African female scholars are invited to provide an indigenous perspective. When we settle for any position we are slotted into, our native status hardly invites any critical reflections. But when we begin to ask disturbing questions about who said what, our political location becomes the subject of scrutiny. While we are busy debating the issue of representation, our views are rendered incidental to the important issues of the day. But African women are concerned with more than studying merely the conditions of their lives; their contributions must also register on the face of global feminism.

What is called for at this stage is a systematic dialogue. It is not unusual for matters of difference and representation to raise tempers

in intellectual circles. Those white female scholars long committed to this field will understandably be troubled by such tensions. But the manner in which these tensions are handled may also be sending the wrong message. For instance, the outrage and shock some white female scholars register suggests that they do not expect to be challenged. As experts in this field, some of these scholars express outrage at being challenged, especially by young African female scholars. But such a reaction could also mask “a desire for personal mastery” that resists any interrogation from those who suffer the weight of misrepresentations in existing literature (many of which we are still reeling from) those who will inherit what is said.³⁴ It would be naive to think that restructuring these relations will be a smooth process. Such a dialogue is bound to create its own unique stresses. But it seems to me that our mutual commitment to improving the lives of African women (and those of women all over the world) is enough to force our political will into action.

Admittedly, the responsibility of harnessing marginal voices does not rest solely with a collective imagination at the center. African female scholars in the West are rising to the challenge of building academic and political networks with those in the mother continent. International linkages among groups of black women are gradually evolving. These networks are needed to give voice to the multiple realities of womanhood in Africa and the diaspora. We cannot begin to talk about analytical frameworks, theories, concepts, and methodologies when the diversity of our lived experiences is largely unexplored. Without these prerequisites, we cannot adequately articulate our positions, especially those on culturally sensitive issues (for example, polygyny, circumcision, and birth control). These positions are crucial if we are to provide any basis for alliance with other groups. Suffice it to say that in the face of these daunting challenges, the immediate concern should be with the state of feminist relations rather than the grand designs of postmodernism.

Notes

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1. In operative terms, “the politics of producing feminist knowledge” refers to the terms of interaction among distinct constituencies. I refer in particular to the hierarchies that create unequal access to the forums in which feminist concerns are tabled for consideration, especially where they command a high currency. This unequal access is reinforced by—among other factors—the structure of white supremacy and Western imperialism and has worked largely to the advantage of white middle-class women scholars.

2. See, for example, Bell Hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989); Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990); Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Sandra G. Harding, *Whose Science, Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

3. For example, see Ann Marie Goetz, "Feminism and the Claim to Know: Contradictions in Feminist Approaches to Women in Development," in Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland, eds., *Gender and International Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 133–157. A critical analysis of cultural relativist and postmodern approaches is viewed as a "response to the challenge of difference" (p. 134).

4. Linda Hutcheon, "Postmodernism," in Irena R. Makaryk, ed., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 621.

5. Jane L. Parpart, "Who Is the 'Other'? A Postmodern Feminist Critique of Women and Development Theory and Practice," *Development and Change*, vol. 24, no. 3 (July 1993), p. 439.

6. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xxiii.

7. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 51–52.

8. Parpart, "Who Is the 'Other'?" p. 440.

9. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 80.

10. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. xxv.

11. Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," in Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 48.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

14. Mohanty, Russo, and Torres, *Third World Women*; Parpart, "Who Is the 'Other'?"; Caren Kaplan, "The Politics of Location and Transnational Feminist Critical Practice," in Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 137–152; and Vidyamali Samarasinghe, "The Place of the WID Discourse in Global Feminist Analysis: The Potential for a 'Reverse Flow'" in Gay Young and Bette Dickerson, eds., *Colour, Class and Country: Experiences of Gender* (London: Zed Books, 1994), pp. 218–231.

15. Harding, *Whose Science, Whose Knowledge?* p. 183.

16. Michele Wallace, "The Politics of Location: Cinema/Theory/Literature/Sexuality/Me," *Framework*, vol. 36 (1989), p. 53.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

18. See Angela Davies, "Reflections on the Role of the Black Woman in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar*, vol. 2 (December 1971), pp. 3–15; Angela Davies, *Woman, Race and Class* (London: Women's Press, 1982); and Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

19. Kum-Kum Bhavnani, "Tracing the Contours: Feminist Research and Feminist Objectivity," *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1993), p. 96.

20. For a historical overview, see Philomina E. Okeke, "From Global Sisterhood to the Assertion of Difference: The Emerging African Feminist Scholarship," *African Update: A Newsletter of the CCSU African Studies Program*, Central Connecticut State University (Fall 1994), pp. 6–7.

21. Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987), p. 8.

22. Parpart, "Who Is the 'Other'?" p. 443.

23. Tiyaambe Zeleza, "Gendering African History," *African Development*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1993), pp. 116–117.

24. For instance, Claire Robertson takes this stance at the end of her review of the relevant historical literature in "Developing Economic Awareness: Changing Perspectives in Studies of African Women, 1976–1985," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring 1987), pp. 97–135.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

26. See Kathryn Ward, ed., *Women Workers and Global Restructuring* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1990); Sheila Lewenhak, *The Revaluation of Women's Work* (London: Earthscan, 1992); Rae Lesser Blumberg, "Introduction: EnGENDERing Wealth and Well-Being in an Era of Economic Transformation," in Rae Lesser Blumberg, Cathy A. Rakowski, Irene Tinkor, and Michael Monteón, eds., *EnGENDERing Wealth and Well-Being: Empowerment for Global Change* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 1–16.

27. Taiwo Olufemi, "Women's Studies Methodologies," in *Women's Studies in Nigeria and Canada: A Comparative Approach*, Proceedings of the Initial Workshop for the Canada-Nigeria Linkage in Women's Studies, Canada International Development Agency, 1988, p. 26.

28. Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 11.

29. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiii.

30. Incident witnessed by the author.

31. Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinventions of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 178.

32. Kirin Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist*, vol. 95, no. 3 (1993), p. 672.

33. Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," in Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner, eds., *Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds: Feminism and the Problem of Sisterhood* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 292.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 299.