

## *Where Have All the Activists Gone?*

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What is feminist theory? This question — which usually only arises when it is time to update a dusty old syllabus — inevitably confronts any reader who dares tackle the impressive *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. Editors Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth announce at the outset that “feminist theory is a vibrant intellectual practice” (1), yet in spite of its vibrancy, they are unable to say much about what it is. They describe it as “a multifaceted, multisited project” (1) that “resists conceptualization as a field because it is resolutely interdisciplinary” (2).

While they refuse to specify the contours of the field of feminist theory, we can read the editors’ introduction as offering an account of what feminist theory is today and how this differs from what feminist theory has been. “Feminist theories,” they declare at first, “arise in conjunction with feminist activism and academic practices” (2). Yet, by the end of their introduction, all discussion of feminist activism has dropped out, and feminist theory has become narrowly aligned with academic practices alone: “Today, feminist theory takes inspiration from multiple critical paradigms, and feminist projects are diffused throughout the academy” (12). The introduction inadvertently expresses through its own movement an implicit history of feminist theory: at first theory was generated through activism *and* scholarship; now theory is a purely academic pursuit.

This narrative of the move of feminist theory from the streets to the ivory tower is echoed in many of the essays collected in the *Handbook*. In some of the contributions, works cited up until the early 1980s include many works by activists; but by the late 1980s, feminist theory appears to be the exclusive production of feminist academics, who have by that point successfully (if unevenly) established footholds in colleges and universities (see, for example, the entries on “Embodiment,” “Experience,” “Intersectionality,” “Politics,” and “State/Nation”). In other contributions, the story of feminist theory’s contribution to a specific theme begins already within the academy, which it then never seems to leave (see entries on “Agency” and “Materialisms”). (One striking exception to this is the essay on “Development” by Elora Halim Chowdhury, which traces the

interaction between feminist scholars, activists, and international development organizations.)

If feminist theory is not exclusively an academic production, what does it mean that many of the essays in the *Handbook* do not engage with any theory produced by nonacademics post-1985? Were feminist theory's origins in activism a function of women's exclusion from, and later marginalization within, higher education? Have activists ceased to produce theory because they are able today to draw theory from scholarly work? Have feminists become preoccupied with activism *within* the academy and withdrawn from political organizing and collective action without? As feminists have become incorporated in academia, has theory produced by activists become dismissed as intellectually thin, or as unimportant? Or is this focus on scholarly literature merely the product of a *Handbook* that is written by academics (all but one of the contributors claims an academic affiliation) and for the consumption of students and scholars?

I pose these questions not to challenge the legitimacy of essays that focus on scholarly concepts like biopower and new materialism but rather to take seriously the claim that "feminist theories arise in conjunction with feminist activism and academic practices." If this claim has value, then we should be asking: what feminist theory has arisen in conjunction with feminist activism in the past 30-odd years? Has our conception of feminist theory narrowed over the past decades such that nonacademic theorizing no longer registers as theory? Are works such as Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards's *Manifesta*, Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*, or even academic Roxane Gay's popular book *Bad Feminist* (none of which are mentioned in the *Handbook*) examples of feminist theory? And if they are not, on what grounds can we distinguish these texts from those that we do count as feminist theory?

We should be asking: how have concepts such as gender performativity and intersectionality been taken up from academic discourses by activists, and how have those theories been transformed by activists? Brittney Cooper's excellent piece on "Intersectionality" reminds us that Kimberlé Crenshaw's original use of the term referred to "structural power relationships," yet it has been distorted to refer to identity as it has "traveled to other disciplines" (389). While I agree with Cooper's concern that intersectionality applied to identity loses its critical force and invites the charge that it "has outlived its analytic usefulness" (386), it is insufficient to lay the blame for the shifting usage of this term at the

feet of academics. Intersectionality has a life in our broader political culture, and it is today regularly invoked by activists, journalists, and even the occasional politician. Restricting our focus to its life in academic scholarship makes Cooper's concern seem entirely reasonable; subsequent scholars were intellectually sloppy when they interpreted Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality to refer to identity instead of structural power relationships. Yet when we broaden our view to think about how ideas circulate and evolve, the new meanings that the term intersectionality has taken on can no longer be blamed solely on poor scholarship. Instead, we may have to look at how new theories may be expressed — both within academia and without — using the language of the old. The application of intersectionality to identity is not a misreading of Crenshaw — or at least not merely a misreading; it is a different feminist theory of intersectionality, one that is regularly invoked in ordinary feminist politics in the streets. We might still be critical of such a theory, as I believe we should be, but we should also take it seriously as a theory that has real impact on how many feminists think, speak, and act.

We should be asking: what feminist theories are expressed in feminist activism today, even if they are not rigorously theorized in written form? This is to follow in the footsteps of feminists such as Elizabeth Diggs, who theorized the categories of liberal, radical, and socialist feminism in a nonacademic article in 1970. Or in the footsteps of Iris Young (1990), who developed scholarly accounts of the theories of justice implicit in contemporary social movements, including in feminist activism. To be sure, there are moments when the contributors to this collection reference feminist theory that has arisen outside the academy in recent years — as when Renée Heberle mentions the phenomenon of choice feminism (606). However, these are not accorded the same standing as feminist theories articulated by nonacademics in the second wave or earlier.

We should be asking: has the incorporation of feminist scholarship into the academy (however tenuous and incomplete) ironically directed feminist energies into scholarship at the expense of political activism? Linda M. G. Zerilli, in her contribution to the *Handbook*, reminds us of a tradition of feminist theory that sees politics as an end in itself, rather than as a mere means to achieving feminist policy outcomes. On this view, politics is valuable in part because through political action “women developed the ability to form, share, and debate opinions with others” (644). Has the shift from activism to academia inhibited the development of these political capacities?

The editors had an enormous task, and one that could never possibly be completed, as they themselves note: to collect a series of essays offering scholarly insight into the broad, interdisciplinary, and amorphous field of feminist theory. They were well aware that, no matter how they attempted to cover the field, they could never satisfy everyone or include every relevant idea. They have done a remarkable job of collecting a series of essays on a wide range of themes of interest especially to feminist scholars in the social sciences. Gaps in such a project are unavoidable. However, the gaps that I have identified here are not their gaps alone: they are ours. Our inclusion of pre-1985 nonacademic texts in our syllabi, our anthologies, and our scholarship reminds us that we do conceptualize feminist theory as arising from feminist politics as well as from academic debates. What would feminist theory look like if we included activist theory post-1985? That *Handbook* is yet to be written.

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### *The Pedagogy of Feminist Theory*

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Feminist theory is pedagogical. At least, this vital new volume should prompt scholars to consider the multiple ways in which pedagogy and feminist theory interact with one another, especially when approaching feminist theory the way that Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth do as editors. In their introduction to the text, they contend that feminist theory is "more fruitfully conceived as a multifaceted, multisited project than as a bounded field," and is "oppositional research" because "it