# Becoming Radically Undone: Discourses of Identity and Diversity in the Introductory Gender and Women's Studies Classroom

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**Abstract**

I suggest here that introductory Gender and Women's Studies courses must teach students the narratives that feminism tells about itself and of related activist movements and that we also must engage students in critiquing these very narratives. Drawing from Robyn Wiegman's (2012) *Object Lessons* and Sara Ahmed's (2012a) *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, I argue that feminist teachers must critically interrogate our utilization of discourses of identity and diversity in the feminist classroom.

**Résumé**

Je suggère ici que les cours d'introduction aux Études sur le genre et les femmes doivent enseigner aux étudiantes les discours que le féminisme fait sur lui-même et les mouvements activistes associés et que nous devons également inciter les étudiantes à critiquer ces discours. En m'appuyant sur les articles *Object Lessons* (2012) de Robyn Wiegman et *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012)de Sara Ahmed, j'affirme que les enseignantes féministes doivent s'interroger d'un œil critique sur leur utilisation des discours de l'identité et de la diversité dans la salle de classe féministe.

**Books Under Review**

Ahmed, Sara. 2012a. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wiegman, Robyn. 2012. *Object Lessons*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

The call for proposals for this special issue asked: "As a vital institutional object, how might the introductory course influence the stories we tell *ourselves* about the interdisciplinary and critical field of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies?" Here, I respond with a related set of questions: How do the stories of the field make their way into the introductory Gender and Women's Studies (GWS) course? How might a critical interrogation of feminist narratives about feminism be useful for pedagogues who teach introductory courses in GWS? How might re-thinking the stories we tell about feminism—about our history, our academic institutionalization, our relation to activist movements—create new pedagogical possibilities?

In what follows, I sketch out some preliminary thoughts in response to these questions by reflecting on two texts: Robyn Wiegman's (2012) *Object Lessons* and Sara Ahmed's (2012a) *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Reviewing these particular texts for a special issue on teaching the introductory course in Gender and Women's Studies may, I realize, appear strange. Indeed, introductory Gender and Women's Studies students are certainly not the intended audience of these texts. Further, both books were published three years ago (2012) and have been reviewed several times already. Yet, despite being "profoundly pedagogic book[s]," a description Sara Ahmed (2012b) gives of Wiegman's text (345), the books' reviewers as well as those who have drawn from these texts in other published work have not yet explicitly

discussed them in terms of the pedagogical lessons they might offer.

By "profoundly pedagogic," Ahmed (2012b) means that *Object Lessons* is "a book that teaches *us* how *we* are taught" (345; emphases added). That it does. Ahmed's own work, incidentally, does much the same. But beyond this, *Object Lessons* and *On Being Included* offer insights for those of us who teach *others* (i.e. our students). In other words, both texts offer potentially crucial lessons for GWS instructors as we examine the pleasures and pitfalls of teaching introductory Gender and Women's Studies courses. What I offer here, then, is not a conventional book review. Rather than summarize each text in depth, I provide overviews of the texts by way of supporting the argument I seek to make: Gender and Women's Studies must teach students the narratives of the field and of related activist movements and we also must engage students in critiquing these very narratives—even at the introductory level. In other words, how might we draw from them to conceptualize how and what to teach in introductory Gender and Women's Studies courses.

**Diversity and its Discontents**

Sara Ahmed's (2012a) *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* is an exploration of the institutionalization of diversity discourses, policies, and practices in higher education. She asks what diversity discourses and documents *do*, rather than what they *say*. In so doing, Ahmed expresses both her interest in questioning what is lost when diversity is so readily incorporated into academic institutions as well as her commitment to understanding the (im)possibilities of this diversity work.

As Ahmed points out throughout the text, paradoxes are central to diversity work. She utilizes the metaphor of the brick wall, which surfaced repeatedly in her interviews with diversity workers in universities in the United Kingdom and Australia, to examine some of these paradoxes. Of the brick wall, Ahmed states, "The feeling of doing diversity work is the feeling of coming up against something that does not move, something solid and tangible. The institution becomes that which you come up against" (26). One of the paradoxes of diversity work, then, is that those hired to make change are actively prevented from doing so. And, worse, those who point out institutional problems come to be seen as the problem. Rather than being able to fight the racism that undergirds the problems that the university supposedly sought to address in their hiring of diversity workers, these workers often feel as if they are embattled with the universities that employ them.

Is this the kind of battle that makes diversity work? Or does it put diversity to work? And to what end? Diversity work, for Ahmed, is valuable to the extent that it causes trouble. Once diversity, and particularly "institutional diversity," is understood as routine and is that which no longer surprises us, diversity has lost its critical edge and potential to disrupt; indeed, at times, "having a [diversity] policy becomes a substitute for action" (11). Ahmed's analysis of diversity is, as the book's title suggests, an analysis of being included—what being included means, what it relies upon, and the issues it both makes evident and obscures. She writes that "inclusion could be read as a technology of governance: not only as a way of bringing those who have been recognized as strangers into the nation, but also of making strangers into subjects, those who in being included are also willing to consent to the terms of inclusion" (163). The problems cannot be located, of course, in those individuals who appear willing to consent to the terms of inclusion. Rather, as Ahmed suggests, the problems lie in the operation of the terms of inclusion themselves; being recognizable as one who is included compels particular labours rarely recognized as labour and, further, inclusion itself reifies social exclusions. That is, all inclusions (including for those who previously have been excluded) rely on, make possible, and further other exclusions.

Ahmed describes this process of being included as a "folding in" that is rooted in fantasy, a violent post-racial fantasy that roots the problem of racism in those who acknowledge its existence and ignores that most people of colour still do not have access to the fruits of being folded in. This folding in is also deeply laboured—for those scholars of colour who do additional unpaid diversity work less often compelled from their white colleagues as well as (under)paid work for diversity professionals who work both to be included themselves and to increase the numbers of and improve the experiences of racially minoritized subjects. Part of this labour is the insistence that one belongs to "the categories that give residence to others" (177). By categories, Ahmed seems to mean those dominant groupings

that keep marginalized people from being recognized by and included in powerful institutions. In a footnote attached to her sentence above, Ahmed describes the labour done by trans*, gender queer, and lesbian and gay people when we articulate our sexual or gender identity or experiences to those to whom one is illegible.

This sentence and related footnote crystallizes a limit to Ahmed's book. She focuses on the labour required to be considered by dominant institutions a proper racialized subject (one, that is, who belongs), rarely addressing the labour that is compelled of those people who see themselves as belonging to a particular marginalized or minoritized category but are not recognized as such by others inhabiting this category. What I mean to say is that diversity workers are as heterogeneous as the institutional spaces they inhabit—and yet in Ahmed's account both are represented as somewhat homogenous. This, it seems to me, is an unfortunate—but quite possibly unavoidable—result of working to protect the anonymity of the diversity workers Ahmed interviewed and of thinking about linkages across institutional spaces. Just as convincing dominant institutions and people who occupy non-minoritized categories that one belongs can be violent and laboured, there too is labour and violence in working to convince the diversity police that one belongs.

Let me explicate by example. I was recently at a meeting in which participants were discussing the content of a department's job call for a queer theorist. Some participants expressed that they wanted the person hired to be a person of colour and, thus, the position should be advertised as a position for a queer of colour theorist. In making this argument, one woman of colour at the meeting gestured toward another woman of colour in the room, stating that their presence as the only two people of colour in the room spoke to the need for greater departmental diversity. In this gesture, the woman of colour who made this claim framed anyone who she did not *see* as a person of colour as someone who is not a person of colour. My multi-racial friend and colleague, having been produced as white, expressed her aggravation, anger, and sadness after the meeting. But she did not publicly resist her erasure. Ahmed's analysis of belonging is particularly useful here: "If you have to become insistent to receive what is automatically given to others, your insistence confirms the improper nature of your residence" (177). To be clear, Ahmed is not speaking of the laboured insistence of fitting into subcultural categories but rather of being included in dominant academic institutions that speak diversity languages (and gain value for doing so) but do not shift their institutional practices to actualize that of which they speak.

Nonetheless, such examples gesture toward the need for greater attention to diversity workers' precise institutional locations, which might help us to understand the ways in which value comes to be associated with diversity discourses differently *within* (not just across various and multiple) academic institutions. Pairing Robyn Wiegman's (2012) *Object Lessons* with Sara Ahmed's *On Being Included* offers possibilities for examining the ways in which discourses, theories, and ideologies—including those related to diversity—become dominant within those identity fields, as Wiegman terms them, typically considered institutionally marginal.

**Identity Fields and their Discontents**

Robyn Wiegman's (2012) *Object Lessons* examines what is at stake, and the discourses utilized to express these stakes, in the work of identity fields (Black Studies, Chicana Studies, Feminist Studies, LGBTQ Studies, and so on). *Object Lessons*, nothing less than a *tour de force*, strikes at the heart of the logics of Women's, Ethnic, Queer, Whiteness, and American Studies, fields with which Wiegman has long engaged. Due to the focus of this *Atlantis* special issue on the introductory Gender and Women's Studies course as well as my desire to think through what two particular texts can offer feminist pedagogues, I focus here on Wiegman's reflections on the attachments, logics, aspirations, affects, narratives, and politics of Gender and Women's Studies in particular.

Wiegman questions why it is that scholars connected to identity fields locate in the objects of our analyses the potential for social justice. Our objects of study come to stand in for our own politics and desires for social transformation, something Wiegman suggests marks identity fields as different from other disciplines; that is, we name our analyses as "world-building engagements aimed at social change" (4). In Ethnic Studies and Gender and Women's Studies, in particular, this "transformation is figured by claiming for minoritized subjects the right to study themselves and to

make themselves the objects of their study" (4). One of Wiegman's most crucial questions with which feminist scholars must grapple is: how have scholars come to insist that studying identity can lead to justice (or, perhaps even worse, that it already has)?

It is precisely this ostensible connection between knowledge, justice, and identity that Wiegman works to unravel. She suggests that institutionalization itself has transformed identity knowledges and studies, in part through expecting (and praising!) coherency and intelligibility; indeed, an ability to represent and to be represented has become the root of our political value. She writes: "how strange it is that in closing the distance, itself conceived of as epistemic violence, between the subject and object of knowledge, identity studies are now sworn to an increasingly unsettling convergence: that to legitimately speak for an identity object of study one must be able to speak *as* it, even as such speaking threatens to strip subjects of epistemological authority over everything they are not" (7; emphasis added). Wiegman makes clear, too, that institutionalization and threats from outside one's field are not fully responsible for this linking of identity, knowledge, authority, and value. Indeed, Wiegman is primarily concerned with the implications of such linkages when they become ubiquitous and taken for granted *within* identity fields.

To explicate the depths of this strangeness, if you will, Wiegman considers the increasingly common move to shift departmental names from "Women's Studies" to something ostensibly more capacious such as "Gender Studies." Wiegman suggests that this shift represents the field's desire for its objects to be representative and, further, for the field to be understood as inclusive. The transition from "women's" to "gender" comes to stand in for the "progress" of the field, of which its inclusiveness is evidence.

Later in the book, Wiegman takes on the theory of intersectionality, another discourse—in addition to being a theory or, for some, a method—deployed as evidence for identity fields' inclusiveness. That I call intersectionality a discourse, particularly in regards to GWS, is in line with feminist reflections on the hegemonic position "intersectionality" has come to occupy within what Wiegman calls the "field imaginary." Intersectionality has, as Wiegman insists, "been given a life of its own, becoming an imperative to attend evenly and adequately to identity's composite whole" (30), an imperative that is, for Wiegman and others, not only impossible to fulfill but also epistemologically dangerous. That is, framing identity's multiplicity as that which we could possibly offer a "cogent and full account" of reproduces the idea Wiegman argues against: that if we locate the right object of study, our analyses will be "adequate to the political commitments that inspire" them (3). Intersectionality, by contrast, locates the "key impediment to identity-oriented justice [in] the problem of partial attention" (240). The irony, of course, is that Gender and Women's Studies has long pushed to recognize that all knowledges (certainly a form of attention) are partial, situated, and subjective. And yet, in other moments, as Wiegman shows, the field's logics turn in on themselves in paradoxical ways that scholars in identity fields too rarely consider.

One of the paradoxes of both Gender and Women's Studies' logics and diversity discourses that neither Wiegman nor Ahmed makes central to their analyses is the role that visibility and visible identities play in the suturing of knowledge to authority and notions of social justice. Wiegman (2012) discusses the relationships among racialized embodiment, invisibility, and hypervisibility in a footnote (23), and Ahmed (2012a), in her discussion of visibility and "passing," focuses on a type of political passing in which diversity practitioners work to not be visible so as to occupy a non-threatening position within the institution (157). For many diversity workers, including my multi-racial colleague referenced above, being recognized as one who belongs within a space of marginalization (Gender and Women's Studies, for example) is at least as important—and, arguably, in many cases, more important—than being viewed as one who belongs in the broader institution. This is because, as Wiegman points out, one's authority within identity fields is tethered to one's identity. And, I would add, not just to an expressed identity but to those identities that are visible (or made visible by laboured speech acts) to others.

Some recent Gender and Women's Studies job calls, for example, express their support for hiring those who are "visible minorities." It is difficult to ascertain from the calls themselves to what precisely "visible" refers. We might guess that it refers to those with a particular racialized embodiment, as does Wiegman's (2012) footnote on invisibility and hypervisibility (23). But one can certainly be visibly genderqueer, poor, disabled,

LGBTQ, or associated with a marginalized religion. Whether these various (potentially non-racially minoritized) identities and embodiments (do or should) count as examples of a visible minoritized status is certainly debatable.[1] I suspect that both Wiegman and Ahmed might suggest that this is the wrong question—a question that may appear to root the problems with identity knowledges in their lack of capaciousness (if only we account for identity differently!) or that may function to ignore the ongoing racism of the academy. Neither is my intention. But these are questions with which diversity workers in/and Gender and Women's Studies as a field must engage. As Roderick Ferguson (2012) explicates in his book on minority difference and the academy, sexuality as diversity represents institutions' "latest affair with minority culture and difference" (209). In a moment in which identity politics and diversity discourses reign, as Wiegman and Ahmed so beautifully illustrate, the question of *what counts as identity and diversity* is, in fact, crucial for all of us located in academic institutions and identity fields.

While we feminist academics still have too little understanding of the political and intellectual costs of conflating subject position and knowledge production —a conflation that occurs in activist and academic circles alike—we have grappled even less with what visibility means and how it figures in discussions of the relationship between subjectivity and the creation of knowledge. Such problematics are evident in Gender and Women's Studies job calls that advertise for a scholar of X, when what the department actually desires is a person who *is* (visibly!) X. (X might refer to any number of social exclusions, including being visibly gender non-conforming, racialized, LGBTQ, disabled, and so on.) We see this conflation, too, in recent discussions of the racial and ethnic identifications and backgrounds of Rachel Dolezal and Andrea Smith. In both cases, a questioning of these scholars' intellectual, activist, and pedagogical work has occurred alongside challenges to their identity. Indeed, they are one and the same.

What, then, would considering the logics, narratives, and discourses of Gender and Women's Studies offer to feminist pedagogues? What pedagogical lessons might we draw from Ahmed and Wiegman?

**Pedagogical Potentialities**

In this final section, I briefly gesture toward some pedagogical possibilities feminist scholars might actualize through critically engaging introductory Gender and Women's Studies students in the narratives and discourses feminists tell about feminism. Teaching the narratives of the field alongside how we might challenge or question these narratives will allow us, I suggest, to teach important feminist concepts as well as how to conduct social critique in generative and reparative ways.

A quick review of introductory Gender and Women's Studies textbooks makes clear that feminist pedagogues often cover a great deal of ground in introductory courses. We often address reproduction, violence against women, domestic labour, differences among women, globalization, the family, the workplace, and sexuality, among a host of other topics. Beyond (and through) teaching this content, we also seek to teach students how to ask questions and analyze information in feminist ways. To reach this goal, we may introduce students to feminist debates regarding the body (say, for example, through focusing on sex work and pornography); identity politics and related discussions regarding the benefits and limits to centralizing experience and positionality in our analyses; essentialism and social constructionism; and the relation of feminist theory to social movements. In so doing, we deploy discourses of intersectionality, diversity, and justice.

Drawing from Ahmed and Wiegman, we might begin to think about how these very discourses—which undoubtedly saturate the introductory Gender and Women's Studies classroom—participate in the construction of those progress narratives that we feminists critically deconstruct elsewhere. "Diversity," as Ahmed explicates, is a term that has come to stand in for social justice (work) within academic institutions. "Intersectionality," as Wiegman points out, is a term that has come to represent progress within GWS. We need for diversity discourses to not supplant justice. And we need Gender and Women's Studies to be a site of contestation, not refuge or progress. Despite our teaching about the problems of progress narratives, students still manage to hold onto the belief that Gender and Women's Studies represents social progress itself; that we are having *these conversations* becomes evidence of both our own and broader social progress. If we are to teach students the problems endemic to progress narratives, we cannot let Gender and Women's Studies as a field

occupy a position understood as in and of itself indicative of social progress.

One way to counter this tendency that my colleagues and I have discussed in our pedagogical strategy sessions is to teach students how to deconstruct narratives of the field. We can teach students what a progress narrative is, for example, through sharing mainstream feminist blog posts that assume women are better off today than we were, say, thirty years ago. We can pair such blog posts with an academic reading that engages with similar framings of feminist scholarship or movements. These are, in effect, narratives that feminism tells about itself. We can help students to see how certain discourses come to be synonymous with progress and become themselves indicative of our field's and society's progress. We can draw from Wiegman and Ahmed to help students see that even when positive affects stick to terms—such as identity, intersectionality, diversity, and justice—we must critically interrogate their ramifications.

I recently asked my students in an upper division Gender and Women's Studies Feminist Engaged Research course—in which all students are Gender and Women's Studies majors or minors—a question about that day's reading we were discussing in class. A student responded with: "It's all about intersectionality." My initial question is not particularly relevant, as I have found that students will attempt to answer nearly any question by referencing (the need for and value of) "intersectionality." I followed up to ask: "What is intersectionality?" My students looked at me blankly. All of my students had been exposed to what they would describe as "intersectionality." Yet, not one had read the original theory of intersectionality. Not one could accurately describe the theory. Not one had a sense of the genealogy of the term. Not one could think of limits to intersectionality. Some thought that the term refers to moments in which activism and scholarship "intersect," while others insisted that it refers to the moment when *any* two or more marginalized identities meet within one person's life. Not one knew its roots in black feminist theory or critical race theory. I raise this point not because these moments gesture toward some type of feminist pedagogical failure—if only the students learned the material *properly!*—but because these moments point to the hegemony of discourses of "intersectionality" within Gender and Women's Studies. In these moments, we can see that, as Ahmed (2012a) suggests, "intersectionality can be used as a method of deflection," as a way of re-directing attention away from race and racism (195)—and, by extension, from whichever form of marginalization one is working to address—by bringing up other forms of social exclusion. The failure here lies with neither an individual instructor nor student but with a field that has produced so little critical reflection on the limits of "intersectionality" that it figures as that which is largely beyond contest.

Despite knowing relatively little about the actual theory of intersectionality, in answering my question "What is intersectionality?," each of these students deployed narratives about feminist scholarship and activism that suggested that feminism was once a middle-class white women's movement but has progressed to celebrate diversity. Intersectionality became, for my students, evidence for such claims. I share this story because it speaks to moments in which the field's narratives quietly reproduce themselves. We need to teach students not only feminist content but also how to deconstruct the narratives we ourselves deploy. We must teach students how to ask questions and how to be critically engaged in ways that are ethical and generative. And what better site *from which* and *to which* to direct our critical engagements than our own narratives and logics? Doing so would allow us to show students that all narratives—including our own —are politically motivated. As Clare Hemmings (2011) suggests, the ways in which feminists talk about Gender and Women's Studies says more about the politics of the speaker and our desires for how we are read in the present than they do about the histories or realities of the field.

The editors of this special issue on the introductory Gender and Women's Studies course ask: "What are some of our best visions for the work the introductory course might do in the world and in the lives of our students?" One of my visions for the introductory course includes teaching students how to critically examine assumptions, positionalities, and politics. We can do this by showing students how to deconstruct the narratives and discourses that underlie belief systems—from hegemonic ideologies to feminist and queer counter positions to their own beliefs. Critique is not something to be directed outward, at those "others" with whom we believe we fundamentally disagree. We must teach students that Gender and Women's Studies is a site of

contestation and critical examination; critique, in this sense, is something politically generative in which we engage with those who we value and respect. Wiegman (2012) suggests that identity fields have come to "mimic radicality instead of teaching us how to become radically undone" (12). I have suggested here that feminist pedagogues can help students become radically undone through teaching feminist narratives of Gender and Women's Studies and feminist movements—through which students can learn how to ask questions, deconstruct, and reconstruct narratives and engage critically with the worlds around us. Doing so requires that those of teaching in Gender and Women's Studies remain willing to critically engage with the discourses we use—including those of diversity, intersectionality, identity, and justice—so that we can work to undo the narratives of feminism that feminists have long accepted and perpetuated. Luckily, as Ahmed's and Wiegman's texts suggest, there are rich models available to us for doing so.

**Endnotes**

[1] I do not have the space here to reproduce feminist and queer debates over visibility. For discussions of visibility politics that I have engaged with elsewhere, please see Thomsen 2015 and Thomsen forthcoming.

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