Global Feminisms Conference, Sept. 15, 2006:
Changing the World, Changing the Academy

USING GF PROJECT IN CLASSROOMS:
FEMINIST ACTIVISM & SCHOLARSHIP (STEWART, ZABOROWSKA)

Introduction:
• Currently no course exists at UM on Feminist Activism & Scholarship
• Continuing demand for such courses:
  o From undergrads, interest in activism and reconciliation of activism with theoretical literature
  o From grad students greater need for integration of perceived tension/contradiction between career pursuing academic feminism & activist feminism
• Syllabi available on the web for examples of relevant courses already in existence were distributed: Amherst, Minnesota, University of Rhode Island, American University (mini-courses)

Using Global Feminisms archive as central: where to from there?
Three proposed aims of discussion:
• How to discuss/teach/reconcile the often thought-of as binary concept of Feminist Activism & Scholarship
• General outline of potential course
• Share clips addressing alleged tension between activism and scholarship from Andy Smith, Cathy Cohen, Ai Xiaoming

Goals of a feminist scholarship and activism course:
• Challenge the binary opposition
• To recognize them as “women’s work”
• Recognition of all types of activations, feminisms, scholarships: need to avoid exclusionary definitions
• Reassess the place of the university: enabling/disabling activists?
• Problematize the concept of the “public intellectual,” emphasize engaged scholarship
• Note intersectionality of activist movements: racial justice, reproductive rights. Activism as not tied to one single thing and as accommodating changes over a lifetime, i.e., the dynamic aspect to activist careers.

Overview of general themes which emerged (elaborated below):
• “Family” and “culture” as social elements informing all interviews
  o importance of avoiding cultural essentialisms, lessening cross-cultural assumptions Û can draw on statistics that illustrate that variance within groups can be equal to or greater than the variance between groups; can draw on two widely-differing cases within a culture, etc.
• Academy as a site of activism
• Intersection of feminisms and social movements; how different feminisms affect one another
• How personal material reveals the process of feminism scholarship and activism over a lifetime and illustrates that there may be “seasons” in particular women’s emphases and activities
• Global focus of GF materials
• GFP interviewers’ roles and organizers’ aims
• Relationship of archive to the content of a course

Specific themes elaborated:
Family & Culture informing interviews:
• Important to acknowledge family as common site of political socialization, but also widely differing experiences leading to political commitments
• Cross-cultural expressions of “family”
  o Important to recognize cultural differences, while avoiding essentializing cultures
• Notice that family includes both family of origin/family of identification and both can be sites of political socialization
• What does feminism mean in other cultures? What are important goals? Forms of organizing? Approaches to social change?
• Differences in cultural specificity, e.g., different language structures/usage.
• Identify themes within countries that do not emerge across sites

Academy as site of activism:
• Problem of university setting raised – incentive structure does not support activism (Cathy Cohen clip)
• Conversely, some note academy provides various resources for activism – scholarship informed by activism (Andy Smith)
• Need to make any course relevant to students’ lives; issues of diversity and range of experience in students’ backgrounds and what they bring to the classroom.
  o Draw on their own activism issues within the university
  o Can build on community activism? Service learning courses? Risk may be of absence of real “social change” agenda
• Acknowledgement of differing educational structures/institutions, locally and globally
• Issue of professionalization of grads to PhDs, undergrads more “active”: possible difficulty in combining types of students in courses. However, also discussion of “cross-fertilization” between undergrads and grads for the same reason.
• Logistics issues: Idea of not privileging any single feminist theory: whose theory anyway? What is to be assumed? Should there be prerequisites to any course using GF material (much assumed by interviewees)? What level of course? Multidisciplinary course? Seminar?
• Distinction made between addressing women’s issues and Social Work.
• Students should not view “scholar-activism” goal as another pressure to be “Superwomen”.

Intersections:
- Feminisms and social movements, illustrated by two clips: Loretta Ross (Reproductive Justice) and Limanowska (Trafficking in Women)
- Grass roots/local activism; unofficial channels for activism. Not easy to “package” women activists’ lives
- Dynamic nature of activism
- Coalitions/collaborations can be articulated and explored
- Differing activisms, differing feminisms

Global focus/Less essentializing:
- Beijing conference of 1995 as illuminating differences in different sites; “same” event with very different key experiences and implications
- Interviews situated within a culture (begin with particular assumptions, exposures)
- Broadening of perspective – less US-centric (for US interviewees)
- Many different cultural guises of feminism/activism; “located” activism.
- Illustrates situated knowledges of interviewees → many variables to consider

Use of personal materials/interviews:
- Personal as political – activism is not “out there” but local, and located within personal life; shifts focus on personal life from “anecdote”; permits analysis of personal life

Interviewers’ roles:
- Differences in process; influence of interviewer’s presence
- Many filters or interpretations in process of interview; can expose/discuss these
- Explore difficulty in transcribing the non-verbal by juxtaposing transcript and film
- Consider differences in style of posing/structuring/editing interviews
  - “Contentless questions” (in Polish site); actual difficulty in conducting completely unstructured interviews.
  - Sites varied in how much they edited (Poland and US not at all, China a little perhaps, and India a great deal)

GFP Organizers’ aims:
- Would be of interest to add these to the website – provides background/context. How do organizers conceive of concepts of activism/s, feminism/s, scholarship/s? Overviews and views of organizers.
Relationship of archive to the content of a course:

- As a base: primary source used throughout semester to identify main themes, theoretical concerns
- As a starting point: use in combination with other resources, e.g., articles and footnotes in transcripts.
- As a springboard: a set of tools for certain research topics. Examples: women’s health, meaning of feminism across cultures, comparative feminisms.
- Illustrative of methodology: narrative, oral history as a valid methodology, i.e., quantitative resource as adjunct to qualitative.

Brief discussion of website:

- How to track others’ use of the GF materials? Sharing of material, teaching tips, syllabi, etc, on the GF website
- Discussion of access to site and availability of DVDs, transcripts.