

## IS WOMEN'S STUDIES DEAD?

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What motivates the question “is Women’s Studies dead?” Firstly, a number of scholars have recently suggested that its demise is necessary and/or inevitable (Brown “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies”; Brown, *Politics out of History*; Patai; Martin). Secondly, in Anglo-American culture, there are numerous contemporary accounts of a move into an era of third wave feminism in which Women’s Studies seems misplaced and anachronistic (Findlen; Walker; Maglin and Perry; Heywood and Drake). And, thirdly, the strength and breadth of criticisms of Women’s Studies appear to be on the increase (Ahmed *et al*; Jackson), impelling more Women’s Studies scholars themselves to address the issue of the downfall of Women’s Studies and its necessary resuscitation.

It may appear that I have a predictable desire in defending its teaching and practice and arguing against its extinction as I currently teach in a Women’s Studies center. However, what lies at the root of my interest is a three-fold, potentially paradoxical view. I agree with many of the contemporary criticisms; I disagree with many of the arguments put forward by practitioners of Women’s Studies for its continuance; yet, I still harbor a desire for it to prevail. How do I justify this apparently contradictory judgement? Why do I entertain some remnants of value in Women’s Studies? To address these questions and the issue of the imminent dissolution of the field, I will elaborate on the criticisms and defenses of Women’s Studies particularly in the context of subject-based enquiry. I will then offer an alternative way to think about the ensuing impasse between the two positions utilising Wendy Brown’s recent interpretations of the work of Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin in *Politics out of History*.

## **Women's Studies Must Die!**

From its genesis, Women's Studies has been plagued by problems emanating from a plethora of critical constituencies. These critical constituencies might be divided into two broad camps: the first includes the more traditional sceptics of Women's Studies, such as the university establishment, women's organizations outside the university and sometimes Women's Studies students themselves; the second group includes more contemporary and perhaps less predictable detractors.<sup>2</sup>

Let me briefly detail the complaints from the "traditional sceptics." The university establishment has always been sceptical about the value of Women's Studies. The suspicion is that Women's Studies is "too political" and not scholarly enough, a view which mirrors public and popular perceptions about the inadequate character of Women's Studies and a mistrust about its place in institutions of higher education (Cramer and Russo; Evans 17). Although, clearly, universities have permitted Women's Studies programs and centers into the academy and indeed some have survived and flourished, they are often run on the un-/under-paid labor of female academics (Skeggs 480), and on shoe-string budgets, making such programs vulnerable in times of economic cut-backs and re-structuring plans. Conversely, women's organizations outside the university frequently complain that Women's Studies has become "too academic," or "too theoretical" and as such has less and less to say about what is happening to "real" women in the "real" world. Sometimes this attitude is reinforced by Women's Studies students who frequently rail against the requirement to study theory and, additionally, often expect emotional as well as intellectual support as a route to providing them with the tools to "change their lives" (Skeggs 482; Jackson 31).

The brevity of this foray into traditional criticisms of Women's Studies is not meant to underplay their importance; rather it indicates my view that it is the criticisms from the less traditional and more recent sceptics that have more fundamentally cut into the heart of contemporary Women's Studies theory and practice. Women's Studies students bring universities income, and so as long as it remains economically viable for such programs to continue, many may well survive. And the scholars who run them will continue to cope with the ever-increasing demands to sustain, nurture and breathe life into Women's Studies. "Women's Studies...is taking a kicking and we are the body bags. It is in these conditions that we will continue to fight" (Skeggs 483). But we need to move on to engage with the question – what is it about Women's Studies that makes contemporary sceptics crave its dissolution?

### **Unsettling Women's Studies: Dropping the Subject**

A major reason why contemporary sceptics crave the dissolution of Women's Studies is because of its inflexible adherence to the subject of woman. According to one influential critic, this has made Women's Studies:

politically and theoretically incoherent, and tacitly conservative. It is incoherent because by definition it circumscribes uncircumscribable "women" as an object of study, and it is conservative because it must, finally resist all objections to such circumscription: hence the persistent theory wars, and race wars, and sex wars, notoriously ravaging women's studies (Brown, *Politics out of History* 34).

Elaborating on her view regarding the impossibility of women's studies Brown concedes

that as a critique of the ubiquitous misogynist, masculinist, and sexist norms in academic institutions, Women's Studies was "politically important and intellectually creative" but, nevertheless, concludes that today "there is no such thing as women's studies (*Politics out of History* 34). She offers this bleak conclusion because, in her view, Women's Studies is not sustainable in the face of the swathe of theoretical objections to its singular project. Biddy Martin similarly rebukes contemporary practitioners of Women's Studies who obstinately hold fast to the insularity and self-righteousness that its attachment to its originary subject invokes. Affirming Brown's prognosis, Martin suggests that "women's studies has lost much of its critical and intellectual vigor" (353). This is the case because women's studies is impelled to insist on its defense of its theoretical foundations which results in a "stultifying entrenchment" (354).

As indicated earlier, a host of other critics share Brown and Martin's judgement apropos the intellectual and political poverty of contemporary Women's Studies. Queer theorists' distrust of the practices of Women's Studies lies in the latter's proclivity to bind the parameters of what sexed subjects "can be." As women and feminists of color have demonstrated scholars' ignorance about the ways in which discourses and structures of racism permeate Women's Studies, queer theorists illustrate how the augmentation of the institution of heterosexuality is effected by the ontological and epistemological conviction concerning the status of "woman." Transgender theorists deplore the apparent inability of Women's Studies scholarship to countenance the idea of bodily "sex" not being identical to subjective gender. Third wave feminists – an emergent and disparate grouping<sup>3</sup> – appear committed to working with a feminism that strategically combines "equity feminism...gender feminism, along with poststructuralism...black feminism,

women-of-color feminism, working-class feminism, pro-sex feminism, and so on” (Heywood and Drake 3). This combination tends to insinuate that a place for Women’s Studies, in its conventional format, would be doubtful.

The relationship between third wave feminism and postfeminism is indeterminate, though there is a sense that each shares a discontent with feminist principles and practices attached to the second wave.<sup>4</sup> This impression is compounded by the connection of both groupings with younger women and feminists; younger, that is, than the women and feminists credited with the development of second wave feminism. What is held in particular disdain is the putative second wave propensity to position women as victims and in a constant antithetical relationship with men and masculinity. Given these views, traditional orthodoxies in Women’s Studies would clearly appear to be unwelcome in third wave and postfeminist domains. To be sure, the term “postfeminism” seems to have been taken up more readily by the media – evidently ever happy to find ways to condemn feminism – and in popular representations of feminism (see Roiphe; Deneffeld; Faludi; Walters). Despite misgivings that the media and many popular feminist texts offer inadequate renditions of contemporary feminist thought, nevertheless, both tap into and circulate ideas about feminism, particularly a feminism which is tainted with second wave principles, all adding to a general aura of contempt for feminism and Women’s Studies, suggesting the latter’s demise would be welcome.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Women’s Studies scholars themselves are among those who berate the practices of their field, though this castigation is exhibited more conspicuously in the US than elsewhere. In addition to Brown, central articulators of the arguments in this arena include Daphne Patai and Joan Mandle.<sup>5</sup> A key problem for Patai and Mandle

concerns the distance Women's Studies has contrived between itself, other feminist scholars and the university institution. They express particular anxiety about the tendency for Women's Studies scholars to create an alternative set of ideological and academic practices. Patai asks: "is women's studies an integral part of academe, or should it embrace permanent outsider status?" (8). She confirms that outsider status is not her favored location for Women's Studies. What emerges as a particularly significant factor in the debate about the current value of Women's Studies among Women's Studies scholars is the difficulties encountered around "going public" with criticisms from "within." Patai suggests that Mandle's questioning of Women's Studies positions her as a "heretic," a view confirmed for Patai by anecdotal evidence collected at the US *National Women's Studies Association* meetings, where "a number of women acknowledged the internal difficulties besetting their programs" (8). Brown also comments on some of the reactions to her public presentations questioning Women's Studies: "the overwhelming response to these reflections...was glowering silence broken by *sotto voce* hallway denunciations of my presentation as 'reactionary' and 'collaborationist' with the enemy" (*Politics Out of History* 34). These reactions further inhibit the ability of Women's Studies scholars to face up to their challengers. To excavate more deeply the trouble contemporary Women's Studies appears to be causing, I will elaborate further on the ways in which the legacy of the "subject" has figured in Women's Studies and the criticisms of it.

## Re-considering the Subject

*Stubbornly, defiantly, we hold on to that truth. There is such a thing as woman (Bell and Klein xix).*

*There is something about Women's Studies...organized by social identity rather than by genre of enquiry, that [makes it] especially vulnerable to losing its raison d'être when the coherence or boundedness of its object of study is challenged (Brown, "The Impossibility of Women's Studies" 86).*

The ontological focus on empirical women and the subject of woman has been a foundational point for the practice of Women's Studies. Western women, weary of destructive patriarchal narratives about them, seized the opportunity presented to them in the 1960s and 1970s to locate their resistance to oppression within the traditional fount of legitimate knowledge: the university (Yeatman 42; Brooks 122). Women took advantage of their formal educated status and the cultural atmosphere of radical social and political ferment to instigate the production of a more systematic and potentially transformative set of knowledges about women's lives. As Miriam Schneir suggests, the situation in the 1960s was such that it "afforded feminists a securer base from which to launch their activities and enabled them to move ahead with a speed and effectiveness that would have amazed their [first wave] predecessors" (xi). The conventional narrative has it that women responded to demands made by women's groups and the women's liberation movement by creating and developing Women's Studies in institutes of higher education (Lees; Brooks 122).

Yet, the destabilisation of the subject – or, more precisely, its exposure as an object of instability – has been one of the major consequences of the last three decades and more of social and political theory, arguably largely inspired by the deconstructionist and post-foundational ethos of postmodernism and poststructuralism. The idea of, or belief in, a

discernible sovereign human subject, the securely anchored and clearly demarcated ontological and epistemological figure of modernism, has been meticulously shattered.

The key thinkers of ‘post-structuralism’ – Derrida, Foucault and Lacan have in combination as well as individually mounted a devastating critique of the main assumptions on which much social and feminist theory was previously based and it has proved to be a critique from which neither has emerged unscathed (Barrett 201).

Given the conventional adherence to the subject within Women’s Studies, it might be expected that its practitioners would be somewhat troubled. Yet, this trouble should have been anticipated. Questions about the subject have consistently tormented Women’s Studies, particularly the question of “which women” are of concern to the field. But feminists and women of color have consistently provided the answer to this question. “The Women’s Liberation Movement is a multitude of white women with an only occasional black sister to lend color to the meeting” (Ware 98).

Ware’s remarks (originally made in 1970) verify the important connection between the women’s liberation movement and Women’s Studies. However, as noted, the women’s liberation movement was predominantly white; and this mattered. Black women and women of color were suspicious of the movement as it soon became apparent that it was not only difficult for a group of white middle-class women to deal adequately with the specific problems that black women and women of color face, but also that white women were not actually interested in issues of race – or, more precisely, their own racism – at all. As Toni Morrison observed in 1971: “what do black women feel about Women’s Lib? Distrust. It is white, therefore suspect” (454). To be sure, women

involved with Women's Studies – the proclaimed “educational arm of the Women's Liberation Movement” (Klein 75) – perhaps genuinely intended their practices to be inclusive. However, in practice – and ultimately in theory – this aspiration would falter as the work of the critics detailed in this article attest.

There is a large body of work which examines the extent to which Women's Studies seems incapable of dealing with the persistent glut of accusations of racial naiveté and ethnocentrism: from bell hooks' intrepid articulations of white feminists' accountability for their own racism (1982), to Audre Lorde's deft response to Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1983), through to the handing over of editorial control of the British-based journal *Feminist Review* to a group of black feminists (1984). This work continues undiminished (if still under-read and under-utilised)<sup>6</sup> and predicates much of the work done in feminist post-colonial and third wave feminist studies which continues to document the injustices done by the ethnocentric tunnel vision of Western feminists. Given the scale of dissatisfaction with Women's Studies, is this the end?

### **The End of Women's Studies?**

*Woman...as an ontological basis of community, has been violently policed, exactly because its boundaries are mobile and contestable, and this is the case even within feminism itself. It is no longer news that the “feminist community” itself can operate, and has done so, along certain lines of exclusion...the feminist political imagination is one which has, even with its ostensibly expansive vision and ambitions, been no stranger to exclusions (Bell 7).*

Women's Studies, perhaps a traditional archetype of a “feminist community,” stands accused of policing boundaries. I do not mean to imply that each of the critical constituencies I have identified share identical reasons for their discontent with Women's

Studies; yet, they all question its effects and its future. A major effect is that the practices of Women's Studies appear to incite the reverse of the emancipatory, inclusionary and benevolent effects that its self-representation suggests should be the case. A further contention is that feminist enquiries about women which remain confined by modernist attachments to foundationalism – such as those expressed in conventional Women's Studies – seem propelled toward rigorous patrolling of their self-imposed boundaries. As Brown trenchantly summarises:

theory that destabilizes the category of woman, racial formations that disrupt the unity or primacy of the category, and sexualities that similarly blur the solidarity of the category – each of these must be resisted, or worse, colonized, to preserve the realm. Each, therefore, will be compelled to go elsewhere; and women's studies will consolidate itself in the remains, impoverished by the lack of challenges from within, bewildered by its new ghettoization in the academy, a ghettoization produced this time by feminists themselves. There is no such thing as women's studies. Now what? (*Politics Out of History* 34).

For those practitioners of Women's Studies who disagree with such a damning indictment, the answer to Brown's ultimate question, "now what?" would be that under no circumstances should Women's Studies be allowed to die.

### **Women's Studies Must Live!**

*Women have very little idea of how much men hate them (Greer 249).*

A defining feature of second wave feminism from which Women's Studies

emerged, was the disclosure and documentation of the ubiquitous global abuse of girls and women.<sup>7</sup> That women and girls were abused in a multiplicity of ways was not a revelation. The exposé was that girls and women were being injured and killed because of a system which, in its requirement to bolster the needs of men and masculinity, demanded the degradation and containment of females. A further disclosure centred on the way in which many of these patriarchal violences masqueraded as something else. Righteous retribution for sexual misdemeanour might be the specious reason for stoning a woman to death for adultery; fostering a sense of well-being may be perceived as the intention behind encouraging a young girl to lose weight; freedom of choice will generally be understood as the motivation for a woman undergoing surgery to recover the appearance of youth. However, in the second wave feminist imagination, these practices are re-read as evidence of patriarchal brutality – all the more sinister for its ability to have these activities appear in (sometimes benign) disguise.

Appalled by both its violence and its invisibility, feminists, energised by the radical social commotion manifest in the 1960s and 1970s, expressed a determination to conquer patriarchy and its practices. Motivated by the politics of the street, but resolute that their actions be effective, second wave feminists transplanted some of their activities to the academy:

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminists moved from the streets to the classrooms, in and outside higher education, and declared that enough was enough, women had been excluded, made invisible, and barred from creating and distributing knowledge for far too long. And what was needed was not just ANY knowledge, but knowledge that helped to *liberate* women, that gave

us power to empower ourselves and that gave us strength, based on women's *diversity* (Klein 75, emphasis in original).

Fortified by passion, sisterhood and solidarity, Women's Studies scholars embarked upon the creation and dissemination of new knowledge. Further empowered by innovations in theoretical work concerning the relationship between epistemology and ontology, culminating in the genesis of feminist standpoint theory, women's studies scholars began to generate "new knowledge of gendered social lives grounded in women's experiences" (Ramazanoglu and Holland 64). From this point of departure, Women's Studies developed, though narratives about its accomplishments clearly vary. A US-based website reports links to nearly 700 Women's Studies (and Gender Studies) programs, departments and research centers round the world.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Women's Studies remains under persistent scrutiny which its defenders constantly monitor and resist.

### **Assaulting the Subject**

*The cutters with words and knives prefer difference. This not only splits women into non-entities, thereby seriously damaging a woman's sense of self and sense of identity; it also splits women from each other: one of patriarchy's best tools to keep women from forming a joint resistance movement (Klein 83).*

Scholars resolute in their desire to reanimate Women's Studies often discern violence done to their work by those ostensibly committed to its disintegration. The ensuing carnage is expressively illustrated by the imagery – quoted above – of "cutting" and "splitting." The sense of butchery invoked by Klein is deliberate and is intended to draw attention to the serious consequences that will result should Women's Studies – and its traditional attendant activities<sup>9</sup> – be extinguished (see also Mikhailovich). Yet, the

deconstructive turn has plainly dictated that the continued belief in the ontological chastity of the subject of woman procures the political and intellectual naiveté of Women's Studies. For those committed to Women's Studies this decree is evidence of a fresh assault on the field.

It is surely the case that violence against women and girls – and perhaps femininity more generally – persists, and contemporary Women's Studies practitioners are swift to document the details. Accounts are offered of the increasing feminisation of poverty (Razavi) and female illiteracy (Dowd) as well as of male violence, including: global “traffic” in women (Pettman 491); and, “sexual abuse, sexual harassment, date rape, rape in and outside marriage, criminal assault at home, pornography and prostitution” (Klein 81; Copelon; Fitzpatrick; Roth). This, it is argued, alongside increasing forms of violence against the eco-system, which is mooted to affect women and children most (Mies and Shiva), together with continuing abuse or non-recognition of women's rights in the realms of sexuality and reproduction (Plata), continue to make it necessary to strengthen international feminist Women's Studies programs (Klein 81). Clearly then, to abandon the identity of woman as a basis for political action is anathema for those entrusted with the survival of Women's Studies and the protection of women and girls worldwide. Opposing the idea that Women's Studies suffers from political or intellectual poverty – if permitted to continue un-violated – these scholars are suspicious of the invasion of critics enamoured with theoretical concerns about difference. The voice emerging from these defenders asks not “is Women's Studies dead?” but “what is dying in Women's Studies – or killing it?” (Smyth 172).

Locating the deconstruction of the subject (of woman) under the general rubric of “postmodernism,” guardians of Women’s Studies allege that the purveyors of this body(ies) of thought are primarily responsible for the current deliberate asphyxiation of the field. As one defender postulates, “post-modernism exults female oblivion and disconnection” (Brodribb 301). One of the most important rationales for the development of Women’s Studies was to liberate women from the subordinate places they occupied. Positioning women at the center – politically, ontologically and epistemologically – appeared to be the most effective strategy available to achieve this, especially given the modernist privileging of this site. As such, Women’s Studies practitioners are sceptical about the increasing popularity of deconstructive techniques and the disdain for the subject-based enquiry that they support. This is surely evidence of a “kind of theoretical subterfuge to undermine the newly acquired power of marginalised groups” (Waters 285). And that women would be party to this “theoretical subterfuge” does not come as a surprise. What would suit the machinations of patriarchy better than to have women and feminists *themselves* ordain that women are a “fiction” and determine that the continued use of the category of woman is intellectually suspect?

### **Women’s Studies in Ruins?**

*The question of whether or not a position is right, coherent or interesting is...less informative than why it is that we come to occupy and defend the territory that we do, from what it promises to protect us (Butler, “For a Careful Reading” 127-28).*

What might serve as an effective resolution to the apparently irresolvable dispute between those who argue for the survival of Women’s Studies and those who advise its

termination? Does the conviction exhibited by those both “for” and “against” imply that a choice between positions is the only way forward? I want to suggest a different way to think about the tension between the two broad options on offer. Let me first briefly summarise what each position bequeaths. On the one hand, the suspected deracination of Women’s Studies clearly causes huge anxiety for its practitioners. The prospect of its annihilation manifestly disturbs Women’s Studies scholars and compels them to resort to a variety of strategies to guarantee its continuation. The most common strategy is to remind us of the unceasing prevalence of global sexist and misogynist practices, with the concomitant implication that allowing Women’s Studies to evaporate will result in increasing violence done to women and girls. Who would wish for this – or to be responsible for its actualisation? On the other hand, the dismissal of conclusions as to the consequences of founding an academic discipline on the basis of a discredited social identity smacks of intellectual incompetence accompanied by a wilful stifling of academic debate and practice. Who would choose to be accused of this?

Rather than endure this unsatisfactory impasse, I want to suggest that my summary of each position might benefit from a more charitable reiteration en route to considering what a more potent resolution might be. This reiteration might usefully be crafted by returning to the strategies used by the protagonists to present their arguments as convincing – but I want to reflect on these strategies tangentially. The question underpinning this reflection concerns what cultivates the ardour with which each puts forward their views? It may appear that I have asked this question and offered answers already in my presentation of the criticisms and defenses of Women’s Studies. Yet that discussion perhaps fails to represent adequately the impulses funnelling each set of

rationalizations. My aim here is not to suggest that I can reveal “deeper” motivations, nor, to imply by the word “impulse,” expose unwarranted displays of irrationality. Instead, I want to trace some of the emotions which energise these debates. Trailing emotions can be risky given their feminised value in much of the traditional canon. Yet my contention is that academic debate is generally saturated with emotional energy. This is not to say that this is always, even usually, apparent as the rules and traditions of academic writing tend to draw a cloak of “reason” over the underlying tumult of ideas, thoughts, beliefs and desires. This veneer, though not necessarily unproductive, nevertheless, has the capacity to mask motivating sentiments, even, paradoxically, in the seemingly explicitly emotional writings of traditional Women’s Studies scholars. In my assessment, each venue of argumentation in the debate about the viability of Women’s Studies evidences elements of emotional agitation around interconnected feelings of loss and fear, which consequently nourish the ensuing deliberations. As a way to better clarify this view, I will restrict my comments in this section to the deconstructive critique articulated by Brown and the Women’s Studies defense expressed by Renate Klein, who I take to stand as exemplars in their arenas. The question animating my inquiry is: what do each fear they might lose – from what are they protecting themselves?

Paradoxically, it is to Brown’s work that I turn to for assistance in excavating some of the motivating sentiments fuelling the deconstructive critique of Women’s Studies. In *Politics Out of History*, one of Brown’s imperatives concerns the consequences of living in an era of “profound political disorientation” (3). She alleges that many of the constitutive narratives of modernity have been disturbed or undermined, yet “we continue to operate politically as if these premises still held, and as if the political-cultural

narratives based on them were intact” (*ibid* 4).<sup>10</sup> This disintegration of what were once considered to be irreplaceable political narratives prompts a number of reactions, one of which is a “panicked and reactionary clutching” (*ibid* 4). Brown deploys these ideas in her critique of Women’s Studies; however, I want to nominate their use into an inquiry into the deconstruction of Women’s Studies.

### **“Hauntings”**

In *Politics Out of History*, Brown draws on Derrida’s conjecture (in *Specters of Marx*) that we possess a language and imaginary around “haunting” because we are unsure how the dead affects the living and how the “dead live among the living” (145). She suggests that Derrida supposes that we have a language of haunting because “it is our confession that dead things live; ghosts contravene the finality of death for the living, undoing the lines between death and life” (145). Employing the metaphysical utility of Derrida’s narrative, Brown proposes that notions about ghosts, spirits and spectres:

figure the impossibility of mastering...the past or the present...they figure the necessity of grasping certain implications of the past for the present only as traces...“learning to live” means learning to live with this unmasterable, uncategorizable, and irreducible character of the past’s bearing on the present...[it] means living without systematizing, without conceits of coherence (146).

Brown uses Derrida’s discussion to help illuminate the problems she claims typify the current political-cultural climate in the West. As such, she employs Derrida’s “ghost story,” and the intangible, ethereal, deconstructive methodology it offers, as a way of

explaining how we might “learn to live” with “the permanent disruption of the usual oppositions that render our world *coherent*” (146; emphasis added).

The concept and practices of coherence have consistently exercised feminists. Plagued by modernist, patriarchal associations of women and femininity with *incoherence*, much feminist energy has been spent trying to exorcise this connection. Within the interconnected realms of epistemology, ontology and politics, feminists have ceaselessly worked to construct convincing and legitimate narratives, but debates have been dominated by disagreements over the possibility and advisability of relying on the tools and methods bequeathed by modernist and patriarchal canons and ideologies. Lorde discerningly insinuated that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (“The Master’s Tools” 99). This insight, shared by many feminists, provides part of the substructure for feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock; Harding, *The Science Question*; Harding, *Feminism and Methodology*; Harding, *Whose Science?*; Allen and Howard). The prestige of feminist standpoint has ebbed and flowed, though more recent deconstructive assaults on the foundational character of standpoint have taken their toll. But, the (feminist) desire for legitimacy and authority still lingers. My purpose in introducing this discussion of “haunting” via Brown and Derrida is to suggest that there may be traces of “haunting” in the deconstructive representation of Women’s Studies, galvanized by the viscous partnership of feminism, women and femininity with incoherence and irrationality.

The investigation of the Women’s Studies curriculum in her institution led Brown and her colleagues to generate a plethora of questions and judgements as to the value and

future possibility of Women's Studies (Brown, "The Impossibility of Women's Studies" 78-80). And, as I implied in my introduction, Brown's arguments are compelling.<sup>11</sup> She suggests that the incoherence of Women's Studies inheres in the theories and practices of Women's Studies themselves, specifically because of the addiction to the category of woman. She further asserts that Women's Studies will remain incoherent because it *must* refuse any objections to its object of study. However, though Brown's conclusions are captivating, she delves into a very traditional cache of concepts and images to compile her picture of Women's Studies. Clinging to a traditional program and mission, Women's Studies practitioners are revealed to be bedevilled by bewilderment and incoherence, and are ultimately frantic, fraught and racked by guilt. This representation surely raises the spectre of a veritable parody of femininity. Is this caricatured denunciation an unremarkable coincidence?

### **Feminine Apparitions**

*The question now facing Women's Studies, it seems to me, is the extent to which she has, in the past decade, matured into the dutiful daughter of the white patriarchal university – a daughter who threw tantrums and played the tomboy when she was younger but who has now learned to wear a dress and speak almost as nicely as Daddy wants her to (Rich 4-5).*

*Casting arguments in terms acceptable to the hegemonic discourse of masculinist social science is the most effective strategy for feminism (Hekman 81).*

As alluded to earlier, questions about coherence, authority and legitimacy have left a trail of doubt over feminist work. The centralising of empirical and theoretical women activated by feminism has inevitably cast luminous shadows over oppositions that have traditionally "rendered our world coherent" – such as, public/private, rational/emotional,

knower/knowledge, political/intellectual. Sandra Harding affirms that “feminist claims wreak havoc within networks of traditional belief” (*Whose Science?* 113). Yet Brown insists that because Women’s Studies does not adhere to the conventional *contemporary* markers of academic discourse, it must be cast aside – or allowed to wither away. She maintains this, despite her suggestion that there may be political reasons for maintaining Women’s Studies programs in order to provide a forum for feminist consciousness-raising among students (“The Impossibility of Women’s Studies” 95).

This inclination to “retain, rather than demolish, the signifiers of intellectual and academic status” (Stanley and Wise 273) might be read as emanating from disquietude with the weighty if ethereal equation between “things feminine” and incoherence and its attendant afflictions. Unsettled by this apparently inescapable phenomenon – “the inferiority of women is a necessary consequence of modernist epistemology” (Hekman 28) – Brown’s narrative seems compelled to pursue a trajectory that ultimately complies with the conventional demands of the academy. My claim is *not* that Brown is *wrong*, but that the phantasmic proximity of feminine incoherence with Women’s Studies, and the loss of legitimacy that this incites, obliges a passionate re-instatement of traditional (coherent) couplings.

### **Arresting Women’s Studies**

My inquest into the defense of Women’s Studies will also turn to Brown for assistance, in this instance, to her employment of the work of Benjamin. As she argues in *Politics Out of History*, whereas Derrida exhumes the figure of the spectre to offer a “site of renewal for historical consciousness and political agency after all modernist logics of

history and political change have given up the ghost” (148), Benjamin summons the emblem of an angel. This “backward-looking angel of history”<sup>12</sup> is employed by Benjamin in support of his critical engagement with the notion of progress. History, for Benjamin, provides some opportunities for revolutionary “interruptions” which offer the possibility of transformation. Yet he claims this conception of “interruption” cannot be comprehended adequately within the framework of traditional historiography ensconced within the grip of modernist principles. As Brown interprets:

interruption or “blasting open the continuum of history” becomes a kind of persistent revolutionary political orientation that breaks...with the notion of progress...this “arrest” of history...sets history’s sails in a new direction...as opposed to the progressivist view that revolution is a teleological conclusion of a historical progress (*Politics Out of History* 157).

In keeping with his anti-progressivist posture, Benjamin suggests that history might be *revered* for its potential for political action, but it should also be treated *irreverently* as “history is never merely realized by revolutionary action but is invented, reworked, and also *destroyed* by it” (Brown, *Politics Out of History* 158; emphasis added). I want to borrow lightly from Benjamin’s ideas, re-worked through Brown, to propose that the guardians of Women’s Studies are fruitlessly gripped by the progressivist promise. Consider how Klein represents and defends Women’s Studies.<sup>13</sup>

Klein seems impelled to vouch for the necessity of Women’s Studies and insist upon its resurrection. She is incited to this stance given the constancy of claims as to the impending or necessary demise of Women’s Studies. Enclosed within the contours of her protection of the field are narratives of attack, dismemberment, usurpation and mis-

representation. A major source fuelling Klein's indignant commitment is the integrity she apportions to the philosophies on which she secures her appeals. Merging a radical and reformist agenda, Klein demonstrates faith and hope in the three-fold progressivist pledge that the past can be utilised to make (better) sense of the present; that the past can be used to confirm the veracity of claims about the present, accompanied by an assurance of the (ultimate) rightful outcome of claims steeped in the values of truth, justice and emancipation. Benjamin's "King Canute-like" angel potentially invokes doubt in this fervent confidence. "Attachment to the object of one's sorrowful loss supersedes the desire to recover from this loss...to be unburdened by it (Brown, *Politics Out of History* 169). Disregarding the hollowness of modernist assurances, Klein insists on the preservation of reason and its accompanying logics, trusting that the loss of Women's Studies can be competently resisted. Yet, the loss seems already confirmed – not of Women's Studies – but of the capacities of modernist tools to deliver. Unless the position of knower and subject of knowledge is subjected to a fundamental reorganization, the epistemological and ontological privileging of women remains as problematic as the knowledges it is attempting to replace (Grosz 40). Said differently:

a socially marginalised group does not have the power to exclude, silence and command obedience from a dominant group. Its claim for epistemic privilege, lacking a social power on which to base them, cannot yield the same results as the self-authorizing claims of the dominant group, and are therefore merely normative, compelling only for those who are theoretically persuaded by them – usually members of the socially marginalised group who finds them empowering (Bar On 96).

Fixing and claiming the memory of the genesis and purpose of Women's Studies, Klein's commitments facilitate a negation of the opportunity to inhibit the destruction of Women's Studies. Her narrative demonstrates an unwillingness to disentangle for fear of losing ownership of the truth of the past, loss of position in the present, thus foreclosing the inability to make the future. Having no other philosophical foundation to which to turn, Klein remains ardently immersed within a discourse which seems structured to achieve the converse of that which is desired.

### **Re-appropriating Women's Studies**

In my introduction I declared my agreement with critiques of Women's Studies and affirmed my dispute with its defenders. Yet I also affirmed that Women's Studies should continue. Does my reiteration of the conflict between the deconstruction and defense of Women's Studies illuminate this allegedly paradoxical conclusion? "I advocate a rigorous pursuit of [women's incoherence] as the problematic that animates the field [of Women's Studies]" (Wiegman 383). The deconstructive critique of Women's Studies does not quite add up. Or perhaps, conversely, the computation it offers is *too* conclusive. Posing the latter as a problem, might seem counter-intuitive in the context of academic debate, yet reflect on Brown's judgement that a further reason to maintain Women's Studies programs is to thwart those opponents of Women's Studies in their goal of deflecting attention away from women and gender. Radically changing such programs could indicate that the opposition was always right. But surely the accuracy of this "signal" is implied by Brown's devastating critique? However, if we re-call Bar On's comments about the allure of the self-authorising claims of hegemonic narrative

structures, we can formulate a further question about the possibility of something *not being graspable* by the deconstructive account. Is there something stalking imperceptibly? To address these points, we might re-employ the ruse of “hauntology,” through which Derrida suggests we might re-think the political present – not by plotting an objective or comprehensive route from the past, but by pondering its operation as a spectral force. In *Politics Out of History* Brown elucidates:

we inherit not “what really happened”...but what lives on from that happening, what is conjured from it, how past generations and events occupy the force fields of the present, how they claim us, and how they haunt, plague, and inspirit our imaginations and visions for the future” (150).

What seems to “live on” within the deconstructive critique of Women’s Studies, is the seduction of conventional accounts of coherence. In customary academic practice, to take the position of “incoherence” is abhorrent and tantamount to intellectual suicide. Brown is adamant in her refusal of this posture as outlined above.

Yet, if we have learned anything from feminist work, surely it is that woman signifies incoherence. The failure of attempts to “add” to the appellation of the field – gender, class, race, ethnicity and nationality, the usual, never complete, “horizontal trajectory of adjectives” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 143) – verifies the incoherence upon which identity is theoretically configured. But, rather than rushing to do away with the (incoherent) category of woman “in a replacement fantasy of categorical completeness, we might consider the intellectual uses to which its inadequacy can be put” (Wiegman 383). Thus, despite my own seduction by the discourse of conventional argumentation performed through the deconstructive critique of Women’s Studies, my ultimate position

reposes with the question of how to retain Women's Studies – *founded on the incoherent category of woman* – whilst simultaneously subjecting the field to radical interrogation and re-organization.

### **A Questionable Paralysis**

*Are we not paralyzed by a kind of moral compulsion that keeps us from interrogating the terms, taking the risk of losing the terms that we keep in question? (Butler, "The End of Sexual Difference" 422).*

*To be exciting again, Women's Studies would have to assume leadership in making significant transformations of university curricula and interdisciplinary scholarship and learning (Martin 354).*

The defense of Women's Studies radiates a defensiveness borne out of a sense that to question the field necessarily invites derision and loss. Yet, the question(s) might be re-appropriated to revitalise Women's Studies. Momentarily working with questions raised by both the deconstructive critique *and* the defense of Women's Studies, what becomes discernible is evidence of a radical *and* conservative, a safe *and* dangerous, venture. Danger is inveigled by resisting and naming dominance and occupying the unsafe space of "inferiority" – safety is aspired to by remaining within traditional epistemological, ontological and political parameters. Insisting on traditional categories and ideologies and resisting their interrogation invites a conservative reading, yet demanding attention to issues conventionally defined as trivial retains a radical edge. Is it possible to work with these paradoxes and contradictions to make Women's Studies "exciting again"?

In the same spirit that Vikki Bell intellectually interrogates her "yes" to feminism (6), I ponder my "yes" to Women's Studies. Revolutionary movements run the risk of

losing their radical possibilities after the first moment. This is especially the case if questioning of the movement – its practices and trajectories – is repelled. In order to be capable of assuming leadership in making significant transformations of university curricula and interdisciplinary scholarship and learning, as Martin urges, Women’s Studies has to rise to the challenge. As Grosz suggests: “only a political or theoretical commitment that can confront its own internal paradoxes, its constitutive inconsistencies, and its necessary if changeable limits can be said to have come of age” (59). Acknowledging that the “theoretical inadequacy of women is an important critical achievement” (Wiegman 383), the sails of Women’s Studies might be set in new directions – ones that are not leashed to the unwieldy demands of shoring up exclusionary and damaging boundaries and fearfully attached to lost causes. It *is* time for Women’s Studies to be exciting *and* subversive again and work with – rather than against – its paradoxes and contradictions. Rejecting the requirement to be accountable to the women’s liberation movement might be a place to begin (Yeatman 45), as would practicing the unexpected and unpredictable (and thereby momentarily avoiding containment). This could involve focusing Women’s Studies scholarship around the development of an “anti-woman imaginary.” The charge on Women’s Studies presents an opportunity for Women’s Studies to re-invent itself. There’s life in the old girl yet.

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<sup>2</sup> These include “other” feminists and critical political theorists (Brown 1997, 2001; Martin 2001), women and feminists of color and black feminists (hooks 1982, 1984 & 1990; Moraga and Anzaldúa; Collins; Christensen; Bhavnani; James and Sharpley-Whiting), queer theorists (Sedgwick; Plummer; Martin; Heller; Jagose; Phelan; Halberstam; Merck; Merck *et al.*; Warner), third wave feminists (Findlen; Walker; Maglin and Perry; Heywood and Drake), transgender theorists (Califia; Hausman; Prosser; More and Whittle), post-colonial theorists (Mohanty *et al.*; Donaldson; Spivak 1987, 1993), postmodernists and poststructuralists (Nicholson; Butler and Scott; Elam; Yeatman; Brooks; Bell; Zalewski), postfeminists (Coward; Coppock *et al.*; Walters) and sometimes Women’s Studies scholars themselves (Brown 1997, 2001; Mandle; Patai).

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<sup>3</sup> This is not meant to imply that the other groups I mention are not still emerging or other than disparate.

<sup>4</sup> Second wave feminism is conventionally understood as dating from the late 1960s and expressing a primary concern with rights, identity politics and documenting patriarchal violence.

<sup>5</sup> It should be made clear that Mandle and Patai might be considered to err towards the conservative end of the spectrum, whilst Brown's work is more appropriately located within the realm of post-foundationalism.

<sup>6</sup> See Springer; Radford-Hill.

<sup>7</sup> Foundational texts of the second wave serve as exemplars of such documentations (e.g. Daly; Greer; Millett).

<sup>8</sup> [wmst-1@listserv.umd.edu](mailto:wmst-1@listserv.umd.edu)

<sup>9</sup> Such as accountability to the women's liberation movement and women's activist organizations locally and globally.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the conviction that history has a reason, purpose and direction, or that humanity is making steady progress toward greater freedom, equality, prosperity, rationality and peace.

<sup>11</sup> Brown's argument is taken here as a representation of the general deconstructive critique of women's studies.

<sup>12</sup> This was inspired by a Klee painting, "Angelus Novus," which depicts an angel "eyes staring, his mouth open, his wings...spread." Benjamin imagines this figure as the angel of history, his face turned toward the past, seeing wreckage upon wreckage. The angel wants to stay and heal the damage, but a storm propels him into the future. "This storm is what we call progress" (qtd. in Brown 2001, 138).

<sup>13</sup> Klein's argument is taken here as a representation of the general defense of women's studies.

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