

# UNOFFICIAL STUDENT TRANSCRIPTS

ACCOUNTS FROM THE THINKING, FEELING, WRITING  
AND TROUBLEMAKING LIFE OF A STUDENT

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UNDISCIPLINED (SARA L. PUOTINEN, PHD)

# UNOFFICIAL STUDENT TRANSCRIPTS

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## DEAR READER,

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Welcome to my intellectual history project. In these pages, you will find a series of essays/accounts/fragments about my life as a student. While a few of them concern my earliest years in kindergarten and first grade, the bulk of them are from college, graduate school and my post-Ph.D teaching and researching (1992-2011). Collectively, they represent my efforts: 1. to make sense of my current status as existing somewhere beside/s the academy, 2. to experiment with ways to bring myself into my academic work on subjectivity, agency, narrative selfhood and storytelling and 3. to hold myself accountable for my stories and understandings of living in and surviving the AIC (academic industrial complex).

If you're reading this unofficial student transcript, it's possible that you know me, or have been a part of my academic journey at some point. Maybe we never met, but you understand and can relate to the experiences for which I'm giving accounts. Maybe your experiences are very different, but you're curious about why I would call this an "unofficial transcript" and wonder what I might have to say about being undisciplined in the academy. Or maybe you've made it to these accounts for reasons that I couldn't begin to anticipate. Whatever has led you here, thanks.

I have written these accounts as a way to engage in the process of taking seriously my experiences as a student, and in the hopes of making some sense of them and the conflicting feelings that they evoke within me. I'm making these experiences public and describing them as accounts because I want to offer up what I believe about the academy: to give voice to my ideas, but also to be held accountable by others for my memories of what I've experienced and for what I've come to believe about the Academy as an Industrial Complex that trains students/Academics in ways that are harmful to deep and meaningful engagements with the world. So, central to this intellectual history project are all of you, my real and imagined readers. I

wish you to bear witness to my experiences, to hear my stories, and to question, trouble, correct, and engage with them.

In several of my accounts, I discuss the importance of intense conversations in my life and my ethical and political visions. The accounts in my Unofficial Student Transcript are my (perhaps preliminary) attempt at initiating a conversation with others about the limits and the possibilities of being a student and an academic. I've spent a long time struggling with my feelings about the AIC, now I want to talk with others about it. Not to condemn or convict higher education, but to rethink my relationship to it.

In solidarity,  
Undisciplined

## WAYS TO CONNECT

Want to talk with me about this book? To engage with the ideas and questions that I raise in these accounts? To challenge the veracity of my claims? To converse about the AIC? Here are a few ways to connect with me:

- Leave a comment on **Undisciplined** ([undisciplined.room34.com](http://undisciplined.room34.com))
- Leave a comment on **Trouble** ([trouble.room34.com](http://trouble.room34.com))
- Tweet at me: **@undisciplined** ([twitter.com/undisciplined](https://twitter.com/undisciplined))
- email me at **[sara@room34.com](mailto:sara@room34.com)**



## A NOTE ABOUT THIS VERSION

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This version is an exported pdf from an iBooks Author ebook. A few of the features (interactive quizzes, interactive images, galleries, videos) didn't make it from that version to this one. Much of that missing content will soon be available on my **Undisciplined** site (<http://undisciplined.room34.com>). In the future, I anticipate creating a few different versions of this material, available in different formats.

## CHAPTER 1

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# EXPLANATIONS

**IMAGE 1.1** Sara, age 38 on Lake Superior



*This photo was taken by my daughter Rosemary (age 6) on Thanksgiving day, 2012.*

# ORIGINS

My efforts to reflect on and write about my experiences as a student in the academy have been happening for over three years on my blog, **Trouble**. But, I didn't envision making them the focus of a singular writing project until this past fall (my first fall since I was 5 that I hadn't been in school as a student or teacher), when I started creating tentative outlines of my autobiography and brainstorming information architecture for my new website, **Undisciplined**. Then, in December of 2012, when I was sorting through my old files and organizing papers that extend all the way back to college (1992-1996), I realized that I wanted to write a series of accounts in which I used my own archive as the source material for critical reflections and interrogations of life as a student in higher education and the Academic Industrial Complex (AIC).

As I began digging through my files in the basement for documents that seemed significant, I was relieved to see that even though I had moved around quite a bit as a student—from Minnesota to California to Minnesota to Georgia to Minnesota again—I had managed to hang onto some key documents: the final evaluation for my senior thesis, a copy of my master's proposal, papers (with my teacher's comments) from my first year in college, name tags from conferences, old student ids. I also explored my digital files, searching through hidden folders (that I only managed to find after trying out different keyword searches), dating back to my masters, and discovered past papers, presentations, my senior thesis, my master's thesis and my dissertation.

Looking back at these materials, both the physical and the virtual, conjured up a mix of emotions that made me feel joyful, sad, nostalgic, angry, and conflicted all at once. I had done so much work over the years. Amassed so many ar-

ticles, all carefully organized with printed-out labels, on feminist theory, identity politics, poststructuralism, feminist and queer pedagogies, feminist theology, ethics, radical democracy, queer theory, critical race studies and more. But even as I marveled at my dedication as a student and scholar, I was troubled by how this work was all in the past—I had stopped teaching and doing “academic” research in December of 2011— and haunted by the questions: What was this work for and why had I stopped?

In order to spend time working through these questions, not so much to answer or resolve them, but to learn to live with the discomfort and uncertainty that they generate, I started writing. The first account I wrote was “Pithy Chewiness.” Then, inspired by the process, I wrote, “Promise.” I began looking through past accounts I had already created on my blog or in digital stories and combining those with new reflections. I read through old papers and wrote about how my perspectives as an undergraduate or an early graduate student had shifted, been complicated, challenged or reinforced.

I’ve tried to be honest with and truthful about my experiences, even as I’ve realized that this project has increasingly becoming a way for me to justify and value the work that I’ve been doing and that (I feel) has been undervalued or ignored by others. I’m not sure that I’ve always succeeded in being honest, but I have found the process of writing (and collecting) these various accounts of my student life to be useful and provocative and very necessary.

## EXPLAINING THE TITLE

*Over the past 15 or so years, I've requested my student transcripts many times for graduate school applications and my academic job portfolio. An official transcript, complete with an authorized seal from the institution on the back of the envelope, is expensive. And not always required for the first round of the application process. So, at some point, I acquired an unofficial copy. When a school needed my transcript, I'd send out a pdf of my unofficial copy instead of spending \$5-10 (each) on a fancy, official version.*

At the top of my unofficial Claremont School of Theology transcript is a stamp that states:

**NOT AN OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT  
FOR STUDENT REFERENCE ONLY**

When I was thinking about what to call my intellectual history writing project, I played around with various titles, but none of them seemed quite right. Then, one day, while I was looking through a folder filled with old job application materials, I spotted this transcript and the “unofficial” statement stamped at the top. Yes, this was it, I thought. A great title for my project! Unofficial Student Transcript.

The more I've thought about it, the more I like this as my title. My intellectual history project is a record of my student work within the academy, from the earliest days of being a student in school all the way through to my explorations of and experiments with how to continue learning and engaging as a student

while being *the* teacher. I'm including documents from school days, like report cards, lists of courses taken and taught, evaluations from professors, syllabi from past courses, copies of my doctoral exams, research and teaching statements and academic cover letters. In many ways, this project functions as proof, much like a transcript, of my time in school and my sustained engagement with key ideas and concepts in my chosen fields of study. Documenting my time as a student, which represents the majority of my life thus far (33 out of 38 years!), is important to me. I want to remember it and take it seriously and the process of reflecting on and documenting it allows me to do so.

But, the student transcript that I offer in the following accounts from my early years through Post-Ph.D work are not official. My perspectives and approaches to understanding the work that I did and the value of my education are not authorized by the academy or the institutions that I attended. In fact, my accounts frequently come into conflict with the "official" story about why and how one gets an education, earns a Ph.D and trains to be an academic intellectual. As will become apparent through my accounts, I have some real problems with the academy, or what I'm calling the academic industrial complex, and how it trained me to think, engage, teach and communicate my ideas to and with others.

My transcript is also not official because I'm not a *real* scholar, at least according to the hierarchy of Academics. I don't even reside within academic spaces. I stepped out a year ago and am writing this in my uncertain position beside/s the academy. While the dismal job market was a factor for my current state, I'm really in a self-imposed exile, where I'm trying to make sense of and take stock of where I stand (or want to stand) in relation to those academic structures and systems that shaped me into the troublemaking and troublestaying scholar that I've become.

In addition to lacking status (and a position) in the academy, my methods for thinking and writing are not officially sanctioned in the AIC. Much of my work for



this project originated, in some form, on my writing and researching blog. While this work involves “serious” and deep engagement with “important” ideas, it was/is not usually recognized as such by academics because it’s not peer-reviewed or published in a top-tier journal or through a big-name publishing company. It also isn’t recognized because my aim was not to produce the newest, most cutting-edge theory that would ensure my status as a big-time fancy academic (BFTA), but to communicate and connect with a wide range of folks in my life that reside inside, outside and beside the academy.

As I compose this introduction, I’m starting to see that my assessment of the academic industrial complex might not be totally fair. I’m sounding angry and a little bitter. And maybe I am. I’ve devoted a huge chunk of my life to the academy. I was (and continue to be) passionate about learning, engaging with and deeply reflecting on interesting, provocative and world-shifting ideas. And I’m very disappointed with what the academy has done to that passion and how it’s trained me to be a scholar who feels compelled to spout jargon and reference countless theories every time I have a conversation.

My lack of fairness is another reason my student transcript is not official. It doesn’t offer objective, always factual truths. It’s biased, subjective and filtered through my current perspective as someone who is struggling to negotiate opposing forces and feelings. On one hand, I have an appreciation for the theories and ideas and training that my student years provided me. And I have many fond memories of being a student. But, on the other hand, I’m angry and frustrated about the current state of the academy and the ways in which it exploits students and teachers. And I’m sad about my loss of passion for being an educator.

Finally, my student transcript is not official because the accounts I’m providing in it are intended to unsettle, call into question and trouble any inclinations I have (and, believe me, I do) for offering up neat and tidy stories about my life as a student. I don’t want to offer up easy resolutions or moments of redemption; I

want to play with and maintain the tensions and conflicted feelings and understandings in my accounts. My troubling intentions, which sometimes work and sometimes don't, make me an unreliable and untrustworthy narrator whose accounts should never be official. *And, I must add, I wouldn't want them to be. I like being unofficial and inhabiting the spaces that that unofficial status makes room for.*



## WHY GIVE AN ACCOUNT?

I can think of at least three reasons why I feel compelled to give a series of accounts of my thinking/writing/feeling/engaging work as a student. First, I want to leave a visible trace of who I am and have been for others and myself. Second, I find tremendous value in processing ideas, emotions, experiences and believe that a public account requires more care and persistent attention to that process/ing than does a private one. And third, I'm using these public accounts to experiment with how to imagine and experience a new relation to the (academic) norms that have shaped me. I'm hoping to critically and creatively develop a space beside/s the academy, where I function not as an Academic but as a person who troubles and is troubled by academics-as-usual.

The need to leave a trace has become increasingly important since my mom died in 2009. It's no accident that I started writing in a public blog just as my mom was in the final stage of dying from pancreatic cancer. Part of this desire to leave my own trace is a response to my desperate need for more traces of my mom and what she thought and felt about the world as she was dying and after she died. As I hungrily searched for more of her reflections on life, teaching, and raising a troublemaking kid like me, I thought about how my kids (or their kids) might want some of my reflections after I've died.

But my need for leaving a trace isn't just about providing others with my reflections and engagements; I leave a trace as a sort of chain, connecting my past selves and their stories with my present and future selves. This need for a chain of connections is important for me because I feel particularly disconnected from my selves, their stories and the worlds in which those stories were created.

In the past nine years, I've had to come to terms with the loss of three grounding forces that enabled me to link together the chains of my selves throughout the years of many moves and transitions: the loss of the farm that had been in the Puotinen family for almost 100 years, the loss of my mom and the loss of my passion for participating in the academy.

The farm was sold in 2004, my mom died from pancreatic cancer in 2009, and my passion for teaching and researching in the academy was gone by 2011. All three were devastating losses. The farm had been my most important homespace; it linked me to past generations and served as a location for retreat and connection. My mom had been a kindred spirit and the person with whom I shared countless hours, hiking and talking and being curious about the world. She was also my biggest source of stories, since my memory seems to fail me a lot, about who I was when I was young. And my passion for being an academic had been one of the primary ways in which I oriented myself; I understood it to be more than a career, but a vocation and life's work.

In losing the farm, my mom and my vocation something happened to my chain of past and present selves; it seemed to fully break and with it, my links of belonging...to a family, to a community, to a future, even to the past selves that I once was.

I think one of the reasons I write online (in my blog and on Undisciplined), is to create a space where I am building up an archive of ideas and experiences that I can access, remember and engage with now or tomorrow or ten or more years from now. This archive not only serves as proof of my past/present/future existence, but it enables me to craft and perform a self that endures through time, space and that is connected to past selves, generations of family members and various communities.

In addition to my desire to leave a trace, I'm giving my unofficial accounts because I want to take seriously my experiences as a student for almost 33 years.

In many ways, I'm ready to move on and explore other ways of engaging and being in the world. But, I don't want to ignore or simply forget what I've learned or how I've been shaped by my time in the academy. As someone who feels compelled to write, I find the process of sifting through materials, reflecting on their various meanings and then devoting time to shaping them into a narrative, to be extremely helpful in enabling me to work through my thoughts and feelings. I want to make this process of "working through" public so that I can share one person's approach to negotiating the limits and possibilities of functioning within (and beside) the academy.

I also want to make my accounts, and the processing that contributes to them, public so that I claim responsibility and be accountable for my perspectives on being a student in the academy. I'm hopeful that others will respond to, build upon, challenge, correct, trouble, and be curious about my accounts. *At this point, I'm not sure what form this interaction will take. How can I encourage others to contribute to my stories and how can I incorporate those contributions into my work?*

Finally, I'm writing and publicly giving these accounts as an experiment in crafting a new way of relating to the academy. I want to use my curiosity about my experiences as a student—by asking and reflecting on why the academy works in the ways that it does and at whose expense—to get some critical distance from the academic rules that have shaped me and how I function as a thinker, speaker, teacher, and engaged participant in the world. I want to use my critical interrogations and challenges of academic practices to undergo the difficult labor of unlearning some of the most toxic values of the academy (that Academics are Experts that are better and smarter than others, that rigorous ideas can't be explained simply, that Academic "standards" require gatekeeping, that an Academic career matters more than anything else, and that Academic engagement is about competition and individual success). And, I want to use my crafting of accounts

that value my role as academic troublemaker to imagine new ways of being an intellectual that neither fully participate in or fully reject the academy, but engage in practices beside (and besides) it.

## THE AIC

So far in this introduction, I've mentioned or alluded to the Academic Industrial Complex (AIC) a few times. But, what do I mean by that? I think I first came across the term the AIC in a 2007 article (which I accessed a year or so after it was published) by Andrea Smith, [Social Justice Activism in the Academic Industrial Complex](#). Smith discusses the academy as a system where dominant ideologies of power, wealth, and status are reproduced and perpetuated, all under the guise of meritocracy and equal access to education, through tenure, the grading system and academic hierarchies.

### MYTHS

- The only thing you can do with a Ph.D is be an Academic
- Even though the academic life is demanding, it's worth it
- Academics are free to study what they want, without risk of penalty
- If you work hard enough, you will succeed
- More degrees = more success and happiness
- More facts + more jargon = better understanding

We envision the academy as a space of academic freedom, where everyone has equal access to ideas and knowledge, and that is based on merit, where individual scholars who work hard and follow the rules will always achieve success

(tenure, job security and status). According to Smith, these ideas of equal access and merit are myths, perpetuated by an industrial complex that needs academics to buy into it and to work (too) hard for it in order to maintain its status and power.

Smith focuses her discussion on how damaging the AIC is for individual scholars and their inability to achieve a healthy work-life balance. She wonders, “Why has being a good scholar and academic come to mean that one should be working incessantly at the expense of doing social-justice work, having fun, or maintaining interests outside academia” (141)? And she concludes that the AIC has trapped scholars into believing that they must choose between succeeding as an academic or having a life.

## VALUES

- Academics are Experts that are better/smarter than other people
- Academic “standards” require Gatekeepers
- Work in service of the academy should be your top priority
- You're a failure and less-worthy without a tenure-track job
- More butts in seats + temporary hires - secure academic positions  
= Successful Institution
- Getting an education is only about acquiring facts and learning skills to gain status and get a job
- Thinking critically requires dissecting and dismissing others’ ideas and experiences

The term immediately resonated with me, partly because I was familiar with the concept of the “industrial complex,” having read/taught about **the Prison In-**

dustrial Complex in my Feminist Debates class several times, and partly because the idea of oppressive ideologies, particularly those that speak to who is and isn't a good-enough scholar, being reproduced within academic spaces was a painful reality for me as an adjunct professor at a big research University who remained perpetually (and unsuccessfully) on the tenure-track job market for years.

In the spring of 2011, I began writing about my increasing frustration over the academic spaces that I regularly inhabited. While I had always felt discomfort in academic/formal classroom spaces, the spring of 2011 was particularly tough; it's when I finally allowed myself to consider the possibility that academic life might not be for me. Up to that point, I had believed that, while I never really fit in with academic culture, my joy of teaching, learning, researching and mentoring made the struggles worth it. But that spring, while teaching three courses, one of which was an over-sized intro class, I was forced to confront my limits as an academic.

## CONFLATIONS

Within this intellectual history, I refer to the Academy, academic spaces and the Academic Industrial Complex almost as if they were interchangeable. They are not. I think the difficult labor of sorting out the differences between them is something I need to continue working on in order to make sense of who I am and what I want (to be...to do). For now, my intellectual history involves stories about a mythical place (the Academy), specific concrete realities (academic spaces) and the interlocking systems of power and privilege that shape how I've come to be as a student/academic (the AIC).

## PROCESS

This writing project draws upon my academic training and the insights I've developed from years of reading, teaching and writing about theories on narrative selfhood, storytelling, agency, subjectivity, memory, feminist ethics, troublemaking (and more), but it's not intended as an academic work in which I directly discuss these theories and use them to explain my experiences or where I summarize the theories and use my experiences to illustrate them. In fact, I'm trying hard to avoid thinking or writing in the ways that I was taught as an academic. *Am I succeeding?*

Additionally, my accounts are not intended to be a finished product, or the final word, on my feelings about or stories of my time in the academy. Over my life, as my perspective shifts, my stories about the theories I've learned and the experiences I've had in the academy will surely change. And, even as I'm collecting these accounts and shaping them into a product of sorts—an unofficial Transcript—I'm less invested in my work-as-product, and more excited about it as a process of reflection, engagement and the taking seriously of my experiences as student.

I imagine my work as a series of musings and deep wonderings about those experiences instead of a formal series of essays on what or how I learned. *I must admit, I like thinking about this as a book that I can brag about to others when they ask, "so what are you doing now that you're done teaching?" I guess I still have some work to do on unlearning academic values. I also like imagining it as a project that, after completion, can be placed on a shelf and forgotten for awhile. Having spent so many years thinking about these issues, I'm ready to*



*take a break, but I can't seem to do it until I've created something substantial with them.*

My focus on process is a departure from my earlier writing style, which I discuss in “Pithy Chewiness.” In the past, when I used to write, I underwent an elaborate set of practices of thinking through and mapping out my ideas. I'd gather together and classify pertinent passages from the authors that I was writing about and construct outlines. *For an example, of my gathering and classifying process, see: [Sample Notes for JB Paper](#).* By the time I was ready to write, I had my thesis and my introduction and conclusion (almost) all figured out. I usually didn't edit because I had spent so much time thinking through the writing already.

That writing method was successful, and got me through graduate school, with only a few tears. But, it also prevented me from engaging with the ideas that I was writing about; I rarely spent time thinking about what these ideas did to me—how they made me feel, why I might be resistant or receptive to them, what investments I had in them—and what they meant in terms of my own lived experiences.

Now, I like making my writing part of the process from the beginning. When I find a pertinent passage, I don't just classify it and organize it with other fitting passages, I write about it on my blog. *Almost all of my accounts in this unofficial transcript originated as posts on my [Trouble](#) blog or my [Undisciplined](#) site.* In writing about it, I take it seriously and start to see, in ways that I usually didn't quite predict, why it's important to me—maybe why it bothers me or moves me or challenges me. Through this process, I'm spending more time thinking about who I am as a person in relation to the ideas and I'm also allowing the thinking and writing process to shape my ideas instead of forcing my preconceived and highly logical vision onto those ideas.

## REVIEW

**Question One:** *Which of the following is the most toxic values of the AIC?*

- A. Academics are fancy Experts
- B. More butts in seats + temporary hires - secure academic positions = Successful Institution
- C. Work in service of the academy should always be your top priority
- D. Academic “standards” require Gatekeepers
- E. Thinking critically requires dissecting and dismissing others’ ideas and experiences

As the title of this review section (all of the above) suggests, all of the answers in this section are correct. However, the toxic value that has currently made it ~~impossible~~ extremely difficult for me to be in the academy is: B. More butts in seats + temporary hires - secure academic positions = Successful Institution.

**Question Two:** *Besides Academic Industrial Complex, what does the AIC stand for?*

- A. ACADEMICS INDIVIDUALLY COMPETE for status and resources
- B. ALL I am trained to CARE about is rigor and objectivity
- C. ASSHOLES IN CONVERSATION with each other

Again, all of these answers are correct. However, the one that resonates the most with me currently is: C. ASSHOLES IN CONVERSATION with each other. As you will read throughout my accounts, engaged, meaningful *and* respectful/caring conversations are central to my vision of how to be in the world (and in the acad-

emy). Assholes have a lot of difficulty participating in these types of conversations. They want to “win” the discussion, to prove that they have the answers or that you don’t (and are therefore inferior). They want to control the terms of the conversation: who gets to speak, when and how. Frequently, they want to prevent any conversation from happening in the first place; they don’t *need* to discuss ideas, because they already have all of the answers. I must also admit that currently, as I’m writing this explanation in February 2013, I’ve been thinking more about assholes. For Christmas, I got (but haven’t had the chance to read), *Assholes: A Theory*. And, I’ve been reading about asshole academics online, both at [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#) and [The Thesis Whisperer](#).

**Question Three:** *This is an academic book.*

A. Yes. Even as I try to break away from academic methods and approaches, I've been too trained and disciplined as a student for 33 years to avoid them. My tone is academic and my approach is as a scholar critically analyzing and reflecting on my own texts.

B. No. I'm using too many "I" statements for an academic text. There are no footnotes and hardly any sources cited. Plus, I've failed to be objective.

C. Neither. What does that even mean? I encourage to reflect on the idea that this series of accounts is neither an academic book, or not an academic book. I like to think of it as a buddhist koan (an answerable question that encourages you to meditate, reflect and lose the desire even to find the answer to your question).

**D. Both/and.** Yes! This is the "correct" answer. Although, you will note that I've titled this review section, "All of the Above," so all of the answers are correct (but not proper). One key value that was instilled in me as a student of feminist,

queer, and critical race studies, was the idea of both/and, where binaries of this or that, yes or no, either/or, were rejected in favor of living with differences and contradictions. We don't always need to choose between, we can imagine new ways of embracing and understanding both. In the case of this question, I imagine my book as both an academic book, because it draws upon my training and the insights I've developed as a student, and not an academic book, because it deliberately rejects and troubles academic methods and approaches.

IMAGE 2.1 Sara, age 8



*Playing soccer in Hickory, North Carolina.*

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# EARLY YEARS

I was born in Houghton, Michigan on June 29, 1974. According to my family, my parents and two older sisters, I was energetic and passionate and a bit of a handful. I had a lot of physical and intellectual energy; I'm sure I was exhausting for my mom and my early teachers. I loved swimming. *Seriously, I really loved swimming and the water, especially Lake Superior.* I also loved playing soccer

and reading random books about my favorite president Thomas Jefferson. *Why Jefferson? I'm not sure...maybe because I had visited Monticello a few times and was impressed with his house?*

My memories of childhood are pretty vague, partly because they happened 30 years ago and partly because we moved around a lot when I was young and I was encouraged to not hold onto a lot of stuff (memories, material objects, nostalgia/longing for past homes). What memories I do have are heavily filtered through the current master narrative that shapes my understandings of who I am and was: Troublemaker.

## TROUBLEMAKER!

*For my first account, I offer up an origin story (of sorts) of my troublemaking in relation to (beside and against) Judith Butler's early experiences as a troublemaker. As will become apparent through my accounts, the philosopher/feminist/queer theorist and theoretical activist Judith Butler is the biggest academic influence on my theorizing about troublemaking.*

In an interview from 1997 entitled "Berkeley's Judith Butler Revels in Role of Troublemaker" for *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, Liz McMillen offers up a story about Butler's troublemaking origins:

Long before *Gender Trouble* caused a stir, and before she became a prominent theorist with a devoted graduate-student following, Judith Butler was a kid in a Cleveland synagogue who frequently got herself in trouble. She disrupted classes. She made faces during assemblies. Finally, she was kicked out and told that she wouldn't be allowed to return to the school until she had completed a tutorial with the head rabbi. The rabbi sized the 14-year-old up and decided that it was time for her to get serious. So what do you want to study? he wanted to know. "Holocaust historiography" was her quick reply. Martin Buber and existential theology. Whether German idealism was responsible in any way for the rise of fascism. This after-school punishment laid the groundwork for a scholarly career marked by extreme diligence -- and a knack for making trouble. "I was always talking



back," she says. "I guess I've elevated it into an art form." Once a disciplinary problem, always a disciplinary problem.

This story of Butler as an unruly child seems to function as an origin story for her political and ethical project of troublemaking. To the question, where did troublemaking come from, we get the answer, a problem child who skipped class, made faces at assemblies, and did other terrible things. So, according to this line of thinking, troublemaking as a concept/practice/action is produced by someone who does it in order to disrupt/unsettle/disturb. And this disruption that they do takes some very particular forms: skipping class, disrupting assemblies, being kicked out of school, all of which conjure up images of the juvenile delinquent. But, is this the only source of troublemaking and the only way to imagine how children engage in it? Is the troublemaker fundamentally a bad girl (or bad boy) who willfully flouts the rules?

As a child, I was a troublemaker. But, what does that mean? Well, I had a lot of teachers who really didn't like me (from elementary school through high school). Not because I acted out in class. I didn't. Not because I made faces in assemblies. I didn't. And not because I "did really terrible things." Because, I really didn't. No, they disliked me because they could sense—somehow—that I saw through their bullshit (for more on being a bullshit detector, see [here](#)) and that I wasn't going to simply believe that what they said was the "Truth." I guess I was a threat to their already tenuous hold on the classroom.

*As an adult—and teacher and parent to my own 'lil troublemaker— I can see how complicated and tenuous the role of an authority figure can be. So, I don't want to simply dismiss the anxieties and frustrations that my teachers probably experienced when confronted with me and my various practices of refusal and resistance. But, as someone who continues to trouble and question*



*authority-as-Authority and who repeatedly felt and feels de-valued within the academy, I don't want to let them off the hook either.*

I asked a lot of questions (and not hostile ones. Just lots and lots of “why” questions). I always wanted to know why things worked the way that they did. I liked exploring ideas without immediately placing judgment on them. And even though I looked the part of the good little white student, I refused to fully buy into the rules and norms that undergird the white suburban school and its goal of molding the minds of children into good little consumer citizens.

So, when I think of my own troublemaking “roots” it is not through the tradition of disrupting class or being disrespectful to teachers. For me, troublemaking was never about breaking the rules (even though I can see why many rules need to be broken) or rebelling against authority/authority figures. No, the tradition of troublemaking that I draw upon in my own understanding and practice of being in/making/staying in trouble is the tradition of posing questions...and lots of them. The question that I used to pose a lot as a kid, and the question that Butler suggests is the first act of disobedience, is “why.” As in, why is something this way and not that? For Butler, to ask “why” is to introduce the possibility that something could be otherwise, that the way things are is not they only way that should or could be. It is to open up the possibility of making ourselves into subjects-who-disobey instead of subjects-who-merely-obey.

*Of course, “why” is not the only question many of us do—or should—ask. With my training in feminist/queer/critical theory, the question that I pose a lot now is “at whose expense”? This question seems to infuse the somewhat innocent “why” with an awareness of oppression and a desire for justice.*

In an interview from 2009, Butler discusses the value of wondering why:

But in the moment we begin to ask ourselves about the legitimacy of this power we become critical, we adopt a point of view that is not completely shaped by the state and we question ourselves about the limits of the demands that can be placed on us. And if I am not wholly formed by this power of the state, in what way am I, or might I be, formed? Asking yourself this question means you are already beginning to form yourself in another way, outside this relation with the state, so critical thought distances you to some extent. When someone says "no" to power, they are saying "no" to a particular way of being formed by power. They are saying: I am not going to be subjected in this way or by these means through which the state establishes its legitimacy. The critical position implies a certain "no", a saying "no" as an "I", and this, then, is a step in the formation of this "I". Many people ask about the basis on which Foucault establishes this resistance to power. What he is saying to us is that in the practice of critical thought we are forming ourselves as subjects, through resistance and questioning.

Butler argues that asking why things are the way that they are is a form of disobedience (or is way of not being obedient if obedience requires unquestioned acceptance). The emphasis here is not on disobedience as a refusal to follow the rules or a rejection of rules altogether—some rules are necessary and important and helpful. No, Butler wants to emphasize disobedience as the refusal to be/become subjects who accept and willingly/unthinkingly obey the dictates that we are given without question. Again, in this sense, the disobedience is not to Rules or Law or the State (although that is important as well), but to the formation of us as subjects-who-merely-obey. So, Butler is particularly interested in how our obe-

dience or disobedience functions on the level of self-(re)making (or what Butler would call subject formation).

Now, this idea of disobedience is not just about how and who we are as political subjects who engage in those practices that are traditionally considered to be political (like voting or protesting or being a part of activist communities or even participating in civic organizations). This idea of disobedience is about how and who we are as selves as we engage in our everyday activities and as we work (intentionally and not so intentionally) on our moral/ethical/intellectual development. And it happens when we ask “why”—not once or twice but everyday and all the time.

Kids are really good (sometimes too good) at asking “why”—from the mundane (why isn’t yellow your favorite color?) to the scientific (why can’t it snow in the summer?) to the existential (why can’t Nana live forever?) to the defiant (why do I have to eat my vegetables?) to the disturbing (why can’t I eat my own poop?) to the repetitive (Why? Why? Why?). The asking of these questions can be tedious for parents, but they are (most often) not done by children in order to be destructive or disrespectful. At their best, these “why” questions demonstrate curiosity and an interest in (caring about) the world and how it works. And, they are an assertion of a self-in-process who is claiming their independence from the forces that shape them.

Posing “why” and later, “at whose expense” questions to myself and to others got me in a lot of trouble. A lot of that trouble was bad (such as teachers hating me, dismissing and discounting me as a problem—not so much a disciplinary problem but just a problem), but a lot more of it was good (as in helpful/productive/motivating for me). The refusal to merely accept and the desire to remain open to other ways of being (instead of just fixing in on the way I am supposed to see and/or act in the world) shaped who I am and have, I think, made me a better (happier, more responsible, aware and just) person.

I am drawn to Judith Butler's work because one primary aspect of her philosophy/ethos/system of thought is the value of asking (and never stopping your asking) of questions. When I look to Butler it is this important strain in her work that resonates with me. Not the acting out (and acting up) that is reflected in the narrative about her as a "disciplinary problem." This single-minded reduction of troublemaking to bad behavior and the revaluing of "being bad" as good doesn't work for me. It certainly doesn't speak to my experiences. And, it is not, in my opinion, a helpful resource for my vision of a feminist or queer ethics.

Butler's emphasis on always asking questions helped me to understand what I had been doing for so long when I was younger. When I was a kid I felt the pressure of opposing forces: 1. a family of intellectuals who encouraged me to think and question and challenge and care (about justice, from my dad the ethicist, and about the world and imagining it otherwise, from my mother, the artist/dreamer/social historian) and 2. the (almost completely) white suburban, conformity-imposing, competition-driven public schools that I attended from fifth through twelfth grade. From my family (and my position as white and middle/intellectual-class), I inherited a strong sense of entitlement--of course, I should ask questions and think, I could do anything and be anything! But from the schools I attended in suburban D.C. (in Northern Virginia) and suburban Des Moines (the insurance capital of the Midwest!), I was reminded everyday that I could ask some questions but only if they were framed in the right way and only if they furthered the goals of success in the forms of being better than everyone else and of acquiring the most stuff (status, possessions, awards, knowledge-as-commodity).

It has always been a struggle to navigate these forces. Why did I have to make everything so difficult? I would sometimes ask myself. Why can't I just participate in the system like a "good girl"? [Of course, as a white, middle-class, heterosexual, I was a "good" and proper girl and my choice to not fit in was always

just that...a choice. I always had the privilege to pass and fit in as normal, even if I often felt like I couldn't force myself to do it.] How can I reconcile the desire to care about others/the world/justice that my parents instilled in me with the implicit (and sometimes explicit) command by many teachers/adults/"society" to care only about myself and how I could fit in and be very successful? Of course, this was definitely not how I phrased it as a child. But the language of feminist and queer theories and of Butler's (albeit underdeveloped) notion of troublemaking have given me a way in which to understand and articulate what was (at least partially) going on with my struggles to care but fit in, to question but not to outrage or alienate, and to stay open to new possibilities of thinking, being and doing.

## DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

*In this account, which was originally the first digital story that I created, I experiment with how to be curious about an object—my first grade report card—that serves as one of the few material objects of my kid-existence that still remains. Through the process of being curious, I'm able to reclaim my trouble-making self and rethink how I understood my story—from someone who was constantly underestimated and devalued as "trouble," to someone who managed, in spite of much adversity, to hold onto my passion, curiosity and trouble-making spirit.*

*As I was working on the digital story, I was bothered by my failure (or refusal?) to provide a larger context for my "undisciplined account." It seemed significant to me to understand what being self-disciplined, and what the consequences for failing to be disciplined, meant in the very racially-charged 1980 North Carolina community where my school was located. Instead of trying to incorporate these facts into my video, I decided to offer them up in an additional blog account, intended to be read beside the video.*

The movie, **Progress Report: An Undisciplined Account** available online.

This is my first grade report card from the 1980-81 school year. My teacher was Josie Miller, my principle Carl Seitz. I attended Clyde Campbell Elementary School in Hickory, North Carolina. It's one of the few artifacts that I have from my elementary school years. We moved around a lot when I was kid. In fact, I went to 3 different elementary schools: this one in North Carolina and two others in Virginia.

As a kid, I didn't care about holding onto a lot of stuff, especially old report cards. So, most of my school papers, my pictures and other material objects of my kid-existence got tossed. What I do have was presented to me in a purple box, adorned with butterflies on the lid, by my mom, just a few years before she died. Amongst random photos, some newspaper clippings, and a swimming report, I found my first grade report card. While it doesn't look like much, after examining it, I was surprised to realize how many questions and reflections that it prompted for me.


This report card makes me very curious. I like being curious. Perhaps a gift from my mom, I have an almost unlimited capacity for wonder; I'm always wondering about the world and the various ways in which we imagine what it is or could be. Since the report card doesn't offer that many details about my first grade year and since I can't ask my mom because she died in 2009, I want to use this report card as a source for wondering, questioning and imagining.

Who was I in first grade? Why did I miss 4 days in the fourth set of 6 weeks? A prolonged sickness? Vacation? Why did my parents request the parent/teacher conference that is noted on the inside? Was it because they wanted to make sure that Mrs. Miller wouldn't treat me like my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Vandolen, who put me in a box as punishment? Or, because they wanted to strategize how to handle my already overabundance of physical energy and lack of self-discipline?



So many of the teacher comments on the back are about my lack of self-discipline. How did my mom handle my so-called lack of it? Did she agree with my teacher's assessment? Did she lack discipline when she was a kid?

I don't need to ask how my dad handled it; he sat on me. Ha! I used to think that

Teacher Comments	Parents Comments & Signature
1. Sara has made a good adjustment to first grade. She has some progress to make in some areas but has made progress in these areas lately.	1. Judith C. Puotinen Arthur E. Puotinen
2. Sara has made some improvement in the area of self-discipline. We can tell she is trying but she still has quite a few days in which she seems to have little control over herself.	2. Judith C. Puotinen
3. Sara has made a lot of progress in her self-discipline this & weeks. She has been doing a lot of extra work on her own.	3. Judith C. Puotinen
4. Sara continues to make good progress in her learning.	4. J.C. Puotinen
5. Sara's progress is great. She has been very active this week in the area of self-discipline.	5. Judy Puotinen
6. We have enjoyed having Sara in my class this year.	6. Assigned to: Grade 2 

SOCIAL AND WORK HABITS

his approach was ridiculous until I had a mini-me. I've never sat on my daughter, but when her wonder and curiosity become overwhelming, I can see how someone might feel desperate enough to just sit on her.

I wish I could ask these questions about my 7 year old self to my mom; she might just remember what I was like in first grade. She might even remember what the parent/teacher conference was about. Or, she might remember why I had trouble having self-discipline.

What was she thinking as she signed her name to my report card, in 3 different ways: Judy Puotinen, J.C. Puotinen and Judith C. Puotinen?

I wonder, though, if she were still alive, would she really be able to answer my questions? She liked to embellish stories, enhancing the details and shaping



them in ways that made them more meaningful and that fit with reality as she wanted to see it and live it. I wouldn't call this lying or twisting the truth, but creating new and sometimes better truths through storytelling. Would she remember the details of an event, like the parent/teacher conference, if it didn't fit in with her story of me as a kid? A story that presents me as full of positive energy and joy, who would wake her up every morning by saying, "good morning! you look beautiful today!" And a story that seems to ignore the evidence, occasionally provided by my sisters, that I couldn't have been such a positive ball of energy all the time. I was also...trouble and an exhausting, never-tiring, always-questioning, ball of energy. My nickname, given to me by my dad, a third generation Finn, was the Finnish Tornado, after all.

A lack of answers about my 7 year old self, provokes a broader curiosity: What is self-discipline? How do we define it? And, what does it mean to not have it? Is it to be too impulsive or unruly? Disruptive? A disciplinary problem? Unfocused? Lazy? After doing a quick search, I came up with some vague answers. Self-discipline means:

- Being in control of your body and focused in your actions
- Being dedicated and responsible
- Being respectful and listening well
- Doing what's right and always improving oneself
- *And my personal favorite:* Doing what you don't want to do. *Ha!*

As I look at my marks for "social and work habits" on the back of my report card, I'm a little confused. While my "practices self-discipline" marks are the lowest, and don't improve, but decline by the end of the year, almost all of my other marks are very high. If lacking self-discipline is about listening to others, then why is my listens attentively score so high for most of the year? If it's about being

too unfocused, then why do I get consistently high marks for “works neatly and orderly,” “follows directions,” “uses time wisely,” and “completes assigned tasks?” According to this report I also have high “respect for school policies and property,” so I’m not disrespectful of authority. I accept and share responsibility, so I’m mindful of others.

So, what was it that made me lack self-discipline? And, why was that such a problem for my first grade teacher and, if I recall correctly, many subsequent teachers? Without more explanation, I’m left to imagine what my lack of self-discipline was really about: a curious, wondering, exuberant child who was struggling to figure out how to stay that way in an environment that wanted her to calm down and conform. Sure I can appreciate the need for being calm (trust me, as a mom to my own Finnish tornado, I can really appreciate the need for it), I’m less thrilled about the ways that that calming down seemed to frequently involve a command to stop questioning, just follow directions, and conform to what I was expected to do.

While I could dwell on the damage that that need to calm down and conform did to me, I don’t want to. Instead, I want to take a minute to celebrate the 7 year old self that was full of life and passion and curiosity and wonder and managed, in spite of much adversity and resistance, to hang onto it for 30+ years. I started making trouble at an early age (mostly the good kind!) and I’ve stayed in it for all this time. I think that’s pretty cool.

## **The Context**

I am troubled/unsettled/curious about my lack of context for my account above. While I briefly mention that I went to school in Hickory, North Carolina, I don't provide any details about the town or the state. Since I'm interested in the ways that **calls for self-discipline have disturbing implications for folks who don't fit the mythical (White) norm**, it seems important to mention that 1980s North

Carolina, particularly in the part of the state that I lived, near the foothills of the Smoky Mountains, was a racially charged and poverty stricken area (at least, right outside of the city of Hickory). It was also in a school district where corporal punishment, in the form of paddling, was mandatory (I need to do some more research on that, but I'm pretty sure that I remember my mom, a junior high learning disabilities teacher, struggling with how to resist/reject this regulation).

Just shortly before starting this account, I wrote a **comment** about the need to contextualize my self-discipline narrative. Here's an excerpt:

I've been thinking a lot lately about my whiteness and its impact on how my lack of self-discipline was handled by my teacher. As much as I can recall, I didn't really get in that much "trouble" in that first grade class. Even though paddling was encouraged, I was never paddled. (It might have even been mandatory for teachers; I went to elementary school in the 1980s in North Carolina, at least partly known for its poverty, racism and corporeal punishment. I think I recall my mom, who taught in a different school, saying that she was told that she had to paddle misbehaving students).

I wish I could remember more of my mom's stories about her teaching experiences in North Carolina. I think she would have a lot to say about how non-white/poor white students were punished as troublemakers with corporeal punishment and by being placed in learning disabilities classrooms like hers.

After posting this comment, I decided to quickly look through one of my mom's notebooks (the same notebook where I found her **reflections on throwing darts at the Censor** and her poem about the **dragonfly**). In it, I found some of her research

notes for a presentation on Creativity and Weaving: "My Experiences in Taylorsville, North Carolina--the 80's." Jackpot! Well, not quite, but it's a start.

In these brief notes, my mom provides some context on 1980s North Carolina and a little bit of information about her experiences as a teacher during that time. She was a special education teacher (I remember that she called herself an LD--learning disabilities--teacher) at West Jr. High School "in the middle of the country in Alexander County, then the 2nd poorest county in the state." She notes that the KKK was a big presence (with at least one teacher claiming membership) and that there was a sharp contrast in wealth between "the richer city of Hickory" (where I attended school) and her extremely poor students in rural Alexander County.

She also briefly describes "discipline in the schools" as: "paddle--wood burned names, classroom chart with 3 demerits than a paddle." *I remember that from my first-grade class! Only once was I almost paddled. I had made it through the entire day without a single demerit. Then, in the last few minutes of school, I managed to earn three! For some reason, Mrs. Miller didn't paddle me. Did I ever see her paddle any other students? I'm not sure. How did my mom handle the paddle rule in her classroom? Did she ever paddle her students? Did she refuse? If so, what were the consequences of that refusal? How did she manage her role as a teacher who was supposed to discipline students (and who was frequently given students who didn't really have learning disabilities, but were just deemed "disciplinary problems") with her role as a mother of someone who lacks (self) discipline? Did she witness any differences between how discipline functioned in "rich Hickory" and "poor Alexander county"?*

## MY FIRST ACT OF RESISTANCE?

*Chronologically, my experiences in kindergarten precede those in first grade, but in terms of my larger narrative about valuing troublemaking, this account was uncovered and crafted after my account about first grade. So I've decided to place it in second in my intellectual history.*

While cleaning up a closet, I unearthed my report card (or, Progress Report, as they called it in North Carolina in 1979) from kindergarten. I was pretty excited; I thought the only report card that I still had was my one from first grade. It's important to look at this report to verify or challenge my memories, especially since those memories conjure up strong (negative) feelings. I don't remember liking kindergarten. *Well, except for when my friends and I would play Dukes of Hazzard.*

My favorite line from the progress report has to be in the teacher comments for the first quarter: "Sara is a sweet child but needs to work on self-control." Ha! That sounds very similar to my first grade progress report.

It's interesting to read through Mrs. Von Dohlen's comments; they're surprisingly nice. I've always remembered her as strongly disliking me. According to my mom, Mrs. Von Dohlen, on at least one occasion, put me in a box for bad behavior. What was my "bad behavior"? I vaguely recall responding to some other kid's question with, "none of your beeswax!"

Another thing to note about this report card are my very low marks for "practices self discipline." I started with L (low), the lowest grade possible, and only improved one level to S (satisfactory).



INTERACTIVE 2.2 Kindergarten Progress Report, front and back

Teacher Comments

Parents Comments & Signature

1. Sara is a sweet child.

1. Judith Puotinen

2.

2. Judith Puotinen

3. Progressing well. Still lacks self-control.

3. J. Puotinen

4. I'm pleased with Sara's reading progress. No change in behavior.

4. J. Puotinen

5. Sara did an excellent job on her reading mastery test.

5. J. Puotinen

6. We have enjoyed working with Sara.

6. Assigned to: Grade 1

SOCIAL AND WORK HABITS

H-High

S-Satisfactory

I-Improving

L-Low

			3	4	5	6
1.			S	S+	H	H
2.			H	H	H	H
3.			H	H	H	H
4. Follows directions			S+	H	H	H
5. Uses time wisely			S+	H	H	H
6. Works carefully and neatly			H	H	H	H
7. Works independently			H	H	H	H
8. Completes assigned tasks			H	H	H	H
9. Accepts and shares responsibility			S	S+	H	H
10. Respects feelings and property of others			S	S+	H	H
11. Practices self-discipline			L	S-	S-	S
12. Respects school policy and property			S	S	H	H

Catawba County is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer

STUDENT PROGRESS REPORT

CATAWBA COUNTY SCHOOLS

P.O. Box 1000

Newton, N. C.

1979 1980

Name Sara Puotinen

School Campbell

Principal C. H. Seitz

Homeroom Teacher N. Von Dohlen

Parent-Teacher conferences will be scheduled during the 2nd reporting period. Parents are invited to confer with teachers at other times if desired. Please plan these conferences at a time that will be suitable with you and the teacher.

ATTENDANCE

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Days Absent	0	0	1	1	1	3
Days Tardy	0	0	0	0	0	0

Promoted

INTERACTIVE 2.1 Kindergarten Progress Report, inside

KEYS:

ACHIEVEMENT

EFFORT

E-Excellent

H-High

C-Commendable

S-Satisfactory

U-Unsatisfactory

I-Improving

L-Low

LEVEL

9. Third Reader-Level 1

10. Third Reader-Level 2

11. Fourth Reader

12. Fifth Reader

13. Sixth Reader

14. Seventh Reader

15. Eighth Reader

Parent - Teacher Communication

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. REFERENCES REQUESTED						
2. By Teacher						
3. By Parent						
4. NOTE ENCLOSED						
5. By Teacher						
6. By Parent						

READING

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Level			E	E	E	E
Effort			H	H	H	H
Understands basic skills			E	E	E	E

Reading Level

WRITING

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Effort			H	H	H	H
Forms letters well			C	C	C	C
Writes plainly & neatly in all work			C	C	C	C

Handwriting

SPELLING

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Level			E	E	E	E
Effort			H	H	H	H

LANGUAGE

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Level			E	E	E	E
Effort			H	H	H	H
Expresses thoughts orally			E	E	E	E
Expresses thoughts in written form			E	E	E	E

MATHEMATICS

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Level			E	E	E	E
Effort			H	H	H	H
Understands basic skills			E	E	E	E
Knows numbers & facts presented			E	E	E	E

SCIENCE

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Level			E	E	E	E
Effort			H	H	H	H

SOCIAL STUDIES

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Level			E	E	E	E
Effort			H	H	H	H

MUSIC

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Level			E	E	E	E
Effort			H	H	H	H

The inside of my progress report is also fascinating. I'm curious, why did my reading level go down from 4 to 2 between the 4th and 5th term? But, more importantly, check out my teacher's note about my handwriting. On the side, she writes, "Needs to continue to work at holding pencil correctly." That might be one of my most vivid memories from kindergarten. My oldest sister, AMP, had taught me to read and write when I was 4 and I liked how *I* learned to hold my pencil. Throughout that kindergarten year, I adamantly refused to hold it the "correct way." What did it matter, I always thought (but probably didn't actually say to my teacher). This small act of resistance was one of my first memories of troubling my education. To this day, I still don't hold my pencil correctly and I still think that regulating students in this way is bullshit.

Movie, [Holding my Pencil](#), available online.



## IDENTITY

I started identifying as Undisciplined almost by accident. Until launching my Undisciplined website in 2012, it was just my twitter handle. I had wanted to use trouble but every variation on it was already taken. I thought about using disciplinary problem, but it was a lot of characters and I had been warned that if I used too many characters nobody would ever want to reply to me. So I settled on undisciplined. Now, almost 3 years later, I've fully embraced it as a useful way to describe me and what I do.

As an intellectual, I have **no home discipline**; my PhD is in the interdisciplinary/anti-disciplinary field of women's studies. And, though I have a strong background in religion and philosophy, my research has always been on the fringes of those fields.

I like to **reside at the limits** and often position myself as an outsider who avoids definitions and fixing ideas in rigid and restrictive ways.

**My methods are unconventional.** I always try to bring many disciplines, discourses, methods together in unexpected ways in my own thinking, writing, and engaging.

Having accumulated some unhealthy habits from too much disciplining by the academy, I want to **break down and break free of the disciplinary values** that encourage me to be too rigid and limited in my thinking and that privilege knowing over feeling and engaging.

Because I couldn't help but **make trouble for rules and common-sense assumptions**, with my constant questions and refusals to just accept the way things are, teachers labeled me **unruly, disobedient**, and lazy. They were wrong...about being lazy.

IMAGE 3.1 Sara, age 21



*Graduating from Gustavus Adolphus College in May 1996.*

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### 3

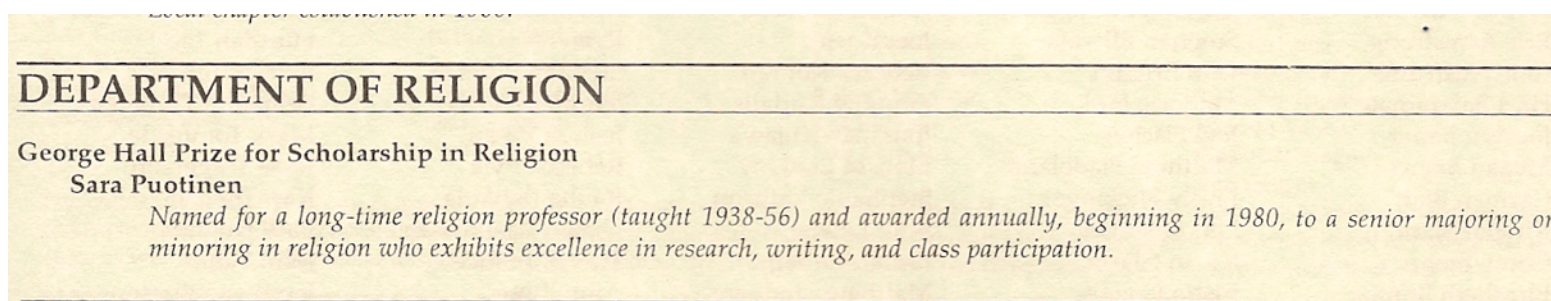
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# COLLEGE

In the fall of 1992, I began attending a small liberal arts college in southern Minnesota, Gustavus Adolphus College. I started out as a history major, but quickly turned to religion. *Why? I recall my advisor Dr. Garrett Paul asking me this question. The only answer I could provide was that I had browsed through the catalog and the religion courses seemed the most interesting to me. Thinking*

*back on it, I'm sure that my dad's strong interest in religion (he has a Ph.D in religious history and is an ordained Lutheran pastor) had something to do with it. I graduated in 1996, with a major in religion and a double-minor in history and Japanese studies. I was also just a few courses shy of earning music and philosophy minors.*

This section introduces another theme that shapes and haunts (and perhaps distorts) my accounts of my past scholarship. As I think back at my time in college, when I had great success in my senior thesis, earning the best student in religion award, I wonder what has happened to me now? I'm not teaching. I haven't written an academic book. I don't have a tenure track job. Did I lose my way?



The process of writing the account in this section entitled “Promise,” enabled me to tentatively conclude that, even though I’m not currently (or may never be again) an academic, I am living up to the promise that I demonstrated in my early work. But this assurance is only tentative. And the question of “what happened to me?” will continue to haunt future accounts of my intellectual history.

## FINDING FEMINISM

*This account was fun to write. Since feminism and feminist theory have been such a big part of my academic life for the past (almost) 18 years, it's hard to remember my intellectual life before them. My contextualizing of my early thoughts on feminism in 1992, come out of my teaching and researching about the early 1990s backlash against feminism for my Contemporary Feminist Debates course. I don't actually remember thinking much about feminism in those first years of college.*

I found feminism during my junior year at Gustavus Adolphus College, while working on a research paper for my "Luther and his Legacy" class. This upper level seminar on Martin Luther and his theology was an unlikely place to finally really connect with theories and ideas about sexism and the myth of gender neutral language and learning. I don't recall any exams for the class, just one big research paper at the end. For some reason, I decided to research feminist theology. Why? What was the connection to Luther? Since my professor was just a few years from retirement, I don't think he cared what I picked for my research topic. I don't remember that much about the research, just that I read a lot about feminist interventions into theology. I read Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether. I read about the Goddess movement. And, I probably read some Carol Christ and *Womanspirit Rising*.

Up to that point, I hadn't taken any women's studies courses in college. I think I was a little intimidated and bit confused by what feminism was about. Why, for example, was the gathering place for feminists in the Gustavus student center named the Womyn's center?



When I started college, much of my exposure to feminist idea(l)s was through popular culture. It was 1992, a notoriously bad time for popular representations and understandings of feminism. In fact, a feminist backlash (against Hilary Clinton, Murphy Brown, Roseanne Barr, Anita Hill, any successful, outspoken women) was in full swing as republicans like Dan Quayle and Pat Robertson charged that feminists were destroying family values. Coming from a family of democrats, I didn't agree with Quayle's or Robertson's ideas on anything, but I'm sure their campaigns to discredit feminism had negatively impacted me and my assessment of what feminism was. Did I buy into the stereotype of feminists as angry and aggressive man-haters? Possibly.

For whatever reasons, I didn't formally study feminism and women's studies until working on my research paper on feminist theology in 1995. That paper changed the direction of my research. I was double-majoring in religion and japanese studies and was planning to do a thesis that combined the two areas. Instead, I ended up turning my japanese studies major into a minor and writing my religion thesis on feminist theology and women's experience.

During my senior year of college, I spent a lot of time researching, writing and thinking about feminist theology and the ways in which women's experiences were ignored or suppressed within theological constructions of God. This work culminated in the production of my senior thesis, *Does the Category of Women's Experience Limit Feminist Theology?*

I loved writing that thesis. It was exciting to be exposed to so many new ideas about feminism and feminist theology. I recall first reading the introductory paragraph to Valerie Saiving's essay, *The Human Situation: A Feminine View* and having my limited (and somewhat distorted) view of the world shift and break open. She writes:

I am a student of theology; I am also a woman. Perhaps it strikes you as curious that I put these two assertions beside each other, as if to imply that one's sexual identity has some bearing on his theological views. I myself would have rejected such an idea when I first began my theological studies. But now, thirteen years later, I am no longer as certain as I once was that, when theologians speak of "man," they are using the word in its generic sense. It is, after all, a well-known fact that theology has been written almost exclusively by men. This alone should put us on guard, especially since contemporary theologians constantly remind us that one of man's strongest temptations is to identify his own limited perspective with universal truth.

Now, after 18 years of closely and deeply studying feminism and feminist theory, the idea that our dominant understandings of humanity are constructions, shaped by those in power, seems obvious. But, in the fall of 1995, learning about the male as the default subject and reading a confession in which the author connects their roles as student, theologian and woman, was revolutionary and mind-blowing. I didn't know it at the time, but my move from theology to feminist theology through that thesis, signaled the start of a bigger shift towards work that troubled the status quo and challenged academics-as-usual. This work would eventually take me beyond disciplinary work in religion and theology to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary scholarship in women's studies.

## A LIFE OF CONVERSATIONS

*I love deep, engaged conversations that are motivated by curiosity and a desire to imagine new ways of understanding and being. Some of the best conversations that I've ever had were with my mom. Before she died in 2009, we used to spend hours and hours talking about our lives, the books we were reading and the theories that I was studying in graduate school. Sometimes these conversations were circular, leading nowhere. Other times, they were transformative. I miss those conversations more than I can express (or sometimes bear).*

Movie, [Walking and Talking](#), available online.

**Document:** Student Paper, [A Life of Conversations](#) (1996)

As I prepared to graduate from college and attend graduate school in theological studies, I became enamored with the idea of my life being about having a wide range of great conversations. Here's what I wrote in the introduction to one of my final papers as an undergrad:

What is the essence of my life and my proposed work? What are my core set of values and where do they come from? In responding to both of these questions, I have come to the conclusion that my life is centered on conversation. Conversation offers the key to my intellectual development, my intended theological work, and my personal fulfillment and happiness.



To me, life is a series of intense, lively, instructive, transforming conversations. These conversations take place with our family, our friends, ourselves, past thinkers, professors, other students and the surrounding world. As participants we share, explore, become engaged, learn, and form relationships.

Conversations result in commitment to community because they necessitate a interaction in which individuals become members of a community by both listening and responding to what has been said by others. In turn, conversations also require that individuals have their own voice in order that they may share themselves and their ideas. A strong personal voice is needed to be able to inform, persuade and be heard.

In this paper, I devote some particular attention to Gordon Kaufman and his powerful ideas about the "serendipitous creativity" that can come out of conversations. I wrote:

For Kaufman, conversations are a "mix of determinateness and indeterminacy" (Kaufman, 275). Because participants enter in the conversations with a unique set of experiences and history, they interpret what is said in their own unique way. However, as the conversation progresses, "the interchange comes to have a 'life of its own'," leading to new, unimaginable places. The dynamic of such a conversation, where participants respond in new and creative ways to each other's comments, leads to new futures that go beyond the individual participants contributions. As Kaufman writes, "The experience of the conversation may be so unforgettable as to meld the several speakers

into a group which lives and develops for a long time, shaping and re-shaping the individual lives of its members in the future in ways none could have anticipated during the original exchange" (Kaufman, 277).

Finally, in my conclusion, I imagined what my future would be:

Upon graduation from the Claremont Graduate School with a Ph.D. in women's studies in theology, I would like to teach at the undergraduate level at a small liberal arts college. I choose this setting because I desire a more intimate, close connection with my students. As a professor, I would like to share with others the critical voice I have developed through my extensive conversations about religion, and I would like to help them develop their own voices. Through conversations about modern Christian theology, I want to discuss the importance of religion and its study with my students.

Wow. Not one part of that vision has happened. I did get a Ph.D, but in women's studies not women's studies in theology. And I did teach at the college level, but not at a SLAC (small liberal arts college) and not in religion. Have I had any of these important, yet difficult, conversations about religion? No. Somewhere along the way, my passion for religion was superseded by my passion for women's studies. *And, in women's studies programs, people didn't like studying religion. But that's another story.* And at graduate school my (somewhat) idealistic vision of conversations was challenged. Through classes in feminist and womanist theory and hermeneutics, I became aware of how only certain ways of speaking and certain topics were deemed appropriate and legitimate. And how even when everyone was invited to the table to talk, only certain people were truly heard. Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider*), bell hooks (*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*),

Nancy Fraser (*Feminists Rethink Habermas*) and María Lugones (“On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism” and “Have We Got a Theory for You!”) were instrumental in enabling me to recognize the unequal distribution of power at the conversation table in my first years of graduate school.

I still like the idea of conversations. I think I had some great ones in the smaller, upper-level undergraduate and graduates courses that I’ve taught. I know that my conversation with my feminist pedagogy graduate students on the **day that my mother died** was one of those serendipitously creative events that Kaufmann extols. But I never had any great conversations in my bigger courses. Maybe that's one of the reasons I grew to strongly dislike teaching at a big research university, where big classes were the norm?

Here's the thing about conversations. They require an openness to others, a willingness to be wrong and a genuine curiosity about the world. And they don't just happen. They require a lot of reading, thinking and critical self-reflection. As a graduating senior, writing about the importance of conversations, I had a lot more work to do. Maybe I still do.

## SENIOR THESIS

**Document:** Senior Thesis

**Does the Category of Women's Experience Limit Feminist Theology?**

Advisor: Dr. Garrett Paul

Completed: May 1996

**Summary:** Does the category of women's experience limit feminist theology? In light of the criticisms of feminist theologians, how can an appeal to women's experience provide any sense of unity among women? How can women that have such different experiences hope to understand each other and work together in a common movement? And, if one accepts the relative, historical nature of all experience, as many postmodern scholars do, how can one claim that women's experience is universal? Finally, even if one accepts women's experience as a good source for theological constructions, how can one define either women or experience?

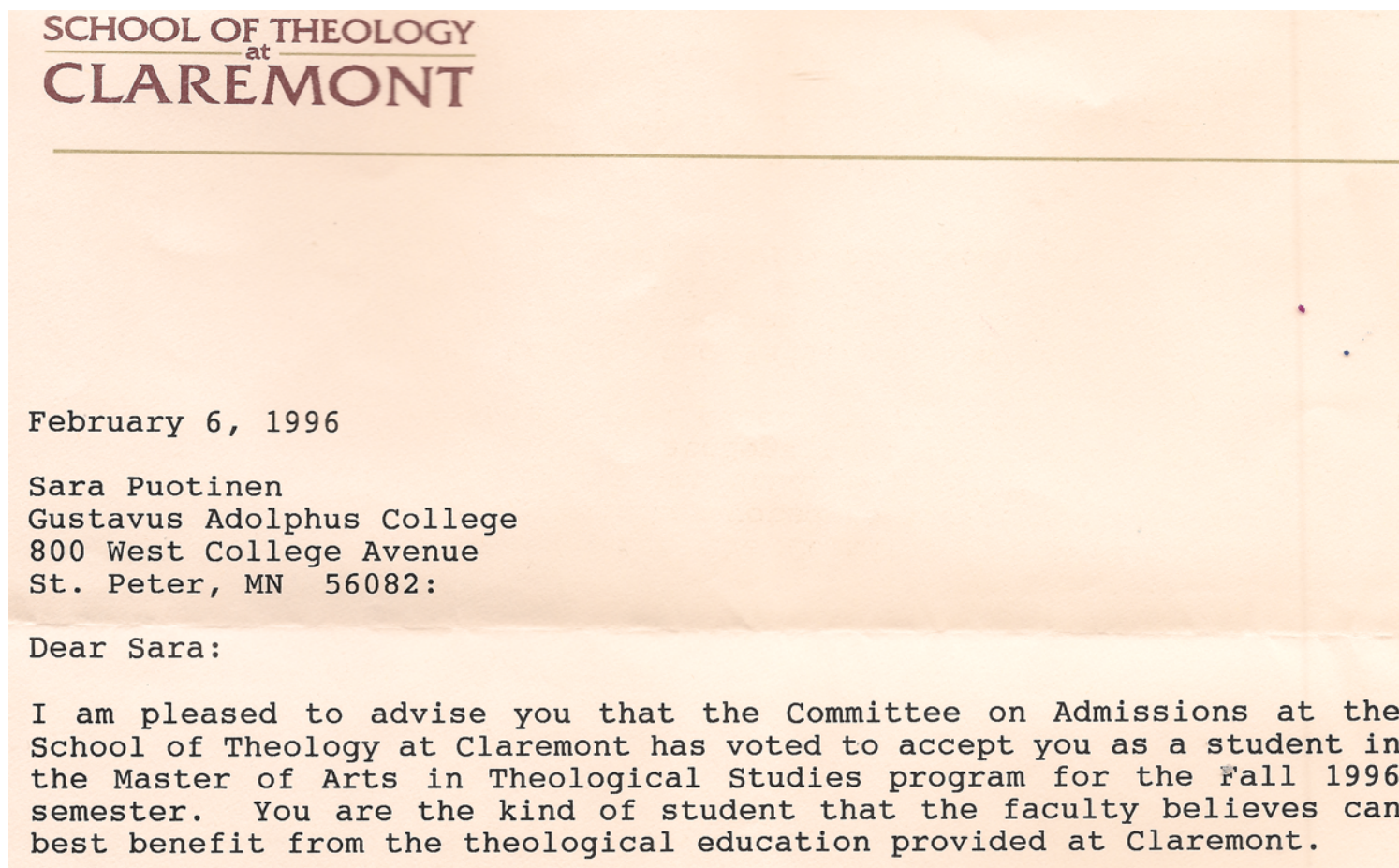
All these questions raised are pressing and must be fully explored in order for feminist theology to recover from the attacks it has received. However, a full exploration of each question, which would require volumes to articulate, is not feasible in this thesis. Instead, my thesis will focus on finding and developing some ways in which to initiate a discussion on the topic of women's experience: both reviewing the category of women's experience and suggesting reformulations that will enable it to be better utilized in feminists' theological frameworks.

First, then, I will examine the problem of women's experience in further detail, reviewing how it has been formulated in the works of many important theologians, and its limits, as articulated by black feminist theorists, black feminist theologians, Mujerista theologians, and postmodern theologians. Second, and more

importantly, I will attempt new ways in which to view experience by uniting the fields of feminist theology and postmodernism. Looking both to the work of theologian Sheila Greeve Davaney and several postmodern feminist theorist-philosophers, I will describe “women’s experience” as historical, relative, and socially bound. In doing this, I will address the problems of diversity and nihilism and offer suggestions for the future of the category in the hopes of providing at least some answers to the questions posed in this introduction.

## A CHANGE IN PLANS

*In this account, I discuss one of the first big disappointments that I experienced as a future academic.*



I graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College in May of 1996. In a few months, I would be heading off to graduate school at Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, California. When I started my senior year, in August of 1995, that wasn't my plan. I wanted to go to the University of Chicago Divinity School to take classes with my dad's dissertation advisor and live in the same city as my sister. Claremont School of Theology was my back-up/just-in-case school.

Shortly before spring break of that year, I received my U of Chicago rejection letter. I remember opening the letter and then sitting down on a bench that was near my mailbox in the student center. For about 10 minutes, I was devastated.

*Why didn't I get in, I agonizingly wondered. I was smart and focused and a promising scholar!? I think I know why now. I was interested in feminist theology and challenging traditional approaches to theology. The University of Chicago, if I recall correctly, was not.*

Then, I went back to my room and called Claremont School of Theology to let them know I was accepting their offer. *It might sound strange that I got over it so quickly. I think it was to my parents. After I called and let them know that I wasn't accepted, they pretty quickly (that day? the next day?) got in a car and drove over four hours to see me. But, I really did get over it that fast.*

It worked out really well. I got a great education in feminism, womanism and critical theory, from great teachers, at Claremont, with much less professionalizing pressure and that cost a lot less.

*What sort of scholar/intellectual would I be now if I had gotten in to the University of Chicago? Would I be as much of a troublemaker? How much debt would I still have?*



## PROMISE

*Through this account, I explore one of the key questions that haunts me as I try to remember and reflect back on my undergraduate years: What happened to all of my academic promise? I also uncover a tension within my own efforts to make sense of my experiences, a tension between a need to be critical of my experiences within the academic industrial complex and a need to honor the passion for learning and engaging with ideas and theories that was at least initially fostered within the various academic spaces that I've inhabited.*

While looking through my files, I found my final evaluation for my senior thesis:

Religion Senior Seminar  
Spring 1996

Final Evaluation

Sara Puotinen, "Does the Category of Women's Experience Limit Feminist Theology?"

This was, without a doubt, a very strong thesis. Indeed, we could not remember one in our experience that was stronger. There was little to quarrel with in the exposition, and you handled those questions well. I thought that you were quite right to call biologism a form of essentialism, even if it's not idealism. And I thought that the plurality/solidarity tension was well discussed in our conversation, though not at all resolved.

I loved writing that thesis. It was my introduction to some of the debates concerning definitions of "woman" and to the tensions between feminism and postmodernism. Since it was an honors thesis, I worked on it for the whole year. I remember (and so do my roommates; they just jokingly reminded me about it a few months ago) carrying a big grey file box around with me as I went to my senior

seminar or to the library. What an academic nerd! I thrilled at being exposed to so many new ideas and exciting debates. And I deeply appreciated how much time I got to spend on researching, writing and revising. Thinking back to those heady days of burgeoning academic nerdiness, I wonder: what happened? Why don't researching and writing academic essays thrill me anymore?

I'm struck by the first line of the evaluation: "This was, without a doubt, a very strong thesis. Indeed, we could not remember one in our experience that was stronger." Am I living up to the promise of that thesis? Sometimes this question haunts me, like when I look through my old academic papers or the three filing cabinets, jam-packed with hundreds (or more?) of academic articles from 10 years of grad school and 6 years of college teaching, that I've barely touched in over a year. So many years of dedicated research and thinking *intellectually* academically about religion, ethics, agency, subjectivity, feminist theory, resistance, subversion, queer theory, pedagogy, etc.. What was it all for and why have I stopped?

### **finding and losing my voice**

Maybe because it was also so many years devoted to researching and writing about other people's (not my) ideas. My academic training, while incredibly useful for getting me to think critically, logically and deeply about others' ideas and theories, also contributed to my inability to connect those ideas and theories to my life (or, lived experiences, in feminist academic-speak). And it made it very difficult for me to cultivate and express my own voice.

Is losing one's voice an inevitable byproduct of academic training? I'm not sure. For me, ultimately it was. My early days in graduate school were incredibly helpful as I learned how to read faster and with more depth. And those days were invigorating as I was exposed to so many revolutionary ideas about the patriarchy, gender and moral development, heteronormativity, white-privilege, radical

democracy, intersectionality, hegemony, storytelling, power, and postmodern subjectivity. I finally had language and concepts for making sense of my experiences and perspectives. It was powerful, for example, to learn that moving from elementary school to junior high and literally losing my voice (often refusing to speak up in class or order my own food at a restaurant) was a well-documented phenomenon for adolescent girls as they struggled with the demands of learning and performing increasingly rigid and oppressive gender roles. Being introduced to all of these concepts and theories and then discussing them with others was exciting and empowering.

But, at some point, all the theories and jargon I was learning and the methods I was using for engaging with them, were making it harder for me to talk with my family and friends. They were also making it harder for me to make sense of my own life and experiences as I struggled to reconcile what theories told me about identity or selfhood and how I actually experienced them in my daily life.

## INTERVENTION ONE

To counter the effects of this academic training, I decided to create a project that would enable me to take many of the theories about storytelling, women's agency, identity, selfhood, memory and home and experiment with them in a different medium. Instead of writing an esoteric academic paper, I, along with my husband Scott Anderson, created a digital video about my family's most treasured homespace, the Puotinen family farm in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The themes that I had been studying for years (like the tension between wanting to belong and needing to critique simplistic notions of belonging) served as the foundation for the project.

After completing and screening the first video, *The Farm: An Autobiography*, in 2001, we created another one the next summer, *The Puotinen Women*. This video, which was a continuation of themes and questions raised in the first one, also focused on the contradictory roles that women played in Finnish immigrant households and was heavily shaped by the miscarriage I suffered just before we started filming.

These two digital videos enabled me to experiment with communicating my ever-increasing feminist theoretical knowledge to audiences outside of academic spaces. And, they allowed me to use these theories to make sense of my relationship to the farm and generations of Puotinens. These videos reminded me that theories weren't just abstract ideas and academic knowledge wasn't just academic! They could help me understand and connect with my family and heritage.

Due to the success of those digital videos, I briefly considered shifting the focus of my dissertation so as to include them. But I didn't. I can't remember the thought process that went into that decision, but I imagine that I was reluctant to subject my highly personal work to the rigid (and often stultifying) demands of academic scholarship.

### **the demand for rigor**

Of course, some teachers/mentors encouraged me to find my own voice and to link my research to my experiences or investments, especially in my women's studies courses. But, even as these professors encouraged me, the dominant academic culture, with its aversion to "I" statements, its love of theoretical sophistication, its loathing of clear and pithy expressions and its need for safeguarding "rigor" and "high standards," reminded me that to be a serious scholar required a (nearly) comprehensive knowledge of a subject (jargon, key theories) that you

could eruditely articulate on demand. Usually during class discussion or when posing a "question" during a post-presentation Q & A at a lecture. In my efforts to achieve this level of understanding, I didn't have time to devote to my own ideas, especially when those ideas were so often at odds with other academics' ideas and approaches.

## INTERVENTION TWO

When I was nearly finished with my dissertation, over two years after I started writing it, my mom got sick. Really, really sick. She was dying from stage 4 pancreatic cancer. I was working on my fourth chapter, "Working to Become Allies, Working for Alliances," and reflecting on Judith Butler's difficult questions, What is the livable life?, and Who gets to achieve it? I wrote a big chunk of that final section in the hospital on the day of my mom's whipple surgery. If the surgery was successful, she might have six months to a year to live. If not, she would most likely be dead in a few weeks. The surgery was a success and, with the help (?) of chemo, she beat the odds and lived for almost 4 years.

When I look back at this chapter, and reread my section on livable life, I don't see any evidence of the pain and fear that I was experiencing on that day. No footnote referencing my own powerful connection to the concept, serving as an intervention into the "academics as usual" prose. But, I know that Butler's theories about the livable life, and my critical engagements with it on that day, and the days to come, was crucial in enabling me to survive that horrific month when my world shattered.

Who pushes the agenda of dominant academic culture? It's not just administrators or professors. It's also other graduate students. I remember feeling the effects of graduate students policing during my Ph.D program, especially in my philosophy classes. But, it wasn't until I began teaching graduate classes at the University of Minnesota, that I witnessed how deeply entrenched many graduate students are in dominant academic culture. In fairness, the need to find a job in an increasingly dismal market, demands that graduate students not only follow the academic rules but uphold them for the future of their chosen field of study (and their future as academics).

### **thinking too much, producing too little**

The more I practiced academic methods—always citing sources, thoroughly researching topics, never making unsubstantiated or over-generalized claims—and the more I became enamored with sophisticated, complex and abstract theories that presented interesting puzzles to solve and play with, but not always viable or concrete solutions, the less I was able to develop, communicate or practice my own ideas.

There wasn't enough time for new ideas; I was too busy (and usually having too much fun) tracking down sources from footnotes or making sure that I was familiar with the literature on every new idea I was encountering. And, with my love for logic puzzles, I was more invested in finding neat and clever ways to understand and pose theoretical problems than I was in thinking through their practical implications and applications.



## INTERVENTION THREE

I can't remember when the idea first hit me, but in the spring of 2009, I decided to create and write in my own blog. I had been using blogs in my classes since 2007, but I had yet to experiment on one with my own theories and research. I decided to use my blog as a space for documenting and archiving all of my ideas and theories about the value of troublemaking and troublestaying. These ideas had been fermenting for over 10 years, almost since the beginning of graduate school, but I had never had time to write about them. And I didn't make the time because these ideas—about The Brady Bunch and Jurgen Habermas; Michel Foucault and Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who; Eminem, Borat and Socrates; or Judith Butler and Hannah Montana, didn't seem as "serious" or "important" as my work in feminist theory and ethics.

From the minute I started writing on the blog, I loved it. I wrote and wrote and wrote. I probably wrote more in that first month on the blog than I had written in the three years prior to starting it. And I was having fun. Finally, I was taking all of these theories that I had been learning since 1995 and not only applying them, but infusing them with my own perspectives and ideas! I was playfully experimenting with my own writerly voice and working to connect various parts of my life with my academic work. My passion for researching and writing was back!



**Pushing up at the Limits**

After falling in love with blog writing, I worked to incorporate it into my scholarship. I continued writing on my blog and using it in my classes. I also began researching blogging and its potential value for feminist and queer ethics and pedagogy. I developed workshops on using blogs to manage teaching and researching. I experimented with combining my less formal blog writing with my more formal academic writing. And I co-authored a book chapter on feminist pedagogy and blogging. All of this researching and experimenting built upon the feminist and queer insights that I had been encountering since beginning my masters program in 1996.

Chapter Four ..... 70  
Teaching With Blogs and Blogging While Teaching: Using Blogs  
to Expand Access to Feminist (Cyber)Spaces  
Sara L. Puotinen and Kandace Creel Falcón

I constantly experienced resistance to my ideas and projects. This resistance was not overt, but subtle. It mostly involved a refusal to take the work (and it was a lot of work!) seriously. After all, the message seemed to be, it wasn't "real" academic work. This resistance often belied an underlying sense of fear about what my new approaches would mean for the future of scholarship. One day, after presenting a workshop on teaching with blogs and blogging while teaching, a colleague came up to me and said that my presentation was great, but it made her glad that she was retiring soon. Keeping up with all these technologies was too much work. Later that year, another colleague quickly dismissed my ideas about the potential for using blogs to share and collaborate on writing and researching projects by stating that she wasn't willing to share her paper with others for fear that they would steal her ideas.

How could these, and other colleagues, not see the tremendous potential in digital scholarship for enabling us to energize and make relevant our work, I wondered. What did it mean for me that I found blog and online researching and writing exciting and motivating?

## INTERVENTION FOUR

Months after my mom died, in 2009, I began writing about grief and loss on my blog. The blog gave me a space for processing my grief and for thinking through how my experiences of being in a sustained period of not-quite-grieving as my mom was unable or refused to die fit or failed to fit with Judith Butler's theories on the value of grief. When I came across a call for papers on grief, bereavement and motherhood in an academic journal, I decided to submit a critical/creative essay for it about my own experiences with being a mother who recently lost her mother. I used my blog to document and share the process of reflecting and writing on grief and motherhood. My finished essay, "Living and Grieving Beside Judith," which was published in the Journal for the Motherhood Initiative allowed me, through the process of writing it, to understand and live with my grief.

I vividly remember how powerful and profound the process of writing that article was. On one day in particular, I recall sitting at a table in my backyard and writing about Judith Butler's chapter, "Beside Oneself" in relation to a memory of how my sisters and I sat and comforted my mom on her bed the night before her surgery. After writing out this memory, I realized that that moment on the bed had haunted me for some time. I had always remembered (whether it was true or

not, I'm not sure) sitting off to the side as my sisters lay next to her. My not sitting beside her symbolized my failure to be there for my mom when she needed me most. In writing myself back onto that bed, next to her, I was forgiving myself.

This essay was an experiment for me in bringing myself into my writing and in negotiating my self-as-academic with my selves-as-mother-and-daughter. It, along with my other academic interventions are, without a doubt, the most important projects related to my academic research that I have completed since starting graduate school. Some days I cannot even remember the title of my dissertation, but I will always remember what I learned and what I was able to communicate through my digital videos about my family's farm (which has since been sold). I will always reflect gratefully on how I used the final chapter of my dissertation to cope with the uncertainty, fear and devastation that I felt as my mom suddenly became someone with stage 4 cancer. I will always read through my blog with delight, remembering the various theories I've encountered over the years and how they connected to my life at the moment in which they were written. And, I will forever cherish the experience, on a hot summer day, of working on my journal article and being able to imagine, through writing, a way to forgive myself for what I believed I should have but didn't do for my mom as she was dying.

## **Promise?**

When I think about the work that matters, I mean, really matters, to me, I'm conflicted. All of these projects were created and completed as interventions in (or breaks from) the academy. Through them, I challenged, resisted and played with academic methods and theories. I wrote them because I had to, because academic approaches were slowly killing my passion for engaging with new ideas and my love for being curious and sharing (in) that curiosity with others. Yet, without my academic training, would I have had the insight and the tools with which to create these projects? And, if that's the case, where and how do I fit into

the academy now that I'm not teaching or researching in it? I'm not sure. That might be a big reason why I'm working on/through my intellectual history right now.

For lack of a better, as in resolved and coherent, answer, I want to return to the haunting question that I posed at the beginning of this account: Am I living up to the promise that I showed in my senior thesis? As someone who likes to raise lots of questions but doesn't always like to answer them, I will counter that question with a few more: What was the promise that I showed in that thesis? And what does it mean to live up to it?

When I first began composing this essay, I wouldn't have been able to answer these questions. And maybe I still can't. But, I can offer a tentative suggestion for what I think about them right now, in my current state as residing beside/outside of the academy. The promise that I showed in that senior thesis was of someone with a passion for engaging with new ideas and for being willing to follow that passion wherever it lead them, even across or outside of disciplinary boundaries. I began my thesis in September of 1995 fully invested in religion and religious studies, but by the time I finished it in May of 1996, I was hooked on feminist theory and women's studies. The promise I showed was also that of a deep thinker who liked to question and refused to quickly or too easily resolve theoretical and practical tensions. And the promise I showed was of someone who was very good at understanding, analyzing and communicating complex ideas, but still needed to work on applying those ideas and making them meaningful for herself and her various communities.

Am I living up to and building on that promise? Yes.

## VISION

Last year, Gary A. Olson wrote an article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in which he strongly cautions against jettisoning "traditional monograph-style dissertations" in favor of digital scholarship. Claiming to have "received calls from a handful of deans and department chairs" who fear the damage to the reputation and careers of those in the humanities that such a shift would cause, Olson suggests that digital scholarship might not be scholarship at all. It's too quick and short. It discourages our capacity for deep concentration and sustained engagement with research. It is not "appropriately vetted by responsible experts." And, it seems to be (at least partially) motivated by a scholar's desire to get "instant gratification" from others on their research.

In contrast, continuing to rely on the 300+ page dissertation enables scholars to maintain "proper" standards and still be rigorous in their efforts, both of which are central to ensuring that the humanities are valued in this scary time of increased budget cuts. It also enables those in the hollowed halls of higher ed to use the peer review process to keep out the riff raff, "the amateur or dilettante simply posting thoughts online." Because without the elaborate peer review process of "top tier written journals," presumably first introduced to grad students through the process of writing and getting their dissertation approved by a committee of experts in their field, written work is (probably) not serious and scholarly enough.

In response to Olson, I want to offer up some praise for the academic riff raff; those scholars, thinkers, writers, teachers, and activists who refuse to settle for the limited and biased set of standards and proper behavior that many in the academy continue to promote. While these "standards" are supposed to ensure

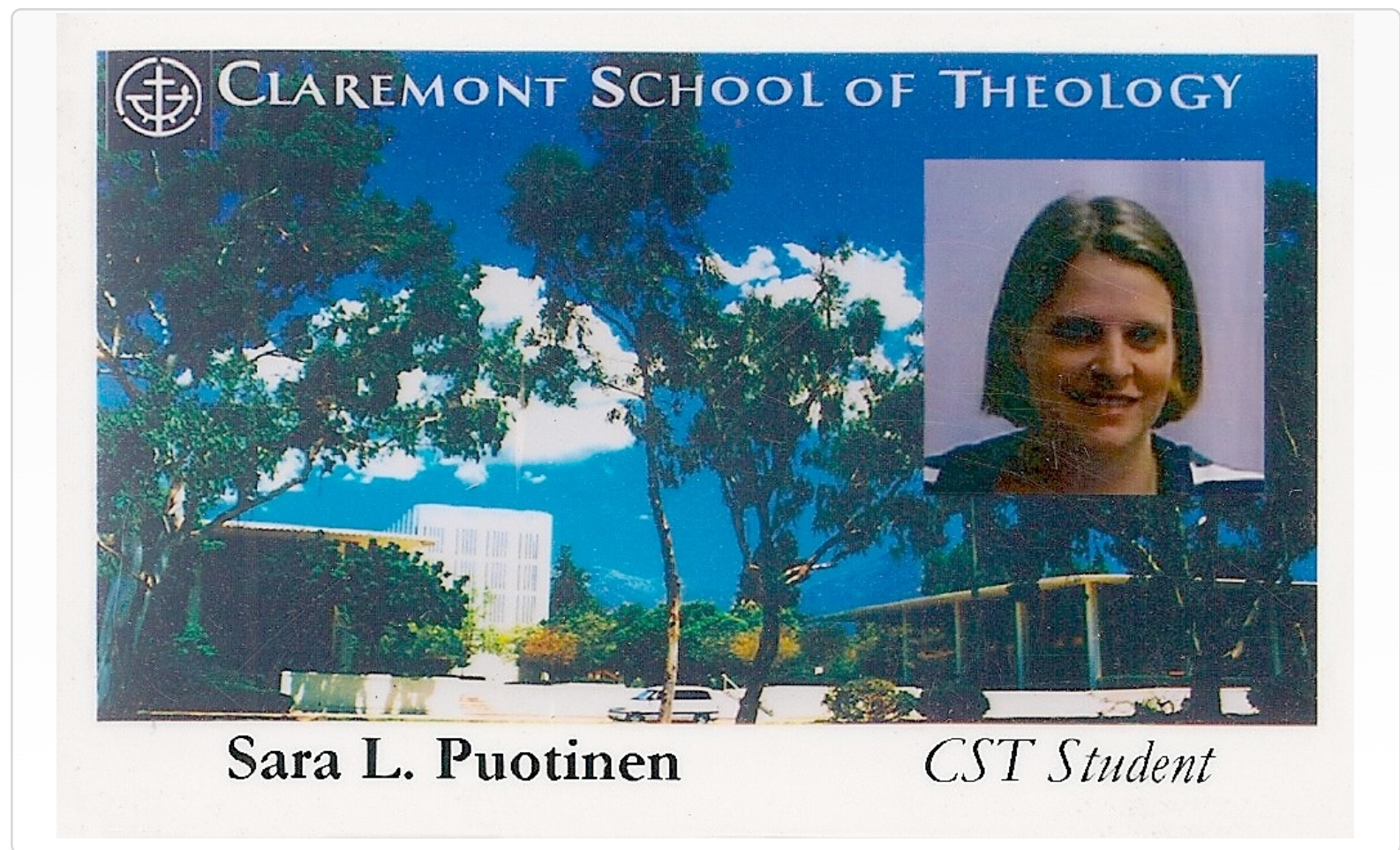
quality, they are often used to keep out ideas/practices/people that challenge privileged forms of knowledge production.

Does this mean that we shouldn't have any standards? That there's no way to effectively assess whether or not serious engagement is occurring? No. It means that academics need to spend less time policing the borders of who counts as a scholar and more time engaged in the difficult labor of repeatedly asking who benefits (and at whose expense) when "standards" and rigor are invoked. They also need to develop new ways to understand, engage with and evaluate research.

My praise is for all the thinkers, troublemakers, storytellers, academic rebels, adjuncts, graduate student teachers (and more) that get exploited, undervalued, dismissed, and rejected even as they engage in exciting, compelling, innovative, "cutting-edge," transformative, revolutionary, and accessible work.



IMAGE 4.1 Sara, age 22



*My student ID for Claremont School of Theology (1996-1999)*

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## 4

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# MASTERS

After graduating from college, I attended Claremont School of Theology where I earned my Masters in Theological Studies (in theology, ethics and culture) in 1999. As I took more courses in feminist theory through Claremont Graduate School and in ethics, critical theory and deconstruction (with my advisor, Dr. Garth Baker-Fletcher), I began to move away from disciplinary work in

religion. By the time I wrote my master's thesis, in the fall of 1998, I had shifted my thinking away from theological/religious ethics. *To what? As I look over my master's thesis I wonder, where's the ethics in it?*

*What happened to my interest in religion and theological ethics? I think the key religious questions didn't move me in the same way that feminist and womanist questions concerning agency, subjectivity, and identity politics did. And I didn't particularly enjoy the theology courses that I took in process theology and on the history of theology.*

Claremont was an exciting time intellectually as I was exposed to so many key thinkers and ideas in 20th century thought: Luce Irigaray, phallogocentrism, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, deconstruction, Judith Butler, womanism, critical race studies, the Frankfurt School, Jurgen Habermas, Gloria Anzaldúa, queer theory, heteronormativity, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Toni Morrison and more.

It was also an overwhelming time as I grappled with the new ideas I was encountering in relation to my own experiences. *I had moved around a lot as a kid, but I had almost exclusively lived in the very white suburbs, so my upbringing was pretty sheltered. Attending a Lutheran liberal arts college in small-town Minnesota—an academy on the hill—didn't expose me to much more diversity. As I learned more about institutionalized racism and white privilege, I wondered how best to confront and acknowledge my white privilege and racism. And as I read about phallogocentrism, heteronormativity and the problems with marriage, I struggled to make sense of my conflicted feelings about marrying so young (in 1996, a month after graduating from college).*

## WHY GRADUATE SCHOOL?

*I was in graduate school from 1996-1999 and then from 2000-2006. I had one year off in-between my masters and Ph.D programs. My graduate programs were at opposite ends of the country; I started out in the Los Angeles area, in the heart of the (somewhat soul-sucking) inland empire, on the west coast and ended up in Atlanta, Georgia, in the deep South. Since I had spent five years living in North Carolina (ages 5-9), I enjoyed being back in the south and reclaiming my (sorta) Southern accent.*

*My graduate school experiences, both in California and Georgia, had their difficulties but, for the most part, I really enjoyed being a graduate student. I somehow managed to pick programs that didn't load me up with lots of extra teaching requirements or epic exam readings lists and faculty members that allowed me to work on the projects that I wanted to do, even if those projects took me outside or across disciplines.*

Right now I'm in the midst of skimming through the article, [Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don't Go](#) (2009), and I'm wondering, Why did I go to graduate school? In the article the author, Thomas Benton (aka William Pannacker), describes how and why he advises his students not to go to graduate school in the humanities. He writes:

What almost no prospective graduate students can understand is the extent to which doctoral education in the humanities socializes idealistic, naïve, and psychologically vulnerable people into a profession with a very clear set of values. It teaches them that life outside

of academe means failure, which explains the large numbers of graduates who labor for decades as adjuncts, just so they can stay on the periphery of academe.

In an **article published a year later** (2010), Benton/Pannacker intensifies his critique, writing:

Graduate school in the humanities is a trap. It is designed that way. It is structurally based on limiting the options of students and socializing them into believing that it is shameful to abandon "the life of the mind." That's why most graduate programs resist reducing the numbers of admitted students or providing them with skills and networks that could enable them to do anything but join the ever-growing ranks of impoverished, demoralized, and damaged graduate students and adjuncts for whom most of academe denies any responsibility.

Harsh. And (mostly) true to my experiences on the job market post-degree. Getting a Ph.D in the interdisciplinary field of women's studies, I was shielded from some of this structural damage (or I managed to ignore it?). Maybe it was because I was being trained to identify and resist larger structures of oppression, privilege and unequal power distribution. Maybe it was because my committee members were supportive of my work and encouraged me, for the most part, to do the types of projects that I wanted to do. Maybe it was because I was one of "those privileged few" to which Benton/Pannacker refers, that are fully funded and have a partner with a full-time job.

I did feel the pressure to professionalize—network! network! network! and publish! publish! publish!—and to pick projects that were cutting edge and grant-



worthy. And I did feel that when I graduated in 2006, I wasn't qualified for anything else. I was 31 years old and had been, almost exclusively, a student since I was 5. While some other students in my department had acquired valuable administrative skills, I had focused almost all of my attention on researching, writing and teaching (oh and having two kids). As the post-Ph.D years went by, and my job search for a tenure-track position continued to be unsuccessful and extremely demoralizing, I kept wondering, If I can't teach at the college level, what can I do?

Like a good little student, I kept preparing and sending out ridiculously labor intensive application packets that continued to be rejected (sometimes without acknowledgment, sometimes after grueling campus visits). It felt hopeless. I felt hopeless. But I also felt like I couldn't stop trying. I had been told too many times, once you stop applying and working for a job, you can't try again. Your degree has a limited shelf life and nobody will want you if you're not active in your field as a researcher or teacher.

It has been a year since I stopped teaching. A year since I sent in an application for an academic job. And, I'm relieved. For the past year, I've been working on a lot of different critical and creative projects that allow me to use the tools and theories that I learned in graduate school in ways that I never had time to do when I was teaching and that wouldn't be valued within academic spaces. I've also experimented a bit with how to translate my skills into work outside of the academy.

Perhaps most importantly, I've devoted tons of time to the difficult labor of unlearning some of the most toxic (at least for me) values of the academic industrial complex: that you're a failure and less-worthy without a tenure-track job; that academic work is better (and loftier) than other professions; that the only thing you can do with a Ph.D is teach at the college/university level; and that even though the academic life is demanding and difficult, it's worth it...for the dif-

ference you make in student's lives, for the benefits you receive, for the flexible hours you can have.

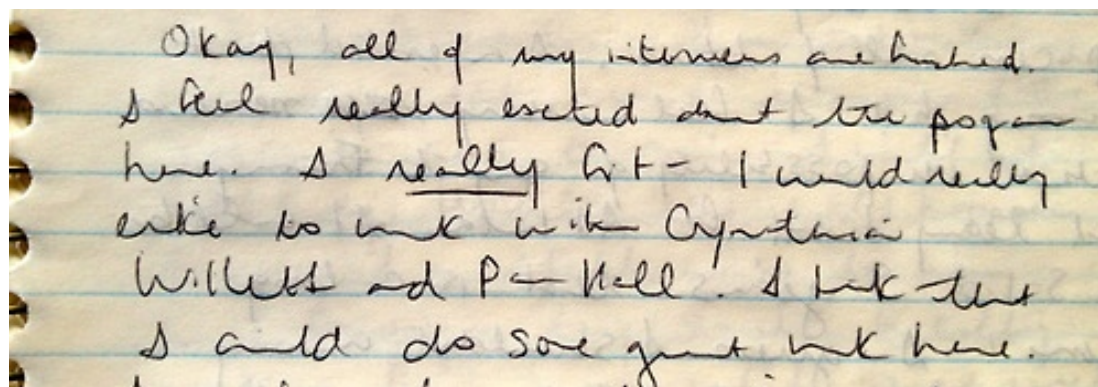
So, as I posed at the beginning of this post, why did I go to graduate school? In one of his articles, Benton/Pannapacker speculates that many students go to graduate school because: 1. School is what they know; 2. School is where they are praised and validated; 3. It's better than trying to find a job; and 4. They "think" they have a passion for a subject. In my case, I'm sure #1 applies to me. Not only had I been attending school since I was 5, but I, and my mom and 2 sisters, had been following my dad around the country my whole life as he worked in higher education administration. School was all that I knew.

But, when I applied for graduate schools, first for a masters in 1996 and then for a Ph.D in 1999, I wanted to go because I believed (maybe a little naïvely) that the deep immersion in ideas and theories that grad school encourages, would provide me with the tools to make sense of my world/s and experiences and to have deeper, more meaningful conversations with a wide range of people. What I didn't realize when I was applying is that I also wanted to go to graduate school to develop the skills that I needed in order to challenge those systems and structures that invalidated my curiosity, my penchant for posing questions and my refusal to ever accept that "that's just the way things are." My graduate training (and my later on-the-job training as an educator) in women's studies and feminist/queer theory, gave me those skills. This training also ~~forced~~ compelled to recognize the limits and problems with the academy and to search for (and hopefully find) ways to resist and refuse it. At this point, I can't say that it gave me the skills for reworking it. I'm not sure that it's possible to rework a system so seemingly broken.

**Addendum** After writing and posting the above account on [Trouble](#), I found an entry in my personal journal from my campus visit to Emory University in March 2000. I want to include one excerpt of it here, along with a paragraph I just wrote



for my dissertation account. Together, I think they offer up another reason why I went to graduate school:



**Artifact:** A paragraph from my journal (March, 2000)

“Okay, all of my interviews are finished. I feel really excited about the program here. I really fit—I would really like to work with Cynthia Willett and Pam Hall. I think that I could do some great work here.”

This journal entry was written during my campus visit at Emory University. I was a finalist for their Ph.D program in Women’s Studies. A month later I was accepted and attended Emory from 2000-2006. I worked with Cynthia Willett and Pam Hall (and loved it).

As I think about the influence of my dissertation on my current projects, I realize that it, like most of what I did in my Ph.D program, wasn't simply a hoop to jump through, or an academic hazing ritual to endure. What I did in my dissertation was meaningful and important to me and my ever shifting understandings of the world. Was it meaningful to the academy? No. Did it generate a dozen articles and/or a book? No. What it did do was give me the time to craft a plan of thinking/feeling/engaging work that could last a lifetime. I definitely don't agree now with all that I wrote 7 years ago, but there's enough in my pithy, 165 page, dissertation to trouble and inspire me for a long time. Cool. I think my journal entry was right, attending graduate school at Emory University enabled me to do some great work there...and beyond.

## HOW TO READ 1,000 PAGES A WEEK

*In this account, I discuss the difficulties of being assigned too much reading without enough time to process it. The result of these difficulties is that students are overwhelmed and frequently unable to engage in meaningful ways with ideas and thinkers. I think these difficulties speak to a more general problem within the academy. Academics spend years reading, writing and developing the tools for meaningful engagement. They also develop a passion for curiosity and questioning and participating in transformative conversations. Yet, with the pressure to publish and the increasing demands placed on them by their institutions (committee work, service work, bigger classes to teach, etc), they barely, if at all, have enough time to do the real work—the work that they are passionate about—that inspired them to become academics in the first place.*

I moved out to California in August of 1996. My first semester, I took two courses that I loved, Dr. Garth Baker-Fletcher's "Critical Theory and Deconstruction" and Dr. Ranu Samuntraï's "Intellectual History of Feminist Theory." They offered great introductions to some key philosophical/critical theories and thinkers of the 19th and 20th century. They also helped me to acclimate to being a graduate student, teaching me how to skim a dense 300 page theory book by reading the introduction, the conclusion and the first and last sentence of each paragraph. Skimming was necessary because that first semester, and many semesters to come, I was reading about 1,000 pages a week.

Now, as someone who has taught graduate students, I think 1,000 pages a week is too much. How can you have a deep, meaningful engagement with the reading/author when you have so many pages to cover? And, in skimming

through the book so fast, what gets forgotten, ignored or not seriously considered?

Remember:

- read through chapter titles and subject subtitles in a chapter to get a general sense of the direction of an author's thought
- read first and last sentences of paragraphs in a chapter, go through as many chapters as you can.
- Note particular "turns" and "twists" in an author's logic
- mark pages with notes *meaningful to you!*
- read "Introduction" and "Conclusions" chapters very carefully
- NOW you are ready to look more carefully at particular paragraphs and sections of chapters which: intrigue, frustrate, and excite your interest and comprehension of the text.

One can read through an entire book this way in two to four hours, with comprehension, and be able to intelligently discuss the issues, conflicts, strengths and weaknesses of the author's presentation

I wonder, is this approach to reading (consuming a ton of pages, without having time to really engage with the ideas developed within them), part of my problem with the academy? It might be. Reading a book a week per class makes it difficult for students to develop patience, which is necessary for deep rumination and comprehension of ideas. With so much reading, students can't be patient with a reading. They don't have the time or energy to devote to understanding what the author is claiming. So, instead they launch into a harsh critique or glib dismissal. The result: unproductive, dissatisfying, and surface-level conversations in class.

As a graduate student, I remember having a lot of these pointless class discussions, even in classes with my favorite professors. As a graduate professor, I tried hard not to replicate that experience for my students. But, I always felt as if I failed. I'll take some of the blame for those failures, but I think that the academic system, with its push to read! read! read! (and acquire more and more facts, jargon, and super smart sound bites) deserves a lot of the blame for why academics don't really have the patience to appreciate and engage with ideas and thinkers, and for why so many conversations within academic spaces seem to lack depth and substance.

## MEETING BUTLER

*Since it felt too overwhelming to try and write an account about Judith Butler and how her work, especially in *Gender Trouble*, has influenced my intellectual history, I decided to post a handful of my documents that focus on her work, along with a brief account instead. Reading through old papers and remembering the various presentations and lectures that I've given about Butler, does give me pause and makes me wonder, Why so much attention on one scholar?*

### **Documents:**

- Class Paper, Spring 1998
- Directed Reading, Spring 2002
- Class Presentation, Spring 2002
- Class Presentation, Spring 2002
- NWSA Presentation, 2004
- NWSA Presentation, 2007
- Course Syllabus, 2009
- Course Syllabus, 2011
- Blog Posts, 2009-present

Recently, I decided to look through my old notes to find evidence of my first encounter with the theorist, philosopher, troublemaking role model, Judith Butler. In [my video introduction](#) to my **Trouble** blog, I claimed that this first encounter occurred in the fall of 1996, my first year in graduate school. But I discovered that I actually encountered Butler and *Gender Trouble* in February of 1997, in my Contemporary Feminist Theory course at Claremont Graduate School. According to the syllabus, I first started reading *Gender Trouble* on February 11th:



Cultural Studies 331:  
Contemporary Feminist Theories  
Spring 1997

Ranu Samantrai  
710 College Ave.  
607-7330 (office)  
607-1271 (messages)  
[samantrr@cgs.edu](mailto:samantrr@cgs.edu)

Course description:

This course will examine some of the major preoccupations of contemporary feminist theories, particularly those resulting from poststructuralism and postcolonialism. We will discuss sources of conflict and unity between women, theories of difference, subjectivity and agency, and the turn toward gender studies. The syllabus presupposes some familiarity with the intellectual and historical roots of contemporary feminist theories. Half the readings for the semester will be determined by students in the course, according to their interests.

Books:

Carolyn Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman  
Martha Minow, Making All the Difference  
~~Miea91 - Foucault, Discipline and Punish~~  
Judith Butler, Gender Trouble  
Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter  
Donna Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs and Women  
Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other  
vToni Morrison, Race-ing Gender, Engendering Justice  
-ichel Foucault, essays and interviews (in xerox)

Schedule for first half of term (subject to change):

Jan. 21	Introduction
28	Steedman
Feb. 4	Minow
-11	Foucault, Butler ( <sup>Gender Trouble</sup> 1), (Sec 13-3, 2, 3, 3), conclusion
18	more Butler Bodies that Matter: Preface, intro, Chpt 3, 4, 6 <sup>See Paris is Burning - movie</sup>
25	Haraway 1, 2, 5, 7, 8 <sup>read Cyborg manifesto carefully</sup>

*Nella Larson*  
*Passing*

It's interesting to read through my old copy of *Gender Trouble* (the 1990 version) and see that my favorite line, the one that has inspired much of my work on the ethics of troublemaking and troublestaying ("trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.") is not underlined.

Contemporary feminist debates over the meanings of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism. Perhaps trouble need not carry such a negative valence. To make trouble was, within the reigning discourse of my childhood, something one should never do precisely because that would get one *in* trouble. The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to be caught up in the same terms, a phenomenon that gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: The prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it. As time went by, further ambiguities arrived on

On that day in 1997, I was interested more in Butler's challenge to the subject/identity "woman" and her critique of feminist identity politics. I had devoted a lot of attention to the question of "woman" in my senior thesis, written just two years prior in 1995, and Butler was addressing many of the same issues (like essentialism vs. social construction) in a way that was new for me. *Did I ever come across her name while working on my senior thesis?* And, having recently been exposed to deconstruction and postmodern critiques of the self, I liked her idea of politics as parody, her rethinking of agency through Nietzsche and her discussions of Luce Irigaray.

Since meeting Butler in 1997, I've devoted a lot of time to thinking through her words and ideas in *Gender Trouble*. Several grad school papers, in-class presentations and my master's thesis and doctoral dissertation are (at least partly) about her work in *Gender Trouble* and beyond. And so are three of my presentations at the National Women's Studies Association Conference: 1. Butler and risk-ing identity (2001), Butler's radical democracy (2004) and Butler and the virtue of troublemaking (2007). I've assigned her texts for my courses, devoting individual sessions to some of her ideas and also shaping entire classes around her importance for queer theory and her ethical evolution. And, I wrote an experimental essay in which I put my experiences of engaging with her texts on grief and the liv-



able life beside my experiences of living and grieving beside my dying mom and my young daughter.

Why have I spent so much time on Judith Butler? I'm not totally sure, but I think it's partly because meeting Butler through *Gender Trouble*, and then reading her subsequent works on gender, deconstruction, speech act theory, radical democracy, feminism, queer theory, grief, critique and more, offered me a useful entry point into some very important theoretical discussions of the late 20th/early 21st century. She's not the only (or the best?) theorist to discuss these issues, but something about the way that she framed it, in relation to trouble and feminism, mattered to me. I suppose I've kept reading, studying and writing about her work in order to make sense of why it mattered to me and how I could respond to it.

I think I've also spent a lot of time with her work because I like the challenge of crafting an ethical project around making and being in trouble. As I've witnessed over the years, the concept that making trouble, especially Butler's articulation of it, could be ethical is met with a lot of resistance by others. I like resistance. Even as I feel drained and sometimes overwhelmed by the negative reactions (dismissive nods; knowing smirks exchanged at conference presentations; outright hostility and rejection), I relish working on projects that are overlooked by or unimaginable to others.

In thinking about the resistance to my project, I want to conclude this brief account (I could probably write an entire book on my engagements with Butler's theories), with a memory from grad school. I originally posted this memory on a [blog post](#), way back in September 2009.

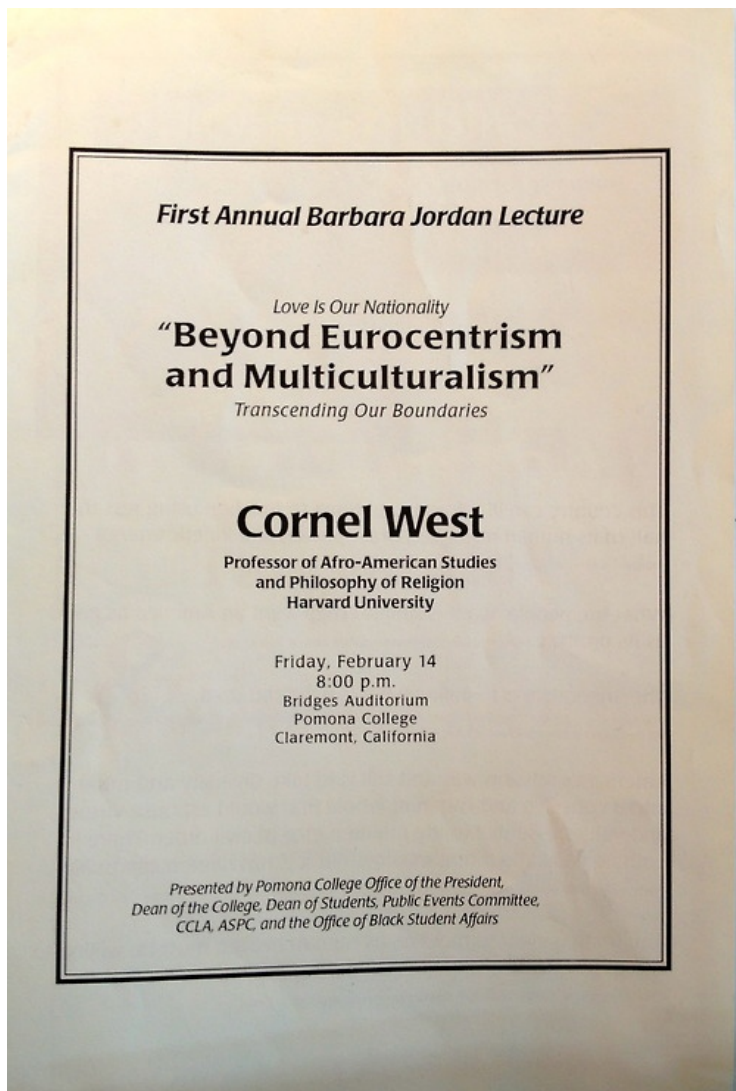
*For too long, the popular (among academics, that is) understanding of Gender Trouble is that it was not only counter but harmful to ethics/ethical projects. I remember this happening a lot in grad school. Ah, grad school...On the first day of every semester you had to go around the room and give your little spiel*

*about what your academic interests were. Although I tried to mix it up, I usually ended up saying something about the ethical possibilities in the work of Judith Butler. One time, after giving my spiel, the professor sarcastically uttered, "good luck with that."*

Thinking about the ethical possibilities of Butler's work for the past several years, especially in relation to troublemaking and troublestaying, has been incredibly useful and (mostly) enjoyable for me. My critical engagements with her ideas, through deep reading, class discussions and writing/creative projects, has generated some valuable work that has helped me to make sense of my experiences and their relation to the larger world.

# HEARING CORNEL WEST

*In this account, I briefly discuss my interest in Cornel West's work on visionary pragmatism, tragic hope and cultural critics in the late 1990s and very early 2000s.*



In February 1997, the African American religion scholar and public intellectual Cornel West spoke at Claremont Graduate School. What a presence, with his purple velvet suit and his long figures that slowly rapped on the podium as he spoke! *This was six years before his star turn in The Matrix.* I seem to recall that he talked about the existential crisis and our inevitable future as worm food.

This wasn't the first time I had heard West speak. He was a friend of one of my favorite professors at Gustavus, Dr. William Dean, and he came to campus during my junior or senior year. And it wouldn't be the last time I heard him at one of the schools I was attending. In 2001, he spoke at Emory, where I was working on my Ph.D.. His speaking at all three of my schools says less about my luck in getting him to see him three times and more about how much speaking he was (and still is) doing around the country.

During my masters, maybe after hearing this speech, I started to read more of his work, especially his thoughts on pragmatism, jazz and identity politics. His discussions of tragic hope, risking identity, radical democracy and the new cultural critic were central to my thinking in my masters's thesis and my dissertation.

In the concluding chapter of my dissertation, I referenced his ideas about continuing to act in the face of the uncertainty and fragility of "our democratic experiment" in the U.S.. I wrote:

The story of democracy within twenty-first century feminism is a story about hope and survival. It is a story in which we remember those individuals who were able to survive within the difficult, risky and uncertain practices of feminist democracy and who effectively resisted the system in many different ways. This is not a story exclusively about how those individuals were successful, but also about how they failed, yet kept persisting in their practices.

And added the following footnote:

Cornel West writes: "And if we lose our precious democratic experiment, let it be said that we went down swinging like Ella Fitzgerald and Muhammad Ali—with style, grace, and a smile that signifies that the seeds of democracy matters will flower and flourish somewhere and somehow and remember our gallant efforts" (West *Democracy Matters*, 218).

Among many of the philosopher professors at Emory (but not my advisor, who worked with him), West wasn't taken seriously. Why? I think it was because his work was too accessible and aimed at audiences outside of the academy. They

claimed it wasn't rigorous enough. Was this one of the official reasons why Larry Summers, then president of Harvard University, fired him? *My professors' dismissal of West was another cue, one of many that I received over my years in higher education, that the academy and its industrial complex might not be for me.*

## MASTER'S CLASSES

Claremont School of Theology  
Theology, Ethics and Culture  
Claremont, California  
1996-1999

### **Fall 1996**

Intellectual History of Feminist Theory  
Backgrounds in 20th Century Theology  
Introduction to Women's Studies in Religion  
Critical Theory and Deconstruction

### **Spring 1997**

Contemporary Feminist Theory  
Major Interpreters in Study of Religion  
Feminist/Womanist Theory

### **Fall 1997**

Hermeneutics and Critical Theory  
Whitehead's Philosophy  
Theological Constructions and Cultural Analysis

### **Spring 1998**

Ethics and Violence  
Black Women's Literature and Theological Ethics  
Culture and Sexuality  
Pan African Theology and Moral Philosophy

### **Exams**

Theology, Ethics and Culture  
Women's Studies  
Philosophy and Religion  
Systematic Theology

### **Fall 1998**

Decolonizing and Feminist Deconstruction (Audit)

### **Master's Thesis**

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity



## MASTER'S THESIS

*This account raises a question that I initially (and tentatively) discussed in my “Promise” account: Is losing one’s voice an inevitable byproduct of academic training? While my academic training gave me useful tools for making sense of my experiences and understandings, it also disciplined me to think in rigid and narrow ways and use specialized jargon that was alienating to non-academics and that made it difficult to think (or express) how theories I was reading connected to my life.*

*But, even as I believe that the ways I was disciplined within the academy contributed to my inability to express my own ideas, have my own voice and demonstrate that “there is a person here” within my work, I can’t just blame my academic training for my failure to bring myself into my work. As a private person, who likes to be in control of the image that I present to others, maybe I’ve been afraid to risk revealing too much about myself?*

*I suppose part of my current (and future) intellectual journey is to find effective and powerful ways to position myself within my work and to be willing to be more than a removed scholar/thinker who hides behind theories and critical analyses of others’ ideas.*

**Document:** Master’s Thesis and Abstract,

Longing to Belong: Feminism and the Desire for Identity

Advisors: Dr. Garth Baker-Fletcher and Dr. Karen Baker-Fletcher

Completed: October 1998

**MAIN QUESTION:** How do we reconcile the need to make identity claims with the need to critique those identity claims?

Building off of work that I had been doing in my coursework, especially the classes I took from both Dr. Baker-Fletcher, I used my master's thesis to critically explore a question that intrigued me as an academic who appreciated post-modern critiques of identity and subjectivity and moved me as a person struggling to make sense of my own identities and sense of belonging. Academically, I was interested in giving serious attention to Judith Butler and her interrogation of the limits of identity and identity politics. Personally, I wanted to read this interrogation, along with Carole Boyce Davies' exploration of migratory subjectivity, in relation to my experiences of moving around a lot as a kid.

In section five of my proposal, I outline how I will incorporate my personal investments into the project:

This final section will focus on how we desire identity—and how a desire for identity can be reconciled with the problems of asserting identity that Butler and Boyce Davies each offer. In particular, I will look at my own experiences and what the notion of desiring identity means to me. Drawing upon my experiences of displacement and migration, I will discuss my desire to balance this subversion of identity and this promotion of identity as fluid with an understanding of the specific instances of identity claims and the need for commitment to certain identities.

The discussion of my own desires for belonging, home and identity, didn't make it into the final draft. This omission is not surprising to me. Throughout college and graduate school, I had difficulty finding my own voice and connecting

the theories I was analyzing and interrogating to concrete personal experiences. Part of this difficulty was immaturity. Part of it was academic methods that encouraged me to speak "objectively" and universally. And part of it was an unwillingness or resistance to making myself vulnerable in my writing.

After re-reading my thesis, I found one paragraph in which I (as a person, not an objective theorist) makes an appearance. This might be my only appearance.

When viewed from my perspective, the tension between rest and resistance can be seen in a different way than either hooks or Reagon. Whereas both hooks and Reagon articulate the position of Black women who have not easily been granted the safe, comfortable place of rest, but have instead had to struggle to create it out of seemingly impossible situations, I have, as a White, middle-class, educated woman, had access to the comfort and security of white privilege. This is not to say that my experiences have always been ones of comfort and safety. Instead, it is to suggest that when exploring the tension between rest and resistance, I must address the fact that creating a safe space in which to rest and be restored varies according to one's experiences and privilege within the dominant hegemony. In my future exploration of identity and identity categories, I will work to develop strategies that enable me to deal with the complexities of rest and resistance from my privileged perspective as I struggle to find a balance between my desire to belong and to feel safe and comfortable and my strong need to actively resist identities that exclude and totalize women.

Why didn't I put this at the beginning and use it to shape the various ways that I read Judith Butler and Carole Boyce Davies? I guess I wasn't ready to do such difficult work yet. I recall struggling throughout my masters with how to confront and negotiate my white privilege and to deal with the racism that was ingrained into many of my perspectives and my training, up to that point, as an intellectual. I'm sure that was a big part of my unwillingness here.

But, there's more going on with my omission of any personal accounts than just a reluctance to address my racism and white privilege. I was also struggling with how to find my voice and to articulate my experiences within a system and environment that prioritized *knowing* an ever-increasing list of theories, authors and schools of thought over *engaging* with those ideas and giving serious attention to how they move us or unsettle us.

A few years after writing this thesis, I tried again to connect academic critiques of identity and home with my own personal efforts to negotiate a longing to belong with a need to critique. This time, my project was not an academic paper or an assignment for class, but **two digital videos**, completed with my husband Scott Anderson, about my family's farm in Upper Michigan. While I did receive summer funding to work on them from Emory University and I did present on them at academic conferences, they were created outside of the academy. I think that these two videos were more successful (but still not completely successful) in taking larger questions of identity and belonging and applying them to my own experiences.

I wonder, after writing this last paragraph, am I suggesting that it's easier for me to find and express my voice outside of the academy? How "truthful" is this assessment? How much of it is a result of my current in-between state, outside of the academy? Is this above account helpful for making sense of why the academy doesn't work for me, or is it more of a justification for why it's okay to be outside of it?

## PITHY CHEWINESS

*This account is the first one that I wrote when I began diligently working on my intellectual history in early January 2013. I originally posted parts of it on **Trouble**. That's where my sister read it and then texted me to let me know that my account wasn't quite right. I corrected it and incorporated in some more thoughts about my memory fail.*

### Documents:

- **Master's Class Paper on Irigaray** (1998)
- **NWSA Presentation**

### Pithy

In the margins of a blue book exam on social theory and ethics, one of four qualifying exams I completed for my masters in theological studies, my professor remarked favorably on my pithiness. I must admit, I had to look that word up. It was the first time I recall encountering it. When I found the definition, probably located in my trusty, beat-up Webster's dictionary that I had used a lot in college, I was pleased.

**pithy:** having substance and point: tersely cogent.  
**syn** see CONCISE

Terse and concise? Yep, that's how I write.

Up to that point, I had seen my economy of words and my ability to densely pack my prose with the key ideas as a liability; it often made it incredibly difficult to meet the minimum page requirements for final papers in my graduate classes. Other grad students bemoaned the maximum page requirement by complaining, “how am I supposed to fit my endless number of brilliant ideas into a mere 25 pages?!” *I’m kidding...mostly.* But I feared the dreaded page minimum as I wondered, “how will I possibly manage to fill up 15 pages?!” (note: my doctoral dissertation was only 165 pages).

My papers were successful and given positive feedback from professors, but I kept feeling as if I was failing as a grad student and an academic-in-training. How could everyone else write so much and me so little?

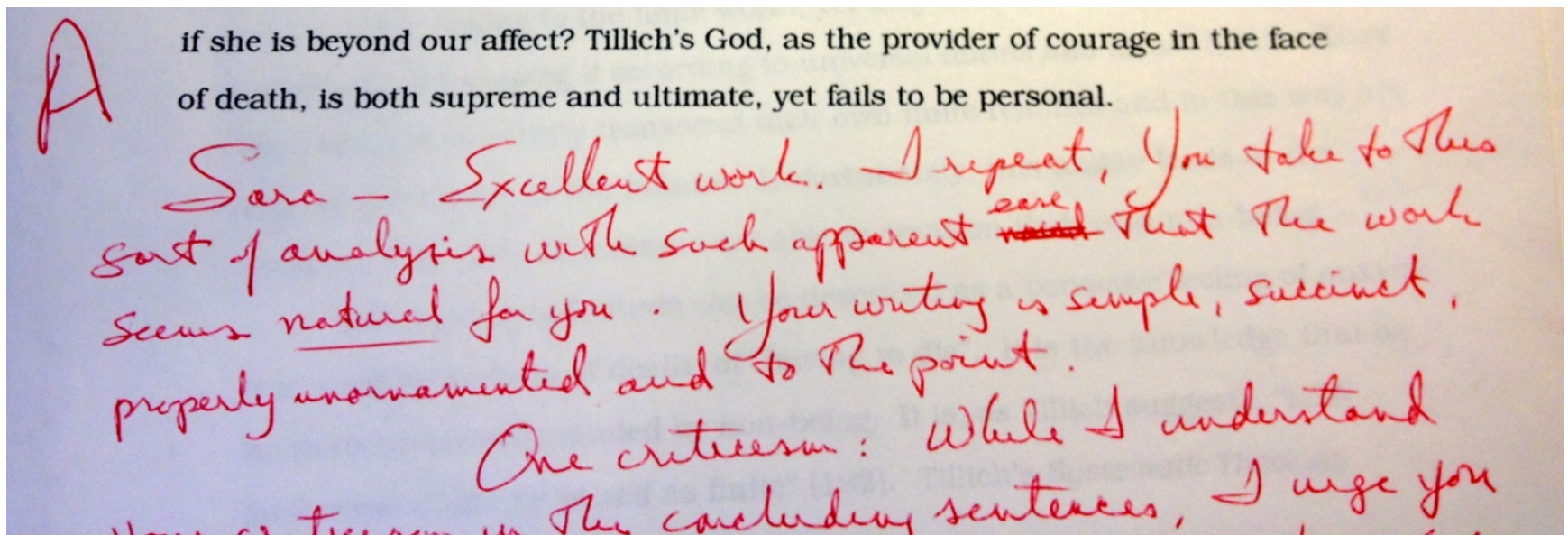
*As I read these lines, my cynicism begins to surface: Perhaps my pithiness was a sign of failing as an academic? Brief and concise (and clear) writing is often misread in the academy as a lack of intellectual rigor, where a longer paper = deeper thinking. Is there room to be a different sort of academic or intellectual?*

So, when I read my professor’s positive description of my work as pithy, I was relieved. Being concise and brief was not necessarily a bad thing! *This might seem like an obvious point, but if you’ve read much academic writing you know that brevity is unusual.*

### **Logical. Efficient. Precise.**

As an academic-in-training, my writing style was very logical and highly analytical, perhaps boringly so. I remember a favorite professor at my college (Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN) frequently praised my analytical ability.





[Sara — Excellent work. I repeat, you take to this sort of analysis with such apparent ease that the work seems natural for you. Your writing is simple, succinct, properly unornamented and to the point.]

*I also recall him remarking on one occasion, "Don't take this the wrong way, but when I read your writing, I don't feel like I'm reading a paper written by a woman." Am I remembering that right? And what does it exactly mean? I'm not quite sure. What I do remember was that, in spite of his blind spots, he was a great teacher who introduced me to a lot of wonderful scholarship on religion, Cornel West and how to be a public intellectual.*

When I wrote a paper, I spent a lot of time figuring out the logic of my argument. I didn't just write; I mapped out ideas and created endless index cards with my three (always three!) main points. I ruthlessly cut out extraneous information (and words) that did not fit with my thesis and goals for my paper. **Logical. Efficient. Precise. Pithy.**

My love of pith (and the magic number 3), which was cultivated as an undergrad in philosophy and religion courses, was furthered fostered in the many masters' classes that I took with Dr. Garth Baker-Fletcher. Borrowing from one of his professors at Harvard University, he required that we write our papers (2 twenty

pages + 1 twenty-five page final) using a three (!) part structure: 1. appreciation, 2. critique and 3. construction.

*Three Moments of Analysis:*

Moment ONE - APPRECIATION in which an objective and dispassionate summary of the authors is presented without presenting one's own critical appraisal.

Moment TWO - CRITIQUE whereby the strengths and weaknesses of the authors points are analyzed. What is missing? What is the apparent "agenda" of the author?

Moment THREE - CONSTRUCTION is where one's own personal agenda enters the picture, and where one may engage in critically appropriating aspects of certain authors as well as creative contributions from one's own ideas and/or culture.

ALL PAPERS MAY HAVE AN EXTENSION OF ONE WEEK ONLY except the FINAL, which must come in on time.

Of course, with my love of clear, logical writing and things-in-threes, I eagerly embraced his method. And I used it to structure my writing efficiently: 4-5 pages on appreciation; 6 pages on critique; 4-5 pages on construction. I continued to apply it to my writing for years, and when I started teaching, I used it for developing my courses and structuring some of my critical thinking assignments. The logical progression from understanding to critiquing to applying seemed to work well as a model for learning over the course of a semester.

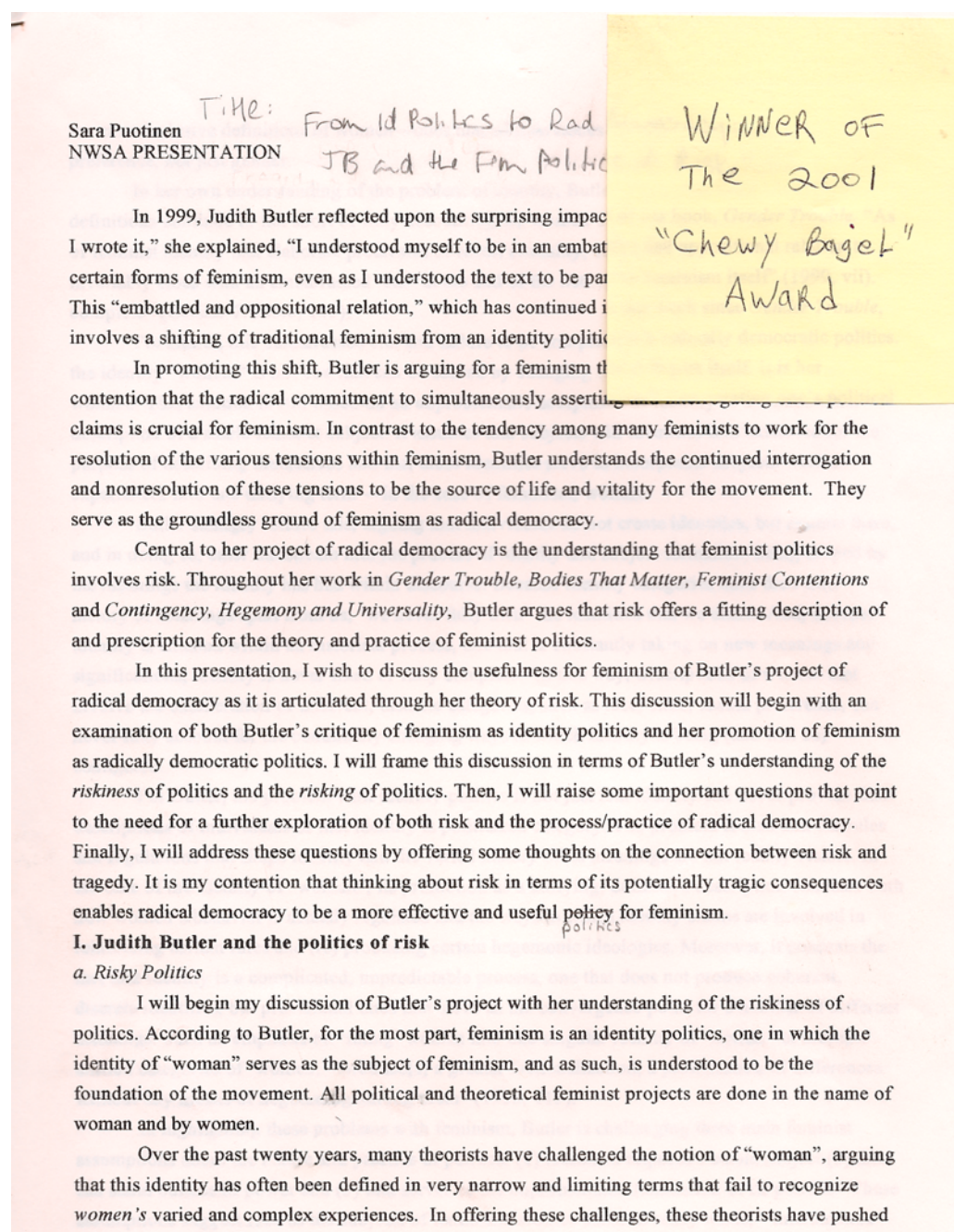
But, even as I continued to be pithy, I was being introduced to theories that challenged and questioned the value of clear and concise writing. In the first class that I took with Baker-Fletcher in the fall of 1996, Critical Theory and Deconstruction, I was introduced to Jacques Derrida. A semester later, in my Contemporary Feminist Theory course, I read Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler. Each of these authors argue for the need to challenge language and grammar as innocent and merely descriptive, contending that we must look for the blind spots in the text, where hidden and alternative meanings exist, but are ignored or concealed.



I became intrigued with writing styles that challenged readers and playfully unsettled ideas and theories. I wrote papers on disrupting readers, challenging common sense and safeguarding critical thinking. I argued that difficult writers were not merely aiming to piss off their readers. Instead, they were attempting to involve readers in the process of reading, interpreting and rethinking. And, because their work was focused on making visible and disrupting the limits of language, they were attempting to demonstrate those limits through their own writing practices.

There seemed to be a contradiction between my own pithy style and the confusing and disruptive style of **Irigaray**, who quoted key Western thinkers like Freud or Descartes and playfully inserted her own critical interjections directly into the quotations, and **Butler**, who peppered her prose with tons of questions and wrote epic, page-long paragraphs, loaded with complexity and implicit references to countless philosophers/thinkers. Even as I loved writing about these thinkers (especially Butler and Irigaray), I didn't love writing *like* them. My style remained pithy and clear.

But, slowly and gradually, as I studied more critical theories that challenged claims for clarity, common sense and singular narratives/reading and as I became more immersed in feminist challenges to theorizing in the academy as a Ph.D student at Emory University, my writing style began to shift. *Or, at least my understanding of it did.* My purpose in writing was no longer simply to clearly explain (or report/summarize) an author's ideas, raise a few critical questions to those ideas and then tentatively provide my own proposals for future work. Instead, it was about crafting sentences that packed a punch, that pushed the reader to think and question and that required me (as the writer) to devote a lot of attention to processing and reflecting on the ideas and theories that I was writing about. My writing was becoming increasingly dense and packed with ideas, questions and provocations. It was no longer pithy, it was chewy.



## Chewy

In 2001, I presented at the National Women's Studies Conference in Minneapolis. Before attending the conference, my dad agreed to read it. *My dad was always awesomely supportive of my academic work. Other than my committee, he might be the only person that read my dissertation.* When he returned it to me, he declared that it was the winner of the 2001 Chewy Bagel Award. Thinking that this chewy bagel description was "a brilliant assessment of most academic writing," my **brother-in-law**, wrote it on a post-it note and placed it on the front of my paper.

*When I first crafted this account and posted it on my blog, I mistakenly wrote that my dad had written the post-it note. My sister texted to let me know that it was actually her husband that had written it and placed it on my paper. I'm grateful that she reads my work and was willing to correct me. I appreciate having a more reliable account of this event, one that enables me to move beyond my typical approach to remembering events as only happening to me or between me and one other person.*

I loved that my dad declared that my presentation was a Chewy Bagel! I can't remember exactly what he said as an explanation for his award, but his idea that my work was "chewy" stuck with me. After earning my Ph.D and starting to teach and research at the University of Minnesota in 2006, I embraced my chewiness. I often told my students the story about my dad and talked about the importance of writing chewy papers. And, when we encountered a particularly challenging text (like one by Judith Butler or Jasbir Puar), I often opened our class discussion with, "Wow, that was a chewy bagel!"

Chewy writing is dense and requires that both the writer and the reader devote substantial time to thinking through the ideas, theories or experiences that are being written about. Unlike some pithy writing, which is aimed at getting to the point quickly and efficiently so that the reader can easily digest the ideas, chewy writing is aimed at encouraging (or forcing) the reader to stop and engage in slow and careful rumination (chewing) on ideas, words, and claims. Here is what Butler says in "What is Critique: An Essay on Foucault's Virtue" about the need for chewiness and how it enables us to patiently and persistently think and reflect:

But here I would ask for your patience since it turns out that critique is a practice that requires a certain amount of patience in the same way that reading, according to Nietzsche, required that we act a bit

more like cows than humans and learn the art of slow rumination (307).

A dense, chewy bagel cannot easily be consumed. It requires effort to be eaten. A chewy bagel text is the same way. It is not meant to be easily understood or digested. It demands that we devote some serious time and effort to engaging and processing the ideas that it presents.

### **Pithy Chewiness**

I love writing chewy bagels. Essays that are packed with ideas that aren't always readily understood. Ideas that trouble us. Make us wonder. Make us challenge our own common-sense assumptions. But, as my kids get older (they're now almost 10 and 7) and they demand more mental attention, I've started to question the form that a chewy bagel usually takes, as an academic essay or a **ridiculously long blog entry**. Not many people that I encounter on a regular basis have the time to or interest in "chewing" on 1,000-3,000 words on feminist or queer theory. So, in the past year, I've started to experiment with various ways in which to present problems or raise questions that encourage people to think (and chew) without requiring that they read a lot of words. I guess I'm hoping to be chewy in my pithiness or pithy in my chewiness.



## COMMUNICATING

While answering a question about the difficulty of her writing style in the interview, “Changing the Subject,” Judith Butler argues, “I believe it is important that intellectuals with a sense of social responsibility be able to shift registers and to work at various levels, to communicate what they're communicating in various ways.”

This passage became the basis for a class discussion in my Queering Theory class in the fall of 2011. I provided the students with three different passages in three different registers from Butler, one from a New York Times op-ed, one from a interview and one from an academic book chapter in an edited collection on difficult writing in the academy. I can't remember all that was said, but I'm sure we debated the value of Butler's “difficult” writing and explored what it might look like to speak and write in different registers.

I agree that different registers are necessary and I've been working hard over the past year to explore speaking in a wider range of ways that might resonate with more people. I've created digital stories, written haikus and used Pixelmator to craft text + image “posters” that speak to some of the same issues that I've been exploring in my academic work for years. I've also continued to write blog posts that attempt to speak in multiple registers at once. *Is that possible?*

As I think more about Butler's call to communicate in different registers, I'm not sure it goes far enough in expressing what scholars need to do in order to be socially responsible in their actions. Speaking in different registers is great, but if all we do is call for expanding the ways we speak, without addressing how certain ways of speaking get calcified (as the Academic way of speaking, for example) and

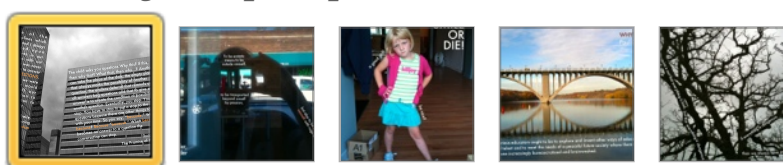
valued over others, then we're not doing enough to challenge academic hierarchies and systems of power and privilege.

We don't just need to speak in a wider range of ways, we need to listen to and take seriously the insights, the vocabularies, the logics and the experiences that exist within those registers. We need to value the deep, serious and rigorous vigorous ideas and expressions from individuals and communities speaking in registers that don't use "classic" academic methods and language.

**GALLERY 4.1** Some of my Problematizers



*Experimenting with texts + images to pose problems.*



Problematizers are available at [Staying in Trouble](#).

## ENGAGING

### **Kevin Kumashiro's *Troubling Education*:**

“Learning that the very ways in which we think and do things is not only partial but oppressive involves **troubling or "unlearning"** what we have already learned, and this can be quite an emotionally discomfoting process, a form of "crisis". In particular, it can lead students into what I call a paradoxical condition of learning and unlearning in which students are both unstuck (i.e., distanced from the ways they have always thought, no longer so complicit with oppression) and stuck (i.e., intellectually paralyzed and needing to work through their emotions and thoughts before moving on with the more academic part of the lesson). Such a paradoxical, discomfoting condition can lead students to resist further learning and unlearning and therefore may be seen by educators as something to avoid. Yet education is not something that involves comfortable repeating what we already learned or affirming what we already know. Rather, **education involves learning something that disrupts our commonsense view of the world**” (63).

### **Megan Boler's "The Pedagogy of Discomfort" in *Feeling Power*:**

“The aim of discomfort is for each person, myself included, to explore beliefs and values; to examine when visual "habits" and emotional selectivity have become rigid and immune to flexibility; and to identify when and how our habits harm ourselves and others” (185-186).

“The first sign of the success of a pedagogy of discomfort is, quite simply, the ability to recognize what it is that one doesn't want to know, and how one has devel-

oped emotional investments to protect oneself from that knowing....Through education **we invite one another to risk "living at the edge of our skin,"** where we find the greatest hope of revisioning ourselves" (200).

**Susanne Luhmann's "Queering/querying pedagogy":**

“As an alternative to the worry over strategies for effective knowledge transmission that reduce knowledge to mere information and students to rational but passive beings untroubled by the material studied, pedagogy might be posed as a question (as opposed to the answer) of knowledge: **What does being taught, what does knowledge do to students (7)?**”



## READING

1. Avoid reading the entire book, from cover to cover. Instead, pick a chapter or essay for focusing your thinking.
2. Read through once without taking notes, preferably in a comfortable chair.
3. Then, ask yourself: what troubles me, moves me, angers me, frustrates me about this reading? Why?
4. Underline those passages that bother or move you. **Talk back** to the text by writing your questions in the margins.
5. Pick one passage or idea that especially moves you (in anger, joy, confusion). This could be a word, a sentence, a passage, a main theme. Spend a lot of time thinking about it. **Ruminate**.
6. Write about it. I like to write about it in a blog post. I find that the public nature of a blog encourages me to organize my thought more effectively and coherently. And, the less formal nature of the blog encourages me to work through and process my ideas. There's an added bonus: it's easier to access those thoughts later. *I have to admit that my handwriting is so bad that sometimes I can't read thoughts that I've written just minutes before.*
7. Start by writing out what the author is claiming. Before troubling these claims, take them seriously by summarizing them. This summary **should not include your judgment/assessment** of the reading.
8. Connect your summary of your chosen passage or idea with the main argument of the text. I often do this by explaining the title of the reading.
9. Now write your reactions. Again, these are not judgments, but reactions. Avoid overly objective, removed descriptions. Instead, **use lots of "I" state-**

**ments** and spend considerable time thinking about how these ideas make you feel and why you are having resistance to them.

10. In your reactions, always draw upon specific examples from the text to support and contextualize your feelings and claims.
11. In your reactions, do not rush to judge (or convict, condemn) the reading or the author's claims. **Be generous and patient.**
12. Develop some tentative conclusions, but **keep working at it** periodically until you can figure out why you are troubled or moved by the essay. This might take a long time; I've spent 16 years trying to figure out why one passage from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* moves me.



## CHAPTER 5

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# THE CENTER

This chapter includes primary documents and artifact images from my archive, a list of sources from other academics, a review of the review quizzes sprinkled throughout this unofficial transcript, and a brief overview of the online and offline tools that I used to construct my accounts.

## MY ARCHIVE

When I decided to craft this unofficial student transcript, my initial goal was to document and archive my time as a student. I wanted to make sure that the work I had done in graduate school would not be lost or forgotten. *With my questionable memory and my dislike of clutter, this fear of forgetting or losing important materials from that time is not unfounded. In fact, I hardly have anything left from my K-12 years, and not that much from college.* I also wanted to make it accessible, both for me and for anyone else who might be interested in reading about the thinking, feeling, troublemaking and writing life of one student.

At some point during the collecting process, I decided that the various artifacts and documents that I've managed to hold on to for almost 20 years, would serve as primary source material for my series of accounts of student life. These accounts represent my effort to take stock of my life as a student and to trace the various events that led to my current position as a troublemaker who resides beside (but not fully outside) the academy. My archive, which is not that extensive, includes: old student papers, professor's comments, program checklists, student ids, conference badges, course and conference flyers, thesis evaluations, report cards, marginalia from some of my books, research and teaching statements, syllabi, my senior, master's and doctoral theses and more.

In using (almost exclusively) my own archive as *the* source material, I'm applying, probably in ways that would not be authorized by the academy, some of the academic methods and skills I learned as a student to my own life in order to take my experiences seriously and to focus this project. In this section, I'm includ-

ing artifacts and official documents related to my student life and many of the documents that I created as a student.

ARTIFACT/DOCUMENT NAME	DISCUSSED IN ACCOUNT
Kindergarten Progress Report	2.3 Kindergarten
First Grade Report	2.12 First Grade
College Acceptance Certificate	
College Professor's Comments on History Paper	7.4 Commentary
College Professor's Comments on Religion Paper	3.5 Promise
Senior Thesis Evaluation	3.5 Promise
Program for College Honor's Ceremony	3 College Introduction
College Diploma	
Master's Acceptance Letter Fragment	3.4 A Change in Plans
Master's Syllabi	4.3 Meeting Butler
Cornel West Program	4.4 Hearing Cornel West
Reading Advice	4.2 How to Read 1,000 Pages a Week
Writing Advice	4.7 Pithy Chewiness
Master's Professor's comments on Theory Paper	7.4 Commentary
Master's Diploma	
Private Journal Entry	6 In-Between
Ph.D Requirements	
Chewy Bagel Award	4.7 Pithy Chewiness
Conference ID Tag	
Conference Flyer	7.8 Healing and Connecting
Comprehensive Exam Completion Form	
Doctoral Exams: Directions and Questions	7.7 Doctoral Exams
Doctoral Diploma	
Flyer, Troublemaking Class	
Campus Visit Itinerary	8.4 Undisciplined Research

Note: Full gallery of images only currently available in iBooks Author version.

DOCUMENT	DISCUSSED IN ACCOUNT
Undergraduate Student Paper (1996)	2.2 A Life of Conversations
Senior Thesis (1996)	2.3 Senior Thesis
Master's Student Paper on Butler (1998)	4.3 Meeting Butler
Master's Student Paper on Irigaray (1998)	4.7 Pithy Chewiness
Master's Thesis Abstract (1998)	4.6 Master's Thesis
Master's Thesis (1998)	4.6 Master's Thesis
NWSA Presentation (2001)	4.7 Pithy Chewiness
Ph.D Directed Reading	4.3 Meeting Butler
Class Presentation (2002)	4.3 Meeting Butler
Class Presentation (2002)	4.3 Meeting Butler
Summary of Coursework at Emory (2002)	7.1 A lot of Questions
Request for Summer Funding (2002)	7.8 Healing and Connecting
Feminist Theory Exam (2003)	7.7 Doctoral Exams
Feminist Ethics Exam, Question 1 (2003)	7.7 Doctoral Exams
Feminist Ethics Exam, Question 3 (2003)	7.7 Doctoral Exams
Dissertation Prospectus (2003)	7.9 Dissertation
NWSA Presentation (2004)	4.3 Meeting Butler
Dissertation: Chapters 1-4, Conclusion, Bibliography (2006)	7.9 Dissertation
NWSA Presentation (2007)	4.3 Meeting Butler
Course Syllabus: Queering Theory (2009)	4.3 Meeting Butler
Course Syllabus: Queer/ing Ethics (2011)	4.3 Meeting Butler
Statement of Research Interests (2007)	8.3 Research Statement
Teaching Philosophy Statement (2008)	8.6 Teaching Statement
Job Cover Letters (2006 and 2011)	8.5 Cover Letters

All documents are links within the account and can be accessed online at <http://undisciplined.room34.com/besides-the-academy/unofficialtranscrip/primary-documents>

# TOOLS

To create this Undisciplined Student Transcript, I'm experimenting with a number of different online and offline tools for archiving and articulating my accounts, including: WordPress, Tumblr, iBooks Author and a green composition notebook. Using these in combination has allowed me to write critically, creatively and joyfully. And, it has enabled me to bring in my voice and experiences in ways that I wasn't ever able to do while writing academic papers. In this section, I'm providing a brief overview of these tools.

## TOOLS

WordPress Blog: **Trouble**

WordPress Site: **Undisciplined**

Tumblr Blog: **Beside/s the Academy**

iBooks Author

1 Green Composition Notebook

This project started on my original WordPress blog, **(making/being in/staying in) Trouble**, in 2009, when I first wrote about my experiences as a troublemaker. Back then, I knew I wanted to write a somewhat autobiographical book about troublemaking, but I wasn't sure how I would do it, or when I'd have time to write it.

When I was done teaching in the winter of 2012, I started typing up notes about the project. I envisioned it as a series of autobiographical accounts of my life ages 0-38 that would be posted on a new website. On July 22, 2012, I started jotting down my thoughts about it in a green composition notebook. After months of thinking and jotting, my website, **Undisciplined** was launched. Since October 2012, I've been slowly adding content and experimenting with different ways of organizing and archiving my accounts and materials. Occasionally, I've posted accounts on both my Trouble blog and the Undisciplined site. *I usually have announced these posts via twitter and received some comments and other feedback from friends and family. In the future, I'm hoping to get more people involved in contributing to these accounts. How? I'm not sure yet.*

[click here  
for more  
information](#)

As my project began to take shape and I realized that I wanted to use more of my artifacts and documents, I decided to create a Tumblr blog for posting images of those artifacts with a brief description/narrative about them. **Beside/s the Academy** became a space where I could store the artifacts and begin crafting my accounts. Several of those artifact Tumblr posts became part of the accounts found in this version of my Unofficial Transcript.

At some point, I'm not quite sure when, I decided that I wanted to turn this project into a book. *I'm hoping that it will eventually take many other forms too.* Because I enjoy experimenting, I decided to try out Apple's iBooks Author. Ever since I discussed the launch of Apple's iBooks Author with Scott on our (now defunct) podcast, **The Undisciplined Room**, I've wanted to use it for one of my writing projects. I'm glad that I decided to try it out for this one. While I see some limitations to using this tool (only readers with iPads have access, the templates are designed primarily for textbooks, it has some quirky rules that shape how and what I can include), I'm pleased with the results. *What do you think?*



IMAGE 6.1 Sara, age 25



*Sitting in my home study, where I worked on my Ph.D admissions applications. (1999)*

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6

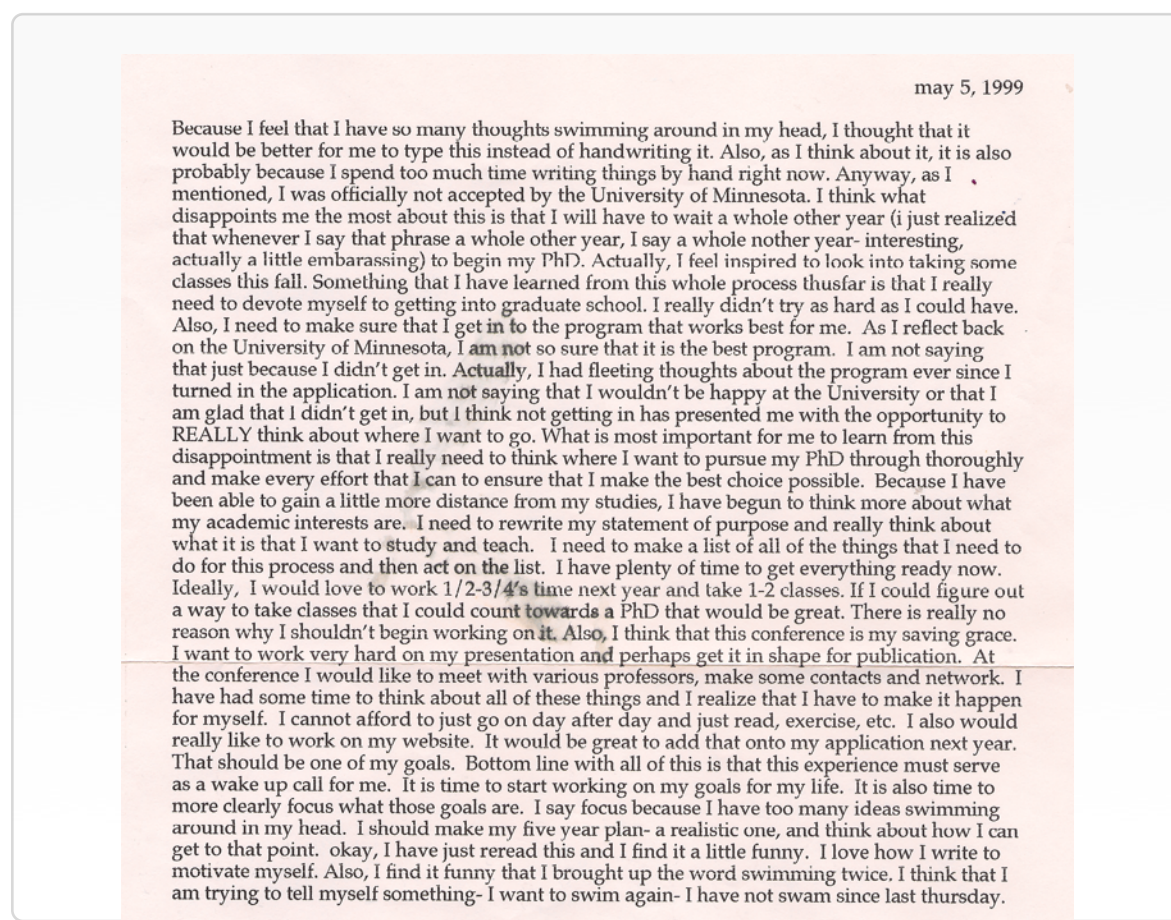
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## IN-BETWEEN

In late 1998, after my master's thesis was approved but before I officially graduated, Scott and I moved to Minneapolis. I planned to apply to the University of Minnesota Feminist Studies Ph.D program and work on my own research project for the rest of the year. When I failed to get into the U (I was supposedly first on the waiting list), I was disappointed but willing to try applying to places

again the next year. *It's interesting to note that, while I failed to be accepted into the graduate program at the U in 1999, I ended up teaching undergraduates and graduates in that department for almost six years (fall 2006-fall 2011).*

IMAGE 6.2 Private Journal Entry



In this private journal entry from May 1999, I discuss how I plan to deal with not getting into the University of Minnesota. This entry is fairly typical for my private journal entries from that time. I discussed how to improve myself a lot in them. Ugh!

In fall 1999, I started working as a Reference Librarian at a local business college. In addition to maintaining the library, I regularly gave workshops on using the internet for classes, and eventually taught my first class ever, An Introduction to the Humanities. Then, in spring 2000 I applied and was accepted to the Ph.D program in women's studies at Emory University.



## I'M A TEACHER!

*Teaching my first class was so exciting. Suddenly, my life made sense. All of my personality quirks—my love of sharing ideas with others and experimenting with new ways of understanding, my goofy personality, my ability to remember and recount random stories—had a place! In the classroom! I loved teaching. And I continued to love it for years. Now, I don't. Or do I? Maybe part of the reason that I'm doing this intellectual history project is to figure out whether or not I still want to claim that "I'm a teacher!"*

I took a year off between my masters and Ph.D. For part of that time I worked on a web-project that never happened. My goal was to take all of my research in feminism and create a resource site for others. It was partly inspired by [Feminist Theory Website](#). I first encountered it in 1998. I can't believe it's still online. I recall spending hours in my apartment in Minneapolis working on plans for organizing all the theories and concepts. But, since I had no technical knowledge of how to create a website and Wordpress and Moveable Type were years from being developed, I eventually gave up. It's funny to think back on that failed experiment, initiated in early 1999. Even before I attended a Ph.D program, I was thinking about ways to be a scholar and educator online.

In the midst of brainstorming about a "feminist web page," I applied for Ph.D programs in Women's Studies and Philosophy and got a part-time job as a reference librarian at a local business college, Rasmussen College. During the spring of 2000, around the time I was accepted for the Ph.D program in Women's Studies at Emory University, I was unexpectedly offered the chance to teach an In-

trodition to the Humanities Course at Rasmussen. The instructor who usually taught it was suddenly unavailable.

I had never taught any class before, especially not an introduction to the humanities, with a focus on art, for college students. During the weeks leading up to the start of the class, I frantically read through the required textbook, trying to pick up as much rudimentary knowledge as I could on the history of painting, music, sculpture and film.

Through that preparation, I learned one of my most important lessons for how to be a teacher: Even though you're the teacher, you don't know everything. In fact, you might know that much, just enough to be a week or two ahead of your students.

I really enjoyed teaching that class. I learned a lot about art. I was able to plan tons of field trips and meet my students at the Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. I got to watch and teach *Dr. Strangelove*. And I learned that, fundamentally, I was a teacher. I wanted to teach and felt moved to share ideas and have important conversations with others. I loved crafting experimental assignments that encouraged students to think in new ways.

13 years later, can I still make that claim? Am I teacher? Do I want to be one? Over the years, one of the things that I've liked best about being a teacher is sharing in the process of learning with students. I like to create classroom spaces where I deliberately don't know a lot, where I'm not an expert, but a learner and more knowledgeable/experienced guide who is being exposed to new ideas just days before my students. My lack of knowledge makes me a more compassionate and energetic educator. Is there room in the current academic environment, with rising costs and increasing demands for faculty to prove their worth (as experts, as teacher who produce concrete and quantifiable results), to be a teacher-as-guide instead of expert?

## ADMISSIONS ESSAY: PH.D

*The following essay was part of my successful application for the Ph.D program in women's studies at Emory University. Here are a few things to note about this brief essay. First, in this essay, I demonstrate my continued love of threes (three versions of agency) and my tendency to construct pithy, logical and neat arguments. Second, I reference the hegemony, but I'm fairly certain that, while I'd repeatedly read that word in theories, I didn't completely know what it meant. I hadn't read Gramsci or Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* yet. Of course, referencing words, but not really knowing what they mean is a frequent practice in the academy. Ha! And, third (3 again!), I mention taking "International Feminist Theory" at the U of Minnesota. While I started the class, I never finished it. But, I did teach it in 2007, when I was a lecturer in the Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies Department at the U of Minnesota.*

How do we define ourselves? How do we fight ideologies that subjugate us? How do we become active participants in our own histories? How do we find ways to connect with others? These are some of the important questions I wish to explore in the PhD program in women's studies at Emory University.

For me, all of these questions relate to the notion of agency for women; that is, their ability to express themselves, resist the hegemony, and form connections. In my masters program in theological studies at Claremont School of Theology, these three types of agency served as a central focus for my studies.

**Agency as expressing oneself** involves the ability to name one's own experiences and to make those experiences heard. My paper, "The Search for Pleas-

ure,” explored Alice Walker’s notion that this type of agency is closely tied to the ability to have control over one’s body and desires.

**Agency as resisting the hegemony** involves the ability to challenge the hegemony without perpetuating it. My paper, “Judith Butler and the Risk of Identity,” explored the tenuous process of both resisting exclusive understandings and asserting potentially efficacious understandings of women.

**Agency as forming connections** involves the ability to connect with others, developing coalitions that can create political and social change. My paper, “The Desire for Identity,” explored how women can develop tentative alliances by examining the ways in which the experiences that make up their identity (race, class, sexual preference, gender, etc.) intersect.

Since graduating with a masters in ethics and culture last May, I have continued to explore agency. This fall I presented a paper on agency and identity at the Second Biennial Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference at the University of Minnesota. This spring I will present a paper on the ethics of identity at the (Re)presenting Women conference in Valdosta, Georgia. Also this spring, I will take a class at the University of Minnesota on the relationship between western and non-western feminists taught by Naomi Scheman entitled “International Feminist Theory.”

Agency will remain central for my PhD work as I continue to explore its implications for feminism by asking questions like: How can individuals be accountable to claims that are provisional and not based on any absolute foundations? How do feminist theories, particularly postmodern feminist theories, address issues of responsibility and commitment? How do feminists with very different experiences connect with each other? And, how does feminism respond to other movements, such as postcolonial theory, critical race theory, or queer theory?

With this in mind, I am applying to the PhD program in women’s studies at Emory University. The program’s promotion of a global perspective fits well with



my focus on creating connections between women. And, the program's emphasis on discussion and debate across disciplines fits well with the interdisciplinary nature of my work. Important for me is the desire to incorporate my religion and ethics training into my feminist work. Additionally, the professors and students in the program, the affiliated programs, Emory University and the city of Atlanta provide for a stimulating feminist community. Participation in this community will allow me to share my ideas and to learn about the ideas of others.

Finally, the program's focus on developing a solid foundation in feminist theories, its focus on professional development and its opportunities for teaching would prepare me for my intended career goal: to teach women's studies on the undergraduate or graduate level. Developing teaching skills is a fundamental part of the PhD training that I wish to receive. Implicit in my studies of feminist theory and agency is the desire to share my work with others and to expose them to ideas that have impacted my understandings of the world.

## ROLE MODEL

*The shift from student/ to expert is the end of / new ways of thinking.*

I stubbornly refuse to be an Expert. When I was teaching at the University and searching for academic jobs in women's studies this was a bit of a problem. Students and Faculty want you to be an Expert. Isn't that why you spent so many years in school?

*I don't like experts./ They claim, "I have THE answer!"/ when I want questions.*

I'm suspicious of Experts. They often tell you what you're supposed to think, what you're supposed to know, what you're supposed to do. I don't like being told what to do. And, in my experience, telling someone what to think, usually encourages them not to think at all. Don't get me started on how annoying I find people who claim that they know more than you and then lecture you on how you should know this or you should know that. While I'm at it, I should mention the other kind of Expert that I dislike: the dazzler. That brilliant professor whose pontifications dazzle their students into submission.

*Watch out for people/ who claim that they are experts./ They are often jerks.*

My distaste for and rejection of Experts has a long history, one that is longer than me. I'm not sure how far back in my family it goes, but I know that my mom didn't like experts, at least the kind that claimed to be Experts and that used their "advanced knowledge" to persuade force people to listen to and follow them. She called these people bullies. And, as the wife of an academic administrator, she had seen and experienced more than her fair share of them. *Perhaps I'm being too free with what I know/ remember here. I'd love to call up my mom right now and have one of those great phone conversations we used to have, before she died. I'd ask her, "So Mom, what do you think of academic experts?" Ha!*

Instead of being an expert, I like the idea of being a guide and/or a flawed but wise role model who demonstrates one approach to making and staying in trouble.

IMAGE 7.1 Sara, age 26



*At Emory with my mom. (2000)*

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## 7

# PH.D

In August 2000, I moved down to Atlanta, Georgia. Since Scott had recently started a new job, he stayed in Minneapolis. This was a tough decision. We faced some resistance from family members who couldn't understand why I needed to move so far away to get a Ph.D, especially one in women's studies. What kind of job, they wondered, could I get with a degree in *that*?

For awhile I traveled back to Minneapolis about once a month. That first semester, I managed to have all 3 of my classes in a 24 hour period, from Wednesday afternoon to Thursday afternoon. This meant that I could fly to Minneapolis for five days at a time. It was pretty grueling. I recall spending a lot of time reading and studying, either while sitting in my room in the apartment I was sharing with a medical student or sitting in the Atlanta airport waiting to fly to Minneapolis. Thankfully our separation didn't last long. By spring break, Scott moved down to Atlanta.

I have fond memories of my time in Atlanta. The graduate students and the faculty in Women's Studies were great. I felt supported and valued. *Which I know, now that I have been in other academic spaces, is unusual.* Emory had a lot of money and resources. *I managed to finish my Ph.D without any student loans.* And, I loved the classes I was taking and the new theories I was studying.

I did feel the pressure to professionalize and to focus my research in ways that would be marketable once I graduated. I also felt that the more theories I acquired and the more specialized my knowledge became, the less joyful my scholarship and writing was. And the less intelligible and meaningful my work was to my friends and family outside of the academy. A few months ago, I summarized my feelings about losing joy in graduate school through haiku:

### **on graduate school**

when I started school  
my wonder was fueled with joy  
but lacked direction

when I finished school  
my wonder was directed  
too much; it lacked joy

In March 2003, just days after I submitted and received approval for dissertation prospectus, I gave birth to my son, FWA. A few months later, probably in June?, I began writing my dissertation. I think I wrote a lot of it while Fletcher slept in a swing.

At the end of 2003, Scott and I decided to move back to Minneapolis. I had finished my coursework and teaching requirements, and I could write my dissertation, which was focused on textual analysis and didn't require any special equipment or resources, anywhere.

From December 2003-November 2005, I wrote my dissertation, squeezing it in while Fletcher napped. *How did I do it? When I think back on it, I'm not sure. Fletcher wasn't in daycare at all; we had tried it, but he kept getting sick, so we gave up. I recall one winter when I would drive Fletcher around Lake Nokomis, about a mile from our house, waiting for him to fall asleep. When he did, I'd pull into the parking lot and sit in the car, writing about feminism and radical democracy.*

I submitted my dissertation in December 2005, two months after my mom was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and three months before my second child was born. With my mom's illness and a new baby, I never made it to my graduation in the spring of 2006. With no big fanfare, my life as a graduate, which had lasted almost 10 years, was over.



## A LOT OF QUESTIONS

*I like to ask questions, lots and lots...and lots of questions. A few years ago, I read a **novel** that was composed entirely of questions, all 165 pages of it. I enjoyed the process of reading it; it opened up my brain and thinking in new ways. When I stumbled upon the large number of questions that I had composed as part of my summary of coursework at Emory, I decided to post it here as one of my accounts.*

### **Summary: Coursework at Emory** (Fall 2002)

What kind of assumptions does the theorist/writer make when she presents herself as “the” authority? How can a theorist take herself and her audience seriously while presenting her ideas as one way among many? What kind of techniques can the theorist use in order to grant her audience some authority? What types of responsibility do/should the theorist and her reader have?

How should we define theory? How does a theorist practice theory? In what ways is the practice of theory exhausting? In what ways is the practice of theory and the project of critical thinking larger than the individuals that practice it? What is the goal of theory/theorizing? What are critical theorists attempting to change with their theories? To transform society or to enable all individuals to recognize their own capacities? How does it relate to practice? Who has access to theory? What does it mean to be a theorist? What is the relationship between the theorists and others? Who can be a theorist?

What function/role should critical thinking play in feminist politics? Can it be a foundation in itself? Should I continue to place such emphasis on the term risk or should I focus on another word for describing this? Why should I promote



risk as the best way in which to describe this process? What will help me to ground this project? What could serve as the foundation of my thoughts on risk? Who should I put Judith Butler in conversation with in this project?

What are the differences between tactics and strategies? In Chela Sandoval's essay ("Third World Women and Differential Consciousness") she discusses the tactics that are employed in order to use different theories. What does it mean to strategically or tactically use theories/ideas? This fits in with my directed reading for Cynthia Willett. How are Butler/Irigaray employing tactics, strategies? What is the significance of describing these in such ways? Another question: How useful is pragmatism for my project? What are the drawbacks of pragmatism?

Where does textual authority come from? What can stand as a foundation for feminist ethics? Some of the key questions that came out of the paper are: Does Butler's radical democracy provide us with a substantial enough vision, one that can encourage and sustain political thought and action? How does Butler account for the connections between individuals? How does Butler's work allow for large-scale contestations? How can she talk about systems of oppression? Why does Butler focus exclusively on the negative aspects of politics? Can we think about the process of radical democracy and its contestation in positive terms? How do we develop our judgments in the process of politics? How exactly do we keep our political terms open? What does the difficult work of perpetual contestation look like?

Is it really enough to say that we need to keep our politics open? Is Butler's project compelling enough to provide the hope that feminists need in order to continue to engage in politics? If politics (and normative visions) are so radically open, how do we have accountability to it? And, through what process are we able to commit to these fluid terms?

What is cultural translation? How do feminists engage in this difficult process? What does it really mean to take difference seriously? What is the hard work

of translation? Does Butler do this in any of her work? How can we put Butler in conversation with Morrison or Hill Collins? How can Butler's project, or one similar to hers, allow for creativity, imagination, improvisation? (See Welch's other book and West's essay on improvisation)

Is contestation, questioning a male/masculine practice? Are there other ways in which to envision the practice of critique? Risk? Contestation? How is it expressed in some other writers? How is critique practiced? Must it be in language? What is the role of critical thought in all of this? What is the relationship between theory and practice? What is the critics relationship to others? Who can be a critic? What are her goals? [these questions are very similar to the ones that I raised in the critical theory class]

Must contestation always result in these series of deaths? Is contestation always a battle? What is the tradition of contestation that comes out of Nietzsche? Again, are there other ways in which to understand contestation? Is critique a masculine, violent, individualistic pursuit? What is the goal of transformation? Will contest critique eventually result in madness?

How can we redefine courage as sustaining life instead of dying? How does having and practicing courage connect with theorizing, writing, critiquing? What is a courageous act? How are heroes connected to communities? Must heroes be isolated from the community? How are politics practiced within theoretical feminist writings?

Where does the capacity to critique come from? Who can be a critic? What values, virtues do theoretical critics/rebels practice, promote? How does JB practice troublemaking in her work? Does she go beyond promoting troublemaking to practicing it? Does her description of critique privilege the practice or the actor? Could it be that the practice of critique is a practice, one that is centered on activity and not actors? It is not controlled by individuals, but taken up by them? *I*

*think these ideas fit in with my earlier studies on identity. But I wonder if my focus on the virtues of critique place the emphasis on the critic again. Actually, I am trying to redefine these virtues to demonstrate the ways in which they are not focused on individuals, but on communities.* How does the body/bodies fit into this description of critique? How is troublemaking practiced by real bodies and what effects do troubling practices have on those bodies?

What is freedom? How can we bring the work of Butler and black feminists pragmatists into conversation? Is Butler practicing a radical notion of negative freedom? How does freedom connect with my larger project? How can it be applied to my thoughts on feminism, the theorist, difference within feminism?

What role does the reader play in Butler's work? If Butler uses a rhetorical strategy to disrupt the reader, how does her writing style reflect this? Does she critically mime philosophical discourse in order to expose its weaknesses or, does she do something else? How does she use language to challenge her readers?

## PH.D CLASSES

Emory University  
Institute for Women's Studies  
Atlanta, Georgia  
2000-2006

### **Fall 2000**

Critical Theory  
Race, Gender And Representation  
Method and Topics In Women's Stud

### **Spring 2001**

Feminist Ethics  
Third-Wave Critical Theory  
Feminist Theory

### **Fall 2001**

Literature, Politics and the Woman Writer  
Masculinity and Violence in 1970s Films  
Foucault, Disputed Questions

### **Spring 2002**

Race, Gender, Sexuality Politics and Literature  
Narrative and Female Selfhoods  
Directed Reading: Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray  
Teaching Women's Studies

### **Doctoral Exams**

Feminist Theory  
Feminist Ethics

### **Spring 2003**

Poetics/Politics (Audit)

### **Dissertation**

Feminist Ethics and the Project of Democracy

## THE PHILOSOPHY BOYS

*This account is a somewhat tongue-in-cheek commentary on graduate school culture. I must admit, while I recall being annoyed by the antics of the philosophy boys in my classes, I was friends with many of them. But, I know that I never wanted to be one of them: a philosophy boy who spouted jargon and couldn't utter a thought without providing a history of its origins or name dropping a dozen key thinkers that have contributed to its significance. As I write this last sentence I realize that, shortly before leaving the academy, I was getting dangerously close to becoming just that.*

My first semester in my Ph.D program at Emory University, I took a philosophy class. I met two great friends in that class. I also met the Philosophy Boys, a group of male philosophy graduate students who were trained in the fine art of pontificating, abstract theorizing and bullshitting. Individually, these "boys" were friendly-enough and very smart, but collectively they exemplified the stereotype of the graduate student as an overly erudite and elitist blow-hard.

While at Emory, I took a lot of philosophy courses, usually with at least a few of the "boys". My wonderful advisor, Dr. Cynthia Willett, was in the philosophy department. I loved her classes and being exposed to new approaches to freedom, agency, politics, and critical theory. But, I always felt like an outsider, and maybe a bit of an interloper when I took a philosophy class (especially if it wasn't her class). Feminist philosophy (or theory) wasn't real philosophy to many of the philosophy students and faculty. And the feminist demand to ground philosophy in concrete experiences and express it in accessible and clear language seemed to them to be aimed at dumbing down the serious and lofty work that philosophers

do. Of course, really cool feminist work was being done in that department, by faculty and students alike. Two thirds of my awesome dissertation committee were in the philosophy department. But, the looming presence of the philosophy boys and their frequent in-class soliloquies served as a reminder that philosophy and my feminist methods and practices did not quite mix.

When I taught graduate students at the University of Minnesota, occasionally I would talk about my graduate school memories and how 90% of what graduate students seemed to do in my classes was bullshit. I was thinking about my classes with the philosophy boys. Their bullshitting typically involved name-dropping at least 2 or 3 highly influential theorists or schools of philosophical thought. It also involved bypassing any summary or recognition of what that author/theory was actually claiming, and jumping right into a scathing critique or outright dismissal of them. As a result, in-class discussions weren't that enlightening or productive.

Sometimes these bullshitting sessions made me feel like a fraud. I shouldn't be in the class. I don't understand what is being said. I don't know half the names that are being dropped. Other times, these sessions entranced me as I listened to the boys wax poetically about Hegel or positivism or phenomenology. I stopped trying to understand their words and instead would marvel over the cadence of their sentences, peppered with polysyllabic jargon and punctuated with phrases like, "the ways in which" or rhetorical questions like, "right?" *Full disclosure: I still like using the phrase "the ways in which."* The meaningless words were so pretty and flowed so well.

By the time I had spent four semesters in class with the boys, I was ready to be done with coursework. I had reached the limits of my desire to be a graduate student.

A few years ago, I attended an on-campus lecture. During the Q & A period at the end of the speaker's talk, after several graduate students and professors



had posed their "questions", which weren't really questions but mini-lectures about their own research, I had a flashback to that class and the philosophy boys. I had attended and even presented at dozens of lectures by that point, but it was this random lecture that triggered my memories of graduate school and made me finally fully realize that the philosophy boys' methods for functioning in academic spaces were, and continue to be, the norm for (most) academics.

What do I make of this realization? Is it possible to be a different kind of academic, a non-philosophy boy one? I used to think that interdisciplinary programs/departments like women's studies (or maybe cultural studies) offered different models. But, having taught in a interdisciplinary department, I'm not so sure. And, now that universities are consolidating departments or **eliminating interdisciplinary programs** to streamline their programs and provide students with a more cost-efficient and "world-class education," I wonder about what spaces are left for me.

Review:

**Question One: Do you enjoy speaking almost exclusively in discipline-specific jargon?**

- A. Yes. It is required for intelligibility in the dominant discourse.
- B. Frequently
- C. Sometimes
- D. Never

**Question Two: Are you more interested in speaking/lecturing/pontificating than listening to others?**

- A. Of course
- B. Usually
- C. No

**D.** I only listen to others so that I can demonstrate how wrong they are (and how right I am).

**Question Three: Are you a boy?**

A. Yes

B. No

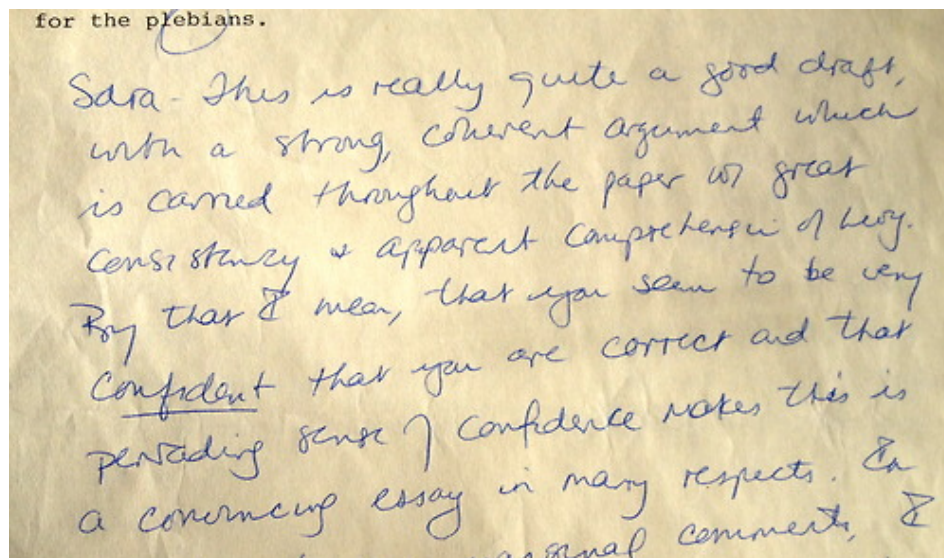
C. Irrelevant. Philosophy boys don't have a gender, or a body. They are minds.

D. A and C.

*Answers: 1. A 2. D 3. D*

# COMMENTARY

*As I was looking through my papers, I was fascinated by the comments on my past papers. Here is a sampling of three papers from my student life: 1. a history paper in my first year of college, 2. a religion paper in my senior year of college and 3. my first big paper on deconstruction for graduate school. The teacher's comments spark questions for me about academic methods and practices.*



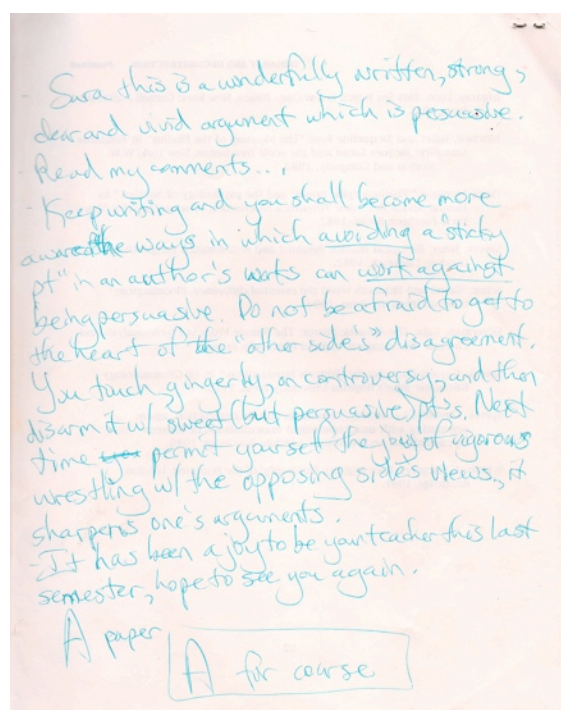
## 1. **Artifact:** Comments on the first draft of a history paper (Fall 1992).

"Sara - This is really quite a good draft, with a strong, coherent argument which is carried throughout the paper with great consistency and apparent comprehension of history. By that I mean, that you seem to be very confident that you are correct and that pervading sense of confidence makes this a convincing essay in many respects."

This paper was about Livy's *Early History of Rome*. I wrote it in my first semester of college, in my Historical Perspectives class. I wanted to include it in my academic/intellectual history because I was intrigued by my professor's (Dr. Eric

Carlson) description of my work as confident and convincing. At first glance, I take this as a compliment, but is it? And, is it really a good thing to have “apparent comprehension” and conviction? What about substance?

I have fond memories of Dr. Carlson’s class and I know that I learned a lot about how to be a better writer. (This paper came at the end of the semester and earned an A; my first paper received a C+.) But, his comment here seems to be describing and praising my ability to bullshit, where substance doesn’t matter as long as you’re confident in your own rightness (and smartness). As I mention in my account, “The Philosophy Boys,” graduate school involved a lot of bullshitting. I don’t like bullshitting, especially the kind in which you understand yourself to be CORRECT and in no need of re-thinking your position so as to take seriously other perspectives.



## 2. Artifact: Master’s Professor’s Comments on Critical Theory Paper (1996)

“Sara: this is a wonderfully written, strong, clear and vivid argument which is persuasive. ...Keep writing and you shall become more aware of the ways in which avoiding a “sticky pt” in an author’s works can work against being persuasive. Do

not be afraid to get to the heart of the “other side’s” disagreement. You touch gingerly, on controversy, and then disarm it with sweet (but persuasive) points. Next time permit yourself the joy of vigorous wrestling with the opposing side’s views, it sharpens your argument.”

I haven’t really looked at these comments since I got this paper back in December 1996. It’s fascinating to read this beside Dr. Eric Carlson’s comment about being persuasive through confidence. Here my master’s professor (and advisor), Dr. Garth Baker-Fletcher, suggests that a stronger (more effective) argument requires risk, vulnerability and a willingness to engage with other perspectives. The deeper I got into my graduate work, and then my Post-Ph.D teaching, the more I focused on risk and vulnerability and the more I tried to take Dr. Baker-Fletcher’s advice.

## A GIFT

*I love teaching women's studies courses. You get to introduce students to new and often revolutionary ways of thinking. You encourage them to explore their own experiences and how and why ideas and theories are relevant (or sometimes irrelevant) to their lives. And, you help them to have a sense of humor, even while they're angry about and critical of systems of power of privilege. Whenever I see this pin, which for the longest time was up on my bulletin board, I smile and remember how fun women's studies can be.*

“Fuck this Fifties Housewife Bullshit” was a gift from two students in the first women's studies course I ever taught: Introduction to Women's Studies at Emory University, Fall 2002. I can't quite remember who they were or why they gave me this awesome pin. I can think of a couple of reasons: 1. They liked my class, 2. They were inspired by our discussions, earlier in the semester, about Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*, or 3. They knew I was just about to become a Mom (I had revealed to all of them earlier in the semester that I was pregnant) and they wanted to encourage/support my feminist resistance to traditional gender roles.



I loved teaching that class. I was a Ph.D student in Women's Studies. While I was in residence at Emory, from 2000-2003, I was only required to teach 2 classes as part of my fellowship and degree. Unlike at other schools, where graduate students are required to teach a lot, usually while taking their own classes, I taught these classes after my coursework and while I was studying for my doctoral exams. *I was also required to be a teaching assistant for two courses, but*



*that job was designed to serve as a mentoring opportunity, in which I worked closely with the professor and received a lot of useful feedback on my own teaching.*

Emory's program was unusual (and unusually awesome) because of the low teaching load for graduate students and the amazing amount of funding they provided for all graduate students: 4 years of full tuition + a generous stipend. Also, they put a lot of emphasis on mentoring and training students to be teachers. While I was a graduate student, I had a teaching mentor and took a class (feminist pedagogy) that was specifically designed to prepare for me teaching the Intro class. And, as I mentioned above, my role as a teaching assistant was primarily designed to give me teaching experience and mentoring; it wasn't just used to exploit me as cheap labor.

I was lucky. I didn't realize that until I began teaching at a research university and witnessed how much graduate students taught (as assistants who graded papers and ran discussion sections, or as instructors, who taught huge classes) and how little mentoring seemed to be formally built into their teaching.

## STORYTELLER!?

*In this account, I trace the history of some of my storytelling practices. What I don't mention is how useful my storytelling skills, especially my ability to connect seemingly unconnected ideas, were in the classroom. I loved taking students' random comments at the beginning of class and connecting them to what we were reading or discussing that day. I also don't discuss how my role as storyteller, especially with my digital videos, seems to come into conflict with my role as academic (and serious scholar). Academic methods, especially those that focus on critically dissecting arguments, discourage me from creatively imagining new worlds and ways of being.*

### **Document:** Chapter Two from my dissertation

When I was a kid, I used to tell people that I could make a story out of anything. And I could. In these stories, I didn't imagine new worlds. Instead, I imagined (or uncovered) hidden connections between ideas, events and experiences. I liked taking seemingly disparate things and finding ways to bring them together to create new meanings. I wasn't your typical storyteller. Not like my sister, MLP, who crafted brilliant tales about the pen and pencil wars or alien spaceships that looked like flying pizzas (with shooting anchovies!). In fact, I didn't write many of my stories down. Is that why I don't remember them? I crafted stories while engaged in intense conversations.

Even though I had proudly declared my ability to tell stories as a kid, I didn't embrace the label of storyteller. In fact, in my statement of purpose for graduate school applications, I rejected the label. Responding to Martin Marty's (a religion scholar and my dad's Ph.D advisor at the University of Chicago) claim in some es-

say (which I'm still trying to locate) that his tombstone would say, "He told stories," I wrote that mine might say this instead: "She had great conversations."

I didn't like the model of storytelling because it felt too much like a monologue, with one person just "reporting" their story to passive, listening others. This rejection of stories, especially "narratives," continued into my Ph.D program. I recall being very skeptical of narrative theory in one of my favorite classes at Emory, Narrative and Female Selfhoods. Why, I wondered, in light of all the damage that Master Narratives and neat and coherent stories have done by flattening out and simplifying our experiences, would we want to tell stories?

At some point after that class, I think it might have been around the time I read Paul Eakin's *How our Lives Become Stories* or maybe Dorothy Alison's *Bastard out of Carolina* or Trinh T. Minh-ha's "Grandma's Stories," I started to rethink my reservations about storytelling and being a storyteller.

The first time I claimed the identity storyteller was in the second farm film that I created in 2002. Entitled **Farm Film, Part 2: The Puotinen Women**, this digital video was about the storytelling women in the Puotinen family. In the opening of the video, I said:

Something important that I've realized in the last couple of years is the power of the Puotinen women in their storytelling. It's been something very profound to understand that these stories that mean so much to our family have really been passed on, in a variety of different ways by the Puotinen women, particularly my grandmother Ines and my mother Judy.

At the end of the video, after weaving together important stories from their experiences on our family farm with mine, I drew upon the brilliant words of Trinh T. Minh-ha to claim my role as the next storyteller:

Tell me and let me tell my hearers what I have heard from you who heard it from your mother and your grandmother.

Producing that video was a powerful experience for me. It was so fun to craft new stories (or new takes on old stories) through the editing process. I had visions of completing a third video about the Puotinen men. But, there was no time. My son Fletcher was born, just days after we (my husband Scott and I) finished editing the video and only hours after we first screened it at a conference. And I had a dissertation to write. *Later, after our beloved farm was sold and my mom, to whom the second farm film was dedicated, got sick and died, I didn't want to make another video. I wondered if the subjects of my videos were cursed, doomed to die or be gone forever if I made videos about them.*

While I didn't have time (or a desire) to continue telling stories about the Puotinen family through video, I did continue thinking about the value of storytelling. In the second chapter of my dissertation, I wrote about the storyteller as one of three important role models for feminists:

...the storyteller trickster weaves words together—in oral or written form—to create meaningful narratives outside and beyond the system. Her goal is not only to critically challenge the hegemony, but also to ensure that the stories (the traditions, the histories, the people) of her communities do not get lost, forgotten or destroyed. In creating and sharing her stories, the trickster storyteller serves three important functions. First, she is a truth teller who bears witness to the stories of her people/her allies/her communities/herself and testifies to others about those stories. Second, she is a conjurer who enthralls her audiences with her words, drawing them in so that they feel like they are a part of the story. And third, she is visionary who uses her

stories to create new meanings and imagine new possibilities for herself, her communities and her audience.

It's fascinating (and strange and curious) to revisit these words that I wrote, way back in early 2004 (or late 2003?), and see how important they still are to me and my vision of how-to-be in the world. After writing my dissertation and then getting a teaching job at the University of Minnesota, I sometimes thought about storytelling. And I occasionally taught about it. But, I focused much more of my research and writing energy on another one of the role models that I wrote about in that second chapter of my dissertation: the troublemaker.

It wasn't until my appointment at the University of Minnesota ended and I stopped teaching (and being an academic) that I returned to storytelling. My first project: a digital story about my first grade report card. Unlike the farm films, where Scott shot most of the footage and did the technical editing, [Progress Report: An Undisciplined Account](#) was produced completely by me (well, with the help of some of his music). Since finishing that first digital story, in March 2012, I've created about **50 more**, including a series of stories about my dad's farm stories. *Admittedly, around half of my stories are minute-long fragments, part of two larger projects: Digital Moments and Love in Fragments.*

Even as I'm beginning to take on the role of storyteller, I'm still skeptical, and a little critical, of the identity, Storyteller. My skepticism has much to do with the power of stories to manipulate, distort and flatten out or erase the complexities of our lives. On my blog, I've recently been writing about the **dangers of the single story** and **the trouble with coherent, unified narratives**.

In my hesitation to claim the role of storyteller, I've tentatively decided to call my various descriptions of my intellectual life accounts, not stories. Will I ever fully embrace the role of the Storyteller? Probably not. As with most identi-

ties that I uneasily inhabit, I'll enjoy remaining just on the edge, telling stories that attempt to trouble and unsettle our inclination for easy, romanticized tales.

So, again, am I a storyteller? Since I'm still not sure how to answer that question, I'll tentatively conclude this account with some narration from one of my favorite digital videos, **Stories from the U.P.:**

I want to craft and share stories that reflect a more troubling understanding of our trips to the UP, that convey the joy and difficulties, our fulfillment and exhaustion.

I like messy stories; stories that don't always erase our conflicts, that allow us to put our sometimes contradictory experiences beside each other.



# DOCTORAL EXAMS

Ph.D. Examination for Sara Puotinen

Institute for Women's Studies

Friday, Jan. 31, 9am

This is a take-home, open-book examination. Your answers should be presented in an essay format (typed, double-spaced, standard font).

You need to answer three questions in total: One from Part I and two from Part II. Give each question roughly equal weight. You may allow up to 7-9 pages per answer, but should not exceed this page limit. Avoid using a single author more than once unless you decide that discussing a particular author is crucial for two questions. Then make sure you focus on very different aspects of their work. You should return the completed exam via email to Lenea Epstein ([lepste2@emory.edu](mailto:lepste2@emory.edu)) and hard copy on Monday Feb 3 by 4pm.

Written: January 31-February 3, 2003

Oral: February 11, 2003

## Reading List

I started in the Women's Studies Ph.D program at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia in August of 2000. After two years of coursework, I took my doctoral exams, one on feminist theory and one on ethics, during the weekend of February 1-2, 2003. I emailed my exams (two essays that had to be 10 pages or less) to my exam committee, Dr. Cynthia Willett, Dr. Pamela Hall and Dr. Elizabeth Bounds, on February 3.

I loved my committee and I appreciated the structure of my exams. Instead of required lists (which seems to be the case in other fields), I was able to completely craft my own lists and questions for the exams. As a result, my list and the essays I wrote for my exams directly fed into my dissertation (I think I even used big chunks of the essays in my dissertation). Also, I was able to choose whether to do a sit-down exam for two hours or a take-home essay exam for 48 hours (if I remember the details correctly). Since I was almost 8 months pregnant with my son FWA, I loved the take-home option.

I don't remember that much about writing the exam. I do recall that when I started writing, I listened to (and sang along with!) the theme from Raiders of the Lost Ark. That song continued to inspire me for years as I struggled to write academic essays.

One other thing that I remember from the exam process was how fun it was to do my oral exams. The oral exams happened just over a week after I submitted my written exam. It was a closed exam (so no pompous academics or academics-in-training were present to "peacock" or trash my project) and we spent most of the time experimenting and playing with the ideas that I proposed in my essays. And we laughed a lot.

## **Troublemaking Influence**

As I think back on that exam experience, I realize that the Department of Women's Studies at Emory University and the amazing committee members that I had fostered my troublemaking (and resistance to academics-as-usual) by offering a model for how to be an academic and/or do academic work that was fun and joyful and meaningful. A model that didn't demand that I merely jump through hoops to prove that I was a serious-enough scholar or that required that I learn a specific canon of (outdated and not always relevant) sources to prove my



marketability. A model that encouraged me to claim my education and shape it in the ways that worked for me and my larger intellectual (academic and otherwise) aims.

## FEMINIST THEORY

Part 1: Feminist Theory (answer one question)

1. Consider feminist theories as constructed texts. Are there more appropriate rhetorics for feminist theories? How are (or should) feminist theoretical/critical writing be connected to its implied values, goals, and audiences? Please answer with a discussion of three texts from your Reading List.
2. How has feminist subjectivity been complicated by different discourses such as postmodernism and psychoanalysis? What types of subjectivity do these discourses offer? How dwell do these types of subjectivity deal with the issue of agency? How well do they deal with desire, emotions, or unconscious drives? Compare and contrast several authors from your reading list.

### **Exam Question Answered: Feminist Theory and Rhetoric**

Consider feminist theories as constructed texts. Are there more appropriate rhetorics for feminist theories? How are (or should feminist theoretical/critical writing be connected to its implied values, goals, and audiences? Please answer with a discussion of three texts from you Reading List.

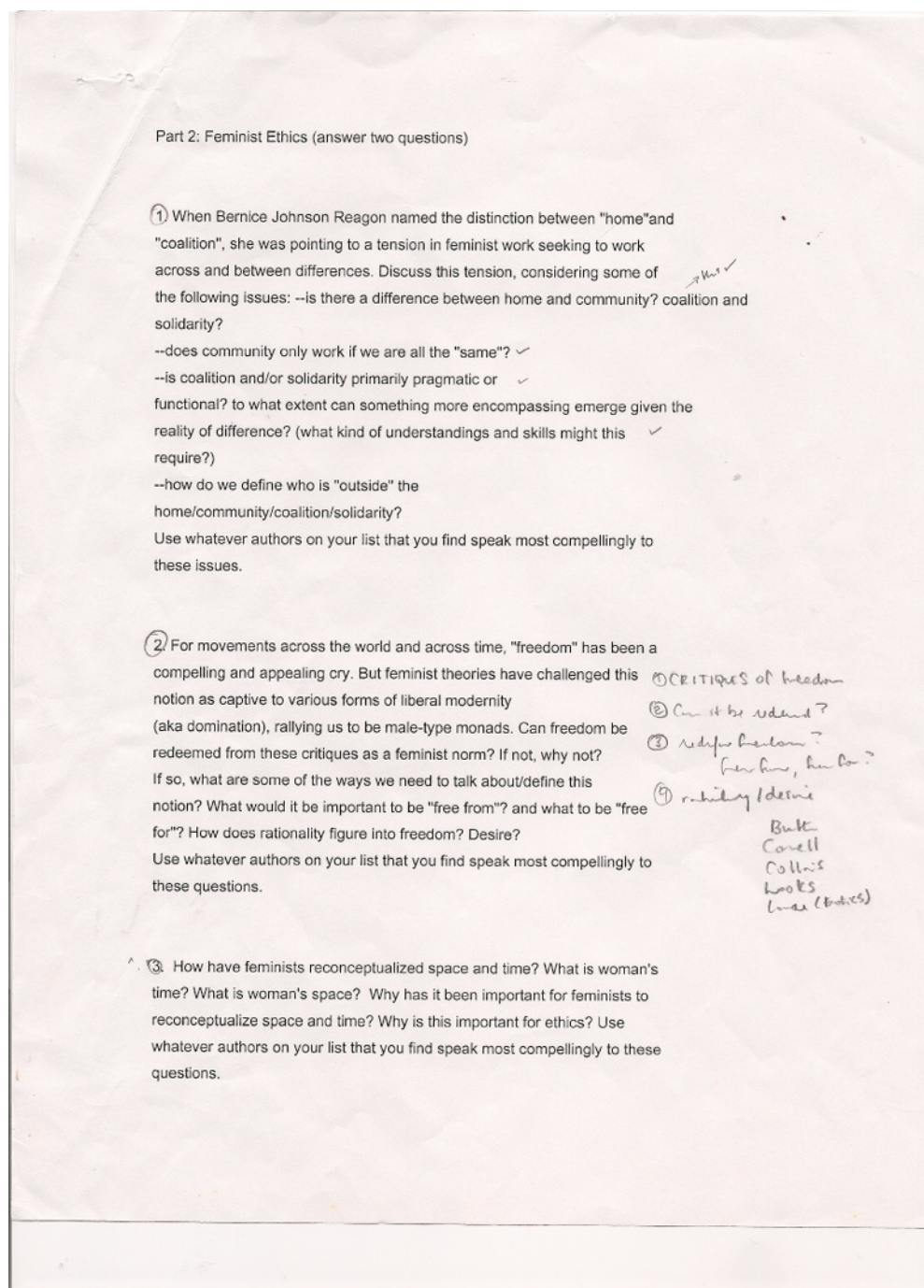
**Excerpt:** How do feminist theorists practice their theory in their writing? Why and how is style important? How does how something is said impact what is said and how it is understood by others? These questions point to an important in-

sight within feminist theory: feminist theory is not a simple (or innocent) description or analysis of facts or ideas. Theory and how it is presented through writing by a theorist is a practice—a practice that is implicated in the power structures that are being critiqued and a practice that has the potential, depending on how it is presented, to further the values and goals of the feminist theorist and her community/ies. This essay will examine how three different theorists practice their theory within their own critical writing, exploring the ways in which their writings and writing styles are (or are not) connected to the values they are promoting, the goals they are wishing to achieve, and the audiences they are hoping to reach.

### **Theorists/texts discussed:**

1. Collins, Patricia Hill. *Fighting Words Black Women and the Search for Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
2. Butler, Judith. "Preface (1999)." *Gender Trouble*, vi-xxvi. New York: Routledge, 1999.
3. Allison, Dorothy. "A Question of Class." In *Skin*, 13-36. Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1994.

# FEMINIST ETHICS



## Exam Question 1 Answered: Home and Coalition

When Bernice Johnson Reagon named the distinction between "home" and "coalition", she was pointing to a tension in feminist work seeking to work across and between differences. Discuss this tension, considering some of the following issues:

- is there a difference between home and community? coalition and solidarity?
- does community only work if we are all the "same"?



- is coalition and/or solidarity primarily pragmatic or functional? to what extent can something more encompassing emerge given the reality of difference? (what kind of understandings and skills might this require?)
- how do we define who is “outside” the home/community/coalition/solidarity?

Use whatever authors on your list that you find speak most compellingly to these issues.

**Excerpt:** In light of all of these problems, a new understanding of difference is needed, one that embraces and celebrates diversity (Lorde) and that maintains (instead of reduces) the complexity that necessarily accompanies difference. In her essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Audre Lorde offers such an understanding of difference. For her, difference is not something to be merely tolerated or to accept as inevitable. Instead, difference is something to be embraced. It needs to be “seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our [women’s] creativity can spark like a dialectic” (111). Sharon Welch echoes this in her book *Sweet Dreams in America*, arguing that the embracing of difference can lead to communities that “have the energy and creativity of jazz [where] community identity and structure can be improvisational, a fitting response to the needs of the moment and the strengths and resources of this people, at this place, and at this time” (71). Welch adds that difference serves an important critical function, enabling us, through engagement with others, to see the limits of our own knowledge and understandings. “We need the vision and expertise of others,” Welch writes, “to see where our views are partial and/or just plain wrong” (63). This critical function and its connection with vision is further discussed in María Lugones and her essay Playfulness, ‘World’- Travelling, and Loving Perception.” In this essay, Lugones discusses how confronting and embracing the differences between her and her mother enabled Lugones to shift her vision from that of arrogant perception—seeing herself as better than her mother—to



loving perception— seeing herself as dependent on and connected to her mother. Reflecting on this loving perception, Lugones writes: “We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood without which we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid, visible, integrated; we are lacking. [sic] to each other’s ‘worlds’ enables us to *be* through *loving* each other” (394).

This positive understanding of difference points to a third type of connection, one that is neither a home space of pure nurturing, safety, and sameness nor a coalitional space of pure hostility, survival, and threatening difference. Although I am hesitant to label this space of connection, I would argue that among the different terms available—home, coalition, solidarity, community, alliance—community comes closest to describing this connection. For me, the notion of community invokes a sense of responsibility and connection to others that terms such as solidarity and alliance do not. In order to distinguish my notion of community from others, I will further classify it as a feminist critical community (FCC).

### **Exam Question Answered: Space and Time**

How have feminists reconceptualized space and time? What is women’s time? What is women’s space? Why has it been important for feminists to reconceptualize space and time? Why is this important for ethics? Use whatever authors on your list that you find speak most compellingly to these questions.

**Excerpt:** In the past two decades, feminist ethicists have undertaken the project of reconceptualizing space and time in ways that are more compatible with the experiences of women. In this essay, I will examine how four feminists have taken up this project. Beginning with notions of space, I will examine Drucilla Cornell’s idea of the imaginary domain and bell hooks’ and Gloria Anzaldua’s ideas of marginal and border spaces. Then, I will move to notions of time by examining Trinh

T. Minh-ha's idea of storytelling time. In looking at all four of these feminists' work, I will argue that their new notions should not be understood as the reconceptualization of space and time but the *reclaiming* and *revaluing* of space and time for women (the idea of women's space and women's time). Such a move (from reconceptualization to revaluing) enables these feminists to directly connect their work with feminist ethics and its projects of moral development and agency.

## HEALING AND CONNECTING

*In this account, I discuss a conference that my sister and I presented at in 2005. A few things I recall about the experience: 1. It was great to present with my sister; it offered us a space to publicly mourn for the farm that had been recently sold. 2. The A.V equipment wasn't working that well. We had no sound, which was a big deal for watching the video clips. 3. That trip was the first time I had been back in the UP (upper peninsula of Michigan) since my parents had left and sold our family farm. It looked depressed and it was depressing. I've returned many times since then, and I have much better (positive) assessment of the UP.*

### **Document:** Funding Proposal for Farm Film Project

One key theme in my intellectual history has been a persistent desire to use the theories and ideas that I was learning to understand, connect, care for/about the world and to heal. This desire was influenced and shaped by my increased exposure in graduate school to feminist thinkers/theorists, like bell hooks, Cynthia Enloe, Dorothy Allison, Patricia Hill Collins, Gloria Anzaldúa, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Judith Butler and Audre Lorde, just to name a few.

But even as I was being exposed to these powerful ideas about using theory to understand/connect/care/heal in graduate school, I was being trained to engage with and express these ideas using alienating academic jargon and methods. The "rigor" I was learning made it harder for me to talk to and connect with my family and friends. And, the emphasis placed on being critical (that is, critical as picking apart and always finding fault with ideas and thinkers) made it increasingly difficult to find my own voice and make sense of my own experiences. As I

struggled with my university's emphasis on a narrow sense of rigor and their increasing demands for a particular type of professional development, I looked for ways to engage beside my graduate training.

In 2001 I decided to create a video (with a lot of help from my husband, STA) about my family's farm in the upper peninsula of Michigan. I wanted to document my family's experiences being (visiting, resting, working) at the farm. And I wanted to use theories on identity, belonging, space, and narrative selfhood that I was wrestling with in my feminist theory classes to make sense of and/or trouble those experiences. I was hoping that my documentary would enable me to share some of what I was doing in my Ph.D program with my family and would help me to make sense of my own conflicting feelings about belonging, heritage and identity.

I loved creating this documentary. So much so that I created another the following year. These **two videos** are some of the most important intellectual projects that came out of my years as a PhD student. While few people will read my dissertation or my academic essays, generations of family members will be able to watch the farm films and learn about the farm (sold in 2004) and hear my mom's stories (died in 2009). *The importance of these films, especially the second one which was dedicated to my mom, became even more evident as my mom was dying and after her death. People who hadn't met her before her illness (like her hospice social worker) could/can watch the video and bear witness to her feisty spirit and passion for storytelling. And those of us, close to her, who were having difficulty remembering the non-sick, non-pancreatic cancer Mom, could watch the videos and remember who she truly was.*

Shortly (as in just days) before my mom was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, my sister and I did a presentation at the Feminism (s) and Rhetoric (s) Conference in Houghton, Michigan on the importance of space and place. Since Houghton was where I was born and was only 70 miles north of our family farm,

it seemed like a great opportunity to screen parts of my film and reflect on them with my sister. Here's an excerpt from the call for papers for that conference:



**Possible topics:**

- Identification of the language patterns or rhetorical strategies of women from a particular culture, race, historical era, or academic field
- Recuperation of the contributions of women rhetoricians, writers, readers, or linguists from a particular race, culture, historical era, or academic field
- Literacy practices of women in underrepresented groups including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual
- Cross-cultural investigations of gendered reading, writing, or speaking
- New directions for alternative rhetorics

5th Biennial International  
**Feminism(s) &  
Rhetoric(s) Conference**

SPONSORED BY THE  
*Coalition of Women Scholars  
in the History of Rhetoric and Composition*

**Thurs., October 6 – Sat., October 8, 2005**

HOSTED BY  
*Michigan Technological University, Houghton, Michigan*

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

**Donna Haraway**  
**Min-Zhan Lu**  
**Andrea Abernethy Lunsford**  
**Jacqueline Jones Royster**  
**Helena Viramontes**

FEATURED SPEAKERS

Jonathan Alexander	Mary Lay
Lisa Ede	Shirley Wilson Logan
Karen A. Foss	Scott Lyons
Sonja K. Foss	Joyce Irene Middleton
Cheryl Glenn	Jacqueline Rhodes
Cindy L. Griffin	Kim Sawchuk
Laura Gurak	Patsy Schweickart
Gesa Kirsch	Lynn Worsham

And here's a draft of my abstract (I haven't been able to find my outline for the actual conference yet):

### **Losing the Farm. Two Sisters Reflect on the Value of Space**

Drawing upon a wide range of theorists, including bell hooks, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cathy Caruth, two sisters reflect on the value of physical space and the impact of its loss on representations, constructions and understandings of identity. This session will be divided into two sections. In the first section, Sara L. Puotinen will show extended clips from her two documentaries

on the Puotinen family farmstead located on eighty acres of land in Amasa in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. These two documentaries represent the filmmaker's attempt to explore the stories of the farmstead—its land, buildings and past and present inhabitants—and how those stories have shaped her understandings of self, family and heritage.

In the second section, the filmmaker's sister, Anne Puotinen, will briefly respond to the films. In addition to critically reflecting on how these films communicate the importance of the farm for the Puotinen family and its individual members, she will discuss how the recent loss of the farm—it was sold in November 2004—affects understandings of physical space in relation to memory and belonging.

In addition to serving as an example of how I tried to connect my own experiences and struggles with identity to my academic theories on self/identity/belonging/space, this document stands as the last project that I completed **before** my mom was diagnosed. It was also just a few months **before** I completed my dissertation and earned my PhD.



## DISSERTATION

Just days before I gave birth to my son, on March 29, 2003, my dissertation prospectus was approved. I worked on my dissertation from the summer of 2003-December 2005. The process of researching and writing this dissertation was exhilarating, stimulating, enlightening and painful. On several occasions, I recall (almost literally) feeling like I was treading water and barely keeping my head above the surface. It was hard. But it was manageable and did involve moments of joy.

I think it helped that I was also taking care of my brand new baby full-time and had to squeeze in writing moments whenever and wherever I could fit them. Being with my son, Fletcher, reminded me that the dissertation was just a dissertation, and only one part of my life. It also served as a reality check; sure, writing a dissertation was difficult, but it was nothing compared to taking care of a brand new baby (almost) 24 hours a day. Day after day...after day.

While no parts of my dissertation have ever been published and I have sometimes had difficulty recalling its title (admittedly, my title here is pretty boring and forgettable), my dissertation was/is still an important project for me and my intellectual history. The work that I documented in my dissertation, work that had been brewing for years in my undergraduate and master's theses, serves as the foundation for many of the research and writing projects that I'm currently working on. My second chapter on feminist trickster role models, serves as a blueprint for my own visions of how-to-be in the world. In that chapter, I discuss three different models for radical subjectivity: the troublemaker, outlaw and storyteller. In the time since writing it, I've deepened my understanding of these subjectivities—and complicated them too. But, the basic idea of these different mod-

els, especially the troublemaker and the storyteller, continue to surface in my thinking, writing and creating. My third chapter on home and coalition connects to my continued interest in crafting my own understanding of home and belonging and functions as some of the background for my current project, **Where do you belong?** And, my fourth chapter on the virtues and the livable life offer some of my first writings on **virtue ethics** and **grief/life**.

As I think about the influence of my dissertation on my current projects, I realize that it, like most of what I did in my Ph.D program, wasn't simply a hoop to jump through, or an academic hazing ritual to endure. What I did in my dissertation was meaningful and important to me and my ever shifting understandings of the world. Was it meaningful to the academy? No. Did it generate a dozen articles and/or a book? No. What it did do was give me the time to craft a plan of thinking/feeling/engaging work that could last a lifetime. I definitely don't agree now with all that I wrote 7 years ago, but there's enough in my pithy, 165 page, dissertation to trouble and inspire me for a long time. Cool. In thinking about my dissertation in this account, I've come up with another compelling reason for **why I went to graduate school**.

## **CHAPTERS**

1. **An Introduction**
2. **Troublemakers, Outlaws and Storytellers: Feminist Tricksters as Role Models**
3. **In-Between Home and Coalition: Feminist Democracy and Alliances that Work**
4. **Working to Become Allies, Working for Alliances**
5. **Conclusion: Telling the Story of Democracy in 21st Century Feminism**
6. **Bibliography**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*I haven't read the acknowledgments for my dissertation in at least five years. It's interesting to see how my words below connect to many of the things I've been writing about in my intellectual history. The idea that writing should be fun. The phrase "limits and possibilities," which I use all of the time. My reference to "chewy bagels." The inspiration I received from my mom.*

I would like to thank my wonderful committee for all of their guidance and support throughout the process of writing this dissertation. My advisor, Dr. Cynthia Willett, was amazing in her willingness to respond so quickly to the various drafts of my chapters. And the critical comments that my other committee members, Dr. Pamela Hall and Dr. Elizabeth Bounds, gave to my chapters was invaluable. I do not think that I could have had a better committee. Through them I learned that critically thinking through the limits and possibilities of my project could actually be fun!

I would also like to thank the women's studies community at Emory. I feel lucky to have met such wonderfully supportive and inspiring colleagues and friends. Thanks especially go to Kristi McKim and Elizabeth Butterfield.

Finally, I want to thank my family for their love and support throughout the writing process. Carol and Darvin Anderson were extremely generous in watching Fletcher so that I could write. Without them, I never would have finished this dissertation. I also want to thank my amazing parents, Arthur and Judy Puotinen. My father not only read all of my chapters before I submitted them but also offered some very valuable insight and critique. Thanks Dad for reading my many "chewy bagels." And my mother served as an unending source of encouragement and inspiration. Mom, you truly are my model for the trickster: part troublemaker, part storyteller and part outlaw warrior, you continue to amaze me with your strength, courage and wisdom. I want to thank Fletcher Anderson, my "little Viking," who was born right at the beginning of this process and turned three

right after it was finished. He helped keep me sane and enabled me to always see the bigger picture. And, most importantly, I wish to thank Scott Anderson. His belief in me and his willingness to do whatever it takes to make sure that I had time to research and write are what made it possible for me to survive and sometimes actually enjoy this process. This dissertation is dedicated to him.

## **ABSTRACT**

Feminism is currently in crisis. It has lost much of its vitality, direction and cohesiveness. In order for feminism to recover from this crisis and restore its vitality, purpose and sense of connection, feminists must develop and sustain a radically democratic ethos. This ethos is one in which pluralism and the irreducibility of differences between and among feminists is encouraged. And it is one in which the questioning of feminism's key terms and the critical debate and creative experimentation that this questioning generates is emphasized. Taking these assertions about the democratic ethos as my starting point, my dissertation focuses on exploring and answering the question: How can feminists develop and sustain a radically democratic ethos? In asking this question, I am particularly interested in exploring the types of resources that exist within feminism for individuals to draw on in their efforts to develop and practice a democratic ethos (chapters two and three). And I am interested in exploring what kind of individual and collective work feminists must do in order to create and sustain that ethos (chapter four). While this dissertation does examine the politics of feminist democracy, it is fundamentally an ethical study, one that (in the broadest sense) fits in the category of virtue ethics.

## WHAT IS (YOUR) THEORY FOR?

# MOTIVATIONS

some of us need to engage with feminist theory  
so we can ground it in our community activist work  
our creative works  
our personal relationships  
for our families, communities and histories  
for our own fucking deserved peace of minds  
maybe we need to know how to make sense of oppression  
because we're so heartbroken we don't want to end up being locked away in psychiatric institutions  
or in a hospital overdosed on pills, getting our stomachs pumped  
because we don't know WHY all this shit is constantly driving us CRAZY (Tagore, 40)

“I found a place of sanctuary in "theorizing," in making sense out of what was happening. I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently. This "lived" experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis, became a place where I worked at explaining the hurt and making it go away. Fundamentally, I learned from this experience that theory could be a healing place” (hooks, 61).

theory works when it/heals pain, moves us to struggle/and creates new worlds  
theory doesn't work/when it alienates us/from that which we love (Puotinen)

According to Patricia Hill Collins in *Fighting Words* a critical social theorist must constantly assess her theoretical visions/practices in terms of three key sets of questions:

- How does this social theory speak the truth to people about the reality of their lives?
- Does this social theory equip people to resist oppression? Is this social theory functional as a tool for social change?
- Does this critical social theory move people to struggle (198-199)?

Notice how this set of questions **doesn't** include: Does this theory make me look fancy and extra smart? or, Does this theory prove that I'm a better academic/intellectual?



**IMAGE 8.1** Sara's view, age 37



*A view from the podium in the cavernous classroom where I taught the big class that crushed my spirit. (2010)*

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## 8

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# POST PH.D

In the summer of 2006, with a recently-earned Ph.D and a new, 3 month old baby, I contacted the University of Minnesota's Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies (GWSS) Department. I was inquiring about the possibility of becoming a Visiting Scholar. After hearing about my project, they offered me visiting scholar status and a job teaching one course, Feminist Thought and Theory. It was a very



busy fall. In addition to teaching the class and watching my two kids (a six-month old and a 3.5 year-old) full time, I gave three presentations, including one at my alma mater. In 2007, I taught more courses for the GWSS department and applied for academic jobs all over the country. I made it to the campus interview round at one position, but didn't get the job.

In the summer of 2008, with my oldest son about to start kindergarten and my mom entering the final stage of dying from pancreatic cancer, I faced a difficult decision. I had been offered a three year contract, with a potential conversion to tenure-track, at a small university out of state. Just as I was ready to accept it, I was notified that a full-time three year position might be available in my current department. Just one catch: it hadn't been approved, so it couldn't be offered to me yet. After a long, gut-wrenching talk with Scott, I decided to turn down the job out-of-state in the hopes of being offered the one at the University of Minnesota. I waited (not so) patiently through August. I was offered the three-year position in early September, after the semester had already started. *While I'm happy with my decision to turn down the other job I still wonder, how might my academic career have been different if I had accepted that job? Would it have lasted longer, or would I have burned out sooner?*

I taught full-time as a Visiting Assistant Professor in the GWSS department for 3 and a half years. At first, it was wonderful. I could overlook the general attitude of disdain for non-tenure track faculty at the University because I was earning good money with great benefits and teaching really cool classes. I didn't care that much when the faculty members in my department repeatedly reinforced the hierarchy of Academics in the faculty meetings because individually they were all friendly and mostly supportive. And I could ignore those graduate students who seemed to always be questioning my intellectual abilities and my validity as a professor because enough of the graduate students were respectful and fun to talk with.

But, when the financial crisis hit in 2008 and the U of M began to fear impending budget cuts, I could no longer ignore the problems...with my department, with the University and with the academy in general. I lived with the constant threat that my contract would not be renewed. Faculty meetings became increasingly uncomfortable as faculty discussed how best to cut the budget (would they have to cut my position, they wondered) and prove their relevance to the University. And graduate students freaked out as funding dried up.

In the spring of 2011, my teaching load increased and I was assigned to teach a big, 120 student, lecture course. While I was nervous about teaching such a huge class—the biggest class I had ever taught or been in as a student had been 44 students—I had no idea how difficult and spirit-crushing it would be. By the time I finished in May, I knew that I needed a break from the University and the academy. I taught one more semester and then stopped at the end of 2011. I applied for one final job and when I didn't get it, I decided it was time to explore other ways of being an intellectual (and a teacher and a joyful person).

And, just like that, my academic career was over. Or, at least on hold. I'm still not sure. The crisis in higher education is getting worse and my fear that the system might be broken is increasing.

## MORE CONVERSATIONS

*After graduating from college and moving onto graduate school, I continued to explore the theme of conversations. I focused a lot of attention on the value of difficult conversations, where folks with very different experiences and perspectives came together and worked to develop connections. Much of this work was theoretical and abstract. I liked talking about the value of difficult conversations, but often failed to provide concrete examples of it or engage in it myself. I see evidence of this failure throughout my dissertation. My chapters lay the theoretical groundwork for some important discussions about feminism, radical democracy, alliances and difficult conversations. Yet, I always seemed to stop short of applying these theories to anything. And, as I mentioned in my story about my master's thesis, I always failed to bring in my own experiences or connections to my theorizing.*

*In this account, I describe my efforts to think through concretely what difficult feminist conversations look like in my feminist debates course. I taught this class 5 times and really enjoyed it. I especially enjoyed making trouble with it. I designed the course to purposefully unsettle and call into question some of my students understandings about feminist values and how to engage in debate.*

**Documents:** Feminist Debates Syllabi and "What is Feminist Debate" Handout

Fall 2007

Spring 2009

Spring 2010

Spring 2011

Fall 2011

What is Feminist Debate?

In the fall of 2007, I began teaching a mid-level undergraduate class, *Point/Counterpoint: Contemporary Feminist Debates*. I decided to use this class to explore and experiment with the practical implications of my theories about and arguments for difficult conversations that don't erase differences and conflict, but use them to strengthen projects for social justice. The course, like much of my work at the point, was inspired by Judith Butler and her critical interventions into feminism. In particular, I used one of her quotations, from an edited collection on the future of feminism, to set up the course:

I approach feminism with the presumption that no undisputed premises are to be agreed upon in the global context. And so, for practical and political reasons, there is no value to be derived in silencing disputes. The questions are: how best to have them, how most productively to stage them, and how to act in ways that acknowledge the irreversible complexity of who we are (Butler, "The End of Sexual Difference")?

In my description for the course, I wrote:

Taking as our premise that debate is essential for the success of feminism as a democratic movement (or collection of movements), the goal of this course is to explore how feminists have energized their theoretical/political projects through an engagement with each other's differences and through productive debates on key issues within the movement.

In that first course, we discussed reproductive rights/justice, work and the limits of "equality" as the feminist goal, and family values. In subsequent semesters, I added in the prison industrial complex, "Drop the I (as in "illegal immigrant") word", SlutWalk and the academic industrial complex. Unlike many debate courses, I set the class up to challenge the reductive, either/or, for or against, approach to addressing and solving problems. Instead we worked on debates that were complicated and involved a wide range of valid claims and demands. I wanted my students to develop strategies for engaging in difficult conversations, where more than one side could claim to be "right" and the goal wasn't to win, but to find a way to work together.

At the beginning of the semester, I distributed and discussed a handout that I had developed on rethinking debate through feminism.

## WHAT ARE SOME GOALS FOR FEMINIST DEBATE?

- To keep feminism effective, vital and relevant.
- To enable feminists to become clearer about what they mean, what they want, and what needs to be done.
- To allow feminists to engage with all of the conflicting interpretations—the irrepressible cacophony (J Butler) and contradictions (Jaggar)—that exist within and among feminists.
- To remain democratic, that is, to allow for as wide a range as possible of different voices/ideas/perspectives, and to never shut down the critical discussion that results from those differences.
- To develop the best possible strategies/theories/agendas for feminism.
- **NOT** to battle against other feminists in order to prove the “rightness” of their own individuals positions and to win the debate, but to open up discussion to include more, potentially fruitful, possibilities.
- **NOT** to create further division between feminists but to enable them, through the process of critically engaging with the issue and each other, to create alliances and coalitions.

## WHAT IS REQUIRED OF US AS WE ENGAGE IN FEMINIST DEBATE?

**FLEXIBILITY:** The refusal to be fixed in one particular idea of how an issue should be understood or resolved and a willingness to look beyond our own positions in order to understand others’ perspectives.

**HUMILITY:** Never approaching the debate with an attitude of arrogance, believing that your position is the only correct one or that the goal of debate is to be the



winner. Instead approach with a willingness to recognize the limitations of your own position.

**OPENNESS:** The resolution “to be as open and sensitive as we can to the diversity of interests and range of values involved” (Jaggar, 11).

**PASSION FOR JUSTICE/GUIDED BY A BROADER VISION:** To engage in critical feminist debate is to be motivated by a passionate and democratic desire to develop more effective agendas that account for a wide range of individuals and that lead to the elimination of injustice and oppression.

**COURAGE:** A willingness to be wrong and to allow others to be critical of our ideas, to not only recognize the limits of our own perspectives but to give up our position when it is proven to be ineffective, to change ourselves as a result of the debate, and to challenge others to do the same.

**CURIOSITY:** Cultivating a sense of wonder about the world in ourselves and others, and always exerting the effort to question and wonder about why things are the way they are and at whose expense.

**PATIENCE:** Taking the time to listen to the widest range of perspectives possible and refusing to come to easy/simple solutions in the interest of saving energy and time.

Some other things to think about...

## **AUDIENCE**

How does your approach to a debate change depending on who the audience is?

Is feminist debate possible in an unsafe space?

What happens when you are debating individuals who fundamentally disagree with you? Who wish you harm? Who refuse to listen?

## **FRAMING THE DEBATE**

- How does the way we frame (and articulate) the debate affect how we debate?
- What kind of power is wrapped up in the ways in which we describe an issue and the debate surrounding it?
- How might this framing lead to the exclusion of some perspectives?
- When does our discussion of issues shut down the critical exploration?
- How can we frame the discussion and shape our response in ways that open up the discussion? That inspire us to think? That encourage us to challenge and to ask: Why? What if? At whose expense? Who made it so and why?

## **NO EASY RESOLUTIONS**

As Cynthia Enloe and Alison Jaggar both argue, feminist critical reflection is hard work—it involves exerting a lot of effort (Enloe) as we attempt to deal with the contradictions, conflicts, and democratic cacophony that is a necessary part of feminist movements. Consider what Jaggar writes in her introduction to *Living with Contradictions*:

“...there are no moral shortcuts capable of bypassing detailed and careful reflection on specific situations from as many points of view as possible” (10).

“Our commitment to ending women’s subordination inevitably leads us to confront complex, multidimensional problems that require us to balance a variety of values and to evaluate the claims and interests of a variety of groups or even species, including a variety of groups of women” (11).

## **POST PH.D COURSES**

University of Minnesota

Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies Department

Fall 2006-Fall 2011

Courses Taught:

### **Undergraduate**

Politics of Sex (2011)

Introduction to GLBT Studies (2008)

Point/Counterpoint: Contemporary Feminist Debates (2007-2011)

Popular Culture Woman (2007)

Queering Theory (2007, 2009, 2011)

Queering Desire (2010)

Rebels, Radicals, and Revolutionaries: History of Western Feminisms (2007)

International Feminist Theory: Feminism from a Transnational Perspective  
(2007)

Feminist Thought and Theory (2006)

### **Graduate**

International Feminist Theory: Feminism from a Transnational Perspective  
(2007)

Feminist Pedagogies (2008, 2009, 2010)

Feminist and Queer Explorations in Troublemaking (2009, 2010)

Queer Ethics (2011)

## RESEARCH STATEMENT

*When applying for academic jobs in the humanities, you are sometimes required to submit a statement of research interests. In this account, I reflect on one research statement that I wrote not too long after earning my Ph.D. While my focus in this account is on my interest in the livable life and my mom's experiences with pancreatic cancer, I could have also reflected on my plans for researching and writing about the virtues, particularly the virtue of truth-telling. Since writing this statement in 2007, I've spent a lot of time developing my understanding of troublemaking, but I've just started working on truth-telling. This intellectual history project is one part of my shift towards truth-telling.*

**Document:** *Statement of Research Interests*

In a Statement of Research Interests, crafted for at least one academic job application in 2007, I wrote about my plans for continuing to research the livable life:

I will explore the question of dignity and the livable life for women diagnosed with cancer. Drawing upon theoretical texts used in my dissertation and new research on women's cancer memoirs and disability studies, this research will be used to support my production of a documentary video on my mother's diagnosis and her experiences of living with pancreatic cancer.

When my mom was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in the fall of 2005, a split happened in my life: before diagnosis/after diagnosis. Up until the moment that my dad called me and said, "Sara, your mom has cancer," I couldn't imagine a world in which my mom was sick, let alone dying or dead. After her diagnosis, surgery and then first round of chemo, I began to think more about cancer and how it strips those who continue to live with cancer of much of their dignity and their access to a livable life. As I tried to make sense of her experiences, I felt a need to cope through research and deep reflection on some of the larger social issues connected to cancer. I closely read Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* and Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, plus a few other books and articles that I can't remember. I worked on shifting my perspective to think more deeply about illness (in general) and cancer (more specifically). I talked with my mom about doing another digital video, a follow-up to my 2003 documentary dedicated to her, that documented her life-with-cancer.

My research projects all fizzled. *Why?* I'm not sure why I stopped exploring the livable life (I'm still interested in it, especially as a contrast to a virtue ethics grounded in the good life), but I know why my digital video about my mom never happened: it wasn't the right way for me to deal with her illness. She didn't want me to document the slow deterioration of her body (but never her spirit) and I didn't want to have a camera between us for any of the time that she had left. Later, when her cancer came back (in the beginning of 2008, I think?) and the chemo started to really take its toll, I couldn't imagine filming her as she described the different, yet equally horrific, ways in which chemo and cancer were destroying her quality of life. *Now, years after she died, when occasionally I'm able to dream about or remember her as not being sick, I'm grateful that I never took footage of her when she was sick. I don't need or want those visual reminders. I have enough memories to haunt me.*

My early efforts, not too long after she was diagnosed, were all about me trying to make sense of and learning to live with my mom's new reality as dying.

And as well intentioned as I was, they weren't really about granting dignity to her. She was an extremely private person and making visible her painful experiences of learning to live with cancer through a documentary wasn't the way she would want to claim (or be granted) dignity. I must have realized that, because I never interviewed her and never shot any video of her when she was sick.

A few years after she died, I taught a graduate course on queering ethics. For **one of the weeks**, I assigned introduction from Drucilla Cornell's book, *Between Women and Generations: Legacies of Dignity*. In the first paragraph, she describes the purpose of her book:

After a long illness, which offered no possibility of recovery other than slow degeneration, my mother decided to take her own life on August 25, 1998. She was seventy-two years old. In the last ten years of her life, she had endured Parkinson's disease, breast cancer, and a series of lung illnesses. She would not want me to tell you much about her suffering or her physical decay. My mother had read a number of books written by daughters and sons about their mother's death and she hated them all. She made it clear that if I wrote a book that portrayed her with the disrespect she found in those books, she would haunt me for the rest of my life and pull me into an early grave. So no more will be said about my mother's bodily condition. On the day she died, she left me committed to the promise to write a book, dedicated to her, that would bear witness to the dignity of her death and that her bridge class would be able to understand.



I thought about these lines for a long time. I still think about them. And I'm still working on how best to bear witness to the dignity of my mom's suffering with, and then dying from, pancreatic cancer. Is it possible? And, how does bearing witness to the dignity of her death fit in with my need to bear witness to the dignity of her life? I'm not sure how to answer these questions, but one thing I have come to realize is the importance of shifting away from trying to tell my mom's story, or using it as material for my academic research on "the livable life." Her story can inspire and provoke my own thoughts on living and dying, but it is her story, and not mine to tell. So, I shifted towards making sense of my experiences living and grieving beside her.

In the midst of her final months, when it was too painful to even consider, I avoided critically reflecting on her illness. Instead, I opted for distraction by creating and feverishly (and joyfully) writing in my blog, **TROUBLE**. My mom used to tell me, "Sara, you need to write. You're a great writer!" This writing wasn't research; it was ideas, inspired by years of researching, that I had been thinking about, but had never had time to write down or craft into essays.

When she did die, I started **writing on my blog** about how my experiences grieving for her as she lay dying for months (she was in hospice for almost a year), called into question Judith Butler's assertion that grief is "one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearing and find our way" (30). Then, during summer break, I started working on an essay about living and grieving beside 3 Judiths—Judith Butler (my academic muse), Judith Puotinen (my mom) and Rosemary Judith Puotinen (my daughter who was born not too long after she was diagnosed). I posted **my progress on the essay**, as I wrote it, on my blog. Here's part of my description:

Throughout the past four years all three Judiths have been a central part of my life. They have literally been beside me, and beside each

other, as I have struggled to make sense of and endure grief and impending loss. In addition to the literal ways in which each of them has been beside me, these three Judiths speak to three different roles that I have negotiated simultaneously but not easily or always successfully: the daughter, the scholar, and the mother.

...For the past four years, the roles of daughter, mother and scholar have resided beside each other. Just like my living and grieving beside the three Judiths, they are not reducible to each other, yet their existence in relation to each other has shaped my experiences with grief and loss. In losing my mother, I am not just a daughter; I am a mother raising her own daughter. In raising a daughter, I am not just a mother; I am daughter without a mother. In reading, writing and teaching about Butler's notions of grief and the livable life, I am not just a scholar; I am a mother and a daughter struggling to make sense of grief and the livable life.

# UNDISCIPLINED RESEARCH

*The following research overview was part of a job talk that I gave in December 2010 for a tenure-track job in women's studies. I was one of 4 (I think?) finalists for the position. In contrast to past job talks, in which I read a paper, I decided to use my own blog as a platform for my discussion. And I attempted to spell out my own undisciplined approach to being a scholar and an educator. I remember really enjoying meeting the faculty members; they were fun and seemed to really like each other. The energy was much different than in my department. But, I also recall that the process was grueling and last-minute. They contacted me on Thanksgiving day for a campus visit starting the next Monday.*

*Here's the schedule for my visit.*

## Monday November 29

Arrive and check in at hotel

## Tuesday, November 30

8:30	Breakfast with Dept. Member
9:30	Meet with Committee Member
10:00-11:00	Interview with Search Committee
11:00-11:45	Campus Tour
12:00-1:00	Lunch with Students
1:15-1:45	Meet with Chair GWS
2:00-3:00	Teaching Presentation in Feminist Research class "Twitter and Feminist Pedagogy"
3:10-4:00	Meeting with GWS Program Faculty:
4:00-5:00	Meeting with Dean
5:00	Return to hotel
5:30	Dinner with Search Committee

## Wednesday December 1

8:30	Breakfast with Committee Member
10:00-11:00	Research presentation <b>Staying in Trouble and Being Undisciplined, or one way of doing feminist interdisciplinary work on and through digital media</b>
11:00-12:00	Wrap up with Search Committee over lunch

*I'm sure other scholars have experienced more grueling schedules than this one, but I remember being so exhausted Tuesday night. I also remember that I stayed up pretty late polishing up my job talk.*

*I don't know if my job talk was a key reason why I didn't get the job (they never let you know why you aren't hired), but I'm sure it didn't help. They couldn't seem to understand the bigger purpose of my research or how it might fit with other faculty members' work. And I wasn't successful in explaining it to them. What big claims was I trying to make? What was the usefulness of it all? I've found that I have difficulty selling myself and my ideas. I think it's partly because my ideas can be too unusual or undisciplined for others, so they seem unintelligible.*

*This job came at an unusual time. Instead of starting in the fall of the next year, it would begin in January, a month after the interview. I was tentatively scheduled to teach three classes that spring at the University of Minnesota, including the big one that I was dreading (and the one that forced me to confront the limits of the academy). As I waited to hear back about the job, over the first three weeks of December, I wasn't sure whether or not to prep for my scheduled classes at the U that I might not be teaching or the classes at the new institution that I might. I felt uncomfortable talking to students or my teaching assistant about the spring semester, when I didn't know if I'd even be there. And I felt bad emailing the chair of my department every week to tell her that I still didn't know if she needed to hire someone else to teach my assigned classes.*

## **Staying in Trouble and Being Undisciplined, or one way of doing feminist interdisciplinary work on and through digital media**

I often tell students one effective way to understand what an author is trying to say is to explain their title. In that spirit I want to begin this presentation by ex-

plaining my title; in many ways, it speaks to who I am and what I aim to do as a scholar, critical thinker and educator-activist.

### **Staying in trouble and being undisciplined:**

In much of my work, I am interested in exploring the ethical and political value of making and staying in trouble for feminist and queer projects and practices. This work is partly inspired by Judith Butler and her claim that “trouble is inevitable, the task how best to make it, what best way to be in it.” While I imagine troublemaking and troublestaying working in many different ways, I am particularly interested in how they can connect to a **feminist curiosity** about the world, a persistent desire to **ask lots of questions** (like “why?” and “at whose expense?”), and a refusal to uncritically accept ideas or practices as given and beyond question.

In relation to my valuing of staying in trouble, I also identify myself as being **undisciplined**. I like to experiment with what counts as “knowledge” and who counts as a “knower.” I frequently experiment with and attempt to transgress boundaries and unsettle “proper” ways of knowing and producing knowledge. I often like to put disciplinary forms of knowledge into conversation in unexpected ways and my work frequently resides at the limits of disciplines. I am also undisciplined in how I engage with and on social media. I frequently push at the limits of how blogs, for example, can (or maybe should) be used. Yet, even though I am undisciplined, my ability to do so comes from extensive disciplinary training and results in repeated, very purposeful practices.

### **One way of doing feminist interdisciplinary work:**

I do not wish to present my work on trouble and digital media as *the* model for how to do interdisciplinary feminist work. Instead it is **one vision** that hope-

fully serves as an invitation to others to critically engage and to offer up their own understandings of how we might do feminist interdisciplinary work. My vision comes out of an understanding of feminism as a collection of movements and communities that exist in relation to and beside other social movements and that gains vitality from not reconciling the various ways in which it gets expressed/realized/enacted/practiced. It is **interdisciplinary** because I draw from a number of different disciplines, including: philosophy, education, religion, ethics, cultural studies, media studies and political science. I understand the **work** that I do to include: not only the finished products of my research, but the thinking/connecting/experimenting/processing work that I also do. I aim to make all aspects of that work visible and accessible to others.

### **on and through social media**

I engage in research that is **on** (about) digital media, particularly exploring the limits and possibilities of digital media for feminist pedagogical projects. I also use digital media to engage in and document that research and thinking. While I focus primarily on blogs and, more recently, some on twitter, I am also interested in critical explorations of facebook and youtube, digital storytelling, creating digital videos, video-logs, podcasts, and maptivism through google maps.

### **Why social media?**

First, *I believe that there is tremendous potential in digital/social media in shifting how we value and engage in learning and producing and sharing knowledge.* I have already written extensively about blogs and how they can foster experimentation, enable us to get our work out to others immediately (more



accessible to wider audience), allow others to engage with us, and encourage collaboration and sharing of resources.

Second, *social media isn't going anywhere. We need to develop strategies for critically engaging with it (not just rejecting it or uncritically embracing it).* How do we respond to the ever-increasing presence of social media in our lives/classrooms/workplaces? How are social media shaping who we are, what we know and how we know it? In many ways, we are in a social media era where it is not so much a matter of being for or against social media; they affect us/shape how we are intelligible as consumer-citizen subjects and regulate what information/ideas/products that we have access to. So, the question is not: are we for or against social media, but how can we position ourselves in relation to social media in ways that are more resistant to its harmful effects while harnessing its potentially transformative possibilities? How do we use social media in resistant, transgressive and transformative ways? How do we develop strategies/ways-of-being that enable us to use/engage with social media for our feminist pedagogical-theoretical-activist practices and projects? What role can feminist scholar/educators/activists have in shaping how social media is practiced--in how people are trained to use them? What skills they develop as they post, tweet and update their statuses?

Third, *in my own practices, I find digital media, especially blogs, to be very exciting and useful.* Here's what I recently wrote about why and how I use blogs:

Having used blogs in my courses since early 2007 and in my own research, writing and collaborative projects since 2009, I see them as potentially powerful spaces for radical transformation, critical and creative expression and community-building. They play a central role in all aspects of my life as a thinker, learner, writer, teacher and researcher. I write in three of my own blogs and I make blogs a cen-

tral part of all my classes. I use my personal and course blogs to encourage myself and my students to archive our ideas, to document our research, to put seemingly disparate ideas or representations into conversation, to offer up various accounts of ourselves, to build relationships with visible and invisible/known and unknown readers, to experiment with pedagogical techniques, to cultivate effective writing and thinking habits, to disrupt the rigid rules and disciplinary borders that discourage new ideas and unexpected connections, to lay bare our own thinking and writing process, to practice what we teach (and preach), to develop connections between our different selves, and to remind ourselves that being thinkers/learners/teachers can be energizing and fun.

In addition to all of these reasons, writing on my own blogs and using blogs in the classroom enables me to access my feminist trouble-making self. Through blogging, I reject rigid boundaries between disciplines, find creative ways to connect my research with my life, and infuse my ideas with a sense of humor. I play with what should count as rigorous scholarship or as proper objects of study. I cultivate a curiosity about the world that is motivated by a desire for engaging and experimenting with ideas as opposed to acquiring knowledge. And I invite my fellow bloggers (inside and outside of my classes) to join me at an experimental and unsettling space where we strive to remain open to new ideas and to critically exploring the limits of our own perspectives.

I didn't start out a few years back, intending to think about/reflect on blogging and social media so much. Instead, I wanted **a space to begin documenting**

and archiving my writing and ideas, ideas that had been brewing for years but that I never had time to formulate in concrete ways. I also wanted a space to experiment with new course assignments. However, once I began writing on my research/thinking blog, I knew that if I were to use blogs effectively, I needed to learn more about how they function, how others are using them, and what specific limits and possibilities they offer to an undisciplined and interdisciplinary feminist educator/activist/troublemaker. For the past year and a half, I have devoted a lot of time to researching, writing about and engaging in blogging practices. In the last six months, I have expanded my work to think more broadly about social media--twitter, in particular--and its limits and possibilities, particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to feminist (and queer) pedagogy.

*In this account, which I'm writing February 2013, I want to add in some of the social media projects that I've worked on since 2009. A few of these projects were completed after I finished at the U and/or are ongoing, but all of them were started or come out of work that I did during my time at the University of Minnesota:*

## **Research on Social Media**

Currently, I have four main areas of interest in social media: 1. Caring on/with/through social media, 2. Digital literacy, feminist pedagogy and social media, 3. Online activism and using social media to make, be in, and staying in trouble.

**1. Caring on/with/through social media:** The popular perception of social media, like facebook or twitter, are that they ultimately contribute to the erosion of our empathy and ability to care about and for others. While agreeing that this

is a possible outcome of using social media, I argue that it is not a foregone conclusion.

For a few years, I've been tracking and documenting examples of social media campaigns/practices that demonstrate (or fail to demonstrate) an ethic of care. Building off of my training, research, teaching on feminist ethics (including care ethics), I've written about these campaigns and practices online. Here are a few examples:

- [Practicing an ethic of care on Twitter](#)
- [Caring about, Caring For, Caring with on Twitter: Breast Cancer](#)
- [The Trouble with Paternalistic/Imperialistic Care: Some Sources on #stopkony](#)
- [Twitter Cares? Using Twitter to Care For, About and With People Who Have Had Abortions](#)

In addition to critically analyzing others' specific practices, I'm also interested in exploring the potential of social media for the development of our moral selfhood and our ability to care about others:

- [More Twitter hatin' and conflatin'](#)
- [The Undisciplined Self Via Twitter](#)
- [Who Cares? I Do](#)

**2. Digital literacy, feminist pedagogy and social media:** In the fall of 2009, shortly after I started writing in my own blog, I began focusing a lot of attention on thinking and researching about social/digital media and its implications for feminist pedagogy. Since then, I've researched, taught, and written extensively about digital literacy skills and applying feminist pedagogy theories and ideas to how we engage on social media inside and outside of the classroom. Here are a few examples:

- [Blog Writing for Students, part 1](#)
- [Blog Writing for Students, part 2](#)
- [Feminist Pedagogies and Social Media](#)
- [Digital Literacy Skills](#)
- [Apps I want to Trouble](#)
- [It's Diablogical! A Collaborative Project in Feminist Pedagogy](#)
- [Teaching With Blogs and Blogging While Teaching: Using Blogs to Expand Access to Feminist \(Cyber\)Spaces](#) with Kandace Creel Falcón

**3. Online Activism:** In connection with my research, writing and teaching with feminist pedagogy and social media, I'm also interested in how many feminists are using social media/online technologies for their activist projects. In the fall of 2011, I developed and taught a class that focused almost exclusively on online activism and its impact on feminist organizing, theorizing and activism. Here are some links:

- [Feminist Debates Course Blog](#)
- [Reading Schedule](#)
- [Class Discussion on Feminism, Mass-based Education and Social Media](#)

In addition to teaching about online activism, I've spent some time tracking how social media is used by feminists and other activist/thinkers for resisting, disrupting and/or reframing. Here are just a few examples:

- [Siri and the feminist media fail](#)
- [Feminist apps from the Obama administration](#)
- [Using Twitter to talk back? #notbuyingit](#)
- [Tweetbombs, Community Guidelines and Slactivism, oh my!](#)

**4. Making/Being in/Staying in Trouble with Social Media:** The focus of much of my work online has been about troublemaking. I've become increasingly interested in how social media enable us to disrupt, challenge, resist, and ques-

tion all sorts of practices, ideologies and institutions. Earlier this year, I completed a four part series on how I'm using social media to make trouble with 1. [Pinterest](#), 2. [Twitter](#), 3. [Tumblr](#) and 4. [Vimeo](#). I've also started thinking more about the connections between troublemaking and hacking/hacktivism:

- [Tracking Trouble, Day 4](#) (Hacking Smartphone Apps)
- [Hacking as Troublemaking](#)

## Experiments in Social Media

I'm not just interested in researching, writing and teaching about social media; I also actively engage on and with them. As an educator, I feel it is necessary to practice what I teach/preach. Not only does it enable me to offer some of my own models for guiding others on engaging with social media, but it also allows me to test out my own ideas on what works and what doesn't.

There are a ton of social media out there; it can be overwhelming. My strategy is to pick a few that I'm interested in and focus my attention on them. Right now, I'm experimenting with Pinterest, Twitter, Vimeo, Tumblr, some iTunes podcasting, Wordpress blogging and (with some hesitation) Facebook. Here are some examples of my experiments:

- [Crafting digital stories about home and belonging](#)
- [Using Pinterest boards to trouble \(challenge/question\) infographics](#)
- [Live-tweeting movies](#)
- [Combining images and text for posing problems](#)
- [Having conversations at the intersections of feminism and technology](#)
- [Hacking Smartphone Apps](#)



## COVER LETTERS

*In this account, I put two successful cover letters (with both, I advanced past the first round) beside each other. The 2006 letter is for one of the first cover letters I submitted after starting my temporary position at the University of Minnesota. The 2011 letter is for the last academic cover letter I wrote before moving outside (or beside) the academy. It's interesting to put them together and see how my research and teaching interests have changed.*

### **Documents:** Job Cover Letters for 2006 and 2011

In the five years between writing these cover letters, I did a lot of intellectual work. I developed my virtue of troublemaking. I experimented with blogs and social media. I taught 20 classes. I learned a lot about feminist pedagogies and queer theory. I published 2 articles and a book chapter. I pushed at the limits of the academic spaces that I inhabited. And I cultivated my own voice and one vision for intellectual engagement.

When I look at these two letters and think about all of the intellectual labor that happened between 2006-2011, I realize that my education didn't stop when I earned my Ph.D. In fact, I learned a tremendous amount while on the job market and teaching for five and a half years at the University of Minnesota.

Some of what I learned was energizing and inspiring, like theories on feminist and queer pedagogy and the value of curiosity, But, much of it was disquieting, like learning about (through experiencing) the job market and the process of applying for an academic job. Preparing elaborate portfolios with imagined syllabi, writing samples, teaching statements and then sending them out to any and every place with a job opening while hoping for the chance to submit even more

materials or do a phone interview or visit the campus for a grueling 2-3 day non-stop interview was tough. Waiting for months and never hearing back again, even if you had had a campus visit and become completely invested in the job and the town where the college was located, was even tougher. And, year after year trying to get a tenure-track job, worrying endlessly about what else you were qualified for after spending so much time in school was toughest yet.

I'm sure the academic job process has always been challenging, but with the recent trend of eliminating departments and replacing tenure track positions with adjuncts (either hired per class or for temporary 1-3 year appointments), it is now cruel, painful and demoralizing. I'm not the first (or the most articulate) to make this point. There are an increasing number of academics writing passionately and critically about these issues. And there's the [adjunct project](#) which is sharing resources and gathering pay and working conditions for adjuncts.

My experiences on the job market weren't unusual or unusually bad. But they were bad enough. And they enabled me to learn that the academy was a messed up (broken?) system that might not be worth my intellectual energy and time.

### **Review:**

**Question One: Are you willing to relocate absolutely anywhere in the country, with a week's notice?**

**A. Yes**

**B. No**

**Question Two: Are you willing to devote a lot of emotional energy to your application without the hope of advancing to the next round?**

**A. Yes**

**B. No**

**Question Three: Are you willing to devote a lot of emotional energy to your application without the hope of advancing to the next round?**

**A. Yes**

**B. No**

**Question Four: Do you enjoy experiencing (a few) dizzying highs, but mostly terrifying lows and absolutely no creamy middles?**

**A. Yes**

**B. No**

Answers: Don't apply for the job.

# TEACHING STATEMENT

*The teaching philosophy statement is a difficult document to write. It needs to be general enough to convey your overarching philosophy on teaching, but specific enough to demonstrate the concrete ways in which you implement it. And, it needs to be short and concise. Ugh. When I was working on this first one, I remember reading through tons of other academic's cover letters for guidance. Pretty boring and generic stuff. I've been thinking of crafting a new one....maybe in digital video form instead? Since leaving the academy, I have had doubts about my teaching ability. Are my methods too troubling? Am I an effective and responsible teacher?*

**Document:** Teaching Philosophy Statement (2008)

In my early years of applying for academic jobs, before I started teaching Feminist Pedagogies and engaging with feminist and queer pedagogical theories and practices, I crafted a fairly generic statement of my teaching philosophy. In this statement, I discussed my responsibilities for ensuring that students claim their own education. Here are the opening paragraphs:

In “Claiming an Education,” Adrienne Rich argues that students, particularly women students, need to take responsibility *towards* themselves and *for* themselves by developing and asserting their own critical voices. They need to become active learners and active and responsible citizens by claiming their education instead of merely receiving it. Her remarks, which took place at a women’s college in 1977, were directed primarily at the students. But, what does the idea

of claiming an education demand of those students' teachers? How can we, as teachers, empower our students to take responsibility for their own education?

Empowering my students to claim their own education is the central goal of my teaching. I believe that this empowerment must occur on three levels. First, students must be able to think critically about the world, to challenge assumptions and question dominant ideologies. Second, students must be able to use their questioning and critique to develop a critical voice, one that allows them to express themselves and to be active participants both inside and outside of the classroom. Third, students must be able think about the world beyond themselves. They must use their new critical theories to reassess their relationship to and responsibility for others.

Looking back on this statement, I appreciate the student-centered approach and the focus on three key elements (I love the number 3!): developing a critical voice, being an active participant, and connecting one's education to the broader world. But, having spent a lot of time researching, writing and teaching about feminist and queer pedagogies, my philosophy on teaching now is far less neat and logical and doesn't offer three easy steps to empowerment.

When I first started teaching women's studies, way back in 2002 as a graduate student, I was a big fan of empowering students. Find your voice! Use critical tools from feminism to resist and reframe! I still think these are important goals and I believe that feminisms (feminist theories and practices, feminist role models) offer compelling languages for speaking and critical tools for resisting. But, feminist spaces aren't by definition empowering. Especially feminist spaces within the academy that participate in and perpetuate hierarchies and alienating

logics of rationality. And feminist teachers, while responsible for providing students with resources and shaping the class environment and how class participants should engage, are not all-knowing Educators who bestow critical voices on their voiceless students.

The more I read and taught essays in feminist and queer pedagogies, the more I realized that, in offering up my neat and tidy formula for empowerment, I had failed to interrogate many of my own assumptions and claims about what it means to be critical, whose voices are heard and taken seriously, how feminist classrooms function within the larger structure of the academy, how interactions within the classroom (between students, between a student and the teacher) must always involve negotiations of power and privilege, and how the model of enlightenment and empowerment that undergirds the liberal education often ignores or suppresses some valuable ways in which students engage with or resist new ideas, concepts and authors.

Some of my lack of awareness came from inexperience; when I wrote my teaching statement I had only taught a handful of classes. But a lot of it came from having been indoctrinated and disciplined into a system (an academic industrial complex, if you will) that ardently believes in objectivity, rationality, and discovering and acquiring, as opposed to engaging with, knowledge. And that maintains the myth that, somehow, academic spaces in the ivory tower are able to transcend the politics and hierarchies that complicate and taint the "real world" and the forms of knowledge and understandings that are produce within it.

This belief in the strict division between the ivory tower and the real world is a twofold problem. First, it suggests that the ivory tower is a space of intellectual freedom and rigorous thinking, where people are able to pursue knowledge for it's own sake and can rely on objective and serious methods for thinking deeply and smartly about Big Issues. This false belief allows scholars to ignore the power dynamics within their classrooms and the political agendas and assumptions that



shape their research. Second, it suggests that the work done outside of the academy isn't as smart or good or serious because it doesn't have the same standards as academic work or because it's compromised by crass political agendas.

This same system that made me believe that my primary role as a teacher was to enlighten and empower, also disciplined many of my students into believing that their main goal in the classroom was to obediently follow my rules and passively receive the knowledge that I imparted to them, so that they could earn good grades, praise from me, and then, a high-paying job.

Of course, thanks to the insights of critical resisters within and beyond the academy (in women's studies, critical race and ethnic studies, cultural studies, gender and sexuality studies), many of these myths have been exposed, challenged and re-imagined. But, even so, it was consistently surprising to me—especially in feminist undergraduate and graduate classes!—to see so many of many students buying into these myths and being unwilling or unable to imagine new ways of functioning within the classroom.

At some point, maybe after reading Suzanne Luhman's "Query/ing Pedagogy" or Megan Boler's "A Pedagogy of Discomfort" or Kevin Kumashiro's *Troubling Education* or Paulo Freire's *Learning to Question*, I started to rethink my goals for what could/should happen in my classrooms. Instead of envisioning the semester as involving a logical progression towards knowing (mastering a subject), I began to imagine what a course that took unknowing as its goal might look like. A course where students would learn skills for dealing with not-knowing and uncertainty. Where their focus would not be on acquiring and mastering facts and theories, but in engaging with ideas and taking seriously how they were implicated in those ideas. Where the aim was not so much to learn but to *unlearn* harmful habits, accumulated from years of school discipline, that prevented them from being open to new ideas and to exploring and giving voice to their own resistances to them. And a classroom where I, as the teacher, didn't serve as the Ex-

pert who revealed truths to them, but as an experienced participant in the process, who had developed some skills and strategies for guiding course members, but who also drew upon others inside (and outside) of the class who had developed their own useful skills and insights.

This new undisciplined (or undisciplining) vision slowly started to creep into my classrooms almost from the beginning of my teaching at the University of Minnesota. But, after I started writing on my blog and began to embrace my role as a troublemaker and troublestayer, I really began to experiment with strategies for rethinking the classroom as a space of uncertainty, curiosity, and feeling trouble and troubled. Here are just a few strategies that I used:

- Gave very few in-class lectures, lots of online lectures as blog posts
- Asked lots of questions without giving answers
- Devoted time to reading about/reflecting on feminist/queer pedagogical practices of curiosity and unknowingness
- Put together readings that didn't offer easy assessments and that offered messy (and sometimes conflicting) perspectives
- Developed assignments that not only emphasize engaging with other students (and collectively producing new knowledge), but making visible and documenting that process on the blog (**diablog**) and (**Queer This!**)
- Developed assignments that encouraged students to be curious (**this is a feminist issue because...**) and that emphasized the process of engagement more than any finished (and final) product of that engagement
- Frequently picked readings/topics that were new to me too, creating teacher discomfort

Were these strategies successful? Did they enable students to start unlearning habits that had discouraged their curiosity and that had encouraged them to

continue perpetuating some of the most dangerous myths of the academic industrial complex? I'm not sure, partly because the kind of work we were engaging in was difficult and required ongoing practice beyond a student's time in my classroom. My goal was hopefully to plant a seed (of doubt, of desire to engage, question, be curious and stay troubled) for their future work inside and outside of classrooms.

*As I think about my transformed vision of the troubled and troubling classroom, I can't help but remember my earlier statement and my emphasis on my responsibilities as a teacher. I wonder, am I being irresponsible in employing these methods for cultivating troubling classrooms and encouraging students to question and challenge and give voice to their own doubts? What resources outside (or inside) of my classrooms will they have for supporting them in their efforts to make trouble and challenge the norms that undergird the current academic system?*

## THE DAY MY MOM DIED

*This account was originally a blog post from May 21, 2011. As I read through it again, I feel a bit undone with grief. I'm grieving for my wonderful mom who died 3.5 years ago. But I'm also grieving for the loss of one of the primary identities that has shaped my adult life: teacher. I taught on the day my mom died because I needed to. It helped me get through it. But at some point in the past few years, teaching became the source of my problems, not a way to cope with them. Will I ever be able (or want) to reclaim my identity as Teacher? I don't know.*

As I was sorting through a ginormous pile of papers from classes over the past few years, I came across my lecture/discussion notes for the graduate class on **Feminist Pedagogies** that I taught on the day that my mother died--September 30, 2009. I feel compelled to post them here today.

First, a set-up. My mom died in the very early morning (I don't know the exact time) in the living room of her house in Illinois. My dad called me at my home, over 6 hours away in Minnesota, around 8 AM. I taught my graduate class that afternoon, starting at 2 PM. It was an intense class; while I didn't cry, I do recall at least one other student did. We spent the first half of class discussing what it means to be a "person" in the classroom and the second half of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I began the class by announcing that my mom had died that morning. Here's what I wrote down to discuss in relation to that announcement:

**Theoretical:** What does it mean to be a “Person” in the classroom? What is demanded of us as teachers? How do we represent our vulnerability—when we are in grief, when we are upset, when we are hurt, when we are passionately committed to our ideas?

**Fisher** encourages us to, “bring our most authentic selves into feminist discourse” and feminist classroom (51). How do we do that?

What sort of space is there/should there be for thinking about teachers as people with feelings, who have experiences that influence their teaching? How do we perform/represent that in the classroom? How does the classroom become a space for the teacher to learn and critically self-reflect—as a fellow classmate instead of “the teacher”?

What sort of resources does/should feminist pedagogy give to the teacher (as a learner, student, member of the class)? How and when should we, as teachers, shift the focus on ourselves—our own care, our own need to be challenged, our own willingness to engage in critical self-reflection?

**Rosa Pugueras** writes about her belief that “she is the decisive element” in the classroom, that her mood affects her student’s mood, that she has the power to hurt or heal them. Is this true? If so, does the professor have a responsibility to be aware (and make others aware) of their mood? When is this admission a performance that is authentic and that helps to create a dialog (co-intentional education) between the teacher and students and when is it too confessional and merely personal?

**Application:** Practically speaking, as teachers should we try to “leave our worries at the door” and perform as selves who are lighthearted and upbeat? Or, should we tell them when we are having a bad day? Should we remind them that we are people too? If so, how? Is one more authentic than the other? What are

some strategies you can think of for bring our “authentic selves” into the classroom?

I can't remember what I exactly said about how these questions were so compelling to me on that day. I do remember feeling that I *had* to teach. Teaching that semester--both feminist pedagogies and my undergrad class, **queering theory**--was what helped me through those gut-wrenching months of my mom's dying/death.

These questions of authenticity and navigating the personal and professional/academic have been central to my classes this year. In my **2010 Feminist Pedagogies class**, we talked a lot about whether or not social media (twitter, in particular) could help us to access our authentic selves, or at least authentic moments of our selves. And in my **queer/ing ethics course** this spring, we repeatedly reflected on how to put the personal and academic beside each other.

As I read these last lines I wonder, is it possible for me to be a person in the academy? Are the methods and practices within the academic industrial complex fundamentally harmful to me and my ability to flourish?



## WHY? BECAUSE!

In 2008, the University of Minnesota started a campaign for promoting what a fancy research institute they were...or were planning to be. I recall someone saying that the goal was to be one of the "top 3 research institutes in the universe." I started seeing signs all around campus, with "Because" in big letters. And I saw "Because" billboards while driving through Minneapolis and St. Paul.



I was really bothered by this campaign. And I hated seeing the word "because" everywhere I walked on campus. It seemed to epitomize an education philosophy that shut down exploration and engagement instead of opening it up (even though it was supposed to be about how much they emphasized exploration and discovery).

After the financial crisis in fall 2008, the pressure to do research that was "serious" and that demonstrated that the U of M was not just a "diploma-cranking machine," but a super-smart research institution doing "cutting-edge" work, meant that a small, inter-disciplinary department like the one I taught in (Gender, Women, Sexuality Studies), was pressured to prove its relevance and was perpetually threatened with being cut or consolidated. It became a very difficult and spirit-crushing environment in which to work. "Because" was a constant re-

minder of that pressure, and almost served as a taunt and command: You must be driven to discover...the things that we deem to be important and serious and profitable!

I **tweeted** the above image to my feminist pedagogies class, along with the following comment:

The answer I give to my kids when I am tired of their "why" questions. What would Freire say? (as in **Paulo Freire**)

**Review:**

1. Why is being “driven to discover” more important than being moved to engage or collaborate?

A. Because!

B. Because!

2. Why do a handful of elite Experts get to determine what is important and serious and valuable?

A. Because!

B. Because!

3. Why is competition, and the desire to be a top-tier institution, the primary motivators for learning and engaging?

A. Because!

B. Because!

Answer: Because!

# BURNOUT

*Last year, after finishing up the most draining and difficult semester of teaching that I had had to date, I decided to reflect on my feelings about teaching and the academy in two blog posts. Instead of editing those posts down, I've decided to keep them intact for this account.*

## **on bad teaching, burnout and bell hooks**

july 19, 2011

Today is another very hot day--according to my weather channel app it is 94 but feels like 120. Yes, 120 (thank you, Minnesota humidity). It is Tuesday and it has been this hot since Sunday. This is very wrong. Especially since I don't have central air. As I write this, I am holed up in one of the 2 bedrooms in the house that has a window air conditioning unit. As you can imagine, these conditions are not the most conducive to writing and thinking and engaging. I am struggling to focus my ideas. I have been at this since 10:30; it is now 3:51 and I really don't have much to show for it.

I wonder, is it just the miserably hot and humid weather that is stopping me from writing? I don't think so. I am also struggling because I feel compelled to write about my feelings of burn out, my disillusionment with teaching at a big research University, and my uncertainty over whether or not I can **survive in the academic industrial complex**. While I am compelled to write about these things, I don't know how to properly (do I want to be proper?) or effectively express what I am thinking/feeling/experiencing. I can't imagine going another day without putting some of my ideas on my blog (hmmm...why is it so important to me that I

make these thoughts public? I might need to reflect on that in another blog post) so I am forcing myself to write right now. Since I don't like coherent, smooth (untroubled) narratives and because I can't imagine producing any like that in this heat anyway, I want to offer a few fragments of experiences, ideas, sources that are slogging around in my head.

I've been thinking a lot about bell hooks and *Teaching to Transgress* lately. In particular, I am reminded of her description in the introduction of the bad class that she taught one semester. It was a very early class and she would have frequent nightmares that she overslept and missed it. The students lacked energy and were very resistant to engaging with new ideas. hooks hated the class.

I came to hate this class so much that I had a tremendous fear that I would not awaken to attend it; the night before (despite alarm clocks, wake-up calls, and the experiential knowledge that I had never forgotten to attend class) I still could not sleep (hooks 9).

*Before my class even started in the spring, I dreaded it. It was a big class (almost 3 times bigger than any of the class that I had taught before) and I was doubtful that I would be able to develop it into a effective and transformative learning space. Once the class began, I was certain that my feminist pedagogical principles/tactics (such as: discussions instead of lectures, frequent small group activities, student-lead activities) would not work. I hated that class. Unlike hooks I wasn't afraid that I wouldn't wake up and would miss the class. Instead, I had fantasies about not going to class and just walking away from the university altogether. I wondered, what would happen if I just didn't show up?*

For reasons I cannot explain it [hooks' class] was also full of "resisting" students who did not want to learn new pedagogical processes,

who did not want to be in a classroom that differed in any way from the norm. To these students, transgressing boundaries was frightening. And though they were not the majority, their spirit of rigid resistance seemed always to be more powerful than any will to intellectual openness and pleasure in learning (hooks 9).

*I did have some great students in my class that semester. Some students who probably got a lot of the class and were excited to be exposed to new theories on sex, gender and sexuality. And who liked using the course blog and critically analyzing popular culture. But the students I remember most were the ones who complained. Who were unwilling to engage with new ideas. Who refused to claim their education or think for themselves. And whose "spirit of rigid resistance" made the class increasingly difficult to endure.*

More than any other class I had taught, this one compelled me to abandon the sense that the professor could, by sheer strength of will and desire, make the classroom an exciting learning community (hooks 9).

*Even as I grew to strongly dislike the attitudes of some of the students, I knew that their resistance wasn't simply because they were lazy and didn't want to learn. The more I taught, the more I realized that my painful teaching experience had so much to do with other factors beyond mine and the students' control: the alienating space, the institutional emphasis--heightened by the economic crisis--on increasing class enrollment instead of enhancing engagement, and the overall conditioning of students into passive learners who aren't prepared (or willing) to experiment with new ways of engaging with ideas and each other. These factors aren't just accidents; increasingly, they seem to be*

*built into teaching at a research university. It makes me wonder, if these factors are part of the teaching experience, (how) will it ever be possible to cultivate exciting and transformative learning communities within the University?*

It is now 10 PM. After an extended break, I am back to finishing up this entry. It has cooled down (ha!) to 91. And it *only* feels like 105. Yes, at 10 PM it feels like 105. Anyway, I think the heat is finally melting my brain. I had intended to write even more about bad teaching, burn out and bell hooks today, but I think that's it for tonight.

## **burning up and burning out in the academy**

july 20, 2011

It's hot again today. Well, not as hot as yesterday. Today it is only 91, but feels like 95, at 10:30 AM. Still, without air conditioning it's pretty hot in my house. Since I'm burning up, it seems like a good time to talk about academic burnout. In my last post, bad teaching, burnout and bell hooks, I hinted at possibly being burned out. But, what does that mean? How do you know if you are burned out? And what can you do about it?

**Post Academic** (which I found via the totally awesome **Worst Professor Ever**) writes about job burnout in their entry, **Job Burnout: Do You Have it?** Citing a **2006 New York Magazine article**, they identify several key aspects of it. You can check out the questions and my answers in this “Academic Burnout Test”:



## REVIEW 8.1 Academic Burnout Test

### Question 1 of 6 Working too much?

- ☒ A. Yes
- ☐ B. No



Check Answer



Hmmm...looks like I have burnout. And if you answered yes to all of the above questions, you do too! The signs have been there for awhile. Check out this passage that I wrote in a **comment** on KCF's post over at **It's Diablogical!**:

There are all sorts of ways that we could discuss this question, but I am thinking particularly of my feminist debates class this past semester and our repeated discussions about feminist education. Early on in the semester (on **this** day), we read an excellent article by Joy Castro: **On Becoming Educated**. Castro is critical of the “trickle-down” theory of academic ideas/theories/knowledge and the inability of much academic work to ever reach audiences who need/hunger for it.

She doesn't want to reject academic knowledge, but to expand it (maybe include internet knowledge as academic knowledge and/or

spread ideas cultivated in academic spaces across the interwebz?). Check out this passage: “The academy—as we fondly, misguidedly call it, as if it were some great, unified thing—is lumbering along amidst eviscerating budget cuts, pressures to corporatize, to streamline, to justify its existence to hostile anti-intellectual factions and a skeptical public, to become purely instrumental, a machine that grants job credentials to twenty-two-year-olds so they can get on with their lives. In the face of such intense and varied pressures, the academy must find ways to preserve itself as a place for thought to flourish—yet everyone needs to be invited to think. The discussion has to matter to everyone, and everyone’s voice must be heard.”

I like this passage from Castro because it also reminds me how much I cherish critical thinking. I find that it can be hard to remember this when working in certain academic spaces; critical thinking is presented in such narrow ways and is often used to shut people out and to actually shut critical/creative thinking down. Personally, I feel that the pervasive attitude within the academic spaces that I inhabit is extremely damaging to my creative and intellectual spirit. While I have had some great experiences with many of my classes and exciting conversations with some colleagues, much of the “good stuff” seems to be in *spite* of the academy and not because of it.

I also wrote the following in a post on surviving the academic industrial complex:

When I first started writing the entry I was already feeling burnt out and disenchanted with the academy. Those feelings have greatly intensified over the course of the semester as I daily confront the limiting (and debilitating) logics of the academic industrial complex.

In their post, Post Academic links to a [burnout test](#) that you can take on the site, Stress Management. I scored very high. After taking the test I clicked on [Recovering from Burnout](#). *For those of you who don't score quite as high as I did, you can click on [How to Avoid Burnout](#).* Here are the different ways that they suggest people cope with burnout:

- Do nothing
- Change career
- Change job
- Use burnout as trigger for personal growth

*Notice how, "take a break," isn't listed as one the options. Apparently, once you hit burnout, summer vacation or the semester break just aren't enough.* Stress Management strongly favors the fourth option, devoting a huge portion of their article to understanding why we burn out and how we can move on and find new direction for our lives. As a teacher (and daughter of a devoted fan to the self-help genre), I must admit that I can appreciate the emphasis on critical self-reflection and the call to learn from our experiences. However, as a feminist who has spent a lot of time thinking about the limits and possibilities of individualized self-care, I am also troubled by these solutions, especially the language of "personal growth." Ugh...too self-helpy for me (and neoliberal-y, but let's leave the jargon out for now).

While focusing on one's own care and physical/spiritual/mental health are extremely important, analyzing the problem as an individual opportunity for growth can fail to address the larger structures that cause burnout in the first place, structures that may affect us in different ways, but that contribute to a

more general academic culture that demands too much, values too little and excludes too many.

Here's another passage from my post on surviving the academic industrial complex in which I talk about the dangers of making survival about our individual ability to cope:

In her article, which is part of a roundtable discussion on “Got Life? Finding Balance and Making Boundaries in the Academy,” Smith argues that our attempts at negotiating between academic and personal/activist lives require more than searching for ways to balance our various demands. Instead, we must ask why, as in: “Why has being a good scholar and academic come to mean that one should be working incessantly at the expense of doing social-justice work, having fun, or maintaining interests outside academia” (141)? And we must “deconstruct the logic of the academic industrial complex to see how it has trapped us into needlessly thinking we must choose between academia and having a life” (141). *Yes! Finding a balance is not enough; the struggle to find that balance places the burden on individual academic laborers to adjust their lives while leaving the larger system that prioritizes academic production over personal/activist practices intact and untroubled. We need to interrogate why the academic system functions as it does and **why** it so often encourages (and demands) that we be unbalanced (and by unbalanced I mean an overemphasis on work over life and a dysfunctional approach to work/life that contributes to emotional/physical distress).*

*As I finish this entry, it is 2:15 PM and 96 (feels like 103). So, what I am going to do about my academic burnout? Not quite sure. I think I'll start by continuing to write and engage with other writers. I'll keep reading Worst Professor Ever and her reflections on why **Teachers Can't 'Do' Because They're Too Freakin' Burned Out** and her guest posts by people like Dr. Karen Kelsky who document the **death of a soul (on campus)**. I'll also look closely at Lucy E. Bailey's essay on **women's experiences as contingent instructors**. And I'm planning to reread *Teaching to Transgress* for the tenth time, giving special attention to passages like this one:*

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries to transgress (hooks 207).

Do I believe this? I hope so...

## WHAT IS FEMINISM, FOR REAL?

*This account discusses one of the last class sessions that I had in my teaching career at the University of Minnesota.*

In my **Fall 2011 Feminist Debates course**, we ended the semester by reading **Feminism for Real: Deconstructing the Academic Industrial Complex of Feminism**. This was a particularly powerful book to read in the last few weeks of my final semester of teaching. It focuses on the feminist academic industrial complex and how those within the academy determine who is a real feminist and where real feminism is taking place.

Here's how Jessica Yee defines the feminist academic industrial complex in her introduction:

...the conflicts between what feminism means at school as opposed to at home, the frustration of trying to relate to definitions of feminism that will never fit no matter how much you try to change yourself to fit them, and the anger and frustration of changing a system while being in the system yourself.

The policing of feminism and feminist identities has been a central topic of interest for me for years. My undergraduate thesis was all about the category "woman" and who it does/doesn't include. And my master's thesis and doctoral dissertation were concerned with the struggle between challenging identity categories and still being able to claim them. Additionally, challenging limited notions of what counts as rigorous thinking/scholarship and where it can/should occur have



been central to my work at the University of Minnesota. As a graduate professor, teaching queer theory and feminist pedagogy, I became increasingly interested in troubling, playing with and expanding how we (as students and teachers) engage with ideas and theories, where we do that engagement and for what purpose.

My personal experiences with feeling alienated from academic feminism are not the same as the writers in *Feminism for Real*. The "truth-telling" in this collection is performed by a wide range of Indigenous women and women of color, whose experiences of oppression and marginalization are very different than my experiences, as a white adjunct, of feeling disconnected and devalued. Yet, their discussions moved me and helped to clarify my own disenchantment and growing anger with the academy.

I wish I could remember how I felt a little over a year ago, as I prepared to teach my two sessions on this book. I have a vague memory that it was difficult to prepare. In her introduction, Yee states that the book isn't "a hate-on academic feminism." And, it isn't. But, as I read and reread that book and really thought about the uncomfortable truths it was telling about what academic feminism (and the academy in general) does to many, I realized I was done, if not for good, for a long while. I had spent almost my whole life in formal school, starting at age 5 and only taking half a year off, in 1999. That's just over 30 years. I had loved school. I had loved learning and engaging. But it was time to move on.

Here are the lecture notes from the one of the class sessions:

## Day One, December 1, 2011

Lee. Introduction

### 1. on "not hating-on" feminism, but encouraging discomfort

- "There needs to be struggle in order to lay out a path to co-existence, and that the process of being uncomfortable is essential for non-Indigenous peoples to move from being enemy, to adversary, to ally" (11).
- I want to say that I don't think we need to reject feminism though -- I think we need to redefine it, find common points and common ground and involve Indigenous peoples and other communities of colour. As long as there is mutual respect and all of our cultural and historic realities are brought into the mix, we can create cross-cultural human movements (18).

### 2. on being "equal"

(How) does our understanding of the goals of feminism change when we shift away from the language of choice and towards the right to self-determination?

Williams/Konsmo. Resistance to Indigenous Feminism

### 3. on independent women and expressing emotion

- I also think that feminism sets this bar of "independent, strong women" that are supposed to be able to "handle our emotions". But the Elders I know tell me that laughter and tears are medicine (Krysta 24).
- I don't even know what "independent" means anymore. I think for a lot of folks it's impossible to not be dependent on someone (a partner, family member) or something, financially or otherwise in order to survive. This especially doesn't speak to our communities, where people are depend on each other and share a lot for survival! We understand that things are connected and interdependent and this does NOT mean weakness (Krysta 25).

#### **4. on the feminist unification project**

the words we use to describe the mentality of mainstream feminists needing to hold hands, learn from each other and be sisters, in one unified circle of feminism, in order to win the fight against patriarchy. But this denies our sovereignty as distinct Indigenous nations, each with our own language, culture, history and experience of colonization (26).

Tagore. A Slam on Feminism in Academia

#### **5. on the need/urge for feminist theory, thinking, acting**

some of us need to engage with feminist theory  
so we can ground it in our community activist work  
our creative works  
our personal relationships  
for our families, communities and histories  
for our own fucking deserved peace of minds  
maybe we need to know how to make sense of oppression  
because we're so heartbroken we don't want to end up being locked away in psychiatric institutions  
or in a hospital overdosed on pills, getting our stomachs pumped  
because we don't know WHY all this shit is constantly driving us CRAZY (40)

Peterson. The Feminist Existential Crisis (Dark Child Remix)

#### **6. on the "proper" way to practice feminism**

I had started to feel significantly less invested in the endless, circular discussions about the proper way to practice feminism, the who's who list, the removal of my rough ideas on feminism from everyday life (46).

# TROUBLE: AN INTRODUCTION

*In my work, I envision social media, particularly blogs and twitter, as important forms of feminist praxis. I believe that blogs can be powerful spaces for radical transformation, critical and creative expression and community building. They can encourage us to connect and collaborate with others and enable us to engage in forms of public education that challenge and transform unjust and ineffective ways of learning and producing knowledge. Since 2007, I have been theorizing about, reflecting on and engaging with blogs inside and outside of my feminist and queer classrooms. In addition to making blogs a central part of my classes (I have created and maintained 19 course blogs), I write on my own research/writing/ thinking blog, TROUBLE. In this account, originally a digital video posted on my blog in honor of its third anniversary, I offer a history of my online exploration of making, being in and staying in trouble. In addition to posting the video and the transcript of my voice-over narration, I provide links to all of the blog posts mentioned in the account.*

## **a story in blog titles**

Here's an easy reference for blog posts mentioned in the above video:

### **Story One: An Introduction**

here's a story of a troublemaker...

what is troublemaking?

about this site

is marcia brady guilty of acting badly or badly acting or both?

horton the caring troublemaking elephant who not only makes trouble, but stays in it

feeling trouble and troubled in the classroom, part one

burning up and burning out  
oh bother! the today show takes on gender-neutral parenting  
being beside oneself with grief  
prepping for class: feminist pedagogies, some sources  
tracking my troublemaking through the virtues app

### **Story Two: GRIEF/life**

can you ever really have too much trouble?  
judith butler wants us to disobey. why? exactly  
living and grieving beside J Butler  
about the Categories: Grief/Life

### **Story Three: LIFE/grief**

is grief our only resource for how to stay in trouble?  
living (not grieving) beside Judith  
in praise of puotinen women in this month of many birthdays

### **Story Four: Troubled in and Troubling the Academy**

about this site  
tag archives: academic industrial complex  
trouble and the academy  
in praise of the academic riffraff  
some tips on surviving in the academic industrial complex  
on bad teaching, burnout, and bell hooks  
burning up and burning out

### **Story Five: More Experimenting**

how I'm using social media for troublemaking, part one: pinterest  
a dis/infographic: the best and worst types of tweets  
how I'm using social media for troublemaking, part 2: twitter  
experimenting with digital stories, part 2  
what is troublemaking?

Movie, **TROUBLE, an introduction**, available online.

## Transcript

In the preface to her most famous book, *Gender Trouble*, J Butler writes: “trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.”

I remember the first time that I read that passage in 1996, during my first semester of graduate school in my first feminist theory class. Those lines stuck with me, eventually playing a prominent role in my doctoral dissertation. *Note: Since first working on this account, I've discovered that I didn't first encounter Butler's work in the fall of 1996, but the spring of 1997.*

When I began teaching feminist and queer classes at the University of Minnesota, I found myself spending even more time trying to think through how and why trouble was inevitable and what exactly were the best ways in which to make it and be in it.

I think my continued interest in those lines has something to do with how they resonate with my own experiences as a child; I was trouble. Maybe not in the same ways that Butler was, but trouble, nonetheless. I lacked self-discipline (whatever that means). I asked too many questions. I refused to uncritically accept what I was told or to follow rules “just because.” And I never seemed to be swayed by the dominant logics of competition and success.

Then, when my daughter Rosie, a mini-me in appearance and temperament was born, I felt a strong desire to find ways to value and guide her troublemaking tendencies instead of discouraging them.

In a 2007 presentation on the virtue of troublemaking, I wrote that I wanted to claim troublemaking as a valuable and virtuous practice for her, and for all girls, “so that their questioning and passionate spirit will always remain and will be granted dignity and respect.”



As my son Fletcher, Rosie's big brother, grew older, I came to realize that finding ways to help him develop his own version of troublemaking, a version that involves a persistent desire to care for and about others, was important too.

So, in different ways I began to incorporate troublemaking into my teaching, my researching and my writing. I even developed and taught a class on feminist and queer explorations in troublemaking.

Then, in the spring of 2009 I decided to start a blog "dedicated to giving serious (careful, intense, playful) attention to what it means to make trouble, be in trouble and stay in trouble." In it "I planned to explore the ethical and political possibilities for troublemaking in my own work and the work of others."

In the 3 years that I have written on this blog so far, I've covered lots of topics, from the Brady Bunch to Dr. Seuss to feminist pedagogy to queer pedagogy to burning up and out in the academic industrial complex to being bothered to processing my mom's death from pancreatic cancer to prepping for classes to hacking iPhone apps to much more.

I love writing in this blog. It's made me a more joyful person, a better writer, a more engaged thinker and a more virtuous troublemaker.

So, what does it mean to be a more virtuous troublemaker? What is the troublemaking and troublestaying that I want to value? And why did I call my blog Making/being in/staying in TROUBLE?

Virtuous troublemaking isn't just about making trouble (that is, disrupting, challenging, questioning), but also about the material and psychological demands of being in trouble and what resources that we can develop and draw upon in order to continue STAYING in it.

Here's what I wrote about troublemaking on my "about troublemaking" page, which was also my first entry for the blog:

What would it mean to embrace trouble? To develop strategies for making it and being in it in ways that could produce compelling and potentially transformative ideas and actions?

What would it mean to take troublemaking seriously—as an important way of living life? As a virtue that guides our moral and ethical practices?

What would it mean to encourage the troublemaker and troublemaking within us—to listen to the voice that tells us that something isn't right and that demands that we challenge the ideas that are being forced upon us? To refuse to merely accept what we are told without question or careful consideration? To perpetually ask why things are the way that are and who benefits from them being so? And, most importantly, always to think and reflect on our lives and our actions and relationships to others?

## **GRIEF/life**

When I started this blog, I was particularly interested in safeguarding critique and critical thinking. Immersed in academia and feminist and queer theory, I was heavily invested in encouraging myself and others to always critique and ask questions that challenge and disrupt. I think that that investment was also influenced by my own unsettled space of grieving for my still-living, yet slowly-dying mom. Struggling to cope with my mom's impending death, it was helpful to dwell in those spaces of discomfort and uncertainty and try to make sense of them.

Indeed, my mom's illness has been a central part of this blog from the very beginning. As I recently wrote in my "about categories" page:

I started this blog back in May of 2009 and wrote most of my first entries during a trip to my parent's house when my mom was entering the final phase of dying from pancreatic cancer. She died in September of that same year. Not all of my writing on this blog explicitly addresses my painful experiences of living and grieving beside her, but her life and death surely haunts and inspires much of what I write.

## **LIFE/grief**

Now, 3 years into writing in this blog and over 2.5 years past my mom's death, I'm still very interested in critique and questioning, discomfort, and grief but I'm more invested in what's beside these things: being creative, joyful, full of wonder and living, not grieving. I think that this wondering, curious and playful spirit is a key part of virtuous and effective troublemaking; it's a needed complement to the demanding rigors of always questioning and never accepting ideas or rules or norms.

## **Troubled in/Troubling the Academy**

In experimenting on this blog, I've not only reflected on the value of trouble, but I've managed to get myself into trouble; I've come up against the limits of academic spaces and institutions. When I started my blog, I imagined it would allow me to experiment with connecting my academic self to my experiences and practices outside of the academy. And, in some ways, it has. But, it has also forced me to confront the problems with the academy. And I've become troubled by how academic work seems to more often come at the expense of my meaningful engagement with ideas and with others. So, instead of enhancing or complementing my academic work, this blog has made me question its very purpose. Is that a bad thing? I don't think so, but it certainly causes trouble for me and my ability/willingness to function within academic spaces.

## **More Experimenting**

On my third anniversary of writing in this blog, I've continued to stay in my troubled state. And, for the most part, I like it. It's enabling me to experiment with new ways of using online technologies and digital media to practice and reflect on trouble and encouraging me to push at rethinking how and where I want to practice my queer feminist pedagogy. Along with my continued interest in twitter, I've been trying out Pinterest, Tumblr and even creating digital videos like this one on Vimeo.

I'm convinced that none of this experimentation would be happening if I hadn't started writing in this blog on May 12th, 2009.

## PERSPECTIVES 1

**Michel Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher”:**

“I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes--all the better.”

**Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist*:**

“What is a feminist curiosity? Listening carefully, digging deep, developing a long attention span, being ready to be surprised.”

I like to pose these questions all the time:

WHY?

**Why** are things the way  
that they are? Who decides this  
and for what reasons?

AT WHOSE EXPENSE?

**Who benefits** with  
the system as it is and  
who gets exploited?

WHY NOT?

**Why not** imagine  
(or value) other ways of  
being and doing?

**Paulo Freire, *Learning to Question***

“...the point of a question is not to turn the question, “What does it mean to ask questions?” into an intellectual game, but to experience the force of the question, experience the challenge it offers, experience curiosity, and demonstrate it to the students. The problem which the teacher is really faced with is how in practice progressively to create with the students the habit, the virtue, of asking questions, of being surprised.”

## PERSPECTIVES 2

- Next to, in proximity to, in relation to others
- In addition to, another perspective, another direction
- Outside of oneself (but not fully outside of oneself), torn from self/bound to others/undone by others/implicated in lives of others
- Overwhelmed with emotion: grief, passion, anger, fear, panic
- Result of extreme event, causing person to realize vulnerability/precariousness
- A space of uncertainty and unknowingness
- A space of (potentially) productive failure
- A counterpublic space of radical intervention that produces material possibilities for subversion/resistance
- A space of community, a "we" that is fashioned through "undoneness," refusals to fully identify, and inability to fit
- Tactics for survival, strategies for imagining new worlds/ways of being
- To identify with *and* against
- To suspend or avoid judgment, not about what is good or bad, but what is "useful" or valuable
- Not a "good subject" or a "bad subject" but a subject who doesn't fully identify (good) or fully (reject), but reworks
- Another direction: using codes differently, reworking them, creating possibilities that are impossible, imaging worlds that are unimaginable
- At the limits

The above meanings of beside/s are inspired by the following sources:

1. Butler, Judith. "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy"
2. Chávez, Karma R. "Spatializing Gender Performativity: Ecstasy and Possibilities for Livable Life in the Tragic Case of Victoria Arrellano"
3. Foucault, Michel. "What is Enlightenment?"
4. Muñoz, Jose Esteban. *Disidentifications*



## CHAPTER 9

# REVELATIONS

IMAGE 9.1 Sara, age 38



*Running my first 5 Mile race in Austin, MN. (2012)*

## A SUMMARY IN HAIKUS

As part of my writing process, I experimented with articulating my ideas in the shorter, pithier form of haiku. I wanted pithier statements because: 1. I like being pithy; 2. working on reducing my ideas to their bare essence helps me to clarify what I'm thinking and feeling and 3. I want to try out different ways of communicating these ideas to others (note: haikus work really well in tweets).

Some of my tweets were incorporated into my accounts and some weren't. I'm including all of them here. As I read through them collectively, I realize that these haikus are fairly effective in summarizing my accounts. If I were teaching in the classroom now, I might assign haikus for theory assignments. They're fun and useful to do.

**warning:** don't trust what  
I write. In my stories I  
don't care about facts

you should know I write  
accounts that aim to question  
and unsettle Truth

do not be alarmed  
if my accounts seem suspect  
that's done on purpose

**on learning**  
to learn is not just  
to collect facts, earn degrees  
but to engage life

**on theory**

theory works when it  
heals pain, moves us to struggle  
and creates new worlds

theory doesn't work  
when it alienates us  
from that which we love

**on graduate school**

when I started school  
my wonder was fueled with joy  
but lacked direction

when I finished school  
my wonder was directed  
too much; it lacked joy

**on experts**

the shift from student  
to expert is the end of  
new ways of thinking.

i don't like experts.  
they claim, "i have THE answer!"  
when i want questions.

watch out for people  
who claim that they are Experts.  
They are often jerks.

## **questions i ask**

**why** are things the way  
that they are? who decides this  
and for what reasons?

**who benefits** with  
the system as it is and  
**who gets exploited?**

**why not** imagine  
(or value) other ways of  
being and doing?

i wonder, how much  
is broken? how much never  
worked in the first place?

## **invitations**

let's collaborate,  
tell stories and talk about  
what we think and feel

if not this, then what?  
not a haunting question, but  
an invitation

## IF NOT THIS, THEN WHAT?

if not this, then what?  
not a haunting question, but  
an invitation

If not this, then what? If I can't be an academic, what can I do with my training and my intellectual curiosity? What else is there besides teaching and researching at a college or university? For years, while working on my Ph.D and then after graduating, these questions haunted me. I felt as if the only thing that I was qualified to do was teach and research within academic spaces. In my darkest days, after sending out scores of job applications for tenure-track and visiting professor positions and getting rejected repeatedly, the panic and sense of hopelessness would creep in.

Luckily I did manage to find a good, albeit temporary, job as a part-time adjunct and then full-time Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota in the Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies Department. I taught at the University from fall 2006-fall 2011. I was really excited when I was offered the three year position. My own office! Benefits! A lot more money than I made as an adjunct! Great classes to teach!

*Getting a full-time academic job before my mom died (I started this position in fall 2008, she died a year later in fall 2009) was very important to me. She was the one I talked to about all of my failed job searches and she could commiserate, having experienced 4 (!) decades of agonizing academic job searches as the wife of an academic administrator. I know that she was very proud of me.*

While I was at the University of Minnesota, I experimented a lot with how I taught (my style, strategies, assignments) and what I taught (topics and type of content). And, I learned a great deal about feminist pedagogy, queer theory and digital media as I worked to stay one step ahead of all of my students. I learned so much that it feels as if my time at the university was as a student and a teacher. *This is the kind of teacher I like to be: one who is always engaging, encountering new ideas and participating in the learning process with my students.*

But, my job was temporary; I was under constant threat of not having my contract renewed. And, I was repeatedly reminded, in big and small ways, that I wasn't a *real* member of the faculty. I couldn't vote, I couldn't apply for grants and I was (just) a visiting member who would eventually leave and therefore wasn't worth investing any time in. *With their super busy schedules and the constant demands placed on them by administration, other faculty members, and students, faculty members in my department didn't have time to invest in me and my future as an academic. They barely had time to eat or sleep or deal with their own personal struggles with serious illness and aging and dying parents. Plus, they had stronger investments in and commitments to their graduate students; placing graduate students in tenure-track jobs meant higher ratings for the department and more status. These ratings were important for ensuring that the department wasn't consolidated ("hubbed") when budget cuts came rolling in.*

Regardless of why it happened, I was made to feel like I was less than the tenure-track and tenured members of the department. That felt uncomfortable, demoralizing and wore me down physically and mentally. By the time I finally left the University in 2011, I had extreme doubts in my abilities as a scholar, a thinker and a teacher. Was I fooling myself that my new research and teaching in and with digital media was interesting and innovative?



Now that I've been on a break from teaching and researching in the academy for over a year now, I'm not as haunted by the questions, What can I do besides teach in the University? and If not this, then what? *I'd be lying if I said that these questions didn't still haunt me a little.* My break has provided me with some much needed critical distance. And I've realized that my perspective on being an academic has shifted.

When I first went on the job market, I wondered whether or not any institution would want me. Was I good enough? Smart enough? Did I fit with their interests and personality types? Now, having spent so much time immersed in feminist and queer theories, reading, writing and teaching about limits, failure and the value of troubling and being troubled, and having spent six years working Post-Ph.D and experiencing the hierarchies and damaging myths of the AIC, I wonder whether or not *I* want to be at any institution. Are the drawbacks of academic life—the push to ruthlessly compete instead of collaborate with others, the demand to prioritize your academic work over the rest of your life, the constant reminder that your work will never be good or rigorous enough, the threat that only certain work counts as *real* academic work and only certain people count as *real* scholars—worth it?

I'm sure that there are many pockets of resistance where scholars are collaborating with each other and, more importantly, with community members outside of the academy, on cool and important projects. Or where wonderful scholars find ways to continue to be joyful and passionate about their work within academic spaces and, by virtue of that joy and their generous spirit, transform those spaces and those who inhabit them in amazing ways. *Actually, I know that these folks exist, even if they are rare. One of my favorite people from graduate school at Emory University, Dr. Kristi McKim, is just such a scholar.*

When I start to wonder if I could be one of those scholars some day, when my kids are older and I've managed to figure out how to be a person and a scholar

at the same time (ha!), I pause. Maybe. Maybe I could recapture the love and passion that I've had for so long for the academy again. But, maybe not. When I think about the disciplining, the push to professionalize, the elitism, the gatekeeping and the entrenched resistance to new forms of scholarship, I'm not sure the academy could ever be a place that welcomes my undisciplined and troublemaking practices and perspectives.

But questions about my future in the academy aren't as urgent for me right now and I'm not as anxious about what kind of present or future I can have outside of the academy. Instead, I understand the question, "If not this, then what?" as a (mostly) exciting invitation to imagine new possibilities and ways of being an intellectual, a student, a storyteller, and a person who has lots of interesting conversations.

# SARA, IN REVIEW

REVIEW 9.1 Sara, ages 0-38

**Question 1 of 5**  
**Which picture of Sara, ages 0-8, best captures what Sara, age 38, would like to be doing right now?**



Check Answer

