

# No Guarantee: Feminism's Academic Affect and Political Fantasy

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## Abstract

Both an assessment of the political present and a deliberation on feminist desires for a transformed future, this essay draws on nearly three decades of the author's engagement with Women's Studies and its academic institutionalization in order to identify both new and ongoing challenges to the intellectual and political life of the field.

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## Résumé

Constituant à la fois une évaluation du présent politique et une réflexion sur les souhaits féministes pour un avenir transformé, cet essai s'appuie sur près de trois décennies d'engagement de l'auteure dans les Études sur le genre et les femmes et leur institutionnalisation universitaire afin de cerner les défis à la fois nouveaux et persistants de la vie intellectuelle et politique dans ce domaine.

"So when are you going to stop talking about institutionalization," a colleague of mine recently asked in a tone that was both curious and disdainful at once. "When people stop asking me to," I retorted defensively, trying as hard as I could to finish our lunch without it slipping into *our last lunch*. To my ears, the provoking question was a flippant dismissal of issues I have taken to be of genuine scholarly value, not the fodder for anyone's suggestion that talking about institutionalization was like droning on about your ex. And yet, I knew instantly that the question felt sharp because it cut into something true: that U.S. academic feminist talk about institutionalization was a genre of its own and very little of it was new.<sup>1</sup> For my part, I have always played the role that sided against the discourse of complicity, wondering not only how the university became such an exceptional scene of collective regret, but why the very performance of regret had so much cachet in advancing one's professional career. In all of my work, I have defended institutionalization as both a political project and critical object of study, not because I love to embrace complicity, but because the alternative claim, of being *in* the university but not *of* it, has always seemed self-serving, especially if you had tenure. As I saw it, there was no way to critique the university without tacitly affirming it, which made it important to retreat from the romance of non-complicity long enough to consider what aspects of the university we might want to cultivate and defend. In the framework of our political present, where twentieth-century projects of social justice have been thwarted by strategies of incorporation as much as expulsion, this is hardly a winning position. From recent debates about academic complicity with Israeli colonialism to new scholarship that considers the neoliberal university in the context of mass incarceration, white supremacy, and U.S. empire, it is tempting to say that the academic left's distrust of the university and its capacity for political transformation has never been greater.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the university that many of us have known seems to be disintegrating.<sup>3</sup> Every aspect

of its once normative description as a state-based mechanism for the citizen grooming of an expansive middle class has come under assault, along with the very concept of a public education.<sup>4</sup> With mainstream news outlets declaring a war on student debt and devoting prime time to issues of inequity in the academy, often cast as tenure-coddled professors on the lam from classrooms run by barely employed adjuncts or indentured graduate assistants, scholars have struggled to effectively contest the new corporate vocabulary and its reduction of the changing global relations of state and capital to matters of accountability and assessment. But if, as Bill Readings (1996) argued in the years following the end of the Cold War, “the university in ruins” is by definition adept at mobilizing its vacuous “idea of excellence” to absorb contenders, it is hardly a shock to learn that, in our current context, it is not always easy to differentiate, at the level of institutional practices, between attention to adjunct labor aimed at a living wage and arguments that address the problem by giving a moral charge to even deeper program cuts (21). To be sure, the situation is as hauntingly lethal as it is complex because the political positions that converge here share so little beyond a potent set of words: adjunct, labor, wage. In some instances, the academic employment crisis is the alibi for enhanced schemes to safeguard capitalism while, in others, it promotes a more thorough condemnation of the eviscerations of the corporate university and the crushing limit a capitulation to capitalism places on any political imagination that obliges the pragmatic. What all of this will ultimately mean for the university of the future is surely beyond the grasp of our critical powers to interpret in advance. But this fact, experience tells me, will have little bearing on the shape of the contestations except perhaps to fortify the academic left’s preference for casting itself as an oppositional force facing down the enemy that pays us.

In the academic domains I know best—feminist studies, queer studies, cultural studies, U.S. studies—power is routinely theorized in complex terms, but the work of challenging it has yet to significantly pivot away from vertical conceptions that rely on self-conscious subjects and forms of agency we have long critiqued as patently humanist. Hence power, theoretically speaking, may no longer be embodied in the king, but the *we* that we craft is incredibly alive as an agent of refusal and resistance, albeit one whose counter-hegemonic traction

has been laminated most recently to the reinvigorated category of the collective. With scholars turning to love and hope as bulwarks against despondency, freedom has been declared a project of *thinking the impossible*, from the end of capitalism to revolution without leaders to futures that will fulfill our investments in them. In all this, the affective has emerged as both a diagnostic and a cure, giving the academic left a way to embrace the utopianism of the future while insisting that its rejection of modernity’s most cherished temporal promise remains secure. Side with the anti-social theorists if you must, but the left’s critical lesson of recent years adamantly refutes Lee Edelman’s (2004) famous dissection of “the regulatory fantasy of reproductive futurism” in which “politics, however radical...remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order” (117, 2-3). Taking the lead instead is a conception of politics as knowingly fantastical, staked to the everyday management and long-term psychic repair of life lived in zones of peril and precarity, the ordinary effects of which are exhaustion, alienation, numbness, and despair. While it would be an overstatement to say that the affective turn has so thoroughly revised the academic sensorium so as to grant, as fact, Lisa Duggan’s (2009) contention “that the opposite of hope is *complacency*,” it is surely the case that, in negotiating the antihumanist inflections of poststructuralist criticism, a new kind of authorial voice has emerged, one that uses critical practice as an affective environment for self-consciously promoting the political fantasies we want most to believe in (280).

The wide angle I am deploying here to characterize the situation in which contemporary criticism proceeds is hardly legible as a response to my colleague’s impatience with my ongoing interest in institutionalization. But I offer it to demonstrate that, in turning to the topic once again, I am aware that my object obsessions are out of synch with the critical rhetoric and political imaginary of contemporary cultural theory, especially the work that resides at the intersection of feminist and queer thought where an emphasis on “the alternative” has long served as the source and substance of the political. My interest collates instead around the *political imaginary of the alternative* and the distinctly modern fantasy it fuels in its appetite for rupture, novelty, and emergence over continuity, the familiar, and the routinely known. While many left critics take their investment

in the alternative as a resolutely antinormative force for counter knowledges and institutional interventions, often claiming that criticality puts us outside and against disciplinary protocols altogether, I have argued the reverse: that the cultivation of the political imaginary of the alternative has been institutionalized in left oriented disciplines as a pervasive disciplinary rule. In the process, the very power we wield in the domains of everyday university life we can call our own—curricular programs, publishing venues, editorial boards, admittance committees, conferences, professional organizations, grading practices, doctoral supervision, etc.—has been obscured, if not actively ignored. Reading *that* power as a point of departure has changed the way I understand not only the performative force of the critical act, but the simple fact that *being political* is itself a critical convention, no matter how affectively genuine. For those of us with academic positions in gender, sexuality, ethnic, or postcolonial studies, in fact, being political is a necessary credential for tenure, best rewarded if your performance conforms to the prevailing conditions. Championing collectivity? Muffle the sounds “crowd” and “clique.” Holding on to radical hope? Control the urge to say “no more affective labor.” Finding love in political places? Ignore the fact that love also names the desire to destroy the object that consumes you.<sup>5</sup>

I am, of course, traveling a long way from my colleague’s quip about my inability to leave the scene of institutionalization when what she most likely meant was not that the topic was exhausted, but that it was bizarre that I was not yet exhausted by it. After all, the sustained engagement of scholars with issues of field formation and the politics of the university, especially in Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies, has been remarkable.<sup>6</sup> The title of my essay, “No Guarantee,” offers one perspective on this expenditure by referencing the simple, but consequential, fact that the outcome of our efforts to transform the university can never be known in advance.<sup>7</sup> Strategies that promise radical intervention in one moment have become the source of lament later, as institutionalizing efforts prove amenable to forces well beyond our control. Contrary to first appearances, however, the repetition enabled by the discourse of institutionalization is far more generative than disabling. It allows scholars to nurture the goal of remaking the university in the face of innumerable failures, giving us the opportunity to rehabilitate belief in our political

agency by revising the narratives that shape our practices and expectations. At the same time, the endless task of differentiating feminist political aspirations from the compromises that accompany their institutional materialization feeds the anxiety that political indeterminacy generates, setting the stage for continued suspicion that the academic feminist project can never be made resistant to institutional complicity. How the inhabitation of this suspicion has become both an institutional role for the critic and an animating feature of the political imaginary of Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies has been at the core of my concerns, generating my long standing interest in the stories told about institutionalization and the narrative conventions on which these stories turn.

In her widely read study, *Why Stories Matter*, Clare Hemmings (2011) shares my interest in academic feminist practices of self-narration. Her focus is on the predominant tropes of progress, loss, and return that constitute the “political grammar” of the stories western feminists tell about the development not of academic feminism *per se*, but of the body of knowledge it has defined as most centrally its own: feminist *theory*. In the introduction, Hemmings describes her hope to make “the stories we tell both more ethically accountable and potentially more politically transformative,” especially because of the way that feminist rhetorics have been absorbed into contemporary state and corporate agendas, making *feminist complicity* with the western formation of capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, and global white supremacy part of the political threat that feminists must address (2). By registering “the *amenability* of our own stories...to discursive uses of gender and feminism we might otherwise wish to” contest, Hemmings offers her intervention into feminist practices of self-narration as a temporal pedagogy for resisting repetition, a vital necessity “if history is not simply to repeat itself” (2). “This book,” she writes, “is a claim for the continued radical potential of feminist theory and for the importance of telling stories differently” (2). While Hemmings links repetition here to failure, I am pretty sure she would agree that it is never possible to know when or whether repetition is an activity of immobilization or a form of intimacy with a present that always eludes us. In the situation that I am tracking here—in which the anxiety of political indeterminacy is both allayed and heightened by engaging with institutionalization—rep-

etition is mesmerizing, stoking the wish to reinvent the story for an outcome that does not betray us while confirming the suspicion that any investment in the university is bound to be politically fatal. To call anyone's persistent return to this scene of ambivalent investment *the repetition of repetition* is perhaps apt, but as an answer to my colleague's haunting question far too dramatic for the alibi that I am going to unravel, which is simply this: that for academic feminism, such attachments are always worth repeating.

In what follows, I return to considerations of the affective shape of feminist institutional attachments not as a form of interruption or political redemption, but to consider what the return yields from the vantage point of *this* present. I begin by reviewing my analysis of the 1990s when the question of changing the field's name emerged in the context of that decade's twin worries: first, that feminism's public political decline was a consequence of academic feminism's success; and second, that the expansion of the field's objects of study represented a loss of its founding feminist ideals. Given how quickly these debates flamed out in the new century, it is tempting to cast the decade as millennial hysteria, but as I read it, the central antagonisms—over men and masculinity, poststructuralist theory, queer studies, and the hegemony of both whiteness and the global north in Women's Studies research and administration—dissipated because the concerns about exclusion they largely represented were far more congruent with the founding political impulses of the field than it first seemed. This does not mean that the ensuring rancor over the field's name was misplaced. An enormous reconfiguration did, in fact, happen as the field renewed its political charge by reversing the inaugural relationship between feminism as a social movement and the academic field that represented it. No longer self-identified as an extension of the movement (that fabled “academic arm”), the emergent entity, Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies, has constituted itself as feminism's mentor, charged now with tracking historical complicities in order to keep pace with its political errors. At the essay's end, I consider how the discourse of the university is being reworked in our current moment, rehabilitating rhetorics about transgression and noncomplicity as neoliberalism becomes the name for a set of sweeping changes to the organization, status, and role of the U.S. university as a whole. Across these three decades—the apocalyptic

1990s, the revised (and revived) 2000s, and what I want to the call, following Lauren Berlant (2011), the “cruel optimism” of this decade—“No Guarantee” stages its own repetition to consider the ambivalent attachments that continue to write academic feminism's relation to itself.<sup>8</sup> In its rhetorical practice, this essay does not offer a new “thesis” about institutionalization nor does it revise contemporary histories of feminism's own academic becoming. Its mode, as readers can already tell, is meditative and its object of study is the ephemeral yet potent affect that accompanies our ongoing investment in the university as the specific site for our collective insistence on social change.

### Apocalypse, Redux

As the story of my lunch with a colleague demonstrates, the topic of institutionalization puts me on the defensive. Like many affective states, this one has a history that I have plotted before. I began writing about institutionalization in the midst of the widespread condemnation of my generation, a group that had been introduced to feminist knowledges in their earliest institutional forms: as certificate programs, minors, independent study majors, and a spattering of graduate offerings. We would inherit almost established but ruefully underfunded programs with volunteer faculty, little to no staff support, and no seat at any of the important decision making tables in our universities. As we moved through the professional ranks and into administrative positions, many of us fought for institutional resources and intellectual credibility while acknowledging the increasing worry that our institutionalizing efforts would destroy some of what people drawn to Women's Studies valued the most. In my own tenure as director of two Women's Studies programs from 1996 to 2007, I spent enormous time trying to find a way to make the institutions that employed me answer to the provocations offered by feminism, which simultaneously entailed grappling with the ways in which *feminism* was not a uniform referent even for those of us who regularly deployed it to name the politics of our intellectual investments. I fought with deans, provosts, and presidents—some of whom were closely identified with feminist concerns—about the shape and meaning of Women's Studies as an academic entity. Sometimes this meant disagreeing with those who wanted Women's Studies to be a refuge for women from the ugly departmental

cultures that reigned in the disciplines, more a “home” for nurturing abjection than an intellectual entity that could stand “on its own” (Wiegman 2002), as the title of my edited collection asserted. At other times, I found myself arguing for the relevance of Women’s Studies to every domain of institutional life, especially those that seemed most untouched by it (such as math or oceanography or, alternatively, alumnae development). In one situation, Women’s Studies was autonomous, its *raison d’être* no longer contingent on playing handmaiden to student services or the disciplines. In another, Women’s Studies was relevant to, indeed imbricated in, every facet of university life, not because it represented women, but because the university’s mission—to educate—was its own.

While feminist political commitments had brought me to the university, it was both fascinating and frustrating to discover that they provided no definitive map for negotiating either the multiplicity or the complexity of the institutional relationships that would engage me. In no situation was it unambiguously clear what it meant to take a feminist position. Do I celebrate a women-only living and learning program as the outcome of the campus-wide Women’s Initiative that finds my university especially toxic for female co-eds, or do I push for what the Initiative rejected, a core curricular requirement that makes gender a central feature of liberal arts education for every student? Do I resist a feminist dean’s insistence that we go back to the drawing board when the short list for a senior position includes no African American scholar, but is comprised of one woman of color, a transgender butch, and a white woman from a discipline that is notoriously dominated by white men, thereby pushing back at the institution’s singular understanding of “diversity” even as I concur with every insistence to make black faculty hiring a priority? Do I encourage my faculty to concede to hiring another spouse to ingratiate the program with a new dean who is suspicious of the field, or continue our insistence that growth must come from national searches, faculty-defined research priorities, and long term institutional planning no matter the consequences? When a student in a Women’s Studies class is assaulted by her roommate who is enrolled in the same course, do I help the confessed assailant finish the term on an independent study basis, as the academic dean requests, or refuse to accommodate the institution’s failure to suspend him,

even though doing so will put the assailant back in the same classroom with his victim?<sup>9</sup>

Most of my work on institutionalization was written in the context of these kinds of deliberations, which helped expose the powerful, but largely obscured, distinction between the labor of institutional politics and the rhetorics of radical intervention that characterized much academic feminist prose, including my own. I emphasize the word “radical” here to mark the political charge it has and continues to carry in conversations about institutionalization where it does more than describe histories of political contestation over institutional practices of exclusion; it *organizes* the political imaginary of the field by differentiating the incursion *into* the university and its elite culture of knowledge and subject production *from* much of what has come later, including the worry that complicity is the prevailing characteristic of what it means to live and work in the university today. In the 1990s, this formulation was especially pointed, as feminist scholars tried to comprehend what Susan Faludi (1991) had diagnosed as the “backlash” against feminism in the U.S. public sphere from our increasingly secure positions in the university. The discourse that ensued—what I named “apocalyptic narration” (2000)—blamed academic feminists for diverting their attention, if not abandoning the radical project of feminism altogether, often by privileging theory, commodity culture, or the insular world of tenure and its political provincialisms. By attending to the anxieties of discipline that generated this self-condemning discourse, I agreed that academic feminism and contemporary feminism, both popular and activist, had diverged, but I was resolutely against the idea that the future required their happy reunion. Unconvinced that “feminism without women,” as Tania Modleski (1991) so memorably called it, was an urgent problem, I maintained that contemporary feminism was inadequate as either a guide or measure for the field built in its name, not because it had failed to live up to the many different political investments made in it—which, of course, it had—but because the knowledge project of Women’s Studies needed to be more capacious, by which I meant: less presentist, less tied to nationalist and nativist self-definitions, less moralistic, less ambivalent about its relation to power, and much less prescriptive about what the content and shape of the political might mean. As I saw it, the problem with relying on contem-

porary feminism as the impulse and aim of Women's Studies was the assumption that responding to the political present was all that the future would need.

I was not alone in being uncharmed by the accusations of apocalyptic narration. Many academic feminists fought against its discourse of blame, pointing out that the agency to stop the well-funded right wing attack on feminism in the U.S. public sphere was certainly something we would have chosen to use if we had actually possessed it. But this fantasy of a political agency that had died or, worse, been abandoned was part of the nostalgic character of apocalyptic narration, crafted in temporal terms as a worry that the future was lost because academic feminists were no longer committed to bringing the promise of the radical past into being. These anxieties dovetailed with others, as practitioners sought to grapple with pressures internal to the field's own object orientations. These pressures included: 1- the limits of the category of woman in its universalist, western, and white feminist deployments; 2- the rise of masculinity studies and subsequent explosion of transgender as a maximalist expansion of the meaning of gender; 3- the challenge of poststructuralism to feminist understandings of language, subjectivity, and experience; and 4- the thorough revamping of the study of sexuality offered by the anti-homophobic and anti-identitarian itineraries of queer inquiry. In retrospect, it is easy to see how these pressures, combined with the widespread backlash against feminism in U.S. life, served as further evidence for apocalyptic narrators, who often cast that decade's heated debate over the field's name as another instance of academic feminism's political betrayal. In many of the conversations about the potential move to Gender Studies—or Gender and Sexuality Studies—the standoff was clear: the agents of feminism's undoing regularly cited by apocalyptic narrators were almost always those foregrounded by proponents of the name change as the animating energy for restoring political optimism and critical currency to the field: poststructuralism, women of color feminism, masculinity studies, and queer theory.

I took what is now the losing position in the name change debate by arguing for the preservation of Women's Studies, but on grounds vastly different from apocalyptic narration. My point was never that "women" was the privileged sign of feminism or that academic feminism had a primary obligation to those

who identified with it. In fact, I had a special interest in understanding feminism and its intellectual traditions as constituted by women's *disidentification* with the category, so much so that one could read feminist discourses that insisted on identification as a deep political wish, one always undermined by identity's ongoing antagonisms. Gayle Rubin (1975) famously depicted this dynamic when she wrote in "The Traffic in Women" that "we are not only oppressed *as* women, we are oppressed by having to *be* women" (204). But when it came to the name change, my argument sought to break away from identificatory conundrums and, with them, the politics of representation altogether, as I found the anti-apocalyptic argument that *women* enforced a conceptual and identitarian *limit* on the field to be a paradoxical reduplication of an old and pernicious referentiality, one that condemned the category of *women* to its dominant configuration under the tutelage of the generic figure of "man." In this, my aim was not only to disorganize the ongoing assumption across identity knowledges that field name and objects of study were the same, but to wonder over anyone's insistence that the political project of the field would be enhanced by consigning *women* to dimorphic gender's most narrow and constraining empirical rule. My position was thus doubly, emphatically negative: I said no to the apocalyptic insistence on continuity with a singular narrative of feminist social movement and no to the reduction of the referential scope and signifying potential of *women* offered by proponents of the name change. In the end, these interventions did less to interrupt the charged atmosphere of the period than to reiterate the anxieties that prompted millennial suspicion. After all, I too read the debates over feminism's academic institutionalization as if what we most risked was making a political mistake.

### **Pedagogies of Correction**

Today, every Women's Studies program I have worked in has been renamed, including the program at Duke University, which contemplated it once the dean who insisted that it become "Gender Studies" in order to "attract more men" has moved on. This localizing of the matter indicates how profoundly issues of institutionalization are embedded in the politics of particular institutions, making it important to say that my analysis of discourses about field formation has never been

a critique of the ways in which scholars have negotiated the political terrain of the universities in which they worked. Nonetheless, as its own kind of movement, the name change has had significant internal effects on the field, making it clear that the apocalyptic worry that feminism was being left behind was not simply a paranoid reading, but an enabling disavowal of the disciplinary apparatus that has and continues to govern the field. By disciplinary apparatus, I mean the assumptions, values, methodological priorities, and critical frameworks that are not only oriented toward, but also *organized by* the field's claim to political agency. In these terms, the central charge against institutionalization—that it domesticates or, worse, abandons politics—has been the field's most productive disciplinary fiction, advancing the institutionalizing process in which radicality and political transgression become the prize of academic feminism's disciplinary signature. As I understand it, discipline is neither a contraction of the political nor its subordination. On the contrary, it is the force that extends, proliferates, excites, and renews. It underlies every claim that politics have been abandoned, domesticated, insufficiently theorized, or misconstrued by reviving, consolidating, and advancing the value of the political as the key referent of the field. When apocalyptic narrators sought to defend feminist politics against the complicities of institutionalization, they were answering the field's disciplinary demand by claiming that their political commitment put them outside and against the institution and its disciplining of knowledge altogether. If their outcry was muted in the new century by scholars and students who would embrace the field's reconfiguration as an urgent political necessity, it was not belief in the future that died, but the founding generation's power to narrate it.

Once we read the claim against institutionalization as a distinct disciplinary rule, it is easier to understand how the contentions of the 1990s could dissolve under the auspices of what is now understood as the field's move toward theoretical expansion and analytic inclusion as Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies (or some version thereof). For once the dust had settled, with no small help from the political crisis we call the son of George Bush presidency, it was clear that at the heart of the field's disciplinary apparatus was a powerful and sustaining commitment not to the abandonment of feminism, but to the pedagogical correction of

its appropriations and complicities. It is this commitment that must be read as the affective disposition of the current conjuncture, where Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies now attends to feminism's complicities in ways that produce and perform the field as a political agency. This performance becomes especially clear when we look at the central disciplinary axioms that govern the field. The first and most obvious axiom is that the category of women is exclusionary, if not also normalizing and imperialist, especially when analyzed on its own. This axiom is the consequence of a number of criticisms of feminism's historical complicity. In Transgender Studies, for instance, the category of women can be seen as a violent imposition of a normative gender order while Postcolonial Studies demonstrates its geopolitical collusion with colonialism and imperial war. Other critical itineraries emphasize the category's racial exclusions or the way it has circulated in North American feminism in distinctly bourgeois terms. Rather than undermining the political pursuit of the field, however, these demonstrations of the category's exclusion work to enhance it, making it possible to say that one powerful effect of the transformation of the field's name is the transference of political agency from feminism to Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies itself.<sup>10</sup> In this transference, the inaugural relation between feminism and Women's Studies is rewritten. Whereas the field's initial conception of itself as a political actor was contingent on its extension of feminism into dominant orders of knowledge, largely signified by the insistence on centering women, scholarly activism is today centered on defining, directing, and in many cases correcting what the name, feminism, has and will come to mean.

If the apocalyptic narrators were most worried that *we* had failed feminism, the political rationale of the field now stages its critical intervention in reverse: it is feminism that needs the academic's activist-oriented attentions. This is largely what is at stake in the now codified declaration that the field's potent political intervention arises from its intersectional, transnational, and interdisciplinary commitments. Under each of these terms, the history in which Women's Studies was taken to reproduce feminism's own complicities—with race and class privilege, U.S. empire, and the normative orders of the discipline—is brought into critical relief by an analytic investment aimed at out-thinking as much as outliving such errors. Consider as well how the

field's axiomatic belief in social construction serves as a field-defining rule that has so upended the authority of essentializing arguments that it is only in the context of a push to rethink human exceptionalism that a return to the body and the biological has begun to be forged. The point is not that any of these positions are wrong or that their political aspirations are wrong-headed; indeed, I have endorsed them all not only as important critical maneuvers in the contemporary minefield of distinctly politicized theoretical debate, but as vital political agendas. But because the pursuit of the political is a disciplinary imperative, overdetermined by the institutionalizing force of a field that is always ambivalent about its own institutionalizing efforts, these axioms function as more than politically persuasive aspirations; they are pedagogies of correction that renew the possibility of a transformed future by locating the field's value in detecting the scenes in which feminism's political compass has failed.

To be sure, transference is always a complicated enterprise, as much an identification with the fantasy that helps to bring it into being as a practice of substitution, misrecognition, and idealization. For the field that now constitutes itself as feminism's mentor, the figure that most confounds its political judgment is *race*, that key term of intersectional commitment that never appears in any of the various configurations that now name the field. By "confound," I do not mean that race has been ignored or subordinated; as I have argued before, much more is at stake in analyzing racialized exclusions than assigning it or women of color feminism to a permanently marginalized position (Wiegman 2012). And yet, it is paradoxically the preservation of this marginality in the new configuration of the field that helps ensure both the ongoing power of *race* as a critique of exclusion and the disciplinary commitment to the political that such critiques evince. More than a decade ago, Rachel Lee (2002) offered a cogent account of marginality's allure by tracing the way that "women of color"—as embodied identity, signifier of critical knowledge, and primary referent for *race*—were situated in both temporal and spatial terms in the political imaginary of Women's Studies. As a temporal figure, "women of color" were the belated and the not-yet—suspended between the exclusions of the past and the transformed future their inclusion would come to mean. As Lee put it, "women of color remain eminently useful to the progress narra-

tive Women's Studies wishes to create for itself, where the fullness of women of color's arrival within Women's Studies is always 'about to be'" (89). In spatial terms, "women of color" signaled mobility and non-territoriality, not just in the writing of white women, but as the definitional centerpiece of women of color scholarship where the language of non-location—of intersections, borderlands, and interstices—had long reigned. For Lee, the signification of "women of color" as every place and no place, belated but "about to be" was a seduction that offered something for everyone, sustaining a disciplinary no less than psychic topography in which women of color and the critical discourses they represented were taken to be external to the institution of Women's Studies and its reinscription of feminist complicities, but internal to its political pursuits. Marginality as the sign of non-complicity; deferred inclusion but political agency in the now.

Lee's (2002) diagnosis is no less accurate today and her agenda for reconfiguration—to turn women of color scholarship toward the disparate histories and analytic capacities of the bodies of knowledge that comprise *it* in order, in her terms, "to begin enunciating 'women of color'...within and through privilege"—no less unmet (100). But the challenge of undoing marginality is greater than ever and the reasons for this do not belong to Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies alone. Under the auspices of contemporary post-racial politics, where inclusion has become the reigning sign of multicultural co-optation and political theft, it is the simultaneous articulation of inclusion and exclusion that confounds both the demand and the promise of moving race, in bell hooks's (1984) famous words, "from margin to center." As Sara Ahmed (2012) and Roderick Ferguson (2012) have each recently argued, the university in ruins does not simply exclude what has come to contest it. It manages dissent and incorporates difference: between populations, now rendered a matter of "diversity," and between knowledges, now cast as a range of differentiating identity "markets." In this context, the continued marginality of "women of color" in the field can be understood as both an instance of the ongoing effects of institutional racism and a deferral of racist forms of institutionalized inclusion—a temporal formation that not only straddles, in Lee's terms, the past and the future, but one that resists toxic fantasies of multicultural progress today. For the field that now

defines its pedagogical task as countering feminism's errors, the continued marginality of women of color bears contradictory political value. On the one hand, it offers a persistent reminder of the field's own institutional limits, interrupting conceptions of the field as an extension of feminism's political progress. On the other hand, it institutionalizes women of color, both as bodies and bodies of knowledge, as the field's most productive de-institutionalizing force, thereby sustaining the field's disciplinary reliance on institutionalization as a master signifier of political and critical threat. As paradoxical as it may seem, the marginality of "women of color" is a necessary political complicity, upending narrative fantasies of progress by performing the anti-institutional ethos that Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies aims to claim not for feminism, but for itself.

### Optimistically Cruel

If conversations about institutionalization are magnetic scenes for rehearsing attachment and detachment alike, they obviously play a crucial role in redefining the political imaginary that governs the field. It might even be true to say that these conversations constitute the political imaginary as much as they perform it, which is why the repetition they enact can be so engaging, at least for those of us who find ourselves continually enthralled. Certainly, the contradictions we encounter in the university are overwhelming—and especially so when both our models and discourses about politics are so out of synch with the temporalities and political struggles endemic to institutional change. This situation, in which an attachment to an "object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle" to fulfillment, is what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls "cruel optimism" (227). According to Berlant, "[a]ll attachment is optimistic," in part because optimism is "the force that moves you...into the world in order to bring closer that satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own" (1-2). Optimism becomes cruel "only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it" (1). It is both the value and force of *Cruel Optimism* that it focuses most intently on those optimisms that collate around sovereign fantasies of the good life and of normative political orders where, in the context of vicious neoliberal practices of attrition, people strive for objects that repeatedly fail to satisfy their material and psychic needs because alternatives are so difficult to

invent and achieve. In their cruelly optimistic return to scenes of predictable disappointment, people confirm, Berlant writes, their "attachment to the system and thereby confirm the system and the legitimacy of the affects that make one feel bound to it" (227). This is the case even when the attachment "has the negative force of cynicism or the dark attenuation of political depression" (227). Whether in despair or guarded hope, then, optimism is most cruel when it is bound to those genres of living that conform to the failures we already know.

But how do we understand those instances when the predictable incapacity of the attachment to live up to the fantasy it cultivates is both a psychic and political necessity? This is the question that haunts the contemporary juncture in which our ongoing attachment to an object (the university) is only possible because we know it will not deliver what we most want from it. In this context, the cruelty of our optimism—to be attached to an object that "impedes the aim" that brought us to it—is a potent form of inoculation against the threat of institutional complicity. Or so it can seem in the affective atmosphere of the present when neoliberal rationalities are revising not only the role of the university, but the material structures in which its organization of learning and labor take shape. In her introductory remarks to the 2011 plenary panel on "The Multiple Futures of Gender and Sexuality Studies" held at Barnard College, Lisa Duggan offered a cogent summary of the contemporary situation in which corporate education envisions faculty as contingent labor, students as consumers, and learning as outcome oriented—a university whose entire ecology is being remade in the name of perpetual crisis. In this context, which to many observers is *the* most thoroughgoing revision of the academy in more than a century, Duggan asked panelists to turn their attention away from the struggles of everyday institutional life to speculate on the university they would build if the agency to make such decisions belonged to them. "If you suddenly had the power to remake the university in any way that you wanted," she asked, "how would you institutionalize Gender, Women's, LGBT, Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies?" No one needs to hear the audience's laughter to register the unworldliness of this question and the future it envisions in which the study of race, gender, sexuality, and post/colonialism emerge, in Duggan's words, "as central rather than marginal to the [university's] academic mission."

Duggan's provocation was no laughing matter, of course, as she sought to counter political despondency by evoking an institutional relation for feminist scholars that was no longer optimistically cruel. In the ensuing discussion, panelists took up the charge in different but related ways. Kandice Chuh discussed forms of institutionalization that could resist "institutionality," a term she borrowed from Roderick Ferguson (2012) who uses it to connote practices of inclusion that appropriate and domesticate the epistemological force of minority discourses, largely by marketing difference as uncritical multiculturalism. Ann Pellegrini described the importance of developing perverse pedagogies that would promote, against neoliberalism, a system of value that privileged the non-monetizable knowledges found in the humanities where creativity and alternative forms of collective world building now live. And for Sarita See, the promise of the power to remake the university meant learning how to create "a non-proprietary space of decolonial knowledge production," one that could nurture collaborative projects on race and colonialism without the master motive of owning knowledge. In these ways, the panelists engaged Duggan's provocation by emphasizing the political commitments and analytic priorities of the fields in question while working hard to sidestep the various threats that becoming agents of institutionalization might pose. The distinctions that emerged—between appropriation and radicality, domestication and epistemological insurgency, and normalizing and perverse pedagogies—were as familiar as the paradox they engendered, as the leap into a future in which Gender, Women's, LGBT, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies were central was figured by distinctly anti-institutional forms of teaching and learning.

In this context, where the future could be optimistically embraced only by resisting institutionalization, we might genuinely ask: is "the power to remake the university" the kind of *power* that scholars in any of the fields under discussion could ever want? I emphasize the word *power* here to draw attention to the condition of possibility that the organizing question quite significantly concealed. For in the postulation that one might "suddenly" have "the power" to transform the prevailing structure of the institution, the provocation allowed panelists to perform an attachment to institutional transformation without having to grapple with what it would mean not simply to seek institutional

power, but to inhabit and wield it. In this way, the panel's affective disposition conformed to the characteristics of political fantasy as Berlant (2011) describes it, splitting "attachment and expectation" in order to isolate "political optimism from the way things are" (228). For Berlant, of course, this cruelty is part of the impasse of the political present, an impediment to the creativity and risk she finds necessary to any project that aims to generate alternative social relations and the political sensorium necessary to sustain them. If her tracking of cruel optimism has concentrated on the conventionality of attachments in everyday worlds, this is because she has long been concerned with the anesthetizing lure of normative culture, which she reads as a cluster of genres that compel affective attachments to objects that tend to suffocate those who use them to survive.

What has always intrigued me, as I have emphasized throughout this essay, is the conventionality that accompanies the rhetorics and routines of what we conventionally cast in professionalized genres of critical thought as unconventional: radicality, resistance, the alternative. Hence, I am not drawn to Berlant's concept because of its potent utility in explaining the way that people continue to attach to social norms, laws, belief systems, intimacy cultures, majoritarian politics, and the like that repeatedly diminish, if not overtly impede, the satisfaction of their material and affective needs. My interest is in the protection that cruel optimism quite powerfully affords in managing the anxiety of political complicity that animates our relation to institutionalization.

This, then, is what cruel optimism offers as a description of the affective atmosphere of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies today: a way to repeat the attachment to political transformation that continues to compel us without incurring the risk of the condemnation of a future failure. To be sure, one of the distinct consequences of this affective disposition is an aversion to addressing the kinds of institutional power we already have and work, often aggressively, not to lose. The absence of such a discussion has value in soothing the contradiction between the status of identity knowledges within the university and the power that practitioners within these fields now hold, not only in relation to those professional practices that attend publication, employment, and all aspects of student training, but in the various informal networks that help establish and

sustain a scholar's career. No matter what we can say about ongoing threats to programs and departments in institutions where even the liberal language of diversity has failed to sustain already-reduced budgets, the fact remains that nearly all of the fields in question have a well-established academic infrastructure with journals, conferences, book series, postdoctoral fellowships, national organizations, and research institutes dedicated to their critical agendas. In these spaces, along with the social networks they generate, scholars not only build and protect their own academic careers, but offer access to younger cohorts by determining what—and who among them—counts as worthy and cutting edge. Unlike many other professional cultures, the left-leaning academy eschews one of the most materially significant facts of its own existence: that who you know matters.

The point, let me be clear, is not to indict the tenured class—those of us who populate the hiring committees, sit on the editorial boards, hold the departmental administrative positions, lead the professional organizations, and whose letters of recommendation are taken as the ones that truly count—as hypocritical or self-deluded, or to say that the authority we exert in and over our fields is unethical or duplicitous. These conclusions would merely repeat the narrative conventions that cruel optimism names by re-idealizing the distinction between complicity and the good politics of anti-institutional insurgency that organizes the field's psychic world. As I see it, the issue at stake here is both more broad and more vexing, having to do with the very power that the disavowal of institutional power exerts within our field. For one thing, it actively prohibits conversations that could enhance our *affective capacity* to engage the university as a contradictory but resonant scene of political desire, one whose urgencies are far greater than the issues of self-representation that have so profoundly besieged us. This is especially necessary at the current juncture when very few resources exist in neoliberal cultures for claiming institutional spaces of any kind, a fact that undoubtedly accounts for the poverty of the choices that face us: take the imaginative leap into the impossible as the recourse for sustaining political belief or declare war on political fantasy by making peace with complacency. While there is no guarantee that such conversations will yield anything of lasting value, I remain engaged by the idea that repetition is

exhausting only when we stop paying attention to what it enables us to perform.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As in all of my work on Women's Studies and matters of institutionalization, my referent point is the field's history in the U.S. university. I make no claim that the issues I highlight are the same across national university systems, though I think it is safe to say that feminist studies in the now-declining first world academy has been shaped by similar structural conditions and stoked by political imaginaries that arise from the shared political history of the nation-state's emergence via colonial modernity. Much of the scholarship on Women's Studies in Canada would confirm this, including the rich archive documented in the pages of *Atlantis*. See as well Braithwaite et al. 2004.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Ahmed (2012); Chatterjee and Maira (2014); Ferguson (2012); and Wilder (2013).

<sup>3</sup> A canny reader has pointed out to me that the discourse of the university in crisis is itself a repetitive one, no less in need of unpacking as the feminist discourse about institutionalization. My use of the ambivalent "seems" in this sentence is an attempt to thread the needle between the felt experience of institutional disintegration and the ongoing command of the university as a powerful institution in U.S. cultural life.

<sup>4</sup> Newfield (2008) is the exemplary text on these matters.

<sup>5</sup> This is especially the case in the work of Melanie Klein (1975), whose citational presence has grown significantly since Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997) paired her with Silvan Tompkins to make what is now considered the queer theoretical affective turn. See also Sedgwick (2007) and Wiegman (2014).

<sup>6</sup> The archive that comprises feminist deliberation on institutional transformation is too lengthy to list in its entirety. Frequently cited texts include: Messer-Davidow (2002); Wiegman (2002); Beins and Kennedy (2005); Scott (2008); and Orr, Braithwaite, and Lichtenstein (2012).

<sup>7</sup> The title echoes the posthumous volume, *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, edited by Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie (2000). In its first chapter, Ien Ang (2000) describes Hall's work as forwarding "an idealistic, if not utopian" understanding of cultural identities as more than "who we are" or "where we come from" by emphasizing "what we might become" (1). But as Ang shows, this orientation toward the future was always, in Hall's words, a negotiation of "both the necessity and the 'impossibility' of identities" (Hall 1996, 16). My shift from "without" to "no" reflects my interest in reading a deeper ambivalence at stake in the rhetorical practices and analytic modes of contemporary cultural theory as it grapples not only with its own sparse political agency, but with the transformed conditions of social life under neoliberal attrition where many of the objects of left critique in the past—institutions, identities, citizenship forms, state practices of social management, even the nation as an ideological bulwark against global capitalism—are differently positioned.

<sup>8</sup> Portions of each section were originally drafted for my participation in two different institutional celebrations. One, at North-

western, took the framework “Radical Pasts, Unknown Futures” to mark its name change to Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. The other was in response to a session on “The Multiple Futures of Gender and Sexuality Studies” at the 40th anniversary celebration of the Barnard Center for Research on Women.

<sup>9</sup> Answers: 1. I push for what the Initiative rejected, a core curricular requirement that makes the study of gender and sexuality a central feature of undergraduate education for every student, critiquing the “boutique” approach that sought to answer the problem of institutional sexism with a special program designed for sixteen female students each year. 2. I resist the dean’s insistence that we jettison our short list and reiterate the program’s own agenda to hire in African Diaspora Studies—a search request previously denied by the same dean. 3. I encourage my faculty to concede to the institution’s request by formalizing the appointment process, which establishes the appointee’s scholarly credentials while seeking assurance that future growth will come from national searches. 4. I refuse to do an independent study with the confessed assailant, prompting the university to change its rules for withdrawing from a course to enable the student in question to complete the term.

<sup>10</sup> Other central axioms include: that intersectionality is women’s resolution; that marginality is opposed to power; that “critical thinking” is inherently progressive; that essentialism is always bad; that interdisciplinarity frees us from being disciplinary; and that a curriculum is a political agenda.

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