gender equity/gender treachery

Introduction
We present here a rather unorthodox text in a rather unusual form. It's a collaborative attempt to wrestle with a set of very concrete challenges surrounding the conception, implementation, and our own involvement in institutional efforts to address what is widely termed 'gender equity.' It was not in total surprise that any of us began this work, yet none of us fully anticipated the kind and extent of the difficulties we would face. When one educational administration after another explicitly targets 'gender equity' as a major initiative, we know at least this much: there is real danger here. We know there's no choice about dealing with this issue now, but for all the grand talk of 'pedagogies of possibility' we know that the educators are set elsewhere and that we—women, lesbians, feminists—are not the architects of its design. We are at best technicians looking for 'transformative accommodations' in tiny corners and crannies in a system which, hitherto, predicated on the creation of gendered difference, now proclaims—inevitably—a commitment to its overthrow. Knowing, then, that while we cannot really act, and yet we cannot sit out, we embrace the tactics of the weak with just one positive idea: our lesson from Virginia Woolf that 'gender equity can't be allowed to mean just 'sex equality.' Nevertheless, that's most likely to be precisely the basis of the institutional strategies within which we set out to work.

here be dragons...

SC: How did we come to this, this social project of "equalizing the genders?" What are the main historical lines, directions, sources of this project, these discourses which reform and regulate girls and women as subjects of public education? Usually, 'equity' is a term of concession. In a progressive movement, it announces the right to be or to become like the idealized subject of 'human rights.' It reasserts traditional rules, roles and relations by announcing the right of non-dominant, marginalized persons to 'assume the position' of dominance, to hold the same jobs, go to the same places, have the same desires, and do the same things as the normally-sanctioned bourgeois subject of human rights. Those become, then, rights to pseudo-membership in the dominant group, rights to be— but always impossibly so— those whose right it is to define the proper subjects of rights.

These are, of course, not rights as human, as indigenous peoples, as animals, as queer, as women. Such rights might in truth be 'human' rights. The struggles of native peoples in Comox today, for example, seem to be principally for such human rights, accorded despite differences, and without the necessity to 'assume the position.' Conversely, struggles for gay rights are advancing only to the extent that the state reconstitutes homosexuality as inevitably falling heteronormative.

In education too, of course, it has always been the purpose of state systems to equip diverse student bodies with the 'bodily' universalized as normative. This compulsory submission of all children to extensive and intrusive state standards is the process whereby the state constitutes the subjects to which it then accords rights, and then reproduces. This is what 'equity' in education has meant for minority students: the right to try, but inevitably to fail, to become white, male and middle class. And this is very much the kind of thing 'gender equity' means for girls and women.

As the New Right mobilizes around 'family values,' the current gender equity work inscribes 'women's ways' as a new regime of truth in educational policy, entrenching even further the very tradition it pretends to reject—the gender revision of a pre-civil rights 'separate but equal' policy justifying systematic discrimination.

MB: What gender equity means to me is equal opportunity to be who I am, not what I am to become, and can't even aspire to be. So long as we insist on working within 'gender' as a necessary or transparent categorical system, there can be no real thing as 'equity.' On the topic of 'gender,' Judith Butler has written:

The presumption here is that the 'being' of gender is an effect, an object of a genealogical investigation that maps out the political metaphors of its construction in the mode of ontology. To claim that gender is constructed is not to erect its illusory or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the 'real' and the 'authentic' or oppositional... if the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiple contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their universal posturing.

Gender Trouble

SGB: I was hired to develop and teach a course which a Ministry of Education Gender Equity Committee suggested to the universities. Through this work, I became interested in the euphemism, 'gender equity,' which seemed to include the possibility of allowing more space for feminism as a means to expand its presence in established social institutions like schools and universities. It might serve as an elixir for feminism. As I worked, I pondered the dual gender equity/feminism dilemma.

Where does the traitor come in? A traitor to socialism, to some essential being lost in the process of socialism? A traitor to feminism? The notion of treachery appealed to me when the title was proposed: now, it has come to encompass some personal history, gender, and feminism, and the unity around all three. For me the treachery begins with amelioration, as we wait for the big change to an equitable society. Let me count the ways...

Through talk and education, we will find justice. Whose talk? Whose education? Whose justice? Can we be sure that this talk in which we engage at the university is not
simply a diversion, something to keep our busy little minds busy as the boredom and anger slowly continue and destroy their lives of privilege. Can we, as Gypsy Spivak suggests, "unlearn our privileges as our loss" in a way that contributes to change for those who are being hurt?

Michal Foucault writes of "regimes of truth" or "general politics of truth which each society adopts", a type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true. As we move into positions of declining truth in the form of working papers on gender equity, outlines of courses called gender equity, delivering courses in gender equity, we accept the role of sociologist and penned prose to the discourse, our version of truth. Whose interests are served? Who benefits? Can we keep the discourse open enough for the visions we'll never be able to conjure up?

We exploit our friends. We call them to be what Suzanne calls the performing parrots. "Step right up! A real live Lesbian. She walks and talks and you can ask her anything you want!" We expose our friends to ignorance and abuse. "Black woman, First Nation woman, Woman of Asian origin, Lesbian. Come to my class and enlighten us." When is a token not a token? How many differences, how much diversity to really address this ideological position called anti-essentialism? How many lives? How much pain?

As the teachah, we agree to take on an impossible task. The limits of time: one nine-day course to challenge assimilation with nineteen people. Some of them have never considered gender issues; the latter have long considered that their experiences could be other than universal, and that their interpretations and political directions are not the only appropriate responses to situations of inequality. In nine days, we will change all this.

"True Stories" about Academic Feminisms

SC: Imagine This Scenario:

I should have known when I first walked in and saw those bands of mini-lavenders around the table that I was in trouble. The first meeting began, as I knew it would, taking for granted that at least one person was a feminist and that some feminist conception of gender. The mood was to be one of purposeful, optimistic consensus. We, all, it seemed, knew what we were, and why we were here. We had a job to do, and we had no opportunity to do it. We were here to advance, together, a hitherto neglected human rights agenda, the agenda of women. We were here to ensure the provision of equal rights—and our job was to work on the ways this mission would be carried out. I put it this way, because our job was assuredly not to discover or to invent the ways in which this was to be carried out, as this had already been done for us. Accordingly, our first agenda item was to approve the Ministry of Education's implementation plans for the next four years, from 1988 to 1994. The first year had already, if inconveniently, taken place. Unfortunately, we were advised this meant we could proceed at a faster rate to 1991—a kind of bonus right at the beginning of the game.

We began, predictably enough, with instructions to identify ourselves and to share with the group information about the gender equity initiatives presently underway at our respective institutions. This tactic served, of course, to cement the token-for-grantedness about what gender equity meant. This rhetorical short-circuiting of the main argument, which was dutifully carried out by each one of us, nonetheless failed to effect a total ban on discussion. Because if I knew nothing else, and at that point I really did know very little else, it was that "gender" and indeed even "equity" were not unproblematic terms. I didn't know who we 'we' were, that is to say, it was already all too apparent that I was not part of the we who were there. In skirts, in jewelry, in a/colors, in wedding rings, in nail-polish, in smiling, lipstick-tipped lips. Nor was I part of 'we men', who joined the first meeting: one young, in jacket, collar and tie, because you could trust, assessment you could feel on your skin: the one who was told to be there, who never came back. Than there was the older one, the Povim human-rights-in-the-school administrative activist, instructing us all to work for the advancement of 'both genders,' haranguing his absent, unsympathetic colleagues for their failure to see how gender equity was so necessary for us all, how it was so necessary for men, oppressed by sex-role stereotyping, their wives' careers impeded by the glass ceiling, their sons' emotional development obstructed by the burden of expectations of their masculinists, who were not allowed to cry (the pinnacle of women's achievement in the affective domain). I wasn't part of 'we women, nor part of 'we men—I was instead—and this was the primary source of trouble for us' from that day on, one of the hitherto unthinkable 'differently gendered.'

MB: Imagine This Scenario:

It is "Women's Ways of Knowing Day" and I am intensely uncomfortable as I walk across campus to attend a session advertised as an "Informed Dialogue for Students and Faculty Interested in Feminism and Epistemology"—an opportunity to discuss the complex issues involved in feminist research" with two of its shining stars, Mary Beelenk and Rhysa Clinchy (see Women's Ways of Knowing, by Beelenk, Clinchy, Tampa, & Goldsberger, 1986). I feel nervous just contemplating what lies ahead. As a lesbian, attending academic events advertised as 'feminist' is invariably to disrupt the 'always already' of compulsory heterosexuality that circulates through those gatherings. Invariably, speaking as a lesbian, I am the ' outsider'—firmly entrenched in a marginal essentialized identity that, ironically, I have to participate in creating by taking my difference—sort of like having to dig one's own mold for one's own metonymic genome.

Predictably, the speakers use the royal 'we' in talking authoritatively about women, and 'our ways,' though the actual sample of women about which they speak is almost exclusively identified as heterosexual and white. Periodically during this tirade, the speakers talk about the fun they had having husbands and children behind to constitute a regular series of women's ways pytoma parties. Periodically these women 'let down their hair' and collaborated in the production of a different gendered epistemological framework, eventually to be described in the best selling book entitled Women's Ways of Knowing. Parodying one of my favorite postmodern idioms, whom I sometimes refer to as 'PoMo the Super MoOn On the

Photos: Heather Cameron, Gender Television, a photographic exhibition exploring the edge, A Space, Toronto, April 1989.
Go. I break into the easy and convivial atmosphere and talk about how odd it is to be a woman and myself "not a woman," or "a woman by any other name" in their analyses. I describe my anger in reading the Women's Ways book which, intertextually, locates on the page descriptions of their research methods and findings between quotations by lesbian writers such as Audre Lorde or Adrienne Rich without ever naming the presence of those voices or "lesbian" and, simultaneously, without ever naming their own voices as discursively constructed through white heterosexual privilege. An uncomfortable silence hangs perceptibly in the room.

Lesbomaniac: "A difference that dares to speak its name." Not if you want tenure.

In the opening scenes of Margaret Atwood's novel, The Handmaid's Tale, women are being systematically hunted down and incarcerated for a variety of 'crimes against the state.' One woman identifies herself as a particular crime on 'goreanish treachery,' used here as a code word for lesbianism. It is not surprising to see the representation of lesbianism as a form of deviancy that will not be tolerated under an explicitly repressive regime. But how might it come to pass for me to speak as a lesbian within the purportedly liberal context of women's studies programs or academic feminism? would, likewise, be consistently interpreted as an undesirable form of disruption, or as a form of "treachery to my sisters" that under mines the otherwise cohesive bond among feminists, ostensibly committed to the betterment of all women?

SC: It is the institutionally sanctioned "REAL woman" the Good Housekeeping woman, necessarily white, heterosexual, and middle class, that gender equity seeks to affirm. Not women of colour, lesbians, or poor women. Hence institutions in this period at the cease of the New Right now gain popular approval and manage liberal tensions by condensing "opposed" understandings of women's culture, or women's "ways" and have relegated to the sidelines feminist culture, "feminist 'ways'". Still, how to trust academic feminism any more, to believe in it... Because there's another treachery concealed at the heart of academic feminism's bond with 'women.' To be a feminist is to be on the side of women. But women's culture isn't always feminist culture, and we know that in real life feminists and women are often in bitter conflict. In this and feminists always have to take the side of REAL women -- it's a distortion tendency the feminist project has of slip-sliding away. I want to say, dangerously, 'queers against woman.' "Queers against academic feminism" for the way it seduces and betrays us, blindsides us with our own good feminist intentions, and lends us back, unseeing, uncomprehending, into the culture of women.

CBH: My first encounter with the new gender equity course was halcyon gossip. One of the powers that be had asked what the academic context of such a course could possibly be, the implication being that there was none. I suggested he could visit my office and I would show him my books. The next thing I knew someone was asking me to teach the course. The feminist treachery began with the course approval process. I was assuming a strange relationship between feminism and gender equity. On March 5, 1987, I received a phone call to let me know that the course outline submitted for approval had been turned down. As I noted in my journal, there were concerns expressed that the course emphasized feminism and that such a course should focus on 'respect for persons' as opposed to women alone. I was speechless. All I could think was that I had never agreed to teach a course about respecting men. They already have respect, positions of power. I do bring to race and class which questions the need to consider some men, but the focus to me should be on girls and women.

The head of the committee told me that I needed to make the course look more attractive to men. A friend assuming heterosexuality suggested that I put a woman in a low-cut dress on the cover. Second I was to take out the word 'gendered' which was a 'femi

MB: Thrown to the wolves? Being a lesbian in academia means being 'thrown to the wolves' on a daily basis. Probably the most disheartening and disturbing aspect of my work in academia is the series of double binds within which anyone whose identity is constructed in the contradictory dynamics of difference is profoundly implicated. In my case, there is the double bind I face as a 'lesbian/lecturer' --- a position which btzmme and I have described as an 'untenable diagonal critical position.' As a lesbian I am profoundly committed both to the production of difference and the support for difference, yet to 'speak as a lesbian' I
assumed an identity which automatically situates me as an outsider whose very marginality signifies and defines itself through its critical stance on the category of lesbian. My agency was coded as lesbianism by virtue of being associated with the status of lesbian, thus denying access to the category of heterosexual woman. For me, the experience of being a lesbian was a constant reminder of my own impotence in relation to the social order. My sexual identity was constituted through the processes of discursive construction that defined and excluded me from the category of heterosexual woman. This process of exclusion was not accidental or superficial; it was a fundamental aspect of the social construction of gender and sexual identity.

The consensus among the overwhelming majority of gay and lesbian theorists is that there is a clear and visible division between gay and lesbian identity. This division is not merely a product of social construction but is also a reflection of the internalized homophobia that pervades all sections of society.

The social construction of gender identity is a complex and multifaceted process that involves a range of factors, including cultural norms, social expectations, and personal experiences. The process of understanding gender identity is not a simple one, and it requires a multidisciplinary approach that takes into account the interplay of social, cultural, and personal factors.

In conclusion, the social construction of gender identity is a complex and dynamic process that is shaped by a range of social, cultural, and personal factors. Understanding gender identity requires a multidisciplinary approach that takes into account the interplay of these factors. The process of understanding gender identity is not a simple one, and it requires a commitment to ongoing learning and research.
The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house...
Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns.

In trying to work seriously on ‘equality issues’ it is critical to understand how institutional responses to, and production of, difference function in the context of unrepresentative communities so as to reaffirm practices we do to work that, paradoxically, engenders further oppressor rather than producing equitable social change.