

## Editorial: Giving gender studies its due

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Gender studies has been around for a long time now. However, one can hardly avoid noticing that while its scholarly insights have been taken up within the mainstream, its theorizing and research are rarely given due credit. A case in point is the symposium on ‘Transnational Bodies’ which was recently held in Amsterdam to commemorate the upcoming anniversary of the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, which has been in existence for nearly two decades. The symposium was remarkable in many ways (more on that in just a moment), but what left me feeling just a little cranky was a remark made by one of the speakers. Casting her eyes over the primarily female audience, she noted that it was no coincidence that a topic like this would draw so many women. After all, she explained, the body has always been a ‘women’s issue’. She then proceeded to provide a sociological take on the body, drawing upon social theories currently popular in sociology, while making no reference to the – by now – massive scholarship on the body within gender studies. While there was nothing wrong with her presentation, which was interesting and provocative, her opening left me with a disturbing sense of *déjà vu*. After more than three decades in the field of gender studies and two decades on the editorial board of the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, I am left wondering why gender studies continues to be defined as ‘something of interest for women’? Why are certain topics (like the body) assumed to be primarily ‘women’s issues’? And, why is an event organized under the auspices of gender studies relegated to the particular and the specific, while sociology implicitly and without further justification, can continue to situate itself as being of ‘general interest’?

Well, before I continue in this grumbling mode, let me take a brief look at the symposium and why we chose this particular topic as a way to think about the journal and what has been happening in the field of gender studies during the past two decades. In 1996, the *European Journal of Women's Studies* devoted a special issue to the body in an attempt to represent what was happening in critical feminist thinking on the body at that particular point in time. It focused on differences between women, cultural discourses about the body, power and domination, and subversive body practices. When it was later published as a book, as editor, I looked for a cover photograph which would do justice to these themes (Davis, 1997). I am returning to it now to show just how the journal – and, along with it, critical feminist thinking – could move from ‘the body’ (in 1996) to ‘transnational bodies’ (in 2013).

The photograph was taken from a photo exhibition from a well-known Dutch feminist photographer, Gon Burman<sup>1</sup> and showed two women, a mother and a daughter, dancing a tango in a garden in Amsterdam. I remember choosing this particular image because I

saw it as a nice example of gender bending. It looked like a feminist act of subversion of what is supposed to be one of the most traditional and hyper-heterosexual of all dances – tango – with its macho men with slicked-back hair and bedroom eyes and women in stiletto shoes and sexy clothing, swooning submissively in their arms. In contrast, this photograph turned the image of male power and female powerlessness on its head, by showing two women from different generations reappropriating tango for their own enjoyment. The photo encapsulated all the themes I then thought were important for a critical book on the body.

Two decades later, I look at this same picture through different eyes and it was this example that I used to introduce the theme of the symposium. For example, the photograph now raises very different questions: how could a dance like tango, which emerged in the slums of Buenos Aires at the turn of the 20th century, end up in a canal house garden in Amsterdam? Why would a white, middle-class mother and daughter living in Holland want to dance an Argentinean dance instead of something closer to home – say rock and roll? What were they thinking while they were listening to tango music from so long ago, played on scratchy records and sung in a dialect which hardly anyone understands any more, not even most Argentineans? And what about the Argentineans? What do they think about ‘their’ tango having travelled so far from home? Are they glad? Do they have authenticity concerns? Are they proud, resentful, or just simply indifferent? And, of course, what about me? Why did I choose a picture like this to ‘juice up’ the cover of our book? Was I thinking about my own position as white academic from the global North borrowing the exoticism of a Latin dance to sell her book as interesting, provocative, and – yes – even sexy?

Obviously, this is just a photograph, but seen through the transnational lens which is central to gender studies today, different questions, topics, and concerns emerge. They also call for a revision of our theoretical and methodological perspectives.

For example, we need to think of individual bodies as embedded in contexts which extend far beyond the local. The way bodies look, feel, move and act are not only the product of the contexts in which they are presently located: the here and now. They are also part of what is ‘out there’ and what has gone before as well as what will follow afterwards.

Thinking transnationally means that we cannot assume that actual bodies stay in one place. People move around. But so do bodily practices, body cultures, representations of the body and body theories. They all travel from place to place these days. They are taken up in all kinds of strange and unexpected places across the globe, where they are changed and transformed in interesting and complicated ways.

Thinking transnationally means thinking about the ways people, cultures, institutions, political movements and organizations across the globe are connected, and, in fact, always have been, historically speaking. It means considering how this interconnectedness generates new forms of power and new kinds of inequalities as well as the possibilities offered by our global interconnectedness for alliances and political activism.

Thus, our symposium returned to the ‘old’ topic of the body, looking at it through the ‘new’ lens of transnationality. It drew together a wide range of body issues: the meanings of ‘sex work’ in the context of worldwide migration, masculinity and sexual violence in conflict situations, racial forensic profiling, the practice of collecting bodily remains of

colonized people for western ‘science’, the globalization of food and media representations of feminine beauty in a globalizing world. These themes were not only notable for their variety, but also because they brought together the theoretical insights and scholarship from a whole spectrum of enquiry (critical race studies, migration studies, queer theory, diaspora studies, postcolonial theory) in order to interrogate and make sense of bodily issues, practices, representations and knowledge about the body. By doing this, they produced reflexive, critical and creative scholarship on the body in a transnational framework.

There is, of course, nothing particularly new about this. Those of you who work in the field of gender studies are unlikely to be surprised about such a symposium and, indeed, what I have described is fairly common in gender studies today. What is surprising – or, perhaps merely disheartening – is that 20 years later, gender studies, which has always spanned different disciplines and different theoretical perspectives, bringing them together to address issues in a creative and provocative way, gets no credit for doing this. I cannot help but wonder whether such a symposium could have been held in sociology or any other discipline which is anxious to protect its own boundaries. Would another academic field have been likely to devote as much attention to the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality and class, national belonging something that has become *bon ton* in gender studies? In short, would a symposium under the auspices of another discipline have just as readily given space to such a range of critical theoretical perspectives and have been just as willing to reflect critically on its own scientific practices, blind spots, or normativity?

I think not. Perhaps I am too pessimistic or have fallen prey to the limitations of my own experience. However, I must admit that I rarely see this kind of border crossing outside gender studies. I would even venture to suggest that the symposium I have described could probably only have been organized under the auspices of gender studies. This is not because women are more embodied than men or more concerned with body issues (for a deconstruction of THAT fossilized notion, the reader is referred to the special issue from 1996 and all that went before and after it). Nor is it because the body is more particular or less general than any other social or culture issue. It is because gender studies has generated a kind of scholarship which is routinely interdisciplinary, intersectional, transnational and reflexive. Those are our trademarks.

So, please, let’s claim credit where credit is due.

## Note

1. It was part of her very successful travelling photo exhibition called ‘Lesbian Connexions’ in 1995.

## References

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