

## Surfaces



# Introduction Roundtable 1

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Volume 7, 1997

LE FÉMINISME HORS DE LUI-MÊME  
FEMINISM BESIDE ITSELF

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1064801ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064801ar>

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### Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

### ISSN

1188-2492 (print)

1200-5320 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this document

Wiegman, R. (1997). Introduction: Roundtable 1. *Surfaces*, 7.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1064801ar>

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# Introduction

## Roundtable 1

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**Surfaces** Vol. VII.102 (v.1.0A - 22/06/1997) - ISSN:  
1188-2492

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It seems appropriate that the first panel of a conference that puts feminism beside itself would focus on the relationship between feminism and Women's Studies, given the imbricated and often celebrated history of these two. But what do we make of the fact that the title of the session, "Feminism and the Future of Women's Studies," is presented as a statement and not a question: does this mean that Women's Studies and its relationship to feminism is now unquestionably secure? Can we be confident in the seemingly innocent conjunction that brings forth a future that continues the unquestioned tie between these two? Or is the exploration of the historical, institutional, and political configuration of feminism and Women's Studies more decidedly disjunctive, more pressured than that?

This is just one way of saying that while this panel presents a simple agenda, the project of exploring the various institutional, political, and disciplinary issues facing Women's Studies as it approaches the end of its third decade of existence is deceptively complex. This is the case both because of the current contestations over disciplinary knowledges in the humanities in general and because of the increasing theoretical pressure placed upon the category of "woman" within feminism itself. For some observers of intellectual practices, the theoretical

link between these two conditions-what have been called "posthumanist" and "postfeminist"-is quite obviously the postmodern, that discourse that seems now to loom over nearly all late twentieth century intellectual inquiry regardless of whether one is directly engaged in its conversation or not. The postmodern critique of humanism and the extension of that critique to feminism's own primary category of woman has radically challenged the epistemological foundations of Women's Studies. Poised now at a moment some might call crisis, others opportunity, Women's Studies finds itself absorbed by a variety of questions about its own disciplinary identity, institutional location, and political efficacy.

This self-reflective absorption emerges, without coincidence, at a time when Women's Studies has achieved a certain level of institutional legitimacy. At a number of (large public or well-funded private) universities, Women's Studies has been transformed from fledgling program to fully staffed department, and its emphasis on feminist knowledges now extends into every discipline in the humanities and social sciences. In English, History, and Sociology, in particular, a familiarity with feminist scholarship is often an established part of doctoral competency, and courses at the undergraduate level more routinely take up issues raised by the study of gender. These kinds of institutional changes, barely imaginable in the late sixties, place Women's Studies at the center of interdisciplinary study and mark as well the pivotal nature of feminist intellectual work in the contemporary academy. In addition, the recent turn toward multiculturalism and the elaboration of cultural studies as a field devoted to the exploration of power and "difference" have simultaneously contributed to the institutional strengthening of Women's Studies, drawing its historical emphasis on gender into the orbit of other kinds of theoretical and political concerns.

In the context of these rapid and crucial reconfigurations of gender and knowledge, it may appear strange to insist on a question concerning feminism and the future of Women's Studies. As I have just said, Women's Studies is less at odds with the institution than it has ever been, and it is now both hiring and retaining faculty based on their commitment to feminist teaching and research. From one perspective, nothing could be better. And yet, there is a discernible uneasiness among Women's Studies scholars on a variety of fronts: not simply a skepticism at our own institutional successes, but a

deep-seated worry over the way postmodern theories on the one hand, and popular media appropriations of our internal discontent on the other, are being used to challenge the history, identity, political assumptions, and utopian ideals that have accompanied feminism's late twentieth century re-emergence. What this means for Women's Studies is a growing unease about its relationship to feminism (and vice versa). We might say, in fact, that it is this threat of a political identity no longer coterminous with the intellectual project of feminist knowledge that characterizes the broad disciplinary anxieties that seem now to accompany feminism and Women's Studies wherever they go.

While the specificities of such anxieties are too multiple for a full listing, I thought it might be useful to list a few:

1. The "Woman on the Bus" anxiety: This anxiety emerges in the breakdown of feminism's hope of speaking the truth of all women's lives, especially as that hope has been constructed as the disciplinary goal of Women's Studies. Given the waning of the women's movement as a public force and the rise of an institutionalized feminism, Women's Studies has become anxious about its potential difference from political activism—that is, about its inability to speak to and for "the woman on the bus."

2. The "Murder Without a Text" anxiety: I take this phrase from a short story by Carolyn Heilbrun in which an "older" Women's Studies professor is accused of murdering her most rebellious and obnoxious undergrad. Such generational anxieties are bound, in both the story and in Women's Studies more widely, to differing methodological approaches, disciplinary stances, and notions of political goals. This anxiety might be said to circulate further in debates about the disciplinary object of Women's Studies, the textuality of its inquiry, and the perceived erasure of history by new generations of feminist scholars.

3. The "Can there be a Teacher in this Class?" anxiety: This refers simply to the feminist expectation that the classroom will not reinvest in the pedagogical power hierarchies at work in the "masculinist" institution. What is the role of the teacher? Can the classroom be feminist? Can knowledge and its production be rendered "safe"?

4. The "Why Can't I Put My Vagina on the Cover of My Own Book" anxiety: also connected to the generational anxiety about the so-called death of the subject, a return

with a vengeance of the "I" as defiant politicized agency of Women's Studies scholarly thinking. Critically derided as narcissistic and reproductive, this anxiety also reflects the star system that the commodification of feminism in the academy has supported and produced.

Some of these anxieties will be addressed in the papers that follow, at the same time that we no doubt produce and cover others. Most generally, our speakers will implicitly ask: Does Women's Studies adequately mark and define the political horizons of feminism in the contemporary academy? Can-or should-this relationship be saved? If the answer is no-or if the answer begs us to recast the question-what exactly marks the conjunction between feminism and Women's Studies? How do they speak to and against one another? And what is it that each has put to the side?

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