95 | 'door bitches of club feminism'?: academia and feminist competency

Zora Simic

abstract

'Feminist competency' is a nascent term that has been identified in three general critiques of contemporary feminism that emerged in the course of research for *The Great Feminist Denial* (2008), a book on feminist debates in Australia that I co-authored with Monica Dux. The first critique highlights the importance of feminist knowledge, typically generated through the academy, to feminist identification. The second posits a perceived lack of feminist competency as an obstacle to feminist affiliation. The third assessment insists that spokespeople for feminism should be sufficiently competent. Using these responses to feminism as a starting point, combined with a reflection on my own framing as an academic feminist in the public sphere, I make a case for the potential value of 'feminist competency' as a means to assess the impact of academic feminism, in Australia and elsewhere.

keywords

academic feminism; Australian feminism; feminist competency; *The Great Feminist Denial*; Germaine Greer

introduction

In September 2008, Melbourne University Press released in Australia a book on contemporary feminism I co-wrote with Monica Dux titled *The Great Feminist Denial* (Dux and Simic, 2008). In the weekend before the official release date, broadcaster and opinion writer Virginia Haussegger labelled us 'the door bitches of club feminism' in *The Canberra Times*, the daily newspaper of the nation's capital. The attack itself was not entirely surprising for in the book we critically examine the controversy that erupted in 2002 after *The Age* newspaper published Haussegger's opinion piece 'The sins of our feminist mothers' in which she blamed feminism for selling women the myth of 'having it all' (Haussegger, 2002: 11).[1] The specific charge that we were 'door bitches' was harder to take as one of the professed goals of the book was to make feminist debate more accessible to a general readership. Monica came to the project from the mainstream media, to which she regularly contributes humorous commentary. For me, the book was a side-project from my day job as a historian of twentieth-century Australia. The cover features a disembodied pink corset that vaguely references the iconic cover of Germaine Greer's best-seller *The Female Eunuch*. The title was similarly designed to be eye-catching and sensational. Yet, as represented by Haussegger, the book comes direct from 'club feminism': 'the Byzantine world of academe and literary discourse between agreeing friends' (Haussegger, 2008: 13).

This article is not designed as an extended refutation of Haussegger's criticisms. Rather than defend my co-author and myself against charges of elitism in an academic journal (the irony of which would not be lost on Haussegger), I will instead use her representation of feminism as an exclusive club with its own gatekeepers to discuss academic feminism and the contrary effects it has given rise to; in particular, a new value I will call 'feminist competency'. Therefore, using Haussegger's condemnation as my starting point, and the survey we conducted for the book as my case study, I will elaborate an argument that Monica and I briefly entertained in *The Great Feminist Denial*. This is: that the reluctance some women have to embrace the label 'feminism' is not so much the function of an 'image problem' as it is a rejection or ambivalence, on the basis that they personally lacked feminist competency. This seems to be defined as a value which *academic* feminists should typically exemplify, though not necessarily 'own' exclusively, as feminist competency is generally defined as knowledge and/or experience of feminist theories, debates, history, struggles and campaigns.[2] It is important to emphasise that these survey respondents generally also supported feminist goals, affirmed the necessity of feminism and rejected the idea that feminism is dead or no longer necessary. The notions of feminist competency and feminist 'door bitches' are not unrelated: both are effects of the often fraught relationship between academic feminism and feminist activism and/or 'popular' feminism since the emergence of academic feminism in Australia in the 1970s.

1 Haussegger wrote: 'I am childless and I am angry. Angry that I was so foolish to take the word of my feminist mothers as gospel. Angry that I was daft enough to believe female fulfilment came with a leather briefcase' (2002: 11). She later wrote that 'the public and media outcry was extraordinary ... In summary, I was told to shut up and stop whingeing' (2005: http://www.theage.com.au/news/Opinion/Childlessness-the-revolution-we-had-to-have/2005/05/08/1115491042240.html. Date accessed: 13th July 2009).

2 Without subscribing to the strict divide between academic and activist feminisms, it is imperative to note that my discussion here is focused almost exclusively on

academic feminism as a specific category or site. However, feminist competency was also often extended by the survey respondents to feminist activists outside of the academy.

From the surveys, there are three main responses to academic feminism that I want to discuss in this paper. The first highlight that academic feminism has influenced the way some women talk about feminism, and also the positive development of their own feminism. The second is that academic feminism has made some women anxious about whether or not they qualify as a feminist using exposure to or competency in academic feminism as a measure. Lastly, our surveys showed that if feminism is *not* claimed because of a lack of competency, there is a correlative expectation that those who do speak as feminists (i.e. academic feminists) should do so *competently*.

Rather than define 'feminist competency' in strict, coherent terms, the purpose of this article is to stress that this value instantiates a perceived division of significance between women who can speak for feminism and those who cannot or should not. And while on the one hand, the discussion of feminist competency here belongs to wider debates about what best constitutes effective feminist politics, it is also a discussion bound by the limitations of the evidence: of the 400-plus women we interviewed for the book, a total of 160 respondents – a substantial but clear minority of those surveyed – shared with us their critiques of academic feminism and/or competent feminisms. A further qualification is that the three categories of response – those which highlights the positive effects of academic feminism; others which express anxiety about their own competence as feminists; and lastly, the responses which articulate expectations of competent feminism – are inevitably varied with different emphases placed on the importance of 'feminist competency'. I am seeking therefore not so much to isolate the specificities, trajectories and locations of 'feminist competency' as to use it as a means to discuss the perceived efficacy of feminist politics and pedagogy, in particular those feminisms that have emerged from the academy.

As already mentioned, from the contradictory reflections canvassed here, there are no emphatic answers as to what 'feminist competency' entails. Nevertheless this discussion, partially inspired by the personal experiences of women who were 'taught' feminism at university, has a valuable contribution to make to ongoing assessments of academic feminism and its utility. We can test, for instance, the following definition of academic feminism by American scholar Lynn Safarik:

> Viewed as a collective meaning-making system, academic feminism works within the institution by using the power it affords while simultaneously subverting it to make resistant discourses (feminisms) more widely available. (Safarik, 2002: 1718)

Further, academic feminism has been regularly analysed and historicised by its practitioners (Curthoys, 2000; Stanley and Wise, 2000; Bird, 2004; Hemmings, 2005), yet its effects in the wider world (sometimes referred to as the 'real world') have been less examined by feminist researchers. The relative lack of such studies is understandable given the obvious difficulties of tracing the effects of

feminist knowledge; however, one ironic effect has been that appraisals of academic feminism's impact have more often than not been left to our critics. From that perspective, general qualitative surveys on feminism can provide useful data for any number of potential topics related to feminism. Scholars and bureaucratic bodies have, for example, routinely analysed the impact of feminism on everyday lives in Australia (Scutt, 1996; Bulbeck, 1997, 2003; VEOHRC, 2008) and this material also offers further insights into the specific influence of academic feminism.[3]

Though we were published by a university press, *The Great Feminist Denial* was not written as a definitive, scholarly text. Our objective was to bring historical research, contrary evidence and personal reflection to bear on what had become tiresome media debates about feminism. We took as our focus the representation of feminism in four distinct, yet related debates: first, the fertility panic; second, the work/life balance or motherhood debate; third, raunch culture and finally; debates about Muslim women. To gauge whether these popular media representations of feminism had registered with 'ordinary' women (and if so, in what ways), we developed and distributed an open-ended survey, asking respondents questions about their feminist identification.[4] While taking care to encompass a diverse demographic, we pursued this objective through word of mouth, rather than social science. There are obvious limits to a sample of 436 surveys (most of them circulated by email) that I will not labour here other than to note our methodology was obviously less rigorous than that of sociologists such as Chilla Bulbeck. Still, as we were unhindered by the institutional breaks that often slow down or stall academic research with 'human subjects', we were able to generate our research findings with considerable speed. Further benefits of this method of swift research include that it often 'enables the exploration of issues not anticipated by the researcher' (Deem, 2002: 837). Assessing the status of academic feminism was not an explicit objective of the book or the survey. Our radar was tuned for popular associations with feminism, and these are mostly what we received: Germaine Greer (foremost a celebrity feminist in Australia, despite her scholarly achievements) and the unnamed hairy-legged lesbian were mentioned by respondents far more often than academic feminists. We were nevertheless intrigued that for a significant minority of respondents (160 to be precise), academic feminism was cited as either the originating site of their own feminism, the contemporary location of feminism or the apex or nadir of feminism's history. The language and key tenets of various forms of academic feminism were also evident. As I will demonstrate, what cut across these different responses to academic feminism was the acknowledged, though not uniformly defined, value of 'feminist competency'.

It is worth reinforcing the benefits of examining academic feminism as part of a broader discussion of contemporary attitudes to feminism. When feminist

3 Chilla Bulbeck's work, for instance, has compared attitudes to feminism among young Australians and Asians, and found a generally more favourable (though by no means uniform) response in the latter group. One contributing factor to this positive assessment is the ongoing introduction of women's studies courses in various Asian countries (Bulbeck, 2003).

4 The questions included: do you identify as a feminist? If so, why? If not, why not? If no, have you been a feminist in the past? What is feminism? Has feminism changed? What is a feminist issue? With whom do you identify feminism? Does feminism have a bad name? What should feminism discard? What should feminism keep?

competency is emphasised, for instance, the popular idea that feminism failed or died is easily disputed. Or, alternatively, when the 'academic feminist' is dismissed as out of touch, theory obsessed and/or inadequate as a feminist spokesperson, it is sometimes possible to detect the combined influences of anti-feminism and anti-intellectualism. Negative responses to academic feminism also demand to be read as trenchant critiques of how feminist knowledge is created and disseminated. They can also remind us that earlier debate about whether or not academic feminism can be equated with 'activism' has not disappeared in an alleged era of 'post-activism'.

The critiques of academic feminism explored here sometimes share features in common with earlier assessments, but it is also imperative that we locate them historically. Feminisms (particularly the institutional varieties) did not fare well under the Federal Howard government (1996–2007). As with other Western democratic countries where feminism achieved a modicum of political, social and cultural influence throughout the 1970s into the 1990s, the impact of feminism in Australia has been widely represented as having entered the 'postfeminist' phase over the last decade. While many of the popularly cited key indicators of 'postfeminism' – generational chasms, new femininities, political retreats – are hardly specific to Australia, the former Prime Minister John Howard's assertion in 1998 that 'we are now in the post-feminist stage of the debate' is a unique example of a national leader explicitly evoking 'postfeminism'. By the end of 2006, when Howard declared feminism 'dead' (using a rise in the birth rate as a key indicator) it had become obvious what Howard's version of postfeminism entailed: a Baby Bonus cash incentive (which was denied as a lump sum payment to many Indigenous women, and a small percentage of poor white women), no paid maternity leave, the espousal of family-centred politics and an economy of non-family friendly workplaces dependent on working mothers. A 2007 Democratic Audit of Australia Report, titled *How Well Does Australian Democracy Serve Women?* reveals that under Howard some women's organisations had their critical voices muffled in exchange for funding, while others lost funding altogether, including government bodies focussed on gender equity (Maddison and Partridge, 2007: 85–89). As Christina Ho has noted, Howard and other conservative politicians in Australia and elsewhere in the Western world – whom she calls the 'new feminists' – also appropriated discourses of women's rights as a means for the articulation of a paternalistic and anti-Muslim nationalism (Ho, 2007: 290). Add to this the distracting layer of the Culture Wars[5] and direct attacks on feminist research and it becomes apparent that the space for feminist intervention in public life shrunk considerably during the Howard years, without disappearing entirely. Academic feminism played a significant role in maintaining public space for feminism, though not always on its own terms.

5 Throughout the Howard era, the daily national newspaper *The Australian* (owned by Rupert Murdoch) and a small group of journals broadly identified as 'right'

defining academic feminism

The definition of academic feminism employed here is necessarily broad. It encompasses the history of academic feminism in Australia (which is interdisciplinary with strong roots in particular disciplines, such as history, Magarey, 2007); feminist research undertaken in Australian universities whatever the discipline; feminist politics inside and outside the academy; and perceptions about what it is that feminist academics actually *do*. Its limits and the efficacy of its politics are also highly contested. Long-standing and evolving international debates – for example about whether the move from women's to gender studies[6] has evacuated academic feminism of feminist politics, or if academia itself is incompatible with feminist activism, and following from this whether it needs to be (Wiegman, 2002), or the extent to which 'feminist theory' now belongs to a few 'stars' rather than emanating from feminist praxis itself (Stanley and Wise, 2000; Hemmings, 2005) – all apply to the Australian context. Academic feminism also exists as much as a representation or discourse as it does a body of scholars and knowledge or pedagogic experience.

Finally, to anchor the definition of academic feminism firmly in the Australian context, a Germaine Greer caveat is necessary. Greer, Australian-born and raised, is a distinguished scholar of early modern literature and currently Emeritus Professor at the University of Warwick. Yet, while her scholarly work is published and often well-received in Australia, she is known primarily as a celebrity feminist with a penchant for intervening in national conversations on a range of issues from the vantage point of an ostensible outsider, a resident of Britain, rather than as an Australian or an academic feminist (Lilburn *et al*., 2000). Her status within Australian feminism is also ambiguous, given that her early fame as the author of *The Female Eunuch* set her apart from the local women's movement (Spongberg, 1993). In the public consciousness, Greer's status as a well-known feminist is unquestionable – she is *the* best-known feminist taking both our surveys and local media commentary as an indication – but her fame in Australia exceeds and resists the limits of 'academic feminist'. Indeed, her fame is such in Australia that it demands a whole separate conversation about feminist competency, which in Greer's case is often coupled with questions about her capacity to speak as an Australian.

Academic feminists in Australia are a muted presence in comparison to Greer, but they are hardly invisible. Media studies Professor Catharine Lumby is among the most visible feminists in the country. Another high profile feminist, Eva Cox, is noteworthy for a long career in public life that has encompassed activism, government, academia and journalism. Yet the 'academic feminist' is also a straw woman who is not always named or placed, though she is sometimes characterised as an individual ivory tower version of the collective 'sisterhood'. She has had if not a starring, then at least a recurring role, in backlashes against

or 'left' wing promoted or participated in the 'Culture Wars' in which history and culture were figured as 'war zones'. Contested topics include Indigenous history and affairs, school curricula, multiculturalism and the War on Terror.

6 There has hardly been a uniform response in Australia to the Women's/ Gender Studies dilemma. The peak body is called the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Association (AWGSA). Note also some of the titles of programmes and departments in the country: Women's Studies (Flinders University, University of Queensland, University of Western Australia, Victoria University); Gender, Sexuality and Diversity Studies (La Trobe University); Gender Studies (University of Melbourne, Australian National University, University of Wollongong); Gender and Cultural Studies (Murdoch University, University of Sydney); Gender, Work and Social Inquiry (University of Adelaide); Women's and Gender Studies (University of New England, University of New South Wales, Monash University); Research Centre for Gender Studies (University of South Australia).

feminism, in Australia, but also elsewhere. Indeed, it is imperative to stress that what passes for 'feminist debate' or 'debate about feminism' in Australia is often imported from overseas, albeit recreated for local conditions. As Susan Sheridan has noted, one of the distinctive features of Australian feminism has been its capacity to graft other feminisms (namely from the US, the UK and France) 'on to its own and sometimes produce new species' (Sheridan, 1991: 1). The 'academic feminism' discussed here – particularly in reference to the notion of feminist competency – also leaks into other forms. As an institutional form of feminism, academic feminism in Australia shares a history with bureaucratised feminism.[7]

7 The term 'femocrat', denoting a feminist bureaucrat, is 'exclusively Australian [and] reflects the significance of Australian feminist engagement with government bureaucracies' (Watson, 1998: 420). Both the 'femocracy' and feminist academia emerged in the 1970s, with the former's peak influence in the 1980s and the latter, the 1990s. Those who have analysed the 'femocrat' phenomenon generally state that their influence has been over-stated or misunderstood (Watson, 1990; Eisenstein, 1996).

Over the past decade, academic feminism in Australia, as elsewhere, has had mixed fortunes. In 2000, historian Ann Curthoys – one of the first academics to teach women's studies in Australia – described the success or mainstreaming of academic feminism as 'double-edged' partly because the category of 'gender' had declined as a primary focus of analysis and theoretical innovation, potentially diffusing feminist politics in the process (Curthoys, 2000). This assessment represented a closure of sorts to a three-decade period of increasing influence and success for academic feminists, nationally and internationally, across and within disciplines, and particularly within the humanities (exemplified by feminist philosophers Moira Gatens and Elizabeth Grosz). Gender and Women's Studies continue to attract undergraduate and postgraduate students, yet institutional support is by no means guaranteed or consistent (as demonstrated by the poor treatment of Gender Studies during the restructuring of the University of Melbourne in the 2005–2008 period) and many departments have been down-graded to programmes housed in other Schools with 'minor' status. Feminist research has also come under increasing attack from conservative commentators and under successive revised systems of government funding has been under intensified – though by no means atypical – pressure to demonstrate 'its usefulness beyond interactions within academic circles' (Spongberg and Moore, 2007: 1). In terms of pedagogy, students who take up Gender Studies have experienced 'feminist harassment', complained that they were not taught feminism in high-school and have expressed marked preference for second-wave style feminist scholarship – thereby challenging generational models of feminism (Raddeker, 2006).

As yet, Australian feminist academia has not experienced high profile repudiations from within (as with Daphne Patai in the United States for instance), though Indigenous scholars such as Jackie Huggins and Aileen Moreton-Robinson have directed much of their negative (and persuasive) critique of feminism towards the academy (Huggins, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). There have been retreats or returns to disciplines or origin (Curthoys, 2000), renewed commitments to scholarly projects informed by feminist theory though not bound by it or necessarily originating from it (Matthews, 1996) and

depressing assessments of the limited impact of feminist scholarship on established disciplines such as history (Damousi, 1999). Feminist scholars who have ventured outside of the academy – into the media, for example – have expressed mixed feelings about the experience. After debating conservative opinion writer Miranda Devine on a 2004 panel that addressed the question 'Is Feminism A Dirty Word?', Gender Studies Professor Elspeth Probyn expressed dejection at:

> teaching a subject about which anyone can have an opinion. What is the point of reading through dense texts, conducting research and trying to formulate decent arguments about gender issues if it's the loudest, most publicly voiced opinion that gets to count? (Probyn, 2004: 30)

That this question was posed in the widely circulated newspaper *The Australian* suggests academic feminism is not always speaking from the margins. I shall now turn to some responses to academic feminism that emphasise its influence, and by extension, its competency or lack thereof.

talking academic feminism

There are clear signs that academic feminism has influenced the way women, particularly the tertiary-educated, speak about feminism. For those who have had exposure to gender analysis at university, the response of 24-year-old postgraduate student Samia was not atypical. When asked to define a feminist issue, she responded that:

> … any issue can be looked at from the perspective of the production of power inequalities between men and women … in 'uni-land' everything is a feminist issue. But then everything is a class issue, race issue and sexuality issue – just to varying degrees[8]

More specifically, the surveys revealed a pronounced reception to ideas about feminisms' plurality, which included an invocation of race and class as collaborative critical tools. For 28-year-old Suzy, a primary-school teacher, studying feminism at university was where she learnt about what she calls 'the whole spectrum of oppression, and how to distinguish between feminisms that were colonising or not'.[9] Similarly, 23-year-old Phoebe, a broadcaster and activist, had no hesitation declaring herself a feminist, and was hopeful that with the 'influence of post colonial scholarship, critical race theory, etc, feminism has become more reflective and cautious in what battles to fight and how'.[10]

Other women also experienced their first identification with feminism in the context of academia: For 35-year-old Rosey, for instance, a feminist conference she attended in 1997 was 'very exciting … a real mindblower'.[11] Legal academic, 34-year-old Shelley remembered feeling that as a young woman first encountering feminism at university, 'it made me smarter. I could argue back

8 (16-05-07). The surveys were distributed by email from November 2006, and although the book has since been published my co-author and I continue to receive responses. Owing to the 'snowball' effect we encouraged with the distribution of the survey it is impossible to know how many women were sent the survey and declined to respond. Monica and I initially sent the survey to one hundred women, including friends, former students, family members,

acquaintances and women's organisations. We encouraged those women to pass the email on, particularly to women who may not normally be the target of such surveys. However, the examples used here are overwhelmingly from tertiary-educated women. The surveys are in my possession and the dates indicate the appearance of the completed survey in our inboxes. Respondents are referred to by their first names only and an * indicates the use of a pseudonym as per request.

using a new language, often using statistics to back up my arguments'.[12] Camille, a 30-year-old editor, was already a feminist by the time she got to university, but it was higher learning that consolidated her feminism. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* was cited by her as a 'treasured text', and a textual studies course at the University of Sydney with lecturer Maria Angel 'opened up a whole new world of feminism for me ... I am deeply grateful'.[13] 24-year-old Cara*, who grew up in rural Australia, had her first 'formal introduction' to feminism taking a 'general political ideology class with Sheila Jeffreys [at the University of Melbourne]'. After class, she and her friend 'would be so energised and inspired, our discussions would continue all afternoon'.[14] For 35-year-old Caitlin, a mother and writer, academic feminism was intoxicating: 'At university I was seduced by various theories, including feminism, and for the first few years of uni I'm sure I bored my family to death with feminist analyses of everything from the latest dishwashing detergent ad to wolf-whistles in the street'. She adds that 'although I found some feminist theory useful and enlightening when it came to understanding the world, I always felt sort of fraudulent if I ever labelled myself a feminist. I was perhaps more seduced by Marx and Foucault at university – and would have felt equally uncomfortable calling myself a ''Marxist'' or a ''Foucauldian''.'[15]

Others reported their first encounters with academic feminism in less effusive terms. 37-year-old Kathryn, a communications officer, was an undergraduate student in the late 1980s and she found that 'second wave feminism was too angry for me, and the third wave of French postmodern theorists was impractical and terribly boring reading!'[16] For 20-year old Annisa*, it was the general feminist culture of her university campus rather than her coursework *per se* that turned her off feminism, particularly the institution of the 'woman's room': 'The feminists campaigned for a female only space on campus and won many, many years ago. And it's nice to uphold traditions and acknowledge how we got to where we are today – but not if we are disadvantaging ourselves by doing it'.[17] 25-year-old Sally*, a post-graduate student, was initially hesitant when she was approached to work on a feminist publication: 'Would future employers reject me for fear that I would indoctrinate my colleagues or pupils with radical feminist ideas? Would I be seen as anti-feminine?' In the end, 'being forced to confront' her 'own conservatism ... was a very valuable exercise'.[18]

For others, academic feminism represented a key historic moment, an ambivalent turning point between grass-roots-based feminism and institutionalised feminism. 33-year-old Amy, a data analyst, saw this in a relatively positive light, noting that what has changed about feminism is that it is now a 'theoretical framework ... for research'.[19] According to 41-year-old Lucy, a high-school teacher, however, the move from activism to the academy has been for the worse: 'There are so many feminisms, currently and historically. The uni feminisms I have encountered in recent studies have made me sick and

9 (25-01-07).

10 (30-08-07).

11 (2-12-06).

12 (21-11-06).

13 (15-12-06).

14 (24-04-07).

15 (19-12-06)

16 (6-12-06).

17 (3-12-07).

18 (15-12-07).

19 (4-12-06).

bored'. To emphasise the point, she added: 'These women need to get their heads out of their own vaginas and live before they're dead'.[20]

20 (9-12-06).

hesitant feminisms

Rather than disavow feminism on the predictable grounds that feminists hate men and are out of touch, some women expressed hesitancy on the basis that they are not up to date with feminist books or literature, or work outside the academy. This applied whether the respondent had been to university or not, though those who had been to university and had some exposure expressed their hesitancy in a particular, anxious way. According to Eleanor, 22:

> The fact that I do not identify as an ardent feminist is a product of my not being overly versed in feminist scholarship and jargon. Perhaps if you asked me the same question before I went to university I would have answered yes most definitely and it would have constructed a large part of my personality – but then I went to uni and found out that there were numerous flavours of feminism and different schools and waves and that not all feminists like each other and I suppose I got confused and to some degree turned off the whole idea.

She went on to add: 'as contradictory as it all is I would also identify that going to uni has been a key factor in the formation of any feminist identity I have. Could anyone actually do an arts degree in the early 21st century and not be influenced by the enormous amount of feminist scholarship?'.[21]

21 (17-12-06).

33-year-old Risa wrote that 'I don't nominally identify as a feminist because I tend to assume it involves being more proactive than I am, ie. involved in political groups, researching feminism, participating in debates etc., all things I have not done'.[22] 24-year-old Grace, a primary teacher, who is hesitant about claiming the label 'feminist', because 'I am not versed in feminist theory'.[23] 40-year-old Eva, a children's book editor, says that she 'was a science student at university, so I've never done any sort of political or literary theory, and I'm not very well read in that area. I have no idea what the academic definition of feminism is'.[24] Eva's response is one example of twelve in which when asked to define feminism, the respondent declined on the basis that they were not familiar with the academic literature on the topic (yet evidently also familiar enough with feminist scholarship to recognise contests over definitions). For example, Alice, a 26-year-old nurse, was hesitant to claim feminism on the basis 'I did not do any feminism at uni, even though there was a form of it in nursing. To tell the truth, it seemed hard and maybe not of direct relevance to my career'.[25]

22 (11-01-07).

23 (27-01-07).

24 (12-12-06).

25 (12-12-06).

Some respondents qualified their feminist identification with reference to feminist competency firmly associated with activism. 39-year-old Carly*, who works in the finance industry, made a distinction between feminism as belief and feminism as praxis. She identifies as a feminist 'by definition ... [but] I don't

however usually ''work to secure these rights and opportunities'' which is the further definition of a feminist'.[26] For Agnes, a 41-year-old lawyer, academic feminism was represented as an 'alternative to activism, but I was never sure how much feminist theory I had to do to feel I had a grasp on it. I never quite got there'.[27]

26 (12-12-06).

27 (30-11-06).

Some respondents, however, were directly resistant to academic feminism, as opposed to expressing hesitancy about their identity as feminist because of a perceived lack of competency in academic feminism. 22-year-old Sarah, a hospitality worker, emphatically rejects the label 'feminist' because she identifies feminism with 'older women lesbian lecturers who hate all men and want women to one day rule the world'.[28] For 36-year-old Allanah*, who works in a feminist community organisation, it is the institutionalisation of feminism – and academia is considered by her to be the pinnacle of feminist infiltration – which has undermined collectivity. She writes 'It can be quite intimidating for women who are not tertiary educated'.[29] 34-year-old Sam*, who works in the rural sector, did not enjoy what she calls 'university feminism', though she identifies strongly with feminism on what she calls a 'personal level'. She adds: 'I leave it up to other people to speak for feminism'.[30]

28 (29-01-07).

29 (19-04-07).

30 (8-12-06).

academic feminism in public

Following from this, some women also have expectations about what feminist academics should be doing. Some dismiss feminist academics as too career-focussed and controversy seeking. According to 43-year-old Tracey, a mental health worker, 'Many of the people who label themselves feminists have done so to make a career and speak in very black and white terms – controversy makes academic careers'.[31] For Sarah, 22, feminism is a form of career-ism for women in the academy: '[Feminism] is [b]asically a wall to hide behind because some women believe it will help them to advance their careers at a quicker rate'.[32] Catherine, 25, who works for the teachers union, recommends media training for feminist scholars: 'We need feminists who have exposed the total failure of Australia in the area of work and family to more regularly have access to supportive journalists who can run stories and condemn policy makers'.[33] Nelly, a 32-year-old performer, also suggests feminists engage more effectively with the media, as part of a general 'image change': 'publicly we need to have a better sense of humour and not sweat the small stuff so much'.[34] Media skills and literacy are thereby foreground as critical features of contemporary feminist competency: without these attributes, feminists risk irrelevancy.

31 (17-11-06).

32 (29-01-07).

33 (30-11-06).

34 (27-11-06).

Other respondents questioned the feminist politics of feminist academics who *do* make public interventions. For 41-year-old Shelagh, a NGO worker, feminism

has a bad name 'because it is represented in the media by opinionated women intellectualising issues that are close to many women's basic lives'. She suggests that feminism rejects 'pseudo intellectuals that call themselves feminists that are media savvy'.[35] 35-year-old Fiona, a public servant, laments that 'feminism is either associated with bimbos who have nothing to do with feminism – people like Paris Hilton – and a small group of academics who comment on them. It makes feminism seem very narrow'.[36]

One particular focus for comment was Catharine Lumby, who frequently provides commentary on gender issues in the mainstream press. She is more than qualified for this role, with an impressive career that extends beyond academia – she is the Director of the Journalism and Media Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, she has a law degree, a background in art criticism and journalism; and has published widely on gender and the media (most notably in her 1997 book *Bad Girls*). Lumby, however, has also attracted controversy through her appointment to the Advertising Standards Board and her (pro-bono) work as a consultant on gender for the National Rugby League,[37] and the Australian version of the reality television programme *Big Brother*.[38] Further, in the context of ongoing public debate in Australia on topics such as pornography and everyday life[39] and the sexualisation of children and teenage girls by the advertising industry,[40] Lumby has been called on to play a dual role, to provide critique *and* to answer to criticisms.

Lumby was cited in four surveys in positive terms, ten in negative and ten in neutral. From a sample of 436 surveys, this appears to be a negligible presence. Yet, what is noteworthy is that after Germaine Greer and Betty Freidan,[41] Catherine Lumby was the most cited feminist. Twelve respondents also commented at comparative length on her role as an academic feminist who is visible in the public sphere. One respondent, 36-year-old editor Jane, wrote:

> According to her [Lumby], nothing should ever be a cause for concern and those who are concerned must have hang-ups … I guess that is her being all media savvy and giving good sound-byte, but I think it ends up giving academics a bad name because people must think "she gets paid to come up with that!" Obviously I don't like the other extreme (academics that can't communicate to a general audience) but there's got to be a middle ground.[42]

Similar responses appeared on the message board of the ABC panel show *Difference of Opinion* after Lumby featured in September 2007 as part of panel discussing the topic 'Sex Sells'. Several bloggers expressed the view that Lumby (who generally prefers to diffuse and critique moral panic than inflame it) does not reflect 'community standards' on issues such as the sexualisation of children and teenage girls. 'Stella' and 'Mike', in contrast, were 'troubled by this barrage of very personal criticism of Lumby', while 'cnw' expressed a preference for 'Professor Lumby who so clearly has experience in the field' over some of her co-panellists (ABC, 2007). These latter views were in the minority, though a

35 (12-12-06).

36 (29-11-07).

37 Lumby began advising the football code on gender issues in 2004 after six first-grade rugby league players were accused of sexually assaulting a 20-year-old woman on a team holiday. They were later exonerated.

38 For the time Lumby was employed by the producers of *Big Brother* she donated her fee to the N.S.W. Rape Crisis Centre.

39 Lumby, along with Kath Albury and Alan McKee, is the author of *The Porn Report*, based on findings from a longitudinal study on the pornography viewing habits of a variety of Australians (2008).

40 This has been evoked in the phrase *Corporate Paedophilia*, also the title of a widely distributed and discussed report by the reputable Australia Institute (2006).

41 Germaine Greer was mentioned in 312 surveys, Betty

Freidan in 50, Gloria Steinam was cited 23 times.

42 (01-11-2007).

message board of a television show designed to provoke debate (particularly on such a 'hot' topic) is itself hardly representative. What is interesting is that the majority (of the minority who post on message boards after a television show finishes) question both Lumby's feminism (on the basis she allegedly does not represent 'community standards' which are depicted as opposed to using sex to 'sell' products) and her expertise (on the grounds, for example, that media analysis cannot compare to the expertise of child psychology). Her feminism (identified by one blogger as 'libertarian' and 'pro-sex') and her intellectual credentials are both questioned, without necessarily rejecting feminism or academic inquiry in general.

Taking one animated message board and some of the survey responses as an index, it is possible to identify some contradictory impressions of academic feminists speaking in public: they are alternatively controversy-seeking, unqualified, over-qualified or inappropriately qualified; they 'intellectualise' or do not represent 'community standards'; they need media training or are too 'media-savvy'; academic feminists are juxtaposed with 'mass culture' or firmly located there; or less often, academic feminists are understood to be misrepresented or mistreated for their engagement with the media. For example, according to one survey respondent, 42-year-old office manager Angela*, feminism has a bad name 'but it is not the fault of feminists. Feminism in whatever form is still so hard for many people to take. I really admire Katherine [sic] Lumby for always speaking out as a feminist because I know she just gets constantly attacked'. Lumby herself has lamented that 'while they [the media] ring me up all the time for some expert semiotic commentary on images, my views ... appear to have no impact on the predictably moralising turn the debate takes in every instance' (Murray *et al.*, 2002: 114).

what is feminist competency?

The conclusions offered here can only be tentative, inspired as they are by qualitative research on some of the views of 160 mostly tertiary-educated women, most of whom live in metropolitan cities in Australia. More targeted research may produce different conclusions, but it is just as likely to produce more detailed variations on the key themes that have been identified here: academic feminism has been a major source and origin of feminist identification; some women are hesitant to identify as feminists on the basis they have not had sufficient or positive exposure to academic feminism; and lastly, there is a discernable expectation that academic feminists who are visible in public life perform their duties competently. Beyond these parameters, 'feminist competency' is not coherently defined. I have suggested, however, that it is a value that serves to both reinforce and quarantine the influence of academic feminisms. Academic feminism is recognised as producing feminist competency,

while others suggest that this competency can reach its limit when academic feminists cross over into public space.

Tested against Safarik's definition of academic feminism as a 'collective meaning-system' with institutional power *and* the capacity to make resistant discourses such as feminisms more widely available, the responses in this paper do provide some encouraging evidence. Yet to conclude with congratulations for a job well done or approbation for not sufficiently engaging with the public sphere would be to short circuit the potential utility of 'feminist competency' on a number of fronts. We may choose to ponder, for instance, whether academic feminism (as produced in women's and gender studies departments for example) encourages feminist competency as an end-goal of a project established in Australia (as in other countries) through political agitation. And following from this, what does this mean for feminist politics and for feminist epistemology? What sort of feminisms and feminists is academic feminism producing and precluding?

From its inception academic feminism has been caught in a recognised bind, captured by Louise Johnson in the question she posed in 1987: 'is academic feminism an oxymoron?' (Johnson, 1987: 529). If understood as an alternative to movement-based feminism, 'feminist competency' could be discouraging to those who have critiqued the development of feminist theory in the academy in terms of loss, whether it be of innocence, unity, direct political efficacy or accessible feminist language (as discussed in Hemmings, 2005). Or if understood as an effect of feminist pedagogy within the academy, the notion of 'feminist competency' could contribute to recent discussions that have questioned whether academic feminism (or women's studies in particular) should continue to operate with feminism as its disciplinary imperative. For example, Wiegman has challenged the hitherto axiomatic link between feminist politics and academic feminism (however formulated) on that basis that it arguably consigns women's studies to a present-ist and/or contemporary orientation that is not necessarily compatible with social *or* epistemological transformation. She has also helpfully suggested that while thinking about academic feminism's obligations to past and present social movements and to a public sphere where feminism has been politically demeaned is by no means unproductive, these discussions would perhaps be better served by rejecting the casting of academic feminism as 'the ultimate agent or arbitrator of the deployment on the political' for the commonsensical reason that to do so forecloses other feminisms (Wiegman, 2002: 34).

Finally, in terms of my own work, the recognised value of 'feminist competency' has figured in a number of contrary ways: in my research on feminism in Australia, 'feminist competency' emerged as a key reason respondents did and did not claim feminism. In publishing a mainstream book on feminism with my co-author Monica Dux, some of it based on this research, I also found

myself 'framed' as an academic feminist as interpolated by mainstream media: first as a 'door bitch', and then as the most prominently displayed feminist author in a two-page spread in a widely circulated weekend supplement reporting on recent books published about feminism (this article ran as a cover story with the cover featuring an image of a suffragette and the headline 'Is Feminism Dead?'). I awoke to an almost full-page photograph of myself, arms folded defensively in a campus setting with the headline 'Girl Power' blazed about my head. The hour-length interview the journalist had conducted with me was reduced to a couple of sound-bites; the topic we had most extensively discussed – feminism's problematic relationship with Islam – was not featured. Instead, the author dismissed the chapter on this issue as 'reading like a primer for a postcolonial indoctrination class' (Neill, 2008: 4–5). Similar to my reaction to the 'door bitch' charge, I was not surprised by the journalist's dismissal (we had clearly not agreed on that topic), but I was struck by how the criticism was channelled through a denunciation of academic feminism.

As a historian of feminism – the key expression of my own feminist competency – I plan to more closely examine such representations of academic feminism as an effect of a backlash to feminism or as antithesis of 'public feminism'. One focus point for the Australian context would be the 1990s when rejections of academic feminism featured as a part of some versions of third-wave feminism. It was also the decade in which Helen Garner's book-length denunciation of 'campus feminism' in *The First Stone: Some Questions about Sex and Power* (1995) sparked a major media controversy and alleged generational divide among feminists. I say alleged because at the time of its publication I was a young feminist who (albeit secretly) admired the book. As a first-generation university student with a non-Anglo, outer suburban background, I shared what I took to be Garner's contempt for middle-class university-based feminism (Simic, 2006). That I have now graduated to 'door bitch' status indicates a level of feminist competency I once rejected or consigned as beyond my grasp. Such personal reflections also have their place in any future histories and examinations of 'feminist competency'.

acknowledgements

Many thanks to Marina Bollinger, Ann Genovese, Maree Pardy and the anonymous referees for their extremely valuable feedback on this article. Thanks also to Monica Dux for sharing the 'door bitch' load.

author biography

Zora Simic is the co-author (with Monica Dux) of *The Great Feminist Denial* (MUP, 2008). She has also published numerous articles on twentieth-century Australian

feminism. She is Lecturer in Australian History, and Convenor of Women's and Gender Studies, in the School of History and Philosophy at the University of New South Wales.

references

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) (2007) 'Difference of opinion message board' Re: Episode 'Sex Sells', 27 September 2007, www.abc.net.au, http://www2b.abc.net.au/tmb/Client/Message.aspx?b=70&m=15862&ps=20&dm=1&pd=3.

Bird, E. (2004) 'The sexual politics of introducing women's studies: memories and reflections from North America and the United Kingdom 1965–1995' *Gender & Education*, Vol. 16, No. 1: 51–64.

Bulbeck, C. (1997) *Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women*, Cambridge and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Bulbeck, C. (2003) '"I wish to become the leader of women and give them equal rights in society": how young Australians and Asians understand feminism and the women's movement' *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1–2: 4–25.

Curthoys, A. (2000) 'Gender studies in Australia: a history' *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 31: 19–38.

Damousi, J. (1999) 'Writing gender into history and history in gender: creating a nation and Australian historiography' *Gender and History*, Vol. 11, No. 3: 612–624.

Deem, R. (2002) 'Talking to manager-academics: methodological dilemmas and feminist research strategies' *Sociology*, Vol. 36, No. 4: 835–854.

Dux, M. and Simic, Z. (2008) *The Great Feminist Denial*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Eisenstein, H. (1996) *Inside Agitators: Australian Femocrats and the State*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Garner, H. (1995) *The First Stone: Some Questions about Sex and Power*, Sydney: Picador.

Haussegger, V. (2002) 'The sins of our feminist mothers' *The Age*, 23 July: 11.

Haussegger, V. (2005) 'Childlessness: the revolution we had to have' *The Age*, May 9, http://www.theage.com.au/news/Opinion/Childlessness-the-revolution-we-had-to-have/2005/05/08/1115491042240.html.

Haussegger, V. (2008) 'An encounter with the door bitches of Club Feminism' *The Canberra Times*, 30 August: 13.

Hemmings, C. (2005) 'Telling feminist stories' *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 2: 115–139.

Ho, C. (2007) 'Muslim women's new defenders: women's rights, nationalism and Islamophobia in contemporary Australia' *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 30, No. 4: 290–298.

Huggins, J. (1998) *Sister Girl: The Writings of Aboriginal Activist and Historian Jackie Huggins*, St Lucia: UQP.

Johnson, L. (1987) 'Is academic feminism an Oxymoron?' *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 10, No. 5: 529–532.

Lilburn, S., Magarey, S. and Sheridan, S. (2000) 'Celebrity feminism as synthesis: Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch and the Australian Print Media*' *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3: 335–349.

Lumby, C. (1997) *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the 1990s*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Maddison, S. and Partridge, E. (2007) *How Well Does Australian Democracy Serve Australian Women?* Report. 8, Democratic Audit of Australia, Canberra.

Magarey, S. (2007) 'What is happening to women's history in Australia at the beginning of the third millennium?' *Women's History Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1: 1–18.

Matthews, J. (1996) 'Doing theory or using theory: Australian feminist/women's history in the 1990s' *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 106: 49–58.

McKee, A., Albury, K. and Lumby, C. (2008) *The Porn Report*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000) *Talkin' up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and Feminism*, St. Lucia: UQP.

Murray, S., Roscoe, J., Morris, S. and Lumby, C. (2002) 'Women in/and media today' *Hecate*, Vol. 28, No. 2: 126–144.

Neill, R. (2008) 'Girl power' *The Australian*, Review, 30 August: 4–5.

Probyn, E. (2004) 'Columnist with a divine right' *The Australian*, 26 May: 30.

Raddeker, H.B. (2006) 'Difference between the waves versus the ''Eternal Return'': today's students of feminism' *Outskirts: feminisms along the edge*, 14, http://www.chloe.uwa.edu.au/outskirts/archive/volume14/raddeker.

Safarik, L. (2002) 'Theorizing feminist transformation in higher education' *Teacher's College Record*, Vol. 104, No. 8: 1718–1759.

Scutt, J. (1996) *Growing up Feminist: The New Generation of Australian Women*, Melbourne: Artemis.

Sheridan, S. (1991) 'Introduction' in Sheridan, S. (1991) editor, *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*, London and New York: Verso.

Simic, Z. (2006) 'On reading *The First Stone* ten years later: a response' *Lilith*, No. 15: 18–31.

Spongberg, M. (1993) 'If she's so great, how come so many pigs dig her?: germaine greer and the malestream press' *Women's History Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3: 407–419.

Spongberg, M. and Moore, N. (2007) 'Editorial: the future of feminist research' *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 52: 1–2.

Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (2000) 'But the empress has no clothes! Some awkward questions about The ''Missing Revolution'' in Feminist Theory' *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 3: 261–288.

Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (2008) *Women's Rights and Equality: What do they want Now?* Report.

Watson, S. editor (1990) *Playing the State: Australian Feminist Interventions*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Watson, S. (1998) 'Femocrats' in Caine, B. (1998) editor, *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 420–421.

Wiegman, R. (2002) 'Academic feminism against itself' *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2: 18–37.

doi:10.1057/fr.2009.60