ABSTRACT

TRANSFORMATIVE SUBJ ECTS EMBODYING DISCIPLINE(S): AN INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE FOR (POST)FEMINISTS

Leah Ross, University of Texas, USA

Presented at Gender and power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference
August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

Academic Women’s and Gender Studies (WGS) programs in the US have often decried their students’ reluctance to embrace the word “feminism” to describe their politics, academic pursuits, and personal engagements, a situation reflected in the controversial critiques of the discipline by authors such as Alice Walker who termed “womanist” (1984). The proposed paper will take up a case study from one of the oldest U.S. Women’s Studies Programs, at the State University of New York at Albany. The academic year 2000-01 saw the student coalition, a group intended to forge dialogue, between students and faculty, for the first time in program history challenging the local methodological and theoretical flaws of the discipline, which they perceived as stifling and stagnant. With reference to the specific history of US academic feminism, I will argue this protest as a part of a very specific epistemological critique leveled against the U.S WGS discipline, a call for WGS to move beyond its first institutionalized configurations, into a position that would allow it to become a powerful discourse posited for international and local social transformation towards to aims of liberation. My analysis of this generational change will be guided by Rosi Braidotti’s model of the nomadic subject (1994). There, she describes how the subject of feminist knowledge needs to be deconstructed and recreated, if that subject is to escape a new essentialism. In the SUNY case, the protesters’ demands open up a new feminist praxis based in an inessential subject. Their specific demands outline necessary revisions that could redefine US WGS as a specific site of cultural production intrinsic to various communities, ethical/philosophical/political claims, discourses, and institutional sites. These demands include:
- methodological and disciplinary pluralism
- construction of forums, which generate transformative and multi-voiced dialogues that can replace too simple oppositional binaries, and which buttress self-reflexive and inclusive pedagogy.
- a re-conceptualization of the curriculum to create productive tensions between revisionary and traditional, current and historical, local and global forces.
- a revision of the subject(s) of knowledge defined as feminist, thereby refuting liberal feminist rhetoric and instantiating a practice that cultivates a more democratic location of knowledge production and distribution.

This redefinition would reclaim WGS’ critical fluidity from behind its current contradictory practices, which fragment and marginalize intellectual, community, and academic engagement. The efforts of the SUNY Women’s Studies’ students exemplify how US institutional practice has created a critical location for reconstructing its traditional institutional, epistemological, and ethical loci, yet one which is inherently contradictory in resisting the change needed to build a new generation of committed relationships across academia and into the community, to redefine the “feminist subject” into a more inclusive, less monolithic position, and to engender new modes of cultural production. The case, however, points toward how “subjects of knowledge” and their produced objects are beginning in US feminism outside the academy to be redefined as
active participants in an ongoing epistemological process rather than as reified subjects/objects of the academy.