In writing this chapter I have recalled Probyn’s (1993: 2) question which she posed in her introduction to *Sexing the Self*: ‘who speaks for whom, why, how and when?’ Probyn’s question concerned the stakes involved in speaking the self in cultural studies. I recall it here as it is my contention that this kind of question, and much of the work which has allowed such a question to be asked, including the making transparent of who is speaking in the social sciences, risks being disallowed by the current emphasis in much social research on reflexivity. Specifically, in this chapter I shall argue that the current turn to reflexivity in social research, or at least, a particular version of reflexivity, concerns a configuration of the relation between subjectivity and knowledge or knower and known which allows only certain subjects to speak. Thus I shall suggest that reflexivity inscribes a hierarchy of speaking positions in social research. What is particularly ironic regarding this inscription is that reflexivity is widely understood to make visible the relations between knower and known and hence redress the problem of the concealment of normatively constituted speaking positions. For example, reflexivity is very often represented as the critical opposite of universalist and objectivist social research where the very practices of that research constitute such speaking positions (see e.g. Pels 2000). Yet I shall argue in this chapter that reflexivity privileges a particular relation between knower and known even as it ostensibly appears to challenge – indeed undo – such forms of privileging. In particular, I shall highlight how in current social research practice reflexivity is attributed to some positions and analysts and not to others and moreover how (for some) reflexivity is serving as an index for judgements regarding ‘good’ and ‘bad’ social research. To address these points I discuss aspects of my qualitative research regarding sexuality and labour markets, and especially sexuality and service labour (see e.g. Adkins 1995, 2000). What I draw attention to particularly is a review of some of my research in this area, especially some of the points of critique raised in this review. I do so not because I want to take this opportunity to mount some kind of defence of my research. Rather, I do so because these points of critique highlight for me some of the issues at stake in current disputes over reflexivity, and in particular highlight the limits of a form of reflexivity which is currently being encouraged in social research.
To begin to lay out these limits I turn first to some recent discussions of reflexivity in relation to social research.

**REFLEXIVITY AND SOCIAL RESEARCH**

Reflexivity continues to be recommended as a critical practice for social research (see e.g. Steier 1991; Woolgar 1991a; Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000; Pels 2000), especially as it is often understood as an antidote to the problems of realism. For example, reflexivity has been recommended as a response to and indeed is often represented as an answer to the crises of representation and legitimation in social research associated with postmodernism and post-structuralism (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 10–11). These crises have concerned making problematic a number of central assumptions of qualitative research. Thus the idea that researchers can somehow directly capture lived experience has been troubled by the argument that experience is created in the social texts written by researchers. In addition, the criteria for evaluating and interpreting social research have been problematized. Thus terms such as reliability, generalizability and validity have come into scrutiny in terms of what totalizing and universalizing assumptions they make regarding the social, knowledge and ways of knowing. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest that the result of these crises is that ‘any representation must now legitimate itself in terms of some set of criteria that allows the author (and the reader) to make connections between the text and the world written about’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 11). And one way in which social researchers have attempted to perform such legitimization is through a turn to reflexive practice (Game 1991), including new forms of textual expression and analysis.

This turn to reflexivity is clearly visible in the social studies of science where one consequence of applying the argument that ‘natural’ scientific knowledge is a social construct to the knowledge generated by the social sciences has been a turn to reflexivity. Thus in their introduction to ‘the reflexive project’ in regard to the social studies of science, Woolgar and Ashmore (1991) have posited reflexivity as a kind of antidote to the problems of both realism and relativism. They discuss the ways in which, as they see it, the conventions of realism constrain explorations of knowledge practices and inhibit the development of reflexive practice in the social sciences. Such practice is itself illustrated by the self-conscious, reflexive style of the introduction to the collection. Here, Woolgar and Ashmore explicitly give presence to more than one textual voice in dialogic form to remind the reader:

> that interpretation goes on all the time, that the idea of one reading – a singular correspondence between text and meaning – is illusory. In particular, the dialogue is one way of introducing some instability into the presumed relationship between text and reader. (Woolgar and Ashmore 1991: 4)

Thus such forms of textual expression are located as potentially overcoming the problems of realism in social research through a self-consciousness...
regarding the role of the author in producing accounts of the social world. Such self-reflexivity is understood to destabilize the relations between text and reader, author and text, researcher and social life. In short, such practices are understood to destabilize all that realism held in place. Consider, for example, the following (abridged) section of dialogue in which such a self-consciousness is enacted to both take account of its own production and to illustrate the ways in which realist conventions inhibit the development of reflexive practice (I shall return to this dialogue in a later section of this chapter):

**REITERATING THE TIRED OLD PLATITUDE THAT ALL TEXTS ARE MULTIVOCAL ...?**
Certainly not.
... TRYING TO FIND A NEW WAY OF SUPPLYING REFERENCES THAT HAVE USED OR DISCUSSED THE SECOND VOICE DEVICE ...?
Look, it’s your intervention. I don’t see why you’re asking me. ... And while you’re thinking about that you might explain why you appear in UPPER CASE this time?
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
... the use of UPPER CASE makes it seem like you’re shouting!
... YOUR MONOPOLY OF THE CONVENTIONAL IDIOGRAPH MAKES ME SEEM LIKE THE ODDBALL. BECAUSE I THOUGHT WE’D BOTH AGREED THAT THERE WAS NO REAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US: THAT WHEN ALL WAS SAID AND DONE WE ARE NOT TWO VOICES BUT TWO SETS OF INTERCHANGEABLE SCRIPTED REMARKS; THAT OUR ORIGINS SHOULD NOT BE HELD AGAINST US AS SOURCES OF SANCTIONABLE CONSISTENCY, AS LABELS TO WHICH OUR REMARKS ARE HELD ACCOUNTABLE, AS ...
... Why don’t you just say that actors’ voices can emanate from quite different and interchangeable identities, and that this can be done without any evident contradiction on the part of actors themselves?
YOU THINK THAT’S LESS OBSCURE
Not very.
BUT THE BASIC POINT IS THAT WE COULD SWITCH ROLES WITHOUT ANY-ONE NOTICING?
Yes.
AND THAT WE COULD DROP THIS UPPER CASE/lower case DISTINCTION IN ORDER TO DELIBERATELY CONFUSE OUR SUPPOSEDLY SEPARATE IDENTITIES?
Right. (Woolgar and Ashmore 1991: 3)

Such textual self-consciousness is understood however to overcome the problems of not only realism, but also relativism. Woolgar and Ashmore discuss how in the relativist (or constructivist) social study of science, while the topic of investigation – science – is relativized, a realist methodology is maintained. The consequence of this adherence to a realist methodology is the construction of a new metascientific reality – that ‘scientific knowledge is built in such and such a way and has such and such a character’ (Woolgar and Ashmore 1991: 4). But within such relativist approaches the
nature of the reflexive similarity between findings and methods is itself not an issue: ‘reflexivity is either treated as an inherent but uninteresting characteristic of such work ... or, by contrast, is actively opposed’ (Woolgar and Ashmore 1991: 8). Thus Woolgar and Ashmore point to a lack of reflexivity regarding the effectivity of method in regard to social world construction in such approaches. In short, such approaches do not problematize the role of the author in producing social worlds. And as an escape from such problems the abandoning of the commitment to realist methods is recommended along with a take-up of the reflexive project, a project described as concerning ‘some of the most exciting intellectual work currently being undertaken anywhere’ (Woolgar and Ashmore 1991: 9).

REFLEXIVITY AND ITS LIMITS

May (1998) has, however, noted a number of limitations of such reflexivity for social research. He distinguishes two dimensions of reflexivity: endogenous and referential. By endogenous reflexivity he refers to the ways in which the actions of members of a given community are seen to contribute to the constitution of social reality itself. This dimension of reflexivity includes not only ‘the methods of people within lifeworlds who are the subjects of social investigation but also those within social scientific communities in terms of how they construct the topics of their inquiries and conduct their investigations’ (May 1998: 8). By referential reflexivity May refers to ‘the consequences that arise from a meeting between the reflexivity exhibited by actors as part of a lifeworld and that exhibited by the researcher as part of a social scientific community’ (May 1998: 8). Through a review of reflexivity in the social sciences in relation to social research – from Weber, through the ethnomethodologists, to the methodological changes brought about by post-structuralist and postmodern arguments – May shows how in all of these different traditions there is a tendency to bracket referential reflexivity. He argues that this has the effect of producing an inward-looking practice that results in a failure to adequately understand the role and place of the social sciences in the study of social life (May 1998: 18). The methodological implications of ‘postmodernism’ for social research – including the critique of the idea that the relation between research production and the representation of the social world may take place according to universal concepts of reliability and validity – are, for example, understood to have resulted in such a bracketing of referential reflexivity and a focus on endogenous reflexivity alone. For instance, May notes a tendency ‘to take the words that are written about social life as the central topics for the social construction of reality’ (May 1998: 17, original emphasis) with the consequence that the authority of the author often becomes an important focus. Indeed, certain critiques of the authority of the author have led ‘to research accounts that reproduce ego-identity!’ (May 1998: 18). Thus May sees the problematization of social science methodology – especially the techniques of representation of
the social world – to have led in some quarters to a (rather ironic) privileging of a new form of authority – that of the author. Instead of turning inwards in this way and relieving social science of engagement with the social world, May suggests the social sciences need also embrace referential reflexivity. Quoting Fay (1996), he agrees that the worth of social science should be judged in terms of ‘what it tells us about those under study, not just what it reveals about the social scientist’ (quoted in May 1998: 20).

May’s distinction between endogenous and referential reflexivity and his claims regarding the limits of reflexivity for social research may be paralleled to Latour’s (1991) arguments regarding the problems of reflexivity in regard to the social studies of science. Latour distinguishes between what he terms meta- and infra-reflexivity. By meta-reflexivity he refers to ‘the attempt to avoid a text being believed by its readers’ (Latour 1991: 166), while infra-reflexivity concerns the ‘attempt to avoid a text not being believed by its readers’ (Latour 1991: 166, original emphasis). Latour’s meta-reflexivity is similar to May’s endogenous reflexivity. It is based on the idea that ‘the most deleterious effect of a text is to be naively believed by the reader as in some way relating to a referent out there. Reflexivity is supposed to counteract this effect by rendering the text unfit for normal consumption’ (Latour 1991: 168).

Latour argues that this position makes a number of assumptions, including that people easily believe what they read, and that believing always involves relating an account to some referent ‘out there’. Yet the most bizarre assumption involved in meta-reflexivity, Latour suggests, inheres in arguments regarding self-reference. Here Latour refers to Woolgar’s (1991b) discussion of reflexivity, where there is an assumption that an ethnographic text which discusses the ways in which ethnography is produced, is more reflexive than an ethnographic text which talks, say, about the Balinese. But Woolgar goes further, to suggest that such a reflexive account could be replaced by another account (or layer of reflexivity), since the reflexivity concerned in discussing the ways in which ethnography is produced could be a naive way of telling a true story about ethnographic production. But still more, this third layer may not be reflexive, and thus Woolgar imagines ‘many other rungs on this Jacob’s ladder’ (Latour 1991: 168). The problem Latour has here is that an nth degree account is no more and no less reflexive than any of the others in the chain:

A text about ... [a] way of writing about the Balinese is no more and no less reflexive than ... [a] text about the Balinese and this is no less and no more reflexive than what the Balinese themselves say. (Latour 1991: 168)

The whole vertigo regarding self-reference, Latour argues, stems from a very naive belief that the same actor appears in the first and last text, while at the same time believing that when a text does not have an author as one of its characters it is less reflexive than when it does, ‘as if these were not, in semiotic terms, two similar ways of building the enunciation’ (Latour 1991: 169).
In place of piling layer upon layer of self-consciousness to no end and holding on to the possibility of reaching a meta-language – searching for a meta-meta-language that would judge all others – Latour asks, why not just have one layer, the story, and obtain the necessary amount of reflexivity from somewhere else? This strategy concerns what Latour refers to as infra-reflexivity and is close to May’s notion of referential reflexivity. Instead of focusing on the knower, infra-reflexivity concerns both the knower and the known, ‘displaying the knower and the known and the work needed to interrupt or create connections between A and B [elements to provide explanations and elements to be explained]’ (Latour 1991: 172). This he says is a non-scientific way of studying the natural and social sciences. Instead of turning to the word, Latour urges let us go back to the world. He considers, for example, completely ‘unreflexive’, ‘journalistic’ accounts of the world in which it is things – such as computers – which appear as reflexive, active, full of life, and ready to take part in dramatic stories, and thus are not objects in the way that empiricists would have them. Latour proclaims: ‘there is more reflexivity in one account that makes the world alive than in one hundred self-reflexive loops that return the boring thinking mind to the stage’ (Latour 1991: 173). Thus while Latour agrees that the problems located by the reflexivists are correct, and that the reflexive trend is inescapable (‘otherwise our field would … be self-contradictory’: Latour 1991: 176), like May, Latour also agrees that meta- or endogenous reflexivity is too limited as an alternative, especially since in the end it endorses a scientistic agenda by believing that there is no other way out of empiricism than language and self-reference. For Latour, a better strategy is to search for non-scientific and weaker explanations, and to look for reflexivity not ‘in’ the author but in the world.2

REFLEXIVITY ‘IN THE WORLD’

But are these problems at issue only in regard to textual self-consciousness or to endogenous or meta-reflexivity? In what follows I suggest that many of the same points – especially the location of reflexivity ‘in’ the self – may be made in relation to the research practices that social researchers have taken up in relation to ‘the world’, that is, in regard to the kind of research which both May (1998) and Latour (1991) suggest is the domain of referential or infra-reflexivity, that is, of the kind of reflexivity which is about the knower and the known. To do so, and with May and Latour’s distinctions between endogenous and referential or meta- and infra-reflexivity in mind, I want to now turn to a review (Williams 1997) of some of my research regarding sexuality and labour markets (Adkins 1995). Here the reviewer compares aspects of my research account with a research project on masculinility in British corporate culture (Roper 1994). The latter involved life histories conducted with twenty-five men and five women executive managers, while my own research involved two case studies of service (tourist) organizations
in the UK (a hotel and a theme park) and a study of the organization of the occupation of public house management. Like some other commentators on organizations, Roper foregrounds the operation of homosocial relations between men in organizations, while in my own account I stress that in service organizations a heterosexual imperative may be central to understanding the organization of service labour. Here then we have two accounts that are squarely in the world, yet, as we shall see, the reviewer attributes referential reflexivity to Roper’s account (and to Roper himself) and discounts it from my own. The grounds on which the reviewer makes this move I believe may tell us much about the limits of reflexivity as a critical practice for social research.

The reviewer describes my own and Roper’s (1994) study, charts out her points of contention, and then makes what for me are some interesting moves in terms of the current debates regarding reflexivity. She says that reading these two books together made her ‘ponder some epistemological issues involved in gender research on organizations when it is conducted either by a man or a woman’ (Williams 1997: 519). In particular, she was ‘struck by the different depictions of male sexuality in the two studies’ (Williams 1997: 519). She describes a portrayal of men as hostile to women in my study, and in Roper’s study a ‘much more humane and sympathetic view of his subjects’ (Williams 1997: 519). Williams is anxious to get to grips with these differences, and on this she has two proposals. The first concerns empathy, which she understands to be an effect of the social characteristics of the researchers. She suggests:

Part of the difference may stem from empathy: as a young woman, Adkins no doubt had difficulty seeing the world from the vantage point of the sexist managers and ride operators she interviewed. In contrast, Roper admits to experiencing countertransference in his interviews: he describes tensions he felt ‘between affection and criticism, sympathy for the organization man’s masculinity, and an often uncomfortable identification with it’ (p. 40). (Williams 1997: 519)

The second proposal, which Williams suspects is more important than the first – indeed, she says ‘something more than differences in empathy may be going on here’ (Williams 1997: 519) – concerns the relations between researchers and research subjects. To illustrate this issue, Williams turns to Roper’s study. In particular, she discusses how Roper’s study points to the importance of the business world as an arena for intimacy among men. Summarizing this aspect of Roper’s research Williams writes:

Men are drawn into the competition, aggression, and risk of business because it is one of the only avenues available to them to establish close, personal, emotional bonds with other men. Women represent a threat to this homosocial world. In fact, Roper found that men were much more inhibited with their emotional expressiveness with women than with other men. Career women provoked fears in the men about the security of the gender order and their own masculinity. (Williams 1997: 519)
Crucially for Williams, it is this aspect of Roper’s study which is held to explain the differences in the ‘depictions of male sexuality in the two studies’. On Roper’s research regarding homosociability in organizations she says, ‘If this finding is correct – and I believe that it is – this could help to explain the different depictions of men in the two works’ (Williams 1997: 519, added emphasis). In short, Williams argues in effect that my research was an outcome of the kind of homosocial logic identified by Roper. In Williams’s view, I was positioned by such a logic in that my experiences in the two tourist organizations were mediated by organizational homosociability, and hence, as a consequence, my research was a direct effect of this logic. She suggests:

Adkins’s male respondents may have seen her as an intruder and an interloper – a challenge to their masculinity and to their authority over women – and treated her accordingly. Roper’s male respondents, in contrast, clearly saw him as ‘one of them’ or at least a younger version of themselves: many projected their own values and ambitions onto him, offering him unsolicited advice about his career and giving him business contacts. (Williams 1997: 519–520)

Roper’s account of homosociability in organizations is therefore held by Williams to be correct (‘if this finding is correct – and I believe that it is’) and is mobilized to position my research as the effect of this logic. Moreover, according to Williams, unlike Roper, I could neither escape nor be aware of this logic as a result of certain social characteristics: ‘as a young woman, Adkins no doubt had difficulty seeing the world from the vantage point of the sexist managers and ride operators she interviewed’. In effect, Williams is claiming that certain immanent characteristics (in this case age and sex) on the part of the knower meant that a ‘meeting of the reflexivity exhibited by actors as part of a lifeworld and that exhibited by the researcher as part of social scientific community’ (May 1998: 8) was not possible in my research. Thus for Williams age and sex ensured that this research could not involve referential or infra-reflexivity, including the various forms of identification between knower and known described by Roper in regard to his research project. Indeed, Williams goes on to write that it is unfortunate that I have not provided any information about how I was treated or how I felt doing the study (Williams 1997: 520), that is, that I did not provide a more self-conscious account of fieldwork of the sort given by Roper. In making these claims however, Williams assumes or reads in an antagonism between myself and the various men I interviewed in the course of this research project. Yet in assuming such an antagonism, Williams ignores the accounts provided by the men and women interviewed of their experiences of work in tourist organizations and their explanations of aspects of service work organization including selection criteria, rules and regulations and the specifics of service work, especially the significance of issues of self-presentation in relation to customers. Williams therefore discounts referential reflexivity from this research not only on the grounds of age and sex on the part of the
What interests me about Williams’s review is the kind of politics around reflexivity in regard to social research being enacted here, about who and who is not recognized as capable of being both self and referentially reflexive in regard to social research in the world, that is reflexive in terms of the knower and the known. Let me pose a number of questions to get at this politics. Why is Roper’s account read as concerning self and referential reflexivity but reflexivity discounted in my own on the grounds of age and sex on the side of the knower and antagonism on the side of the known? Why is my research discounted on the grounds of a logic which my own positioning did not allow me to ‘see’, while Roper’s positioning is understood to be constitutive of both self-reflexivity and the kind of reflexivity between knower and known (referential or infra-reflexivity) which writers such as May and Latour suggest the social sciences need to embrace? Why does the reviewer foreground the relationships between the researchers and the men interviewed in Roper’s and my own study and ignore the relationships between the researchers and the women interviewed in the respective studies? Why doesn’t the reviewer see similar problems in Roper’s research with respect to his relationship with the women executive managers he interviewed to those she accredits to mine in relation to interviewing men? In short why does my sex (and age) matter while Roper’s does not? My answer to these questions is that it has something to do with the concept of reflexivity, and in particular that reflexivity concerns a particular figuring of the relationship between the knower and the known, not only in regard to textual and other forms of endogenous reflexivity, but also in regard to social research ‘in the world’. Specifically, and in the section which follows I will suggest that reflexivity in regard to social research concerns a form of relationship between the knower and the known which positions the researcher as able to ‘speak’ (and be viewed as ‘correct’) via a particular figuring of identity. However, I suggest that this speaking position does not concern a claim of a transcendental positioning as in realism, but rather that in reflexive social science practice such a speaking position is constituted in terms of a vision of a mobile relation to identity on the side of the knower in relation to the known. In short, I shall argue that calls for reflexivity in social research concern this kind of vision of mobility in regard to identity. One implication of this argument is that the kinds of problems located by May and Latour in regard to reflexivity are not simply confined to meta- or endogenous reflexivity but also to the reflexivity associated with being in the world. Another however, and as I shall make clear, is that there are a number of exclusions from reflexivity. To make this argument I turn to Felski’s (1995) analysis of the emergence of self-conscious textualism in the writings of the literary avant-garde. I do so because Felski’s analysis highlights the kinds of politics in regard to reflexivity which I want to suggest are at issue in relation to contemporary calls for reflexivity in relation to social research. If my turn here to textual reflexivity seems odd in the light of the way May and Latour tend to associate
textual reflexivity with endogenous or meta-reflexivity and their distinctions between endogenous/meta-reflexivity and referential/infra-reflexivity, I hope it will become clear that part of my argument is that I am not sure if these distinctions can be so easily drawn.

**SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND THE POLITICS OF SUBVERSION**

In *The Gender of Modernity* Felski (1995) discusses how during the late nineteenth century the literary avant-garde pursued a self-consciousness textualism as a strategy of subverting sexual and textual norms. Such a strategy was deployed in the context of the emergence and rise of consumerism for the middle classes, particularly for middle-class women. This ‘feminization’ and aestheticization of the public sphere, Felski suggests, was threatening to bourgeois men whose social identity had been formed ‘through an ethos of self-restraint and a repudiation of womanly feelings’ (Felski 1995: 90). Yet for men who were disaffected from the dominant norms of middle-class masculinity, Felski argues the emergence of an aestheticized and feminized modernity offered hope of an alternative to the forces of positivism, progress ideology, and the sovereignty of the reality principle. And it was this alternative that offered the literary avant-garde a ground to challenge traditional models of masculinity via an imaginary identification with the feminine (Felski 1995: 91). This took the form of a self-conscious textualism which Defined itself in opposition to the prevailing conventions of realist representation, turning to a decadent aesthetic of surface, style and parody that was explicitly coded as both ‘feminine’ and ‘modern’. (Felski 1995: 91)

While as Felski points out these practices were limited to a small, if influential group, nevertheless in questioning dominant ideals of masculinity this group aimed at ‘the heart of bourgeois modes of self-understanding’ (Felski 1995: 92), in particular, these practices denaturalized masculinity. Thus masculinity could no longer be assumed to be fixed, unitary and stable. But Felski argues it is a mistake to understand the feminization of texts as simply undoing gender, since the appropriation of an aesthetic of parody and performance ‘reinscribes more insistently those gender hierarchies which are ostensibly being called into question’ (Felski 1995: 92). This, she argues, is the case as the transgressive power of the feminine in such texts is predicated on a ‘radical disavowal of and dissociation from the “natural” body of woman’ (Felski 1995: 92).

Felski considers a number of avant-garde texts to give flesh to this proposal. Here, she draws attention to the ways in which femininity was crucial to the self-reflexivity of such texts. She considers, for example, how the trope of femininity is mobilized to epitomize artifice rather than authenticity and acts ‘as a cipher for the very self-reflexivity of poetic language itself’ (Felski 1995: 94). The key precondition of this move was the aestheticization of
woman in relation to consumerism, and in particular how the everyday practice of femininity gradually came to concern practices of adornment and self-presentation. This aestheticization of woman decoupled femininity from the natural body, and as a set of signs femininity lent itself to appropriation. Through this very artificiality ‘femininity was to become the privileged marker of the instability and mobility of modern gender identity’ (Felski 1995: 95). For example, in avant-garde texts the ‘modernness’ and supposed transgressiveness of the male protagonists in regard to gender is portrayed in terms of femininity. Thus the protagonists possess traits usually associated with women such as a love of fashion, sensitivity and vanity and they spend much time in private space codified as feminine rather than in the public sphere of work and politics, often locked into practices of self-reflection and self-contemplation in regard to their aesthetic practices. In addition, language itself in such texts is an object of display, with description taking priority over narrative, form over substance, style over history, characteristics which the protagonists also share. This abandonment of realist conventions in such texts leads, Felski argues, to a self-conscious preoccupation with the surface of language, a self-consciousness which is evident in the use of techniques of cliché, stereotype and paradox which undermine any referential dimensions. Thus in these texts the transgressiveness of the protagonists (their mobility in terms of gender) and the challenges to realism and to conventional codes of masculinity all converged on the appropriation of the trope of femininity, whose very stylization, denaturalization and artificiality provided the grounds for such moves.

But while Felski draws attention to the ways in which the trope of femininity is central to such moves she also highlights a number of key exclusions from this textual strategy. For example, while women’s bodies in such texts are often portrayed as aestheticized – for instance, through portrayals of women as actresses, performers, images and works of art – nevertheless women are denied mobility in regard to gender and an ironic self-consciousness in relation to this aestheticization. Indeed, women are portrayed as embodying ‘artifice naively … without being able to raise it to the level of philosophical reflection’ (Felski 1995: 110). The subversion of gender norms is therefore not available to women ‘whose nature renders them incapable of this kind of free-floating semiotic mobility and aesthetic sophistication’ (Felski 1995: 106). For example, Felski points to Huysman’s text Against the Grain (1884), where after fantasizing about the possibility of erotic perversity with a masculine female athlete, the male protagonist is dismayed to find that she is ‘unable to transgress the limits of her own gender’ (Felski 1995: 111) and possesses ‘all the childish weaknesses of a woman’ (Huysman, in Felski 1995: 111). In avant-garde texts women are thus excluded from a self-conscious transcendence of corporeality and identity. And in this context Felski draws attention to how the very strategy of subversion deployed in such texts is constitutive of new boundaries and gender hierarchies, as well as to the similarities between self-conscious literary texts and modern rationalism. In particular, the latter share a vision of
overcoming the constraints of psychological determination and dissolving the power of sexual difference. Reducing the body to a free floating play of signs and codes, aestheticism, like science, positions itself as being against (female) nature. (Felski 1995: 112)

But Felski also notes the similarities between the early modernist concerns to overcome gender via the feminine, and more recent concerns with destabilizing power of feminine textuality, especially in the ‘deployment of the motif of “Becoming woman” as a trope for the crisis of Western philosophical thought’ (Felski 1995: 113). Felski argues that in such contemporary strategies the fantasy of becoming woman is often defined in opposition to the naivety of feminists’ struggles for social change which are read as either essentialist or as concerning phallic identification. On such strategies she writes:

Without wishing to exaggerate the similarities between very different intellectual and political contexts, one might note that this strategy appears to enact an uncanny repetition of the dandy’s affirmation of his own ‘feminine’ semiotic at the expense of women. (Felski 1995: 113)

For the purposes of this chapter what I take from Felski’s analysis of literary avant-garde texts is that self-reflexivity has an important – yet often hidden – effectivity in regard to gender, even as it appears to challenge or subvert gender norms. Indeed, a similar logic is also located by Ahmed (1998) in her analysis of the postmodern genre of meta-fiction – a genre of writing which is often understood to concern an extreme form of self-reflexivity and as overcoming the conventions of realism. Ahmed (1998) notes that while often fascinated with sexual difference and sexuality, nevertheless this genre is not read as being about such differences. Indeed they are often read as overcoming such differences (see e.g. Kaufmann 1998). But she argues while postmodern fictions are often read as such, they ‘may re-constitute those differences differently, through the very experimentations with literary form’ (Ahmed 1998: 150). Via a detailed analysis of meta-fictional stories, Ahmed suggests that such a reconstitution may take place through the way in which the self-reflexivity of such narratives concerns a masculine mode of enunciation. For example, she draws attention to how the self-reflexivity of such narratives often concerns a liberal and masculinist freedom to create woman, as well as phantasies of ‘over-coming gendered and generic limits as an aspect of a masculine mode of enunciation’ (Ahmed 1998: 158).

REFLEXIVITY AND THE POLITICS OF MOBILITY

With similar caveats as Felski’s in mind in regard to issues of historical, intellectual and political specificity, what I want to draw attention to is the affinity between the kinds of politics of reflexivity in regard to gender at issue in relation to the self-consciousness of the literary avant-garde and postmodern
fictions located by Felski (1995) and Ahmed (1998) respectively, and the politics of reflexivity at issue in regard to social research ‘in the world’. Consider, for example, the disembodied textual mobility enacted by Woolgar and Ashmore (1991) in their self-conscious dialogue above (‘BUT THE BASIC POINT IS THAT WE COULD SWITCH ROLES WITHOUT ANYONE NOTICING? Yes. AND THAT WE COULD DROP THIS UPPER CASE/lower case DISTINCTION IN ORDER TO DELIBERATELY CONFUSE OUR SUPPOSEDLY SEPARATE IDENTITIES? Right’). Thus, as Felski argues in relation to the literary avant-garde the apparent transgressiveness of such self-reflexivity – indeed the speaking position of such self-reflexive texts – is constituted through a vision of a self-conscious transcendence of corporeality and identity. But consider also the non-textual, non-endogenous, referential, ‘in-the-world’ mobility accredited to Roper (1994) by Williams (1997) in terms of the relationship between knower and known. Specifically, Williams accredits Roper’s research with referential or infra-reflexivity (and his account is understood to be ‘correct’) on the grounds of an account of a recursive identification between knower and known, that is, on the grounds of Roper’s identification with the male organizational executive managers he interviewed, and an account of the latter’s identification with Roper, evidenced in offers of career advice and business contacts. Thus what constitutes Roper’s account as reflexive for Williams is a vision of mobility in regard to identity on the side of the knower in relation to the known, that is a mobility both in terms of identity and identification (in this case a mobility in terms of different forms of masculinity) as well as a self-consciousness regarding this mobility.4 For example, according to Williams, such mobility ensured that Roper’s research involved the kind of challenge to subject–object relations in relation to the knower and the known which a more reflexive social research reaches towards. By contrast, in regard to my research (Adkins 1995) Williams disallows such a reflexive dimension by attributing a lack of mobility in regard to identity and identification to the knower in relation to the known. In short, Williams suggests that the problems of my particular research project related to the inability to overcome identity – age and sex – and that this fixity in turn led to a lack of reflexivity – referential and endogenous – and to problematic research. Hence her claim that I ‘had difficulty seeing the world from the vantage point’ of those I interviewed and her assumption of hostility between those interviewed and myself.5 It seems therefore that the capacity for reflexive social research, and in particular the precondition of referential reflexivity (for example, claims of a recursive identification between knower and known), is an issue of overcoming fixity on the part of the knower through a vision of a mobile relation to identity in relation to the known.

While for the literary avant-garde and for the contemporary textual self-reflexivists reflexivity is constituted through a vision of a self-conscious transcendence of corporeality and identity, it seems that reflexivity ‘in the world’ is constituted through a similar vision of mobility in regard to identity. As we have seen, Felski has shown how the reflexivity of the literary avant-garde
was constituted through a mobility in regard to gender, yet this mobility was predicated on a ‘radical disavowal and dissociation from the “natural” body of the woman’ (Felski 1995: 11). Hence in avant-garde texts women are denied mobility in regard to gender identity ‘whose nature renders them incapable of this kind of free-floating semiotic mobility’ (Felski 1995: 12). And so too it seems that a similar politics of exclusion is at issue in regard to reflexive social research. Thus according to Williams (1997), age and sex may render women incapable of mobility ‘in the world’ and hence referential and self-reflexivity in regard to the social research process. In this context, and along the lines of Felski’s questioning of the subversiveness of the literary avant-garde, the progressiveness so often ascribed to reflexive social research – not only endogenous, but also referential – must surely be questioned. Indeed, reflexivity as a critical practice may be far from neutral and in particular may have a hidden politics of gender. Specifically, if reflexivity between knower and known is constituted via a vision of a mobile relation to identity on the part of the knower in relation to the known, and women are excluded from such mobility on the grounds of their ‘nature’, then much like the self-reflexivity of the literary avant-garde such strategies ‘in the world’ may also concern the inscription of new gender hierarchies. Here the issue concerns who can speak ‘for whom, why, how and when’ in the age of reflexive social science. For as I hope to have illustrated through the example of two research projects, reflexivity in terms of the knower and the known may inscribe a hierarchy of speaking positions in relation to gender (for a further example of such an inscription see Barnes et al. 2000). The inscription of this hierarchy is however hidden by claims that reflexivity is a ‘good’ and ‘progressive’ thing in regard to the gender politics of social research. Indeed, what is ironic regarding this inscription is that reflexivity is often understood in part to concern a response and antidote to feminist critiques of universalism in regard to social research (see e.g. Gergen and Gergen 1991). Thus a more reflexive politics of location in regard to both the knower and the known in social research developed in part due to feminist critiques of universalism in social research. Yet while reflexivity ostensibly calls into question such universalism, and in particular appears to call into question assumptions of a masculine speaking position and the normalization of masculine experiences, at the same time reflexivity may be constitutive of new hierarchies in social research, particularly if reflexivity is attributed to certain selves and not to others.

CONCLUSIONS: SITUATING REFLEXIVITY ‘IN THE WORLD’

In a critique of the reflexive ethnographic turn in anthropology, and in particular a turn to self-reflexivity (where ‘the reflexive gaze stops at the author’: Probyn 1993: 80) Probyn has drawn attention to the ways in which self-consciousness on the part of reflexive ethnographers often relies on making respondents as well as ‘the field’ stationary. What I am suggesting is that in
regard to referential reflexivity a similar logic is also at issue regarding speaking positions on the side of the knower. Thus while some social scientists are deemed mobile (and their research hence reflexive and sound), others are deemed fixed (their research unreflexive and hence questionable). Discussing self-reflexivity further, Probyn (1993) has argued that the problem in regard to reflexivity is not that there should not be reflexivity regarding one’s research practices, but rather that it ‘is the conception of the self at work within this reflexivity that is at fault’ (Probyn 1993: 80), a conception which she characterizes as concerning an ontological egotism. Against this conception of the self, Probyn insists that it is vital always to ask ‘what had to be held in place in order for this self to appear at all’ (Probyn 1993: 80). Thus, she posits an understanding of the self as a speaking position based on a questioning ‘of how it is that I am speaking’ (Probyn 1993: 80; see also Skeggs 1995). It is precisely this kind of questioning which I am suggesting may be disallowed in reflexive social science through a normalization of a speaking position based on a vision of a mobile relation to identity, a normalization which makes invisible exclusions from this vision. Thus while Probyn, along with writers such as May (1998) and Latour (1991), has questioned the version of the ego-centred self posited in regard to endogenous and self-reflexivity, I would suggest that this questioning also needs to be extended to referential or infra-reflexivity, particularly if, as I have suggested, the politics of reflexivity allows only some people to speak.

Felski denaturalized the speaking position of the avant-garde and called into question the apparent transgressiveness of their textual strategies by showing how a self-conscious speaking position relied on an appropriation of femininity, an appropriation made possible by the emergence of consumerism for the middle classes. Following this strategy, alongside Probyn’s suggestions regarding the importance of historically situating speaking selves and questioning conceptions of selfhood at work in social research, we might ask how it is that the referentially orientated social researchers are speaking? What has to be held in place in order for vision of the self with a mobile relation to identity to appear? We do not have to look far in the social sciences to find arguments regarding an increasing reflexivity of social life (see e.g. Beck et al. 1994). Nor do we have to look far regarding arguments about an uneven distribution of reflexivity in regard to class, gender and other contemporary axes of difference such as sexuality, indeed to find arguments that reflexivity may be an important constituent of such differences (see e.g. Lash 1994; Illouz 1997; McNay 1999; Adkins 1999, 2001). Lash (1994), for example has considered how distributions of reflexivity are central to new axes of class formation (see also Illouz 1997), and I have considered how categories of sexuality and in particular heterosexuality are increasingly defined in terms of self-reflexivity (Adkins 2001). What such analyses suggest is that the version of the self at issue on the side of the knower in relation to reflexivity ‘in the world’ – that is, a vision of the self with a mobile relation to identity – may be the ideal self of late modernity. Reflexivity may then be far from the critical practice it is often understood to be for social research. Indeed while
reflexive social research practice ostensibly aims to redress the normalization of particular privileged speaking positions both in relation to the knower and the known it seems, as Haraway has argued, that ‘reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere’ (Haraway 1997: 16).

NOTES

1 May (1998) recognizes that a set of diverse thinkers are classified under the term ‘postmodernism’.

2 See also Lash (1994), who makes a similar point in regard to cognitive understandings of reflexivity in regard to social theory.

3 The case studies looked at governance in tourist organizations including the regulation of employee behaviour and appearance and interactions with customers. This involved non-participant observation of employee and customer interactions and training sessions, semi-structured interviews with managers, supervisors and employees, and documentary research on the changing formal organizational policies regarding governance in these areas. The study of the occupation of public house management involved interviews with public house managers (husband and wife teams), interviews with company (brewery) personnel managers and documentary research regarding the shifting organization of this occupation. The latter primarily concerned analysis of company records and policy documents.

4 Indeed, it has been suggested that reflexivity is constituted through mobility within and across fields in the context of intensified social differentiation (McNay 1999).

5 In so doing Williams disputes my account of the significance of heterosexuality as an organizing principle of service labour. This raises interesting – if complicated – issues regarding the politics of reflexivity in regard to sexuality.

6 See also Lynch (2000), who likewise argues that in contemporary social research reflexivity is being used as the basis for such judgements.

REFERENCES


