

3-29-2007

## The Conundrum of Women's Studies as Institutional: New Niches, Undergraduate Concerns, and the Move Towards Contemporary Feminist Theory and Action

Rebecca K. Willman  
*University of South Florida*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

### Scholar Commons Citation

Willman, Rebecca K., "The Conundrum of Women's Studies as Institutional: New Niches, Undergraduate Concerns, and the Move Towards Contemporary Feminist Theory and Action" (2007). *USF Tampa Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.  
<https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd/3861>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the USF Graduate Theses and Dissertations at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in USF Tampa Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usf.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usf.edu).

The Conundrum of Women's Studies as Institutional: New Niches, Undergraduate  
Concerns, and the Move Towards Contemporary Feminist Theory and Action

by

Rebecca K. Willman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Women's Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Sara Crawley, Ph.D.  
Marilyn Myerson, Ph.D.  
Maralee Mayberry, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:  
March 29, 2007

Keywords: Feminism, Theory, Activism, Women, Politics

© Copyright 2007, Rebecca K. Willman

## Dedication

For Spencer Cahill, because your passion for academics and devotion to your students will forever inspire me. You are always alive in my heart and work.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my mom and Paula for their infinite support and love; to my mom who taught me that women are strong from the very beginning. Thank you for believing in me when I say I'm going to change the world--it made me know I can. To the Department of Women's Studies at USF, you provided me with a home in which to grow and become someone I never thought I'd be; you helped turn this C-average high school kid into an academic scholar. To my friend Clare, without whom I could have never survived this process--our talks about everything and nothing provided me with the strength I needed when I never thought I'd catch my breath; also, for loving Skipper's as much as I do. To my activist, Ali, your drive, heart, and love mean the world to me; no matter what, you're always my girl. To Marilyn, I thank you for your peaceful hugs and presence, for the constant reminders to love and believe in myself, and for always making time for me. To Maralee, you helped me prepare to teach, the only thing I've ever wanted to do; your involvement with this project was invaluable. Lastly, to Sara: this wouldn't have been possible without your guidance and hands-on support; you helped bring to fruition that which I've longed to write for 12 years. You are an incredible professor, but most importantly, a kind and trusting friend. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Literature Review: Contemporary Concerns on Feminism as Institutional	4
The Heart of Women’s Studies: The Second and Third Waves of Feminism	10
The Face of Contemporary Feminism: Women’s Studies Programs as Abeyance Structures	14
Women’s Studies as Feminist Abeyance: Setting the Terms for Activism	18
Chapter Two: Methods and Methodology	21
Interview Findings	25
Theme #1: “It changed my life.”	27
Theme #2: “I’m an activist--well, kind of...”	32
Theme #3: “I want to do more, I just don’t know where to begin.”	39
Chapter Three: New Directions	47
Defining the Matrix: Four Pillars of Activism	48
Structural Activism	50
Community Activism	51
Activism of the Self	53
Discursive Activism: Consciousness-raising as Contemporary Feminist Praxis	56
Chapter Four: Conclusion	62
References	66
Bibliography	69

The Conundrum of Women's Studies as Institutional: New Niches, Undergraduate Concerns, and the Move Towards Contemporary Feminist Theory and Action

Rebecca K. Willman

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I address current debates on the perceived lack of contemporary feminist activism and concerns of Women's Studies as existing within university institutions. I propose that Women's Studies programs and departments serve as locations useful for feminists interested in participating in feminist activism in and beyond the university.

By viewing Women's Studies programs and departments as contemporary abeyance structures in feminist movements, I revisit the ways in which debates on differences between second and third wave feminisms have contributed to social change. In doing so, I highlight how the feminist movement maintains itself between upsurges in mass-based visible collective action. I argue that Women's Studies programs and departments are contemporary locations in which the feminist movement continues to raise feminist consciousness, create feminist activists, produce feminist theory, and contribute to social change.

Through a series of interviews with Women's Studies undergraduate majors and minors, I discuss the ways in which feminist activism is occurring, and address concerns of contemporary feminists with regards to organizing and focusing their activism. I propose a "matrix of activism," comprised of four pillars in which contemporary activism occurs: structural activism, community activism, discursive activism, and activism of the

self. The matrix of activism, including its four pillars, can be utilized in Women's Studies classrooms to clearly discuss how activism is currently done rather than focus on an undefined mass-based feminist movement.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

A longstanding debate circulating throughout Women's Studies programs in the U.S. questions whether such programs prepare students for engaging in feminist activism beyond college campuses (hooks: 1994; Boxer: 1998; Weigman: 2002; Balén: 2005; Kennedy and Beins: 2005; Zimmerman: 2005). More specifically, a major concern is whether institutional Women's and Gender Studies programs have the potential to affect revolutionary social change and if students are adequately equipped with the necessary tools to do "activism" when they leave academia. The plethora of answers to date--"yes," "no," or "kind of, sometimes,"--obscure the issues and are dependent upon the specified definition of "activism". For feminist scholars, and our colleagues engaged in critical race theory and queer theory, we often find ourselves unsure as to whether our "theory" adequately informs "activism" outside the academy. Left with a blurred discussion and intangible answers, our discussions have not successfully resolved the issues at hand, but have rather resulted in a new "niche" in which we are able to research, study, publish, and talk or argue with one another. In this thesis, I will investigate the ways in which institutional Women's Studies programs, as contemporary feminist spaces, prepare students for activism beyond academia and whether such programs have the potential to affect revolutionary social change. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, I will explore the ways we conceptualize and define "activism", what we consider as valuable "activism", and how such activities may or may not contribute to revolutionary and radical social change.



Accepted as their central mission, Women's Studies and Gender Studies scholars have utilized various theoretical approaches for analyzing and critiquing social and institutional hierarchies in the world at large. In recent decades, academic feminisms have made use of similar approaches for assessing Women's Studies' own location within hierarchal educational institutions. Such critiques are not only warranted but necessary: for how is it possible that feminisms seeking to challenge unjust social orders can be useful as existing components of a hierarchal institutional academy? In short, as Audre Lorde said over 20 years ago, can the "master's tools dismantle the master's house" (1984)? Many feminist scholars, including Lorde, maintained that they cannot, for the "master's tools" may allow us to "temporarily beat him at his own game," but will not ultimately lead us to revolutionary change necessary for the liberation of marginalized and oppressed groups (Lorde: 1984; Minh-ha:1987). At the same time, many feminists claim that the production--and deconstruction--of theories based on identity, difference, and experience, including those often created within the realm of academia, are integral to the formation of knowledge, politics, and epistemologies which have the potential to create a revolutionary reorganization of society (Haraway: 1988; MacKinnon: 1989; Collins: 1990; hooks: 1994; Hartstock: 1998).

Concerns about the institutional status of Women's Studies programs necessitate investigation; currently, such interrogations are on the rise. Feminist texts, journals, and conferences around the globe have begun to ask important questions like the one above, only to be left with further directions for research and study. Rather than formulate tangible or acceptable answers, it appears that we have instead carved out yet another niche for study, one only truly researchable by those of us on the 'inside'. For feminist

academics promulgating discussions on the conundrum of Women's Studies as institutional, many opt to remain within the academy as teachers, faculty, and scholars, suggesting that such critical self-reflections continue to reveal the value of these positions and their locale. For Women's Studies scholars and those of us working in academic feminist programs, we can no longer imagine the university system without such departments and are not ready to give them up. As it is, many of us struggle to maintain departmental status due to deficiencies in funding and support; our existence within an increasingly conservative political climate by which the university system is controlled is constantly under threat.

I believe a large and important resource has gone untapped in proposing such questions: the undergraduate students that make up our classes and departments. Though they instigate a number of rhetorical questions, we rarely directly include them in academic and curricular discussions on this topic. Undergraduates often inspire us to continue our goals of creating theories that will lead to social change; they teach us about contemporary personal and sociopolitical issues, and ask serious questions that often guide our research. Yet undergraduate students, though they take up much of our energy, time, and effort, have, in many ways, been left out of this discussion about the future of Women's Studies and feminist academics.

I do not intend this critique as another criticism against feminist academics; I am calling for self-reflection. The fact that undergraduates have been left out of curricular discussions makes a certain amount of sense. Many of these students are still working on comprehending the language of theory and acquiring the analytical and written skills that are needed to access scholarly journals, texts and conferences, where the breadth of this

conversation takes place. Yet undergraduate influence on us remains significant, and their involvement with this discussion should be encouraged. Undergraduates provide an excellent sounding board into public perceptions and literacies of feminism. This work intends specifically to include the concerns and ideas of undergraduate Women's Studies students. Through a series of interviews with Women's Studies undergraduate majors and minors, I hope to broaden the scope of this research and engage them in the discussion about the present and future of Women's Studies.

I am arguing for a shift from conversations questioning the usefulness of Women's Studies to conceiving of them as activist-based spaces. Rather than perpetuating discussions on institutional Women's Studies programs as problematic, I propose that the existence of Women's Studies programs are evidence of the continuation and livelihood of feminism. To view Women's Studies this way requires that we expand limited definitions and conceptions on what counts as feminist activism. More attention must be paid to feminist activism as relevant to contemporary feminist concerns and issues; this attention will ultimately contribute to an increase in feminist activism and social change.

### **Literature Review: Contemporary Concerns on Feminism as Institutional**

In 2005, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Agatha Beins compiled *Women's Studies for the Future* in hopes of addressing some of the current concerns around the institutionalization of feminism and women's studies programs. They contend that rather than focus on the problematic of Women's Studies as institutionalized, current programs

should shift towards addressing contemporary social conditions in order to manifest new frameworks for the future of the discipline. Rather than basing ideal models of “activism” on the past, we would be better off looking at the present to create new modes to create social change.

Kennedy, an early founder of Women’s Studies at the University of Buffalo contends that she continues to work within academia to “keep feminist education and scholarship radical, critical, and contributing to social change [as well as] to refine continually the meaning of a socialist feminist perspective.” She continues that the most important consideration is that “history is ruthless; it keeps moving ahead; social movements, institutions, and individuals (even radical ones) either engage it quickly or become ineffective” (2005:2). For Kennedy, we cannot remain glued to our visions to glorified feminist histories or idealized futures. In order to create the change we long for, we must focus our attention on the present.

Kennedy’s co-editor, Agatha Beins, has a different relationship and concern for Women’s Studies. She has only recently completed her MA in Women’s Studies, and contends that the emphasis on feminist theories which prompt self-reflection within Women’s Studies is its main strength. For Beins, “postmodernism, poststructuralism, and other theories that work to deconstruct and disrupt traditional ideas about identity” are integral to the work that Women’s Studies does (2005:2). Problematizing identity, and hence, the subjects of Women’s Studies, must remain integral to our programs, in order for our work to be considered, as Kennedy says, “radical, critical, and contributing to social change” (2005:2).

Though their approaches slightly differ, the editors share concerns for the direction and perception of Women's Studies programs as not moving towards revolutionary change because of their institutional location. Again, Kennedy and Beins offer this anthology with the attempt to ask that those of us involved in feminist scholarship "push the field to actively engage the present rather than long for an ideal future" (2005:24).

Perhaps one author who states this last point best is Robyn Wiegman in "The Possibility of Women's Studies" (2005). Wiegman contends that the "apocalyptic narration" of Women's Studies does a disservice to the field; she defines this "apocalyptic narration" as pointing toward the "failure in academic feminism's institutional success" (2005:41). In short, "apocalyptic" narratives give rise to the notion that the institutionalization of Women's Studies is a betrayal to itself. Wiegman argues that these narratives do not offer suggestions for broadening the scope of feminist scholarship to include new options for political activism; furthermore, narratives like these establish a "history of the political present that voices academic institutionalization as a betrayal of the political urgencies and critical vocabularies that inaugurated the project thirty years ago" (2005:41). Such a narrative posits the "academic *against* feminism" (emphasis in original), and academic feminism "thus comes to figure the impossibility of a transformed and transformative feminist future." (2005:41).

Wiegman addresses the notion that Women's Studies departments are often criticized for simultaneously being too theoretical or not theoretical enough. Similarly, they are often rebuked for being too political or not political enough. These narratives often contradict their intent wherein they eliminate future possibilities for progress while

privileging only past political feminist projects, methods of activism, and theory. Finally Wiegman suggests that we must explore beyond apocalyptic accounts or the ultimate failure of Women's Studies will come from our attempts to reproduce histories of feminist projects instead of contemporary solutions to current concerns. Without focusing on contemporary projects and a new criterion for the formation of feminist theory and activism, we will lose opportunities for engagement with academic and mainstream feminism, politics, activism and social change.

bell hooks is widely known in the academy as a theorist who has managed to maintain community engagement outside of academia. The accessibility of her work is key to this position; at the same time she is a strong proponent of the importance of feminist theory (2000). She has prompted important discussions about those issues which are often interpreted as the most difficult to reconcile: issues of race, difference, and identity. She exemplifies a position that many of us seek to attain: a voice recognized and honored within feminist scholarship, as well as a legible voice in mainstream communities. For hooks, theory creates the questions necessary to make sense out of that which does not; theory enables us to imagine a future that is not founded in hierarchy, oppression and domination (1994).

In her chapter on "Theory as Libratory Practice" in *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks holds that students often enter Women's Studies classes precisely because feminist theory offers students a way to understand and ask questions about politics of hierarchy, domination and constructions of inferiority/superiorities among genders, races, sexual orientations, and the like (1994). hooks contends--and I concur--that theory, if presented as moving toward a goal of healing and social change, will inevitably result in actions

that foster activism. Theory and action are reciprocal: if self-realization leads to self liberation, the two cannot be separated.

Theory becomes problematic however, when it becomes obscure, jargonistic and esoteric; if one can literally not understand theory, then rather than creating revolutionary thought, a new “intellectual class hierarchy” is being formed. This formation will ultimately assume a gap in theory and action. This new “class elite” of intellectuals impedes the reciprocity of theory and action, and thus, theory becomes inaccessible outside of academia. hooks suggests that in order for theory and action to remain reciprocal, the language of theory must remain accessible (1994; 2000). She warns however, that the privileging of “action” over theory ignores the importance of the production of theory. Such reminds us that theory is necessary for new revelations and a potential “collective consciousnesses” to be built. Such theory is integral for the construction of new ideas and opportunities for action.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether Women’s Studies undergraduate majors and minors see Women’s Studies academic programs and feminist theory as adequately informing the feminist activism they seek and/or create. It appears, and many of us hope, that institutional Women’s Studies programs are here to stay; so then, how can we to reconcile the split between academic and other forms of feminisms? I suggest one approach is to allow undergraduate students to contribute new answers and ideas for resolving the issue at hand. In this study, I interview undergraduate Women’s Studies students about their experiences within academics to find whether such experiences adequately inspire and equip them to engage in activism and social change outside of the academic classroom. Using their comments as a sounding board, I then offer my own

analysis regarding the connections between theory and activism. In particular I offer a more complex definition of what comprises activism and suggest steps that scholars might undertake to improve undergraduates comprehension of the connection between theory and the activism they accomplish in their everyday lives.

To accurately assess the usefulness of a Women's Studies degree, we must first identify the general curricula and components that comprise feminist academics. While Women's Studies is primarily an interdisciplinary field, there are specific foundations in which feminist theories and histories are developed and discussed; we commonly present feminist theories and histories to students as specific to the "waves" in which they occurred. These waves allow us to contextualize feminist timeframes, events, theories, and upsurges in activism.

Though US feminist history was taking place before then, the first wave of feminism is often recognized as occurring between the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and 1920 when women in the US gained suffrage rights. A number of Women's Studies courses acknowledge this as the "beginning" of feminism in the United States. While attention is sometimes paid to the years preceding and subsequent the first wave of feminism, in Women's Studies greater attention is frequently given to theorists, histories, and activists of the second and third waves of feminism. The second wave of feminism is understood to have happened between the early 1960s and late 1970s, and is frequently accredited as the starting point for modern and contemporary feminist concerns and theories. The third wave of feminism is said to have evolved out of the second wave, beginning in the early 1990s. As of 2007, many feminists claim that we are still in the third wave of feminism; however current discussions have begun to question whether we



have now moved beyond the third wave (Jervis:2003; Berger:2006). Whether we have moved beyond the third wave of feminism is not my present concern; rather I am interested in briefly discussing popular critiques of the second and third waves of feminism. This discussion is warranted here. In arguing for the usefulness of Women's Studies and feminist academics, I ask that we first pay attention to--and perhaps reconceive of--the ways in which we present and discuss of feminist histories, activism, and the "waves" of feminism.

### **The Heart of Women's Studies: The Second and Third Waves of Feminism**

During the 1960s and '70s, feminist activism resulted in changes in U.S. policy and social life that increased opportunities for women to engage in professions, work, and public domains previously limited to men. In addition, Women's Studies programs and departments were established in the early 1970s to recruit young women as feminist activists, therein changing the university landscape forever (Boxer:1998). It is fitting that current academic discussions on second wave feminisms often focus on structural shifts in sociopolitical culture as a result of second wave activism. Indeed, according to the canonized debate between second and third waves of the feminist movement, the second wave is often most credited with attempting structural change.

The third wave of feminism, which begun in the early 1990s, is often critiqued as more concerned than the second wave with interlocking oppressions, anti-essentialist rhetoric and politics, and stemming from commitments to "coalition politics" (Reagon:1983; Findlen:1995; Walker:1995). As such, the third wave of feminism is often said to focus more so on discursive issues than structural ones. Third wave feminists

spend of their much time discussing definitions, identity politics, multiple oppressions, and so on. These discussions often include analyses of power utilizing concepts gained from critical race, queer, and social and political theory.

In the 1960s and '70s during the second wave of feminism, the formation of NOW, founding of Ms. Magazine, ratification of Title IX to the Civil Rights Act, and continued lobbying to pass an Equal Rights Amendment evidence a strong focus on institutional and legislative structures. During the 1990s the third wave of feminism produced an increased amount of feminist journals and texts containing theories utilizing post-structuralist and Foucauldian critiques of gender, race, and sexualities. The growth of feminist discourse and feminist academics pointed to what some considered a “new” type of feminism centered on personal and political epistemologies, analyses of gendered experiences, and theoretical concerns on social constructions of identity categories. Perhaps following the epistemological bases of each era, second wave feminism, seems in retrospect to focus on structural change, whereas third waves’ focus on deconstruction seems to focus on discursive change. Though correct, the above analyses of the second and third waves of feminism are incomplete. Both waves of feminism have resulted in structural and discursive shifts in policy and culture, and have been successful at implementing social change.

The second wave of feminism did far more than implement structural change, just as the third wave has done far more than deconstruct notions of identity. Second wave consciousness-raising resulted in a new lexicon and discourse specific to the experiences of women of the '60s and '70s; it specifically gave rise to new conceptions of the meaning of “woman” and women’s lived social reality (Sarachild; Mackinnon). In the

1990s through present day, third wave feminists continue to effectively influence public policy on issues ranging from sexual and domestic violence to reproductive rights and the environment. Third wave feminist movements the Riot Grrrls, groups like Radical Cheerleaders, and magazine publications such as Bitch and Bust exemplify third wave feminism as engaged with far more than discursive theory and identity deconstruction analyses.

Pitting the second and third waves against each other so-to-speak posits feminism as existing within a dualistic framework and inaccurately depicts them as unrelated entities. When connections between the waves are made, limited critiques are often given: the script goes that the third wave grew out of an overtly racist and middle-class second wave feminism, but the downfall of the third wave is its limited focus on beauty and pop culture and a lack of activism due to lazy young feminists. The creation of this dichotomy oversimplifies the work, histories, and successes of an array of feminist activism and inaccurately delimits the eras in which the evolution of feminist theory, discourse and activism have occurred. This picture paints feminism as fractured and interruptible, as if feminism as a social movement is easily stopped and made immobile. Here, we lose the perception of feminism as continuous and constant; we are left with no recall of feminist “abeyance” periods where feminism sustains itself between peaks in pop culture and major historical turning points (Taylor 1989: 761). Without recognition of these periods in feminist history, we undermine the necessity of all components of feminism and the importance of the wave metaphor to accurately depict feminist social change: to be sustained, a wave needs a crest, trough, and the often intangible, indiscernible force driving the cycle.

Verta Taylor argues that abeyance organizations contribute to social change by maintaining a commitment to “collective challenges under circumstances unfavorable to mass mobilization” (765). If we consider the second wave to have ended close to the end of the 1970s or early ‘80s, and the third wave to have begun in the early 1990s, we are bound to a timeline ignoring feminist activism preceding the 1960s and during the 1980s. The first wave of feminism is thought to have ended with women’s suffrage in 1920, though important feminist historical events took place between the years of 1920 and the early 1960s. For instance, Margaret Sanger dedicated her life to making birth control available to women between the years of 1921 and 1966; the National Women’s Party first introduced the idea of an Equal Rights Amendment in 1923. In spite of this, the second wave is far more credited than the above with demanding access to birth control and legal abortion; and though the Equal Rights Amendment has yet to pass, we rarely recognize its origins and the years in which it gained strength, popularity and mass support.

In the 1980’s, activism and literature by women of color demanded greater attention to issues of poverty, race, welfare, and divisions of labor. The introduction of Black Feminist Thought, concerns about “white privilege,” and growing concerns about capitalist imperialism laid the foundation for the discursive focus of the third wave of feminism. In the late 1970s, the Combahee River Collective (CRC) wrote “A Black Feminist Statement,” gaining major feminist attention in the early 1980s when it was published in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), an anthology highlighting the concerns of feminist women of color. The CRC, and feminist authors such as Audre Lorde, Beverly and Barbara Smith, and others began to demand feminist accountability on

considerations of interlocking oppressions and intersecting identities affected by race, class, gender and sexuality (Moraga: 1981; Hull, Scott, Smith: 1982; Smith: 1983; Lorde: 1984). In the 1980s, Angela Davis' *Women, Race and Class* (1981) called attention to ignored experiences of women of color in the US, and publicly recognized the complex histories and positionality of women of color. Davis called attention to ignored histories of slave women; she pointed out racism of white feminist suffragists; and drew attention to distinct oppressions faced by women of color in the US in the areas of welfare, work, and economics. This reclaiming and documenting of histories of women of color was later designated a defining feature of Black Feminist Thought, a phrase coined by Patricia Hill Collins in 1990, forever changing the face of feminism. If Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* was written before what we consider the beginning of the third wave--as termed and claimed by Rebecca Walker in 1993--to which wave does Black Feminist Thought belong? Thorough considerations of feminist abeyance periods can allow us to accurately assess the full usefulness of the wave metaphor; more importantly we can engage in more accurate analyses of contemporary feminism and feminist activism.

### **The Face of Contemporary Feminism: Women's Studies as Abeyance Structures**

The "wave debate" perpetuates an impression of feminist activism and mobilization taking place between apparent upsurges as insignificant, precisely in that they are often ignored. Further complicating the wave debate are new discussions on what "wave" we are currently in. Many contemporary feminists resist the third wave label, and at the same time deny that a fourth has yet to begin. If we cannot name or define our "waves," how can we successfully use the metaphor to describe feminist

movements? How do we recognize feminist productivity? Without a massive public display of feminist upsurge, it appears we are hesitant to claim the activism many of us are engaged in as worthwhile and valuable. Many contemporary feminists hold that while they are active, they “can always do more,” and “don’t do enough.” Perhaps they are correct--maybe they could do more. Yet if they did, contemporary feminism would still not match the visions of massive collective upsurges of rallying witnessed in the second wave. It would remain dissimilar to the third wave’s escalations of 1990s feminist attention to pop culture, identity politics, consumerism, and environmentalism.

To contemporary feminists, in comparison with the second and third waves of feminism, there is an apparent lack of collective feminist visibility and direction. Contemporary feminists often view their movement as scattered and nameless; this contributes to current concerns on the future of feminism and the potential to create revolutionary social change. Paired with the number of feminist scholars and lack of mainstream visibility, the contradictory appearance of feminists as existing within a hierarchal institution lends confusion on the usefulness of Women’s Studies departments.

Whatever wave we are in, it is obvious that the collective visibility during the second wave has left current feminism nearly undetectable to the masses; similarly, where we once debated the effectiveness of third wave activism, most third wave and contemporary feminists have demonstrated their work as worthwhile, even when it *only* (sarcasm intended) resulted in new theory and discourse. Today, contemporary feminists, some who consider themselves “third wave,” some who claim to have moved beyond, continue to study theory, engage in activism, work in non-profits and public policy sectors to affect social change. Still, the lack of public visibility of feminisms today is

suspect to many who question whether feminists are successfully advocating for gender, sexuality, racial, and class equality.

Rather than naming what is lacking in contemporary feminism, I suggest feminist scholars would be better off considering what *is* taking place; to do so we can consider the feminist movement as occurring in “abeyance,” at least in the sense of lacking vast public recognition. Though contemporary feminism may not be at what we consider a “peak,” feminism in abeyance allows us to investigate contemporary feminism for what it is--applicable to current culture and relevant to contemporary gender oppressions and concerns for current students who I am optimistic will create future change. Feminism in abeyance should not give the false impression of feminist activism and theory as stagnant, but rather as providing the force for the next possible upsurge, though I would argue it erroneous to focus too much on future upsurges over present moments. Rather than focus concerns of the potential future of a massive collective and public feminist upsurge, focusing on feminism’s abeyance structures tells us to focus specifically on contemporary feminist activism, feminist theorizing, and organizing as important, valid and productive for the movement over time.

Verta Taylor’s concept of “abeyance organizations” is helpful in illuminating the usefulness and appropriateness of women’s studies departments as productive feminist spaces. For Taylor, an “abeyance organization” is a place of exclusivity and commitment where feminists continue to critique and shape dominant political culture, resist oppression, and exist as voices of dissent to social and gender norms. Continuing traditions of radical activism, voicing opposition to social standards and recruiting like-minded allies, women’s studies as an abeyance organization exists within an institution

useful to the production of feminist discourse and creation of social change. This is extremely important in a climate where a public or visible mass movement is either superfluous or difficult to establish. Upsurges of activism in the early 1900s to 1920 and later visibility in the 1960s and '70s were results of sustained and continuous feminist mobilization and abeyance organizations between 1920 and 1960. Feminist discourse, theory, and political reform did not stop between upsurges, nor are they insignificant to the activism that occurred during the years in which they were more publicly visible. To discredit events taking place between the peaks in feminist waves not only contradicts the purpose of the wave metaphor, but discredits and falsely historicizes the feminists who worked diligently during those years.

Understanding Women's Studies programs and departments as abeyance organizations responds to several important concerns about the status of Women's Studies and Gender Studies departments. First, we are reminded that feminism is alive and well; crediting Women's Studies as a "feminist abeyance structure" requires that we *alter our conceptualization of feminist activism*. In this context, the pervasiveness of Women's Studies precisely points out the existence and enormity of feminism, its continuation and fluidity, rather than its demise or stagnation; in Women's Studies departments, consciousness-raising continues to be contemporary feminist praxis. Second, it allows us to investigate the usefulness of such departments when they are often criticized as exclusive, elitist and problematically institutionalized, or irrelevant beyond academia. Third, and perhaps most important, we are able to consider that the successes of feminism and feminist activism cannot always be defined in terms of how visible it is to mainstream culture. Feminist movements should not be measured by their successes as



relative to oppositional movements such as the radical right. Rather, it is important to recognize all forward motion of contemporary feminisms, not simply whether we are “beating the competition” in the public eye. Feminism is not solely a responsive movement; goals of unity and “visions of mutuality” (hooks: 2000), exist for groups of people culturally defined as “inferior,” therefore feminist achievements should be measured by such groups, not by the extent to which we gain public visibility and acceptance by the dominant and often oppressive mainstream culture.

Women’s Studies as an abeyance structure then, requires a reconceptualization of what counts as activism in implicating social change. It requires our acknowledgment of the production of discourse, mobilization of activists, and circulation of feminist analyses of sociopolitical culture. Feminist activism cannot always be defined in terms of how visible it is to mainstream culture, or we are bound to miss opportunities to create and participate in activist movements, as well as discredit activists constantly engaged in working for revolutionary social change. To require the worth of feminist activism as measurable through public recognition implicates a need for approval from the patriarchal and normative structures we are trying to critique, shift and move beyond.

### **Women’s Studies as Feminist Abeyance: Setting the Terms for Activism**

As Kennedy and Beins state in *Women’s Studies for the Future*, we need to reconceptualize how we see or define activism in order to make it applicable to contemporary culture and feminism. If our only “picture” of activism includes posters, rallies and marches, we are leaving unappreciated those who do daily activism, live as activists, work as activists, and make less public, but still vital forms of change. Constant

discussions on the *lack* of feminist activism perpetuates the idea that contemporary feminists are unimportant and ineffective. This point is especially poignant for women's studies undergraduate students, many of whom are just beginning to understand and articulate where and how to negotiate change. Many of them are just beginning to discover the ways in which to live activist lifestyles, speak out on oppressive issues, and confront peers on sexist and racist speech and actions. A focus on the lack of activism is frustrating to students who are doing activism on and beyond college campuses. Many of them are conscious consumers, environmentalists, working to broaden their awareness of gender concerns, actively speaking out against racism, heterosexism, and the like.

University Women's Studies departments on college campuses often serve as foundational space in which to practice and gain experience in organizing, promoting and involving oneself in various issues. Yet, rather than the encouraging contemporary forms of activism, discourse on the lack of activism often implies that the exhaustion students feel as a result of living as feminist activists is under valued and not worthwhile. In addition, for feminist scholars and those of us teaching Women's Studies, we may be forgetting just how important our jobs are--not just in promoting awarenesses, but in encouraging the upcoming generation to speak up, use their voices, and become active in feminist movements in a variety of ways.

I propose that as scholars and instructors in women's studies we begin to call specific attention to the types of activism currently taking place. Though Women's Studies exists within a hierarchal and patriarchal institution, we must remember that the founders of Women's Studies saw an opportunity to create new activists, open new minds, and bring feminist awareness to a mass amount of people. Women's Studies has

had great success in doing this. Feminist scholars, activists, and professionals now abound on and beyond college campuses, in a variety of departments and influence tremendous amounts of students every year. This recognition should suggest we focus our lens more broadly on what we value as activism.

## Chapter Two

### Methods and Methodology

Mary Fonow and Judith Cook advocate that feminist research methodology include reflection on the “study of actual techniques and practices used in the research process” (1991:1). They suggest that self-reflexivity, orientation towards action, consideration of affective content, and attention to everyday situations are identifiable components of feminist research methodology. The decision to conduct interviews with undergraduate Women’s Studies majors and minors stems from consideration of these; upon investigation it appears that current research on feminist academics and feminist activism rarely includes these voices. These missing voices stand to inform current discussions on how Women’s Studies affects feminist activism beyond academics, as undergraduates remain our main bridge with the “outside” world. Undergraduates have prompted a number of questions on the usefulness of feminist theory as sparking feminist activism, and often challenge us to move beyond an academic and non-academic feminist split. Following Fonow and Cook’s suggestion that feminist collaborative research leads to political action and social change, I contend that the interviews and subsequent discussion can expand our perceptions of feminist activism and increase our valuing of academic feminism. I challenge the reader to reconsider the classroom as a space designated for--and successful in--creating social change.

Though I am writing with regards for the pervasiveness of Women’s Studies departments, the following interviews are not a representative sample intended as

generalizable “truths” about Women’s Studies. The discussions have implications beyond this campus, but I am in no way claiming that these accounts are directly applicable to non-USF Women’s Studies departments. There is no intent to present this work as exhaustive or final. I do not claim that interviewees are providing “right” answers to questions surrounding feminist activism, academic feminism, and the worth of Women’s Studies as an undergraduate degree. But these undergraduate interviews do provide insights into discussions of curriculum, pedagogical strategies and the effectiveness of current practices in Women’s Studies contexts beyond USF. I use them as a sounding board for a broader analysis and argument that intends to connect theory and activism more visibly.

As such, I interviewed nine undergraduate Women’s Studies students, all of whom have taken three or more Women’s Studies classes, including seven of whom have completed more than two upper level courses with substantial amounts of feminist theory in the curriculum. Four of the students were Women’s Studies majors; one of the students was an Interdisciplinary Social Science major with Women’s Studies and Sociology as her concentration areas; four of the students were Women’s Studies minors. Of the minors, one student was majoring in History, another was a double major in Sociology and Psychology; one student is majoring in International Relations; the last is majoring in Creative Writing. All students are female and identify as women, and two identify as heterosexual. Not all racially identify as white, though all of them may be perceived as white. All of the students were in their early to mid 20’s, the youngest student being 19, the oldest 26. Of the interviewees, none have any previous degrees; all are still enrolled in school; five are completing their last semester as an undergraduate. Three of the

interviewees attended previous institutions before coming to the University of South Florida.

Interview contacts were established through Women's Studies professors and faculty, announcements about interviews were made to upper level classes and interested students were encouraged to contact me. In addition, I contacted students I knew to be Women's Studies majors and minors through teaching classes and my previous position as Women's Studies undergraduate advisor.

I realize that these women cannot yet have full comprehension of how Women's Studies will impact their personal and professional lives beyond graduation; I am not implying that they can predict what will come of their lives after graduation. However, as college campuses are assumed to prepare students with the tools and skills useful beyond the university, Women's Studies is no different. Just as with a Business or Marketing degree, the question of "what are you going to do when you graduate?" is valid here; the assumption being that an undergraduate degree should help prepare one for endeavors after college.

With that considered, we cannot know what undergraduate Women's Studies students are getting from their degree if we do not ask them. While they do not have concrete answers as to how well Women's Studies is preparing them for a life they have not yet led, their perspectives are valuable, informative and useful to educators. The goal of conducting such interviews is to expand the analysis of how academic feminism impacts activism done outside of the university and to look at how the students perceive Women's Studies as preparing them to "do activism." Specifically, I am interested in

how students see Women's Studies as preparing them for any future attempts to create social change and why they feel this degree or minor is valuable.

I first asked interviewees to describe how and why they are pursuing Women's Studies courses; I then asked them to respond to the lack of current feminist visibility and perceptions of contemporary feminists as unorganized, lazy, and/or not active. They were prompted to discuss their opinions on whether they viewed academic feminism as inaccessible, elitist and ineffective beyond the university. Interviewees were asked if they considered themselves activists, what types of activism they participated in, and what modes of activism they felt to be important and influential in creating social change. Lastly, I inquired about how they viewed Women's Studies as informing to their current personal, social and political lives, and what they envision themselves doing after graduation--including whether they feel it necessary or beneficial to go on for graduate degrees.

A goal of Women's Studies is to encourage students to use their voices for self-empowerment, to assist their understanding of their experiences as valuable, and to speak-up in favor of social change and justice. To lead by example is one way of empowering students to do so; in this niche of research it is especially important to consider our students' concerns or hesitations. The lack of undergraduate voices being published and included in current theory and texts often goes unquestioned and is regarded as usual practice. A feminist critique of this practice would hold that the privileging of one voice over another contradicts the goals of feminism--to embrace and value all perspectives, even if they are still in the process of formation and experientially lacking. While I do not contend that undergraduate students understand the full scope of

Women's Studies pedagogy, curricula, and epistemologies given their lack of graduate and faculty level exposure, their perspectives are still important and informative. The presumption of Women's Studies as existing to foster to social change remains present, therefore Women's Studies educators should be held to some level of accountability in answering the concerns of students--especially if those concerns have to do with their desire and ability to actively create social change. If we encourage undergraduates to use their voices, but then ignore their words and concerns, we contradict and confuse the message that they are capable of developing sound personal awarenesses and creating social change. We cannot presume they will have all of the answers for us, yet it is important that we remember them in our conversations on the usefulness of Women's Studies and feminist academics.

### **Interview Findings**

Three main themes were revealed through discussions with Women's Studies undergraduate students. First, when asked about their decision to major or minor in Women's Studies, none of the interviewees initially came to the University of South Florida with the intent to do so. Instead, each of the interviewees claimed to have found Women's Studies by "accident," or "just happened to sign up for a Women's Studies course"; some enrolled in a class based on the recommendation of a friend or advisor. Most did not know that Women's Studies existed before coming to college, but after their first class made the decision to pursue additional feminist education courses.

Second, when interviewees were asked if they considered themselves feminist activists, all but one stated that while they engaged in some activist projects and events,



they “could be doing much more.” Only one interviewee gave an affirmative “yes” to the question of whether she would describe herself as an activist. When prompted to define and explain what they perceived to be feminist “activism,” interviewees initially referred to marches, rallies, and public feminist uprisings, and stated that the current lack of that “type of activism” meant that they had to do activism in “smaller ways,” like “the more day-to-day stuff.” Initial associations of activism as something exemplified during the first and second waves of feminism, quickly turned into conversations on “everyday activism” as resulting from feminist awarenesses, such as speaking-up in classes and peer groups, for example, when witnessing racist comments or sexist jokes. Many students also discussed participation in “smaller” activist events organized through the Feminist Student Alliance, a student-organized feminist group officially recognized by student government and housed in Women’s Studies, “dedicated to promoting awareness on women’s rights issues.” At some point, every interviewee had participated in at least one event with the Feminist Student Alliance.

Lastly, when asked how Women’s Studies informed their activism, most said that Women’s Studies did an “okay job,” but that there was room for improvement with regards to specifics. Some spoke of wanting more faculty involvement; others discussed the inaccessibility of feminist theory, stating that “it was great, but it’s like, what am I supposed to do with that?” Again preoccupied with the concept of activism as a massive collective of feminists, they appeared dissatisfied with the lack of direction in which Women’s Studies aided them in “choosing an issue” around which to organize. Feminist theories based around interlocking oppressions and identity politics expanded their awarenesses, yet resulted in confusion as to how to approach doing activism due to the

wealth of concerns facing contemporary feminists. The appearance of an infinite number of issues affected by sexism prompted hesitation on their abilities to recognize “where to start,” and “what the most important things were.” How do you organize a mass movement, when there is “so much to do, and so many people and issues to consider?” While recognizing that Women’s Studies provides a community in which to raise consciousness and build feminist awareness, interviewees consistently noted a lack of instruction on how to focus, prioritize and organize for potential activism.

In the section that follows I discuss the three main themes that developed during the course of the interviews. The first, “It changed my life,” discusses the ways in which Women’s Studies classes and coursework impacted students on a personal level resulting in a raised feminist consciousness which altered their personal and career goals. The second, “I’m an activist, well, kind of...” points to the ways in which Women’s Studies students are often hesitant to describe themselves as activists because they claim they do activism on “smaller scale” and are not participating in visible or massive feminist events. The third theme, “I want to do more, I just don’t know where to begin,” addresses how students see Women’s Studies as informing--or not--the activism they seek to do in and beyond the classroom.

### **Theme #1: “It changed my life.”**

For many students, the first semester in a feminist class often piques their interest and encourages them to take more classes or even become a Women’s Studies major or minor. The first semester may empower students to speak up, incite them to find their voice, and compel them to realize the value of their lives and autonomy. Interviewees

spoke of how Women's Studies "changed my life forever," and that they "took [their] first women's studies class and that was it."

Donna<sup>1</sup>, an International Relations major and Women's Studies minor said that for her,

"I fell into it [Women's Studies] by accident. I was looking for an exit requirement and Classics in Feminist Theory was one of the last classes available. And I was like, how hard can it be? [Laughs] And that's when I decided I loved it. ...It's helped me put a lot of names to the feelings I've had about activism and feminism and sexuality and all that kind of stuff."

While the data collected from interviewees can only be attributed to their experience in Women's Studies at USF, my assumption is that the "accident" of Women's Studies is common in other universities. Cassidy, a senior majoring in Women's Studies summarizes her decision as:

"...it's just a haphazard degree. And by that I mean just the way you find it. Like, you never leave high school [and say], *I'm going to USF for Women's Studies*. You never hear that! I think a year and a half ago I was at my fourth college. I had one Women's Studies class and that was it. I was hooked. And I would never picture myself doing anything else."

So what is it then that changes their lives? How can something so "haphazard" and "accidental" be so life altering? Lucy, a Creative Writing major and Women's Studies minor said, "when I took Intro [to Women's Studies], I was aware that there was a lot going on in the world, but not of how it affected me. Learning about these issues in Women's Studies made me aware of how it affected *me*." Similarly, Julia said, "I took my Intro class and I felt like, right at home. This was exactly it and I didn't want to do anything else." Julia declared her major in Women's Studies that year.

Like Lucy, Julia, Donna and Cassidy, many students commented on the appeal of a degree that related to their personal lives and provided a sense of community, or made

---

<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed; pseudonyms have been used.

them feel, as Julia said, “at home.” Angie stated getting a Women’s Studies degree might not be “anything that’s considered, quote, functional, but I think if I didn’t have it I would have gone crazy. ...it provides a good community.” For Angie and others, Women’s Studies is relevant to their lives in ways that other degrees are not and provides them with the “community” and “home” they realized they wanted. When I asked Michelle what the deciding factor was for her, she talked about a specific moment when she “got it”:

"I actually kind of fell into it by accident.... I was [also] taking Statistics, and read this one article called 'Imagine a Country'... and it was like, it kind of all hit me at once, how much things really did affect my life, and I never even realized it before. And just all at once I totally had this revelation about the way things actually were... you're suddenly like, 'click!'"

But the “clicks” don’t always happen immediately the way they did for Lucy, Julia, and others. For Michelle, the challenge of opening herself up to feminist perspectives meant confronting a lifetime of personal beliefs:

“We read, the first [article] was Audre Lorde, ‘Defining Difference’. I sort of grew up in a city that is all white people [and I] had never seen any diversity until I came to USF. And so, like, I was very uncomfortable with talking about it or even acknowledging it. I wasn’t prejudiced, I was just uncomfortable discussing it. And so to think about that inherently, I had some sort of privilege when I didn’t think that I did and that kind of thing was [hard]. I guess the topic that the class started off on, I wasn’t too fond of. And I actually remember the moment [when I read ‘Imagine a Country’], that Women’s Studies changed my life. ...I was just totally in denial about it for the first half of the class.”

Johanna entered her first Women’s Studies class much like Michelle, somewhat resistant to the material. A double major in Psychology and Sociology, Johanna is now minoring in Women’s Studies, but had not intended to do so when she began her first Women’s Studies class.

“I took it as a last resort class because it was open. I was very conservative, and I was like, *I don't think what they're saying is right*, and I was very into [normative] gender roles and such. I think I spent the first half of the semester coming in and just blasting the professor; in my journals I'd be like, *you're so wrong!* I was very defiant. And I decided one day that I'd actually open the book and read it, and pretty much from there started to try to at least entertain the ideas. Over the course of the semester, eventually I was like, *I should go back and re-read everything I spent so much time hating*. And I ended up really loving it.”

Before coming to college, Johanna's goal was to become a sex therapist or sexologist, but since working on her Women's Studies minor has shifted the way in which she envisions conducting her work:

“I decided that I couldn't do it without feminism. I started to think about how our society medicalizes it [sex therapy] and I don't want to be a part of that. Though I want a PhD in Psychology, I do consider it to be important that I'm 'feminist' first in my dealings with people. The ultimate goal has changed. I want to eventually start a women's clinic, and I can do that without a PhD in Psychology, but no one's going to care until I have that.”

Rebecca: “So you're aware of the privilege and benefit of that degree, and it sounds like you're using it to get you to a place where you can use it to help others. You don't want to be a psychologist first, you're a feminist first. Is that it?”

Johanna: “Right. I'll be like, *I'm a feminist doctor*. It's not like, I'm a doctor and a feminist. The overarching theme of why I chose Women's Studies [was] because I wanted that to inform all of my other decisions rather than letting the decisions lead me to whatever in other departments.”

Molly is a History major minoring in Women's Studies; though her degree and goals differ from Johanna, she shares similar sentiments. Molly's interest is researching women's participation in radical social movements. She has applied to start graduate school for Women's Studies in the fall stating “I didn't want to do it in the History department because I didn't feel like the tools for analysis would be there.”

Rebecca: “What tools? What is the difference?”

Molly: “There’s a big difference. In History, we don’t really talk about radical women at all. In fact, not at all because I’ve never talked about that in a History class. So I was hesitant to do it in History because I didn’t feel like it would be accepted or [that] there would be anyone to help me.”

Rebecca: “So then, Women’s Studies became your choice for graduate school because...?”

Molly: “I didn’t stay in History because ideally I’m more interested in more different divisions between women and different gender consciousness. So it’s in a historical context but it’s not just history. History is boring. Women’s Studies is never boring.”

Lucy, a Women’s Studies minor and Creative Writing major, has found that Women’s studies is “informative for investigating feminist authors,” something she finds lacking in the Literature department, but is interested in pursuing. Specifically, Lucy is interested in finding out “what are feminist critiques and [who are] feminist authors?”

When I asked how Women’s Studies informs her work, she responded:

“As a creative writer, I now have a plethora of issues now to deal with that are affecting everyone. And now they affect me because as a writer I can write about them and listen to other people, and get stories from them. And also just in arguing with professors and defining what a feminist author is. So knowing the issues, hearing more stories about them, [and] getting the background information.”

Rebecca: “How does Creative Writing and Women’s Studies further your plans for after graduation?”

Lucy: “I want to go to grad school and possibly [on for] a PhD, depending on money and time and those other factors that take a stand in the world I want to do Creative Writing and Women’s Studies together and I want to be a feminist author. And critique the American canon of literature.”

Though none of the interviewees intended to pursue Women’s Studies when they first came to USF, it is clear that feminist academics have provided them with a unique foundation on which to understand their lives and guide future work. Women’s Studies

serves a framework for which they have become empowered to understand their place in the world and assess their research and career goals. In addition, many students appear thankful for the sense of community they have found with Women's Studies students and faculty, and speak of finding something in Women's Studies that they do not get elsewhere. Though perhaps a "haphazard" or "accidental" degree, all of the students appear thankful for the existence and influence of the Women's Studies department at USF and the education they have received as a result of their coursework, professors, and engagement with feminist theory.

**Theme #2: "I'm an activist--well, kind of."**

All but one of the students interviewed stated that they could be doing more activist work than they currently do; most referred to activism they engage in as existing on a "small scale." When asked if she was an activist or how she defines activism, Molly stated:

"I think activism can range from small gestures to very large, collective gestures. But I don't really consider myself--I don't take part in large marches and stuff. I'm a student and I'm broke, and I can't afford to go to Washington on a whim for a weekend [because] I have to work and all this other stuff. But I would say activism could be anything... I guess telling someone about it, or shaving your head or things like that."

Rebecca: So would you consider "everyday activism" to be "activism"?

Molly: "Activism with a lower-case 'a'."

Rebecca: "And activism with a capital A would be what? A visible collective movement?"

Molly: "Well like, in the '60s there was everything. It'd be nice to have a big massive movement because we're still not getting paid... It's not public, or the same way as in [the] '60s. It's going on, it's just not highly

visible. I think back then people really felt that those things that were needed to be done *now*. People were being drafted. We don't have the same sense of urgency."

When I asked Angie if she considered herself an activist, she responded with "I'd like to think so." I then prompted her to tell me what that meant to her:

"It depends on whether or not we're talking about episodic or everyday activism. An everyday activist I totally am. Like everyday. [Like when] somebody says, *that's gay* meaning, *that's stupid*. Or something incredibly misogynistic."

Rebecca: "So you consider 'everyday activism' and speaking out on those things you named as activism?"

Angie: "Well, the episodic is kind of different. I've participated in--there was that Voices for the Unborn counter protest that FSA did, and I was in that. And in high school I did the AIDS walk. I like being active, but I don't always have the opportunity. And doing the everyday stuff, which is constantly taking gender into account--which is how I do it--and saying something about it instead of being quiet, is something. The everyday activism doesn't even out the episodic activism, but it's definitely always there. So it's not really as active I think. ...I'm in that mindset so often that it's not as active. It's just how I live my life."

Rebecca: "So because it's day-to-day and not as say, direct, it's not as active? Can you give any other examples of everyday activism you do?"

Angie: "Well, I work for [a corporate department store] on commission. And basically they tell me to bully people into stuff that they can't afford. And I'm like, *I'm not going to do that*. And that bugs me. The fact that I work off of commission or have the potential to do so really hurts. Because I think about sweatshops and how the people who make those TVs probably don't have electricity, and on and on and on. I'm just always thinking about it."

When I asked Donna whether she considered herself an activist, she responded affirmatively. I asked her to define "activism" as well:

"I consider myself an activist. I think activism, personally, is something that's consistent that you never really take a break from. You continually participate in activities or functions like protests. You go out and create an uproar I guess. You just have to go make noise, be visible."



Rebecca: So as a feminist, you would say you are active? You said that you have to 'make noise, be visible.' So how would you respond to people who say that contemporary feminists are unorganized or lazy?

Donna: We're not outside of Washington getting beat up by the police and protesting; we're not asking for suffrage and that kind of stuff. But we're definitely not causing as many problems as we used to. And I think that's one reason. ...It's not like it's not happening, it's just not getting acknowledged."

A member of FSA, Donna proceeded to discuss an example of the activism in which she has participated where she took a trip with seven other members of FSA at the end of 2006 to promote women's access to safe and legal abortion. The students (three of which were interviewed) drove to South Dakota before the 2006 elections to canvass and rally support against a proposed state ban that would have outlawed abortions in the state. They stayed in South Dakota for three days, knocking on doors, standing on streets with posters and signs, and passing out literature to the community of Sioux Falls to encourage them to vote against the ban; the ban did not pass, and abortions remain legal in South Dakota. When I asked what prompted them to plan the event she stated, "I think one of the things that triggered it was the elections that happened. We saw people that possibly could get elected that would influence decisions that are going to be made not in our favor."

Rebecca: "What about 'everyday activism'? Do you do that? Is that different?"

Donna: "I do speak up in certain situations. Especially with the whole '*that's gay*' and '*that's straight*'. I'm like *excuse me!* People and friends that don't identify with being homosexual... I call them out on things that are offensive. I speak up when people offend me. Some people don't care, some people ask *why*. It's a mixed reaction, but I appreciate when I can explain things to people. I think that counts as activism because it educates someone."

Rebecca: “Can you give me any other examples of what you consider everyday activism’?”

Donna: “When someone decides to major or minor in Women’s Studies, some see that as a form of activism. Numerous times I have wanted to just be a Women’s Studies major. But if I minor in Women’s Studies and major in International Relations, it’s a way for me to become a part of government or work on a global scale. It’s a way of getting our thoughts and beliefs out there. [For example,] in (an International Relations) class, we had to present a 15-minute thing on a global issue. I heard about money and multinational corporations... And I get up there and I’m like *gender based violence*. And I’m talking about all these women, human trafficking, child marriage, female genital mutilation... and people were like, *what!?* Even in other classes, we had to pick a cancer to research. I’m like *cervical cancer!*”

Rebecca: “So you see that as activism?”

Donna: “Yes. I think Women’s Studies helps me choose presentations and stuff I do in classes. And even doing sexuality panels, presentations on gender-based violence, cervical cancer... It’s like my way of thinking when I do that is that I have 80 people in front of me that I can educate at one time.”

I asked Julia about whether she views herself as an activist:

“Because I’m taking a class social action class online; you realize, okay, that little thing I did really does matter. So I want to say yes [that I am an activist], but then someone might be like, *no, you’re not...* I think of speaking up when someone says, you know, *faggot*, or something sexist. And then also getting out in your community and you know, doing the [stuff] like FSA did. And even having resources for when you meet someone, like, *oh, I know this place you can go* and being ready for somebody.

Julia, like many of the other interviewees brought up “doing the [stuff] like FSA did,” and students in FSA have done a lot. At some point, every interviewee I spoke with had participated in at least one activity with FSA, most of them more than three or four events. FSA, an organization run by students with little to no faculty involvement, have, within the last year, gone to South Dakota to lobby against a proposed amendment to ban

abortion procedures in that state. Three interviewees, along with a number of other students organized a counter-protest to an anti-choice “Voices for the Unborn” exhibit on campus where they handed out condoms and factual information about birth control, condoms, abortion and sexually transmitted infections. One project involved a “pub-crawl” where they went to popular bars and clubs handing out thousands of condoms to promote safer-sex, of which four interviewees participated. FSA has promoted awareness on HIV/AIDS; last year they sent hundreds of letters to the FDA in support of making Emergency Contraception available over the counter. Six of the nine interviewees participated in a 150 person walk-out at a speech by Ann Coulter (whose visit was sponsored by university funds), organized by FSA, resulting in local media attention. Two of the interviewees were involved with the 2007 production of Eve Ensler’s “The Vagina Monologues,” in which they raised over \$4,000 dollars to donate to two domestic violence organizations in Tampa; two other interviewees were also involved in the 2006 production last February. They have appeared in the campus newspaper, *The Oracle*, at least ten times in the past school year and have been mentioned in local papers at least three to four times. They regularly appear on WMNF, a local radio station in Tampa, as guests to talk about various events and activities that they have organized and participated in.

So students on our campus are active, and often, are quite visible within the community in the traditional sense of organized protests and public speaking. Perhaps they do not appear daily in massive groups, but their messages, ideas and activism regularly gain attention in the local community and on campus. The list above hardly begins to cover the types of personal awarenesses they engage with or the everyday

activism they maintain. From the perspective of an interviewer, it is difficult to imagine that they see themselves as inactive, or that they feel it necessary to provide the disclaimer on the types of activism they *do not* do before discussing the types of activism that they actually *do*. Certainly not every event the students organize is picked up by mainstream media, nor does each activity draw participation from a massive group of students. But FSA continues to hold weekly meetings, plan events, socialize regularly; they have formed a solid community of activists and contribute to the overall feeling of Women's Studies as community space. As an outsider to their group, and from the perspective of an instructor, it appears that students within USF's Women's Studies department have a solid, active, feminist community, complete with regular consciousness-raising meetings, participation in structural and community activism, and as a result, constant activism of the self as they sustain momentum and inspiration in one another. Where one student is active, another sees and adopts certain practices and so on. They call each other on oppressive language, discuss personal issues, and are constantly developing a personal feminist politic that informs their everyday life.

As demonstrated above, everyday activism is very important to them. Every interviewee claimed to constantly engage in day-to-day activism and activism of the self.

On the question of everyday activism, Julia stated:

“Like you know, I've got a button on my book-bag and stuff. But also I think you have to change--we've talked about how you change yourself and the way you live, and [then] that's going to affect everyone else and then it just kind of goes. It's like the big movement change. It's going to have to start on a smaller level.”

If Julia is correct--and I believe she is--that change has to begin with the self, then how is possible that what they are doing is not activist “enough?” What “more” can they

do? Perhaps part of what undergraduates need is a reminder that what they are doing does count. For Cassidy, she feels that:

“This generation is being labeled as lazy or apathetic; in the past, revolutions and changes in ideologies all happened on college campuses, and we’re not creating that action--we’re not on the forefront of that. And I think that misrepresents us, but I also think it separates us. And it feeds back into the apathy, like, *well, we’re told we’re apathetic, so I guess we’ll be apathetic.*”

Cassidy appeared to be the one student utterly confident about the usefulness of everyday activism. When I asked her if she considered herself an activist and how she perceived of activism, she stated:

“I definitely consider myself an activist. And I know that activism comes in daily forms, it’s basically calling someone one language that’s inappropriate or oppressive. For myself, being an activist is involving myself to the point of exhaustion as much as I possibly can by pulling on the resources and trying to find avenues that allow me to participate in organizations that I personally feel are going to make a difference. And if those organizations are unavailable, to find ways for myself to participate outside of them.

Rebecca: “So do you think there is a specific “type” of activism that is given more credibility?”

Cassidy: “I think that comes with a certain amount of visibility. What’s visible is given more reward... But I think anything that involves being in contact with other activists and networking with the largest group possible of people to work with. So when you’re setting up a collective of people, that you know you are working for the same cause I feel is the most important type of activism out there.

Rebecca: “So are you saying that a visible collective movement is the ideal?”

Cassidy: “...Doing all this stuff is very exhausting. And if you only have three people at a meeting it’s frustrating. But if you know that there are three people having a meeting here and here and here and all over the country, that’s something we don’t think about and don’t take into account. And the daily-ness of those practices, and practicing activism in your daily life; incorporating it into your being is just as important as a

protest you have on the side of the street. I mean, you hold up a sign, people see it, and ten seconds later they might forget about it. [But] you have a conversation with someone and they're probably like, thinking about it."

Johanna illustrates this last point further, about the value of an interaction following an event she participated in:

"The only thing was the Ann Coulter protest--that reached a lot of people because of the media. [People] saw me in the paper and that opened up a can of worms with some of my family. But then we got to have a conversation about it and I think that's where the real change can come in. But the everyday things that you do... and what you believe... it does affect people. ...when you're living it, you're affecting the people in your life... like whole family structures can be changed just by having one person in the family be in Women's Studies."

The Women's Studies students I interviewed are engaged in activism on a number of levels. Though the above illustrates their reluctance to view all of their activist efforts as equally worthwhile, all of the interviewees have engaged in feminist activism and desire to take it further. The discussions above lead me to believe that USF Women's Studies students are far more involved than they may perceive themselves to be, yet at the same time, concerns about how to further their activism is consistently present. They all expressed unease about how Women's Studies curricula informs the activism they seek with regards to organizing, focus, and choosing issues. I discuss this more in the next section.

### **Theme #3: "I want to do more, just don't know where to begin."**

The interviews make clear that Women's Studies students would benefit from clearer discussions on activist tactics and organizing strategies. The "how-to's" of feminist activism matter; many students who "just don't really know what to do" are far

from lazy or uninterested, but quite simply often do not know where to begin. In any given Women's Studies classroom, we constantly attempt to raise awareness on racism, sexism, sexuality, globalism, transnationalism, economics, and classism--the list goes on. In addition we prompt awareness on these issues and countless others, constantly demonstrating issues as interlocking and infinitely connected. In a discipline where we urge students to recognize oppression in an array of forms, it should be no surprise that some students are left feeling powerless or helpless to working against political inequalities and social injustices.

Johanna, stated that while she attempts to be more active, she finds it difficult to choose an issue when there are so many:

“The problem is like...would I be more effective choosing just one and sticking with it or spreading out half-assed attempts to help with a bunch of things? I guess you have to trust that someone else will choose what you couldn't, you know?”

Though Cassidy describes herself as personally and politically aware, the difficulty of “choosing an issue” is present for her as well:

“...I don't want to not address everyone's issues. In the past, when collective movements have been pressed for it, it's with the understanding that someone's issues will have to take a backdrop until whatever has been achieved...”

Lucy shares the above concerns, yet expresses the importance of individual decision making:

“Sometimes I feel overwhelmed like I'm not doing enough, and I wonder what else I can be doing if possible. But I want to say that I don't want to consider that a fault of a Women's Studies department, because they do--we're offered opportunities in class that affect change. And I think it's now up to the point of the individual to not be overwhelmed and sit there and say, *I can't fix everything but what can I help to do? I have these opportunities, so now I can make a choice.*”

Rebecca: “How would you answer the notion of young feminists as lazy or unorganized?”

Lucy: “I can see that... We, as third wave women can definitely do a lot more. And maybe not just stick to one thing but say, *hey, I’m going to fight this ageism thing and I’m also going to fight this whole thing about religion and what not. I’m going to fight several different things.*”

So part of their difficulty is where to begin, and their concerns are warranted. As many of them are “new” to feminism and Women’s Studies, it is understandable that many of them are easily overwhelmed by the myriad of issues facing them on the road to gender, sexual, racial and economic equality. Though they speak of often having difficulties in “choosing” which issue to focus on, many of them are attracted to becoming part of a mass visible movement. When asked, every student replied that they would love to see the formation of a visible collective similar to what they view as “second wave activism,” yet none can imagine what they’d organize around.

In response to whether she would like to see a massive collective movement begin again, Donna, states:

“...it has been done and it can be done again.... But I think now we realize how separated we are. And there are so many different types of women, it’s everywhere. But coming together again, I don’t know what issue or how it’s going to get triggered, but it’s going to happen.”

Julia is also unsure of what a massive movement would look like:

“I think it’s possible, but who knows. I think before it was like, you know, [the] suffrage movement [and] they got the vote. Then another big thing was sexual harassment and getting girls in sports. And now it’s like we have these laws and now, [sexism] is more covert; you can’t really see it. It’s not visible.”

The implication in the above statement is clear: if sexism is not clearly visible, how is it possible to collectively respond to it?



Rebecca: “So then how does feminist theory inform your activism? What do you see as challenging for Women’s Studies students?”

Julia: “I feel like--I think Women’s Studies should be really embracing in getting undergraduates together. And having a seminar or lecture about what other women have done. Maybe not step-by-step, but I feel like I’m kind of drowning, like it’s really hard to grasp anything. It seems like it should be a little more of an easy community to come into, like they could have, at the beginning of the semester [ways] to come together and meet the teachers? And after you could mingle and interact. [Women’s Studies] is smaller so we could get together and talk and exchange information, get to know other students, let them know about FSA and stuff.”

Molly, concurs with some of the above sentiments:

“In the 60s there was everything. It’d be nice to have a big massive movement because we’re still not getting paid the same. But how would it happen? Because we already know the problems... but it’s not public or the same way it was in the ‘60s. You’re given the tools [in Women’s Studies] to assess the situation and look at things differently, but as far as organizing, I don’t know that we’re given that. Maybe it does for a college campus.... But college campuses aren’t the majority.”

Rebecca: “So feminist theory, in some ways gives you the tools to assess various situations, but I think a common perception is that Women’s Studies should promote activism and social change. Do you find that to be your experience?”

Molly: “Kind of. This is going to be blasphemous! Some of the theories we read, I feel, don’t really have an affect outside of academia. So while I think it lays a groundwork, I don’t think that those theories are getting out to the majority of people that are being active, and I think some is very abstract. So it’s hard. For example, I think it’s Wittig? She says, *these lesbians are not women, this is redefining woman*. It’s like, okay, *what do we do with that now?* I mean, dominant culture is still doing to perceive a lesbian to be a woman, so it’s not going to matter that lesbians are not women.”

Molly continues to discuss the difficulty of organizing and choosing a “focus”:

Molly: “It seems like we’ve started to address that differences don’t mean we need to separate, that we should all be valued. But there’s not--in Women’s Studies, history is left out. We don’t really learn in Women’s Studies classes about the actions. I don’t think we really learn about tactics. Maybe if we focused more on how people had done it before, we

can get an idea of how to incorporate those skills. ...Organizing skills that became the women's movement...

Rebecca: "Like a feminist tactics class?"

Molly: "Yeah, maybe. I'm taking a History of Feminism course, but we haven't really covered that. And now we're talking about the '60s and '70s, and how much can you talk about? Prior to this we covered women's history--but there's a difference in women's history and feminist history. We've covered more women's history; we don't really discuss the feminist stuff, [such as] *this is what they did, these were all the different groups, these were their strategies*. I think if we were to do that it would give people more ideas of how to go about doing it and help people get more creative.

Molly raises important questions about how feminism has been taught to her.

While feminist theory and history provides an understanding of the movement, builds awareness on difference, oppressions, and successfully presents a vision of equality for the future, certain elements are lacking. She knows *that* feminists organized historically, but is rarely taught *how* they did it. She knows *that* they rallied, but not *how* the rallies were actually created. The awareness and vision is there, but in the midst of so many issues and theories, the specifics on developing one's personal method of activism is blurred, and not directly discussed in the classroom.

I asked Angie about her perception on how Women's Studies aids feminist activism, to which she said, "It prepares the mindset to want to do social change and definitely creates an environment where it's accessible to do that and talk about it." What follows with Angie builds upon my above conversation with Molly:

Rebecca: "So you view Women's Studies as inspiring activism among students?"

Angie: "Sure. Because after a while, for somebody that isn't in the community all the time could get faded out and worn out. Burnt out on it maybe."

Rebecca: “So then does feminist theory encourage activism?”

Angie: “The theory and the study and everything helps explain a lot of it. I’m not entirely sure it’s necessary in order to do something active. I like to think that anyone could be active.”

Rebecca: “You mean because of the inaccessibility of some feminist theory? You’re saying you don’t need it [theory] to do activism?”

Angie: There is the educational privilege that people--it’s an academic thing. That creates a hierarchy that doesn’t have to be there. It’s not a bad thing, it’s just a problem that makes sense. It’s a big contradiction that Women’s Studies exists inside an institution, but I also think, *where else does it have a place?* Which may sound incredibly open ended because I was just saying you don’t need it [theory] to be active. But where else are people going to have the tools and time to sit down and study so much? There’s a lot of stuff to read, and who’s going to do have the patience if they’re not here?”

At the same time, Angie commented on her desire to see more faculty involvement:

“...instead of just passing around flyers or something, actually showing up [to events] might be motivation. It’s always like the newest undergrads doing it, and the grad students and professors aren’t there. So then, where does it [activism] go after [undergrads leave] Do teachers still want to do it? Do they still care?”

Cassidy remarked on the connections between feminist theory and action when I asked her whether she saw Women’s Studies as guiding the activism she sought to do:

“Women’s Studies facilitates a lot of it. But do I feel that Women’s Studies facilitates an activist side to it? I think it gives a foundation, but I don’t know that it’s overtly encouraged.

Rebecca: “What do you think could shift that?”

Cassidy: “More faculty involvement, more from the department itself. And we get flyers in class, like the other day a teacher talked about Take Back the Night. But it’s really up to the student organizations to be like, *we’re having an FSA meeting*. Teachers could promote our organization in classes where there weren’t [FSA] members, that would be really nice.”

Many students brought up the desire to have more faculty and teacher involvement. Perhaps the reason students ignore what faculty may be doing off campus is because it is not visible to them. Missing in our discussions of tactics is also our own participation in feminist events and activities in and beyond the university. If this was addressed more clearly in classes it might hinder student visions of faculty and graduate students as “not caring anymore” or “uninvolved,” while simultaneously providing them with examples of activism with which many of us engage in daily.

It is clear that Women’s Studies does inform activism students are seeking to do, yet they have mentioned a number of areas they see as potentially improved; I suggest that our perceptions of what counts as activism greatly contributes to skewed perceptions of Women’s Studies as uninformed feminist activism. Though interviewees consistently stated that one of their main concerns in claiming to be activists was that they “don’t do enough” and “could do a lot more,” they all seem to be incredibly active. I cannot help but wonder if this supposition has to do with an actual lack of activism on their parts, or if the lack of a visible collective movement prompts them to consider their activism as inconsequential. I suggest that increased recognition of the activism they currently engage in would greatly enhance their conceptions of what counts as activism. At the same time, desires to be more active should not be dismissed as solely misconstrued perceptions of activism, and should be taken seriously. In many ways, their point is quite simple: they all want to do more activism but are not sure of how to do it. If they are seeking to do more, I suggest that as educators we need to utilize the classroom to more directly discuss activist tactics and strategies potentially useful for social change. In

addition, a majority of interviewees stated that more teacher and faculty involvement could help them to create ideas and avenues for activism.

As instructors, teachers, teaching assistants, etc., we are too often exhausted from our own work to engage in yet *more* Women's Studies events and student interactions. Our students and classes are often emotionally and mentally exhausting and paired with frequent concerns about funding for research and other projects, are often overwhelming. Paperwork, grading, curricula and lesson plan development, our own social and political concerns, personal lives and energies spent on papers, research and articles often leaves us with little energy or patience left to further engage with students. As instructors we are also aware of our influence on students—every semester we see minds open and lives change; we are already aware of the activism with which we engage in the classroom. Running out of patience for what we may see as our students asking us to hold their hands through the steps and processes of activism appears draining, time consuming, and unnecessary. Yet as those of us who have often facilitated major “life changes” in our students, it is important to remember our influence on them; while they are often becoming empowered and more self-confident in the context of Women’s Studies classes, they often continue to seek our approval and turn to us for guidance. I propose that many of the above concerns could be alleviated--or at least lessened--if we were to pay greater attention to how we teach our courses. Greater attention to activism in the classroom would allow us to avoid “extra” work we may not have time for, while satisfying some of the fears and concerns of undergraduate students. To do so, we must first embark on a reevaluation of activism, our approaches to discussions on activism, and what “counts.”

## Chapter Three

### New Directions

Contemporary feminist activism does not look like the Women's Liberation Movement of the 60's and 70's, nor should it. Most of us realize this point; therefore we must answer the question: what does feminist activism look like today?

To answer this, I have defined a "matrix of activism," which I will describe shortly to paint a clearer picture of how contemporary feminist activism is being done. My hope is that this will prompt more specific explanations for students on how they can engage in activism, and that it will remind us to tell them that everyday actions, personal awarenesses, and discourse matter. Naming and addressing the importance of everyday activism, calling attention to current and historical activist tactics, and greater specifics on the ways in which certain types of activism can influence social change will lead to an increase in the value we place on a variety of different types of activism. If, as instructors, we discuss activism more specifically in the classroom, perhaps students will begin to think more often about the "type(s) of activism" they do and how it is useful, rather than spending the majority of time figuring out what "type of feminist" they are.

The matrix I propose is hardly exhaustive of the various forms of feminist activism, however based on discussions with Women's Studies students, it is clear that they would benefit from clearer discussions on activist tactics and methods of organizing.

### **Defining the Matrix: Four Pillars of Activism**

As previously stated, I suggest that rather than naming what is lacking in contemporary feminism, feminist scholars could be more productive by considering what types of activism are currently taking place. If we consider Women's Studies as a feminist abeyance movement we are able to move past the conundrum of whether it is useful as existing within an institution. As academic feminists we are currently engaged in utilizing the tools around us to create change—and we are doing it successfully. Each student interviewed was unaware of Women's Studies before they came to the university; currently each of my narrators considers themselves as some type of activist, even if they don't see their activism as being "big" enough, or as "activism with a capital-A." Whatever "type" of activism they are engaged in, it is a direct result of their involvement with Women's Studies.

As components of the matrix of activism, I outline four pillars of activism in which contemporary academic feminists engage most effectively and regularly: structural activism, discursive activism, community activism, and activism of the self. Structural activism implies work done to create shifts in public policy, legislation, discrimination laws, etc. Discursive activism refers to contemporary consciousness-raising, engagement and creation of feminist theory, critical race theory and queer theory; discursive activism also often includes everyday activism, though this is a component of "activism of the self". Community activism loosely refers to campus activist activities and engagement with the local, county or city in which the activists reside. Activism of the self includes transformations in consciousness, everyday activism, and a personal commitment to recognizing feminist concerns and interlocking gender oppressions everyday.

I refer to the matrix of activism as comprised of “pillars” to emphasize the need to avoid conceptions of activism as existing on different “levels,” which tends to imply a valuing of one level over another. Conceiving of different types of activism as existing in pillars shows them side by side, equally important, and equally capable of informing one another; here, there are no “steps” one must take in order to move from one form of activism to the next. We must begin to move beyond the privileging of certain types of activism over others, i.e.: structural activism as preferred to everyday, etc. I do not claim these pillars of activism as distinct or absolute, they are not inherently separate nor should they be viewed as such. Most likely methods of activism and various tactics will overlap; though the pillars are each distinct, their relationship to one another will be noticeably apparent. The four types of activism I discuss should be regarded as interactive and as having the ability to bring about opportunities for further activism. For example, while it is often presumed the discursive activism and consciousness-raising has the potential to lead to structural change, it is important to remember that a structural shift in a social and political climate has the ability to shape discourse and language and contribute to discursive activism. Whereas engagement in community activism can result in a person adjusting everyday routines and personal activism, activism of the self can also take place before one begins to participate in community activism. The matrix I propose suggests that these pillars be easily interchangeable. What I am suggesting is that each of these areas have the potential to inform and contribute to each other under the umbrella of feminism as a movement influencing social change. The matrix highlights the ways in which people engage in more than one type of activism at a time; if we are involved in community activism, we often feel engaged in discursive and structural



activism. An overall awareness of these various types may influence the ways in which we value and “do” activism, and has the potential to encourage more to be done, as we become aware that various actions have the potential to affect various modes of social change.

I use the pillar metaphor much like the wave metaphor of feminism--to describe and highlight distinctions in the variety of approaches to feminist activism. I am naming them as distinct in order to encourage a reconceptualization of how we view and name activism and to call attention to the myriad of ways in which feminist activism is conducted. With this matrix, I am attempting to begin a new conversation about the ways in which feminist activism is taking place; I see no better place to begin than in utilizing my own location within the feminist location of Women’s Studies.

### **Structural Activism: Rallies and Marches and Protests, Oh My!**

My interviews led me to believe that the massive feminist uprisings witnessed during first and second waves of feminism remain the first association many have when they think of “activism.” By “structural activism,” I refer to those methods of activism that publicly demonstrate in support of, or in opposition to, public policy, legislation, and overarching ideologies that have the potential to affect the overall structure US politics. For example, GLBTQ activists are presently running campaigns and gathering support for the rights of same-sex couples to marry and receive legal benefits, gain acceptance to establish families, adopt children and so forth. If successful, these activists would alter the structural landscape of a culture that implies homosexuality as “unnatural” and “immoral.” Activism that attempts to create an overall structural shift in society would

fall under this category. Due to the enormity of work and efforts it takes to create structural shifts, as well as the numbers of activists often needed to make patriarchal forces take notice, “structural activism,” could be understood as activism that publicly rallies mass amounts of people with the intent of altering the way in which our society is organized. This could be demonstrating for or against wars, campaigning for political candidates, or attempting to establish new laws granting rights to certain groups of people often deemed “second-class citizens.” This type of activism could also include lobbying, or participation in legal, legislative and electoral processes.

During the 1960s and ‘70s, second wave feminists gathered in massive groups to demand equal pay for equal work and publicly rallied in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment. Though neither were actually achieved--the ERA has yet to pass, and the Equal Pay Act did not rectify the wage gap--feminist rallying required a shift in the way women were viewed in the US. Gender differentiation and ideal gender roles did not end in the 1970s, though a public reevaluation of women’s capabilities and potential resulted. Subsequent to public feminist activism in the 1960s and ‘70s, women gained access to professions, work, sports and more, ultimately changing the structural organization of US politics and women’s place in the political landscape.

### **Community Activism: Grassroots and Local Organizing**

In 2004, the Women’s Studies department at USF established a Women’s Studies Advisory Board, made up of various community members, such as feminist doctors, counselors, former Women’s Studies faculty and executive women who were interested in strengthening the goals of Women’s Studies and the visibility of the department in

Tampa and surrounding communities. The Advisory Board currently engages in projects like raising funds to offer scholarships to Women's Studies majors and minors and has created an endowment fund. They bring in guest speakers from the community at monthly meetings to further ties between community members, campus faculty, students, and staff.

The creation of the Women's Studies Advisory Board is an example of community activism. Community activism includes activities organized to increase local or regional involvement with feminist projects; activism aimed at networking and building allies; as well as awareness-raising campaigns aimed at neighborhoods, specific constituencies and local businesses, city and county boards, and non-profit groups.

The most extensive example given throughout this paper is the activism in which the Feminist Student Alliance has been involved. The students in the alliance have worked to raise awareness on campus and in the Tampa Bay area on a number of issues like safer-sex, domestic violence, and sexual assault. In addition, they have created a community for themselves in which they have established friendships, allies, connections with other student groups and so forth.

Community activism is perhaps one of the most common forms of contemporary feminism outside of discursive activism. Though they do not always result in media or public attention, community events are a large component of the maintenance of social movements over time. They provide spaces for interactional encounters that have the potential to create change and shift thoughts. In Johanna's interview, she spoke about experience with FSA during the "Ann Coulter walk-out," which gained attention from a local newspaper. We can consider the walk-out a form of community activism as well as

the discussions she later had with family members. Johanna said that it was not the walk-out so much that probably made people think or “change their minds,” but that “then we got to have a conversation about it, and I think that’s where the real change can come in. But the everyday things that you do... and what you believe... it does affect people.”

Community activism is valuable because it points to something often overlooked in discussions about feminist activism: the importance of interactions and conversing with community members, family, friends, and peers. As Women’s Studies students are learning about issues ranging from globalism to politics of motherhood to gender performativity, they often forget the simple ways in which conversations and interactions have the potential to shift people’s perceptions and alter their ideas of what is or is not just or right. Women’s Studies students lost in the enormity of issues facing feminists must be reminded of the ways in which interactions and conversations have the power to inform various views and ideas. Community activism and such conversations encourage students and activists to “choose an issue,” something interviewees discussed confusion with. Community activism prompts intimate connections and conversations that often have the greatest potential to change people’s minds, increase acceptance and tolerance of difference. Community activism can also take the form of coalition politics, bringing together members of the community around certain issues that otherwise would not have the chance to meet and organize together.

### **Activism of the Self: Personal Awareness and Empowerment**

When, in “Defining Difference,” Audre Lorde (1984) prompted her readers to recognize the “oppressor within,” she was not doing it to escape telling us how to do

“real activism.” She was doing it because she recognized the power of changing our minds and perceptions of the world. For social change to genuinely extend beyond ourselves, it must first take place within ourselves.

When students come into a Women’s Studies classroom, they are often “changed forever.” New awarenesses on how gender, race, sexuality, and class affect their lives, everyday experiences, and perceptions of others often sends students through an initial whirlwind of emotion and confusion. Students are introduced to concepts and theories that alter their lives--as I heard a colleague once say, “once the blinders are taken off, you just can’t put them back on.”

Personal awarenesses, self-empowerment, and recognizing the potential of one’s voice can be a major activist event. To assume one’s own power and potential--and name those things as power and potential can forever alter one’s existence and perception of their existence and purpose in the world.

A yoga instructor once told me that our minds are like the muscles and bones in our bodies, that “in order to take care of our minds, we have to work them out, just like we would attempt take care of our bodies.” In order to shift racist, sexist, and other oppressive thoughts into reflections on embracing difference and diversity, we have to train ourselves to think accordingly and acknowledge that certain thoughts we previously held were racist, sexist or oppressive. To move beyond stereotyping, and in order to shift our thinking towards positive and non-oppressive beliefs, we have to work at it. We have to constantly be aware and make choices everyday that affect and contribute to overall social change; we have to believe that what we are doing is worthwhile in order for it to be so. We have to call out friends and family on oppressive language and sexist jokes.

We have to know that being conscious consumers who pay attention to sweatshops and corporate greed matters--even if the shirt we're contemplating buying costs only \$3. We have to know that recycling that one small bottle of water is still recycling. If we did nothing--nothing would ever happen. Small or large, all of our acts, thoughts, and processes matter.

In *The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy* (2005) Allan Johnson suggests that we have to at once view ourselves as significant and insignificant: in the large scheme of things, we are at once nothing and everything. Certainly our existence in the context of the entire world means very little--yet at the same time, our existence to our parents, friends, children, students--can be everything; so are our politics and actions. Using Gandhi's metaphor of a tree, Johnson says that if we view ourselves as a single leaf, we appear insignificant to the tree. If one leaf falls, the tree will continue to grow and is not affected by the leaf--over the course of a tree's life, it will lose and grow thousands or millions of leaves. Yet at the same time, the leaves sustain the life of a tree. Combined, if all of the leaves fell off, the tree would die. The leaves bring oxygen and sustenance to the tree. His metaphor is clear: we are always significant and insignificant. And if that is true, we must remember to live our lives as if our thoughts and actions *are* significant. Even when they appear to not be significant, they are.

To assume that we are powerless or insignificant negates us of our responsibility in contributing to social change. To assume powerlessness of the self plays into the hands of oppressive forces and those who have interests in maintaining our submission and passivity. Acknowledging the healing power and potential of one's voice cannot be destroyed by dominant cultural forces unless we believe that individuals do not matter or

cannot speak loudly enough. Our belief in ourselves, and the change we seek to make must begin in ourselves if genuine change is to come of it. Personal awareness, self-empowerment and everyday activism matters.

### **Discursive Activism: Consciousness-raising as Contemporary Feminist Praxis**

In the mid 1960s Kathie Sarachild and others attempted to form a women's liberation group as a way of starting a "mass movement of women to put an end to...segregation and discrimination based on sex." To do so required studying the components of women's oppression before taking action; as stated by Ann Forer, they had to begin by "raising consciousness." (1968) "Consciousness-raising," (CR) as described by Jo Freeman (1979) is where women gathered in rap groups to "discuss personal problems, personal experiences, personal feelings and personal concerns." This gathering led to a social and political collective consciousness. "From this public sharing of experience comes the realization that what was thought to be individual is in fact common; that what was considered a personal problem has a social cause and probably a political solution. Women see how social structures and attitudes have limited their opportunities and molded them..." (561-2).

CR was radical in that it called for an analysis of women's lives that would lead to "women's liberation" from "male supremacy." CR groups necessitated that women set and define the terms around which they would be discussed and understood; in these women-only spaces, women began to name and define their lives as differently situated than dominant culture had held. Located within the framework of a patriarchal culture, the formation and growth of CR groups was in many ways, more radical than the

“activism” that would later stem from them. When “the powerful normally determine what is said and sayable”, women’s controlling of space, creation of definitions and therefore assumption of power was a radical slap in the face to male supremacy (Frye 105: 1983).

As women began to articulate the inarticulate, a new reference point for truth and reality developed; Catherine Mackinnon states that within consciousness raising groups “detailed and critically reconstructed composite images” of women are created, and that a shift in the “way of knowing a social reality” of being a woman developed. A discursive shift was taking place giving rise to the activism that would eventually lead to a structural shift in political and public life. However, the act of consciousness-raising, as Sarachild argues remains one of the most radical “acts” feminists can partake in:

The resistance to CR groups named them as “petty” or

“‘not political’ ... Everybody from Republicans to Communists said that they agreed equal work was a valid issue... But when women wanted to try to figure why [women] weren’t *getting* equal pay for equal work anywhere, and [they] wanted to take a look in these areas, they what [they] weren’t doing was politics, economics or event study at all, but ‘therapy’, something that women had to work out for themselves individually.” (Sarachild, emphasis in original).

Sarachild’s point here cannot be overemphasized. Though feminists had participated in public activism, the biggest threat to male dominance was seen the response to the discussion of male chauvinism. When examples of “discrimination against women, or exploitation of women” were brought up, feminists were accused of being “man-haters” and “women who complained all the time”; CR groups were called



“hen parties” and “bitch sessions.” Efforts to invalidate CR group discussions named their ideas and issues “psychological delusions” and subjects unworthy of study.

“Consciousness-raising then, is neither an end in itself nor a stage, a means to a different end, but a significant part of a very inclusive commitment to winning and guaranteeing radical changes for women in society. The view of consciousness-raising as an end in itself--which happens when consciousness-raising is made into a methodology, a psychology--is as severe and destructive a distortion of the original idea and power of the weapon as is seeing consciousness-raising as a stage.”

The above analysis of consciousness-raising suggests great similarity between it and Women’s Studies. bell hooks has stated that a problem with the development of Women’s Studies departments was that it replaced consciousness-raising as the primary site for feminist thinking and strategizing for social change. In doing so, she claims that feminists have lost their “mass based potential.”

I have to disagree with hooks’ assumption. In a society where the media and mainstream public is hostile to feminism, I see Women’s Studies as the closest thing we have to a mass-based movement, and that the revolutionary potential of feminism has remains precisely because of the existence of Women’s Studies departments. hooks may assume none but liberal reform as taking place in the classroom, but feminist theories, critical race theories, and queer theories continually require us to redefine and reevaluate our lived realities. Though at times inaccessible to non-academic feminists, Women’s Studies scholars are hardly engaged in using the “master’s” discourse, even if the “space” in which we engage is located within a hierarchal institution. For even though in seeking revolutionary change, most feminists will support various laws and legislation in support of gender and racial equality--that too is “liberal reform.”

In my classes, I utilize one to two class periods to discuss CR and the ways in which second wave feminist used it for personal growth (activism of the self) and as an organizing strategy towards community and structural change. During our conversations I always ask the students, “what is consciousness-raising?” To this question they always respond, “we’re kind of doing it now, in class.” I agree with this assessment. Though contemporary CR is not identical to the CR of the second wave, Women’s Studies classrooms exist as settings to build feminist awareness, critique patriarchal culture and combine feminist theory with our lives, experiences and futures. As Freedman states of CR, the same description could apply to contemporary Women’s Studies classrooms. She says that a CR group “...functions as a mechanism for social change in and of themselves. They are structures created specifically for the purpose of altering the participants perceptions and conceptions of themselves and of society at large” (561).

In Women’s Studies, we are continuing, as CR groups did in the ‘60s and ‘70s, to expand “women’s ways of knowing.” The existence of Women’s Studies programs are contributing a paradigm shift within the university system and beyond. Universities exist to prepare students for careers and lives beyond academics--Women’s Studies is no different. Women’s Studies actively informs students lives outside of the academy. When we view Women’s Studies this way--CR as contemporary feminist praxis--there is no split between feminist theory and the everyday theorizing of our lives. They are connected; feminist theory becomes relevant to students in and beyond the university.

hooks’ has also periodically discussed the need to include men in feminism; she frequently discusses the problematic perception of feminism as anti-male rather than anti-sexist. Whereas hooks encourages the return to CR groups modeled after those of the

'60s and '70s, I remind her that those were distinctly women-only spaces. Women's Studies classrooms expose males and sexist females to feminist theories and modes of thought, oftentimes when they would have otherwise not participated in such discussions. Women's Studies in academics not only requires students to come to class, but requires active engagement with feminist teachers, authors and texts if they are to receive passing grades. In Women's Studies, CR is expanded to include men while still privileging women's experience and feminist theory as the basis for discussion. The CR group dynamic changes, but the goal and potential of a Women's Studies classroom continues to work toward the same priorities of CR groups of the 1960s and 70s.

Women's Studies demonstrates the continued development of discursive activism; consciousness-raising techniques are employed in feminists classrooms requiring students and teachers to engage in critical analyses of their social and political lives. Such engagement requires a continuous defining and redefining of social and personal realities. In addition, the existence and resistance of Women's Studies programs on college campuses exemplifies the need for them to be there. For as Sarachild said, it is often not the public activism and lobbying for legislation taken as directly threatening to patriarchy, but the knowledge that feminists are gathering regularly, talking, and defining their own lives in their own terms.

As stated before, my claim is that Women's Studies as an abeyance organization responds to concerns about the institutionalization of Women's Studies and Gender Studies departments. First, it requires us to stop measuring the quality of feminist activism only via feminism's visibility to the mainstream public. Second, we are able to remind ourselves of the role of Women's Studies departments in creating activists,

broadening awareness and as creating change in and beyond academics. Third, rather than posit feminism as at a standstill, we can recognize feminist activism as still taking place as we reconceptualize our understanding of what activism is. In this context, Women's Studies as an abeyance organization reminds of the value of consciousness-raising, activism of the self, everyday activism, and the ability to continue to work towards and feel accomplished in continuing to create social change. The above matrix allows us to understand the ways in which Women's Studies contributes to feminist activism while providing a template for discussion in the classroom. Use of the matrix of activism in feminist classrooms can enhance the Women's Studies students' understandings of how feminist activism is "done." The matrix and pillars will provide more concrete answers to students on how to engage in feminist activism in a myriad of ways with regards to specifics, tactics, and organizational focuses, even when there are "so many issues." It is our job to help them figure out "where to begin."

## Chapter Four

### Conclusion

Concerns about whether Women's and Gender Studies programs have the potential to affect revolutionary social change have led to a new "niche" of feminist research and scholarship. Self-reflection on the ways in which Women's Studies programs prepare undergraduate students for activism beyond academia is a critical step in assuring the possibility of social change. Such reflection led me to conduct a series of interviews with USF Women's Studies undergraduate majors and minors to present a more detailed vision of how Women's Studies alters perceptions of the world, raises awareness and promotes activism. These undergraduate voices are hidden in discussions on institutional Women's Studies programs; I contend that we have much to learn by recognizing and including the concerns and opinions of our undergraduate students.

In order to discuss the relevance of Women's Studies as applicable to feminist activism beyond the university it is important to situate the development of Women's Studies as a product and continuation of feminist activism. We must turn our attention to the ways in which the waves of feminism have evolved over time; it is important to recognize what has made feminism productive. With regards to feminist activism and productivity, what do we value as historically significant and why? How have various types of activism responded to concerns of that particular time? Though we often focus our attention on the upsurges in collective feminist activism, how does the wave metaphor prompt us to consider the periods between peaks in mass-based visibility?

By using Verta Taylor's concept of "social movements in abeyance," we can answer the above questions as this concept allows us to understand how Women's Studies programs influence social change. Conceiving of Women's Studies programs as feminist abeyance structures demonstrates their usefulness in prompting feminist activism rather than naming the institutionalization of such departments a failure of the feminist movement. I have argued that Women's Studies programs are evidence of a contemporary feminist movement relevant to present-day concerns; Women's Studies is useful in the creation and promulgation of feminist theory, in maintaining and building feminist communities, and in increasing awareness on oppression, difference and inequality. In addition, Women's Studies, like other university degree programs, prepare students to graduate and maintain personal and professional relations with feminist consciousnesses, whether they remain with or seek careers outside of academia.

Kennedy and Beins ask that we recognize productive feminist activism as specific to its historical location. In order to evaluate whether academic feminism informs feminist activism, we must define and discuss activism as relevant to contemporary feminist concerns. To perceive of activism as valuable only in mass-based collective form ignores the importance of abeyance periods where social movements maintain their livelihood and gain collective support. The measurement of feminist activism as valuable only when recognizable by patriarchal mainstream culture is erroneous and perpetuates the inaccuracy of feminist activism as not currently taking place. It furthermore deters those of us who are active from valuing our own work, including those of us working in Women's Studies departments as feminist scholars.

In addition to conceiving of Women's Studies as feminist abeyance structures and evidence of the continuation of the feminist movement, I have argued that we more closely address the ways in which Women's Studies classes act as sites in which to help students become more active. A feminist classroom exists as an opportunity to present the myriad of ways in which students can partake in feminist activism. My data analysis of interviews with undergraduate Women's Studies majors and minors at USF shows that while Women's Studies is useful in prompting feminist consciousness and influencing a desire to do activism that there is room for improvements in regards to specifics, tactics, and making connections between feminist theory and feminist activism.

In response to these concerns I have defined a matrix of activism to aid in the examination of the ways in which feminist activism takes place. The four pillars of activism that make up this matrix are structural activism, community activism, discursive activism, and activism of the self. By paying closer attention to the ways in which feminists engage in activism it may become easier to discuss the "how-to" specifics of feminist activism. For those students who appeared to feel that Women's Studies classes lacked discussions on activist tactics, organizing strategies, and historical developments, I suggest that this matrix provides a clearer view on how various forms of activism are created, maintained and influential in and beyond the university. In addition, the matrix and pillars illustrate the ways in which various types of activism inform one another and become interactive (structural to discursive, activism of the self to community, and so on).

Women's Studies has the potential to reach thousands of students each year all over the world. While concerns about feminism as institutional are warranted, it is

important that feminists recognize the usefulness and potential of Women's Studies. Women's Studies classes, faculty, and feminist theory are changing the lives of students with every course taught. Women's Studies courses introduce students to revolutionary ideas and give rise to radical consciousnesses that feed back into their daily lives, personal relationships, careers and professions. Women's Studies programs spatially allow for the continuation of consciousness-raising and production of feminist discourse that has the potential to create revolutionary social change; in Women's Studies consciousness-raising becomes feminist praxis. Self-reflection, as a necessary process for feminists and social movements is useful as long as it continues to be productive in its analysis. It is time that we include more regularly in our focus what feminists *can* do and *are* doing, instead of what is missing and lacking. This positive shift has the potential to be more productive, encouraging and useful to the students whose lives we touch and change every day.



## References

- Balén, Julia. "Practicing What We Teach." Pp. 272-284. 2005. in *Women's Studies for the Future: Foundations, Interrogations, Politics*, edited by E.L. Kennedy and A. Beins. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Berger, Melody, Ed. 2006. *We Don't Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Feminists*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
- Boxer, Marilyn Jacoby. 1998. *When Women Ask the Questions: Creating Women's Studies in America*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Combahee River Collective. 1981. "A Black Feminist Statement." Pp. 210-218. in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Edited by C. Moraga and G. Anzaldúa. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press.
- Davis, Angela Y. 1981. *Women Race and Class*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Findlen, Barbara, Ed. 1995. *Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation*. New York, NY: Seal Press.
- Fonow, Mary Margaret and Judith A. Cook. 1991. *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Freeman, Jo, Ed. 1979. *Women: a Feminist Perspective, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Frye, Marilyn. 1983. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and The Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14:575-599.
- Hartsock, Nancy. 1998. *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- hooks, bell. 2000. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- 2003. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York, NY: Routledge.

-----, 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hull, Gloria T, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith, Eds. 1982. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. New York, NY: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York.

Jervis, Lisa. 2004. "The End of Feminism's Third Wave." *Ms Magazine*. Winter ed. Retrieved March 3, 2007.  
(<http://www.calstatela.edu/library/bi/rsalina/asa.styleguide.html>)

Johnson, Allen. 2005. *The Gender Knot, Revised Ed.: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press

Kennedy, Elizabeth Lapovsky and Agatha Beins, Eds. 2005 *Women's Studies for the Future: Foundations, Interrogations, Politics*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Orde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.

MacKinnon, Catharine. 1989. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. 1987. "Difference: A Special Third-World Women Issue." *Feminist Review*. 25 (Spring):5-22.

Moraga, Cherrie and Gloria Anzaldúa, Eds. 1981. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press.

Reagon, Bernice Johnson. 1983. "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century." Pp. 356-368. in *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New York, NY: Kitchen Table--Women of Color Press.

Smith, Barbara and Beverly Smith. "Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue. Pp 113-127. in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Edited by C. Moraga and G. Anzaldúa. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press.

Smith, Barbara, Ed. 1983. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* New York, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

Taylor, Verta. "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance." 1989. *American Sociological Review*. 54(Oct.):761-775.

Walker, Rebecca, Ed. 1995. *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. New York, NY: First Anchor Books.

Weigman, Robyn. 2002. "Academic Feminism Against Itself." *NWSA Journal*. 14(2):18-37.

----- Pp. 40-60. 2005. "The Possibility of Women's Studies." in *Women's Studies for the Future: Foundations, Interrogations, Politics*, edited by E.L. Kennedy and A. Beins. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Zimmerman, Bonnie. "Beyond Dualisms: Some Thoughts About the Future of Women's Studies." Pp 31-39. 2005. in *Women's Studies for the Future: Foundations, Interrogations, Politics*, edited by E.L. Kennedy and A. Beins. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

## Bibliography

Brown, Wendy. 1997. "The Impossibility of Women's Studies." *differences* 9(3):79-101.

Freire, Paulo. 1998. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Heywood, Leslie and Jennifer Drake, Eds. 1997. *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Labaton, Vivien and Dawn Lundy Martin, Eds. 2004. *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.