

## What Has Happened to Feminism?

### *Continental Feminism Reader*

Edited by Ann J. Cahill and Jennifer Hansen.

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### *Review by Kristen Hennessy*

Hansen and Cahill's collection of essays begins by asking the question that I have heard so often, typically dripping with deep disappointment: What has happened to feminism? They reflect on the hostility of young women towards feminism, and a political and social climate in which feminism is angrily dismissed. (I immediately resonate, and recall my first semester teaching, when an impassioned and intelligent young woman leapt from her seat to fervently declare feminism the root of all contemporary problems. To my surprise, her classmates merely nodded their heads.) Hansen and Cahill proclaim that feminism is in a state of crisis (p.1). This book is an attempt to understand that crisis and create pathways out. I appreciate that they look for answers both inside and outside of feminism. They note that feminism has not yet sufficiently challenged patriarchal structures. "In demanding equality, we often overlooked crucial questions: equal to whom? Equality on what basis? And how are we to deal with the differences among women and the relevance of those differences to social and political equality" (p. 1)? Thus, feminism is in the process of developing new theoretical tools that are capable of standing up to this challenge.

The reader compiles essays by prominent feminist thinkers: Butler, Bradiotti, Brennan, Oliver, Cornell, de Lauretis, Gatens, and Grosz, all of whom are engaged in developing theories in response to feminism's crisis. Each author's work is given a short introduction that seeks to situate the essay within the author's project. Hansen and Cahill hope that this reader will be accessible to those outside of academia. Although it is accessible enough for undergraduate students, it does seem to require some background in philosophy, psychology, or feminist theory in order to access the text due to the number of passing references to other theorists. Nonetheless, the reader does succeed in providing a useful introduction to the current struggles of continental feminism.

I will address a few of the themes and struggles that emerged across the essays in order to provide a little taste of the content. There are other themes that I could have chosen—different essays have different emphases—but these are some that were of interest to me.

*Essentialism versus Relativism: What and Who are Women?*

Feminism is struggling with what it means to be a woman, bouncing between essentialism and absolute relativism. Each theorist in the reader responds to the tension differently, resulting in a plurality of viewpoints. Although different, the voices compliment one another, creating a melody of feminist theories.

Each theorist has a different response to the tensions between essentialism and relativism. Butler's (1990) essay "Gender Trouble" struggles with subjectivity and womanhood, noting that womanhood itself is no longer an easily defined term,

The very subject of woman is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms. There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of "the subject" as the ultimate candidate for representation, or indeed, liberation, but there little agreement after all as to what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women. (p. 30)

Butler turns to gender as performativity as a response. Butler turns gender into an action. Braidotti (1994) describes the tension as such:

More specifically, I think that over the past ten years the central questioning feminist theory has become: how to redefine female subjectivity after the decline of gender dualism, privileging notions of the self as process complexity, interrelatedness, postcolonial simultaneities of oppression, and the multilayered technology of self? (p. 72)

Simply put: what is a woman? She proposes nomadism as a potential solution that maintains the tension, acknowledging the many subjectivities that women—and each woman individually—enact. Braidotti explores differences between men and women, differences between women, and the differences that occur within an individual woman. Brennan (1996) addresses this theme explicitly in "Essence against Identity". Cornell (1995)

questions sex and gender in order to develop a feminist legal theory. “Given the so-called realities of sexual difference, how are we to think of personhood in order to make coherent a claim of parity?” (p. 196). DeLauritis (1984) calls upon psychoanalytic theory and semiotics to explain the creation of woman in response to male desire. Oliver (1998) explores masculinity, looking at the Promise Keepers and the Million Man March in order to shake up concepts of masculinity.

There are many differences amongst these responses to the question of femininity. Yet, there is one commonality: womanhood is complex, and it is a multiplicity. All of the theorists work to articulate a femininity that acknowledges that women are many things.

### *Embodiment*

When I read good feminist theory, I find it difficult to sit still. The words resonate in me. A sensation gathers just below my ribcage and radiates throughout my body. It is a sort of raw and passionate energy that I breathe into my belly and exhale out into the world. But feminism still struggles to answer the question of feminist embodiment. Into what do I inhale this passion?

In Oliver’s (1998) critique of masculinity, she notes that white men rely on a disembodied power, and that doing so allows them to dismiss a feminist critique. “But, by ignoring and denying the body, white men ignore and deny that they are the beneficiaries of sexism and racism; they deny their responsibility for it” (p. 164). Yet, how are we to conceptualize this embodiment? Gatens (1996) argues that, despite its longtime concern with female bodies, feminism lacks a coherent philosophy of the body, particularly regarding the distinction between the female body and the body politic. “In particular, there has been little critical work done on the *conceptual* dimension of the relations between women’s bodies and the state: between the body of woman and the body politic” (p. 276). Grosz (1994) explores the sexual natures of bodies, delving into the descriptions given of vaginal and seminal fluids.

Again, there are differences between the ways in which each theorist conceptualizes the body and feminist embodiment. The commonality amongst them is a struggle to conceptualize the body in a way that does not reduce it, that calls attention not only to the experienced body but also to the body’s relationship to culture and power.

*Final Thoughts*

This reader provides a nice sampling of post-feminist thought. Together, they highlight many of the tensions that post-feminism faces while remaining hopeful. The essays combine nicely, with some thematic consistencies across the essays. The reader emphatically carries the thought that feminism is alive and well, even if it faces a crisis. Perhaps the message of the collection is to embrace the diversity of post-feminist thought.