

OUT OF THE BOX

Notes from Teaching at the Ends of the Earth

Colette Morrow

It was the most miserable fall Friday in Northwest Indiana: winds near 50 miles per hour as I snailed through traffic in my junker Neon. At my university, students are clients, and retention is more important than teaching or learning. I thought, “There’s gotta be more to it than this.” At home, I found a message from Stan Rubin, U.S. State Department—apparently a perfunctory can-you-recommend-someone email. I suggested a few people and crawled into bed.

The phone rang too early on Saturday morning. It was Stan. He had found my name on a list of regional contacts for the National Women’s Studies Association. He wanted to know if I would travel to Minsk, Belarus to attend a conference on “Women, Education, Democracy.” ENVILA Women’s University, a new institution established after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, had organized it. He needed a reply urgently. I asked him to call me back on Monday. Then I pondered the invitation. I had a great babysitter at the time. I figured that a few days in Minsk under the watchful eyes of President Lukashenko, a former collective farm boss who idolizes Stalin, couldn’t be worse than pre-tenure scrutiny on my campus. I went.

Back in 1998, Minsk might have been the end of the earth. No Internet, just a black rotary phone like my grandma had since the 40’s. The hotel was a dim, Soviet-style box where the elevator only stopped on even floors. I wasn’t permitted to keep my room key when I left: a system, I’ve been told, that facilitates surveillance. But my Belarusian colleagues’ passion—pro and con—about Women’s & Gender Studies (WGS) was like nothing I’d seen before.

At that time, sentiments about WGS were splintered among students, faculty, and a small but emerging middle class. Those who associated the field with democratization embraced some or all its tenets. But for a lot of other folks, the mere mention of WGS bespoke Soviet exploitation of “feminism” to shore up the regime and justify quasi-forced labor programs. Furthermore, innumerable Belarusians misidentified U.S. culture’s most visible form of feminism, access-to-work feminism, as feminism *en toto*. They thought it foolhardy if not stupid that U.S. women, in the absence of economic necessity and government pressure, wanted to work outside the home.

Since my first visit, I’ve returned to Belarus many times. At one point, I lived there for a year and brought along my daughter. More than once, to my surprise, Belarusian students or colleagues accused me of being Communist in a tone that suggested I had violated a sacred taboo—often after I advocated anti-oppression praxis, particularly in resistance to racism and classism. Students were especially hostile to anything that smacked of social justice. They often championed a neo-liberalism that embraced the new capitalist era, and dreamed of becoming small business owners. Once, in response to my critique of sweatshop economics, a student declared that profits were all that mattered. It was workers’ responsibility to ensure their own safety at work.

I hadn't anticipated this kind of dialogue. But as I learned more about Soviet and post-Soviet society—years of enforced collectivist culture followed by Lukashenko's strongarm rule—I saw Belarusians' antifeminism from different perspectives. I responded by developing curricula that offered students skills in surviving this "brave new world."

I brought this curriculum back to my own university and delivered it online. North-west Indiana residents have many of the same needs that ENVILA students do, though for different historical reasons. The curriculum been wildly successful financially, which keeps anti-feminist administrators at bay, and, more importantly, the courses synthesize lessons in feminist theories and activism. The undergraduate track consists of five interdisciplinary courses that enhance students' workplace skills. The curriculum also develops students' efficacy in policy-making and advocacy processes at local, national, and international levels. The graduate track includes courses in sustainable economic growth, social development, conservation, and the environment. Together, these curricula foster feminist critical analysis, students' global consciousness, and their practical skills, which regional employers have told us they lack.

Last fall (2010), my ongoing work in gender and global leadership education led to an invitation to apply for a two-week Fulbright grant in Pakistan. As in Belarus, I observed an emerging middle class movement for Pakistani democracy, along with resistance to economic colonization by the West. At the same time, new historic intersections of class, ethnic, and gender hierarchies have created highly stratified groups with competing goals and ideologies. A major challenge is the lack of data on gender—no government statistics and little information through universities or Non-Government Organizations. This lack of data created obvious problems for feminist praxis. In the absence of "big picture" research, I emphasized remedies oriented toward individuals, such as mentoring.

But in a discussion on mentoring with women leaders in business, politics, education, and NGOs, one Pakistani colleague reminded me that until the government and other institutions adopt policies prohibiting sexual harassment and sex discrimination, mentoring alone won't overcome the impediments women face. They need Western feminists to address topics such as Islamophobia, violence (manifest particularly through warfare), and the economic injustice that our countries' foreign policies cause—as well as the roles that media and multinational corporations play in perpetuating all three. Building transnational feminist solidarity is more urgent than ever.

How can we do this?

Here's one way. Shortly after I arrived in Pakistan, I learned about a young Fulbright scholar who had just returned from his ancestral village where unpiloted drones had bombed his kinsmen and kinswomen. We can take a firm stand against the U.S. policy of bombing civilians.

Here's another way. Apply for a Fulbright grant to teach in countries such as Belarus or Pakistan. Funding is available, and universities are eager to host scholar-teachers in social sciences and the humanities. Today's Fulbright grants are more flexible than the traditional one-year model. Your stay can be as short as two weeks or as long as a year, and you need not be a regional specialist. There are programs for administrators, too. I'm happy to help you prepare an application. Contact me at colettemorrow@aol.com or check http://www.cies.org/us_scholars/.