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Identity Politics, Feminism, and the Problem of Difference Roundtable 2

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As a number of feminist theorists have begun to accede, [[1](#)] difference-in all its multiplicity-might be understood as the true energizing force in feminist theory, the source of its most radical and transformative discoveries. How then, we might ask, can we make sense of difference and differences? Why are they important? What do and can they tell us? Why should they seem to represent an impasse in contemporary feminist theory? From such questions, we may derive others that are even more far-reaching in their implications. How does feminist theory constitute itself in the academy as a field? How does its necessary interdisciplinarity speak to the issue of difference, and more specifically, to women's differences? How does it fit into an institution which, at least in the humanities, is often constituted in the frame of imperialist cultural aims and goals? What is feminism's role in the institution once it is conceived of as plural? How does and should feminism handle its own cultural contradiction, between its own sometimes imperial cultural aims and its stated political origins and desires? Such questions locate the terms of analysis in the proliferation of difference, its ramifications for the

feminist understanding of identity, and the problem of institutional specificity.

As many critics now attest,[[2](#)] feminist theory is currently experiencing a crisis of identity, one that not only threatens the very foundations of feminism as it has been articulated to date, but also its continued existence, as well as its role and influence in the academy. The voices of "other" feminists, such as women of color, Jewish, and lesbian feminists introduced the notions of "feminisms," rather than simply "feminism." They also made evident the problem of radical division in a theoretical discourse that had constituted itself upon a principle of unity based on what was perceived as the shared oppression of all women at the hands of their overwhelmingly patriarchal societies. In addition, these feminisms inaugurated the notion of multiple oppressions in place of the traditional conception of oppression as operating in terms of a simple binary: man/woman. In doing so, they introduced other binary oppositions unthought of in the early days of the Second Wave of feminism, which many Anglo-American feminists still remember with bittersweet nostalgia for what they felt was at the time a powerful solidarity.[[3](#)] Such binaries include white woman/woman of color, heterosexuality/homosexuality, Jewish/Gentile, rich/poor and all of the permutations of female and sexual identity that are linked with each. These oppositional feminisms not only demanded to be heard; they also challenged the decade-old feminist scholarship in much the same way that the scholarship had challenged the academy in which it had made its home. They challenged its truth claims and its ability to speak for women, at least in the form of a generalized notion of "woman." In short, their concerns demanded a transformation of feminist knowledge. But this suggests a problem that can only be discussed within the context of feminism's relation to the academy.

But what would such a transformation entail and how could it be made manifest in feminist theory? While the many criticisms levelled at feminist theory as it has been articulated up to the 1980's are quick to point out its problems, few or none are as forthcoming with possible solutions.[[4](#)] Part of such a transformation must, of course, necessitate a more focused attention on the concerns of non-mainstream feminist scholars, and a more overt recognition of their right to be respected for their cultural differences.

But there is another consideration here, one whose importance comes into view only when we try to push

our analysis a little further, to begin, in other words, to try to understand the deeper significance of those differences. When differences are gathered under the conceptual umbrella of what I will call the "pluralist ideal," and each cultural framework is tolerated to the same degree, such tolerance, while mitigating the potential clashes that the proximity of radical difference may sometimes engender, can also occlude what may be learned from such clashes, and thus be a powerful impediment to feminist theory's possibilities of realizing the full potential of its endeavors. What, for example, are the ramifications of recognizing such difference within the academy? How can feminists exist within the academy, yet remain more or less separate from it? In a recent essay, Ellen Messer-Davidow discusses this very problem:

In pondering the institutionalization of feminist inquiry, we must avoid characterizing universities and colleges as we did in the 1960's. We envisioned them as social structures that "housed" people and believed that we, as agents for change, had to position ourselves on their margins. If we were inside them, movement leaders warned, we would be co-opted. So we met for criticism and coffee in basement rooms, took to the quadrangles and streets, banged down the doors, and liberated the administrative offices. By the mid-1970's, when those of us in the New Left had departed for academic feminisms of our own, we realized the ineffectuality of confrontational modes and developed other ways to get institutional resources. By then, we were situated precariously inside universities and colleges, where we negotiated women's studies programs with our administrations . . . Still caught up in an us/them model of politics, we did not recognize that our institutions were not exactly functioning as *containers* of us/them, the metaphor we used to think about them. Rather than being in them, I want to suggest in retrospect, we were becoming them.[5]

What Messer-Davidow identifies here is precisely the dichotomy with which feminist theory is presented in the 1990's: what is the relation between feminist theorizing on the one hand, and feminist politics on the other? How can feminists avoid falling prey to a radical split between academic life and its relation to everyday experience, yet still remain feminists, still produce feminist knowledge, and survive in traditional academic settings? What effect

does the academic connection have on feminist theorizing?

Such questions, underlying a nagging doubt in the first years of feminism's move into the academy, have now become concerns of primary importance. In the third decade of its uneasy institutional connection, feminism has begun not only to doubt the efficacy of its place there, but also its certainty in its ability to maintain that place in the future. And with the fiery sense of purpose and mission-of actually making a difference-that characterized feminism's early days of political activism receding further and further into the past, feminism is even beginning to question its own commitment to its own goals.[6]

How can such radical change in the character of feminism be explained? Is it the result of what some, as does Messer-Davidow, would call a form of institutional "co-optation," a watering down of feminist resistance and opposition? Is it, rather, a complacency in a new-found sense of power and belonging, whether that belonging be precarious or not, and having much to do with feminism's success in the academy?[7] Or is it in some way, as Messer-Davidow suggests, an effect of feminists somehow *becoming* the university?

Closer analysis of these questions will reveal that what seems a plethora of sometimes angry debates in feminism over various issues[8] is really a symptom of an institutional dilemma, one that is cleverly hidden deep beneath the sources of controversy. This dilemma is derived from an epistemological clash, between traditional methods and modes of "knowing," those which have their origins in the Enlightenment and scientific method,[9] and a new mode of knowing, one that does not rely solely upon, but certainly privileges to a larger degree, the experience of the knower in question.[10] As the editors of *Feminism Beside Itself* attest, feminism is "beside itself,"[11] questioning its own premises, its own positions, its own assertions, its own conclusions, its own existence. This is because in constituting itself within the academy through narrowing its definition to that of a discipline with the study of women as its subject, whose politics concerned the liberation of women, feminism gained the right to play the institutional game, under the umbrellas of women's studies and feminist theory. In this sense, then, feminism did *become* the institution, operating largely in the context of institutional structures and rules, though creating and having created itself in opposition to those

same structures and rules. What this means is that in entering the university, feminism was political but not too political; prolific but containable.[[12](#)]

But when examining feminism in relation to identity politics, we begin to see a curious anomaly. Viewed from within established institutional hierarchies, feminism would seem to be the recalcitrant Other, resistant even perhaps hostile to established authority. From this perspective, feminists, feminism and feminist theory would definitely seem like outsiders within. On the other hand, viewed from the perspective of identity politics,[[13](#)] feminist theory would definitely seem to have lost its perspective in its desire to solidify its position. In this way, the issue of experience becomes an important arbiter not only of feminism's understanding of itself, but also of the way in which feminist knowledge is constituted both within and on the margins of the academy. In turn, such experience then also becomes an arbiter of our understanding of established academic knowledge, from which it is so clearly differentiated.

The experience that forms the foundation of identity politics is essentially an experience of radical otherness, radical because it must articulate itself on the margins of an otherness (that of woman) whose difference from established academic knowledge is already stark. But because experience underlies feminist knowledge production in the area of identity politics to a stronger degree than it underlies feminist theorizing in general, it has very important implications for feminist epistemology. And it is these implications that pose a serious problem not only for established feminist theory, by demanding a radical alteration in its epistemological framework, but also for institutions and established epistemological practices themselves, which represent a dominant cultural perspective that does not easily take such difference into account.

How can feminist theory, as it has been articulated to the present, begin to address on its own the cultural significance of the intersections between the multiple "positionalities" implied within identity politics?[[14](#)] Therein lies the problem: for feminism to keep its hard-won place in the academy, it needs a stable ground for the production of knowledge-one that is easily quantified, tested, and judged, so that the value of individual contributions may be ascertained in the context of a given *field*. But how can the field of feminist theory and/or women's studies be described, particularly if the vagaries of cultural difference are taken seriously?

The answer seems simple, but its implementation is not. It becomes a matter of not just tolerating, but of actually *interacting* with difference, of trying to understand what proximity with cultural difference teaches, rather than the ways in which it threatens diverse cultural systems, world views, and ways of knowing.

NOTES

[1.](#) See Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*, eds. Micheline R. Malson, et al. (1986; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989); Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts," *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), pp. 1-19; Susan Stanford Friedman, "Making History: Reflections on Feminism, Narrative, and Desire," *Feminism Beside Itself* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 11-53; Jane Gallop, *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's," *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics*, ed. Elizabeth Weed (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 173-204, esp. pp. 179-85; Mary Kennedy, Cathy Lubelska and Val Walsh, "Introduction: Making Connections: Women's Studies, Women's Movements, Women's Lives," *Making Connections: Women's Studies, Women's Movements, Women's Lives* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1993), pp. ix-xvi; Micheline R. Malson, Jean F. O'Bar, Sarah Westphal-Wihl and Mary Wyer, "Introduction," *Feminist Theory and Practice and Process* (1986; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989), pp. 1-13; Donna Stanton and Abigail J. Stewart, "Introductions: Remodeling Relations: Women's Studies and the Disciplines," *Feminisms in the Academy* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995), pp. 1-16; Elizabeth Weed, "Introduction: Terms of Reference," *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

[2.](#) Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (Boston: South End P, 1986); Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color P, 1981); *Home Girls: A Black Feminist*

Anthology, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color P, 1983); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*; Marianne Hirsh and Evelyn Fox, *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Weed; Alcoff.

[3.](#) See, for example, Gallop.

[4.](#) For in-depth discussions of these issues, see Alcoff and Modleski, who both describe what has been called "third-course feminisms."

[5.](#) Ellen Messer-Davidow, "Know-How," (En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe, eds. Joan E. Hartman and Ellen Messer-Davidow (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1991), p. 282.

[6.](#) Messer-Davidow; Susan Stanford Friedman, "Relational Epistemology and the Question of Anglo-American Feminist Criticism," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 12.2 (Fall 1993), pp. 256-7; de Lauretis; Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman, *Feminism Beside Itself* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[7.](#) See Messer-Davidow; Michele Paludi and Gertrude A. Steuernagel, *Foundations for a Feminist Restructuring of the Academic Disciplines* (New York: Harrington Park P, 1990).

[8.](#) See Hirsch.

[9.](#) Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, *Theory and History of Literature*, volume 10 (1979, Minuit; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984).

[10.](#) I realize that this is a very complex assertion, requiring a much more detailed historical and philosophical argument than there is space available here to elaborate.

[11.](#) See Elam.

[12.](#) See Pauldi and Steuernagel p. xvi. Approaching the success of women's studies programs with ambivalence, the editors write: "Too often, the tendency has been for feminist scholarship to be contained within the

boundaries of women's studies courses and journals. The initial revolutionary thrust of women's studies is threatened by the growing acceptance and recognition of women's studies as a legitimate academic enterprise. . . . Conceived as a clarion call to eliminate gender bias in knowledge and ways of knowing, it has become the unwitting victim of the forces of institutionalization."

13. See Weed p. xxii. Weed writes that "the most common ground for knowledge and agency has historically been experience" Although she does not agree with this tendency, viewing it as a dangerous situation in which the political may be reduced to the "merely" personal, I would suggest that there is yet some merit in closer analysis of this tendency and its potential for feminist theorizing.

14. See Alcoff p. 324.

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