a community of a greement

FEMINISM IN THE UNIVERSITY

danielle bouchard

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Excluding Exclusion in the University of Agreement

Beginnings: Academic Feminism and the Narrative of Crisis

Wendy Brown's declaration of "the impossibility of women's studies" in 1997 is only one of the more famous of a series of such statements issued by feminist scholars at the turn of the twenty-first century.¹ Motivated by the rise of a critical mass of doctoral programs in women's studies, and perhaps a millennialist sensibility, a variety of established scholars have authored books and contributed to special journal issues on the state of academic feminism in the US. Few of these authors have gone so far as to suggest that the continued viability of cross-disciplinary feminist scholarship might require the dissolution of women's studies departments (as did Brown), but many have described academic feminism as being in a predicament due to its growing attachment to the privileges afforded by institutionality. Others have articulated a more optimistic view, seeking to describe feminism's unique ability to model ethical modes of institutional being. As a whole, such work has addressed the intricacies of the field's peculiar positionality—as at once institutionally authoritative and yet continually threatened with dissolutionand has done so in many different ways, but it has also taken as a point of general agreement that academic feminism has reached a crucial, and potentially dangerous, turning point.

I began my own doctoral training in feminist studies at precisely this moment of the turn. I found myself in the midst of a heady and complex blend of sentiments. Along with expressions of excitement over new beginnings and future potential for a field that was just now offering doctoral degrees in significant numbers, there was a strong undercurrent of crisis. Some felt that feminism had been crushed by institutional pressures, transformed into a misshapen and unrecognizable version of its former self. Some worried that it would not survive the onslaught of budget cuts typically aimed at marginalized fields of study. Some claimed that debates between and amongst feminist scholars had weakened its foundation in the academy, leaving it dangerously close to succumbing to the external critiques wielded by its detractors. I realized quickly that my degree would carry a heavy weight of overdetermined meanings, that to some it would represent less an achievement than an object of profound ambivalence. Now, a decade later, the questions raised by such conversations and scholarship persist, even as the institution of the university has arguably changed during that time. More such programs have been established under a variety of different names, and feminist work has become more prevalent and accepted in multiple disciplinary and institutional locales, but the sense of precariousness remains and in many cases has been proven to be founded in all too real fears (whether due to program closures, decreased availability of resources, or concerted intellectual attacks aimed at feminist studies and allied areas of inquiry). While our continued existence is certainly a pressing issue, this should not preclude deep inquiry into feminist thought itself; what remains unfinished is a serious engagement with the narratives of academic institutional being and purpose produced in the name of feminism.

This book begins, though it does not end, with a critical reading of the scholarship on the state of academic feminism. Such scholarship has rarely received sustained treatment as a body of work in its own right with attendant consideration of its assumptions, internal tensions, consistencies and inconsistencies. Nor has much attention been paid to the more far-ranging implications of this work, in terms of the particular intellectual genealogies it draws from, the concepts it employs, the disciplinary legacies it both challenges and perpetuates, and its relationship to feminist theory more broadly speaking. While it expresses a diverse array of motivations and conclusions, a closer reading reveals common assumptions about the problems and possibilities of feminism's relationship to the institution of the university. The historical narrative offered by most of these accounts is remarkably uniform in its privileging of a particular subject position: an advanced scholar, looking back at the founding of academic feminism, assesses its progress or lack thereof. The adequacy of current academic feminism tends to be premised upon its fidelity to a defined past, and its problems are attributed to incursions made either by thought movements deemed to be external to feminism or by the forces of institutionality. Oftentimes in these works, the positioning of the author as herself having been there for the event of the field's founding supports the claim to a kind of purity of interests untouched at the origin by institutional desires, and feminism is imagined as initially characterized by the unity of its practitioners and objects of study as women.² Thus despite

the burgeoning of feminist work which explores the mutual constitution of race, sexuality, nationality, gender, and other identities and categories of knowledge—and has profoundly troubled the notions that any of these should be treated as primary, or that they could be collapsed into each other—the scholarship on the state of academic feminism often still assumes women as the locus and foundation of feminism.

This warrants deep questioning, particularly as in these narratives certain individuals and bodies of work are characterized as secondary or external to feminism proper, that is, as themselves inherently characterized by a difference that ostensibly did not mark feminism "in the beginning." If this approach to difference is difficult to see on first inspection, this is because it is not always an explicitly stated preoccupation of such work. Indeed, the subject of greatest concern is often a perceived crisis of disciplinarity, or the idea that now that it is possible to actually earn a doctoral degree in and become a scholar of women's studies as a primary field, academic feminism will have to work harder to make the claim to not be of the university while still retaining its place in it. Women's studies' "success" is understood to mean something more for academic feminism than the culmination of a longand hard-fought struggle for institutional legitimacy; it constitutes a sign that the originary claims of feminism might be forgotten, perhaps even deliberately sold out. The crisis of disciplinarity has been most immediately visible as a feature of those arguments that women's studies is too institutional, that the granting of women's studies doctoral degrees represents the pinnacle of feminism's capitulation to external and improper interests, namely those of the university. In becoming a discipline, so the argument goes, feminism has been disciplined.³ But even positive assessments of women's studies' current condition, those which have posited the institutional success symbolized by the development of doctoral programs as the evolutionary unfolding of academic feminism's own internal logic, still posit disciplinarity as essentially foreign to feminism-so foreign in fact that women's studies is not only not disciplinary, but is the most effective strategic position from which feminism more broadly can act as a catalyst for necessary institution-wide transformations.⁴ In either case, "disciplinarity" stands for those improper interests that would tempt feminism to give itself over, and ultimately lose itself, to the institution. The main question of interest to this work is to what extent feminism has become institutionalized-a question which posits a pre- and non-institutional origin for feminism and hence for its academic iterations. This pinpointing of a defined origin works to characterize the field as constituted by a unity of interests: here, the problem of disciplinary limitation can be posited as resolvable or as able to be opted out of, because feminism knew

itself as such prior to its entry into the institution. Whether feminism is seen as having been corrupted by or as having successfully guarded itself against corruption by the university, its presence in the world as a defined project is taken to have arisen prior to the incursion of that which it is not—in this case, all things institutional, as coded for by "disciplinarity."

Because many such accounts are premised upon a basic assurance about feminism's anti-institutional essence, they have also come to privilege certain understandings of difference over others. Namely, difference becomes a problem to be solved, the object of a necessary consensus which will in turn allow feminism to put into operation a clearly defined program for the future. It is this understanding of difference that has guided many well-meaning attempts to describe possibilities for feminism to include those individuals, social problems, theoretical viewpoints, experiences, and identities it has either overlooked or actively excluded. In other words, where difference has been posited as an ontological problem regarding the proper essence of feminism as a defined project, the solution to this problem has been articulated as the inclusion within feminism of various identities and subject positions taken to be marked by difference. This slippage-from "difference" understood as anything which is not original to feminism as an organized project. to "difference" understood as a sociological descriptor-is enabled by the common claim that difference is secondary to any identity, and so exists only as a "mark upon" specific social identities. This leads to some odd formulations. As a sociological descriptor, difference names a social reality that needs to be brought to light, to be included within the purview of academic feminism and, via the latter, the university. As such, it at one and the same time ensures feminism's unique importance to the institution and its fidelity to its own originary aims; that is, its recognition and representation of difference allows feminism to be in, but not of, the university. But because difference in so many narratives of academic feminism's history is conflated with the disciplinary and the exclusionary-that which feminism cannot be lest it lose touch with its beginnings and hence with its mission-it takes on a burden of association which transfers to its other functions and uses, including as a name for that which feminism needs to include. This becomes especially apparent in accounts of academic feminism that, seeking to preserve feminist academic community from a perceived external threat, characterize women of color feminists as intruders upon what would otherwise be the field's democratic operations of rational agreement and even equates them with the "disciplining" work of the institution. But that this sometimes occurs in the very same arguments that claim the importance of feminism recognizing and including difference does not simply indicate the simultaneous use of incompatible understandings of difference; rather, both positions are enabled by the general understanding of difference as a problem, one that requires a definitive solution.

I propose the need to think academic feminism's institutionality outside of the limits according to which its story has commonly been narrated, and to question and reconceive the understanding of difference that has been integral to such narrations. Doing this requires not only a careful reading of the literature on the state of the field but also a reading of feminist theory, other scholarship on institutionality and the politics attendant upon academic knowledge production, and texts of the sort which may at first seem tangential to the concerns of feminist work but which in their own way contribute to the discursive milieu in which feminist thought also finds its meaning and reason. It requires understanding academic feminism-as an institutional formation and as the name for a vast array of intellectual work-to be constituted within and indeed enabled by conversations, discourses, and institutional entities that it did not create but to which it is yet indebted. In particular, it seems necessary to address the fact that women's inclusion in academe-the issue over which much of the literature on the state of academic feminism dwells-has always necessarily been about processes of racialization and US nationalist projects, and increasingly also about globalization. The university has a long history as one site for the production of hierarchical and exploitative understandings of difference, and the social action often credited as the beginning of academic feminism's formalization and recognition-the student movements of the 1960s-can also be seen as on some level part of this history. These movements were certainly immediately met by the full force of institutional paranoia, retrenchment, and cooptation. But the institutional response was arguably carried out in ways both blatantly reactionary and, more insidiously, recognizant of and accommodating to feminist (and allied movements') claims. Indeed, this troubles the very formulation of a linear historical movement or a cause-and-effect relationship between protest and response, and it suggests that feminist understandings of difference, inclusion, and equality are not always or in all ways distinguishable from those held by our detractors.

The University Community and the Management of Difference

The understanding of difference as a problem to be solved through inclusionary measures is not confined to feminist work, but appears in a variety of institutional imaginings. It attempts what I will call, following the work of Peggy Kamuf and Samuel Weber, to exclude exclusion.⁵ While not commenting on feminism per se, their studies outline the features of the discur-