

# Belaboured Introductions: Inspired Reflections on the Introductory Course in Gender and Women's Studies

## Inspired Reflections: An Introduction

### Cluster Editors

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*"This course changed my life!"* Transformative, beloved, dreaded, neglected, unruly, inspiring: at its best, the introductory course in Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies is a feminist, antiracist, queer, trans\* social laboratory in action. With limited published work on this pivotal course, especially as it relates to field development, we convened this co-edited issue to query the psychic and political aspirations, economies, and pedagogies of the introductory course, or "GWS 101." We asked prospective contributors to consider the following questions: How do those of us who teach—or avoid teaching—the introductory course imagine the performative and affective labour of GWS 101 in relation to broader debates shaping the field? If we consider the introductory course as a vital institutional object or cluster of desires, then how might GWS 101 reflect, influence, and/or reify the stories we tell our students and ourselves about the critical interdisciplinary field of Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies (cf. Wiegman 2012, Hemmings 2011, Orr et al. 2011, Hobbs and Rice 2012)? These questions struck us as particularly germane given our personal and professional stakes in the relationship between teaching and field (trans)formation as feminist scholars who hold Ph.D.s in the field.

In our desire to learn more about how and through what institutional processes content for the course is defined, as well as what pedagogies are deemed most effective for introducing students to the field, we found ourselves continually coming back to the entanglement of embodiment, knowledge production, credentialization and the academic industrial complex. Given the exponential increase of Gender, Women's, and Feminist Studies Ph.D. programs over the last decade,<sup>1</sup> it is not only necessary to explore how the introductory course is envisioned, but also the fraught politics around whom—and with what training—is considered qualified to teach it. If the introductory

<sup>1</sup> Between 2008 and 2016, the number of Gender, Women's and Feminist Studies (GWFS) Ph.D. programs nearly doubled. At the time of this writing, there are 23 GWFS Ph.D. programs in Canada and the United States alone. A polarizing discussion on this fact began in Milwaukee at NWSA 2015 on a panel convened by the GWFS Ph.D. Interest Group called "Precarious Value? Critical Reflections on the Ph.D. in Gender, Women's and Feminist Studies." Participants, all of whom hold a Ph.D. in the field, included Carrie N. Baker, Maria Bevacqua, Laura Briggs, Patti L. Duncan, Lisa Diedrich, Vivian M. May, Allison Kimmich, Melissa Autumn White, and Kimberley A. Williams.

course is decisive in the overall health of a GWS undergraduate program, because it serves as the entry point for students who (we hope) will become majors or minors, then why is it often staffed by non-tenure-stream faculty (lecturers, graduate instructors, adjuncts, post-doctoral fellows etc.) who are, at best, precariously positioned in the field? Relatedly, why is the introductory course just as often taught by non-GWS Ph.D. holding tenure-stream or tenured professors who are marginally or eclectically trained in the field? How might the intensifying workload expectations of tenure-stream and tenured faculty as well as rising class enrollments effect such staffing decisions? Beyond these questions, we felt called to engage in a meta-reflection on the place of the introductory course in relation to field formation and social justice more generally. What do we imagine we are doing when we usher students, and colleagues, into the (inter)discipline of Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies?

In making the familiar strange—or at least remarkable—GWS 101 can lead, for faculty and students alike, to the intense pleasures of coming alive to new attachments and approaches to politicized knowledge at the same time that it insists upon difficult discussions of power, identity, subjectivity, and agency that can be experienced as anxiety-producing, destabilizing, and even, for the more or less privileged, world shattering. The unrepeatably affective ecologies set in motion in each class assemble against the backdrop of the neoliberal corporate university, which increasingly relies on precarious and/or "entrepreneurial" sessional, adjunct, graduate student, or postdoctoral faculty to teach ballooning introductory courses that, nevertheless, promise to deliver on the branded "social value" mandates of the institution. In the context of the academic industrial complex, wherein the university is involved in providing "knowledge transfer" to students imagined as future "global citizens" who are prepared for "civic life," what are some of our best visions—optimistic or otherwise—for the work that the introductory course might do in the world and in the lives of our students? What role do political and psychic desires play in the introductory course as it circulates in and re-creates the field of Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies more broadly?

In reflecting on the questions that led us to craft the call for this special cluster of papers we noticed an

emerging set of distinct but inter-related key thematics that, based on ephemeral and sometimes more formalized conversations with our colleagues in Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies, seemed particularly urgent to consider. As we synthesized our curiosities, six main themes, inflected by recent work on the field and its pedagogies of "minoritarian," "identitarian," and "intersectional" difference, crystallized (Ferguson 2012, Wiegman 2012). First, we asked prospective contributors to consider the ways that the introductory course is mobilized through *affective ecologies* that animate, and sometime debilitate, the learning environment. We invited a consideration of how political and psychic investments and imaginaries take shape in the sensate atmospheres of the introductory course, and we explicitly asked about the role that pleasure, anger, anxiety, suspicion, joy, sadness, depression, melancholy, and so on play in the work of critical introductory pedagogy. Second, we invited contributors to think about *storytelling* in relation to the introductory course. Drawing on Claire Hemming's brilliant book (2012), we wondered how and which stories come to matter in GWS 101. We asked prospective authors to critically reflect on the stories we tell ourselves, our curriculum committees, our university administration, and our students about the role of the introductory course in and beyond the program or department. Storytelling is an epistemological strategy, to be sure, but how are other ways of knowing also present in the introductory course, and to what effect? More specifically, then, we invited contributors to explore how queer, trans\*, decolonizing, transnationalizing, and indigenizing feminist *epistemologies* open space not only for new analytic "objects" but also new *archives* of knowledge creation and citational practice in the field.

These questions and themes required us to be explicit about situating the introductory course in the context of the neoliberal corporate university. Since 2008, the discourse of *austerity* has been nearly ubiquitous in public and private institutions alike. We wanted to learn about the impact of austerity discourses on the introductory course as a particular mode of social and intellectual labour. How do faculty members, programs, departments, and administrators (more or less strategically) ascribe "value" to GWS 101 by positioning it as meeting social justice, sustainability, global citizenship, civic engagement, and/or diversity learning outcomes,

and with what implications for the field? In the present context, GWS faculty and administrators are implicitly if not explicitly expected to become "brand managers" charged with carrying the weight of institutional strategic plans, staffing student recruitment tables, and crafting marketable visions of what students can "do" with their degrees. Lacking the institutional (i.e. administrative and financial) resources to fulfill "brand management" duties in any meaningful or politicized way, GWS chairs and faculty teaching the introductory course are arguably pressured to engage in a dance of *seduction*, promising prospective majors and minors a pleasurable experience in "life altering" courses that provide "a place to call home." Thinking with the inimitable Kathryn Bond Stockton (2011), we asked contributors to consider the role of seduction, luxury, and pleasure in critical pedagogy, especially in programs whose survival depends on cultivating majors and minors. How do critical programs such as GWS risk competing with and/or working against other "identity fields" in the academy (Wiegman 2012, see also Ferguson 2012, Butler 1994) as they are institutionally situated (e.g. Ethnic Studies, Africana Studies, Asian American Studies, Indigenous Studies, Disability Studies, Latin@ Studies, Chicanx Studies, Cultural Studies, LGBT and Queer Studies, American Studies, etc.)?

Finally, in thinking about the connections between epistemologies, austerity, and seduction, we encouraged contributors to engage with questions of *labour and embodiment*. While some universities have proactively decided that only tenure-track or tenured faculty members should teach the introductory course (the University of Toronto has made such a move, for example), often the job of teaching GWS 101 falls to the New Majority of precarious, contingent, adjunct and sessional faculty, advanced graduate students, and otherwise marginalized professors who cannot count on adequate teaching resources such as markers/graders, teaching assistants, technological support, pedagogical training, or mentoring. The introductory course, then, is embedded in broader questions about embodiment and labour, and the racialized, sexualized, gendered, material and affective labour politics experienced in and by the socially (un)marked body.

Ours was, undoubtedly, an ambitious call, one that stemmed from our shared investments in feminist pedagogy and teaching, as well as the relationship

between the introductory course and field (re)formation. Our approach to these questions was shaped by our differential locations as feminist scholars who both hold Ph.D.s in GWFS, and who have simultaneously been participating in and observing the brutalities of an academic job market in which the majority of open positions in Gender, Women's, Feminist, and Sexuality Studies continue to go to scholars who are not trained directly in the field. While we knew in advance that the questions our CFP raised could never be exhaustively addressed, we trust that the essays gathered here will open space for our readers to reflect upon the introductory course and its *affective ecologies*; the *storytelling, archives and epistemologies* it rests upon and/or unsettles; the discourses and practices of *seduction* and *austerity* that uniquely situate it in relation to the neoliberal university; and the *embodied labour* it relies upon and too often obscures.

### The Essays

The essays curated here bring together the established and emerging voices of feminist scholars working in the field of Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies in both Canada and the United States.

The collection opens with a reflection stemming from the NWSA Curriculum Institute held in Cincinnati in the summer of 2014. Drawing on over four decades of collective teaching experience, authors Dana M. Olwan, AnaLouise Keating, Catherine Orr, and Beverly Guy Sheftall take stock of the politics and praxis of teaching GWS 101 in the United States. "Make/Shift Pedagogies: Suggestions, Provocations, and Challenges for Teaching Introductory Women's and Gender Studies Courses" offers a broad and multi-vocal critical reflection on the investments that inform syllabi design, course planning, and pedagogical strategies as the introductory course charts current trends and signals new developments in the field.

Moving from field analysis to the institutionally particular, SUNY New Paltz professors Meg Devlin O'Sullivan, Karl Bryant, and Heather Hewett critically reflect on their program's primary textbook, *Women: Images and Realities, An Anthology*, in "Unlearning Introductions: Problematizing Pedagogies of Inclusion, Diversity, and Experience in the Gender and Women's Studies Introductory Course." Devlin O'Sullivan, Bryant, and Hewett trace how discourses of "inclusion,"

"diversity," and "experience" became central to the introductory course at SUNY New Paltz; as critiques of the textbook emerged, these professors responded by revising their introductory syllabus to feature transgender and Native American feminisms.

Next, the special cluster highlights two emerging scholars who experiment with feminist pedagogy in their introductory classrooms. In "Viewing as Text: Theorizing Visual Literacies in Introduction to Gender and Women's Studies," Carrie Hart explores the un(der)theorized role that visual literacies play in the introductory course. Reflecting on her own experiences as a student and now new Instructor in GWS 101, Hart argues that epistemologies of the visual need to take a more explicit place in the introductory course so that students become actively involved in interpreting how meaning is made. Stina Soderling also considers issues of pedagogy from the vantage of a new Instructor in GWS in her essay "Anarchist Pedagogy in the Gender and Women's Studies Classroom." In this piece, Soderling specifically reflects upon the (dis)connections between feminist and anarchist classroom structures, grading practices, and syllabus design. Soderling argues that feminist and anarchist pedagogies have much to learn from each other, and that both are examples of insurgent knowledges in the context of the neoliberal university classroom.

From these new voices in the field, the collection then turns to a multi-authored reflection on "best practices" by more seasoned scholars teaching in Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies. In "The Intro Course: A Pedagogical Toolkit," Jocelyn Thorpe and Sonja Boon assemble a wide range of ideas and strategies for teaching the introductory course authored by feminist scholars from across this part of Turtle Island dominantly known as Canada. Through a series of short vignettes, Lisa Bednar, Glenda Tibe Bonifacio, Marg Hobbs, Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, Krista Johnston, Heather Latimer, Helen Hok-Sze Leung, Marie Lovrod, Carla Rice, Trish Salah, and Alissa Trotz offer readers a "toolkit" of inspiring approaches to teaching and learning in the GWS 101 classroom.

Finally, our collection concludes with two extended review essays. In "Agendas, Horizons and the Canadian introductory Reader," Ilya Parkins reviews three Canadian introductory readers and critically examines what their structure and content might reveal about the investments and imaginaries of the field. Rec-

ognizing the impossibilities of a “perfect” introductory text, Parkins provides compelling insights into the disjuncture between the cutting-edge theoretical and methodological questions shaping the field of GWS and the topographies of the introductory course as reflected in the readers she analyzes. Echoing Parkins’ generative interventions, Carly Thomsen’s “Becoming Radically Undone” provides a thought-provoking closing essay in which she argues that GWS 101 must find ways to both teach students the narrative framings of the field whilst cultivating students’ capacities to see the historical, geographical, and (re)productive particularities of the narratives themselves.

We started this inquiry wondering why GWS 101 is so important departmentally and institutionally, yet too often neglected intellectually. Ideally, our cluster contributes to what we see as a significant gap in the academic literature on the feminist scholarship of teaching and learning while provoking new questions about the role of the introductory course in relation to field development and (re)constitution. We hope the cluster will be read by curriculum committees, department chairs, graduate students in GWFS, new professors tasked with teaching GWS 101, seasoned scholars who have played a pivotal role in the formation of GWFS as a field that has transformed over the past 25 years with the advent of the Ph.D., and perhaps even students in the introductory course themselves. Ultimately, this cluster is “an intellectual project that has turned its gaze back on the field itself” (Orr et al. 2011), a project we believe is worthwhile at this critical juncture.

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