I will be talking today from the vantage point of Women’s Spirituality as a field of research, of belief, and practice. We affirm an embodied and gendered spirituality as our primary locus of research; and we use a womanist-feminist standpoint.

I myself am situated in a human body, a female body, a 61 year old body and mind and spirit. I have been raised in a white Euro-American heritage and culture, within a Protestant-Episcopalian-Christian religious tradition which I have valued very much. In college, while majoring in religious studies, I became fascinated with world religions, an interest that continues to the present. Beginning in graduate school, pursuing an M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy, I got caught up intellectually with secular humanism (Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, etc.) and feminism before turning to Spirit and Mystery through the practice and beliefs shaped by the emergent international Women’s Spirituality Movement of the late 20th century. I come from a mixed-class background, that is to say, both working class and professional class. I am a citizen of the nation called the United States of America, and I share some responsibility, along with the rest of us, for its national policies, both domestic and foreign. And that’s just the basics. I am also much more than these categories, and like each one of you, I am also unique.

One of the great spiritual teachings of the Mysteries religions of the ancient Greek world—a teaching shared around the world by religious traditions—is, “Gnoothi sounta!” “Know Thyself!” This was inscribed atop the temple of Apollo at Delphi, at the high oracle center in the mountains of Parnassos. The second precept of the Mysteries, also inscribed at Delphi, but much less known, is at least as important, for me, for us, especially today in the United States, namely: “Medan agan!” “Nothing in excess!” I want to take these two precepts as the guiding lights of my talk today.

One of the most important things we do in Women’s Spirituality—as I assume is true in other areas also—is to ask our students to come to know themselves—in a deeper, fuller, truer way, season upon cycling season. We ask them to come to know themselves, and to include themselves significantly, in the work they do here at CIIS.

1 Mara Lynn Keller, Ph.D., is Director of Women’s Spirituality, Philosophy and Religion at the California Institute of Integral Studies. This paper was presented at the CIIS, School of Consciousness and Transformation Faculty Development Retreat: On the Positionality of the Self in Research (March 30, 2006)

This paper was the basis of a paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Western Region, Women’s Caucus pre-conference workshop at the Graduate Theology Union in Berkeley, CA (March 24, 2007)
Partly because in the Women’s Spirituality program we are women who are womanist and feminist in our standpoint—and so share the view that all too often in public life, including academic matters, women have been ignored, marginalized, subsumed, erased, or sacrificed -- we ask of ourselves that we include ourselves in our work and not forget ourselves, not to put ourselves last, or to leave ourselves out of the picture altogether. For that would feel too much like what it is we have come here to depart from.

As we practice this spiritual practice, to include ourselves in our work, -- our embodied, engendered, ethnic, historical, emotional, rational, spiritual, and artistic selves -- we ask, how are we to do this well?

We do not think that 100% self-focus is healthy. We ask ourselves to balance a focus on self with a focus on the outer world and an understanding of others, in their complex situations and realities. To do only one or the other, to focus only on self, or only on others, would be to ignore the spiritual practice of “Nothing in Excess.”

To include ourselves and others in a balanced way, we use a variety of research methodologies.

To focus on self, we may use “alternative ways of knowing” such as meditation, dreaming, ritual practice, bodywork, therapies, and the creative processes of art-making. For example, for my own research on the Eleusinian Mysteries’ nine day rite of initiation, I have found it especially valuable to reenact the 9 days of ritual in order to come to know better the possibilities of spiritual initiation into the Mysteries of life, death, and rebirth. And I also found it valuable to use the art of poetry to reach for deeper spiritual insights and more vivid expressions. I also research ancient texts in their original languages, go to archaeological sites, study artifacts in museums, talk onsite with archaeologists, and read and converse with historians of religions. I also listen for the voice of the sacred feminine which I name as Goddess.

We may also use “alternative ways of knowing” to come to know others -- sharing meditation or prayer or ritual, sharing dreams, sharing our artworks.

The ways that we come to know others and the larger world, in addition, use a variety of more outward-oriented procedures, such as scientific and social scientific research, statistical analyses, textual interpretation, surveys, story-telling, action research, and community service. As one expression of our outward-focused approach to education, Women’s Spirituality students have contributed a sum total of 3,750 hours of community service to the greater SF Bay Area region in the past 10 years.

Because our primary subject matter is Women’s Spirituality, the spirituality of women across time and place around the world, we are by definition involved in material which is primarily subjective and inter-subjective. Because we are womanist and feminist, we are primarily interested in focusing on women’s spiritual experiences that are multi-faceted and culturally diverse, across cultures and through histories of change.
My own spiritual practice centers on the ineffable Mystery of all Being and Becoming. I also acknowledge and affirm gendered aspects of divine powers of nature, both masculine and feminine. For whatever complex reasons, I find myself drawn more to the study of the divine feminine than to the sacred masculine. I am not interested in claiming that one is more important than the other, in general, or that one is ontologically superior to, or more primary than the other. But I myself am especially interested in Goddess traditions of peoples all around the world. This is a matter of personal preference and intellectual curiosity, it is also a matter of religious faith and belief and dedication. I am not objective about it. I am passionate about it.

Most of our Women’s Spirituality students are passionate about their beliefs as well. And we encourage them to articulate their worldviews and to choose methodologies which are congruent with their beliefs and worldviews. Religious scholar and theologian Carol Christ writes that in addition to the more objective paths of scholarly research, in feminist spirituality research we also use “eros and empathy” -- eros that connects us in a loving and passionate way to our subject, and empathy to move beyond our own limited and partial selves, the better to approach and enter into the experience of others.

In Women’s Spirituality, we ask ourselves as faculty, and we ask our students, to use a feminist and/or womanist standpoint: that names our own embodied living as a woman of a particular gender, race and ethnicity, and age, with subjective biases, interests, fears, desires, passions, and socio-historical situatedness, a standpoint that recognizes and articulates how our own situation enters into and conceives the work we choose to do. We find this helps to bring greater focus, depth, clarity, and purpose to our work. Articulating our “standpoint feminism/standpoint womanism” is an invaluable step that assists us -- through a larger-than-self self while being inclusive-of-self -- to engage more clearly and fully a chosen subject of inquiry.

Many of our students are drawn to Organic Inquiry, a transpersonal methodology developed by Jennifer Clements, Dorothy Etting, Dianne Jennett, and Lisa Shields, because in the first place, it asks, “What if research were sacred?” Our faculty and most if not all of our students choose to view the research we do as sacred work. We want it to be a means of having the divine become more present in our own life, and in the life of the others we may be studying.

Some of our students also choose the Narrative Inquiry methodology of Organic Inquiry because it allows them to work in relationship with “co-researchers” and to share the process of knowledge production in either partnership pairs, community based groups, or communal activities like a pilgrimage. The interview process of Organic Inquiry, which takes seriously women’s embodied spiritual experience, brings to light new knowledge previously unknown to the academic world, for example, women’s menstrual stories, or the practices of contemporary women psychics. Others choose Collaborative Research, again because they are interested in a more experiential, participatory, and relational style of work.
Because our work is in the first place subjective and inter-subjective, we are looking for spirit-to-spirit connections that are inspiring, healing, enlivening, empowering, and revelatory of new ways of living, at the same time that we are interested in changing the world toward a more just, harmonious, peaceful, and sustainable world.

Moreover, because our work is interdisciplinary, we ask that our students use several methodologies of different disciplines such as: archaeology and mythology, anthropology and psychology, religion and philosophy, and each of these possibly in conjunction with the arts and art history. Women’s Spirituality students use Narrative Research and Heuristic Research methods, Literary Criticism, Phenomenology, and/or Hermeneutics, among other methodologies.

‘Hermeneutics’ comes from the Greek word for interpretation. It is about the interpretation of texts, more specifically in religious studies, of scriptures. Like Organic and Heuristic Research, the hermeneutic method posits that the researcher/writer will include one’s self as a self-aware lens in revealing insights into texts and drawing forth values for one’s one time and place, one’s contemporary world.

A feminist Hermeneutical method developed by Christian Biblical scholar Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza (now at Harvard) is a fourfold hermeneutic. In _Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation_, Schussler-Fiorenza shares the feminist view that women have been largely excluded not only from academic notice but also from Christian religious inclusion. She recommends that when feminist women and men study biblical texts, that we come, in the first place, with the assumption that these were male-oriented, “androcentric texts that serve patriarchal functions.” In light of this, she recommends that we begin with what she calls a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” one that discerns between texts which are genuinely gender inclusive, and those which claim to be generic or universal but are actually androcentric. But this is just a beginning, and we are not to stop there. Secondly, she calls for a “hermeneutics of remembrance,” where the feminist reader “moves against the grain of the androcentric text to the life and struggles of women.” Thirdly, she calls for a “hermeneutics of evaluation and proclamation” which critiques the value of the text, using feminist beliefs and values, and proclaiming what is found to be worthy. Fourthly, she invites a “hermeneutics of creative actualization,” which includes feminist retellings and revisionings of the texts for the benefit of one’s own day. (Schussler-Fiorenza: pp 15-22.) Some of our faculty and students adopt this 4-fold feminist hermeneutics when reading androcentric texts, from whatever traditions.

Finally, I want to speak about the methodology of post-colonial feminist and womanist research, which I have been studying recently and that I am beginning to include in the courses that I teach, for example the course on _Womanist-Feminist Worldviews and Methodologies_ which I co-designed with professors Arisika Razak and Carol Christ. (I have made copies of this for everyone, and hope you will use it as a resource in finding texts by and about women, and especially by and about women of color). We are also studying post-colonial womanist and
feminist research in my class this spring semester on Thealogy/Theology: Goddess-God, Humanity-Nature, a course that I am team-teaching online, with Carol P. Christ. For this course we have included writings by the Chinese-American feminist Christian, Kwok Pui-lan. Kwok has criticized radical white feminists, for example, of speaking of women of color, abstracted from their own cultural context; and/or speaking of women of color only as victims of misogyny and sexist oppression -- as in discussions of Chinese footbinding, or Indian widow-burning or suttee, or female genital circumcision -- and not also as active agents in resisting and organizing against their oppression. Kwok Pui-lan also talks about the need for white feminists to begin to reflect upon what it means to be situated in a country which has a history of benefiting from, and continuing to be privileged by, its colonial and post-colonial relationships to other peoples.

I have found Kwok Pui-lan’s work, for example, Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology, to be very stimulating and beneficial to the education and further development of my own perspectives, and the perspectives of our students in Women’s Spirituality. I begin to understand myself better as a white, middleclass Euro-American woman who is a US citizen, when I can reflect on ways that I myself continue to benefit from, for example, cheaper gas prices, or cheaper imported clothing, or foods, because of the political and economic relationships of enterprises in my country in relationship, for example, with China, or Mexico, or Saudi Arabia, or Iraq. What does it mean to me to be a citizen of the super-power United States? How does this affect who I am, my embodied spirituality, my mentality, my health? And how can this self-reflection help me better understand the realities of those who have been victimized and who have been resisting and organizing against the legacies of colonial and post-colonial relationships that continue to deprive peoples in all parts of the world of clean water, air, soil, food, and sustainable livelihoods? I would like to leave us with these questions, as a part of the way that we each continue the process of coming to Know Thyself! and to practice, Nothing in Excess!

And now, in the interests of “Nothing in Excess,” I will close.