



**Recognition & reflexivity**

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## Observation & Commentary

### Article Title

Recognition & reflexivity

### Key Words

Youth, feminism, transnational, reflexivity, representation, activism

The point is not to institute new forms of intelligibility that become the basis of self-recognition. But neither is the point to celebrate unintelligibility as its own goal. The point, rather, is to move forward, awkwardly, with others, in a movement that demands both courage and critical practices, a form of relating to norms and to others that does not “settle” into a new regime. I take this to be a way of opening to new modes of sociality and freedom.

Here, in dialogue with Athena Athanasiou, Judith Butler envisions a radical politics of recognition (2013, p. 68). Her words resonated with us during the final stages of this Special Feature as we considered, once again, what was driving us. Asked originally to co-edit a collection that addressed ‘young women’s (re)engagement with feminism’, we were initially hesitant to cast yet another *think-net* on to young feminists; to capture ‘us’ in a weave of who, what, where, when, why and how. Especially from our current locations in U.S. and U.K. universities. It seemed to the two of us that in recent years it has become somewhat customary for the neoliberal press and academy to prod and probe feminism for signs of life – either to resuscitate or re-brand, or announce a sorry demise. ‘Young women’ in particular appeared in these accounts as simultaneously too dead, alive, under false consciousness, pomo-babbling, apathetic, aggressive, oppressed, oppressive, under-sexed, over-sexed by feminists and non-feminists alike; categorical, conflicting representations that threatened to homogenize, bleach,

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3 deflate the presence, necessity and potential of contemporary feminisms. Hence our concern that  
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5 this most recent installment – The (Re)engagement – might also get encircled.  
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8 *“The different temporality that characterizes queer and feminist movements in China also means*  
9 *that it is a new political configuration, emerging out of intertwining global and local currents,*  
10 *becoming an unpredictable force of its own.” (Wen Liu, Ana Huang, & Jingchao Ma)*  
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12 Thus, compelled also by our own involvement as young feminists in historical and  
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14 emerging movements of anti-neoliberal protest, scholarship and revolution, disgust at the  
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16 ongoing ease of violence against marginalized genders, and desire for spaces that witness how  
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18 feminisms are taken up in the global South as well as (or perhaps in spite of) the global North,  
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20 we dreamed of a transnational collection powerfully alluding to both *that* and *how* diverse  
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22 feminisms are being, and could be, done by young people within current-day conditions of  
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24 repression *and* resistance. Or, as Michelle Fine (2012) writes, these ‘revolting, revolting times’.  
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28 *“Two broad areas of reflection and research arise for us: What kinds of dialogues and debates*  
29 *on women and womanhood are young South American activists holding? And how do historical*  
30 *debates about human nature and women’s capacity for peace-building inform each other?”*  
31 *(Carolina Munoz Pronto & Antonia Devoto)*  
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35 And so we put out a call for short pieces by young feminists from across the globe telling  
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37 us what they do and creating conversations around ‘the following sorts of questions, and then  
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39 some’: (1) How does ‘young women’s (re)engagement with feminism’ speak within current-day  
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41 cultural and political conditions? (2) What are the complexities, politics and possibilities of  
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43 contemporary feminisms? (3) How do these feminisms speak to/of ‘past’ feminist movements?  
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45 How do (or can, or should) we enact, refuse, and/or imagine transnational feminisms? (4) What  
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47 exactly is a ‘young feminist’, anyway?  
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52 *“Feminism for us has not become a separate lens through which we see the world; rather, it has*  
53 *become a tool we can use to blur those borders, facilitating an ease of integration, emphasizing*  
54 *our reality of intersectionality, without guilt or shame or overwhelming confusion.” (Susana*  
55 *Martinez & Claudia Mejia)*  
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Indeed, the entire project was dependent on the *non*-definition of ‘young’ and of ‘feminist’. Paradoxically, the foundation of our collection was a-foundational; we sought to gather responses from young feminists at, on, or, across borders of nation, race, class, disability, gender, sex and/or sexuality, in academia and/or in activism, and at scales ranging from the intra-psychic to the global. Standing together, we hoped such eclectic accounts would not only go eye-to-eye with the potential for young feminists to be ‘violently misrecognized’ (p. 65), but also be ‘talking back to the violence of recognition’ itself (p. 64). A violence that emerges when, as Athanasiou continues, ‘the apparatus of recognition, especially in its liberal form (is there any other?) ... endlessly works to encompass, adjudicate, and commodify “difference” and thus depoliticize and legitimize the differential configuration of subjects, lives, and the world’ (p. 64-5).

*“On Friday afternoons, I join my fellow members of the Israeli-Palestinian collective Anarchists Against the Wall. When I cross the physical and psychic borders and join Palestinian activists in their protest against Israel’s occupation, I am acting as a feminist. I am a feminist who is refusing the ideologies of human difference constructed by my state, and building relations of solidarity and friendship with those oppressed by my government.” (Maya Wind)*

Athanasiou’s caution seemed especially pertinent given this collection’s relationship to what we see as three such, at least traditionally, (neo)liberal apparatuses in The West: academia, psychology and feminism. Here, we listened to scholars committed to decolonization and thus wary of the imperialist roots and effects of these institutions. This scholarship casts a critical gaze on the sameness and suffering produced by accounts that ‘recognize’ un-knowing, oppressed, broken and powerless objects through the eyes of a knowing, liberated, unbroken and powerful subject; perpetrating a discursive colonization (Mohanty, 1984) and epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988), and reinstating the domination they avow to challenge.

*“Thus, ‘old and new’ feminisms do not fit together like two puzzle pieces – and that is a very good thing. For it is their more complicated relationship, their ‘pushing up against one other’,*

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*which has helped me to understand and commit to ‘not knowing’ and to invite uncertainty to enter my work, and indeed, my life.” (Emma Tseris)*

Returning again to Butler and Athanasiou (2013), it struck us that one of the conditions of possibility for such benevolent imperialism might be when recognition ‘designates the situation in which one is fundamentally dependent upon terms that one never chose in order to emerge as an intelligible being’ (p. 79). And it is *reflexivity* that these scholars feel is a potential means to interrupt this process; having the capacity to witness that which is ‘left over and, at the same time, exceeds the onto-epistemological typologies of the recognizable ... self’ (p. 64). Butler and Athanasiou thus call for a doing of reflexivity wherein ‘the self acts upon the terms of its own formation precisely in order to open up in some way to a sociality that exceeds (and possibly precedes) social regulation’ (p. 70).

*“With a fractured agenda, full of opportunities, it was a rich moment, demanding dynamism and fluidity and opening possibilities for us to impact our community and challenge Portuguese society to transform itself.” (Sara I. Magalhães & Carla Cerqueira)*

Perhaps this is why we decided early on to refuse research papers *on or about* ‘young feminists’ and instead require reflexive pieces *by* them, us. Disinterested in hero(ine) stories and in resolution, we explicitly drew on Wanda Pillow (2003) and Andrea Smith (2013) to look for discomfort, questioning, and contradictions in people’s accounts, alongside indignation, desire, despair, hope, humility, joy, antagonism, fear, passion, uncertainty.

*“I can hack away at the patriarchy, safely, in the cyber-kinetic landscape of blogger discourse, but when confronted with all the norms and values I work so hard to dismantle, in the flesh, I lose my power?” (Candace Christenson)*

Courageous pieces that, as Butler and Athanasiou (2013) say, *dislocated* the self and *risked* intelligibility; collectively pushing their, our, feminist praxis beyond itself vis-à-vis

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‘modes of becoming-with-one-another, supra-individual modes that are out of sync with regimes of social regulation and the identitarian apparatus’ (p. 71).

*“For the Brazilian feminist movement as a whole, young people have been demanding to be politically active. They are destabilizing the legitimacy of established roles within the movement’s own political ethos and proposing an internal debate about power relations and generational knowledge.” (Raissa Barbosa Araujo & Karla Galvão Adrião)*

In short, we wanted a writhing set of pieces that could create what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) might call a *pastiche*. That is, a collision of bodies, practices and politics – agreeing and disagreeing with one another, identifying and disidentifying with ‘young’ and with ‘feminist’. Troubling the terms of their own formation, these pieces collaborate *not* in the name of producing an ‘absolute occasion of miraculous alter-ontological identity’ that could then become tolerated comfortably and included within (neo)liberal apparatuses of recognition, but in the name of opening possibilities through their ‘failure to repeat properly’ while simultaneously echoing responsiveness and response-ability (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 66).

*“Having queer(y)ed together, I proceed to straighten my students back out. Furthermore, the system that allowed me the space to queer(y) is doing the same straightening to me.” (Jenny Slater)*

To help cultivate these echoes, we decided to take a somewhat disobedient approach to co-editing – drawing on our ambivalence and naiveté to explicitly experiment with how we might do publishing differently within the constraints of the neoliberal (patriarchal, imperialist) academy. More than two years in the making, our process was lengthy, involved and subjected to our own reflexive, iterative process as we surrendered to the tensions between our American- and Euro-centric locations and our transnational desires, individuals’ needs and collective guardianship, institutional demands and radical aspirations. While we wanted to resist pressures to produce, a lot and fast – to enact ‘ideals’ about the ‘good worker’, the ‘self-sacrificing woman’ – we were simultaneously concerned about how to do so might be to dismiss the effects of these

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3 demands on authors in the name of our ‘own’ somewhat privileged aspirations. We also became  
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5 aware, as time went on, that while we idealized this gesture to a subversive slowness, it was not  
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7 always a choice; sometimes it was imposed upon us by the very constraints that we were trying  
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9 to subvert. We felt that we were left, therefore, with ‘simply’ trying to be transparent about  
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11 where we were at and where we were coming from – sharing the theories and politics driving us,  
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13 emailing detailed updates, and inviting people’s feedback (including sending this and our other  
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15 piece in this collection out to all authors for our own peer review).  
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20 *“Conversely, marginalised groups – such as nonbinary-identified people like myself –*  
21 *can’t help but understand the underlying illogic of the dominant paradigm; for example, the*  
22 *binary model of gender. These examples demonstrate that science is a social activity, and*  
23 *subjectivity is therefore as significant in defining and selecting its content as the objectivity it*  
24 *fetishizes.” (Reubs Walsh)*  
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27 We also actively sought contributions from young feminists whose praxis might typically  
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29 not be presented in an English-only academic journal from the global North, with modest success.  
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31 To the detriment of our vision, we clearly struggled to make this forum attractive, trustworthy,  
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33 cooperative, and ‘worth it’ for people outside of this limited context; leading us to ask questions  
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35 of our selves about who (supposedly) *needs* ‘diversity’, and who (supposedly) *is* it. Far from  
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37 signaling an absence, the silences present here ring with the histories of feminist relations, the  
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39 richness of feminist praxis in the global South, and the limitations of feminist praxis in the global  
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41 North (Mohanty, 2003).  
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46 *“By locating power in presenting femme, femme-inism highlights the ironies of transphobia,*  
47 *Queerphobia, sexism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy in the Queer community. As womyn-*  
48 *loving, lesbian, and Queer identified people, femme-inism works to demolish the oppressive*  
49 *walls that affect the way we love each other” (Nkiru Nnawulezi, Shani Robin, & Abigail A.*  
50 *Sewell)*  
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53 In addition, we made an unequivocal commitment in our call for submissions to doing a  
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55 process of peer-review ‘with sensitivity to, and defiance against, the potential for Western  
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3 gatekeeping' – trying (and failing) to negotiate what we saw to be veils of neutrality such as  
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5 'blindness', fighting to have young feminists from 'inside' and 'outside' the academy comprise  
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7 the majority of our reviewers, searching for people whose boundaries stretched beyond the U.S.  
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9 and the U.K., and disseminating our own reviewer guide. In our guide we emphasized that this  
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11 process was about cultivating dialogue between our unique and connected feminisms, and that  
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13 we understood reflexivity as by necessity participatory; honoring the reviewers' 'outside' eyes to  
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15 be an integral element in the co-production of the collection.  
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20 *"It is quite a struggle to understand, make sense of, and fight the ambivalent, heinous, and often*  
21 *contradictory political and economic realities young feminists navigate and it is entirely*  
22 *impossible to do it alone."* (Nora Ruck)  
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25 We invited reviewers to simply consider: (1) Are there any unquestioned assumptions  
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27 that you think need to be unpacked by the author(s)? (2) Are there any unspoken ways in how the  
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29 author's/authors' positions have influenced their piece? (3) Does the piece 'add something' to  
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31 how feminism is generally represented in the current day? (4) Are there any readings/viewings  
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33 that you would recommend to extend the author's/authors' analysis? We did not require the  
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35 allocation of the standard review categories – 'accept', 'reject', 'major revision', 'minor  
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37 revision'; preferring a 'policy' to see the potential and complexity in what people were doing,  
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39 and to push for more.  
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44 *"The refusal to acknowledge multiple ways of knowing is a violent act against those whose*  
45 *knowledge is rendered irrelevant/unimportant. As we continue to navigate ourselves in these*  
46 *academic spaces within South Africa, we cannot disconnect ourselves from the past that*  
47 *contributed in the exclusion of many Black faces in academia. We find ourselves playing 'catch-*  
48 *up' as a result of a system that intentionally excluded us from participating in intellectual*  
49 *spaces."* (Puleng Segalo & Peace Kiguwa)  
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52 Our responsibility as co-editors, then, was to facilitate authors' engagement with  
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54 reviewers' subsequent critiques in a way that we hoped would strengthen openness, solidarity,  
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56 and expertise. Nonetheless, the review process felt like 'dirty work' – we had to pressure people  
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3 who were already pressured to do often unpaid, and relatively un-credited, labor. And we  
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5 yearned for people to be able to have direct dialogue with one another. We were also confronted  
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7 by how difficult it was to do a collection that explicitly embraced critical onto-epistemologies,  
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9 theory as activism and activism as theory, transdisciplinarity, non-academic affiliations, porous  
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11 definitions of ‘feminism’ and ‘psychology’, and less ‘scholarly’ selves and forms.  
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15 *“So in the spirit of searching for new feminisms and moving away from feminism as a fixed*  
16 *identity and toward understanding it as an active process, we would argue that the work of*  
17 *FemSex and the ‘young feminists’ behind it is the work of translation and bridge building.*  
18 *Translating theory into practice, bridging academia and community” (Melissa Janson & Julia*  
19 *Uyttewaal)*  
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23 It was with some relief, then, that we returned to Anzaldúa (1987) for guidance, and came  
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25 to see the peer-reviewed journal – this powerful neoliberal regulatory device – as a *borderland*:  
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28 Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from  
29 *them*. A border is a dividing line a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a  
30 vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural  
31 boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (p. 25)  
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34 According to Anzaldúa, to be in a borderland is to be at a ‘fulcrum ... where phenomena tend to  
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36 collide” and thus also “where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs’ to create an  
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38 ‘element greater than the sum of its severed parts’ (p. 101); one that gets its energy from a  
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40 ‘continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm’ (p.  
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42 102).  
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46 *“Transgender. Genderqueer. I call myself those things while refusing to relinquish the*  
47 *word ‘woman’ – ‘woman’ articulates my history, my life under patriarchy, the shape I*  
48 *wear when I move through the world. ‘Transgender’ and ‘genderqueer’ express*  
49 *something else – something dizzying, painful, internal – something that rises inside me*  
50 *like bile and makes my body ache to transform, bids me to reframe my flesh in clothes*  
51 *that approximate the shape it should be.” (Hel Gurney)*  
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54 And so, once submitted, we invited authors to amplify parts of their pieces that refracted  
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56 the collection as a whole, as well as pre-existing constructs-cum-tropes in feminism and  
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3 psychology, whether ‘old’ or ‘new’. Then, rather than predetermining the faces of their dialogue  
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5 with one another, we randomized the order of their placement; seeing any friction as generative  
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7 potential, hoping for instances where ‘the young feminist’ might escape expectation or  
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9 explanation...  
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### 15 **Acknowledgements**

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22 Tehseen Noorani for their advice throughout this process.  
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