

"imagined" possibilities of relatedness draws our attention to the role of imagination in transforming the status quo. After all, the spirit of communitarianism has often been associated with utopianism. The importance of imagination, which can take the form of futuristic projection, utopian dream, or collective fantasy, has been stressed in different ways by most feminist thinkers referred to in this paper. Thus, Judith Butler introduces "a notion of futurity - the 'not yet'" as the defining horizon of any movement toward transformation (Benhabib et al 143). Drucilla Cornell defines feminism as a kind of "endless challenge to the ethical imagination ... continually calling on all of us to re-imagine our forms of life" (Benhabib et al 79). Finally, Seyla Benhabib, bemoaning what she calls "a retreat from utopia within feminism" (1992:229), tries to rehabilitate the role of utopia and imagination in political and ethical thought. Such repeated emphasis on that which is not yet, but which can eventually be realized, reminds us that as feminist subjects engaged in a continuous project of community building in Women's Studies, we may need precisely the right dose of fantasy and imagination to think beyond reified or static norms and values.

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"ROCK THE BOAT, DON'T TIP THE BOAT OVER:" A CLASSROOM ACTIVIST'S PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN'S STUDIES, CONFLICT, AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

I have set for myself a rather untenable project. I have chosen to write about "classroom activists," students who agitate within the Women's Studies classroom for change in both curriculum and methodological approaches to material, and the impact of this agitation upon perceptions of conflict and community building in Women's Studies programs. As one of those students, however, I am aware of my inability to accomplish this without prejudice, and therefore make no claims to "objectivity." Nevertheless, it can be hoped that the following observations will generate some discussion and thought ... or perhaps even productive conflict.

I would like to begin by stating the obvious: Women's Studies is different from any other discipline. It is unlikely that members of Dance, Philosophy or Computer Science faculties would express interest in "conflict and community building" in relation to their respective programs. Women's Studies is one of the few faculties, however, to be based upon the various principles of idealism, engaged political analysis, and an ongoing commitment to social change. Students who enrol in Women's Studies programs generally do so because they privilege similar principles within their own academic work. These principles lead to a series of expectations of Women's Studies programs on the part of students. I would argue that the three primary expectations of students are as follows:

1) The opportunity to form political and/or academic alliances with individual like-minded students. This would constitute the formation of small scale individual collectives, or "communities," if you will.

2) An environment in which to pursue our individual research where its validity will not be called into question; instead we hope to find general support among students and faculty alike. This is a broader based definition of community, one which

is not so dependent upon the existence of attuned individual politics.

3) An environment where the same battles do not have to be fought repeatedly to the detriment of the learning process. Again, this suggests a broader based community, but one composed of individuals with moderately reconcilable political agendas.

While the first two are achievable, it is the third that is the most interesting, as it is the most contentious. It depends upon the assumptions that we all identify the same battles, possess similar definitions of how they are constructed, all want to fight them, and that we identify similar strategies for doing so. "Classroom activists," whatever their definitions of the battles - and in my experience they have generally revolved around the often-cited issues of race, sexuality, ethnicity, colonialism and capitalism - are generally willing to fight them. It has also been my experience, however, that there are students in Women's Studies whose individual battles have revolved primarily around locating a space in which to concentrate upon predominantly "mainstream" feminist scholarship in relation to their field. Once in Women's Studies, very rightfully tired of fighting, and wanting to finally proceed with their own work, they resist the imposition of what may be construed as new "battles," and I do not intend by that observation to question or undermine the validity of these projects, or the enrollment of these students in Women's Studies programs. The dilemma arises when these students collide with students who have chosen Women's Studies because it appears to be the most receptive environment for pursuing scholarship that posits other forms of marginalization as being of equal import to their project as gender, and who are willing to continue to "fight" in order to receive an education that reflects this perspective. This collision of agendas is responsible for the majority of classroom conflicts that have erupted in the Women's Studies classes I have been enrolled in.

My experience in Women's Studies classrooms as an undergraduate student was riddled with much conflict, resulting in a compensatory amount of community building. Attempts by classroom activists to intervene in curriculum and

question assumptions informing approaches to material were often met with ongoing suspicion and/or hostility by both professors and students alike. In response, classroom activists from a number of courses formed "alternative communities," outside of the classroom in an attempt to pool resources and knowledge in both formal and informal strategy sessions. Strategies engaged in were varied but included the following: spreading ourselves out geographically in the classroom, so as not to appear as a purposefully intimidating or monolithic force; taking turns offering suggestions to the class or professor about alternate or supplementary readings; preparing additional handouts, often bibliographies; and alternating commenting in the classroom, taking into consideration who might be able to express an idea in the most succinct manner, or present it in a way in which it might be best received. Some weeks individuals might take responsibility for researching certain aspects of subjects it was suspected might be marginalized, if they were even acknowledged.¹ While these strategies worked well in terms of *our* idea of community building, they presented several problems in regards to conflict. Students who did not align themselves overtly with activists in a given class, often alternately expressed feelings of deliberate exclusion from the informal groups, concerns about being "ganged up on," and/or the perception of being villainized. Some students felt uncomfortable expressing their views for any number of reasons, including: concerns about being perceived as having chosen a posited "side;" resentment about feeling forced to align one's self unilaterally with a supposed side; as well as a number of reasons I was no doubt not privy to. Other problems included the perception of the classroom activists as a monolithic "you" with a singular subjectivity, despite apparent or stated differences in race, religion, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and/or political stance. This perception created an overt "us against them" dynamic in several different classrooms which resulted occasionally in tears, but more often in hostility, and - most detrimentally - an inability of either of the posited sides to listen. I should add that neither group possessed exclusive rights to bull-headedness, self-righteousness, or short tempers.

My experience in undergraduate Women's Studies is obviously not that of every student. I very informally questioned a number of students in one of my graduate Women's Studies courses about such relations in their undergraduate Women's Studies programs, and asked them as well if their experiences there may have shaped their expectations about conflict and community building in graduate Women's Studies.

Those who chose to respond - and it should be stressed that many people didn't choose to respond for a variety of extremely valid reasons, no doubt including residual issues about the divisions that occurred in that particular classroom - described their undergraduate experience in essentially one of two ways: as either a time of relative harmony, of non-confrontation, and of significant intellectual growth in a community of like-minded women; or as frustrating and sometimes alienating because of a lack of a more radical and informed political analysis overall. These comments are intriguing; obviously those feeling frustrated and alienated overall still found something rewarding and supportive in their program, in order to continue in Women's Studies. Conversely, those who described their experiences as harmonious may have not been aware of the students who might have felt alienated or frustrated in their classrooms or aware of the reasons why these feelings might have occurred. Nevertheless, the students who chose to answer these informal questions were in concurrence on one point, however idealistic: they hoped a graduate Women's Studies program would offer an environment where confrontation was minimal, and differing political agendas would not significantly disrupt or divide a classroom.

It is my experience that the graduate Women's Studies program at York is significantly less contentious than my undergraduate experience. Still, it is apparent that certain confrontational issues continue to surface at every level, generating conflict. This might imply that these issues have not been adequately addressed at the ground level. However, since that statement obviously relies upon the acceptance of my political agenda, something that can't be assumed, I'll offer a second observation: as it is unlikely that we will ever be

able to adequately address every issue that arises in the classroom, we need to accept the ongoing presence of conflict as inevitable - especially in a program that valorizes community and individual activism - and find new ways of approaching and integrating it. The difficulty of undertaking such a project is evident, especially when reactions to conflict vary from hopeful to ambivalent to bewildered to disappointed to defensive. These differences, however, would form the basis for a potentially useful introductory class discussion if one considers them in the form of the questions: "why can't we all get along?"; "why are we expected to get along?"; "on whose terms are we supposed to get along?"; and my personal favorite: "what are we going to do because we can't get along?"

This strategy suggests the integration of conflict as an intrinsic and necessary part of Women's Studies programs. Doing so would hopefully reduce the occasions when students sometimes interpret differences in political stances as extremely personal attacks, all too common in a program where our academic projects can not be easily separated from our personal politics. My hope would be that the activities of classroom activists would then be accepted as "legitimate" and the activists themselves not resented for perceived attempts to disrupt classroom dynamics, nor blamed as interfering in the project of education. If such an acceptance is possible, then activism, and any conflict generated as a result of that activism, become part of the learning process itself.

I realize that what I'm suggesting may seem entirely self-serving. But as long as Women's Studies programs continue to operate on the principles I identified above (idealism, political analysis, and a commitment to social change) the presence of activism and conflict in the classroom are unavoidable. Other suggestions I have encountered for dealing with classroom conflict have proven dissatisfying because they do not acknowledge the very roots of activism and conflict in the Women's Studies project itself, and prefer to emphasize ways of suppressing conflict, rather than utilizing its dynamic and educational potential. I would like briefly to summarize some of those suggestions, then consider their potential

implications for the suppression of classroom activism:

Ground Rules

Ground rules have often been suggested as a means of negotiating between students who are uncomfortable speaking in class, as they fear criticism and disagreement, and those students who may "claim too much space." I agree that ground rules are useful for any classroom. But if part of their purpose is to suppress criticism and disagreement for fear of making certain students uncomfortable, what are the resulting implications for those students who feel directly or indirectly "injured" by a peer's perspective? Do they have no recourse to challenge the opinion expressed by that student? Or to pursue a line of questioning in order to better understand that perspective? Or to expand a potentially limited perspective on a situation by offering counter examples? Additionally, it is often classroom activists who are charged with occupying "too much space" in discussions, although it could be argued that this is more of a perception than a reality. This suggestion also does not acknowledge that classroom activists might continue to interject because they feel that their concerns are not being sufficiently addressed, or integrated into additional discussions of material (alternately, those who cease to interject may feel alienated or suppressed). A group of classmates, of which I was a member, produced and presented a handout for that very reason.² We wrote:

When sexuality or race issues are brought to this class, they are treated as if merely mentioning the issue is sufficient. In order to feel comfortable in this class, we need engaged discussions of race, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. - discussions facilitated by our readings and class instructors.

This concern anticipates both the second suggestion for handling classroom conflict often suggested in Women's Studies, and its potential problems.

Collective Responsibility

Often professors call upon students to jointly share responsibility for classroom discussion, and the establishment of a "safe space." First, I would quite honestly prefer that the notion of achieving a "safe space" in Women's Studies could be finally acknowledged as untenable while inequalities and differences of opinions continue to exist among women (at the same time I'd like to point out that an "unsafe space" is not the logical replacement, that there are other spaces on the continuum). Second, I find the supposition of a collective in which a professor assumes responsibility equal with that of the students deceptive as long as professors continue to retain control of course syllabi, and authority over the handling of classroom conflict. This is not a suggestion that professorial authority should be "overthrown," merely to suggest that the often cited Women's Studies formula, whereby a professor attempts to foster alternatives to patriarchal modes of learning by attempting to relieve themselves of some of the appearance of power, can contribute to classroom conflicts if not carefully negotiated. This attempt to absolve one's self of power can falter when student concerns regarding course content and methodology are presented to a classroom as a joint concern, and the professor implicated publicly. At this point she must suddenly decide whether or not, and if so, how, to effectively reassert a certain authority, something which may create resentment in students who may have felt they had been invited to participate "equally," and then had their metaphorical hand slapped for doing so. Other scenarios include the student who becomes frustrated after approaching a specific professor, who, while sympathetic to individual concerns in private, may exhibit no real impetus to change in the classroom, and/or the student who feels their inability to conform to the professor's expectations of a "good" student has resulted in their being "punished" academically. Ultimately this issue of professorial power and the way in which it plays itself out in the classroom must be negotiated by individual professors according to their own degree of comfort. Nevertheless, professors should also be aware that students prefer

a clear delineation of power roles to a potentially misleading one.

Creating Space For Difficult Issues

There exists a long-standing suggestion that time be left for addressing class concerns and/or conflicts during ten to fifteen minutes at the beginning or end of each class. While this suggestion certainly has some potential, it also has many possible failings if mishandled. Too often important issues - including once again the often cited race, sexuality, and class - are relegated to the end of the discussion, instead of being integrated into the discussion of the material, or the material itself. When classes go overtime, this portion is often neglected, or relocated to the beginning of the next session, by which time some pertinency and immediacy is lost. This unfortunately only serves to reinforce the marginalization felt by some students, and adds to a sense of general frustration and dissatisfaction. While it is frustrating for professors to feel they are not adequately addressing the material in a given class, it is equally frustrating for some students to feel that the absences in, or problems with, the material are also not being discussed, let alone acknowledged. By anticipating and integrating any potential problems with the material into the discussion, instead of waiting for - or being surprised by - classroom activist intervention, significant unnecessary conflict could be avoided.

It must be obvious the degree to which my political beliefs have influenced my paper. But I would also like to invoke the Women's Studies emphasis upon pursuing one's beliefs as a form of meaningful political action. There will always be those who dislike classroom activists and the problems posed by our presence in classrooms; my project in this paper, however, has not been to defend any specific actions or interventions, but to suggest the inevitability of our presence in the Women's Studies classroom, and potential strategies for addressing the conflict therein presented. By acknowledging potential eruptions of conflict, and by addressing the importance of conflict in generating dialogue, one hopes that the presence of conflict in the classroom might be

legitimated. Students who might not feel comfortable contributing to classes where they feel pressured to select an assumed side, as well as those students who might take conflict personally - whether classroom activist or not - might also be better able to negotiate disagreements in the classroom, and their own relationship to them. That said, I would like to gesture to an affirmation of the importance of continuing to agitate both within the classroom, as well as outside of it, by ending this paper - but hopefully not this discussion - with the advice of Adrienne Riche:

the first thing I want to say to those of you who are students, is that you can not afford to think of being here to receive an education; you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to claim one. One of the dictionary definitions of the verb "to claim" is: to take as the rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction. "To receive" is to come into possession of; to act as the receptacle or container for; to accept as authoritative or true. The difference is that between acting and being acted upon, and for women it can literally mean the difference between life and death.

ENDNOTES

1. Examples might be: what percentage of women of any race were middle class "housewives" at the time *The Feminine Mystique* came out? What were "other" women doing? Was this regional? Exactly who responded to, and/or embraced, this book?
2. This was after other forms of intervention - handouts, bibliographies, etc. - had been established.

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