

Feminist Studies vs. Feminist Activism: Understanding and Transforming Conflicting Epistemologies of Gender and Sexuality

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Overview

Feminist, Queer, and Trans Studies scholars are increasingly being attacked from the far right for espousing what conservatives call “gender ideology,” an ostensibly subversive set of ideas meant to destroy traditional gender roles and to corrupt children. But perhaps even more dangerous, Feminist, Queer, and Trans Studies scholars are being chastised by feminist, queer, and trans activists and DEI practitioners for pushing back against the very ideas about sex, gender, and the body that have become commonsensical among liberals and progressives. For instance, scholars argue that LGBTQ rights advocates’ claims that sexuality is innate (that we are, as Lady Gaga says, “born this way”) and that gender resides in the brain are both factually inaccurate and also politically conservative. This project began as a way to examine the conflicting epistemologies at play among Feminist, Queer, and Trans Studies scholars and related activists. Ultimately, we sought to outline the value of academic scholarship on gender, sexuality, and the body for social justice movements as a way to begin to transform these deep conflicts.

Research Findings and Outputs

We conducted a review of academic literature on the diversity industry, as well as public-facing journalism about the diversity industry, including both conservative and liberal critiques of DEI work. Based on this review, we feel confident in joining the many critics who have argued that current DEI approaches do not work—that is, they do not increase diversity in the workplace, make the workplace less racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, classist, or metronormative, or change people’s belief systems. Our questions went beyond these typical concerns regarding DEI’s lack of effectiveness to instead consider *why* DEI efforts are having essentially no impact. One reason, our research suggests, is that DEI discourses and trainings, which are often framed as progressive and liberal, actually rely on extremely conservative ideas about gender, sexuality, and the body—ideas that Feminist, Queer, and Trans Studies scholars have worked to disrupt. To come to this conclusion, we researched DEI discourses and trainings evident at NESAC schools as well as major corporations, focusing specifically on how DEI practitioners in these spaces approach several topics: privilege, visibility, safe spaces, trigger warnings, pronoun pronouncements, gender and sexuality as biological, and experience as knowledge and expertise. Ultimately, we outlined the differences between DEI and Feminist, Queer, and Trans Studies discussions of these topics in one-page vignettes, which are laying the foundation for several articles. For instance, Thomsen’s analysis of experience and identity as expertise is the theoretical backbone of her essay “In the University, But Not Of It: The Diversity Industry vs. Queer Epistemologies,” forthcoming in *Feminist Studies: An Introduction*. In addition, we conducted a preliminary discourse and textual analysis of how feminist activist organizations reference Feminist Studies as a field. We found very little engagement with academic work among activists—a striking finding considering the ubiquity of claims made by Feminist Studies scholars that the field grew out of the women’s movements of the 1960s and 70s. With additional research, this finding could become the basis for a future article. In addition to generating these typical research outputs, we wanted our work to circulate in broader ways. As such, Laurie Essig

created a [blog and podcast](#) entitled “Feminism, Fascism, and the Future.” At this point, two episodes are available on Spotify and many more are in the works.

We also wanted the insights of this collaborative research project to inform our teaching, and we came up with an innovative approach for using conflict transformation as an organizing mechanism across our 5 GSFS core classes in Fall 2023. These classes, which enrolled approximately 100 students, include: GSFS 0191 Gender & the Body; GSFS 0200 Feminist Foundations; GSFS 0289 Intro to Queer Critique; GSFS 0225 Making Feminist Media; and GSFS 0435 Feminist Engaged Research. We did so in several ways. We agreed on 6 texts to assign in the first week of all of our core GSFS classes (Carly Thomsen’s and Laurie Essig’s “Lesbian, Feminist, TERF: The Queer Attack on Gender Studies,” Jen Manion’s “The Performance of Transgender Inclusion,” Loretta Ross’s “What if instead of calling out we called in?” and “I’m a Black Feminist. I think call-out culture is toxic,” Cathy Cohen’s “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens,” and Natalie Wynn’s “Transtrenders” video. Engaging the same slate of texts gave students across our classes a foundation for discussing ideas with students in other classes, which they did at a mandatory 3-hour teach-in on September 21st from 7-10pm. The teach-in included various break-out activities—discussions of the readings, an original student drag performance that translated Jen Manion’s critique of the pronoun go-round, tracking the funding of different podcasts by going to SourceWatch.org, and brainstorming in small groups which conflicts they’d like to explore in their semester-long projects. Throughout the course of the rest of the semester, we worked with our students as they created projects that both trace how commonsensical ideas about gender, sexuality, and the body are in conflict with those of experts in Feminist, Queer, and Trans Studies and also intervene in these conflicts. On November 30th, from 7-8.30pm, students shared their work at the college’s first Public Feminism Symposium. Approximately 200 people attended the event, which took over the entire first floor of Axinn. For more information about the symposium, see *The Campus*’s coverage of the [event](#). Students’ projects will live on through the Center for Public Feminism website and a website associated with a forthcoming Feminist Studies textbook.

We see our multi-pronged approach as generating significant insights for the study and practice of conflict transformation. The vast majority of the students who take GSFS classes are entrenched in the commonsensical ideas about sex, gender, and the body that Feminist, Queer, and Trans Studies scholars have worked to disrupt. These students, as well as all of their friends who learned about their projects, now have greater tools for questioning the ideas that circulate among self-identified liberals, progressives, and leftists. They also know that conflict is not something that solely exists between groups of people with radically different political ideals, such as conservatives and liberals, and, further, that it is not necessarily negative. Indeed, we witnessed repeatedly just how generative conflict can be. With the generous support of the KWD Conflict Transformation grant, we were able to articulate the value of thinking with conflict through our research and writing, public facing projects, and pedagogy.

Collaborators and Partners

We received research support through UCRF and FRAF, through which we hired three student RAs. In addition, we received support for the teach-in and Public Feminism Symposium from the Program in Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies and the Feminist Resource Center at Chellis

House. Lastly, the Public Humanities Lab grant and the Middlebury College Activities Board (MCAB) contributed to the costs of students' semester-long projects.