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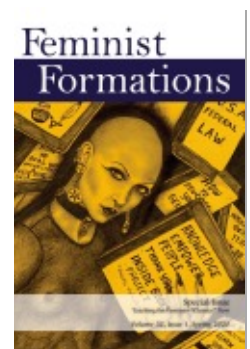
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Feminist Formations, Volume 32, Issue 1, Spring 2020, pp. 227-237 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0019>



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Notes in the Margins: A Conversation about Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart”

Serena Visser, Jaisie Walker, and Suzanne Lenon

This conversation originated in a biweekly graduate-level course on queering feminism. Following a generative classroom discussion on an assigned reading, “Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart” by Minnie Bruce Pratt, Suzanne Lenon (course instructor) proposed formalizing the conversation for this special issue of Feminist Formations. A loose set of questions was circulated to the two students (Serena Visser and Jaisie Walker) ahead of time. The conversation took place in a living room over the course of a morning, then was transcribed and edited for clarity.

Keywords: Affect / community / identity / Pratt, Minnie Bruce / queer / time

Suzanne Lenon: Can I ask each of you to introduce yourselves?

Serena Visser: I am a first-year doctoral student. My background is in clinical social work, and my project is looking at the institutional norms and practices within the mental health system and how they affect trans and gender-diverse folks accessing service.

Jaisie: I am a first year master’s student with a background in sociology, nonprofit governance, and frontline antiviolence programming. I’m using PhotoVoice to look at the complexities of violence for rural LGBTQA2S+ non/monogamous community.

Lenon: As you know, we read “Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart” by Minnie Bruce Pratt (1984) together for our graduate course. What was your experience in reading this particular piece?

Walker: For me it brought up a lot of the felt differences between self and society. There is one quote in particular, where Pratt discusses deconstructing, learning, and figuring out that you are implicated in things, where she says, “I felt in a struggle with myself, *against* myself. This breaking through did not feel like liberation but like destruction” (1984, 53). This really characterizes my experience with emotional care and accountability in both grassroots work and academia. Doing my undergraduate degree in sociology, I learned the phrase “there is no individual,” and this reading made me wonder how many times I’d used that phrase to justify hurting myself, my worth, or my body *through* grassroots work and academia. I think everyone internalizes oppressed/oppressor binaries, either as a means of survival, to work through ideas, or to desperately try to find love or peace. I know, particularly as a younger student, that I struggled with processing white complicity while simultaneously feeling so hurt by patriarchal violence. In a struggle with myself, I learned to cope politically, outside of my body, despite my need for self-compassion. So, ultimately, the reading brought up a lot of feelings for me about how building movements or doing “good work” can actually be a way that we can hurt ourselves, by taking ourselves out of our work.

Visser: So many of the readings this semester engaged my mind and expanded it and challenged it in new ways. This one really affected my heart in a way that others didn’t. Perhaps it was the timing of it, but also because Minnie Bruce Pratt is so focused on her process and so open about her affect in this piece. That really called me to be able to attend to it. For me, it felt like a powerful experience of someone naming and giving voice to some of the thoughts that I’m having, and the struggles and the intentions and the realities I’m finding myself in. Pratt and I are separated by decades, localities, and various other things, but she articulates in this article and reflects about what has been percolating in my head and my heart, really. That was really a powerful thing for me. It took me a long time to read, because I was processing so much emotion as I went through it about my past complicities, current complicities frankly, participations, oppressions that I’ve experienced, caused for others and, I think, also recognition of my longing for something different. All of these things. When I was looking back over my text, the margins are filled with all kinds of notes and reactions and questions that came up. I remember feeling at the time, and even rereading them now, a little overwhelmed with conviction but also relief. It was a fear of what she might say next because it felt like she was stripping some things bare, but also validation: I’m not the only one to think these things, to experience these things, to wonder about these things. It helped me to articulate some of

my fears and anxieties, and also hopes and intentions both for me personally and also for my project.

Lenon: I think the notes in margins are an archive. It's an important part of one's intellectual journey, to remember these notes as you move forward with your work because they capture a moment in time of your own thinking, our own thinking.

Walker: It's like a research journal! The first time I read this piece, when I look through my margins, it's me trying to capture clever phrases that I can put into a course paper.

<laughter>

How to attempt to summarize this *vastness*. Then, when I was reading it through again last night and this morning, it feels so much more connected to my research. I think it's interesting how its purpose has changed for me, going back and reading it after learning about palimpsests. (The palimpsest—a repeatedly scraped and reused document that carries traces of past text—has been utilized as both metaphor and methodology for conceptualizing the “new” structured through the “old.”) In their piece (*Decolonizing*) *the Ear of the Other: Subjectivity, Ethics and Politics in Question*, Silvia Posocco (2016) explains that different ears will construct and produce different meaning afterward and at different times, resulting in a circuit of unstable authorship where “one’s signature is not one’s to offer” (256). I think the experience of reading Pratt multiple times made this concept even more meaningful for me, in what it offers for thinking about my own body in relation to time, history, and subjectivity.

Lenon: As you know, the theme of this special issue of *Feminist Formations* is “Teaching the Feminist ‘Classics’ Now.” “Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart” was paired with a chapter from José Muñoz’s book *Cruising Utopia* (2009) and a chapter from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s book *As We Have Always Done* (2017). I was thinking in particular about the connection with Muñoz. He imagines a “forward-dawning queerness that calls on a no-longer conscious in the service of imagining a futurity” (2009, 21), one that is beyond a pragmatic lesbian and gay politics of inclusion. In other words, if queerness is not yet quite here—“we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now’ (22)—it is nonetheless intensely *relational with the past* (27; emphasis added). Leanne Simpson, too, writes about time: “Indigenous thought doesn’t dissect time into past, present, and future. The future is here in the form of the practices of the present, in which the past is also here influencing” (2017, 213). And Minnie Bruce Pratt writes, “I’m trying to get a little closer to the longed-for but unrealized world, where we each are able to live, but not by trying to make someone less than us, not by someone else’s blood or pain” (1984, 30); she writes about the expansion of her “constricted

eye,” a necessary re-evaluation and return to the past in order to move forward to the present. Thus my questions are, what continuities and dis/continuities do you see between her text and our historical present? Is this a text that is still relevant, and if so, how/why? And relatedly, what was/is it like to encounter this “feminist classic” in the 2018 graduate classroom?

Walker: You know, I didn’t know this was a classic! I do see a discontinuity because other scholarship that we were reading in the course, like Muñoz, has a language of queerness that she doesn’t have. I wonder if Pratt would say that futurity is something we can reach, as opposed to Muñoz’s belief in *doing* futurity. But I was rereading it this morning and there was something so queer about this reading that made it feel so present. I felt really connected to this “childish place,” where she describes wanting to make a place a memory, and interpreted that as what Muñoz would describe as “ecstatic time” (2009, 32). Childish places burn with a painful combination of nostalgia and something that is not quite there. It is not a comfortable feeling but it is also familiar—and she critiques this desire. When I am looking inwards for inspiration for my body and my own sense of self-worth, I continue to think back to when I was a child before painful things happened to me and I was so full of courageousness. That is how I mobilize going forward, and make sense of the present. That connection between that childish place, ecstatic time, and the way that I am processing emotionally and politically right now gives me a lot to think about. I wasn’t expecting it to bring up things I needed to process and internalize. I think the way that this reading snapped me back into my body is evidence of how powerful Pratt’s messages still are. Connected to this, I like where she cites Lillian Smith, who instructs us to “Do *something* to overcome our ‘basic ambivalence of feelings,’ by which we move through our way of life ‘like some half-dead thing doing as little harm (and as little good as possible), playing around the edges of great life issues’” (1984, 64). I’ve been doing a literature review for the final paper for this course, and it reminded me of Muñoz’s citation of Lauren Berlant’s notion of “dead citizenship” to describe heterosexuality, and what he would call “straight time.” This reading by Pratt is hitting on all of these things about *liveliness*, and how that is a big part of feeling or doing futurity, living in the present, the here and the now. This results in a formulation of time that is really queer.

Visser: Like Jaisie, I didn’t know this was a classic necessarily and that is where some of my ignorance due to my previous training being in a different discipline comes out. I wasn’t aware of its status. I will admit that I was caught off guard, but in a good way, by the emotion of the piece and my affective reaction to it. My first impression was that some of the examples are kind of dated and irrelevant, but upon reflection they’re actually not! When it comes down to it, some of the things that she’s referencing as having happened to her and around her are happening again or still. One of the themes that really came out of this

piece was around fear, so I made a note: some of the things she discusses as her fears might be different than mine, but her actions in the face of fear are still relevant, and can still educate and still call people to consider. There is a quote that I was really affected by: “Yes, that fear is there, but I will try to be at the edge between my fear and the outside, on the edge at my skin, listening, asking what new thing will I hear, will I see, will I let myself feel, beyond the fear” (35). And she goes on in that way and talks about the constrictions of fear and, wow, I was emotional reading that for sure! And my need to loosen those constrictions and break the cycle of fear and attack—that is very much relevant in my own life but also externally, politically, more broadly with what is going on. I come down pretty firmly on the side of “yes, still relevant.”

Walker: What makes something a “feminist classic” if neither one of us has ever heard of it? Can a classic simply be characterized by what meaning it has for someone? I think one reason why both of us like this piece is that it seems Pratt built her theoretical framework around core urges or feelings, and those things are timeless. Fear is timeless, and that is why I love this. What comes to mind is Amin’s (2016) concept of “attachment genealogy,” and how Pratt uses her own feelings and histories methodologically to defy the tradition of matching and transplanting ahistorical examples onto any context. In this way, she is using her body as a unique geopolitical landscape. When I read other “classics” I love them, but they feel less like personal transformation and more like “how can I understand their theory.” I always think about texts and structures like a personal relationship. You know that feeling when you’re spending time with someone who *gets you*, and you don’t have to defend the basic premise of your existence? You can access a greater level of communication, relatability, comfort, and possibility. This piece felt like something I was already acquainted with, so I’m able to reach a deeper intimacy with myself and the reading’s contents. Like Serena, I had a chance to reflect too, on the edge between my fear and the outside. There’s a lot of fear for me in this piece, too, and when I was thinking through that quote, I wrote down, “Every time I get the urge to remain more objective and distant and not let things influence my research, I have to make a conscious effort to reject this,” because I’m afraid my connections to my research will somehow impede it, and so instead I try to ask how I can mobilize that feeling methodologically. I wrote down, “How can I make intimate research a radical act? How can I make research an act of self-care for myself and others involved in the research, to not deny myself the connections and consequences that it will inevitably bring?” This is fear, and also possibility. This piece is so relevant.

Lenon: But you do raise an interesting question, though, about what does make a feminist classic, and what is considered part of the canon of feminist theory. Is “classic” about time? Probably. But what are texts not considered “classics”

that maybe should be? What are the academic strictures at work that come to deem something a “classic”?

Walker: Why did you pick the piece for the course?

Lenon: Well, for a couple of reasons. The text is relevant because we are still dealing with systems of power that Pratt names in the text, for example, white supremacy, heteronormativity, anti-Semitism. In planning the course, it intuitively felt like a pedagogically sound way to end the course with this reading and this particular ensemble of readings. Also, because this was a course on queering feminism, I wanted to attend to the lesbian feminist/women of color lesbian feminist roots of queer theory. As we have been talking about, there is so much queerness to this text without articulating it in those terms and instead of beginning the course with this text and privileging linear time, I wanted to put it at the end to have those roots emerge a little more strongly. I also included it because I love this piece! But when I was preparing for the seminar and rereading it, I became insecure about my choice, thinking, “Uh-oh, will it be taken up as dated? It’s not going to connect. . . . What have I done?!”

<laughter>

So it was to my delight that you both embraced this text. What issues or questions or thoughts did the reading raise for you with respect to your respective research projects (theoretical, methodological, anything else)? What did the text raise for you personally and/or politically?

Visser: In this first semester of my program, I’ve struggled in the framing of my project and with the feeling of “deservedness,” and I thank you, Jaisie, for helping me name that. In a previous conversation you asked me, “Why do you keep going? Why is this important?” I was reflecting that the answer I gave you felt really self-serving, in the sense that it focused on transforming my understandings of the world, of me, how I am in the world, and my hopes to make a difference. And then as I was reflecting on that answer, I realized that while it’s true, it also demonstrates that same thing you mentioned, “that place I wanted to reach” (Pratt 1984, 42). Through this first semester of my program, the class, and interacting with texts like this one, I have started to recognize that some of the things I was hoping for at the beginning of this endeavor were childish in the way that Pratt is talking about them. I can see that my position is one of incredible privilege, as we, Jaisie, discussed: getting paid for four years to engage in self-transformation, that’s pretty awesome. I am realizing that there’s a lot of privilege, and I think, a lot of accountability in that. I think that this piece is allowing me to move past questions of guilt, deservedness, and questioning my intent. I’m beginning to understand power in terms of my identities and also in the work that I do. I certainly had some understanding of that in terms of power dynamics within the room and in the counselling relationship, but I don’t

think I really took it to a more structural level in ways that I can now or that I am beginning to see. And that's why I need to do this work actually, because I can't depend on anyone else to do it for me and that there is accountability in the doing. Something that stood out and described how I have been feeling was where she says, "I need to do my own work, I need to express my sorrow and my responsibility for myself in my own words and my actions" (Pratt 1984, 59). I feel like Pratt is helping me name some of what is going on in my head and my heart. I need to question "the layers of deceit I have been taught" (1984, 57) and contemplate how I can strip them away in an accountable way. There are other fears that she articulates that resonate: How do I breathe through or break through the fear I share with her, that the values at my core, of my culture, will only be "those of negativity, exclusion [and] death" (57), when I, perhaps childishly, want them to be something different than that? When it comes to my research project, I see this question as all drawn together: research, personal, political. I need to look at them that way, questions about how can I do and feel differently. Like you said earlier, Jaisie: how should or can my fears mobilize or operationalize me in a methodological way instead of being something that causes paralysis or doubts? Your comment about hiding in objectivity would be a big temptation for me, and reading this piece has been helping me to frame some of my desire for this project in a more realistic way, an accountable way, a grounded way.

Walker: You know, that is what comes up for me. This question, and also your response, Serena, really makes me think about one of the first things I ever learned in women and gender studies courses: "the personal is political." Because of my training in sociology and in a particular kind of activism, I think that I couldn't attend to the personal because of fear and survival, and so that message got internalized as "the political is political." That often means that we're going to dismiss or ignore our needs, desires, and complicity, and instead externalize political concerns. These are the kinds of articles that teach us how to be in our feelings, be in our bodies. They also facilitate a support network in order to process these things. So many texts we read, we read by ourselves and produce a paper that only the professor reads, but I feel that it's unreasonable to expect a depth of accountability without any kind of support network. The reason why I like this piece is that it inspires that kind of collective processing. That's also why the graduate classroom can be so powerful. Unlike an undergraduate environment, where you can disappear into a sea of students and retention-oriented education, it's all about processing and *you*, which can create more accountable student researchers.

Lenon: In her book *Feminism without Borders* (2003), Chandra Mohanty has an analysis of "Identity: Skin Blood Heart." Mohanty writes that it is a text that "calls into question the notion of a coherent, historically continuous, stable

identity and works to expose the political stakes concealed in such equations” (89). How do you see that in conversation with Mohanty’s assessment that part of what Minnie Bruce Pratt is doing here, is in fact destabilizing that “self”? And then another question is that, as graduate students, what methodological and/or theoretical questions/points/issues does Mohanty’s point raise for you, that identity is contingent?

Walker: Destabilizing herself, and gathering up the parts of herself in new ways is what Pratt does best. I love this quote that she has: “I slipped from thinking of myself as white, to thinking of myself as *married*, without much regard for other categories” (1984, 40). That punctuates so many things for me about time and subjectivity, and also about how so much of marriage is whiteness! That’s why you can slip into that so easily. This quote was a really great tool to help me think about the perceived, felt, and often exaggerated differences between monogamy and nonmonogamy, and how we perceive those things through existing normative structures. We can easily slip from thinking of ourselves as monogamous, to thinking of ourselves as nonmonogamous, without much regard for the normativities that will continue to influence what makes relationships meaningful to us. Pratt’s discussion of pregnancy, marriage, and childhood, all happening in the same body, communicates a lot about subjectivity. When I think about *myself* as a tool, though, it also brought up: what am I at risk of losing?

Visser: Honestly, the idea of community and identity not being linear and possibly not being stable are fairly new understandings for me. So thinking about what it means for me personally, for me as a researcher, are questions I quite haven’t figured out yet. I guess how I was approaching even thinking about this question reflects what Minnie Bruce Pratt describes as setting out to find “what was being done in my name” (1984, 51), and figuring out what that means for me in this project. I don’t have a full comprehension yet. Yes, on a broader historical level, I can recognize the impact of the interactions with the mental health system for trans and gender-diverse people—that’s part of it. I think just as or even more importantly, I am comprehending my own contributions to the system I am questioning.

Lenon: I was rereading this piece this morning and also rereading the Leanne Simpson chapter, in which she asks, “Who should we be in constellation with?” (2017, 228), because how change is achieved matters. And then Minnie Bruce Pratt writes about the fear of breaking with our own (67) and who is in our family (68)? I don’t really have a question but want to hear your thoughts on this relationship between blood, skin, heart, community, home.

Walker: The first thing that comes to my mind is things I’ve been trying to figure out about my body, reintegrating my body into research. It’s very visceral—the

blood, skin, heart. It makes me think about what happens to your body when you feel afraid and your blood is pumping. That is my initial connection to those words.

Visser: For me, they represent a lot of things I've taken for granted, and had assumptions about at times, in the past and currently, but things I am learning to look at differently. We had a conversation recently, Suzanne, about "relaxing the grip" as I go through this process, these studies, and very rightly so. That image comes up for me here because I think the assumptions I've had about the relationships between blood, skin, heart, community, and home have served me well, actually, but also bear further exploration and examination. And I think that's why this resonated so deeply, as Minnie Bruce Pratt is really wrestling with all of these issues, they are sort of bubbling and percolating in my brain and my heart. It is speaking to my need to examine those things and to account for them in some way, not with a grand statement at the end but with a loosening of the grip and allowing it to unfold.

Walker: Body-words and feelings, like "skin," are a great way to remind us to *be bodies* more, and how that provides an important connection to our research.

Lenon: I was thinking of who to be in community with, the "skin blood heart" of community building, of solidarity building. I'm thinking about these in a social way, blood as something that is social, skin as social, the heart as social, our skin extends beyond our personal bodies, is socially made, the whole social-ity of identity.

Walker: Honestly, that's both a terrifying and a liberating conceptualization. On the one hand, that brings to mind the essentializing justifications that people continue to use as a basis for discrimination and violence. In many ways our skin, blood, and heart are there for public consumption. On the other hand, it speaks a lot to constellated relationships, accountability, and a particular kind of commitment to emotional and physiological connection that I believe is important to our work. We have to dedicate ourselves to embodying and internalizing our politics, listening to ourselves and the right people, and building sustainable emotional foundations with which to mobilize. And, how wonderful it is that we have terms like "skinship" that we can use affectionately to remind us how important it is to build intimacy and connection through skin to skin contact?! Overall, I think this whole framing speaks a lot to thinking about power as an organism.

Visser: I hadn't thought about it quite that way before, Suzanne . . . My first thought again returned about the process I seem to be undergoing. As my understanding of who I have been and who I am becoming shifts, so my social

“skin blood heart,” my connections to community seem to also be variously expanding and disintegrating. These concurrent, maybe requisite shifts affect who I am desiring to be in community with, and probably those who might be interested in welcoming me, really.

Walker: And as well as who we are desiring to be in community with, I think it's also important to discuss *how*. Lately I've been practicing new ways of labeling in my relationships. One friend I simultaneously identify as my best friend, my dad, and my emotional life partner, and she practices similar language. This is a testament to how we both understand ourselves as genderqueer, as well as the feeling of being fathered, and how have I found that feeling in queer kinship where there are maybe barriers to me feeling that in my relationship with my own father. I think it is also important to distrust these flattened and preestablished notions of “community.” Queerness for me is about so much more than spending time with someone because you share the same identity category. That bond feels falsified in so many ways. Anything that allows for a building over time, despite the systematic attempts to isolate us from one another, is how I understand queer kinship—imagining supportive, exciting, and accountable futures with people.

Lenon: Thanks to you both, for your engagement with this text and with each other.

Serena Visser is a PhD student in cultural, social, and political thought at the University of Lethbridge. Her doctoral research, funded by a Social Science and Humanities Research Council Doctoral Fellowship, focuses on the intersections of gender, power, and mental health. A registered clinical social worker, Serena is also an instructor for the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary.

Jaisie Walker is an MA student in women & gender studies at the University of Lethbridge, and a dedicated community organizer. Their thesis, “Genealogies of Violence in Queer Non/Monogamous Community: A PhotoVoice Project in Lethbridge, Alberta,” has received funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, and the Parkland Institute Graduate Research Award. Outside of academia, they are involved in grassroots movements at the intersections of harm reduction, restorative justice, advocacy, and education—most recently in their role as president of LGBTQA2S+ nonprofit OUTreach Southern Alberta Society.

Suzanne Lenon is associate professor in the Department of Women & Gender Studies at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. She teaches and researches in the areas of critical race feminisms, and law, gender, and sexuality. Her current research focuses on the topic of inheritance as a way to apprehend the workings of

social inequalities and to imagine their transformation. She is co-editor with OmiSoore H. Dryden of Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging (UBC Press, 2015).

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