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American Studies and Gender Issues in an International Classroom

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Any discussion of the function of American Studies/Gender Studies in international settings should begin with an appraisal of the specific role that we, international Americanists/feminists, are called upon to play in academic environments distant, and not just geographically, from those in the US. Such an appraisal, moreover, should primarily involve the recognition that the majority of us, who work within literary studies, are facing a double challenge that defines the paradoxical and provocative nature of our work: on the one hand, like our US colleagues, we are confronted with the necessity of justifying our role as literary scholars and teachers in cultural arenas where 'practical' business values have demoted humanities education; on the other, we need to respond to the more specific challenge of having to justify, and even defend, ourselves as agents through whom American Studies infiltrate cultural spaces often by definition inimical to American political and cultural influences. As to the first of our concerns: I believe that nowadays, few people in literature programs can still feign unawareness of the fact that the most serious problem facing them is the ghettoization of literary studies in society at large. At the same time that literary scholarship is proliferating within the academy, in the 'real' world literature professors are stereotyped as self-indulgent social misfits and spoofed as users of a theoretical jargon that, as rumor has it, even *they* do not fully comprehend. The image of the literary scholar who speaks gibberish because he or she has nothing to communicate is becoming alarmingly widespread in a world in which the values of practicality and expediency are pushing literary studies into a position of social and hence political irrelevance.

This systematic devaluation of literary studies and, most importantly, of the social values they promote, should be a source of concern for all of us, and not just because our field is in danger of losing academic prestige. The negative stereotyping of literary studies as ultimately 'useless' and 'irrelevant' to the business of 'real' life could ultimately lead to our loss of a vital role within society itself. I believe that as we consider the intersections of American Studies and gender issues in academic settings outside the U.S., we need to remind ourselves that our more specific engagement with the institutional development of American Studies and Women's Studies programs in international sites takes place in the broader context of skepticism concerning the validity of literary scholarship — and, we have to admit, not all of this skepticism is thoroughly unjustified. As to the second of our concerns: if the problem of relevance is critical for literary scholars in general, for us international Americanists/feminists it is doubly and more so, since, in addition to all else,

we have to resolve the question of our role within societies which often possess cultural features very different from those of America. What exactly is our contribution to the social and cultural life of our native land? To what extent do we serve as mediums through whom American values and mentalities spread to erode foreign cultural structures in the name of U.S. economic and political hegemony? And how can women's issues be introduced as part of an American Studies program to audiences whose experience of gender is unique, embedded as it is within a unique matrix of historical memory and social practice?

As a professor of American literature at the American College of Greece, I find myself in a unique and paradoxical situation. First off, I teach at an American institution which still demands that courses maintain a survey orientation and emphasis on American exceptionalism; but then, the majority of students are Greeks who simultaneously embrace and disapprove of American culture, while rejecting American politics. Second, I am a feminist in a society of women who have won many political and social rights for themselves, but by whom the word "feminism" is rarely used and the concept of feminism far less respected. Whereas in the younger age groups a majority of successful professionals are women, in Greece there is no systematic dissemination of feminist values, while the two largest women's groups function as branches of and accessories to major political parties — with everything that this entails. Third, I teach American literature and culture in a country where Americanization in pop culture goes hand-in-hand with political anti-Americanism. Fourth, as a professor of foreign literature — and that American — I have to defend my *raison d'etre* amongst an elite of Greek scholars whose work is automatically validated as part of the national(ist) enterprise of preserving "essential"*Greekness*. Finally, and most relevant at the present moment, I declare myself an anti-essentialist and a critic of scholarship which produces scripts of American exceptionalism, at the same time that I keep referring to myself as an *American* literature professor.

And yet, impossible as our role may appear to be, I believe that the interdisciplinary and multicultural orientation of American Studies and Women's Studies, constitutes a potential solution to the problem of social/political relevance that many of us Americanists and feminists face within our native cultures. Because it investigates 'difference' in relation to particular material conditions, American Studies has, first of all, shifted literary scholarship away from the inert setting of abstract theorizing, into the dynamic arena of culture, where literary interpretation may realize its potential for radical political engagement. By historicizing the experience of class, gender, race, and ethnicity, American Studies appears to assert a vital social and political function, and that not only in a strictly national, but also in a global context.

Indeed, much is being said about the fact that nowadays American Studies cannot be thought of as a merely national project aiming to identify and reproduce the collective and at the same time, unitary "American mind." On the contrary, American Studies is, at least theoretically, positing "America" within a global, transnational setting of commodity and culture exchange. Women's Studies has made a particularly significant contribution to the internationalization of American Studies. The traditional international orientation of Women's Studies has indeed infused into the field of American Studies a healthy dosage of what is lately referred to as "critical internationalism."

In an article in *The American Quarterly,* Jane Desmond and Virginia Dominguez define "internationalism" as

> a conceptual orientation that re-situates the United States in a global context on a number of terrains simultaneously: in terms of the scholarship that gets read, written, and cited, and, most importantly, in the ways scholars conceive of new directions for formulating research (Desmond and Dominguez 490).

Critical internationalism redefines American Studies in a transnational arena of cultural product exchange and de-centers Americanists' confidence in the validity of their interpretive tools by inviting international scholars' perspectives on "American" themes. In short, critical internationalism entails a lot more than the mere establishing of American Studies and Women's Studies programs all over the world, mostly as a result of colonizing initiatives by USIA [*now the cultural department of the American Embassy in many countries - Ed.*]. It redefines American Studies as an ideologically progressive global project that facilitates intercultural dialogue and rejects the naïve assumption that American Studies should and *could* promote American culture products to passive and uncritical international student populations. There is no doubt that by maintaining its essentialist focus on things "American," American Studies, while increasing its numbers abroad, would lose momentum by remaining caught in a vicious and outmoded cycle of perpetuating paradigms of American exceptionalism.

The dynamic potential of American Studies as a means of engendering challenging and progressive discussions on matters of global ideological interest becomes very apparent in international classrooms. Last spring I taught a seminar for graduating seniors which helped me acquire valuable insights into how in the process of studying 'difference' — ethnic, racial, class, and gender — an international American Studies audience transformed *Americanness* by appropriating and reconceptualizing *it* in multiple ways through a variety of cultural viewpoints. The class, which focused on novels by American women, consisted of an interesting ethnic/gender mix: there were three men — a white South American, a New Yorker, and a Greek — , and seven women — an African American, two Greek Americans and four Greeks. Interestingly enough, a number of students (two male, three female) made sure to tell me before registration that they hoped the class was not going to be "one of those feminist courses." After two weeks of preliminary discussion of theoretical texts dealing with the concepts of gender, class, race, and culture from a poststructuralist point of view, we delved into the novels. For the first half of the course I had purposely chosen novels by authors like Wharton, Cather, and McCullers, hoping that for my class the process of grasping the intersections of culture and gender would be facilitated through discussion of texts centering around white heroines of European ethnic origin with whom, I thought, they could easily identify. My assumption was proven wrong. As an end-of-the-term questionnaire showed me, nine out of my ten students declared [Wharton's] *House of Mirth* to have been the text they liked least in the course, on the grounds that, compared to the other novels, it was "less original" and "more predictable." Four added that they found McCullers "boring" compared to ethnic authors whom we studied in the second half of the course: Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, and Bharati

Mukherjee. To the question "Which was your favorite text in this course?" six out of ten responded with Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and four out of ten with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In addition, they all gave enthusiastically positive answers to the question "Did you find the texts focusing on ethnic minority issues interesting? Why?" They justified their response by saying, almost uniformly, that ethnic texts exposed them to 'difference' as a function of ideology and culture, and thus led them to gain insights into the roots of their own experience of marginalization within Greek society (depending on the case, as members of ethnic, race, gender, and class groups). It was clear, not only from their questionnaires but also from the interaction between foreign and native-born students on a day-to-day basis, that ethnic and race difference created the conditions for a very intense and extremely productive exchange of ideas in that class.

In addition to issues of race and ethnicity, the class seemed to respond well to problems of gender. To the question "Do you feel the course gave you a better understanding of gender issues and how?" they all gave a resounding "yes," adding that the course indeed helped them see the connections between femininity, language, and culture. Interestingly enough, half of them pointed out that the multicultural agenda of the class de-naturalized the concept of gender in their minds, because it exposed them to the ways in which "woman" is constructed by dominant ideologies in a variety of cultural sites.

In contrast, and to my dismay, to the question whether "the College needs to institute a Women's Studies program," they generally responded with reserve verging on hostility. With the exception of the African American woman who defined herself as a feminist, and of one Greek female student who graced the question with a monolectic "yes," the rest of the class seemed to remain resistant: four (one male, three female) said that women's issues are better dealt with in general courses, one declared that classes should focus on "universal human" subjects rather than on specific feminine concerns, and two (one male, one female) pointed out that "women's issues are O.K., but that feminism is not" (thus clearly identifying 'feminism' with polemical anti-male propaganda). The students' responses to this question appeared mystifying, especially since gender issues often provoked some of the most lively and substantial discussions among them. Moreover, wasn't it precisely those texts they enjoyed the most that treated gender problems most radically?

Can it be then than my feminist message did not go through at all — or did it, in its own way? The course consistently undermined essentialism and grounded the study of gender issues in a context of cultural power relations, thus locating within the construction "Woman" an infinite number of femininities as defined through a variety of cultural events (ethnic background, class origin, historical context, etc). Could it be that for my students the concept of womanhood was so deeply implicated with constructs of race, ethnicity, and class as to cease to exist as a separate category in their minds? Or is it possible that at least the Greek majority of seven displayed through their response to feminist issues their cultural conditioning in a society where national identity and class traditionally superseded the realities of gender?

And would this mean that the women's studies model as practiced in America cannot be transferred intact into cultures where gender dynamics are defined by a different set of socio-historical contingencies?

I would respond with an affirmative to all the above questions. My class did become sensitized to gender issues, apparently beyond my initial expectations. But they appeared to have embedded their reconceptualization of the category "gender" within a broader matrix of cultural forces that, as they came to realize, constitutes "identity". It was on these grounds that they paradoxically declared their rejection of "feminism": they came to regard "feminism" as an attempt to essentialize gender difference (by promoting female worth) instead of stressing the cultural construction of "gender." My students were able to learn precisely because they worked beyond the narrowness of "isms;" in this way they developed new responses to less-easily-acknowledged aspects of their cultural world (problems of ethnicity, race, gender, class), at the same time that they acquired an awareness [of] American life and mentalities.

One fact remains: in the international classroom, 'American' Studies each time becomes less 'American' and more whatever its international audiences project into it. Far from absorbing monolithic paradigms of American exceptionalism, international students of American Studies should be able to locate the global relevance of their field of study, since "America" provides the ideal ground for the interplay of multicultural forces. Likewise, Women's Studies is deconstructed and reinterpreted each time it crosses cultural borders, whether domestic or national. Woman's experience is culture-specific and so are debates on what constitutes "feminism."

It is precisely in the constant destabilization of essentialist definitions of ethnicity, gender, race, and culture, and more precisely in the infinite prospect of creative and politically potent denaturalization opened up by "critical internationalism" that the future of American Studies and Women's Studies lies. As for my Seminar seniors, they managed to show me that student exchange across national borders can function as a paradigm of scholarly exchange.

We feminists who study and teach American literature and culture would have much to gain by studying each other across our national borders, by constantly de-centering our preconceptions of who we are and what exactly it is we teach.

Works Cited

Desmond, Jane C. and Dominguez, Virginia R. "Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism," *American Quarterly* 48 (September 1996): 475-90.

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[1] While *JAST* does not normally publish articles which have appeared elsewhere, we have chosen to print this article on account of Mary Louise Hill's response to it. A version of this article first appeared in *American Studies International, October 2000, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3* 55-61. Reproduced by permission of the author [ALK].