



***Compass Interdisciplinary
Virtual Conference***
-19-30 Oct 2009-

Anna-Liisa Aunio
**(Centre de Recherche en Éthique de l'Université de Montréal
[CRÉUM])**

COMMENTARY ON:

**Borderlands Studies and Border Theory:
Linking Activism and Scholarship for Social Justice**

Nancy A. Naples
University of Connecticut

Launched from the precarious moorings of interdisciplinary writing and research, border theory has since charted a strong path through scholarship in both the humanities and social sciences. Naples captures this journey well and employs its brief history in order to provide a clear assessment of the field, its limitations, and its promise. Of particular note is Naples' emphasis on praxis as a necessary foundation for bridging the gap between cultural theory and social scientific research as well as knowledge and action. By highlighting the experiences and works of activist-scholars, she demonstrates how bridging these two worlds has the potential to enrich both the political and the intellectual landscape. The purpose of the scholar studying inequality and domination, in particular, can and should be relevant to those who suffer from it.

Significant to this emphasis on praxis is the connection of border theory to the epistemological foundations of feminist standpoint theory. In this regard, analysis of the experiences and social history of the "other-within" (in Collins' terms) has the potential to provide insight into historical-material relations of domination. While one would expect that the experiences of the oppressed would drive these insights (and thus the analysis of the activist-researcher), however, border theory in fact relies upon the privileged position of the researcher to both identify and diagnose the specific relations of domination that create the "other-within". Naples' statement that "these processes can only be revealed through sustained reflection and analysis and therefore may

not be directly seen or understood by those inhabiting specific social locations” reflects the presumption of epistemic privilege on the part of the researcher as necessary for theoretical insight and the potential for political action. Naples’ emphasis on praxis is an attempt, in part, to address this (in addition to emphasizing the importance of material relations as well as identities). While it seems hopeful that an activist-researcher may correctly identify borderlands and draw conclusions with reference to border theory through active engagement in social change activities, questions remain about the positionality of the researcher vis-à-vis the experience of the oppressed. The role of consciousness can be more fruitfully explored in order to address this.

Interestingly, by focusing on the works of activist-researchers, Naples embarks upon a fruitful course of future inquiry. As a field of research, border theory has been driven by a feminist theoretical and political history and, as a result, has traditionally focused on the conflicts and borders navigated by historically and materially oppressed groups. While Naples argues that standpoint epistemology problematizes the particular supremacy of one kind of oppression over another, border studies and Naples’ emphasis specifically on activist praxis demonstrates that groups consistently do so in order to combat oppression. In this regard, the “outsider-within” is continuously broken down, recreated, and reinforced in the everyday realities of social action. Research on these shifts is one potential avenue of future exploration for border theory. In doing so, border theorists can more fruitfully engage the significance of specific relations of domination by exploring when borders are salient in the everyday lives of both the oppressors and the oppressed. To do so, empirical studies should examine not only instances of exclusion and resistance, but of inclusion and acceptance. One potential question, for example is: when do individuals “take up” borders in order to create and reinforce privilege? In this regard, the insights from feminist theoretical work on privilege may prove useful. Naples, in this review, makes important strides in the right direction.