

**WOMEN'S STUDIES AND THE POLITICS
OF RELATIONS ACROSS DIFFERENCES:
THE LESSONS OF POSTMODERN
EPISTEMOLOGY**

Introduction

The rise of academic feminism over the last three decades and its institutionalization through the establishment of Women's Studies as an academic discipline have posed serious challenges to the modernist canon of Western knowledge. Of the countless debates spawned by feminist intellectuals, that which centres on the Western epistemological paradigm has been particularly unsettling for the gatekeepers of the status quo. Feminist epistemologies - such as feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory - have no doubt been instrumental in problematizing androcentric modes of thinking. However, in recent years, a growing number of feminists have turned to postmodern critical analysis and focused their attention on some fundamental epistemological questions. How and where is knowledge produced and by whom? What counts as knowledge? How ought the structures that determine the way knowledge is disseminated be transformed? And how can resistance be harnessed so as to disrupt established knowledge production channels and also to foster a feminist politics of relations across differences?

Social theorist Anna Yeatman deserves credit for collecting important threads of postmodern feminist epistemology and for weaving them into an intelligible framework of critical theorization (Yeatman 1994). My argument was inspired by her contention that the academic field of Women's Studies stands in an epistemologically "transgressive disposition" towards dominant modes of knowledge production (43). The ideas exposed in this essay have come under critical scrutiny and would no doubt benefit from further interrogation. However, given the scope and the purpose of this essay, I have refrained from engaging in a critical analysis. Instead, I have sought to map out - though in a cursory fashion - the arguments in question and to make connections among them with a view to probing possible

avenues for theorizing the political praxis within Women's Studies.

This paper is divided into three sections. In the first one, I take a glance at two important moments in feminist epistemology, namely the deconstruction of the modernist notion of universal reason and the emergence of a "perspectivalist" approach to knowledge (Grosz 1993). The purpose of this overview is to illustrate Yeatman's claim that Women's Studies - particularly under the influence of postmodern thought - is placed in an epistemologically disruptive position towards other disciplines.

In the second part, I explore whether feminists can translate this epistemological transgressiveness into a project of democratic relations across differences within the institutional space of Women's Studies. In probing the feasibility of this political project, I try to identify some of the discursive and material impediments to its realization. Particular attention is given to the ongoing re-configurations of the university culture under the consumerist drive of neoliberal entrepreneurialism.

I conclude my argument with a brief overview of the kinds of political theoretical considerations that have arisen out of postmodern feminist epistemological orientations. These, I suggest, could arguably provide guideposts around which to conceptualize a politics of democratic relations across differences within the space of Women's Studies.

Elizabeth Grosz argues that "Reason as a modernist concept is undergoing an existential crisis (193). Heavily influenced by the thinking of French philosopher Luce Irigaray, Grosz seeks to expose the false universalism of the Western "Subject and of the dominant epistemological order of rationality. In her view, the edifice of objectivity is crumbling under the growing weight of scepticism vis-a-vis claims to value-free observations and detached analyses. In addition to uncovering the fallacious presumption of neutrality that inhabits the core of Western thought, Grosz's analysis helps reveal some of the false pretences of an epistemic regime that camouflages the politics of normalization under the supposedly innocent guise of universal objectivity.

According to Grosz, the yearning of the Humanities and of the Social Sciences for more objective modes of research and analysis has led to an obfuscation of the specificity of the subject. In sublimating the "nonrational kernel within rationality" (192), the deployment of universal Reason obliterates the subject/knower's particular relationship to the knowledge produced. The Cartesian presupposition that thinking processes are neither influenced by historically specific socio-material contingencies nor marked by the unruly impulses of emotion or desire generates subjects who are in the dark about the genealogy of their self-development as knowers. Put differently, Descartes' view of reason presupposes that every "man" is a free, intellectual agent and that thinking processes are not coerced by historical, socio-cultural, or individual circumstances. As the context under which knowledge is produced is obliterated, there is no way of ascertaining the impact of discursive and material power relations on the definition and the organization of knowledges (194).

Grosz subscribes to the poststructuralist notion according to which modernist thought systems suffer from two major flaws. The first one, known as the presumption of non-contradiction, results in ambiguity being reduced to a minimum. The second one, binarism, often exemplified through the dichotomy between nature/reason, subject/object, man/woman, assumes that everything has to be either one thing or another. More importantly, binary oppositions are constructed in such a way that the first term is always ascribed a superior value over the second one. This hierarchical divide separates those who are authorized to produce knowledge and to articulate it through sweeping narratives of "truth" and "reality" from those who are not.

For Anna Yeatman, reformist and separatist strands of feminist theory subscribe to the modernist epistemological order. On one hand, the reformist school's principal ambition is to make traditional disciplines more hospitable to women. While this is a valuable exercise, it tends to foster accommodation to, rather than transformation of, the constraining discourse of male gender dominance. On the other hand, while separatist

feminism rejects the phallogocentric construction of the knowing subject under modernism, it reproduces "its own version of binary oppositions" between men and women (Yeatman, 16) and casts "woman" in the role of a Promethean and self-sufficient freedom fighter against patriarchal tyranny. The project of separatist feminism is supported by an "ethics of inversion" whereby "woman" - instead of man - is posited as maintaining "a privileged ethical relationship to domination" (Ibid.). Such a construction of a unitary category, "woman," results in what Yeatman characterizes as "a false utopia of free, uncontaminated theoretical space." The inflections of women's voices chiming in from their position "as other in class, race or ethnic terms" (Yeatman, 16) are muted in the chorus of universalizing sisterhood.

Yeatman posits that a postmodern perspectivalist approach opens a way out of the binary trap of modernist traditions of theorizing. In calling into question the ahistorical representation of knowledge as a force that transcends the environmentally determined conditions of the knower's experience, the perspectivalist paradigm shift poses in a compelling fashion the plausibility of knowledges that embody a plurality of "points of view of the world" (Grosz, 194). The feminist claims of a unified, universal sister subject have to make way for the gradual advance of partiality and specificity. In other words: "All knowledge is situated knowledge, and is governed by the perspective of those who are the knowers" (Yeatman, 18).

This echoes Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" (Haraway 1991). In her conception, feminist partial perspectives are *more* rather than *less* objective because, unlike the scientific "god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere ... the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibilities," such "situated knowledges" can be held to account (582-3).

Because it understands knowledge-making as a contextually grounded and power-infused process, perspectivalism requires that knowing subjects be accountable for their knowledge-producing activities and for the knowledges that

they create. It proceeds from a recognition that practices of knowledge production entail a range of socially and culturally mediated choices.

This shorthand version of two major feminist postmodern epistemological orientations gives an indication of the extent to which some feminist postmodern currents of thought can unsettle the premises of Western epistemology. The next compelling question concerns the ways in which feminist academics - professors and students alike - can build on this "transgressiveness" and envision a politics of democratic relations across differences within the institutional space of Women's Studies. As part of this exercise, we must apprehend the discursive and material contexts within which such an enterprise may unfold.

First, notwithstanding its critique of the dominant epistemological order and its tensed - and at times conflictual - relationships with the canonical valuation and organization of knowledges within the university, Women's Studies is not exempt from the power relations and the disciplining norms that are inherent in processes of institutionalization. As a university-grounded field of knowledge, Women's Studies not only participates in the legitimation of the established order of higher education, but it also tends to produce its own universalizing discourse. Mary Evans reminds us that the "relationship of gender to the construction of knowledge" cannot be cast in the Manichean light of a binary opposition between men and women (Evans 1997: 111). If the dominant fiction at the inception of Women's Studies privileged the bipolar divide between femininity and masculinity, it has by now become clear that it is impossible to separate this opposition from other ideologically constructed oppositions. Indeed, ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and class work together in collusion in the authorizing of knowledge. It is imperative to keep in mind that the joint forces of socio-economic disadvantage and of cultural marginalization (Fraser 1997: 14) play a determining part in shaping the norms and the rules of access to, and achievement within, Women's Studies.

These lines of segmentation among women are arguably reinforced by the current neoliberal shift away from the ethics of socio-

economic redistribution to the performative instrumentality of market economics (Crook, Pakulski, & Waters 1993: 5). Instead of being hitched to the banner of social equity whereby entitlements to "minimum social and economic conditions" can be claimed from the state, social membership is becoming contingent on individual/private market contribution. From this vantage point, the "legitimate" citizen displays creativity in maximizing his/her self-interested benefits and in so doing, must excel at the neoliberal game of socio-economic self-reliance.

Increasingly driven by the entrepreneurial ethos of the market, universities - and other public institutions - are expected to mimic the planning and operational modes of private corporations. This phenomenon gives impetus to a proliferation of organizational restructuring schemes conducted under the frantic impulse of consumer-driven "efficiency [...] and accountability" (161). Client satisfaction is used as a legitimating tool to enjoin educational institutions to perform up to corporate standards. In a regime where state regulatory engineering favours the commodification and privatization of the public sphere, the university - similarly to the state - operates as a market player, that is, in compliance with the rules of social and economic competitiveness. With the neoliberal state imposing drastic cuts to publicly funded institutions and forcing the latter to direct their rationed resources towards more profitable areas, many academic departments and programmes turn to private fund-raising schemes and corporate donations as a solution for their chronic revenue shortfalls. Under such conditions, the guarantee of intellectual autonomy - as relative as it may be - is bound to be increasingly compromised by the "logic of consumerism" (Readings 1996: 28).

Governed by the rationale of "accounting" (18) rather than responsibility, public institutions understand themselves solely in terms of efficiency of means. This is to a significant extent what the managerial ethos of the neo-liberal university is all about. It is a trend that academic feminists should not treat lightly. The integrity of Women's Studies is bound to be exposed to a regime that combines the application of techno-rational accountability mechanisms with strong state regulatory powers

that are connected with corporate capital.

Given these challenges, the question is whether Women's Studies can strategically resist the performative mindset behind the new culture of the university and articulate within its institutional space a project of democratic renewal. Rather than settling on any particular theoretical account, I will simply outline key reflections from several feminist political theorists with a view to casting light on some of the conditions that should arguably inform a feminist political project of democratic relations that works across differences within Women's Studies.

First, it is important to problematize the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that structure the processes leading to specific representations of reality. As Chantal Mouffe argues, accounts of reality and the political choices to which they lead, are "constituted through acts of power." Individual subjects and groups ought to accept "the particularity and the limitation of their claims" (Mouffe 1995: 248). A democratic *modus vivendi* can only operate if there is a clear understanding that competing claims have to be subject to negotiation. In other words, the contemporary "diversity of the conceptions of the good" (246) requires an acknowledgement of the inherently conflictual dynamics of the democratic debate. With the absence of a universal consensus around the foundational principles of truth and justice, the politicization of social relations proceeds apace with the proliferation of public spaces. As more social relations become incorporated into the public arena, the "field of social conflictuality" grows wider and provides a breeding ground for emerging political movements (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 163). This extension of egalitarian struggles favours the opening up of representation spaces for a diversity of political constituencies (Yeatman, 107). Provisional coalitions can presumably be struck on the basis of overlapping predicaments or needs; yet, they have to be understood as the result of power-infused dynamics. Processes of claims' negotiation - even among women - are not free of the conflictual potential that is inherent in the interplay of social relations. To claim otherwise would amount to a denial of the fact that what lies at the heart of the political is contestation.

We have to beware of the sort of moral utopianism that sometimes underlies feminist projects of community-building. This becomes particularly manifest when "the" community is constructed around a singular, putatively superior understanding of the "common good." As Iris Marion Young points out, community is often formulated in an exclusionary fashion. In obscuring the "borders, dichotomies, and exclusions" (Young 1990: 312) that it creates, this type of community not only homogenizes and represses differences, but also silences legitimate dissenting voices. While exercising caution in the face of feminist communitarian moralism, we ought to interrogate the complicity of some difference-based identity claims with certain relations of domination. Any particularisms that are used to enhance the supposed authenticity and moral authority of one set of accounts of the world while denying the validity of others have to be treated with a healthy dose of scepticism.

Women's Studies also should take some critical distance towards the liberal notion of "empowerment." Empowerment should not be wielded as a magical wand for the materialization of transformative political projects. According to Wendy Brown, as it is often interlocked with the notions of "self-esteem" and "self-assertion," empowerment tends to facilitate a certain acclimatization of the individual to the dominant regime, rather than to foster active defiance. Brown explains: "... in its almost exclusive focus on subject's emotional bearing and self-regard, empowerment is a formulation that converges with a regime's legitimacy needs in masking the power of the regime" (23).

Brown is critical of the liberal appropriation of empowerment, for it reifies individual predicaments and in so doing, occludes the relations of power within which subjects have to operate. In "de-link[ing] [the individual] from historical configurations of social powers and institutions" (12), empowerment becomes complicit with "a radical decontextualization of the subject characteristic of liberal discourse" and as such, reinforces the idealist belief in the "sovereign individual" (23). As it makes the individual the primary site of liberation, the liberal take on

empowerment is unlikely to produce political agents who will contest the prevailing discursive association of freedom with "possessive individualism" and of democracy with market economics.

In her diagnosis of the current impediments to "transformative" political projects, Brown highlights the propensity of some feminists to accept capitalism as a given and to turn a blind eye on "the diffusion of domination through the production process" (13). She contrastingly proposes a revalorization of Marx's understanding of capitalism as "a political economy of domination:"

For Marx, [...] a commodity is never just a commodity but, [...] as the effect of the complex and dissimulating activity of "commodification," always remains itself a social force as well as the condensed site of social forces. (13)

Brown's prudent rehabilitation of Marx is arguably warranted by the urgency for feminists to disentangle the neoliberal web of socio-economic power relations within which women are increasingly ensnared. It also provides an alternative to extreme currents of "identity politics" which, as a result of their fetishizing of "difference," tend to "mirror" rather than "transform" organized patterns of domination (7). As Haraway lucidly observes: "Some differences are playful, some are poles of world historical systems of domination. Epistemology is about knowing the difference" (Haraway 1990: 202-3).

These insights are echoed in Nancy Fraser's proposed "critical theory of recognition that identifies, and supports, only those forms of identity politics that can be coherently combined with a politics of social equality" (Fraser, 6). In an era when the social and the political are increasingly subordinated to the imperatives of market economics, identity-based injustices (including gender, sexual and racial) should not be tackled in isolation from their socio-economic contexts. For Fraser, theorizing the intimate connectedness of these two fundamental grounds of exclusion opens up a progressive path that feminists

may wish to follow to articulate "provisional alternatives to the present order" (4).

Conclusion

A feminist postmodern epistemology attempts to shake the foundations of the edifice of Western discourse by whittling away at the hegemony of universal systems of interpretation and representation of truth and reality. This counterhegemonic epistemological development is not only conducive to the eruption of a plurality of political subjects standing in defiance of imposed forms of identity, but also lays the groundwork for an expansion of the "democratic imaginary" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 163).

Yet, with the excessive commodification of social, political, and cultural relations, the notion of citizenship is increasingly de-coupled from the realm of social rights and re-cast within the sphere of market performativity. For feminists who search for a meaningful politics of socio-economic and cultural transformation, it may be time to recognize that change is more within the reach of the many if brought about through the micro-politics of localized struggles and specific power relations. From this perspective, academic feminists may be well-positioned to make the geopolitical space that Women's Studies occupies within the university an experimental ground for integrating "the different democratic struggles around gender, race, class, and sexuality" (Mouffe 1995: 7). This presupposes, however, a conception of the "democratic imaginary" that is informed by the complexity of social relations and the diversity of political subjects. At a time when a widening constituency of women see their experience, their knowledge and their representation of reality de-authorized by the neoliberal order of "truth," the challenge may be daunting but certainly imperative to tackle for the benefit of democratic renewal.

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