

Some ideas to develop a multigenerational discussion: Starting from the messages posted on the discussion group 30Something@ women.it

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First published in:

Braidotti, Rosi, Esther Vonk & Sonja van Wichelen (eds.) (2000) *The Making of European Women's Studies. Volume II.* Utrecht, ATHENA.

CONTEXT

The 4th European Feminist Research Conference held in Bologna last September was an excellent opportunity for young women to participate and express their opinions in relation to other feminist scholars. The nextGENDERation/30Something Forum was a space of exchange between two European networks of young women involved in women and gender issues.

I consider such moments important mainly through the lines of discussion that they open. In such places, we can clarify our positions, recognize our different geographical, institutional and political locations, and develop our relationship with other generations of feminists. In a sense, these are the few moments in which we can “materialize” the network in an actual space and time.

THE FORUM

Time, in fact, has been a constraint on the possibility to discuss all the issues raised by the two networks. Not only that, the presence of a luminous guest like Donna Haraway, and the form of NextGENDERation's performance, which raised an incredible amount of issues, made the forum very compressed in time. Because such meetings are extremely useful, we wish they were structured in a way that would allow room for longer discussions. We hope that this forum will be a starting point from which a long discussion on the issues emerged can continue.

It was to notice how the NextGENDERation performance dealt with some of the same themes addressed by 30Something, albeit developed through highly technological, multi-vocal, and multimedia hypertext. The network 30Something has not been concerned with as many themes, but in the last two years we certainly dealt with questions of generations and power relations in the institutions, of technologies and gender and sexuality distinctions.

During the summer we discussed on the 30Something mailing list, the themes to be presented at the forum; we focussed mainly on the distinction between women's studies, gender studies and the political implications of our presence as a network. Our very structure of being a network leaves open a space for elaboration of answers as well as shifting, redefining, and refining our questions and analysis, especially thorough the mailing list. What follows is a text, a re-elaboration of some key passages emerged in the e-mails posted in the 30Something-list, as well as some summarizing questions, as presented in the forum.

NextGENDERation and 30Something are both networks interested in the relations between gender and generations. As young women, we are involved daily in complex relations and

dialogues inside and outside the academic contexts, as well as between different disciplines and technical languages we engage with and try to change (the term “genderation” is a good example).

We try to think and describe a new sensibility in dialogue with previous generations of women. We developed a *connectedness*, through the horizontal communication that a mailing list can provide. We are creating stable and visible networks.

CONNECTED

Perhaps an interesting point to start questioning is the issue of our use of technology, or a “*connectedness*”. A peculiarity of our networks is that we both took on the challenge of using cyberspace, mainly through carrying on many of our activities through “electronic networking”, regardless of each member’s sharing of past experiences. On this issue, I feel the need to pose some questions:

Are we caught in the net? Or, more precisely, are we somehow limited by the amount of information and by the type of contacts we develop through e-mail? Are we alienated by a lack of face to face interactions, or are we more free to express ourselves?

DIFFERENT LANGUAGES AND SENSIBILITIES

The network is seen as a common point for young women who share interests, worldviews and lived experiences. We don’t want to divide our lived experiences from mediated knowledge processes. The network can be seen as a multi-centered space that allow the members to see themselves in their differences, and yet choosing to be together in pursuing common interests.

WOMEN/GENDER/GAY AND LESBIAN STUDIES

Another question that emerged in the discussion was: *Are we elaborating/validating definitions coined by previous generations? If so, how is this a limitation or an advantage?*

In the article of constitution of 30Something, we included the terms women, gender, queer, gay and lesbian, and feminist studies. This choice reflects our foundational recognition of contaminations we live as historical subjects. We know we still need a feminist project to remember the material conditioning of gender, and to think in terms of social change.

This poses the question on how we perceive the shift from women’s studies to gender studies. Such change is important for us in terms of how gender studies goes beyond an essentialist category of “woman”, and its consequent partial knowledge of sexual identities.

In Italy, such a move represents a problematizing of thinking (sexual) difference, -literally “il pensiero della differenza”-. Nevertheless, we don’t consider this shift in terms of erasure of the women’s studies in favor of gender, but rather a situated knowledge, which allow us to go beyond gender and sexual identity. We propose to speak more broadly about feminism, as a connecting point to escape the binarism of women's studies-gender studies so often determined by academics. As Donna Haraway pointed out, today’s feminism can only be conjunctural, and it’s not a simply unifying term. If we look at the literature we were exposed to as a younger

generation, we realize that we still want to learn what women's studies was and what we need to keep of it now. Perhaps, though, we need to rethink and re-code the term "women's studies".

GENERATIONS, GENDERATIONS

We emphasized the plural of generations, since we do not use this term in a strictly temporal sense, as in the commonly used term “the young generation”, or, “young women”. Using the plural allows us to emphasize the relations with many previous generations, which still inform our self-definition. As young women we do not see ourselves as a unified subject to study. Such a starting point seems to give us the possibility of escaping inherited binarisms, in favor of a decomposition of categories into complex intersections of paths and ideas.

For similar reasons, we feel a strong need for discussions, and dialogues that do not reduce new definitions to their institutionalization. As a network, we would like to initiate exchanges, open debates, and spaces listened to, rather than claiming to represent all young women’s positions or promote a visible homogeneity in our generation.

This leads to another key question: *are we reproducing the power dynamics we try to escape?*

The various meetings of 30 something, last year, were fraught with ambivalence on this issue. In previous feminist movements the university was seen as an institution where knowledge could not be related to sexual identity and subjectivity. Now, as a network, we are in dialogue with feminists inside and outside of the university and, in both contexts, we are producing gendered knowledges.

Inside and outside the university. This emphasis on inside or outside the university reflects a key question in Italian feminism, which had consequences for the fact that there was not an institutionalizing of women’s and gender studies as in other countries. In the university, however, it was crucial for our generation to find women’s studies as a starting point for our educational and life projections.

Now the question is, *how to transform and re-contextualize such presence in the university?* (especially considering that since the 80ies, in the countries where women’s and gender studies has been included in curricula and departments, there has been a further questioning of its presumption, inversely related to its ability to offer visibility and institutional legitimacy).

This last point poses interesting concerns for our network, about our organizing in visible and stable networks: *How do we relate to institutions and their reflexivity about our generation? How fast are we to open dialogues, and slow in theorizing/defining./ questioning our identity?*

Most importantly, how do we go beyond the present visibility, to address effectively political issues that we have not dealt with so far, considering that we live in contexts in which many forms of discriminations and exploitations of women are still present?

To access the archive of our discussion in 1999:

<http://www.egroups.com/group/30stthing/>

To access some of the documents produced by 30Something:

<http://www.egroups.com/files/30stthing/>

To participate to the current discussion, you can subscribe writing to: lfantone@gc.cuny.edu.