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A Canon of Our Own?

Kanonkritik und Kanonbildung in den Gender Studies

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VERHANDELTER RAUM

Therese Garstenauer

The inevitability of a Canon in Women's and Gender Studies, and what to do about it

Motto

> Yet I still wonder whether the dominant power matrix within globality will allow for the expansion of public spaces for interacting, arguing or debating among feminist scholars, activists and artists or for feminist collaborations based on more than established canons or, conversely, political correctness and good intentions. (Kasić 2004: 476)

The aim of my paper is to give some thought to the apparent inevitability of canon(s) in Women's and Gender Studies. Drawing upon reading and my own experience, I will take a look at how canons emerge and what conditions make texts (authors, theories, methods...) likely to become part of a canon. I will finish by discussing what to do with something that is bound to make scholars of Women's and Gender Studies – having set out to criticize and deconstruct canons – feel ill at ease.

Women's and Gender Studies: Academic business-as-usual?

One has reason to believe that Women's and Gender Studies[1] – like other areas of the social sciences and humanities – cannot help but develop a kind of canon. In the introduction to the volume *Thinking Differently. A Reader in European Women's Studies*, Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti speak of a feminist canon[2], obviously with no need for explanations or ex-

[1] The term "Women's and Gender Studies" is meant to include Feminist Studies, Men's Studies and Queer Studies. Women's and/or Gender Studies (translated into the local language or not) are, to my knowledge the most widely used terms for departments and curricula in this field in Europe.

[2] An attentive reader will notice that the canon in question is called "feminist," and not of "Women's and Gender Studies." These terms are often used interchangeably,

cuses that there is one (Griffin and Braidotti 2002: 3). Another example: the Women's studies curriculum of Vassar College, New York, claims to cover the "currently recognized canon of women's studies."[3] The same names and titles keep popping up. There are classics (like Simone de Beauvoir, to mention just one) and stars (like Rosi Braidotti – no surprise that the name turns up in the bibliography of the article at hand repeatedly). One could ask: Is Women's and Gender Studies an academic endeavour like others in the social sciences and humanities? The answers to this question can only be no and yes.

As for no: Surely, there was and is a big deal of influences on and aspects of Women's and Gender Studies other than purely academic ones. The US sociologist Judith Stacey finds the phrase *academic feminism* in itself to be an oxymoron (Stacey 2000). The influence of the second Women's movement has been pointed out over and over again.[4] Its repetitive mention could make one think of something monolithic, taking effect nearly everywhere in the Western[5] world at approximately the same time. A closer look[6] shows that complex interplay has taken place, depending on various factors, such as the strength and nature of a women's movement, the role of state institutions and of the prevailing type of university system (Griffin 2005). One can find, for instance, that a rather anti-institutionalist Women's movement such as the French can to some extent even hamper the development of academic Women's and Gender Studies (cf. Silius

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implying that Women's and Gender Studies are by necessity feminist, in the mentioned textbook as well as in other publications in the field of Women's and Gender Studies.

[3] "The three main areas of concentration are theory, history and current issues. The curriculum covers the currently recognized canon of women's studies with emphasis on women's rights, health and medical issues, legal issues, minority women, Third World women, theory, gender, concerns related to reproduction, family and work relationships, economic and educational issues, technology, philosophy, sociology, psychology of women, women in professions and women and religion."
(http://library.vassar.edu/cmr/departments/WomensStudies/womensstudies.html, accessed on March 11, 2006)

[4] For a critical view on the historiography of Feminist, Women's, and Gender Studies see Hemmings 2005.

[5] I am well aware that my use of "Western" and "West" is simplifying and should be questioned and deconstructed. I will not express my caution by putting these words in scare quotes, but rather replace them by more precise terms (e.g. the exact nationality /provenience of an author or text) where possible.

[6] Such as the five volumes of "The making of European Womens's Studies," published as outcomes of the Utrecht-centered Advanced Thematic Network in Activities in Women's Studies in Europe (ATHENA), (Braidotti et al. 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2004)

2002). Furthermore, there are considerable differences regarding the time of institutionalisation of Women's and Gender Studies – for example, if one compares the contexts of the USA and Austria, both are being conceived as Western (as in Western Gender Studies, Western Feminist thought etc.).

> At present, it seems that the strongest external influences on European Women's and Gender Studies stem from state or supranational institutions rather than from grass-root organisations of the Women's (or Lesbian or Queer or other) movement.[7] The advancement of Gender Mainstreaming, for one, has had favorable as well as negative effects on Gender Studies. For instance, one no longer has to explain what Gender (Studies) means, because everybody has heard of Gender Mainstreaming. Still, Gender Mainstreaming can but need not have to do with Gender Studies, and most of the time it has not. I have heard Austrian and German colleagues complain that nowadays at Gender Studies conferences one cannot avoid the issue of Gender Mainstreaming. The Croatian feminist theorist and activist Biljana Kasić has 'critically assessed several kinds of mainstream(ing)s in Women's and Gender Studies, characterizing Gender Mainstreaming as "the primary marker of global feminism (Kasić 2004, 480).[8]

As for yes, Women's and Gender Studies is indeed an academic endeavour like others, I would like to start by quoting a deliberately self-congratulatory account of the Utrecht-based Women's Studies scholar Gloria Wekker, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the European Journal of Women's Studies:

> Ours is a body of thought that is singularly impressive; feminism has, in the past 30 years, developed into an academic space for innovative know-ledge and rigorous analysis. Women's studies has, nationally and inter-nationally, grown into a disci-

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[7] In this context, Stanley and Wise remark that "... the relationship between feminist theory and feminist practice has changed markedly as a consequence of the institutionalization or mainstreaming of feminism in some areas of government, private enterprise, welfare bodies and education." (Stanley and Wise 2000: 265f)

[8] "The notion of 'gender' itself (...) might be a good sample for 'gender mainstreaming'. The use of gender as a concept appears to have been generally accepted during the 1990s by feminists from the 'East' (scholars, grass-roots activists, artists) as a basic assumption in the West, as a 'convention'. Having been 'adopted' by diverse women's and academic circles for different purposes, but never deeply explored or examined from the inside out, gender became a free-floating signifier marking an epistemological time-lag." (Kasić 2004, 480)

> pline of its own, with a curriculum and degrees offered from the BA to the PhD levels, with its own journals, conferences, professional associations, publishing outlets and a prolific stream of publications. There is a significant labour market for women's studies graduates. (Wekker 2004: 488)

Since Women's and Gender Studies has succeeded to set foot in academic contexts and is most probably here to stay, it is likely to adjust to academic uses. Yes, it will be different from classical disciplines as it is conceived as interdisciplinary (or trans-, meta-, supra- or even post-disciplinary [see Holm and Liinason 2005, Lykke 2004]). Yes, it will claim to have a critical and subversive potential, and rightly so. But, if established within the framework of a university, it will not be able to avoid adhering to uses and rules of the academe[9] – all the more so, the more successfully Women's and Gender Studies are institutionalized. In Judith Stacey's words: "To some extent, even an old-fashioned Weberian could have predicted that the very success (however incomplete) of once-subversive feminist assaults on women's exclusion from academic knowledge and institutions would bureaucratize the movement's formerly charismatic character" (Stacey 2001: 100).

Canon in Women's and Gender Studies

The notion of "canon" – originally referring to a measuring device – makes sense in a literary (or, in a broader sense, aesthetic) and religious context. A canon defines what one has to believe or to know. It is about inclusion and consequently also about exclusion, deliberate or not. It is not for nothing that Aleida and Jan Assmann have pointed out that censorship is closely linked to the formation of a (literary) canon (Assmann and Assmann 1987). The use of canon in the context of Gender Studies is metaphorical, yet powerful. Sometimes, as in the examples I will give, the issue at hand is discussed in terms like *mainstream, tradition, classics* or *theory* (or *Theory* – with the capital letter underlining the importance of it). The precondition is that *texts* (and not data and figures) are of central interest, their

[9] I am not arguing that such academic uses and rules are fixed and unchangeable. But it is safe to say that traditions, goals and ideals in the academe (e.g. objectivity, elitism, androcentrism) differ somewhat from those of Women's and Gender Studies.

importance may differ according to disciplines involved, depending on how empirically-minded these disciplines are.[10]

Although Women's and Gender Studies, particular Feminist Women's and Gender Studies, have set out to question and criticize classical canons for their omissions and exclusions, these very efforts may only lead to new canons. The new canons include works by women, but only, say, ones that were written in English, and that were written by white middle-class women.

One need not go very far to stumble over the question of canon formation. Imagine you have to design a simple introductory course to Gender Studies. Although students are supposed to do a lot of reading in this kind of course, the amount of literature to be included is limited. Thus the following questions arise: What does a beginner need to know? What is indispensable, what is negligible? Or rather: What must, unfortunately, be left out, despite its relevance? One has to choose between older and more recent texts. A dedicated and open-minded teacher will also try her or his best to keep the balance between including knowledge of local relevance and provenience on the one hand, and the attempt to overcome provincialism on the other. If, additionally, one wishes to take into account that Gender Studies is about more than what US-American and Western European scholars (have) come up with, the reading list will just abound. Such decisions do not necessarily lead to a canon, and particularly not to one canon. But it is precisely in this context – the reproduction of Women's and Gender Studies – that the question of canon becomes visible and pressing.

A similar situation, namely that of getting acquainted with a field of study that is new to oneself but has been developing over decades, arises in contexts like that of post-Soviet Russia in the early 1990s. Two prominent Russian social scientists – also contributing to the volume at hand – characterize the situation as follows:

The main concepts of gender research – gender, feminism, women's subjectivity – have been taken over from Western feminist discourse and were introduced to the Russian public early in the 1990s; Russian gender

[10] Although this is not the focus of my paper, I am aware that "canon" can also refer to methods of research. In the social sciences it was very clear for some time that only qualitative, non-standardized methods were acceptable for Women's and Gender Studies (cf. Mies 1983, Reinhartz 1992). Although there still appears to be a strong preference for qualitative methods, the last years have seen a more diverse range of methods. Standardized interviews and surveys are no longer considered as opposed to the goals of Gender or even Feminist Research (cf. Behnke and Meuser 1999).

studies began to develop as a whole thanks to the application of Western concepts and theories. (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2003: 51). Or, in the words of Elena Gapova, a Belarusian Gender scholar: "...'gender' IS Western knowledge: conceived, born and nurtured in Western academia" (Gapova 2003:7).

Although not every Russian gender scholar will subscribe to this point of view, and despite the considerable body of scholarship in Russian that has been developed to this day, the crucial role of imports from whatever "West" can not be denied in this context. After a period of virtual impossibility to get access to Western books on feminism or Women's andGender Studies[11], a plethora of Western texts from the humanities and social sciences, including Women's and Gender Studies, have become available in the 1990s – if often in fragmentary form and/or in translations of questionable reliability, as Tatjana Barchunova has pointed out (Barchunova 2003, see also her contribution to this volume). Again, one has to choose: What is important and useful (if anything), and what should one start with? Sometimes, due to the given conditions of publishing and translating, one might get familiar with the critique of a theory before one actually gets to know that which has been criticized. Temkina and Zdravomyslova have assessed this situation as a chaotic, but rather optimistically as a self-regulating chaos (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2002: 28)

Under the circumstances of an emerging (inter)discipline situated in a semiperipherial region, one is quite unlikely to contribute to a canon of Women's and Gender Studies. As the sociologist Marina Blagojević from Beograd has put it:

> ... an excellent woman social scientist at the semi-periphery can hardly be the creator of excellent knowledge while staying at the semi-periphery, even if she succeeds in doing such impossible work, mainly because there will be no one to take notice of it. (Blagojević 2004: 144).

[11] Elena Gapova describes how taken aback she was on reading in the foreword of the Russian translation of Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* that the translator had been in a position to read this book *as early as 1980*. Of course, you needed to be a collaborator in a prestigious Institute of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow to enjoy such privileges (Gapova 2003: 4)

The opportunities to participate in an international community of Feminist and/or Women's Studies scholars are confined to a responsive role[12] or to that of providing empirical data about the particularities of the post-communist condition – data that will be analysed and interpreted by using (seemingly universally valid) Western models or theories (cf. Blagojević 2004).

To say that language plays a role here is a truism. English serves, as in other academic areas, as a lingua franca, which makes it another means of inclusion as well as exclusion, of communication as well as hegemony. Nina Lykke, for one, has pointed out the prevalence of articles from native speakers from the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia in English-language European journals of Women's and Gender Studies (Lykke 2004a). Some journals that originate from non-English speaking regions (e.g. NORA the journal of Nordic Women's Studies) are publishing in English (and not Swedish, Norwegian or Finnish, which I appreciate, as I am unable to read any of the Scandinavian languages). But even if a journal such as the European Journal of Women's Studies has an editorial policy of encouraging the submission of papers in the (non-English) native languages of the authors, someone will at some point have to translate or at least proofread it. And this boils down to extra time and/or money for those who are not native or fluent speakers of English (cf. Lykke 2004a, Gapova 2003). We are far from discussing the contents and quality of a scholarly work yet, we are considering the mere odds and opportunities to get published and thus visible/readable for a larger audience in the first place.

The role of theory in Women's and Gender Studies will also need some consideration when asking for a canon. According to Pierre Bourdieu among others (and also, I might add, according to a hunch, acquired in my own experience as a social scientist), theory is of higher prestige than empirical research (Bourdieu et al 1991: 13). More often than not the texts that are considered as classical are rather theoretical (abstract, universal) than applied research or case studies.[13] In a broadly discussed article in the

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[12] As Clare Hemmings writes about Feminist (hi)story: "...this story has rightly been critiqued as an Anglo-American trajectory within Western feminist thought, one that forces European or non-Western feminist theorists either to reposition themselves in line with the former's logic or to depict themselves as critical or transcendent, but nevertheless as responsive." (Hemmings 2005: 116)

[13] There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Think about *classical case studies* of the social sciences, such as the Austrian study about the unemployed in the village of Marienthal by Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld and Hans Zeisl (Jahoda-Lazarsfeld et al. 1933),

journal *Feminist Theory*, the British sociologists Liz Stanley and Sue Wise have elaborated on the role of theory in Feminism and identified a peculiar division of labour:

> The current situation is one in which theory is written, categorized and criticized as a largely taken-for-granted activity, in which the variant 'feminist Theory' has become de facto the mainstream, and in which other feminists read about and consume this but do not produce it. This divorce between 'feminism in general' and 'feminist Theory' has been mediated, indeed promoted, by the rise of academic feminism and its assimilationist professionalizing activities, including its creation of the indexical category of 'feminist Theory' and the semi-autonomous grouping of 'feminist Theorists' who produce it. For some feminists, the hierarchical relationships thus engendered are now so completely normalized as to seem axiomatic. (Stanley and Wise 2000: 266)

When asking who then are the producers of this capital-Theory one might consider the disciplinary backgrounds. Its (proclaimed and realised) inter- and multidisciplinary character notwithstanding, I suspect that there are implicit leading disciplines within Women's and Gender Studies, particularly such with a strong theoretical side like philosophy. It would be interesting to ask which are the most prevalent disciplines or what are the disciplinary backgrounds of the current stars of Women's and Gender Studies.

These are but a few aspects pertaining to the odds of becoming authors of *key texts* (Stanley and Wise 2000: 266), *theory stars* (ibid.: 273), *threshold figures* (Hemmings 2005: 124) of Women's Studies, or even feminist classics. Or, maybe, of merely being taken notice of. And here, I reckon again, Gender Studies is very much like any other academic context, in which it is of extreme importance to make oneself a name.

What to do with/about it?

Since an academic subject is very likely to develop a canon of classics, stars, foremothers and -fathers and required reading, one could just as well face the facts. But one must never stop to question the lists. It is indispen-

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or Harold Garfinkel's famous investigation of the transition process of the transsexual Agnes (Garfinkel [1976] [1984]).

sable (as in any other academic subject) to inquire what makes the stars so popular as well as one has to ask for who and what is *not* there. At the very least, one should keep in mind the situatedness of one's own approaches or of that of one's favorite star theorists. A canon of Women's and Gender Studies is constantly in the making. It is not chiseled in stone for good and, unlike the Holy Bible, it can also be influenced by intellectual and scholarly fashions. Such a canon will be internally differentiated and include classics, more recent accessions as well as border cases.

I have found some contributions to the discussion of canon at a conference on Gender Studies in German speaking countries taking place in Berlin in the summer of 2003. As a guideline, the German jurist Susanne Baer names four important programmatic aspects of approaching the canon question: *acceptance* of canon, *contingency* of canon, *transparency* of canon and strategic, contextualised *formation* of canon (Baer 2004: 72). The papers of the Swiss Gender and literature scholars Christa Binswanger and Brigitte Schnegg, who propose *hybrid formation of traditions* (Binswanger and Schnegg 78) instead of a more or less fixed canon, and that of Konstanze Plett, who juxtaposes a static canon with an *empirical canon* (i.e. one that is developed by assessing which works have advanced Feminist, Women's and Gender Studies in different disciplines) (Plett 2004), follow the intention of critically putting up with canons. The Swiss philosopher Michael Groneberg suggests that an *organon* (understood as a toolbox from which one could take whatever serves one's purposes best), would be a more adequate concept than a strict canon (Groneberg 2004). However, this idea seems to neglect the power relations within Women's and Gender Studies – we still need to ask who/what gets into the toolbox in the first place and who is in a position to assemble one. It seems useful to keep the notion of canon as a warning reminder of power relations and exclusion.

Whether it is called canon, tradition, mainstream, organon, or else, the problems of inclusion and exclusion, visibility and ignorance, and power/authority and lack thereof stay the same. What scholars of Women's and Gender Studies need in order to keep a critical stance towards the concept of the canon is open-mindedness, flexibility, disrespectfulness and, I would add, the knowledge of as many languages as possible, at best.

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