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Within this project, I examine knowledge production in Women's Studies as mediated and established through visual literacies. Drawing theoretical support from poststructural and postcolonial feminist theories, I explore the ways in which students and teachers of Women's Studies engage with visual texts and the ways that these engagements designate subject formation within the discipline. I offer close readings of my own experiences as a student of Women's Studies as well as introductory syllabi from the past decade.

IN/COMPLETE VISUALITIES: SPECTATORSHIP AND
SUBJECTIVITY IN WOMEN'S STUDIES
EPISTEMOLOGIES

by

Carrie Elizabeth Hart

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To Danielle, for reading closely, asking difficult questions, and helping for me to imagine
new ways to think about Women's Studies.

To Rick, for collaborating with me.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Early in my undergraduate Women's Studies courses, I experienced a shift in my understanding of what studies were possible within the field. Whereas I entered my first courses under the impression that they would afford me opportunities to learn about women's histories, experiences, and issues, I found that the ideas that intrigued me the most in these courses were not necessarily those regarding "women," or their "experiences" as discreet entities, but rather the structures and institutions in and through which these ideas circulated. As a current graduate student and also as an instructor within the field, I maintain that the field can be a location in which students and scholars examine issues of power both broadly and specifically. For the purposes of this project, I am considering Women's Studies as the study of the systems of power through which knowledge of intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, and citizenship comes into being. Though this perspective may appear to depart from approaches that foreground "gender" as the primary object of study within the discipline, I maintain that modes of examining power and gender are not distinctly separate, as even an interrogation of "gender" might be framed from an understanding of its constructs as subsumed within and available through modes of power. As Karen Caplan and Inderpal Grewal explain

woman as subject exists in so many shapes and forms that we [within Women's Studies] need to study how it has been reproduced and scattered across popular,

corporate, political, and academic cultures in relation to other social categories such as sexuality, nationality, class, religion, race, and so on. (68)

Additional scholars have noted that disciplinary formations themselves, including but not exclusive to those within Women's Studies, mark epistemic locations in which the relationship between knowledge formation and imperialism are important to consider in the context of examining power structures. Chandra Mohanty explicitly addresses this relationship when she states, "feminist scholarly practices (whether reading, writing, critical, or textual) are inscribed in relations of power – relations which they counter, resist, or even perhaps implicitly support" (53). In this way, Women's Studies as I participate in and produce it is not always primarily "about" gender, but is instead a set of frameworks through which both other scholars and myself might interrogate the means by which gender and other epistemological formations, including those within Women's Studies educational praxis, come into being and determine the ways in which institutions interface with one another.

I take my own experiences as an undergraduate student in Women's Studies as an example of the ways in which completeness can get invoked as a goal for Women's Studies students to attain, particularly in the name of effectively enacting feminist praxis. For example, I often thought that if I could only become more completely informed about the state of oppression for women around the world, I would be able to present a compelling case for feminism. If through the texts I encountered in class, I could assemble a complete, or at least comprehensive picture of the ways that people's

experiences were connected transnationally, my education within Women's Studies could prove to be not only worthwhile, but practical and useful to others who I understood to be both like and unlike myself. I saw these connections as especially viable in the context of suffering, which I understood to inform both the origin and purpose of the field. While this desire reveals several anxieties that currently circulate within the field (as well as certain kinds of both guilt and privilege on my part as a student), my focus in this project is less about anxiety regarding the field as manifested in its students per se and more about the impulse to imagine the classroom as a location from which any student could occupy an omnipotent vantage point as granted by the investment of knowledge as explained or revealed in complete ways. My concern with the impulse to mark the work of Women's Studies as somehow potentially completed by extending feminism from its supposed center to the outermost reaches of the classroom's imagination comes from the reemergent desire (perhaps of my instructors, my classmates, and/or myself) in my undergraduate courses that Women's Studies should be a location in which students could consider feminism in a "global" sense as necessary for people all over the world for reasons that were at once overarching (e.g. global sisterhood) and geopolitically specific. The reminder that we, in the classroom, were not the only ones for whom Women's Studies was important, persisted throughout my undergraduate coursework.

So for what reasons and through what ways might this "we" interrogate these anxieties not only regarding the knowledge they produce and what they understand the purpose of this knowledge to be, but also regarding the ways in which one, as a student

who is part of a discipline, moves “beyond” the limits of the discipline to enfold that already within it – in this case, “global” subjects and transnational feminist issues? One possible way of exploring these quandaries is to think closely about the epistemological methods those within the discipline employ. Within this project, I am specifically focusing on knowledge produced by ways of viewing. As such, I am inquiring about what configurations of knowledge are possible when interfacing with visual texts in Women’s Studies. Furthermore, the particular way I have chosen to examine visual literacies is part of a broader inquiry of what it means for students and instructors to be producing forms of Women’s Studies’ knowledge, including knowledge that constitutes themselves as producers of knowledge in the discipline. Who, within Women’s Studies, gets to invest in their own capacity to evaluate the visual through what means? When viewing, are some vantage points considered better locations from which to produce knowledge than others? What are the relationships between the production of subjects and those who are framed as not being able to achieve full subjectivity? Rachel Lee addresses the ways in which the demand for a “Women of Color” course within the core curriculum of her Women’s Studies program has generated an environment in which, even within courses designed to examine the experiences of “women of color,” desires articulated within the demand for the course generate a space in which said women of color can only receive institutional recognition as representing “themselves” when institutions call upon them to do so in prescribed ways (83). Lee’s concerns come to bear on my inquiries into the ways in which visual literacies similarly construct spaces in which certain bodies get mediated

according to seemingly “inclusive” demands. What are the various relationships that are produced by seeing coupled with the epistemologies that seeing informs? If epistemologies interpellate social beings into ideological constructs in which they are granted capacities to obtain and create knowledge, then tracing the ways that disciplines generate educated subjects bears importance not just for critiquing potential exclusions or oversights of knowledge production within a discipline, but also for understanding knowledge in the ways that it is continually produced and constructed.

In addressing these particular concerns regarding the ways Women’s Studies practitioners have, at times, attempted to resolve imperialism as present within disciplinary stances, I am interested in the ways that the relationship of subject construction to visual texts functions within pedagogical contexts that literally offer visual images as objects for learning. What patterns exist in the expectations regarding what these images will do or the kinds of knowledge they will produce within the classroom? How are these expectations linked to mechanisms of oppression in which Women’s Studies, as a discipline, is interested in dismantling at the same time that it is in some ways still complicit? As a variety of subject positions retain various investments in their capacities to be actualized vis-à-vis visual representations and identification, through what pedagogical frameworks might instructors of Women’s Studies cultivate modes of questioning said investments in the visual? One of my initial concerns in initiating this study is that some investments within Eurocentric educational projects have resulted in prescriptive viewing practices that continually construct an idea of a rational,

Western subject as central to the gathering and production of knowledge, while marginalized “others” exist as objects of, not subjects within, fields of dominant vision. Chandra Mohanty addresses this pattern within broader, disciplinary formations when she describes ways in which “Western” feminisms are often predicated on an understanding of “the West” as both coherent and primary to knowledge (53). Within Mohanty’s critique is not only the positioning of the West as coherent and central, but a response within Western feminisms to remedy these problems through the recognition of the construction of “objects” and the solution to grant them subjectivity (57). Mohanty’s skepticism of both these epistemological foundations and the proposed remedy suggests a framework in which ideologies cannot simply reverse themselves to appeal to a more universal and just stance. Rather, more complex strategies and understandings are necessary to undertake the kind of work that critiques, and does not consistently reinscribe hegemonies of knowledge (54 - 55).

While Mohanty focuses on feminist scholarship, I am interested in addressing the patterns she is critiquing within pedagogies and visualities. Particularly in the ways that imperialism informs modes of education and ways of seeing, educational praxis that explicitly interrogates what is accomplished in formulating relationships between viewing and knowing can function as a valuable means of tracing methods of constructing and differentiating ideas of “the West” from the rest of the world. As one possible means of locating these patterns within disciplinary epistemologies, specific theorization of visual encounters within Women’s Studies classrooms affords the

potential to theorize viewing as a process that produces the structures through and within which knowledge gets constructed and legitimized.

This study emerges from my interest in epistemological praxis within the field of Women's Studies, particularly as mediated through and within processes of seeing in undergraduate Women's Studies classrooms. Specifically, in what ways do visual literacies contribute to the production of disciplinary knowledge? What elements are present in the configuration of visual texts in relation to what scholars study, instructors teach, and students learn within the field? Additionally, in what ways could the nexus of visibility and pedagogy be cultivated as part of a praxis that establishes methods with which to examine and deconstruct the relationship between imperialism and knowledge formation? In some ways, the primary question of this study is simple: What do practitioners of Women's Studies make when they look? When considering the multiple factors informing a student's or instructor's capacity to generate knowledge regarding what and the ways in which they see, the possible answers to this question proliferate. My intention in exploring these possibilities is not to delineate "good" from "bad" viewing practices, but rather to open questions regarding the ways that visual literacies might offer rich opportunities for theorizing issues of epistemology itself within Women's Studies.

I am utilizing the terms "visualities" and "visual literacies" as concepts that describe the processes of producing knowledge of engagements with visual texts. Within this particular study, my use of these terms is specific to pedagogical praxis, for they

have been helpful in theorizing moments and patterns in which students and instructors within Women's Studies already generate knowledge regarding visual texts. In contemplating the specificities of processes of engaging with the visual, I also hope to theorize ways to question and perhaps shift methods of viewing that regard literacies of the visual as both dynamic within and significant to projects of the discipline. Specifically, my understanding of these terms is that they do not assume a singular or universal meaning that, through critical viewing, can be derived from any text. Inasmuch, they allow me to theorize multiple ways of seeing and the pedagogical possibilities present in a context in which a dominant subject position does not necessarily foreclose others by either refusing to acknowledge them, or in some cases, by casting them as those which need to be acknowledged in order to be considered legitimate or even present. Additionally, these terms help to call attention to the processes involved in gathering and engaging with visual items as coherent or incoherent objects of study. Whereas a focus on visual texts as already assembled and coherent could conflate seeing with the seen, a focus on the modes of encounter expands my investigation into the ways that these objects get configured within and as informed by various contexts.

I examine subjectivity as both a product and an effect of learning that transpires within Women's Studies because this framework allows me to examine the ways in which subjectivity has often been predicated through uneven relationships to power. Investigating the relationship between subjectivity and visual literacies, then, yields a nexus in which causal relationships blur incoherently into one another. In other words,

visualities function as apparatuses that at once produce and foreclose subject positions; at the same time, subject positions manifest through visualities as effects of viewing. This interdependency of these two processes (seeing and “being”) yields itself as available for a particular kind of theorization that I will utilize throughout this project when the relationship signals investments in maintaining a close causal relationship that presumes seamless, coherent forms of knowing.

As mediated within visualities, the construction of subjectivity involves delineating patterns that allow social agents to locate themselves within a matrix of meanings, visual modes of knowledge production are important not only as a source of ideas regarding social constructions, but also as a set of locations which actively locate spectators and in which spectators position themselves. As Lutz Koepnik describes, “Dominant Western conceptions of identity are inextricably bound up with the modern privileging of sight as the primary locus of experience and knowledge” (41). Within the epistemologies Koepnik references, ways of seeing and knowing get conflated in knowledge projects that, though they emerge specifically from Western modes of education, are not always acknowledged within those modes as being geopolitically specific. Joan W. Scott explicates this conflation in her initial reading of Samuel Delany’s *The Motion of Light in Water* in which she interprets Delaney to confirm his own gay identity upon viewing other gay men in a bathhouse. Scott explains that she derived her first interpretation of Delaney’s newly “gay” subjectivity from an epistemological relationship in which

Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct apprehension of the world of transparent objects. In this conceptualization, the visible is privileged; writing is then put at its service. Seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is reproduction, transmission – the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience. (776)

As Scott explains the function of the visual in relation to subject formation, visual modes of engagement seem to be not only more immediate than a written text could be, but also more “realistic” than written texts, and more capable of offering an “authentic” experience with which spectators may choose to identify.

Of particular interest to this study is the way that Scott traces the formation of the subject as maintaining a kind of dependency on the visual, which is presented as both immediate and intimate. Using her interpretation of Delaney as an example, Scott notes that encounters with the visual get formulated in a different way than the written – written texts, she implies, require kinds of translation and interpretation that visual texts do not. Scott’s critique of the hierarchy of fact, knowledge, and objects of vision within her original reading illuminates some of my primary concerns with the use of visual texts as pedagogical tools – that without discussions of self-reflexivity and a vocabulary that enables students to situate themselves and their ways of seeing in a deconstructive context, visual texts can be read as easy to consume and easy to teach. Particularly when the conflation of seeing and knowing functions as a part of an ideological system that forwards the imperialist gaze as authoritative, and in some ways, the only gaze that matters, the ways that translations get marked as “easy” are often in alignment with the foreclosure of alternate modes of visual literacy.

When Scott revisits her reading of Delaney, she makes an assertion of particular importance to the scope of this project. Rather than explaining the event in the bathhouse as an uncovering of a visually transparent truth, Scott explores the potential to read this moment as “the substitution of one interpretation for another” (794). This alternate configuration employs vision as less of a tool with which to reveal truth and more of a mode in which multiple reflexive explanations are possible. As a pedagogical approach, the interrogation of the visual as automatically true and knowledge as inherently coherent affords students with opportunities to consider power imbalances within epistemological constructs. Within this project, I am examining visual literacies within a specifically pedagogical context because of the ways that they help me to consider (and may also help students to consider) ways to approach questions of who gets to create knowledge about whom. The particular constellation of ideas I am contemplating enable me to question who, within Women’s Studies, gets to see themselves as a subject, as well as the ways that the capacity to examine others *as* objects is involved in establishing a subjective standpoint. What about specific visual encounters casts the object of study/sight *as* an object, and in what ways is this casting flexible or fixed? Who gets to understand themselves as producing Women’s Studies in ways that are in line with other symbolic undertakings of the field, and who is at odds with Women’s Studies projects as positioned relationally to discourse within a particular learning environment which is informed by disciplinary structures? In other words, if some students are inherently able to understand and reference themselves primarily as “learners” while others are primarily

“learned about,” then epistemologies as they are enacted within pedagogical and disciplinary spaces are responsible for generating uneven access to what gets validated as knowledge production within the very processes *of* production.

Though the scholarship I am utilizing and producing is explicitly critical of imperialism as manifest in locations of education, subject formation, and visualities, I do not understand the primary reason for this study to be a critique of imperialism.

Though I critique visualities as sometimes operating in complicity with projects of empire throughout this paper, I do not intend to foreclose the potential for visual literacies to be theorized in other ways, or to suggest that establishing an anti-imperialist praxis is the dominant justification for this study. In other words, I do not mean to suggest that a connection between cultivating a critical visualities praxis and an anti-imperialist praxis is somehow logical or inevitable; rather, I hope that linking these two in some instances will provide a means of offering questions regarding what informs ways of seeing within (not divorced from or exclusive to) epistemological stances within Women’s Studies. While an anti-imperialist critique is important to the kinds of pedagogical praxis I am ultimately suggesting, it is my hope that offering a means through which to theorize visualities enriches Women’s Studies in ways that I, as one scholar within the field, am not able to fully describe. In this sense, I am hoping to contemplate ways to generate open spaces in which multiple critiques and ways of knowing can co-exist at the same time that I gesture to possibilities that I cannot “know” in a complete, totalizing sense. As one way of theorizing the kind of praxis I am

describing, I have found incompleteness to be a helpful idea to deploy in that it calls attention to and in some cases defies imperialist solipsism without defining itself primarily as oppositional to viewing practices that presume a particular dominant subject.

“Incomplete” knowledges, as I am referencing them, offer the possibility of multiple simultaneous investments in the products of knowledge, their recognition, and their representations in relation to one another. Though the idea of incompleteness is not explicitly anti-imperialist, it holds the potential to disrupt colonizing impulses to claim all knowledge as evidence that is knowable, in its entirety, from a particular imperialist standpoint. In utilizing incompleteness, I hope to gesture towards a means of approaching knowledge production and educational projects that opens up methods of interrogating processes and products of learning. To be clear, I am employing the idea of incompleteness in several ways: 1) as a descriptor of the *means* with and through which students produce knowledge, 2) in reference to the enactment and theorization of educational praxis, 3) as a way of referencing the construction of subjectivities in relation to and as mediated by visual literacies, and 4) as a way of conceiving of elements of visual literacies and texts themselves. The multiple valences within the idea of incompleteness allow me not just to critique imperialism but also to theorize the work that produces Women’s Studies at several interdependent intersections. Trinh T. Minh-ha utilizes the idea of incompleteness as a way to trouble interpretations of documented facts as both coherent and unmediated when she writes, “On one hand, truth is produced, induced, and extended according to the regime in power. On the other, truth lies in

between all regimes of truth” (Documentary Is/Not a Name 76). When students employ visual literacies, they are both drawing from and contributing to the available knowledge of the field. Incompleteness enables me not only to challenge ways of knowing through modes of surveying that are derivative from and supportive to imperialist endeavors, but it also facilitates theorization of several simultaneously existing relationships within epistemological frameworks. To be clear, I do not anticipate that the incomplete modes to which I gesture are entirely compatible with one another, or that they are even working towards a singularly coherent praxis. My interest in exploring the multiple ways in which incompleteness might be helpful when considering and critiquing disciplinary formations emerges from the ways in which facets of the idea can locate gaps in epistemologies that forward pragmatism and “reason” as complicit extensions of empire.

In my current roles as student, scholar, and instructor within Women’s Studies, my desire has shifted away from a praxis in which the knowledge of the field can only be effective if it is framed as potentially comprehensive. Instead, I urge both myself and my students to consider incompleteness as a helpful mode through which to consider specific texts, praxis, and overarching goals of and within the discipline we constitute. Within epistemological frameworks that do not measure their viability according to their capacity to speak for or about all experience, students can radically reconfigure the modes through which they locate themselves in relation to the objects and purposes of their studies. Furthermore, they can examine the epistemological foundations upon and through which they construct their interpretations, as Rosalind Morris suggests in her

reflection on Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Regarding the ways in which Spivak's ideas complicate the "alternative stories" that might emerge from "the place of the subaltern woman" as themselves located within ideological structures that mediate their interpretation, Morris writes that, rather than representing the "actual" experiences of the subaltern woman, these stories "would have made visible the unstable claims on truth that the ideology of masculine imperialism offered" (3). Utilizing a framework such as the one Morris proposes enables students to examine knowledge as always a partial representation of itself.

When informed by the imperialist ideologies Morris references, the production of knowledge within Women's Studies becomes difficult to conceive of as detached from its relation to particular claims of truth within them. In the interest of calling attention to the instability of both these claims and their recurring presence within Women's Studies, I have chosen to utilize scholarship that explicitly challenges subjectivities that forward imperialist ideologies. Fatimah Rony, for example, explores modes of spectatorship that utilize the ways in which "other" subjects can engage with and challenge the cinematic apparatus by looking back through the camera to those who understand themselves to be directing the lens (193). Frameworks such as Rony's that investigate the ways in which viewers participate in constructing versions of knowledge through vision assist me to not only interrogate the ways that imperial knowledge configures Western subjectivities as central, but also to consider the ways in which students, centralized by imperialist ideologies or not, construct themselves by producing knowledge.

In addition to reflecting on my own experiences in learning and teaching within Women's Studies, I have utilized course syllabi as my primary means of noting patterns and practices within the discipline. I have chosen to focus on introductory courses in order to both delimit the scope of my project and to open up broader questions than an examination of the patterns I have observed in these courses might shed upon broader practices within and expressions of the field. I draw heavily upon a "resource publication" document compiled in 2007 by the National Women's Studies Association entitled "Introducing Women's and Gender Studies: A Collection of Teaching Resources" (NWSA). This collection includes syllabi from introductory courses in both lecture and seminar format from courses taught from 2004 – 2007. As NWSA positions itself as a leading organization for the field, the resources it offers are in a position to be read as particularly viable, or at the least available for duplication in a way that is not incongruous with the goals of the discipline. While this collection might be read as a resource, as NWSA most clearly describes it, I have chosen to utilize it as a kind of archive of aims and strategies enacted by practitioners in various locations within Women's Studies. Within the syllabi I read, I noted patterns in when visual texts appeared in syllabi as well as what kinds of visual texts instructors selected. I read this information alongside broader goals of the course as each instructor articulated them in course descriptions or student learning outcomes, and took note of when visual texts appeared to be involved in or related to meeting certain requirements. For example, I observed that developing a critical media analysis, particularly in regards to Western

advertising and sexism was a recurrent goal for introductory courses and that visual texts such as mainstream U.S. films or advertisements were often implicated in the ways in which students might cultivate analytical skills. I also noted the ways in which assignments required students to respond or consider visual texts or to reflect on artifacts they had viewed independently or in class.

In the interest of examining the ways that instructors involved visualities within their praxis of introducing students to what they determined to be important narratives within the field, I noted the ways in which instructors structured their courses according to themes and issues and also noted commonalities in the ways that visual texts appeared within these structures. Since documentaries (often within the ethnographic genre) appeared frequently in the syllabi I reviewed, I explore possibilities for why this particular genre functions as a common visual text. I do, within this project, also note a few other visual genres, such as photography, that I include in my own courses.

While this methodology is limited and presents only a partial view of the educational potential and praxis in any given classroom, this particular approach of examining syllabi as archival documents enables me to consider the ways that instructors have intended to facilitate their students' entry into the discipline. The ways in which instructors articulated the goals of their courses as well as the ways in which they addressed those goals through texts, sequencing, and assignments exist as artifacts of both intent and praxis of those who speak on behalf of the field. I theorize common patterns within introductory syllabi, as repeated methods, inclusions, and exclusions have

the potential to speak to broader narratives regarding the ways that come to seem logical or appropriate for Women's Studies to become enacted pedagogically. In my readings of syllabi, I formulate several critiques of said enactments, including ways in which certain framing of visualities may instruct an enabling tourism through which some students can "travel" to "other" parts of the world vis-à-vis the ways they see. More broadly speaking, I consider the ways in which the structure and intent of courses may anticipate and/or occlude theorization of the ways in which pedagogical practices construct subject positions and frame epistemologies as legitimate or marginalized within the discipline. Finally, I address teaching narratives that offer complex theorizations visual texts and modes of engaging them in a way that is specific to and meaningful within Women's Studies.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter overviews scholarship that supports my inquiries into the relationship between visual texts, subjectivity, and disciplinary formations within Women's Studies. In particular, I draw from scholars whose ideas assist me in investigating visualities as present within ways that instructors delineate Western and non-Western populations, experiences, and histories. Specifically, I have attempted to utilize theories that enable both teachers and students within the field to reflect on the way their viewing practices construct their subjectivities in relation to how they see. Scholars who have theorized the partialities and disjunctures within visual practices and disciplinary formations have helped me to engage in a sustained discussion of the way that I might utilize the idea of incompleteness to foster a complex understanding of the implications of knowledge production in relation to ways of seeing.

In theorizing epistemological patterns and possibilities present within visualities, I have found poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques to be particularly helpful lenses for examining Women's Studies praxis. Utilizing the documentary genre as my entry into examining the politics of subjectivity and visibility, I examine the modes with which Women's Studies instructors frame documentaries and the contexts in which documentaries appear. As poststructural and postcolonial theories offer critiques of the

construction of geopolitically specific knowledge, and also as they offer sustained critiques of the modes through which Western feminisms get established and maintained, they support interrogations of Western knowledge production as emergent from several patterns, such as 1) the need to *look elsewhere* than the West for evidence of knowledge, 2) the use of ethnographic “evidence” as aligned with visual taxonomies and the relationship of scientific observation to constructions of truth, particularly regarding racial and ethnic “others,” and 3) the relationship of visibility to the ways that students locate themselves within and through ideological formations. By examining these paradigms, I hope to open up new ways of questioning the intellectual work that Women’s Studies practitioners cultivate within their pedagogical approaches and aims. The endeavor of framing visibilities as perpetually incomplete is not a project that has always been markedly feminist by Western standards, though feminist theories have engaged with issues and ethics of gazing – often in terms of how women are objects and victims of particular kinds of viewing as informed by Western patriarchy. When thinking about how students within Women’s Studies classrooms *themselves* perpetuate viewing practices, it is helpful to engage postcolonial frameworks in order to interrogate the construction of Western gazes as omniscient and omnipotent, particularly in this project of thinking about the reasons why certain visibilities have been enforced, practiced, and taught in particular ways.

For example, when syllabi and programming reveal certain assumptions regarding the kinds of viewing that Women’s Studies students are already practicing, a means of

critiquing these expectations regarding visibility generates opportunities to think in multiple ways about not only the means and meaning of gazing, but also feminist activism and the discipline of Women's Studies itself. One of the most frequent documentaries I have encountered in introductory syllabi, Jean Kilborne's *Killing Us Softly* (or the second, third, or fourth editions of this film) issues a critique of the effects of Western advertising on the ideas that women have regarding their bodies. Specifically, the film takes up concepts of the detrimental nature of advertisements on what it refers to as "body image." Perhaps not surprisingly, it most often appears on introductory syllabi under sections that also deal broadly with "media" and "body image." Neither the film nor its placement on the syllabi I have reviewed suggests a more specific means of locating the film or its visual ideologies in context that takes the impact of imperialism or transnationalism on knowledge production into account. In this way, the women in the film (both those featured in the advertisements and those affected by advertising messages) appear to stand in for all women, while the implications concerning the ways that students in the classroom should react to the film appear to be limited to a constricted scope of what counts as positive or negative advertising, as well as feminist or sexist modes of viewing bodies.

Both the framing and expectations of Kilborne's film become complicated in ways that should concern Women's Studies instructors as they endeavor to produce and examine transnational scholarship. What happens when, for example, *Killing Us Softly* comes into conversation with Fatimah Rony's observations regarding what happens when

students derive knowledge about themselves based on *how* they see what they see? Roy utilizes the idea of “the third eye” to theorize the process of viewing oneself as an object at the same time as one views the process that makes one into an object (4). Rather than taking up the kinds of visual critique that I imagine Kilborne generates, which depend on a translation that doesn’t necessarily take processes of subject formation into question, Rony theorizes the potential to visualize two simultaneous and contradicting processes – that involved in making “savage” subjects and that involved in making subjectivity impossible to acquire for those determined to be “savages ” (4-5). The kinds of possibility this mode of gazing enables engages with what Rony describes as the capacity to theorize the process of documenting as well as the process of seeing. To shift the critical emphasis from questioning object of sight to interrogating modes of seeing would enable Women’s Studies students to take up new goals and aims for what it determines to count as sufficient knowledge and noteworthy activism. For example, I imagine that a more specific engagement with visualities could help students within Women’s Studies classrooms to hone their capacities to think and speak critically about the ways they view and how their understandings of their own subjectivities are contingent on their modes of visualizing. If Women’s Studies practitioners aimed to complicate the ways that they see, and to articulate the ways that they may not be capable of seeing, Women’s Studies might become a site of profound deconstruction of imperialist epistemology and praxis that presumes to be able to see all.

In my understanding, desires within Women’s Studies to frame the discipline’s

epistemologies as comprehensive, coherent, and always progressing in ways that bring them closer to completion are rooted in histories of white feminisms attempting to reconcile racist histories of the discipline by incorporating the experiences of brown women alongside the experiences of white women. Many other scholars have noted the desire to map the course of the discipline along a path of linear progression and increasing sensitivities to categories “other” than, or as informed by gender, such as race and nationality. Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, for example, take up the emergence of U.S. Women’s Studies programs from what they explain as a Cold War mentality that invested interest in maintaining Western nationalist epistemologies (70). Kaplan and Grewal assert that even while integrating an analysis of “difference” according to nation and race during late second wave feminisms, Women’s Studies programs maintained context in which white women in the U.S. remained the central analytical agents who were positioned within disciplinary constructs as those who might take up the “Third world woman” as an object of study, or perhaps even invite her to participate in their scholarship (71). The universalism applied to “women’s” experiences in these cases is of course, uneven, for the invitation does not necessarily function to ameliorate “difference” but rather to reify it and its discursive forms of power. Wendy Brown also locates white guilt as a product of the original exclusion of race as a category of analysis at the heart of Women’s Studies’ “impossibility” (24). Though I will not take up Brown’s suggestion to dissolve the work of Women’s Studies into other disciplines specifically here, my interest in noting her article emerges from a desire to note the extent to which she theorizes that

the relationship between exclusion, race, and Women's Studies complicates the aims and praxis of the field.

Given the ways that practitioners of Women's Studies have aligned themselves, albeit with varying and uneven investments, with the politics of both violation and liberation, it is important to pay attention to how the field both deploys and explores visual literacies in the name of alleviating oppression, and the multiple levels of power at play in the ability to frame viewing as absolute, violating, and/or liberating for the subjects of particular ways of viewing. Hazel Carby argues that the negotiations involved in rendering women of color visible and present in feminist epistemologies are themselves important to theorize, and that simply bringing women of color into feminist classrooms as objects whose bodies and/or experiences students can study does not address the means by which they are continually excluded (68). Since scholars within Women's Studies have also taken up questions regarding the manner in which the discipline constructs Western perspectives as central, interrogating the use and framings of visual texts necessarily involves analyses of the ways that certain kinds of viewing are framed as enlightened or civilized. If some of the methods that practitioners of the discipline have answered the call of transnational feminist praxis involve bringing "other" women into Western classrooms via visual representations of ethnographic documentaries, for example, then the utilization and intent behind this particular mode of inclusion bears a dangerous resemblance to the *modus operandi* of the those who act in the interest of colonization. If, in this case, the expectation of visual texts is that they will

perform with a transparency that makes their experiences immediately salient to those who view them, these modes of framing risk presenting coherent narratives and versions of the “real” that leave colonizing modes of inquiry intact and hence exclude the very experiences that the field is purporting to engage.

In a broad sense, the almost canonical status of texts such as Peggy McIntosh’s “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in Intro courses speaks to a far-reaching understanding in the field that students within it should learn various strategies for articulating the dependency of categorizations of race and gender upon one another (78). That instructors frequently introduce Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality as a primary mode of analysis also reflects a methodological stance that is aware, in certain ways, of histories of racial exclusion within Women’s Studies (1243). However, the syllabi I have surveyed do not necessarily indicate that an intersectional mode of analysis is evenly dispersed over the content of the course; rather, it appears most frequently alongside texts that offer overt discussions of women of color. If, in these instances, intersectionality functions as a means by which to bring previously excluded women of color into the (white) Women’s Studies classroom, the means with which they become visible is of profound importance.

In a pattern which Carby would likely find suspect, the Introduction to Women’s Studies syllabi I have reviewed often juxtapose the experiences of women of color with white women’s experience in units on sexual and gender-based violence, or in units on sexuality as a mode of identification and political mobilization. In both cases, the

relationship between these sets of experiences appears to reify a distinct separation between the West and the non-West at the same time that it relies on evidence from the “non-Western” world to support certain framings of gendered victimization as transcending geographical and historical boundaries. Evan Towle and Lynn Morgan offer a critique of the appropriation of a “third gender” concept by Western authors and academics concerned with establishing alternative formations of gender identity within Western heteronormativity (469 - 471). Towle and Morgan posit that appealing to examples such as “the *hijra* of India, the *berdache* of native North America, the *xanith* of the Arabian peninsula, the female husbands of western Africa, and the Sambia (a pseudonym) boys of Papua New Guinea who engage in ‘semen transactions’” in order to “buttress the argument that Western binary gender systems are neither universal nor innate” often emerges from an imperialist impulse of romanticizing indigenous cultures and practices as innocent, regressive, and authentic in ways that “developed” cultures are not (469). Though the relationship that authors such as Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg are attempting to highlight is one that performs a potential deconstruction of homophobia, transphobia, and sexism, Towle and Morgan argue that the danger in lumping all “non-Western” articulations of non-binary gender into a Western construct of a “third gender” reifies investment in epistemological stances that treat the “non-West” as a decontextualized location from which Western gender-resisters can draw evidence without interrogating the lenses through which they stake their claims regarding gender non-conformity (476).

While Towle and Morgan take up Western appropriations of “alternative” sexual behaviors and identities, Inderpal Grewal examines the ways that Western feminist discourses of human rights locate gender within a transnational matrix of violation. In her critique of Marjorie Agosin’s, *Women, Gender, and Human Rights*, Grewal asserts that the text represents a problematic pattern of rendering transnational connectivities visible vis-à-vis an essentialization of female gender as interconnected with sexual violation.

Grewal explains:

In forming an ‘international’ struggle, in which all women from all nations could speak to or understand each other or work together for a ‘common’ goal, gender was stabilized through practices articulated as human rights violations essentially linked to gender, for example widespread violence or the vulnerability to rape for women by militarized or nationalist power. (137)

Within the political framework Grewal describes, it becomes possible for instructors of Women’s Studies to express the purpose of the field as that which renders the connections between women’s experiences in the U.S. and in “developing nations” visible according to measures of shared violation rather than as mediated through transnational technologies and discourses that determine theories of violation unevenly. In this way, an emphasis on the commonalities between women who have experienced “domestic violence” both in the West and in “developing” nations operates in a similar way to the use of the “third gender” construct that Towle and Morgan critique – by flattening cultural differences and evading contextualization of access to and construction of information vis-à-vis transnational hegemonies.

While others have critiqued the trope of global sisterhood more thoroughly than I will do in this project, my critical interest lies in the ways that instructors and scholars within Women's Studies attempt to reconcile the exclusions of their teaching and scholarship vis-à-vis the addition of particular kinds of *content* rather than the construction of a praxis in which the epistemologies of the field itself can come under critical consideration. For example, within rubrics of transnational violence against women, introductory classes often prompt examination of the ways in which women both in the United States and non-Western nations may experience what "sexual violence." Utilized uncritically, the naming of both non-Western women and their experiences with violence according to Western epistemologies supports knowledge projects in which said women function as evidence for the universality of gendered oppression. Mohanty remarks on the ways that discursive invocations of "universal" violations function to construct Western subjectivities vis-à-vis the idea of a monolithic "third world woman," who is at once similar to and dependent upon the Western feminist subject to address her needs (74). Mohanty writes, "Without the overdetermined discourse that creates the *third* world, there would be no (singular and privileged) first world" (74). In examining visualities involved in producing the kinds of ideologies to which Mohanty alludes, I hope to interrogate the risks that uncritical visual literacies make when deployed in the interests of protecting the coherency of Western subjectivities.

Rachel Lee addresses this pattern as present within her program's demand for the core "women of color" course within her Women's Studies program at the University of

California Los Angeles to answer to disciplinary anxieties regarding the historical exclusion of perspectives of women of color. Lee argues that charged with the responsibility of diversifying culturally homogenous programs (and implicitly righting racist histories of exclusion) courses that “include” women of color in this particular way “become freighted with the weight of a racial alibi, and the bodies of knowledge produced by and about women of color becomes less important than the hailing of ‘women of color’ as a synecdoche for Women’s Studies’ own blind spots” (83). While Lee’s concerns are not explicitly about introductory courses, her argument is still a useful means of tracing impulses to resolve disciplinary racism via particular kinds of “inclusion” of women of color in which the recognition of the presence of bodies of color presumes to answer to or even solve past exclusions. Lost in these framings are opportunities to theorize multiple means of exclusion and the ways that gestures towards inclusion might further ghettoize those who have been subject to imperialist necropolitics.

Within Introduction to Women’s Studies, documentary ethnographies based in non-Western locations often appear to prop up already existing narratives of Western women’s gendered victimization rather than complicate those narratives or exist in their own context. Their almost exclusive positioning alongside Western women’s experiences of victimization suggests that they serve as a means of evidence for frameworks of transnationally gendered victimization. Of additional concern are the ways that these frameworks set up the “activism” unit on which Intro courses often end and the particular

ways that Western modes of “help” can get mapped onto bodies once they are understood to be victims in some global sense. When documentaries function to bring the bodies of non-Western women into the Women’s Studies classroom, ethnographic framings risk reifying many of the hegemonic processes that course descriptions and student learning outcomes purport to oppose. Of particular concern are the modes with which these framings both lack specificity and posture to be inclusive, global, and potentially complete. Given the ways that visualities are involved in producing knowledge regarding the content and purpose of these texts, a narrow framing of viewing the bodies, experiences, and needs of non-Western women in a Eurocentric discourse of human rights or a framing that occludes the opportunity to theorize the process of viewing at all seems to be incongruous with proclaimed anti-oppressive aims articulated by those who contribute to Women’s Studies scholarship.

To offer an example of a moment in which a richer, more complex framework of visualities might have been helpful, I return to a day during a course I taught on Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies this past summer. I had assigned my students to look at Shirin Neshat’s photograph, *Speechless*, and read the accompanying caption from the Feminist Art textbook in which my copy of the photograph appeared. The photograph is a black and white close-up of a woman’s face, to the right of which is a veil and the silver barrel of a gun, which can easily be mistaken for an earring. Persian script covers the woman’s face. When I had used this photograph in past classes, most students who spoke during discussion admitted to not being able to read the writing but

also felt confident in their assertions that this woman was obviously “being oppressed” – the evidence, they claimed, they could see in her sad, somber expression. When pushed to elaborate, many of these students also cited the presence of the veil as additional evidence of her oppression, and speculated that someone else is holding the gun, even though the barrel is pointed at the photographer/viewer, not the woman. I chose to assign the photograph because I anticipated these responses and hoped that the class would be able to read these articulations of visibility alongside Neshat’s photograph in order to form a critique of Western solipsism and also to speculate on what it may entail for meaning to be inaccessible to those who expect to be able to access all cultural meanings through the lens of the West.

On the day that my class was to discuss this photograph in my summer course, however, one student raised his hand and informed me, along with the rest of the class, that the text covering the woman’s face was Persian, not Arabic, as the art textbook had originally explained. He did not translate the text into English or offer any input as to his other thoughts on the photograph. The moment of his correction presented many opportunities for conversations regarding visibilities that, in retrospect, I wish I had been more capable of facilitating. At the time, however, I became stuck in the space between my original *intent* of bringing this text to the class’s attention and the effects of my student’s statement. While I had originally hoped that the photograph would enable a discussion on limitations of accessibility to cultural meaning, particularly in a Western context of presuming to be able to access absolute knowledge of everything, I

encountered considerable challenge regarding my own limited ways of seeing and what it might mean for someone who is supposed to perform “expertise” in her field to demonstrate incomplete knowledge as a praxis rather than an error.

What meanings could have emerged, for example, from a contextualization of that moment as a shifting, incomplete visibility? What questions could have emerged if a text, a student, or I had framed that moment as representing both ethnography and an effort at its deconstruction? For even within my desire to generate an environment in which interpretations of the visual are up for debate and political contextualization, my pedagogical stance in some ways depended on my students’ ability to read or not read in certain predictable ways that, to me, represented a coherent relationship of sign to signifier. To begin to unpack moments like this, I turn to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s 1983 film, *Reassemblage*. About three quarters of the way into the film Trinh focuses her lens on a woman in rural Senegal, the geographic location in which the entire film is set. At this moment, Trinh’s voiceover states, “Watching her through the lens, I look at her becoming me becoming mine. Entering into the only reality of signs where I myself am a sign.” (*Reassemblage*). Trinh generates several slippages in this moment – between the subject of the film and her camera’s gaze, between the way she, the camera, and her audience all gaze, between gazer and gazed upon. Perhaps most important to the anecdote I have shared is the relationship she notes in which a viewer makes an entry into a constructed reality vis-à-vis her gaze in which she herself functions *as* a referent for knowledge production. Within this conceptualization, no viewer can ever generate a “complete”

theorization of what she sees; rather, she can exist as a part of *what* and *how* she does and does not see.

Within this project, I am referencing postcolonial theories for the ways they engage with the relationship between visualizing and educational projects. Additionally, these modes of theorizing offer ways to consider the partiality and incompleteness of the visual, as well as ways to interrogate the reasons why visual texts have been framed as particularly realistic, perhaps more realistic, at times, than other modes of knowing. For example, Frantz Fanon calls attention to the visualities within the context of colonial concerns regarding women who wear the veil in Algeria. Fanon explains that French colonists of Algeria conceived of the veil as problematic in that it obscured the visibility of the woman wearing it. Visibility, for those concerned, meant the ability to gaze upon the woman's body rather than the garment covering it. Once seen, according to the colonizing gaze, the female body could be "known" by those who, prior to this vision, did not have access to said knowledge. Here the particular mode of viewing aligns itself with colonialism not only as a form of domination, but as a way of knowing that at times seems indistinguishable from colonial control itself. The desire to see in a particular way stands in for the capacity to see *at all*, and within the matrix of colonization that Fanon describes, this way of visualizing also functions as an expression of power and a means by which subjects constitute themselves as "selves" in relation to other subjects.

So what implications do the viewing practices that Fanon describes have within Introduction to Women's Studies classrooms? Certainly the answers vary depending on

the individual contexts of each learning environment, but if one is to assume that the field of Women's Studies sometimes operates in complicity with colonial knowledge production, then these classrooms must continually contend with certain constructions of the visual as encounters with unquestionable, absolute knowledge. Additionally, when visual texts register as complete, ways of viewing themselves may go un- or undertheorized. If, as according to Fanon, knowledge that results from viewing gets framed as a more immediate kind of knowing within a colonial or postcolonial imaginary, it seems particularly important in classrooms that introduce students to methods of deconstructive feminist praxis to offer ways of theorizing the connections between seeing and knowing.

Fanon theorizes another function of visibility that is important to consider for the learning that transpires in Women's Studies. He explains how, within colonizing modes of knowledge production, visibility presents not only a more immediate kind of knowledge (what one sees, one knows), but also an ethically superior mode of knowing – one that can be utilized in order to control the objects of vision. Within this framework of visibility, it is less important to be reflexive regarding who is looking and how they are looking than it is for that subject to understand the object of her/his gaze. Such is the mindset of the colonizers in Algeria who aim to liberate women by removing their veils. The argument goes that when the colonizers are able to see the women in particular ways that they, the colonizers, have determined to be truly visible, the women will be free. According to this logic, not only are the qualities of freedom determined by those who

will not experience them, but those same qualities are configured according to what is visually available to those looking at bodies that are not their own.

The constellation of visibility, knowledge, and ownership that Fanon explains here resonates with the project of theorizing victimization in relation to its solutions that Women's Studies scholars have often taken up. For Western knowledge formations, the capacity to see and therefore, know certain subjects and circumstances *as victims* often aligns with the ability to produce knowledge regarding the solutions to said forms of victimization. As I have mentioned previously, this pattern often emerges in the structure of introductory courses as not only including, but also concluding with a unit on activism, which often focuses on specific women helping other women in particular ways. When forms of help go untheorized, the potential to reify ideas of racial and national superiority is great, as Sherene Razack notes in her contextualization of colonial encounters in the classroom. She explains that underlying certain articulations and enactments of "help" are deeply rooted forms of commodification and investments in ethical difference in which Western subjectivities emerge clearly as those capable of offering help and non-Western subjecthood is realized as that which needs to receive help. As evidenced by certain framings of the veil and of what Western feminisms have named "female genital mutilation," Razack asserts, "for white women, contact with non-white women reinforces the imperial idea that white women are more liberated than their sisters in the South" (5). When Women's Studies instructors frame not only these issues but the visual texts that bring them into the classrooms in ways that generate certain formations of "action" or

response as inevitable or logical, then a means of theorizing the visual frame could open up broader possibilities for the ways that students understand the implications in what it means to give or receive help.

Of additional importance to an examination of visualities within Women's Studies praxis is Fanon's argument that the colonizing gaze he describes is entangled with sexuality and sexual ownership. The removal of the veil, as Fanon describes, marks several kinds of colonial access to native society – in one sense, the removal of the veil becomes conflated with the sexual availability of Algerian women, and in another sense, the removal of the veil marks a symbolic ownership of and entry into Algeria. Fanon describes the ways that women who are marked by colonial power as visible in this particular way “circulated like sound currency in the European society of Algeria,” as evidence not of their own actual freedom, but of the success of the spread of colonial ideology and power (42). One could easily read some of the common tropes of sexual victimization and liberation manifested in Women's Studies alongside Fanon's critique and note striking similarities regarding patterns of who gets to name whom as liberated, or who gets to be interpellated as more potentially liberated than another subject.

As a mode of inquiry rather than objective knowledge, visualities conceived as texts themselves can come under scrutiny and be theorized alongside other epistemological frameworks. When visual literacies are theorized as multiple, incomplete, and at times even in contention with one another, the ways in which viewers construct themselves through said literacies becomes available as a point of inquiry.

When, for example, Rony discusses the ways that subjects whom the imperialist gaze would describe as non-subjects indicate an awareness of the ways the cinematic apparatus attempts to use them to buttress imperialist ideologies, she not only troubles the coherency of imperialist visualities as singularly authoritative, she also introduces formations of agency that profoundly troubles frameworks that construct non-Western subjects as incapable of realizing full subjectivity.

My questions regarding the ways that students engage with visual texts in Women's Studies classrooms emerge from understandings of subjectivity as a process formed in relation to a multitude of fluctuating factors such as the vocabulary, experiences, and relations cultivated, acknowledged, or ignored within educational praxis. In my understanding, subjectivity is central to a study of viewing, as it is necessarily informed by both specific means of producing knowledge (in this case, knowing vis-à-vis seeing) and also by the kinds of knowledge that these mechanisms produce (such as an identity reached or occluded within literacies of the visual). In the moments of incomplete visual contact between students and the subjects of their viewing, the construction of subjectivities on all sides of the lens are at stake, though the power differential between the two is often asymmetrical. The social processes that I am most concerned with opening up for question are ones that leave the subjectivity of the learner and of the object of study unquestioned and intact. Furthermore, an analysis of subjectivity and the recognition of its fluidity enables this study to take the process of viewing itself into more critical consideration. When engaging with the subjects of

documentaries and the ways instructors frame the context of the documentary, what patterns of recognition occur? In what ways does the context of the course encourage students to read themselves as like or unlike the subjects or objects they view? In what contexts does viewing come to resemble commodification or consumption of an exoticized “other,” and in the case that some students may sense that they are to identify with the exoticized subject of the gaze, what within the structure of the class marks their ability to theorize this process and perhaps to resist the kind of split that Rony describes? Or, to ask a different kind of question, what might it mean to cultivate critical pedagogies that do not expect “resistance” to translate universally, or do not rely on resistance as the only, or best response to exclusions or oppressions within feminist praxis?

An account of subjectivity that locates social agents as perpetually constituting, undoing, and relocating each other’s capacity to be recognized in predictable, unified ways allows for a way to theorize the classroom as fraught with power differentials. A complex understanding of multiple subjectivities present within Women’s Studies classrooms opens up many questions regarding the intent of showing specific visual texts (or “kinds” of visual texts, such as ethnographic documentaries) and framing them in particular ways. If instructors expect documentaries to perform as authentic representations of difference and suffering in such a way that they are meant to be read in a transparent, informative manner, what does this framing presume about the students already in the class both in terms of the ways they need to be informed and the fashion they should go about acquiring knowledge?

To return to Koepnik's assertion that the construction of knowledge as visually available identification emerges from Western traditions of viewing, a postcolonial analysis is invaluable to posing questions regarding *how* students see texts as well as how their instructors might encourage or expect them to generate knowledge through acts of seeing. What do the ways that Introduction to Women's Studies instructors choose to cultivate viewing practices reveal about who they, or their field, expects the disciplinary community to include? Postcolonial modes of theorizing provide ways to link histories of learning and viewing with patterns of racism and imperial domination. For example, Shohat and Stam's explanation of the ethnographic function of cinemas during early 20th century European imperialism locates the mechanisms of spectatorship in a context of both the rise of the cinema and of events such as world fairs in which colonizers exhibited indigenous persons for purposes that they claimed to be both educational and entertaining. Shohat and Stam link exhibitionism and spectatorship as imperialist projects in a tradition of viewing practices that they trace into contemporary media, such as Western news coverage of the Gulf War. They explain that imperialism mobilized a kind of spectatorship that delineated bodies, territories, and power, claiming that

the cinematic exposure of the dark body nourished spectatorial desire, while marking off imaginary boundaries between 'self' and 'other,' thus mapping homologous spheres, both macrocosmic (the globe) and microcosmic (the sphere of carnal knowledge.) (109)

In tracing the visual means of distinguishing populations from one another, Shohat and Stam link visualities to imperialist implementations of power and the maintenance of

assymetrical power relations by the same avenues with which they were brought into existence.

If practitioners of Women's Studies are to make claims of engaging with oppression, gendered or otherwise, they must contend with the ways that imperialism lingers or flourishes within the expressions and functions of spectatorship that Shohat and Stam describe. They must also negotiate, as Lee suggests, the ideological and temporal boundaries that those who enact Women's Studies utilize to demarcate disciplinary borders. Theorizing visualities has the potential to offer a praxis that notes these boundaries while not promising to undo them. In this sense, critical pedagogies can engage with modes of seeing in ways that enable students to theorize feminist epistemologies as partial yet also constructive and inherently grounded in constant reflexivity and contextualization of educational projects within the discipline.

CHAPTER III

UNCRITICAL VISUALITIES

In this chapter, I explicate several texts that enable me to discuss problematic elements of uncritical framings of visualities in Introduction to Women's Studies courses. I do not intend the framework I offer to delineate "good" from "bad" teaching practices in any prescriptive way, though I do hope to offer critiques of the ways that visualities, uncritically engaged, can represent missed pedagogical opportunities and reify imperialist epistemological foundations. Particularly when disciplinary frameworks presume a universal mode through which its students construct meaning vis-à-vis reading visual texts, I argue that practices within Women's Studies can function in complicity with many of the imperialist ideologies its practitioners often claim to dispute. While much of the scholarship I mention in the previous chapter theorizes implications and effects of disciplinary formations within Women's Studies, during my research I located gaps in scholarship between theories of visual literacies and theories of the field of Women's Studies. It is within these gaps that I hope to make connections between visual literacies and pedagogical choices as informed by the ways in which instructors and disciplines are situated within universities, particularly as related to practices of engaging feminisms that are critical of imperialist epistemologies. While the framings that I critique are produced and sustained by individual teachers in some ways, they are never products of individual

choice alone, as they exist in the institutional apparatus of the university and answer to the ways that both their discipline and the university shape each other.

Several concepts involved in uncritical framings that I intend to address explicitly include:

1. **The touristic imaginary:** Frameworks of engagement that function vis-à-vis a touristic consumption of “other” women’s experiences. This idea links back to modes of learning that promote the need to “go elsewhere” to find evidence regarding not only experiences of oppression but also the very constitution of Western subjectivity.
2. **Who Women’s Studies is for:** Un-reflexive visualities leave imperialist processes of knowing undisturbed, and in this way, the consistent reinforcement of dominant visualities creates an inflexible sense of who Women’s Studies instructors intend to teach and who they intend to teach *about*.
3. **Missed opportunities:** The ways that visualities themselves are important processes to theorize and critique; however, as they frequently go untheorized within Women’s Studies classrooms, they mark missed opportunities for engaging with epistemology within the discipline.
4. **Narratives of completion:** The way that Women’s Studies practitioners employ narratives of progress and completion within the structure of their courses, as is often evidenced in a final unit on particular kinds of “activism.”

The Touristic Imaginary

Given that documentaries appear frequently in sections of introductory syllabi regarding subjects that are not only geographically distant from Western classrooms but are also located within regions that have been determined as “underdeveloped” by imperialism and institutions within the West, I am arguing that the specific use of the ethnographic documentary as a vehicle with which to address transnational ideas of gender and sexuality reifies and reaffirms knowledge projects that constitute objects of vision as both particularly *authentic* and also particularly *valuable* to Western feminist constructions of violation, difference, and oppression. In bringing the bodies and experiences of non-Western women into Women’s Studies classrooms vis-à-vis filmed images, Women’s Studies practitioners are operating within an epistemological apparatus that determines subjectivity in distinct ways depending on who is gazing and who they claim as the objects of their gaze. Within these mechanisms, then, subject formation gets constructed, in part, on the basis of who is able to survey as a full, imperialist subject, and who must either be surveyed as a non-subject who can only gain subjectivity through its granting. In other words, the touristic imaginary necessitates that only certain subjects are capable of viewing in objective, realistic ways, and that if those who are gazed upon wish to see in ways that count, they must be invited to do so. Both the scientific approach of gathering evidence with which to justify particular claims (of the effects of transnational, transhistorical sexism, of the need for feminism to exist, of the need to deconstruct binary understandings of gender and sexuality, etc.) and the assumption that the representation

of this evidence constitutes adequate proof (of sexism, women's experiences, etc.) emerge from faith vested in the capacity of visual media to transmit knowledge directly and seemingly without a need for interpretation. My concern here is not necessarily that ethnographic documentaries get used within Women's Studies classrooms per se, but rather that perhaps their inclusion in particular parts of syllabi and curriculum seems obvious, or like the most illustrative text available for conveying particular ideas about transnational feminisms in an "accessible" way. It is precisely the treatment of documentaries as accessible that I wish to trouble, for in the modes through which Women's Studies practitioners access and construct meaning, multiple hegemonic ways of constructing knowledge have the potential to get reinforced. By utilizing visual texts whose function is to demonstrate (to students, faculty, the university) what Women's Studies is *about*, those who work within the discipline may miss opportunities to think critically about what those texts and the epistemologies that accompany them *do*.

By utilizing modalities of evidence collection similar to those employed by ethnographers at the height of imperialism, both the discipline and practitioners of Women's Studies risk eliding the construction of particular narratives (in which modes of racial superiority are often present, if not foundational) with the act of bringing in items of evidence as objects to be studied. In this elision, the construction of visual narratives as available to be seen in certain ways does not get studied; rather, visual texts function only as evidence, and the modes by which they are constructed and acquired continually in all encounters (the original filming, the editing, voiceover, the ways instructors frame

films, their place in syllabi, etc.) go untheorized, as if power imbalances were not also present within them, as if the *ways of seeing* themselves were not adequate or important to the project of deconstructing oppression. One danger in this elision is that the enactment of touristic modes of gazing goes unchecked, even while other discussions of asymmetrical relations to power might be present in the structure of introductory courses.

Uncritically engaged, touristic gazes enable non-Western bodies to be framed continually as evidence, while white bodies (such as those in *Killing Us Softly*) appear to exist for the sake of enabling subjectivities who, though victimized, have the potential to become empowered vis-à-vis interpellation into certain feminisms. Within the film, Jean Kilborne speaks directly to an audience, walking them through her critique of Western advertising, often found in women's magazines, as detrimental to women. Though at first she frames her interpretations of the representations she features as sexist according to her own ideologies, she quickly generalizes the visual literacies she demonstrates to those that all women should share. While screening a slideshow of women in the advertisements she discusses, Kilborne says, "The first thing the advertisers do is surround us with the image of ideal female beauty so we all learn how important it is for women to be beautiful, and exactly what it takes" (*Killing Us Softly*). Here Kilborne implies that in the audience of her lecture understand her critique even before she makes it because it is part of their known experiences. Her specific use of "us" and "we" links Kilborne and her audience together in a way that emphasizes a common oppression at the same time that it underscores the purpose of the film as providing an instructional

methodology for critiquing certain visual texts as sexist. For students who are watching the film in a classroom, the invitation to participate as a kind of extended audience is clear. In framings of *Killing Us Softly* under the rubric of “body image,” the relationship between the gaze and the construction of victimized subjects is already present in the conversation between the content of the documentary and ways of theorizing self-worth and resistance to sexism that introductory courses already claim as foundational. In contrasting these two framings, the Western, white bodies appear to exist independently, formulated as potentially recoupable vis-à-vis an empowered, feminist gaze, while the non-Western bodies exist in relation to an ethnographic need for them to be defined as retrievable for Western knowledge production and never capable of achieving full subjectivity.

For example, the film *Blossoms of Fire*, a 75-minute ethnography which appeared on several syllabi documents the lives of the residents of Juchitán, Oaxaca, Mexico through an understanding that the people it records live within what it terms a “matriarchy.” The film takes up several areas of interest for a Women’s Studies classroom – the struggle of indigenous peoples to maintain their sovereignty, an economic structure at which women are the head, and a seeming acceptance, and even celebration of what the film frames as a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality than often appears in dominant western culture. Utilizing interviews with residents of Juchitán as a mode of entry into understanding their culture, the film can seem to feature representations of authentic experiences. While decisions regarding representations vis-à-

vis interview questions, editing, voiceover, etc. mark a multitude of ways in which the information that the film offers is mediated, I have additional concerns for the ways in which a screening of this film as a gesture towards more “inclusive” Western feminisms. Particular framings of the presence of “other” cultures as marking discursive inclusion in articulations of Western academic feminisms may emerge from threads of nostalgia and yearning for the “innocence” of indigenous cultures that frequently operate with what Dawn Davis terms the “touristic imaginary,” which she describes as “the desire of [the dominant] student group to encounter a racial and/or global Other in ways that do not disturb or critically engage their privilege” (137). In other words, touristic encounters continue to frame others inherently *as* Others without acknowledging the ways that dominant groups depend on the continual production of “otherness” to reify their own subjectivities and the privileges that accompany them. Regarding *Blossoms of Fire*, for example, a framing of the subjects of the film as liberated in ways that Western subjects (women, queers, etc.) need to be liberated reflects a desire to see the Other as a potential yet incomplete self. If the presence women in financial control or openly queer individuals appears to be exceptional in the film, it is not what is presented as their culture that determines this exceptionalism, but rather the implicit comparison to cultural practices in the West that reflect sexism and homophobia. A framing of the cultures within this documentary as somehow more “progressive” than those of the West still utilizes solipsistic visualities in that it models constructions of the Other off of the Western subject, but then displaces the Other and frames it as somehow prior, original,

regressive to the full Western subject. In this way, utilizing *Blossoms* as a window through which students might peer to gain knowledge regarding another culture overlooks the way it might also be understood as a mirror in which Western subjects look for that which is like their potentially liberated selves. However, I employ the metaphor of the mirror cautiously, for as Gayatri Spivak has notably posited, the call for non-Western subjects to represent themselves, or to be represented through Western discourses involves the production of the very ways in which imperialist epistemologies are able to recognize participation in discourse (271). The representations such as those within *Blossoms*, then, do not emerge as transparent within the Women's Studies classroom, but rather are continually mediated within epistemologies that construct the visibility of non-subjects.

What Davis describes as the "touristic imaginary" both fuels student resistance to pedagogies that are critical of imperialist epistemologies and

can be understood in relation to the feminist postcolonial problematic of self-other relations, specifically as the power dynamics of self-other relations pertain to the politics of knowledge and the politics of recognition. (137)

In other words, if a discipline such as Women's Studies endeavors to deconstruct modes of producing knowledge that foster touristic identifications as a point of departure from which to create ideas, it must generate methods with which to deconstruct tourism not only as a set of behaviors or social patterns but as a mode of knowing itself. For students who are educated within a framework that treats racialization as that which must be

added on to a pre-existing (non-marked white) foundation, the way in which students and instructors “seek out” racialized bodies is often motivated by a touristic desire to constitute those bodies as both exotic and consumable (Davis 144). When theories within Women’s Studies inform the decisions to *include* the experiences of all women, particularly those that those producing scholarship and delimiting the boundaries of the field have excluded in solipsistic constructions of who women are and what they need, enactments of those exclusions within disciplinary formations can foster the desire to consume the bodies of Others in an effort to right previous scholarly wrongs. Within a framework in which students “travel” to far away places to retrieve evidence, it becomes possible for students to participate in touristic encounters in which they construct subject positions for themselves as those who may obtain “authentic” evidence regarding the way a “different” culture understands gender, sexuality, race, etc., while the objects of their evidence must be understood only within their function *as* evidence. For practitioners engaging touristic epistemologies, it becomes difficult to conceive of subjectivity (for themselves or others) outside of a practice of positioning “others” as somehow simultaneously extraneous and valuable to Western feminisms.

My concern in the framings of any “other” culture, romanticized as pre-colonial or not, through uncritical visualities is in the ways that viewers contest neither their access to representations of “authentic” bodies and experiences nor their intent to utilize them within Western knowledge projects. Optimistically understood, the urge to use evidence in a way that buttresses course objectives of engaging with transnational

subjects suggests represents a desire to think outside of the effects of imperialism – yet the extent to which it is possible to think outside of imperialism for those whose subjectivities rely on its existence is a matter of contention. Even when referencing cultures such as those in Juchitán in order to critique the functions of imperialism, Women’s Studies practitioners must be cognizant of the ways that their own vocabularies draw from imperialist epistemologies, and so the means with which to deconstruct the tactics of transnational oppression are themselves fraught and not necessarily deconstructive in any complete sense.

Who Is Women’s Studies for?

Implicit in a contextualization of the reasons for which Women’s Studies instructors utilize touristic modes of education is a critique of the ethics involved in representing ethnic “others” through frameworks of help. Since the ways in which practitioners often frame the process of gathering knowledge within course goals and assignments as in alignment with projects of globally feminist justice, visualities often involve modes of learning to distinguish the “helpers” from the “helped.” In learning to see themselves as “helpers” who are educated and mobilized by Western feminisms, Women’s Studies practitioners employ visualities that still depend on the construction and consumption of the Other to support the construction of the self who is capable of lending help. As articulations of the very purposes of Women’s Studies education and the modes through which practitioners enact learning within the field, these visualities create

a particular sense of who can participate in Women's Studies as a full subject capable of producing and implementing knowledge and who cannot willingly participate unless invited by those already present.

When disciplinary desires within Women's Studies suggest the use of ethnographic documentaries as the most logical texts with which to resolve issues of exclusion and suggest modes of help, the direction of both the intent to solve these exclusions and the directions that the solutions take can reify imperialist power dynamics vis-à-vis a dominant understanding of certain visualities as having the capacity to produce objective truth while foreclosing the possibility of visualizing the "evidence" used in other ways than *as* evidence. This contentious formulation of subjectivity then produces a closed sense of who can participate in Women's Studies and whose knowledge the discipline deems to be worthwhile.

Razack suggests that one of the ways that feminist praxis has attempted to solve the problem of imperialism within itself is to invite previously excluded "others" in to knowledge projects, as I have previously explained. By operating within frameworks of racial and national inclusion, undertheorized relationships with visual texts can appear to represent critiques of imperialism when they are really representing "difference" in a way that interrogate neither the means by which difference is determined and maintained nor the asymmetrical relations to power involved in varying relationships to "difference." In other words, the idea that Women's Studies education "over here" (the West) will be incomplete unless it includes experiences from "over there" (the non-West) serves to

reinforce that Women's Studies pedagogies are ultimately meant to educate Western women about their own experiences, perhaps through the consumption of ethnic "others." Informed by these particular underpinnings, the work of the Women's Studies student risks enforcing solipsistic practices, even those that purport to lend activism or service.

Razack critiques what she terms the "cultural differences approach" to education as a framework that examines cultural variety as seemingly divorced from a context of histories in which some groups have subordinated others (8). Within this framework, it becomes possible for privileged groups to ignore that which has secured their dominance in favor of a superficial acceptance of "others" who they understand to be "unlike" them in ways that within the context of this approach are notable yet also dismissible. The paradox of this stance clearly functions to mask and enable dominant constructions of knowledge, as Razack emphasizes when she states the construction of "difference" devoid of power differentials

reinforces an important epistemological cornerstone of imperialism: the colonized possess a series of knowable characteristics and can be studied, known, and managed accordingly by the colonizers whose complicity remains masked. (10)

These concerns come to bear upon Women's Studies in particular ways as a discipline whose scholars take up "difference" as a primary mode of analysis. Though feminist critical pedagogies have often utilized the idea of "privilege" to address framings of "difference", this notion of privilege does not often get applied to visibility, and so the potential for conversations regarding how ideas of difference are constituted in and by

Women's Studies curriculum and praxis gets overlooked.

Another way of getting at this issue of privilege is to inquire about *who* gets to see *what* in introductory courses, and how do student spectators get taught or encouraged to name their ways of seeing? When considering whom Women's Studies imagines itself educating, what modes of recognition does the field expect its students to employ? By thinking more critically about what dominant epistemologies in the field *hope* to recognize by gazing at certain bodies and experiences within their classrooms, how might practitioners within the discipline theorize the ways they are generating support for technologies of recognition that are potentially problematic? The need to interrogate the different ways Women's Studies constitutes subjectivities (some are learners and helpers, others are learned *about*, helped) is wrapped up in the need not just to determine what Women's Studies scholars "do" with what we know, but how we *learn* what we know (as an inherent part of what we "do.") Davis asserts:

A domestic nationalism tends to dominate the extent to which many U.S. students are able to engage intersections between gender and nation, providing little in the way of altering the imperialist impulse to encounter 'global diversity' as the cultural embodiment of a racialized Other, who then "appears" in their coursework as a commodity for educational consumption. (143)

As nationalism emerges in both the ways practitioners position themselves in Women's Studies in terms of articulating their scholarly purposes ("these are women – they are what we study") *and* in educational incarnations of the touristic desire to consume the Other, it is worth pondering that processes that constitute nationalism should become

suspect within a discipline that attempts to critique it and other modes of subordination.

Within a critique of nationalist epistemologies, what might it mean to interrogate what is it that, by bringing in “other” bodies upon which to gaze, Women’s Studies scholars hope to accomplish? Furthermore, what might it mean to theorize the difference between bringing in those whom dominant paradigms might consider “other” and interrogating the function that the politics of recognition themselves play in constituting the nation?

When visualities go uncritiqued, the classroom can become a space for reinforcing dominant modes of seeing which are often complicit with imperialist praxis that defines the subjectivities of those in the “non-West” as necessarily contingent on the desires of Western subjects to recognize them. Women’s Studies then becomes a location from which its practitioners can enact tourism and cultivate touristic gazes that define the realization of full subjectivity primarily according to Western paradigms. These kinds of uncritiqued, imperialist viewing praxes reserve agency, such as the ability to realize subjectivity as that which can resist victimization, to only those who utilize dominant modes of viewing. Those whose subjectivities within this framework deny them the capacity to gaze touristically cannot participate in the knowledge production the discipline validates. At the same time, as Rachel Lee suggests, the production of a “native” subject upon which to gaze employs epistemological stances that rely on imperialist paradigms to call said subjects into subjectivity only upon invitation (88).

Missed opportunities (visuality itself as text)

In her voiceover for *Reassemblage*, Trinh narrates, “Creativity and objectivity seem to run into conflict. The eager observer collects samples and has no time to reflect upon the media used” (198). Though in the context of the film, Trinh’s immediate critique concerns ethnographic documenting practices, her words come to bear on “observers” in many spatial and temporal relations to the filmic lens. In applying her critique to those present in introductory Women’s Studies classrooms, one might describe students as observers and collectors. In this case, Trinh suggests that issues of what and for whom scholars amass knowledge sometimes eclipses an awareness of *how* this knowledge becomes available to them and in what ways they assemble it to make meaning. In what ways, for example, does their mode of collection rely on a standard of objectivity? What about their disciplinary environment encourages them to “reflect upon the media used” and what encourages them to pass up the means of data collection as a potential site of inquiry?

In proposing a Women’s Studies praxis that takes up visualities as objects of study, I am not necessarily proposing the kinds of “unlearning” that Davis suggests, but rather a means of theorizing new kinds of critique that are in a continual process of becoming aware of gaps in approaches to feminist epistemologies. Rather than engaging a model in which dominant epistemologies become somehow reversed, I am much more interested in the potential of theorizing ways of seeing as multiple and contested forms of knowledge production themselves. For example, in *Reassemblage*, Trinh does not

necessarily explicate an undoing of an ethnographic mode of filming or viewing; rather, she calls attention to the ways in which ethnographic filmmaking and viewing produces particular visualities, and within those visualities, certain subject positions for those who make films, view films, and/or get represented and interpreted as the objects of sight. As Mohanty asserts that within her critique of Western feminist discourses, she is “not trying to make a culturalist argument about ethnocentrism [but] rather... trying to uncover how ethnocentric universalism is produced in certain analyses,” I am also interested in the possibilities of examining the products of visualities (55). To imply that a mode of learning/viewing can be willfully reversed is not only to privilege a dominant subject position which needs to be reversed but is also to elude possibilities for theorizing the construction of subjectivities within those modes. I imagine that the kind of shifts I am suggesting involve conceptualizing disciplinary and pedagogical stances that locate students, instructors, and all producers of knowledge within Women’s Studies as positioned within particular formulations of difference that require them to be both reflexive regarding the means within which they conceptualize “difference” as relational to the self.

If Women’s Studies practitioners understand *ways of seeing* themselves as part of an ideological system that props up ways of seeing *themselves* vis-à-vis constructions of otherness, they can begin to theorize the work that occurs within Women’s Studies in both an immediate and overarching way. If the work that happens within Women’s Studies classrooms matters because of what it produces and what enables it to produce

knowledge in the ways it does, the classroom can become understood as a space that warrants direct theorization. In contemplating the cultural productions that occur in Women's Studies, I have found the idea of "suture" to be a helpful means of conceptualizing enactments of visualities and interrogating the ways that students recognize themselves within ideologies in which the visual is implicated. Kaja Silverman relates suture, or the ways the view of the camera generates a mode and space through which the viewer may gaze, to Daniel Dayan's argument of suture "as a means of examining ideological coercion" (215). For Dayan, suture has to do with the transparency with which filmic modes purport to deliver information and the ways that visual literacies interpellate their viewers as viewing subjects. Suture enables individuals to subscribe to particular versions of what and how they see, as well as how the way they see secures their own subjectivity, because "it conceals the apparatuses of enunciation" (215). In other words, suture enables viewers to collapse viewing and reality so that neither seems informed by cultural constructions. To critique the ways that subjects are sutured into reality vis-à-vis seeing, then, involves interrogating investment not only in what sees, but in how one sees oneself through seeing objects "outside" of the self. The ideas that students construct within Women's Studies, then, and also the way that disciplinary epistemologies construct them, is predicated on relations determined by imperialism at the same time that it reflects multiple forms of subject formation, not all of which are recognized by disciplinary reticence to engage critical visualities. The presence of imperialist visualities in feminist epistemologies presents a process in which ways of

looking both produce and foreclose gaps in which Western subjectivity may insert itself. *Blossoms of Fire*, for example, seems to invite a framing in which those in the West might assert touristic impulses to travel, collect, and appropriate customs as evidence that homosexuality and matriarchies are indeed valid. This visuality does not allow for the objects of the gaze to look back at that which is collecting them, yet a disciplinary and pedagogical stance intent on critiquing this modality of viewing might afford Women's Studies students with opportunities to theorize what subjectivities and versions of the "real" are supported by framings of the subjects of *Blossoms* as always in relation to Western subjectivity. In an uncritical framing, the work that presents itself within the context of viewing this documentary involves drawing parallels between ways of understanding gender, sexuality, and power as enacted by two different cultures. Lost in this kind of framing are the ways in which the subjects of the film are represented and interpreted, and how representations and interpretations emerge from and come to bear on ideologies that center Western subjectivity. Also lost is the potential to engage theorizations of the film as suturing multiple subject formations into epistemologies of Women's Studies.

In their critique of the role of cinema in promoting and reproducing imperialism, Shohat and Stam refer to the "cinematic apparatus" as the construct that produces both colonizing *modes* of viewing and also the *mechanism* that makes these modes available (104). They posit, "In an imperial context the apparatus tended to be deployed in ways flattering to the imperial subject as superior and invulnerable observer, as what Mary

Louise Pratt calls the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’” (104). In thinking critically about the multiple ways of viewing present when an instructor screens a documentary in her classroom (here I am referencing the view of the filmmaker, the view, as Rony would describe, of the subjects/objects of the documentary gazing back, the way different students see the documentary-maker seeing and the film’s subject seeing), theorizing the mode that emerges, or perhaps underlies, as dominant is important to the project of discussing the distribution of power, who has agency, etc (213). Shohat and Stam call attention to the way that documentaries operate as records not necessarily of an event but a gaze, and that detecting the gaze enables one to think about the politics of who benefits from gazing in this way and who has no choice but to be the object of the gaze (104).

Theorizing visual literacies as situated within specific ideologies enables students to deconstruct their expectations regarding when they expect to see subjects *like* themselves, and also when they expect subject *to see* like themselves. While the two are clearly interrelated, the second often gets foreclosed when discussions of feminist intervention to processes of victimization require particular objects and experiences to stand in as evidence that both victimization and a response to it are necessary. That the proof of the need for academic feminism gets formulated according to these kinds of evidence of gendered violence does not fully account for the means by which violence is understood. As such, the means of understanding themselves go under the radar as processes that could and do subordinate subjects in systemic ways. Razack offers the example of the visibility of the veil within Western feminist epistemologies. She writes,

“A message of Southern cultural inferiority and dysfunction is so widely disseminated that when we in the North see a veiled women, we can only retrieve from our store of information that she is a victim of her patriarchal culture or religion. Few alternative images or more complex evaluations are *possible*” (7, emphasis mine). Theorizing visual literacies could not only interrogate how the perspective Razack describes gets secured, but also consider how other visualities might be possible.

Narratives of completion

In my observations of introductory syllabi, I have noted a trend in which courses frequently end with a unit on “activism.” Particularly in courses whose structure involves progressing through a number of “women’s issues,” such as body image and gendered violence, the conclusion of the course appears to be modeled as a kind of response or solution to the problems that course has illuminated. As such, the work that gets framed as activism speaks both to the issues the discipline considers consistently important for academic feminisms to address and also to the ways that, through the education Women’s Studies offers, students might participate in addressing these issues. My concerns with this structure are regarding what gets named most often as “activism,” and the sense that this framing can instill in students that the knowledge they produce in the classroom is not truly active.

When the function of Women’s Studies courses including but not limited to introductory courses is expressed primarily in the end result of particular kinds of action as

implementing the theoretical work produced by the classroom, the ways that the classroom is continually fostering action of all sorts gets glossed over. If students must wait until they are ready to “act” to implement their knowledge, the ways they create knowledge themselves get framed as non-active. As an action that transpires within the classroom, among other places, viewing in accordance with or in resistance to practices that rely on the subordination of particular groups, gets elided as not only a practice which one might resist, but as one that comprises action *at all*.

When Women’s Studies instructors gesture to the possibility of a finite completion of feminism, or at least a route by which to achieve it, this impulse often rests upon constructions of literal translations of authentic experiences. As the construction of subjectivity necessarily involves processes that situate subjecthood relationally within constructs of ideology, the recognition of the potential to “act” not during the course, but at its very end, suggests that introductory courses might be instructional in a way that is also “practical.” My concern here is not only in the under-theorization of the classroom itself as an “active” location, but also with the ways that the framing of particular acts as “activism” as the implementation of knowledge can foreclose the potential for knowledge itself to be understood as partial, or which can only be attained in partiality. What might action, or even knowledge production, look or feel like within epistemologies that do not utilize the ability to measure or describe absolutely and precisely? What might “action” look like for a Women’s Studies in which students expect to be able to help those who they cannot describe vis-à-vis their own sense of undisturbed identification? As I have

suggested that incompleteness can function as a helpful component of deconstructive praxis, I would extend the construct of incompleteness as one that could be helpful to pedagogical modes and directions as well.

CHAPTER IV

CRITICAL VISUALITIES PRAXIS

In this chapter, I examine modes of framing visualities as fraught epistemological locations within Introduction to Women's Studies classrooms. As part of the critical praxis I am suggesting, Women's Studies practitioners could take up the study of visual literacies themselves as a helpful entry into interrogations of transnational hegemonies, feminist epistemologies, and subjectivity as formed in various, uneven ways throughout the discipline. This praxis might emerge in various forms in a variety of educational settings, and my interest in explicating it is not to delimit it or provide prescriptive instructions on how it might be implemented, but rather to pose questions through which Women's Studies instructors and students might approach visual literacies through a mode of incompleteness.

Engaging visualities as sites of critical potential is not a praxis that orients itself towards a particular destination of enlightened, progressive feminism, but rather deconstructs knowledge projects in some of the very moments in which they are enacted. In deconstructing visualities, it is my hope that Women's Studies practitioners can theorize the ways they are positioned within disciplinary tensions at the same time that they can, in many ways, consider how to shift possibilities for engaging sites of knowledge production within the discipline, at times perhaps against some of very

impulses that brought Women's Studies into being. For example, if through course objectives and structures, Women's Studies instructors construct their and their students' work as involving the saving of various kind of women vis-à-vis recuperation from obscurity and oppression, the task of interrogating visual literacies may involve critiquing some of the foundational ways that the practitioners of the field gather information regarding their objects of study. While films that uncritically document the experience and victimization of women in "other" parts of the world may fit neatly into a Women's Studies conceived of as a discipline through which to "know" and "save" women, the introduction of critical visualities to the field entails asking questions regarding not just how certain subjects get constructed as "in need," but also how visual representations and their interpretations construct evidence upon which to base claims of victimization and (non)subjectivity. Notably, a praxis that deconstructs visual literacies necessarily calls attention to practitioners of the discipline as actively and continually shaping the way in which ideas are understood in relation to one another, and in doing so, radically destabilizes disciplinary epistemologies that claim to reveal knowledge as somehow universal or unconditionally intact.

Because I envision visualities as constructed and enabled by disciplinary articulations of primary goals within Women's Studies at the same time that they are shaped by pedagogical decisions within the context of specific classrooms, I hope to offer modes of examining and framing visualities that take both broad and specific contexts of the field into account. As Women's Studies practitioners often name the politics of

representation as an area of study within their scholarship and teaching, the potential to theorize the ways that representations become established and reified in scholarly conversations vis-à-vis engagements within visualities is of particular importance not only to Women's Studies praxis, but also to the foundations and intentions it claims. For practitioners within the field to be able to participate in discussions regarding what informs their modes of constructing knowledge of and through the visual is not only of importance to formulating reflexive feminisms, but is also helpful in locating epistemological analysis as a vital function of the discipline.

Mehre Khan suggests that incorporating visual texts into Women's Studies pedagogies affords instructors and students opportunities to theorize multiple epistemologies and relations to power within modes of visualizing. Khan points to modes of spectatorship as sites in which Islamophobic and Arabophobic sentiments can become reinscribed; yet at the same time she gestures to visualities as locations that have the potential to reflexively address these reinscriptions. Because Khan interprets the potential for visual literacies to reinforce imperialist hegemonies, she proposes engaging with visual texts as they are connected to constructions of subjectivities, both for those "within" these texts and those whose systems of knowledge purport to locate them as spectators external to the texts that they view. She claims:

If racial and ethnic identities are primarily imagined, constructed, theorized, naturalized, and personalized within the realm of the visual, recognizing the slippages and inconclusiveness of visual imagery allows students and instructors to accept the unbridgeable gaps of intercultural understanding. (327)

In other words, within epistemologies that students draw from in order to construct their understandings of visual texts, an understanding of both the texts and the means of accessing them are imbricated in ways that do not guarantee singular, conclusive interpretations. The critical potential of incompleteness that Khan references is inseparable from a framing of visualities as themselves contested and subject to incomplete interpretations. According to Khan, this epistemological incompleteness operates not as a signal of failure on the part of instructors or students, but rather as a means through which to formulate critiques of systems that produce both “differences” and the means by which they are measured. The “gaps” then, and the ways that they are “unbridgeable” are neither fixed nor the cause for nihilistic claims that knowledge which cannot be fully attained is not worthwhile to pursue; rather, moments in which knowledge seems to be partial are locations in which Women’s Studies can become actively invested at sites of profound epistemological importance. To return, for example, to the moment when my student challenged the description of the script in Neshat’s photograph as Arabic instead of Persian, the gap itself (both *what* and also *the ways in which* my student could see that I and many of his classmates could not) presented a valuable site for deconstruction of the means through which subjects arrive at knowledge of themselves and others. For even while one might argue that Neshat’s composition itself is aware of and responds to imperialist viewing practices that attempt to locate veiled women as needing to be liberated according to Western standards, the discussions that the piece enables in Women’s Studies classrooms still emerge from particular ways of seeing in

which imperialist viewing has been instructive. The text itself, then, cannot take full responsibility for the ways in which it is read, and if instructors such as myself include it to help facilitate conversations that are critical of the work that Western modes of gazing do, then they must direct focus to the ways in which visual literacies themselves function.

Khan explicates her decision to incorporate Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* into her introductory Women's Studies class as a part of a pedagogical praxis that prompts students to think critically about how they locate what they see, and how they themselves are located in relation to ideas of race and nation. Within *Measures of Distance*, Hatoum layers an Arabic conversation between she and her mother in which they are discussing the making of the piece with voiceover of her reading her mother's letters, translated into English. The letters also appear on the screen as Arabic script along with photographs Hatoum has taken of her mother, including many in the shower. Hatoum's piece seems to suggest that no amount of translation will ever be complete, for even those who are able to understand both Arabic and English find themselves unable to access any component of the text in a way that is not intersecting with and interrupted by the others. Hatoum's decision to layer multiple visual and audio texts on top of one another suggests multiple points of access to meaning at the same time that it refuses the possibility of total access to meaning. In a literal sense, Hatoum offers opportunities to think of visualities as always partial, incomplete, and contingent on the viewer's relation to the text at each moment of engagement. This relation is, of course, both pre-determined and continually determined with the tools that viewers have and continue to

cultivate while they are viewing. To return to Shohat and Stam's assertions regarding the function of the cinematic apparatus as a mode of colonization, the ways in which students are able to understand themselves as possessing the capacity to observe the objects of their studies in detached, neutral ways are closely related to the methods through which they are able to position themselves as both recipients and producers of true knowledge (103). When the education students receive and construct within Women's Studies involves finding visual evidence for supportive or critical uses vis-à-vis solipsistic modes of seeing that frame themselves as the most accurate or the most feminist, the literacies themselves can become technologies of control in which, within disciplinary contexts, certain visualities are foreclosed entirely. To the degree that Women's Studies scholars enable the circulation of epistemological practices that cater to an imperialist subject capable of not only assembling intact objects of evidence but also surveying all objects within its desire, they become complicit in privileging imperialist ideologies that construct some as subjects capable of seeing and others as objects for the subjects to see. Within this framework exists the desire to see not only items of evidence as inherent within the particular configurations that they appear (e.g. narratives of identifiable "matriarchies" existing within "other" cultures), but also the configurations themselves (and the dependency of their meaning on Western epistemologies) as coherent bodies of knowledge that reflect inherent, ahistorical ideas. Hence, while students may locate said evidence to support or critique, the methods and relations through which the knowledge they are utilizing is made available remain undertheorized.

During her February 10, 2011 lecture “Love in the Time of Oprah: Why America Loves to Save Africa,” Kathryn Mathers addressed the relationship of one such configuration to its role in buttressing American subjectivity as contingent upon notions of humanitarianism within the geographic and imaginative location of Africa. According to Mathers, the construction of particular kinds of American subjectivity vis-à-vis touristic humanitarianism is present both within physical travel to Africa and the commodification of Africa as a location to be helped through the purchase of products that represent some kind of humanitarian effort towards an understood need within Africa. Mathers pointed to the ways in which as long as African people appear to be particular kinds of subjects as determined by Western ideologies, Africa can be continually produced as a location through which to realize American subjectivities. As an example, Mathers pointed to an advertising campaign for the organization Keep A Child Alive in which Western celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow appear wearing “tribal” regalia. Bold copy at the bottom of each ad claims “I AM AFRICAN.” Mathers also displayed a spoof of Gwyneth Paltrow’s ad in which a photograph of an “African Woman” appears in a similar style to the original Paltrow image. The copy in the spoof ad reads, “I AM GWYNETH PALTROW. Help us stop the shameless famehohes from using the suffering of those dying from AIDS in Africa to bolster their pathetic careers... Just kiss my black ass to help” (Mohney). Though this advertisement demonstrates a critique of the interests that Western celebrities have in placing claims to African needs or identity, the audience for whom the critique is intended still appears to be those

invested in Western subjectivities. While the image of the “African Woman” performs a critical function of pointing to the absurdity of Paltrow’s performance of African-ness, it relies on a similar production of a generalized, needy non-subject through which full Western subjects might speak. In other words, the “African Woman” is not actually asking for readers of the ad to “kiss [her] black ass,” for her image and voice are being produced and mediated by social agents whose subjectivity allows them to speak through and for others who are understood to be in need of being spoken through and for (Mohney). The false dichotomy that these two visual artifacts present (in which the spoof gestures towards the possibility of a correct interpretation) speaks to the difficulty in getting “away from” the relationship between Western epistemologies and formations of subjectivity. In the case that these images both rely on assumptions regarding the ways that full subjects are capable of identifying problems and producing solutions, instruction in critical visual literacies could interrogate the methods by and intent for which students can purport to “get beyond” cultural differences or even their own subject formations.

By examining the ways in which Western subjectivity gets constructed in and by both images as dependent upon the voicelessness of non-subjects, critical visualities redirect conversations away from reductive understandings of either image as more or less “accurate” or “progressive” in order to present opportunities to consider the partiality of both perspectives. For at the same time that both ads depend upon the construction of non-subjectivity through which to enact subjectivities capable of speaking and helping those who “cannot” speak, they also hinge on the potential for subjects to realize and

complete themselves through their capacity to help others who are not understood as full subjects. In this touristic formulation, the humanitarian Western subjects are not constructed as originally incomplete; indeed, their position as social agents capable of helping others who cannot reciprocate similar kinds of help is never in question. In a similar way, the women effected by the advertisements that Jean Kilborne critiques in *Killing Us Softly* seem to be full subjects who have been victimized by sexism but not severed from their agency or their ability to resist the sexism that enacts itself upon their expectations of their bodies. Hence while some forms of dependency get constructed as essential to the representations of ethnic and geographic “others,” the ways in which the performance of humanitarianism (potentially through modes of education which Women’s Studies instructors promote and enable) become understood as somehow independent of the ways it derives its very meaning from tropes of need. A limited focus on the ways in which dependent non-Western non-subjects need Western subjects to help them, then, fails to address the ways that the very construction of the humanitarian (or the student aligned with humanitarian projects) requires the production of perceived need.

Rony offers a means of thinking through solipsistic constructions of viewing in which visualities are construed as always in relation to an imperial self through the idea of “the third eye,” which she explains “turns on a recognition: the Other perceives the veil, the process of being visualized as an object, but returns the glance” (213). As a tool for considering the ways that those whom imperialist technologies have construed as lacking agency are not lacking agency in a universal sense, the third eye offers a method

of considering relationships to imperialist gazes that do not reify them. This gesture to recuperate the capacity for the “other” to participate in reconsidering visual literacies from within the very frameworks that cast her/him as incapable of such a response does not reference a means of resistance that is essentially “other,” but rather a reconfiguration of an imperialist apparatus that groups disparate people and experiences as both already similar to one another and inherently inferior to imperial subjects. As a means of engaging the apparatus of visibility that constructs “other-ness” as necessarily inferior and incapable of returning the gaze in a manner that indicates knowledge of its functions, for Others to see with the third eye marks one potential mode of contending with imperialist epistemologies in ways that do not claim to undo them but also do not reify them. Additionally, a concept such as the third eye offers a direct way of thinking about epistemological projects as both contingent upon and produced within modes of seeing. If, for example visual ethnographies require that the objects of the gaze do not understand the ways they are being portrayed, theorization of the third eye profoundly unsettles the basis upon which such knowledge projects are built.

When those whom the cinematic apparatus positions as objects of the lens look back through it, as Rony suggests, their actions twist the functions of imperialist literacies that would otherwise attempt to render said subjects as incapable of viewing or speaking back to, through, around, or near to the processes that locate them as objects. In calling attention to constructions of a text by engaging with the ways in which it gets constructed, theorizing the third eye enables a kind of thinking about texts as requiring

continual production and interpretation in order to exist as knowledge. The ways in which ideologies circulate vis-à-vis recurrent recuperation from within their own constructions is particularly notable within Western epistemologies in which learning about “difference” becomes entrenched in articulations of Western subjects vis-à-vis the construction of ethnic “others.” In her critique of the dearth of this form of inquiry within Western education, Trinh writes:

There is not much, in the kind of education we receive here in the West, that emphasizes or even recognizes the importance of constantly having contact with what is actually within ourselves, or of understanding a structure from within ourselves out. The tendency is always to relate to a situation or to an object as if it is only outside of oneself. (Chen 82)

For Women’s Studies to trace patterns of hegemony according to constructions of difference, the very methods through which difference gets assigned is of particular importance, and the means of engaging with objects apart from the “self” to which Trinh alludes becomes especially significant in theorizing imperialist practices as present even within the feminist languages and tactics that intend to critique them.

In a way, Mona Hatoum highlights the processes of relational epistemology to which Trinh refers by demonstrating its incoherencies and gaps. Midway through *Measures*, Hatoum reads a letter her mother has written to her reflecting on the way Hatoum’s father has reacted to her project. In translated English, Hatoum states:

I suppose [your father] still can’t forgive you for taking those pictures of me in the shower. It’s as if you had trespassed on his property and now he feels that there’s some weird exchanges going on between us from which he is excluded. He calls it women’s nonsense. (*Measures of Distance*)

That Hatoum directly addresses the issue of exclusion vis-à-vis the words of her mother at the same time that she is addressing the construction of the text brings viewers of her piece into a relation with it that interrogates not only the ways that they are included and excluded from knowledge of the text, but also the relationship they understand between knowing and owning. Since Hatoum's audience can see the photographs she took of her mother in addition to reading and hearing the exchanges between them, they become implicated in the trespassing of which Hatoum's father is concerned. However, because Hatoum's text complicates notions of total interpretation or availability of the exchanges she includes, she also troubles the very idea of attaining ownership by means of trespassing.

Khan seems to be suggesting that using a text like Hatoum's offers viewers a very direct opportunity to consider both the expectations they have for visual texts to be understood and also the means with which they construct and derive knowledge from these texts. In Khan's framework, Hatoum's piece is particularly valuable because it renders visibility as an inextricable part of knowledge construction – that is, one cannot get *past* visibility in order to get *to* the meaning of the text, for any potential meaning gets constructed in acts of interpretation, and specific literacies inform the modes through which viewers construct knowledge. As *Measures of Distance* itself specifically seeks to trouble visual epistemologies as they construct narratives regarding Muslim and Arabic cultures, it challenges the ways in which spectators employ visual practices that anticipate the capacity to see, and therefore know, the absolute meaning of a text, as if

only one, or at least one most important one took precedence over other possible meanings. As Khan seeks to expose the ways in which visual literacies both emerge from and support Islamophobia and Arabphobia, her rationale in using Hatoum's text to trouble notions of visual coherency as it constructs hierarchies of race and nation is, in some ways, relatively straightforward. In examining a text such as Hatoum's, which negates the potential for any audience to translate it in seamless, straightforward manners, Khan presents her students with opportunities to think about their investments in visualities that do seem to translate smoothly. While *Measures of Distance* lends itself to discussions of fragmented visualities by layering images, using sounds to obscure one another, and refusing to offer a viewing experience that is "coherent" in Western terms, even visual texts that appear to lend themselves to "easy" translation have the potential to bring visualities into a pedagogical context in which they can be theorized and critiqued.

For example, Kobena Mercer takes up implications of understanding visualities as contested, fluid, and incomplete by suggesting multiple modes of deriving meaning from visual texts. In an examination of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs in his 1982 publication, *Black Males*, Mercer traces several potential readings of the images Mapplethorpe renders. While Mercer himself initially reads Mapplethorpe's photographs of black men as drawing from cultural tropes of racialized sexual fetishization that establish the white male subject as the dominant subject capable of objectifying racial "others," he later entertains alternative visualities that consider the way that Mapplethorpe's homosexuality has the potential to reconfigure his relationship to his

subjects. Given that Mapplethorpe's queerness locates him in a potentially subordinate position at the same time that it changes the context in which one might read his relationship to the subjects of his work, Mercer suggests that Mapplethorpe's representations can be interpreted in several ways – as eroticizing a racial “Other,” and/or as homoerotic and desirous, for example. Mercer argues that Mapplethorpe leaves the problem of interpretation open “since his aesthetic strategy makes an unequivocal yes/no response impossible. The question is left open by the author and thus thrown back to the spectator” (246). Utilizing his own interactions with the photographs in *Black Men* as an example, Mercer describes his emotional identification with the men in Mapplethorpe's photographs – that is, he identifies with their masculinities and their blackness and becomes angry that Mapplethorpe has objectified them as black men. Further into his analysis, however, Mercer describes that his initial interpretation relies on a “reductive dichotomy between good and bad... and thus fails to recognize the ambivalence of the text” (247). Utilizing his own black queerness as a means of examining his multiple positions in relation to the investments that inform his interpretations, Mercer produces multiple questions in his visual engagements: does he desire to be looked at as the subjects of the photographs are? Does he desire to look at the subjects? Is his subjectivity in a position of rivalry with the object of desire? Does he share a position with Mapplethorpe, the white gay artist? Mercer's conflicting positions reflect the openness with which visualities can be engaged as fraught and evocative sites of meaning. Furthermore, the ways in which he demonstrates the potential to derive multiple

meanings from the same text calls not only interpretations of representation into question but also interrogates investments in maintaining certain interpretations as more meaningful, realistic, or “true” than others.

In considering the implications of Mercer’s questions within an introductory Women’s Studies classroom, I regard his insistence on engaging Mapplethorpe’s work at the level of interpretation as a helpful way of getting at issues of representations as themselves in constant negotiation. When Mercer engages the photographs in *Black Men* with ambivalent openness, he is able to theorize not so much *what* he sees but how what he *wants* to see is inseparable from what he formulates as his objects of sight. Similarly, Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance* invites viewers to reflect on their desires to understand the meaning of the multiple texts within the piece more so than it enables viewers to access each text within the piece as somehow separate from their desire to see it. The distinction in each of these pieces between meaning and reality is one that Trinh draws attention to when she states:

Truth and meaning: the two are likely to be equated with one another. Yet, what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than *a* meaning. And what persists between the meaning of something and its truth is the interval, a break without which meaning would be fixed and truth congealed. This is perhaps why it is so difficult to talk about it, the interval. About the cinema. About. (Documentary Is 77)

It is within the interval that Trinh describes that I understand much of the potential of theorizing visualities to exist, particularly within disciplines whose task it is to produce knowledge around certain subjects. If one is to interpret the “truth” to which Trinh refers

to mean ideas that are regarded as valid knowledge, then the processes through which meaning gets determined are not separable from the structures that grant their recognition and reproduction. Inasmuch, those who produce education and scholarship within the discipline of Women's Studies are profoundly implicated in producing models of knowledge that locate thoughts and patterns in relation to one another in ways that often get reproduced as inherent truths of the field. For example, individuals included within third wave feminism often get represented within introductory syllabi as both victimized by and potentially resistant to Western advertising within popular women's magazines in a way that encourages Women's Studies students to reproduce the same relationship of recognizing social problems within visual media and formulating resistance vis-à-vis the feminist vocabularies provided by the course. That responding to Western visual media (such as advertising, popular films, and music videos) with critical feminist analysis appears as such a common course goal in introductory syllabi suggests to me that modes of activism as related to visual literacies may be limited to both a particular audience and a particular approach to naming and responding to oppression. In this model, the privileging of certain kinds of victimization and resistance presupposes particular relationships to sexism and resistance as manifested in viewing, hence presuming that visual literacies themselves will be consistent and produce consistent responses to what gets constructed as the important points of the text. Within the Women's Studies classroom as a specific site of knowledge production, Trinh's idea of the "interval" helps to keep the construction of meanings and their alignments or misalignments with "truth"

open to constant interrogation. For all of the visual pieces I have named in this project, this openness also generates a space in which to ask questions regarding elements of desire that exist within the interval – for example, the wish to render visual texts as recognizable in ways that a viewer might easily assign meaning.

If one of the disciplinary goals of Women’s Studies is to provide students with a vocabulary for interpreting and critiquing particular elements in visual media, then its instructors must also contend with the ways that specific visual literacies involve the desire to see recognizable patterns that rely on knowledge established by imperialist formations of subjectivity. In my observations of course syllabi, Women’s Studies instructors often assign the task of critiquing visual culture, but do not necessarily include an interrogation of the ways that their students are already involved in constructing meaning from the texts that they see. For example, learning objectives for an introductory class include an expectation for establishing modes with which to critique sexist tropes within Western visual media such as advertising and popular films; they do not, however, often state that they intend to introduce conversations concerning visual epistemologies that already exist in culturally specific ways. The media critiques, then, seem to exist as intact evidence to be sought and found vis-à-vis instruction in feminist vocabularies - the sexism exists to be found – you can see it with your own eyes. According to this praxis, a Women’s Studies education functions as a conduit for revealing problematic images rather than a medium through which knowledge of *how* and *what* to see gets continually re-produced. In this elision of the detection of problems within visual media and the

visualities through which Women's Studies practitioners detect and name said problems, the discipline can continue to draw upon practices supported by and implicit in imperialist solipsism.

When I originally began this project, I thought I was advocating for different, or perhaps better kinds of texts to be used in introductory Women's Studies classrooms. Specifically, I imagined that visual art could provide a certain kind of platform for interrogating the role of Women's Studies students engaging visual literacies, and that visual texts could serve as exciting and evocative entries into some of the discussions that are important to have in Women's Studies classrooms regarding oppression of all kinds. While I maintain, for reasons I have explained above, that visual texts can provide a helpful kind of entry into discussions of power and difference, my interest in theorizing visualities lies in the ways that they function as critical sites of knowledge production regarding the discipline of Women's Studies itself. Because all visual texts require the deployment of some kind of visual literacy, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, the pedagogical approaches to visualities I am suggesting do not necessarily revolve around selecting "good" texts over poor ones so much as they involve thinking about the way instructors frame the methods and reasons they employ in order to facilitate discussions regarding particular kinds of viewing practices as informed by the discipline of Women's Studies. If, for example, instructors frame texts such as *Measures of Distance* and *Speechless* as those that they anticipate will be difficult for students to "get," they risk structuring their pedagogical stances around the needs of Western feminists to understand

“non-Western” subjects and their needs, thus feeding back into disciplinary frameworks that structure their epistemologies unreflexively around the needs of said Western feminists.

The practice of framing some texts in a way that anticipates “direct” interpretations and expects students to deploy visual literacies that are somehow universally literal both makes presumptions regarding the ways that students are already making meaning of texts and also depends on pedagogical investments in particular texts, or particular kinds of texts, to convey information in an “accessible” way to students who are reading in similar ways to one another. For example, if instructors introduce ethnographic documentaries of “women in the Global South” as a means of providing insight into the lives of women in “other” places, and if, upon screening such documentaries, they expect for their students (who they assume have no previous knowledge of or investments in the subjects of the films) to gain new knowledge regarding the experiences of women in “other” places, then Women’s Studies projects can become very closely aligned with imperialist epistemologies in which all experiences are available to be gathered through unequivocal observation. When the methods of both interpreting and accumulating knowledge presume a singular, unified set of interests, then issues of how and through what lenses texts are assembled is profoundly important to thinking in terms that interrogate the imperialisms that Women’s Studies scholars so often claims to dispute. Rather than utilizing ethnographic texts to interrogate the nature of shared experiences (the idea that “their” oppression is somehow like “ours”), critical

visualities might interrogate the investments present in claiming such dis/similarities. If Women's Studies students are to take up interrogations of the construction and maintenance of difference, a theorization of the ways in which disciplinary stances that rely on a singular or dominant method of interpreting media run counter to deconstructive impulses might be helpful to their cultivating critical praxis.

In noting the frequency with which visual texts on introductory syllabi seem to be fulfilling a "straightforward," illustrative function, I am concerned with the ways that this pattern may demonstrate pedagogical oversights to engaging with logic that renders some texts "easy," and others "difficult." If texts that complicate solipsistic visualities are understood as particularly "difficult" in that they stretch the boundaries of the skills that Women's Studies instructors hopes to cultivate within their students, then narratives of said difficulty may also speak to the skills that instructors determine to be less necessary than others in constructing epistemologies for and within the discipline. Not only does the treatment of a text as "difficult" reify expectations for students to be operating from a dominant subjectivity and employing dominant literacies, it also precludes the potential for Women's Studies classrooms to be locations in which multiple subject formations might co-exist in ways that complicate, yet do not subsume one another.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

I see this project as a form of the incompleteness I have operationalized throughout it. My suggestions for pedagogical strategies within Women's Studies represent shifts that I feel are meaningful to implement as part of the way that I produce Women's Studies and as part of the way I facilitate the production of Women's Studies through the work of my students. My suggestions are not the only possible suggestions regarding ways to produce Women's Studies, challenge imperialist epistemologies, or engage visual literacies. The critical visualities praxis I am advocating is a specific means through which to call into question my goals as an educator within Women's Studies both as my thoughts might shed light onto the work that others are doing within the discipline and as these goals might facilitate a kind of knowledge production for my students that involves actively interrogating the ways in which they are aware of their roles *as* producers of knowledge. I see this goal as ultimately advocating for a different kind of Women's Studies education than the one in which I was a student. Rather than approaching the work of Women's Studies through tropes of victimization and identification, I am suggesting a pedagogy that directly theorizes the work that students do when they learn and that interrogates their very capacity to do so, while it also questions my capacity as teacher to teach.

When I enact a disciplinary objective as an examination of epistemological structures within Women's Studies itself, I can work toward fostering an environment in which agency, subjectivity, and the very routes through which facts become established as coherent come under productive scrutiny. For students whose position within knowledge production is supported by and functions because of imperialist solipsism, their modes of scrutinizing may involve interrogating the means through which their ways of knowing position them as central, while others are always positioned in a subordinate relation to them. Additionally, as I have also attempted to explicate within this project, a critical visualities praxis requires students who can regard themselves as central within imperialism to clarify the ways that their knowledge of centrality is both explicit, implicit, and in some cases seems inherent within the modes of discourse through which they operate. Though they may not be able to reverse or somehow get away from ideological constructs that position their subjectivities as central by simply willing those constructs away, they can be much more reflexive about their stakes in particular formations of knowledge, not simply as specific epistemologies benefit them, but also as said knowledge formations locate them as producers of knowledge at all.

For those students whom imperialism does not locate as central, their interrogation of the ways they produce knowledge within Women's Studies does not necessarily involve the kinds of reflection as students upon whom imperialism does endow the formations of subjectivity I have discussed. Though I cannot speak fully to the ways that these students might exist within the praxis I am suggesting, I am hopeful that

their epistemologies will register within Women's Studies education in a way that is not formulated primarily in relation to what, who, or the ways in which they are "not." One way to circumvent this theoretical mode is not to think about what this praxis "gives" to these students, but what it might mean for an educational environment in which multiple subjectivities already exist. As I share Rony's conviction that attempting to call marginalized subjectivities back into subjectivity does not fully attend to the features of marginalization, I seek to be cognizant of the ways in which the praxis I am suggesting might gesture towards "recovery" of objects of sight into subjects who see (217). Thus, what I am proposing is not a pedagogical praxis in which "recognition" ultimately occupies a privileged or desired position, but one in which the production of recognition remains open to critique.

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