

COMMENTARY

“FOR IMPROPER OBJECTS”:

Thinking about the Past, Present, and Future of Women’s Studies¹

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ON 10 FEBRUARY 2006, the Department of Women’s Studies at Simon Fraser University (SFU) celebrated its thirtieth anniversary by holding a day-long conference entitled “Transformations: The Politics of Women’s Studies.” After several panels of scholars spoke about the history and future of women’s studies, the event was followed by a keynote address by renowned writer and activist Leslie Feinberg at the Vancouver Public Library.² The conference concentrated on the changes that have occurred within the women’s studies program over the course of thirty years of institutional politics and the relationship of women’s studies to key areas of debate within feminist theory. Emerging from this program were the central themes of identity and institutionalization, and woven throughout both of these were the meanings and politics of interdisciplinarity, the making of alliances, and the meanings of activism.

¹ With thanks to Helen Leung for the title, adapted from Judith Butler’s “Against Proper Objects,” *differences* 6, 2/3 (1994): 1–26. The authors would also like to thank Mary Lynn Stewart for her helpful suggestions and Marjorie Griffin Cohen, who was central to organizing this conference.

² List of presenters and topics at “Transformations: The Politics of Women’s Studies,” held at Simon Fraser University, 10 February 2006. Helen Leung, “Gender Studies/Sexualities”; Marilyn MacDonald, “Sciences/Interdisciplinarity”; Bobby Noble, “Anti-Racist Whiteness and Female/Trans Masculinity”; Natasha Patterson, “Distance Learning Pedagogy”; Liz Philipose, “International Human Rights”; Caelie Frampton, “From across the Hall [Activism]”; Andrea Leibowitz, “Living through Getting Women’s Studies Established”; Wendy Robbins, “Traditions of Academic Activism”; Mary Lynn Stewart, “Making Alliances”; Cheryl Suzack, “Indigenous Feminisms”; Audrey Kobayashi, “Accessibility and Disabilities”; Jen Marchbank, “It’s Not What We Do, It’s the Way We Do It”; Katherine Side, “Women’s Studies and the Academic Job Market”; Sneja Gunew, “Surviving the Corporate University.”

IDENTITY

It is not a surprise that the politics of identity emerged as a central focus of many presentations. With publications like Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and "Against Proper Objects" (1994), a rich strand of theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical innovation has developed within women's studies departments and feminist theory. Within the academy, anti-racist, transgender, and transnational scholarship has deconstructed the category of woman, as well as the notion of a coherent discipline of "women's studies," by asking who is/are the woman/women in women's studies? Other questions follow, including: What does this challenge ultimately mean for women's studies as a discipline and its status within the university? Does women's studies still have a recognizable identity, and, if not, what does that mean for scholars who work in this area? Theoretical challenges surrounding the meaning of identity have led to pressing debates within the field, including what title fully captures the identity of women's studies programs, what role women's studies plays as an autonomous discipline within academia, and what constitutes proper objects of study for women's studies scholars.

There are real, material issues for women's studies programs: curriculum development, course titles, and the development of major, minor, and graduate programs. The ongoing debate over what to name a program is linked to the question of integration/autonomy, a debate that has marked the discipline since its founding. Do we create a separate department for this discipline, thus guaranteeing space for feminist research and teaching within the university? Or do we want to "colonize" disciplines so that feminist scholarship transforms the mainstream curriculum and shows that all topics should be examined with attention to the gendered dynamics of power?³ At some level, feminist scholars have succeeded in this area. Many departments are hiring scholars whose topics, methods, and interests do not fit neatly into a "woman and" approach, yet are nonetheless attentive to the theoretical challenges of feminist theory.

³ See Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein, "Introduction: Theories of Women's Studies and the Autonomy/Integration Debate," in *Theories of Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli, 1-26 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983). See also Jacqueline Jones, "Writing Women's History: What's Feminism Got To Do with It," in *Exploring Women's Studies: Looking Forward, Looking Back*, ed. Carol R. Berkin, Judith L. Pinch, and Carole S. Appel (New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2006): 139; Robyn R. Warhol, "Nice Work, If You Can Get It – and If You Can't? Building Women's Studies without Tenure Lines" in *Women's Studies on Its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*, ed. Robyn Wiegman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 224-32.

So, is women's studies a victim of its own success? The question remains as to whether the relative success of feminist research might be used to phase out women's studies programs. For scholars wedded to a "progress" narrative,⁴ the terminology of "women's studies" is somewhat "old fashioned" in comparison to "gender" or "sexuality" studies, partly because it assumes too much coherence in the category of woman. Perhaps, as Helen Leung remarked in her presentation, we are in the midst of a "crisis of category," with increased pressure to change the name of women's studies on the assumption that the term "gender" more fully captures what we do. On one level, this seems accurate: rarely do women's studies programs focus solely on the "experiences of women" paradigm, and even basic introductory courses, at SFU at least, introduce students to ideas of colonialism, racism, and transgender and queer theory, to name just a few.

But are the terms "gender" and "sexuality" really any more "capacious" than the term women?⁵ Do we constantly change titles of programs when we know, as Leung argues, that language cannot fully capture all that feminist scholars teach and research? While the constant rethinking of our relationship to language is positive and necessary, we cannot assume, as Leung points out, that even gender itself will stand as a category, especially if we accept that all categories are in a constant process of being rethought.

The issue of identity is also connected to defining the objects that women's studies scholars choose to study. As Bobby Noble's presentation argued, women's studies can work to court incoherence in identities of gender, sex, and race. Noble's own work on antiracist feminism, whiteness, and transgender theory reflects the importance of both occupying a category while simultaneously undoing the means of that categorization, thus disrupting its coherence and, perhaps, its ultimate power. When feminist scholars do not question all types of categorization, we find ourselves within the uncomfortable territory of designating what constitutes "proper" identity politics. Audrey Kobayashi's discussion of marginalization within a women's studies department illustrates what happens when what is advocated in feminist theory is not translated into everyday practice. For Kobayashi, who was assigned, along with a transgendered student, a washroom different from the "gender conforming, able-bodied" washroom, it was made

⁴ Robin Wiegman, "The Progress of Gender: Whither Women?" in Wiegman, *Women's Studies on Its Own*, 106-40.

⁵ Leila Rupp, "When Women's Studies Isn't about Women," in Berkin et al., *Exploring Women's Studies*, 59.

painfully clear how “deviant bodies” become sites of contestation over body/gender politics. Her personal experience reflects an instance of how women, not just men, can enact “symbolic violence” upon other women, challenging the notion that safety is a natural by-product of women’s studies. Kobayashi raised concerns about how bodies become coded or categorized across different spaces. And this was further compounded by her experiences of becoming a “woman of colour” (designated by others) with the rise of anti-racist scholarship. Feminist scholars must retain a critical position on identity, remembering that theoretical arguments have material consequences on real bodies. We must constantly be thinking about how feminist research and theory redefines and reconstitutes the subject position of woman.

We are currently left, however, with some complicated issues for feminist politics. For if the category of woman does not hold, what does this mean for academic programs such as women’s studies? Feminism, like other social movements, has often championed a politics of unity on the assumption of a shared identity or common understanding of basic injustices. But what if we take Noble’s call to measure politics not by identity but by practice? To destabilize a category (woman, man, white) or to live within gender while undoing gender questions the foundational quality of woman and, therefore, has an impact upon women’s studies as a discipline. Many people reading this article will remember moments, whether in activism or academia, in which “our” allegiance was supposed to be tied only to a particular notion of woman. What feminist hasn’t heard, for example, that transgendered scholars are too “male-identified” to be “real” feminists or women’s studies scholars?

The queering of sexual and gender identity challenges the identity of women’s studies for it destabilizes the very premise upon which most departments were originally built. And some women’s studies scholars see this as a threat to a hard-fought-for measure of institutional respect. This response can be understood much better by acknowledging the deeply hostile institutional reluctance to acknowledge women, let alone feminist inquiry, as a valid category of research. Given the rampant sexism of the university in the early 1970s, it is not surprising that advocates of women’s studies programs highlighted the overall oppression of women and the shared commonalities of that oppression. For example, it is illustrative to look at the controversy that exploded when feminist scholars, activists, and students lobbied for a women’s studies program at Simon Fraser University. Responses ranged from the claim that women’s studies was “only” a social movement and not a

serious program of study to the assertion that “woman” was too narrow a topic for academic study.⁶ To counter such concerns, the committee lobbying for a women’s studies program asserted the importance of the category of woman, separate from men: such a program would investigate the contemporary and historical status of women, examine the “discrepancies of equality” that existed between men and women, and create an opportunity to “rectify discrimination” and generate “social change.”⁷ This does not mean, however, that advocates for women’s studies at SFU were naive to the differences between women. The active role of socialist feminists within the women’s liberation movement in Vancouver and elsewhere in Canada should be a reminder that gender oppression was clearly understood within the context of class. But within an environment of sexism, and where university senators were convinced that women’s studies was a threat to university rigour, women’s unity was emphasized and differences downplayed. Attentiveness to the historical record will allow future scholars to investigate this question with greater consciousness of the ambiguities and contradictions that have always existed and that continue to exist within feminism and the discipline as a whole.⁸

Given that these problems of identity will not go away, Cheryl Suzack’s presentation on indigenous feminism presented an alternative response. As Suzack argued, indigenous women struggle to live within categories of womanhood yet also within a fight for cultural autonomy – battles that do not always “foreground” the interests of gender equality. Scholars often pit women’s rights against Aboriginal rights, leaving indigenous women in an untenable situation.⁹ Suzack suggested a movement of

⁶ Hugh Johnston, *Radical Campus: Making Simon Fraser University* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2005): 249–54; Julia Smith, “The Enduring Marginalization of Women’s Studies in Academia: A Case Study of Simon Fraser University,” unpublished paper, SFU, ws 320, 2006. See also Florence Howe, ed. *The Politics of Women’s Studies: Testimony from 30 Founding Mothers* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2000).

⁷ SFU Archives, Andrea Leibowitz Women’s Movement Collection, F 164-1-0-4, file: Proposal for a Women’s Studies Program, “Proposal for a Women’s Studies Program, July 1974.”

⁸ Annette Kolodny, “A Sense of Discovery, Mixed with a Sense of Justice,” in Howe, *The Politics of Women’s Studies*, 276–90; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, “Dreams of Social Justice,” in Howe, *The Politics of Women’s Studies*, 243–63; Sharon Rosenberg, “At Women’s Studies Edge: Thoughts towards Remembering a Troubled and Troubling Project of the Modern University,” in *Troubling Women’s Studies: Pasts, Presents and Possibilities*, ed. Ann Braithwaite, Susan Heald, Susanne Luhmann, and Sharon Rosenberg (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2004), 195–240; Anne Firor Scott, “Introduction,” in Berkin et al., *Exploring Women’s Studies*, 1–7.

⁹ Michael Behiels, “Native Feminism versus Aboriginal Nationalism: The Native Women’s Association of Canada’s Quest for Gender Equality, 1983–1994,” in *Nation, Ideas, Identities: Essays in Honour of Ramsay Cook*, ed. Michael Behiels and Marcel Martel (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2000), 212–31.

political activism centred less on identity and more on “needs.” Rather than trying to fit individuals into one narrow category, all categories can be conceptualized as tenuous and impermanent formulations that might exist for particular goal-oriented purposes in one moment but not in the next. Certain battles might best be fought on the basis of coherent categories, but once these same categories become bases of exclusion or markers of “authentic” feminism, we subjugate the very real need for transformative social policy to narrow political battles and the politics of authenticity.

Perhaps we can take what Andrea Liebowitz identifies as the “revolutionary impulse” of women’s studies (to create a space where women are at the centre of critical analysis and inquiry) to assume that the centre of inquiry is ultimately the meaning of woman; what remains is the space in which teachers, activists, and scholars can pull apart all exclusionary categories in order to transform them. The priority is not changing language to better reflect what we do but, rather, letting what we do show that the language we use is never complex or subtle enough to explain it fully; that in the constant process of “doing,” we not only render the categorization of language incomplete but we also begin to transform the ways we see, feel, experience, and understand the world in which we live.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The politics of naming led to another prominent theme at this conference: that of the institutionalization of women’s studies within the university. Presenters Sneja Gunew and Katherine Side both argued that the increasing commodification and privatization of knowledge harms “identity”-based studies the most, with the “corporate university” ultimately concerned with cost-benefit analyses rather than with the unique contributions of women’s studies students, scholars, and the interdisciplinary enterprise as a whole.

Katherine Side’s presentation made the valuable point that working in an “undisciplined subject” has an impact on graduate students who attempt to study and find work within a discipline-bound university structure. How do women’s studies graduates “market” themselves in an academic job market or define their work when applying to granting agencies? When the university is increasingly forced to seek non-state funding, it is difficult to predict what kind of currency women’s studies will hold, especially given that this discipline emphasizes multiplicity but

exists within a structure in which the goal is to streamline knowledge production for maximum profit and return.

We must address some of these issues with an eye to the various, complex ways that feminist scholars can make allies within and outside of the university. As both Side and Mary Lynn Stewart pointed out, women's studies has successfully crossed many boundaries; the history (and future) of the success of women's studies is, as Stewart argued, based on making allies through such practices as joint appointments and associate positions, along with the movement of sympathetic colleagues into positions of administrative power. Yet Side warned that such practices have the unintentional effect of creating work overloads for young female scholars. The time commitment that is necessary for successfully running such programs can butt up against the reality that what is needed for promotion is an academic record uninterrupted by activism or creative program development.

In addition, faculty, teaching assistants, and instructors often work within an environment in which students think women's studies courses are easy, and in which young women and men are mocked for taking courses in gender seriously. Professors must also, as Jen Marchbank pointed out, deal with an environment in which teaching evaluations negatively assess "too much" feminist context, in which feminist knowledge is perceived as biased, and in which teachers self-censor to play down feminist analysis. Moreover, while distance education offers (primarily female) students a more flexible model of learning, the lack of direct contact and the geographical dispersion of students makes it difficult to recreate the learning environment so cherished in the traditional classroom (i.e., relating experience to theory, making the personal political in a group situation), leaving some students disconnected and frustrated. This results in conflicts over how, where, and in what modes feminist learning can effectively take place.¹⁰

These structural challenges are even more pressing for sessional instructors who rely on evaluations of students and colleagues when applying for future jobs or contract renewal. As Robyn Wiegman discusses in *Women's Studies on Its Own*, labour and capital are integral to institutionalization, and we must consider how these are manifested through power relations within the university – between administration and faculty, faculty and students, and faculty and sessionals.¹¹ As Liz

¹⁰ Natasha Patterson, presentation.

¹¹ Robyn Wiegman, "Introduction: On Location," in Wiegman, *Women's Studies on Its Own*, 23–37.

Philipose's presentation made clear, women's studies does not exist apart from relationships of power. Attentiveness to power relations between women is crucially important at a time when academic labour is becoming increasingly hierarchical. Just when women have entered the academy in record-breaking numbers, the university is increasingly relying on part-time, contractual labour. Even more disturbing is the fact that American scholars have pointed out the racialized and gendered dimension to the casualization of professional labour.¹² Feminist scholars who have benefited from the implementation of gender equality in the workplace (at least in principle), must work harder to reach out to future generations of feminist teachers and researchers who are now faced with precarious employment with few benefits. Young feminist scholars will thrive on much-needed alliances among contingent labour and tenured faculty. Seeking out younger scholars and listening to their challenges and triumphs will be an important and necessary point of alliance building in the wake of decreased public funding for Canadian postsecondary institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

What is the status of women's studies in 2007? Faculty and students still face many struggles. Wendy Robbins's presentation on the long tradition of feminist academic activism outlined, for example, the ongoing work of current feminist scholars who have formally challenged the lack of gender diversity in the allocation of Canada research chairs. And the reality is that many women's studies programs in Canada still struggle with chronic underfunding and institutional marginalization, and with finding ways to fund their graduate students.¹³

Disciplinary unruliness, Side maintained, creates conditions of intellectual flexibility and creativity. Women's studies has, as Gunew pointed out, been a pioneer in what funding agencies and universities now pay lip service to: interdisciplinarity and community-university

¹² Sivagmi Subbaraman, "(In)Different Spaces: Feminist Journeys from the Academy to the Mall," in Wiegman, *Women's Studies on Its Own*, 258-66. For Canada, see Vicky Smallman, "Academic Labor: The Canadian Context," *Cinema Journal* 45, 4 (2006): 108-12; Harald Bauder, "The Segmentation of Academic Labour: A Canadian Example," *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 4, 2 (2005): 228-39. Less research has been done on this issue in Canada, but Smallman and Bauder argue that universities in Canada are relying more on part-time, casual labour and that women are overrepresented in the part-time labour force, particularly in the social science fields.

¹³ Barbara A. Crow and Lise Gotell, "What Is Women's Studies?" in *Open Boundaries: A Canadian Women's Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Crow and Gotell (Toronto: Pearson, 2005), 1-28.

dialogue in research and policy development. We must remind university administrators that women's studies has been at the forefront of this kind of model.¹⁴ We must also be self-critical of the shape that interdisciplinarity has taken in our departments, however. As Marilyn MacDonald argued in her presentation, feminist scholars of science played an important role in developing women's studies, but over time, many departments have marginalized science studies, leaving such scholars without a home either in women's studies or in the sciences. Women's studies must also continue to build alliances. Jen Marchbank argued that women's studies lacks Bourdieu's symbolic capital; like the humanities and some of the social sciences, it must justify its existence within a corporatized university, where profit patents and *MacLean's* rankings become the ultimate markers of academic excellence. Women's studies can only fight this battle by making connections with other disciplines that also criticize the devaluation of a public good. Allies are not just built within universities, however. As Andrea Leibowitz, a founder of SFU's women's studies program, demonstrated, the successful development of the program was rooted in the forged ties between faculty, students, and local activists. This relationship has not always survived the process of institutionalization intact. It is no longer possible to assume a direct relationship between academic women's studies and grassroots feminist activism or to assume agreement on what kinds of activism are best suited to feminist pursuits.¹⁵ Yet feminist academics have remained committed to broadly defined kinds of activism, ranging from engagement with public policy debates to collaborative research with community organizations.¹⁶ Perhaps feminists can overcome this supposed schism between activism and academia by embracing a political identity that rests on an understanding of the feminist subject as oscillating between activist and academic, never situated wholly within either realm.

The last thirty years of feminist politics has bequeathed a critical foundation of knowledge and strategy for the next generation of feminists, as Caelie Frampton's paper on the ongoing vibrancy of student activism demonstrated. To take up a feminist position within the academy is always to take up a position fraught with vulnerability; but

¹⁴ See also Marilyn Boxer, "Modern Woman Not Lost," in Howe, *The Politics of Women's Studies*, 240; Nona Glazer, "Making a Place," in Howe, *The Politics of Women's Studies*, 334-44.

¹⁵ See Sneja Gunew, "Feminist Cultural Literacy," in Wiegman, *Women's Studies on Its Own*, 47-65; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "Dreams of Social Justice," in Howe, *The Politics of Women's Studies*; Bonnie Zimmerman, "The Past in Our Present: Theorizing the Activist Project of Women's Studies," in Wiegman, *Women's Studies on its Own*, 183-90.

¹⁶ Crow and Gotell, *Open Boundaries*, 2.

embracing unruliness holds the promise of new possibilities, alliances, and insights. It was fitting that keynote speaker Leslie Feinberg ended the day with a talk about uniting across difference with an attitude of “principled agreement” in order to fight social injustice.¹⁷ Ultimately, Ann Braithwaite argues that practitioners of women’s studies must examine “both what is passed on and how it is being passed on” in order to keep the discipline “open-ended, complicated, situated, and always changing.”¹⁸ SFU’s thirtieth anniversary conference was up to the challenge, bringing together a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that contributed to an inspirational dialogue cutting across gender and generation, race, sexuality, class, culture, and ability.

¹⁷ Leslie Feinberg gave the 2006 Maggie Benston Lecture Series address, which was incorporated as part of the “Transformations” conference.

¹⁸ Ann Braithwaite, “‘Where We’ve Been’ and ‘Where We’re Going’: Reflecting on Reflections of Women’s Studies and ‘The Women’s Movement,’” in Braithwaite et al., *Troubling Women’s Studies*, 136.