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Women’s Studies as Virus: Institutional Feminism and the Projection of Danger

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Abstract

Because women’s studies radically challenges social hierarchies and lacks a unified identity and canon of thought, it often negotiates a precarious position within the modern corporatized university. At the same time, women’s studies offers—by virtue of its interdisciplinary, critical, and “infectious” structure—cutting-edge perspectives and goals that set it apart from more traditional fields. This paper theorizes that one future pedagogical priority of women’s studies is to train students not only to master a body of knowledge but also to serve as symbolic “viruses” that infect, unsettle, and disrupt traditional and entrenched fields. In this essay, we first posit how the metaphor of the virus in part exemplifies an ideal feminist pedagogy, and we then investigate how both women’s studies and the spread of actual viruses (e.g., Ebola, HIV) produce similar kinds of emotional responses in others. By looking at triviality, mockery, panic, and anger that women’s studies as a field elicits, we conclude by outlining the stakes of framing women’s studies as an infectious, insurrectional, and potentially dangerous, field of study. In doing so, we frame two new priorities for women’s studies—training male students as viruses and embracing “negative” stereotypes of feminist professors—as important future directions for the potentially liberatory aspects of the field.

Keywords: women’s studies, virus, feminism, pedagogy, moral panics

Estudios de género como virus: el feminismo institucional y la proyección del peligro

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Resumen

Dado que los estudios de género desafían radicalmente las jerarquías sociales y carece de una identidad y canon de pensamiento unificado, a menudo ocupa una posición precaria dentro de la universidad corporatizada moderna. Al mismo tiempo, y debido a su estructura interdisciplinaria, crítica e “infecciosa”, los estudios de género ofrecen perspectivas y objetivos innovadores que lo distinguen de los campos más tradicionales. En este trabajo se teoriza sobre una futura prioridad pedagógica de los estudios de género consistente en formar a los estudiantes en tal conjunto de conocimientos que les sirva como "virus" simbólicos para infectar, perturbar, e interrumpir en los campos de estudio tradicionales. Así, en primer lugar establecemos una pedagogía feminista ideal utilizando la metáfora del virus, para luego investigar cómo los estudios de género y la propagación de los virus reales (por ejemplo, Ébola, VIH) producen el mismo tipo de respuesta emocional en los demás. Analizando la trivialidad, burla, pánico e ira que los estudios de género pueden llegar a provocar llegamos a la conclusión que éstos pueden convertirse en un ámbito de estudio potencialmente peligroso e insurrecto. Finalizamos enmarcando dos nuevas prioridades para los estudios de género.

Palabras clave: estudios de género, virus, feminismo, pedagogía, pánicos morales

The question of what women’s studies is, and what women’s studies does, continues to haunt the field in numerous ways. Because women’s studies originated from radical and frankly activist origins that threatened conventional power imbalances, it exists permanently on the margins of academia and struggles to maintain a coherent identity and a consistent and agreed upon canon of thought. Program and department chairs, along with women’s studies faculty members, consistently negotiate numerous aspects of women’s studies and its relationship to the university. This includes everything from the creation of new programs, faculty lines, content of courses, the name of the programs (e.g., “women and gender studies”; “women, gender, and sexuality studies”; “gender studies,” and so on), practices of assessment, curricular priorities, and the specific sorts of knowledge women’s studies students should learn during their tenure as undergraduate and graduate students (Allen & Kitch, 1998). Consequently, the field of women’s studies often negotiates in precarious ways its relationship to the highly corporatized and patriarchal university. It struggles, in short, with a permanent identity crisis, engendered not only by its relationship to other disciplines and fields, but also by its continued questioning of its own priorities and existence (Scott, 2008).

At the same time, women’s studies offers—by virtue of its interdisciplinary, critical, and “infectious” structure—cutting-edge perspectives and goals that differentiate itself from more traditional academic fields. Women’s studies has wholly embraced both its humanism and its social science leanings; it occupies a place across fields, within fields, and has thoroughly (and somewhat chaotically) attached itself to numerous partnerships, cross-listings and interdisciplinary projects across the university (Romero, 2000). Women’s studies programs traverse disciplinary boundaries and often exist permanently on the margins of academia (Hooks, 2000b), taking on topics as diverse as feminist science studies, critical intersectionality, embodiment, trans studies, and new materialisms. With its ever-changing names and alliances, women’s studies has become even more difficult to locate and place within the corporatized university (Briggs, 2013), particularly as it prioritizes emotional course content, critical stances toward sexism, intense classroom dynamics, and the fusion between theory and practice (Fisher, 1987).

This paper argues that one future pedagogical priority of women's studies is to train students not only to master a body of knowledge but also to serve as symbolic "viruses" that infect, unsettle, and disrupt traditional and entrenched fields. We explore how the metaphor of the virus—its structure and its potential for unsettling and disrupting the everyday processes of its "host"—exemplifies a compelling model for feminist pedagogy (minus, of course, the killing of the host). We then turn to the affective experiences of viruses and the sorts of emotional responses they typically produce both in individuals and in the public at large. We specifically investigate how both women's studies and the spread of actual viruses (e.g., Ebola, HIV) produce similar kinds of emotional responses. By looking at triviality (or the trivialization of women's experiences), mockery, panic, and anger that women's studies as a field produces and elicits, we explore the stakes of framing women's studies as an infectious, and potentially dangerous, field of study. In doing so, we conclude by framing two new priorities for women's studies—training male students as viruses and embracing "negative" stereotypes of feminist professors—as important future directions for the field.

The Birth of Women's Studies

At its inception in the early, 1970s, women's studies was designed as a bridge between feminist activism, consciousness-raising, and university scholarship, practice, and pedagogy (Boxer, 2001a; Shircliffe, 2000). Cornell University held the first women's studies class in, 1969, followed one year later by the founding of the first women's studies programs at San Diego State University and SUNY-Buffalo (Salper, 2011). Catharine Stimpson (1971) noted that, prior to the existence of women's studies programs, omissions, distortions, and trivialization of women's issues dominated the academy. Early women's studies programs sought to inject feminism into the university, to inhabit spaces where women were previously excluded, and to showcase not only the rigorous academic scholarship of women, but also train younger generations of women in feminist theory and political activism (Boxer, 2001a; Crowley, 1999). Linda Gordon (1975) called women's studies "the academic wing of the women's liberation movement" (p. 565); in line with this, Susan Sheridan

(2012) claimed that women's studies drew from the women's liberation movement for inspiration, just as it influenced feminist activism in return. Aiming to establish itself as a discipline in its own right, women's studies spawned its own academic journals, the National Women's Studies Association and other feminist professional organizations (e.g., Association for Women in Psychology), and advocated for university resources devoted to this new and emerging field (Gerber, 2002; Howe, 1979). These efforts were quite successful, as women's studies grew from a small handful of programs in 1970 to over 600 programs by the mid-1990s (Boxer, 2001a). In 1990, Emory University established the first Ph.D. in women's studies; currently, there are at least a dozen stand-alone women's studies Ph.D. programs across the country, revealing again that women's studies has become increasingly robust within the university system (Artemis Guide, 2014; Guy-Sheftall, 2009).

At the same time, establishing women's studies as a discipline has created challenges for feminist scholars in the academy, particularly as the boundaries and practices of the field are negotiated over time (Boxer, 2001a; Crowley, 1999). Some scholarship has noted that the attempt to merge the highly political and clearly left-leaning agenda of feminism into the more conservative and corporate university has resulted in numerous tensions and difficulties (Scott, 2008). By decentering the professor within the classroom and emphasizing more egalitarian dynamics, women's studies challenges the very hierarchies that underlie higher education (Shrewsbury, 1987).

Still, this radical upheaval of traditional priorities of the university has sometimes resulted in problematic consequences. The professionalization of women's studies has resulted in a strange pairing of second wave activists who resisted assimilation into the university system combined with younger women's studies scholars who have studied gender relations without necessarily being politically active (Patai & Koertge, 1994; Stake & Hoffmann, 2001). Further, the prioritization of white women's concerns over the concerns of women of color has continued to haunt the implementation and practices of women's studies within and outside the university (Duncan, 2002). Even more recent efforts to move toward intersectionality have led to an overemphasis on black women's experiences as quintessentially intersectional and a general lack of

empirical validation for the processes and consequences of intersectionality (Nash, 2008). When attempting to rectify these problems, many women's studies programs have turned to the question of how to meaningfully integrate themselves with other critical disciplines like ethnic studies, black studies, indigenous studies, and American studies (Franklin, 2002; Romero, 2000), though this often raises questions about allegiances and the difficulty of existing within and between multiple fields particularly if universities do not throw enough financial and political support behind those programs (Fahs, 2013). Some even fear that women's studies may become an "impossibility" due to the difficulty of locating its disciplinary boundaries within the university (Brown, 2006).

Locating Contemporary Women's Studies

Wendy Brown (2006) noted recently that women's studies may be facing "dusk on its epoch" (p. 17) due to the constant renegotiation of the pedagogical and scholarly goals of the field. She asks: "Is it rigorous? Scholarly? Quasi-religious? Doctrinaire? Is it anti-intellectual or too political? Overly theoretical and insufficiently political? Does it mass-produce victims instead of heroines, losers instead of winners? Or does it turn out jargon-speaking metaphysicians who have lost all concern with Real Women? Has it become unmoored from its founding principles? Was it captured by the radical fringe? The theoretical elite? The moon worshippers? The man-haters? The sex police?" (p. 17). In addition to these debates, women's studies faces constant negotiations surrounding the difficult links (or divisions) between ethnic studies, queer theory, American studies, and political activism (Brown, 2006; Orr & Lichtenstein, 2004). Indeed, "contemporary feminist scholarship is not a single conversation but is instead engaged with respective domains of knowledge, or bodies of theory, that are themselves infrequently engaged with each other" (Brown, 2006, p. 20). In short, women's studies students are typically interested in topics that span psychology, sociology, theory, activism, literature, history, and sexuality studies (Boxer, 2000b). Students in women's studies might dabble in a wide range of theories and research methodologies, including ethnography, oral history, qualitative psychological analysis, Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis, quantitative sociological analysis, memoir or self-

reflection, object relations theory, historical theory, literary theory, postcolonial criticism, second and third wave feminist tactics of activism, Marxist theories of labor and political economy, social history, critical science studies, and beyond (Fahs, 2013; Brown, 2006; Scott, 2008).

In attempting to decide what women’s studies currently is, Wendy Brown (2003) noted, “it is proposed that the subject and object of the field might be left behind even as the field persists. It is a place where the ‘what’ and the ‘we’ of feminist scholarly work is so undecided or so disseminated that it can no longer bound such work, where the identity that bore women’s studies into being has dissolved without dissolving the field itself” (p. 3). Existing women’s studies programs are, for these reasons, becoming increasingly difficult to find, evaluate, and sustain (Romero, 2000). Conflicts over naming, for example, have erupted across the country, with competing demands for women’s studies to merge their names with gender studies, queer studies, sexuality studies, or, more radically, to eliminate the word “women” altogether and to instead champion critical studies, cultural studies, or social and cultural analysis (Fahs, 2013; Bell & Rosenhan, 1981; Orr & Lichtenstein, 2004). Feminist scholars have also struggled to validate their work in terms of tenure, promotion, and publication, as talk of journal “impact factor” (typically valued more in the natural sciences) have appeared more prominently in recent years as a pressure placed upon women’s studies faculty when they seek tenure and promotion (Burghardt & Colbeck, 2005; Walby, 2005).

Women’s studies also faces challenges in establishing (or even wanting) a core canon of thought, as faculty and administrators disagree about what constitutes a women’s studies education and about how much connection should exist to other traditional disciplines (Stacey, 2000; Thorne, 2000). Some key questions that arise include: Should women’s studies courses prioritize activism, and if so, how does that work in the largely patriarchal and conservative academy (Crosby, Todd, & Worell, 1996)? Should postmodern and deconstructionist lines of thinking dominate the women’s studies classroom or should scholars work to also train students in empirical and positivistic methodologies, and how can feminist science studies inform this thinking? What theories should have a prominent place in the women’s studies classroom and how do other modes of difference factor into feminist knowledges? While faculty and administrators have lobbied around these

questions for many years, consensus on how to answer these questions rarely occurs.

Feminist Pedagogies

In the broadest sense, feminist pedagogies have as their primary goal the teaching of feminist thought and the establishment of its clear relevance to student lives. Taking the motto “The personal is political” seriously, feminist professors often prioritize issues and subjects that deeply and immediately impact students’ personal lives (Luke & Gore, 2014; Stake, 2006). These issues can include things like domestic violence, sexuality, body image, eating disorders, social justice work, parenting, family life, educational disparities, wage and economic inequalities, labor, and global inequalities (Luke & Gore, 2014). As one consequence of teaching such “up close and personal” subject matter, students in feminist classrooms often experience more intense emotions and affect than students in other classrooms (Morley, 1998; Smith, 1999). In a positive sense, students in classrooms with feminist pedagogies reported more willingness to validate and give feedback on other students’ work (Duncan & Stasio, 2001) and students become more politically engaged after taking women’s studies classes (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1999). Further, the relationship between professors and students in women’s studies has become less hierarchical, thus creating greater opportunities for parental projection and strong emotion between students and professors (Morley, 1998; Wallace, 1999). In a more negative sense, students perceived feminist course content as less “rational” than other courses, rated women professors lower than male professors, and expressed dismissal and disavowal of feminist material (Abel & Maltzer, 2007; Basow, Phelan, & Capotosto, 2006; Webber, 2005).

Female professors also face a plethora of challenges regardless of whether they promote feminist ideologies in the classroom. Teaching evaluations, for example, are often more harsh toward female professors, just as female professors report a greater incidence of students challenging their authority, asking their age, commenting on their appearance, or requesting grade changes (Duncan & Stasio, 2001). For professors with explicitly feminist viewpoints, they are then positioned as “hopelessly

biased” and as having a clear agenda that students often want to challenge (Elliott, 1995). Also, unlike other disciplines and fields, students in women’s studies classrooms are essentially studying themselves as the subject matter, leading to a lack of distance between course content and their material lives (Hooks, 2000b). Students in feminist classrooms express particular resistance to critiquing men, acknowledging structural forces of inequalities, and understanding the problems of “blaming the victim” (Moore, 1997). Davis (1992), however, argued that student resistance may positively reflect on the professor’s ability to push students to become upset or agitated and to take the classroom content personally. Students’ greatest educational growth typically occurred alongside emotional states of confusion, anxiety, excitement, and anticipation (Dirkx, 2001; Hollingsworth, 1992).

Women’s Studies as Virus?

Given the tremendous potential to produce emotional responses in others, to directly impact student lives, and to elicit emotion in the course content, what, then, are the pedagogical priorities of women’s studies? We posit that one future pedagogical goal of women’s studies is the creation of students as symbolic “viruses,” capable of infecting and unsettling the academic spaces around them. While this metaphor works imperfectly—we do not advocate the killing of the host, for example—it situates women’s studies as an insurrectionary field and extends its already “dangerous” status in compelling ways.

In order to understand the metaphorical significance of such a framework, the specific nature of viruses must first be addressed. Scientists typically conceptualize the virus as a particularly small infectious agent that interacts with biological cells in order to replicate (Villarreal, 2005). While viruses can be structurally elaborate, they all possess a simple set of important features—nucleic acids DNA or RNA, protected by an outer protein shell, that contain information necessary to make future copies in host cells. Viruses replicate, in essence, by attaching to and exploiting the DNA synthesis process of host cells, entangling themselves within and corrupting the host cell’s own DNA (Nathanson, 2007). This viral cellular damage contributes to the physiological symptoms of infections, while the

immune system then produces various other effects such as inflammation, fever, and its own cell destruction. In some cases, the immune system can overreact and produce positive feedback effects that have the potential to be much more dangerous than the viral infections themselves (Brandes, Klauschen, Kuchen, & Germain, 2013; Nathanson, 2007). For example, the, 1918 influenza pandemic disproportionately killed young adults because the viral infection caused their healthy immune systems to overreact (Tumpey, 2005).

One could argue that both capitalism and academia already function with the virus as one of their guiding metaphors. This notion of a virus seeking to replicate itself in the host cell can metaphorically work on numerous levels to explain the interests of both capitalism and academia (and any of the typical agents of socialization). For example, the project of capitalism essentially functions to produce more capital rather than to produce material goods (Jameson, 1991). Capitalism invades and infects nearly all aspects of American life—work, home, sexuality, relationships, family, education—and works to supplant the priorities of connection, leisure, community, and even personal laziness with the goal of ever-more-efficient production (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). Work in a capitalist society often extracts labor from workers and leaves their bodies tired, injured, and demoralized. Academia, too, embraces certain aspects of viral infection in its incessant desire to replicate the powerful aspects of the academy in its students. Reproduction theories of education view schools and universities as institutions that keep parents and children in similar class positions (Bettie, 2003). Graduate faculty, for example, overwhelmingly train students to become like them, often imposing their own research interests onto students and expecting students to adopt the methodologies, practices, and ideologies of their own small subfields (Gardner, 2008). These forms of replication exist not to disrupt or unsettle the existing order, but to fanatically enforce and maintain the existing order and to refuse actual change (Bargar & Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983).

That being said, the virus is capable of more than merely replication in relation to the host; it also acts as a dangerous mutagen that can radically alter the design and operation of cells. Viral interaction with host cells is also not merely transient. After replication, portions of the viral DNA are left behind permanently within the cell DNA strands, leading to genetic

expressions that have been proposed to cause cancer, autoimmune disorders, and neurological disease (Bertozzi, 2009; Griffiths, 2001). In this sense, the virus may work as a powerful metaphor for women’s studies pedagogical practices. Rather than simply inducing harm among its victims, viruses can also represent transformative change. Though viruses technically lack “intention” in the most classic sense, they nevertheless can have a powerful impact merely by unworking and unsettling the existing blueprint of the host cells.

Inherently opportunistic, viruses exploit the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of the systems they attack (Nathanson, 2007). Similarly, women’s studies programs are allowed to settle into corporate universities and regenerate themselves through the education of students and by manipulating portions of the academy under their control. Using interdisciplinary women’s studies coursework as a springboard, women’s studies students are then “set loose,” much in the same way that lytic replication (wherein cells reproduce viral components until the cell walls rupture) causes a burst of new viruses into the system that then infect other cells (Nathanson, 2007). Note that this model also assumes that students do not merely receive information as in the more traditional disciplines but instead that they utilize information and knowledge systems to develop particular skills, intentions, and insurrectionary priorities; further, students do form coalitions with professors and other students to promote progressive fields and to enact institutional and social change (Arthur, 2012; Rojas, 2007).

Women’s studies should prioritize the development of students who can move through, within, and between disciplines, who can, in essence, change form. As Patricia Clough and Jasbir Puar (2012) wrote, “The virus is transformative; it has an open-ended relation to form itself. In this sense, the virus takes on characteristics, albeit selectively, which usually are attributed to the virus. At play is the virus’s ability to change itself as it replicates and disseminates” (p. 14). These infectious students, carrying the blueprints of feminist pedagogies, step into other programs and reconstitute themselves through the work they submit and through interaction with instructors and student peers. This infects the formerly isolated and protected, traditional disciplines (e.g., history, mathematics, physics, psychology, and so on) with principles of critical feminist analysis.

Unwittingly, then, the corporate university begins to integrate, bit-by-bit, portions of feminist pedagogies into its own ideology. As the perpetual expansion of the corporate university builds upon itself, it carries these alien blueprints into new domains.

This then raises the question of how women's studies benefits from its permanently marginal position, always on the outskirts and in the shadows of the behemoth corporate university (Hooks, 2000b). While mindless production and consumption, heavily influenced by capitalism, drives the mainstream of the corporate university, women's studies and its allies (e.g., ethnic studies, American studies, religious studies) can prioritize the project of "infection" as its core principle or mission. Critically aware of its relationship to the surrounding ideologies and the canons of thought used in traditional disciplines, women's studies as a virus can unwork, unsettle, and dismantle commonly-held assumptions about "truth" within the university. While this reflects its power, it also opens up complex possibilities for panic, anxiety, and hostility directed toward women's studies as a field and toward women's studies professors as individuals. This can have material consequences like the firing of feminist faculty, closure of programs, or continued erosion of institutionalized support, just as it can infuse feminist classrooms and feminist research with intense emotional responses.

Viruses and Affect: Ebola, HIV, and Beyond

Like many biological occurrences seemingly devoid of political and social meanings, viruses also have notable potential to produce emotion (in individuals) and affect (in the culture at large, sometimes outside of full consciousness) both within individual people (e.g., those infected, those who care about those infected, etc.) and the culture at large (Price-Smith, 2009). The process of getting sick in masse, of witnessing or experiencing the destruction that viruses cause, of being infected, has powerful emotional consequences (Sikkema, 2000; W.H.O., 2014). For example, the HIV epidemic, formed from a disease perceived as "ingenious, unpredictable, novel" (Sontag, 2001, p. 158), led to inexorable feelings of dread and shame within the medical community and the general population; eventually this led to the inevitable moralization of the disease and those infected with HIV (Smith, 1996; Sontag, 2001). The disease is now

infamous for its associations to gay male sexuality and the “gay plague”, intravenous drug abuse, and the loss of a racialized nationalist identity through the invasion of the Third World (Sontag, 2001). In many cases, HIV is synonymous with fear, anxiety, and moral panics (Eldridge, Mack and Swank, 2006; McNamara, 2011; Palmer, 1997; Price-Smith, 2009).

The amplification of people’s emotional reactions to HIV has emphasized the “primordial fear” of HIV/AIDS as sign of an imminent cultural apocalypse. Media coverage similarly feeds into this frenzy of fear by comparing HIV to biblical plagues, the Black Death, moral scourges, and even to Hell (Palmer, 1997). Increasingly, the rhetoric reinforces its fury of anxiety when the media links HIV to a “fight against an exponential enemy” and “a race against time” (Gould, 1987), waxing nostalgic on the sunset of humanity and the utter hopelessness of the new social and global order (Palmer, 1997). HIV and AIDS have clearly captured the emotional tenor of our time, infusing sexuality and politics with a clear emphasis on the virus as dangerous (Epstein, 1996).

More recently, the Ebola virus has illuminated the ways that social anxieties about infectious diseases are informed by, and distorted through, the mainstream media (Adeyanju, 2010; Blackman & Walkerdine, 2001). In, 2001, a Canadian Ebola scare involving a critically ill Congolese woman caused a public and media panic; despite the unlikely odds that Ebola had breached Canadian borders, the ensuing discursive explosion of panic expanded conceptions of Africa and Africans as threatening, invasive, and as an “enemy” to the Western world (Adeyanju, 2010). Ebola became a proxy for the gendered and racialized Other, with headlines associating “the female body with fear, nationality, and anxiety” (Adeyanju, 2010, p. 48). After test results came back negative for Ebola, the media (now with less material to manipulate) continued on by investigating the criminal background of the non-infected woman. Through this process, the anxiety and moral panics about an invasive, infectious disease, combined with the criminalization of a woman of color (and, by default, women of color more broadly), fused together the fear of Ebola and the fear of the “diseased” black woman (Adeyanju, 2010).

Even historically, multiple examples of mass hysterias, moral panics, and outright cultural anxieties have occurred in relation to viruses or other infectious biological agents. The Black Death (a European and Middle

Eastern plague pandemic during the Middle Ages) threw organized society into existential chaos and produced mass violence against beggars, Jews and Romas (Cohn, 2012; Price-Smith, 2009). Cholera epidemics throughout modern history have catalyzed waves of social violence and political upheavals (Cohn, 2012). Other historical epidemics have generated fervor around the persecution of politicians and police officers, doctors, gravediggers, prostitutes, gypsies, and racial and religious minorities (Cohn, 2012; Voigtländer & Voth, 2012). For example, despite the lack of widespread violence seen in epidemics of early modernity, the Spanish Flu of, 1918-1919 was considered by many to be a “nefarious and demonic weapon” (Price-Smith, 2009, p. 78) developed by Germans during the First World War.

Fear and anxiety toward contagion can sometimes even outpace the spread of the diseases themselves; in some cases, the fear of a disease looms larger than the actual infectious disease, as in the case of the H5N1 virus commonly known as the “bird flu” (Greger, 2006) or in the case of the, 2002-2003 SARS outbreak. Despite the relative seriousness of the SARS disease in impacted regions, the detrimental economic consequences, induced by the psychological effects of the resulting social global panic, were more recalcitrant than the disease itself (Price-Smith, 2009).

Mass hysteria has also historically produced social, psychological, and physiological impacts without any requirement of an “organic” cause. Dancing plagues throughout the Middle Ages caused large groups to spastically dance to the point of exhaustion or death. These bouts of dance, triggered by cultural conditions, became a means of catharsis set against a bleak social backdrop (Donaldson, Cavanaugh, & Rankin, 1997). Further, fears of industrial accidents and terrorist attacks have generated various outbreaks of hysteria throughout the, 20th and 21st centuries, including clusters of “hysterical” episodes following the, 1995 Japanese subway gas attacks (Bartholomew & Wessely, 2002). In short, nearly anything has the potential to create a fear of disease contagion, as the hypervigilance over “terrorist threats” has thrown the U.S. into a permanent state of anxiety.

In tandem with the destructive potential of viruses—to harm, to kill, to wreak havoc on the culture at large—viruses can also generate productive or even creative outcomes. For example, viruses can help to reinforce nationalism in some cases—while promoting global collectivization in

others (Price-Smith, 2009)—and channel funding in the direction of research, treatment, and prevention efforts about viruses (National Research Council, 1993). Further, funding for Ebola research has increased manifold since the, 2014 outbreak began (Schnirring, 2014), though larger issues of addressing the racist and xenophobic undertones of the Ebola outbreak remain effectively untouched (Seay & Dionne, 2014). Viruses also have the ability to command attention in immediate and visceral ways, prompting people to radically alter deeply ingrained behaviors; for example, following the initial spread of information about HIV, people reported much more positive views of condoms (Pinkerton & Abramson, 1997; Sacco, Levine, Reed, & Thompson, 1991) and awareness of the need to communicate about sexuality—and to fund efforts to promote sexual health—grew exponentially in the United States (National Research Council, 1993). The spread of HIV also inspired the creation of the activist group ACT UP that influenced and laid the groundwork for other social movements for LGBT rights and gender equality (Andersen & Jennings, 2010; Van Dyke, 2003).

Women’s Studies and Affect

When compared to the emotional impact of viruses—particularly the sorts of panics viruses create—women’s studies and feminism also tend to produce similar emotional responses both within and outside of the corporate university (Zucker, 2004). Despite its successes and accomplishments as a field—and the way it fits with university priorities of social engagement, community involvement, and interdisciplinarity—women’s studies has always had to struggle to maintain its existence. Panics surrounding women’s studies continue to threaten and undermine its ability to thrive, even while these panics demonstrate the clear “nerve” that women’s studies hits on a broader level. For example, feminist and left-wing professors have endured accusations of communism, terrorism, and destroying the university alongside sustained backlash against women’s studies and its allies (Faludi, 2009; Prakash, 2006; Superson & Cudd, 2002).

The production of panic, in essence, demonstrates the threat and damage to the existing order and to people’s feelings of comfort and security (Fahs, Dudy, & Stage, 2013). Women’s studies department chairs and professors

have routinely discussed the consequences of living with the possibility of shutting down their programs, cutting funding, or otherwise redirecting resources away from women's studies, even while they acknowledge the normal occurrences of fully enrolled classes and clear impact on campuses and beyond (Fahs, 2013; Scott, 2008). Further, reactions to women's studies in the public also resonate with fear, hostility, and panic, whether via harassing celebrities like Lena Dunham who "out" themselves as feminists (Keane, 2014), or by accusing women's studies professors of corrupting students (Aguilar, 2012).

The fusion of panic and trivialization also appears in reactions to women's studies scholarship, journal publications, and tenure committee decisions (Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). As a field permanently critical of traditional modes of knowing, assessing, and understanding—for example, feminist literature scholars work to upend typical readings of classic texts, while feminist social scientists prioritize the experiences, narratives, and data of those typically forgotten or obscured by the fields—women's studies often struggles to assess its own excellence (Wiegman, 2008). Some questions that arise include: Who should and can assess and judge the quality of women's studies scholarship, particularly if women's studies is permanently interdisciplinary and most senior scholars were trained within a specific traditional discipline? How can tenure committees assess the value of women's studies publications if all women's studies publications are typically devalued as "trivial"? How do the official channels of universities work with the critical material women's studies professors teach, and how do they account for the complicated emotional reactions produced in students (and evident on teaching evaluations of feminist professors) (Fisher, 1987)?

At times, women's studies produces outright anger and hostility as well (Gross, 2013). For decades, "men's rights" groups have accused the academy (and women's studies programs in particular) of oppressing men and boys and of "hating men" (Bawer, 2012; Rollmann, 2013). From charges leveled against family courts for the supposed favoritism toward mothers, to attacks on women's studies programs as "anti-male," these groups have as their primary mission the goal to counter the supposed sociocultural misandry that permeates U.S. culture (Rollmann, 2013). Fusing the rhetoric of equality with clear tenets of hegemonic masculinity,

antifeminism has gained ground within the general public consciousness and even within certain academic circles. Feminism has been, in some cases, demonized and degraded, a move that clearly goes beyond merely “not calling oneself a feminist” (Dottolo, 2011). One recent Far Right media article even proclaimed that “patriarchy is a gal’s best friend” (Stolba, 2002).

The notion of “post-feminism” or “modern sexism” has also made similar claims about the irrelevance of feminist movements, arguing that gender equality has already been accomplished or cannot exist through commonly understood feminist labels or ideals. As such, postfeminism has argued for a highly individualistic understanding of inequalities and embraces sexual differences as “natural” (Gill, 2007). The conservative group, Accuracy in Academia, which seeks to attack feminist/liberal professors, has recently produced its own lecture series entitled, “Sex, Lies, and Women’s Studies,” claiming to deconstruct women’s studies pedagogies in order to illuminate the supposed failure of feminism (Accuracy in Academia, 2014). These movements seek to essentially reaffirm the need for the patriarchal status quo, devalue the critical capacities of women’s studies programs, and re-appropriate the rhetoric of “liberation” for the conservative Far Right (Clark, Garner, Higonnet, & Katrak, 2014). Collectively, these institutional and popular responses represent the corporate university’s immune responses to the imposition of the feminist virus. Anti-feminist, postfeminist, and men’s rights organizations represent, metaphorically, the protective t-cells and cytokines that seek out and dismantle threatening critical/pedagogical invaders.

The mass media further enforces the trivialization and mockery of academic feminism—combined with outright hostilities and anger—by framing women’s studies as having dangerous intentions (Becky, 1998; Lind & Salo, 2002). Hate mail, hostile commentaries, and even verbalized intent to harm those doing feminist work have confirmed the status of feminism as a clear threat to the existing order both within and outside of the mass media. For example, Cambridge classics professor Mary Beard has endured harassment and defamation on a nearly constant basis: A *New Yorker* article by Rebecca Mead (2014) stated that “Such online interjections—‘Shut up you bitch’ is a fairly common refrain—often contain threats of violence, a ‘predictable menu of rape, bombing, murder,

and so forth.’ She mildly reported one tweet that had been directed at her: ‘I’m going to cut off your head and rape it’” (Mead, 2014). Many other women’s studies professors in the public eye have also endured such public abuse for their work and ideas. Feminist blogs endure nearly constant harassment and angry, vitriolic diatribes on their online comment section (what one scholar calls “e-bile”) (Jane, 2014). Taken individually, these could be seen as anomalies; seen together, this represents a more serious, troubling trend that reflects the powerful affect feminism and women’s studies often produce in the more conservative and Far Right public sphere (Scott, 2008). Conversely, however, when feminism is framed more positively in the media, men and women express more solidarity with feminists and feminist aims (Wiley, Srinivasan, Finke, Firnhaber, Shilink, 2013).

Women’s Studies as Dangerous

One must ask, then, whether women’s studies is actually a dangerous field to some entities, and what might be at stake in claiming women’s studies as purposefully infectious and intentionally dangerous. Is there any truth to the accusation that women’s studies professors are “ruining” America? Are women’s studies programs “destroying the way things have always been”? Is that perhaps a good thing? (We were recently asked to comment on a trend of women in Phoenix embracing a “retro housewife lifestyle” where they submit to their husbands and remain at home out of duty.) The notion of women’s studies as dangerous and infectious implies, much like the metaphor of the virus, that it has permanently altered its host’s DNA and has radically upset its environment. This process reveals the danger of dismantling the status quo by introducing feminist pedagogies into the corporate university. Perhaps women’s studies could, now and in the future, embrace as a true accomplishment the infection of traditional spaces both within and outside the academy. It has, in part, already done so, but we argue that women’s studies could push this political position even further. For example, resituating women’s studies as an exuberant contagion, one that disregards a pre-determined canon of thought and instead prioritizes a fusion of activism and scholarship, could transform its self-understanding and political priorities. Accepting these possibilities rather than trying to be

safe, respectable, and accommodating represents important territory in the future of feminism.

A brief look at some of the accomplishments of women’s studies might also confirm that women’s studies already poses a real danger to the corporate, patriarchal (white, middle-class, able-bodied, etc.) status quo. Women’s studies programs have successfully lobbied history departments to more seriously address the lives of women, just as they have outlined theoretical and empirical ways to understand intersecting and interlocking identities and oppressions (Hooks, 2000a; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982). Feminists have demanded more serious analyses of sexual assault and domestic violence on campus (Armstrong, Hamilton & Sweeney, 2006; Smith, 2014) and have invaded traditionally “male” fields like philosophy and English. In some cases, like the field of psychology, feminists have made it possible for women to not only invade the (traditionally male and pathologizing) field, but to radically take it over; psychology is now dominated by female students who make up 72% of Ph.D. and Psy.D. recipients entering the field in, 2007 compared to just, 20% in, 1970 (Cynkar, 2007). More importantly, women’s studies pedagogies have equipped students with the necessary tools to see any field, any course, and any future career through a critical lens (Luke & Gore, 2014). With these tools, students may go on to consume less, demand better working conditions, produce feminist art, evolve their expectations about satisfying careers and work lives, pass feminist legislation, and change their romantic, family, and kinship relationships (Harris, Melaas, & Rodacker, 1999; Stake & Rose, 1994). These collectively represent a danger, in particular, to the priorities of the corporate university.

Women’s studies as an infectious discipline—one that serves not only as a virus that attaches to the “host” bodies of other disciplines and disrupts and infects them, but one that fundamentally alters the cell’s blueprint and directs it to a new purpose—might accurately describe the kinds of work that the field could prioritize and embrace (or, in any case, should prioritize and should embrace). Women’s studies students and the fields they infect and disrupt both gain from such an arrangement. As Clough & Puar (2012) noted, “In its replications, the virus does not remain the same, nor does that which it confronts and transits through” (p. 14). Just as women’s studies has gained much from its institutional status, it has also

lost some of its “bite” (a problem this essay takes up). Further, if women’s studies also works to train students to become their own kinds of viruses, capable of infecting, disrupting, unsettling, and altering their own spaces (at work, home, in relationships, and in their communities), perhaps framing women’s studies as dangerous may actually prove useful and interesting. Dangerous things, after all, transform not only through destruction, but also through imagining and redirecting toward something new (Leonardo, 2004).

Feminist Futures

Male Feminist Viruses

When envisioning the future priorities for women’s studies—ones that take advantage of women’s studies as a dangerous, infectious, potentially radical force of change—we posit two new directions for the field to embrace. First, training both female and male students as viruses could prove especially useful in articulating the mission and goals of the field. There are clearly different stakes in the feminist pedagogical work directed toward female students versus male students. While female students must work to understand their own experiences as women and to deconstruct, critically analyze, and understand the ways that their identities as women map onto other privileges and oppressions, they often at least sense the impact of oppression and privilege in their lives.

Male students, on the other hand, may have had little or no exposure to thinking about their own male privileges at all, particularly for white men who may perceive themselves to be victimized by feminist critiques and classroom discussions (George, 1992). While men of color and gay men may differently understand concepts of privilege and oppression, white heterosexual men may arrive at the examination of privilege with little to no experience examining such personal aspects of their lives and identities. The danger of challenging white men, for example, to recognize and critique their own (and other men’s) privileges may be different than teaching women to recognize and critique their privileges and oppressions. Precisely because whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness are not oppressed classes (George, 1992), and thus are not subjected to the consciousness of oppressed classes, the methods used to discover their own

privilege may prove critical to the virulent capacity of women’s studies programs seeking to infect male-dominated institutions. Men may more readily listen to, mimic, and follow their male feminist peers than they would their female feminist peers (Fox, 2004).

The potentially dangerous impact of men as feminist viruses exists for multiple reasons. First, people rarely expect men to hold or propagate feminist viewpoints, particularly in spaces where they interact with other men (Digby, 2013). Second, corporate universities often assume that the fusion between patriarchy and capitalism will receive the least challenge from its most privileged students (e.g., white, heterosexual, upper-class men). Third, men can gain access to spaces that exclude women (and especially feminist women), and can thereby disrupt the notion of “in groups,” dominance, and hierarchy (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). And, finally, men with feminist politics are often assumed to be relatively innocuous; jokes about men in women’s studies classes “wanting to get laid,” or men “already knowing about women” help to contribute to this illusion (Strimpel, 2012). Thus, when men become feminist viruses, infecting and unsettling spaces where their privilege and dominance is assumed, the potential danger and impact is keenly felt.

Embracing “Negative” Stereotypes

As a second goal for feminist futures, working to embrace so-called “negative” stereotypes of feminist professors may also give women’s studies a distinct advantage as it evolves and changes over time. If the field of women’s studies produces a variety of emotions and affective experiences in others—panic, anger, trivialization, mockery, fear—this suggests that distancing women’s studies from its stereotypes does little to alleviate or address these emotional reaction from others. Rather, by directly embracing the stereotypes of feminist professors as “scary” (or “man-hating,” “lesbian,” “hairy” and so on), it allows the field to both utilize and expose these emotional experiences as material for learning and growth. In short, by engaging in a public relations campaign to promote the idea that feminism is for everybody (Hooks, 2000a) or that feminism is not actually dangerous or scary (McDonald, 2003), women’s studies loses some of its potential pedagogical impact. Unsettling previously held assumptions, challenging previously held worldviews, and equipping students to

critically engage with traditional gender roles (and beyond) require that women's studies professors focus less attention on the stereotypes they confirm or disconfirm. Anything that radically upsets and challenges power will be met with intense (and often negative) emotions. Choosing to embrace this fact and not seek distance from such stereotypes will ultimately lead to a more powerful and coherent feminist presence both within and outside of the academy.

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