

# Agendas, Horizons, and the Canadian Introductory Reader: A Review Essay

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## Abstract

This essay reviews three Canadian Introduction to Gender and Women's Studies readers, asking what they might reveal about the investments and values that animate teaching in Gender and Women's Studies. It argues that the texts are incommensurable with current theoretical and methodological trends in Gender and Women's Studies and considers what each offers to the field.

## Résumé

Cet essai examine trois recueils de textes canadiens pour le cours d'introduction aux Études sur le genre et les femmes, en se demandant ce qu'ils pourraient révéler au sujet des investissements et des valeurs qui animent l'enseignement dans le domaine des Études sur le genre et les femmes. Il soutient que les textes sont en contraste flagrant avec les tendances théoriques et méthodologiques actuelles des Études sur le genre et les femmes et examine ce que chacun offre à ce domaine.

## Books Under Review

Biggs, C. Lesley, Susan Gingell, and Pamela J. Downe, eds. 2011. *Gendered Intersections: An Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies*. Second Edition. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.

Crow, Barbara, and Lise Gotell, eds. 2009. *Open Boundaries: A Canadian Women's Studies Reader*. Third Edition. Toronto, ON: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Hobbs, Margaret, and Carla Rice, eds. 2013. *Gender and Women's Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain*. Toronto, ON: Women's Press.

For Gender and Women's Studies (GWS) instructors, there is perhaps no more fraught and contested teaching-related document than the introductory textbook or reader. We expect so much of these books—they are the means by which we hope to hail, engage, seduce, and forge an ongoing relationship with our students. The books also, crucially, map a set of expectations for the discipline while scaffolding the content. They thus bear a heavy weight and the task of editing them becomes a monumental one. This paper examines three current GWS introductory readers—*Open Boundaries: A Canadian Women's Studies Reader* (2009), *Gendered Intersections: An Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies* (2011), and *Gender and Women's Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain* (2013)—to consider how they relate to the wider field and what they might reveal about the field's investments, its positioning in relation to the university, and its future.

The first section of *Open Boundaries* intriguingly asks: "Who is the Woman of Canadian Women's Studies?" Beginning from what is now several decades of debate over the apparently homogeneous character at the centre of the dominant feminist imaginary, editors Barbara Crow and Lise Gotell (2009) stress "diversity and boundary-crossing" (7) as the thrust of this

most recent edition of their reader. *Open Boundaries* is not alone in beginning from this point; each of the other readers open with a section that points readers to the internally conflicted recent history of feminism. In *Open Boundaries*, the selection of essays by essential Canadian feminist theorists, such as Himani Bannerji, Cressida Heyes, and Enakshi Dua, comes together as a deeply questioning, mobile, and productively unresolved or incoherent whole. In Lesley Biggs, Susan Gingell and Pamela Downe's (2011) *Gendered Intersections*, the first section is called "Setting the Stage: What Does it Mean to be a Woman or a Man?" and it includes a subsection on "Gender and Difference" that also aims to disrupt monolithic conceptions of the subject of Gender and Women's Studies, this time not relying as much on Canadian scholars but instead on familiar, oft-anthologized introductory pieces by Peggy McIntosh, Allan G. Johnson, and R.W. Connell. And in the most comprehensive and weighty of the three readers, Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice's (2013) *Gender and Women's Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain*, Part I is called "Why Gender and Women's Studies? Why Feminism?" and includes sub-sections "This is What a Feminist Looks Like" and "Diversity and Intersectionality," which strike a very accessible note with contributions from public advocacy organizations and popular feminist voices, such as Jessica Valenti and bell hooks. Notably, though each of these sections nod to Gender and Women's Studies as an academic discipline, only *Open Boundaries* includes a piece, Ann Braithwaite's (2009) "Origin Stories and Magical Signs in Women's Studies," that explicitly reflects on the work of Gender and Women's Studies as an (inter-)discipline.

In other words, each of the readers reflect on *feminism's* subject but generally not on the subject—or even the structure—of GWS itself (beyond the introductions, which seem to be aimed at instructors rather than students). As Braithwaite (2009) stresses in her essay, "[t]o harness Women's Studies to 'the women's movement' (or to any version of feminist social action)... is to elide the differences between these two endeavours..." (54). Given the rarely acknowledged tensions between what happens in GWS as an academic field and feminist activism more broadly, it is interesting to reflect on how feminism's assumed subject governs the structuring logic of introductory texts in the field whose links to feminist activism have been so naturalized as to make

it indistinguishable from feminism. That is, how is the introductory text marked by the history of GWS' ostensible entwinement with feminist activism? And, how is the shape of the introductory text produced as acutely different from current knowledge in upper-level courses and the research at the so-called "leading edge" of the field? What "technologies of the presumed" (Hemmings 2011, 19) operate in the selection and ordering of texts for students beginning a program in GWS and how do these both shape and chafe against the degree program as it unfolds through subsequent study?

Considering the definitions, configurations, issues, and approaches that are foregrounded in introductory texts is also about what gets left out of them and so it raises the question of absences and gaps in Canada's introductory curriculum. Of course, it was absences and gaps from the curriculum—of women's histories, knowledges, and experiences—that first spurred the creation of GWS as a discipline in the early 1970s. Several decades later, in the wake of GWS's institutionalization, it seems crucial to reflect on how and whether those gaps have closed, persisted, or taken new forms—or some combination of all three. Introductory texts provide an accessible form for such reflection. That is, because the introductory text, perhaps more than any other kind of artifact related to the construction of GWS, reveals something about our affective investments in particular kinds of narratives of what matters to the field. Such texts are conceived as a foundational primer—which tells us something in itself—but they are also marked, in very particular ways, with the language of social transformation that initially animated what we imagine we do in GWS. They are thus intangibly but indelibly structured by a vision of the future and, as such, they offer a unique window on a set of priorities, a kind of loose agenda into which we seek to interpellate students. The texts are thus, in a sense, utopian and the language in each editor's introduction is unabashedly hopeful and forward-reaching. This is not a criticism, not at all. Rather, it recognizes the unique, affectively charged quality of these texts as collaborative documents that reveal something about the yearnings of GWS practitioners.

This future orientation explains the relative paucity of historical writing in this group of introductory readers. Notably, Hobbs and Rice's (2013) textbook includes several pieces that historicize the *Indian Act*.

Arguably, this is one of the text's greatest strengths, in that it provides a crucial genealogy for ongoing colonialism and its effects on Indigenous women. Disparate pieces of historical content by Estelle Freedman, Leila J. Rupp, Stephen Gould, and Afua Cooper are also included, along with one piece historicizing Sojourner Truth's much-anthologized speech. But in a textbook of over seven hundred pages, historical work makes up less than fifty pages. In *Open Boundaries*, Braithwaite's (2009) piece and Kim Sawchuk's (2009) "Making Waves: The Narrativization of Feminist History and Intellectual Matricide" are the only chapters that treat questions of history and these are more about narrations of the past in the present than examinations of the past "in itself." *Gendered Intersections* (2011) includes a more substantive historical dimension by grouping together six historical writings, a quiz, and a poem under the theme "History." That these materials are included so near the beginning of the text neatly sets up historical inquiry as an intrinsic element of the field and orients students toward its importance. But the relative lack of historical materials overall—and their confinement to certain sections of the readers—is surprising, since, as Wendy Kolmar (2012) notes, "many of the central questions that shaped the field in its early days were inherently historical. 'Where are the women?; the founding question that propelled scholarship in many disciplines...is an archaeological question demanding that we excavate the pasts of disciplines, cultures and societies...' (230). This absence is all the more notable since, in Canada, feminist historians have been so central to the formation of GWS programs as core faculty in half or often full appointments and/or by running them as Directors or Chairs. And, although the presentist and future orientation of GWS and especially the introductory course is understandable, the lack of historical literacy among students may contribute to an impoverished sense of how to engage in the world-making that is so central to GWS's vision. After all, "[h]ow can we learn how change happens—how feminists rethink flawed positions or concepts—when we either never see the past or see so little or so simplified a version...that we are at a loss to make connections?" (Kolmar 2012, 237). Indeed, if we want the students we meet in introductory courses to be able to effectively understand difference—arguably the most important broad concept in GWS—then learning about both the historical construction of differences

and how feminists have historically engaged with those differences should be a central task in the Introduction to Gender and Women's Studies.

Alongside historical writing, another striking absence in these readers is any substantive work about cultural texts or the work of cultural interpretation beyond a small handful of selections in *Gender and Women's Studies in Canada* (2013) and *Gendered Intersections* (2011), which both feature chapters on the media in recent history and the contemporary moment. Given the importance of art history, film, and literary criticism in the development of feminist theory, this absence is troubling. *Gendered Intersections* includes a number of poems and images of several artworks by women artists, accompanied by a short paragraph or two of the artist's statement about that work; however, for this reason, it seems particularly odd that there is no work that introduces students to ideas about how gender shapes the creation and reception of the arts. Such questions certainly do not stand apart from the concerns with social construction, differential access to resources, and intersectional or interlocking approaches to social difference that are so central to the visions behind these texts. And if these readers are concerned with providing specifically Canadian perspectives on GWS, there is surely no shortage of feminist literary criticism that might contribute to such a project; Indigenous literary studies and translation studies are two areas from which editors could draw excellent, Canadian-specific pieces that focus on intersections between gender and other axes of difference.

Why, then, is there a complete lack of work that thinks through cultural production apart from the mass media in introductory readers that are meant to provide the most comprehensive possible introduction to GWS as a field? Perceptions of what work is "urgent" and of what counts as a "real" issue surely shape this silence, and the persistence of these tensions indicates that far from having moved past debates about materiality in the poststructuralist 1990s and early 2000s, GWS at the introductory level feels it must cleave to "reality" and let go of "discourse." The reasons for this are understandable: literary and cultural criticism are often perceived to be opaque, not relatable, and to have a less direct and obvious relationship to the futuristic, social change orientation that animates GWS. Surely questions of relatability and the fear of turning students "off" are partic-

ularly acute in an academic governance climate that is increasingly ruled by the bottom line; courses, and thus programs, that do not fill their seats are often in the line of fire. Yet, by following received wisdom about the inaccessibility of contemporary approaches to the arts—their apparent irrelevance to urgent agendas for political change—it seems like introductory pedagogies are sacrificing one of their most powerful tools: interpretation. Setting aside concerns over the difficulty or inaccessibility of literary and art historical approaches, cultural criticism's greatest strength is an invaluable modeling of close reading, a skill that students can bring to a range of other social phenomena. And in avoiding this material in the hope of mediating complexity, instructors risk entrenching an unproductive split between the humanities and the social sciences, between “discourse” and “reality,” a split that ultimately undermines our very attempts to introduce our students to critical means for analyzing “reality.”<sup>1</sup>

The occlusion of literary and art historical analysis in our introductory readers points to another surprising gap between what GWS researchers do in our introductory teaching and in our research. The state of the field in Canada today reflects significant trends in feminist research: towards affect theory, new materialisms, posthumanism, broadly conceived, and deeply theoretical transnationalisms. Yet, for the most part, this “leading edge” is absent from the content of these introductory readers. Even the most theoretically engaged of the three—*Open Boundaries* (2009)—contains no hint of any of these. *Gendered Intersections* (2011) contains a couple of pieces that problematize global or transnational systems, and *Gender and Women's Studies in Canada* (2013) has a short final section on transnationalism, containing just two substantive readings along with several policy and definitional documents. And in these two, affect theory and new materialisms are again completely absent. The failure to include such cutting-edge theoretical debates makes a kind of pragmatic sense—this kind of work requires a notional familiarity with some challenging conceptual frameworks. Yet, it seems to me that, by the end of an introductory course in GWS, especially one that is a year long, we might usefully provide students with some scaffolding on which to make sense of basic interventions from these emergent and powerful fields. Not to do so seems misleading and fails to adequately prepare students for the kinds

of questions that might emerge later in their degrees, when courses are more specialized and often directly informed by faculty members' strengths in these areas of specialization. It is admittedly difficult work to translate some of these questions into frames that make sense for students with no background but Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's (2006) *An Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transnational World* demonstrates how translating theoretically dense concepts into legible, digestible form might be done: by choosing short passages from a wide variety of texts and reading them together, by making innovative, transhistorical groupings, and by focusing on the genealogies of concepts and cultural formations.

Having considered the variety of questions and subfields that are *not* well-represented in these readers, I suspect that, alongside an orientation toward futurity and hope, these gaps are indicative of a certain opaque but undeniable change in expectations about learning in GWS. The materials that are privileged in these works suggest a tendency toward action over contemplation, as befits a GWS mandate that has a close but conflicted entwinement with activism. To be sure, this derives, in part, from the perceived distractibility of students as well as a general shift in thinking about effective learning that seems to dominate most universities; the new emphasis on everything from community service to experiential learning to “global citizenship” privileges activity followed by reflection as the preferred mode of learning. Challenging theoretical work is not as compatible with this framework as it is with more traditional and contemplative engagement with texts and concepts. But there is a way, of course, in which such a texture can be easily accommodated and adapted to the aims of the GWS introductory course, since GWS instructors are so often concerned not only with relevance to and buy-in among students, but also with pedagogical approaches that de-center the learning process and push at the boundaries between town and gown, learning and political engagement. This is especially true at the introductory level, when such an orientation so neatly intersects with the need to recruit students in order to ensure programmatic security. Little wonder, then, that it is policy-relevance, “data,” and social scientific topics and approaches that tend to be privileged in the introductory text: these are the domains that lend themselves most obviously and smoothly to action, en-

agement, and service, to use the buzzwords that, oddly, converge in the mandates of GWS and of the university in the present day.

But the cynical view that these readers unintentionally mesh with the agenda of the corporate university is offset by the counter-discourses these texts contain. For all of their gaps, each of these texts are, in themselves, rich and illuminating collections of readings that have much to offer the undergraduate student, especially as they introduce concepts that challenge dominant ideologies not only of gender, but of race and sexuality as well. If these texts set an agenda for introductory courses, it is an agenda that is deeply attentive to difference and intersectionality. These introductory texts have each been thoroughly conditioned by a critique of feminism's assumed homogeneity and each usefully foregrounds questions of racism and heterosexism alongside gender. In *Open Boundaries* (2009), the prominence of work by critical race theorists, such as Sherene Razack, Sunera Thobani, and Yasmin Jiwani, is particularly notable. *Gender and Women's Studies in Canada* (2013) opens with a redrawn map of the part of Turtle Island, now known dominantly as "Canada," that insists on mapping First Nations rather than colonial political boundaries. The text's effort to foreground Indigenous women's experiences results in excellent, comprehensive sections on colonialism and indigeneity. For its part, *Gendered Intersections* (2011) does an impressive job of integrating marginalized voices throughout the text; this is especially significant with regard to disability, as excellent pieces on ableism are threaded throughout the various sections of the reader and not confined to a separate section of the text.

Apart from this shared commitment to an interlocking analysis, each reader has its own profile and strengths. *Open Boundaries* (2009) is somewhat distinct from the other two; it is not as comprehensive and it is more unwaveringly focused on the Canadian context. The editors note in the introduction that they have "selected five topics that have been central areas of analytic inquiry and debate within contemporary Canadian feminism: 'Who is the Woman of Canadian Women's Studies: Theoretical Interventions'; 'The Changing Context of Activisms'; 'Engendering Violence'; 'The Body: Reproduction and Femininity'; and 'Sexuality.' These five areas are ones that frame the organization of many introductory courses" (x). The selections in this book

paint a specific picture of feminism as it interacts with the Canadian state. Interestingly, even though transnational agendas have structured policy-making and economic developments in Canada for over twenty-five years—at least since the introduction of the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement—and even though Canadian scholars are deeply engaged in transnational feminist scholarship and activism, transnational analysis is virtually absent from the reader. Though the book is bereft of strong transnational analysis, the editors draw together focused articles that provide a critical national snapshot in some areas. Still, this absence makes for a reader that is oddly out of step with current conversations and critical directions in the field and may end up reinforcing the primacy of national boundaries as determinants of what counts as a feminist issue. And, though the selection of writings is undeniably excellent and can do the important work of introducing students to some of the most influential names in Canadian feminist and queer theory, focusing on these five themes is unnecessarily limiting. Though the editors claim that they have chosen these themes because they are often the same themes that structure introductory courses, it does seem as if this reader imagines an introductory course that misses some crucial initial steps: nowhere does it introduce or problematize the construction of gender, race, or sexuality, for instance, nor give an historical account, as I note above, of how feminism or gender-based activism and scholarship came to exist on this national stage or any other. I cannot imagine teaching an introductory course—surely the scaffolding on which all subsequent study is built—without offering some sense of these questions; students would be unable to navigate more complex work without having had an introduction to the concepts of gender. In fact, this reader strikes me as well-suited for an upper-level course about "Feminist Theory in Canada" that would rely on, critically apply, and develop the foundational concepts introduced in an introductory offering. The fairly sophisticated theoretical engagement that characterizes many of these works—certainly a strength in itself—means it is better suited to students with some prior experience in GWS.

While *Gendered Intersections* (2011) is more squarely aimed at an introductory GWS course and more comprehensive in its coverage and reach, it also has a curious lack of engagement with these founda-

tional questions of definition. Its opening sub-section, "Setting the Stage—Pedagogy," is pitched rather high for the beginning of an introduction. Though the questions obliquely raised in this section, such as how to operationalize concepts of gender equality in learning, are excellent—they emblemize the kinds of meta-reflexive work that should be foregrounded in GWS—such questions nevertheless seem better suited to the end of an introductory course than the beginning. Another early section, "Gender and Difference," introduces white privilege, masculinity studies, and systemic oppression as important concepts but their inclusion means that the failure to offer a discussion of the social construction of race, gender, and sexuality stands out as particularly puzzling. Apart from this oversight, the work is strong and comprehensive: sections on waged work, gendered caring labour, law and public policy, activism, violence, health, religion and spirituality, and sexuality offer a very solid structure on which to build a fairly wide-ranging introductory course. The inclusion of poetry and some visual art contextualized with artists' statements is compelling (despite the lamentable lack of corresponding interpretive methodologies that I discuss above) and such inclusions offer instructors a means to diversify approaches and discussion in their classrooms. Two sections of *Gendered Intersections* are particularly fine. The one titled "Sexualizing Women and Men" is distinguished by its sheer diversity: a fascinating article by Russ Westhaver theorizing pleasure through gay circuit parties sits alongside, among other pieces, work by Alison Lee and editor Pamela J. Downe on porn and sex work, Angus McLaren's work on medicalization of sexuality, some poetry, and Shawna Dempsey and Lorry Millan's short discussion of their performance piece, *We're Talking Vulva!* The result is a wonderfully diverse and celebratory selection that will be truly eye-opening for most students, with the potential to significantly broaden and enrich their understandings of sexuality. The other notable section is the one on religion, spirituality, and identity, a subject that has been largely absent from curriculum in GWS for the past twenty-five years. Simplistic alignments of feminism with secularism have tended, as scholars have increasingly noted, to prevent a truly intersectional recognition of the multiple ways that faith figures in gendered and racialized lives. As Niamh Reilly (2011) points out, "both the 'religious' versus 'secular' binary and the underlying assumptions

of 'secular feminism' are being challenged in key ways" (7). The selection of texts in this section—which offers everything from an overview of "Feminists' Pathways in the Study of (Religious) Beliefs and Practices" by Darlene M. Juschka to several poems and meditations about the intersections of various religions with gendered and racialized identities—thus finds itself at the cutting edge of a shifting field and can help to move students away from unhelpful stereotypes about the oppositional relationship between feminism and religion. In this sense, *Gendered Intersections* models a deconstructive approach that instructors will find most helpful in preparing students for the complexity of much of the material that characterizes upper-level offerings in GWS.

As a result of its sheer comprehensiveness—and its relentlessly intersectional approach—*Gender and Women's Studies in Canada* (2013) also provides an excellent foundation for further study. The text is particularly suitable for a year-long introductory GWS course or could usefully be adopted across two companion one-semester courses, as we have done at my institution. The first several hundred pages provides the structure that I, as a GWS instructor, have been looking for. After introducing feminism and intersectional approaches in multiple voices, the editors move onto several substantive sections that offer the introduction to constructions of sex, gender, sexuality, and race that seems so necessary for our new students. These are followed by sections on difference and identity, legacies of colonialism, and Indigenous women. Together, these sections allow for an accessible introduction to the conceptual and theoretical work that is done in GWS. Following this are a number of sections that apply these concepts to analyses of contemporary social organization, touching on issues like reproductive rights, violence, globalization, poverty, and health. Throughout, the editors combine carefully abridged longer pieces of writing with a variety of documents—policy briefs, lists, blog posts, stories—allowing for a truly varied reading experience that will appeal to the random diversity of students that ends up in introductory GWS courses. The editors note in their introduction that they have attempted to shape the reader according to current trends in Gender and Women's Studies, including "the concept and practice of intersectionality," "gendering and queering women's studies," "indigenizing and decolonizing women's studies," and "globalizing, internationalizing, and transna-

tionalizing women's studies" (xix). Though, as I note above, the transnational approaches that are represented do not really capture the current dynamism of this field, in general, the selection of works does represent these key trends very well. The volume's commitment to decolonization and indigeneity are particularly welcome; works by Kim Anderson, Bonita Lawrence, Sylvia Maracle, and Chrystos, among others, offer both a stark picture of the gendered dimensions of racism and cultural genocide for Indigenous women and a sense of the amplitude and creativity of women's resistance. That the dedicated section is called "Aboriginal Women: Agency, Creativity, and Strength" (italics mine) is significant in itself and indicates a sort of contradiction in this text. Though the editors are influenced by the gendering and queering of GWS, this remains, essentially, a text about women's experiences and incorporates very, very little work on masculinity, trans, or genderqueer identities, and what is there remains confined to the sections on the construction of sex and gender. To return to the question posed in *Open Boundaries* (2009), "Who is the Woman of Canadian Women's Studies?," this generally excellent reader effectively implies that the subject of the field is a cisgender woman, which seems oddly out of step with developments in the field, particularly given the general trend in most Canadian GWS programs to prioritize "gender" alongside "women."

In a sense, this tension in *Gender and Women's Studies in Canada* (2013) is emblematic of change. A survey of three readers reveals that we are in a period of transition—and probably a very long one, given the time it seems to take to robustly integrate new perspectives into our practice at all levels. Critiques of racism and white supremacy within feminist politics, for instance, though well-established and widely circulating by the mid-1980s, took at least twenty years to transform the structure of most introductory readers to allow for the interlocking analysis that characterizes the three texts under consideration here. It is not surprising, then, that our introductory readers have not fully assimilated the last decade's developments. In a sense, the existence of these gaps is productive from a pedagogical perspective. Assessing the readers with students, after some time in an introductory course, is an excellent way to introduce students to the reflexivity of the work that is done in GWS. Indeed, such reflexivity may be the discipline's greatest methodological contribution. And so, absences

may exist but even these are productive if an instructor is willing to consider the selection and ordering of texts as an examinable text in itself. This will require, then, expecting less of the introductory GWS text, even while incorporating it as an invaluable aid in the work that we do.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Such an opposition is astonishingly persistent. It can be traced back to tensions among feminists over the merits of poststructuralism beginning in the 1980s. This conceptual split is ably traced in Hemmings 2011.

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