Conclusion: Lessons from Signs: Revisiting Feminist Field Formation

The *Signs* [editorial] board, to a large extent—and surely not everyone—had this intellectual trust and this willingness to celebrate in other people’s ideas. I mean that’s what an editor does really. You’re not putting forward your ideas. You’re celebrating someone else’s.

—Barbara Gelpi

My book sought to trouble a disconcerting and inaccurate narrative about the past of feminist scholarship in the United States that has gained ascendency in some feminist scholarly circles. Throughout I have called this inaccurate account *feminist scholarship’s stock narrative*; I have argued that it incompletely and incorrectly summarizes the past of feminist scholarship. The picture that the stock narrative paints of feminist field formation is limited and requires modification in several ways. In particular, this book was concerned with how the stock narrative renders sociopolitical—and *geopolitical*—dynamics involved in feminist field formation invisible; these dynamics demand further scrutiny for the multiple dispersions they effect in feminist scholarship. Geopolitics has dispersed into the seemingly most unrelated modes of inquiry, including feminist scholarship. In this book, I account for how these dispersions manifested in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. The stock narrative functions to foreclose further scrutiny into the myriad sociopolitical and geopolitical referents of feminist scholarship, because it misleadingly limits the social grounds of academic feminism to the 1960s new social movements, the New Left, and the
changes these political and intellectual movements wrought in higher education.

My book disrupts the interpretive hegemony of the stock narrative by developing three alternate accounts of feminist field formation. One account borrows analytical strategies from Karl Mannheim’s (1936) conception of the sociology of knowledge; the second makes use of Arthur O. Lovejoy’s (1940) approach to the history of ideas; and the third employs Foucauldian archaeology (Michel Foucault 2002). To be sure, my method could have been more quantitative in scope, surveying several women’s studies programs across the country or accounting for the copious contents of several English-language feminist journals. Some may argue that my decision to limit the book’s archival purview to the first ten years of *Signs*’ publication results in a considerable sacrifice in intellectual breadth, so considerable that the arguments herein are too specific to be applicable to other areas of interdisciplinary feminist scholarship as it emerged in the United States through women’s studies programs, research institutes, scholarly journals, and the National Women’s Studies Association. This might be true, but we will not know for sure until several scholars study the history of women’s studies and feminist scholarship with the attention to institutional and scholarly specificity their historicity deserves.

My intellectual breadth surfaces in areas not typically associated with the historical purview of feminist scholarship. My Foucauldian conception of the archive encompasses not only the thousands of pages that fill the first ten volumes of *Signs*, but also the multifaceted relations within, between, and among the academic institutions that housed the journal during its first ten years, the University of Chicago Press, the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, and the UN and USAID. With its expanded notion of the archive, my book demonstrates that what may be sacrificed in temporal depth is compensated for in the creation of an entirely new sense of breadth—a dispersed and spatial breadth—encompassing the multidimensional (and not simply intellectual) forces responsible for feminist scholarly emergence.

The philosophical presuppositions informing my project are genealogical in the Nietzschean sense. I have sought to generate partial accounts of feminist field formation that open up different ways of relating to feminist scholarship at present and in the future. My ultimate hope is to breathe new life into the field by pointing to different methodological possibilities for feminist scholarly investigation. Some may question my sincerity about breathing new life into the field, given my critical posture toward *Signs* in its earliest years. However, I have given such thorough