

Rethinking Women's Studies: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and the Introductory Course

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Abstract

We comment on the current context framing women's and gender studies in Canada, identify recent and important curricular trends, and discuss some guiding principles that we have used to revise our first-year course. We offer reflections that might assist instructors in the challenging task of mounting the entry-level course.

Résumé

Nous émettons des commentaires concernant le contexte actuel d'encadrement des études sur les femmes et sur le genre au Canada. Nous identifions les tendances circulaires récentes et importantes, et discutons de quelques principes directeurs dont nous avons

fait usage dans le cadre de la révision de notre cours de première année. Nous offrons des réflexions qui pourraient aider les instructeurs avec la tâche difficile de monter le cours de première année.

Introduction

During the past few years, women's studies programs in Canada have experienced increasing threats and attacks from both inside and outside academic institutions. The closure of some programs due to university restructuring, and the name changes of others to reflect theoretical developments in feminist scholarship and to widen the student base, have prompted media coverage critical of women's studies as an outmoded discipline that is, according to the *National Post*, too political, too radical, and undeserving of an existence in the academy (Belyk 2009; Cole 2010; *National Post* Editorial January 25, 2010; *The Current* January 12, 2010).

Although Women's Studies at our university has also been hit hard by cutbacks and administrative restructuring, our department is managing to hang on, albeit with distressingly diminished resources. We believe that the first-year women's studies course is key to maintaining our major base and our autonomy as a distinct academic department. An introductory women's studies (or women's and gender studies) course inhabits a pivotal place in the curriculum as the site where women's studies as a scholarly field and an academic unit is introduced, explained, and, to the extent that this is possible, defined. This is a daunting challenge given the extent of debate within feminism about what exactly women's studies is at this point in time, what constitutes its foundational knowledges, and what, therefore, we want our students to learn (Brown 2008; Friedman 2002). Introductory undergraduate courses, intentionally or not, "brand" the field, and with it the department or program. They construct a program's identity

while giving students a taste of the broader fare available for consumption at the upper years. Student reaction to the “gateway” course can either make or break the viability of the undergraduate degree program. As at most other universities, our first-year course also services other academic units by providing important gender and diversity training not available in such concentration elsewhere.

We are two women’s studies professors with almost thirty years combined experience teaching in women’s studies. For several years we co-taught the Introduction to Women’s Studies course at Trent University, and we are currently collaborating on the development of a women’s and gender studies reader geared specifically to introductory classes. This paper grows out of our ongoing reflections, observations, and discussions about trends, developments, and debates shaping women’s studies and how first-year courses and students might engage with them. In this article, we comment on the current context framing women’s and gender studies in Canada, including the political climate, and we identify some recent curricular and pedagogical trends within the field. Considering these new directions and the challenges they pose for introductory courses, we conclude with a discussion of some guiding principles that we have used in our efforts to revise and revitalize our first-year course content and teaching.

It’s Chilly in Here

The recent direct attacks on women’s studies programs are part of a broader backlash against feminism made all the more damaging by the neoliberal political and economic climate and the corporatization of university campuses across Canada and other countries (Bromley and Ahmad 2006; Karpinsky 2007). As governments and university administrators police the bottom line, departmental budgets are reduced, tenure-track appointments become scarce, and more of the undergraduate teaching load is carried on the backs of underpaid, often itinerant, part-time faculty with no job security. Departments competing for “bums in seats” feel pressure to revamp the curriculum with an eye to economic

efficiency and marketability to a new student body constructed as “consumers” of education (Karpinsky 2007). Women’s studies programs, which typically run on a shoestring budget, are particularly vulnerable in this climate, and the effects of restructuring are often evident in curricular discussions and shifts focused specifically on the first-year course from which majors are recruited. Curriculum review and reflexive self-scrutiny are essential to the survival of feminist scholarship and education. In a backlash environment, however, when the institutional and political future of women’s studies is so uncertain, this potentially fruitful process carries risks. Witness the enormous controversy sparked by Wendy Brown’s 1997 article “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” which argued that women’s studies as a discrete field in the university had outlived its original purpose and value, and was becoming “politically and theoretically incoherent” and conservative—“incoherent because by definition it circumscribes uncircumscribable ‘women’ as an object of study, and conservative because it must resist all objections to such circumscription if it is to sustain that object of study as its *raison d’être*” (2008, 21). The controversy has not quieted as influential feminist scholars like Joan Scott continue to suggest that women’s studies has lost its “critical edge” and must embrace critique, “still feminism’s most potent weapon,” in order to revitalize and re-imagine a future that is not trapped by nostalgia (2008, 7).

We suggest, however, that women’s studies is not as inflexible and intransigent as is implied in these critiques. In Canada, as elsewhere, the field is undergoing rethinking, redefinition, and, in some cases, renaming, partly in response to internal intellectual and political debates and challenges. We refuse Brown’s construction of feminists within women’s studies as defensively “policing” the borders of the field, and we take issue with her judgment that women’s studies was becoming overly political at the expense of its intellectual project. A cursory reflection on some of the key recent curricular developments within Canadian women’s studies reveals a robust and healthy embrace of debate, an expansion of boundaries, and a willingness to explore the tensions, contradictions, and

uncertainty that characterize women's studies at this historical juncture (see for example Braithwaite et al. 2004; Crow and Gotell 2009). In the section that follows, we introduce and synthesize some of these trends, specifically those that we think warrant critical attention when students first encounter the field of women's and gender studies.

Curricular Trends: Women's and Gender Studies in Canada

Over the past three decades, the field of women's studies has shown considerable curriculum development and change (Salley, Winkler and Celeen 2004). Many of these changes are reflected in the recent move towards highlighting "gender" over or alongside "women" in the names of programs and departments. This shift potentially takes women out of the centre of the curriculum in favour of broader subjects of inquiry, with greater attention to masculinities, queer, gender, and sexuality studies, and trans-feminism (National Women's Studies Association, <http://www.nwsa.org/research/genderstudies.php>). The department at Queen's University reoriented recently under the umbrella of "Gender Studies," and Nipissing's program has become "Gender, Equality and Social Justice." Others, not willing to let go of "women," have added "gender" and in one case "sexuality" to their names (Carlson 2010). Included in this group are the University of British Columbia (BC and Okanagan), Simon Fraser, Carleton, Dalhousie, Acadia, Laurier, University of Toronto (St. George and Mississauga), Saint Mary's, and the programs at Winnipeg, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Regina. Trent has just made the move as well to "Gender and Women's Studies," and the issue is being discussed at the University of Victoria and likely at many other institutions (Carlson 2010). Controversy over naming extends back to the early 1990s in North America, and continues today, although less vociferously (see the eight-part discussion from 1993 to 2009 in Joan Korenman's online Women's Studies List: <<http://userpages.umbc.edu/~korenman/wms/t/womvsgen.html>>; Wiegman 2002). Programs in Canada have proven cautious about relinquishing their intellectual and political investment in the study of "women." As we browsed university websites in preparation for

this paper we found that of 43 undergraduate programs or departments visited electronically, 25 still called themselves "women's studies." Still, that left 16 with names flagging "gender," and 1 (Western) adding "feminist" to its title. Concordia's program is unusual, simply calling itself the "Simone de Beauvoir Institute."

While acknowledging the impressive history of knowledge generation and dissent in women's studies, in this section of the article, we emphasize some emerging trends in women's studies curricula and pedagogy across Canada in response to recent developments in feminist scholarship and activism. Our discussion addresses curricular more than pedagogical trends, but curriculum changes (the "what" and "when" or content and sequencing of courses) are intimately connected with pedagogy (the "how" or methods of teaching content). We identify and synthesize current curricular trends from two main sources. The first consists of scholarship published in the last decade on teaching women's studies in North America. This rich and diverse literature explores and debates key themes, new directions, and challenges in women's and gender studies as a scholarly field and as a critical site of teaching and learning. The second comes from an informal perusal of course outlines and calendar descriptions of recent introductory courses from 43 undergraduate women's and gender studies programs across Canada. We wrote to first-year instructors in women's and gender studies at most Canadian universities. At the time, we wanted to sample course descriptions and learning objectives, and discover which (if any) core texts instructors were using. Assuring them that our interest was not evaluative, we highlighted our desire to use the information to assist us in reviewing women's studies textbooks on the market and assigned in Canadian introductory classes. Thirty-seven syllabi from 30 different institutions were received from generous instructors and from program websites. (The fact that some universities had more than one section of the introductory course and the content was not always the same explains why the number of syllabi exceeds the number of programs in this sample.) As we went through this material, we were struck by

the variation in content and approach to teaching first-year women's and gender studies, yet we also noticed that prominent new directions in the field as a whole were reflected in the topics, the required readings, and in the organization and orientation of the courses. The information gathered has been used in two separate but interlinked projects: a review of multiple textbooks as well as this essay examining curricular and pedagogical developments and their relevance to gateway courses. We did not request permission from instructors to analyze their syllabi but collectively they have shaped our reading and understanding of the ways that introductory courses are engaging with new bodies of work and areas of inquiry. More specifically, the course descriptions and learning objectives helped us identify which of the trends and new directions shaping the field in general were being taken up in first-year classrooms.

In our reading of these varied sources, we identify four prominent and recent developments in women's studies content and pedagogy: 1) de-universalizing and diversifying the curriculum through undertaking intersectional approaches; 2) gendering and queering the curriculum; 3) globalizing, internationalizing, and transnationalizing the curriculum; and, finally, 4) indigenizing and decolonizing the women's studies curriculum. The curricular moves we describe emerge from debates and developments within feminist scholarship. They also come out of women's and social justice movements, from diversely positioned and especially marginalized people and grassroots communities locally and globally, at the forefront of feminist thought and action (see, for example, Antrobus 2004; Bornstein 1998; CRIAW 2006; Green 2007; Mohanty 2006; Smith, 2005; Wilchins 2004). Our description of these developments is not intended to be exhaustive or conclusive. We recognize that they are overlapping and evolving. Instead, our purpose here is to identify some of the significant trends in women's studies curricula more broadly with a particular focus on how they may be impacting first-year women's studies courses and shaping the future of and debates about the field.

1) The first curricular move involves explaining and applying the theoretically important and challenging feminist concept of "inter-

sectionality" (McCall 2005). According to the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, an intersectional approach attempts "to understand how multiple forces work together and interact to reinforce conditions of inequality and social exclusion" (CRIAW 2006, 5). Intersectionality is not a new concept. Conceived by African American feminists and critical race scholars Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and Kimberle Crenshaw (1994) in response to issues of exclusion within mainstream second-wave feminism (Ringrose 2007; Yuval-Davis 2006), the theory has been adapted and developed in the work of many feminist writers and organizations in Canada (see for examples CRIAW 2006; Denis 2008; Lee 2006). Intersectionality moves a feminist focus beyond gender to consider the multiple, intersecting "axes" of power and difference that constitute women's diverse experiences and positions in the social world (Yuval-Davis 2006). Its utility lies in its capacity to explain how gender, sexuality, aboriginality, class, race, disability, geography, refugee and immigrant status, size, age, and other differences interact with broader social forces such as colonialism and neoliberalism to shape women's subordination and status in highly specific ways (CRIAW 2006). Taking as its starting point what Karpinski calls the "heterogeneity of difference," intersectionality seeks to historicize, contextualize, and politicize differences as a sustained critique of "homogenizing" multicultural approaches to diversity, which erase inequality by detaching difference from a critical analysis of power (2007, 46). Through interrogating the complexities and specificities of identities and social locations, intersectionality explores how women occupy many different and contradictory positions, and illuminates how we each are implicated in power relations (Brah and Pheonix 2004). Although some scholars have raised concerns that intersectionality theory has become watered down in introductory women's studies courses, others see the concept as pivotal to feminist pedagogy (Davis 2010; Ringrose 2007). By de-centering the assumed white, Western, middle-class subject of feminism and women's studies and articulating an approach to understanding women's specificity (Davis 2010), intersectionality works to overcome historical exclusions that have alienated

Aboriginal women and women of colour (for example) from earlier theorizing and activism, and it awakens students to how power differences affect them profoundly and differently (Ringrose 2007).

2) A second curricular move involves “gendering” and “queering” the women’s studies curriculum. Recent developments in gender, queer, and trans theory and activism across North America have placed a strong analytic spotlight on gender and sexuality as social constructs. Within women’s studies courses and programs, this move has resulted in greater curricular attention being paid to masculinities, queer and sexuality studies, and transfeminism. At their heart, gender and queer theory involve deconstructing the binary categories of woman/man and femininity/masculinity by de-stabilizing sex, gender, and sexual identities, or, in other words, challenging “the notion of two discrete tidily organized sexes and genders” (Scott-Dixon 2006, 12). In addition to feminist studies, this rich theory base has emerged out of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual (GLBT) studies, itself a fairly new area of academic inquiry which seeks to investigate GLBT history and culture and understand how gendered and sexed bodies/identities and erotic desires and practices are socially constructed in different times and places (Meem et al. 2010; Stomblor et al. 2010). Distinct from LGBT studies, queer theory aims not only to interrogate sexuality norms but also to turn upside down the very idea of “the normal,” namely “everything in the culture that has occupied a position of privilege, power, and normalcy, starting with heterosexuality” (Bacon 2007, 259). While GLBT studies highlights the diversity of sexuality, gender studies as a discrete field focuses on understanding gender variance historically and cross culturally. Adding another layer of nuance and complexity, transfeminism has materialized at the intersections of feminist and trans ideas as a vibrant gender inclusive political, social, and intellectual movement dedicated to ending the oppression of gender-crossing and gender-divergent people (Scott Dixon 2006). These theoretical and political movements have challenged women’s studies to become inclusive of gender and queer theory (Wilchins

2004); to explore masculinity as a manifestation of sex/gender systems (Kimmel and Aronson 2010); and to integrate trans and intersex experiences and perspectives in ethical, progressive ways that go beyond de-constructing binaries toward advocating visibility, inclusion, and social justice for gender and sex variant people (Cooper and Connor 2006; Koyama and Weasel 2002). Although most feminist educators believe that a sustained focus on sexism is necessary—especially in the face of deepening global gender inequities—theoretical insights offered by GLBT studies, queer theory, and transfeminism have led many to radically rethink the assumed subject of feminism and the privileging of women in women’s studies curricula and classrooms.

3) The third curricular trend involves globalizing, internationalizing, or transnationalizing women’s and gender studies. The terms themselves, as well as the practices they entail, are the subject of considerable debate. Sometimes they are used interchangeably. Increasingly, however, the language of “global feminism,” and hence calls for “globalizing” the curriculum, is giving way to the politics of “internationalizing” or “transnationalizing.” For most, the term “global” in relation to feminism is too reminiscent of the condescension and denial of differences evident in past Western feminists’ scholarly and activist interventions in the “Third World” (Grewal and Kaplan 2006; Mohanty 1991; Shohat 2001). Internationalization is often employed as a broad umbrella term encompassing various practices and methods, which are not themselves inherently counter-hegemonic. Indeed, international issues can be taken up in women’s studies in highly problematic ways. A recent example in the post-9/11 context was the Western feminist campaign to “save” women in Afghanistan from the Taliban. Preoccupied with cultural practices like veiling and locked in orientalist stereotypes of Islam, Western feminists participated in “new forms of cultural imperialism,” rarely acknowledging the history of US foreign policy support for the Taliban regime (Grewal and Kaplan 2006, xvii–xviii). Mohanty describes three dominant models for internationalizing women’s studies. The “feminist as tourist” approach adds “Third World” and Indigenous women into existing analytic frame-

works, stereotyping them as either hapless victims or romantic heroines. The “feminist as explorer” model, an outgrowth of area studies, focuses on “foreign” women “over there” (through courses such as “Women in India,” “Third World Women,” etc.), without a sustained analysis of structural relations of power. Mohanty instead encourages a third alternate approach, “feminist solidarity,” which enables anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, and anti-capitalist critique, draws on trans-national border crossings and comparative work, and recognizes differences and hierarchies of power while building on affinities and common interests (Mohanty 2006). Increasingly, a “transnational” lens (as opposed to an “international” one) is promoted as a complex and nuanced way to “teach students how to think about gender in a world whose boundaries have changed” (Kaplan and Grewal 2002, 79). Transnational approaches emphasize the movement of capital, labour, information, and culture across national borders; they draw out how histories of colonization and, more recently, globalization structure inequalities; and they explore the possibilities for solidarity among women and social movements organizing across geographic boundaries. In a transnationalized women’s studies curriculum, Canada and the US can still be examined, but they are not centred (Mohanty in Dua and Trotz 2002).

4) The fourth curricular move centres on “indigenizing” and “decolonizing” the women’s studies curriculum. “Indigenizing” involves the integration of Indigenous thought and perspectives; rather than focusing on Aboriginal women for a single unit or class in an introductory course, for example, Indigenous women’s perspectives are woven across course topics and themes. The closely related concept of “decolonizing” refers to the anti-colonial project of critiquing western worldviews and challenging oppressive power structures that they uphold. According to Maori scholar Linda Smith, decolonizing, “once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power” including in the academy (1999, 98). For Davis, decolonization of women’s studies means displacing white, Western subjectivities from the

centre of course texts and topics, and disrupting Eurocentric, first-world privilege through an examination of colonial relations from the perspectives of colonized “others” (2010). Aboriginal feminists including Smith (Cherokee) (2005), LaRocque (Metis) (2007), and Green (Ktunaxa/Cree-Scots Metis) (2007) see such anti-colonial feminist approaches as critical to grasping urgent issues faced by Indigenous women today. For example, Smith (2005) argues that because sexual violence has been used as a weapon of colonialism to destroy and assimilate Aboriginal people into a white racist, sexist hierarchy, anti-violence and anti-colonial struggles cannot be separated if feminists hope to end violence against *all* women. Straddling tensions between anti-colonial and feminist perspectives (in no small part due to white, European feminist failure to recognize white women’s complicity with colonialism and imperialism) (Ali 2007; Grande 2003), women’s studies instructors are now taking up the important task of decolonizing the curriculum. Many feminist scholars, both Native and non-Native alike, are working to centre Indigenous feminist thought, issues, and activism; analyze the gendered genesis and consequences of colonialism; and teach learners to interrogate their positionality and implicatedness in current conditions (Blyth 2008; Dion 2009).

The above trends are transforming the field in significant and exciting ways. Even a cursory glance at program descriptions and course offerings (including those first-year outlines we received) reveals that these developments are influential in women’s and gender studies across the country. It is possible that some might see the new directions as evidence of a fragmenting field with a fractured focus, as the centre and subject of what historically defined women’s studies undergoes profound challenges and shifts. The curricular moves we identify, however, are broad and internally diverse: they can be taken up in scholarship, teaching, and activism in many different ways and are subject to continual debate and revision. Our interest is in ensuring that feminist analyses of gender and sexism remain central points of entry into these broad new arenas. We maintain that there is a need for a sustained study of gender and sexism as they operate and intersect with other axes

of power and difference including racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism, and that women's and gender studies must continue to provide that "critical edge" in its engagements with gender, queer, and trans theory, intersectionality, transnationalism, and indigeneity.

Reflections on Introductory Course Curriculum

What is it that introductory women's and gender studies courses today are hoping to accomplish? From our review of syllabi and calendar descriptions, we have synthesized the following list of common goals, which admittedly is partial and suggestive of greater coherence across programs than probably exists:

- To introduce students to women's/gender studies as a broad, dynamic, interdisciplinary, and global field of inquiry, and to familiarize students with some of the key issues, debates, and approaches in feminist scholarship and activism.
- To complicate normative understandings of concepts like "women," "sex," "gender," "race," and "disability" by examining historical and contemporary constructions of "difference."
- To analyze and challenge hierarchical and intersecting relations of power influenced by gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, ability, and other categories of difference.
- To understand how power relations are embedded in institutions and in everyday, taken-for-granted social relations, practices, and values.
- To highlight affinities and differences among women, both within North America and worldwide, and to analyze intersecting social, cultural, political, and economic systems which shape their lives and agency.
- To explore the multiple pathways and forms of women's individual and collective resistance to injustice and inequities in the past and the present, and to analyze their creative visions and strategies for change in local and global contexts.
- To inspire and empower students to develop their knowledge of feminist scholarship and to engage critically in their communities at local, national, or global levels.
- To develop students' skills in critical thinking and analysis, reading, and writing, and to create classroom environments that

support learners' respectful debate and disagreement.

These goals and objectives reflect a vision of women's and gender studies which is indebted to the insights and emphases emerging from the curricular shifts described above. Instructors charged with the responsibility of developing entry-level courses must absorb these trends, sift through confusing and often contradictory perspectives, and become familiar with the underlying debates. As we worked through these challenges in our own teaching, we have generated a number of governing principles that are helping us incorporate the new theoretical developments.

1) Diversity of authors, multiplicity of disciplines: We found that it is important to include work by a broad range of authors from various social, economic, and geographic identities and locations. We need to highlight the richness of women's studies literature and debates and the diversity of women's experiences, perspectives, and analyses. We want voices from the margins as well as the centre. Women's studies developed as a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field, and students need exposure to feminist scholarship from across the disciplines as well as within the newer interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary women's and gender studies stream. (For debates on multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinarity see Bouchard 2004; Buker 2003; Dölling and Hark 2001; Finger and Rosner 2001; Friedman 1998, 2001; Kitch 2003; Shteir 2007; Wiegman 2001.) Because a minority of first-year students typically go on to major or joint major in the field, the introductory course might be the only one they take that specifically and consistently centres feminist work. While selections should balance historical with contemporary analyses, to address broader society's historical amnesia they also should aim to build a strong foundation in history.

2) Canadian and Aboriginal content: We believe that in Canadian women's studies classrooms there should be a focus on Canada, partly to challenge some commonly voiced assumptions that gender and other inequalities exist mainly beyond our borders (over "there"), and partly to encourage student identification with content. Understanding the specificity of issues in Canada provides students with critical

perspectives on their immediate contexts, where they can also begin to untangle the multiple and complex relations of power between “the West and the rest.” We believe a focus on Indigenous women and colonial histories within the Canadian context is also essential, not merely in a few separate classes or a distinct section of the course, but as sustained themes throughout. There is a rich and growing body of Native women’s writing, including work by Indigenous feminists, and integrating this work across thematic sections builds breadth and depth of understanding.

3) Global/transnational content: Although we maintain it is useful for Canadian topics’ specificity to be foregrounded in introductory women’s and gender studies courses in this country, it is critical that links are made to broader global trends and to the diversity of women’s experiences within and between different geographic and political contexts. Students need encouragement to think about the local and the global as mutually constitutive. Global systems and institutions of power demand close examination, and material should be included by and about women in various parts of the world while trying to avoid the “feminist as tourist model” so aptly critiqued by Mohanty (2006) where women from “other countries” are merely added in to existing Eurocentric frameworks. The Canadian foregrounding we envision does not take up fully Mohanty’s challenge to “internationalize” women’s studies curriculum in accordance with the “feminist solidarity” model that she favours. Our approach, however, still draws on her insights and those of other transnational feminist scholars.

4) Multiple genres, styles, and methods: As instructors, we appreciate materials that vary genres and styles, exposing students to the multiple forms in which feminist ideas are created, sharpening their skills at reading across disciplines, and celebrating epistemological diversity. In addition to standard scholarly articles, short fiction, poetry, and personal narrative add a great deal to a textbook or coursepack, and not only by breaking up the academic style. They can teach different truths, and can move audiences in different ways, and often more intimately, than straight scholarly pieces. Popular works by activists or activist organizations ground the

material in practice and let students in on strategies and debates from inside the ranks of social justice movements. Such works also inspire students to see the relevance of their studies, and generate ideas for their action-oriented praxis. Materials and teaching aids must be chosen with attention to the wide variation in identities, ages, backgrounds, interests, literacy levels, and other academic skills among first-year students.

5) Balance of bad news/good news: Women’s and gender studies instructors are well aware that students can be overwhelmed with the “bad news” about women’s status and socially created inequalities, particularly in contemporary neoliberal times. The optimism that fueled second-wave feminists is not as accessible to our students for a host of different reasons, yet they want to build on signs of hope. Diverse examples and case studies of women’s resistance go far to dispel lingering myths about women’s powerlessness, by challenging gendered and racialized stereotypes and conveying a sense of the vibrancy of human agency. Organized and collective forms of resistance, as well as individual actions, require exploration. Many students yearn to explore and share ideas about what they can do, as individuals and in groups of their own making and choosing, to participate in social change. The introductory course content and pedagogy should inspire and facilitate students’ social justice aspirations, while also developing their intellectual capacity to critique different pathways of resistance.

Conclusion

We have geared this article towards a general women’s studies audience in Canada but more specifically to first-time and even seasoned instructors of introductory courses. While making no claims to comprehensiveness, we have reviewed in broad strokes some of the key contexts and developments—theoretical, political, and curricular—that inform the current state of women’s and gender studies, and that shape the thinking and rethinking of the beginner-level undergraduate course. As scholars in the field continue to question and revise the very foundations of women’s studies, the introductory course becomes a site of debate,

uncertainty, and often anxiety. Compounding these challenges, programs and departments face financial, administrative, and political pressures in the current neoliberal climate, thus intensifying the scrutiny of women and gender studies programs, their content, pedagogy, and enrolments. The introductory course, typically the biggest course in a program's offerings and the foundational course for the field, does not escape this critical gaze. This article offers some practical and theoretical reflections that might assist instructors in the challenging task of mounting the entry-level course.

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