

FOREWORD: THE CHALLENGES OF CONSTRUCTING A TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY

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This book began with what seemed, at times, an impossible dream: to create a course in the history of feminist thought that would be both transnational in coverage *and* historically organized. From the first discussion, among the Gender and Women's Studies faculty at the University of Kentucky, the idea provoked surprisingly heated debate. Some among us considered the emphasis on history to be a Western imposition, carrying with it a whole raft of distortions about how to mark "periods" and plot appropriate narratives of crisis and change. Others felt that a lack of the sense of context and movement through time was our students' most serious barrier to understanding the motivations, controversies, and upheavals of feminist thought. The "pro-history" faction was outraged that many of our students had no idea that anything of value had been written before 1985, because earlier works had been so thoroughly dismissed as racist, heterosexist, essentialist, et cetera, et cetera in their feminist theory courses. Others among us bristled at the very word "history," and suggested that historical organization of a course would degenerate into ethnocentrism and essentialism; "Whose history?" they challenged. These discussions were among the most contentious we had as a faculty; not even the most delicious snacks (usually the crisis-averters in our department) could prevent us from leaving these sessions feeling misunderstood and angry.

Like many heated debates, this one was resolved only when we abandoned abstraction and decided to start *doing*. Our action took the form of what we affectionately (and sometimes ironically) called "Feminist Summer Camp": two weeks of daylong sessions in which each of us—a group now expanded to include invited participants from other

institutions—had the opportunity to pick readings and lead discussion on the movements and ideas that each considered essential to include in the course. With participants from a broad range of disciplines and areas of specialization, none of us could claim expertise over the whole; with actual texts in front of us, we were forced to recognize complexities and subtleties in works that we might have dismissed, and were delighted to be introduced to writers and traditions of which we had been ignorant. Liberated from abstract debate about “positions,” we felt like students again. And from the very first day, the seminar exploded with the excitement of discovered connections, influences, and convergences. We began to see the concrete historical reality of what we subscribed to in theory: that the world is not a collection of discrete and disconnected items, each existing in its own self-contained universe of values, but an infinite set of relations, interactions, exchanges, and conflicts, many of them anchored in inequalities and culture-bound perceptions. We never relinquished our individual passions and priorities, but we began to realize that in making them converse with each other, we were collectively creating new ways of telling familiar narratives, new ways of reading familiar texts, new understandings of feminist insight and activism.

What is new about the collection that ultimately emerged from this seminar? Perhaps first and foremost is its unique format, which pairs primary texts with original introductory essays. Written by scholars of various nationalities, with disciplinary training in anthropology, educational policy, French, history, classics, English, sociology, philosophy, and women’s studies, these essays provide navigation tools for reading and teaching the primary texts. Every text comes from somewhere, historically and geographically, with all the possibilities and limitations that its specific location entails. By emphasizing the specifics of the “somewhere”—the particular histories of colonialism, nation-building, racism, class, religion, and gender—rather than the sheer spectacle of “diversity,” we hope to develop a sense of the dynamic emergence of feminist thought in response to specific contexts, encouraging readers to understand why particular lines of inquiry and argument appeared where, when, and in what form they did. Our primary sources are drawn from Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. We hope that the accompanying essays will make what is new and unfamiliar accessible and meaningful to students, as well as provide teachers with convenient jumping-off points for discussion. To facilitate this goal, each original essay ends with a set of questions for classroom use—or private reflection.

One cannot do justice to such complexities—as we discovered in our seminar—so long as the goal is the representation of “diversity.” It’s an impossible goal to satisfy, of course, and in many ways not a very helpful one. We firmly believe in the value of cultivating what philosopher María Lugones has called “world-travelling” habits of thought, which expand the horizons of the familiar and create a broader cultural map for students to explore (María Lugones, “Playfulness, World-Travelling, and Loving Perception,” *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 [1987]: 11, 12). But in the absence of orienting contexts, the question remains as to what scholars and students are to *do* with all this diversity, beyond celebrating it, tasting all the dishes on the smorgasbord table. It becomes too easy to put works

into artificial dialogue with each other, culling out shared themes (e.g., “sexualities,” “gender violence,” “motherhood,” etc.) that flatten cultural and historical difference. This approach invites a “compare-and-contrast” orientation that provides little sense of the realities of events, power, and conversations that drive ideas, and thus, ironically, may encourage the ethnocentrism of readers who have only their own culture as a frame of reference within which to evaluate the documents. The less familiar contributions remain what Simone de Beauvoir described as “the Other,” marked by their divergence from the norms with which students are familiar.

Our approach, in contrast, is to encourage appreciation of each contribution or set of contributions in its own geographical and cultural context, while prodding history to reveal what is shared—and not shared—across those borders. When common themes seem to emerge across differences, the essays accompanying the primary texts and their discussion questions will encourage readers to think about the “why,” “when,” and “how,” so that readers can go deeper than surface similarities. Thus, for example, chapter 22 in our collection highlights violence against women as a common issue for women’s activism in Mali, India, and Peru. But the coauthored essay that accompanies these primary texts examines the national, historical, and legislative particularities that caution us against making generalizations about violence and women’s activism. Similarly, arguments for the education of women are prominent among the writers included in part 1—on ancient, medieval, and Renaissance views—but the historical periods and cultural/national differences that separate Musonius Rufus, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Mary Astell invite a “text in context” exploration that would not be possible without the accompanying essays.

These points of convergence/divergence can be found throughout the collection, as our selections were chosen to make them visible. Ann M. Ciasullo’s and Norma Mogrovejo’s pieces on the development of lesbian feminism in the United States and Latin America, for example, reveal fascinating differences—and some similarities—in the political contexts within which each of these movements emerged and in the issues that became central to each movement. The similarities are instructive, but even more so are the differences, which demonstrate that the path followed by feminists in the United States was not the model for the rest of the world. Similarly, in Obioma Nnaemeka’s essay on African feminism, “womanism” appears as a significant concept—which may come as a surprise to those American feminists who believe it was coined by Alice Walker. These essays make clear, instead, that “womanism” was independently developed in the contexts of Africa and the United States; at the same time, African “womanism” clearly engages in dialogue with Western feminism and shares some characteristics with Walker’s concept. This volume encourages readers to notice when ideas are talking to each other, influencing each other, and criticizing each other across borders, allowing us to trace and analyze what we call “cross talk” among writers and thinkers.

This cross talk represents one of the key structures of transnational feminism as it unfolds throughout history and throughout the collection, interrelating works without

submerging their particularities. In some cases, this cross-talk is intentional and concrete, as in the fertile if highly charged interchanges among English, American, and Indian writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, around the issues of sexuality and suffrage. More often, it has become visible in hindsight: Christine de Pizan and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz both addressed the “*querelle des femmes*,” the woman question, from within their own cultural contexts (France and Mexico, respectively), in the process contributing to a transnational feminist conversation whose global scope they may not have been aware of, but that we can see as historically significant. Yet another example is the move away from biology and towards a “social constructionism” of the body, which began to preoccupy feminists in the 1970s. This shift in paradigm is often credited to male poststructuralist writers such as Michel Foucault, but history shows that feminists were the first to argue constructionist positions, although not always in the same theoretical form as their peers. Rather, the highly distinctive approaches of these feminist writers together coalesced around a change that was later consolidated in more unified theory. These approaches beg to be considered not just as the works of individual writers, but as racially and nationally inflected as well. Juxtaposing and critically analyzing texts by Germaine Greer, Anne Koedt, Luce Irigaray, and Audre Lorde reveals that, although these authors were not in explicit conversation with each other, their texts do “talk” to each other across cultural lines, at a moment when feminists were dramatically changing the intellectual landscape.

Our biggest challenge, in a project of such broad scope, was choosing what to include. Faced with an abundance of fascinating texts, we have highlighted key documents—from Christine de Pizan, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Paula Gunn Allen, Fatima Mernissi, and others—that were particularly influential or that raise issues that continue to occupy feminisms today. However, we also include lesser known texts, and define “feminist thought” broadly, including texts that were created before the terms and conversations with which we are familiar came into being. Our selections thus range from manifestos to imaginative writing to cartoons to philosophical essays. We want readers to appreciate that astute and creative feminist thinking reaches far back into history. Women were passionately imagining, theorizing, and arguing long before the first women’s studies course was offered, long before the study of gender became splintered into disciplines, and long before Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf authored their groundbreaking studies. Highlighting this legacy was one of our prime motivations as we imagined putting together a collection that displayed the history of feminist thought. Women’s studies courses can tacitly construct a narrative of progress, in which the limited thinking of earlier writers is improved upon by the superior insights of the present, in spite of the respect they pay to canonical women writers of the past, such as Sappho, Christine de Pizan, Virginia Woolf, and Simone de Beauvoir. The idea that theory is an invention of the late twentieth century has sometimes devalued the contributions of earlier writers, especially some Western women writers of what is sometimes called the Second Wave, particularly since a good deal of

poststructuralist theory is built up out of criticism—and too often, rather harsh dismissal—of earlier works. Why, we wondered, are so many male writers permitted to retain a respected place in the social thought curriculum despite their blind spots, while so many feminist writers have been discarded because of theirs?

Although we wanted to restore historical consciousness, none of us was interested in telling “The Story of Feminism.” Our pairings of primary texts and critical essays are organized chronologically not to create an overarching historical narrative but to give a sense of the movements, relations, and conversations that can justifiably be described as crossing or overlapping borders, as well as the differences between them. So, within four broad historical clusters—antiquity to 1800, nineteenth- to mid-twentieth centuries, 1955 to 1975, 1975 to the present—readers will find multiple essays focusing on particular countries and regions, and will be able to track moments of transnational significance for feminism, as well as themes that preoccupy feminists across national borders. These periods and themes are not signals of “sameness” but potential points for starting dialogues about the histories and meanings of feminisms.

So, for example, the first section of this collection, *Challenging Male Dominance: Antiquity to 1800*, highlights the emergence, in distinct places and times, of some of the earliest writings that can meaningfully be described as feminist. What “feminist” means in these contexts is ultimately something for readers to discover and debate. As editors, we group these texts together because they demonstrate that there always have been creative women protesting prevailing theories of female inferiority and various “natural” justifications for excluding women from full participation in education, culture, and politics. Simply by writing, these women challenge the assumption that they are intellectually inferior to men and naturally prefer modesty and silence. And they also argue, sometimes quite explicitly, with the dominant discourses of their time, as poets from classical antiquity revel in descriptions of women’s desire, and writers like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Christine de Pizan engage forcefully in debates about women’s nature that were dominated by men.

The next section, *Activism on Three Continents: Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Centuries*, charts the dense interconnections among British, Indian, and American feminists as they become conscious of themselves *as* agents of change. In this period, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, women come to see themselves as actors on the public stage, a vision that, in our selections, begins with the construction of “sexual politics” in prostitution reform and culminates in the fight for suffrage. Because of the historical links among these three countries, we can trace concrete interactions across national borders. For perhaps the first time in history, feminism becomes actively transnational: thanks to international travel, the circulations of books, newspapers, and letters, and the establishment of international women’s organizations, feminist conversations unfold in “real time.” These conversations allow us to understand the ways in which women found common agendas as well as the ways in which distinctive national contexts shaped different strategies aimed at the shared goals. They also reveal the currents of

power that complicated the ideal of international sisterhood—though, contrary to what we might expect, power does not run in only one direction, nor do Western feminists have the final say in what constitutes “progressive” political change. This multisided case study raises many provocative issues, both strategic and ethical, that continue to preoccupy feminist politics.

The next section, Talking Back to Sexism before “Women’s Liberation”: Nineteenth to Mid-Twentieth Centuries, focuses on writing as a form of activism as images, concepts, and representations begin to be deconstructed and satirized, their sexism exposed. The selections range historically from the late nineteenth century through 1949, when *The Second Sex* was first published in France. The postwar movements for “Women’s Liberation” had yet to bring the concept of “sexism” or notions such as “consciousness-raising” and “personal politics” to cultural prominence, yet it’s clear from the works we have chosen that these ideas were under construction. This was a fertile period for women writers; making selections was difficult, and in the end we chose to go with a mix of well-known works and works that are probably less familiar to many readers. Essays on the French Caribbean and India focus on the racialized representation of women as erotic objects and on early feminist protests against the intertwining of sexism and colonialism. From China, a fantasy-narrative imagines “reform” within the patriarchal structure of Confucian thought, both extending and curtailing women’s roles. From England and France, influential new concepts are developed and “catch hold” internationally, as Woolf and de Beauvoir challenge the particulars of male-dominated discourse and theorize the conceptual, political, and cultural scaffolding that supports it.

Discovering Gender and Remapping Feminism: 1955–1975 explores what are arguably the two most concentrated, influential decades of contemporary feminist thought. One way of thinking of this period is in terms of a progressive splintering of the myth of the unified “subject,” as gender, class, race, nationality, and sexuality assert their claims against any notion of the “essential” or unmarked “human.” First directed against assumptions of a male norm, groundbreaking work on class, sexuality, race, and the body, explorations of the collisions between “East” and “West,” and considerations of the impact of colonialism dismantle the essentialist category of “woman” as well and thus the possibility of a single brand of feminism. While U.S. feminism, for example, was both shaped and redefined by racial, sexual, and class perspectives—and often, conflicts—among women, modern feminisms of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and Morocco emerged from confrontations with imperialist and religious authorities, on the one hand, and indigenous patriarchal customs on the other.

Choosing readings for this section was particularly challenging, as we were constantly aware of everything that we were leaving out. We wanted to give readers a sense of the complexity of “Women’s Liberation” in the United States—a movement too often caricatured as “white and middle-class”—but at the same time to emphasize that “Women’s Liberation” had feminist counterparts in other places around the world. These movements should not be assumed to have taken their cue from white, middle-class feminist

developments in the United States; for example, while many white, middle-class U.S. feminists were asserting the value of what we now call “identity politics,” laying claim to a defining identity in order to gain solidarity, women of color in the United States, Latin America, and Africa were forming coalitions that depended on recognition of what we now call the “intersectionality” of identity—the ways in which women’s identities and experiences of oppression are founded on multiple intersecting markers of difference, such as gender, race, sexuality, and class. At the same time, the increasingly global nature of commerce and culture inevitably affects every feminist struggle—as the selection from Tsitsi Dangerembga’s *Nervous Conditions* demonstrates.

We titled our concluding section, Beyond “The Decade of the Woman”: 1975 to Present, with several developments in mind. When the UN declared 1976–1985 the “Decade of the Woman,” it placed gender politics at the center of the international stage, publicly recognizing the fact that the situation of women is not simply a matter of private or personal experience—just as feminist thinkers have argued for centuries. At the same time, the singular “woman” of that designation belies the global reach of gender politics, and evokes a notion of feminism that is no longer credible. Writers and activists in this section underscore their increasing awareness of the distinctive nature of their identities, values, and struggles, reminding readers that, as Obioma Nnaemeka writes, “feminism, as ideology and struggle, has taken location-specific and culturally defined forms across time and space.” Those specifics, in this section, include not only the political innovations and critical challenges posed to mainstream feminism by postcolonial societies, but the emergence of men’s studies and Third Wave reframings of feminisms’ relationships to consumerism and pop culture.

Our shared goals as we began our work on this collection were to make the study of feminist thought fresh, accessible, and provocative—and to encourage transnational and interdisciplinary analysis rather than simply to represent “difference.” But as editors and scholars positioned in different disciplines, generations, and cultural traditions, we came to the project with different ideas about how to achieve those goals. Working from and through those ideas has been intellectually exciting and personally rewarding. We came to understand each other better, and in many ways our own cross talk became the collection’s true editor, as what each of us initially brought to the project—assumptions about each other, intellectual and political passions, sensitivities and hot-button issues—were transformed by our discussions. This is our hope, too, for teachers and students who use this collection: that they bring themselves to their discussion of feminist thought—and then find themselves transformed by it.