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The Nightmare Voice of Feminism

Feminism and Cultural Studies

Carol A. Stabile

To say that the relationship between feminism and cultural studies has ever been easy or simple would be to misrepresent more complex and contentious realities. In "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," Stuart Hall describes feminism's impact on cultural studies in this memorable passage:

> I use the metaphor deliberately: As the thief in the night, it [feminism] broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies.[1]

Feminism's entry into cultural studies, Hall continues, destabilized "good, transformed" men's best intentions: "every single unsuspected resistance rose to the surface—fully installed patriarchal power, which believed it had disavowed itself."[2] Judging from the language Hall used to describe feminism's ostensibly rude burglary attempt, its impact on cultural studies was profound. Nearly twenty years later, Hall's avowedly deliberate use of such abject metaphors reminds us that feminism's entry into cultural studies was experienced as an intrusion—and an unpleasant one at that.

In a passage from *The Pirate's Fiancée*, Meaghan Morris describes how feminist psychoanalytic criticism had undergone homologous intrusions. After a lecture on her then recently published *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, feminist psychoanalytic critic Juliet Mitchell was "greeted instantly with that voice, that nightmare voice of the Left, yelling boldly from up the back of the room, '*Yeah, Juliet, what about Chile?*'" Morris went on to

criticize what she defined as "the characteristic Left theoretical question . . . '*What's all this crap, then?!*'"[3] For me, and a cohort of graduate students very much interested in cultural studies at the time, the nightmare voice of the Left seemed to be posing a reasonable question about the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminist politics. I recall being confused about Morris's recounting of this incident some fourteen years after it occurred and reflecting on her representation of it as "the characteristic Left theoretical question."

These two anecdotes illustrate the ways in which unsettling questions or ideas become marginalized by existing fields of thought. In the case of the relationship between cultural studies and feminism, feminists—in a stealthy, feline fashion—broke into the house of cultural studies, where they violated a number of pollution taboos. For feminist psychoanalysis, the intrusion was more seemly, albeit understood as no less inappropriate. What right did a Marxist interlocutor have to bring up the vexed and distant question of politics? What possible relationship did the CIA-backed murder of Chilean president Salvador Allende have with feminism or psychoanalysis?

Influenced by cultural studies scholars like Raymond Williams and Hall himself, who understood the work of translation from the intellectual to the popular to be crucial, I have always taken such intrusions seriously, even when I disagree with them. And lately I have had occasion to feel like that intrusive nightmare voice myself, when at conferences I have asked earnest cultural studies scholars about the role of gender analysis and feminist theory in their own work. Mostly, they are patient with my questions, in the way that one is patient with an older aunt whose hearing is not what it used to be, even though it is clear that they believe that the question itself is either unfair—indeed, even underhanded—or, like the question "What about Chile?" simply irrelevant. Predictably, they have referred me to the work of feminist scholars, saying that "[insert name of relevant feminist scholar here] has written about that," thereby demonstrating their familiarity with feminist scholarship while at the same time inscribing a sexual division of labor when it comes to intellectual work that makes it clear that they do not need to grapple with such issues in their own. In a word, nearly thirty years after we crapped on the table of cultural studies, far from being mainstreamed, feminist scholarship in cultural studies largely remains the work of a handful of women scholars; an argument that can also be made for the work of scholars of color.

Despite its Marxist influences, cultural studies in the United States has been invested in institutionalized projects of distinction, gravitating toward the cutting edge or trendy. In part, this logic of distinction is inescapable, governed as it is by the entrepreneurial spirit of individual innovation and originality of the contemporary academy. Gender and class, in particular, seem old school in this hipster landscape; too inflexible to describe the new

realities of the post-9/11 world or the neoliberal epoch or whatever taxonomy of the present is in vogue. Nevertheless, the exclusions and elisions in cultural studies, particularly in debates about the negative consequences of "identity politics," are old school, too: as familiar and consistent with longstanding institutional practices and routines as to warrant continued thought and self-reflection. And the gender inequities that continue to govern women's lives are what may seem to be very old fashioned stories about employment discrimination, the international division of labor, the inaccessibility of education for many of the world's poor women, and the lack of access to health care, among other things.

This has been in many ways an impossible chapter to write. As a scholar, feminist theory and cultural studies formed the two main pillars of my own intellectual formation, supporting my interests in interdisciplinarity, collaboration, the relationships between theory and practice, and, perhaps most important, the kind of self-reflexivity I understood to be central to intellectual work. I am indebted to the male cultural studies scholars, many of whom became friends, who have supported my work over the years. At the same time, cultural studies' encounter with feminism—the one that made such an impression on Stuart Hall in England—stalled in the United States. In what follows, I offer one feminist scholar's account of her political and intellectual drift away from cultural studies, what I understand to be some of the causes of this drift, and a concluding meditation about the future of feminist analysis within cultural studies. Although this is necessarily a personal narrative, grounded in specific institutional and cultural experiences, my hope is that this can initiate a larger conversation about feminist theory and self-reflexivity within groupings of scholars who associate themselves with cultural studies.

Looking Backward

For Marxist feminists, the emergence of cultural studies in the United States allowed and, in some cases, encouraged challenges to the hegemony of psychoanalysis in film theory and media studies. Cultural studies allowed us to take Marxist theory seriously, without summarily dismissing it as reductive. Cultural studies also considered popular culture to be a legitimate object of study in its own right, allowing many feminist scholars to focus on reception in more complex and contextualized ways. Frustrated with the hermeneutical approach of feminist psychoanalysis to film and television, alienated by its intrinsic androcentrism and ahistoricism, for feminists interested in popular culture and media, cultural studies offered a way out of these myriad cul-de-sacs. Cultural studies, moreover, had little investment in auteur theory, and its materialist insistence on the importance of history, relations of

production, and standpoint offered a potent and productive analytic brew for feminism.

Feminist theory and cultural studies played such a central role in my graduate education because of the influence of the feminist movement on the academy. In 1977, the anthropologist Louise Lamphere brought a class-action suit against Brown University, alleging gender discrimination in the awarding of tenure. Lamphere won, and as a result of a consent decree that dictated timetables for hiring women faculty members, the number of women faculty (of more than 300 faculty members in 1974, 25 were women and only 12 of them had tenure) had increased fivefold by the time I received my Ph.D. in 1992, the year the consent decree was vacated. Feminism was very much in the air during my graduate years at Brown, from faculty hires, to university-wide studies of sexual harassment, to activism on the part of women students, who, in protest at the university's handling of sexual assault cases, began writing the names of their assailants on bathroom walls. Feminism and cultural studies seemed inextricably linked to me at that point in time, serving as important correctives to one another's blind spots.

With all the passion of the newly converted and freshly hired, as a post-doctoral fellow and later assistant professor, I was enthusiastic about participating in debates over the meaning of cultural studies, as well as the project of institutionalizing it. I was committed to collaborative forms of pedagogy and to being both responsive to the needs of graduate students and responsible for their training. As a scholar, I felt it important to try to model the rigorous, historically grounded, interdisciplinary, self-reflexive, and politically principled scholarship that cultural studies claimed as its domain. These attempts were sincere, however uneven and limited the results. Yet I increasingly experienced a painful lacuna between the institutional project of cultural studies and trying to practice cultural studies in my research and pedagogy.

Once again, the context in which I found myself working shaped my experiences. Hired by a communication department whose main focus was rhetoric (a field that has been extremely resistant to feminist thought), I turned to cultural studies for intellectual sustenance. But cultural studies was being institutionalized in English and literature and language programs, and the program as a whole preferred film studies to the Birmingham School. The brand of cultural studies being institutionalized thus bore little relationship to how I understood the field of cultural studies. In the first place, it was wedded to a hermeneutics of reading and interpretation that was basically incompatible with interdisciplinary scholarship. Of course, theoreticism and antiempiricism had been strong crosscurrents within cultural studies—these tendencies just found fertile ground at certain institutions where low enrollment and decreased funding were forcing departments to turn to interdisciplinary programs in order to devise strategies for reinventing themselves.

In the second place, cultural studies was deeply depoliticized. There was a distinct and sometimes bitter divide between those forces institutionalizing cultural studies at the University of Pittsburgh and faculty members and graduate students who had a more explicitly politicized understanding of cultural studies and who were associated with programs at nearby Carnegie Mellon University. The latter were struggling to find political practices that related to their intellectual interests, working with the labor movement and with the fight against racism and often murderous police brutality in Pittsburgh.

At the same time, I felt myself increasingly divided between the cultural studies program and the women's studies program. Cultural studies scholars tended to look down a bit at women's studies as a field (the case at many institutions), which hints at the intertwining of sexism and elitism that underwrote divisions between these two interdisciplinary programs. Women's studies was understood as being too much about "women" and not enough about gender, too social scientific (e.g., empirical), too anti-theoretical. In all fairness, at the University of Pittsburgh, the two programs were thrown into structural competition by the university administration. For political reasons, the university needed women's studies, while some influential and well-endowed faculty members supported cultural studies. At the same time, the university was only willing to maintain both programs if costs were kept to a bare minimum. The resulting competition was exacerbated by serious epistemological and political differences.

Over the years, I have noticed that interdisciplinary programs and departments can become refuges for faculty members who find themselves in dysfunctional departments. This was certainly the situation for me at Pitt, where I looked to interdisciplinary appointments and committee assignments in order to dodge a department that was toxic for women and people of color alike. Perhaps most devastatingly, in painful lessons that were driven home by my experiences as an assistant professor, it was one thing to write feminist cultural studies criticism; it was altogether another to raise issues about sexual discrimination in hiring and promotion, sexual harassment, salary inequity, unfair divisions of labor, and the hostile climate in the workplace within cultural studies programs that remain dominated by men.[4] Faculty members closely associated with cultural studies were vehemently opposed to affirmative action policies; at Pitt and elsewhere, they were practitioners and apologists for sexual harassment, while others merely turned a blind eye; and most were blind to their own homosocial practices, which, intended or not, had material effects on their institutional practices and the everyday lives of those around them. Cultural studies does not, of course, have a monopoly on these behaviors, but the disjuncture between the talk, as it were, and the walk, only became more excruciatingly clear as time went on. When it counted the most, I found that there were fewer feminists in cultural studies than I had believed and even fewer feminist men.

Promises

Although the concept of gender mainstreaming is generally used to apply to the realm of policy, it can be helpful in thinking about the problems I have touched on thus far. According to the United Nations:

> Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.[5]

Intellectually, mainstreaming a gender perspective (and I understand a gender perspective to necessarily have to grapple with the differences within and between categories of women and men) would force scholarship and institutional practices alike to account for exclusions and omissions. It would do so, moreover, in ways that would not isolate any single nightmare voice or voices, but insist that the work of equality should be shared. Mainstreaming a gender perspective avoids the additive approach undertaken by so much cultural studies scholarship, in which gender, race, and class are tacked on as afterthoughts, rather than being knit into the very fabric of a book, journal article, or edited anthology.

Another effect of gender mainstreaming might be thought of by way of the following analogy. Cultural studies scholarship, a graduate student once told a seminar, is a lot like the work of making a map. A mapmaker, she said, makes a map for a specific purpose and must be clear in specifying why certain otherwise prominent features of the landscape are omitted. A map intended for fishing, for example, need not include details about the highway system, but it has to explain why such features do not appear. Similarly, she believed that if a cultural studies project did not discuss gender, race, class, sexual orientation, or national identity in an analysis of neoliberalism, to take one example, the scholar would need to provide some explanation for those omissions. Rather than making the nightmare voice responsible for raising those questions, the scholar would have to be accountable for understanding and addressing the necessary limits of her or his analysis.

Cultural studies' strategies for rethinking the structure and function of knowledge production could be potent tools in efforts to mainstream gender perspectives in the academy. Originally, cultural studies scholars and disciplinarians shared certain basic commitments with feminist

theory: their work was interdisciplinary, collaborative, self-reflexive, and politically engaged. These four terms are mutually constitutive: interdisciplinarity and collaboration are inextricably linked, while self-reflexivity is not only a necessary component of effective political engagement, it can only be effectively practiced through collaboration.

In terms of interdisciplinary work, it has become clear to me that actual interdisciplinarity requires collaboration with scholars outside one's own discipline. I may draw from scholarly literature and research across disciplines in my research, but the engagement with faculty members who do not share the same disciplinary legacies allows me to see and understand issues and ideas that would otherwise remain outside my frame of reference. Collaborative work not only yields a better understanding of the limits of disciplinary knowledge and methodologies, but it also enables forms of give and take and perspectival diversity that are impossible for individual scholars to model. To be fair, institutional policies and imperatives make it difficult for people working in the humanities to collaborate. This has long been the main reason offered for not undertaking or attempting to revalue this kind of work. For graduate students and junior faculty members who will be evaluated on the basis of the individualistic ideology of the autonomous author toiling in isolation over his book, the obstacles to collaboration can appear insurmountable.

But to be perfectly honest, scholars in the humanities have been reluctant to collaborate for reasons that bear further scrutiny. Collaboration forces us to rethink the forms of aggressive and competitive individualism that humanistic training inculcates in students—it can work to undo the logic of distinction that drives so much work in critical theory. Collaborative work further means sharing control and authority and giving up some of the individualistic privileges that accompany single-authored work. Cultural studies in the United States has not provided notable instances of collaborative work nor has collaborative work merited much discussion in the graduate seminars where cultural studies is discussed and taught or in national conferences on cultural studies. Persuading scholars to cede control over ideas and to learn to engage in a form of labor that can be dramatically different from the labor of the individual intellectual is difficult, although literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar did so in 1979, while feminist political economists Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson have done so with great success more recently. While, like proper capitalists, we may care more about ownership than about ideas, changes in the academic publishing industry, external funding guidelines that increasingly call for collaboration, an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinarity in scholarship and teaching are forcing many institutions to reconsider how collaborative work will be valued and assessed. Someone is going to be making those changes and given both feminism's and cultural studies'

commitments to interdisciplinarity and collaboration, we need to be represented in those reconsiderations.

The issue of self-reflexivity bears further scrutiny. While cultural studies scholars always gesture toward self-reflexivity or self-reflection in defining cultural studies, the term itself is seldom defined. I understand self-reflexivity in both theoretical and practical terms. In terms of scholarship, self-reflexivity involves the ability to consider the construction of one's object of study, not only to avoid preconstructions that come with a state guarantee (like the "War on Drugs") but also to render transparent the perspective from which one's object of study comes into focus, or what feminist theorists refer to as standpoint epistemology. Self-reflexivity should not be equated with forms of self-confession that uncritically privilege experience as a category of analysis. Instead, it involves but a principled insistence that questions of perspective and context are necessary aspects of intellectual work.

But if self-reflexivity is to be meaningful, it must also inform our institutional practices, which entails a level of procedural transparency and accountability that may be alien to some. It also involves challenges to authority that can be unsettling, to say the least, and often time-consuming. But self-reflexivity is indispensable to politically engaged work, whether in the university or in our communities—for academics in the United States in particular, the need to constantly reflect on and unlearn our own privilege is a precondition for activism. Unfortunately, self-reflexivity in the academy remains the labor of people of color, women, and queer people, who often—weary of their status as nightmare voices—simply become silent or absent themselves from the spaces in which discussions take place and decisions get made. It is one thing to invite feminists, people of color, queer people, and their allies to the table. It is another thing altogether to listen to them.

I do not want to suggest that feminist studies are the panacea to these intellectual and political problems. The single journal devoted to feminist cultural studies remains deeply invested in psychoanalytic approaches to the study of media. Elsewhere, the popularity of the term "intersectionality" speaks volumes about the continued absence of materialist analyses within feminist studies. It remains as difficult to talk about class in feminist studies as it is in any other area of U.S. institutions that long ago gave up on the idea of open access to education. Oppression occurs against a background of class inequality, which dictates the resources individuals have to fight the forms of oppression they confront. Understanding how race and gender, to take just two terms, combine also means understanding how class inequality shapes those relationships. Thinking relationally in this manner has not come easily for feminist studies or for cultural studies, but the necessary complexity of the category of gender has kept the significance of this work in feminist theory in the foreground, while without similar political pressures, in cultural studies these questions have receded into the background.

While the problems in women's studies programs, particularly around race and class, remain difficult and painful, at the very least these are problems that are articulated as such—they remain active sites of struggle within many institutional settings.

Passionate Intensities

I understand the project of this volume, "renewing" cultural studies, to be an important intervention into well-established ways of thinking and talking about cultural studies, which historically have focused on trying to define and institutionalize a project often contradictorily understood to be political and intellectual. I am glad about that, because the usual ways of thinking and talking about cultural studies always seem to devolve into battles over control, canonical meanings, orthodoxies, and institutionalizing cultural studies, particularly at the graduate level. During a period in which higher education is likely to receive even less public funding (the University of Oregon, in fact, is trying to privatize), when graduate programs function like puppy mills to churn out Ph.D.s no one can hire, when 900 graduate students are applying for a single job at a major northeastern institution, further talk of institutionalizing cultural studies seems the worst kind of narcissism.

But if we agree that interdisciplinarity, collaboration, self-reflexivity, and political engagement continue to be important features of cultural studies scholarship—and I understand the fragility of that "we" and the enormity of that "if"—then we need to have conversations about what new, perhaps extra-institutional configurations of cultural studies might look like, how we might support the kind of scholarly research and activity that cultural studies once promised, and how feminism might be mainstreamed within cultural studies. Rather than pursuing business as usual—all those projects of distinction and space clearing aimed at self-promotion and professional advancement—perhaps those of us drawn to cultural studies for its promises of interdisciplinarity and collaboration on one hand, and self-reflexivity and political engagement on the other, would be better served by quietly and determinedly pursuing forms of research and practice that challenge sexism, racism, and class privilege in our scholarship, teaching, institutional practices, and everyday lives. Rather than asserting the importance of collaboration, we practice it; rather than talking about self-reflexivity, we model it in our own work. Instead of holding competing national conferences that replicate traditional models of well-established national and international organizations like the Modern Language Association and the American Studies Association, perhaps those of us invested in collaboration, interdisciplinarity, self-reflexivity, and political engagement might plan

more modest events, predicated on the need to collectively consider contemporary themes and issues. Instead of simply hoping that collaboration will somehow magically and organically emerge from a traditional conference, we build events intended to actually facilitate those activities. Rather than producing journals that compete on the old terrain of editorial control and peer review, perhaps we could think about platforms that might be more vital, interactive, inclusive, accessible, and expansive across institutions. And our institutional practices need to mirror our intellectual practices; otherwise, the latter will remain little more than empty promises about the emancipatory potential of knowledge.

One of the last books that the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote was *Masculine Domination*.[6] He offered various reasons for writing the book—an answer to feminists who, like myself, criticized the absence of gender in his analysis; an awareness born of age and experience that gender was perhaps the most determinative social category; an attempt to grapple with the nature and provenance of sexism. I like to think that he also wrote the book because he knew that, by virtue of his status as a prominent French sociologist and public intellectual, and that it would draw attention to issues he cared deeply about. Admittedly belated, the book was an attempt to shoulder some of the responsibility for analyzing masculine domination, rather than expecting that women alone would do this work. This expectation underwrote Stuart Hall's experiences at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s, where men "thought it was time there was good feminist work in cultural studies," but were not willing to engage in that work themselves. As he later put it, we "tried to buy it in, to import it, to attract good feminist scholars. As you might expect, many of the women in cultural studies weren't terribly interested in this benign project."[7] What would be more interesting, and more potentially radical, would be for male cultural studies scholars to take this work on themselves—for male scholars to consider their relationships to gender, male privilege, and feminism (as did Andrew Ross, Paul Smith, and others so many years ago in *Men in Feminism*); for straight scholars to challenge heteronormativity; for white scholars to consider how race and ethnicity function in relation to their objects of study. Benign, additive projects may be nonthreatening, but in the end they offer no road to renewal.

NOTES

1. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 282.

2. Ibid.

3. Meaghan Morris, *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism* (London: Verso, 1988), 180.

4. Many cultural studies programs, particularly those serving graduate students or without institutional support, are directed or coordinated by women faculty members who are typically associate professors. Cultural studies programs with more capital (both actual and symbolic) tend to be headed by male full professors.

5. "Gender Mainstreaming," *Report of the Economic and Social Council for 1997* (New York: United Nations, 1997), http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/GMS.PDF (accessed March 16, 2010).

6. Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

7. Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," 283.