

## Women's Studies in Communication Still Matters

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When we coedited our special issue of *Women's Studies in Communication* (2009, volume 32, issue 1), “Power Feminism: Exploring Agency, Oppression, and Victimage,” Karma was a graduate student concerned about directions in which she saw some feminist scholarship heading. Some of those directions seemed like perfect embodiments of broader cultural turns toward the neoliberal privatization of the social and the attendant cult of personal responsibility. Cindy was equally as concerned, and out of our increasingly shared perspective, we laid the groundwork for the special issue. Despite our clear political point of view on power feminism, in our introduction to that issue, we wrote, “[C]onversations about what our feminisms are, how we define them, and how they move us forward in the world are among the most important feminist conversations that we could have” (Chávez & Griffin, 2009, p. 2). In that spirit, our interest was not in foreclosing conversations or silencing perspectives; in fact, we were committed to featuring an array of voices. *WSIC* is the only journal in the field of communication where we could imagine having hosted that special issue. This journal continues to serve vital functions in the field, and it will do so no matter what we call it. Those functions include featuring the best in feminist communication scholarship and serving an important pedagogical purpose for newer scholars by helping them through the publication process. Undoubtedly, this mission and the journal's name reflect its second-wave feminist beginnings, even as the mission and function has morphed over the years. We are not opposed to changing the name if, by some consensus, feminists in the field of communication determine that this is best. We will insist that some form of “women's studies” remains and, in the remainder of this article, we will explain why.

To begin, women's studies (broadly conceptualized) has a history as a field of study that emerges from activist efforts and grassroots social movements; this is also true of women's studies in communication. The preservation and promotion of such impetuses seems to us vital even if such pursuits remain fraught. Certainly, the histories of women's studies are contested, diverging over questions regarding identity categories such as race, class, and sexuality and the systems of oppression

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that produce their meanings: racism and White supremacy, capitalism and classism, and homophobia and heteronormativity (Braithwaite, Heald, Luhmann, & Rosenberg, 2004; Howe, 2000; Kennedy, 2008). Such questions continue to permeate contemporary conversations about the status of women's studies as an academic discipline, as well as feminist studies in communication (on the former, see Brandzel 2011; on the latter, see Chávez & Griffin, 2012). The questions facing women's studies have become more complex as scholars more fully attend to globalization and transnationalism, gay and lesbian, queer, disability, and transgender studies. These are crucial bodies of knowledge and activism, and they necessarily, and productively, challenge some of the very premises of women's and feminist studies. In our minds, such past, present, and future struggles should not turn us away from women's studies, even as they do turn our scholarship and our approaches to our scholarship toward naming and interrogating the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, heteronormativity, and ableism as well as White and cisgender privileges and more. The gifts and challenges this work brings to feminist scholarship are foundational to questions about how we can deepen, rupture, or complicate what we do as women's studies scholars. Such questions are not, in fact, new to our discipline or the pages of this journal. In 1988 (volume 11, issue 1), several feminists in communication participated in a forum that asked: "What distinguishes/ought to distinguish feminist scholarship in communication?" This history tells us that these questions have always been vital for *Women's Studies in Communication*, and we think they are part of the activist and grassroots legacy of women's studies, one reflected in this journal's name.

To be clear, we are not advocating a position such as the one some White feminists took in response to Black feminists who wondered why a special issue on feminist rhetorical studies in the 1990s featured no perspectives from or about women of color. As Marsha Houston (2012) shares, the answer from one of the editors was: "Let *them* do *their* own special issue!" (p. x). Houston explains that not only did that response ignore the difficult work undertaken by White feminists to have their voices appear on the pages of communication journals but also the persistent institutional and individual roadblocks and hostilities that face(d) feminist women of color in communication. Neat and tidy silos are certainly not appropriate; neither are they possible or productive.

Nevertheless, the name of this journal, and all other academic journals, is by definition exclusionary yet simultaneously constitutive. We are, all of us, the products of our histories and the linguistic choices embedded in those histories. As such, the question for us is, regardless of our title, what do we want our journal to constitute? If *WSIC* is to name a space in which queer, queer of color, feminist women of color, intersectional, transnational, trans, disability, and other kinds of radical scholarship belong, those of us invested in this journal need to work to constitute that space. How? Editors need appropriate institutional support from the Organization for Research on Women and Communication (ORWAC) and their universities; editorial boards need to reflect intellectual, institutional, and identity-based diversity, even if that means larger boards or trimming the number of established, straight, White, able-bodied, U.S. feminists on our boards; and our journal's leadership, as well as those of us who read, use, and teach the scholarship within its pages, need to actively foster a space for these ways of being and knowing, including special forums, special issues, and targeted outreach. The exciting and sustainable journal we have just described could still be called *Women's Studies in Communication*.

Finally, we believe it is imperative for those of us committed to feminist, queer, trans, anticapitalist, transnational, critical race, disability, and other radical intellectual projects to recognize their necessity and also their precarity. Women's, gender, and sexuality studies, like ethnic studies, are the target of neoliberal attacks, whether directly via the multifaceted ideological positions against us that conservatives hold or indirectly in the form of liberals who offer unrelenting support of neoliberal economic policies and values—values like personal responsibility and privatization that always and already are at odds with social justice-oriented intellectual projects.

Attacks against ethnic studies, particularly the dismantling of Mexican American Studies in the Tucson Unified School District in 2010, are real and damaging. So, too, are those against gender studies. In 2013, newly elected North Carolina governor Patrick McCrory announced his intention to focus public university education on the sole objective of postgraduate employment. Although the chair of UNC-Chapel Hill's gender and women's studies department noted that her department has little problem placing students in jobs after graduation, McCrory's now famous statement "If you want to take gender studies that's fine, go to a private school and take it" (Kiley, 2013) reflects an oppressive and colonizing sentiment that is gaining traction. As conservative think-tanks begin drafting probusiness legislation designed to completely revamp public university education, governors and state legislators across the country are taking positions similar to McCrory's. Meanwhile, the "general public," which often sees feminist scholars only as part of an ivory tower increasingly out of reach for the average student, tacitly and sometimes actively supports these efforts to undermine our presence.

Our continued feminist, critical race, and anticapitalist analysis of these efforts is absolutely crucial in this moment. Although conversations about what to call our journal are important, our existence as feminist scholars is being challenged and undermined, actively and systematically. As such, we personally will not focus more attention on debates over our name. We choose, instead, to follow the spirit of the activist labor that created these intellectual spaces of debate for us and to put our energy toward securing our place, and our future, as feminist activists and intellectuals. Similarly, we will attend to the struggles outside of (though always connected to) the discipline that our understandings of feminist communication equip us expertly to address: human rights, borders and migration, poverty, and climate change and environmental sustainability, to name a few. Why *is* women's studies (in communication) still important? We should hope we don't have to answer that question.

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