



# Interrogations of Community from the Women and Gender Studies Program at The College at Brockport

*This project draws from hybrid methodologies to enact an interdisciplinary analysis of students' articulations of community within the Women and Gender Studies Program at The College at Brockport. In order to subvert traditional colonizing research power dynamics, my own positionality as a trans\* masculine queer identified person is contextualized within broader networks of power throughout. To highlight the creativity and recognition in relationships, I deploy and document "community" not to collapse any particular identities or other distinctions that exist among my co-participants, but to invite a revaluing of conventional boundaries and a rethinking about how knowledge is produced.*

## INTRODUCTION

This research project is a collaborative investigation into the perceptions of community among my Feminist Research Methods classmates (majors and minors) within the Women and Gender Studies Program at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. Inspired by what Marjorie DeVault (1999) describes as the intersection between attentions to emotional needs and sustaining intellectual work,

I analyze these perceptions to theorize the program as a site for creative new meanings regarding feminism, difference, and coalition-building, while resisting limiting neoliberal models of progress and community. I depart from much of the most available mainstream rhetoric about Women's Studies which deals primarily with the limiting neoliberal models of progress and community. I depart from much of the most available mainstream rhetoric about Women's Studies which deals primarily with the marketability of a Women and Gender Studies Program at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. Inspired by what Marjorie DeVault (1999) describes as the intersection between attentions to emotional needs and sustaining intellectual work, I analyze these perceptions to theorize the program as a site for creative new meanings regarding feminism, difference, and coalition-building, while resisting limiting neoliberal models of progress and community. I depart from much of the most available mainstream rhetoric about Women's Studies which deals primarily with the marketability of a Women and Gender Studies degree; these sources tout the value of characteristics such as interdisciplinarity for their career viability. I have

personal interest and experience in the Women and Gender Studies Program at Brockport as uniquely positioned for interpersonal spaces of encounter, where new knowledge and models of relationality both challenge and re-inscribe dominant models of community, progress, and identity. Specifically, I argue that the interdisciplinarity of the program is both marketable and undermines expectations of marketability itself. That is, the ambiguity – or the challenge to traditional disciplinary loyalties – of the specific community I am interrogating, and for which Women's Studies more broadly is praised and criticized (1) fosters and expands vocabularies for attending to the nuances of intersecting forces of oppression and finding common attributes of resistance and power, and (2) dismantles the myth of Women's Studies (and feminism) as a monolithic political program that operates under recurrent threats of being dismantled within the capitalist corporate academy.

The following account of feminist rhetorical research captures my intentions to focus on explicating imaginative futures of resistance by challenging the taken for granted

evidence of progress before us that ultimately reproduces inequality:

[Feminist rhetorical research] is not primarily to reclaim, establish, or invert but rather to challenge the empirical evidence before us and used to further the inequality of women and other subjugated groups of people. Feminist rhetoric allows us to ask questions that have not previously been asked as well as to posit theories and conduct research that would otherwise remain unimagined (Addison, 2010, p.138).

I incorporate this methodology with Sandra Harding's concept of "cross field appropriation" (as cited in Olson & Hirsh, 1995, p. 194) to interrogate perceptions of community within the program, and to analyze neoliberalism-as-community-as-discursive-practice as one variation of Addison's empirical evidence before us (p. 220). Importantly, Harding (1995, 2004) distinguishes the processes of cross field appropriation from those of "dissolving disciplinary borders" (Olson & Hirsh, p. 220). I extend this line of thinking about disciplinarity and difference to propose that research-as-community is one way that the Women and Gender Studies Program has engaged with multiple truth claims while facing the threat of being dismantled, or forcibly dissolved from

the outside, in order to "think the world rather than being thought by it, to take it apart and understand its mechanisms, and thus [...] reappropriate it intellectually and materially" (Wacquant, 2004, p. 101). I invited my co-participants, all classmates in my Feminist Research Methods class working on their own projects, to bring individual questions to focus group dialogues negotiating our multiple meanings of "community" and the ways in which our experiences within the Women and Gender Studies Program align with these meanings of community (or not), in order to explore new spaces of critique. I also attempted to document the complexities of my classmates' experiences to illustrate the diversity that constitutes the rich context in which my research is embedded.

## **METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

I speak from my own embodied experience, as I can only speak for myself. Theory and praxis are inextricably connected. With regard to the privilege intertwined with bodies in research, Flax (1992) writes:

To take responsibility [...] we need to learn to make claims on our own and others' behalf and to

listen to those which differ from ours, knowing that ultimately there is nothing that justifies them beyond each person's own desire and need and the discursive practices in which these are developed, embedded, legitimated (p. 461).

As researchers, students, philosophers, theorists and activists, how can we take responsibility for the political repercussions of our projects entering inherently political spaces? This research project cannot be separated from my continuing identity project of becoming, and of interrogating the power shaping my own incoherency. Epstein and Straub (1991) invite us to engage with the stakes of specificity that often become silenced by mainstream discourses: "The temptation is to reify ambiguity and to celebrate the disruption of binary oppositions without asking concrete questions about how power is distributed through that disruption or ambiguity" (p. 23). Keeping this in mind, I engage with concrete questions regarding diversity and interdisciplinarity within the context of the Women and Gender Studies Program. These questions, as well as my own experience of recognition in my relationships, make the incoherent

legible on the one hand, while prioritizing inclusivity by continuing to ask how our communities function as spaces of elitism – the mechanism frequently used "to encourage keeping people out" – on the other (Collins, 2009, p. 104).

For example, how can I interrupt the binary perpetuated by reparative "both/and" framings of reality as real/constructed? Who is being left out, and whose voices are not being heard? Furthermore, to highlight the creativity and recognition in relationships, I resist deploying or documenting "community" here in an attempt to collapse any particular identities or other distinctions that exist among my co-participants. However, I do hope to use this abstraction to highlight the connections of sociality and interconnectedness, and to contextualize our creativities and affective public cultures in their ever-shifting permutations (such as those shaping the encounters where I perceive recognition).

For "recognition," I draw (though not exclusively) from Henry Rubin's (2003) definition in *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men*:

Recognition is a function of two relationships: a relationship of distinction and a relationship of

integration. On the one hand, there must be two bounded entities, a “self” and an “other,” for recognition to occur. On the other hand, the insistence on mutuality is a defining feature of recognition. If one seeks recognition, one must be willing to grant recognition to others. Therefore, recognition is a relationship of reciprocity between two distinct, authentic individuals. (p. 15)

This concept of recognition, to me, speaks in part to the interdependency embedded in our social intersubjectivity in terms of the stakes of coherency and creative potential. At the 2012 National Women's Studies Association [NWSA] Conference, Patricia Hill Collins addressed the concept of coalition-building within our desegregating society. She identified commitment to social change as the most salient connection between theoretical work and experience in a community within the corporate academy. But how do we *define* social change in spaces where people are always already excluded from coalition-building and the freedom to define their own needs? Negotiating community within the Women and Gender Studies Program at Brockport – what one participant described as “a mixed bag” – led to discussions of

community beyond an uncritical static space – defined not by boundaries, but by movement across those boundaries–toward critical education that considers privilege as a social issue and de-centers margin-center discourse. However, I do not propose this concept of community as a verb over that of a noun to either dismiss or foreground heteropatriarchal white supremacist capitalism’s violent normative discourses and communities, which are far-reaching in their silencing power. For example, the survival of the program itself remains at stake as long as it retains its marginal status as a program as opposed to a department, and as long as the critical discourses of the community continue to be dismissed and devalued from many directions by the larger community of the college/society as a whole.

While I attempt to use the words of my co-participants to deepen the conversations regarding the impact of societal oppressions on individuals, with this project I am pushing for advocacies of attention to the struggles/achievements of *relationships* divided structurally through disciplinary boundaries in the academy. As an individual in these relationships, I am privileged on many levels within the social matrix in which I am enmeshed: My whiteness, masculinity, educational

access and institutional attachments, able-bodiedness, these factors, among others, shape my positionality as I proceed in the lifelong identity project of challenging privilege/identity construction. Despite my best efforts, I will make mistakes. The embodied assumptions I propose here are informed by my personal experiences within feminist, queer and trans communities, among others, as well as my education within the North American capitalist regime. I propose that the Women and Gender Studies Program is a space of strength and resistance not in spite of its incoherence, but because of it.

**The beast is already inside the house.**

Brown (2009)

In the 2009 issue of *Ms.* Women and Gender Studies graduate Erin “Toni” Williams states:

Women’s studies filled mental and emotional voids an entire lifetime of education had not satisfied, enabling me to examine the world with a sense of clarity and purpose I’d never known. Whether I remain in academia or pursue work that benefits women outside the classroom, I’m excited about

my options (as cited in “A matter of degrees”, p. 67).

In this particular excerpt, the speaker identifies a connection between her emotional experience and the work she will go on to do following graduation. One salient theme that I gathered from the quotes on this particular page was that Women and Gender studies is a rewarding and useful degree. The more I read, the more I began to recognize that one piece of the dominant rhetoric emerging around and about Women and Gender Studies programs of the corporate academy is linked to the viability of a Women’s Studies degree in an economic sense, particularly for its versatility in a technological, globalizing marketplace. Where and to what extent can we rethink these structurally organized communities as spaces of encounter for imagining new modes of relationality informed by process over production? (McRuer, 2006)

Furthermore, in order to situate myself and my voice as a queer trans\* masculine person within my research, and to engage with the above quotes, I would like to flesh out some of the ways that the spaces in which my research will unfold is an already-gendered space. This hierarchy and the violent normative discourses it produces have profound influences on

the ways I articulate my research questions, and organize my project. I cannot dissociate my own embodiment and identity project from the phenomenon of community that I've chosen to study. Naming my own perceptions of community as part of my ongoing identity project (as opposed to an intellectual process, for example) is a conscious effort to distinguish this narrative as my own and no more valid than any other. One encounter that shaped the trajectory of this project took place after an exchange with one of my feminist mentors from the English department. We were discussing the experiences of performance, specifically what it might feel like to perform (music in this case) with a large band that can drown out individual talents, or, as M. Obourn put it: "the production of belonging over sound" (personal communication, 2013). Can identity projects produce belonging over sound? Can they create space for others to speak? And what is the cost of creating these spaces in a neoliberal discursive context? These are some of the questions informing my continuous identity project of resisting white supremacist heteropatriarchal oppressive versions of masculinity. And as a researcher, I strive to resist a violent normative colonizer identity

through a prioritizing of collaboration (Hesse-Biber, 2004).

In addition to calling for solidarity around commitments to social justice, Patricia Hill Collins advocated a rethinking (and re-prioritizing) of intersectionality and social justice in a desegregating society in her keynote address at NWSA 2012. In this speech, Collins problematizes academic language (intended for specificity) deployed as academic capital at the expense of its subversive potential. For example, she points to the co-opted pluralization of words such as "feminisms," useful for opening up critiques of power to resist hegemonic versions of feminism, but now with the power to justify itself by mere virtue of its status in academic spaces. As Wendy Brown (2009) observed of reforms at the University of California, "[Y]ou cannot simply say yes or no to privatization because the beast is already inside the house" ("Save the University" of *Reclaim UCSD*). At the same time Hursh (2008) argues "neoliberalism is neither inevitable nor neutral" (p. 126). In other words, although neoliberalism is one of the powerful, meta-narrated questions to which our social projects much negotiate/respond with and against, it does not mean that inequity is

inevitable and cannot be changed. I invoke the abstraction of neoliberalism not to make a polemic Marxist proclamation, but to attend to the explicit connection that the State University of New York (SUNY) Report Card outlines in the overlap between new liberal policies and economic progress in New York. I pull the following excerpt from the SUNY “Annual Report Card” (2013) to show the explicit articulation of education’s tie to the New York economy in order to de-contextualize some aspects of our perceptions of community in the Women and Gender Studies Program:

SUNY will not only measure success in teaching and research, we will also embrace our public mission to play a role in the critical issues facing our state, including helping to turn around New York's economy and improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers. To do this, we have identified priorities in alternative energy, “cradle-to-career” education, globalization, diversity, research and innovation, health and wellness, and the impact SUNY students, faculty, and staff can theoretically have on building stronger *communities statewide* (emphasis mine) (para. 4).

The rhetoric of the SUNY report card aligns with neoliberal discourse in its direct linking of political involvement and education to economic progress of individuals and the state. What are the implications of this? My critique is not of the articulation of the specific goals listed above, but for the lack of alternative social registers for progress and value that are not also always tied to capital. Mark Fisher (2009) describes “capitalist realism” as a world in which, “everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business” (p. 17). However, he also departs from Marxist class ideology by highlighting the limitations that capitalism places on ways of being in the world, which includes the ahistorical impulses that haunt the ways we create and negotiate community. When we take capitalism, like civilization, for granted in this way, we are negotiating responsibility within a system that has largely already been outlined for us. The SUNY Report Card further claims, “You can hold us to it” (para. 1) which ties SUNY’s performance to a “competitive New York” (“Report Card, 2011). This invitation is participatory and democratic; how can we then, as students and researchers in this context of “capitalist realism,” access and enact critical pedagogy?



(Fisher, 2009, p.15) The Women and Gender Studies Program at Brockport, through advocacy, outreach, and collaboration, is a unique space for producing belonging over sound. I draw from M. Obourn's distinction between "belonging" and "sound" previously discussed. Additionally, Rubin's (2003) concept of recognition as a relationship of reciprocity, as I have experienced within the program, constitutes the noise, or belonging, produced in space of Women and Gender Studies. Specifically, Rubin's reciprocity is useful for moving beyond a concept of Women and Gender Studies as a marginal space, into one of discourses produced through movement between and beyond conventional or structurally delimited boundaries we call community. However, in questions of political voice in the contemporary globalized political economy, the discursivity between noise to sound is a relationship that invites a revaluing of coherency imagined differently. Sound is not merely a unit of discourse articulated and defined easily, or delimited by the listener. Within its social context, individual sound both maintains its profound difference and articulating force within the collectivity of noise,

and is marked by the interconnections that characterize listening as reciprocal.

*"Capitalist realism" as context and the "hidden injuries" of everyday life (Gill 2009)*

So, why this particular group? In a general sense, I have a particular affinity to the campus. I have found a community of many non-traditional students such as myself. I experience a sense of shared perspective as well as belonging with my classmates. I also derive a great deal of support from my fellow students who find voice and construct themselves as individuals in ways that I admire. In the course of working together on our own individual research projects, the group of us had the opportunity to dialogue about issues to which we are in close intellectual, physical, and/or emotional proximity. In some ways, this interaction was mitigated by the structure of the classroom and the university itself, with facilitation and expertise provided by our professor. In *Crip Theory*, McRuer (2006) establishes, "[q]ueer theory and praxis emerge as much or more from nonacademic spaces" (p. 232). Considering the elitism that haunts and debilitates queer theory/embodiment as praxis from making (particularly) non-white, non-able-bodied and/or non-masculine identities central, I engage

standpoint epistemology and queer theory to acknowledge that my co-participants and I are not merely individual knowledge producers; we are co-participants in the *process* of knowledge production outside of the academy and through interconnections across our heterogeneous investments across the college. Our individual research projects engaged with topics such as study abroad students' perceptions of human rights/feminism, body image perceptions on campus, and the sex education of incoming freshmen. As Holloway (2009) argues, "such forms of embodied critique emerge not from academic research into one's condition, but dialectically through the experience of realizing not just that things are not as they should be, but that you exist in the 'wrong state of things'" (p. 14).

It is this movement, this shifting and expansive field of knowledge production, which constitutes the tensions and affinities between our perceptions of community in our spaces of encounter. Can this framing be used to imagine community differently? And how does this relate to our identities as citizens? Lauren Berlant (1999) explains, "Sentimental politics generally promotes and maintains the hegemony of the national identity form, no mean

feat in the face of continued widespread intercultural antagonism and economic cleavage" (p. 53). While I perceive a visceral attachment to the space of our encounters, what can these attachments mean politically? Can feelings that we experience in the affective public sphere be examined to contextualize the limitations of our imaginative futurities without generalizing experience over structure? Do our incoherent communities have the potential to challenge dominant exploitive models without losing their specific lived realities/meanings in their representations? Berlant suggests, with regard to tying our incoherencies to social being-ness:

Training in one's own incoherence, training in the ways in which one's complexity and contradiction can never be resolved by the political, is a really important part of a political theory of non-sovereignty. But we still have to find a place for adjudication, or working out, or working for, or working over, which requires a pedagogy of attention, of paying attention to the different ways in which we engender different kinds of claims on the world, in our attachments or ways of moving or desires for habituation or

aspirations... (as cited in Davis & Sarlin, 2011, para 17).

The “researched” of my project engender claims on the world that differ from my own and from each other; they were also researchers in their own concurrent projects on diverse topics, and it was from listening to their processes that I was inspired to document the listening itself. A community of researchers co-participating in the development of each other’s methodologies and navigating the emotional terrain that these projects entail was a space for “paying attention,” in nuanced ways - for critical “adjudication” that could easily go undocumented and ghosted by the production of completed research projects created with explicit recourse to sanctions in the form of grades. While the political economy of the classroom was structured in both useful and limiting ways, some of the most transformative, engaging, and sustaining exchanges of ideas and mutuality went otherwise unrecorded and unexamined.

There are multiple forces in the form of theoretical and practical norms governing my academic disciplines which construct my own biases, which rendered certain aspects of my project inaccessible, while opening up others. My position of dominance as the

researcher is one that I attempted to consciously subvert and make useful in creating a non-dominant identity of researcher as collaborator in order to imagine the researcher/researched dynamic as a space for community. The position of researcher calls me into a position of critical advocacy for others, which is a space of responsibility and privilege.

One of the epistemological questions underlying my research project is, ‘How might this research be distributed within the academic community?’ The audience for my “results” is firstly my classmates, those who chose to participate and those who chose not to. At the outset of the course, through a conversation with my research advisor, I learned that despite her perceptions of community within the Women and Gender Studies Program, there was a lack of a cohesive narrative to document this community. I hope this project will put into motion further interrogations. There are several reasons for this; one is that our Women and Gender Studies Program is currently that – a program – and not a department. Despite lack of resources and support in structural ways, it is my experience that the passion, support, and expertise (particularly from our feminist mentors/teachers) invigorate

the program with its unique vitality, student support, and intellectual rigor. These qualities contribute to the translation of the noise of belonging and internal community into an externally legible sound for those in power. Being heard from the center is crucial for the survival of the program, but if we are to interrupt the reproduction of inequality, we must continue to creatively interrogate the meaning of listening and politics.

### **Experiential knowledge**

In an attempt to frame my experiential knowledge, I draw on feminist queer negativity as articulated by Jack Halberstam's (2007) queer negativity. Halberstam advocates the negative affects – which are oftentimes subordinated limiting operative binaries (such as success and failure) that structure masculinist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal capitalism – for their political potential and power of resistance. In his critique of masculinist, anti-social queer negativity projects, Halberstam (2008) distinguishes between feminist and anti-feminist anti-social queer negativity: he identifies the latter as ahistorical and aligned with liberal progress ideas that ignore women, domesticity and

reproduction. Instead, he advocates an anti-social queer negativity that is:

[W]illing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and put, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate, and, to quote Jamaica Kincaid, to make everyone a little less happy! (p. 154)

Beyond establishing this important distinction, Halberstam (2008) also emphasizes the need for affects as sites of resistance that can only be accessed and recognized through an attention to those legacies of queer resistance that may not register within masculinist frameworks. The Women and Gender Studies Program at Brockport provides a register for such legacies. Furthermore, Halberstam (2008) enacts this affective shift with several examples: “Jamaica Kincaid’s colonial rage;” “Valerie Solanas and the War on Men;” “Abromovics and Ono on Radical Passivity.” I open up the affective archive of the Women and Gender Studies community at Brockport into what Halberstam describes as a space for local resistance

that can articulate itself as a branch of the “many headed hydra” that historically opposed white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism but that was written into history as something else. Previously a debilitating mechanism for isolation and closing off, my personal experience of depression within the temporal, emotional, and intellectual space of the Women and Gender Studies community facilitated an opening up, for creatively “working out, or working for, or working over” (Berlant as cited in Davis & Sarlin, para 17). It became a space not to transform depression into something else, but to experience depression differently. Nurturing this space as one where the co-production of knowledge is constantly in flux allows me to revalue my attachments to skepticism, doubt, and the intellectual joys/pains of experience, not as subordinate to other modes of sociability but as part of the human experience and a viable site for resistance. Furthermore, I carry an attachment to the program with regards to my sincere desire to help create a space that is at once safe and not asked to justify its own existence all of the time. The program’s marginalized location in relation to an institution that is affected by systemic inequalities –

among them violence against women, rape culture and oppression – creates a space of knowledge that both runs the risk of becoming a dominant space, and is consciously self-reflective in ways that may be foreclosed by taken-for-granted disciplinary codes. In my experience, there is an overlap of the emotional/intellectual in experiencing shared spaces in that my co-participants and I, pursuing a Women and Gender Studies degree, do not have to justify our choices to each other; I feel in these moments of encounter and recognition that I do not have to justify my existence, and that while our perspectives may overlap in very limited ways, if at all, what is often taken for granted is just the desire to hear each other, and I find this incredibly sustaining.

I also entered this research with a specific experience of interdisciplinarity with Sociology and English minors that I think is worth mentioning. I have been in classes where students claim that affirmative action is reverse discrimination, engage in victim blaming, or proclaim that women have achieved equality so “what is the big deal anymore.” Mistakes will be made, and I am responsible as well. My point is that, for me, these common-place incidents register as individual-level

examples of a larger cultural dissonance that operates structurally. In the absence of dissenting languages and impulses in these spaces, how do I take responsibility for myself and others who might be pathologized, silenced, and isolated, for feeling what they may not be able to articulate coherently to those in power or to each other – that epidemic dissociation between the fetishized, celebratory, dominant narratives of autonomous individualism and those narratives that have yet to even register as a result. As one of my co-participants described her perceptions of recognition within the Women and Gender Studies Program: “I’m not crazy, neither are you,” (Participant G).

When a man murdered Alexandra Kogut on the Brockport campus this semester, I experienced rage with no place to put it. I do not know this woman, but the transformations of this project are in part a result of the rage that I felt/feel. At the same time, I am wary of sharing this in the context of an assignment. I do so because I hope to channel some of the rage productively, and respectfully, and to express my hope that – given the precarious existence of the program, and amid continuous pressure from students, faculty, our families, and others to

defend ourselves – if there is a distinctively viable space within the academy to fight systemic inequality, including the atrocity of violent masculinities, it is here. In the novel, *Reading Lolita in Tebran*, Azar Nafisi (2004) writes that to ignore the suffering of others is to deny their existence. How can we engage in critique, and community, that does not simply “hand down sentences,” in all senses of the word, but that “multiply [...] signs of existence” instead, so that all individuals can exist and flourish? (Foucault, 1980, p.326)

### **Queer Relationships Researcher and Researched**

Pulling from Detamore (2010), I argue that the alternative social worlds co-constructed between researcher and researched as a political space can be used to highlight the ways in which our “embodied critiques” of the “hidden injuries of everyday life” is a site of knowledge production. I shared the following focus group questions for the sake of transparency with my co-participants, however our discussions touched on many different topics, many of which were not directly related to these questions:

- How do you identify yourself?

- Have you experienced a sense of community in your experience at Brockport? What does this feel like?
- Has being a student in the WMGS Program at Brockport changed your identity and/or your goals? How?
- Can you identify any relationships (academic, friendship, mentorship, research, etc) that have facilitated any significant changes in your experience or self-identification at Brockport?
- What does it mean to say that there is an overlap between the intellectual and the personal?

I also shared the following research questions with my co-participants, to which they may have tailored their responses in order to help me with my project, as we were all working on our own individual projects concurrently:

- What would constitute the tensions and affinities between our perceptions of community?
- Where is there language for inclusivity that isn't digested by the system immediately in its corporate codification?
- How do we navigate/negotiate spaces of rigorous criticality and accessibility within an institution that has been hierarchied for us?

- How can I take an intersectional approach to masculinity?
- Does community relate to our identities as citizens or influence civic participation?
- What can perceptions of community in a pluralistic incoherent sense tell us about the potentiality for inclusivity?
- What sorts of old/new meanings are created in the embodied negotiations of community that take place within the Women and Gender Studies Program? Why are they important?

**Synthesis: “I’m not crazy; neither are you”**

While it would be disingenuous of me to claim broadly that I have experienced a cohesive narrative from the dialogues with our co-participants, I would like to identify a few themes:

- Disagreement
- Relationships
- Radical listening
- Critical Thinking
- Recognition
- Authenticity
- Responding to persistent pressure to justify choice of major to friends/family
- Discontent

This group of Women and Gender Studies students responds in politically strategic ways to the pressure to de-pathologize the individuals who constitute it by separating stereotypes of trauma, while resisting closing off the space for those whom the program acts as a space of healing and meaning-making.

Participant F's reputation as an activist on and off campus preceded her. After the second focus group, she and I walked together for a bit for a one-on-one chat. She revealed which of her classes she felt were most fulfilling/challenging, as well as some of her frustrations with the level of discussion in a few of them. She tentatively expressed that she felt her experience was quite different than the others in our focus group because she did not relate to a feeling of community on campus. She touched on this during our group discussion as well, and some of my co-participants who lived on campus said they felt they understood this, drawing on their comparative experiences of immersion in campus life. For example, as Participant G expressed, "School is my life right now." F expressed her concern that her feeling of detachment would be perceived as "feeling better than" students who learn and experience the

program differently from herself. She shared, "I'm a traditional learner, and school is like my job right now. I'm not here to make friends."

I perceived some similarities between Participants F and G that reflected some themes within the larger group: languages of movement from the shared space of the structured community of the Women and Gender Studies Program into individual lives (whether it be spaces of work, activism, friendships, family, relationships, other disciplines), as well as a gratitude for the mentorship of our program director as one critical support due to her consistent effort to recognize students as complex individuals with a keen attentiveness to our different needs. From our very different discussions about movement – from the space of the Women and Gender Studies community back into our individual lives outside of campus – emerged narratives not of resolution or settling or reconciliation, but of negotiation, different needs, and finding voice. This movement dismantles the constructed boundaries between the consolidated "sound" of external articulations of coherency and the recognizable "noise" of internal productions of community belonging.



Many of the participants reported that they had actually left more “stable” academic tracks – those that they felt would have provided them a sense of certainty about their future – to join the Women and Gender Studies Program. For example, Participant E transferred from a large university abroad. She expressed her sense of community at Brockport in general, not specific to Women and Gender Studies. She explained that at her former institution, she was just a number: “No one would recognize me. If I went back and walked through my former department, not one person would recognize me.” Her original plan was to go to law school with the goal of helping asylum seekers. Now, she says, “I have no clue what I want to do with my life, and that is genuine.” However, when explaining her reasons for continuing at Brockport, she described her communities at home as spaces where she felt ignored:

This is the first time I’m doing something that means something to me. I enjoy it more than I’ve ever enjoyed anything. At home, I was shut down whenever I tried to address anything that meant something to me. I was losing my shit and frustrated with life in general. And my friends talked

about boys and hair and drinking and looking for husbands twenty-four seven.

Participant C felt unheard within her family, which she says is because she is the only one in the family not in the medical field. She described how her “family doesn’t give a shit about it [her major] because it’s ‘not important.’” Participant C is active in campus outreach and activism, working on campus to help educate students and provide support for issues such as sexual health, education, and sexual violence.

Considering the recruitment rhetoric from *Ms. Magazine* noted earlier, these interactions indicate the usefulness of a Women and Gender Studies degree beyond recourse to neoliberal metrics of economic growth.

## I DISSENT

In “Sex and Gender through the Prism of Difference,” Messner et al. (2013) promote analyses that move beyond the “patchwork quilt phase” of studying groups to those that “highlight bridges of interdependency,” because as they observe, “relationality suggests that the lives of different groups are interconnected even without face-to-face relations” (p. 18). Embedded in this patchwork quilt argument is a

critique of the cooptation of difference for political divisiveness, but with an emphasis on bridging over our recognized real differences. McRuer (2006), like Messner (2013) and Collins (2009), distinguishes between tolerance and acceptance:

I know that assertions of decisive differences between our present and a problematic past, appeals to things like a seemingly unprecedented "climate of integration and diversity" and triumphant conclusions are generally the necessary components of a progress narrative and, when present, sufficient for constituting said

narrative, but in this case, I consent as a reader to not see it. Call it a queer eye for the progress narrative, but you will have gathered that I dissent (p. 178).

In a desegregating society, what constitutes politically responsible feminist narrative and rhetoric that allows us to "make accessible" the sites where our representations are produced? (McRuer, 2006; Collins, 2012). As our political economy continues to reshape the dominant meanings of community, to all of the narratives of progress and equality that constitute the violent normative discourses of Brockport: I dissent.

### **That the Protagonist Is Always a Man**

That Cheney's daughter campaigns for Bush's son.  
That Bush's son wins a presidency that hates her.

The way Condoleeza Rice called her boss, her husband. That it was an easy slip.

\*That Michelle Obama is called the First Black Lady.

That the 1960s beatniks are the revolutionary poets. That seventh-century-BC Sappho is that lesbian poet.

How the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame describes Joan Baez as "the female Bob Dylan." That she launched his career.

That in "female musician," adjective becomes noun.

How Marge Piercy says “the moon must be female.”  
That the moon was forcibly penetrated by an American flag.  
That plots on the moon are now up for sale.  
Because Mother Earth is melting.

How the Security Council of the United Nations has five  
permanent members. That all five are the official “nuclear weapon  
states.” That the United States is the only country to have  
dropped an atomic bomb. That it is called the security council.

The way the old philosophers who declared human nature to be  
naturally brutish were men.

How that one guy in your women’s studies class raised his hand  
for the first time in the semester to reprimand that “men can  
be raped too.” That we respect all voices. That maybe he has a  
point. That he is a good guy for being there.

That Margaret Thatcher. Queen Elizabeth. Hillary Clinton.  
How anomalies save their ass.

That father with the baby in the backpack in the grocery store.  
How exceptions erase us.

That Adam produced Eve. That Mary did not birth Jesus.  
How miracles screw us.

The way that a Father, a Son and a Holy Spirit exclude us from  
the highest positions of power in the Catholic Church. How  
they, condemning women and fags, then don dresses, diddle  
little boys, devour the flesh and blood of their gaunt, devout,  
dapper, special man-friend.

The way women, denied education, had to pass down our  
herstory through stories and poems and dance and music and  
recipes. How the Great writers and poets and dancers and  
musicians and chefs have not been women.

That my computer spell-checks “herstory.”

The way the English language carries us inside Man like his fetus. That it is only our wombs that are patrolled.

That the members of Jane, helping to provide safe abortions before *Roe v. Wade*, were criminals.

That the rounding bellies in South Dakota clinic lines are murderers.

That Emma Goldman was considered a U.S. terrorist.

That they are pro-life. That they take the good words.

That Ann Coulter may consider herself an “us.”

That self-determination is terrifying.

That self-determination is what we fight for.

That we fight for our sisters’ right to choose stilettos. How the women in horror films can’t run in stilettos. That one drag queen who used her stiletto as a weapon during Stonewall.

How the women in horror films can’t run in stilettos.

The way CNN finally devoted an hourlong segment to the brutal systematic government-sponsored rapes in Darfur.

How these women fled bombed and burning homes and still had the courage to testify to Amnesty International. How one sixteen-year-old had been raped by ten men for seventy-two hours straight. How pregnant women are not spared. How women have their nails pulled out. How unmarried women are considered spoiled.

That the title of the broadcast was “Angelina Jolie: Her Motherhood, Her Mission.”

That she was wearing stilettos.

That the Lesbian Herstory Archives can fit no more material into its Brooklyn brownstone.

That Focus on the Family headquarters has its own zip code.

That the National Organization for Women. That the Kitchen Table Press. That the Radical Cheerleaders. That the Feminist

Majority. That NGLTF. That the Third Wave Foundation. That Planned Parenthood. That the Guerrilla Girls. That Code Pink. That NARAL. That Refuse and Resist.

\*That the Women and Gender Studies Program at Brockport.

\*That the Women's Center.

\*That the center is in the basement.

\*That One Billion Rising.

\*That Alexandra Kogut cannot rise.

That.

Is why I am a radical feminist.

(Olson, 2007, p. 172-175 [\*additional stanzas by A. McKay])

*Performed with Dr. Barb LeSavoy at the One Billion Rising open mic night, 2013*

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