Refusing to Account: Toward a Pedagogy of Tectonic Instability

The increasing commoditization of knowledge and corporatization of the academy have led to a drastic restructuring of higher education, and in particular, of public institutions of learning. There is a striking similarity to the strategies enacted across institutions, each governed by modes of efficiency and profitability. These moves have included a preference for larger classes, curriculum decisions that are governed by seats rather than pedagogical possibilities, an expansion of online offerings, tuition increases, and ramped-up bureaucratization, with the latter being accompanied by fewer faculty hires, a greater dependence on contingent faculty, and a swell in the ranks of senior administrative staff.

This restructuring has held very specific consequences for women’s studies programs. While larger classes are not inherently at odds with a student-centered feminist pedagogy, they do require adjustments in order to achieve similar results with our students, and they do exact greater physical and emotional labor from us as instructors. These restructuring strategies have also positioned the field in a Catch-22 in that a number of issues that we have lobbied to have valued within the academy have now come into the university’s line of vision only to be redeployed as part of the university’s public relations branding agenda. There are numerous examples if we would but look: campuses that are spotted with banners portraying faculty and students of color — a visual map to the institution’s “embrace of diversity”; committees
that are convened to review the institution’s sexual harassment policy while simultaneously refusing the involvement of women’s studies academics in the process, for whom these are scholarly and intellectual areas of study; the introduction of multicultural general education curricula, where the study of “difference” amounts to a banal presence of one or more categories of “otherness” in syllabi. This list is not exhaustive but the similarity that threads through is the commodification and the PR-ization of issues that sit at the heart of the field of women’s studies. Such cooptation notwithstanding, in this economic climate of profit maximization, small, interdisciplinary programs and departments such as women’s studies, ethnic studies, and LGBT studies have become woefully vulnerable to mergers, downsizing, and elimination.¹ Our own program, now defunct, attests to this growing reality.² So what then is the story to be told for a program that no longer exists?

As alumna of Clark University’s now defunct women’s studies doctoral program, we consider the ways in which Clark, under the guidance of Cynthia Enloe, worked to move the field toward a more transnational bent. While we begin with an engagement with Clark’s specific institutional vulnerabilities, we use Clark’s commitment to a transnational praxis as our comparative point of departure to note the ways in which the importance and acuity of a transnational feminist critique have seeped away from the field. At various points in the article, we discuss how our individual trajectories emerged out of a transnational feminist sensibility. We interrogate the ways that the dominant logics of the field continue to be complicit with the very inequities and modes of representation critiqued within transnational feminist discourses. We point to the role that our scholarly pursuits play in an ongoing effort to hold the field accountable to a transnational feminist critique. Finally,

². The doctoral program at Clark began in 1992 and closed in 2008, graduating twenty-six PhDs and training many more who have gone on to make significant contributions at NGOs among other locations. For example, Parissara Liewkeat and Barbara Schulman have held positions with the International Labor Organization and Amnesty International, respectively.
we look back at our own training in the field of women’s studies in order to examine the contemporary complexities of doctoral training, particularly under the exigencies of academic capitalism.

We represent different cohorts, countries, areas of scholarly inquiry and trajectories. Our differences are many and those listed here merely skim the surface. That said, our point of unanimity came to rest in the belief that we would not be able to write this fractured tale without Cynthia Enloe. Enloe and her colleagues, like many other pioneering academic feminists in North America and other parts of the world, absorbed the psychological, professional, and in some instances, economic costs of establishing women’s studies programs within their institutions. Recounting this early period, Enloe remarks,

At the time —1990–92 — when we, faculty members teaching in the WS program, first began talking with each other about launching a free-standing WS PhD all of us (maybe ten or a dozen of us) had never heard of a free standing WS PhD. So we had no model to follow or even to tweak. What we had — and what excited us — was having created together (since 1975) a wonderful group of WS faculty across humanities and social sciences (alas, there were no faculty members from any of the natural sciences in the faculty group). Some of us were in departments that already had PhD students (e.g., Psychology, Geography and History), while others of us were in departments that did not have their own doctoral programs (e.g., English, Foreign Languages, Sociology, Political Science) — but we all were eager to work with doctoral students doing WS explorations.

At this point, the only other women’s studies doctoral programs in North America were at Emory University and York University, and as

3. The “we” reflects our initial effort to write this piece collectively. Our process began electronically via email and Skype, from which conversations different themes emerged. The article has therefore benefited from various modes and degrees of input from Elora H. Chowdhury, Deidre Hill Butler, Isis Nusair, Sandra McEvoy, Michelle Morkert, Young Rae Oum, and Michelle V. Rowley. Young Rae also provided valuable comments and help with the paper’s title, and Deidre contacted our colleagues from the early cohorts (Denise Sutton, Gabri’el Atchison, and Angela Bowen) as well as our collective mentor, Cynthia Enloe.

4. Cynthia Enloe, email correspondence to Deidre Butler-Hill, August 2, 2016. (Enloe’s permission was secured by Elora Halim Chowdhury, January 2, 2017.)
Enloe recounts, “none of us knew the others were doing it too!” The generative possibilities of community, need, and experimentation may well characterize the experiences of many other programs that attempted to build departments well into the late 1990s. There was little that was recognizable to the early administrators who would have had to vet and approve these pioneering doctoral programs and departments. Were they going to reside in the social sciences or the humanities? Is it really theoretically sound to only study women? Are they not building a field on biased assumptions? We are speculating, but the questions that we still hear today must have some history to them. These programs had no reports, no placement data, no model program evaluations with which to persuade. Clark, therefore, may not have been unique in the lack of support given by the university’s senior administration. Enloe goes on to note,

[We thought our] faculty’s energies and commitments would persuade the President, Provost and Graduate Deans during the later 90s to see the value to Clark as a whole and thus start serious infusions of resources—especially for scholarships and money for hiring at least one, hopefully two, WS faculty members. This never happened. This began to take its toll. Mostly, it became dispiriting.5

Clark’s journey and subsequent demise highlights the dependence that newly emerging fields have on senior administrators for their very survival. By the program’s eleventh year there were approximately forty affiliated faculty; almost thirty percent of Clark’s total faculty, with fifteen of these carrying the curricula and supervisory demands of the program alongside their ongoing departmental responsibilities. At this point, the program had no dedicated lines and received none regardless of repeated calls from Clark’s faculty and external reviewers.6 Indeed, with a remarkable sleight of hand, Clark’s administrators turned the faculty’s request for support into justification for eliminating the program, Enloe recounts,

By 2003–4, the Provost and President and apparently, the Program and Budget Review Committee (PBR), were framing their own choices

5. Ibid.
re: the future of the WS PhD program this way: “Well, the WS faculty say that they cannot sustain the program without getting at least one full-time senior faculty line, Clark at this point cannot invest in such a new line. Therefore, the WS have left us no choice but to end the PhD program.

If ever there was a cautionary tale for being relentlessly attentive to who is appointed to administrative posts, our program would be it, and even with vigilance and the best of administrative intention, women’s studies remains vulnerable to contemporary administrative vagaries. Yet, this is more than a story of absence, and it is not a story of failure. We do not aim to fix the narrative for Clark’s doctoral program. Enloe’s reflections give us, alumna of the program, an opportunity to also reflect on these early beginnings, if only as a launching pad to think about the contemporary state of the field and doctoral training in women’s studies. We will work to give a glimpse of what was unique about the program, its early commitment to training activists/scholars who had returned to school later in life, and its struggle to incubate a space for the study and growth of transnational feminism, as well as offering a critique of nationalism and militarism. Our goal is to draw on our individual experiences and observations to think critically about the state of the field, the dilemmas and possibilities of our trajectory as scholars, and the contemporary training of women’s studies doctoral students. Our discussion runs the gamut of thinking about the ways that transnational feminist scholarship figures in contemporary doctoral training, the intersections between women’s studies scholarship and activism in graduate education, and the limits of the doctoral dissertation in assessing the effectiveness of our graduate training in women’s studies.

7. See Angela Bowen, “Testifying: My Experience in Women’s Studies Doctoral Training at Clark University,” *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 2 (1998): 374–86. Angela Bowen came to the program in her late fifties as an activist, dancer, and educator. When she voiced her doubts about the constraints of a PhD, her mentor convinced her of its merits by remarking that our program was going to be a “different breed of PhD” (380). In the first cohort were two Boston-area activists, Angela Bowen and Barbara Schulman; Miho Hirohashi, who was part of the translation team for *Our Bodies, Ourselves* into Japanese; art historian Marcia Lagerwey-Commeret; and Claire Cummings. No one in this first cohort, or the second, was under the age of thirty.
While we posit a generic “women’s studies,” we do so recognizing that the field now identifies through and alongside a number of other institutional formations such as “gender,” “sexuality,” and “critical race.” Where appropriate, we try to think through the ramifications of our discussion for the many permutations of women’s studies that are presently in play. And while we know this, it bears repeating, this is a partial story. The authors worked to cast a wide net and solicited input from a number of our colleagues, but what follows are our attempts to wrestle with each other to make meaning of our experience as “Clarkies” in relation to our contemporary understanding of the field of women’s studies. Others, no doubt, will tell a different story.

NAVIGATING WOMEN’S STUDIES TRAINING, PEDAGOGY, AND PRACTICE

ELORA HALIM CHOWDHURY

In the mid-1990s, when I was researching women’s studies graduate programs, having completed a BA and MA in the discipline, Emory and Clark Universities were the only two institutions in the United States offering freestanding doctoral degrees.8 A small program with no faculty lines, Clark was my first choice because of its emphasis on global/transnational feminism and its reputation for drawing practitioner-oriented graduate students from the global South. My cohort at the time included students from the United States, China, Thailand, Palestine, Trinidad and Tobago, South Korea, and Bangladesh. Many of the students came with years of experience in the field as activists, higher education administrators, teachers, NGO practitioners, journalists, and policy writers. Because of the intimate and flexible structure of the program and its reliance on other graduate programs on campus to fulfill the full coterie of courses required to complete the PhD, the students had the leeway—perhaps by necessity—to design not only their own curricula, but chart their own research paths. Even though at the time it felt like a sink-or-swim situation, I believe it cultivated an early women’s

studies pedagogy and methodology of interdisciplinarity, collaborative knowledge production, and reflective social justice praxis.

I came to women’s studies as an undergraduate international student in a small liberal arts college in the United States in the early 1990s, a time when the interdisciplinary discipline of women’s studies was attaining institutional recognition and there was much debate and dialogue over what constitutes women’s studies research, scholarship, and praxis. Being granted a bachelor’s, a master’s, and finally a PhD in women’s studies over fifteen years offered me a unique position to occupy the roles of the student (carving out a track suitable to my particular interests); the teacher (constructing multi- and interdisciplinary courses that often challenged disciplinary boundaries and genealogical approaches to women’s studies); the practitioner (using a women’s studies lens and tools to interrogate and operationalize a scholar/activist agenda); the researcher (using interdisciplinary methods to conduct fieldwork and produce new knowledge); and the subject of inquiry (what does one do with a women’s studies degree, and what are its potential and limits?).

Ours is a field that emerged and evolved within contestations, and coming of age in women’s studies for me has meant the same. At the outset, I must note this conversation is located in a North American context, and the contentions I refer to take that location as a frame of reference. Writing from this vantage point means having an acute awareness of the production process of the Third World feminist doing work on Bangladesh in the United States. Furthermore, it brings to the fore what Mary John refers to as the predetermined trajectory of post-colonial subjects—a westward turn for higher education, garnering knowledge within the US academy, recognizing historical processes that attribute privileged status to that knowledge particularly in relation to the peripheral status of higher education in Third World countries, and interrogating the “native informant” category bestowed upon, self-promoted, or actively negotiated by elite Third World migrant intellectuals. As a doctoral program with so many students from countries outside the global North and with its emphasis on transnationalism, Clark’s

program engendered continuous critical considerations of such pedagogical and methodological positionings.

*Pedagogy and Politics in Women's Studies Education*

I have been teaching and writing at the intersections of women's and gender studies, South Asian studies, and global studies, as well as US-focused ethnic studies for a decade, and I am affiliated with all of these disciplines—rather interdisciplines—at my home institution where I situate myself as a feminist scholar trained in the discipline of women's studies and always negotiating the complex, and sometimes contradictory, encounters between women's and gender, area studies, ethnic studies, and global/transnational studies. To be located at the intersections of these disciplines raises an interesting issue: the lumping together of distinct historical and political trajectories while simultaneously erasing regional specificities and obscuring questions about the strategic importance of some nations over others to the imperial center. We ask, what is the place of South Asian studies in global/transnational studies? What is the relationship between ethnic and area studies? What is the place of transnational feminism or South Asian feminism in women's and gender studies?

I share here a few thoughts about my own personal and professional trajectory and how it shapes the work that I do. I grew up in Bangladesh at a time when it was emerging as an independent, postcolonial nation and the intellectual and political promise of crafting a new society was vibrant. I studied in university in the United States at a time when scholarship by and about US women of color and Third World feminists and feminisms were making a tremendous impact within the discipline of women's studies and transforming our vision and understanding about local and global systems of gender, power, resistance, and oppression. I have also worked in the thriving development sector in Bangladesh where gender and human rights praxis are negotiated in the most innovative and challenging ways. This particular trajectory and consciousness of dual oppression and resistance—anticolonial nationalism in Bangladesh and anti-imperial/antiracist politics in the United States—led me to reflect deeply about gender, justice, and activism, and it continues to influence my work, which has specifically addressed women's transnational advocacy against gendered violence in Bangladesh. This is the outcome of the reflexive transnational training of Clark's PhD program that
I referenced above. Of particular importance to that training was the question of accountability to communities that inform our research and writing and, hence, our knowledge production, leading to further questions about modalities of knowledge production that are available to us to produce emancipatory knowledge about feminism in the global South and how the uneven relations between North and South are or are not replicated within these processes.

The past decade has been an era of tremendous growth in the field. In the mid-1990s, my interest in global feminisms and gender and development, and a career as scholar/activist, meant that, of the two existing PhD programs in North America at that time, Clark was my only option. Acceptance then to that sole suitable program meant a strategic fashioning of my dossier. It certainly helped to have a BA and an MA in women’s studies and some work experience in the field relevant to my research agenda. Moreover, identifying faculty mentors in the program I was applying to and demonstrating the ability to be independent and resourceful in shaping my graduate career were key given that the program had no full-time women’s studies faculty, funds to support graduate students beyond three years, opportunities to teach undergraduate courses, nor organized initiatives around professional development. Lack of resources for interdisciplinary programs, including ethnic studies, area studies, and women’s studies, speaks generally of university administrations’ lack of investment in interdisciplinary programs despite paying lip-service to their importance. This is a reflection of the corporatization of higher education in the service of global capitalism.10 In this climate of shrinking support, women’s studies faculty and graduate students, reaping few rewards, are left with the Herculean task of running programs with meager resources or access, and racialized and sexualized exploitation continue to grease the wheels of the academic machinery. Despite high achievement records of women’s studies graduates, increasing visibility of women’s studies research and praxis, and the importance of foregrounding gendered analyses for building just societies, such a move to deny programmatic support can only be described as a poverty of imagination and a disregard of democratic principles. Being a student in one such impoverished yet pioneering and high-achieving

10. Mohanty, Feminism without Borders.
Michelle V. Rowley, Elora Halim Chowdhury, and Isis Nusair

women’s studies program taught me to be much more than just a graduate student in the conventional sense; it has driven home the very politicized space and nature of a women’s studies education in an era where misogyny still prevails in the academic power structure.

Along the lines of training women’s studies scholars, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of a solid attention to interdisciplinary methods. Because women’s studies positions itself as oppositional to what is considered “legitimate” knowledge and is indeed a valid critique of much that is considered “knowledge,” unwittingly there is a tendency in the field to be scornful of “master narratives.” If the use of interdisciplinary feminist methods, among other things, means borrowing research tools from a variety of disciplines to ask new questions, to foreground questions of hierarchical relations of power between researcher and subjects of research, to be critically conscious of one’s own social location and how that influences the research agenda, process, and product and the accountability of the researcher to the communities they write about, then all of these principles need to be thoroughly engaged in the classroom to prepare students for responsible research and to anchor their work. Absent a grounding in “master narratives,” and relying entirely on interdisciplinary methods, may offer breadth but not depth. I truly believe this is an area to which scholars and teachers of women’s studies must now turn their attention, and it would behoove students to demand attention to these questions as part of their graduate education. These questions have implications for those seeking tenure-track positions in disciplinary or interdisciplinary programs.

In the mid-1990s, the job market tilted favorably toward the disciplinary-trained gender scholar rather than the interdisciplinary women’s studies scholar because the former could be hired in joint appointments. Recent years have witnessed the opening up and creation of tenure-track positions seeking full-time appointments in women’s studies and the emergence of scholars trained in the field and even in tracks of intersectionality and global/transnational feminisms. I find particularly interesting the resolute grounding of intersectionality tracks in scholarship on Euro-America and the transnational tracks beyond the geographic Euro-America. Hence, there are continued divisions in conceptualizing the categories “women of color” and “Third world feminism” as well as what constitutes the United States and the global. We must dislodge this division that hinges on the idea that the borders of the American nation
are intact and that obfuscates the confluence of the local and the global in the transnational. These false divisions limit in vision the urgent alliances that are possible across oppositional spaces, especially women’s studies, ethnic studies, and area/international studies. Having been in the US job market, I can vouch for my own marketability in the transnational feminism track as opposed to the woman-of-color track, albeit the boundaries between these tracks are essentially fluid.

Within women’s studies, the modes of identity affirmation and politicization of women of color and white women differ. Women of color remain in token positions. They can speak to only certain issues narrowly conceptualized by hegemonic feminism as “special tracks” whereas white women (especially under the rubric of feminist theory) are free to position themselves everywhere. The struggles experienced by some white women — often defined simply as “a woman in the male academy” — are more easily understood and taken on by the administration and the women’s studies establishment, whereas those faced by women of color are seen as divisive and swept under the rug. Tokenism leads to competition and impedes potential alliances between US women of color and non-US women of color, alliances that are further muddied because of inadequate attention to imperialism as well as the racist fragmentation of colonizing structures within women’s studies curricula and pedagogy. In this context, it is important to connect the struggles of US antiracist and postcolonial feminists — historically viewed as distinct — in order to envision a collective response to the hegemony of neoliberal feminism.

These divisions also influence the (re)production of women’s studies constituencies along lines of color, nationality, and citizenship. For example, in my “Gender in Global Context” introductory-level course, the most enthusiastic students are those from new immigrant communities and/or international students. Even the most theoretically savvy

North American women’s studies student has difficulty in deconstructing categories such as “Third World women,” although they are quite adept in applying an intersectional lens to categories such as “Western/hegemonic feminisms” or “US women of color.” However, when the subject of women elsewhere is broached, there appears to be a peculiar collapsing of divisions among women in the United States so as to create a singular privileged First World woman in relation to her oppressed Third World counterpart.

Women’s studies pedagogy has championed the validation of personal experiences, mostly through a promotion of confessional statements and journaling of personal reactions. I myself am a product of that pedagogy, about which I must add a cautionary note. Considered liberatory and validating of women’s experiences, this confessional model can also be stifling and counterproductive because it runs the risk of reinforcing ascribed categories and assumptions of the Other. While I do not doubt the importance of creating safe spaces to share experiences and build alliances, I am extremely conscious of which students’ voices and experiences are privileged and which enunciations are intelligible through these modes of learning, given the US-specific frame of reference implicitly rooted in a liberal individualism. Hence, unless we are careful to simultaneously address systematic and global inequities, we run the risk of de-intellectualizing and depoliticizing our field. My intent here is not necessarily to rehash an age-old discussion on the “growing pains” of women’s studies or on the divisions between white and nonwhite feminists or pedagogies. Rather, I am interested in illuminating the everyday interactions in women’s studies spaces and the political economy of feminisms that validate, structurally and institutionally, a politics that embraces pluralism, soft relativism, and diversity management through harmonious coexistence over productive engagement with conflict, inequality, and asymmetrical power relations.

13. In fact, the pedagogical project of integrating international studies and women’s studies has been well documented in works such as Mary M. Lay, Janice Monk, and Deborah S. Rosenfelt, eds., Encompassing Gender: Integrating International Studies and Women’s Studies (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2002); and Susan Sánchez-Casal and Amie A. Macdonald, Twenty-First-Century Feminist Classrooms: Pedagogies of Identity and Difference (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
Education is not merely an accumulation of knowledge that is bartered in the market for upward mobility; there are critical issues at stake, including the recovery of alternative, oppositional knowledges, histories of domination, and struggles of resistance and survival. Women's studies, Black studies, and ethnic studies, committed to oppositional knowledge from their inception, continually run the risk of being assimilated and depoliticized in the academy. A feminism that reproduces and espouses assimilationist politics is complicit in the maintenance of that which it claims to transform.

As scholars trained in the discipline of women's studies, these are scattered issues we confront. I consider this a privileged position from which to enact social change, further oppositional consciousness, take apart false dichotomies, and forge unsuspecting alliances, conversations, and dialogues. Through contestation the field has emerged, and it is time to take ownership of that history as we continue our struggles toward more rigorous feminist solidarity.

**Activist Scholarship**

**Isis Nusair**

While my coauthors have focused on the politics of the field and contemporary doctoral training, I offer my personal scholarly and activist trajectory as a reminder of the ways that early field commitments to a transnational praxis by programs such as Clark's have contributed to a broader and collective remapping of the field. In 1994, I was in the process of completing my MA in International Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution at the University of Notre Dame. At the time I was looking for PhD programs in women's studies, only two were available. One was at Emory University, where despite enrolling in women's studies, students were required to follow a disciplinary concentration in the fields of history, literature, and sociology. The other was at Clark University and was stand-alone and interdisciplinary; this was the one I applied to.

During my three years at Clark, I took classes for the first two and dedicated the third year for more specialized, directed studies with two members of my PhD committee. I also designed my fields of study in preparation for my oral exams: women and the state, women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and transnational feminism. I received a tenure-track position in 2005 at Denison University where I continue to design and teach courses on women and gender (later gender
and revolution) in MENA; gender, war, and conflict; transnational feminism; gendered migration; and Iraq post-2003.

Two things in particular made my studies at Clark rewarding and still affect my work and approach to the field. The first was the interdisciplinary nature of the program, and the second was the program’s focus on the link between theory and practice. There were only two students in my cohort, and I was especially impressed with the diversity of women who attended the program. They came from different parts of the world and were of different ages, races, classes, and activist backgrounds. The skills of navigating racialized and transnational difference, the ones that were being written into the field, and ones that we would write into the field were skills that we learned, in part, by being part of our respective cohorts. As incoming students, my cohort peer, Dyan Mazurana, and I found ourselves photocopying material for each other instead of hiding it or competing against each other. As a current teacher and mentor, I strive to pass along these intellectual and activist pedagogies.

Learning how to be creative and resourceful was part and parcel of being a women’s studies student at Clark. Although there was no faculty member that focused on my field of study of women and gender in the MENA region, I took courses and worked with a number of faculty to develop my research interests. We were well aware that creating and sustaining our women’s studies program was, in part, an activist project by the faculty to bring more visibility and presence to the field not only on Clark’s campus, but nationwide. Watching faculty navigate administrative constraints, particularly funding the program, was inspiring and frustrating in equal parts. This thread continues into my current position at Denison where I hold a joint appointment in two interdisciplinary and underfunded programs, International Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies.

The Clark faculty’s dedication to their students and to activist pedagogy challenged us to constantly engage with the world. I still have boxes of newspaper clippings (yes, this was a time when we still used newspaper clippings!) on topics pertaining to my research interests that my main research advisor, Cynthia Enloe, would send me. Over time, I started sending clippings her way and would come to the office with paper bags full of research material. Cynthia once teased that I was joining other women who also walk around with grocery bags full of feminist analysis! I closely observed how she followed the war in the
former Yugoslavia and engaged us as students with her writings and analysis of nationalism, militarization, and the rape of women in conflict situations.

Despite the department’s dedication, the university’s lack of support and the program’s limited funding were particularly onerous for international students. Many of us had visa limitations on our ability to work in-country, and our research locations were not US-based. Funding and teaching assistantships were not available beyond the three years of coursework, and since I wanted to keep connecting theory with practice, I ended up taking a nontraditional route to complete my dissertation. I borrowed money from a family member to complete my overseas fieldwork on the gendered narratives of three generations of Palestinian women in Israel, and I worked for four years at the women’s rights division of Human Rights Watch and at the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network.

Clark’s intellectual support for maintaining the links between theory and practice continued to move me along, but it was in the field that I fully experienced the discussions held in the classroom, namely the importance of learning from and with. My work with these organizations brought the experiences of women’s rights activists from the MENA region to the center. I was challenged to think of knowledge production, not in isolation but in connection to real-life experiences and the potential for social and political transformation. Most of all, I learned about transnational feminist solidarity and what it means to challenge and cross boundaries.

Before officially returning to the academy, I received two fellowships, one from the Five Colleges Women’s Studies Research Center and the other from the Women’s Intercultural Leadership Center, to complete my dissertation. My dissertation interest, as is usually the case with dissertations and in keeping with the feminist dictum of politicizing the everyday, was a product of my family history and location as second-class citizens in Israel. My work focused on the gendered politics of location of three generations of Palestinian women in Israel, of which I was a member of the third generation. My dissertation focused not only on centering this understudied group but also on its explorations of the gendered dimensions of memory and narrative and of the historical, political, and social continuities and intersections between generations.
Making political detours as an activist-scholar was something I found myself doing again, during the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. On the verge of completing my dissertation, I, like many others, was shaken by the images of torture at Abu Ghraib prison. It was this intervention, not my dissertation research, that I took on the job market—a risk I was willing to take to make a statement about the gendered, racialized, and sexualized torture at Abu Ghraib, the ramifications of Orientalist representations, and the lack of state accountability in war situations.14

I now challenge my students to think of the classroom as a place for activist and collective learning and the campus as a place for organizing and collaboration. These pedagogies, which we now expect, are only possible because programs like Clark’s worked to challenge traditional modes of knowledge production. Rooting my teaching in intersectional and transnational feminist analysis, I start my classes by working with students on deconstructing their assumptions (mostly racist and sexist) about the Other; then I engage in rebuilding knowledge that is critical and constantly challenging of binary oppositions such as “us” and “them”; “here” and “there.”15 We learn to challenge savior rhetoric and cultural relativism, and most of all, liberal individualism and instrumental consumptions of knowledge.16 We center our analysis on how to think critically about continuums of violence and displacement and context-specific analyses of long, comparative and intersecting histories of colonization and domination.17 By problematizing body politics

and moving beyond narrow-minded, Orientalist, and American-centric representations of the Other, we learn about “aesthetic citizenship” in the MENA region and how it is marked by “embodied, symbolic, and artistic performances of everyday hybrid languages, orality, national identity and belonging.” When learning about Iraq or Syria, we learn about the US military industrial complex and the local, regional, and transnational actors involved in sustaining a war. We also learn about accountability and our complicity in what is going on. In the process, we develop feminist consciousness and resistance; a form of “dialogic praxis [that] necessitates constant renegotiations and retheorizations of power through alliances, languages, and critiques that disrupt dominant logics and imaginaries.”

The commitment of programs such as Clark’s to training cohorts of international scholars was key to expanding the then US-centered nature of the field. This remapping continues in a number of different arenas. In my own case, following my doctoral work, I coedited, with Rhoda Kanaaneh, a collection of articles by twelve academic Palestinian

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Michelle V. Rowley, Elora Halim Chowdhury, and Isis Nusair

women citizens of Israel. This collection focused on ethnicity and gender as they relate to topics such as rape in war, gendered migration, and hip-hop production. After the book came out in English, we worked to ensure an Arabic translation in order to make it available to the communities from which it emerged.

My research with Iraqi women refugees in Jordan and the United States focuses on the gendered effects of war trauma and forced migration. It is anchored in knowledge production and political practices that challenge hierarchies of domination and call for accountability and resistance. As I was completing this project, another war was emerging in the MENA region. Not being able to bear the helplessness of watching boats full of Syrian refugees sink in the Mediterranean, I traveled to Germany in 2015 to meet with activists and scholars and to volunteer with an aid organization at the train station in Hamburg. Since then, I have been conducting research on the narratives of crossing of Syrian refugees into Germany. I also translated a book of poetic prose about the war in Syria by Ramy Al-Asheq titled *Ever Since I Did Not Die*. Laila Farah and I are in the process of completing the writing and directing of a one-woman performance titled *Weaving the Maps: Tales of Survival and Resistance*, based on our research over the last two decades with Iraqi, Palestinian, and Syrian refugee women.

Both my research and activism intertwine to cross boundaries and challenge the invisibility and naturalization of pain and suffering inflicted on certain communities. They redefine my/our commitments and crossings of inter/disciplinary, personal/political, private/public, and here/there divides. For these struggles are about survival, theirs as much as ours, in the physical, political, and ethical sense. It foregrounds questions of “intersubjectivity, connectivity, collective responsibility, and mutual accountability as fundamental markers of radical praxis.”

Such praxis commits itself to “building situated solidarities and configuring the specific nature of our alliances and commitments.”

This overview of my activist and research work underlines the point that there are no set paths for doctoral work in women’s and gender studies. I am a product of a generation of scholars who went through these programs as they were at inception, with limited resources but with a clear sense of how the field could change, in this case, through a feminist intersectional and transnational analysis. Maybe our diverse paths as students and scholars have helped shape the field, as it refuses to be defined in narrow and elitist terms.

**How Will We Know?**

**Doctoral Training in Women’s Studies**

**Michelle V. Rowley**

I do not remember my training at Clark with any degree of clarity. I remember a summer of intensive reading, I remember one core course, for reasons other than content, and, I remember my doctoral defense because there are pictures, a tome, and a certificate that remind me that it occurred. This “lapse” is probably a casualty of time; I prefer to think of it as a consequence of giving myself over to the intellectual and scholarly malleability that women’s studies insists upon. Or maybe, I’ve just forgotten. My colleagues remind me that there were two core courses, a weekly pro-seminar until you advanced to candidacy, an oral comprehensive, and a dissertation proposal defense. This overview of essentially two qualifying benchmarks seems shockingly few in number given that my own doctoral students are now required to complete five benchmarks before advancing to candidacy.

Yet, thinking on the two benchmarks that constituted my own training versus my students’ five prompts me to ask is “more” better? Is “more” a consequence of knowing more? Or, is “more” symptomatic of the never-ending and exhausting quest for institutional legitimacy? There are no quick and easy answers to these questions. Doctoral training in women’s studies invariably follows many different points of departure, and given the novelty of our questions and the interdisciplinary nature

of our process, we intentionally work to achieve a diverse range of outcomes. This lack of a predictable trajectory can indeed present some difficulty for the field’s articulation of its “rationale not just to outsiders, but to our own peers and colleagues.” 25 As we think about doctoral training, we constantly revisit whether there should be a core body of knowledge, named methodologies, and research commitments that should sit at the heart of the field. These deliberations about what students should know continue to engage us and may not be readily assuaged by the allocation of “more” (materials, exams, papers), given that more begat more and that there is always more that we will need to know. Disciplinarity entices us by giving ready language for these awkward and potentially irresolvable encounters, but the unsteadiness of our answers, while ungainly, leave us open to what has proven to be a resounding strength of the field: namely, its innovation is in its instability. Assessing the latter, however, presents dilemmas.

The Dissertation as Barometer

If the dissertation represents the culmination of doctoral training, then, might a study of dissertations provide an inductive vantage point from which we can then explore what constitutes adequate training in women’s studies? Sally Kitch and Mary Fonow’s 2012 examination of the doctoral dissertations written between 2001 and 2008 offers preliminary insight into this question. 26 Theirs is an ambitious study that could only have emerged out of their pioneering role in shaping the field, their tremendous regard for the field, and their concern for its future. Analytically, the authors draw on the artifact of the dissertation to “consider what doctoral programs have contributed to the production of new knowledge in the field.” Beginning with 117 dissertations (1995–2008), the authors sourced the abstracts for 106 of these dissertations. They then coded these abstracts using eight methodological and sixteen topic categories. Guided by availability, they were able to secure 97 of

the initial 117 dissertations. They drilled down even further to read a sample of the 97 dissertations secured; for the purposes of manageability, they narrowed their time frame (2001–2008) and ended up with a final sample that accounted for institutional differences in the numbers of dissertations produced across programs.27

If doctoral dissertations tell us something about the nature of the contributions made to the field, then simultaneously implicated are hints about how we train our doctoral students. And here, according to Kitch and Fonow, we are in dire need of revisiting the fundamentals. The authors critiqued much of the work produced during this period as lacking in interdisciplinarity, being inadequately transnational despite professing to be, and having a “nativist” thrust. For example,

We found a close connection between students’ personal experiences and backgrounds and the topics they wrote about in their dissertations…. This finding was especially significant with regard to dissertation focuses outside the United States…. By the same token, any dissertation focused on sexuality was inevitably written by a gay or lesbian student (revealed in the text), a dissertation on domestic violence in Native American communities was predictably written by a Native victim of domestic violence (emphasis mine).28

Their critique is a strong indictment of the training of women’s studies doctoral students, finding only five dissertations in their final pool of twenty-four that they thought did a good job of demonstrating “the value of producing feminist knowledge via freestanding women’s studies PhD programs.” “These dissertations,” they go on to note, “rose admirably to the challenge of constructing new knowledge on well-chosen and sufficient evidence with appropriate methodology and convincing arguments to justify their knowledge claims.”29 The authors note that it is time to discuss how we might “translate the more familiar

27. Ibid., 102–105.
28. Ibid., 106. For international students, students of color, queer students, and other marginalized voices, the space between scholarship and self is certainly one about “identity,” but it is also the space of the counter-narrative, the place from which difference forces open space and place within the academy.
29. Ibid., 119. For the purposes of comparison and consistency, the authors did not include dual-degree programs.
interdisciplinary teaching mission in women’s (gender/sexuality/feminist) studies into research agendas and methodologies, ” and they provide eight recommendations that would help “expand the value of women’s studies doctoral degrees.” These include the facilitation of interdisciplinarity through a less chair-centered approach, an emphasis on the fundamentals of research design, greater methodological clarity, and attention to intersectionality, among others.

The researchers’ reach for disciplinary and methodological intelligibility is an understandable one, given the institutional precarity that women’s studies faces. Equally as reasonable is their insistence, not on a specific methodology, but for clarity, regardless of the methodology or method deployed. They argue for the importance of intelligibility and clarity as pathways to ensuring that our knowledge “count[s] for our field” and as the platforms from which we can be taken seriously. These are not anxieties that we can readily dismiss, and they loom large for anyone who has had to do battle with the administrative behemoths that guard the gates to institutional resources. Similarly, I have no investment in parsing the very fine work of the final five dissertations that the authors deemed excellent and the many others not accounted for in this group of five. I am committed, rather, to having us pause long enough to tease out what dissertations might actually help us understand about doctoral training in women’s studies with the hope that we learn to see doctoral training as both text (dissertation and only one part of other texts such as syllabi) and context (a historical period in which our scholarly resources change over time).

Women’s Studies Doctoral Training: An Imminent and Belated Enterprise

Women’s studies departments did not exist until the 1970s, with San Francisco State’s being one of the earliest in 1976. The first freestanding doctoral program in women’s studies began in 1990 at Emory University. The University of Maryland’s minor in Black women’s studies, started in 2005, is still the only such program at the undergraduate level.

30. Ibid., 100, 124.
31. Ibid., 124.
32. Prior to the establishment of full-fledged departments, many programs had already been established. The University of Washington, among the first, founded their women’s studies program in 1970.
There are now approximately eighteen doctoral programs nationally, of which more than half are fewer than ten years old. Given the field’s many advances and contributions, it seems incredible to think of it as a nascent and emerging field, but it is, and this matters in terms of how we assess the training of doctoral candidates.

With programs still only just being established at the graduate and undergraduate level, women’s studies has not had the luxury of a demarcation known as “the early days” through which we can adequately assess the consolidation of anything remotely akin to “fundamental precepts.” We also have not had, nor embraced, a practice of veiled knowledge production. We have not hidden our trials, emerging from a lab when an answer has been secured. Rather, we have tried in public, failed in public, and tried again in public. Many of the field’s developments and changes have happened rapidly and within our lifetime, in some instances over the course of writing a dissertation. One of the strengths of the field is an ongoing quest to navigate a kind of tectonic instability of concepts, methods, subjects, and politics; the ramifications of this unpredictability offer a rich terrain for thinking through a range of feminist methodological innovations.


34. We can think of the seismic shift that would have resulted with the US Supreme Court’s ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), solidifying a decade’s old struggle for marriage equality. Similarly, the rapid escalation of state-sponsored violence against black life, while not qualitatively different has raised profound ontological questions about black life. What we study in women’s studies is always on the move, a particular difficulty for the stuff of methodology, which aims to track and account for precisely the things that are on the move. Methodological approaches would suggest that we could temporarily hold our objects steady. As I watch my students grappling with how to run alongside of their objects of study, I realize that many of our old approaches fail them.
To say, therefore, that the relatively recent emergence of the field matters ought not to suggest that as we “age” we become more fixed or firm-footed in our methodologies, and therefore “better.” Rather, and somewhat optimistically, my own hope is that as we age we may become more confident about the unpredictable destination points of our methodological frameworks, more confident in our experimentation with the methods that we use.

Regardless of our disciplinary location, we ask the same thing of all doctoral students: that they make a contribution to the field. This is a monumental requirement that assumes that there will always be more to say, that things will continue to shift under foot, that we will always have tectonic instability. Given the stakes that we place on the dissertation, it would appear to be the ideal measure of how we are faring in the training of women’s studies doctoral candidates. Yet, I find myself questioning the value of this artifact, taken in isolation, as an indicator of the health and well-being of the training that we do. Taken one step further, I find myself questioning in toto the very desire to account for the state of the field by way of processes that would streamline what we should expect of our students.

Who, to the melody of nostalgia and hindsight, has not said, I could have written a better dissertation? The inevitability of such a question is connected to the fact that dissertations are always belated documents, coming years after the formal training has been concluded, sitting only at the cusp of the new. Dissertations tell us only a little about a students’ prior training within a program and even less across one program. For example, methodologically, dissertations E and D may both have been defended in 2002, but with significant internal variation in terms of when the respective authors may have started their program, the syllabi and materials that shaped their understanding of the field and, certainly, different electives that occur within, but more likely external to, our departments. To ignore this is to flatten out variability for the purposes of critique, and it is somewhat presentist as it assesses work that may have been produced earlier in time via a more contemporary frame of reference. We see glimpses of this in Kitch and Fonow’s critique of the existing work. They write,

Agency and social change are also foundational to feminist methodology and often turn up both as the purpose of research and as a research
topic. Some writers in our study displayed the more nuanced understanding that (even feminist) research can reinscribe women as victims, while others subscribed to earlier, more naive notions that research findings in and of themselves provided agency or empowered women to change the world.35

In an instance such as the one intimated above, it is important to think of the field not as a teleological formation, but again, as tectonic, tiered formations, where tiers are simultaneously separate and abutting. A tectonic approach to the field and doctoral training in general remains open to the fact that in some tiers finding women—any woman—is still the work that needs to be done, and this work happens alongside of and is imbricated within other tiers where these questions may already have been examined. They are potentially symbiotic moments, where, for example, the excavation of heretofore-erased actors may well be a needed nugget for ongoing research within an abutting tier. Doctoral work responds to these differentiated calls, and rightly so. Dissertations may well be assessed comparatively for many legitimate reasons, but arguably less so to understand an interdisciplinary field. Students build their interdisciplinarity within and external to women’s studies departments, and while departments have the final say in what constitutes a “good dissertation,” to assess the dissertation as a statement about the field misses the point that imbricated in a women’s studies dissertation are the departments of communication, kinesiology, American studies, in other words, the many ways in which the student has built her own interdisciplinary framework. How the student navigates these borders is as important as the overall content of the work itself.

Dissertations are also artifacts of their institutional era and may, more usefully, provide possible hints about institutional capacity. While I may not remember my training at Clark with any degree of precision, I do remember the historical era within which that training occurred. This was one where we grappled with concepts that were still in process but are now very much a taken-for-granted part of our lexicon, categories such as “interdisciplinary,” “transnational,” and “intersectionality.” We were scaffolding and applying simultaneously. Methodologically, we were working to trouble the limitations of standpoint epistemology and

uncomplicated approaches to “the view from below” without diminishing the importance of centering, in order to notice, heretofore-unheard vantage points. In my own case, the goal was not to identify a missing subject per se, but rather to examine the ways that state agents at different points in the Caribbean’s historical and contemporary development deployed the idea of the maternal: to examine to what political end, who benefitted, and how did women (in their capacity as mothers) respond. Our faculty, all disciplinarians from fields such as political science, psychology, geography, international development, and English, worked earnestly to navigate the line of their own knowledge base and the horizon ahead. But, there were no Caribbeanists, no benefit of a historian with an interest in women’s studies with whom to talk about archival research, and very little professional guidance about how we might navigate the field to access needed resources or the job market for that matter, much of this resulting, of course, from the fact that we had no dedicated lines to the program, no one for whom our training was their primary responsibility.36

That we wrote dissertations, now teach, chair departments, direct graduate programs, and have contributed to the scholarly and professional terrain of women’s studies is a strong testament to the fact that at the limits of our faculty’s disciplinary line, we, as students, took each other forward, sharing and suggesting new reading materials to faculty, going off to conferences to supplement our respective needs and staging walkouts when we encountered the same homogenous vantage points that we were aiming to challenge.

The institutional and historical moment within which one is trained therefore matters greatly. In this regard, my students do have infinitely “more,” and here I would argue that this more is better. It also means that while Kitch and Fonow may well be assessing the same unit of analysis in our hypothetical dissertation D and E; the context, content, and imperatives may be so internally disparate as to make a comparative analysis

36. This is not an indictment of the faculty but an acknowledgment of the context within which they worked given the lack of support they received from the administration. The folk narrative that we rehearse to each other is that the women’s studies program at Clark existed because Cynthia Enloe placed the heft of all that she was between the program and the administration. The program was shut down two years after she retired.
unfair and skewed. I am not suggesting that we ought not to and cannot assess the merits of a project. Rather, I am suggesting that we need to be more tempered about what kind of data we think we might glean when we use a doctoral dissertation as our primary indicator of how well we are training our graduate students.

Women’s Studies Doctoral Training: Refusing to Account

If we are to continue to use dissertations as the primary indicator of the effectiveness of doctoral training in women’s studies, then we may be better served by drilling down to identify more about the period that exists prior to the production of the work, syllabi, external disciplinary integration, and in some instances pose the question about what the work aimed to do in its historical period.

But, to the larger question of why should we account.

Doctoral programs are increasingly required to account for whether or not they are achieving their stated goals, whether by “outcomes assessment” or some other rubric or metric. As a field, our institutionalization is by now too embedded to “opt out,” and our time may be better served thinking creatively with our colleagues about how we might use these mandates to serve purposes that are of value to us. Miranda Joseph takes up this impetus by examining the modes of “complicity” that are inherent in all processes of institutionalization, departmental and individual. With the die cast, Joseph notes, “In fact, we might need to recognize that our implication in the game implies responsibilities to actively take up the hegemonic struggle; we are not made innocent by our marginal location on the eighth floor of our local ivory tower.”

 Anyone who has held any administrative position will need very little to convince them of the insidiousness of complicity and the sustained vigilance needed against its damage, to both the self and the department. Part of this vigilance, however, is the need to find fissures. In other words, the inevitability of accounting does not mean that accounting should become the modus operandi of our work. It bothers me that the recommendations offered by Kitch and Fonow are rendered to “expand the value of women’s studies doctoral degrees.” In this vein, accounting becomes an act of containment, containment potentially of

instability, nuance, the particularity of what is essentially a highly specialized project, in favor of a process that has broad-based appeal by a criteria of “abstracts,” “fundamentals” and “appropriate evidence.”

Thinking about what constitutes “more,” my proxy for “better,” should be student-centered, not an accounting to the disciplinary pressures of the academy. Momentarily adopting Kitch and Fonow’s corrective tone, their recommendations to train “better” could easily have included the need to examine the extent to which the student has laid out her project, mindful of the theoretical frames that guide the work, which may or may not be poststructuralist; the extent to which the student shows a recognition of the body of literature that needs to be engaged as the work progresses, as opposed to the inability to cite the most current research or approach in a project that may have started seven years prior to defense; the extent to which the method and methodology trouble existing modes of engagement, rather than whether it adheres to an established framework; or the extent to which the work can account for its limitations. In other words, we might offer recommendations that see the dissertation for what it is, a belated document that sits only at the cusp of the new, rather than the end of a project that can be assessed against disciplinary criteria.

While I am sympathetic to concerns about the future of the field, the way that we envision that future cannot be in terms of longevity. I have always relished what I see to be the irony of women’s studies: that its utopic possibilities reside in its destruction. If we are aligned with the dimensions of a field that centers social justice, then we should not want a women’s studies that lasts forever. How we value our training of those in the field may be better served philosophically, by the extent to which the student project brings us one step closer to the elimination of the need for the field.

My call for less methodological sure-footedness should not suggest that I am opposed to having doctoral students think carefully about their guiding questions, identify their process, or draw on evidence to support their discussion. I think that it is our students’ ability to walk this trajectory, not more method in and of itself, that positions them well in the job market. Further, given our existing disciplinary intransigence, my explorations here will look no different to members of hiring committees who are already hostile to the field. This then, is a conversation among kin.
Our assessment of how we train students should align with how we view the field — in process, tectonic, and critical — with a commitment to producing junior scholars who can account for the processual nature of the field. In this moment of our field’s formation, one of the best methodological skills that we can give our students is the ability to ask critical questions as the ground moves under their feet. In this moment, it is important that students develop the skill of asking the question that is urgent to the time, and we will figure out our “how” together, because hopefully many of their questions have not been asked before.

In conclusion
As graduates of Clark University’s pioneering women’s studies doctoral degree, our experiences within the field are by no means representative. In this essay we attempt to share our stories and to reflect on a few of the critical questions that shaped our training — transnational feminisms — and the weighty questions for the field today, including the training of doctoral students, feminist knowledge production, the convergence of women’s and gender studies with critical area and ethnic studies, and the critical need to foster activist scholarship and global analysis. In cultivating these questions, we do not mean to assert any singular methodological or pedagogical grounding, as in, our opinion that such a move would be antithetical to the field’s radical openness. Based on our own shifting journeys, however, we commit to the field’s multiplicity and transdisciplinary approaches and ongoing and foundational contestations of power, pedagogy, and praxis.

It is noteworthy that we entered the women’s studies doctoral training in the United States at a time when only two freestanding PhDs were available. Since then, the field has grown exponentially in ways that clearly cannot be captured from only our vantage points. We are, at present, located in freestanding undergraduate and graduate programs, at public and private institutions, in the Midwest and the Northeast, and we are multiply affiliated with various interdisciplinary programs and practitioner networks in multiple regions of the world.

The challenge for us remains how to link transnational and intersectional feminist analyses and how to keep accountability, alliance, and solidarity at the center of both our teaching and our scholarship. Continuing to question hegemonic narratives from our different transnational locations challenges us to think about what it means to continue crossing
boundaries as activist scholars. Creating alternative and transformative spaces that challenge and shape our practice and theorization requires hard and sustained work. We continue to learn and teach about how to transgress in a constantly changing environment and in complex contexts such as the one we currently live in since the election of Donald Trump as president. Daring to speak where the stakes of backlash and silencing are high prompts us to continue challenging hegemonic and neoliberal structures in and outside the academy. Focusing on practices of accountability, solidarity, and coalition building will continue to shape not only our trajectories but our commitments to our communities.