The Practice and Legacy of a Black Lesbian Feminist: Selections from the Archive of Dr. Angela Bowen (1936-2018)

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2001 Article in Feminist Teacher “Interdisciplinarily Speaking” by Angela Bowen

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INTERDISCIPLINARILY SPEAKING
by Angela Bowen

Introduction
The proliferating discourse around issues of interdisciplinarity and in particular the interdisciplinary Ph.D. in women's studies, begs a response from one who has been involved with same for eight years, five in obtaining the degree and four in making use of it (one year overlapping). Although it would be a rare feminist within or outside of academia who was unaware of attacks against women's studies as a field of study—not only its content and intentions, but concomitant personal attacks against individual professors—, I was nevertheless startled to see how fiercely the freestanding interdisciplinary women's studies Ph.D. degree has been under siege in some quarters within women's studies programs and departments by those for whom women's studies constitutes a major portion of their pedagogy and research. Although the debate does not seem to be hampering the expansion of new women's studies Ph.D. programs, as more universities continue to implement it, the discussions and concerns indicate that there is a great deal at stake, and I feel the need to weigh in.

Three discussions of concern
Biddy Martin, in her essay, "Success and its Failures," in the fall, 1997 issue of differences, casts women's studies as a victim of its own success. Women's studies has succeeded in defining and delimiting objects of knowledge, authorizing new critical practices, significantly affecting scholarship in a number of disciplines, defining important political issues, and establishing itself as a legitimate academic and administrative unit on hundreds of college campuses. (102)

With such success have come problems: women's studies having now "lost much of its critical and intellectual vigor" has "settled in" (Martin 102).

Martin's project here is to discuss the current state and the future of women's studies by setting her discussion "in the context of larger discussions about knowledge and of learning in universities and efforts to change the forms of disciplinary and intradisciplinary balkanization that constrain our intellectual vision and prevent us from providing students a more integrated education" (103). Addressing Martha Nussbaum's project, Cultivating Humanity, in which Nussbaum responds "to the right wing's assaults on university curricula reform" (114), Martin, agreeing with part of Nussbaum's assessment, states that Nussbaum:

stresses that new information or knowledge is crucial, but that rigorous, critical thinking is even more essential if the university is to fulfill its purpose to help young people learn "how to stimulate their own tradition within a highly plural and interdependent world." (115)
It would be difficult to argue with the above statement by Nussbaum although Martin's assessment of *Cultivating Humanity* is not altogether uncritical. Allowing that Nussbaum “provides an important intervention into the culture wars over curriculum” by aiming to make “the study of non-western cultures part of the core of an integrated, undergraduate curriculum” (115), Martin supports Nussbaum’s “insistence on modes of thinking about differences rather than on modes of appropriation,” but nevertheless sees Nussbaum as “draw[ing] predictably rigid boundaries between reason and its others. Her axioms for the study of difference do not unsettle the assumption that western culture can serve as ground and referent for reason, even if, as she argues, reason is not an exclusively western possession” (115). Praising Nussbaum’s proposals as “important,” Martin nevertheless labels them “depressingly tame and premised upon surprisingly traditional boundaries among disciplines, replicating the terms that have become familiar from recent ‘wars of the faculties’” (117).

Martin is also critical of the current state of women’s studies: in addition to having lost its earlier “vigor,” it has become “entrenched” and “insular” (102-103). Nevertheless, Martin’s final message is a recognition that “it would be naive and dangerous to think that the work of Women’s Studies, or of feminism, is over” (130). Even while questioning “whether the work can be done in the context of the programs and intellectual formations we have established and institutionalized,” she never proposes that we abandon women’s studies, trusting any and all other disciplines to take care of the baby we have birthed at such pains: “Perhaps,” she says, “the work cannot go on in the absence of the placeholder we call Women’s (or Gender) Studies even when much of the liveliest scholarship and teaching is conducted outside its official parameters” (130).

Wendy Brown’s title, “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” describes her essay as aptly as Biddy Martin’s title, “Success and Its Failures,” describes hers in the same 1997 issue of *differences*. Brown’s signal opening sentence refers to the “harangue concerning the field of women’s studies” and suggests that “dusk on its epoch has arrived, even if nothing approaching Minerva’s wisdom has yet emerged” (79). This tone is carried throughout the essay. While admitting that other disciplines, including sociology and literary studies, have had their own battles and mutations, she insists that because women’s studies is “organized by social identity rather than by genre of inquiry,” it is “especially vulnerable to losing its raison d’être when the coherence or boundedness of its object of study is challenged” (83). So, unlike other disciplines which, when challenged, have managed to mutate, reconfigure, and expand their boundaries, women’s studies, rather than following that route, simply becomes “impossible,” in her view.

Brown proposes that women’s studies practitioners abandon the field altogether and pitch outposts in traditional disciplines. Rachel Lee, writing in the premier issue of *Meridians*, views Brown’s proposal to dissolve women’s studies and rove among the traditional disciplines as a problematic vision and “ineffective” as a model for a program within a university: “In the contradictory logic of fetishized marginality, the narration of women’s studies’ critical progress
inheres in its ability both to incorporate the outside and to substitute itself for
the outside” (Lee 2000, 91).

Lee sees Brown as:

propos[ing] a vision uncannily similar to the oppositional
third world feminist consciousness proposed by Chela
Sandoval. Her suggestion to render women’s studies a
completely transitive project is a way of re-inhabiting on
behalf of women’s studies the position of the lost object that
travels in a ghostly fashion, haunting other disciplines rather
than being haunted by cycles of guilt and blame around its own
exclusionary practices. (Lee 94)

Brown spends a large part of her essay convincing the reader that:

despite the diverse and often even unrelated formations of the
subject according to race, class, nation, gender, and so forth,
subject construction itself does not occur in discrete units as
race, class, nation, and so forth. So the model of power
developed to apprehend the making of a particular subject/ion
will never accurately describe or trace the lines of a living
subject. (Brown 93)

Within or outside of academic discourse, most people know this. The theo-

ry has been expounded, albeit in different terms and language, over several cen-
turies by a number of “minority” groups, which, long before we were informed
by academia that we were “socially constructed” by race, gender, sexuality (fill
in the blank), have passed along to each generation the understanding that the
“race” box to which we were consigned by whites was their construction, hav-
ing less to do with who we actually were than with a justification for oppression,
exploitation and commodification. Taking the analysis further, “minority”
women of the nineteenth century spoke to the complexities of our condition,
that is, being more oppressed than black men because of sex and more than
white women because of race and, generally, class. In 1979 the Combahee River
Collective (preceded by Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper, to name only
two black foremothers who spoke to this phenomenon) advanced a second wave
feminist version of this theory, well-accepted and reiterated now as the “simul-
taneity of oppression.”

Brown has “chosen critical approaches to the law as a way of highlighting
diversity in the production and regulation of different marked subjects . . . ” (92).
Focusing particularly on Critical Legal Race Theory, she states that the law (and
the courts and public policy) sees us as “either economically deprived, or as les-
bians, or as racially stigmatized” (92). Admitting that the law could be seen as
deficient, ontologically clumsy or epistemologically primitive in not being able
to see the complexity of our identities as women (emphasis added), Brown states
that what is more significant “for purposes of this essay is what it suggests about
the difficulty of grasping the powers constitutive of subjection” (92).

Criticizing women’s studies for casting its argument for its continued exis-
tence in terms of its “political intent,” rather than its rigorous scholarship (the
impossibility of connection?), she describes a scenario wherein women’s studies must represent and redress the construction, the positioning and the injuries of complex subjects. Women’s studies, she says, has a fraught relationship . . . to race and racism [that is] configured by this dynamic of compensation for a structural effect that can never be made to recede, even as it is frantically countered and covered over. Insofar as the superordination of white women within women’s studies is secured by the primacy and purity of the category gender, guilt emerges as the persistent social relation of women’s studies to race, a guilt that cannot be undone by any amount of courses, readings, and new hires focused on women of color. (93)

(That will remain a moot point for the many years it will take before “any amount of courses, readings and new hires focused on women of color” occurs). Brown describes a curriculum wherein “women of color in the U.S.” is the sole group of women our students are required to learn about (her emphasis):

students’ experience of this course is intensely emotional—guilty, proud, righteous, anxious, vengeful, marginalized, angry, or abject. And consider too that alumnæ of the course often relay these feelings, highly mediated, into other women’s studies courses as criticisms of the syllabi, the student constituency, or the pedagogy in terms of a failure to center women of color, race, or racism [“center” or include?]. Faculty, curriculum, and students in women’s studies programs are in a relentless, compensatory cycle of guilt and blame about race, a cycle structured by women’s studies original, nominalist, and conceptual subordination of race (and all other forms of social stratification) to gender. (93)

Reading Brown’s description of this situation, I am mindful that this imperative of negotiating racial boundaries has become both a national and transnational commitment to negotiating power. Audre Lorde, one of the prime progenitors of feminists’ working across differences, said in an address at Smith College in the late 1980s:

To white students, to whom I also feel I have a responsibility, I really want to say, You cannot be Black. You cannot be other than who you are. You need to identify who you are and begin to use it for the things you say you believe; and if you believe something different, then you have to recognize what it is and choose what you want to believe. But in any event you have to use who you are. There are . . . places that you can reach, there are people to whom you can speak who will hear you who will never hear me. So I do not need you being guilty, I do not need you rejecting who you are. I do not need you lambasting yourself for being white and privileged and well-to-do. I need you to recognize that you are privileged, and to use that
privilege in the service of something we both believe. If we both believe it. (Abod 1987)

Indeed, this is the premise from which I and my colleagues, whether white or of color, proceed in addressing race, ethnicity, class and gender within women's studies. While reading Brown's description of the impact on students of studying about race, I felt sad, certainly, for all the students and instructors caught up in such a cycle, but even more so I was completely unable to relate to it and remain profoundly perplexed and troubled by its implications. Brown's statement that "the superordination of white women within women's studies is secured by the primacy and purity of the category gender" (93) begs the reiteration of Sojourner Truth's question, "Ain't I a Woman?" Through two women's movements within the U.S. in two separate centuries, women of color, stating repeatedly that gender is not white, have been attempting to intrude upon the assumption of that very "superordination of white women within women's (movement and) studies" (93). In this quest, a large number of women, including white women, here and around the globe, have understood and embraced the obvious reality; some have not.

My experience in dealing with race, ethnicity and class within women's studies is decidedly different from Brown's. At my university we teach a similar course, "U.S. Women of Color," which I and another faculty member of color (both of us hired in fall, 1996) designed and implemented in 1997 at the behest of our program. We worked on e-mail (she having taken a postdoc before arriving here in fall, 1997) in a triad with a white associate professor in our department who is our "curriculum expert." Although ours is not a required course, it fulfills a General Education and a Human Diversity requirement; thus it has grown from one class each semester, taught by each of us women of color alternately, to four classes each semester, taught by varied faculty; we are currently discussing an expansion to five. Always oversubscribed, the classes are comprised of white women and women of color, men of color and white men. Currently teaching the course: a black lesbian feminist (myself); two white women, one of whom is disabled; one Latina woman. Previously, and alternately, we have had another black woman, a Japanese-born historian, and two other white women teach it at different times. This semester, my original partner in designing the course, a Japanese-American, is not teaching it, just as I have not taught it during other semesters. She and I have helped each of the other professors if they desired and in whatever ways they wanted as they began designing their classes: sharing syllabi, exchanging recommendations for books and readings, meeting with them to discuss our approaches and other issues. Yesterday morning at 7:30 (the only time we could find) three of us currently teaching the class met for breakfast off-campus to share information about how our classes are going. In none of our classes is there any notion of guilt, responsibility for the racism in our society, rage at one another, or vengeance. My message, delivered sometime during the first two classes, is that we are responsible only for how we act once we begin expanding our awareness. The students take the point; I find no need to keep reiterating it as we proceed through the semes-
ter. Taking care to lay out the kind of readings we do, and their order, I create an atmosphere where we can understand our positions within the world, and particularly, for purposes of this course, within the United States. This allows us to focus on analyzing the work, rather than on one another personally, even when the need arises for one student to disagree with another’s interpretation. Sometimes the readings incite classroom learning experiences that, through their personal nature, elucidate perfectly the societal complexities we are deconstructing.

In one recent class, as we discussed a reading on color/complexion prejudice within groups of color, one young man, who had barely contributed previously, entered the discussion to elucidate a particular nuance that was not being addressed. This necessitated his sharing of his biracial identity in order to speak to the two different sets of dynamics he experiences with his two sets of families, one black, one white. The class was utterly silent, all of us recognizing that particular and precious moment when a silent student decides to become a speaker because s/he has something of significance to impart. Later a woman arrived during my office hours frustrated that she had not been able to say what she wanted to in class. I told her that I had been aware that she wanted to contribute but since she is a frequent and articulate speaker I chose to hear him at that moment because this was the first time he was eager to speak. She agreed and seemed satisfied to impart to me what she was intending to say in class.

Where Brown sees anxiety, guilt, anger and revenge, I see contemplation, comprehension, change, growth--and scholarship. I have received letters and remarks regularly, not only from present and past members of the U.S. Women of Color class, but from students who have taken other women’s studies classes of mine and others attesting to the complexity of the analyses they are required to develop and the research methods they are learning as they prepare their papers and oral reports. A persistent mantra is their surprise at having to work so hard in these courses. One graduate student whom I mentored was a McNair Scholar whose research project began three years ago as a result of a casual conversation we had after class, the first women’s studies class she ever took; she was then a junior. While an undergraduate, she presented her research paper (still in its early stages) in six venues, won a first prize award and all-expense-paid trips to Albuquerque, Chicago and Baltimore to present it at conferences. She began another research project as a senior, which she also presented several times before graduating. Having applied to Ph.D. Programs in both sociology and women’s studies, she received an early offer from Sociology and held out until she obtained her heart’s desire, an offer into the women’s studies Ph.D. program at the University of Washington. She is only one of several students whom I know to have changed their major to women's studies in the four years that I have been on this campus, so my experience here is also unlike Brown’s, who questions why students are turning away from majoring in Women’s Studies. This particular student is black, as am I, but I consistently mentor students of every ethnicity and combination thereof, most of them white (the English students I have mentored are all white, except for one, a white-skinned Mexican-

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American). The same acceptance, respect, and assumption of decency and fairness that I give to my students and expect them to exchange with one another is what I want—and indeed do receive—for myself. My satisfaction in being in the right profession and the right program escalates every time one of my students either expresses surprise (and delight) at how much they are challenged to dig in and fasten onto the meaning of their readings as the level of work escalates, as do the requirements made as the semester progresses, or articulates the ways in which this program or a particular class has helped to clarify their thinking in other, non-women’s studies classes.

At my university, white students do not enter or leave our classes believing that they are being required to study women of color, as Brown suggests. Still, even if “women of color in the U.S.” were the sole group of women (my emphasis) our students were required to learn about, that one required class would have to cover within one semester at least four distinct racial/ethnic groups as well as various other configurations. Yes, within that class, white women’s “superordination” might (and must) indeed be challenged, but why should that lead to such negative feelings rather than being seen as an opportunity to discover and explore their own positions (complex and varied for all of us, including white people) within society? Because the superordination of white women, originally constructed uncritically, has been challenged, questioned, and even acknowledged over the years, has it automatically disappeared, mandating us to simply stop discussing it lest we upset new generations of feminists? Do we want to help spawn new generations of feminists who are too fragile to engage with one another closely enough to devise some new and imaginative strategies for dismantling—or at least undermining—the beast of “division by difference?” It is not too late to reconsider and abolish the concept of superordination by one group of women, given that the “gender” category is occupied by a variety of “races,” ethnicities and colors. Should such reconfiguration cause any more anxiety in white women than women’s (including women of color) deconstructive challenges decades ago caused (and still cause?) among the ranks of a male hegemony that kept “pure” the major disciplines of literature, history, sociology, and anthropology, to name a few? Among the many questions that “majority” women’s studies practitioners are posing about the women’s studies Ph.D., we might also ask: Can we learn nothing when women of color are at the center of discussion? Nothing about whiteness, structures, power, indeed gender itself? This ought to be no minor question.

Minor questions are not on Marilyn Boxer’s mind as she, like the previous two writers, delivers her message within her title, “Remapping the University: The Promise of the Women’s Studies Ph.D.” in the Summer, 1998 issue of Feminist Studies. Boxer’s is a detailed and thoughtful argument in which she neither shies away from discussing the “successes and failures” of women’s studies nor sees women’s studies as “impossible.” Asserting that women’s studies has lived up to its promise of bringing “new vitality and fresh perspective to its staid relatives in the academy” (387) and supporting her claims by quoting from Academe, the AAUP journal, she calls the women’s studies Ph.D. “one of the
newest and most transformative ripples spreading across academe" (387). Rather than fearing transformation, Boxer sets out to "explore the contributions that a ‘freestanding’ or ‘autonomous’ doctoral degree in women’s studies might make not only to women’s studies as a field but also to the map of higher education as we enter a new century" (387). She summarizes previous arguments, one by historian Sandra Coyner, who advocates holding onto the apartness of women’s studies and making it into a discipline, and another by historian Nancy Cott, who believes that teaching women’s studies from a separate perspective will become unnecessary because the women’s perspective will become the normal one (388).

Taking on the arguments of “structure,” “confusion within higher education between departments and disciplines,” and “the multiplicity of subject matters and research methods now housed in many fields,” Boxer reminds us that: women’s studies is not alone in facing the structural and intellectual problems presented by interdisciplinarity but its encounters with traditional disciplines and departments are intensified by the resistance both to its feminist politics and to its own ambitions. (389)

While admitting that most women’s studies research has emerged from the disciplines, Boxer offers intellectual arguments in favor of declaring women’s studies a discipline. Structures for such a move are already in place, she says, including a separate academic location, a specific scholarly community, professional associations, and a “shared language.” Boxer is not offering an academic disputation, but a plan. Although she does not state it, her words indicate that she considers “Remapping the University” an urgent concern:

By recognizing the need at once to institutionalize women’s studies as if it were a discipline while also “transforming” other disciplines, women’s studies may help to create a new model for an academic world that is expanding beyond long-established forms and inherited structures no longer congenial to many of society’s educational goals. Degrees in women’s studies, topped by the doctorate, may signal the point where quantitative changes require a new map of the educational landscape. (391)

**Interdisciplinarity**

On Boxer’s “new map of the educational landscape,” I see myself in a hamlet within a growing village. Disputes about or disdain for the legitimacy of its existence notwithstanding, the degree multiplies. My teaching experience at a large state university in California, with a student body hugely diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age and gender, continually convinces me that an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in women’s studies is of inestimable value. It seems to me a paradox that anyone teaching women’s studies wouldn’t agree on the value of the degree, even while attempting to work out the details of refining its constitution. Regardless of the type of degree that we practitioners of women’s studies
hold, we had no choice but to utilize some form of interdisciplinary methods long before interdisciplinary studies began to attain the level of acceptance and respectability it has been enjoying of late. It goes without saying that any pedagogy focusing on women necessitates our transcendence of male-constructed boundaries of disciplines. How could we possibly study women without engaging with our histories, economic situations, literatures, cultural backgrounds, ethnic placements vis-a-vis the power structures of our specific societies, and myriad other realities, and using existing methodologies, disciplinary and interdisciplinary, to formulate our theories?

The theoretical and methodological meaning of interdisciplinarity has been the source of an avid debate that remains one of the elements lying at the very core of what a women's studies degree means. As an unbounded field of study, interdisciplinary studies (ids) has had a rebellious history since the early part of this century. John Dewey, its early champion, felt that the outcome of a student's education should be "continuously growing in intellectual integration." He said, "the mentally active scholar will acknowledge, I think, that his mind roams far and wide. All is grist that comes to his mill, and he does not limit his supply of grain to any one fenced-off field" (qtd in Newell 1998 xi). Only in 1979 did ids hold its first conference and establish a professional organization, The Association for Integrative Studies. By that time women's studies had been part of academia for approximately 15 years, utilizing ids methods as well as those of the traditional disciplines in which many of the earliest women's studies practitioners had been appointed before women's studies arrived, and continue to be. William Newell tells us that:

In the first half of the 20th century, the most prominent interdisciplinary presence was in general education. Data continue to reveal that general and liberal education programs remain prominent sites of ids, from Levine's 1976 study of college catalogues (Levine, 1978) to Klein and Gaff's 1979 survey of 272 colleges and universities (Klein and Gaff, 1982) to Newell's 1986 questionnaire, results from 235 interdisciplinary programs. The most recent data, gathered by Newell for Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Programs: A Directory (1986), indicated that a renaissance of ids was under way across geographical locations, institutional types, and curricular areas. The greatest increases were in general education, followed by honors and women's studies. (Newell 4. Emphasis added)

Does granting freestanding interdisciplinary Ph.D.s in Women's Studies not mean ultimately that we comprehend and value the complexities of exchanging and extending our knowledge about women, moving through artificially erected barriers in the way that indigenous peoples have continued to see land as communal regardless of the barriers of "ownership" erected by colonizers over many centuries? Can we not step as determinedly and respectfully back and forth across academic barriers to access holistic knowledge as we do in our activist

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work when we eschew national boundaries that we had no part in constructing? If we as transnational feminists are to fulfill one of the cornerstone principles of feminism, which calls for supporting all women striving on their own terms for control over their lives, why not use to our own advantage whichever "master's tools" (acquired at such great cost) we find useful? The master's tools of disciplinary boundaries serve some purposes in particular ways, to be sure, but holistic thinking, a particular strength of women, allowed us to make the connections that not only enabled feminism to emerge—in many different eras and surroundings—but also led to the creation of women's studies within academia. How interesting that just now, when the interdisciplinary methods of learning and teaching that we have been developing and utilizing for several decades in an organic and practical pedagogy, are becoming more acceptable (within academic settings, that is; outside of academia, this natural way of learning has never been considered illegitimate), we in women's studies begin questioning their validity. With theorists (among them Dewey, Green, Haas, Hursh, Kavaloski, Klein, Kockelmans, Moore, Newell, Piaget), a book (William H. Newell, 1998), a conference (1979), periodic institutes, and a professional organization, interdisciplinarity has grown up and earned respect—as has women's studies, which of necessity entered academia interdisciplinarily. So why not an interdisciplinary women's studies Ph.D.?

In her essay, "(Inter)Disciplinarity and the Question of the Women's Studies Ph.D.," in which Susan Friedman describes herself as "ambivalent" and "of two minds" (301), she states that interdisciplinary studies is most successful "when it emerges out of a firm grasp of at least one of the existing disciplines . . . developing a strong home base which one enriches and challenges with ideas and methods from other areas" (312). Klein and Newell delineate four levels of interdisciplinarity, the fourth and highest being the "synergistic" model, the most holistic and creative, wherein one must "integrate material from various fields of knowledge into a 'new, single, intellectually coherent entity.'" While recognizing Klein and Newell's goal as both ideal and achievable, I agree with Friedman's bottom line, realizing that her paradigm is the most frequently used interdisciplinary model. However, I do not share Friedman's concerns about the "contradictions inherent in training graduate students to do something that faculty themselves do not and may not even want to do." If, as she states, "the curriculum would be largely multidisciplinar^ with an array of feminist courses anchored in traditional disciplines supplemented by a smaller number of interdisciplinary seminars in feminist theory, methodology, cultural studies or special topics"; if, also, "Whatever its specifics, a women's studies doctorate would require students (if not faculty) to cross existing disciplinary boundaries and bring to bear on the study of gender the foci, knowledge of the humanities, social sciences, science and the arts," then, it could be the case, as Friedman states (but is not necessarily so), that "students, faced with a large multidisciplinary curriculum, would have no grounding in a traditional discipline"; according to Friedman, "In graduate training this constitutes a serious anomaly." Possibly, but is a serious anomaly bad? Anomaly is merely a deviation from the norm, which
deviation was already inherent in the study of women—just as interdisciplinary studies began as an anomaly and is climbing the ladder of respectability. As for those faculty who are not trained in interdisciplinarity but envision the possibility for their students, I see them pushing themselves to the limits of their own borders (and sometimes beyond), stretching to work collaboratively, sharing their own disciplinary and multidisciplinary methodologies, finding creative ways of encouraging their students to synthesize what they are learning. It is also the case that graduate students often have highly developed grounding in at least one discipline—which Friedman refers to as a “strong home base” (312).

Discipline-based faculty understood, even as they intrepidly designed women’s studies Ph.D. degrees, that they had much to learn and that their students would be helping them in that process by making demands that the faculty could not yet predict, for they were launching themselves, their programs and their doctoral candidates into unknown territory. Unlike Friedman, I see no “contradiction” in sharing what you know, including the rigor of whatever academic discipline you can offer, and moving women’s studies to the next stage. Many of us remember that when women’s studies entered academia, whoever had the desire and the will to teach women’s studies learned by simply jumping in and creating a course. Not uncommonly a number of these professors were community scholars without academic degrees, some of whom knew more about women’s history, sociology and literature than the Ph.D.s who held legitimate positions within academe, which they had of necessity achieved through hard-won entry into the male-developed disciplines that led to academic legitimacy. Admittedly, the majority of the pioneer women’s studies Ph.D. entrepreneurs do not have interdisciplinary Ph.D.s. But we cannot assume that many of them would not have obtained them had more ids opportunities existed. Now, thanks to these women, they do.

A Specific Design
The Women’s Studies faculty at Clark University designed and implemented guidelines to which three other women and I agreed to adhere when we entered the program in fall, 1992. We were assigned two mentors but were allowed to change after one semester at our own discretion. The women’s studies Ph.D. linked three disciplines, two of which were required to be traditional; the third we could design to suit ourselves. We were immersed in core courses for two years: women’s history and feminist theory in the humanities and the social sciences, some team-taught in an obviously multidisciplinary fashion, while at the same time we were being guided into interdisciplinarianism. After completing the core courses, we were free to design our own degrees, choosing from among many graduate courses and/or designing independent study projects in disciplines including, but not limited to, geography, law, anthropology, literary criticism, art, sociology, government, psychology, history, and socio-linguistics.
The interdisciplinarity of the degree was more demanding than it sounded in the initial entry interview, a reality that we students discussed within our self-directed colloquia. We agreed that it was difficult even for those of us who were accustomed to thinking in this mode. My interdisciplinary BA in Human Resources, undergirded by public policy studies and social movement theory, along with my lifelong research of and experience in teaching black history and literature within community settings (including public schools and historical societies), led to the choices I made in formulating my particular women's studies tripartite Ph.D.: African American Literature, Black U.S. History, and Biography and Social Movements.8

Two papers assigned at the end of our first semester in December, 1992 for the feminist proseminar are instructive. The demand was for us to synthesize at least two of the team-taught seminars, incorporating them with a theory of our choice. I based my papers on Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Thought, submitting: 1) “The Diversity of Women's Experience: as a Basis of Cross-Disciplinary Analysis” and 2) “Black Feminist Thoughts on the State, the Law, and Literature.” Each of these subjects had been addressed as a unit of study by the professor within that discipline, who provided the readings and lectures, and facilitated our discussions. For the first paper I used geography and history; for the second, government, law, and English. The proseminar coordinator (a psychology professor who was also director of the Ph.D. program for the first two years) was present at each set of sessions, being involved sometimes as a team partner, other times simply as observer or discussant. In our second year, we had a visiting professor housed in our program, an expert on methodology, who was available to advise us about applications of methodologies familiar and comfortable (different for each of us), and to clarify our thinking about their utilization in relation to other methodologies we might need to embrace and employ. For, whatever the various configurations of our degrees, we carried a mandate to work toward synthesis. In the introduction to my second paper I wrote:

I will use Black Feminist Thought to expand our proseminar discussions on the state, the law, and literature, with particular emphasis on how the notion of “Black Community” impacts Black women in all of these spheres. In my first paper, I laid down Patricia Hill Collins's theory as my principal means of analysis of our proseminar discussions and used her theory to analyze the geography and history discussions. . . . just as our lives and identities are packed and interwoven, unpacking is not an easy, nor necessarily a productive, task. Therefore at times the themes will touch on each other within their sections, at other times they will interweave. So be it.9

“Justifying” our Worth?

Professors who hold the interdisciplinary women's studies Ph.D. have valuable contributions to make in their own pedagogy and research, and to several
types of students, regardless of discipline, who benefit greatly from them as well.

First, the professor with an interdisciplinary women's studies Ph.D. is valuable to the general student, regardless of her/his major, or even if the student has yet to declare a major. Most university students are required to take at least one interdisciplinary course which will move them closer to graduation while also giving them interdisciplinary experiences they can handle and enjoy as well as use effectively in their lives and their studies. Whether utilizing history, literature, economics or social movements, somewhere within the semester a professor who is trained interdisciplinarily will touch a place where the general student can connect and thus relate to women's studies.

Second, the professor with an interdisciplinary women's studies Ph.D. is valuable to women's studies majors or minors who, as they fulfill their specific requirements, need to be able to place the work that they study—whether literature, theoretical or experiential essays, discussions, or arguments—within the context of the time. What events were occurring when the essay, the poem or story was written or the speech delivered; what was happening historically, culturally and sociologically, as gender related to perspectives on class, race and/or ethnicity, and age as they were manifested during particular periods? Sometimes professors are so bound to the text that students who study specific works come to understand them on an intellectual plane as a theoretical abstraction but never know just what circumstances prompted them, to whom (sometimes a particular person) or to what audience the essays were addressed originally, or even the existence of a counterargument which is not reflected in the specific text being studied.

For example, in teaching Audre Lorde's "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," I find it important to provide context. Having a background in literature and in women's movement history, including a knowledge of black feminist and lesbian history, helps me to bring complexity to a discussion that could simply be interpreted (and often is) as an angry attack on a sister lesbian/feminist.10 Similarly, teaching Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality" (1980) means bringing in to class the 1975 book, Lesbianism and the Women's Movement (Myron and Bunch) and pointing out how the compulsory heterosexuality discourse was abroad in the women's community for several years before Rich fleshed out the arguments and gave us an influential work which, although it has been cited and used in various ways in the past twenty years, has not generated the full, complete discourse and number of papers, or even a book-length project, that the topic surely was crying out for—and still does. 11

A third group of students who benefit greatly from a professor's interdisciplinary training in women's studies are those who are majoring in disciplines other than women's studies and are moving on to graduate school. Of 12 students from Cal State University, Long Beach who attended the 1999 National Women's Studies Conference, half were women's studies majors. Others were majoring in sociology, psychology, English, journalism and business. Of the half who majored in women's studies, almost all of them started out in other disciplines but were so taken by how much more meaning adhered to their under-
standing of their own disciplines once they applied feminist analyses, history, and context, that they ended up switching to Women's Studies. Except for one student, who was a Masters candidate in English working toward a thesis on Compulsory Heterosexuality, all who were not majoring in women's studies carried it as either a double major or a minor. We don't need to ask why. The importance and excitement of women's studies is so obvious that I need not belabor the point. Why else would so many women in other disciplines keep circling around it and sniffing at it even as they often treat it with disdain? Why else would those who claim it to be of mere peripheral value stay just close enough to keep slapping it around rather than turn and mosey off in another direction?

Finally, an interdisciplinary women's studies Ph.D. is hugely valuable to the person utilizing it in her pedagogy. In this case, me. If a women's studies Ph.D. did not exist, I would not be a professor because I would never have gone to graduate school for any other kind of degree except one in women's studies. In spite of loving literature, I would never have considered obtaining a doctorate in that field had I not been able to teach women's studies. And vice versa. In a previous essay, I wrote about the role my undergraduate mentor at the University of Massachusetts, Boston played in directing me to applying to the Clark Women's Studies Ph.D. Program (1998). Still, if the designers of the Clark program had not made it possible for me to move among disciplines—using history, literature, and social movement theory—and deciding where each one is calling out to be foregrounded at certain points in my research or pedagogy—I would not be teaching within academia. However, that does not mean I would never have taught, because I always have, and always will, but with an approach that allows for delving deeply into one specific disciplinary area while still being able to pull on the supports of other disciplines to elucidate, clarify and expand understanding and imagination.

As large as women's studies may loom for us, however, we know that in the entire scheme of things it is only a small, albeit vital, part of women's worldwide struggle for knowledge, liberation and power—a transnational struggle that has been ongoing for centuries, whether in organized movements or small rebellions both individual and collective. As we examine the long trajectory of that struggle, we see women's studies, this recent construct, this very late entry into the world of academia, as a mere featherbrush against a massive mountain of centuries-long hegemonic control of male-designed institutions where legitimacy for knowledge is distributed in the form of degrees acknowledging that you have learned and are ready to pass along epistemologies, pedagogies, theories, language—and to break new ground by proposing and advancing new theories, methodologies, and pedagogical practices. Is the question really whether we "need" an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in women's studies because we have the doctorate in all the relevant disciplines already and isn't women's studies really an "impossibility" anyway, as Brown suggests? Is the question really whether we can ever agree on a core of knowledge necessary to the enterprise of creating a discipline out of interdisciplinary knowledge, as Biddy Martin rightly wonders? Or
is the question actually how seriously will women be taken if we continue to retain some autonomy for women's studies instead of simply "folding" the study of women into other disciplines (whenever, that is, we can find an accepting attitude--and what percentage of women, either as subjects or teachers, would the attitude allow once we throw up our hands and retreat from the complexity of it all)? Each semester several students show up in my office (singly, each considering herself to be the "only one") relating incidents of being abruptly shut down--and often punished by shunning or hostile treatment thereafter (sometimes by women professors)--if they ask about the absence of women in other courses (no matter how gentle and respectful their inquiry and even when there is not one woman in the syllabus). A number of them say in class, verbally or on paper, that they never imagined that women had accomplished so much of value "then" or "now," and subsequently decide to pursue majors in women's studies. Unfortunately, some are already juniors or seniors by the time of their discovery and must spend extra college time and more money redesigning their plan and adding more courses in order to achieve a minor or, investing even more, a double major. These experiences would give me pause in even considering abandoning autonomous women's studies programs and departments in favor of an "incorporation" model. A cautious "both/and" model might be a possibility but that would require a great deal of trust and carefully laid out guidelines.\(^2\)

We are familiar with the questions that accompanied women's full-scale entrance into ("invasion of"?) the academic setting three decades ago: Who decides what constitutes knowledge about women? Who decides what we need to know in order to: create a class, earn a certificate of concentration, obtain a BA, design a Masters? What is the point of studying women as an entity anyway; after all, we don't study men that way, do we? Isn't it an unequal advantage to do so? I wonder if these questions still underlie all the rhetoric surrounding the current discourse, for women's studies is feminist studies. Which means that women's studies must be political, for feminism is about change. And since academia must maintain its stance that "politics" is not rampant within every aspect of its existence--and has ever been--women's studies must do its part in maintaining the cover.

Are We There Yet?

I first embraced feminism--for which I had had no name, only a lifelong consciousness--in the mid 1970s. By the early 1980s, having made huge life changes in order to accommodate my plan to live in an active lesbian feminist community, I moved with my two children from Connecticut back to my birth state of Massachusetts where, among the women I met were a number of white women my age who were departing the women's movement they had helped to build. Why, I asked them. Because, they said, they had been involved for a decade and weren't seeing the changes they thought should be forthcoming by now. Disappointed, but more than that, surprised by their expectations, I related my experience—and that of most politically-conscious black folks—of having been

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raised with the understanding that whatever we accomplished on the road to a more equitable life, we were climbing the wickedly painful steps laid down by others before us and, even as we laid new steps, we never expected to achieve all that we desired and deserved within our lifetimes. We were expected to incorporate working for change into our daily living, enjoy our lives, and pass the baton to those who came after. They listened politely, acknowledged my words, and continued to depart. Since that time, of course, I have met and worked with many white women who had the same expectations I did. Nevertheless, I have yet to meet even one woman of color who held a timetable notion of when changes were supposed to occur. Audre Lorde put it this way: “We know that all our work upon this planet is not going to be done in our lifetimes . . . but if we do what we came to do, our children will carry it on through their own living” (1988 42).

What exactly is my point? Simply that when people who have contributed to creating a movement, a building, a school, a church, a department, a discipline, or other entities grow tired or disenchanted or are ready for another phase of life, they choose their method of bowing out. Some slip away without a word, some leave in a flurry of anger and disappointment. Still others transition themselves out while trying to pass along their knowledge and experience to those who are staying the course. If they own a business, they might sell or dismantle it or leave it to their heirs—and still those heirs will make whatever changes they deem necessary for the times. So my question is: Who owns women’s studies?

Who gets to decide how far women should go in presuming to acquire Ph.D.s specifically about women, and who decides what we need to know in order to earn it? When some women decide to plunge in and keep sorting out the specifics as they go (as is already happening and as men did when they began granting Ph.D.s so long ago), do women who do not want to participate in the proliferation of Ph.D.s in women’s studies get to decide that they should not only distance themselves from the degree but also brand the degree useless and its practitioners and recipients political but not scholarly? Are the two descriptions mutually exclusive; and if you decide that they are not, are you to be automatically dismissed as a scholar? Finally, as I asked above, are these merely extensions of the familiar questions that accompanied women’s entrance into (invasion of?) the academic setting three decades ago?

When Adrienne Rich said in 1965, “women’s studies . . . offer(s) . . . women a new intellectual grasp on their lives . . . a critical basis for evaluating what they hear and read in other courses, and in the society at large,” she was discussing the very beginning stages of women’s studies within the academy (1979, 233). That has hardly changed. We have learned the critical basis of evaluation Rich exhorts, but some of us seem more intent on turning it upon each other, and even our own work, than “morphing” into that “whole new way of thinking” that Rich also prescribes so well in What is Found There (1993). Women and men who understand that we are still at an early stage in the study of women will see this current discourse as a legitimate process that might need to take place but at the same time need not halt our progress.
Long before women had any voice or power, let alone the mere physical presence within academia that could possibly lead to such decision-sharing, formulae were set forth prescribing what constituted knowledge for doctorates in history, geography, literature, anthropology and other areas of study that would have led naturally to a study of women, along with men, if full knowledge had ever been the point. Now that women have (barely) begun the study of women (at great cost to many women, their academic careers being only part of the cost), we have every reason to continue and to take it even more seriously than men have taken the study of “mankind” (as if that were even possible). For women's studies to have grown enough within its infinitesimal duration to be now launching freestanding Ph.D.s is a testament to the need that has existed for such a degree—interdisciplinary and woman-focused—ever since Ph.D.s were first awarded in the twelfth century.

By the middle of the twentieth century when women sensed and seized the moment that began moving us toward this place where we stand now, holding these crucial discussions, we knew not only the monumental efforts it would take to make the journey but also the monumental trust we needed to invest not only in the rightness of our claim but also in one another’s abilities. Trust is the underlying component of the second major point I want to address in this piece: the notion that perhaps we should call a halt to creating Ph.D.s in women’s studies because there are fewer and fewer tenure track jobs available. We need to trust ourselves. We need to trust our students. And we need to realize that an interdisciplinary women’s studies doctorate can move us outside of the boxed-in belief that the skills we have learned in the process of attaining a Ph.D. can be utilized and appreciated only within academia. Newell and Green tell us that “(s)ynthetic thinking (demanded by the integrative process) is the most important of several intellectual skills fostered by interdisciplinary training” (1998 32). Others are deductive reasoning and reasoning by analogy. Utilizing their deductive and analogical reasoning, some women's studies Ph.D.s are heading not toward academia but in other directions once the degree is in hand.

Let me use Clark University as an example, simply because that is the program with which I am most familiar. When I received my degree in September, 1997, I had already been employed within the California State University system for a year, having been hired ABD. The next graduate received her degree in May, 1998 but had been hired ABD by Simmons College the previous year as an advisor to entering students; she was not interested in teaching and has now started her own company as an editorial consultant. The third, who finished in 1999, is a professor of women's studies at the University of Wyoming, where she had already been teaching with a master's degree before enrolling in the program. Of the four who obtained their degrees in spring, 2000, one, who wrote her dissertation on the intersection of race, class and gender in the lives of pre-adolescent urban girls, and started an outreach program for them, plans to take that program nationwide; she has no desire to remain within the academy, although she is now working as a McNair Scholars program advisor at Salem State College. The second woman, now entering Columbia on a post-doctoral

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fellowship, has a tenure track position in women's studies at the University of Southern Florida. Another has just accepted a tenure track position in women's studies at Temple. The fourth is seeking an academic position.

Of the two 2001 graduates, one has been a full-time professor in sociology at a private junior college for a number of years and continued teaching while working on her degree about class issues. She will continue there, where she will create the first women's studies course. The second, whose dissertation addressed the history of black women's church groups in the greater Boston area, has accepted a tenure track position in sociology at Temple College in New York.

Of the ABD candidates, one, a Palestinian Israeli, has been the Middle East Women's Specialist Researcher at Human Rights Watch in Washington, D.C. for the past three years. She and five other ABDs hold positions directly related to women's advocacy, including work on anti-violence against women; a women and HIV project in Bangkok through the ILO agency; a Ford Foundation Program Associate position in Religion, Culture, and Education; a project developer of programs at a community organization in Harlem; and a Japanese woman living and doing research in Nicaragua on women working in sweat shops. Two others expect to enter academia.

In summary, of the first nine graduates of Clark, five of the six who are interested in teaching positions have obtained them, three in Women's Studies (myself included). Of the eight ABDs, only two have expressed a desire to teach. Non-academic agencies seem quite willing, and in some cases decidedly eager, to hire women with degrees in Women's Studies. Thus in response to Susan Friedman's questions: "How many [women's studies] departments would want someone with an interdisciplinary degree instead of a Ph.D. in sociology or history or economics with a feminist specialization and some interdisciplinary experience? How many deans or campuswide tenure and promotion committees are eager to support someone with an interdisciplinary degree?" (304), I would answer, based on very recent and admittedly limited data, "Apparently, quite a few; as do others also." 13

With Imagination, Possibilities

Women's Studies Ph.D.s now have options that were undreamed of when women's studies took its first baby steps more than three decades ago during the period when Adrienne Rich was urging women students not to receive but to claim an education--reminding them that to claim means "to take as the rightful owner; to assert in the face of contradiction." 14 Having claimed the right to institute women's studies as a field of study, having moved from concentrations to Bachelors, Masters and now Ph.D.s, why retreat? The first Ph.D. programs began only in 1992, with the first candidates beginning to graduate in 1997. Reader, I challenge you to imagine men, in any discipline whatsoever, telling one another after less than a decade that perhaps they needed to slow down in granting degrees. Indeed, after eight centuries there appears to be no letup in the proliferation of degrees or disciplines. In the microcosm of society that is academia, women struggle for equity in all areas. Yet, in a recent letter to the

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adjunct assistant professor of philosophy Richard McGowen, in his list of complaints about what he constitutes as gender bias against men in higher education, cites the lack of a men’s studies major at a California State University that has a Women’s Studies major. This “lack” he sees as proof that “equal opportunity is unavailable to men.” So, according to McGowen, we are not claiming our own centuries-long denied education but denying men equal opportunity.

When we assert our rightful claim to a complete education concerning knowledge that women deem important—all the way to a free-standing Ph.D.---, we are so accustomed to skepticism and disdain from certain quarters that we do not blink. However, this current anxiety signifies a different and disturbing dilemma. What exactly do we women’s studies practitioners fear might happen if we turn out numbers of women’s studies Ph.D.s?

The theories of women’s studies, our methods, our language and visions are taken up and used within the discourses of more and more disciplines. Transnational feminism roams the globe; feminist ideologies and practices have permeated virtually every society and every level of government to a greater or lesser extent. Why wouldn’t we believe that we can be everywhere—and why shouldn’t we desire to be? Women are still on the move; that has not changed. When the women’s movement took up lodging inside the academy, some of its practitioners might have petrified, holding fast to what they knew when they entered, nevermore glancing outside, but pulling the shades down and fastening the tie to the bottom sill. Others might have grafted themselves onto various disciplines, carrying the thermos of women’s knowledge, methods, and theories to warm up old departments frozen in time and attitude; they might have added a slow drop or two from their thermos, carefully stirring, not shaking. Still other groups of women moved in surely and swiftly, charging immediately into the heady fray, using the brilliance of their own minds, and the words and ideas of thousands of women just as brilliant who never had either the notion or the chance to breach the academic walls themselves. Numbers of women who made it into the academy along the road paved for them by the visions of and battles waged by second wave feminists (some of whom were themselves) became academic stars, and rightly so. Many of them welcomed, trained and nurtured several generations of feminist scholars, as they should. So where now does the claim arise that there is no need for Ph.D.s in women’s studies? Are the women whom they nurtured and trained now incapable of taking agency in bringing about whatever changes will be necessary to move the scholarship along, just as men who have been trained in past generations were expected to do within their disciplines? Isn’t there a need for all of us to bring our skills into academic work in whatever manifestation we can? Those who want to be based in one discipline are certainly needed by the students, the scholarship, the universities, community colleges, and our communities worldwide just as surely as are those of us who insist that interdisciplinarity is our metier. Whichever method suits a particular woman’s pedagogy is the one she should use, without self- or other-imposed censorship, as long as she is adhering to methods allowable within her
Nor should we worry about enough positions being available for every women's studies Ph.D. Unlike Friedman, I do not believe that we are obliged to guarantee every women's studies Ph.D. a position within academia. Society today needs and awaits individuals capable of integrating the knowledge of many disciplines in a single mind. The urgency of our societal problems calls for thinkers and doers outside of academia as well as in, and there is no reason that women's studies Ph.D.s should not be among that number. A woman with a doctorate has obviously learned research techniques and (inter)disciplinary methodologies, textual and historical analysis, time management, organization, committee negotiation, and patience, among other skills, all of which are transferable to any profession in or outside the academic setting. She has also, let us hope, learned feminist ethics and values—values of diversity, inclusion, and respect for however each woman wants to live her life. Any woman who has managed to obtain a Ph.D. is capable of figuring out where to take that degree to maximize it to its fullest potential. Marilyn Boxer urges, "(L)et another generation proceed" (1998 399). I can only agree, adding, "and let them proceed in every direction possible."

We are at a very early stage of granting the degree, and naturally questions abound. One certainty, however, is that we have an obligation as scholars and educators to pool our knowledge. Because of the variety of our degrees, we can only be strengthened when we discuss what each of us can offer to the interdisciplinary Ph.D. for the future of women's studies, our students and ourselves. This, it seems to me, is just what some thoughtful women considered, and rightly so: that if they kept waiting for women who had been specifically trained in ids to lead us to women's studies interdisciplinary Ph.D.s, we would have remained in an exceedingly long waiting mode, for if only those previously trained in ids could be trusted to train others in that method while every discipline continues training only disciplinarians, who would step into the void? Understanding the problem, they decided that the energy must come from those who are trained as single and double discipline professors, then took the leap, knowing that they could not be what they were asking us to be, but would do their best to press against their own boundaries while helping us to push beyond theirs, and hope that we would continue to do the same with the next generation. Some decry the women who can't (or "won't" [an unfair implication of willfulness, to my mind]) do it themselves [step across disciplinary boundaries]. Yet the women who started us down this path knew beforehand that they didn't have all the answers and that even we, their students, would complain when they got some of it wrong. They knew their limitations, just as we ought to know our own. After all, how perfect can we be after only three decades within academia (even the "perfect" patriarchs are still evolving)? Becoming petrified within disciplines or within our own minds and dreams will not advance us beyond our limited individual possibilities. When we come together without ego to decide what it is necessary for our students to know; when we admit what we wish we did know and share that with each other; when we form think tanks,
create internet chat rooms, and hold regional and national meetings to exchange information, we will have even stronger interdisciplinary Ph.D. degrees. These and other challenging ways of examining this critical issue need to be placed on the table. Anything else would be a step backward, an admission that there is something wrong, deviant, weak about studying women. If we do not maintain, nurture and strengthen our Ph.D. we will be returning women to the not very distant past when women entered universities knowing that it was possible to pursue a terminal degree in any discipline but women’s studies—admitting, of course, that a Ph.D. in women’s studies has no legitimacy unless it is attached to another discipline. Is this not the same lesson we were taught about women until only recently—that unless we are attached to a man we are not legitimate? However, we have learned that when we attach ourselves to men without first obtaining the means of assuring our own autonomy, we can find ourselves divorced, summarily dismissed when they decide that they are ready to move on. Thus we live in a constant state of insecurity. When we are dependent, no longer young and “attractive,” we grow edgy, anxious.

A sense of anxiety, in the sense of danger and risk, is what editor Joan Scott says she was suggesting by her choice of “Women’s Studies on the Edge” as the subtitle of the fall 1997 issue of differences (introduction, i). Are we perched on the edge of a precipice into which we will fall if we make a move? Do we have more of a mandate to maintain (some would say regain) our trendy and interesting “edge” than do other fields of study? Do history, geography, sociology, political science, literature and other disciplines put themselves out of business because numbers of people regard them with a ho-hum attitude? Some have been suggesting for the last 50 years that anthropology fold its tent. Ignoring all the barbs aimed at it over several decades, psychology continues to grow. If these disciplines can “take a licking” and simply “keep on ticking,” what particular dynamic makes women’s studies practitioners so ready to fall on our swords instead of settling in and spreading our roots deeper, designing long-range, cooperative studies that help us to gather the information that would allow us to address the concerns we all have for women’s studies even while continuing to generate scholars and ever-evolving questions?

True, women’s studies is no longer young and nubile, but we have no need to be edgy and anxious either, because women’s studies has grown up and decided to stop playing “outsider” games, lurking around in the shadows, occupying what Rachel Lee calls the “ghost” position, accepting benevolent handouts for our programs while legitimate departments receive their due budgets. We can argue our positions with respect, formulate guidelines for pulling together and strengthening the varieties of interdisciplinary women’s studies Ph.D. programs already in existence, and pool information to make long-range plans that will necessarily take time, commitment and resources to implement. Rather than remaining edgy, women’s studies can embrace its maturity, put down roots to secure our own discipline, and stretch out into a vibrant middle age, generating new inquiries and supporting a new generation that we must simply acknowledge will not all be gathered in universities, either in women’s studies or other
disciplines—some because they have chosen to work outside of academia, some because they could not obtain positions within, just as is the case in other disciplines. We might also ask ourselves whether a position in academia is the only expectation we should project as our reason for training women's studies Ph.D.s. Do we not believe that women's studies Ph.D.s have the right to be wherever there is space, need, and desire for us? Surely the more knowledge, the more theory, the more methods for building and learning and training and sharing that we take with us into every sphere of society means the more power women have to keep asking critical questions, control our own lives, and pass that power on. This was the plan, wasn't it? Or was it for all of us to make a beeline into the academy and when there was no more room, stop teaching, studying, writing, arguing, growing? Just a question.17

Notes
3. At semester's end the ten students in my Black Women in America class responded to my offer of two minutes for each to provide one unexpected discovery that had occurred during the semester. Both of the white women (not friends; they first met in the class) expressed their initial fear of attending, expecting resentment or at least annoyance at their presence. (One said, “It was worse for me because I registered late and had to walk into the second class already feeling behind as well as illegitimately here.”) Having steeled themselves for whatever came, they were gratified by the respect they received as students able to analyze the material and participate fully in discussions. One of them reminded the class of a mid-semester reading that I had returned to in the class following the initial reading, prodding them to examine the nuances, which, she said, had given her permission to reveal that she had felt insulted by the tone of the essay and its broad-brush stereotyping of white women. She had been surprised that the black students had understood her feelings (and that of the second white woman, who concurred with the first) although most admitted that they had noticed neither the tone nor the stereotyping until we returned to read closely and discuss certain passages in the essay. When they had finished, I pointed out that the black students were in their comfort zone and thus did not notice the tone of insult to the white students, but that having a lifelong experience of being stereotyped, understood, once they examined the reading closely, how the white students had felt. But, I said, much larger numbers of whites have the privilege of not noticing, and can keep denying others' experiences, calling them “too sensitive” and “whiny” when such incidents are raised. All students left the class understanding the work it takes to sort out the complexities of mixed messages, extracting what is useful.
interpreted and taught as Lorde's condemnation of patriarchy only, must be seen also as her rebuke to white women who organized a conference against racism (NWSA 1981 in Storrs, Connecticut) but were, in Lorde's view, using the "master's tools" of racism, classism, and homophobia within that very conference. The catchiness of the phrase and its two-decades long repetition with minimal examination has obscured the intent of her words within that speech. Surely, many of the "master's tools" need to be redesigned, but hardly discarded. Lorde herself, in turning the master's tools of writing and rhetoric against him, belies the notion that we cannot make use of his own weapons.

5. Doreen Kimura compiled articles from Scientific American on sex differences in the brain to make a convincing argument in her 1993 book, Neuromotor Mechanisms in Human Communication, that women use both sides of the brain in performing the same tasks as men. Mark George, a psychiatrist/neurologist at the Medical University of South Carolina at Charleston, conducted MRI studies proving that the "fibertrack" connecting the two sides of the brain is thicker in women than in men, the opening between the two sides thus being wider.


7. Sometimes students arrive in graduate school so firmly grounded/anchored within one discipline that it is difficult for them to engage in a dialogue of ideas with anyone outside of their disciplinary range.

8. Having taught in a variety of settings for many years before entering graduate school, I negotiated an arrangement to design and teach my own course instead of serving as a T.A. in exchange for my stipend. Implementing several of my areas of interest in an interdisciplinary pedagogy (women's movement history and literature, history and literature of the civil rights movement, and history and literature of the black lesbian and gay movement), I asked my sociology professor to be my supervisor, fulfilling a necessary component of the agreement with the administration. Minority Groups Within Social Change Movements was a vibrant and successful course, which I taught for four semesters, and which I plan to resurrect at my current campus in the near future.

9. In the paper (December, 1992) I utilized two feminist pieces on law: one by Patricia J. Williams and one by Wendy Brown, of which I wrote: "In her essay, 'Finding the Man in the State,' Wendy Brown constructs an argument to feminists to be wary of the state. Although Brown does not deal specifically with Black women's concerns, everything she says about the state has even deeper ramifications for Black women, who have been trained from birth to develop just such a wary, outsider stance."

10. When feminist philosopher/theologian Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism was published in 1978, Lorde was hospitalized for a mastectomy, which delayed her reading it and responding until 1979. Her subsequent letter, first published in 1980, led to a rift between them which took on its own life in the feminist community, both in the U.S. and abroad, and was never resolved. Teaching the essay, I lay out background details of the period and provide readings of some responses that arose then and as late as 1996
regarding Lorde's decision to publish openly what had begun as a private letter.


12. Students taking my women's studies class for the first time as seniors say that they feel cheated by their preconceived beliefs about feminism which had kept them from enrolling earlier. Additionally, when they are assigned to visit the Women's Resource Center and write a report on that experience (within the first two weeks of the semester), some of them express feelings akin to anguish about having missed all the years of support groups, books (numbers of which are not in our campus library), a place to do homework, or just hang out between classes and meet other women. Their report-back papers are full of thankful expressions for the assignment: "that place is going to save my life"; "If I'd only known about it, I don't think I'd have dropped out 3 years ago. It's a way for me to keep coming to school"; and "I intend to tell my friends who don't take women's studies that the center's not like we thought. Neither is women's studies for that matter." Since most women professors in other departments do not assign students to visit the center, I find it hard to imagine the continuance of a center of this importance to women of every age once women's studies folds its tent.


17. This paper, considerably shorter then, was originally delivered as part of a plenary panel addressing the women's studies Ph.D. at the 1999 National Women's Studies Association conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

18. Unquestionably, some will consider this essay political rather than scholarly. Readily accepting that assessment, I reiterate the long-established understanding that scholarship and politics have forever been striding arm-in-arm even when the purpose of a work is cloaked and denied, the passion pushed determinedly underground for purposes of "objective" scholarship. I embrace the intertwining of theory and practice, theory and knowledge arising from action, activism stemming from theory, historical research unearthing and validating our past even as new readings of established "truth" energize and signal our future, poetry springing from a political demonstration and inspiring a play, from which arises a work of music, dance or visual art, which ignites a philosophical discourse, an ancillary argument within the discourse leading to a

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novel, the literature inspiring an inquiry which might lead us toward new ways of doing what was done poorly or not at all before, science bringing new discoveries about women, and scientists interested in studying women making sure that the research methods and protocols are established, and the funding obtained. Speaking only for myself, all of this is what makes academic work vibrant and exciting and useful. Of course careful scholarship is altogether important and necessary if our work is to last, be taken seriously, and built upon. But for me the work at its core needs to be political, even if its form is light-hearted or comical. Without that serious political intent, women's studies would hold absolutely no interest for me.

References


Myron, Nancy, and Charlotte Bunch, eds. Lesbianism and the Women's Interdisciplinarily Speaking ♦ 25


