

Forum

A Science of the Specific: An Interview with Mary Poovey

by Caroline Arni and Mischa Suter

Mischa Suter: You research finance with the tools of historical epistemology, a field that has received much attention since the “Great Recession” after the crash of 2008. However, already several years before the latest crisis you were interested in the epistemology of economics and in finance’s characteristic ways of abstraction. As the biography of a scholar is often made of a succession of research problems, can we start biographically?

Mary Poovey: All my degrees are in English literature and I did my doctoral degree with a dissertation on gothic novels at the end of the eighteenth century. Then I got my first job at Yale University, and it turned out they did not want me to teach on the eighteenth or the nineteenth century, so I ended up teaching narrative theory. After a few years, I moved on to Swarthmore College where they didn’t want me to teach eighteenth-century literature either, so I ended up teaching literary theory for quite a long time. And then I went to two or three other places, but I never quite made my way back to what I had actually been trained in. I eventually wrote a couple of books, one called *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, which is on the late eighteenth-century, early nineteenth-century English literature, which was the actual focus of my training, and then I wrote *Uneven Developments*, which was on the nineteenth century, but this time, I focused not just on literature, but also on medicine, health reform law and governesses, and about Florence Nightingale and the position of women in society.¹ This one was really focused on gender relations. That is what I consider the first part of my career.

Caroline Arni: What route did you take from there, by the nineties?

MP: I wrote a series of works that had to do with cultural questions as opposed to strictly gender questions, *Making a Social Body* and then *A History of the Modern Fact*.² Both of these books are concerned with the ways culture makes knowledge and rules. *Making a Social Body* is about the transformation of the administration in

1 *Mary Poovey*, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*, Chicago 1984; dies., *Uneven Developments: The Ideology of Gender in Victorian England*, Chicago 1988.

2 *Mary Poovey*, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830–1864*, Chicago 1995; dies., *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*, Chicago 1998.

nineteenth-century England and the creation of sewer systems and things like that. Already, I was moving out of strictly literary studies, although some of the texts I talked about were literary in nature. These questions enabled me to think how power is distributed, not only through politics, but also through the literal infrastructure of a city or a government, and I was very interested in the administrative reform, which is something that occurs within a bureaucracy, but it can also occur as a consequence of something like the health sanitary rules of the Victorian administrator Edwin Chadwick and so on.

History of the Modern Fact was a far more ambitious project, for in it, I was interested in how it came to be the case that in my own university, Johns Hopkins, most of the research money went to people in the sciences and the social sciences, and not as much money went to the humanities. I wanted to understand how the humanities got demoted and how social sciences and sciences got elevated in terms of prestige, because of course in the long history of things, the humanities were at the center of the disciplines. I focused on the history of statistics because statistics is one of these peculiar languages that from the long eighteenth century on were represented as being necessary but inadequate. So people would say: “We have to know how many houses belong to the Irish that have not been whitewashed”, and then they would say, “Unfortunately knowing the number of houses is not sufficient, we have to understand the moral degradation of the Irish.” And so you would have bizarre paragraphs in which they would alternate between statistics and narrative. They were saying that both of them had to be there, and each was insufficient without the other. But by the end of the nineteenth century, the discourse of statistics became much more prestigious than the verbal descriptions.

MS: You had your first post as an assistant professor at Yale at the moment when Literary Theory, with a capital “T”, really took off. How, in retrospect, would you say did this Yale “moment” equip you for those more cultural questions?

MP: But wait a second. On the one hand this was the heyday of Literary Theory with a capital T, that is, deconstruction associated with people like J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, or Geoffrey Hartman. Yet on the other hand, it was also very much theoretical Marxism, represented by Fredric Jameson. He lived across the street from me, and every day I came home from work, I would go to Fred’s house and we would drink a bottle of wine and we would talk. Since I was not a student of any of these people, I was able to learn only as much as I wanted to learn and to ignore the rest.

CA: Which must have given you a lot of independence ...

MP: Well, I was not part of the Yale school since I was not a student there. I was far more interested in the kind of cultural questions that Jameson was asking. And so I was lucky enough to be present at Yale but not part of it. Obviously I learned quite a lot of theory, because I went on to teach it for many years, but I did not ever consider myself part of a particular theoretical school. What Jameson’s work did that I found so interesting was to combine textual analysis with the analysis of

the flows of power. It helped me to think about how cultural objects and processes were complex parts of texts, but also complex parts of social relations. So you could distinguish between that and the deconstructionists who were primarily interested in textuality and language. Fred, in turn, was interested in language but also in materialism, and the way in which language was part of culture as opposed to being all of culture. So that gave me a break, or a distance, if you like, between the high theoretical textuality and historicism. I got some of the benefits of the linguistic turn without ever being trapped in the “prison house of language” – to quote Jameson.³ And that was a real benefit.

CA: You mentioned before that *A History of the Modern Fact* was your most ambitious book until now. Why?

MP: It was ambitious in part because there was no canon. There was no obvious set of texts with which to write a history of the fact as a unit of knowledge and the concept of the modern fact didn't really exist. So I was creating the concept that organized the book and trying to find texts set within it. I ended up making a case for why this should be the canon and not something else. This included writing a kind of history that other people hadn't written with some exceptions like Lorraine Daston and that is a history of epistemology: the question of how the conditions emerge under which we can know what we do know. Obviously this is inspired by Michel Foucault and is not completely original. But what I was trying to do was to tunnel through as if there were a path there, knowing all the time that I can be charged with creating the path that I claim to be finding. So that was a big theoretical challenge. It ended up being a successful book. It was read by people in anthropology, history, sociology, and that empowered me to write *Genres of the Credit Economy*.⁴ That book is an attempt to extend what I did in *History of the Modern Fact*, but now to take more thoroughly into account the way in which the disciplines of economics and literary studies split apart over a long period of time and the overlap that they retained. And now I am finishing what I consider the third in the trilogy and that is a book called *Finance in America: An Unfinished Story*.

CA: Let us focus on your ongoing work on finance and financial models for a moment. You say that the model is what comes after the fact; that today, the dominant way knowledge is organized, is the model, whereas previously, it was the fact. The model is now what constitutes truth ...

MP: ... what *counts* as truth. The book was originally to be called *The Modern Way of Knowing* and it was going to be a history of financial modeling. It is co-authored by Kevin Brine, who had a long career at Wall Street and was a trustee at New

³ Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, Princeton 1972.

⁴ *Mary Poovey, Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Chicago 2008.

York University. One day he came to me and said, “This is what your next book is going to be about. It’s about financial models. It’s what historically comes after the fact as a unit to organize knowledge.” What this meant was that whereas previously scientists said, “It is a fact that ...”, now they predominantly say: “My model shows that ...”.

MS: Was your interest in finance, which in a sense continues your interests from *Genres of the Credit Economy*, also related to the financial crisis of 2008?

MP: Around 2008, I wanted to know what was going on. There was this urgency of the moment when you just say “What in God’s name is going on here, I need to understand it”. This coincided with Kevin turning up and showing me the continuity between my last two books and the new book on modeling. I couldn’t have projected the book on modeling out of the crisis of 2008 because I didn’t know what modeling was or that it had anything to do with the crisis. So I came to an understanding of the logic of the book in my own work in the process of writing the book.

We wrote the first draft and it was very much the case that we wanted the book to begin in the 1890s but modeling didn’t get brought into finance until the 1940s. So we suddenly had this problem: We had the first half of the book about a subject that didn’t yet exist. In a sense it was like *Tristram Shandy*; the hero would be born about three quarters through the book and then it would spend the rest of the time figuring out why that window sash fell, right?⁵ So it became clear to Kevin and me that the book had to be about finance, and modeling as a sub-story of the story of finance, as opposed to having finance as a sub-story of modeling. Because people wanted to know, “Why aren’t you writing about modeling in genetics, or in climate change, or in sociology? It’s everywhere.” And we are not able in this lifetime to write that book on modeling. And so by writing a history of finance, we were able to tell the story of how modeling came into one practice without having to come to a story of how modeling exists, period. That was just too much.

MS: Talking about the coming into being of new entities by institutions, boundary drawing ...

MP: ... technologies ...

MS ... what *does* make finance specific in this regard?

MP: Two things about finance. One, it’s as old as money itself. It’s almost without a history, it is so old. But in turns of its more modern version, finance has this peculiar history that it began inside and outside the discipline of economics and universities. Economists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were practicing what they would have called political economy, but some of them would ask

⁵ *Laurence Sterne*, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, London 1767.

questions about finance. And yet, there was no academic study of finance. In trade schools, courses that we would associate with finance existed, but in the American university system, you would have some economics professors like Irving Fisher, the first American economist to use mathematics, asking questions that we would now call financial. Like, “Let’s think about the value of a share in one of the new corporations – where does the value of the share come from?” It comes from your expectations about the future payments of that share discounted to the present. That’s a new definition of value that Irving Fisher came up with, based upon the large corporations that were new as of the 1890s in America. So the definition of the financial value, that is, the future value discounted to the present, is a function of the rise of the institution of these corporations and of an economist trying to think about that. So, fast forward to the 1940s, when finance began to develop very gradually in some courses in business schools, and after 1970, there were programs in economic departments, some business schools specialized in finance and so on. Finance has this non-continuous history, but a history where it began here and there, sometimes it took a long break and then it came back again. You could write a history of economics; that would be a continuous history. Writing the history of finance is much more of a challenge because it is a discontinuous history until the 1970s when the curriculum took place. So it’s quite the opposite to writing a history that says it’s a logic informing itself through time. We’re saying: something came into being, it didn’t have a logic that lasted 70 years. What were the pieces that were assembled over the years without anybody having the idea of modern finance? How did they come together, where did they come from?

The other thing about finance is that one of the ontological peculiarities of finance is that finance is a claim. It isn’t property. It isn’t like land is a property. It isn’t a capacity like labor is a capacity. It is a claim against the future. And so finance has this peculiarity of being imbued with uncertainty. Because you don’t know what the future is going to bring. That’s the oddness of the nature of the asset.

MS: That leads to one of your main points. You say that humanists should take an interest in the ontological question of economics. What is the nature of the economic agent? My question is: what’s a humanist’s answer to this question?

MP: You got to study the history to find out the answer to that question because the answer to that question changes in different historical periods. For example, as of 1937 a national economy became an economic agent because for the first time data was collected and statistical tools were developed that would present a picture of a national economy as one thing. Before that, all the same things had existed but there was no agent called the national economy that could make a difference in the world. Or, to give another example: Unemployment did not exist as a concept before there were figures that made it comprehensible as an aggregate. So what constitutes an economic agent is a function of institutions, laws, and opportunities that come to exist. Some of these come to exist as consequences of theories, but usually these entities are not theorized in advance. Usually the entities are solutions to a particular question, and sometimes they come into being in response to a different problem.

But once they are given a kind of infrastructure, like the collection of statistics or tax returns, then they come into being and then it's hard to kill them.

CA: What comes to mind on this is the specific role of statistics in non-centralized states like the US or Switzerland as opposed to its role in centralized states like France.

MP: As you know, statistics was originally considered to be an engine of statecraft. And they were such instruments of statecraft in Prussia and France. But in a non-centralized state like the United States what came before statistics was taxation. Taxation not at the state-level, but at the federal-level, was an early opportunity for the federal government to extract data from the people. And from this, statistics followed. But in a centralized state like France, statistics went first. That's one of the reasons why I think it's important to do historical analysis as opposed to simply theoretical analysis because in the context of a centralized state, the order is going to be different between, in this case, statistics and taxation. The effect might be the same in the long run, you might have control of certain populations whereas other populations get out of control, but I just don't think you can have generalizations like "Economic agents are always created by this."

MS: The creation of the aggregates you mention involves abstraction, and what seems to preoccupy you time and again is the work of abstraction. You show that abstraction is not reductive but profoundly generative of new situations or new figurations. So what would be the new situations and figurations created by finance?

MP: Oh, gosh, the whole derivatives revolution that created a form of value that never existed before! And that form of value is now an enormous proportion of the global economy. The financial revolution is a fantastic powerful example of how abstraction has created value, careers, criminal law suits, and a global financial crisis.

MS: This ties in well with a statement of yours, that in finance the relation between epistemology and ontology becomes ever more important because it is nearly impossible to draw the distinction between the two. Can you elaborate on that?

MP: To use an example: If I'm going to buy a flat in Zurich, I have a number of ways that I might decide on the value of that flat. I might look at all the comparable flats in a building, or I might say: I really like the kitchen, or: it's a great place for my dogs, all of this will go into my estimation of the value of that asset. A financial asset acquires its value not exclusively by my assumption about some kind of underlying referent. The value of that asset is the function of my expectation of other peoples' tendency to value that asset. The value becomes a function of a representation of a representation, or an expectation about an expectation about an expectation. So what I believe about a financial asset becomes in a very real way its price. When I say epistemology becomes ontology or vice versa, what you know – or think you know – becomes in a very real sense what it is worth.

MS: This is the explanatory power of the performativity thesis regarding finance: that, in a recursive way, the model begins to make the market. Are there limits to this performative capacity?

MP: Let me clarify one thing about sociologist Donald Mackenzie's version of the performativity argument.⁶ He is quite careful in saying that not all derivatives, which are a particular kind of financial instrument, are performative. The kind of derivative that has proved to be performative, that is to say, the model begins to make the market, is the options pricing that began in the 1970s with the Black-Scholes model. Mackenzie is not extending from the behavior of options pricing an argument about the nature of all financial securities. And I think that's an important distinction to make, that he is quite intent about having a specific definition of the kind of assets that have this performative quality. I think to extend the performativity thesis to a general statement about speech acts in the world as J.L. Austin does, or even to a lesser extent Judith Butler does, is a mistake. Because it leaves out of the picture the historical context in which some kinds of speech acts do become performative, some kinds of financial models do become performative. But there are other contexts in which it doesn't happen.

CA: That again would fuel your argument on specificity. Because it comes up time and again, I was wondering if what makes you committed to historical study is that it is the way to get into the specific.

MP: I think historical study is essential to counteracting our desire to theorize too soon. I think it's very tempting to go to the level of meta-commentary or theory, and then to make big general claims. The hard work is in testing those claims against specificity. And also I think history gives a kind of texture, a narrative richness to the stories we can tell, that are lost in purely theoretical claims. So my theoretical commitment is to historical specificity.

MS: Given that you are interested in the formal rules of a text, I imagine that you are well equipped to look at the representation of a representation: How does your background in literary study relate to the study of finance?

MP: In terms of the skills that enable me to talk about the performative meta-levels, literary study was one of the earliest disciplines to wholeheartedly endorse a kind of self-reflectiveness about our own methods. And in so far as I came of age in the time of high theory, that's what I took away from it. Not so much the linguistic turn or deconstruction, but the notion of always examining the assumptions with which I operate in the text that I read. I'm always looking for the logic that's underneath the logic. And literary theory in the 1970s was very good at teaching us that. That's what I took from it.

⁶ *Donald Mackenzie, An Engine, not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets*, Cambridge/MA 2006.

CA: But then you also criticized a lack of historicizing in this approach.

MP: That's right. They got the theory drug. And the theory drug is very intoxicating because it gives you a great sense of power. And as you know as historians, there's a lot of drudgery in doing history.

MS: You seem to be willing to engage with drudgery.

MP: Yes, I'm a very hard worker.

MS: How, then, do you work? You mentioned the very elementary difficulty to acquire the really different language of mathematics in order to enter the field of neoclassical economics.

MP: Kevin is doing a lot of the heavy lifting on the math. He has no training in math, either. So here are two ignorant people learning stochastic calculus. He can now read the mathematics and explain it to me, and our agreement is that I will not write about anything that I don't understand. Often that means that between me reading a textbook and him explaining it to me, I come to a fairly sophisticated understanding. But I could not sit down and read the textbook on stochastic calculus and tell you much about it. I've read them before, but I'm the first to admit the limitations of my knowledge. But if I hadn't sat down and tried to read the books myself, I would just be summarizing what other people said. Then I alternate between reading secondary and primary sources. We all know that some secondary histories are better than others, and that we find things in the primary texts that no secondary histories are writing about. The excitement is in finding those things that nobody has written about yet. But I wouldn't know what to look for if there were no help by the historians who have been there before me. However, the secondary literature is directing you to take the same path that the secondary literature took, instead of taking your own. You have to read a lot of secondary literature and it has to come from all over. Because if you only read historians of ideas, you are going to write a history of ideas, and I'm not terribly interested in how one idea affects another.

MS: You follow analytical concepts through history more than certain schools of thought, or institutions, and perhaps not even "thought collectives" (Ludwik Fleck). How do you find the protagonists of your story? And who is the protagonist of your current story?

MP: One kind of history that I'm not particularly interested in is the history of thought. I want to know how ideas are instantiated, and how their instantiation either impedes their being taken up by somebody else or facilitates it. So, for example, I'm very interested in the effect that technological advances have on the transformation of knowledge, but I'm not a technological determinist. In our work on the early research on stock forecasting, we found that there were no computers to process the data. So the men who did the research had to hire what they called "human com-

puters” at the University of Iowa to enter the data on the first IBM punch cards. They listed the names of the people who processed the data in the front of their study, but they did not call attention to a fact that Kevin and I found fascinating: a majority of these human computers were women. So, I’m interested in this as part of the story, and in the fact that the earliest computations on stock forecasting were impeded by the difficulty of literally punching the data into the cards. That is an example of how a history of ideas would do injustice to the drag of progress that was imposed by technological limitations. You say that I’m not interested in thought collectives, and that’s right, because I don’t really see power moving around in a monolithic way. Especially not by male thinkers who sit around and discuss ideas and therefore move the world. I’m a strong believer in the fact that Robert Boyle had his servant who didn’t deliver the right specimen to the laboratory and therefore certain things did happen or that he depended on his wife to transcribe data, so I’m as interested in that level of friction in the transmission of historical ideas as anything else. Because that’s where the dailyness of history exists. In terms of how I find my protagonists: The book we are currently writing doesn’t really have a protagonist because it follows so much time.

MS: What about the models themselves as protagonists?

MP: Well, for that you would have to leave out the first 50 years of the book, where there are no financial models. That’s the problem. You could say finance is the hero of the story, but finance has no single identity, but multiple identities. So I don’t know if that book has any hero except the reader who manages to get through the whole thing ...

MS: I want to push you a little by asking about the place of critique in your work. In your writing, you show that what looks ordered and stable is actually fissured and shifting. For example, to show that a category like gender was in itself contradictory, had a great critical investment to it.⁷ But right now, we are perhaps living in a different situation, for crisis-talk seems to be part of the new normal. How can you make a critical statement by way of displaying incoherence in the financial crisis, when so many commentators already stress contingency, crisis, and speak of “Black Swans” and the inability to find any kind of orientation?⁸

MP: Oh, I think on the contrary, “Black Swans” and theories of crisis are attempts to bring order where there is only contingency. The only thing that “Black Swans” is, is an attempt to eliminate the possibility of contingency by giving a model that allows for contingency. But let me respond two things. One is that I’m not wedded to the fact that every piece of history has to be a critical intervention. I think there are some historical accounts that are extremely generative and valuable without being

⁷ *Mary Poovey*, „Feminism and Deconstruction,“ in: *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988) 1, 51–65.

⁸ *Nassim Nicholas Taleb*, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, New York 2007.

reducible to a single critical position. And that I have fought many people about, especially in literature departments, who say: “How can you write a book about finance and not say, on every page, how terrible it is!” That’s basically what it is reduced down to. The second point I would want to make is that economic modeling is internally coherent but it has a complex relationship to the real world. The task of econometrics is to try to adjudicate the relationship between the model and the world. The latter rests upon statistics and probability. And these in turn rest upon data and a certain kind of mathematical analysis and logic. Which themselves are constructs and so there is no moment at which the model is either absolutely applicable to reality or absolutely inappropriate for reality until history changes, because the very notion of its applicability rests upon these instruments of statistics and probability. So there is a kind of infinite regress of the point at which you could say the model is internally coherent or “only” internally coherent; the limits of the internal coherence become clear if somebody tries to see how it applies to the real world. By definition, models are not realistic representations, they are simplifications. And you just have to accept that *that is* the way modeling works. If you say, “Well, that’s dumb, why do people do it”, then that’s another complaint. The point I’m trying to make is that the alternative is not between coherent and incoherent, or logically self-contained or breaking down at its own incoherence. The distinction is, how do you want to use this knowledge instrument. If you want to use the knowledge instrument to simplify, as a model does, then it will never represent the real world, it will always break down when confronted with the real world, because that’s not what it’s designed to do! But on the other hand, if you want to try to represent all the particulars of the real world, then don’t use a model! That’s not what they’re designed to do. It’s what Ragnar Frisch called “a little model world”.⁹ But if you try to step out of the little model world into the real world, there’s a problem.

CA: There’s a saying by Fernand Braudel, that a historical model is like a ship and you set it on sea, and if it fails while drifting back in time, it’s a good historical model.¹⁰

MP: I would say, if the ship fails, and the people who launched the ship are not sad, then it’s a good model. The problem is that the people on the shore want their ship to go on forever. So it’s actually the expectation of the people on the shore that matters.

MS: You approach your research problems from a different angle than an analytical concept like “capitalism” implies. Yet there appear some parallels or tangential concerns. In a sense, my question goes back to Jameson: on the one hand, Marxism is linking its analysis to the economic, but then analytically dissolves the economic in social conflict. And on the other hand, Marxism has the notion of real abstraction,

⁹ *Ragnar Frisch*, *A Dynamic Approach to Economic Theory: The Yale Lectures of Ragnar Frisch*, 1930, ed. by Olav Bjerkholt and Duo Qin, London 2010, 31 f.

¹⁰ *Fernand Braudel*, „Unity and Diversity in the Human Sciences“, in: id., *On History*, transl. by Sarah Matthews, Chicago 1980, 55–63.

of abstractions that become corporeal in the world. How do you position yourself to a macroconcept like “capitalism”?

MP: I’m very skeptical of master narratives of any kind, so to say that the economic, or anything else, is the last instance in general is not a path that I’m going to go down. That’s why I don’t write about capitalism. Or about financialization. Or about neoliberalism. Because I think while these general abstractions have real effects in the world, I think that to write a narrative in which that’s the protagonist, is to lose specificity. Another thing Jameson said is that history is what hurts.¹¹ So it’s the specificities again of the historical instantiation of the abstraction that mattered to me more than the impression that there is some unfolding logic.

CA: What did he mean by “history is what hurts”?

MS: It’s what resists desire.

MP: Exactly, which means, it’s what resists generalization. It’s what you stumble on, just when you think you are in charge.

CA: The urge to be in control and to have the master narrative.

MP: One thing history documents over and over again is endings; death or the failure of some project. As soon as there is a master narrative, it can overcome all forms of resistance. This is vain, it’s a form of egomania.

CA: Has it always been easy *not* to do the things you are not doing? Like, not doing the history of ideas, or to refuse macro concepts or master narratives? What enables you to resist?

MP: I think there is also a personality trait that I have, that I’m very resistant to influence.

CA: And expectations ...

MP: ... very resistant to expectations. I really like discontinuity. I really like to walk out of institutions, to walk out of projects, to walk out of relationships, and yet I crave continuity. I love stories, I want them to have closure, I always want them to end in the right way, I want to be in control — so that tension between two different personality tendencies has made it impossible for me to follow imitation but also impossible to know where I’m going next. I’ve been fortunate that I’ve had institutions that would let me do what I wanted to do.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca/NY 1981.

CA: In another context you said that you write a book to work it out of your system.

MP: I have dogs with very long hair. For me, it's like getting a tangle out of a dog's hair. You can't just pull it right through, you have to work it down and then to go up here, and then you pull a bit, and pull the knots out and then pull it out a bit more, and then once the tangle is out, it doesn't bother you anymore. It's often the case that I can't remember what I wrote about after I finished it. I wonder sometime, if I retire and spend my time raising my dogs and boating, maybe I never will have another thought again. People have told me that they were able to finish a book only when they wanted to start writing the next one so badly. That is not me. I'm more like, "I want it to stop hurting right now! Tomorrow, I'll be free and will not get out of bed, no commitment."

CA: And then you also moved through disciplines. That is enabling because you don't have to be loyal. Disciplines demand loyalty.

MP: In a sense that goes back to the earlier question about the Yale school. I was not of the Yale school but I was on the outside looking in and that gave me the freedom to not be of it, but to be close enough to it to take from it what I wanted. But I want to repeat that there is a lot of luck involved in anybody's career, and I have been fortunate to have jobs that permitted me to write what I wanted to write. I think I don't lack for desires; there's always something I want to do. The question is, how do I get myself in a place where I can do what I want to do. So, for example, I'm learning the clarinet. Nobody would predict that at my age, one would take up the clarinet. And I'm not good at it, really, in fact I'm terrible. But that's not the point. I really wanted to learn the damn clarinet, so I practice up to three hours a day, and I take private lessons twice a week, and it has become part of an organizing desire in my life.

CA: One last point. In a short article in *Critical Inquiry* in 2004 you called to go beyond representation.¹² What do you think about the fields you move through: has there been a move beyond representation, and how do you assess the current situation in theoretically informed history-writing? In the discipline of history there is in some parts the – slightly triumphant – feeling that theory is “over” or “done with”, in a sense, and that we can go back to topics.

MP: Well, I don't think that we will ever be beyond theory. I don't think you can think without theory. Because, otherwise, without any theories at all, you're just naming what you see. There would be no categories, and I'm a very strong believer that the categories you use, the way you organize knowledge, dictates what you can know. I think maybe the case for theory for its own sake is a lot less interesting to many scholars today, but I bet any student who is learning with you or me has been informed to a certain extent by the theories that we've all learnt. It's very hard for me

12 *Mary Poovey, For What It's Worth ...*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004) 2, 429–433.

to imagine that this is not true. But my students probably now don't read all of Lacan. And do I think that's a good thing? I think to a certain extent they don't have to; we did it, why do they have to? I'm a pretty firm believer in following your curiosity because I think the human curiosity as it is embodied in different people has value. I think the turn for the topical in history is a theoretical turn, it's a turn away from a certain kind of theory, but topics are theorized, too, just as they are categorized, just as they are geographically specific. I also think that it's not for somebody who's at the end of her career, as I am, to say "oh gosh, what these people are doing is worthless", because people said that about me when I was much younger. It didn't stop me, but still, it could have been very discouraging. I feel like clearing the way for other scholars is the best thing that you can do.

CA: We could go on and talk about your early work on gender that was always imbued with a feminist impulse and about how you assess the relationship between gender and feminism today. But we should let you off the hook now and continue this conversation at another time ...

MP: ... long live feminism!