Speech accepting New People Award, May 2006

Shalom, yinz!

Thanks to the Merton Center and past and current awardees for their work toward that peace that comes not as the absence of war but as a result of justice. Timmy, thanks for being the bearer of this wonderful news. It's great to be in such good company, even if now my phone is tapped! I will try to keep the conversations interesting.

Thanks to Phil Wion and Marianne Novy, my AAUP comrades who helped me write the testimony I delivered last Fall before the Select Committee hearing on "liberal bias" in the academy.

Thanks to my friends and colleagues and students who came to celebrate with us tonight, esp. my Poetry Appreciation Group: Maggie, Katie, and Lisa P. Along with Amelia, you remind me that we all want both bread and roses - and "bread and roses" is not too much to demand.

Some people have asked me for the full text of the words I quoted when Jeremy asked me to say something for his story about this event. Here it is: "It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting." - Simone de Beauvoir

The freedom to produce "knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives" is the freedom to demystify life. One of my mentors, Pauline Bart, says demystifying life for women is the first duty of a feminist academic. Freedom to produce demystified knowledge, "knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives," is at the top of my reasons to fight for academic freedom. It is gratifying and inspiring to be honored for the research I have been doing on the costs of taking a beating, on the intersections of battering and employment in the context of welfare reform. That freedom matters enormously for me, for the students whose research I guide (esp. Danielle Ficco), for my co-investigator, Lorraine Higgins, and for the welfare recipients and battered women of Allegheny County.
But freedom to study, write about, and teach the projects rooted in the integrity of our lives and struggles is only part of what we are celebrating and honoring tonight. We are also honoring scholar/activists willing to bite the hands that feed us. Academic freedom means being free to criticize the Powers That Be on campus and in government, even though our livelihoods depend on them.

Karl Mannheim, a neo-Marxist sociologist of knowledge, distinguishes between “ideology” and “utopia.” Mannheim reminds us to fight for academic freedoms that help us burst the limits of the present order. Otherwise, the idea of academic freedom just reinforces the libertarian ideologies that keep academics isolated, competitive, and complicit.

Example from a 2-handed sociologist:
On the one hand, it was imperative that I stand with the University of Pittsburgh administration in defending my colleagues in social work, sociology, women's studies, and cultural studies from the surreal inquiry by the Select Committee on higher education. The main witness at the hearings blasted these programs by name for teaching about and promoting the subversive, anti-American values of diversity, social justice, and critical approaches to inequality.

How surreal is that?! I will happily appear before any panel, anywhere, any time, to stand up for the subversive, anti-American character of social justice!

It still amazes me that the witness from the National Association of Scholars could sit there and attack academics for focusing on social justice - without blushing. But the fact is, he did it. I was proud that the Provost told the right-wing legislator who instigated the hearings (who represents a congressional district where school boards have tried to mandate teaching Creationism in biology classes - just in case things needed to be a little more surreal) that he should go red-bait people somewhere else. Real academic freedom rebuts the “topia” – the confining “what is” of the conservative campaign of anti-intellectual conformism – with the “utopia” of researching and teaching diversity, social justice, and critical approaches to inequality, no matter how anti-American that might be.
On the other hand, that same Provost represents a University administration that has used the rhetoric of academic freedom to thwart faculty organizing, to rationalize resisting contributing to City revenues, and to avoid providing equal benefits for GLBT workers. Worst of all, the ideology of academic freedom concedes to a logic of privatization, commercialization, and corporatization in the academy that jeopardizes both the mission of the university and the possibility of academic freedom to produce "knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives" without concern for profit or fear of retaliation.

So let me thank the Thomas Merton Center for supporting the fine examples of scholar-activists and the best sense of “academic freedom”: the non-pejorative, utopian sense of creating knowledge and taking action that requires us to transform the system that privileges our credentials and expects us to be quietly grateful for becoming part of the military-industrial-therapeutic-entrepreneurial machine that is the university today. Thank you for this opportunity to rededicate ourselves to being what the lesbian poet Judy Grahn calls a fly in the elephant's nose.

Elephant Poem

Suppose you have an elephant
with 56 millimeter trunk
and say he’s

tearing up the jungle
(say you think he’s drunk
or crazy)
How’re you going to bring that elephant down?
lion can’t
bear could but don’t want to
and the panther’s too small for that job.

Then suppose you have an elephant
with a million millimeter trunk
and his jungle is the whole green world?
(and drunk
and crazy)
you see the problem.
one more word
about elephants
No matter how hard they try
elephants cannot pick their noses
any more than bankers can hand out money
or police put away their pistols
or politicians get right with God.

a sty
in the elephant’s eye
aint nothing
but a fly in his nose
is a serious if not fatal condition

when the fly
gets into that nostril
it begins to swell
and stay closed
he can’t smell can’t drink can’t think
can’t get one up
on anybody
he beings to regret
all that flabby ammunition
hanging on him
he begins to wish
he’d been a little more bare-faced
like an ape or a fish
all those passageways
he needs to feed himself
tied up

ELEPHANT TURNED UPSIDE DOWN
by a fly
a million flies
outweigh a trunk
a tank
a bank
a million flies
outthink a pile of IBM
junk
we must be wise  
to the elephant’s lies  
you may think we should try  
to sober him up  
but the trouble isn’t that he’s drunk  
the trouble is  
that he’s an elephant  
with a multi-millimeter trunk  
who believes the world is his jungle  
and until he dies  
he grows and grows  

we must be flies  
in the elephant’s nose  
ready to carry on  
in every town  
you know there are butterflies  
there are horse flies and house flies  
blue flies, shoo flies and it’s-not-true flies  
then there are may flies and wood flies  
but I’m talking about  
can flies & do flies  
bottle flies, rock flies and sock flies  
dragonflies and fireflies  
in the elephant’s nose  
ready to carry on  
til he goes down