After reading Sharon Welch’s *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* in order to respond to Michael Gunzenhauser’s essay, I was so taken with her work that I immediately read, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*, which examines the role of communities in both fostering liberation and sustaining oppression, and *Sweet Dreams in America*, which utilizes her ethic of risk in secular multicultural education. Beyond the scarcely disputable need for active engagement and mutual critique in ethnographic research that Gunzenhauser suggests, Welch’s oeuvre also merits educators’ philosophical reflection on several fronts that he has not mentioned. Therefore, to afford some opportunity for philosophical dialogue today, I will focus specifically on Welch’s conception of resistance.

Welch envisions a postmodern approach to theorizing and sustaining activism in the face of entrenched social injustice. Although I concur with much of Gunzenhauser’s summary of Welch’s *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, I must respectfully dispute his view that Welch embraces a modest social transformation, exchanging, as he says, the hope of victory for the hope of “better conditions for later possible victories.” I do not see that she ever capitulates on the goal of societal transformation. In fact, Welch disputes the equation of maturity with resignation or acceptance of the improbability of fundamental social change. Her ethic of risk offers an alternative to an ethic of control, that is, the notion of complete control over events and quick, predictable responses that motivate both national fixation on absolute security and Euro-American passion for domination of difference (*FE*, 23-35). Welch’s ethic of risk never sacrifices justice, dignity, and freedom necessary for social transformation, but is mindful of the limits of human thought, the intransigence of systems of domination, and the need for specific and local interventions (*FE*, 23-35).

Youthful activists in the liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s believed that revolution born of righteous rage would melt away the issues of social injustice. Activist educators believed that challenging the canon of literature and traditional pedagogies would usher in social change. After four decades of activism and deconstruction, theory and research, Welch worries that anger has atrophied into despair and cynicism, particularly among the middle class, who are already beneficiaries of partial change. She also appreciates that even the best-intentioned acts undertaken to redress wrongs have resulted in a mixed bag of consequences. Not only can one never be sure of all the unintended effects of actions undertaken with the best of intentions, people simply do not agree on what changes are “positive” (*FE*, 34-39).

Welch reckons, therefore, that global transformations and quick fixes are highly unlikely. The educational implication is that educators should celebrate partial victories even while recognizing the need for continued courage, persistence, and
defiance. Without sacrificing emancipatory goals, educators must recognize human limits, the damages that result from arrogant disregard of those limits, and the potential for producing both harm and good (FE, 14-15).

I believe that Welch makes a significant contribution to educational discourse on resistance. I was surprised, however, that as frequently as Welch utilized Michel Foucault’s work, she did not turn to his discussion of resistance. Had she done so, she would have found much compatibility between his ethical inquiries and her own. For example, even though Foucault severely criticized revolutionary theory, he stubbornly maintained his belief in notions of “liberty” and “human dignity” central to the humanist project. He claimed that his project was to “show people that they are much freer than they feel,” and that all of his analyses “are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence.” Feminist philosophers Lorraine Code and Jana Sawicki, among others, have cited these statements as evidence of his commitment to emancipatory politics.

Foucault explored Greek and Roman constructions of the self to demonstrate cultural specificity and to find a gap for alternative aesthetic recreations of self. Similarly, Welch drew upon African American womanist literature to show that the cultural despair and cynicism affecting middle class America is not universal. Both authors challenge the continued acceptance of oppression. Both projects educate people about the disruptive effects of defiance, local action, and critique. Both serve as reminders that ordinary people can practice freedom. Further, Welch is, as Foucault was, keenly aware of the intransigence of oppressive systems because of the intense webs of power relations in which all persons and institutions are part. This recognition influenced Foucault’s skepticism about the inevitability of linear progress and revolutionary solutions aimed at global transformation. Yet, Foucault suggested that freedom must continually be pursued, not as an end state to be attained, but an action to be practiced. He said “my position leads not to apathy, but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.” Foucault explained that the ethico-political choice that one must make every day is to determine which “danger” most needs our attention. For educators, this hyper- and pessimistic activism requires new tactics as problems shift. It also means expecting even successful solutions to be both incomplete and temporary. Hence, “hyper- and pessimistic activism” accepts lifelong resistance.

These notions closely parallel Welch’s ethic of risk. One does not give up on transformation, but recognizes the multiple and unpredictable costs, including potential harms that can occur, in the work for justice. For Welch, however, those costs do not include the loss of self. Rather, she says that the ultimate loss of self would be choosing not to resist injustice (FE, 165). To stop raging against oppression is to die.

Despite Welch’s compatibility with Foucault, she offers educators a more practical perspective. I will limit my comments to two points. First, even though feminists have utilized Foucault’s work, Sawicki suggests that his rhetoric is masculinist, his perspective is androcentric, and his vision is pessimistic. Further, feminists have denounced his call for discontinuity and his nihilistic tendencies.
Renouncing continuity is problematic for groups of people for whom oppression has been continuous and who historically have been coerced into discontinuity. Further, Foucault’s heroes of discontinuity are drawn from the likes of the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille. I concur with Janice Raymond, Dale Spender, and Andrea Dworkin, who have denounced Foucault’s “philosophizing” when it covers multitudes of transgressions: cruelty, degradation, rape, torture, murder, and child abuse. Celebrating these men for their defiance and discontinuity risks repeating a history with which many women and minorities are already far too familiar. Educators will find that Welch’s ethic of risk reads against the grain of hegemonic thought without nihilism or discontinuity (FE, 149).

A second crucial difference between the two authors focuses on the relationships necessary for ethical living. Foucault’s ethical inquiry explores a “technology of the self,” that is, the kind of relationship one ought to have with oneself. Persuaded of the extent to which the self has been formed through discourse, Foucauldian ethical inquiry attempts to free individuals through aesthetic re-creation. In Welch’s ethic of solidarity and difference, however, one cannot be moral alone (FE, 127). Rather, her theology maintains that ethical living must reside in the beloved community. She suggests that it is not necessary to posit “god” as the substance or ground of divinity. Members of the beloved community relate to one another in compassion, love, and solidarity, celebrating difference, finding healing and resilience in the power of relatedness. Relational power is divine. The beloved community is based, therefore, not on shared morals, faiths, or cultural norms, but on raging against all that destroys the dignity and complexity of life. Shared stories of conflict, oppression, and exclusion educate community members about both their oppression and their complicity in oppressing (FE, 154-55, 162, 165-68). Welch’s thought offers hope for educators as critical activists. Her vision for education, like her vision for life, is based on risk, celebration, solidarity, and difference—all necessary for sustaining struggles for justice—and worthy of educators’ further philosophical inquiry on another occasion.

1. Sharon D. Welch, A Feminist Ethic of Risk (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 70. This book will be cited as FE in the text for all subsequent references.
8. Ibid., 343.
9. Ibid., 343-44.


12. Raymond, A Passion for Friends, 44-47.

In response, many of Foucault's advocates argue the Habermasian critique presupposes what it seeks to show and that the critique is based on a misunderstanding of Foucault's work. In 1999, Ashenden and Owen published an edited volume of papers entitled Foucault contra Habermas: Recasting the dialogue between genealogy and critical theory in an attempt to re-engage the debate and shift the dialogue to new ground. As to re-writing Re-Thinking History differently today, that is obviously the case: history does not and should not repeat itself! On the other hand, I think the issues it tried to raise have by no means gone away, and that is why I haven't changed anything for this Routledge Classics edition. Rather, what I have done, as you know, is to write a new book (which will be out a little time before this edition in the Autumn of 2002) called Re-Figuring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline which tries to bring things together in ways which, for what it's worth, I see some things now. Foucault re-describes knowledge in a way we almost instinctively find wrong at first; an understanding that leads many to believe that understanding knowledge in such a way doesn't constitute any understanding of knowledge at all. Foucault's genealogies, however, are not so easily silenced. Foucault's work is applied to epistemology so much because of his distinct and compelling descriptions of how knowledge actually has operated in history. Foucault's work cannot, however, be applied to and compared to epistemology in the same way as we might compare and contrast two theories. Foucault on Power: In Discipline and Punish, Foucault develops his specific conception of power through a genealogical study of crime and punishment in Europe. He starts his book with two contrasting scenes. In response to mechanism of repression, I can refer to Foucault's concept of docile bodies. Modern institutes are controlling, instead of repressing, individuals through establishing certain modes of individualization in them. She claims that Foucault and his followers fail to address either the lived experience or resistance of individuals and groups to the process of spatial social control. Michel de Certeau (1984, xiv & xv) in his great work, The practice of Everyday Life, has the same view. Feminism & Foucault: reflections on resistance. Item Preview.