

Introduction

Rebordering Feminist Praxis

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The authors included in this special issue of *Atlantis* originally wrote their pieces for or were inspired by the conference Praxis♀Nexus: feminist methodology, theory, community, held at the University of Victoria, 18-20 January 1996. We, as members of the conference planning committee,¹ hoped to bring together feminists from various academic disciplines and community groups and organizations to discuss the multiple intersections of feminist research and practice. In designing the conference, we worked from two assumptions. First, in organizing for change, feminists must face that space between theory and practice where ideas are translated into concrete activities. Second, in being active in this space, feminists must be innovative and creative in both their methodological approaches to research and their political approaches to social action. This space, or nexus, is where feminist practices come to life. And it is through connecting these practices, or praxis, that feminists redefine the borders of feminist activism and research and actually 'do' theory.

Students, community-based activists, and academics responded positively to the

initial conference call. While this excitement was encouraging, much of the inspiration, electricity, and even anguish at the conference flowed out of competing assumptions and the different experiences among feminists and within feminisms. Some frustration was the result of applying stereotypes and assuming particular actions and reactions from other feminists. Some uneasiness was rooted in the imposition of both abstract and concrete borders among feminists located in different spheres. And some friction was based more fundamentally in what it was to be feminist and do feminist work.

Yet out of this estrangement arose concerted efforts to contest the borders within and among feminisms as well as to increase the commitment to solidarity in feminist praxis. The authors here begin to resolve the challenge of rebordering feminist praxis and, as a collection, approach what is a diverse understanding of connecting feminist practices while doing theory. By way of introducing this collection, we discuss, via example, the nexus where these borders among feminists and feminisms emerge. Then, in an attempt to promote an understanding of these borders, we

draw out and comment on proposed directions for feminist praxis.

EMERGENT BORDERS: MANIFESTATIONS OF DIFFERENCE AND SAMENESS

Borders between what make feminists the same and what make them different, between what they hold in common and the distinct experiences they bring to praxis, are continually being drawn and redrawn. No matter whether they are real or imagined, such divisions concern feminists. A central issue of many of the authors here is the border between 'academics' and 'activists'—variously defined as a border between theory and practice, academy and community, or researchers and the researched. Some suggest that this barrier is rooted in the perception that academics are only concerned with theory and not capable of activism and that community activists refuse to learn from theory. Both lander [by Bennett] and Miedema, for example, suggest, each in their own way, that academics and activists often operate in separate spheres. These spheres are separated by language and by fundamental philosophical differences with academics valuing the ideal, theory, and institutional credentials while activists value 'actual,' experiential, and practical knowledge. Yet both these authors also challenge the simplicity of such a distinction and, as they point out, in their own practices, these spheres are not so neatly divided.

Most of the women contributing to this collection show that no such border really separates academics from community activists. Nearly all the women contributing are, in fact, firmly located in both the academy and the community being both academics or students

and community-based activists. They write on their attempts at: fomenting feminist social change through the actual process of undertaking research (Lee, Piscitelli, Powell and Keck), using conceptual tools to shed light on the construction of hegemonic discourses shaping women's lives (Dyck, Eaton, Smalec), implementing theory collaboratively in the field (Beagan, Miedema, Reitsma-Street), and learning from social action in the community to rethink theory and research (Demers, Fulton, Mies). Other academy- and community-based activists recount their own and others' experiences in implementing feminist theory (Ogino, Skrobaneck, Yaffe). Community-based activists show how they are able to draw out the potential practical contributions of academic theory, research, and action to community organizations (Albion and Ozard, de Guevara [by de Guevara and Demers], lander [by Bennett], Rezanowich) and call for a more realistic integration of theory and practice in order to create more complex understandings of the social locations of women (Sanghera, Schofield).

Borders between the researcher and the researched concern Dyck, Powell and Keck, Piscitelli, and Miedema. At issue here are questions about what counts as legitimate and credible knowledge in settings where participants have unequal power. Dyck raises the issue of ownership of women's experiences in her discussion of access to women as research subjects who have been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS). Gatekeepers at the MS clinic challenge the validity of experiential knowledge by claiming that women in MS support groups do not necessarily 'have' MS and therefore their

'knowledge' about MS should not count. Powell and Keck describe their ongoing practices in building and maintaining what they and their collaborators, who work as miners in the nickel industry, together define as an equitable and just research working group. Piscitelli, in her work with a Brazilian NGO, identifies class as a fundamental source through which the researcher/researched as well as the North/South divides among women were created. Miedema addresses the difficulties of academic/community partnerships and reflects on the possibility of exploitation of women in community-based groups by academics who attain most of the benefits of the research process. All these women struggle to maintain credibility in both their own and the others' communities without imposing an authority of either experiential or academic knowledge; in this way, they break down the border between the academy and the community.

While many of the authors address this border between the academy and the community, some individuals also show how borders in general are created and how they can be broken down. Various authors write about the tendency, at times, to overlook the multiple and intersecting positions and identities of women across various borders. This often leads to simplistic images of where and how women are located. The experiences of young, untenured, and often harassed lone female and feminist members of male- and masculine-dominated academic departments, for example, are often at odds with the common image of privilege for such women held by those outside the university. This is not to say that female and feminist academics are not privileged; rather, the process of

privileging is itself complex and the principles upon which privilege is assumed need to be examined (as Lee suggests). Ogino, in discussing the history of abortion in post Second World War Japan, describes the tension between women's groups and those groups organizing around disability rights over their attempts to privilege their different positions on abortion. She describes how their respective claims to their own social positions shape their responses to movements to change abortion legislation. Beagan, too, writes about how privileging one opinion on abortion over others can divide women's communities. As she notes, privileging pro-choice as *the* feminist stance negates and makes invisible the stance—rooted in historical relations of race, class, and power—of black women in Nova Scotia.

Other authors point out the difficulties of crossing borders that form around particular discourses (ideas, language, reasoning, theories). For example, Eaton explores breaking down borders between the discourses of ecofeminism and spirituality. She notes that their integration can create an uneven tapestry which limits the transformative potential of the union unless the spirituality is rooted and genuine, not self-serving. Smalec similarly discusses borders around discourses, in this case those which form around images of women and AIDS. She uses an activist art piece to contemplate the boundaries around the visible and invisible, the real and the representational, social categories (women) and social insignia (the designation as to which women are low-risk).

Within these discussions of creating borders in practice and in theory, feminists still find some common elements and

sameness. And although there may be some discord around how to overcome the oppression of women, that this goal is held in common is to recognize, value, and applaud the endurance of women's daily individual and collective struggles. The monolithic category of "woman" no longer exists, just as those of "third world woman," the "black woman," the "lesbian," the "able/healthy woman," no longer exist. The hegemony of North American and European feminism is waning to be replaced by practices and political activities which are based on specific and everyday experiences of women around the globe. The activities individual women engage in are shaped by their multiple positionings along various axes of power. These positionings, however local, fluid, or incidental, are points around which to effect social change, connect practices, and do theory.

THE FUTURE OF FEMINIST PRAXIS: THE PRACTICE OF THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

It has become almost cliché today to privilege difference. Few writings or discussions do not begin with a recitation of the narrow boundaries of the situation from which one speaks. Within feminisms, this practice is obviously a long overdue response to the overgeneralizations, essentialisms, and exclusions of early second-wave North American and European feminisms. It also marks the general commitment to inclusivity of most feminisms while highlighting the difficulties and contradictions of achieving inclusivity. This privileging of difference is more than working within borders among women. Because difference is rooted in both historical and material conditions of women's

experiences, various competing worldviews develop among women. Acknowledging that difference is so rooted makes the task of inclusivity even more challenging. Depending on the situation, as some of the authors point out, some differences among women cannot be overcome and need just to be acknowledged. And, it is within this context that, rather than operating from a place called *the feminist*, it might be more appropriate to develop a coalition-based politics among feminists.

Yet stressing differences without recognizing anything that women share in common can be as much of a problem as emphasizing similarities and playing down differences among women. To draw borders around women along the lines of either sameness or difference has contradictory effects. On the one hand, such borders can bring women together and create social spaces for women who have been separated because of the dominant set of power relations based on class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, citizenship, religion, ability, and so on. Yet, on the other, these borders can push women apart and keep women with shared goals and pursuits from coming together to effect social change. As the authors in this collection suggest, coming to terms with these precise contradictions is the challenge facing contemporary feminists and feminisms.

In a sense, all authors contributing to this edition explore drawing borders around identities, either their own, a more collective identity (of a group of women), or some combination of the two. One of the most interesting themes arising in the following papers is how feminists often assign very specific and narrow identities to both ourselves and others and, as a result, create borders

among women. The authors go on to challenge these borders in particular contexts rather than dismissing and discarding in full all the specific identities that separate women. Some authors explore North/South and East/West identities (Ogino, Piscitelli, Sanghera, Skrobanek) while others discuss ethnic, racial, or immigrant identities as well as the complexities of assigning and taking on prefixed collective and tokenized identities (Beagan, de Guevara [by de Guevara and Demers], Dyck, Lee).

Various authors speak to this process of creating borders and propose ways of negotiating the tensions between differently located individuals, groups, theories, and experiences. Fulton makes the observation that gay and lesbian communities can be inclusive of more than those who identify as homosexual. In the article, her daughter comments that she is part of the gay and lesbian community because of her family. Here, alliance, not separatism, is the focus. Drawing on her experiences in a lesbian, gay, and bisexual caucus and a lesbian centre, lander [by Bennett] argues that it is important to find a collective voice among diverse groups of people with common experiences, while at the same time finds it difficult to create lesbian space when straight and bi women are included. Depending on the specific context, as these women suggest, borders need to be drawn, perhaps erased, and then redrawn again.

Community groups, like feminisms, are not static, nor do they coalesce easily around social issues ripe for action. Reitsma-Street describes her experiences in organizing around shutting down a welfare fraud telephone hotline. She worked with

several groups and encountered competing definitions of what acceptable social welfare regulations were. Yet through her active persistence in heightening awareness of the unethical position of supporting a snitch line, she was able to engage successfully other groups as well as some of her students in class. Even within feminist groups, working through competing types of feminisms can be time-consuming and problematic. Yaffe, however, draws attention to the accommodation of difference in practice in an ongoing successful feminist project. She reviews her experiences as a member of a bookstore collective and demonstrates how a loose, but convergent, set of feminist principles makes possible the inclusion of a wide range of feminisms within a group of volunteer workers. And Rezanowich tells how a commitment to a feminist vision came into being for a group of organic farmers. Through video as an empowering medium, each woman reinvented her work and her sense of self as a political actor in the struggle against the dominant agribusiness model.

One of the most important questions arising at the conference and in these papers is: how can feminists resolve their desires to challenge existing power relations among women while at the same time recognizing that differences in power do in fact exist? It is one thing for privileged feminists from the North and West finally to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of feminisms locally and globally; yet it is something else to confuse difference (women's contrasting backgrounds and social locations) with diversity (women coming together from various backgrounds and social locations) and practice feminism as if power differences did

not exist. 'Imagining' individuals to be equal—without recognizing and analyzing the sources of power within various feminist research models and collective decision-making processes—does not make all participants equal, socially, economically, or politically. The critical decision becomes whether or not feminists should give up the pretence of equality in their organizations, institutions, and research. Schofield suggests that perhaps it is better to release feminist practice from its name and to pursue the construction of new decision-making models—ones that do not idealize feminist principles but which coincide more closely with the structures community activists encounter daily. Lee offers another interpretation and proposes that feminists can begin to maneuver in, through, and around institutional constraints by analyzing the forces that create real and imagined borders which constrain our actions, thoughts, and feelings. Resistance and feminist praxis are set in motion by the act of crossing borders, questioning the construction of borders, and integrating multiple identities.

Rethinking definitions and the meanings attached to certain labels entails a different set of practices, ones that incorporate new thoughts. For example, in shifting the focus from international prostitution to international trafficking in women, Sanghera and Skrobanek radically redefine sex as a consumable product in the global economy and highlight the ways in which sustaining economic and political structures need to be challenged through international acts of feminist organizing. Albion and Ozard recount their and others' experiences of becoming experts while participating in a court

monitoring program. Women gain knowledge and confidence in the process which they then use to effect long-term structural change. de Guevara [by de Guevara and Demers] describes her role in organizing a popular theatre production about immigrant women by immigrant women. In preparing the play, she draws out immigrant experiences as a way of knowing and then, through the staging of the play, she and the other women are able to legitimate those experiences as knowledge. Demers discusses how young women's experiences in linked alternative schooling and daycare programs are redefined, valued, and incorporated as knowledge. Given the long-term commitment she and others have made to the programs, experiential knowledge is and will be brought into the research process over and over again.

In many ways the authors in this collection chronicle the practice of a politics of difference. This chronicling of women's lives, histories, and struggles is a theme taken up by Mies. Having written about feminist methodologies and participatory action research for over two decades, she urges women not to overlook the work of earlier feminist pioneers and to continue to record women's lives so as not to commit "matricide" through the loss of information. From her we must learn that not only are the intellectual histories of women important, but also the histories of women's concrete everyday lives comprising communities, academe, activism, practices, and theory.

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In the papers that follow, each contributor connects her practices as a

feminist, whether it be through her activities as an activist, her struggles over theory, or her engagements in texts, to her own way of doing theory. Each recognizes that the uneasiness we may often feel with other feminists and with other feminisms is a place where feminists and feminisms can gain strength to engage simultaneously in struggles locally and globally, in the community and in the academy, in action and in research. As for the borders that pull women together and push them apart, as feminists, we need to draw them, erase them, and draw them again. We need to draw circles, triangles, and spirals (but definitely no obelisks) connecting that which we share while pointing out our differences. This is the ongoing challenge we must face when we choose to call ourselves feminists—afterall, this is what connecting practices and doing theory is all about.

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