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### Linking Theory and Practice in Feminist Scholarship

In my undergraduate career as a Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies major at UC Davis, I have found that one of the most profound challenges I have run into is how to translate the highly pedagogical academia I am being exposed to in my classes to tangible, material practice in my everyday life. There have been countless conversations between me and my classmates about how dense a theoretical reading was to get through, and subsequent wondering about how any of that dense theory could be translated into the very world that the theory was critiquing. Rosi Braidotti, a feminist philosopher and theorist, puts the paradox very simply. The question is "...how to engage in affirmative politics, which entails the production of social horizons of hope, while at the same time doing critical theory, which means resisting the present" (Braidotti 42). This issue of bridging the gap between theory and practice is not a new one – feminists have grappled with and debated whether theory and practice are really so distant from each other, and if they are, how to overcome the invisible barrier between the two. I argue that although feminist theory that is revered as valuable scholarship seems, at times, extremely inaccessible, as consumers of that scholarship we can translate that theory into material practice in our lives in some form.

In order to further discuss theory and practice, I will provide my definitions of both terms. Theory written by feminist and Gender Studies scholars, as discussed in this paper, provides a framework that serves to explain the way something works. Oftentimes feminist theory is critical and serves both to explain a current system of understanding and criticize that

current state. While not all theory is highly pedagogical and academic, the writing that I will be addressing in this research project will reflect scholarship that tends toward more philosophical thought. Practice, on the other hand, can mean a variety of things. Practicing feminist theory can be as mundane as choosing to listen only to femme artists in order to move away from androcentric art, or as invested as starting a grassroots movement to oppose a certain injustice. In the context of this paper, “practice” refers to uprooting those ideologies that critical feminist theory seeks to deconstruct in some form.

Exploring the connection or disconnection between theory and practice requires different methodological approaches. In this paper, I will be using a mixture of methods to investigate the question at hand. I chose to use a mixed methods approach because I believe it to be feminist to explore more than one avenue of knowledge production in order to come to a more cohesive conclusion. First, I will employ an autoethnography in order to share my experience with theory and practice as a Gender Studies college student. My focus in this project is on theory and practice in an academic setting, so I want to ensure that I include student perspectives that may not otherwise be centered in theory-centric spaces. In this autoethnography, I strive to do my best to represent myself and my experience in the most raw form possible, without doctoring my story to fit a certain narrative or argument. I will also interview fellow Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies majors to learn more about their experience in bridging feminist theory that they read in class and how they do or do not find ways to practice such theory in their everyday lives. Although it is beyond the scope of this project to be able to hear the experiences of a large sample of students, my hope is that highlighting even just a few other students’ stories will help us get more of a sense of how students feel about whether there is a gap between theory and practice. Finally, I will engage in two case studies of discourse analysis by looking at two

different highly influential feminist scholars that Gender Studies majors often encounter in our education. These two scholars were not only selected because of students' exposure to them, but because they do engage in very philosophical and pedagogical academia that can seem difficult to translate into practice. The first author, Judith Butler, inspired me to investigate the question of theory and practice after reading one of her essays. Butler is famously known for her book *Gender Performance* (1990), which introduced the idea that gender is not innately something that we are, but something that we continually constitute through our own behaviors (Fischer). The second author, Donna Haraway, explores the relationship between gender beliefs and producing knowledge about nature (Weigel). I will analyze a sample of the theory that these scholars have produced and put it in parallel with each author's engagement in activism and practice of their own theories. While I cannot know everything about their theoretical practice without interviewing them, I will use media texts to analyze their public activism.

Finally, before I begin my investigation of bridging feminist theory and practice, I will offer some information about myself and the identity that I bring with me as I engage in this research. In one of Haraway's most famous pieces, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", she argues that feminist objectivity lies in "situated knowledges" (Haraway 442). None of us as individuals are all knowing, so all we can do is bring partial perspectives to the work that we engage in. Feminist objectivity comes from putting as many of those partial perspectives together as we possibly can to get a better idea of the whole picture. Haraway explains that the partial perspectives we bring are informed by the way we are "situated" in the world by our identity (Haraway 445). In order to put that theory into practice, I will offer a brief summary of how my knowledge is situated, and revisit the essay in more detail later. I am a white, young student at UC Davis in my final quarter of my

undergraduate career. I am majoring in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies and American Studies with a minor in Human Rights. I identify as a cis, straight woman and come from a middle-class family, and have enjoyed a great amount of privilege in my life. I am half Mexican and am a proud Chicana. These are some of the qualities I bring with me in my investigation of this research.

My experience with the tension between theory and practice has followed me throughout my four years as an undergraduate student. I began thinking about this question in earnest when I took a class in my third year required for my major, "Introduction to Feminist Theory." In this class, our professor had us read through an anthology called "The Feminist Theory Reader" and it included such authors as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, among other brilliant feminist scholars. Upon reading Butler's essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", I was having difficulty coming to terms with the theory I had just read. In this piece, Butler explains the way that we consistently constitute gender through our own repetition of behaviors that we have come to understand as natural and innate characteristics of gender. She argues that we construct our idea of "self" through our repeated performance of gender. As my classmate and I read through Butler's theory, we became more and more distressed at what the revelation about gender performance meant for us. Though we understood and appreciated the argument Butler makes in the essay, we were not sure what to do with that information now that we knew it. Butler completely deconstructs hegemonic ideas about gender and self, and leaves it up to the reader to decide what to do with that information. She references Foucault and puts it perfectly in her essay, "...the subject that is freed is even more deeply shackled than originally thought" (Butler 490). Though I felt that I had a "coming to consciousness" moment, I was at a loss for how I was supposed to translate this radical theory

about gender into practice in my personal life. Luckily enough (for the purpose of this research), my internal crisis about bridging the gap between theory and practice after reading Butler is well documented in one of the essays I wrote for the class, “I may have been freed from the ignorance that was keeping me comfortably unaware of the power that was regulating my very identity, but I feel worse and more trapped than I did before. I am aware of the instruments of my entrapment, yet I do not want to break free, because the discipline is so complete. After all of this, I am left with one question: where do I go from here?” (Kadlec 6). My struggle to bridge theory and practice, in this case, was brought on because I saw how deeply rooted the systems of identification that Butler was criticizing are in everyday life. When everyone around me believes in that constitution of gender that she describes as their innate “self”, how was I supposed to bring the theory that was debunking it into practice? Though theory is often enlightening, the path to action can be intimidating and sometimes feel impossible, as evidenced by my own existential crisis after reading Butler’s essay.

Upon interviewing fellow Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies students at UC Davis, I was surprised to learn that all of them brought some theory that they learned about in their classes into their lives. I first interviewed Alexxis Peterson, a student who graduated last year in the Gender Studies department at UC Davis. Interestingly enough, she chose to double major in Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies along with her Sociology degree because of the gap between theory and practice that she observed in the field of Sociology:

I felt the same way as you about, what, I guess, your project is now, because... in general, most sociologists study, they study these people and they have them under a magnifying glass, but like, they don’t actually try to help them, or improve neighborhoods, or do anything towards society to better it. We’re analyzing it, making

these theories up, and then just leaving it to study and that's it. So that was the problem for me. (Peterson, See Appendix A)

She explained that she had taken a class about sexuality in the field of Sociology and was disappointed to find that the class was engaging in analyzing how gender and sexuality is perceived by different demographics of people in different spaces, but not discussing how we might problematize these perceptions and what action could be taken to change those conceptions of gender and sexuality. Alexxis had taken a Gender Studies course before and appreciated that the professor focused on how to think differently about gender, instead of merely analyzing the way it is perceived in its current state.

In order to get a sense of how central theory was to her Gender Studies education, I asked Alexxis whether she had taken many theory-heavy classes for the degree. She responded with a resounding "obviously." I was interested to know whether she enjoyed those theory-intensive classes, and she explained that they were not her favorite:

Um, not necessarily. As you know... I kind of winged it in my theory classes. Like I would pick up and put my identity out there to kind of analyze theory, but not necessarily really practice it or really analyze it, or completely take in the concepts. Like some of them, yes, don't get me wrong - it comes up in every class. But those classes, I feel like I didn't take it seriously because, um, I know we've talked about this maybe before, but our theory classes... they just stay in class. I can't say I loved my theory classes, unless the theory personally affected me, maybe? (Peterson, See Appendix A)

From what I understood, Alexxis was frustrated at the way that she attempted to use her own standpoint to understand the theory she was learning about in class, but oftentimes did not see herself reflected in that academia as a black woman. She did not find learning feminist theory to

be very enjoyable unless she saw herself directly reflected in the scholarship in some way. I asked her if she remembered any theorists that struck a chord with her because she felt it was applicable to her life:

Okay, um... I believe - isn't it Gloria Anzaldúa? I don't know if it was more of a practice, I don't know if it was that much of a theory, but she always, um, she always brought up how... basically, you should implement your voice through writing. And that was like a big way to, kind of, get the message out there. And I honestly appreciated that - that was kind of like, why I kind of wanted to do my project [for WMS190] that I did last year about being seen as this completely separate category of being a black woman. And I obviously have a totally different identity from her, but it's kind of like the Black Feminist Standpoint Theory. (Peterson, See Appendix A)

At this point in the interview, I began to see how Alexxis was indeed translating the theory that she enjoyed into practice. When she cited Anzaldúa as an influential theorist for her, she immediately started telling me a story of how she directly translated Anzaldúa's works into practice. Alexxis completed her capstone project for her Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies degree last spring, and tried to translate some of the theory that she read into her work:

I definitely did try to practice [these theories] through a whole project - a blog basically, using Anzaldúa and [Patricia Hill] Collins and putting that into my own perspective. But it was difficult because my professor didn't want me to. She wanted me to write any other essay... And I didn't personally think that was fair because... this was research to use theory and uplift my person, and who I am as a black woman, and that was really difficult when this cis white woman was telling me that I couldn't. She wasn't giving me

the support that I needed to do it. She just wouldn't let me talk about what I needed to talk about. I didn't at all feel supported. (Peterson, See Appendix A)

In this case, Alexxis found that the gap between theory and practice was not the result of inaccessible theory, but rather an academic gatekeeper that wanted to limit her theoretical focus to other works that she did not resonate with. I was struck by that, because as a white woman, I have never felt underrepresented in feminist theory. My only concern was that some of that theory felt dense and difficult to translate into my life. However, after speaking to Alexxis, I was forced to take a step back and think about how her position at the intersection of race and gender also affected the way that she interacted with the theory she learned in her classes, and that her position as a black woman created a barrier of access to theory that she felt she could translate into her own life. Once again, Haraway's theory of "situated knowledges" proved to be critical in my analysis - in order to get a more holistic view of the relationship between theory and practice, speaking to folks of different backgrounds and perspectives is essential.

I then interviewed a Gender Studies student who has just begun her coursework for the degree, Emily Htway. Along with her GSW (Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies) degree, she is double majoring in Neurobiology, Physiology, and Behavior, with the hopes of going to medical school after her undergraduate studies. Emily is currently taking WMS103: Introduction to Feminist Theory, a required course of GSW. I asked whether she was enjoying the class so far, and she said that it might be one of her favorite classes that she has ever taken at UC Davis (See Appendix B). Emily was able to name a particular theoretical reading that she really appreciated:

There's one that I really like... I really like - I think it was Hewitt? The essence was like, you can't make a seat for yourself at the table by removing someone else's seat. And that, that particular chunk of theory really stuck with me. A lot of it was in the vein of



multicultural feminism. Oh yeah, it was Hewitt! So there was that reading, and in that piece she says, “We can’t make a seat for ourselves by pushing others out.” And it was a lot about politics of location. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. (Htway, See Appendix B)

She noted that she was bringing this particular theory to the forefront of her thinking because of the current state of events in the United States right now, especially in regards to the heightened Black Lives Matter protests in response to George Floyd’s death and the continued disproportionate police brutality against black folks:

I think that, for this particular theory, it definitely has changed my thought process and kind of like how I see the world. Because before I took Women’s 103, I was like, you know, obviously a feminist, but not as smart of one. I was like women’s empowerment, and women are better than everyone, and we should put women of color in positions of power - and all of that’s totally valid, but then like, after reading this particular piece that talks about Seneca Falls, it’s like you can’t say that one group is better than another group. That’s not equality. So you can say, you know, women’s empowerment is fine, but you know, a matriarchy is no better than a patriarchy. And you have to think about, you know, are you really egalitarian or are you not. So that really changed the way I approached activism. Especially with everything that’s going on right now. And like, how people, especially in my family when we talk about things.. I think understanding that no one is better than another one, you know, there’s no basis for that. So I think that’s changed the entire way I approach, like, a lot of my conversations with my family or what I post on social media, or what I decide to put on my poster when I go to the Women’s March, like, thinking about what is a good aim for social change and what is a

problematic aim that might look good when you first look at it and then you think about it and you're like, "Oh no, that isn't good." (Htway, See Appendix B)

Emily explained that Hewitt's particular theory has translated into practice for her in the way that she has adapted her approach to activism. It has helped her redefine her goals to not be "the oppressed are better than the oppressor", but instead that no one is better than anyone else, and we have to fight systems of oppression that uphold that idea to make our society more egalitarian. For her, practicing Hewitt's theory meant rethinking her current practices and clearly defining her focus and what she believes should be the aim of her activism.

Finally, I interviewed Mathilda Silverstein, a graduating GSW and Human Development double major who also has experience as an organizer as the president of J Street U at UC Davis. Consistent with the other two interviews that I conducted, I asked Mathilda about theory that has been influential for her:

...lesbian separatism pieces got me thinking... Lesbian separatism is like, the only true way to be a liberated feminist is to only show love to women and surround yourself with women and being lesbian. Like even if you don't feel like you are, you can be...

Which... it was like a lot for me to take in. And that's where, like, TERF-ism kinda came from, was like out of that movement, because it was only, like, women with vaginas.

Only cis women could be in that movement, and it was, like, very exclusionary of trans women and men, like they were all traitors... So there's a lot of problems with it, but it also helped me kind of focus some of my energy into female friendships. (Silverstein, See Appendix C)

Mathilda found that although theories surrounding lesbian separatism were problematic, she was still able to find a productive way to translate it into practice by focusing more on her friendships

with femme folks, and being more aware of nourishing those relationships. Though it is not necessarily activism, deciding where to focus your energy and time is still a significant practice to come out of reading theory.

After interviewing all three students, I began to reevaluate my definition of “practice” as it related to Gender Studies and Feminist theory. As I spoke to these women, I noticed that much of the theory that resonated most with them did not necessarily directly translate to them protesting on the street, but rather changing the way that they think about certain ideas and making slight changes in their everyday lives to fit that frame of mind. As students of theory, that is a significant takeaway, and should not be discounted.

It was incredibly valuable to speak to students about their experience with the accessibility of theory, but it is still critical to examine the way that the scholars behind these theories engage with the relationship between theory and practice. I aim to understand what kind of practices Judith Butler and Donna Haraway advocate for, and how that might translate back to some of the theories that they write.

Butler is most well-known for her theoretical works surrounding gender and performativity. In her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, Butler asserts that gender is created in each of us through a repetition of acts and behaviors that we have learned to code our bodies with a certain gender, but actually, that illusion of a substantive gender identity is just that - an illusion. She claims that there is nothing inherent about gender, no “I” that comes before it, but that our idea of “self” is constructed through our performance of gender. Butler argues that gender is so well rehearsed and performed that it is understood as an innate part of ourselves, “The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the

credibility of its own production” (Butler 484). Our performance of gender is so good that we have fooled even ourselves, the actors, into believing it is real and natural. The theoretical work she puts forth in this essay is critical to understanding that gender is not inherently a binary, and that we should avoid thinking that way at all costs in order to avoid legitimizing the systems of oppression that rely on the existence of that binary to function. However, her argument about how our “selves” do not exist without us repeating gender into existence through our behaviors strikes me as a difficult theory to put into practice at any level. If it is so unavoidable, how does Butler propose we go forth with this theory?

Towards the end of the essay, Butler addresses just that. She recognizes that it is still essential to represent women as a category in political and social spaces in order to fight for a cause, but asks that we reconsider how we understand that category. Butler offers this theory so that we complicate the notion of gender as an immutable and natural means of classification that lends itself to the reinforcement of a binary. She believes that anyone can think philosophically about gender, and that we must (Butler 17). Butler is not necessarily asking the reader to abandon all gender performance and not recognize gender categories as useful, but she is asking the reader to complicate their conception of gender and the way that they think about it. Her call to action is to have us disturb our understanding of ourselves and the “natural” appearance of our gender.

Butler does practice that scholarship and translates it into her life. She does not merely leave what she has written in the past behind. Butler adheres to her call to action by going out to speak at various institutions - I myself saw her give a talk here at UC Davis in Fall 2018. In this way, she is trying to change people’s minds and ways of thinking about gender by continuing to speak about it over and over again to various demographics. Her talks are not just relegated to

institutional spaces, either. There are several easily accessible videos of Judith Butler speaking on gender performativity online, including in less academic forms. She appears on one YouTube channel called “Big Think” that describes itself as “...the leading source of expert-driven, actionable, educational content... We aim to help you explore the big ideas and core skills that define knowledge in the 21st century, so you can apply them to the questions and challenges in your own life” (Big Think). In this video, she presents an easily digestible three minute talk that breaks down her ideas of gender performativity and why people’s gender is so intensely policed. In this video, she gives another call to action that can easily be translated into practice, “It’s most important to resist the violence that’s imposed by ideal gender norms” (Big Think). In this one clip, Butler explains her theory quickly to the viewer and gives a direct argument for an action that can come from that theory.

Though I still have some trouble knowing exactly what to do with all of the theoretical arguments that Butler makes in her scholarship, it is now clear to me that she is not asking us to completely resist every single aspect of the way we practice our gender now. She is merely giving us a theoretical framework from which to work from and gain a deeper understanding of gender in order to combat the negative impact of the way we constitute a gender binary through our own repetitive acts. Butler herself continues to do the work of practicing her own theory by complicating more people’s notion of gender and self and giving clear and tangible calls to action to conclude her work, so as not to leave the listener floundering and not knowing what to do.

Donna Haraway is another highly influential feminist theorist who is widely known for her feminist critiques of traditional science. As someone who is educated in the sciences, she has taken it upon herself in many of her works to complicate the way we understand science and

empiricism. In her notable essay “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Haraway asks her readers to reimagine the way that we produce knowledge. Coming from a scientific background, Haraway is familiar with the notion of scientific objectivity - the idea that if one follows the scientific method, they will achieve unbiased and universally true results. However, she contests this idea and argues that one person cannot have “God-like” vision. To believe that would be to fall for “a god trick” (Haraway 442). As human beings, there is no way for us to have disembodied, universal knowledge, no matter how “unbiased” the method we use. Instead, she argues for a “feminist objectivity” that comes from “situate knowledges.” By putting together many perspectives and epistemologies, we are able to come closer to a more universal truth, but only by recognizing that each person’s contribution is limited and only partial (Haraway 443). In the same article, she asserts that in this new feminist objectivity, the researchers must recognize their subject of study (the earth and its components) as one with agency.

I analyzed two videos of Haraway giving lectures in academic spaces in order to evaluate whether she was indeed translating her own theory into practice. The first lecture was held at Yale University, and I was struck by how focused Haraway seemed to be on acknowledging other people’s contributions and work, despite the fact that she was invited to speak about her own work. Even before she begins her talk, she thanks the faculty for combatting sexism at Yale since her time as a graduate student there, during which she was treated poorly as a female student. She quickly acknowledges the Algonquin tribes that did (and still do, to some extent) live in that area of Connecticut. Later, when she shares some Greek mythology about Medusa, she is sure to say, “Eva Hayward teaches me this,” to give credit where credit is due (Haraway). Throughout the lecture, she highlights the work of different artists to illustrate the points she is

trying to make. Even in the description of this filmed lecture, Haraway made a point to cite several other people that she forgot to address during the talk. I interpreted her emphasis on recognizing other folks' work as her dedication to and practice of situated knowledges. By citing all of these other people, she is recognizing that the knowledge she is sharing in the lecture is the result of collaboration with others in an attempt to practice "feminist objectivity" and bring more than one partial perspective to her work.

The second lecture video shows Haraway directly addressing the theory of "situated knowledges" in her activism. In this talk at the San Francisco Art Institute in April 2017, Haraway talks about the "March for Science" that she had attended the weekend before, and the three subsequent weekends of marches she planned on attending. That in itself is not necessarily evidence of her direct practice of the "situated knowledges" theory, but she does address it in relation to the march:

The difficulty of integrating indigenous knowledge-making and indigenous sciences into the march was really significant. It was a march that I still am for... but also the lack of the pursuit of situated knowledges at that march was really significant. But it's also a moment, I think, when the importance of positively affirming simple statements like 'Facts aren't optional'... A really important moment, perhaps, for people like me to go easy on the critical spirit and go large on the affirmative and working with each other spirit. (Haraway)

In this statement, Haraway recognizes that critical theory is not always useful at a time when larger movements are taking place for a broader goal. At the "March for Science" there was a lack of understanding of situated knowledges, and there were many marginalized voices that were left out of the organization of the event. However, Haraway argues that it was more

important to her to practice affirming activism that might still create change in a positive direction, even if it was not perfect.

Ultimately, my quest to better understand the relationship with academic feminist theory and tangible practice has made me more optimistic about how theoretical frameworks have impacted me. Though I began this project by thinking that pedagogical, theoretical writing was not entirely useful unless it translated into explicit activism in some form, I have discovered through this study that feminist practice does not have to be overt in order to be significant. For my fellow GSW students and interviewees, the theory that they read in class did not necessarily drive them to make a sign and march in the street, but it did change their framework in thinking about feminism and their worldview. In analyzing some of Judith Butler and Donna Haraway's work, I found that though they are critical of some of our world's current practices, their goal is not to leave the reader with despair. Instead, they advocate for even small actions that are feasible under existing structures to combat the problem that they are critiquing. Haraway especially emphasizes the importance of affirmative politics over nitpicky critical theory in certain times of crisis. That is relevant now more than ever as we find ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic and a national movement to combat the disproportionate use of police violence against black people. We can use the theory that we have learned to frame our thinking, but recognize that what is most important is engaging in whatever way we can - and that is what is ultimately at the center of feminist theory.



## Appendix A

Sarah: What were your majors?

Alexxis: Okay, so, um, I came in as a Sociology transfer and the reason I kind of like decided to be a GSW major was because I was so interested after taking “Sociology of Gender”, and actually that same quarter, I actually took, I believe, “Sexualities”?

Sarah: Oh, okay.

Alexxis: So, those were all new concepts for me, um, I never thought of gender in that way, like, you know, in Sociology, we have like a similar lens to feminist theory, but not, I guess, as, kind of freeforming. I would say freeforming. Like, because when you’re a Gender Studies major, you’re thinking about equality for all, for every identity, and, I kind of didn’t always see that in Sociology.

Sarah: Yeah.

Alexxis: It’s not as practiced, and that was a problem for me. And I felt the same way as you about, what, I guess, your project is now, because... in general, most sociologists study, they study these people and they have them under a magnifying glass, but like, they don’t actually try to help them, or improve neighborhoods, or like do anything towards society to better it. We’re analyzing it, making these theories up, and then just leaving it to study and that’s it. So that was the problem for me.

Sarah: Okay. So was that “Sociology of Gender” class kind of like that where you were reading and forming theories, but not doing something with it?

Alexxis: So, my project in that class was kind of basically to understand gender and see how it’s implemented into society. So our social cues, and how we talk, and just like, how men and women take up space. Stuff like that. Even in how we see gender, or how I would pick up gender in a cartoon, too.

Sarah: I see. That sounds really interesting. My next question for you, and I suspect your answer already, but as a GSW major did you take a lot of classes that focused on theory?

Alexxis: I obviously did, it was a requirement.

Sarah: Which one would you say was the most theory-heavy?

Alexxis: It was the Wendy Ho class [WMS103: Intro to Feminist Theory]. I feel like that’s the only class I really focused on it. WMS60 was also theory-heavy.

Sarah: Did you like those classes? The more theory-heavy ones?

Alexxis: Um, not necessarily. As you know, I’m kind of like a, I kind of winged it in my theory classes. Like I would pick up and put my identity out there to kind of analyze theory, but not necessarily really practice it or really analyze it, or completely take in the concepts. Like some of them, yes, don’t get me wrong - it comes up in every class. But those classes, I feel like I didn’t take it seriously because, um, I know we’ve talked about this maybe before, but our theory classes, there’s just like um... they don’t just stay in class. Some theory is structured to be in every single class and it’s really annoying because it feels like we’re retaking the class all over again... I can’t say I loved my theory classes, unless the theory personally affected me, maybe?

Sarah: Did any theorists or specific readings stand out to you? In terms of theory, was there any moment where something really interested you?

Alexxis: Yikes... um. This is really hard to remember. Can we go to the next question and come back?

Sarah: Yes of course! I know that's probably hard to remember. My next question, then, is did you find it hard to translate any of the theories that you read into practice?

Alexxis: Okay, um... I believe - isn't it Gloria Anzaldúa? I don't know if it was more of a practice, I don't know if it was that much of a theory, but she always, um, she always brought up how... basically, you should implement your voice through writing. And that was like a big way to like, kind of get the message out there. And I honestly appreciated that - that was kind of like, why I kind of wanted to do my project that I did last year about being seen as this completely separate category of being a black woman. And I obviously have a totally different identity from her, but it's kind of like the Black Feminist Standpoint. It's hard to remember exactly what that was, ack...

Sarah: But it rings a bell for you. I remember, we definitely did a reading on that.

Alexxis: Yeah, we did a whole reading on that, it's a whole theory. Like, it's brought up in Sociology too. I'm pretty sure it's Patricia Hill Collins. It's basically the standpoint of black women. I would say that one, obviously, it's a given for me, personally, because I am a black woman. I definitely did try to practice it through a whole project - a blog basically, using Anzaldúa and Collins and putting that into my own perspective. But it was difficult because my professor didn't want me to. She wanted me to write any other essay... And I didn't personally think that was fair because, yes, 190 is definitely a class where you should be using all the techniques that we've learned to do research, and all of this. But this was research to use theory and uplift my person, and who I am as a black woman, and that was really difficult when this cis white woman was telling me that I couldn't. She wasn't giving me the support that I needed to

do it. She just wouldn't let me talk about what I needed to talk about. I didn't at all feel supported.

Sarah: So in that case it wasn't that the theory wasn't accessible - you understood the theory and enjoyed it and wanted to practice it - but there were other people that were shooting you down.

Alexxis: Yeah, exactly.

## Appendix B

Sarah: What are your majors?

Emily: I have two of them. The first one is NPB - Neurobiology, Physiology, and Behavior. And the second one is Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies.

Sarah: And you just declared your Gender Studies double major?

Emily: I just declared it! I have never felt more relief in my entire life.

Sarah: What made you decide to be a Gender Studies double major?

Emily: So I, like, wanted to double major in something. My idea was that I wanted to expand my pre-med education beyond hard science. Like, I knew I was going to be a really shitty doctor if all I knew was science. I knew that I really liked sexual health, but I was like, I don't know... And I took Women's 50 [Introduction to Critical Gender Studies] in the fall upon Thilly's suggestion, and I was like, "Oh my God. This is so relevant." And one day Rodrigo came into my class and he was like, "You guys can double major in this!" And I was thinking, I don't know if I'll be able to do that. But I kept getting subliminal messages around campus, and you know, I decided - what really turned me is when we learned about ACT UP and we talked about AIDS because I'm using Gender Studies to supplement a medical education and all of my electives are body politics, and that kind of stuff. And I was like, okay, this is super important and no doctor that I know talks about this kind of stuff this way... So I'm using it to be a better doctor.

Sarah: I think that's really admirable and I'd like you to be my doctor someday! I don't think I've ever heard of any doctor that has thought about Gender Studies in their practice, or that even knows about it. As a GSW double major, have you taken any classes that focus on theory?

Emily: Yes, oh, definitely. I'm in 103 [Introduction to Feminist Theory] right now!

Sarah: How many quarters have you been taking GSW classes?

Emily: This would be my third, because I started taking GSW this past fall.

Sarah: So has 103 been the most theory-heavy?

Emily: Yeah.

Sarah: Do you like it so far?

Emily: I absolutely love 103, it's my favorite class I've ever taken, I think.

Sarah: Really? What makes it your favorite class?

Emily: Part of it is the professor... my professor is absolutely spectacular. They are wonderful, and they make the theory so digestible and so applicable, and I like how the theory, like the reader, takes what you thought you knew and rips it to shreds. Like, it's okay though, you know? I like how it's a very objective way of thinking about things, like I appreciate that, because I don't like to be in a mindset where everything is very opinionated, very subjective, and I don't want, like, thinking about what I'm using Gender Studies for, I don't want to come off as someone who is very much biased one way. Where, like, theory, some theory, considers everything and says, "Well this is seventeen different ways you can look at that problem." Every opinion is valid, and here's a bunch more that you can think about that you didn't even know about. I feel like it's opening my third eye.

Sarah: It really does. In 103, I think it was also one of my favorite classes because I had so many of those moments where I was like, "Oh my God, I never would have thought of that on my own!" Have you read anything in 103 that has stood out to particularly? Any theorists or readings?

Emily: There definitely has been. There's one that I really like... I really like - I think it was Hewitt? The essence was like, you can't make a seat for yourself at the table by removing someone else's seat. And that, that particular chunk of theory really stuck with me. A lot of it was in the vein of multicultural feminism. Oh yeah, it was Hewitt! So there was that reading, and in that piece she says, "We can't make a seat for ourselves by pushing others out." And it was a lot about politics of location. I've been thinking about it a lot.

Sarah: Coming off of that, has any of that theory that you've read, has any of that inspired different practices in your life? Or different trains of thought or behaviors?

Emily: I think that, for this particular theory, it definitely has changed my thought process and kind of like how I see the world. Because before I took Women's 103, I was like, you know, obviously a feminist, but not as smart of one. I was like women's empowerment, and women are better than everyone, and we should put women of color in positions of power - and all of that's totally valid, but then like, after reading this particular piece that talks about Seneca Falls, it's like you can't say that one group is better than another group. That's not equality. So you can say, you know, women's empowerment is fine, but you know, a matriarchy is no better than a patriarchy. And you have to think about, you know, are you really egalitarian or are you not. So that really changed the way I approached activism. Especially with everything that's going on right now. And like, how people, especially in my family when we talk about things.. I think understanding that no one is better than another one, you know, there's no basis for that. So I think that's changed the entire way I approach, like, a lot of my conversations with my family or what I post on social media, or what I decide to put on my poster when I go to the Women's March, like, thinking about what is a good aim for social change and what is a problematic aim

that might look good when you first look at it and then you think about it and you're like, "Oh no, that isn't good."

Sarah: This is also just partly out of curiosity, but what is this TikTok final I've heard you talking about?

Emily: Okay so, like, the project is that instead of writing a final paper, we're supposed to make something on any kind of social media or creative platform that makes one particular aspect, like we choose one theory, and we make it more digestible for non-scholars... the idea is to create something that's digestible for people who are not studying Gender Studies to understand what that means and the importance of it, but not as inaccessible.

Sarah: That's really cool. It seems like your professor is kind of focusing on what I'm looking at in this final project, like, how do you make this theory that's super academic and feels kind of inaccessible, even to students that are used to reading theory, more digestible?

Emily: Yeah and they're pretty young, too, and look forward to how we can use this stuff now, when it really matters.



Sarah: What are your majors?

Mathilda: My majors are Gender Studies and Human Development.

Sarah: As a Gender Studies major, have you taken any classes that focus on theory?

Mathilda: Yes!

Sarah: Which ones?

Mathilda: 103 [Introduction to Feminist Theory], um... most of them really. 50 [Introduction to Critical Gender Studies], 60 [Feminist Critiques of Western Thought], maybe 70 [Theory and History of Sexualities] a little bit. And then there were a few others as well.

Sarah: I think it is most of our classes. I don't think I've ever really had a GSW class that doesn't focus on some sort of theory.

Mathilda: It's like either theory or method. And even that is, like, theory of method.

Sarah: Did you like those theory-heavy classes?

Mathilda: I really liked 103, because it was more of a group discussion and we had really great readings and then we would all talk about them in a group. And if we didn't read it, then the discussion didn't happen. Also Wendy Ho is an icon. Quote me. I love her. She deserves the world. Another class that I really learned a lot from, not to suck up or anything, was Kaiser's class. That really made me think about sustainable fashion.

Sarah: Did any particular theorist or reading stand out to you in those classes or any others?

Mathilda: Yes. There were a few. What's the one?

Sarah: Was it Sandra Bartky? The one where she was like, you don't wear makeup because you want to? That one was wild.

Mathilda: That one and lesbian separatism pieces got me thinking.

Sarah: Can you explain that a little bit to me?

Mathilda: Lesbian separatism is like, the only true way to be a liberated feminist is to only show love to women and surround yourself with women and being lesbian. Like even if you don't feel like you are, you can be.

Sarah: Oh, interesting.

Mathilda: Yeah. Which... it was like a lot for me to take in. And that's where, like, TERF-ism kinda came from, was like out of that movement, because it was only, like, women with vaginas. Only cis women could be in that movement, and it was, like, very exclusionary of trans women and men, like they were all traitors.

Sarah: Oh my.

Mathilda: So there's a lot of problems with it, but it also helped me kind of focus some of my energy into female friendships.

Sarah: So there were parts that you agreed with, and maybe parts you didn't agree with.

Mathilda: Mmm-hmm.

Sarah: Have you found any theory that you've read in Gender Studies to be inaccessible?

Mathilda: Oh yes. Probably Judith Butler, honestly. We saw her talk and it was hard to listen to. I think it was something about global economic models?

Sarah: Have you found it to be inaccessible because of the language of it, or like, the ideas?

Both, maybe?

Mathilda: Both, I think, sometimes. And I think if the language is better, the ideas would be conveyed in a more clear manner. Like, I'm thinking about when we read that piece about, um... it was in 103. It was about sex positive feminism and how good is it really for women? She was arguing that it wasn't really that great for women. Like, encouraging prostitution and sex work as a valid choice for women is letting men have control, and even if you feel like you're liberated as

a sex worker and you're doing it for yourself, you're still selling your body to men. So it was like a really important idea, that I would probably be on board with to some extent, but the language was really dense.

Sarah: So it was hard to understand what she was really saying?

Mathilda: Yeah. I would like to understand. But I simply cannot.

Sarah: Did you, and you kind of already addressed this, but did you read any theory that inspired direct action in your life?

Mathilda: Oh definitely. I think a lot of the disabled feminism kind of stuff I read really made me think about how our bodies work and how, we're really just bodies. Like, we have minds and stuff but... it really makes you think about bodily "here-ness". I don't know how else to put it, but I think about that a lot. And also lesbian separatism. And I also think about a lot of the stuff I learned in queer theory, like 170 [Queer Studies] and 70, like how we can queer our lives in different ways. Postmodernism is really hard to be actionable with, but it's something I think about when I'm doing things.

Sarah: And I guess thinking about things and being conscious of them is a kind of practice in some sense.

Mathilda: Yeah.

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