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RESPONSE

Feminist Theory as Praxis

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A handbook published by a leading academic press is a vehicle for the circulation of ideas, a site for the dissemination of knowledge, a space for the cultivation of a distinctive intellectual tradition, as well as a moment of legitimation for an academic field. Yet handbooks are not usually reviewed in scholarly journals, and for good reason: just how is any reader — even a group of them — to evaluate a multiauthor, encyclopedic project? Timothy Kaufman-Osborn was inspired to convene this symposium in the conviction that the production and publication of this *Handbook* was politically eventful. We share that conviction. And we are grateful to the contributors to this symposium for their generous engagements with *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* and, especially, to Timothy for organizing it and inviting our response.

What set this event in motion? A feminist editor. Angela Chnapko at Oxford contacted us in 2010 because she realized that a handbook devoted to *feminist* theory was long overdue. Developing a prospectus for this magnum opus that could pass muster with anonymous reviewers and Oxford's editorial board involved two years of intellectual labor. The momentum grew through the yearlong recruitment period as chapter authors — many of them colleagues but some of whom neither of us had met in person — enthusiastically agreed to participate. By lending their talents to this project, contributors agreed that it was time to demonstrate

how feminist theory challenges established knowledge and engages the world systematically. Their prodigious engagement generated 50 chapters and more than 1,000 pages of transformative analysis. Even to order this book and have it arrive on your doorstep is an event, because the hardback weighs close to five pounds. This speaks volumes about the depths and breadth of feminist knowledge-making in academia today (Severs 2018).

To the thoughtful readers who contributed to this symposium, we have a simple observation: the *Handbook* reflects its material and political conditions of production. What are these conditions? Several respondents observe that the *Handbook* presents feminist theory as a "scholarly project" (Snyder-Hall 2018) and that this may make it symptomatic of a disjuncture between feminist academics and feminist activists. If feminist theory is, as we claim in the introduction, a knowledge practice fueled by feminist activism, then why are there no references in this volume to "theory produced by nonacademics post-1985"? (Ferguson 2018). Has feminist theory left feminist activism behind as it has become an academic credential with established scholarly journals and professional conferences?

We undertook this project assuming that feminist activism occurs at varied sites and that academia is one of them. Certainly, the *Handbook* is an academic project. This does not disqualify it from being a political project and activist engagement in its own right. Sonia Corrêa's (2018) formulation nicely captures the tension that we perceived as its political conditions of production and that most influenced what we aimed to achieve. She describes ours as an era in which feminist theorizing moves away from the "lived worlds of feminist politics" and "*closer* to the charmed circles of power" without being *in* power. We would add that this liminal positioning necessitates feminist politics within as well as against established institutions.

In the 50 years since the emergence of "second-wave" feminism, institutions at every level — national, international, global, economic, political, religious, familial, academic, and more — have taken up concerns that feminist activism and feminist theory put on the agenda. Yet even as nations and agencies adopt policy innovations regarding women's education, political representation, reproductive health, wage equity, sexual violence, and more, they resist the very central insight of feminist theory and politics: that gender is not a social role — and certainly not a synonym for "women" — but a system of stratification that defines and privileges normative masculinity.

Corrêa (2018) cites the career of "gender mainstreaming" to illustrate this tension. A concept invented in the early 1990s by feminists working in the European Commission, it was championed by transnational feminist activists who succeeded in establishing it as a plank in the Platform for Action created at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, held in 1995 in Beijing. These feminists proposed gender mainstreaming to move governments and agencies from addressing "women's issues" piecemeal and treating them as problems specific to women to adopting a structural analysis that recognizes "gender … as a system of stratification riddled with male power" and suffused throughout society (Hawkesworth 2012, 234). The rhetoric of gender mainstreaming took off. Yet when the concept moved from its activist base into the "charmed circles," it met civil servants who construed "gender hierarchy as the effect of individual choices and competitive processes" (Hawkesworth 2012, 244). They transposed the feminist political project into a technocratic exercise to be satisfied by gathering statistics and subjecting them to neutral analysis. Implementation of gender mainstreaming mostly reenacted the entrenched power, privilege, and biases that feminist activists intended it to challenge (Verloo 2005, 359). This dispiriting effect owes far more to the misappropriation of a feminist concept than to the depoliticization of feminist theory.

The *Handbook* is our "mainstreaming" project for academia. Demonstrating to nonfeminist scholars that gender figures into the central concepts of their work is as urgent today as it has ever been. We imagined a broad audience of readers, which we hoped would include scholars who do not identify as feminist but who realize that they can no longer ignore that gender matters. And it is integral to the *Handbook*'s analytic commitments and its politics to insist that gender can never be understood in isolation from race, class, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality. For such readers, the *Handbook* would be an entry point into an otherwise vast, unmanageable literature. It is indeed "pedagogical" in this respect. We do aim to invite "teachers across a variety of disciplines to rethink the way they approach their courses" (McMahon 2018). If we succeed in reaching anyone in that way, it will be a political victory.

Many of the contributors to this symposium also note that participation in the *Handbook* is skewed toward North America. They are correct. More than two-thirds of the chapter authors either were born in or hold academic positions in the United States and Canada. All but one chapter was written by a native speaker of English or someone with near-native fluency in the language. These facts prompt reflection on the *Handbook*'s material

conditions of production and on the ways it works as an index of political and academic privilege.

Even in the United States, where academia is a notorious feminist beachhead, programs and departments of women's, gender, and sexuality studies remain precariously institutionalized by comparison with the traditional disciplines (Disch and O'Brien 2007). They typically enjoy fewer administrative staff, despite the extra labor required to coordinate an interdisciplinary program or community of scholars. They are almost always populated by jointly appointed faculty who have service responsibilities in at least two units. There often exist fewer resources in the form of fellowships, teaching assistantships, and research and travel money for doctoral students. Feminists in academia, whether faculty, staff, or students, work a "double shift" (Hochschild 1989).

Few academic departments count chapters written for a handbook toward tenure, promotion, or an annual raise. Even in the United States, where feminist academics are lucky to enjoy a wealth of jobs (not to mention annual raises), it remains a privilege to spare the time to participate in a project like this one. We cast a wide net when we initially solicited authors and were turned down most frequently by scholars outside North America. Some were living on such meager incomes that they could contribute only if we could pay to commission a chapter — but we had no budget to accommodate such requests. Others asked if they could write their chapters in their native tongue for subsequent translation — but we lacked resources to cover translation costs. Others were constrained by productivity assessments that demand yearly publications. It was not easy to square a multiauthor volume likely to take at least three years to come to fruition (mind you, it took *exactly* that) with such neoliberal imperatives. Producing this volume confronted us with the practical difficulties of decentering Anglophone knowledge without the financial resources required to undertake that endeavor in a significant way. In recruiting contributors, we also encountered limits imposed by our own networks, our particular situations, and our disciplinary imaginations.

We are tremendously grateful to the contributors to this symposium for their generative responses to the *Handbook*, which prompted us to reflect on its material and political conditions of production. Their responses also inspire us, in the best spirit of feminist dialogue, to resist a suggestion that runs more or less explicitly through several comments: the suggestion that theory is not itself activism and that a turn to scholarship is a turn away from action.

The ongoing debates over the concept "intersectionality" that Brittney Cooper so astutely analyzes in her *Handbook* chapter are illustrative. Jasbir Puar's (2007, 215) contention that "assemblage" is to be preferred over "intersectionality" because it is better able to work against imperialist logics of identity is undoubtedly "esoteric" (to borrow a term from Snyder-Hall). Cooper (2016, 395) demonstrates that it is also action, a political judgment that perversely recasts the demands of "marginalized U.S. subjects for state-based recognition as a collusion with empire" when they are just the opposite — active "dissent from various forms of state-based violence" that racialize and criminalize people of color. Cooper's (2016, 389, 392) restoration of conceptual precision and political force to the category of intersectionality — as "an account of [the] structural power relationships" that "confound and constrict the life possibilities of" some subjects "even as they elevate the possibilities of those living at more legible (and privileged) points of intersection" — is also at once activism and theorizing. We do not agree that to use the term as a description of identity is merely to offer a "different feminist theory of intersectionality" (Ferguson 2018). A deployment of the concept that erases structural power is not a *feminist* theory at all: it takes away the critical edge.

At a moment in the academy when positivism is regaining ground through the imposition of replicability as a regulative ideal and "Data Access and Research Transparency" standards for publication, a feminist volume designed to illuminate the politics of knowledge in all its messy complexity faces many hurdles. The risk in editing such a *Handbook* is that it never finds its audience. Thanks to the vibrant interlocutors in this symposium, and to Timothy Kaufman-Osborn who assembled them, *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* has begun to travel to diverse audiences as an "act of political insurgency," to borrow Edward Said's (2000, 202) felicitous phrase.

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