Note to Instructors, or, Is This the New Textbook for Your Intro Course?

*Everyday Women’s and Gender Studies (EWGS)* is an opportunity to think otherwise about how to organize an introductory Women’s and Gender Studies (WGS) course. While many introductory texts focus on a number of *topics*, often predominantly about women (or sometimes about gender more broadly), *EWGS* shifts the focus to some of the major *concepts* that organize the diverse work in this field. Concepts, in the broadest sense, are frameworks that allow us to weave together a range of disparate content, focusing on the connections between a wide variety of WGS interests. As a multifaceted discipline whose practitioners take up everything from sex chromosomes to sex work, global flows to girl cultures, social movements to sitcoms, war to the wedding industry, the prison industrial complex to pornography, fat bodies to female masculinities, and so much more, focusing on concepts allows us to follow the threads that connect the approaches, questions, languages, theories, actions, and topics we talk about in our introductory classes.

Our focus on “the everyday,” in both the title and the many examples we provide throughout the text, speaks to the importance we place on students’ understanding of the taken-for-granted circumstances of their daily lives. Precisely because the everyday is not the same for everyone, it becomes the ideal location for cultivating students’
political investigations and interventions. In this book, then, we present six major concepts that structure much of the work done in the field—“Knowledges,” “Identities,” “Equalities,” “Bodies,” “Places,” “Representations”—as well as a concluding chapter, entitled “Now What?”; our aim throughout is to both explore the idea that “People are different, and the world isn’t fair” and engage students in the inevitably complicated follow-up question, “Now that we know, how shall we live?”

What Should an Intro Course Introduce?

A couple of the central questions we asked ourselves in thinking about how to write an introductory text (and not simply replicate the many others that already exist) was “Who is the audience?” and, perhaps more importantly, “What does that audience need from a textbook?” The introductory course is usually assumed to be a primary site for disciplinary training in “the basics,” not just by the students who take the course, but often by the faculty who teach it. And, as a disciplinary artifact, the introductory textbook can play an outsized role not just in explaining what Women’s and Gender Studies is to an uninitiated audience of undergraduates—the vast majority of whom will never take another WGS course—but in influencing instructors’ understanding of what is critical to “pass on” to those students (and, by default, what is better left for the advanced courses that most intro students will never sign up for).

For example, when we were approached by an editor about writing an introductory text, she framed instructors’ needs this way in an e-mail: “In my conversations with instructors on campus visits, etc., I’ve received quite a number of requests for a book that doesn’t just assume that students know the basics of the history behind what they’re reading.” What struck us immediately was this notion of “the history.” Two assumptions seemed implicit—and problematic—in this framing of what should be in an introductory text: there was only one history worthy of passing on to students and that history’s content was—or should be—known to the rest of us in the discipline. But, we wondered, isn’t this exactly the sort of assumption about history we would want our students to interrogate even at the introductory level?

We quickly dashed off what was, upon reflection, a rather snarky response to the
editor: “To (re)produce a history that focuses only on women (as opposed to gendered identity formations), starts at Seneca Falls (thereby replicating race/class/U.S. privilege), then trots out ‘waves’ and ‘generations,’ and then wraps up with critiques by women of color and/or lesbians/queers [is not what this field needs]. This history has been done . . . and often roundly critiqued as highly problematic and/or not even true. The field does not need this history . . . again.” Thus, from our first thoughts about this book, we took seriously the idea that we would not produce a dominant narrative about WGS origins and objects of analysis born of a singular history that privileges a singular identity category. Rather, like our own experience of this diversely constituted discipline full of complexity and interesting contradictions, we wanted to create an introductory text that encouraged students to see the value of WGS as a knowledge project that exposes the diverse impacts of difference and power in our lives, even in our lives as WGS practitioners.

Shifting the focus of the introductory course to WGS as a knowledge project means that we are freed up to ask critical questions about this course’s purpose: What are the basics that should (some of us might say, must) be included? In other words, what do we feel duty bound to pass on to do the work of the discipline? How does this response shift if we instead ask, what knowledges from the discipline will be most provocative for our particular students? What can we let go of? For example, and apropos of our response to the editor, do we have to tell a story of something called “The Women’s Movement,” given that any number of WGS scholars have pointed out serious problems of race and class exclusions in this disciplinary narrative? If we find those claims about the problems with this “origin myth” of WGS compelling, why pass the myth on to our students? Likewise, do we need “waves?” After all, the value of this metaphor has been questioned repeatedly for constructing generational divides that sometimes do, but mostly don’t, exist. And, do we have to make feminism the foundational—and singular—paradigm of the field when a significant number of practitioners in WGS might prefer to emphasize different intellectual traditions (think: womanist or trans or Xicanista or queer) and have pointed out the obvious: that there are multiple versions of feminism that fundamentally contradict each other? Too often, the women’s movement or waves or feminism are the intro course artifacts that many of us return to in an advanced theory course or a
fourth year capstone to “unteach.” But, again, what if the students never take another course and thus never get the correction?

A New Approach, or, What Were These Authors Thinking?

Given our emphasis on rethinking the intro course as a knowledge project, this book is organized to highlight the richness of the many theoretical languages that inform contemporary thinking in Women’s and Gender Studies. In this text, then, the concepts we introduce are informed by feminism(s), of course, but also by ethnic studies, critical race studies, queer theory and sexuality studies, disability studies, critical legal theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies. If Women’s Studies (by its earlier name) was initially understood as the mobilization of feminism in the academy, WGS today has successfully put feminism in conversation with a broad assortment of thinkers and theoretical approaches in any number of disciplines that productively question its singularity. Those questions in the early context of the field’s emergence about “which feminism”—and the successive questions about whether WGS is feminist/is about feminism/is where feminism is the object of study/is the study that feminists do—broadened the intellectual scope of the field such that passing on a singular, or at least uninterrogated notion of, feminism can no longer encompass the rich and productive set of debates and approaches that are mobilized under this disciplinary rubric. Rather, the knowledge produced in this field can only be reflected, we believe, if we refuse to invest in only one theoretical language as the focus of WGS. As such, the concepts laid out here derive from a wide variety of theorists and approaches that are, in a sense, translated from these debates about and beyond feminism(s), even as they maintain a common focus on questions of how we know, what we know, and what we do with the knowledges we have. Likewise, resisting feminism as the sole organizing concept of the introduction to the field means that the primary learning goal is not centered around a “conversion experience” for our students. In other words, we set aside questions about whether our success as faculty is measured by our students identifying themselves as feminists (or, indeed, anything else) as a result of taking this course. Instead, maintaining the focus on WGS as a knowledge project
allows students to raise critical questions about the histories, political mobilizations, and limits of any identity category, theoretical approach, or field of study, including our own.

Obviously, we are evoking what is, to some, a rather profane line of thinking. But it is our suspicion that, as instructors of WGS intro courses, we don’t always allow ourselves the critical space to question whether our classes are actually introducing what we think is most worthy of passing on from the discipline to our largest audiences. And we wonder: Why not introduce students to the version of the field we find most compelling? Why not, for example, introduce a version of WGS that raises more questions than answers; that develops habits of thinking through exploring issues from multiple perspectives; that emphasizes how understanding the world is contingent on the institutions, structures, and processes by which we are disciplined; and that is always doubling back to interrogate the assumptions implicit in its own knowledge production? What you have in your hands is, as best as we can pass it on to students in an accessible way, that version of WGS.

The question of who our students are in the intro class also frames our thinking about this book’s organization. In many colleges and universities, the intro course serves double duty for any number of required credits (e.g., a general education or humanities or social sciences credit, a “diversity” or “cross cultural” credit, a “civic engagement” or “experiential learning” credit). What will capture the imagination of these heterogeneous student bodies in a way that makes this course worth their time and energy? And what, given the range of disciplinary training of people (like you) who teach this course, can be “covered” in this class? Starting with a recognition of who is in the classroom can—and perhaps should—challenge us to rethink both the pedagogical purpose and the received intellectual content (“the basics” or “the history”) for any intro course. This is why we opted to write a text that focuses on key concepts in the broadest possible way but leaves aside the long, detailed, and varied intellectual heritage of those concepts. While this option runs the risk of lacking specificity about particular knowledges, it also provides instructors with the opportunity to present a version of the field that will be most meaningful to their own students and to themselves. Without a singular genealogy, history, foundational identity category, or movement named by us, our hope is that the need for
performing resistant readings of the textbook or the labor of “undoing” the introductory version of the field for the few students who later take the advanced courses will be mitigated.

This open-ended approach to the field’s history is both a political and an intellectual stance on our part, drawing on the thinking of writers, like Clare Hemmings and Sara Ahmed, who have warned against the ways in which scholars, despite their best attempts at open-mindedness, objectivity, and inclusiveness, nevertheless tend to assume a generalizable past to “secure a history as a prelude to the author’s own particular insights” (Hemmings 2005, 117). As such, we see citational practices in introductory texts as fraught. They’re “a catering system,” as Ahmed terms it, “justified as a form of reassurance, a way of keeping things familiar for those who want to conserve the familiar” (2014). Because we are cautious about reproducing a version of the field that emphasizes what is familiar, we decided against using names of authors or citing works in the chapters themselves. We see this as a democratizing gesture that invites students to locate themselves as knowledge producers alongside recognized WGS scholars and practitioners, a move that also models WGS’ challenge to hierarchies of knowledge that reinforce precisely the power relations we aim to question in this field. Since many intro students will not take additional WGS courses, it seems to us less relevant that their textbook cite authors and more important that they learn the critical thinking practices WGS emphasizes.

Of course, we realize that this may be another bit of profane thinking on our part. To be clear, the lack of in-text citations from this point forward is not an attempt to erase the discipline’s intellectual history and present it as our own. (See “Chapter Genealogies” tucked away in the back of the book—where few students are likely to venture—to find out more about our intellectual debts.) Instead, we see it as a form of translation for students just wading into the challenging terrain of difference and power. As such, we distill a number of theories, approaches, languages, and ideas from across the breadth of this field into six approachable chapters for students. And many of you will no doubt recognize the provenance of our explications as belonging to people widely regarded as threshold thinkers in WGS: Jasbir Puar’s homonationalism, Judith Butler’s performativity, Michel Foucault’s discourse/power/knowledge,
Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality, Stuart Hall’s representation, Andrea Smith’s conquest, Donna Haraway’s situated knowledges, Sarah Ahmed’s killjoy, and many, many others. This text obviously benefits from discussions, debates, applications, and refusals from many important WGS thinkers ranging from academic stars to popular intellectuals to emerging scholars. Again, we think that focusing on these broad conceptual frameworks, without covering the who’s who of WGS in the chapter itself, enables multiple points of entry into the discipline.

This is not to say that we don’t provide some potential paths to launch what we think are some compelling WGS genealogies. Our selection of readings that accompanies each chapter, as well as the additional online resources, is offered as suggestions for some provocative ways to think about each concept. No doubt, seasoned instructors of WGS intro courses will have their own favorites, too—their “go-to” articles, chapters, films, lectures, and assignments that dependably do good work in their classroom. And we hope you will find our resistance of “coverage” allows for a nice balance of old and new, of our selections and yours, in shaping your course. That said, as with any text-reader, we clearly have preferences. Ours tend towards recently published, humanities-oriented materials that capture the multiplicity and instability of categories and meanings outlined in each chapter. The additional materials—both in-text readings and online resources available on the companion website (more articles, blog posts, podcasts, YouTube clips, videos, documentaries)—provide extensions, clarifications, illustrations, complications, and even “troublings” of what is in the chapters. We think of them as “exit ramps” to further explore these concepts depending on what individual instructors want to stress from any one chapter, given their own interests, areas of expertise, and learning goals. We hope this combination of broad conceptual frameworks along with a variety of possible directions for supplementary materials offers you the ideal combination of both structure and freedom to inspire your students to explore WGS.

**Structure of Chapters, or, What’s On Tap for Your Students?**

In selecting six different but related concepts, we sought to ensure that the structure of each chapter was consistently reproduced as a means of developing some
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intellectual habits on the part of students. This book starts and ends with a declaration and a related question that we think are foundational to WGS. The declaration that People are different . . . and the world isn't fair is an easily made and yet complex observation that motivates the practitioners of this field to focus on a number of identity categories, explore the social worlds those identities create and inhabit, and challenge the ways in which they are reproduced. We then follow up with the (somewhat dauntingly open-ended) question, Now that we know . . . how shall we live? Ultimately, we want to encourage students to imagine alternative ways of being and acting in the world that are more just for a greater number of people. Our task in each chapter, then, is to both explain and complicate various layers of difference and unfairness and to demonstrate a method to think carefully about the effects that can accrue from trying to make change.

To organize this task, we divide the book into two even sections. Part One includes the chapters on “Knowledges,” “Identities,” and “Equalities,” while Part Two consists of “Bodies,” “Places,” and “Representations.” Part One is sequentially organized, and we suggest that students read “Knowledges,” “Identities,” and “Equalities” in that order as they lay the groundwork for what we then take up in the final three chapters. “Bodies,” “Places,” and “Representations” are more interchangeable and can be read in the order that works best for your course. Additionally, throughout the text, we note connections to previous examples or discussion points and indicate how some ideas are taken up further in other chapters. This strategy highlights for students and instructors alike the ways in which these concepts (and our examples) can connect in useful ways. To that end, we’ve also included a “Readings Chart” that points to alternative chapter-and-reading pairings. Finally, between each chapter and the readings that follow, we offer a “Preview of Readings” section that connects the topics covered in each reading with the concept outlined in the chapter.

Each chapter is organized in a similar way, opening with a hypothetical, but student-specific, illustration about how the concept circulates in their everyday lives. Using plenty of examples, each chapter develops an argument about differences and unfairness, exploring both the analytical potentials and limitations of the concept. Chapters then conclude with “The Concept at Work,” which provides an extended example of its function in specific local, national, or transnational contexts. Our
desire for these elaborated examples is to demonstrate that these concepts are big enough to frame any number of social issues and that they provide critical thinking tools for a wide range of topics in WGS and beyond. Finally, in order to emphasize the versatility of these concepts, we include a variety of “comments” in the margins that we call “Think about,” “Know about,” and “Talk about.” These marginalia offer historical information, gloss key terms, ask students to think more in-depth about how to apply what they are learning to other contexts, and offer prompts that can be used for class discussions.

The idea of “fit,” or the question of “Who fits where?,” is central to all chapters. “Fit” is a handy heuristic at the introductory level, because it raises questions about belonging and inclusion—and their corollaries, not belonging and exclusion—in everyone’s lived contexts. As such, this focus highlights the importance of identity categories (e.g., gender, race, class, sexuality, able-bodiedness, nationhood/citizenship, among others) and the ways in which they are constructed (as opposed to being the result of self-invention). Looking at the question of fit means that we are front-loading the roles of languages, social structures and institutions, and everyday practices in determining who fits where and rethinking what it even means to fit. For example, by whose definition do we or others fit somewhere, on what terms, and for what purposes? We realize that this could be a highly complex set of questions for introductory students. After all, they often ask, “Why isn’t simply being included enough?” The aim of social justice, however—at least as we frame it in this book—is not simply the inclusion, visibility, or presence of otherwise excluded groups into existing social structures and practices. Instead, we point to instances where inclusion can also result in continued marginalization. In this way, our aim is to ask students to think about what we call the terms of inclusion, so as to constantly draw their attention to the idea that social structures and institutions are not neutral, but, instead, precisely that which need to be made visible, explored, questioned, challenged, and (often) changed. This shift turns the emphasis of social justice away from simply declaring inclusion to be the unquestioned goal. Instead, we ask students to both consider how exclusions occur (purposefully as well as inadvertently) and to explore how the very idea of inclusion might be something to be challenged and even resisted.
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In addition, our explication of each of the six concepts is guided by what we call a “both/and” (as opposed to an “either/or”) approach. We think that both/and approaches encourage students to see the multiple and contradictory ways in which identities are both structured by and yet also freed up to move within multiple discourses in our everyday worlds. While explicating the various ways in which identities are socially regulated, then, we also insist on people’s abilities—albeit uneven and different—to challenge those regulatory regimes. The key, for us, is to identify this tension as productive and energizing, rather than depressing and immobilizing. In other words, recognizing one’s social power doesn’t mean overlooking one’s own and others’ simultaneous disempowerment, just as identifying moments of disempowerment doesn’t just become a complete lack of agency. Rather than attempting to cast something only as “good” or “bad” for a particular group, we emphasize the multiplicity of potentially contradictory responses, again, always depending on questions like: For whom? Under what circumstances? To what ends? And with what consequences?

We believe that a recognition of the impossibility of being completely outside of power structures can be a transformative idea for students (and for all of us!), because the both/and assumption refuses to position them as simply resistant to or complicit with power relations. Instead, it recognizes that we are all in and of this world, accepting and perhaps benefitting—even as we are challenging and demanding change—from its structures, practices, and processes. And this recognition enables thoughtful action even as it demonstrates that our desires for change are an inevitably uneven and often fraught process. This both/and approach is especially highlighted in “The Concept at Work,” where we raise questions of how we can engage with the world even while holding on to its contradictions and our own ambivalences about it.

Additionally, and importantly for students who are looking to this class for step-by-step instructions for solving the injustices they see around them, this recognition of a both/and approach leads us to complicate the often uneasy relationship between “how we think” and “how we act,” or the relationship between knowledge and justice. How concepts help produce new knowledge about our worlds and what to do with new knowledge to bring about change in those worlds are clearly linked; yet, we argue, their connection is never linear nor easily mapped out, and certainly can never be prescribed in advance. In other words, we emphasize to students that activism
never happens outside a set of powerful assumptions that frame our understandings of who we are in relation to others, assumptions that bear further investigation. We want them to think about how what we are acting for or against both draws on and is impacted by those relations, by what wrongs have been done to whom, by what kinds of justice we seek, and by how we might ethically and effectively bring about change. Each of these assumptions, of course, is potentially rife with contingencies and contradictions, even as we attempt to “do good” in the most obvious sense. As authors, then, we resist the idea that knowledge must be immediately instrumentalized into prescribed actions. Instead, we focus here on the necessity of thinking through the complexity of how we produce knowledge, how we can/should/might then act upon it, and on what the consequences of any action might be.

If knowledge is always multiple and situated, though, and there is no singular connection between our knowledges and our visions of or actions for social change, then related to that is the importance of recognizing that no dream of social change is ever applicable (or possible or desired) in every social location. We want to convey to students that social change is just as contextually specific as knowledge; senses of the possible are always framed by the time and place of one’s circumstances and how we so differently occupy those locations. Again, this can be frustrating to students who look for simple solutions. But we contend that this attention to the difference that context makes is a necessary caveat to the social-change aspirations of this field. The advantage of emphasizing the contingent relationship of knowledge and action is that if instructors seek to make a specific connection for the benefit of their students’ learning, then this book provides them with the critical thinking frameworks to ask about those contingencies and consequences.

If you have made it this far—and at least nodded at a few key points—then we hope this is your new introductory text. We realize it’s a bit different: It leans a little more towards the humanities than most Women’s and Gender Studies intro texts out there, it values critical perspectives over the discipline’s more “sacred” objects, it seeks to instill intellectual habits more than it asks students to learn a single genealogy of the field’s great thinkers, and it emphasizes complexity and ambivalence more than it seeks to prescribe conversion and “right” actions. We think this text-reader both offers students a set of concepts to unpack their everyday experiences and gives you,
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the instructor, a tool to convey your own passion for WGS to those students. Through our initial guiding observation that *People are different . . . and the world isn’t fair*, which eventually gives way to the question *Now that we know . . . how shall we live?*, we hope that this text helps you to think otherwise about the possibilities for an introductory WGS course.