



The Internet is Cool, Scholarship is Cold and Beyoncé is a Feminist: Reflections on the Popular Action Assignment in *Introduction to Women's Studies*

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How to cite

Sanatan, Amilcar. 2016. "The Internet is Cool, Scholarship is Cold and Beyoncé is a Feminist: Reflections on the Popular Action Assignment in Introduction to Women's Studies." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* 10: 149–162.

Introduction

In this gender dialogue I write from the standpoint of a socialist feminist man, first as a graduate student and research assistant of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus and then as an activist involved in the *depatriarchal*¹ struggle for gender justice in the Caribbean. From this position I argue for a greater emphasis on a critique of neoliberal discourse by Caribbean feminist theorising in order to productively engage the experiences and trajectories of Caribbean youth today.

In my experience teaching in the classroom, I have observed the disconnect between the course material's concepts and students' application of feminist principles. More and more, there is a clear-cut and unambiguous gap in the ability of the readings to communicate effectively to the women (and men) about gender oppression in their lives as constituted by structural inequalities.

I enter this dialogue by reflecting on Gabrielle Hosein's "Activism in Academia: Twenty-first-Century Caribbean Feminist Dilemmas" (2012) and her evaluation of the popular action assignment in the course, Introduction to Women's Studies. This dialogue is intended to contribute to the creative potential of Caribbean feminism to build bridges with a generation of younger Caribbean women and men, in particular, the female students, who constitute the majority of the class as seen in the table below:

Semester/Academic Year	Number of Female Students	Number of Male Students	Total Number of Students
SI/2013-2014	65	7	72
Summer/2013-2014	11	4	15
SI/2014-2015	61	7	68
SI/2015-2016	45	5	50

Enrollment for GEND1103: Introduction to Women's Studies

Popular Action Assignment in Introduction to Women's Studies

The Popular Action assignment was first introduced by Gabrielle Hosein in 2006 for students to "...engage in consciousness-raising, feel empowered to express their own perspectives and the perspectives of women on a range of issues, challenge male bias in various forms, and reflect on ways that Women's Studies could remain connected to women's movements." (Hosein 2012, 356). While students bemoan the complexities of social dynamics in group work, many of them express a sense of gratification with this project because it involves them in a learning activity external to the classroom as well as an evaluation based on creativity and participation criteria.

Among groups of three to five, students identify a contemporary gender justice issue and its implications for women, then they develop a feminist analysis of the issue with the application of course readings and, finally, conceptualise a creative action to engage the campus community. For example, in 2013, one of the most outstanding popular actions to date was a group's design of "Manopoly", a board game that illustrated the ways in which patriarchy subordinates women and privileges men. The popular action, therefore, is a tool for feminist consciousness-raising that challenges restrictive gender ideologies. Making the case for activist activities and knowledge production in academia, Hosein (2012, 355) argues that women and gender studies are useful tools and sites for feminist consciousness-raising and movement-building in the Caribbean today.

A consistent theme has emerged in the popular actions over the past three years. Overwhelmingly, the gender justice issues of choice have centred on sexual politics – sex-positive messaging, slut walks and beauty – but also a very individualised form of women's liberation through a 'self-empowerment' narrative. Hennessy (2002, 83-84) notes the "retreat from concepts and critical frameworks that explain and combat the ravages of capitalism" in feminist

theory in the late twentieth century for a greater investment in knowledge production around postmodern and identity analyses. For example, students possess an acute awareness of the ways in which gender ideologies define and confine women's sexuality, and they challenge its absoluteness. At the same time, students fail to make connections to women sex workers who are both materially subordinated and denied on multiple levels the ability to express their sexuality. This illustrates the challenge students have in linking both the economic and cultural dimensions of gender, as well as the interactions of these dimensions in shaping women's lives; that is, an analysis that focuses on women from the standpoint of both the category and the individual.

Hosein observes that students showed concerns for political issues on a personal level but generally failed to offer a broader structural analysis of material and power inequalities that come to shape the everyday oppression in women's lives. She articulates, "Students didn't bring a sense of global, institutional or structural analysis to class discussions, and in many ways I failed to explore adequately how food security, human rights, state health care, international trade rules or simply economic inequality were areas for feminist analysis and action" (Hosein 2012, 359). In this observation, Hosein (2012) responsabilises² herself and renders the problem as a pedagogical one. While her statement about "failure" may hold true to a certain extent according to her own account, this analysis does not interrogate more exhaustively into the context in which learning takes place in this historical moment. Notably, she does not solely blame herself for the limitation but also offers a criticism of liberal feminism. Hosein (2012, 357) puts forward that the advance of liberal conceptions of feminism over a number of decades has produced discourses and understandings of empowerment in terms of "personal choice and individual freedom", which accounts for young women's sense of not feeling oppressed. While Hosein (2012) explicitly states these are liberal notions, the intervention I suggest that she is touching upon is a veiled emergence of neoliberal impositions on feminism.

Feminists have described the contemporary gender terrain as “post-feminist” (Barriteau 2002; Mc Robbie 2009) or as situated in a “Third Wave” in which students encounter feminism as “an amorphous set of ideas and practices” (Mohammed 2003, 27). Such feminists were at that time speaking of the tendency of women, especially young women, to be reticent about declaring or identifying themselves as feminist. In fact, contrary to young women's fear of self-identifying with feminism (Jowett 2004), lately, there has been an amplified affirmation of the ‘feminist’ as a label. One asks, what then does identifying as a ‘feminist’ actually affirm?

Celebrity Brand Feminism

This is where celebrity brand feminism becomes accountable. In this section, I interrogate the representation of Beyoncé and what her ‘FEMINIST’ politics signify. I discuss her example only as a reference to a discursive practice of a wide number of contemporary female and some male performing artistes who make use of such labels. At the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, R&B and musical icon Beyoncé portrayed, during her performance, a fully lit stage backdrop that read “FEMINIST” in bold, capitalised font. In 2013, she expressed her ambivalence about the label ‘feminist’ and considered herself a “modern-day feminist.” A year later, she made her unambiguous declaration of feminism to a worldwide audience. Internet debates ensued for weeks after marking a moment, composed by a pattern among prominent female performing artistes today (e.g. Taylor Swift and Lady Gaga), that feminism has found its celebrity moment. Jessica Bennett (2014) posited:

“No, you don't have to *like* the way Beyoncé writhes around in that leotard – or the slickness with which her image is controlled – but whether you like it or not, she's accomplished what feminists have long struggled to do: She's reached the masses. She has, literally, brought feminism into the living rooms of 12.4 million Americans.”



Source: <http://time.com/3181644/beyonce-reclaim-feminism-pop-star/> Accessed July 10, 2016.

Throughout the time that celebrities have re-branded feminism and presented it to wide audiences, there have been consequences for its politics. While one must value the multiple origins from which challenges to sexism and the promotion of gender equality emerge; there are two questions that Caribbean feminism must confront today in relation to this celebrity brand feminism: (i) What meanings are created when women's liberation is packaged in hypersexualised symbols that embody the ideals of capitalism? And (ii) what hope is there for the feminism that is not sexy, not on Twitter with millions of followers, and does not have bright lights on the big stage?

Hosein (2014) observes: "Beyonce's brand champions women as flawless and sexy, smart and powerful, economically in control and unanswerable to the politics of respectability. It also sells sex as it sells feminism. Indeed, here, sex sells

feminism, potentially popularising a narrower project [rather] than dismantling the beauty myths still packaging the meanings of female sexuality. What do hypersexual feminisms do for kinds that are not or refuse to be sexy?"

Popularising feminism and introducing some of the language of gender equality to worldwide audiences is worthy of recognition because it provides an accessible entry point in popular media to many young people who may not have come across feminism outside of the academy. Be that as it may, feminism premised on individuated agency and 'sexy' terms as the most visible, reachable and operative form poses severe complications for collective action and solidarity-building in the Caribbean feminist movement.

Calling Neoliberalism Out

Neoliberal governance not only produces an economic model, it also produces a neoliberal rationality. The impact of neoliberal policy and its gender ramifications in Caribbean social and economic development has been well documented (Freeman 2000, Jayasinghe 2001, Trotz 1998). However, there is less literature from the Caribbean on an engagement with neoliberal discourse and neoliberal self-making in the region. Neoliberalism has co-opted language from the feminist movement and associated capitalist accumulation with self-empowerment and freedom in profound ways. Batliwala (2007) explains how words such as 'agency' and 'empowerment' have been co-opted by development agencies and their meanings have deviated from their more radical feminist roots. The meanings of the words themselves have lost their political character.

Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson call for a revised feminist engagement in order to expand the possibilities of social transformation in an age of the dominance of the neoliberal model of development and the 'mainstreaming' of gender. They

posit, "Challenging and potentially transforming existing relations of power involves not only empowerment but also resistance: the two are inextricably intertwined" (Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson 2008, 8).

Critiquing the re-emergence of popular literature on feminism in the context of business leadership and development, Rottenburg marks Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013) as a shift in political culture from liberal feminism to a more pronounced and unmistakable system of neoliberal governmentality which produces a "new feminist subject." She notes:

"Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care...The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilised to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair" (Rottenburg 2013, 3).

For this reason, we must take notice of the (new) ways in which students in the classroom and Caribbean youth today come to understand feminism. There has been a reinvigoration of public debate and discussion on women's rights and sexism (for example, Amber Rose's slut-shaming campaigns and Beyoncé's 'feminist'-themed concert performances) in popular social media. However, this emergent feminism is fundamentally premised on individualistic expressions of agency and conforms to the impositions of the neoliberal lexicon and not the Caribbean women's movement that advanced collective action for social transformation.

The events and social interactions that students experience in their everyday lives occur in a neoliberal environment. The pervasiveness of neoliberal

rationality on gender ideologies and feminism itself requires further study. Understandably, what manifests in the popular action assignment is that self-empowerment becomes a sufficient means to contribute to social justice within this logic.

“Googling” Caribbean Feminism

Gender courses, while often regarded as some of the more interesting courses in the social sciences and humanities at The UWI, carry a reputation for examining students on a heavy load of required course readings. Students routinely complain about the reading load, they are also unaware of the reduction in course readings twice in the past three years. Many young women and men, search the Internet exclusively for scholarship in preparation for assignments. Without discussing the complexities of education and online participation, I am more interested in asking: (i) What do Caribbean women and men discover when they Google “feminism”? More aptly, (ii) what pages ‘pop up’ when they command a search engine with the words “Caribbean feminism”?

A Caribbean feminist practice in digital culture is an emerging area of study. Haynes (2016, 3) defines online Caribbean feminisms as “extremely diverse, heterogeneous, and polyvocal.” While Caribbean feminist bloggers have produced knowledge for over a decade online and scholars have begun documenting its impact and implications, more than often, blog writing and peer-reviewed journal articles from the North dominate search finds. Since searches rely heavily on ‘hits’, popular culture debates and celebrity-centred websites are highly visible on the Internet search engines rather than Caribbean writing and narratives. Simply put, what choices will the Caribbean youth make when presented with feminist theory in peer-reviewed journal articles by Antrobus and the catchy headlines of the Beyoncé and Taylor Swift interview? On the surface, one may think that these are two separate fields that are not in

competition; however, what is at stake is the epistemological standpoint from which young Caribbean women and men first come to understand feminism.

In the classroom, I witness the evidence of a gap in the knowledge and literature produced in the Caribbean (what we teach) and what young people access today on the Internet. On one level, the gap relates to access where youth reach information on the Internet more quickly than from a library search. On another level, there is a spacious gap between the language style and expression of Caribbean scholarship and online writing for popular consumption. Online Caribbean feminist resources such as *CODE RED for gender justice!* and blogs hosted by individual Caribbean feminists attempt to bridge these gaps in their own way. Simultaneously, we must understand that online and social media interactions often do not engage in long-term thinking for solutions and analysis. Moreover, it is highly problematic to establish the Internet as the lone site of legitimacy for Caribbean feminist thought and activism (Hosein 2016). Ultimately, for a generation that may have *Beyoncé's dreams but not Beyoncé's means*, 21st century Caribbean feminism is confronted with the task of advancing the feminist struggle on multiple platforms online and offline because it is not only feminism that is at stake but also the identity of Caribbean people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we need to teach and produce more research that critiques neoliberalism in relation to gender power relations in the Caribbean. Neoliberalism is a structure of hegemony and dominance and our task is to name it explicitly and take it apart. In my opinion, celebrity brand feminism has developed taglines and hashtags out of the scholarship that feminists have produced over decades; they index the unsung labour of sustainable feminist epistemologies without engaging that labour and sacrifice in a committed manner. At the same time, we cannot leave sites of learning and participation in

feminist discourses unengaged; we are called to produce more popular writing and critical perspectives on accessible platforms and in accessible language in order to provide a generation of younger Caribbean readers and scholars with the tools for gender justice. After all is said and done, however, I maintain that pointing to structures, breaking capitalism and neoliberalism down and uncovering the social relations that shape inequalities in the lives of women and men are not always sexy, fun and 'likeable' – it is reality.

¹ *Depatriarchal* refers to theory and praxis that focuses on critiquing and transforming patriarchal system of power and epistemology. (Drayton, Richard. 2016. "Whose Constitution? Law, Justice and History in the Caribbean." Lecture delivered to the Judicial Education Institute of Trinidad and Tobago. Accessed September 18, 2016. <http://www.ttlawcourts.org/jeibooks/books/djl2016.pdf>)

² *Responsibilisation* refers to a discursive practice of neoliberal theory and governance that exclusively focuses on individuals and self-responsibility without an analysis of state accountability and social context. (See: Liebenberg, Linda, Michael Ungar and Janice Ikeda. 2013. "Neo-Liberalism and Responsibilisation in the Discourse of Social Service Workers." *British Journal of Social Work*: 1-16. Accessed September 15, 2016. <http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2013/11/10/bjsw.bct172.full.pdf+html>)

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