The Controversy Capital of Stealth Feminism in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper argues that stealth feminism, when used consciously and critically, affords a way to manage what we term 'controversy capital' in our neoliberalizing educational systems. Controversy capital refers to the amount of controversy that we, as feminist instructors, can effectively manage over the short- and long-term in a given classroom. Through a collective writing process, one in which we are particularly attentive to the impacts of our whiteness on our pedagogical strategies, we examine what aspects of feminist pedagogies we prioritize in the classroom and why. We critically reflect upon our teaching practices, including how we present ourselves and establish classroom norms, in order to identify three imperfect pedagogical strategies for realizing stealth feminism: (1) historical and geographic distancing; (2) depoliticizing language and concepts; and (3) normalizing feminist examples. We acknowledge that the indirectness of stealth feminism can be interpreted as not being political or subversive enough, but this tension between stealth feminism as a productive force and stealth feminism as a hindrance is an idealization of reality. We claim that our use of stealth feminism as teachers can best be understood not as a fear of controversy but rather as a strategic choice for engaging controversy.

Keywords

Feminist geographies; critical pedagogies; stealth feminism; controversy capital; neoliberalization; higher education; whiteness

Introduction

Critical feminist geographic scholarship has significantly advanced our understandings of classrooms as valuable spaces for feminist intervention; it has shown that classrooms can be uncomfortable (Dowler, 2002), personal (Browne, 2005), and diverse sites of praxis (Oberhauser, 2007). This paper builds on these understandings to discuss the constant micro-negotiations, tensions, and strategic deployments of what we term "controversy capital" within feminist classrooms. We understand controversy capital as the amount of controversy that we, as feminist instructors, can effectively manage over the short- and long-term in a given classroom. Controversy can be produced both by our embodied positionalities, shaped by intersecting dynamics of racialization, gender, ability and so on, as well as by the topical or issue-based content of our courses. Management of controversy calls for intensive emotional labor inside of and beyond the classroom, to cultivate sufficient student engagement to withstand negative emotions. Controversy capital, we argue, must be strategically 'invested' in a calculated way in order to ensure a 'return' in which students productively engage the material and lessons of our feminist classrooms. There are times, however, in which we choose not to name our politics as feminist in order to maintain controversy capital for other topics. This strategic choice is a practice we refer to as "stealth feminism." How, when, where, and why we name our politics as feminist, and who has the privilege to do such naming, have significant repercussions for the work that feminist pedagogies can do within post-secondary classrooms and institutions.

Feminist pedagogies are critical pedagogies that use education as a tool for social change. At their most basic, they seek to address injustice and inequalities through strategies, techniques, and approaches that are informed by feminist theories and politics (Welch, 2007). Feminist teachers strive in their classrooms to facilitate anti-hierarchical, active, student-centred learning by raising student consciousness about intersectional oppressions (e.g., sexism, racism, xenophobia, classism, and ableism), creating space for marginalized voices, ways of being, and knowing, and empowering students to take action (hooks, 1994; Shrewsbury, 1993; Webb et al., 2002). Inspired by a range of social movements that inform feminist scholars (e.g., anti-racist, women's, queer, and anti-colonization movements) and the foundational critical pedagogical work of Paulo Freire (1970), feminist pedagogies emerged as a way to question and redefine long-standing beliefs and practices in education (Wink, 2011). Feminist pedagogies are intended to be disruptive of the academic canon in order to facilitate the transformation of society (Crabtree and Sapp, 2003).

A primary pedagogical decision in any feminist classroom is whether or not to explicitly name one's politics as feminist (Seymour, 2007). We believe this decision calls for sustained and deliberate consideration, particularly for courses that are outside of Women's and Gender Studies or otherwise do not assume feminism as a core analytical perspective. As feminist instructors, do we openly

give our pedagogy a name in the classroom, or do we instead practice feminist principles without labeling them and thereby engage in a form of stealth feminism? While these are fundamental questions at the core of this paper, we extend our inquiry beyond the politics of naming to ask: *What aspects of feminist pedagogies are we prioritizing in our classrooms and why?*

Our approach to addressing this question is derived from a feminist methodological practice of collective biography (Hawkins et al., 2016) and knowledge production in which we shared our teaching strategies with one another and critically interrogated our pedagogical decisions and experiences. Through this reflection, we identify three "imperfect strategies" we have used to incorporate stealth feminism into our classrooms: (1) historical and geographical distance; (2) depoliticizing language and concepts; and (3) normalizing feminist examples. While the focus on imperfection may initially appear negative, it is a deliberate political choice for framing our teaching strategies. It reminds us that we are always learning, we ought to be open to new ideas and innovation in the classroom, and it reinforces how the process of teaching is ongoing and never complete. Thus imperfection is a key dimension of our critically self-reflexive feminist teaching practices; there is pedagogical strength, we assert, in acknowledged imperfection.

Our three imperfect strategies are not intended as recommendations for others to follow, but rather as examples of our pedagogical practices that we open to critical examination. They do not present a tidy picture of unencumbered and fully effective feminist pedagogies. The vignettes included below are necessarily full of emotional residues, tensions, and negotiations, but they are intended to bring "real experiences from university classrooms alive" (UKCPWG et al., 2015, 1264). It is the emotional messiness of our personal narratives, we maintain, that is evidence of the imperfections of feminist classrooms but not their political limitations. Instead, the imperfections and the amount of controversy capital that can be managed in a given classroom are derived, in significant part, from the substantive structural constraints of neoliberal universities that regiment time, depoliticize work conditions, and metricize productivity (Mountz et al., 2015). In this context, what function does stealth feminism perform in our realization of feminist pedagogies?

Stealth feminism as pedagogical strategy

The concept of stealth feminism does not have a singular history or a well-established definition, but it generally describes manifestations of feminism that do not explicitly announce themselves as feminist. The term has been used by critical scholars to describe self-identified feminists who practice feminism without the label (Fredrickson et al., 2011; Michals, 2003), as well as people who may hold feminist principles but disavow feminist self-identification with disclaimers like "I'm not a feminist, but…" (Heywood, 2008). Though the concept can variously denote individuals who do or do not identify as feminists, we use it in this paper to refer to the practice of self-identified feminists who work to advance feminist goals

and negotiate whether to explicitly identify them as such. In this context, the objective of stealth feminism is to "draw attention to key feminist issues and goals without provoking the kneejerk social stigmas attached to the word feminist" (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003, 51). Thus, stealth feminism is a strategic choice in situations where feminism is, or may be, marginalized.

On a larger scale, the neoliberalization of higher education around the world has ushered in significant changes to post-secondary teaching and learning (SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012; Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). Budget cuts – "justified in terms of efficiency, accountability, productivity, and choice" (Kobayashi et al., 2014, 232) – often mean that universities must increasingly cater to students-as-consumers, rather than students-as-learners. As students face tuition hikes and high levels of loan debt upon graduation, they often come to understand higher education as an exchange of money for a service. Students have the ability to influence teachers and topics through a range of evaluation metrics and can provide negative evaluations for teachers with whom they disagree politically (Wilson, 2016), a practice that is shown to inequitably impact racialized scholars. Within this new political economy of education, we are also contending with a shift toward the use of precarious labor in higher education, including the increasing use of graduate students, post-doctoral teaching positions, and part-time lecturers (UKCPWG et al., 2015). Combined with the student-as-

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Our motivations for using stealth feminism in teaching are multi-scalar, emerging from local issues within the classroom to global processes occurring within the context of neoliberalism. In the classroom, the idea of feminism can invoke skepticism or hostility from students because of the marginalized position of feminist thought within contemporary culture, which is shaped by systems of oppression such as heteropatriarchy and Western imperialism. They may associate feminism with negative stereotypes of who or what a feminist is (e.g., the angry man-hating lesbian or the whiny feminist killjoy) which can lead people who otherwise embrace feminist principles to distance themselves from the feminist label (Zucker, 2004). In this context, stealthily advancing ideas about feminism amongst those holding such negative preconceptions can be a useful strategy to advance feminist principles in a way that is not threatening or isolating for non-feminist students and colleagues. For Frost-Arnold (2014, 801), there is epistemic virtue in employing a stealthy approach, because "[s]ometimes non-dominant views are more readily accepted by the dominant if the views are not advertised as such. Stealth feminism may be an effective strategy in contexts where feminist objectivity-enhancing critiques are rejected out of hand if voiced by an acknowledged feminist." While a stealthy pedagogical approach to feminism can be effective, Seymour (2007) argues that being covert as a feminist teacher risks losing student trust and other aspects of a democratic feminist classroom, including the opportunity for reluctant or uninformed students to learn about feminism. The pedagogical practice of stealth feminism, therefore, involves risks as well as rewards that we must consider in our teaching practice.

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consumer model, it may appear 'safer' to please students than to teach topics that may be viewed as controversial or polemical, and, thus, risk one's employment or career. Though many of us have been resisting processes of neoliberalization through pedagogical praxis for years, the changing political-economic climate has some of us looking for a 'safer' way to talk about controversial topics.

In addition to the prevalence of neoliberal ideologies, another related dimension of the educational context within which we work is the increasing prevalence of postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004). The ideology of postfeminism holds that feminism is, or soon will be, dead, and therefore feminist activism is unnecessary or unwanted (Hawkesworth, 2004). Gill (2007, 163) argues that both neoliberalism and postfeminism "appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has replaced almost entirely notions of the social or political, or any idea of the individual as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves." Postfeminism is not simply anti-feminism, however, as postfeminist ideology putatively holds some feminist values, such as the importance of (individualistic) equality. Gill (2007, 163) asserts that postfeminism is more complex than an anti-feminist backlash "precisely because of its tendency to entangle feminist and anti-feminist discourses" where "feminist ideas are at the same time articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed." Within such an environment, feminist scholars may face challenges justifying feminist research or obtaining tenure.

This postfeminist sensitivity often resonates with our students in the classroom (Love and Helmbrecht, 2007). Students may enter our courses thinking that feminism (narrowly defined) is no longer needed because they do not notice the impacts that feminist history and activism have had on their own daily lives. Worse, they may feel that because they do not personally experience gender discrimination nor fully appreciate the ways it intersects with other forms of oppression, we as a society have moved beyond a need for feminist inquiry. Thus, a stealth feminist approach emerges as a means to address, negotiate, and challenge this postfeminist and neoliberal language of individualism and choice, as well as the depoliticization of feminism and other political movements that seek to address structural oppressions and stereotypes. Our ability to deploy stealth feminism as a pedagogical strategy is influenced by our individual positionality, both social and institutional.

Stealth feminism and positionality

As feminist geographers, many of us may wish to dismantle the hierarchy of expertise that puts the instructor in a position of power, but our positionalities in the classroom differ in relation to our embodiment, style, and classroom practices (Browne, 2005). Such positionalities may enhance or limit our feminist practices. As Pulido (2002, 47) has shared in response to the overwhelming whiteness of the discipline of Geography, "few whites will ever appreciate the enormous psychological and emotional energy that many people of colour expend in all-white

environments" – "the daily challenge of facing predominantly white students and colleagues does take its toll." Mahtani (2014) pointedly describes the academy and the discipline of Geography as producing "emotionally toxic material spaces" for women of colour, or what she terms "toxic geographies." She deliberately uses the metaphor of toxicity to capture the violence of racism and "the systemic discrimination that continues to structure the lives of racialized faculty" (Mahtani, 2014, 362). One way in which such racism manifests in teaching practice is in the documented race- and gender-based bias of formal and informal student evaluations; instructors who are male, white, and native speakers of English get higher evaluations than others, while white women who conform to a narrow range of gender norms score higher than either women who are less gender conforming (Basow, 1998) or women of colour (Reid, 2010).

Embodiment and preconceptions based on ascribed identity lead to differential expectations of instructors based upon ethnicity, racialization, and gender, which Harlow (2003) asserts calls for different kinds of emotion management. In other words, embodiment, teaching practice, and style interact (Anderson and Smith, 2005). Perhaps we are afraid to directly confront the label of 'feminism' because our students might label us as too radical or too Leftist, and what 'too much' looks like in the classroom depends very much upon embodiment. For example, women of colour and LGBTQ2S people, whether instructors or students, who discuss the multiple oppressions that intersect in their daily lives, are often framed as discussing 'their issue' (Spafford et al., 2006).

This is not to say that instructors should embrace particular teaching styles to achieve higher course evaluations. On the contrary, we should be wary of course evaluations because of their known biases against women and minorities, their failure to measure actual teaching effectiveness, and the dangers of their uncritical use for employment review (Nast, 1999; Stark and Freistadt, 2014). Nevertheless, as instructors, our understandings of our positionalities and teaching styles may help us to choose our battles in the classroom and decide how to spend or invest our controversy capital.

It is important to acknowledge that we, as the authors of this paper, come from a variety of institutional environments in Canada and the United States. We work in large state or public universities and smaller private institutions in positions of relative privilege, but at different career stages. Some of us are tenured faculty, while others are part of the academic precariat as untenured, sessional, or contract faculty. We teach in a variety of disciplinary and sub-disciplinary areas and course formats (e.g., small seminars, large lectures, and online courses) to a range of undergraduate and graduate audiences. While all but one of us received our doctoral training in Geography, some of us currently teach in Geography departments while others do not. We are a group of predominantly female-identifying, white, middle-class, able-bodied instructors with doctoral degrees who identify as feminist geographers. We acknowledge the vantage point that our white-privilege affords us within North American academe and the discipline of

Geography more specifically (Kobayashi and Peake, 2000; Peake and Kobayashi, 2002; Domosh, 2015). Despite having a critical and anti-racist stance, we are not innocent – we benefit "in very real and material ways from ongoing white supremacy" (Berg, 2012, 515), which is integral to the settler colonial contexts in which we live and work. In this paper, we offer a preliminary reflection upon how our pedagogical strategies are impacted by our whiteness. We acknowledge that in the face of such blatant white supremacy this is insufficient, but we offer it as a small contribution towards a much needed disciplinary-wide conversation for systemic change. In identifying commonalities, we are not suggesting equivalence across place; rather, we note the similarities in feminist pedagogical strategies despite the various settler colonial contexts in which these strategies are employed. In what follows, we begin by exploring the challenges of establishing a feminist classroom.

Feminist pedagogies in collective conversation

This conversation about feminist pedagogies began at a panel discussion at the inaugural meeting of the Great Lakes Feminist Collective in Guelph, Ontario in 2013. The dialogue continued at a session on feminist pedagogies at the 2014 Association of American Geographers annual meeting, where a focus on stealth feminism emerged. Discussion centred on questions of how, when, and why to make our feminist politics explicit in the classroom. Six individuals who were part of the discussion have shared in this collective writing project. It is important to note, however, that while both panel discussions had some degree of racial diversity, that diversity was lost during the writing process. A major contributor to the whitening of the voices was an acknowledged physical and emotional exhaustion experienced by women of colour – what Mahtani (2006, 23) refers to as the "two-fer" experience which demands that women of colour professors "take on gargantuan tasks simply because they were seen as being… both a woman and a woman of colour." The women of colour on the panels made significant contributions to our collective understanding – reinforcing that their experiences are not identical to those of white women (Sanders, 2006); yet they had to make strategic individual choices to invest their time and energy elsewhere in order to survive within their departments and the academy. Thus, while our co-authoring is a deliberate effort to challenge neoliberal individualization of knowledge production and expectations of accelerated publication timelines it does not challenge the whiteness of the disciplinary discourse. We therefore acknowledge that the lack of racialized diversity within our co-authorship necessarily limits our theorization of stealth feminism. We are unable to sufficiently account for the impacts of racism and colonialism upon the ways in which Indigenous scholars and scholars of colour might employ a stealth feminist praxis. As a consequence, this paper opens a conversation about stealth feminism that we hope will be taken up by other scholars to more effectively address a broader range of experiences within different institutional settings and to represent a greater diversity of intersecting social positions.

Despite the very real shortcoming of our knowledge production process – of not dismantling the social relations of hegemonic whiteness in our authorship (Berg, 2012) – our paper does actively contribute to a burgeoning feminist project to engage in slow and collaborative feminist scholarship and community-building (Kern et al., 2014; Mountz et al., 2015). Moreover, our analysis is informed by the 'emotional turn' within feminist scholarship (Wright, 2010) which has reinvigorated practices of reflexivity and positionality (Faria and Mollett, 2016). As Laliberté and Schurr (2016, 72) remind us, "a critical engagement with emotions can offer novel epistemological techniques for studying the politics of knowledge production and the landscapes of power" in which we, as teachers, are enmeshed.

To initiate our collective writing process, two of the authors developed the following set of three writing prompts and invited participants to individually write a response to them:

1. Describe a classroom situation in which naming your politics as feminist was useful. Why was it useful? What did students learn? How did the classroom dynamic change or not? What spaces/opportunities did it open up for you in your teaching practice?

2. Describe a classroom situation in which naming your politics as feminist was not useful. Why was it not useful? What tensions/conflicts arose? What harm was done, to whom and in what ways? How did you address these challenges? What lasting impacts has this had on your own teaching practices?

3. Describe a classroom situation in which you chose not to name your politics as feminist. Why did you make this decision? Was it a strategic choice (if yes, how)? What were the consequences?

The written reflections that contributors emailed each other answering these three questions became the empirical data for this paper. Our paper has grown iteratively from conversations and written answers to these questions into a work of collective biography (Hawkins et al., 2016). We have deliberately used first person narratives about experiential knowledge in conjunction with a collective voice to describe what feminist pedagogies look like in the classroom because we see these as feminist acts. First-person writing and collective authorship are both strategies that work to destabilize patriarchal modes of knowledge production that privilege neutrality, objectivity, and individualized scholarship (Accardi, 2013). Our narratives, much like the contributors in UKCPWG et al. (2015, 1264), "highlight everyday incidences of pedagogy-as-resistance and help us envision the classroom as a transformative space of educational possibility." In what follows, we use this approach of collective knowledge production to interrogate the pedagogical decisions we make in our classrooms and to consider their potential political implications.

Creating a feminist classroom

Within the rich tradition of feminist pedagogy, the question of how to create or initiate a feminist classroom has generally received little attention (Seymour, 2007). How do feminist scholars set a pro-feminist tone in their classroom when core aspects of their identity and politics may be perceived as controversial? Research has shown how embodied identities such as racialization (Spafford et al., 2006), gender (Basow, 1998), and sexuality (Skelton, 1997) affect students' perceptions of, and relation to, their instructors. While we do not have much control over these embodied presentations, we do have control over how we present our politics. The ways in which we present ourselves and our politics is a negotiation that must take into consideration cultural values, institutional norms, and the make-up of our student body. One instructor explains how she introduces herself on the first day of class:

> I talk about my recent move to Canada, about my educational training, and about my hobbies. I always mention that I have a dual degree in Geography and Women's Studies. I acknowledge it and then move on. I tell myself it is to be true to myself, to let those interested in feminism in the room know they have an ally, but not to overwhelm those who have negative impressions of feminism.

Such an introduction is intended to show students that this instructor, as a self-proclaimed feminist, is approachable and supportive. But who is she supportive of? Is she marginalizing her own feminist identity and thus catering to the post/anti-feminist bias often found in contemporary classrooms? These are important questions to consider particularly within the broader feminist agenda of creating safe classrooms.

As feminists, we often emphasize to our students that we aspire to create a safe classroom, one in which they can share personal experiences and ideas in development, including the more difficult and uncomfortable ones. But what does it mean to declare a learning space 'safe,' and who has the authority to make such a declaration in the first place? Feminist critiques of 'safe spaces' directly question positionality and privilege. As McKittrick reinforces in an interview (Hudson, 2014, 238), classrooms must also be understood as "sites of pain" because teaching about oppression, violence, and injustices cannot possibly be safe. To her, the vision of safe classrooms is a "white fantasy" because "only someone with racial privilege would assume that the classroom could be a site of safety". As Berg (2012, 514) provocatively illustrates, classrooms can be sites of trauma for students of colour who are "forced to listen to 'the stupid shit that white students say about race.'"

With these critiques in mind, we find the reconceptualization of safe space by the Roestone Collective (2014, 1346) productive: safe spaces are not static or complete, never fully safe for everyone, but "inherently paradoxical." The collective highlights instead the relational and dynamic work that goes into

cultivating safe spaces – a process in which binaries and differences are negotiated, hierarchies identified, and oppressions challenged. This understanding also encourages us to rethink what safety means. A safe space is not without pain and discomfort. Following hooks (2010, 87), "if we rather think of safety as knowing how to cope in situations of risk, then we open up the possibility that we can be safe even in situations where there is disagreement and even conflict." In this paper, we do not detail our individual practices of bringing about safe space in feminist classrooms because we understand safety as an unstable negotiation, experienced differently by people depending on their intersecting subjectivities. We are reminded that our teaching practices have the potential to "traumatize those people of colour that our anti-racist teaching proposes to protect" (Berg, 2012, 514), and thus we have a shared responsibility to critically reflect upon the "broader matrix of contradictory and complex racialized and gendered power relations" (Mahtani, 2006, 22) that cross-cut our classrooms.

As a microcosm of the world, a classroom is a place where social change can be initiated in subtle, yet significant, ways. Students have the capacity, as UKCPWG et al. (2015, 1262) remind us, "to critically engage with their world in order to create more just and equitable futures." In constructing a feminist classroom, the inclusion of feminist theory may not matter as much as the classroom practices, teaching strategies, approaches to content, and student interactions that can all be deployed in the service of critical pedagogy:

> I teach mostly general education courses on sustainability and climate change, where feminism shows up much more in my pedagogy than in the course material. Regardless of the course content, we learn through discussion, sitting in a circle, or in small groups, de-centering the instructor's authority and empowering students to engage the material with their own voices. Engaging in praxis, infusing our lives with course ideas and vice versa, and generally taking the material beyond the four walls of the classroom are always our ultimate goals. Feminist pedagogy permeates my teaching; indeed, for the first course I designed and taught on my own as a graduate student (an introductory course on sustainability), I actually created a checklist of the principles of feminist pedagogy from Lynn Webb and colleagues (Webb et al., 2002) and made sure I incorporated each one into the course design.

Webb et al.'s (2002) principles include reforming the relationship between professor and student, empowering students, building community, privileging the individual voice as a way of knowing, respecting the diversity of personal experience, and challenging traditional views. These basic elements remain fundamental for enacting feminist pedagogies in the classroom and they rely heavily upon an ethics of care that is attentive to students' intellectual and personal growth. When employed in teaching practice, the principles can help guide students to uncover valuable knowledge within themselves and to unlearn and challenge

oppressive practices. However, in our various institutional contexts we are often unable to realize all of these six elements simultaneously in our teaching practices; therefore, it becomes essential, we argue, to critically assess the pragmatic choices that we make when we prioritize different feminist classroom strategies.

In what follows, we consider some of the opportunities and limits of stealth feminist pedagogies through a focused discussion of three imperfect strategies that we (the authors) have all deployed in some fashion in our classrooms: (1) distancing; (2) depoliticizing language; and (3) normalizing feminist examples. Our discussion of these three strategies illustrates the imperfect application of Webb's feminist principles in our classrooms through specific teaching techniques.

Imperfect strategy 1: historical and geographical distancing

In our selection of case study examples for lectures and class discussion, historical distancing (temporal) and geographic distancing (spatial) are often used. This multi-layered distancing allows students to selectively engage in discursive and intellectual exercises of critical analysis seemingly free from personal responsibility and accountability; the power relations of gender, for example, are perceived to be happening 'back then' or 'over there.' Sexism is thus often mistakenly understood to be a historical problem and not a contemporary issue. It is not understood as embedded in processes of colonialism and racial hierarchies. As the following examples illustrate, while students tend to respond to this approach, it often leaves us as instructors feeling somewhat empty, as if we had taught gender power relations without any politics.

In the example below, the instructor has purposely chosen to begin a Gender and Geography class with a very broad definition of feminism originating from hooks (2000) that describes feminism as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression:

> Of course, all of the students agreed that this was a good thing – or at least none wanted to admit that they wanted 'sexist exploitation' to continue! Then we reviewed a history of feminism… We talked about what American feminists asked for in the past – voting rights, equal pay for equal work, and so on – which again, all students agreed with. We also talked about who calls themselves a feminist, and the many different politics that that can represent. But this is where it got a little sticky. I found that almost all of my students felt that feminism was no longer needed – it was outdated and now we live in a world that was mostly free of sexism, with a few exceptions almost always in Other/ed places. One student even said that feminism was really only needed in other countries now.

In this instance, feminism has been strategically introduced at a distance. It was analyzed as a historical object, or a movement only needed in "other" places (Narayan, 1997; Mohanty, 2003). As a consequence, feminism was framed as outmoded and unnecessary. This is precisely the postfeminist mentality at work in

the classroom (Love and Helmbrecht, 2007), as discussed earlier in this paper. Moreover, despite having drawn upon black feminism to provide a working foundational definition of feminism, sexism was not understood by students as embedded in contemporary processes of racism, imperialism, and capitalism. But this need not be the outcome, as the following example illustrates.

In an introductory human geography course, the instructor began with a discussion of Amartya Sen's (1990) article, "More than 100 Million Women are Missing" which reveals the excessive female mortality hidden within the population totals of Asian countries. This example has the potential to get students thinking about gender oppression in other countries as it intersects with ethnicity and class:

> Everyone agreed that this was a bad thing and that something must be done to change it. Then, we moved into sex versus gender, and I showed them the first ten images that popped up on Google when you look up male/masculine and female/feminine. We talked about whether these images seemed to be a good portrayal of their personal gender identity. Again, everyone agreed – these representations of sex and gender were limited and limiting, which was 'wrong.' Finally, we moved into a discussion of the relationship between gender and space, focusing on the spaces/places that people perceive are male/masculine or female/feminine and the ways of behaving that are expected in those places. We also talked about how we know when someone breaks or challenges those norms. We had a lively conversation and the students themselves brought it back around to gender discrimination, seeing that it exists in the U.S., even if it might not seem as visible as the discrimination associated with China's one-child only policy. By the end of the class period, students were interested, actively talking, and excited about the topic.

As with the previous example, this instructor also began by constructing a temporary distance between 'us' and 'them' by suggesting that gender discrimination exists, but it is far away, in other places. Students can get upset about the historical geographies of female infanticide, as they can about eugenics and forced sterilization, but they also distance themselves from those places, times, and processes. That distance is foreclosed when students critique online images of the gender binary based on their personal experiences of gender identity. This re-grounding in the personal allowed a judgment to be made about gender normativities that could then be translated back to the American context. The instructor has experienced success at keeping the students engaged in discussion and facilitating the application of a feminist lens to lived experience.

Nevertheless, in our collective writing process for this article, the author of this example revealed that she was still left feeling a sense of failure due to

'playing it safe' in the facilitation of discussion. She felt that the consideration of a feminist response to gender norms fell substantially short – it showed a problem – gender discrimination – without explicitly using the term feminism. Furthermore, assumptions were made about the student body in terms of what is a 'safe' and 'distant' entry point for the discussion. Perhaps there were first- or second-generation Chinese immigrants in this classroom who had personal experience with the one-child policy and felt silenced by its othering. Bereft of politics, feminism became a tool for identifying connections between the personal and global, but not for helping some students to appreciate their potential complicity in reinforcing racialized gendered norms and normativities. Invariably, there will be an unequal distribution of experiential knowledge of racialized and gendered norms within the classroom, and our challenge, as instructors, is to find accessible and adaptable pedagogical strategies that initiate and invite more students to participate in critical conversations about the politics of difference.

Imperfect strategy 2: depoliticizing language and concepts

Underlying the distancing strategies undertaken in the vignettes discussed above, we found another strategy used in various ways: the selective depoliticization of the language and concepts we use in our framing of contemporary geographical issues. This process of depoliticizing language – of not explicitly engaging with the politics behind a concept – is often a means of attempting to engage a broader range of students, as the following quotation illustrates:

> In my introductory human geography course, I tried to disguise controversial topics in apolitical language – for example, talking about the contradictions of capitalism (the relationship between the housing bubble and the most recent recession) without labeling any particular politics or philosophy. I had to keep everyone engaged, and in a classroom where I am most certainly the most political (and the furthest left), it felt safer to talk about gender and sexuality in what seemed like neutral terms. It seemed like using the word feminism would alienate much of the class. So I talked about essentialism, identities, difference, gender expression, and gender norms in the safest way possible, by using their own experiences.

"The safest way possible," as the instructor above later notes, became a complicated question when more is at stake than just student involvement. There was a real danger of perpetuating a 'majority' narrative that further marginalized the voices of racialized, Indigenous and genderqueer individuals when relying upon student-led examples in a predominantly white, heteronormative institution. There is a fine line to be walked with this strategy, in that depoliticizing the language associated with a particular theory (e.g., feminism or queer theory) has different consequences and safety implications than the avoidance or depoliticization of

language used for self-identification or collective action (e.g., cisgender, transgender, or queer).

The choice to tone down our language or to use less controversial terms often happens through processes of internal and external disciplining (such as teaching evaluations and performance reviews). At various times our students, our institutions, and our colleagues subtly or overtly suggest we are being too polemical, biased, or ideological. These comments are particularly problematic for those without job security because the expectation is that we should work with collegiality and a minimum of confrontation within the academy in order to maintain our livelihoods and have our contracts renewed. Thus, attempting to create "uncomfortable classrooms" (Dowler, 2002) can be problematic for faculty whose job security is tied to student and faculty evaluations. Discomfort can be a valuable, yet difficult, tool to manage in the classroom, particularly when instructors or students may embody the 'controversy' under discussion and, as a consequence, feel exposed, isolated or traumatized by peer insensitivities – any fleeting feeling of safety, potentially undermined.

Our second example of this strategy addresses the question of depoliticizing language from a different perspective. Rather than trying to avoid the label of feminism, this instructor directly engaged with feminism in a course on gender and geography. However, her attempts to make the material accessible to her students still led to a process of depoliticization:

> When we started the semester, I asked my class "Do you think of yourself as a feminist?". Not unsurprisingly, none of them said "yes". At the end of the course, I asked them the same question. This time, nearly all of the students agreed that they were feminists. I expected this, because I had spent the whole semester making feminism palatable, exciting, and relevant. But their explanations and our discussion of the future of feminism were interesting. I realized that I had helped to produce a very generic, almost apolitical class of 'feminists' over the course of the semester. They said they felt very strongly that women should be treated as equals to men, and that discrimination was wrong. They also defined feminism in terms of individual empowerment and the success of women in a man's world – a sort of 'Beyoncé feminism.' Most also dismissed radical feminism as alienating and ineffective – as opposed to the activism associated with policy reform. The definition of feminism that we ended up with by the end of the semester was so watered down that it had no meaning at all.

Why was the version of feminism enacted in this classroom so diluted? Was it the way in which the instructor had approached issues – teaching to avoid confrontation, to capture more of the audience, to avoid alienating any particular person or politics? Or was it the inevitable outcome of teaching about a splintered

feminism in general? This example reflects the presence of postfeminist thought and the popularity of "lifestyle feminism" (hooks, 2000) in our classrooms. While a liberal feminist perspective (that articulates individual choice, autonomy, and empowerment) was embraced by the students, a more political and critical feminist perspective was challenged and rejected as irresponsible and vindictive.

There are multiple depoliticization strategies at play in this example – some intentional and others not. The instructor has identified the depoliticization of feminism, but this framing of the classroom could appear to lack critical engagement with racial politics by associating Beyoncé (pre-*Lemonade*) with 'lifestyle feminism.' There is also the potential of devaluing blackness in this context, particularly without a more sustained engagement with a race analytic (Mahtani, 2014). The instructor, however, clarified that it was the students who kept returning to Beyoncé. As a class, the students had read multiple radical black scholars, but these readings did not resonate with them in the same way Beyoncé had.

When feminism is largely understood in terms of gender, and not as gender intersecting with other systems of oppression, it is easier for students to identify as a feminist. But what power does feminism have, if everyone can be a feminist – sometimes without even having to adopt a political stance, or to stand in solidarity with others? There is some power in the sense that some people may now call themselves feminists who may not have claimed this identity in the past. Nevertheless, in this claiming process, the views, approaches and politics may be so varied that feminism becomes incapable of confronting oppression or challenging the status quo (Ellis, 2007). While this multiplicity of perspectives is good when it decenters dominant forms of knowledge production, it can also be problematic when domination and oppression are uncritically incorporated into understandings and performances of feminism.

Imperfect strategy 3: normalizing feminist examples

The third strategy we discuss involves the normalized use of feminist examples and theories in our courses. The main characteristic of this approach is not over-emphasizing the labeling and attributes of something 'as feminist' and yet still making the politics of it explicit. While this strategy has some overlap with the previous strategy to depoliticize language, we make a distinction regarding where and when it is applied. Whereas we use depoliticizing language when teaching courses that explicitly engage with feminist material, normalizing feminist examples is a strategy we use to incorporate feminist material into 'non-feminist' courses. This strategy works in a wide range of courses to challenge the idea of feminism as niche by employing feminist examples and perspectives.

Below we have two examples, one from a research methods course and another from a population geography course. Both excerpts include feminist thought as relevant to other ideas, problems, and topics in geography, and by doing so, 'normalize' feminism:

> I drop feminist examples in, as if they are the most normal thing in the world. For example, in teaching about ontology in a social research methods class, I talk about understandings of gender. In my lecture on the difference between an objectivist versus a constructivist approach to research, I use gender as my example. I show how an objectivist approach would see gender as a thing that can be studied independent of our perceptions of it while a constructivist approach would see gender as a social construction that must be studied through the social processes that create it. Later, I return to the issue when critiquing survey designs. I give students a very poorly designed survey and have them work in small groups to identify all of the problems and then attempt a redesign. As we debrief the demographics section, I always ask about the gender question. Inevitably, I have students who challenge the binary of male/female and suggest that we need additional options – usually 'trans' and 'other' are offered as alternatives. Similarly, I use examples in my teaching about racialization, homophobia, ableism, and other systems of exclusion and oppression. This example provides the empirical cases we use to practice coding, to learn about writing good questions, and to choose a research design.

Here the instructor used feminist thinking not as the material to be studied, but rather as the context for students to carry out social research. Often textbooks for required courses employ heteronormative, white, middle-class examples, so instructors must work, as this one has, to expand the social context to reflect the diversity of the student body and broader society. In order for this classroom strategy to be successful with limited discussion of the case studies, it is helpful if students are open to questions of social justice, which include, but are not limited to, egalitarian gender relations.

Another instructor who teaches a Population Geography course used a feminist lens for analysis, but only named it as such after its practice had become normalized within the classroom:

> Frankly, the way I teach feminist theory is a complete set-up. Before we work through this material, students read about sterilization campaigns in India (and their international, Orientalist sponsors), the one-child policy in China, and forced sterilization of women of color in the United States. They are already in a place where they dislike and distrust state intervention in reproduction, and it would defy social norms were we not to agree that democracy is good, and that 'forced' anything is bad. By the time I introduce feminist perspectives on population control and family planning, which appear to be in alliance with political ecology perspectives on environment and development, the students – who are taking this class as an elective – are all fine with these kinds of feminisms.

Here, drawing on feminist scholarship that challenges forced sterilization works to place feminist approaches on the side of human rights, which students more readily embrace. Thus in this context, feminism becomes a common sense approach.

The strategy of normalizing feminist examples can be rewarding for teachers because it whets the appetite of students to learn more. Most valuable, perhaps, is the ability for students to appreciate how systems of oppression are embedded in their everyday lives, including their education. For example, the academy has been described as dominated by corporate cultures (Mohanty 2003); thus, there is value in directly addressing the injustices in the spaces of higher education that we share. Depending on how normalization is employed, however, it does not necessarily train students in particular forms of feminist analysis. Nevertheless, it becomes a way to get students from a variety of backgrounds engaged with feminist content in the classroom without significant resistance.

The controversy capital of stealth feminism

In each of these ways, we have sought to unobtrusively embed feminism into teaching and to subtly model a feminist teaching practice. Such indirectness can be interpreted as not being political or subversive enough; yet, it springs from the desire to make the broader goals of feminism more palatable and accessible to a greater range of students. Feminism becomes a way of being in the world, elements of which can resonate, percolate, and get taken up individually depending on a student's own social position and experience.

Our use of stealth feminism as teachers can perhaps be best understood not as a fear of controversy, but rather as a strategic choice for engaging controversy. For example, one instructor considered the value of explicitly adding feminism to a list of course topics that may already be controversial:

> I regularly teach courses about sustainability as a socio-cultural critique and the disinformation and denial surrounding human-caused climate change. These topics are heavily value-laden, involving deep-seated aspects of politics and identity, and involve much critical evaluation of ideas previously taken for granted. Nearly all of my pedagogical approach is aimed at navigating students through this ideological minefield; including feminism as an explicit topic or goal would require an additional layer of complexity to do responsibly, and I feel it would likely make engaging the original controversial topic that much more difficult or even less productive.

In a sense, we as instructors have a limited supply of controversy capital that we can allocate towards navigating students through one controversy or another. Capital, generally, is a set of assets that have productive value, whether economic, social, or cultural. Stealth feminism, then, can be seen as the strategic allocation of controversy capital, a deliberate choice to devote time and energy to productively engaging controversial topics other than feminism. The holding of controversy

capital in reserve may also be an effective mechanism for self-care and/or self-preservation. There are times when instructors may not have the emotional energy to do the work of managing controversy in the classroom.

In suggesting that stealth feminism may be a way of managing controversy to support self-care, we proceed cautiously so as not to imply that individuals are responsible, through self-care, for the many forms of discrimination and oppression that may shape their lives. Thus, self-care is potentially subsumed by self-preservation for those marginalized within university spaces (Louis et al., 2016). This metaphor of controversy capital is instructive in its inaccuracy: capital is not meant to be spent but is rather invested[1]. Perhaps investing in some measure of controversy early, like explicitly establishing the goals of the feminist classroom, will pay off later when engaging other controversial topics, like questioning the sustainability of the status quo. Certainly, this model of investing controversy capital seems to work well in the context of an introductory women's studies course, where a critical analysis of gender can very productively lay the groundwork for a critical analysis of race or class (or vice versa). It might be that explicitly establishing a feminist classroom would make the engagement of other controversial topics more productive, not less.

We acknowledge that by using the metaphor of controversy capital to describe the politics of our classrooms, we are invoking the very capitalist system that we seek to dismantle as critical scholars. But the provocation of this uncomfortable concept can also be instructive, as it confronts and reminds us of the imperfections of our own embodied teaching practices. We strive to appreciate the more-than-economic dimensions of capital – particularly, social and cultural capital – that is generated in the classroom. We especially value the importance of social relationships but reiterate the importance of acknowledging that controversy capital is unequally distributed amongst instructors based upon their intersecting subjectivities.

Conclusion

Taking a 'stealth' approach to feminism may seem like a reactionary response to the changes occurring in higher education, but we see it as one of several productive steps that we can take toward (re)incorporating critical and feminist pedagogies into the classroom. From our vantage point, stealth feminism implies a reflective and dynamic negotiation of feminist ideas and visions in the face of particular tendencies we encounter in the classroom that are also tendencies prevalent in the wider white settler cultural and political contexts in which we teach. It reflects the ongoing negotiation of embracing feminist pedagogies, while at the same time addressing postfeminist, neoliberal and anti-feminist attitudes in general. As many of the examples we have drawn upon in this paper illustrate, our

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[1] We would like to thank Andrei Israel for this discussion.

practices of stealth feminism, while shaped by white privilege, are realized through constant self-reflexivity about how we can practice feminisms – informed by queer, critical race, decolonial, and other intersecting analyses – most effectively in our classrooms.

We recognize that in everyday experience many mundane constraints and institutional barriers modify and limit how we embody and enact feminist pedagogies. Invariably, there are disjunctures between theory and practice, between aspirations and reality. The "guide by the side" (Accardi, 2013, 46) model of teaching is not one that is welcomed by all students who may favor more overt assertions of authority and may challenge the notion that they should have to take responsibility for their own learning. Critics of feminist pedagogy suggest that strategies to decenter classroom authority may still serve as instruments of domination and control (Luke and Gore, 1992) and that an ethic of care may work to reinforce a stereotype of women as nurturers (Villaverde, 2008). We acknowledge these critiques, but we maintain that the techniques of stealth feminism that we have described in this paper, while imperfect and operating on the micro-scale, have afforded us, as white instructors, strategic and pragmatic pedagogical interventions to inspire feminist sensibilities in our students. The opportunities afforded us by stealth feminism may not exist or may be fundamentally different for instructors with less social privilege and differing intersectional subjectivities.

Like Dowler (2002), whose initial discussion of "uncomfortable classrooms" inspired our investigation of stealth feminism, we too see value in facilitating a "disquieting process" through which students are challenged to question existing power structures and empowered to seek out social change. Stealth feminism becomes one way in which to negotiate our controversy capital within the neoliberal parameters of contemporary post-secondary education. Controversy capital exists not simply as an investment in controversial topics, but also as an investment of course time in developing particular kinds of classroom relationships between students and faculty and among students. These relationships require the development of practices of respectful engagement and critique. In mobilizing our poly-vocal understanding of controversy capital, we are able to highlight the ways in which our approaches to stealth feminism strategically work to disquiet teaching processes and to reconfigure social relationships within and beyond the classroom.

We have struggled in this paper to come to terms with the whiteness of our collective voice. Despite the participation by feminist geographers of colour in early conversations, their voices, challenges, and strategies are absent from this paper. Their decisions to decline further participation exemplify their negotiation with the multiple oppressions and demands they face in the academy at large, and potentially in collaborations with white academics. Further, while we never intended for this paper to perpetuate the "classic manoeuvre in the western academy" of a "simultaneous erasure and emphasis of difference" (Berg, 2012,

512), our responsibility to directly challenge the white supremacy of the academy has not been fully realized. For our currency of controversy capital to retain some of its value, we must recognize that Indigenous and racialized scholars, as well as scholars with visible disabilities, may not have the same abilities to enact stealth feminism because their difference is not 'stealth'. Thus, we invite interventions from critical race studies, Indigenous studies, queer studies, and critical disability studies to expand our collective understanding of how to effectively and strategically engage controversy in our teaching.

As white feminist instructors, we have the responsibility to use the controversy capital afforded us by our white privilege to ensure that the burdens of engaging with controversy do not fall upon our racialized and othered colleagues. When we have the choice to decide which controversies to engage with, those opportunities should be used to open up conversations in the classroom that are comprehensively intersectional. Thus, the praxis of stealth feminism can afford us the opportunity to strategically prioritize intersectional analyses in our teaching but also, beyond the classroom, to challenge the established canon of white feminist geography and the white hetero-masculinism of the discipline more broadly. Collectively, we can work to redistribute opportunities within the discipline so as not to reproduce the same kinds of exclusionary and authoritative social privileges that have perpetuated the underrepresentation of marginalized voices in geographic classrooms, scholarship, and leadership. In so doing, we seek to realize Geography's potential as social justice in practice (Sanders, 2006).

Acknowledgements

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