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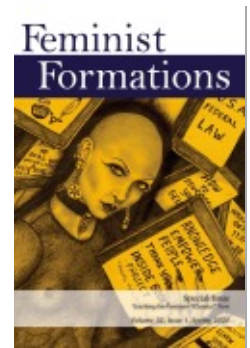
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Eva Cherniavsky

Feminist Formations, Volume 32, Issue 1, Spring 2020, pp. 88-95 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0007>



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On (the Impossibility of) Teaching Gayle Rubin

Eva Cherniavsky

This essay explores the pedagogical challenges of designing a broad orientation to traditions of feminist theorizing, given both an entrenched progress narrative (in which the third wave overcomes the deficiencies of the second) and a tendency to conflate text-selection with value. In particular, the essay considers the responses of several graduate student cohorts to two well-known essays by Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women” and “Thinking Sex,” and the presentist political sensibility that seems to animate these responses. How might we teach “feminist theory” in a way that historicizes the production of theory and appreciates (rather than effaces) the difference between what a feminist intervention might accomplish in its own moment and in our present? Against the prevailing teleology, in which feminism overcomes its pasts, the essay argues for a genealogical approach to the urgencies, aspirations, profound limitations, and vexing complicities of earlier feminist projects.

Keywords: canon / historicism / presentism / Rubin, Gayle / second-wave feminism / theory

About fifteen years ago, when I was still teaching at Indiana University, an institution widely associated (by virtue of its press and a number of prominent scholars) with both feminist theory and feminist literary criticism, a cohort of graduate students (mostly from my own department of English) came to my office to appeal for a course in feminist theory. While texts on feminist theory were routinely incorporated within other, theory-focused classes (classes offered, for example, under cultural studies or postcolonial studies rubrics), and while our curriculum in any given year might include a course on a specific topic in feminist theory (such as feminism and nationalism, or feminist pedagogies), no one, they pointed out, was offering a course that would constitute some kind of

broad orientation to feminist theory. Thus students who understood feminism as a necessary critical axis of their proposed research found themselves, at the moment of developing exam lists, with little or no grounding in the area.

The students' appeal surprised me. Thinking back to my own graduate training (in the second half of the 1980s), there had been a wealth of courses on (something called) "feminist theory" from which to choose. Why was it that a decade later this rubric no longer beckoned as a way to present and engage feminist inquiry? Indeed, why had it not occurred to me to offer an (up to date) version of the courses I'd taken? In part, of course, the answer was obvious: at precisely the moment I first encountered it, the canon of feminist theory was exposed to a long-overdue reckoning with its Eurocentrism, and its grounding in white (and generally bourgeois, cis-gendered) women's experience of domesticity, reproduction, sexuality, labor, and culture. The graduate "feminist theory" classrooms I remembered had been sites of cutting, generative, and often embittered debate on what counted as either/both "theoretical" and "feminist." Ten or so years later, the rubric of "feminist theory" seemed hopelessly retrograde—a claim to settle the contours of a theoretical enterprise become irreducibly and productively indeterminate. But the distaste for "feminist theory" as a rubric did not explain why there were seemingly no courses that provided a broad orientation to traditions of feminist theorizing in modernity. Or, more narrowly, the absence of the kind of course I eventually worked to develop, on feminist theorizing of gender, psychic life, and political economy since the 1960s.

Indeed, in the intervening years, I've experimented with several different versions of such a class, and I'll say something in closing about the most recent of these, which is also, to my mind, the only one that has allowed me to stage a productive metacritical conversation on theory, history, and value—that is, on the question of canon itself. But I want to begin with what my first iteration of this class so palpably revealed, which was that these students did not actually want the thing for which they were asking. Indeed, no matter how marginal their readings in feminism, there were two things all my students professed to know: (1) that second-wave feminism was essentialist, universalizing, and therefore fundamentally implicated in perpetuating the discourses and structures of white supremacy; and (2) that this description is exhaustive, such that any attempt to know more or to say more about it was simply to repeat its errors. (Interestingly, too, my students had virtually no interest in the first wave which must, they supposed, have preceded the second; in this progressivist scheme, the function of the first wave was, simply, to deliver us to the second.)

Put another way, the course that my students actually wanted would have *begun* with some of the salient critiques of second-wave feminism, while holding the referent of that critique under quarantine, and then settled into a reading of what was essentially (at that point) contemporary (1990s) feminist work—precisely the materials they were already reading, piecemeal, in those other classes, and for which they complained they had no wider analytic context.

The evolution of this class has been the story of my attempt to disturb and ultimately to unravel this fundamentally moralizing orientation to a feminist theoretical canon, by which I mean, my students' conviction that a theory of gender is a repository of value, rather than a mode of engagement with the world at the particular cultural site and the particular historical juncture at which the theory is located.¹ Thus in asking for this course, my students wished to peruse the history of feminist theorizing and locate what they could find of value for the urgent task of feminist political subject constitution *in the present*. This history was to be mined as a resource for critical self-fashioning—and so, not surprisingly, the desired encounter with “feminist theory” reduced, almost immediately, to an encounter with the theoretical productions of their own historical moment. With each successive iteration of the class, I've struggled to make vivid what is lost to this profoundly inert conception of a feminist theoretical canon. Above all, my syllabi have been an implicit (and indeed, more recently, an explicit) argument that this mode of simple *repudiation* is *anything but* an adequate confrontation with our (differing forms of) implication in brutal histories and continuing inequities. It has been an argument that the will to critical righteousness—to *cleanse* ourselves of error, of complicity—is never adequately theoretical or historical, let alone adequately political.

Our discussions of Gayle Rubin's “The Traffic in Women” (1975), a piece that I have always, stubbornly included in my syllabus and that seems unfailingly to baffle my students, provides a useful snapshot of the tension between my students' investments in the course and my own (tensions that I have, obviously, labored to make conceptually generative). To my mind, Rubin's essay stands as a brilliant intervention in its moment. It is a reflection on feminism's relation to theoretical production in modernity (Marx, Engels, Freud, Lacan, Levi-Strauss), a reflection that both avows the bedrock misogyny of this corpus and demonstrates its susceptibility to feminist appropriation. It offers a critical engagement with that keyword of second-wave feminism, “patriarchy,” rejected by Rubin in favor of the “sex/gender system,” and what the latter calls into view of the relations between premodern and modern (capitalist) structures of women's oppression. It represents an early and still powerful attempt to think the relays between psychic life and political economy; along the way, it maps why a feminist “revolution” is at once party to the radical transformation of economic and political institutions, and also, necessarily, enacted on the terrain of domesticity (or kinship).

Yet foregrounding these dimensions of the essay to my students is always an uphill battle. For one thing, they note, the essay itself traffics in that universalized category, “women.” To be sure, it *doesn't* do so in the mode of taking white women as paradigmatic—if anything, the essay works disproportionately from the example of indigenous peoples in New Guinea, the Pacific, Africa, and the Americas. Indeed, in its rigorous constructivism, it postulates no common meaning (or content) to the category “women” other than the bare fact of gendered

oppression. All of which my students readily enough concede. But the essay's analysis is not intersectional; it does not speak to the imbrication of gender with race, ethnicity, and other vectors of oppression. That Rubin's essay manages to think "women" as a wholly plural category (that she posits no common experience or commonality in the mode of oppression); that she does so in the midst of the second wave (at a historical juncture where most of what counted as feminist theorizing hewed to one or another kind of essentialism); that she gets there, so to speak, by other analytical means, including a radical cultural comparativism, strikes me as a considerable part of the essay's interest. But her failure to somehow anticipate the intersectional analytic that constitutes, for my students, the prescribed method for thinking difference among women, and especially, I would suggest, the prescribed method for contemporary feminists to resolve our implication in (other) women's oppression, not only disquiets my students, but also, and more to the point, makes them leery, if not downright unwilling, to think (even for the interval of an afternoon) with and through the lens of Rubin's analysis.²

Similarly, Rubin's attachment to psychoanalysis taints her by association: psychoanalysis stands accused, not simply of pernicious tendencies toward both ethnocentrism and essentialism, but ethnocentrism and essentialism tout court. In response, I point out how Rubin's essay models, among other things, a heuristic for reading psychoanalysis against the grain: Rubin's Oedipus is a minimalist apparatus, "a machine which fashions the appropriate forms of sexual individuals" in any given culture (1975, 189). This machine is operative (again, *minimally*) where maleness (howsoever conceived) is valued over femaleness (189). Rubin's Oedipus obtains insofar as female children are barred from access to modes of power conferred on their male counterparts, and it names the process by which female children are taken up within domestic arrangements designed to enculturate them—to reconcile them to this power differential, at whatever costs. It does *not* universalize the psychic life of gender (or sexuality) on the basis of the specific arrangements of the bourgeois nuclear family, much less on the basis of its sexual morality; quite the contrary, Rubin reads Freud back into Levi-Strauss in order to suggest that the bourgeois nuclear family is fundamentally atavistic, yet one more iteration of the elementary (pre-modern) structures of kinship. This leads to one of Rubin's more provocative claims: that Oedipus is "residual," has outlived its social and economic functionality, and now only reproduces itself (1975, 199). I invite my students to ponder this claim: is the division of the sexes "residual" in relation to the current organization of political and economic life? What precisely would this mean? And what does our answer suggest for the prospects of the "revolution in kinship" for which Rubin calls (1975, 199)? My students follow me, duty-bound, down this path. It is not a conversation that compels them.

Indeed, their palpable indifference to Rubin's insurgent program—for this "revolution in kinship," or the "reorganization of the sex/gender system through

political action”—strikes me as particularly interesting in our present moment, where my students (like so many others) generally feel a sense of urgency about (re)constituting a more ambitious, a more utopian Left politics (1975, 204). I ask them whether Rubin’s agenda—to dismantle the structure of domestic life as it functions to reproduce (binary) gender and compulsory heterosexuality—feels, simply, obvious. They tell me they are more interested in how people are actually going about this task: they want to learn from and be allies to the communities most damaged by the operations of the sex/gender system. I ask, is it a zero-sum game? Standpoint epistemologies and the kinds of political mobilizations they enable (which, of course, we also read and debate in the class) are undeniably important. But does standpoint exhaust our analytic efforts or mark the horizon of our political imaginaries? I press the point: what would a revolution in kinship mean? That men do housework and childcare? That we can define as family whatever intimate, domestic groupings we may choose? Is that sufficient? To what extent do our choices seem to reproduce precisely these “residual,” oedipal arrangements? Should we worry about that? Is a revolution in kinship compatible with the institution of marriage, or indeed with the couple form? My students shrug. Somewhere along the line, the discussion devolves into why these questions might have compelled earlier feminist “generations.”

So I am left to imagine—to hope—that there is something gained for them, conceptually, in the exposure to Rubin and in my framing of the piece that might stick, in whatever ways, and hone or complicate their thinking at some future moment. To be fair, and when we’re honest, this is all that teaching ever means—nor is this a mean achievement. Yet *for me*, the truly unsettling moment arrives later in the term when we get to Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” (1984); I know what’s coming, yet I still feel blindsided. Here Rubin’s analytic, focused as it is on sexual stratification, and on the damage done to those whose sexual proclivities are most thoroughly and viciously abjured, would seem more compatible with the standpoint epistemologies my students prefer, and with the critique of normativity, which is for so many of them synonymous with critique itself. But they find this essay off-putting, as well—indeed, never more so than in recent years. Yes, absolutely, they embrace Rubin’s reconsideration of the relation between gender and sex, and her (from our vantage, unsurprising) contention that the study of sexuality must be understood as semiautonomous from the study of gender. They concede readily enough that Rubin’s discussion of sodomy laws, and their criminalization of consensual sex on the basis of what is, essentially, canon law was no doubt urgent in its moment. Yet even though relatively few of my students are willing to argue a straight-up feminist anti-pornography line, virtually all of them conceive of sexuality as a terrain of power *in need of* regulation—and they are aghast at what they perceive to be Rubin’s defense of predatory forms of sexuality, especially pedophilia. (As an aside, I recently added Laura Kipnis’s film, *Ecstasy Unlimited* (1985), to the syllabus, which I consider

interesting but rather dated and reductive in its ostensible conflation of sexual with commodity fetishism. My students loved it.)

Here again, I try to mediate the text. Rubin is not defending coercion, sexual or other, I point out. But she is drawing our attention to the abjection of certain categories of person, who are deemed unable to consent (including youth)—and the ways in which those determinations are historically malleable, fundamentally arbitrary, and (arguably) have far more to do with policing morality than with protecting the vulnerable. Why can an eighteen-year-old consent and a fifteen-year-old not—especially if we recognize that consent *never completely* resolves questions of power; that all of us operate, always, under various psychic and social constraints?

Alright, my students agree, age of consent is arbitrary—and yes, they can see how the line (the wall, in Rubin’s graphic) that abjects (and criminalizes) certain forms of (for example) intergenerational sex is the same line that has been used to abject and criminalize homosexuality, transsexuality, and other modes of sexual being my students wish to affirm. Yet the line must be drawn *somewhere*, they want to argue, in a world so replete with predatory sexual behavior. Rubin’s call for radical sexual tolerance collides with what seems to me, increasingly, our contemporary feminist commonsense: that sex (especially heterosexual sex) is insufficiently consensual, laden with risk, and ought to be subjected to greater rather than lesser public norming.³

I should be precise. When I refer to “my students,” I am describing no less than five different cohorts, who took some version of this class with me between 2003 and 2018. Very nearly all of these students were thoughtful, engaged; several went on to work with me and have written, or are currently writing, excellent dissertations. This is, emphatically, *not* a story about my students’ limitations. Rather, I have come to see it as a story about the way that the crises of our historical present have produced certain kinds of critical habits and sensibilities, manifest in our students, in feminist public culture, and in ourselves; habits and sensibilities that make it challenging to engage whatever is not proper to the moment. Up to a point, of course, this is always and invariably the case. Every history is a history of the present, as Benjamin reminds us; but the function of history, as he also contends, is to estrange us from the given quality of our present, from our immersion in its obviousness. In this short essay, I have been trying to capture the ways that my students are not only struck by the differences of Rubin’s context (as well they should be), but are highly resistant to that estrangement—as though the present moment of feminist consciousness and feminist mobilization in which we have arrived is so fragile, so precarious, that feminists must dedicate ourselves wholly to its *reproduction*. Thus where the longer histories of feminist theorizing do not accord with the priorities and practices and idioms of feminist political self-fashioning in the present, they are perceived as valueless, if not, frankly, deleterious.

But this anxious presentism is *not* a general problem—not at all a “classic challenge,” as one reader of this essay has suggested, inevitably repeated as each successive cohort encounters the theoretical output of a prior moment. There is nothing inevitable about this form of intellectual guardedness, and in fact, I would venture that the exploration of theoretical traditions or projects is more commonly motivated by the *pursuit* of estrangement, by the desire, in other words, to *relax* the hold of an overbearing present on our thought. Nor, relatedly, is there anything inevitable in the disposition to instrumentalize theory—to weigh it on the scale of its immediate political applications. I am suggesting instead that both are dispositions specific to our *particular* moment, which is why my narrative is *not* a generic family romance (wherein my students devalue what I have to confer, even as they resent the loss of their inheritance), but rather an observation about critical habits in our fraught historical situation. Most saliently, it seems to me, we live in an epoch where political power operates, not by shoring up a consensual reality (from which we therefore struggle to extricate ourselves) but, quite the contrary, by undermining it, a process that Wendy Brown has recently described as an assault on the very existence of “the political” (as distinct from politics), and that I have termed the de-realization of political life (2019, chap 2; cf. Cherniavsky, 2017, chap 5). In the face of the collapse of political reason and political norms, it is not entirely surprising that the rescue of political values and the project of moral reconstitution trump a more open and historicized orientation to practices of feminist theorizing.

In my more recent iterations of the class, I have nevertheless sought to foreground just such an orientation to the course materials: to suggest strategies for confronting the urgencies, aspirations, limitations, and yes, the profound complicities of feminist theorizing with coeval structures of power and privilege, strategies that do not, however, simply amount to measuring the past by the yardstick of the present; to show how every phase or situation of feminist theorizing, including second-wave feminism, is heterogeneous and polyvalent; to insist that redacting those theoretical projects we may well deem problematic does not make us better political subjects—it makes us self-congratulatory and less able to entertain the limitations of our own practice or to reckon with *our own*, present implications in the institutions and imaginaries of neoliberal governance. To these ends, I have organized the class around an interrogation of the *relays* of theory and politics: to be sure, theory is irreducibly political and politics always presupposes a theory—which is to say, that activism, too, is unquestionably a site of theoretical production. And yet the work of theorizing, of knowing our conditions, is *not simply identical* with the task of crafting political identities and mobilizations that are responsive to our myriad present emergencies. There is, I propose to my students, a necessary incommensurability between the work of theorizing and of organizing, profoundly interconnected as they are. When we refuse that incommensurability, or friction—when we require of theory that it be immediately redeemable as a political program or

value, that it make us better actors, indeed, that it redeem *us*—we pretty much ensure that we remain exactly as we are.

Eva Cherniavsky is the Andrew R. Hilen professor of American literature and culture at the University of Washington. She teaches and publishes in the areas of U.S. literature, visual media, and critical theory. Her most recent book, Neocitizenship: Political Culture after Democracy (New York University Press, 2017), explores the shifting practices and imaginaries of citizenship in the present moment through the optic of popular culture.

Notes

1. My discussion of canon and value draws on John Guillory's discussion of literary canon formation, particularly his insightful analysis of "the reversion to moralism" that obtains when text-selection is conflated with value-selection. See Guillory 1995, 19–28.
2. This, of course, despite the fact that intersectionality itself remains a theoretically unfinished model, as Jennifer Nash has powerfully argued. For an important discussion of how intersectionality is extracted from the juridical framework of Crenshaw's analysis and enlisted in a project, or fantasy, of a feminist analysis that can itself deliver justice, see Wiegman 2012, chap. 5.
3. I discuss the current, dystopian orientation to heterosexuality more fully in a key word essay on "#MeToo" (Cherniavsky 2019).

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