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Transforming the Academy: *Spiritual Activism, Multicultural Pedagogies, and Women's Studies Programs on the Verge*

Perhaps the present moment is one for considering where we have been so that we might, in a Nietzschean vein, affirm our errors. Perhaps it is a moment for thinking.

-- Wendy Brown ("The Impossibility of Women's Studies," 1997)

You struggle each day to know the world you live in, to come to grips with the problems of life. Motivated by the need to understand, you crave to be what and who you are. A spiritual hunger rumbles deep in your belly...

-- Gloria E. Anzaldúa (*This Bridge We Call Home*, 2002)

Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.

-- Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the opening pages to 2002's *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, AnaLouise Keating explains that her contribution to the project was driven by her own desire to "re-energize" a quest for "new alliances," revisit outdated feminist ideologies, and "make change occur" (8).¹ Just as Andrea Lunsford once suggested that her work on anthologies, of and by women writers, was a form of *personal* "activism," so does Keating claim that her work with Anzaldúa was *grassroots* activism. She writes, "Bridge is infused with an activist vision, a concrete belief that we can and must assert ourselves and redefine our world; working together, we *create* the world we want to inhabit ... I see a need for further change, so why not engage in some anthology-making activism?" (9). The work that

¹ This 2002 text was a follow-up, or "companion" text, to Anzaldúa's groundbreaking 1981 anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Though Keating also contributed a chapter to the body of the book, GEA and ALK both wrote introductory "prefaces" to the text. Keating's preface is titled "Charting Pathways, Marking Thresholds."

Keating and Anzaldúa accomplished in This Bridge We Call Home provided proof that critical discourse can occur in academia -- when these liminal spaces are afforded the attention and allotted the transformative potential they deserve. If This Bridge Called My Back provided a space in which difficult conversations of race, gender, and power and equity could happen unmolested, then This Bridge We Call Home demanded a reply that was even more “concrete.”² The question remained: since Bridge’s 1981 debut, how had these “radical” women, and their transgendered, male, white, queer, or Jewish peers transformed the “master’s house”?³ What *actions* might result from these complex and empowering epistemic approaches to feminism, sexuality, and power? In this paper, I will build on these very questions, and the myriad of answers offered from a variety of disparate sources; I will suggest that Women’s Studies (WS) programs – as the academic channel for feminist epistemologies Anzaldúa and Keating espouse in the Bridge texts – provide a tested and potentially transformational model for the twenty-first century pursuit of multiculturalism, diversity, and social change in the college or university classroom. Moreover, as a space in which dialogue and action are encouraged in *tandem*, I suggest that WS programs create, by their very existence, a model for spiritual activism in the academy. What then is the expectation of a model of spirituality?

Motivated by the Need to Understand

² In the foreword to This Bridge Called My Back, Toni Cade Bambara suggested that her particular task was irrelevant – as “It’s the Afterword that will count” (qtd. in This Bridge We Call Home, 21). According to Chela Sandoval, Bambara believed that the text was “meant to provoke action” (21).

³ A reference to a “well-circulated but misunderstood warning” from Audre Lorde’s 1981 Bridge essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (Sandoval 21).

While it hardly seems necessary to provide evidence of Anzaldúa's pragmatic approach to education and spirituality, I believe that it is important to contextualize, in terms of this essay, an *Anzaldúan* definition of "spiritual activism," as I will use her language in this essay's subsequent discussions of women's studies and the activism these programs foster within the confines of higher education. According to Keating,

On the collective level, Anzaldúa's belief in a divine cosmic force infusing all that exists enables her to create a new identity category and a theoretical, ethical framework for social change. Positing a universal commonality, she [Anzaldúa] can insist that – despite the many differences among us – we are all interconnected." ("Forging *El Mundo Zurdo*" 521)

Nevertheless, perhaps one of Anzaldúa's most lasting acts of spirituality connects directly to this essay's claim that WS programs can, and do, function as a space for future spiritual transformation in the university. As mentor, teacher, and friend to Dr. AnaLouise Keating, Anzaldúa helped mold a scholar whose work has continued to shape the future of feminist practice long after Anzaldúa died.⁴ Important to note, is that, unlike Anzaldúa who moved in and out universities, Keating has made her own scholarly "home," not as an independent scholar or freestanding activist, but as someone who embodies both exigencies – all within the patriarchal walls of the academy.⁵

⁴ Gloria E. Anzaldúa died May 15, 2004 of complications from diabetes.

⁵ Though Keating is employed as a ranked, tenured professor at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas, my suggestion is that, despite the specifics of Keating's appointment, higher education is a male-dominated space, where gender bias and racism exist unchecked. For more details on sexism in the academy, read Minelle Mahtani's article, "Mapping Race and Gender in the Academy: The Experiences of Women of Colour [sic] Faculty and Graduate Students in Britain, the US and Canada," in the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (2004), "Gender Inequities Persist on U.S. Campuses" by Leigh A. Neithardt, published in *Academe* (Jan/Feb 2007) or

In Keating's own numerous, academic essays, she has become a spiritual "translator" for Anzaldúa, repackaging her mentor's often complex language and, ultimately, making an argument, from within the academy, that scholars have a lot to learn from Anzaldúa's inclusive foci and "politics of spirit" ("I Am a Citizen of the Universe" 54).⁶ Certainly, just as Anzaldúa's philosophies sought to include formerly marginalized *feminist* voices of "color," so have WS programs increasingly acknowledged "that the experiences of and needs of women differ" (Salley and Winkler 184). Indeed, perhaps as a result of works such as the Bridges texts, both theoretical and empirical scholarship in WS now includes a great deal of discourse on the "intersections of race, class, gender, and social constructions of whiteness" which, in the last decade, is "transform[ing] women's studies" (184).

In a soon-to-be-released article titled "Power, Pedagogy and Personalization in Global Higher Education: the Occlusion of Second-Wave Feminism?" authors Mariam David and Sue Clegg ponder the ways in which original theories of "second-wave feminism" have been reshaped over the last thirty-five years, as "socio-economic" factors have transformed dominant "higher education practices." The authors argue that when feminism moved into the academy in the 1970s, female scholars were able to refashion existing concepts in the "social

"Grappling With the Gender Disparity Issue" by Ernest Holsendolph, published in Diverse: Issues in Higher Education (2006), which addresses the problems of gender inequity in recruitment and retention of *students* in higher education. What studies such as these seem to suggest is that programs that support and espouse gender and racial equity – programs whose goals remain focused on multiculturalism and diversity – are sorely needed in our American colleges and universities.

⁶ In addition to her role as tenured professor of Women's Studies, Keating has published two books, edited or co-edited six texts, written more than twenty book chapters, and published more than 14 peer-reviewed journal articles. Additionally, Keating has authored well over twenty-five commissioned essays/articles/entries and contributed numerous book reviews, article reviews, and professional presentations on topics as varied as American literature, queer theory, pedagogy, feminist theory, composition theory, Chicana/o studies, and more to existing scholarship on sex, gender, race, and pedagogies in the college classroom.

sciences and humanities” to create their own “sophisticated conceptualizations of the personal,” which, in turn resulted in an emerging belief in academia that personalization was

...ubiquitous in the pedagogical discourses of higher education. As higher education has expanded in the context of globalization and itself become global, it has both elided and incorporated questions of diversity, difference, inequality and power. ...New forms of global higher education have built upon feminist theories and yet, at the same time, they have done so by the marginalization and occlusion of feminist critiques. (“Abstract”)

It is this same “marginalization” of women of *color*, by other feminists, that urged Anzaldúa to compile The Bridge Called My Back in the 1980s; it was, in the model of second-wave feminism, equal parts personal *and* scholarly pursuit. The 80s text and its follow-up, This Bridge We Call Home, are both prime examples of spiritual projects that were the material manifestations of feminist activism. Both remain core components of spiritual activism in WS programs today.

Affirming Our Errors

Despite the efforts of scholars such as Anzaldúa and Keating, even a number of primarily women-serving institutions have been forced to reassess their missions, as declining enrollments, financial problems, and “legal threats” challenge their “gender-based admissions criteria” (Sahlin 164). These “threats” are not limited to women’s institutions. When faced with rising costs or falling enrollments, women’s colleges and mixed-gender institutions often have more in common than not. According to Dr. Claire Sahlin, professor and chair of the Women’s Studies Program at Texas Women’s University, when faced with these financial constraints, colleges often “channel the energies of feminist faculty and staff toward the creation of

isolated women's studies programs instead of intentionally designing university-wide curricula explicitly aimed at... developing critical thinking about social inequalities" (164). The irony is, of course, that there is a need to understand and embrace difference in higher education while simultaneously fostering an environment of inclusivity for, most importantly, incoming freshmen. Studies continue to show that "the type of education necessary to produce successful workers and responsible citizens requires a diverse student population," and yet these populations must have access to programs that are comprehensive, involve the "entire campus community," and include an initiative for active mentorship (Duffy 19, 23).⁷ Anzaldúa, in fact, argues that it is essential to include multiple voices in any endeavor. She writes,

Gathering people from many geographies in a multicultural approach is a mark of inclusivity, increased consciousness, and dialogue. This inclusivity reflects the hybrid quality of our lives and identities... Living in multicultural communities and the complexities of our age demand that we develop a perspective that takes into account the whole planet. (3)

Collaboration in academia may be nothing new, but, clearly, institutions of higher education must carry this burden for increased inclusivity and understanding of difference – if we are to encourage and foster these Anzaldúan initiatives for spiritual activism into *global* transformation.

The idea that WS programs could, and perhaps even should, house a number of disparate curricula is not a new one. Women's studies, like critical race theories, queer studies,

⁷ Jennifer Duffy is a professor of higher education at Suffolk University in Boston. She specializes in issues of class and gender equity in U.S. colleges and universities.

disability studies, class, socio-economic research, and studies in post-colonialism and multiculturalism acknowledges, according to scholar Wendy Brown, “the complex workings of power that converge at the site of identity” (94). In fact, studies of “multiculturalism” offer academics a “safe” methodology to provoke “talk about race or gender ...in ways that vary across fields” (Urciuoli 288). Though suggesting that so many disciplines find common ground at the center of power and identity is overly simplifying an extremely complex subject, few universities are large enough to support so many small, unique programs or, in some cases, even academic emphases.⁸ The risk, according to scholars like Brown, is that if women’s studies continually subsume so many other smaller programs, all may suffer for the broadening of the discipline as the “problems and incoherence of the field” increase exponentially (95). Brown argues that WS programs, inherently, are politicized sites of academic manipulation, and that as such, the establishment of WS programs within the academy actually “erodes” the very basis for the programs’ existence in the first place. If the creation of diversity or multiculturalism proposals in higher education happen only as a “knee-jerk” reaction to shifting student demographics, inner-departmental strife, state-mandated diversity initiatives, or a ill-evidenced perception that a university’s student population “wants” the new curriculum, the result, Brown claims, can be disastrous:

By privileging the political over the intellectual, the institutionally strategic over the intellectually sound... these arguments affirm the status of women’s studies as something distinct from the rest of the university’s intellectual mission for

⁸ Dr. Wendy Brown’s article, “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” traces, in part, the impetus for WS as the all-inclusive umbrella for numerous disciplines. Though this discussion may be, for some scholars or administrators, intrinsically linked to the larger discussion of WS as transformative or “spiritually active,” it is my belief that any justification of WS as an all-inclusive “umbrella” program warrants its own study and cannot be adequately explored or argued in an essay of this length.

research and teaching. In effect, by admitting its thoroughly politicized rationale, these defenses replicate the low value that hostile outsiders often accuse women's studies of attaching to the caliber of arguments and intellectual life as a whole; suspicions about the non- or anti-intellectual dimensions of women's studies are thus confirmed. Equally problematic, these arguments affirm this nonintellectual mission for something wholly and uniquely identified with women, and what could be more detrimental to feminist aims? (96)

Scholars such as Sahlin may recognize the political nature of their programs, yet unlike Brown, not all chairs or directors see the politicization of their programs as explicitly problematic. Politicization, after all, is at the center of any question of "power and identity" and is nothing new to those scholars who investigate inequities or violations of basic human rights.

TWU's WS program was created as a result of the 1994 university decision to admit men to the undergraduate programs. In the Board of Regents' attempt to remain true to the original university mission to "serve women," they chose to establish an M.A. degree in Women's Studies. Despite the overtly "politicized" move that led to its very creation, TWU's WS program continues to maintain an identity that asserts its power as a "freestanding, interdisciplinary program... integral to the institution's mission" (167). In TWU's case, this mission has been defined, for more than a decade, as a co-educational rather than gender exclusive. What "co-educational" means then for Sahlin is that, even at a primarily female-serving institution, her WS program must appeal to a large, diverse, and mixed-gender population of undergraduate and graduate students; yet, because TWU upholds a mission that is dedicated to women, politics within the university system would likely make a change in program title nearly

impossible – though such a change might better reflect current course offerings and the program’s appeal to the increasingly diverse student body. In fact, Sahlin points to numerous studies that suggest that “colleges that are currently flourishing tend to be characterized, among other things, by an inclusive curriculum which examines gender and racial inequalities as well as women’s contributions to society” (168).

Despite Sahlin’s professional connection to TWU, her most powerful argument for Women’s Studies programs as institutionally “transformative” comes in the form of Trinity University, a Catholic-serving women’s college in Washington D.C. that faced the threat of closure in the 1990s due to failing enrollment. Ironically, though Trinity is a women’s institution, its administrators had failed to fully comprehend the “inherent feminism” that made its very mission to serve women possible. It was, Sahlin explains, Trinity’s inclusion of a Women’s Studies program that “saved” the school from closing or being forced to go “co-ed” in an attempt to “forestall closure.” According to Sahlin, Trinity “chose to transform its historic commitment to women by designing a new interdisciplinary curriculum aimed at fostering women’s leadership as well as seeking to educate women from all racial, religious, and economic backgrounds in the liberal arts” (168). Key to this transformation was Trinity’s decision to recruit outside of its original Irish Catholic demographic. Sahlin’s suggestion is that TWU and Trinity, while struggling with differing issues of survival and identity, both looked to women’s studies as means to transform curricula and “radicalize” their broader institutional missions. In both cases, these programs and their institutions have flourished since the changes. Nevertheless, if the role that WS will play in women-centered higher education is as

controversial as Sahlin's two anecdotal examples suggest, what is the future of WS programs in co-educational institutions?

A Spiritual Hunger

Salley, Winkler, Celeen, and Meck's 2002 survey, "Women's Studies in the Western United States," offers evidence that, "while women studies scholars have maintained that women's studies is its own discipline, 'interdisciplinary,' 'multidisciplinary,' and 'transdisciplinary,' the number and type of women's studies courses offered is quite varied from school to school" (183). In fact, what this survey really proves is that most WS programs are only as limited as their institutional resources. Because WS programs still rely heavily on 1) course creation and coverage from faculty housed in other departments, 2) ties to one or more departments, and 3) administrative oversight that is frequently unaware of the scholarship in the field, a "core-curriculum" has been slow to emerge in WS, and classes or "tracks" have grown to include a variety of offerings that satisfy an institutional need for multiculturalism and "global" issues (184). And, perhaps it is the move to include diverse voices that allows such productive conversations regarding personal identity to emerge in WS programs. Mark P. Orbe argues that academic success happens only when institutions of higher education begin to understand "identity as an ongoing negotiation of dialectical tensions" and that the resultant "positive growth" can provide an "innovative, productive lens for scholars across disciplines" (92).

Of course, in a very practical sense, WS programs have never been exclusively focused on what might, in the mainstream, be identified broadly as "women's issues." Indeed, Campbell and Patterson suggest that even when academia began to embrace the "category of woman,

separate from men,” these programs, while focused on the “contemporary and historical status of women” still examined perceived gender and cultural “discrepancies” in terms of *men* and women, a valuation that implied an extant knowledge of the male experience. Campbell and Patterson propose that the innovative WS spaces opened up opportunities, from within the academy, to “rectify discrimination” and “generate social change” – all necessary components if WS is allowed to create spaces that empower a larger call to spiritual activism (125).

Undeniably, any significant social change or “opportunity” that isolates and/or corrects gender, racial, or sexual discrimination effects more than those who may have initially *addressed* the inequity; in the case of WS in higher education, women and men alike could benefit from these transformative, academic discussions – if the discussions result in action. Indeed, the theoretical, in WS programs, is often a precursor to *doing*. And while this “discourse of doing” may happen within diverse academic communities, women remain at the center of these academic conversations in WS programs, a reality that further complicates the role of “subject” as “researcher” – key positions for addressing opportunities for “doing” spiritual activism.⁹ Ruth Frankenberg explains that, in these instances when the scholar is also a participant, “the researcher’s location is visible rather than invisible, a resource rather than an

⁹ I argue that WS retains a power by its transformative ability to move people to action. My own experiences as a student of WS suggests that theory, at least in its WS manifestation, will lead to action. In this way, my WS experience has been personally transformative as it has forced me to question my own identity, my privileged use of power, and my role as educator. In this scholarly, WS space, I have begun rethink my own belief in spirituality; this spiritual journey has encouraged me to adapt my pedagogy and has resulted in a new approach for encouraging activism in my own classroom.

obstacle or distraction. This, I would argue, helps undo some of the ‘compartmentalizing’ processes” (15).¹⁰

A Beloved Community: Personalizing My Own Spiritual Activism

In this final section, I attempt my own version of the personal as a scholarly resource for the “discourse of doing.” When I began my college career in 1990, the outlook for women in academia was brighter than it had been for my mother in the 1960s; however, in this same year, scholar Elizabeth Pleck bemoaned the “unfulfilled promise” of women and “academe.” In her controversial article, Pleck concluded with the admonition that “only by piercing the ideology behind which academic injustice flourishes can women achieve the equity they seek” (524). Clearly, by Pleck’s standards, in the 1980s, the “independence and autonomy of the university” had continued to win out over “equal justice for all” (523-24). The question remained: if women were to reach a state of “equality,” would they be able to do so without marginalizing others or standing on the shoulders of the “master?” The answer is, naturally, a complicated as the question.

Although I had finished a Ph.D. in Rhetoric at Texas Woman’s University last spring, well before my coursework was complete, I knew that my real passion was for women’s studies. In fact, I spent years molding my more traditional doctoral research into something that fit my personal and professional goals. Each class – each paper – was designed as an inquiry into the issue of gender in academia, the media, the classroom, and even my own pedagogy. Though I

¹⁰ Frankenberg’s study, while on religious practices and spirituality, addresses some central issues for women in WS. Frankenberg explains the troublesome aspects of academic “compartmentalization,” whereby “subjects” enter the academy only as “data... description... or as objects of analysis” (13). Frankenberg’s observation is, she continues, important if we wish to fully understand the space that must be “bridge[d]” between the “disparate worlds of academia and spiritual practice” (13). Compartmentalization, while understandable, cannot be allowed in WS programs. Inclusivity, Frankenberg suggests, is an all or nothing proposition if one seeks complete spiritual fulfillment.

found it impossible to fit a WS course load into my doctoral degree plan, as soon as the ink was dry on the final draft of my dissertation, I approached Keating about my desire to pursue a graduate certificate in WS. The program's focus on gender, race, sexuality, and class – all through an inclusive feminist lens towards multiculturalism suited my professional and personal interests well.

Multicultural teaching, as Keating approaches it in her WS, graduate-level classroom, has as a basic tenet a *praxis* perspective, that is, she asks that her students focus, simultaneously, on critical self-reflection *and* action. Keating's student-centered approach is not surprising to anyone who has read the Bridge texts. In 2002, only two years after I had begun my own teaching career, AnaLouise Keating would argue in the preface to This Bridge We Call Home that, despite some grand and specific leaps, the work of *bridging* was “not yet complete, the vision... not yet fulfilled” (20). It was a charge she took seriously in the text and even more seriously her classroom. In addition to her work on the 2002 book, Keating has continued to use her role as a WS professor in order to encourage, promote, and fulfill her own calling to spiritual activism. Mirroring Anzaldúa's belief in the spiritual interconnectedness of all things, Keating explains, “As an educator, one of my goals is to awaken in my students a sense of this radical interconnectedness, for I believe it can play a crucial role in working toward social justice” (“Making New Connections” 101).

Needless to say, projects in Keating's WS classes often take bold and unexpected forms. In most cases, students are allowed to select, from pre-determined, yet broad, options, the way/s in which they will fulfill the final research component of their WS course. This open-ended approach in TWU's WS program was just one of the many reasons that a WS certificate

was an appealing option for me. That a number of the classes were offered as “hybrid” or 100% online courses was another; in late May 2008, my life took another turn as I accepted a position as a tenure-track, Assistant Professor of English and Director of Writing at Colorado State University-Pueblo (CSU-P). My husband and I would have to sell our house, move, and start new jobs just as I began the serious work towards a certificate. The majority of my coursework would be completed from a distance of 700 miles. Flexibility and extreme understanding from my professors would be crucial, I knew, to my ability to succeed.

Other scholars have addressed the complexities of WS as distance learning. WS scholar and professor, Annis Hopkins, admits that her “experience has revealed that it is possible to bridge even the physical distance between my podium and a student’s living room... if framed appropriately, the material speaks for itself. It’s time to move beyond the confines of our classrooms” (104).¹¹ Hopkins’ claim that WS lends itself to innovative teaching strategies is not new to Keating. In Keating’s fall 2008 course, WS 5663: “Spiritual Activism for Holistic Transformation,” one student, for example, began an aggressive plan for personal mediation as her chosen form of transformative “activism,” while others conducted academic inquiries into more traditional manifestation of the spiritual. Indeed, while my own project may have begun as an inquiry into women’s studies programs as spaces in which spiritual activism occurs in higher education, only weeks into the class, it took a much more personal shape.

Not only did the readings such as Akasha Gloria Hull’s Soul Talk and Leela Fernandes’s Transforming Feminist Practices provide me spiritual succor *and* practical suggestions for my

¹¹ Annis Hopkins made a name for herself, and her WS program at Arizona State University Main in Tempe, in the 1990s by broadcasting her WS lectures on a public broadcast channel. Not only did registered students watch her “show,” but so did a number of interested community members. It was a move that was ahead of its time – one that predicted the importance that online learning would have in the decade that would follow. Today, more than 30% of TWU’s WS graduate curricula are offered with an online component.

own pedagogical transformation during my first weeks in a demanding new position, when I was asked to serve on a four person Advisory Board for CSU-P's Women's Studies and Chicana/o Studies programs, I felt empowered to speak through these readings – to offer matter-of-fact suggestions based on sound research and spiritual centeredness. My journey into WS is not even close to done, and each new course suggests a direction for future research. My work on the new advisory board is already demanding, and the political turmoil that accompanied this board's creation has given me a different sort of academic experience. In the end, it may be that my professional transformation, that is the tangible certificate, will take longer to earn than I originally anticipated, but my *personal* spiritual transformation as a student and professor of women's studies is ongoing and indisputably life-altering.¹²

¹² Special thanks to my colleague and peer, Thom Hecht, for his support, humor, and friendship. Untold thanks to AnaLouise Keating for her never-ending encouragement and commitment to spirituality in a feminist classroom. Thanks, finally, to my amazing peers in fall 2008's WS 5663 course. Your "virtual" discussions made me always yearn to write more, read more – be more.

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