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Article abstract

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Logo Surfaces

Disciplining Women

Feminism or Women's Studies

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the university's disciplinary organization, this essay analyzes the epistemological and programmatic relationships between women's studies, feminism and deconstruction.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet essai analyse, dans le cadre de l'organisation des disciplines universitaires, les relations épistémologiques et programmatiques qu'entretiennent les Etudes féminines et la déconstruction.

It has become standard fare in popular journalism in North America to bash Women's Studies for its lack of academic rigor, to announce that feminism is over, and to continue a campaign that denounces deconstruction as a form of nihilism that is generally bad for one's cultural health. What's more, various forms of these pronouncements have taken up an increasing amount of space in serious academic journals and books. I will say from the outset that I am not ready to jump on these bandwagons, however popular it may be to do so. Instead, in this essay I will discuss the value of thinking women's studies, feminism, and deconstruction alongside one another. Specifically, I am going to focus on how Women's Studies is situated in the academy by examining its relationship to feminism and to deconstruction. While the first of these relationships may seem obvious, the other may come as a bit of a surprise. But if we think back to the enthusiasm with which

women's studies, feminism, and deconstruction have all been denounced, it may lead to the conclusion that this is more than a mere coincidence, that there may in fact be some things that they all share. I would suggest that certainly one of these things is their commitment to a serious critique of established cultural and political institutions, including the university. Placing deconstruction alongside women's studies and feminism, then, raises some productive questions about the force of institutionalization and, particularly in the context of this essay, the academic institutionalization of the study of women.

To begin with, Women's Studies is thought by many to be a discipline created by feminism as a response to a society and a university structure that did not meet its needs.¹ Almost by definition, Women's Studies is an attempt to rethink the disciplinary organization of the university. First, by refusing to limit itself strictly to the academy, by appealing to a wider community of women, it has challenged the division between academic and popular feminism. Second, by potentially appealing to scholars belonging to almost every traditional discipline, it has provoked a reevaluation of the disciplinary borders which have divided feminism from itself.

In these respects, Women's Studies has promoted a radical rethinking of the disciplinary structure of the university. For, as Jane Gallop (following Elaine Marks's lead) suggests, Women's Studies is not "a mere region of knowledge supplementing traditional disciplines."² Rather, according to Gallop and Marks, Women's Studies alters the very subject of knowledge by calling "into question what is considered knowledge in any discipline."³ Women's Studies, then, is not simply one more interdisciplinary program on the academic menu; the radical epistemological move on the part of Women's Studies partially deconstructs the whole notion of the university.

I purposely use the word "deconstructs" here, because I would argue that the general concerns of Women's Studies closely match what Derrida envisions as some of the results of deconstructive interrogation of the university. To move Derrida's general remarks about the university into the more specific site of Women's Studies, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that, in the name of feminism, Women's Studies sets out "to transform the modes of writing, approaches to pedagogy, the procedures of academic exchange, the relation to languages, to other disciplines, to the institution in general, to its inside and its outside."⁴

In making my deconstructive case for the close affiliation between feminism and Women's Studies, however, I do not wish to leave the impression that feminism is restricted in the academy to Women's Studies. Women's Studies is an important, but certainly not the only, institutional location for feminism; moreover, feminism is directed at concerns other than women. Likewise, not all of Women's Studies is feminist. It is possible to make women the subject or object of investigation without bringing feminism into the picture, and not all versions of feminism will feel equally at home in all Women's Studies programs. For example, the focus on women's experience in some versions of Women's Studies would be seriously at odds with feminism that calls the entire notion of experience into question. Significantly, Women's Studies as a discipline does not proffer either a

consensual acceptance or rejection of "experience." Women's Studies can exist as a discipline without a consensual affirmation of female experience. To put this in the simplest terms, Women's Studies is more than feminism, just as feminism is more than Women's Studies. And in this sense, there is a way in which feminism, at the heart of Women's Studies from the beginning, is also an outsider to Women's Studies. And this is not necessarily a bad thing. Part of what makes feminism such a potentially disruptive force within the academy is precisely this lack of complete congruence with Women's Studies. While feminism may most readily be recognized by the academy as located within Women's Studies programs or departments, it also has invaded any number of disciplines. Feminists have at times even been suspicious of the risk of ghettoization that Women's Studies as a /pp. 7-8/ discipline may encourage. In short, the work of feminism is not to construct its own cell in the academic beehive but rather to challenge the notion of institutional construction, of academic disciplinary isolation, *tout court*.[5](#)

Thus far I have painted a very positive picture of Women's Studies, arguing for its subversive, often feminist effects on the academy. But does Women's Studies always work in the best interests of feminism? Could Gayatri Spivak be correct when she suggests that, in fact, Women's Studies is just another branch office of humanist philosophy?[6](#)

Women's Studies has been known to conform to very traditional understandings of what women are supposed to be and do. For instance, charges of racism and homophobia have been levied against Women's Studies programs for finding their disciplinary coherence in an idea of woman that is predominantly white and straight. In the same breath, the problems that go along with identity politics have long haunted Women's Studies. And if it's possible to breathe in even more here, the disciplinary innovation, which has been the hallmark of Women's Studies, has sometimes fallen by the wayside when Women's Studies installs itself into the academic framework like any other discipline. Women's Studies students answering multiple choice questions by filling in circles on computer scan sheets with number two pencils is hardly a radical departure from the daily grind of the academy.[7](#)

At the same time that Women's Studies tries to challenge disciplinary boundaries and constitute a new field of knowledge, it risks instituting its own rules, regulations, and laws that can prove just as oppressive as those of any other discipline. For example, Women's Studies may want to reflect on its traditions and methodologies, but is a course on the classic texts of Women's Studies necessarily the answer? By relying on a notion of "classics," would Women's Studies just be creating an exclusionary canon where it should be critiquing the very notion of a classic?

There are, however, practical considerations behind the need for Women's Studies to act like its neighboring disciplines. However much it might seem undesirable for Women's Studies to consider itself a discipline at all, it cannot altogether ignore the constrictions of university budgeting. If Women's Studies is to be a part of the academy, there comes a point when it must think about the practicalities of funding: How will the staff be paid? Do the instructors give their time to Women's Studies for free? Are students

forced to take overly large classes? In what ways will the program have contact with the larger community?⁸

These are only a few of the practical questions that begin to take over the economic life of Women's Studies. But budgetary questions should not be an excuse for Women's Studies to engage in exclusionary practices that reflect a desire for disciplinary uniformity. Christina Crosby is right to suggest that "dealing with the fact of differences is *the* project of Women's Studies today."⁹ And these difference will not be done justice if Women's Studies does not reflect critically on its own practices. For as Crosby recognizes "the challenge is not to purify Women's Studies or the academy, but to question constantly our most powerful concepts."¹⁰ If an important feature of Women's Studies is its interrogation of what constitutes the university, then Women's Studies also should not forget to interrogate what legitimates the division between its own inside and outside.

And this is perhaps where deconstruction comes in again, at the point where disciplinary institution blinds Women's Studies to its own exclusions and inclusions, at the point where Women's Studies might take itself, its functioning, and its purpose for granted. This is not to suggest, however, that deconstruction comes in from the outside as a methodology that will rescue /pp. 10-11/ Women's Studies from itself. The impossibility of that particular relationship should be the lesson of the *pharmakon*. Rather, deconstruction is what allows us to think the strange articulation of feminism and Women's Studies, by reminding us that the theoretical analysis and practical politics of feminism cannot simply take on institutional forms. By making institutional critiques, feminism and deconstruction can remind Women's Studies that it is an institution, while Women's Studies can remind feminism and deconstruction that they have to take the institution seriously.

These are not, I think, easy things of which to be reminded. It will take more than a little memo attached to our work that says "Do Not Forget The Institution." At a time when the future of Women's Studies -- not to mention feminism and deconstruction -- hangs in the balance of university budgets, its continued success, or even existence, depends on it being able to address institutional questions effectively. In this regard, perhaps what it shares with deconstruction and feminism is the possibility of a certain institutional normalization: the danger of developing a fatal methodological rigidity as the price of its very institutional success.

I do not want to believe that nothing guarantees the failure of epistemologically radical programs like Women's Studies as does success. Rather, I would like to end by saying that I hope the success of Women's Studies will lead to a transformation of institutional practices, a cross-disciplinarity that will hold open, rather than foreclose, the questions of what women are and what women can do.

NOTES

¹This essay was made possible by the financial assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the Québec Fonds

pour la Formation de Chercheurs et l'Aide à la Recherche (FCAR). Portions of it have been previously published in *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyrne* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

[2](#)Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 18. Gallop is making reference to Elaine Marks's article, "Breaking the Bread: Gestures toward Other Structures, Other Discourses," *Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 13 (Spring 1980).

[3](#)Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 18. Gallop concludes that the strength of "women's studies" lies in its "peculiar vantage point as neither quite subject nor object, but in a framework which sees that vantage as an advantage and not a shortcoming" (16). Both Gallop and Marks also echo Adrienne Rich's earlier remarks that women's studies does not broaden some "real" curriculum but rather challenges the very disciplinary foundations of the university. (Adrienne Rich, "Women's Studies — Renaissance or Revolution?", *Women's Studies* 3 (1976), 123-4.) Rich argues for the radical potential of women's studies, which she understands as "a pledge of resistance" (122).

[4](#)Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils," *Diacritics* 13 (1983), 17.

[5](#)Derrida explores this point in "Women in the Beehive," *Men in Feminism*, ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 191.

[6](#) Gayatri Spivak, with Ellen Rooney, "In a Word. Interview," *differences* 1,2 (Summer 1989), 144. Let me also say right away that I do not think that the problems with women's studies can be solved by changing the name to "Gender Studies." This name change would only sidestep the problems, not answer them, and would go a long way in removing any institutional and political threat that "women's studies" might pose. As Joan Scott rightly argues, "'gender' includes, but does not name woman," and so seems to pose no critical threat" [Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988)], 31.

[7](#)For a provocative critique of the pedagogy of women's studies, see: bell hooks, "toward a revolutionary feminist pedagogy," *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989).

[8](#)For more detailed discussions of these questions, see: Margaret L. Anderson, "Changing the Curriculum in Higher Education," *Signs* 12, 2 (1987); *Theories of Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); Marilyn J. Boxer, "For and About Women: The Theory and Practice of Women's Studies in the United States," *Signs* 7,3 (1982); Saskia Grotenhuis, "Women's Studies in the Netherlands: A Successful Institutionalization?," *Feminist Studies* 15, 3 (Fall 1989); Lynette McGrath, "An Ethical Justification of Women's Studies; or What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?," *Hypatia* 6,2 (Summer 1991); Catherine R. Stimpson, "What matter mind: A theory about the practice of Women's Studies," *Women's Studies* 1 (1973); *Women's Studies and the Curriculum*, ed. Marianne Triplette (Winston-Salem, NC:

Salem College), 1983. McGrath probably sums up the problem best when she argues that "in the bureaucratic, finite world of the university, as women's studies gains power it will also contribute to the exclusionary effects of all academic choices and of all efforts to valorize one set of materials, principles, persons, and points of view over another" (142).

[9](#)Christina Crosby, "Dealing with Differences," *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 131. Crosby finds that the problem US women's studies has in dealing with difference lies in its methodology. According to Crosby, "much of US women's studies is still bound to an empiricist historicism which is the flip side of the idealism scorned and disavowed by feminisms" (136).

[10](#)Crosby, "Dealing with Differences," *Feminists Theorize the Political*, 142.
