

*Diving (Back) into the Wreck:  
Finding, Transforming, and Reimagining  
Women's Studies and Sexuality Studies  
in the Academy*

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We are, I am, you are / by cowardice or courage / the one who finds  
our way / back to this scene / carrying a knife, a camera / a book of  
myths / in which / our names do not appear.

—Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck”<sup>1</sup>

AS A SEXUALITY RESEARCHER who has traveled with a formal, institutional “women’s studies” label since the start of college—first as an undergraduate at Occidental College’s women’s studies/gender studies department (1997–2001), then as a graduate student in women’s studies at the University of Michigan (2001–2006), and now as a tenured professor of women and gender studies at Arizona State University (2006–present)—my formal ties to academic feminism owe much to the work of those who blazed that path for me. Scholars of my generation—those who have always seen women’s studies in the academy as possible and available—often forget the hard-won battles, challenges, and struggles that gave birth to women’s studies as a field of study. As we now embark on the challenge to decide where women’s studies and sexuality studies should reside within the academy—as separate fields, as joint programs, or as fields tied with ethnic studies and American studies—the privileges and dangers of this conversation deserve assessment.

While interviewing radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson several years ago, she advised caution about a formalized association between women's studies and sexuality studies.<sup>2</sup> She warned, aptly, that fusing women's studies and sexuality studies too closely could lead to the implicit pairing of women and their bodies (and men and their minds) that feminists had long fought to negate. We had been discussing some shifts at the university—the move from women's studies to gender studies and conversations about further collapsing women's studies into “something else”—and she expressed concern that, even though the political alliances between women, gender, and sexuality studies remained strong, the *linguistic* connection between the three would create political assumptions about women and bodies that could be difficult to shake. This advice hit particularly hard for me as a sexuality scholar in women's studies, as my entire career has incessantly fused sexuality, embodiment, radical feminism, and women's studies together.

The road to renaming, reclassifying, and regrouping women's studies and its allies is fraught with messiness, intellectual and ideological struggle, personal passions, and hard-earned political strategizing. With so many having a stake in this process, the priorities of administrators (concerned with cost-cutting, student retention, and numbers), chairs and directors (fighting to keep women's studies and its goals alive), faculty (struggling with pedagogical and political tensions, particularly about intersectionality, not to mention keeping their jobs), and students (wanting a recognizable, “legitimate,” and provocative course of study) too often stand at odds.<sup>3</sup> In my experience, at least four key areas in this debate provoke the most discussion, each of which I outline briefly here: (1) the politics of naming; (2) the intellectual risks and benefits of “ghetto” studies; (3) shifting definitions of “social justice” as an umbrella term; and (4) the continuing risks of institutionalizing radical, activist, or politically significant social movements.

Every college and university I have joined has had numerous discussions about name changes in women's studies. At Occidental College, a decision was made to link both women's studies and gender studies, while the University of Michigan (after a heated multi-month debate among faculty and graduate students in 2004) decided to retain the name “women's studies.” Arizona State University's Tempe

campus recently transitioned their women's studies program into the School of Social Transformation, while West campus (my current home) has embarked on a series of conversations about eliminating both women and gender studies and ethnic studies in favor of a larger social justice program, mostly in the name of "saving" the program from annihilation. (Are we acting, as Laura Briggs frames it in this issue, out of fear for our future or instead a "wild optimism" and a "contagious sense of freedom"?) Most women's studies students and faculty know these debates quite well; they follow us around, just as the fear of losing women's studies seems a constant threat hanging over our heads. Naming carries with it many interesting conversations about public presentation, personal identity, attraction to newer students, and even "hipness" and "freshness" along with placement within the university's mission (and money streams). The potential losses or gains from name changes are difficult to ascertain, as the context in which the name change occurs prohibits generalizations in this regard. For example, erasing the words "women" and "Latino/a" and "indigenous" at Arizona State may advance the (far Right) conservative aims of the state while also giving us the opportunity to act stealthily and strategically when they do not immediately recognize us as a fundamentally progressive program. Doing so at the University of Maryland, where, as Marilee Lindemann describes in this issue, women's studies is well funded and operating in a solidly blue state, may yield a different outcome altogether.

Some questions I commonly hear: If we call a department "Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies," does that fuse identity groups together with a *subject*, or is sexuality also (solely?) an identity? Why prioritize sexuality over other obvious identities that link with women's studies? Are we further watering down women's studies or creating new spaces for intersectional identities? (Similar conversations have ensued about the risks and benefits of dismantling black studies in favor of ethnic studies — did we erase blackness or make the department more inclusive and comprehensive?) Adding *gender* to women's studies has made room for scholars to think more broadly about men, masculinities, trans and queer sexualities, and the non-essential qualities of the word "women." (It also gets conservative men off our backs for not "having a men's studies department too.") Adding *sexuality* to the mix makes an even more welcoming home

for gay feminist men to join the department, signaling formalized links between feminism and queer rights struggles. Politically, I have not encountered a single women's studies person who would argue against the intellectual linkages between women's studies, ethnic studies, and sexuality studies (although feminists have encountered resistance from some ethnic studies and sexuality studies scholars); we know intimately how fused these fields are in the "real world," yet naming these links invites different stories and risks into the mix. Briggs asserts in this issue that women's studies cannot exist without sexuality studies and vice versa. I would add the questions: Will women's studies evolve its way into the erasure of women altogether? Have feminists fought this long to have the word *women* disappear from visibility? Conversely, if women's studies continues its success—particularly in its work on intersectionality—won't we work our way out of a job because it has so many intuitive allies? Isn't women's studies necessarily "timing out" as an academic discipline in a positive way (even though sexism and patriarchy remain strong)?

Still, when sitting in meetings where administrators argue for the collapse of women, gender, sexuality, queer, ethnic, American, First Nations, indigenous (and so on) studies, I get nervous. If all of these programs and departments get taken out and "ghettoized" into one place, does that make the more traditional fields (especially the social and natural sciences) less critical of social identities and inequalities? For example, women's studies at the University of Michigan exists only within joint graduate programs (psychology, sociology, history, English); its presence serves as a necessary and important virus/gadfly that infects these (fixed, exclusive, traditional, masculine) fields with a strong feminist jolt. By creating a separate umbrella program for all critical fields together, might we lose the ability to challenge, inject, and disrupt fields that are not all that excited to welcome us to the party?

My ultimate position on the issue is that there is no universal answer for all conditions because *it depends on the political priorities of the university/college as a whole*. At liberal arts-focused Occidental College, the creation of the Critical Theory and Social Justice department—housing women's studies/gender studies, ethnic studies, American studies, sexuality and queer studies, and chunks of religious studies—works well because the entire college already had a strong commitment

to the success and visibility of these lines of study. The department expects students to become well versed in critical theory, social identity, queer and sexuality studies, and intersectionality; as a result, the college is producing an excellent undergraduate journal and has generated students who can enter multiple fields for graduate school *and* who have built institutionalized links between feminism and its allies. Whether other universities, public or private, have a similar commitment to helping these fields succeed—or whether they simply want them to stop pestering the traditional (high dollar) departments—is an absolutely pivotal factor in whether these hybrid departments can or will work. Public universities that do not adamantly defend the *necessity* of critical fields to grow and flourish will ensure their gradual marginalization and eventual extinction.

My hunch about the future of women's studies and sexuality studies is that both will increasingly find housing beneath a "social justice" umbrella. In theory, this is a fine way to proceed; in practice, it may transform the scholarly and political goals of women's studies in ways that deserve caution and careful assessment. Social justice often evokes the more literal definition of justice: legal, social, and political battles about underrepresented groups (certainly a priority for women's studies). At its most literal interpretation, it reads as "criminal justice" and leaves out other priorities for women's studies: sexuality, queer theory, embodiment, critical theory, postcolonial/post-structuralist criticism, textual and visual analysis, and interpersonal analysis, among others. Clearly defining social justice in a broad discursive manner (and transmitting those definitions into coursework and hiring decisions) could pose serious challenges if women's studies and sexuality studies become collapsed within a more narrow social justice framework. Tensions between social justice and social injustice may also be worth examining, just as psychology and public health have long had to negotiate the dual and sometimes competing languages of health and pathology. How might women's studies operate within a framework of *injustices* toward women and others? Further, how might women's studies and sexuality studies reconcile their vastly different interpretations of "good scholarship" (theory versus positivistic work) about injustice, particularly if sexuality studies continues to emulate public health and medical discourses? These questions only represent the start of this difficult conversation.

Finally, as we dive back into the wreck (and meditate on the loss of Adrienne Rich herself), let us consider the continuing risks of institutionalizing radical, activist, and politically significant social movements. Institutionalization is dangerous. It produces several outcomes that concern me for the future of women's studies and sexuality studies: first, it requires replication and spawning of similarity (for example, faculty producing graduate student replicas, creating a singular canon for women's studies and sexuality studies); second, it creates sometimes unpleasant links between those with and without political alliances to women's studies, with decision making often going to those who create financial gain for the university; and third, it creates the need for public relations (to distance women's studies from angry, hairy, lesbian stereotypes) and a clear shift away from activism as a valuable faculty and student contribution.

Consequently, this discussion "whither feminisms?" is far from benign or inconsequential; it speaks to the heart of what happens when our politics get appropriated, marketed, and sold to others (including ourselves). Let us ask: What kind of field do we want to be and what kinds of allies can we imagine? How can we resist the toxic effects of institutionalization while fighting to keep our status within the university? What kinds of scholars and citizens do we want to produce, and how can we do this without sanitizing and underselling the force of our political histories and stories? Finally, how can we best infect, upset, disarm, and undermine the closed-door traditions of the (white, masculine, heterosexual, capitalistic) university?

#### NOTES

1. Adrienne Rich, *Diving Into the Wreck: Poems 1971–1972* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 24.
2. For the full interview, see Breanne Fahs, "Ti-Grace Atkinson and the Legacy of Radical Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 3 (2011): 561–90.
3. Catherine Orr and Diane Lichtenstein, "The Politics of Feminist Locations: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Studies," *NWSA Journal* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 1–17; Judith Stacey, "Is Academic Feminism an Oxymoron?" *Signs* 25, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 1189–94; Barrie Thorne, "A Telling Time for Women's Studies," *Signs* 25, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 1183–87.