

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION

Women's History Month 2005

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible.

(Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Susan Turell Dept. WMNS

Course Number and Name WMNS 490 Semester completed Spring 2004

Title of Nominated Work CUNT

CATEGORY: Sampson:
Undergraduate Research Paper
Undergraduate Project
Graduate

☒ See
☒ Olson
☐ Kessler
☐ Turell
☐ Belter

STUDENT INFORMATION:

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****WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.

TO: WMNS Awards Committee Judges

FROM: Susan C. Turell 

January 26, 2005

I am pleased to nominate Alyson Pilch's paper "Cunt" for a 2005 Women's Studies award. Her paper was an assignment for the WMNS 490 class (Feminist Theories), in which students were asked to integrate the themes from their chosen book to ideas from the course text and other book excerpts chosen by their classmates. Alyson's chose the book *Cunt*. As you can read in her paper, reading this book was a powerful experience for Alyson. It challenged her to question previously held assumptions. In her paper, she demonstrated an understanding of the ideas of the book as well as how to apply those ideas to one's life. Further, she was able to tie those ideas to other feminist writings, noting both similarities and differences. Throughout her paper, her writing style was informal and engaging, and her carefully chosen words were effective in making her points. I was pleased to read in her own voice how reading feminist theory could change a young woman's life and perspectives on the world.

CUNT
WMNS 490/Current Debates in Feminist
Theories and Methods
Spring 2004
By Alyson Pilch

Cunt, a declaration of independence

Cunt by Inga Muscio is truly a book that helps to empower women, both internally and outwardly. The subtitle is exactly what the book represents, a declaration of independence. It offers readers a chance to connect with other women by learning and understanding others experiences; it allows the reader to apply these experiences to their own life adventures. *Cunt* is an awaking book, at least for myself; it made me really question some of my daily norms. One woman described the book as being about freedom; "the all-purpose, common-denominator, one-word synopsis of *Cunt* that I (Muscio) like best. *Cunt* is a product of my freedom and my need to be in a free world with free people."

My hesitation about reading this book wasn't about fear or judgement, it was about misunderstanding. The title in itself is so powerful, *Cunt...Cunt...geez...Cunt*. How could one not feel a little uneasy picking it up for the first time? It is interesting how my perceptions of a certain word in the English language can be so extremely different from another. I have always put a bad connotation with the word cunt, in my opinion, it stood for everything I hate or are taught to hate about women and myself for that matter. By gaining an understanding and being introduced to its original origins, my perception changed again. I spent 22 years of my life hating the word cunt and everything I thought it stood for. It is only now after reading this book that I will no longer feel this way. *Cunt* challenged me to question other terms that I have associated with women, i.e. bitch and whore. My interpretations to these words were so shameful, and why I wonder? These words all convey negative meanings about women, but all

happen to have once had totally positive associations with women, I really wonder where and when these changes occurred.

It is through language that we can communicate feelings and experiences, but when language is turned into a manipulative sense in order to control something, things get difficult. After reading *Cunt*, I have now started to reexamine much of today's language. English is considered the "universal language" because it represents "the victors of history's present telling." I have never really appreciated the power of words, actual meanings or modified. This passage from *Cunt* really stood out about language... "Words outlive people, institutions, civilizations. Words spur images, associations, memories, inspirations and synapse pulsations. Words send off physical resonations of thought into the nethersphere. Words hurt, soothe, inspire, demean, demand, incite, pacify, teach, romance, pervert, unite, divide. Words be powerful. Grown-ups and children are not readily encouraged to unearth the power of words. Adults are repeatedly assured a picture is worth a thousand of them, while the playground response to almost any verbal taunt is 'sticks and stone may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' I don't beg so much as command to differ." Women must seize a vocabulary for ourselves. I am now learning more times than not words that once had a positive association with women are now being altered. Positive to negative, negative to positive how could one not get confused. Words are used to communicate and although I have been mislead for years, I now know how much of an impact a word can have on someone, even a word like cunt.

Cunt is about a woman's freedom. To be free with one's body; with one's mind; with one's soul: honestly to be completely free with oneself. I have tried to relate *Cunt*,

first and foremost, with my personal experiences. I have opened doors that were once shut; I have challenged norms that were once unchallenged and I have broken free from my close-mindedness. *Cunt* didn't teach me how to be a better person it just gave me the confidence to try to be. I know that everyone is unique and different, people have different backgrounds and cultures, different values and ideals, different dreams and aspirations, but all-the-same people have feelings. Awaking the inner-feminist inside all women is, in my opinion, one of *Cunt's* main objectives. I have learned that although my personal experiences might be completely different from another woman's, I am still able to learn from her life, as she is able to learn from me. And this will in turn forever connect us through a bond of womanhood.

Each and every woman has an inner-feminist; the distinguishing factor of the inner-feminist is how its (do I dare say) ruler perceives it. The inner-feminist may be a cunt, a hag, a spinster, a shadow-beast or a phantasm; it all depends on how you want to distinguish it. Audre Lourde describes her inner-feminist as "a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, "beautiful/and tough as chestnut/stanchions against (y)our nightmare weakness/"** and of impotence." She continues in *Sister Outsider* by saying, "These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep." Gloria Anzaldua has a different description of her inner-feminist; it is not a dark place rather the opposite, alive and well. "There is a rebel in me—the Shadow-Beast. It

is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts." *Cunt* believes that a cunt, the anatomical jewel, is what bonds all women together. Once our realization of uniting all women occurs our inner-feminist will be set free. We must take responsibility for our cunts and let our inner-feminist work for a better way of life. Muscio believes we need to stop fighting with our minds and take action and responsibility.

One of *Cunt*'s aspirations is to contribute to a language and philosophy specifically designed to empower and unite all women. I questioned if this is at all possible. *Willful Virgin* seemed unsure, Marilyn Frye described how women are categorized in the "concept of women" which is the established idea of what a woman is... age, class, race, etc. She made me question if we see all women as the same or do we discredit these categories and recognize the differences. Audre Lorde states, "We have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion." I believe that we must recognize these differences, but can't we use them to our advantage? In my opinion, it is better to put an army together of different backgrounds and experiences rather than not building an army at all. Women sharing

similarities and experiences all while having different backgrounds allows for consciousness-raising. And isn't this what we are looking for; it would assist in the realization of women being oppressed and help to promote taking steps forward to challenge the way we are forced to live. Ignoring to see these differences will allow for a sense of invisibility and nothingness. As Adrienne Rich stated in *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, "When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing." We must overcome this nothingness or this perceived nothingness. Honestly. Audre Lorde states, "It is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation."

As stated in *Cunt*, "Personal experience has proven to be a very effective way for women to communicate. Sharing individual knowledge contributes to the whole, and has been a foundation of women's power, in cultures spanning the globe, since time out of mind." Marilyn Frye does believe that it is in the consciousness-raising conversations among women (however intentionally or unintentionally joined) that women discover that similar "anomalies" occur in most of their lives and that those "anomalies" taken together form a pattern, or many patterns." She believes that there are two sides that are collectively perceived to fit together into a coherent whole. "The happy side of this is that we learn we are not sick or monstrous and we learn to trust our perception. The

unhappy side is that the coherent whole we discover is a pattern of oppression.” Frye believes that through the communication of women we will recognize that it is in the structures of men’s stories that women are made weak, but collectively women can generate a picture of ourselves and the world within which we are strong. “The consciousness-raising process reveals us to ourselves as authoritative perceivers which are neither men nor the fantastical, impossible feminine beings which populate the men’s world-story. Our existence is not inherently paradoxical or problematic. Our existence is an indigestible mass of discrepant data for the patriarchal world-story.”

Naomi Wolf questions consciousness-raising as mainstream women have been beginning to experiment with it in the media after a gain in power. “The female imagination was investigating images newfound worldly power, the imagination of some feminism was producing exactly the wrong images for the time: images of helplessness, silence, pain and defeat.” Was it really the women who gained this status of power and determined the imagery we see with feminism or was it patriarchy? Patriarchy is what shapes our society. Honestly what will patriarchy demand next? Mary Daly describes the rituals of FGM (female genital mutilation) as “a spread of this atrocity was condoned, legitimated, demanded by the World Religion which is patriarchy.” Gyn/Ecology describes some of the barriers designed by patriarchy to stop the “Journey of women” from finding themselves and each other. Being anything from an obsession of purity to behavioral patterns. Patriarchy demands on women are absurd; it is time to take back and regain our femininity. *Cunt* believes in order to reestablish “a close relationship with my cunt, I must take responsibility not only for what it is to me today, but everything it has become due to the seemingly endless throng of spin doctors, past and present.”

The status of power women hold should be a realization for all women, young or old. Muscio states, "For young girls in this society, coming into the power we are born with is no easy task. As children, our power is not culled out of us as it is for boys. Still, culling power is—above and beyond all social conditioning—very surmountable task to which womankind collectively rises higher each day." The female body is a powerful being arguably the most powerful being on Earth, unfortunately also one of the mostly controlled powers of today. Blood, birth, sexuality any sort of power women's bodies hold regulations and restrictions are placed. We are taught to remain discreet about menstruating as if it is a bad thing, a secret thing. We have regulations and health codes to follow when pondering abortions. And it is heterosexual relationships or nothing. No one ever discusses how our uteruses are almost exactly like the moon, shedding and growing...shedding and growing...shedding and growing. Or we don't need to look to the outside for healing, for each person is a healer within. Or sexuality isn't up to a council, a community, a government; it is up to an individual. Rape is another serious topic that *Cunt* touched on. Muscio states, "I go to great lengths to make it seem like I'm not fettered to the violence—and subsequent injustice of the American legal system—that my cunt can potentially inspire. But I ain't foolin' nobody. Certainly not myself. I'm fully privy to the reality that my cunt's presence on my body can inspire people with cocks to attempt to exert their power by attempting to humiliate me. I have no illusions about what happens to women in 'the wrong place at the wrong time'. I have seen to many movies, read too many newspapers, watched too many episodes of *Unsolved Mysteries*." Susan Griffin discusses in her *An Anthology of Writings* the seriousness of rape. "I wrote 'The Politics of Rape' in 1970; during this time, rape was not generally

written
on
abortion?

perceived as a political issue, and to call it one seemed a daring and extreme act. And it was not then common to use the pronoun 'I' in a political essay, or to begin such an essay by describing one's emotions." Susan Griffin's stylistic writing choice was purposeful and reflected the feminist thought that the 'personal is political.' She found it difficult to express her beliefs on rape because she had to struggle with seeing past all the old assumptions about rape. When a certain label and description is placed on something it is definitely hard to overcome and look past, as I have realized throughout all experiences in life.

I think people forget that they can make up their own minds; they don't have to be influenced by peers, media, and politics. It is evident that men want women to remain silent at all costs. The enforced silence of women allows men's fear of us and our sexual power to reign unchallenged. Mary Daly states, "Indeed this profound silencing of the mind's imagination critical powers is one basic foundation...it teaches women never to forget to murder their own divinity." Silence has not improved women's lives past or present.

Cunt, a very radical collection of experiences, wants us to take responsibility for our cunts, as I have said before. Other responsibilities women have to overcome to end this oppression Muscio believes are: developing a vocabulary for ourselves; actively teaching ourselves to perceive cunts—ours and others'—in a manner generating understanding and empathy; taking this knowledge out into the community; learning self-protection; seeking out and supporting cuntlovin' artists, businesses, media and role models; using our power as consumers; and keeping our money in a community of cuntlovin' women. Audre Lorde also has a very radical perspective she writes from

wanting to reconstruct the system. "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Loxrde challenges the master's tool: the ideals, the values, the process... she believes through the use of the master's tools, we will overcome our oppression. Marilyn Frye's feminist perspective is also radical; "many of us have rewritten many chapters of our own lives and are living lives neither we nor our mothers would have imagined possible, or even imagined at all. We have deconstructed canons, re-periodized history, revised language, dissolved disciplines, added a huge case of characters and broken most of the rules of logic and good taste." Unfortunately we have also discovered our own vast ignorance of other women of our time. We have once more detected that we have overlooked or misunderstood the truths and the experiences of other groups of women. We have ourselves been overlooked and misunderstood by some other segment or school of feminist thought... it is what we must continue to overcome.

Through the words of Inga Muscio, I have learned how important it is to connect with others but more so how important it is to trust oneself. For no one can tell you who to be or how to be: you should just be. Be by your own standards, be by your own regulations, be by your own ideals. Be true. Be your freedom. Be.