

Undermin(d)ing the Gap

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Bologna, 2000

In July of 1997 I was riding on a train to Lisbon, Portugal after having been to the 3rd European Feminist Research conference in Coimbra. It was my first experience of a large-scale European feminist event. Apparently I was so impressed by the weekend filled with so many inspiring contributions and women from all ages and a wide range of backgrounds, that I failed to notice the especially large gap between the train and platform as I was exiting. I fell into the gap. Luckily I was snatched up and placed on the platform (relatively unscathed) by a passer-by with a strong sense of civic duty and quick reflexes.

I often reflect upon that terrifying 3 seconds when hearing the cautionary recording on the London tube at each stop: “MIND THE GAP”, says the ominous male voice over the intercom to the passengers. For obvious reasons the thought of “gaps” now makes me uneasy. The uneasiness also applies to the notion of generation gaps and other gaps said to exist between defined groups of people. It is made known that we should “mind” (obey) these gaps and accept them as givens. I would like to think that the Next GENDERation of feminists are “minding” the much-discussed generation gap in so far as they are specific and important to their historical, social and cultural contexts.

My troubled relationship to the word “gap” can be linked to its connotations of a negative space between two distinct (often oppositional) things, a break-down of connection, lacking imminence. The generation in which I have been placed and the previous and the “nexts” are not distinct nor coherent entities, with defined beginnings or endings. There are no clear cut-off points, no fixed terms for belonging or not belonging. One generation does not stop when the other starts. Rather, they flow into one another and overlap.

The persistent connections and exchanges between women from all ages is something very real and integral to the feminist movement and feminist theory - - these transactions occur in a plethora of ways and in all directions (not just passed from old to young). Perhaps where gaps are said to be, we can mindfully insert “plurality”, “specificity”, inevitable and positive differences between women that are related to their historical positioning, the life-phase they may be in, their sexual preferences, their class, race, and so forth. UNDERMINING the notion of gap as negative space and making something meaningful of the in-betweens and overlaps between us seems to me a more politically enabling and socially enhancing approach for feminists.

Natascha raised some important concerns in regard to defining or doing “new” or “next” feminisms that are not just bad re-mixes of something previously produced a fetishized indulgence in all that’s “newer, better, cooler”, or in denial of the past in our

present and future. I'd like to further problematise this idea of generation and feminism and "being next" by raising the following questions:

- In considering what the NEXT GENERATION may mean for me, or dare I say for "us", we can look at WHY certain group of women would be interested in creating and affiliating with groups like the Next GENERATION or 30 SOMETHING.
- Can we situate ourselves within a generationally-based feminist framework without constructing a hierarchical or exclusionary group that resorts to an identity-politics or glossing over the differences among us and exaggerating the differences between an "us" and "them"?
- If we CAN develop some framework of younger feminists that doesn't get mired down in exclusionary or static notions of identity, what can we say about "our" situation and "our" priorities, our theories and our activism? How are we *positioned* as young feminists within existing power relations and how do we position ourselves and access power to being about change?

These are not new questions for feminism. One easily recognises in my questions the "old" difference vs. identity debate, or post-modern vs. humanism debate that feminism has been contending with for the last decades. Unlike the Beatles, feminism has not broken up....maybe/hopefully it has diversified, but this story is not over, the issues are real, and the debates are alive and well. It is crucial that younger women get a chance to struggle and work with these tensions as they relate to the particularity of our stories and the ways in which power is negotiated in our daily lives. We have had a glimpse of parts of our stories in the performance and throughout the conference and we are continuing to tell them.

Our feminism has taught us to develop a critical approach to any fixed categories. While we problematise the category of "woman", we also do not want to essentialise the notion of generation or age. We are not interested in separatist identity politics based on the supposed generation that we belong to. Neither are we assuming that all of us necessarily share the same perspectives, points of view and opinions.

However, I do believe that this "we" has something in common. The "we" refers to a quite specific group of young women, young feminists, mostly European, and mostly Western European who are highly educated in most cases. Privileged, if you will. Not only do we have access to education and the opportunity to engage with diverse knowledges, but we have the means and the possibility to meet and work with others in an international context, whether this takes place in university networks or activist movements.

We share a certain cultural environment, we were born into the already existing dynamics of feminism, at a specific historical moment. We share a certain feminist history, a history that we did not participate in, but that was transmitted to us. We are in the privileged position of having access to experiences and knowledges of the feminists that came before us, and to work and learn from and with them. At the same time, we do not

necessarily see our stories represented in the respective environments that we live, work and study in.

The notion of “generations” or even a “generation gap” lately became a hot issue in the media, in public debate and within feminism, and we are overwhelmed by images of “young women today” -- a group that we are supposed to belong to.

We are all too familiar with the characterisation of our supposed generation as apolitical, individualistic, irresponsible, consumer-crazy, asexual and over-sexed, spoiled, pseudo- or post-feminist, historically ignorant. These dismissive portrayals have been advanced by the media, politicians, academics, and by some ‘older’ feminists --Germaine Greer, to mention one, has put quite some effort into dismissing a whole generation of young women, the so-called “girls” , as consumer-crazy and obsessed with nothing but looks, boys, and shopping.

Such representations of our or any generation are of course reductive and generalising. They tell a story whose linear plot and end are determined before they can get started. The urgency of speaking for ourselves, amongst ourselves and in dialogue with “other” generations that we have been pitted against has become increasingly evident for me and many of my peers. Rather than being spoken for, we set out to “fill in” and complicate this constructed gap with our words and actions that do not fit in to one side or the other. I am particularly referring to the stories told about young women’s relationship to feminism, and the post-modern conditions in which we live. OUR story is not “a story” at all, it is many stories that change over time, that intersect and diverge and that depend greatly on the place from which they are being told.

Taking as a starting point my own location as a young feminist, working in the university which is, in my case, a university that is quite central in European Women’s Studies, ‘the next GENDERation’ for me is in the first place the result of a desire to be visible, to be heard, to show that a lot of young women today **are** active in feminism. Feminism, for me includes an awareness of power relations, a critical reading of the ways hierarchies are structured, including the way power is distributed in the feminist movement, in Women’s Studies, in the university and society more generally. Calling ourselves the “next GENDERation” is not only an answer to the labels and characterisations attributed to us by the media and within public debates. If we want the story to continue we have to account for both our heritage as well as for our own position and locations.

When the network was just getting started, the idea of identifying with a generation was not so problematic for me. Unlike the term “feminist”, the category of “generation” seemed a lot simpler, obvious. We could come together under the less messy rubric of young women or as the next generation to come of age in order to share ideas and position ourselves vis-à-vis more hotly-debated feminist issues and the term feminist itself.

At this stage of my life, however, identifying with the term “my generation” is more difficult than identifying with “feminist”. Feminism is voluntary, a category I choose to

consciously and cautiously identify with, whereas generation is where I am assigned, based on age. My feminism has become increasingly sceptical of, and resistant towards assigning people to general categories—especially those put forth as preordained by “nature”. This results in the freezing of identities frequently incompatible with my own and many others’ fluctuating and diverse stories, processes, experiences.

Through my discussions and work with other young and “less young” women (and men), I have been forced to become more aware of my personal and social locations, paradoxes, privileges and blind spots... this has helped me to become more secure and open in my feminism. What I have realised over the last years in the network is that the need to speak as a unified generation or feminist group has not been important or necessary. Crucial, however, was having a loose framework, a shared space to interact and draw upon our political, social, personal affinities as well as our differences and disagreements. Donna Haraway’s emphasis on “affinities” between bodies, people, and groups, rather than on over-determined, essentialised, oppositional “identities” helps us to think of ways to formulate our politics and critical theories without neglect the heterogeneity of our feminism, locations and stories.

Like the category “woman”, we can work towards refiguring the category “generation” that is politically, socially and intellectually enabling and transcribed by our temporary and strategic affinities. We can UNDERMINE and contest totalising and oppositional categories like Woman/Man; Young/Old; East/West; White/Black; Gay/Straight...even identity/difference. The feminism of the next GENDERation can generation new ways to subvert the kinds of fictitious unities Joan Scott discussed yesterday. Those that ultimately depend on fictitious gaps. We can think of our feminism as on-going story-telling and genre-making, NOT as a defensive and static posture of a coherent group, but more as mindfully, active GENERATION ENGENDERING our practices, politics, desires and our links to others across our difference.