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She Who Speaks Shadow Speaks Truth: Transdisciplinarity in Women's and Gender Studies

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As arbitrary as such demarcations may be, the end of the century raises the question of the future of women's and gender studies. Caught between a visible trend toward normalization and a renewed struggle over the legitimacy of women's and gender studies, feminism is undergoing a critical reexamination, as women's studies' own disciplinary location brings renewed attention to the necessary role of transdisciplinarity in women's and gender studies.

A trend toward repositioning women's and gender studies within the "field of science" (Bourdieu 1998) has been visible for some time now. Although women's studies is often still not fully accepted, with increasing institutionalization (as evinced by the creation of professorships and courses of study), it has moved from margin to center. Even given the variations among individual disciplines, women's and gender studies has long since ceased to be a matter pursued by a few scholars from an outsider or marginal position in the academic field, and its construction of new research perspectives and subjects is also no longer connected per se with a critique of the system of knowledge production called "scholarly research." For women's and gender studies, as for other disciplines, increasing institutionalization carries with it the threat of a loss of critical potential, especially the capacity to reflect upon its own modes of knowledge production. Moving into the center, however, necessitates a higher level of self-reflexivity. Transdisciplinarity, understood as a critical evaluation of terms, concepts, and methods that transgresses disciplinary boundaries can be a means to this higher level of reflexivity.

Moreover, the social transformations that are now taking place or becoming visible serve notice of the end of industrial capitalism, and with it the transformation of all of the subsystems of "modern" society. This process confronts women's and gender studies with the task of testing whether, and to what degree, the disciplinary or interdisciplinary perspectives applied thus far are adequate to analyzing and representing these

changes. New types of inequality and social divisions are becoming visible, as are new phenomena in the “feminization” of social groups, activities, and life-styles, which no longer necessarily obey gender lines and cannot be grasped simply in terms of (social and cultural) differentiations within a genus group. With modification, however, the hierarchical construct of a two-gender system can definitely continue to be useful in naming and signifying these new boundaries.

The progress in genetic and reproductive technologies also makes trans-disciplinary approaches crucial if we are to address the development of a modern “bio-power” with the intention of creating life (Foucault 1993). At the end of the twentieth century, it is impossible to overlook the discursive entrance of a “new species” that leaves behind the limitations and ecologically threatened human, bound by a “naturally given” body. Whether gender differentiation is meaningful in the cultural construction of this new species and in what way this cultural construction can be influenced from a feminist perspective constitute challenges to women’s and gender studies that not only call into question terms and patterns of thought thus far held to be valid but also demand the abandonment of disciplinary boundaries in the formulation of research subjects.

If women’s studies has moved further toward the center, then it can no longer easily claim a critical marginality from which to challenge the established canon of knowledge. Under what conditions, then, can feminist theory as a critique of the dominant order be maintained? What capabilities do feminist scholars require in order to act as dissidents in the face of increasingly commodified and identity-oriented production of scholarly knowledge? These questions are being debated in feminist contexts — and other places — under the rubric of transdisciplinarity. As an epistemological and methodological strategy, transdisciplinarity proceeds from the insight that disciplines are conventionally thought of territorially, as independent domains with clear boundaries. In fact, however, disciplines are characterized by multiple interconnections and shot through with cross-disciplinary pathways. Consequently, the boundaries between them must be understood — much like physical territorial borders — as arbitrary products, effects of social activity: as sociological facts that formulate themselves in space, as Georg Simmel (1992) puts it.

Transdisciplinarity as a structural principle for scholarly work attempts to take seriously the idea that disciplines are less constituted around a core than organized like knots in a netlike structure. The task lies, then, in tracing these interlacings to untangle the separate strands, “to recognize from the beginning the actual transdisciplinary constitution of disciplinary content” (Welsch 1996, 947). Transdisciplinarity is thus not a new demand

on the production of scholarly knowledge; it is its structuring principle. In a certain sense, it denotes that scholarly practice is becoming more self-reflective, questioning identity as the privileged mode of knowledge formation. That is, true transdisciplinarity is characterized by a continual examination of artificially drawn and contingent boundaries and that which they exclude.

This last point, especially, could be decisive as a future foundation for the production of feminist scholarly knowledge as a critique of the dominant order. The past two decades have been characterized by vehement worldwide struggles over the epistemological and political "we" of feminism. This has led to a decentering and questioning of the representativeness of any one version of feminism. In the course of these struggles it has become clear that while reference to an epistemological "we" is basic to the production of feminist scholarly knowledge, it must also be simultaneously relativized, displaced, and reformulated by the thematization and treatment of differences and inequalities between women. This is in no way to be understood as a misfortune or childhood illness of a still-young scholarly practice; it can be regarded rather as a significant indicator of the direction feminist theory should take. A women's/gender studies that understands itself to be critical of the dominant order must constantly reassign itself the task of questioning its own epistemological foundations in the spirit of antifoundationalism (as defined by Judith Butler [1994], among others). Feminist theory must reflect upon the contingency of its own premises and constructions to maintain its awareness of the difference between the thought and the thinkable. It is less a matter of working out a subject core (e.g., gender) than one of developing a range of tools for analyzing the logic of power relations and power struggles. A scholarly practice that aims to critique power and hegemony must be forthright about its own complicity in given relationships of power. The unsaid must also appear in the said. Transdisciplinarity, while hardly feminist scholarship's last word in response to this challenge, accepts the task of making itself transparent by thematizing the conditions of its own speech. "In the ideal case, this transparency of conditions," the philosopher Wolfgang Iser commented, leads to "an explicit delineation of the boundaries and exclusions of the respective conditional framework" (1996, 938).

Feminist theory has repeatedly resisted the procedures of exclusion inherent in the disciplinary organization of knowledge. In doing so, it has provoked a reconsideration not only of disciplinary structure itself but also of what qualifies as knowledge in any discipline. Feminism's openness to self-reflection and subsequent changes have been largely the result of its attention to women's contradictory social experiences. On its intricate path

from margin to center, women's studies now is in danger of giving up its dialogue with the other in favor of a dialogue with the canonized powers. It behooves us to bear in mind Paul Celan's remark that "[s]he who speaks shadow speaks truth" (1983, 135) — that full speech is realized only when the unspoken appears in the spoken, that, as Bourdieu put it, "acts of recognition are unavoidably acts of misrecognition" (1997, 96).

Understood thus, transdisciplinarity can be an opportunity to retain the dissident potential of women's/gender studies while also transforming it into a well-honed, central tool for scholarly analysis of the problems of the next century.

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