

INVITED REVIEW ESSAY

Still Too Hot To Handle? Firebrand Radical Feminism

Firebrand Feminism: The Radical Lives of Ti-Grace Atkinson, Kathie Sarachild, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Dana Densmore. By Breanne Fahs. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018.

Reconsidering Radical Feminism: Affect and the Politics of Heterosexuality. By Jessica Joy Cameron. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2018.

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This is a particularly important time to be reconsidering and revisiting radical feminism. The contemporary visibility of trans rights movements, and the unsurprising, accompanying backlash from a variety of camps makes this a politically charged and tense moment for reflection on the herstory, present, and future of this school of feminism.

These two books both acknowledge this; indeed, both books start with an almost apologetic tone, and the writers situate themselves and their own feminism as being on a journey that takes them in and out of agreement with some of the classic texts and figures from the American second wave of feminism from the late 1960s into the 1980s.

In this sense both books are looking back, but both translate the feminist theory and activism of that time for learning in the present day; Fahs does this through the voices of the activists themselves who were key players in producing that theory, and Cameron through her own experiences of attachment to both radical feminism and poststructuralist, sex-positive feminism, so-called.

From my own perspective, I devoured these books for insight that I could bring to my current research into the much-hyped gender wars pitting radical feminism against trans rights and particularly against trans women. I am a radical feminist myself, as this school of feminism chimes most closely with my own activist concerns and analysis of the workings of patriarchy, though I certainly do not align or agree with every position associated with it. I am also a queer butch, or transmasculine, identifying with much in the trans-with-an-asterisk label, as explored by Jack Halberstam (Halberstam 2018). Having

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been an activist in both radical feminist and LGBTQI+ activism, I feel quite torn in the current gender wars and am always interested to read new takes on the relevance and utility of radical feminism today.

First, I wanted to see how these writers declare their intentions and how they were defining radical feminism. This is no easy mission; most of the historical takes on this movement have not been written by radical feminists themselves, the available archives of their original works are rarely consulted, and myths abound about this branch of feminism, which is often held up as a poster girl for general antifeminism, sexism, ageist misogyny, and lesbophobia. It is also a tricky task because, as Cameron acknowledges, there is no one unified definition of feminism broadly, let alone the schools within it, and what definitions are produced are often dismissed. “Feminist frameworks and the political positions attributed to them are often contested . . . it is difficult both to draw clear lines between different feminist frameworks and to attribute unified political positions to any particular feminism” (13).

Both books, however, set out from the conventional and accepted premise that radical feminism is about being radical, not being extreme or fundamentalist, but going to the roots of the identified problems in society. Fahs explains that radical feminism “seeks to look at the roots of the structural and systematic qualities of patriarchy and sexism, paying particular attention to how seemingly private experiences (e.g., sexuality, the body, the family, emotions or spirituality) connect to broader structures that disempower women and limit their freedom and autonomy” (5). Cameron, from her own focus particularly on sexuality, also notes that radical feminism has always scrutinized that which was supposedly private. “Radical feminists are consistently concerned with the coercive conditions under which heterosexuality is practiced and reproduced. The most frequent objects of examination are intercourse, sexual assault, pornography and sex work, as they are seen to be explicit expressions of the gendered political and economic inequalities produced through and productive of heterosexual practice” (14).

Cameron’s is not exactly a supportive reconsideration of radical feminist theory on these matters, but it does strive for accuracy, and in that regard it is to be welcomed. It is rare to read critiques of radical feminist theory on sexuality and sexual violence that actually go back to what was said and written in second-wave classics. It is this consultation of archives living and literary that both books have in common. Cameron notes, for example, the regular misreadings of the late radical feminist shero Andrea Dworkin, not least in her book *Intercourse* (1987). Often accused of man-hating, Dworkin is also cited as putting forward the argument that heterosexual penetrative sex is always rape. This is a myth, one of many about radical feminism, of course. “Dworkin is, in fact, quite explicit that she is investigating the political meaning of intercourse. We must first remember that, aside from a couple of historical and theoretical chapters, the entire book is a literature review” (23). Contextualizing the feminist sex-wars, Cameron explains that radical feminist theory on heterosexual sex can be categorized as a paranoid perspective, one that bears an often-traumatizing witness to the trauma of sexual violence, but does not move on from there. Cameron describes radical feminism’s wounded attachment that means it is always stuck in a loop: “continually referencing histories of exclusion as a means of politicizing the category of woman” (97). Most critics would end their argument there, but Cameron goes on to explain that sex-positive theory often follows what she calls a manic-reparative position. This is a position that focuses on women’s agency and reframes women’s power, in the process it re-presents or renarrativizes experiences of gender relations, but wrongly concludes that this is enough to change the unequal pattern of gender relations outside of these

individual standpoints. Cameron summarizes that radical feminist theory keeps us in the past, but sex-positive theory pretends we are already in the future.

Fahs has an enviable and decade-long personal connection with the movers of radical feminist theory and activism, including that which Cameron's book reflects on. Fahs provides the personal biographies at the start of the book, and they show what many prefer not to know about radical feminists, which is their common documented history in committed and personally taxing activism for antimilitarism, prison reform, Black Power, socialism, and environmentalism. Fahs's book is led by their voices, taken from formal interviews but also from parties, dinners, and debates. Putting aside my jealousy of her social network, Fahs has usefully been able to ask current questions of these feminist sheroes and allow them to reflect, clarify, and emphasize what they meant when they wrote what in the 1960s, or whether they still believe what they said in that speech to a conservative women's group, or just why they didn't sign a joint letter. All of these women are the feminist shoulders on which we stand, whether or not we agree with their every stance. It is clear that some have maintained fairly clear positions, and hold the same view on many questions, whereas some have shifted slightly. This book is full of wisdom we can apply to activism today and into the future.

There are answers to practical questions in this book, on that most famous of questions—what is to be done? On women's studies, on academia more broadly, on archiving women's liberation sources. The sheroes Fahs interviewed paid attention to this early on, producing their manifestos and conference papers in published works, recognizing right away that these would be important, saving the receipts for their theoretical direction of travel to validate their work and to show that it mattered. The matter of archiving and who has control of and access to women's liberation movement sources is a pressing and current concern. Here in the UK I am a trustee of The Feminist Archive, which has physical bases in Bristol in southwest England, and Leeds in the north of England. A regular consideration is how and whether to make certain sources available; some newsletters and magazines have handwritten or stamped instructions on the front stating "For Women Only." Accurate referencing for catalogues is stymied by the radical feminist resistance to "star"-making, resulting in classic and popular manifestos or conference papers being credited to anonymous, "five radical feminists" or "some Revolutionary radical feminists." Although admirable, such structureless anti-institutionalization does not fit well into the institutions and online cataloguing systems we are now forced to turn to in order to house and protect these important herstorical works, in all their acid-free boxes and temperature-controlled stacks.

On women's studies and academia, Fahs discussed with Kathie Sarachild the well-known tension between those seen as activists or academics, as if these are always opposed, and the still familiar critiques that find feminists within academia to be lacking. "The pressure to speak in more scholarly ways also lessened the potential radical impact of women's studies. Kathie bridled at the idea of obscure theoretical language being used within women's studies" (165). Sarachild expressed that there should be more practical links made between feminism in academia and activist and women's sector providers outside it, suggesting, for example, that women's refuges or rape-crisis collectives could work with academic departments on research that would aid the women's sector with funding by providing necessary data-collection. Sarachild: "The link between activism and women's studies should be stronger, where outside groups could present or could work with people inside" (171). Fortunately, this already happens in several instances; here in the UK we are fortunate to have departments such

as the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University and the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol in the southwest.

On the movement for trans rights, it was interesting to read how some of the radical feminists Fahs interviewed have shifted in their thinking. It is easy to think that this is a modern topic within feminism; certainly the media perpetuates this perspective, but disagreement has been going on since the second wave over whether and when feminism should or should not be inclusive of trans women. Then, as now, there were radical feminists who worked with trans women, and there were those who argued against doing so. In fact, the nuance within radical feminism is too often erased; this is not something that Fahs has done, and she presents the sometimes competing and conflicting positions of the sheroes she spoke with. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz for example, founder of Cell-16 in Boston, stated that she has become more sympathetic to struggles for trans rights over the decades:

I think that kind of fierceness in the [trans rights] movement is sort of like what we were in the '60s. You make so much noise that people eventually have to listen—the gay movement for gay marriage, the prisoner rights movement in the prison industrial complex. There's a different kind of spirit—a take no prisoners kind of calling out of stuff—and I've come to see that radical feminists can't just rest on their laurels. They have to evolve with the times and understand that wasn't the end of everything back then. (160)

Ti-Grace Atkinson, founder of *The Feminists* in New York in 1968, was not so sympathetic and was concerned that a focus on trans rights would further a decline in dedicated women-only spaces. Ti-Grace: “The whole thing of trying to break down or attack these spaces is very hostile. They're so rare to begin with! I resent it in terms of trans groups” (154). However, Atkinson supported moves to unisex or gender-neutral toilets; and all the radical feminists were hopeful about destabilizing gender norms. Dunbar-Ortiz explained that a postgender future was always where radical feminism was heading, but cautioned that this should not jettison attention to the needs of female-bodied people within patriarchy. Dunbar-Ortiz: “I do think that that's where we wanted people to get to—where gender really didn't matter anymore—but I don't think that ever meant that attention wouldn't be paid to the needs of lactating women, pregnant women, raped women, and the possibility of impregnation with rape and so on” (158).

On moving forward, the radical feminists Fahs consulted urge us not to make the same mistakes they did, and in particular to find ways to acknowledge and celebrate differences between women and use those as strengths from which to base new strategies. They are heartened by young women's activism in antiracism movements, environmentalism, and prison-abolition and urge activists not to forget the importance of antimilitarism and peace work. Highlighting the significant differences between antidiscrimination and women's liberation, Dunbar-Ortiz rightly points out, “It's disappointing to think that we imagine the advances of feminism as being women in combat and women in the military rather than women being in the leadership of antiwar movements” (185).

Both Fahs and Cameron end their books by reminding us that this theory and the women who voice it are not history; they are part of our future. Of course, tensions exist, states Fahs, but history is alive within us. “Their rage is our rage. Their struggles

are, in many ways, our struggles” (194). Cameron highlights how her journeys through competing schools of feminism have built her theoretical position, a position from which ambivalence is accepted as necessary, constant, and rich; indeed, it’s a sign that feminism is always growing. Both these books are exciting responses to an urgent call to correct the flourishing myths and stereotypes about radical feminism and radical feminists. There are answers in this school of feminism, to the life-and-death questions we are wrestling with today. Even if we disagree with the answers we find there, at least we will know what they actually said, and perhaps, if we are open to it, we need not throw the revolution out with the bath water. We march in the footsteps of radical feminists, so often activists out on their own, working to clear the way; and whether we like it or not, we owe them a great debt.

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