

## **Observation & Commentary**

### **Article Title**

Reflexivity & (r)evolution

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### **Key Words**

Youth, feminism, transnational, reflexivity, representation, activism

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Wanting to introduce an element of disquietude to the task of addressing “young women’s (re)engagement with feminism”, in this Special Feature we present 17 pieces from 27 authors; identifying with 17 nations across six continents – Australia, South Africa, England, China, Taiwan, Portugal, Brazil, Aotearoa New Zealand, United States, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Israel-Palestine, Austria, Haiti, Jamaica, Nigeria; deploying scholarship, poetry, dialogue, personal narratives, family stories, direct speech, reflections; categorizing ourselves as diasporic, African, Taiwanese, white, Chinese, Latina, Pākehā, Mexican immigrant, Ashkenazi Jew, Haitian-Jamaican, African American-Nigerian, Afro-Caribbean Pentecostal, Catholic, bicultural, bilingual, queer, gender-queer, straight, trans, cis, femme-identified/femme-allied, womyn-loving, lesbian, Black Queer, single, middle class, poor, Aspergers, able-bodied, privileged,

clinician, sociologist, psychologist, neuroscientist, teacher, student, blogger, writer, poet, scholar-activist, ex-prisoner; our feminisms becoming within the clinic, academy, classroom, street, Internet, laboratory, non-profits, and consciousness-raising groups in large cities, rural towns, occupied territories, ‘post-apartheid’ societies, and ‘the feminist movement’; and through syllabi, psychotherapy, educational campaigns, art festivals, media interventions, (inter)national meetings, governmental policies, anti-violence campaigns, anti-globalization movements, transnational marches, squatting, protests, blogging, face-to-face conversations, mentorships, friendships, lovers, dress, flesh, and a Special Feature.

If we had to name the winds blowing through this unruly Anzaldúaian borderland, they would be three: being *bodies*, sitting with divergent identities; building *bridges*, connecting across categories of people and struggle; and breaking *binaries*, ‘kicking a hole out of the old boundaries’ to transcend dualities (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 71). The authors here narrate a surveilling, patrolling, breeching, dismantling *and* erecting of walls – metaphoric and concrete; refusing flat representations of who ‘we’ are and what ‘we’ do; refracting hegemonic histories, subjectivities, and fantasies about ‘youth’ and about ‘feminism’.

However, there is a fourth wind traversing this collection, one that emerged from the process itself: reflexivity as (being) difficult. Nearly every author was asked to more deeply trouble their own praxis, politics, and place – some assuming they had to then send these ideas to the margins (literally, vis-à-vis footnotes), many ending up engaging in considerable conversation with us, and most making us wonder if they were stopping themselves from going ‘too far’. As well as if we were doing something similar. To us, these interactions shone a light on the contextual shadows of this project. Within the Western milieu of neoliberalism and ‘post-feminism’ from which this Special Feature beckoned, feminism is regulated in ways that mark

out a terrain of appropriateness; of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ways of doing feminism (e.g. Gay, 2014). Here, any potentials to understand feminism as incomplete, messy, ongoing, and/or difficult, are pushed aside by the celebratory versions of liberal feminism that have come to signify cultural progressiveness (Budgeon, 2014).

In turn, those of us more explicitly writing from ‘inside’ this context may also have especially needed to push against the stubborn ‘feminist individualist subject of much of liberal feminist theory’ – one pivoted around analyses and actions around gender, seemingly freed from histories of imperialism (Mohanty, 2003, p. 80). Yet, inviting emotion, imagination, uncertainty, and vulnerability, reflexivity disrupts the objectivity, productivity, predictability, and individualism demanded by the contemporary institutional, cultural and political descendants of these histories. Thus, perhaps especially in the pages of a peer-reviewed journal, to be reflexive is to go into battle.

Such toil further reveals reflexivity as a form of *radical* recognition; not ‘just’ an epistemological commitment, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013) emphasize how recognition itself can work to ‘produce frames of ontology’ (p. 87). These “transformative categories” come from undoings and redos of the self and all its practices, histories, and possibilities that are at-times painful and always social. Indeed, Tehseen Noorani (2013) suggests that ‘expertise-by-experience’ emerges in collective spaces through a ‘cultivated reflexivity of becoming’ vis-à-vis *combat*. This is a Deleuzian idea that we create meaning not by ‘judgment’ – the application of predetermined and unchanging evaluation criteria, but by a process of enrichment whereby opposing forces are seized and joined with and new ensembles may become. Combat thus presents, ‘the idea of immanently producing ... a moving (set of) boundaries that are transcended and replaced at once’ (p. 59) – the evaluation criteria, their

constitutive ‘outside’, *and* our experiences are changed in the process of meaning making. Herein, Noorani argues, lies the political capacity of the personal; if generated through ‘dynamic interaction between antagonistic forces’ while ‘deferring or frustrating judgment’ (p. 60), our experiences have the potential to affect the common sense. In this case, that of *The Young Feminist*, if not the process and product of academic publishing.

Audre Lorde (1984) too argues for the transformative potential of the personal, although through creativity. She powerfully urges us to consider how the ‘quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives’ – the form by which we distil our experiences – ‘has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives’ (p. 36). Refusing to rely solely on that which ‘the white fathers told us were precious’ (p. 37), she calls for poetic techniques that trigger imagination alongside insight, and, most importantly, that honor feelings. Lorde thus considers poetry – modes of articulating feeling – as a means of struggling through and overthrowing the ‘intimacy of scrutiny’, believing that when we ‘learn to use the products [our feelings] of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us’ (p. 36). For, ‘within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive’ (p. 39); they are the ‘sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas’ (p. 37).

Also drawing on (and ‘betraying’) Deleuze, Kara Keeling (2007) lastly offers a doing of radical reflexivity vis-à-vis ‘the witch’s flight’, or that which we pursue in the name of thinking. Following the figure of the black femme in film, Keeling is driven by the following questions:

In what ways are subjugated knowledges produced, and how do they survive attempts to incorporate them into dominant regimes of knowledge and their modes of production? How can subaltern common senses that elude consent to domination and exploitation, that create an alternative to existing power relations, be crafted? (p. 7)

The black femme, then, represents a means to ‘locate the kernels of perceptions that might be capable of supporting alternate forms of sociality’ (p. 6). However, realizing that such a politics of visibility threatens to be reformist unless it ‘liberates itself’ from the ‘common senses that animate it’ (p. 10), Keeling especially hopes to, ‘strike a blow to the existing hegemonies of racism and sexism by (once again) undermining their claims to the inevitability of their rationalism’. ‘Risking non-sense’, she thus explicitly pours intellectual and affective labor into a project, ‘predicated on the possibility that various hegemonic and official common senses might be exploded, unleashing affectivity’s creative, self-valorizing potential’ (p. 6).

When woven together, Noorani, Lorde and Keeling articulate *how* reflexivity joins with a radical politics of recognition: engaging with subterranean/subjugated stories, feelings, and figures; being an unashamed combatant, poet, and flight-tracker; deflecting and escaping judgment, rationality, and hegemony; seeking uncomfortable meaning-making, creativity, and non-sense. Spawning ‘a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave’, this reflexive tornado perhaps then *does* the ‘new mythos’ that Anzaldúa (1987) sees as the ultimate capacity of borderlands (p. 102). A space where differences collide and something else becomes, this Special Feature, then, offers ‘(r)evolution’:

In our very flesh (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we’ve made some kind of evolutionary step forward ... the great alchemical work ... an inevitable unfolding. (p. 103)

Our project became ‘less of one based on self-improvement or even collective self-improvement, and more about the creation of new worlds and futurities for which we currently have no language’ (Smith, 2013, p. 274). Not so much wanting to *know more*, as committing to a collective process of reflexive trial & error; a radical experimentation to beckon *what we do not know* to emerge; a ‘feminism without borders’ (Mohanty, 2003). It is our hope that, in content

and in form, this collection displays a ‘critical topography’ (Katz, 2005) of local feminist projects connected and collaborating in our simultaneous refusal of the transnational circuits of regulation spinning through patriarchy, positivism, imperialism. Undoing and redoing our separate knots in the same pieces of string wrapped around the globe, we come away from this project with an even stronger sense of being *a part of something*.

Something past, present, and future. We proposed this Special Feature in 2012 – the same year Slavoj Žižek was to publish, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* and contemplate the revival of radical emancipatory politics, reading their related ‘outbursts’ – from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street – as ‘signs from the future’:

Instead of analyzing them as part of the continuum of past and present, we should bring in the perspective of the future, taking them as limited, distorted (sometimes even perverted) fragments of a utopian future that lies dormant in the present as its hidden potential. (p. 128)

It follows that ‘one should learn the art of recognizing, from an engaged subjective position, elements which are here, in our space, but whose time is the emancipated future’ (p. 128). Such ‘watching’, Žižek thus argues, is a technique in, of, and for liberation.

Nearly two years on, and this kind of recognition seems more urgent than ever. While feminist scholars – including contributors to *Feminism & Psychology* – have meaningfully examined the dilemmas and implications of ‘young women’s’ (*non*)engagement with feminisms’ from within our same politics of location (e.g., Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 2004), to depict only repression is to foreclose a fierce assortment of feminist vitalities – erupting and dormant. Witnessing this resistance becomes especially significant given the intensification of global violence *and* unrest – movements of power and protest that invariably demand critical attention to questions, practices, effects, and possibilities of gender.

And so through this collection we finally hope to have trialed a courageous, reflexive

psychology; one that has failed to repeat properly, that has pushed itself beyond itself, that echoes of response-ability and responsiveness (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). And thus that experiments with Derek Hook's (2012) call to revitalize a 'psychology of critique' that embraces the discipline's potential for social justice; a project that, for Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman (2008), needs to contain 'possibilities for critical and utopian imagination that can continually rework and rethink experience in liberatory ways' (p. 26). Including the experience of being 'young' and 'feminist'.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to especially thank the contributing authors and reviewers for everything, Rose Capdevila, Nicola Gavey, and Virginia Braun for their guidance; and Priya Chandrasekaran and Tehseen Noorani for their support throughout this process.

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### **Biographical Notes**

Originally from Aotearoa New Zealand, I (Rachel) am currently a PhD Candidate in Critical Psychology and an Adjunct Instructor in Interdisciplinary, Disability, and Gender Studies at the

City University of New York. My research engages with affect, queer, and de-/anti-/post-colonization scholarship to trace paranoia within the neoliberal security state using (auto)ethnography and public art. I am also a member of the Public Science Project – a collective of academics/activists/artists collaborating with communities toward social justice. I have co-facilitated a number of creative ‘scholar-activist’ projects to disrupt dominating approaches to madness, sex, education, and policing. This shared work has received support from Fulbright, Bright Futures, AAUW, and ISTP, and been published in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *The Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, *Aporia*, and *N+I*, among others. Overall I am committed to participatory, experimental, non-imperialist onto-epistemologies; nourishing spaces for dissent, imagination, and connection.

I (Lucy) am a senior lecturer based in Psychology at Leeds Beckett University. I recently completed my doctoral research on institutional practices of police work in late capitalist conditions. My interests lie in feminist analyses of ‘work’, labour relations, protest, and the politics of public space. I joined the committee of the British Psychological Society’s Psychology of Women Section (POWS) in 2011 as an assistant editor on the section review, and also took the role of conference organizer until 2014. In my home town of Leeds, I have participated in public actions against vicious conservative policies. I am also actively involved in my local union branch, and have organized on campus around resisting marketised models of education and reimagining the neoliberal University. My work is informed by critical and feminist psychology, driven by anti-capitalist and decolonizing agendas, and done with a view to agitating for institutional change.