Revisiting the "Men Problem" in Introductory Women's Studies Classes

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Abstract
Outside women's studies classrooms, discourses of white masculinity under siege are proliferating with devastating consequences for women and people of color. Indeed, in each of the most reactionary domestic political events and trends of the past five or so years the social group most united in the support of reaction has been young white men, from the 1994 "Republican revolution," to California's propositions 187 and 209. Yet, against the backdrop of globalized labor markets and diffusing corporatization, the manifest destiny of being young, white, and male in the United States now seems to many like a cruel promise; in the face of this uncertainty, it makes a kind of sense that white guys could feel powerless, experiencing social policies like affirmative action and political projects like feminism (and "identity politics" generally) as antagonistic to their self-actualization. Nor is it any surprise that Hollywood films like Falling Down, the four Lethal Weapon movies, and Die Hard depict the angry return of the vanquished white male (usually at the hands of affirmative action, immigration/ greedy foreigners, or an uppity woman). At the same time, though, a new, highly commodified, kick-ass "feminism" has emerged on the popular culture horizon. Here, seemingly more transgressive images like those in Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Terminator 2 blend with the Spice Girls and Nike ads to imply that liberation requires only individualistic attitude adjustment as opposed to reconfiguring institutional power relations.¹ These are just some of the features of gender relations as they appear in a few registers of contemporary U.S. social life, but they are enough to evoke the daunting stakes faced by students and teachers of women's studies.

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