

May 2001

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### Recommended Citation

Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. and Gillman, Laura (2001). Facing the Medusa: Confronting the Ongoing Impossibility of Women's Studies. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 2(2), 35-52.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol2/iss2/3>

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## **Facing the Medusa: Confronting the Ongoing Impossibility of Women's Studies**

**Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman<sup>1</sup>**

### Introduction

When feminism is defined in such a way that it calls attention to the diversity of women's social and political reality, it centralizes the experiences of all women, especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about, studied, or changed by political movements. When we cease to focus on this simplistic stance "men are the enemy," we are compelled to examine systems of domination and our role in their maintenance and perpetuation. Lack of adequate definition made it easy for bourgeois women, whether liberal or radical in perspective, to maintain their dominance over the leadership of the movement and its direction. This hegemony continues to exist in most feminist organizations. Exploited and oppressed groups of women are usually encouraged by those in power to feel that their situation is hopeless, that they can do nothing to break the pattern of domination. Given such socialization, these women have often felt that our only response to white, bourgeois, hegemonic dominance of feminist movement is to trash, reject, or dismiss feminism. This reaction is in no way threatening to those women who wish to maintain control over the direction of feminist theory and praxis. They prefer us to be silent, passively accepting their ideas. They prefer us speaking against "them" rather than developing our own ideas about feminist movement (hooks 25-26).

There is today enough retrospective analysis and harangue concerning the field of Women's Studies to raise the question of whether dust on its epoch has arrived... (Brown 79).

We cannot afford to ignore our differences any longer, they provide us the keys to new tactics for confronting oppression. We must face the Medusa, the unfaceable in ourselves, in order to have access to the powers we require....Every day repeats an opportunity for beginning anew (Sandoval 71).

As the above sentiments suggest, there has been a shift within the women's movement whereby critique no longer focuses merely on patriarchal social structures but also on white middle-class women's perpetuation of them to the detriment of other women and possibly to the demise of the women's studies movement in its entirety. Such a juncture has created a tragedy like that of the Medusa. In this Greek myth, an originally lovely woman turns monstrous because of her foolish act of aspiring to be a goddess. We see a parallel between this classical myth and the transformations within women's studies. Facing the Medusa tragedy that has befallen the women's studies movement due to the hegemonic aspirations of its members is so frightening that to join its ranks or to consider taking on such a movement from within could prove death-dealing. The ultimate fear

when facing the Medusa for women's studies scholars is that they might prove what their male detractors have been saying--that she was a monster all along.

In the last decades, in spite of the risks, certain groups of women have been facing the Medusa as they confront the ongoing impossibility of women's studies. Private and public debates both within and around the domain of women's studies and feminist camps, in particular, those emerging from women of color movements such as *mestiza*, *mujerista*, womanist and U.S. Third World feminisms," have questioned the viability of a movement that could embrace all women (Chéla Sandoval 1991, Ada María Isasi-Díaz et al 1992, Katie Cannon 1988, and ChandraTalpade Mohanty 1991). Without trying to do an overview of U.S. and third world women of color critiques of the U.S. academic women's movement, we would like to set some parameters for the discussion of that critique. A few dates and events will suffice. The year 1981 is preeminent in this regard. In that year, the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) held their conference in Storrs, Connecticut on racism in women's studies.<sup>1</sup> The conference theme was a response to women of color's denunciation of women's studies as racist and classist, one that had surfaced and proliferated in a number of writings by women of color between the years of 1972 and 1980. The title of that conference was "Women Respond to Racism," and its purpose was to confront and name the kind of (racist) movement it had been, to map out a new women's movement, and to further develop the discipline of women's studies. According to Chéla Sandoval's report of that conference, many participants felt that the exploration of racism in all of its complexities would help make these goals come to fruition (55-56). Yet, even while acknowledging that racism was pervasive in women's studies, the conference itself mirrored the oppressiveness of social systems in its very structure and organization (57-58). Ultimately, little came out of the meeting except a limited recognition of the presence of racism within women's studies, a recognition that "does little to help affect the radical transformations necessary to create a coalition of U.S. women through their differences" (70).

The failure of the meeting signified a major transformation within the National Women's Studies Association, which is the major academy of women's studies scholars. Within the conference itself, a women of color movement was founded, entitled "The National Alliance for American Third World Women." After this alliance was created, a flood of women of color movements took the same path, seeking separatism "for health's sake."<sup>3</sup> These new movements (womanist movement, 1985; *mujerista* movement, 1987; and *mestiza* movement, 1987) show the reaction that women of color had to white feminists' unwillingness to address the question that Audre Lorde posed so well in her keynote speech at that fateful conference: "Do the women of the Academy really *want* to confront racism?" (Sandoval 56).<sup>4</sup>

Lorde's question unveils the disfiguring and death-dealing countenance of the Medusa within women's studies. In this essay, we seek to face the Medusa head on. Our endeavor is threefold: 1) to describe the ways in which institutional racism has impacted the movement; 2) to offer our own institutional experiences with racism in women's studies as a case study of this national epidemic; and 3) to offer prescriptions for transforming the impossibility of women's studies for women's empowerment to a possibility for

empowerment. Within this endeavor, we are willing to offer a way to analyze the poignant resistance within the movement in order to answer the question Lorde poses. We will suggest strategies for reviving the spirit of the movement and for bringing back to life the people who have been silenced and turned to stone along the way. We use our own salient experiences as a black junior women's studies scholar and a white senior women's studies faculty and former women's studies director as a living laboratory for understanding these theoretical issues at our shared institution. We also bring to light the testaments of other women's studies scholars whose voices have been similarly marginalized or dismissed when there is an attempt to carry the dialogue forward in order to embrace the influx of diverse women and their epistemologies within the academy. It is by interweaving our own stories with those belonging to many women who are still in the trenches asking Lorde's very same question that we enter into this dialogue.

Almost two decades after that fateful conference, interrogations as to the viability of women's studies continue to resurge. In her 1997 seminal essay, "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," women's studies professor Wendy Brown exposes the conundrums faced by women's studies scholars and teachers within U.S. academic institutions of higher learning upon attempting to institutionalize feminism as curriculum, method, and field. She suggests and raises arguments for the idea that women's studies critiques of sexism and other '-isms' within scholarly work and practices in the academy may be politically and theoretically contradictory to the goals of the academy. Again we find ourselves revisiting this ever-present concern in the 2001 National Women's Studies Association Conference at one of the premier workshops entitled "the Impossibility of Women's Studies? A Response to Wendy Brown."

Analyses like Sandoval and Brown's continue to evoke theoretical tensions within the academy, such as the NWSA, as well as within interpersonal relations within women's studies classrooms, programs, and departments. In what follows, we will illustrate similar tensions in the discussions held at our home institution. Since any discussion of our experiences is going to be a product of the institutional history of women's studies, we deem it necessary to contextualize our voices as well as our program within that history.

### Women's Studies: Disciplining Feminisms

Something happens when a movement becomes institutionalized. A clear benefit of bringing feminism into the academy was that women's perspectives became legitimized institutionally inasmuch as women's studies was now considered a critical field of inquiry. Moreover, women's studies changed the face of education inasmuch as it was successful in using gender as a lens through which to critique the misogynist biases of traditional education. This brand of education saw women's culture as antithetical to reason and morality as exemplified in the classical canon of great works. Such a benefit, however, was not without its cost and consequences. In its evolutionary development as an academic discipline, women's studies entrenched itself into institutionalized living, both within its theories and practices.

Within its merger with academics, feminism found a home (Floyd-Thomas; and Humm 56-60). But, rather than taking its cues from the women-led and women-centered

protests concerning first wave issues around abolitionist anti-suffragist movements as well as second wave concerns around anti-war protests, civil rights, and women's liberation, women's studies took its cues from the strongholds of traditional education. Concerning itself with being taken seriously as a field of inquiry, it prioritized the intellectual presence of feminism within disciplinary circles over and above improving the lives of women. Although feminism brought with it an assumed association with activism, it thus leaned, in its incarnation as women's studies, increasingly towards its alignment with the academy. Indeed it found a home. Women's studies uprooted feminism from the political movement and transformed it into an academic discourse in order to legitimize its new disciplinary identity and status. Barbara Christian, among other feminist critics, has signaled feminism's well-intentioned investment in theories that run contrary to its own feminist values by investing in the elitism of the academy of which it is a part.

In wanting to become a part of the institution, feminism had to acculturate itself to the academic environment. As Bourdieu (1991), Foucault (1977), Freire (1970/1997), Giddens (1991), Goffman (1963) and others have disclosed, institutionalized living comes with a normalizing agenda. Thus, women's studies, since its inception and in the course of its evolutionary development as an academic discipline, not only invested in but was also founded upon just such a modern doctrine of normativity. Based on the consensus of white, middle-class, heterosexual, educated women, the movement acted conservatively (read xenophobic) as it tried to imbricate itself into its institutional setting. Women's studies, and thereby the feminist movement, ignored the realities of the diversity of all women's voices and created an ideology that was to serve the values of the women that it now represented. This is not to say that within its institutionalization, women's studies was not progressive and even successful in altering some patriarchal understandings of knowledge. Yet, its monolithic representations of women's experiences and its institutional makeup removed the radical spirit of feminism from a political context to an academic one in which certain women wielded the control of discourses and the production of knowledge. What began as a possibility of the personal and collective power of women thus became transformed into certain women's ability to attain institutional power and claims to knowledge (Córdova; Alperin).

Those particular values that prevailed in the movement at the historical juncture in which the movement became embedded in the academy in the form of a discipline (first and second waves of feminism) were already biased towards white middle-class heterosexual women. Those values having become firmly established, women's studies scholars made use of all of the tools that the discipline provides-- in the way of methods, in the way of approaches, and in the way of discourses-- in order to reify them. Women's studies developed a discourse that stemmed from white women's experiences while it delimited other women's specific concerns and cultural ideals so that certain ideas about womanhood, as expressed through feminism, would inform the constitution of what a woman is (Cannon 1996; Collins 1990; and hooks). While women's studies was supposed to become institutionalized in order to liberate *all* women, it instead used its power to fortify systems of oppression that were already intimately bound with patriarchal institutions and hegemony. This situation poses an ethically contestable issue

which women's studies scholars must still address if they wish to be faithful to the goal of women's liberation: having willfully faced the Medusa, how can we now escape its death-dealing consequences?

### Defensive Postures and Dismissive Retorts

This more generalized historiography of the academic incarnation of the women's movement provided us with a context within which we could understand the tensions we experienced within our own program. One of the sites of contention centered on attempts made to bring the curriculum in line with the diversity of female students and women faculty within our program. Once embarked upon, such attempts are not without their threats to those who have been trained within the parameters of institutional feminism and therefore invested in it for its institutional sake. When one challenges something that is structural, one ultimately challenges the whole notion of what the discipline is: its epistemology as well as those who implement it.<sup>5</sup> In posing such a self-reflexive activity, a series of conservative gestures are put into motion to maintain the identity and life force of what feminism has been and at the same time to subvert or ward off any effort to institutionalize change (Bourdieu 117-26). Such has been our experience.

In our own institution, clearly, we had to contend with those academic frustrations of which any program or department experiences. Our particular issues focused on the following areas: junior faculty feeling more theoretically qualified than their senior white colleagues because they had degrees in women's studies; black junior faculty prioritizing their role as advocates to black students; senior faculty rallying around issues that would safeguard current policies and practices; an influx of new junior faculty pushing against the barriers of liberal feminism; and still other faculty questioning the viability of women's studies as a discipline of its own. When we addressed the need to initiate curricular development at our institution in order to meet new national trends and standards in the areas of diversity and globalization, there became manifest a series of defensive postures and dismissive retorts. In attempting to design and place in the group of core courses within the women's studies program a sequence of courses dealing with race from a variety of perspectives (womanism, race, class and gender, and postcolonial and global feminisms), we found ourselves at faculty meetings involved in conflictive dialogues that we are calling here defensive posturing and dismissive retorts. When we suggested that courses such as 'Race, Class, and Gender' and 'Global Feminisms' be created, these were some of the responses: "*Why don't we just do 'Race, Class, and Gender' as a special studies? It doesn't have to be a permanent course.*" "*The theme could alternate if we put it within a Special Issues on Feminism course.*" "*Why should we even have a 'special studies' course on race? --Aren't we already doing race in all of our classes?*" "*If we singled out a course on the intersections of race, class, and gender, we would be saying that we aren't doing it in other classes. We would be ghettoizing.*"

When we suggested that we organize a syllabi workshop in order to determine if we were teaching about the intersections of race, class, and gender in all of the courses, and to assess our ability to do so effectively, these were some of the responses: "*Exactly what*

*percentage of course content has to deal with race?" "Syllabi don't show the extent to which race is included."*

When suggesting that we include race issues as a major focus in our feminist agenda, these were some of the responses: *"Aren't we prioritizing gender here? Why are we talking about race then?" "If we are going to teach about 'other things', why don't we teach about women and aging, why don't we teach on broader issues like femininity and masculinity? Why don't we teach gender studies? "Who says that women's studies has to be safe for all women? That's a utopian ideal."*

When suggesting that we need to continue to look at ways of creating an inclusive curriculum that meets the needs of an increasingly diverse population of female students, ones who have voiced their concerns about inclusivity to black women faculty, these were some of our colleagues' responses: *"Why does women's studies have to do this work and bear this criticism?" "Why is more expected of us than Engineering?" "Nobody calls Black Studies on their sexism the way we are called on for our 'racism.' "It's because we care that so much more is demanded of us."*

When suggesting that an agenda based on diversity requires that we globalize and internationalize the curriculum, these were some of the responses: *"We don't have that area of expertise. That's under the domain of Anthropology." "We can't be expected to retool." "Why do we have to keep up with national standards anyway?" "Why do all of us have to do this? Why can't we hire someone who specializes in this so the rest of us can go on working in our respective areas of expertise?" "We're already doing a lot. Why do we have to do more? Do you know how much is demanded of me in my home department already?" "It's not my unwillingness, it's just that it doesn't pertain to my field of study." "We don't do activism."*

When suggesting ways in which women's studies could demonstrate its commitment to women by reaching out to local international women's organizations in our communities and by creating concentrations and tracks such as women's leadership that would make central to students the connections between feminist activism and women's studies, these were some of the responses: *"We don't do activism. That's not our job. Let the Women's Center do that." "We're no different from other academics, so why ask us to be different," Our only job is to provide the theory in the academic unit, not praxis."*

Some may innocently read the aforementioned remarks as problems related to managing an interdisciplinary program rather than (or in addition to) conservative ideologies of white women. However, it must be remembered that it was never a question of time management and being overworked but rather a defensive posturing that resisted open dialogue about the need for diversifying the curriculum in the area of race. It is of important note that people felt overworked only when pressed to take into account issues of race yet were perfectly comfortable and willing to talk about other categories of difference (i.e. age, sexuality and gender). These retorts constitute a hermeneutics of normativity at various structural levels. On the one hand, they reveal that when it is convenient, one can hide behind institutional logic by suggesting that in our professional

activities with regard to curriculum content and design we are no different than other academics. There is a measuring stick of success or accountability that is produced not by women *per se*, but by the patriarchal institution. Moreover, the hermeneutics reveal that we maintain and perpetuate hierarchies of identity within our curriculum by suggesting that what *is* must maintain itself as the core. Anything else is cursory, tangential or expendable. Thus, integrating race or global issues can be reduced to a question of percentage only when one thinks in terms of essence and norm. The norm is always left intact, only decreasing or increasing its proportion in regard to other identity categories that are to be integrated. Or, as Wendy Brown suggests, women's studies faculty often times feel that by including race, class, and globalization into the curriculum would somehow destabilize the priority of the category woman, and thereby "disrupt the unity or primacy of the category" (83).

White western normativity thus maintains a privileged place at the center of analysis only by resting on the premise that gender can at will and whim be divested from the categories of race, class, ethnicity, nationality and sexual orientation. The domain of women's studies has already been grounded on this belief. That is why only so much modification or retooling in order to create new courses can or should be required. Through our desire to diversify the curriculum, we realized that our colleagues were threatened by such an act. The threat that diversifying the curriculum poses is that it subverts the notion of "woman" as it had previously been previously conceived (on the basis of the social uniformity of its subjects and its scholars) by suggesting that women must not only be understood but also studied through a race, class, gender and global lens. This subversion removed our white women colleagues from the center, an action that de-centered their sense of identity, security and authority as women's studies scholars and women. In spite of this fact, we maintained that our women's studies curriculum should reflect such subversion (Baca Zinn et al).

### Putting Theory Into Context

In that curriculum and scholarship are fuelled by theory, the natural second step in creating a diverse women's studies program should be the examination of the body of theory women's studies espouses. This poses a twofold concern, on the one hand the prioritizing of theory that is disconnected from experience, and on the other, the potential harm that espousing theories disconnected from the lived experiences of women can generate. Feminism has never had its own theory, but rather, has sought to legitimate itself on the basis of its chameleon-like ability to assume another for its purpose. We have further compromised women's studies by wedding it exclusively to normative theoretical discourses. Women's studies attempts to authorize itself by wedding itself to, or divorcing itself from, different disciplinary theories (Marxism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, postmodernism, etc.), seeking thusly to garner some level of respectability within the academy. However, our contention is that it should not concern itself exclusively with its respectability in regard to disciplinary discourses but instead be more deliberate in its objective to attend to women's communities and concerns.

Theories that emerge from the lived realities of women are subversive to dominant structures in academia inasmuch as institutional discourse asserts that one's intelligibility

as a human being is derived from theory rather than experience (Christian). Indeed, one's humanity is constructed and measured more by theory and intellectual debate than by the gauge of real contexts and people. Theory becomes the sacred text that reads as immutable truth. It privileges institutional power. It is supposed to represent the real, but it becomes the real. It produces a hegemonic culture where there is a preference given to texts over contexts. Theory becomes fact while real experiences become fiction. Theory has gone unexamined because it has not been held accountable to reality. Without such examination, we are condemned to repeat actions that circumscribe and objectify oppressed groups and their experiences. Hence, this culminates in theory taking precedence over the identities and experiences of marginalized women. Hence, we have the situation in which white women reject the experiences of women of color and the tenets of identity politics as *passé* in order to more comfortably justify their production of hegemonic theories that eschew the liberation of oppressed groups (Hill Collins, 1998 52-55, 278).

In the case of our own program, we found that our colleagues had similar priorities. Thus, when discussing the possibility of hiring a women's studies faculty of color in order to at least represent the diversity of women, the following was said: *"I'm okay with a woman of color hire but it doesn't really matter whether it's a woman of color or not, as long as the person hired is able to teach about diversity and race issues."* *"To say that you need to be a woman of color in order to teach about diversity is the same as saying that you have to be a woman in order to teach women's studies"* *"You don't need to be a person of color to understand racism just as you don't need to be a woman to understand sexism."* *"Identity politics is not valid because there is no one theoretical perspective of a given collective group. It would be dangerously simplistic and narrow-minded to make that assumption. Moreover, you cannot trust or invest in a centered perspective as if it were the truth because the whole notion of an identity politic is without merit. Anyone who is trained in a topic can speak to the topic."* Or, as one feminist colleague put it, *"Not only is the personal no longer political, but the personal is suspect. Indeed, any investment in the personal can foster self-indulgent politics and practices on the part of the oppressed."*<sup>6</sup>

It is this type of reasoning and discursive control that perpetuates institutional racism. We can produce the most sophisticated theories explaining the liberation of oppressed groups and at the same time in our practices maintain the hierarchies that we are trying to eradicate through our theories. The contradiction lies in the fact that the theories do not emerge from the ranks of the marginalized groups themselves, but from the hegemonic groups of which most of our feminist colleagues form part.

### Faculty Rewards and Punishments

Theory becomes a form of "cultural capital" when one is able to generate theory that sustains institutional normativity (Bourdieu 117-26). Within the context of women's studies, this can take the form of adopting theories endorsed by current institutional and disciplinary trends. The ability to do so enables a scholar to publish in the prominent journals of the field, to be accepted within the most elite of intellectual circles nationally

and internationally, and to thus achieve professional renown. Adherence or lack thereof to the norm results alternately in rewards or punishments. In abiding by the norm, an individual is consecrated through ritual acts of legitimization that justify her existence. The inevitable counterpart of this consecration is the desecration of individuals who deviate from the norm. In doing so, they are “damned into nothings or the lowest being” (Bourdieu 126). Our public acts are public rituals, not just interpersonal exchanges, conflicts or affronts, but rather publicly enacted and institutionally legitimized. There are no innocent bystanders or neutral parties to these public rites of initiation. Rites of initiation are those symbolic gestures of power that provide at one and the same time the rewards that result from conformity and the punishment that results from transgression. The symbolic violence of the institution is fuelled by its gestures. Its sole function is to absolutely and permanently discourage any attempt “to cross the line, to transgress, desert, or quit” and, alternately and simultaneously seduce people into conformity to the norm (Bourdieu 126).

We find feminist corroboration to Bourdieu's claim that theory can become dogma exacting blind allegiance by its followers in Susan Griffin's "The Way of All Ideology" as cited by bell hooks:

...when a theory is transformed into an ideology, it begins to destroy the self and self-knowledge. Originally born a feeling, it pretends to float above and around feeling. Above sensation. It organizes experience according to itself, without touching experience. By virtue of being itself, it is supposed to know. To invoke the name of this ideology is to confer truthfulness. No one can tell it anything new. Experience ceases to surprise it, inform it, transform it. It is annoyed by any detail which does not fit into its world view. Begun as a cry against the denial of truth, now it denies any truth which does not fit into its scheme. Begun as a way to restore one's sense of reality, now it attempts to discipline real people, to remake natural beings after its own image. All that it fails to explain it records as its enemy. Begun as a theory of liberation, it is threatened by new theories of liberation; it builds a prison for the mind (9).

As we have experienced, women's studies participates in these institutionalized rituals by developing a body of theory through a generative process wherein theory gives way to new theory without acknowledgment of context or human experience. Women's studies disassociates, fragments, and subverts any alternative lifestyle in its attempt to produce a homogeneous culture. Diverse modes of culture and consciousness harbor frightening consequences for white women. As Ruth Frankenberg notes, the dangers inherent in introducing diversity for white women are numerous: 1) inclusivity subverts whiteness as a norm against which all others are measured; 2) it exposes to white women that whiteness is inextricably linked to domination. Thus when diversity is implemented, the structure of domination and subordination is threatened and white women find themselves on slippery ground; and consequently 3) it results in an identity crisis (202-04). Likewise, and more simply put, Nellie McKay observes that what separates black

and white women is not the recognition of difference but the loss of power that such a recognition implies for white women. She affirms that the wounds inflicted by generations of white women on women of color are deep "and the continued insensitivity of many white women today are embedded in race, and retard progress toward unity" (272-73).

As women of color or radical white women confront those white women scholars who remain entrenched in their white privilege, they too suffer from attacks on their identity. In effect, when one dares to be different (espousing a different theory or perspective), she finds herself in a risk society wherein her reality becomes inverted. In this regard, a reality inversion is an experience that one encounters when a stereotypical representation is deemed more authentic than her real experience (Giddens 27). Once an individual is immersed in a context, she undergoes a reflexive project of identity formation. This largely entails the individual not only looking at herself through the eyes of another to see who she is, but also encompasses what the institution and society would have her be. At the moment of her acceptance of this version of her identity over and above her own perception, she becomes stripped of her moral agency and shifts from being subject to object (Isasi-Díaz, 1996 96). This is how we experienced this shift.

*As a Black woman within a women's studies environment that is predominantly white, my initial appearance on the scene was one that was embraced for tokenist reasons. People felt enthralled by my presence because whether it was being at a women's studies faculty meeting or being at a social function or just being in a personal conversation with one of my colleagues, my blackness spoke to their willingness to embrace diversity. My presence reaffirmed to them their good will and their inclusiveness, enhancing who they were. I was appealing and welcomed when my presence fit comfortably with their anti-racist self-image. But when I moved beyond my objectified blackness and spoke as a person and as a womanist, I was perceived to step outside the role that had been cast for me. I was no longer the nurturing mammy but the villain. I came with a voice and a reality that wanted to be heard at the table along with those of other women. Instead what I said was perceived as a criticism, a hostile gesture. As long as I was quiet, they could construct me into whoever they wanted me to be. But when I spoke, it was seen as a threat to their identity because it challenged what their notion of a woman is. My blackness could be commodified and appropriated inasmuch it legitimized and affirmed white women's privilege, status and comfort level.*

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*As a director of the women's studies program, I was invested with symbolic power. They unconsciously believed that, as a white, middle-class "senior" woman, I would maintain the homogeneity and preserve the status quo. When I divested myself of that symbolic power in order to talk about women's studies being inclusive, I was perceived as a traitor, I was no longer a good feminist. I had flipped the script, using my power*

*but not playing the same game with the same rules. I was told that I was making them look racist. I was pitting Black women against white women, just by voicing my concerns for inclusivity. I was not eliminating the racialized climate but fomenting it, they said. I was the villain. And I realize, as a white woman observer fighting for diversity, women of color are only wanted to validate white women's concerns.*

As these theoretical frameworks and personal accounts reveal, white women tend not to want to include women of color into the women's studies arena. As hooks states, racism in women's studies abounds. She exemplifies this sentiment in the following way:

When I participated in feminist groups, I found that white women adopted a condescending attitude towards me and other non-white participants. The condescension they directed at black women was one of the means they employed to remind us that the women's movement was "theirs"--that we were able to participate because they allowed it....they did not see us as equals. They did not treat us as equals....Our presence in movement activities did not count....If we dared to criticize the movement or to assume responsibility for reshaping feminist ideas and introducing new ideas, our voices were tuned out, dismissed, silenced. We could be heard only if our statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant discourse (11-12).

What hooks is relaying in this observation is that women of color are allowed to be present, only if silent or accommodating. "In other words," as Uttal states, "business goes on as usual with the only change being the inclusion of token women..." (43).

The abiding principles of women's studies fit squarely with those of the educational institution. They aim to conserve the ethical frameworks of normativity. Forgetting that their own representations could have many names, faces, and colors, feminist academics pattern their strategies of conservatism after those of their institutional (patriarchal) counterparts. Thus, the ideological underpinnings that are used to keep those principles in place are those of authoritarianism and the maintenance of the hierarchical status quo, with those guarding the norms at the top. These feminists devote their energies to reminding the rest of their cohorts that any pressure on the group from external forces is destructive. Herein lies the hypocrisy. Women's studies becomes a mirror of patriarchy.

### A Possibility for Women's Studies

In order for the new academic discipline of women's studies to understand, clarify, present strategy and provide a basis for political action which will end domination and subordination, it must incorporate the discoveries being made by *all* women. (Sandoval 70)

As Wendy Brown's seminal essay "The Impossibility of Women's Studies" suggests, such dismal contemplations about the status of women's studies within the academy leaves one to conclude that the discipline is an impossible vehicle for all women's

empowerment. We could take refuge in Brown and Sandoval's statements and abandon women's studies altogether as many women of color predecessors and contemporaries have done. But we do not think it is fair for a certain minority to hold the monopoly on who is a woman and what women's studies should be. Ultimately, therefore, we are not invested in ushering in an inevitable demise of women's studies, but rather seek to offer a paradigm for disciplinary transformation that is at once practical and feasible within women's studies programs. The narrative that follows describes the table below.

Table 1 A Possibility for Women's Studies<sup>7</sup>

Categories	Normative Problems	Radical Solutions
Governing Principles	Conservatism	Transformation
Institutional Structure	Authoritative	Participatory
Justification	Re-presentation	Liberation
Politics	Conformity	Difference
Theory	Anti-realism	Emancipatory Historiography
Hermeneutical Metaphor	Consecration	Conversion
Attitude toward Conflict	Destructive	Creative; Empowering
Ethical Motif	Psychological Hedonism	Good Society Utilitarianism

Instead of conserving the status of sameness, we could begin by defining the discipline not in terms of previous theories governing women, but by looking at the stories, narratives and representations of all women, both locally and globally, in order to understand the diverse realities of women.

We must create a *participatory* community. ALL women's experiences are the locus and source of women's liberation. In order to look at the varying experiences of women, we need to repudiate universalist and trans-historical reason, elaborated as normative by patriarchy and feminism. Women's narratives that center on their own experiences must be allowed to develop.

With *liberation* for all women as the goal and end of women's studies, no one perspective will be given exclusive privilege. Instead, those working within women's studies towards the end of liberation will want to find patterns of commonalities as well as particularities of women's experiences in order to develop non-oppressive structures. Absolute *conformity* to one perspective will not be seen as possible since no single perspective can account for all women's experiences, nor can the experiences of any woman or group of women offer exclusive access to the truth.

The politics of women's studies will not be concerned with creating structures and laws that make imperative the conformity to certain acts, values, and beliefs, but with creating ones that will allow for *difference*. At the same time, a new women's studies politics will be concerned with the seeking of truth claims both relationally and communally. This politics departs from the recognition and valuing of differences while acknowledging the imperative to deal with differences and to set up the criteria for determining whose

experiences to privilege at any given moment. No single perspective is a given or absolute. No perspective is outside of a context.

The intelligibility of differences among women must have as its goal not only to make visible and privilege the epistemologies of all women but also to bring women together in order to seek commonalities across their differences. We are not suggesting that difference is an absolute, but is instead often conditioned by external structural elements, including social, economic, political and cultural factors. *Liberation* must be understood in a holistic manner, not just in the personal but also in the structural sense.

In order to embrace the realities, experiences, and understandings of real women in order to liberate them from oppressive structures, it is necessary to look at historical contexts and conditions. An *emancipatory historiography* should be put into place that would function to retrieve historical data that can help us understand how history has led to marginalization and systemic oppression along the lines of race, class, gender and sexuality. In this regard, in order to ignite a radical spirit of feminism, we should generate our theories from the narrative accounts and discourses of women throughout history, looking for definitions of womanhood both from the particularities of each narrative as well as from the collectivity of narratives and discourses. The truth of one woman's experiences is affirmed in the face of another's.

This communal and collective building of theoretical and explanatory frameworks for defining women and their realities thus never aims to consecrate or privilege any given group or individual while desecrating others, but would instead lead to a *conversion* in our understanding of feminism as engagement and interaction with diverse women and collectivities of women. The experiences and realities of diverse women would not be simply tolerated, but would be deemed positive for what they are. In this regard, those who are different (from the heteropatriarchal/ feminist norm) must be free to be who they are instead of being required to act in such a way so as to be intelligible to those who have found it lucrative to be normative. Such conversions will not be perceived as threatening to the status quo or to a core group of people, theories, or texts, because there will be no core. Instead, inclusivity will result in the creation of many points or centers of privilege and empowerment. Presently, the consecration of normativity results in *psychological hedonism*, that is, the greatest pleasure for that select group who is able to adhere closest to the norm. Yet, we might imagine a future of *good society utilitarianism* in which the guiding principles of a society would focus on the well-being of an entire collectivity. The goal of this principle would be to maximize social welfare, happiness and basic wellbeing. In this feminist vision of society, the work of academic women's studies scholars would not be self-referential, but instead would explore ways of seeing and understanding the world or of constructing the self and society from an ever-expanding range of contexts and social locations.

What we are envisioning here is a change in the culture and practice of women's studies in order to make the discipline accountable to the lives of real women in the name of its goal, that of liberation and empowerment. And it cannot be accountable by maintaining its order but by the breakdown of its order. In the process of renewal, women's studies

must face the Medusa even if that means facing unpredictability, messiness, and new uncertainties, in order to achieve a radical transformation.

### Getting from Here to There: Moving from the Impasse of Impossibility to Transformation

One may wonder if the radical solutions of transformation suggested above are truly within the realm of possibility. Is it possible that institutionalized women's studies will adopt a radical position all of a sudden given the grim realities that we presently face? Such a disparity between what is desired and what is seems so vast that the realization of it is in and of itself immobilizing. This is the culminating effect of facing the Medusa. However, some intermediate steps can be taken to initiate a necessary process that would move us from here to there. The following steps are how we envision realistic undertakings that can help implement the idealistic program outlined above:

1. *Center ourselves in another experience and perspective.* Each and every one of us can validate another's experience without imposing a comparison to one's own experience or feeling compelled to give up one's own perspective in order to adopt it. This calls for pivoting the center as Elsa Barkley Brown states. A larger perspective is needed in order to understand and then eradicate our heterosexist, racist and classist ways, as Alice Walker affirms (Eugene et al 93).
2. *Readdress the quality of our inclusive practices.* White women must recognize that plurality means respecting the peculiarities of different women. We have to be intentional about how we relate to each other. We cannot make any assumptions about our commonalities. We must realize that who we are ought to be inextricably bound to the personhood of others. Thus, as Isasi-Díaz underscores, "self requires self-conscious interaction" or, as she states in another way "we must allow the person who is different to be herself, and not require or demand that she be or act or present herself in a way that is intelligible to us" (Eugene et al 95). When we engage with the practices and scholarly research of other women, we need to reciprocate. We can learn from diverse women only if we are also prepared to act in solidarity with their pain and struggle (Eugene et al 97).
3. *Exercise the "feminist ethic of risk."* As we begin to be present and accountable to each other, we will be able to learn from the moral insights of others (Welch). Upon tackling such an ethic of risk,

we must strive to welcome diversity rather than gather around us what is comfortable and familiar....At the same time, we must take the personal and professional risks involved in building alliances, listening to and respecting people who have firsthand knowledge of how to cope with oppression, and overcoming the institutionalized barriers that divide us. Within this context, our efforts to develop common goals have the potential to produce a truly diverse community of people who study women and who

understand their scholarship as part of the broader quest to arrest all forms of social inequality (Baca Zinn et al 39-40).

Why take the risk of facing the Medusa? We well know the dangers that facing the Medusa implies for our own lives as authors of this essay within our professional context and personal relations within the women's studies program at our own institution. But we believe, as Sandoval, that if we face the monster within our own ranks, we may find the opportunities to restore her to the beautiful maiden that she once was. And so we invite others to join us and join those women who have already laid the groundwork for the radical transformation of women's studies. We take the risk, not to deconstruct for the sake of deconstruction, not to vent our personal frustrations, not to place ourselves on a pedestal as superior, nor, finally, to invest as professional victims in a politics of complaint (Ross 335). Instead, we do so because we find it imperative in order to revive the spirit of the movement, restore its academic arm and, most importantly, because we know that the very souls we save may be our own.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article has been inspired, in large part, by our reading of Wendy Brown's seminal essay "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," published in 1997.

<sup>2</sup> We have relied on Chéla Sandoval's description and interpretation of the conference, in her "Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference" throughout the analysis that follows.

<sup>3</sup> This is an expression from Walker's definition of womanism, 1983, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Womanism derives its name from African-American novelist Alice Walker, who coined and defined the word womanist in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, published in 1983. Womanism has its roots in the work of Katie G. Cannon. Her essay "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness" published in the anthology *Feminists' Interpretation of the Bible* and her book *Black Womanist Ethics* laid the foundation for womanism in the academy. Gloria Anzaldúa coined the term "chicana *mestizaje*," initiating *mestiza* feminism in her foundational work *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza*.

<sup>5</sup> For a more extensive review of curriculum integration in Women's Studies and its difficulty, see *Women's Studies Quarterly* 18; and *Radical Teacher* 37.

<sup>6</sup> Wendy Brown gives another version of this logic that precludes any progress, principles, or political devotion. In her essay, she cites the paradoxes that arise when trying to determine who counts as faculty, what courses should be included, what agenda should receive priority, and what theory or perspective should be used (84-86).

<sup>7</sup> Many of the terms used within the table are exemplified in the following texts: *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* and *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*.

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