Barbara Godard

Feminist Knowledge Production:
Culture at the Crossroads

Uneasy Relations

A rhetoric of crisis pervades the current proliferation of reflections on the state of Women’s Studies. The dystopic impulse in such titles as “Is Academic Feminism Dead?” and “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies” (Brown) conveys an urgency beyond any permanent interrogation of disciplinarity or process of thinking out of bounds that opens to a future different from the present. The stakes are high indeed, for what these forensics deconstruct is feminism’s self-representation as a heroic modernist narrative of progress. Women’s Studies is no longer perceived as the programme linking a way of looking at the world and a pedagogical method to a movement for social change that troubles the traditional disciplinary knowledges of the university. Now Women’s Studies is itself in trouble, afflicted with an acute definitional instability as it is challenged from within as well as from without. The transhistorical transmission of feminist knowledge has been disrupted by the questioning of its narrative of personal and political transformation by a younger generation of scholars concurrently with the delegitimation of feminism’s epistemological primacy of critique in the corporatized university, oriented increasingly to the commodity production of graduates and knowledge. As the authors of Troubling Women’s Studies elaborate, Women’s Studies currently suffers a “crisis of definition, of disciplinarity, of theory, of politics and even of feminism” (10). And it is within this conjuncture, I propose, as both an effect of and a contributor to the malaise, that the uneasy relations of the Humanities and the Social Sciences within Women’s Studies must be considered.

Women’s Studies (along with ethnic studies), as Cathy Davidson and David Goldberg contend, was at the forefront of the crosscutting work of interdisciplinarity which brought about a paradigm shift “from disciplinary questions to transdisciplinary problems” (43) that initiated inquiry- or theme-based forms of knowledge (55) whose objects of analysis are socio-culturally chosen. Moreover, it was the “expansive humanist reach” (43) which first challenged the borders of disciplines with intellectual practices oriented more by the demands of the object of analysis than by disciplinary protocols. Increasingly, however, interdisciplinarity is being defined by university administrators in terms of the sciences and technology alone (42) with a consequent loss of “culture” as a “critical diagnostic” for registering the complexities of contemporary life and knowledge production (49). Culture in this critical sense is concerned reflexively with contact, flow and intersection, rather than with the narrower national delimitations favoured by traditional disciplines. Culture functions, then, as dialectic in the intersection of the Social Sciences’ engagement with the ethnographic and political and the Humanities’ analysis of aesthetic and expressive form.

Internal stresses and divisions emerging in Women’s Studies’ consolidation as an intellectual project are more frequently invoked than external pressures as its greatest current challenge. Acts of narrating the history of feminism to another generation are always fraught endeavours, for any summarization is inevitably a selective reconstruction of the past producing “interested stories” (DuPlessis and Snitow 21). A number of such memory projects from North America of narratives by
women who pioneered the teaching of Women’s Studies around 1970 testify to the desire of second-wave feminists to make visible a record of their work in order to take a stand “against historical forgetting,” with the disappearance of women from the “political narrative” of the 1960s and 70s as it has been written (DuPlessis and Snitow 23). The archives and library shelves will not be empty as they were when Virginia Woolf went in search of a “tradition” of women writers to “think back through” (Woolf 1929, 76). Collections such as *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women’s Liberation* (DuPlessis and Snitow 1998), *The Politics of Women’s Studies: Testimony from 30 Founding Mothers* (Howe 2000) and “Feminist Challenges to Knowledge” (Eichler and Luxton 2003, 2006) highlight memory and its reconstitutive work. Their titles invoke the potentially conflictual domains of the public and private spheres, politics and maternity. Many of these accounts relate the story of a “click” which marked a change of consciousness, a kind of “conversion experience,” as feminism enabled women to see things anew, to recognize that much of what they had thought was personal was in fact political which gave them hope for a different world without oppression (DuPlessis and Snitow 7-9).

The individual trajectories are echoed on a larger scale in the project of feminist knowledge production. Emerging in the 1960s from a variety of movements on the Left, feminists recognized early the danger of setting up a dichotomy between feminism as a movement in the social arena and courses taught within the ivory tower in view of the social formation’s structuring of higher education to provide technically skilled but compliant workers. The objective of “female studies” was political, to “train women for the task of ‘creating real social change’” (Messer-Davidow 90). A crucial process in the intellectualizing of “female studies” was the articulation of feminism as “a philosophy of knowledge,” a critical epistemology analyzing the history of power relations (89), a formulation which linked academic knowledge to social change across the disciplines. Despite their recall of the “excitement” of this formative period in their intellectual development, the recent autobiographical narratives cohere around an emplotment of loss, the loss precisely of that “dialectical relationship” (Eichler 130) between activism and knowledge production of Women’s Studies’ early years. This narrative forms both around feminism’s incomplete political project of structural transformation to end inequality in public and private life and around Women’s Studies as yet incomplete promise of interdisciplinarity in its institutionalization. At present, the gap between movement and academy has widened as charges of lack of political vigour are countered by critiques of lack of theoretical rigour so that they are “doing the splits” (Eichler 133). On the one hand, there is a perception that community-based discourses of activism have been displaced with the domestication of feminism by the academy: activists now consider academic research irrelevant to movement critique (Messer-Davidow 128). On the other, a theoretical anemia is perceived to have resulted from a narrowing of the field of Women’s Studies in its constitution as a consequence of a focus on social transformation in the name of “women” (Luhmann et al 20-21). When an alliance between political activism and knowledge production can no longer be easily assumed, Women’s Studies seems without a compass, “politically and theoretically incoherent” (Wiegman 515).

The Praxis/Theory Dialectic

The way certain feminist theories have become canonized and institutionalized at the expense of others has produced many of the internal tensions in Women’s Studies. Social science models of knowledge production which theorize gender as socially organized have had greater currency than literary or other cultural models which, working with textuality, theorize gender as symbolically inscribed. Arbitration of the relative claims of studies of feminist organizing against analyses of gendered discursive strategies occurs in the fraught conjuncture of an as yet incompletely institutionalized Women’s Studies as interdisciplinary project. In the present situation, disciplinary
models continue to legitimate knowledge production in programmes which might be more accurately described as multidisciplinary, their courses cross-listed from traditional disciplinary departments which prefer to hire people trained specifically in their disciplines. Disciplinary imperatives inform any account of Women’s Studies, including my own, but especially skew the origin narratives toward framing its knowledge production as a political mandate as a consequence of the disciplining of Women’s Studies by the social sciences. The dialectic activism/knowledge production, with all its inherent tensions, sets out the terms of debate in feminist scholarship that frequently divide the Social Sciences and the Humanities. Longstanding disputes about “praxis” versus “theory” are symptomatic of these faultlines which, within the prevailing discourse, have made theorizing, as ongoing reflexive process, a blind spot of feminist knowledge production. In legitimating what counts as feminist theory, the received discourse has favoured problematics which address the concerns of feminist social movements over the scrutiny of complex mediations attending its formation as discourse. Certain sites of feminist activism are also more likely to be the object of scholarly attention or student practicums, sites such as rape crisis centres or agencies for immigrant workers, rather than editorial collectives, which remain the province of literary studies. Such an orientation to praxis also maps onto Women’s Studies a longstanding Marxist suspicion of the superstructure where conceptual work occurs in a system perceived as distinct from the economy. This distrust of representation plays into ancient warnings of the dangers for the polity of the aesthetic with its affect and to modern assumptions of the lack of utility of poetry. Consequently, questions of language and representation, central to feminist scholarship in the Humanities, are caught between two different regimes of value.

Controversies over post-structuralism have been framed in the particular contexts of these institutional politics with implications for the interdisciplinary configuration of the Humanities and Social Sciences. The emergence of psychoanalysis as a major paradigm in literary studies and other artistic disciplines, such as Film Studies and the Visual Arts, has challenged the primacy of the subject, postulating a split subject-in-process or subject-effect, wherein “woman” is constituted as such in her difference by language within social relations of power. While productively displacing the universal subject of reason long gendered masculine—the pre-existent unified subject of liberal humanism—, this move simultaneously calls into question the possibility of feminist agency, requisite for social change. Moreover, the deconstructive turn taken in these cultural fields has troubled “Women” which, as its principal object of analysis, has been foundational to Women’s Studies. As discursive category, “women” exposes a contradiction in feminism, for it addresses women as subjects of a feminine discourse of irrationality and submission proposed to them by society and, simultaneously, as subject of the liberal discourse of freedom, autonomy and rationality that offers them emancipation from this situation. Responses to this loss of a defining analytic and mobilizing figure for activism have been ambivalent, for troubling foundationalism and essentialism has been key to feminist critique. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” as Simone de Beauvoir observed (267).

“Becoming woman” has consequently emerged as a problematic across many disciplines with the relentless denaturalizing in the wake of post-structuralism. The genealogical work of unravelling woman and identity deconstructs the ambivalent inclusions/exclusions in every category, performing an immanent critique of the structures of institutions as well as of rhetorical forms. A social constructivist paradigm is also at work exposing truth as production, analyzing the discursive constitution of “woman” by means of micrological histories of socially organized activities and linguistically constituted differences. That these questions have often been addressed more insistently in the disciplines, especially in the cultural fields, which, with a focus on method, are not bound by any prescription linking theory to a politics of identity and a social movement, increases the tensions within Women’s Studies between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity. For its curriculum is generally assembled piecemeal into a patchwork of disciplinary courses along with a few interdisciplinary
introductory and capstone courses. Even as Women’s Studies has challenged traditional disciplinary
knowledges so, too, the disciplines, each with their specific protocols, now trouble the understanding of
what counts as feminist theory within Women’s Studies itself.

What Counts as Culture?

The place of culture in the feminist movement is seemingly a marginal one, at least in the
movement represented in Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution. Although
women writers have long explored the dilemmas of the feminine condition—novelists having written
political treatises (Wollstonecraft, Woolf, Beauvoir) and economic analyses (Martineau, Gilman,
Schreiner)—little consideration is given to the importance for feminism of such representational
practices of consciousness raising and community building. At the launching of her book, Judy Rebick
commented on the differences of third-wave feminism in which all the young women are into culture
(March 27 2005). The culture in question at times seemed to be poetry, at others representational
practices of embodiment, all of which were distinguished from feminism. Her history of the second-
wave feminist movement includes only one cultural worker among the profiles, poet Dionne Brand,
whose work with the Black Women’s Collective is highlighted, along with her role in anti-racist
activism within the International Women’s Day coalition, but not her poetry, novels or films. Brand
herself observes that the “black movement was a cultural movement as well” with many “cultural
nationalist debates” about women’s roles which sparked her feminism (Brand in Rebick 130). Quebec
feminism, too, is considered distinctive in its “emphasis on culture,” with magazines such as Les Têtes
de pioche and La vie en rose playing central roles in the women’s movement but not, apparently,
Broadsides in Toronto (Rebick 48). Only the margins have culture, it seems, instead of politics. Traces
of artists’ work infusing public chronicle with individual emotional memory are to be found in the
pages of Ten Thousand Roses. “Guerrilla theatre” was performed during the stop-overs of the abortion
caravan and poetry read in the Prime Minister’s office while the protestors awaited him (Rebick 40,
42). And, despite her suspicion of poets and novelists, Judy Rebick cites a number of them in
epigraphs to the chapters of the book, writers as varied as Audre Lorde, Carol Shields, Lee Maracle,
Toni Morrison and, in conclusion, novelist Arundhati Roy, speaking at the World Social Forum, 2001
(257).

If I am troubled by the marginalization of cultural practices in Judy Rebick’s account of
feminism, I am also uneasy about gaps in the approach to narrative by the authors of Troubling
Women’s Studies which elide work on narrative in feminist literary and cultural theory. The third-wave
feminist authors of this book reject the intellectual field of Women’s Studies in which they have been
trained as it has been institutionalized with its disciplinary narrative emphasizing a politics of utopian
transformation and expressive account of a “redeeming moment in women’s lives” (Luhmann et. al.
26). Narrative itself is problematic for them, its teleology imposing a linear causality which holds the
present in the debt of the past and mortgages the present to the future: “From these narratives of what
women’s studies was ‘originally’ (its particular political self-understanding), claims are made upon
what it should be today” (Luhmann et al 179). They have difficulty identifying themselves with the
conventional story of the change in consciousness, living as they do in a different historical moment
after the advent of feminism characterized by scepticism and irony, with different things at stake for
feminist theory (32). For them, the singularity of Women’s Studies’ “narrative of progress” evokes
those modernist grands récits which have been challenged in other fields by a proliferation of petits
récits imagining the future otherwise (32).

I want to respond to their call for greater reflexivity in an ongoing process of interrogation of
disciplinarity with an increased attention to feminist theory by dialogically extending their analysis of
narrativity. The narrative these authors find troubling because of its linear causality and change of consciousness was characteristic of the nineteenth-century realist novel predicated on myths of progress. While this narrative form remains prevalent in intellectual disciplines in understandings of epistemology itself as “discovery,” modernist and post-modernist creative writers have challenged its expressive realism to insist on narrative as poeisis, on its power of making reality through the capacity to forge connections and so cement social relations. Feminist theoretical work in narratology has critiqued the ideology of form, showing how narrative emplotments perform the work of gender, conventionally positioning women as objects of or obstacles to a masculine quest. Plots have been tied to plausibilities, articulated in relation to extratextual social codes. Indeed, genres themselves are imbricated in the specific historical conditions of their production, consolidating and sustaining discursive formations, like the novel with the rise of the bourgeoisie in modernity.

Resisting the demand to identify against themselves with narrative objectification, contemporary women writers have used narrative to imagine different possibilities, writing in the future perfect of a feminist era. Some feminist writers and filmmakers have abandoned realist illusionism entirely, opting for fictional forms such as fantasy, sci fi, or detective fiction that foreground the author’s work of shaping and the reader’s of interpreting. Rachel Blau DuPlessis is not just an editor of feminist memoirs: as both experimental writer and critic, she has been at the forefront of those embracing avant-garde practices to challenge narrative rules; “writing beyond the ending” (DuPlessis 1985) and analyzing the experiments of feminist modernists who prepared the way for her own writing. The practice of Gertrude Stein with her incremental modulations, of Virginia Woolf with her multiple perspectives and serialism in fictions such as The Waves (1931) or, more recently, of Nicole Brossard with the abruptness of her baroque perspectival shifts exemplifies such an epistemology open to the unanticipated. Such cutting and folding is not limited to new forms of fiction but also makes possible new ways of writing feminist theory and analysis. The fiction-theory of Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt, writing from Canada, foregrounds the intercutting of genres as it draws upon experiments with language and form of French theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Feminist work in narratology and semiotics, of which it is a branch, thus proposes a different way than the Social Sciences of thinking about the relations of aesthetics and politics: ideology works within language and relations of address, making every utterance a signifying practice.

In their contribution to the millenial issue of Signs on the current state of Women’s Studies, Italian feminists Paola Bono and Federica Giardini invoke the “taglio” or “cutting line” as founding gesture, emphasizing discontinuity over teleological closure (Bono and Giardini 37). To cut away from or to cut into established categories or discursive forms opens up new questionings and orderings of reality, new possibilities for creating meaning, in a gesture that problematizes the so-called naturalness or inevitability of previously available narratives. Such a break introduces a “movement of thought” (37). Since it involves an interaction of lived situation and theoretical elaboration occurring within social relations, this movement is also a practice and a political action. The emphasis on relational logics undoes the binary between interpretation and change, theory and praxis, knowledge and action. Indeed, such signifying practices change relations within the social, change not only the angle of view but the limits of the discursive formation and so of interactions with the world. As a way of addressing “crisis” that is open to “adventure” (Bono and Giardini), such a narrative constituted of fractures, gaps and rhizomatic relays responds to the concerns about repetition and closure raised by the authors of Troubling Women’s Studies, even as it draws on the experiments in narrative of feminist modernists.

Crossroads” in my title evokes these manifold movements of cutting and reorienting in its multiple meanings of intersection, as a place of convergence or interchange among differences at the site of crossing, and of conjuncture or cutting point, the place or moment of decisive change and divergence. The Latin term for crossroads, trivium, refers not only to the point of intersection of three
different roads, but also to the three foundational subjects of the liberal arts curriculum in the early universities: grammar, rhetoric and logic. Rhetoric or speech in action, I invoke not in the classical sense of the ethics of the speaker, but in the poststructuralist focus on the social relations of the situation of address which establish the limits of the sayable and constitute speaking subjects. As multivalent hinge within the trivium, rhetoric links thought and language to the social, extending the contradictions implicit in crossroads to questions of (inter)disciplinarity.

“Culture,” the other critical term, is, according to Raymond Williams, one of the most complex words in the English language, partly because of its historical development but principally because of its importance as a concept in different intellectual disciplines and “incompatible systems of thought” (87). Like crossroads, culture embodies contradiction, its diverse meanings persisting in unresolved tension across the Humanities and Social Sciences where it functions as an open dialectic, cutting and reworking through its interactions. In its historical changes, culture spans the full spectrum of knowledges from its roots in the tending of natural growth through to its postmodern antithesis where nature itself is perceived as cultural. In the interval, the meaning of culture as husbandry was first metaphorically extended to the tending of human minds and, then, to the general self-development of humanity in the progress of civilization. In its modern usage, as an abstract noun, culture took on the meaning of a distinctive way of life. In the plural, cultures refer to the specific life-forms of different groups while, in the singular, culture became increasingly a synonym for civility, a free play of disinterested thought standing in opposition to both the brutishness of industry and the commodification of commerce. Stretching across the divide of the organic and civility, culture hovers between wheat-growing and Shakespeare, between the given and the created, between fact and value. The very elasticity of the concept facilitates the contemporary culturalism which celebrates signifying practices as all-encompassing. Potentially totalizing, the recognition that we are always in culture displays a thoroughgoing constructivistic and (with the absorption of the real in a simulacra) idealism. However, these tendencies have been respectively criticized from the contrasting positions of vestigial foundationalism and materialism. Framed instead as dialectic of the natural and the artificial, the opposition of nature and culture is thoroughly deconstructed. For each term is supplement for the other: the container is itself contained as nature produces culture which changes nature. Correspondence between consciousness and the world is consequently impossible as the singularity of events exerts its limiting determinations. The idea of culture enacts a refusal, then, of both naturalism and idealism, of biological determinism and the autonomy of mind.

The contemporary pre-eminence of culture as category of knowledge production is evident in both the “cultural turn” in many disciplines and the “Culture Wars” of the 1990s. The rise of Science Studies and Translation Studies, for example, and a new focus in literary criticism have come about with a shift of attention from practices or texts as objects to socio-structural analyses of the cultural systems and the institutionally organized practices that constructed them as disciplinary objects. Feminist scholarship in these disciplines has analyzed cultural production within interconnected systems of oppression, gender preeminent among them. The “cultural turn,” then, introduces culture as a “critical diagnostic” (Davidson and Goldberg 49) of the complex intersections of methodologies, objects of study and other practices serving to reproduce the disciplines. Against any easy assumption that such wide spread theoretical reflexivity signifies the advent of a common culture, the charges and counter-charges of the culture wars remind us that what is at stake in this theorizing are the interactions of multiple factors making distinctions among practices and objects about what counts as culture. Among the incompatible systems, friction has been greatest between culture as a distinctive way of life, linked to the collective identity of a community or nation, and culture as civility, in which the highest values of humanity are embodied in certain well made artefacts. Arguments in favour of a canon of received “aesthetic” texts are couched in terms of the emancipatory possibilities of art, a refinement of
living to which all society should aspire. This position is directed as criticism at the cultures of difference intimately connected to specific life-forms and identity politics. Consequently, it reworks the old quarrel between the universal and the particular, between the Culture that would link a specific civilization to universal humanity and the cultural fragmentation of proliferating life-styles.

The Culture/culture division is not simply a reworking of the culture/anarchy binary. For one thing, there is no culture without barbarism, as Walter Benjamin observed. But also, a third definition of culture, popular or mass culture, disrupts any dualist tendencies in the distinction between an elite or “high” culture of critique and the “low” culture of collective identity. Culture may be symptom of the contemporary separation of the economic from the socio-political, as Williams observed, but in its concern with intersection, culture may well overcome that division in the dialectical convergence of the aesthetic and the ethnographic with the economic, of the Humanities’ concern with expressive form and the Social Sciences’ analysis of organization and action. Women’s Studies finds itself at a crossroads when faced with the question of culture. Attending to the dialectic Culture/culture, I suggest, will make this carrefour a site for the productive convergence of paths rather than of their divergence.

Works Cited

Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn. Editors: Mielke, Katja, Hornidge, Anna-Katharina (Eds.) Free Preview. Arjun Appadurai, Goddard Professor in Media, Culture and Communication, New York University, US. "The social sciences as a product of the cold war academia have been actively questioned and criticized in the last twenty-five years everywhere, including in the West itself. Area Studies at the Crossroads is a product of recent radical rethinking efforts of the previous colonizing approaches to the study of the other. De-centered Area Studies are the way forward in knowledge production at the intersection of new humanities, social sciences and regional studies. They no longer focus on mere ontological innovations or territorially defined regions. Production Culture is a stunningly original contribution to film and television studies. John Thornton Caldwell's argument that we can learn a lot about the production of culture by looking at the cultures of production is borne out in an analysis that ranges across texts, populations, and institutional and physical spaces. This is a superb book. Anna McCarthy, author of Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space. Caldwell's study of 'production cultures' adds enormously to our knowledge of a larger media culture. Descriptions of proper 'uniforms' for 'pitch meeting Academic journal article Resources for Feminist Research. Culture at the Crossroads. By Godard, Barbara. Read preview. Academic journal article Resources for Feminist Research. Culture at the Crossroads. By Godard, Barbara. Read preview. Article excerpt. "The young feminists are different, they're into culture." -- Judy Rebick, "Fresh Air," CBC, 26 March 2005. A big divide? The restructuring of knowledge currently underway in the universities undoubtedly lends weight to the sense of crisis affecting Women's Studies. A realignment of power is changing the legitimacy of what counts as knowledge and redistributing resources among the faculties and disciplines accordingly. SUBSCRIBE TODAY! Subscribe to Questia and enjoy.