

**Revisiting Feminism:
Academics versus Activism**

Shannon Lewis

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Master of Arts
English

Dr. Bernice Hausman
Dr. Martha McCaughey
Dr. Paul Heilker

April 13, 2001

Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: Feminist theory, academics, activism, Judith
Butler, Kate Millett

Copyright 2001, Shannon K. Lewis

Revisiting Feminism: Academics versus Activism

Shannon K. Lewis

Abstract

Today, feminist theory, instead of accompanying a movement or being generated by a movement, is out there on its own. There is no large-scale social movement to complement it and to act on it. The energy and excitement of collective action is what many feminists miss and what is implied through critiques of contemporary feminist theory. The lament is for unity, for what was conceived of as "sisterhood" and what emerges as a myth. Many feminists share a nostalgia for a time that was filled with the potential for and intensity of social revolution.

When we look at the theory of early second wave feminism and the theory of more recent years, the differences are negligible. What is different, and glaringly so, is the social climate. Theory is not to blame; we are. Theory is not the culprit. Theory is just as impacting and politically useful as it ever was, but it is missing its partner. This realization should be no cause for alarm, however, because there still exist many opportunities for activism, albeit different sorts of activism, based on different sorts of political issues that complement our present needs and abilities.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my second and third readers, Dr. Martha McCaughey and Dr. Paul Heilker, and especially to my director, Dr. Bernice Hausman, for the hours spent helping me with this project and for the encouragement and valuable insight provided throughout.

Table of Contents

Introduction:	"The Personal is Political"	1
Chapter 1:	The Debates: Academics v. Activism, Theory v. Practice	14
Chapter 2:	The Myth Debunked	26
Chapter 3:	Situating Kate Millett and Judith Butler in Theory	37
Chapter 4:	Comparing Millett and Butler	52
Chapter 5:	Academics and Activism Reconceptualized	70
Works Cited		83
Appendix		94
Vita		97

Introduction: "The Personal is Political"

I always think it is important for a reader to understand the position from which a writer is writing. For this particular work and in keeping with the spirit illustrated in Carol Hanisch's influential article,¹ this particular type of understanding is all the more important because this project has emerged from my own personal confusion.

As an English graduate student, I found myself asking, "What is the point of what we do in academia?" This may sound like an overly pessimistic sentiment, but I don't think it is unfounded. And it is what I found myself wondering after a year of existing in a world, *an academic bubble*, in which academics (students and professors alike) seem to write, research, and publish only for each other.

Accompanying my cynicism was hopefulness - a hope that the *bubble* didn't actually exist. After all, hadn't I been significantly affected by the books I'd read and the ideas I'd examined in school? Hadn't I been taught new ways to see the world? Hadn't I learned about the lives of people I was not exposed to in my daily life? Yes, I have been changed by my studies and especially by my exposure to feminist texts and ideas. I feel my eyes have been opened

¹ "The Personal is Political" (1970) by Carol Hanisch

to many ideas, and I am able to see through things and see beneath surfaces. I feel I have a new perspective on the world which keeps me from being completely ignorant or exploited as a woman.

For me, a student, academics have had impact on my personal life. Feminist theory has had impact on *me*; it has *done* something. That's a good thing - impact is at the heart of feminism. Women have been and still are oppressed in our culture and throughout the world and the oppression of women is what feminism attempts to correct.² Feminism is "not just a perspective, a methodology - it has a prescriptive purpose which is to bring about social change to make women's lives better" (Stanhope par 4). Theory, in large part, is the articulation of these ideas.

These are the sorts of thoughts that led me to want to explore, beyond my own experience, the implications of and applications for feminist theory outside of academia, to explore the possible intersections between the two seemingly opposing worlds of academia and "real life." How does feminist theory apply outside of academia? Or more specifically, in what ways do people apply feminist theory outside of academia? How does feminist theory, in

² Feminists, in challenging gender, also challenge the oppression of men. All people are oppressed by the gender system, which is one of many binary systems which operate in harmful ways in our culture.

the texts that feminist scholars produce, enact social change and affect the world?

Of course, these questions rely on the premise that feminist theory should enact social change and affect the world and the premise that feminist theory was originally created to do so, which, according to most accounts, it was.³ In my opinion, that is what makes any scholarship meaningful. The idea that scholarship should have applications outside of itself is not new to academics, nor does it pertain only to feminism. It does seem, however, to apply particularly to feminist theory. According to Marilyn Boxer in *When Women Ask the Questions*, many academic disciplines have arisen out of the need for social change and have been subject to criticism as they allegedly stray from this intention. For example, she points out that sociology was created to "replace civil strife with social harmony" (162). Robert S. Lynd, a Princeton lecturer in the late 1930s, criticized sociology as a practice of collecting data that serves no purpose, a "self-gratifying pursuit" (qtd. in Boxer 162). Thus, critiquing and questioning the purpose of scholarship in academics is not new. But for feminist theory, the

³ Diane Coole contends feminist "theorizing was from the start directed at changing the world, theory is oriented to political tasks" (18).

intensity and longevity of the debates, and the political controversies they create, signify the particular importance of the challenges they present.

The revitalization of feminism, which we know as "the second wave," stemmed, in large part, from the radical movements of the 1960s. Women fighting injustices through their involvement with radical political groups came to realize the injustices waged against them by the men they were working with.⁴ First wave feminists had won for women the right to vote earlier in the century, but women now began to fight for more rights. They focused on issues such as reproductive rights, equal opportunity, restrictive gender roles, and also upon installing the study of women in academia. In *Women's Studies in the United States*, Catherine R. Stimpson credits the women's movement of the 1960s with revitalizing "feminism as a political force in the United States" and bringing "women to the fore as a subject of public discussion, debate, and policy, as well as a legitimate focus for scholarly inquiry" (12). The fight to create women's studies departments, the fight to

⁴ In "The Grand Coolie Damn," Marge Piercy addresses the way Movement women were treated by Movement men, accusing them of creating "a microcosm" of patriarchal oppression and being "proud of it" (438).

In "Who's Come a Long Way, Baby?" (Time 1970) the author notes that "radical organizations saw to it that the 'chicks' operated the mimeograph machines and scampered out for coffee while the men ran the show" (17).

get students in the classes, the fight for more women's studies faculty, more courses - all were part of early second wave feminism. And the fight was successful, as is evident by the number of women's studies programs in existence today and by the number of classes and departments that house feminist professors and support courses in feminist theory.

What I refer to as "feminist theory" consists of a large body of academic work done by feminists that takes place in (almost) every area of today's university curriculum. Martha Nussbaum describes feminist theory as "not just fancy words on paper; theory is connected to proposals for social change" (37). Barrie Thorne, in a millennium edition of *Signs*, defines feminist theory as "the most valued academic currency of women's studies," signifying "our shared intellectual life, our claims to legitimacy as a distinctive academic field, and our hierarchies of knowledge" (1186). Some theory, such as feminist literary theory, remains within a particular disciplinary structure. Other feminists produce theory that is interdisciplinary and stretches across the borders of various academic disciplines. Not all feminist scholars are feminist theorists, but most are informed by feminist theory and use it in their work. And not all feminist

theorists are associated with academia, but feminist theory, in large part, did emerge during the increasing institutionalization of feminism.

In exploring the nature of the applicability of feminist theory outside of academia, the relationship between feminist theory and feminist activism becomes integral since activism is perhaps the most visible, and thus most viable, way to examine the ways in which theory stretches beyond academic borders. The relationship between academics and activism is a subject that has been highly debated amongst feminists. Conceptualizing feminist theory and its relationship to activism doesn't necessarily directly address the impact of theory on everyday lives, but it is a tangible entry point into the exploration. Enacting social change to better women's lives has always been the goal of women's movements and the roots of feminist theory.

In recent years, some feminist theory has been criticized for maintaining a level of abstractness in language and content; these complaints have coincided with the merging of some feminist theory with postmodern theory. In fact, accessibility is where my concern originates. If theory is not expressed in clear, concise language and related directly to real world issues, then how can it have

impact or result in social change on some level? How can it affect others as it has affected me? Feminist theory cannot fulfill its goal or meet its potential unless it has impact, unless it can enact social change which improves lives. Contemporary feminist theory has been called into question for failing to be political, failing to have impact, because it allegedly is not accessible in terms of language or content.

So in my attempt to explore the usefulness of feminist theory, I find it necessary to explore the sources from which the debates concerning academics versus activism and theory versus practice originate. And this means that I will address the following question: "Is feminist theory today less grounded in activism and the need for social change than that produced during the late 1960s and early 1970s?" In exploring this line of questioning, I will rely on two of the most well-known feminist theory texts, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, each of which I will study as representative of the theory being produced by their contemporaries. During the early second wave of feminism, women were looking for ways to illuminate and explain their oppression; Millett's theory of patriarchy does just that. In more recent years, feminists began to address issues surrounding gender,

recognize their own internal fragmentation in terms of race, class, and ethnicity, and utilize postmodern theories in their work. Representative of these developments, Butler addresses the performative (as opposed to biological) nature of gender and contests the stability of the subject "woman" in feminist politics.

The critiques concerning the lack of political applicability in recent feminist theory rely on its difference from early second wave feminist theory. Much of the criticism results from what appears to be a nostalgic lament for the "good old days" of feminism.⁵ I will show that, when examined, the differences in theory between the two different time periods are minimal. Instead, ideas about second wave feminism and the bond it represents between academics and activism, between theory and practice, comprise a myth. The myth is overlooked (or downplayed, or ignored, or superceded) because of the nostalgia with which women remember the early days of second wave feminism. Women remember a unified sisterhood spurred on by the energy and passion of the 1960s.

However, the united front of sisterhood, although deserving

⁵ Diana Coole says that feminism must "avoid nostalgia for its earlier more totalizing discourses and models of collective action in favour of qualitatively different modes of political intervention . . . against which contemporary feminism would perhaps be judged lacking" ("Threads and plaits" 37-38).

much credit, was guilty of being eurocentric, heterosexist, elitist, and suffering from tensions between academics and activists; in this sense, the feminism which is remembered did not actually exist.⁶ Of course, the early second wave feminists made tremendous accomplishments and theirs was an intense and powerful movement. It simply seems that, for some, feminism's lack of unity from the start is conveniently dismissed, downplayed, or ignored as some feminists praise early second wave theory and criticize contemporary theory. And this oversight hurts feminist theory today, making it out to be the villain, the evil stepmother to their Snow White.

Early second wave feminist theory is just as academic in terms of language and style as today's feminist theory. Recent theory is just as politically useful and grounded in the real world as second wave theory has been said to be. What *is* different, and glaringly so, is the social climate. There is no large-scale social movement to complement today's feminist theory and act on it, as opposed to the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Today, feminist theory, instead of accompanying a movement or being generated by a movement, is out there on its own. The

⁶This is not to say that early second wave feminists did not or do not admit these faults.

social and political climate of today in no way compares to the exciting and revolutionary climate of the 1960s and 1970s. But theory is not to blame for this; we are. Theory is not the culprit.

The energy and excitement of collective action is what many miss and what is implied through critiques of contemporary feminist theory. The lament is for this unity, this sisterhood, this togetherness, this myth - all of which was brought about by a growing social movement, a time that was filled with the potential for and intensity of social revolution. This means that the criticism leveled against contemporary feminist theory and the binaries it enforces between academics and activism are unjustified and unnecessary. The theory is essentially the same; the context in which it emerges is different. The failure to recognize the power of contemporary feminist theory exists because of the nostalgia surrounding the early days of second wave feminism, which perpetuates a myth.

The change in social climate presents new possibilities for feminist theory and its connection to activism. Activism can no longer be conceptualized as it has been in the past. Activism cannot be thought of only in terms of sit-ins, demonstrations, and street marches.

Thus, today's feminist theory cannot be critiqued as lacking activist elements, according to our traditional conceptions of activism. The social climate in which we live has changed. The 1960s/1970s was a time of social movements. Activists for civil rights, for the environment, for women, for gays, all picketed and paraded the streets. Today, women have achieved much of what is needed to be equal, at least in terms of the law and recognized practices. What remains to be fought for may be much more subtle and indirect and even more entrenched in our culture. There is still the occasional rally or protest, but overall, our society today is not as blatantly political as the society that housed early second wave feminist theory. The feminist theory of today is also not as blatantly political - it is clothed in new words and expresses old/new concerns through new paradigms - and that is what is at the core of the critique that contemporary feminist theory has become less meaningful and less impacting upon the lives of women.

In short, the social climate and the political activism that accompany feminist theory have changed, but this does not mean it has become less valuable. Theory is just as impacting and politically useful as it ever was, but it is missing its partner. This realization should be

no cause for alarm, however, because there still exist many opportunities for activism, albeit different sorts of activism, based on different sorts of political issues that complement our present needs and abilities. Different, although still significant, questions have begun to pop up. What possibilities exist for effective feminist political action in a time when there is no large-scale social movement? The potential for and the existence of feminist activism today is immense. Despite critiques to the contrary, feminist theory provides an impetus for activism and furthermore, it performs an activist function in and of itself. Is today's feminist theory inherently activist? Do texts that question and challenge perform an activist function? In addressing these issues, I will consider the ways in which feminist theory of even the most "academic" nature can be (and is) incorporated into real lives. And perhaps most importantly, I will suggest that the feminist classroom provides an appropriate and significant venue for activism, in short, that teaching feminist theory constitutes activism.⁷ A classroom in which students become exposed to feminist ideas and texts has the potential to

⁷The idea of the feminist teacher being an activist is no new idea (see Silliman, Welch, Orwin for similar discussions), but I hope to provide some new insights and illuminate the aspects which relate most significantly to the debates surrounding the applicability of theory.

alter the way they see and exist in the world, and to move them to action. Feminist theory gains power as it is incorporated into the minds of students, making the feminist teacher/scholar a feminist activist in the sense that through them, knowledge is disseminated. Contemporary feminist theory has mistakenly been blamed for not being activist at the expense of our failure to recognize the current and potential forms of activism it encompasses.

Chapter 1: The Debates: Academics v. Activism, Theory v. Practice

Martha Nussbaum takes on Judith Butler

"Judith Butler's hip quietism is a comprehensible response to the difficulty of realizing justice in America. But it is a bad response. It collaborates with evil. Feminism demands more and women deserve better" (Nussbaum 45). These are the words with which Martha Nussbaum ends her scathing critique of Judith Butler in "The Professor of Parody—The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler," an article published in *The New Republic* in February 1999. Nussbaum blames Butler for a "new, disquieting trend" in feminist theory, which has turned "from the material side of life, toward a type of verbal and symbolic politics that makes only the flimsiest of connections with the real situation of real women" (38). She attributes to Butler a disruption in the relationship between feminist theory and feminist activism:

For a long time, academic feminism in America has been closely allied to the practical struggle to achieve justice and equality for women. Feminist theory has been understood by theorists as not just fancy words on paper; theory is connected to proposals for social change. Thus feminist scholars have engaged in many

concrete projects; the reform of rape law; winning attention and legal redress for the problems of domestic violence and sexual harassment; improving women's economic opportunities, working conditions, and education; winning pregnancy benefits for female workers; campaigning against the trafficking of women and girls in prostitution; working for the social and political equality of lesbians and gay men. (37)

Three major claims run through Nussbaum's critique:

Butler's style of writing and use of language is elitist and inaccessible; she fails to engage with real issues and real lives; and no real political motivation for change can occur through her work. Nussbaum accuses Butler of encouraging through her theoretical writings a pointless, symbolic, gestural politics that is not grounded in a desire for social change and does not encourage action for social change.

Nussbaum admits that many feminists "in America are still theorizing in a way that supports material change and responds to the situation of the most oppressed," but claims that this "new trend" she detects is growing, owing primarily to the popularity of Butler's work. She complains that the "great tragedy in the new feminist theory in America is the loss of a sense of public

commitment." For Nussbaum, public commitment means "working on changing the law, or feeding the hungry, or assailing power through theory harnessed to material politics." For Nussbaum, public commitment means focusing on issues that affect immediate and visible changes in the lives of women, gays and lesbians (Nussbaum 44).

Nussbaum claims that feminist theorists "of the new symbolic type," as she calls them, have come into prominence due, in large part, to the influence of French postmodern theory, which says that "the intellectual does politics by speaking seditiously, and that this is a significant type of political action" (39). These "new" feminists are busy writing and thinking and "need not engage with messy things such as legislatures and movements in order to act daringly." After all, they have been told by Butler that "there is little room for large-scale social change, and maybe no room at all," so all that we can do is "find spaces within the structures of power in which to parody them, to poke fun at them, to transgress them in speech" (Nussbaum 38). This "symbolic verbal politics" is what Butler offers feminism, according to Nussbaum, and she is deeply bothered by it. She clearly spells out the issues she feels theory should be addressing and resents feeling that "old-style feminist politics and the material

realities to which it was committed" have been sacrificed to "a stance that looks very much like quietism and retreat" (38).

Nussbaum is not alone.

Feminist Dissent

In recent years, a significant amount of feminist theory has been criticized for failing to be grounded in activist purposes or applicable to the "real world," for maintaining a level of abstractness in language and content. Feminist theory has been called into question for failing to be political, failing to have impact, because it allegedly is not accessible in terms of language or content. In this sense, it fails its activist purposes - it fails in fulfilling its prescription for activism, and/or it fails because it is not utilizable by activists or in activist ways.

For many years, feminists have been struggling with the supposed binary that exists between feminist theory and feminist practice. In recent years, feminists, for the most part, have situated theory within academics and practice within activism (Berila par 1), producing a dichotomy which has resulted in a substantial amount of criticism. Many feminists have critiqued what they see as a growing distance between feminist theory and practice,

between academics and activism. In "Is Academic Feminism an Oxymoron?" Judith Stacey argues that

many feminist scholars too often do produce works that are quite literally "academic" - that is, "theoretical or speculative without a practical purpose or intention". . .composed in ungainly prose infused with gratuitous displays of arcane jargon. How sobering to note that academic feminist sisterhood has proven powerful enough to replicate many of the less endearing status hierarchies, anxieties, affectations, and schisms of "normal science." (1191)

Stacey's perspective, a perspective shared by many others, contends that the increasing institutionalization of feminism has contributed to a decrease in the political nature of theory. In this view, theory has become less radical, less applicable to activist practices. Annette Kolodny, in "Dancing Between Left and Right: Feminism and the Academic Minefield in the 1980s," declares "feminism is a visionary politics which declares that a theory is only as good as its practice." She warns that with theoretical knowledge comes the "responsibility to act in the world to dismantle institutionalized inequities" (461). She ends her essay by stating that "theory devoid of activist politics isn't feminism but, rather, pedantry and moral

abdication" and encourages feminists to disrupt the pattern she sees forming (465).

Feminist theorists today "have been scolded for engaging in heady theoretical debates that have no bearing on women's real lives and damaged bodies" (McCaughey). Feminist theory influenced by postmodernism is criticized for being too "discursive" (i.e. not accessible to the average reader) and not relating directly to women's issues or calling for social change. Victoria Stanhope, in "Bad Writing or Bad Politics" observes that with the development of the postmodern perspective "the divides in the feminist community seem to have gotten more pronounced" (par 5), which we see clearly in Nussbaum's treatment of Butler.

There is a common conception that during early second wave feminism, the boundaries between theory and practice were much more permeable than they are today.⁸ Karen Brodtkin claims, "Twenty-five years ago, the lines between feminism in the academy and activism in the streets were much more blurred than they are today" (1224). Jael Silliman and Anannya Bhattacharjee argue that a significant amount of feminist scholarship is not "closely linked" to ongoing political struggle whereas activism used to be more

⁸ See Plotnik, Silliman, Hanisch, Kolodny, Stacey, Stanhope, Brodtkin, Coole, Segal, Nussbaum.

central to feminist academics; "early theorists and scholars were activists and vice versa," they claim (122). Carol Hanisch, a second wave feminist activist associated with the 1968 Miss America protest, accuses academic feminists of producing "self-serving ivory tower theories that either have no relationship to the lives of most women" ("Some Thoughts . . ." 42). Diane Coole idealizes the late 1960s a privileged moment "when women rode the crest of a wave and theory and practice were in sync" ("Feminism Without Nostalgia" 24). The idea that feminist theory and practice operated in a reciprocal sort of way during early second wave feminism, that the boundaries between academics and activism were blurry to non-existent is what lends support to the contempt with which contemporary feminist theory is often received today. In looking at some of the criticism waged against contemporary feminist theory, we'll see that critiques and recommendations often depend, as Nussbaum's do, on the notion that early second wave feminist theory did not suffer from separate spheres of academics and activism.

Diana Coole, in "Feminism Without Nostalgia," illustrates how critiques of contemporary feminist theory are often accompanied by a comparison to the "good old days" of early second wave feminism. While she contends

that theorizing in itself is political, that deconstructing reality is a political act even though "it is not easy to point to concrete results," she feels that contemporary theory has lost its way, so to speak (18). She attributes to postmodernism a "retreat from engagement with the real, in light of our epistemological skepticism and its political intransigence," a "postmodernization of feminism," which makes collective action difficult (19).

In examining the problematic nature of contemporary feminist theory, Coole claims a separation between theory and practice. She wants the two "stitched" back together. In her view, theory and practice have been torn apart because of the postmodern influence on feminist theory, which has resulted in ineffective theorizing. While political, this theorizing does not engage directly in the real lives, does not encourage collective action in the real world, and does not even acknowledge a collective group from which to politicize.

Coole urges contemporary feminist theory to "re-politicize" based on what she sees as the ideal, which comes from the days of early second wave feminism. Coole explains what she sees as the exemplary theory-practice relationship:

Theory grows out of personal experience and interprets it by eliciting generalities which are then related to structural forces. Politics is strategically guided by such theory, and theory mobilizes the individuals to whom it speaks to collective acts. In so far as change occurs, then the new conditions call for new theorization, different strategies and so on. (20)

Her sentiments mirror Kathie Sarachild's, author of an article entitled "A Program for Feminist 'Consciousness Raising'", based on a program for the First National Women's Liberation Conference in 1968:

In our groups, let's share our feelings and pool them. Let's let ourselves go and see where our feelings lead us. Our feelings will lead us to ideas and then to actions. Our feelings will lead us to our theory, our theory to our action, our feelings about that action to new theory and then to new action. (78)

Coole essentially argues for a return to the days of early second wave feminism in articulating as the ideal theory-practice relationship what so closely resembles the methodologies concerning consciousness-raising, which reinforces the idea that a comparison to and a nostalgia

for early second wave feminism is central to her critique of contemporary theory.⁹

Christine A. Kelly makes similar claims in "Whatever Happened to Women's Liberation? Feminist Legacies of '68." She claims that in an effort to combat the "de-politicizing trends of current feminist intellectualism" we should return to the commitments of early second wave feminism. Contemporary feminist theory needs to become reacquainted with its roots, according to Kelly, to "aid in formulating categories of analysis which might overcome the paralysis of essentialism and postmodernism" (165). She sees postmodernism as suggesting a politics of parody, which leads nowhere; she says we need to recover the legacy of early second wave feminism and "the integrity of their concern to acknowledge, evaluate and redress injustice through mass organizing" (165). Postmodern feminist theory, Kelly argues, "in talking about the ways that gender oppression and exploitation gain meaning and force, has made a fundamentally linguistic turn and sidestepped questions concerning the concrete ways that economic and political institutions constitute gender" (174).

⁹ Since Coole's article is entitled "Feminism Without Nostalgia" this is a sort of ironic realization.

For a 1993 issue of *Ms.*, bell hooks, Gloria Steinem, Urvashi Vaid, and Naomi Wolf gathered to discuss the current state of feminism. During the discussion, hooks stated that feminist theory rarely "provides any actual strategies for altering everyday lives," while what feminist theory should be is "something that we can shape and redefine according to our needs." Early second wave feminist Steinem replies that "that's where we started from," that "that's where feminism came from. And that's exactly what we lost" (40). Once again, a critique of contemporary feminist theory based on a comparison to early second wave feminist theory.

Lynne Segal also critiques contemporary feminist theory, especially its utilization of postmodern theory, through the lens of early second wave feminism. She pokes fun at the destabilization of the category of woman that postmodernism enables, arguing that however "'fictitious' or 'fixed' the category of women," during the early days "feminists did once manage to successfully mobilize [women] (and not just signifiers) onto the streets and into campaigns" (7). In her view, contemporary feminist theory influenced by postmodernism does not bring women "onto the streets" as did second wave feminist theory.

As evident from the examples I've cited, several

critiques of contemporary feminist theory exist alongside comparisons to early second wave feminist theory. These critics see feminist theory of the early second wave as having emerged from the lives of women and from their activist experiences, which indicates a unity, a sisterhood between academic feminists and activists that nevertheless never really existed.

Ch. 2: The Myth Debunked

Early Tensions

Although women look back to early second wave feminism as a time of unity, there was a significant amount of tension between the academic and activist elements already. In an essay written in 1973, Ann Leffler, Dair L. Gillespie and Elinor Lerner Ratner claimed that "the women's movement is in danger of co-option from the right, from small groups of women whose institutional affiliations give them disproportionate power within it" (par 1). The authors argued that since academic feminists were responsible to and took money from the system they were attempting to resist, they were "free to sell out the movement" (par 24). The authors further claim that:

Without the establishment of a movement which potentially taps massive discontent, the establishment would have no use for female academics. They depend on the movement's existence but cool it down and get rewarded for doing so. They peddle conservative platitudes as movement analyses. They use the movement's momentum to advance their own goals. There is a word for such behavior: opportunism. (50)

These accusations certainly do not resonate with the idea of a powerful and unified group of women.

These women, although representing an extreme point of view, were not alone. The tension between academics and activism was apparent right from the start, as is apparent in the tensions apparent in the development of academic feminist programs.

A Case in Point: Women's Studies

One of the foremost accomplishments of the second wave of the women's movement was ensuring a place in the academy, a place we've come to know as Women's Studies. The tensions between academics and activists emerges in the history behind Women's Studies programs, which has been called the academic arm of the feminist movement and which houses a significant amount of feminist theory.

The first Women's Studies department was created at San Diego State University in 1970. The situation that occurred there during its first year delineates the extent to which second wave feminism suffered from the tensions between academics and activism. According to Boxer, the Women's Studies program at San Diego State split during its first year because of conflicts concerning funding and control. The "activist" members separated themselves, moving downtown and opening the "Center for Women's Studies and Services." Four years later, when the new dean's determination to make the program adhere to university

standards of personnel appointments became apparent, the currently appointed faculty resigned en masse. What follows is an excerpt from their final statement:

If we do a lot of BB [bureaucratic bullshit] we can maintain the program, if we don't we lose it. After all, what we really wanted was a Women's Studies Program, wasn't it? Or did we really want women's lives to be dealt with as a reality in every class, in every aspect of the university. Well, after a while you forget what you really wanted, you just work to maintain what you've got. (qtd. in Boxer 165)

Their complaints illustrate perfectly how feminist scholars worried their work would become so embedded in university policy and procedures that it would cease to fulfill its intention to work for social change. In short, they worried that academics would take over activism.

Women's Studies was created with a dual purpose in mind, claims Boxer, "to elicit from new understandings of [women's] lives a commitment to collective action for social change." The double mission, "to educate and to motivate," created controversy and uneasiness from the start (Boxer 164). Since Women's Studies came out of the Women's Liberation movement, its creation was directly political and in the same sense, so was its purpose. The

combined purpose of activism and education became institutionalized in preamble to the constitution of the National Women's Studies Association (1977):

Women's Studies owes its existence to the movement for the liberation of women; the women's liberation movement exists because women are oppressed. Women's studies, diverse as its components are, has at its best shared a vision of a world free not only from sexism but also from racism, class bias, ageism, heterosexual bias - from all the ideologies and institutions that have consciously or unconsciously oppressed and exploited some for the advantage of others. (qtd. in Stimpson 27)

This statement embodies the commitment of academic feminism "to advocacy -- that is, to political action in the interest of women" (Boxer 14). Many critics, feminists themselves, have argued and continue to argue that this commitment is compromised by university affiliation. They argue that Women's Studies programs are not political enough, while still others argue that Women's Studies courses are too overtly political (Boxer 160).

The dual purpose of Women's Studies programs became challenged more and more as they became increasingly entrenched in university systems. Stimpson summarizes the

issues:

Would a Women's Studies program survive within a college or university? Could it work authentically -- i.e. preserve the goals of the Women's Studies movement or would it be co-opted into the establishment, an establishment that had once excluded women? To put the question another way, are radical feminist goals compatible with the university system and structure? Powerful voices argued against university affiliation. (28)

University affiliation meant that academic feminists "required institutional validation that rendered them accountable to university administrators rather than to the 'feminist community'" (Boxer 163). Many worried that "success would kill [Women's Studies'] activist - i.e. feminist - political impulse" (Boxer 171). They accused academic feminists of "sharing the privilege of the [male] academic elite" (Boxer 173).

Sisterhood Re-Examined

In *Sisterhood is Powerful*, a collection of writings from early second wave feminism, editor Robin Morgan claims:

The women's liberation is the first radical movement to base its politics - in fact, create its politics -

out of concrete personal experiences. We've learned that those experiences are not our private hang-ups. They are shared by every woman, and are therefore political. The theory, then, comes out of human feeling, not out of textbook rhetoric. (xvii-iii)

Morgan attempts to portray a unified movement, one in which experience, theory, and political practice are interconnected. While it does seem that theory did emerge, to a large extent, from experience through consciousness-raising groups, the unity of the movement was deceptive in the fragmentation of academics and activism that plagued feminism from the very start, as discussed previously. Also problematic in applying the title of sisterhood to early second wave feminism is the idea of women, as Morgan describes above. The same personal experiences were not shared by every woman, as every woman was not the same. Each woman was subject to race, class, and sexuality distinctions as well, which affected the way they experienced being a woman, and in turn, the political reforms they sought. Since the movement was largely white, heterosexual, and middle-class, it was the needs of those women which were privileged.¹⁰ According to Priscilla

¹⁰ According to DuPlessis and Snitow, some women began to see sisterhood as a "myth that excluded them" (8).

Long's essay "We Called Ourselves Sisters," by 1971, "rifts had developed between lesbian and heterosexuals, between radical feminists and socialist feminists" and non-white women had begun to "explore their experiences as distinct from those of other women" (335). Barbara Smith goes as far as to claim that feminism became another venue for institutionalized racism in the sense that it ignored "the multiple oppressions and multi-issued political agendas for women of color" (478).

During the early days of second wave feminism, separatism (from men) played an important role in the movement. According to Barbara Epstein, while sometimes, the desire for separatism indicated a desire for a separate society from men, most often it simply indicated a desire to restrict the movement and the community it created to women. Women often had to defend their relationships with men. Separatism might have been more appropriate for the overwhelmingly "young, white, middle- to upper-class, university-educated women" of the movement, but non-white women did not want to abandon their communities (126-127). One of the primary goals of the movement was to challenge

Helen Crowley sustains a discussion on the "whiteness" of gender: "White middle-class women had converted their reality into the currency of universal womanhood, a conversion itself which was only possible by virtue of privilege" (139).

the nuclear family, and as Epstein reminds us, not all women grew up in a nuclear family, white or non-white (127).

Nostalgia

It seems that the shortcomings of early second wave feminism are overlooked today by many who remember the intensity and excitement of those days. This intensity and excitement was generated by the newness, the incredible revolution suggested by early second wave writings and activist events. It seems that when feminists look to the early second wave, the ideal theory/practice relationship it represents, and the unity and sisterhood of the "good old days," they forget the fragmentation that plagued feminism from the beginning. Alix Kates Shulman remembers the emotional aspects of early second wave: "the passion, excitement, and high energy of those days which consciousness raising, the chief movement tool of organizing and discovery, so effectively fostered and tapped; the anger, love, sense of upheaval, community, and exhilaration that exploded into a powerful movement" (Howe et al. 33). Women are seduced into believing the myth of sisterhood by nostalgia for the emotional and intellectual highs of a political movement that was innovative and radical, and part of the 1960s, one of the most exciting

periods of time in history. Vivian Gornick remembers it as "the joy of revolutionary politics, and it was ours. To be a feminist in the early seventies - bliss was it in that dawn to be alive" (373).

And "dawn" is an ideal way to describe the early second wave. Every idea, every action, felt fresh and new. Rachel DuPlessis and Ann Snitow, editors of *The Feminist Memoir Project*, remember that all the

writing felt extraordinarily fresh. The new feminists placed the once-discounted materials of female life in the context of power and control. Now they talked of politics, not of custom, nor of individual choice, nor of private sorrow. (4)

The atmosphere of the social climate was fast-paced and exciting: "Women thought on their feet, trying to keep up with things that were happening in a hurry. They also dug in and began inventing institutions, disciplines, strategies . . . The movement was named a 'wave' for good reasons" (DuPlessis and Snitow 13). DuPlessis and Snitow, point to the "dynamism of the sixties" which

catalyzed all this rich political material, mobilizing mass movements. Many people sought to understand the motors of change . . . the time had come to confront the deep structures of society. Rising desires

clashing with many unmet claims for social justice created intense political hopes and passions. A wide range of boiling, expanding movements sought a United States renewal. (6)

The energy and intensity of the time period lent itself to greater activism. Accounts by women who were there consistently remember the highs of being radical revolutionaries, as they saw it. It was them against the world; the power of sisterhood remains foremost in many feminists' memories. "Sisterhood" as a term describes "the proposition of sheer solidarity among women" (Duplessis and Snitow 8). Now most recognize that female solidarity was "a fantasy, a metaphor, a fiction" (Duplessis and Snitow 8), although Smith finds herself amazed at the failure of many white feminists to make this realization even today (478-479).

Still, most feminists look back to the early second wave as the best days of feminism. They long for a return to those days. Their writing about the early days is filled with nostalgia for sisterhood and the revolutionary atmosphere of the late 1960s. So it is not surprising, and it is even somewhat excusable, that when criticism is waged against more contemporary feminism, it always emerges in a comparison with early second wave feminism. But, as

becomes clear when we look back to those early days, sisterhood was a myth: "As it turned out, sisterhood was not as powerful as we liked to think," says Priscilla Long (337).¹¹

Realizing the myth, we can still respect and admire and appreciate the efforts of early second wave feminists for all they did to improve our society and the lives of women. But at the same time, when we realize the myth, we realize that at least, in part, the comparison of contemporary feminist theory with early second wave feminist theory, upon which the criticism rests, is unfounded.

¹¹ Shulman notes that "for from the very beginning the movement was full of strife and splits alongside the famous sisterhood" (34)

Ch. 3: Situating Kate Millett and Judith

Butler in Theory

Sexual Politics

The second wave of feminism "burst upon the American scene somewhere between 1967 and 1968" according to Sheila Tobias in *Faces of Feminism: An Activist's Reflections on the Women's Movement* (3). According to Tobias, discussing this "new feminism" of the second wave has to begin with Kate Millett's book *Sexual Politics* where the feminist theory of patriarchy was first sketched out (3). Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* has been called both "the bible of the women's movement in the 1970s" (Lipovenko par 3), and "a manifesto of the feminist movement" (Long par 2).

One of the early second wave feminists' tasks was simply to force others to reckon with the truth of women's inferior social status. According to Linda Nicholson in *The Second Wave*:

The major political problem that early Women Liberationists faced was in getting others in the New Left, women as well as men, to recognize the importance of women's oppression, its presence across large stretches of history and its fundamentality as a principle of social organization. This meant

developing a theory that explained the origins of women's oppression and the means by which it has been sustained over time. The theory had to account for both the pervasiveness of women's oppression throughout much of history, yet also allow for the different forms this oppression has assumed in different societies. (2)

We see this in several primary texts of the time period. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* claimed that women were socialized into inferiority ("One is not born a woman") and drew attention to the pervasiveness of women's oppression. Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* claimed that women's oppression resulted, in large part, from their biological reproductive responsibilities. Both texts served to contribute to feminist goals of the time: "to document the seriousness of women's oppression and develop theories to account for it" (Nicholson 7).

Nicholson also points to another characteristic of early second wave feminist theory. Feminists often divided on the issue of whether or not gender is biological or socially constructed, believing either that women and men were inherently different or that women and men were inherently the same. Many early second wave feminists drew on the idea that men and women were basically the same by

nature, and in arguing for social change that would acknowledge this equality, gender and its social enforcement came to the fore as a feminist claim (Nicholson 8).

Millett's text comments on all of these issues - the pervasiveness of women's oppression and how it was reinforced in all aspects of our culture - and proposed that in no way was women's lower social status the result of nature, but of culture. Imelda Whelehan, in *Modern Feminist Thought*, calls *Sexual Politics* "certainly the most famous early radical feminist work" (74). Whelehan further asserts that Millett "did much to popularize the feminist adoption of the term 'patriarchy' for feminists" (15), which of course has become a foundation for much of feminist thinking:

The fusing of the words "sexual" and "politics" opened up new theoretical possibilities for feminist debate, enabling the assertion that all things "private" and "personal" in women's lives were affected by the politics of the state and patriarchy, and that the chief weapon of resistance for feminism was to politicize those sacred spheres of liberal individualism. (76)

Millett's thesis is simply that we live in a patriarchy; it infiltrates society at every turn (through every institution) and maintains male privilege by inherently allowing males more status and assigning them higher valued temperaments and roles. Sex becomes political in this sense. Traditions and ideology concerning men and women are created to assure and perpetuate male superiority. In addressing her intention, Millett calls her claim "notes toward a theory of patriarchy," which attempts "to prove that sex is a status category with political implications" (24). And politics, in terms of the sexes, she says, refers to "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (23).

Millett grounds her argument by citing passages from literary texts by men and explicating the ways in which power operates in sexual encounters, arguing "that sex has a frequently neglected political aspect" (xi). From here she delves into her claims, explicitly addressing how patriarchy is present in all aspects of our culture, from our ideas about mythology to our conceptions of psychology to our economic system. She "attempts to formulate a systematic overview of patriarchy as a political

institution" (Millett xi). Millett characterizes the term "patriarchy," in Tobias's interpretation, as

a society dominated not just by masculinity but also by men whose primary purpose is to construct and maintain a certain power relationship over women. In such a society, much of what is taken to be traditional or even "true" is really an extended political maneuver to maintain the unequal power relationship between males and females. This does not necessarily imply a conspiracy in which every man colludes with every other man to keep women out of power. That would imply malevolent intention. It is rather the case, feminists believe, that in the enjoyment of privilege and individual advantage, all (or most) men accede to the system that is in place and have no particular interest in making change. (3-4)

Her definition of patriarchy, which differs greatly from the traditional meaning used in political science, "is now widely employed by feminists as a shorthand for a social system based on male domination and female subordination" (Bryson 27).

Millett begins her analysis with the theory that males and females are traditionally seen as different in terms of

three dimensions: temperament, role and status. She explains, "Sexual politics obtains consent through the 'socialization' of both sexes to the basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role, and status" (26). Temperament has to do with the conceptions we all have about how men and women are. For example, some believe men are more rational, while women are more emotional. In Millett's words,

temperament involves the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category ("masculine" and "feminine"), based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, "virtue" and ineffectuality in the female. (26)

Based on these ideas, people see men and women as occupying different appropriate roles in society and "that role differentiation is natural and in fact grows out of temperamental differences" (Tobias 4). For example, many see women's role as domestic (in the home), while seeing men's role as public (outside the home). And "men enjoy higher status than women because what men like and do are

given more social value than what women do and like"

(Tobias 4). According to Millett, sex role

decrees a consonant and highly elaborate code of conduct, gesture, and attitude for each sex. In terms of activity, sex role assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to the male. The limited role allotted the female tends to arrest her at the level of biological experience. (26)

What is most provocative about her claims, though, is that they contrast the popular view that "the causal chain of temperament-role-status begins with temperament and ends with status" (Tobias 4). In Millett's view, the causal chain is reversed: "Status really comes first in patriarchy . . . for patriarchy's most important goal is to maintain the superiority of males over females" (Tobias 5). Higher status is given to males upon birth, then their inherent temperaments result in a more valued social role which gives them power over women, whose lesser inherent temperaments result in their less powerful social role; Millett explains that "[t]hose awarded higher status tend to adopt roles of mastery, largely because they are first encouraged to develop temperaments of dominance" (26).

Millett claimed that there was nothing natural about women's inferior status in society: "it must be admitted that many of the generally understood distinctions between the sexes in the more significant areas of role and temperament, not to mention status, have in fact, essentially cultural, rather than biological, bases" (28). And Millett's most brilliant insight, according to Tobias, concerns the way in which women are forced to conform to and accept their inferior social position. The "people professionals – social and behavioral scientists, therapists, and educators" were responsible for maintaining patriarchy by defining normality for women: "Let a woman declare the mother role to be constricting or want the kind of economic power usually enjoyed by men, and she is judged in need of professional help" (Tobias 5). Millett pinpoints the family as largely responsible for "the socialization of the young (largely through the example and admonition of their parents) into patriarchal ideology's prescribed attitudes toward the categories of role, temperament, and status" (35).

Women who read or heard about Millett's ideas in the early 1970s began to examine their own relationships and

had what Jane O'Reilly termed a "click" experience¹², "a sudden awareness of how political those relationships were" (Tobias 5). Millett's work has been received as instrumental in developing feminist theory and extremely significant in opening the eyes of women to their inferior position in society and how that position has been created and is being maintained. Millett's work is also representative of early second wave feminism, for which feminists have nostalgia.

Gender Trouble

Stemming from early second wave feminist theory was the recognition of a serious theoretical weakness: the portrayal of a universal category of woman. As Nicholson puts it, feminist theory "tended to deny difference among women. The description of women's differences from men seemed too often to involve homogenous visions of womanhood" (3). It did not always consider race, class, and/or sexuality issues in its claim to speak for "women." And in this sense, the theory failed to benefit all women or fight for all women, which led to the (still) controversial ideas surrounding identity politics. How useful was the category of women if that category implies a

¹² Jane O'Reilly "The Housewife's Moment of Truth" in the premier issue of Ms. Magazine.

homogeneous identity that does not exist or serve all women? What happens if there is no identity from which to fight for women? How can any useful politics come about? According to Nicholson, questions concerning the usefulness and legitimacy of the category of gender as a position from which to render theory and/or political action came to prominence in the 1990s. These debates are highly influenced by the postmodern ideas of Lacan and Derrida (4), indicating a shift in contemporary feminist thinking in which Butler is a major player.

Judith Butler is at the heart of the controversy surrounding feminist theory and its current alleged shortcomings. She is Professor of Comparative Literature and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. She is well known as a feminist philosopher and theorist of power, gender, sexuality, and identity. The *altculture* website describes her as "one of the superstars of '90s academia, with a devoted following of grad students nationwide" ("Judith Butler" par 1). *Gender Trouble* is probably Butler's most famous and influential book and catapulted her into major feminist theorist.

Butler makes a few primary claims in *Gender Trouble*: that the category of woman is not stable and thus should not be the focus of feminist politics, that gender is

performance, and that gender can be parodied in subversive ways resulting in liberating political acts. According to Butler:

gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed . . . There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.

(25)

Butler claims the performative nature of gender; one can represent a gender through the acts of performing that gender. If this is true, then gender becomes an unstable category that cannot (or should not) be used to regulate our feelings and behaviors as humans, including enforcing heterosexuality, from which oppression of women and homosexuals stems.

In a review of Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Susan Bordo states that Butler intends to make trouble "in the mind of the reader - by 'denaturalizing' the categories of gender and of the 'natural' itself - and to suggest how 'gender trouble' is culturally stirred up through 'subversive bodily acts' that exhibit the artificiality of gender" (167). These claims emerge in three main sections, in addition to a preface and conclusion. In the preface, Butler articulates her aims to problematize gender in an effort to improve feminist politics:

Precisely because "female" no longer appears to be a stable notion, its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as "woman," and because both terms gain their troubled significations only as relational terms, this inquiry takes as its focus gender and the relational analysis it suggests. Further, it is no longer clear that feminist theory ought to try to settle the questions of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics. (xi)

She constructs her claims through the utilization of many postmodern theories. The subject of woman is called into question and out of existence. In many cases, her ideas have been received as a threat to feminist activism/politics. However, she encourages the

destabilization of the category to lend legitimacy to the feminist cause. In Butler's view, we should not dismay the possibilities, but ask "what political possibilities are the consequence of a radical critique of the categories of identity? What new shape of politics emerges when identity as a common ground no longer constrains the discourse on feminist politics?" (ix).

Butler sees herself as conducting an investigation, which shows that gender is illusory in the sense that it resides within binaries that enforce difference between sexed positions. Instead, we should

think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity.

(Butler 32-34)

According to Bordo, "[t]he genealogical critique is the deconstructive aspect of Butler's work. The 'constructive' aspect is her theory of gender, which has

two parts: an analysis of gender as 'performative' and an argument for parody as the most effective social strategy for subverting the fixed 'binary frame' of gender" (168). Bordo further claims that seeing gender as performative provides an enormously insightful "framework for exploring the ongoing, interactive, imitative processes by means of which the self, gender . . . and their illusions of authenticity are constructed" (168). Butler places compulsory heterosexuality at the origin of the restrictive gender categories into which we are socialized, as

philosophically what happens to the subject and to the stability of gender categories when the accepted, naturalized, and apparently ahistoric regime of heterosexuality is unmasked for what it is - namely, as the origin of the gender categories that have been reified as transcendent, for all times and places, rather than local or historically specific. (Kaplan 845).

So instead of attacking social practices or gender ideology, Butler attacks the "premises of identity that sustain them" (Jordan 258). Kaplan claims that Butler "represents a politics aimed at 'subverting' any such 'identity' by exposing the system of signs through which culture polices sexuality" (843). Butler provides drag as

an example of gender parody, which displaces gender norms. Butler claims that "imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency" (137).

Despite Butler's prominence, her work has been received with mixed feelings. As discussed previously, Nussbaum sees Butler's work as apolitical and inaccessible. Others worry about the political implications of eliminating the stability of gender categories from which feminist politics operate. Some herald Butler as being insightful and revolutionary, offering many potential possibilities for activism and doing valuable feminist work¹³ while others accuse her of an intellectual exclusivism.¹⁴

¹³ Stanhope, Nash, Bornstein, Lloyd, Nangeroni, McNay, Fraser, Gauntlett, Jagose, all have a positive perspective of Butler and see usefulness in her work.

¹⁴ See Nussbaum, Gubar, Rothenberg and Valente, Dutton (qtd. in Everbach), Epstein (qtd. in Duggan), Pollitt (qtd. in Duggan) for examples.

Ch. 4: Comparing Millett and Butler

So far, we've looked at some of the theoretical developments in feminism in situating two major feminists: Kate Millett and Judith Butler. Millett's generation has been heralded as "sisters"; her theory is seen to be representative of a unity in the women's movement where academics and activism worked hand-in-hand to better women. Judith Butler and the tradition in which she writes has recently come under fire for being too complex, too reliant on prior knowledge of theory (specifically postmodern theory), and not accessible to the average person, in addition to lacking real world applications and discouraging effective political action - in short, for being too "academic."

What becomes most apparent (and very surprising) when examining the two works is that Millett's *Sexual Politics* is just as academic as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. In fact, the critiques made against Butler really start to break down when we look closely at Millett's work. Butler's work is criticized for being academic in the worst sense of the word, but Millett's work can be critiqued on the same grounds.

To describe these texts as academic, according to the online *Oxford English Dictionary*, means the following¹⁵:

1. Of or belonging to an academy or institution for higher learning; hence, collegiate, scholarly.
2. Not leading to a decision; unpractical; theoretical, formal, or conventional.
3. Conforming too rigidly to the principles (in painting, etc.) of an academy; excessively formal.

These descriptions mirror the accusations to which Butler is subject by Nussbaum and others, as explained in the preceding chapters.¹⁶

"Of or belonging to an academy"

Both Judith Butler and Kate Millett have a history of association with academia, although Millett's connections to academia are a bit more blurry. Butler is unquestionably part of the academy. Butler got her Ph.D. in Philosophy from Yale University in 1984, and currently works at the University of California, Berkeley as chair and Maxine Elliot Professor in the departments of Comparative Literature and Rhetoric. She holds a powerful position at a powerful university. According to a

¹⁵ I chose the most applicable definitions here - there are others provided.

¹⁶ In addition to Nussbaum, critiques have been leveled at Butler, usually in the context of postmodernism which see her as representative, by Segal, Gubar, Dutton (qtd. in Everbach), Epstein (qtd. in Duggan), Pollitt (qtd. in Duggan).

bibliography compiled by Eddie Yeghiayan, she has over 300 publications to her credit and has been mentioned and/or addressed in over 1800 publications by others. Just being aware of these credentials, we know that she is a scholar, deep in associations with the university, and takes part in academic conversations through publishing and producing texts.

Millett, like Butler, was part of the academy. In fact, she has been credited with "introduc[ing] academia to feminism" (Cole 9). According to "The Liberation of Kate Millett," she graduated from the University of Minnesota, then attended Oxford University, where she got her master's degree and specialized in Victorian literature. She taught at Hunter and Barnard in New York, then entered Columbia University's Ph.D. program in English. In fact, *Sexual Politics* was her Ph.D. thesis at Columbia University (18-19). Her other book publications number around 13, in addition to several essay publications ("Kate Millett"). Millett's affiliations with academia were strong, but not exclusive. While Millett was working on her thesis, she partook in Women's Liberation activities, picketing, giving speeches, and attending meetings ("The Liberation of Kate Millett" 18-19). After the publication of *Sexual Politics*, a best-seller, she became one of the spokespersons for the

Women's Liberation Movement. In 1980, she was institutionalized for depression. By age 63, Millett was broke, out of print in the United States, unemployed (Freely par 2), and living on a Christmas tree farm in Poughkeepsie, NY ("Kate Millett"). Today, *Sexual Politics* is back in print and she occasionally contributes to publications and does speaking engagements, some even associated with academia.

"Not leading to a decision; unpractical; theoretical"

According to Nussbaum, Butler's *Gender Trouble* is not practical for feminist politics. In fact, it encourages little to no action on behalf of women in her view. Neither parodying gender, for which Nussbaum argues Butler gives no explicit instructions on doing so, nor dressing in drag, which Nussbaum sees as a "tired old script" (44), help the material needs of women and gays. Butler's theory that gender is performative and even her suggestion to parody gender in subversive ways remains indecisive and unclear, especially when readers try to actually put Butler's theory into action. Butler seems to fully recommend parody as a political tactic or strategy:

Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and

one that appears as a derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic - a failed copy, as it were . . . Hence, there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects. The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: "man" and "woman."

(146)

Yet, she ends her last chapter with a question: "What other strategies for engaging the 'unnatural' might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such?" (149). Well, isn't that the question she was just answering? Or are the strategies she recommends so lacking that we need to come up with more? The answers are not clear. So when people attempt to put subversive parody into action, they are not effective.

Butler does not tackle specific issues like rape, or birth control, or equal pay. Instead, she calls into question the category of gender. On the one hand, the binary gender system is extremely oppressive to all members of our society. On the other hand, the ways to challenge

it are unclear. Butler provides drag as an example of the ways in which gender shows itself to be performative. However, drag has been misinterpreted by many as "the paradigm for performativity" when she meant to offer it "as an example of performativity," according to an interview Butler had with *Radical Philosophy* (Butler qtd. in "Extracts . . ." par 8). The interviewers told Butler that many "people like *Gender Trouble* because they liked the idea of gender as a kind of improvisational theatre, a space where different identities can be more or less freely adopted and explored at will" but find it unclear how "to use transgressive performances such as drag to help decentre or destabilise gender categories" ("Extracts . . ." par 7). Butler, however, responded that she doesn't think that "if we were all more dragged out gender life would become more expansive and less restrictive. There are restrictions in drag" (Butler qtd. in "Extracts"). The discrepancy just illustrated is the problem. In fact, Butler has had to address this very thing in *Bodies That Matter*, arguing that although many readers saw *Gender Trouble* as claiming "the proliferation of drag performances as a way of subverting dominant gender norms," there is actually "no necessary relation between drag and subversion" (qtd. in Rothenberg and Valente par 12).

In *Gender Trouble*, it is unclear exactly how or what Butler means us to do when she encourages us to parody gender, to subvert it, to make its illusions apparent to the world. Butler even admits that parody "by itself is not subversive" and says that "there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (138). However, she is not going to provide us with this knowledge. Rothenberg and Valente critique Butler for failing to acknowledge that the way an action is received is dependent on the context of the action and the interpretation by the audience. The success of subversion depends on social context. What results is misdirected "activist energies, not only squandering resources but even endangering those naïve enough to act on performativity's (false) political promise" (Rothenberg and Valente par 1). They argue that any "practical political discourse" should try to link its proposed actions with their possible effects so that energy is not wasted (par 1). So as far as practical applications, *Gender Trouble* offers none. Butler has asked lots of questions, but answered none sufficiently.

Millett's *Sexual Politics*, although highly popularized as *the* text of the Women's Liberation Movement, proves problematic in its applicability to practical politics as well. The most powerful aspects of Millett's work are the claims she makes concerning the patriarchal nature of our culture and the women and men we socialize into it. Millett advances her theory of sexual politics, in which she proves how deeply patriarchy affects us in every cultural institution, in the second section of the first part of *Sexual Politics*, which equals approximately only 10% of her book.

An astonishingly significant portion of the book is devoted to the study of literature. She spends over one-third of the book talking about specific authors who she sees as reflecting and influencing conceptions of the relations between the sexes. In fact, she begins the book citing passages from works by D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet to illustrate the power relations that emerge between the sexes and, more specifically, in sexual encounters. Studying human relations in literature does not replace their study in real life¹⁷; however, she defends her choice to use

¹⁷ Clough claims that "Millett treats the literary text as a transparent reflection of reality that therefore provides evidence of sex in a patriarchal society" without making clear the "relationship of the

literature, claiming that "the literature of literary criticism" is "capable of seizing upon the larger insights which literature affords into the life it describes, or interprets, or even distorts" (Millett xii). Despite a degree of validity to her claim, what results in *Sexual Politics* is a sort of double-layered criticism. We have to read through the layer of literary criticism to understand what she is saying about life. She analyzes "real life" through the lens of literature. The insights literature affords us are significant, but her extensive use of literature maintains a separation from practical action in the world.

While her ideas are powerful and convincing, they are no more relevant or applicable to activism than Butler's. While Butler's intent is related directly to feminist political action, her recommendation for parody is vague. The bulk of Millett's text is not directly related to feminist political action, yet she does include a call to action in the postscript. This, however, is too little too late. In the postscript, approximately 1½ pages long (her book is 363 pages), she attempts to solidify the political nature of her book and encourage her reader to act in the

ideological deployment of male domination, representation, literature and discursive authority" (475-476).

interests of a "sexual revolution." Her recommendation is as follows:

The enormous social change involved in a sexual revolution is basically a matter of altered consciousness, the exposure and elimination of social and psychological realities underlining political and cultural structures. We are speaking then, of a cultural revolution, which, while, it must necessarily involve political and economic reorganization traditionally implied by the term revolution, must go far beyond this as well. (362)

She is calling for a new society, one in which all of our cultural institutions are revised, and one necessitated on "altered consciousness." Of course, this is no small task, and the radical nature of her plea is admirable. But what exactly are we supposed to do with it? She mentions "human growth and true re-education" above physical violence to uproot our culture. And she says "no lengthy evolutionary process" is necessary to do so because students, in whose hands she leaves the sexual revolution, have the ability to organize very quickly and effectively. So students, who have little to no power in society and little to no independence from their parents, and who are in the *process* of *being* educated, are supposed to re-educate the human

population to the extent that an altered cultural consciousness comes to fruition. And how are they supposed to do this? Millett provides no answers, although she hopes "the usual self-destructive resort to violent tactics" is not necessary (363).

Millett's theory includes a call to action, but that is all it is - a call. A call that is vague - and overwhelming no less. Diane J. Cole compliments Millett for presenting an excellent case for the overwhelming infiltration of patriarchal oppression and the "altered consciousness" needed to eliminate it, yet finds *Sexual Politics* to be no more than "a skilled piece of rhetoric" which does not provide "a realistic blueprint for change" (9). Millett's work "concentrates mainly on raising universal feminist consciousness, rather than providing a clear agenda for change" (Whelehan 76). It is there to open eyes, but we have to figure out what to do once our eyes have been opened. In this sense, her work is impressive and important, but no more related to activism than Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

"Conforming too rigidly to the principles of an academy; excessively formal"

Oftentimes, when we think of language use in academia, such words as exclusive, elitist, mystifying, unclear,

boring, verbose, abstract, obscure, complex, and many other like words come to mind. The production of language in academia has been criticized by many as resulting in a kind of intellectual club - a "club that academics create for themselves, and jargon is part of the club" (Everbach par 2). Edward Said, President of the MLA, condemned university literature departments in 1999 for obscure writing (Everbach par 2). Dennis Dutton, editor of the journal who holds a "bad writing contest," says that "actual communication has nothing to do with" academic language (qtd. in Everbach par 6).

The following sentence won Judith Butler the first prize in the 1999 Bad Writing Contest sponsored by *Philosophy and Literature*. It appears as part of her article "Further Reflections on the Conversations of Our Time" in *Diacritics* in 1997:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to

one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

(qtd. in Nussbaum 39)

According to Nussbaum, Butler might have written the following:

Marxist accounts, focusing on capital as the central force structuring social relations, depicted the operations of that force as everywhere uniform. By contrast, Althusserian accounts, focusing on power, see the operations of that force as variegated and as shifting over time. (39)

Butler, according to Nussbaum, "prefers a verbosity that causes the reader to expend so much effort in deciphering her prose that little energy is left for assessing the truth of the claims" (39). Butler's prose has been called "thick soup" with an "air of in-group knowingness" and its "extremely high ratio of names to explanations" (Nussbaum 38).

Millett, however, also writes utilizing a formality of language that results in verbosity and complexity. Her writing is subject to the same criticisms in terms of language use. For example, Millett writes:

As patriarchy enforces a temperamental imbalance of personality traits between the sexes, its educational institutions, segregated or co-educational, accept a cultural programming toward the generally operative division between "masculine" and "feminine" subject matter, assigning the humanities and certain social sciences (at least in their lower or marginal branches) to the female - and science and technology, the professions, business and engineering to the male. Of course, the balance of employment, prestige and reward at present lie with the latter. (42)

She could have written:

Like the patriarchy in general, the education system enforces the socialization of "masculine" and "feminine" character traits by encouraging males into the privileged "masculine" areas of scientific studies and females into the less valued "feminine" areas of study, like the humanities.

Verbose and grammatically complex sentences are a trademark of stereotypical academic language. Butler, and others who write postmodern feminist theory, have been criticized for complex and inaccessible use of language,¹⁸ but Millett's

¹⁸ Susan Gubar addresses the complexities of Butler's grammatical constructions to illustrate the inherent problems of combining

use of language is just as wordy and abstract. Cole claims that Millett's use of language "is a barrier" and is exclusively for "literary types" (9).

Millett employs a formality and maintains a degree of personal separation through her use of the passive voice. Use of the passive voice results in language that is subject to vagueness and void of power and personality. For example, she writes:

The word "politics" is enlisted here when speaking of the sexes, primarily because such a word is eminently useful in outlining the real nature of their relative status, historically and at the present. It is opportune, perhaps today even mandatory, that we develop a more relevant psychology and philosophy of power relationships beyond the simple conceptual framework provided by our traditional formal politics. Indeed, it may be imperative that we give some attention to defining a theory of politics which treats of power relationships on grounds less conventional than those to which we are accustomed.

(24)

postmodern ideas about the instability of the "subject" with feminist ideas that rely on the stability of the "subject."

Is she or is she not recommending these new philosophies? Her use of the phrases "It is opportune," and "it may be imperative" to introduce her ideas leave us wondering.

According to *A Writer's Reference*, passive voice constructions "lack vigor because they convey no action" and contribute to "dull or wordy sentences" (Hacker 142). Millett's sentences here are dull and lack power. The usual recommendation for using passive voice is if one wants to emphasize the receivers of actions instead of the actors themselves. The sentences above seem to ask us to do something, yet the passive voice construction does not emphasize us, the receivers and would-be actors. Millett's intention is limited by her use of passive voice. In addition, she separates herself from her work in using the passive voice. For feminist theory, the place where the personal is the political, it is appropriate and commendable to write personally instead of from the distance that the passive voice allows.¹⁹

Another trademark of formal academic convention is use of its reliance on other academic work. Theory is built on theory, in other words. Much academic work "is allusive in some way: it presupposes prior knowledge of certain

¹⁹ She may have chosen passive voice so much because it was her dissertation.

doctrines and positions" (Nussbaum 38). Butler's use of theory has been subject to critique because of the extent to which she employs theory, which theory she employs, and because she does not make clear her interpretive use of the theory. Her style has been said to be "ponderous and obscure. It is dense with allusions to other theorists, drawn from a wide range of different theoretical traditions" (Nussbaum 38). She addresses the ideas of Lacan, Freud, Beauvoir, Irigaray, Kristeva, Wittig and Foucault. However, Millett's work is no exception. Millett relies on a great amount of theory, discussing the theories of Mill, Ruskin, Engels, Freud, and Erikson.²⁰ Both Millett and Butler seem equally reliant on theory and thus, are similar in their adherence to the conventions of academia.

Thus far, I have attempted to establish a similarity in the academic nature of contemporary feminist theory as represented by Judith Butler and early second wave feminist theory as represented by Kate Millett in an attempt to defend contemporary theory from charges that it is less related to the real world and less dedicated to improving the lives of women. While both texts remain, in large

²⁰ The ways in which Millett and Butler utilize these theorists is interesting, but for my purposes it is sufficient to note that they both conform to academic convention.

part, compliant to the textbook definition of academic work, this is not to say that feminist theory (of today or yesterday) is useless or confined to academia. Clearly, early second wave feminist theory has not been subject to the same sort of criticism as contemporary feminist theory. Additionally, early second wave feminist theory was being created alongside a huge social movement. The argument that theory was "academic" or not directly related to the material needs of women did not need to be made; feminist activism was at its peak. Although there is no large-scale social movement to accompany contemporary feminist theory, that does not make it less valuable or less activist.

Ch. 5: Academics and Activism Reconceptualized

Gender Trouble Breeds Gender Outlaw

Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* shows that Butler's theory can and does escape the confines of academia. It is through Bornstein's work that complaints concerning Butler's lack of accessibility and applicability are mitigated.

Bornstein, who grew up feeling as if she was the wrong gender felt as if her "non-traditional gender identity had been [her] biggest secret, [her] deepest shame"(8). She wants to make people realize, through her work, that the gender system represses us all. Bornstein claims: "In living along the borders of the gender frontier, I've come to see the gender system created by this culture as a particularly malevolent and divisive construct, made all the more dangerous by the seeming inability of the culture to question gender, its own creation" (12).

Bornstein wants us to realize the fluidity of gender and thus the lack of "truth" in the gender system. She has been influenced by Butler's thesis that gender is performative and she's adopted this idea into her own activism. Her theory of the "third space," a space where one can bend/blend gender and thus illuminate its artificiality emerges in her own work in queer theater.

Bornstein claims that "it will be the act of playing with gender that's going to change cultural attitudes about gender" (140).

It is in this sense that Butler's ideas about parody have been utilized in a social movement. Bornstein credits Butler with being an activist in her work and helping transgender theorists like herself; she is thankful that theorists such as Butler are "asking great questions and making room for [transgender people] to respond . . . Questions are the hardest part" (14).

Butler's work has been highly appropriated by the transgender movement, queer theory, and by intersexed people. When Butler is criticized for not being applicable to real lives, the transgender movement's utilization of her theories is completely ignored. According to Nancy Nangeroni, Butler has influenced the way transgendered people see themselves and others (par 2). Because of Butler, in their eyes, they are no longer the problem; the binary gender system is the problem. Through Butler, transgender people learn that "transgender shame is imposed by a culture striving for something unnatural and repressive" in the binary gender system (Nangeroni par 4).

Martha Nussbaum, seemingly Butler's biggest critic, ignores the transgender movement and the applications of

Butler's ideas therein. When she discounts Butler's political nature in her work, she discounts transgender applications for it. Why is this the case? Nussbaum is strictly concerned with women, gays, and lesbians, at least according to her critique of Butler. All these people "fit" into categories. Butler and Bornstein want to get rid of categories. They think that dismantling the binary gender system is the way to improve all lives. However, many feminists worry that with the dissolution of gender categories and the destabilization of the category "woman" feminist politics will be over.²¹ This same fear emerges through critiques of the usage of postmodern theory in feminist theory. Postmodernism threatens the existence of identity politics, on which feminism relies, according to some viewpoints.

Postmodern Problems

Barbara Epstein argues that the adoption of postmodernism by some feminists has undermined "social analysis, replacing concern for social change with concern for intellectual and aesthetic sophistication" (qtd. in Duggan par 9). Katha Pollitt attacks postmodernism for engendering a "pseudo-politics, in which everything is

²¹ Ironically, Nussbaum makes no mention of identity politics or the destabilization of the category of "woman."

claimed in the name of revolution and democracy and equality and anti-authoritarianism, and nothing is risked, nothing, except maybe a bit of harmless crossdressing" (qtd. in Duggan par 12). Charlotte Bunch tells of a student schooled in postmodern theory who was totally immobilized:

The theory has conditioned the student to feel that she cannot have a voice. She is afraid that if she speaks, she will be accused of speaking for or ignoring somebody else. The theory has important truth in it, but it has become immobilizing because it has not been done in conjunction with practice. The theory is interesting, but it is not engaging with real-life situations. (Hartmann et al. 933)

Nancy Hartstock agrees, saying that theories built on a series of postmodern doctrines "inhibit any kind of political activism" (Hartmann et al. 938). Valerie Codd, in "Postmodernism Obfuscates Reality: No Room for Activism" argues that since the postmodern "person is thoroughly socially constructed, with no essential core, and, so, defined to the point of having no real agency" that postmodernism does not allow for the possibility of change, and threatens to conceal the very real power relations that threaten women (Codd par 4-5).

The inclusion of postmodern ideas in feminist theory has introduced new activist possibilities, as in the transgender movement, and new concerns such as accessibility to language and lack of possibility for political action. Both can be addressed through the classroom, which gives the classroom a renewed importance as a venue for feminist activism than it has been in the past.

The Classroom

The classroom has been seen as an appropriate place to "do" feminist activism by many, and as a weak activist effort to others.²² With the increasing use of postmodernism in feminist theory, the classroom becomes even more significant as a place of activism. Difficult language and theoretical concepts in theory influenced by postmodernism do limit access to work, but this does not mean the theory is useless. The teacher of theory is there to make the theory accessible to students and that spreading of knowledge is activist. In the classroom, teachers familiarize students with feminist texts that will impact them; in this sense, a sort of consciousness raising will take place. This becomes all the more

²² For discussion about how activism should take place outside of the classroom in addition to or instead of inside, see Ring, Welch.

important since the postmodernization of feminist theory has resulted in a certain use of language which is difficult and abstract. This is not to say the theory is not political; it is. But feminist teachers become all the more important in helping texts utilizing postmodern language become accessible and thus utilizable in activist activities.

Difficult language creates problems in accessibility for audiences, especially when we consider the audience's reaction very important in creating impact. Susan Bordo, an academic and philosopher, finds *Gender Trouble* "an extremely difficult book to read, fully armored as it is with Foucauldian terminology and written in the dense, complexifying style of much continental philosophy" (173). Bordo admires Butler's work as "enormously insightful" and "pedagogically useful," but she also admits that she "cannot imagine using *Gender Trouble* with students" and that this "is a serious limitation for a work whose ambitions are to subvert dominant cultural assumptions . . . I am not sure at all, however, that Butler would be (or should be) satisfied to have stirred up 'trouble' only for a handful of academic sophisticates" (Bordo 174). And I agree, to a certain extent; however, I would argue that this makes the classroom an even more significant

opportunity for teachers to be activist. Theory by nature is difficult, which reinforces the importance of teaching students to dissect theory, helping them to understand and pass the ideas on.

Butler defends her own use of language as political, which points to possible advantages of complex and subversive discourse. Butler feels that language in our culture is inherently connected to oppression. In a response printed in the *New York Times* (3/20/99) to an earlier article on her bad writing award, Butler claims that non-traditional academic language is necessary to subvert the power structures in place which are represented through traditional academic discourse. In other words, Butler believes that in order to change society, we must change our language, since language creates our understanding of society. Learning to understand her use of language is important is removing ourselves from the oppression of the gender system.

Kate Millett wrote in *Sexual Politics* that:

When a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely need to speak itself aloud; when its workings are exposed and questioned, it becomes not only subject to discussion, but even to change. (58)

The binary system of gender maintains a gender hierarchy through which women and transgressors are oppressed. Theory that reveals this idea makes it possible to change. That is how texts such as Butler's and Millett's, academic works in every sense of the word, are activist. Their activist elements increase though, as they are disseminated through the classroom, where students can learn about them and spread knowledge, sort of a trickle down theory. We know that since more women are in the workplace today, as opposed to the late 1960s and early 1970s, college students become all the more integral to the feminist cause. Women that would have paraded on the streets in 1970 now have jobs which prevent them from being so actively political. Activism can occur on the streets today, in addition to in the classroom and in the minds of students. While traditional and collective forms of activism are still desirable, new and more individual forms of activism exist today and we should not ignore them or hold them up against what went on the revolutionary social climate of second wave feminist theory.

A classroom in which students become exposed to feminist ideas and texts has the potential to alter the way they see and exist in the world, and to move them to action. Annanya Bhattacharjee addresses this idea:

It is increasingly through women's studies programs that younger women are being introduced to feminism today. Thus the classroom become an important site for women's studies faculty to exercise activism. For it is through teaching, readings, and personal example set by the faculty that students become committed to understanding and challenging gender, race, class and other forms of discrimination in its myriad forms. I have found in teaching Introduction to women's studies that I can inspire activism. Students take home the readings and share them with their friends and family members. They undergo the process of discovery, learning, and change with those closest to them. Thus, by sharing this information and working to build less oppressive relationships, students come to realize their ability to bring about change. Pointing this out and encouraging them to conduct research that lends itself to action develops their activist skills. The classroom gives students both information and knowledge and the tools to effect personal and broader change. (Silliman and Bhattacharjee 131)

Although there is little revolutionary atmosphere at work in the new millennium, there are plenty of possibilities for and examples of feminist activism.

Activism today takes place on a smaller scale, on a more individual as opposed to a collective basis. And although this may not seem as effective today in pushing for political change, we have to remember that political change, in the most traditional sense of the word, has already occurred for women in many ways. Yet it is clear that we still live in a society of male privilege (women earn 76 cents to the male dollar) (Cox 58); there is still work to be done. Linda Grant notes that: "The staggering excitement of those early days was that we were making it up as we went along, with no manuals and no laid-down orthodoxy . . . We no longer live in the times of the pioneers but the age of trying to make it work, to muddle through with all the contradictions" (par 4). And it seems that theory, even without the benefit of large scale social activism, presents many possibilities to help bring about the changes that seem necessary today. What is left in terms of female oppression occurs in much different terms than it did in the twentieth century. While many women have benefited from advances made, many women, mostly poor or nonwhite, are still subject to extensive subjugation.

The importance of the classroom in consciousness raising is magnified today, as a result of the backlash and the token advances women have made, which while

improvements, have yet to challenge the gender system. The combination of the classroom and the powerful ideas of contemporary feminist theory combine to serve a very important function. Consciousness raising is one of the many ways in which theory can be, has been, and currently is used to advance feminist causes by raising awareness. Affecting lives is how feminism comes to be important and how it enables social change; "It makes you very sensitive—raw, even - this consciousness . . ." (Morgan xv).

Susan Faludi explains the backlash against women in the 1980s in her book *Backlash*. She critiques popular culture and the Reagan administration, primarily, for suppressing women's rights and stepping on the gains they had made in the previous decade. She explains how women are presented with a version of femininity which when they fail to live up to has destructive results: "Its false front has encouraged each woman to doubt herself for not matching the image in the mass-produced mirror, instead of doubting the validity of the mirror itself and pressing to discover what its nonreflective surface hides."

Many women and men alike are reluctant to claim the title of feminist. They see feminists as threatening the status quo (which it does of course) and complaining about

problems that no longer exist. Note: I am speaking strictly from my personal experience, although I'd venture to say mine are not unusual.

As discussed earlier, one of the major tasks facing early second wave feminists was getting people to recognize that a problem existed, to admit that women were created to be and treated as second class citizens, and to create theories that explained how this came to be. Well, it seems as if this is still the case. I hear students frequently argue that women and men are equal now, so what's all the fuss about? They do not want to align themselves with the feminist cause, having heard misconceptions about it in the media. But when I ask them if they believe that women and men deserve the same opportunities, privileges and treatment in society, I have yet to have anyone say no. In this sense, they are feminists. Many advances have been made, but the fact remains that women are the underprivileged members of our culture and the entrenched values that make that so have shown no signs of leaving. The structure of our culture, realized to be patriarchal and problematic on many terms, has not really changed. The value structure is still the same. Think of our language - male is still the norm in all aspects. Males still insult each other in terms of

female anatomy, or in less offensive terms, by comparison to females or anything relating to femininity (this is an exercise I do in my classes). We still think in terms of stereotypes. (See Appendix A). Males still feel threatened by feminist ideas, which only lends support to the fact that they are in privileged positions, or else they would not be so paranoid about losing them.

Making gender issues apparent is very important today. In this sense, conceptions of activism have changed and yet remained the same. Women in the 1960s started consciousness raising as a way into political ideas for women, but we still need to employ consciousness raising today - it's still one of the most important activist feminist tools and one of the most important ways theory can function through the classroom and be politically useful in the absence of a large scale feminist movement.

Works Cited

- "Activism." Oxford English Dictionary Online. Newman Library, Virginia Tech. 4 April 2001. <<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.
- Berila, Beth. "Enacting Feminism: The Feminist Methodology of Community-Based Arts." Conference paper. Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association. Detroit, Michigan. October 2000.
- Bordo, Susan. "Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies" *Feminist Studies* 18.1 (1992): 159-175.
- Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Boxer, Marilyn Jacoby. *When Women Ask the Questions: Creating Women's Studies in America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- Brodkin, Karen. "Once More Into the Streets" *Signs* 25.4 (2000): 1223-1226.
- Bryson, Valerie. *Feminist Debates: Issues of Theory and Political Practice*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

- Clough, Patricia. "The Hybrid Criticism of Patriarchy."
The Sociological Quarterly 35.3 (1994): 473-485.
- Codd, Val. "Postmodernism Obscures Reality: No Room for
 Activism." *Off Our Backs* 29.8 (1999): 11. Infotrac
 Expanded Academic Index. Newman Library, Virginia
 Tech. 8 pars. Gale Group. 10 February 2001.
 <<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.
- Cole, Susan G. "Sexual Politics: Charged Microcosm."
Broadside 3.9 (1982): 8-9.
- Coole, Diana. "Feminism Without Nostalgia." *Radical
 Philosophy* 83 (1997): 17-24.
- - - . "Threads and Plaits or an Unfinished Project:
 Feminism(s) through the Twentieth Century." *Journal of
 Political Ideologies* 5.1 (2000): 35-54.
- Cox, Meg. "A Special Report: Balance Fixing Retirement."
Ms. 11.2 (2001): 58-65.
- Crowley, Helen. "Women's Studies: Between a Rock and a
 Hard Place or Just Another Cell in the Beehive?"
Feminist Review 61 (1999): 131-150.
- Duggan, Lisa. "The Theory Wars, or, Who's Afraid of Judith
 Butler?" *Journal of Women's History* 10.1 (1998): 9-
 20. Infotrac Expanded Academic Index. Newman
 Library, Virginia Tech. 25 pars. Gale Group. 10
 February 2001. <<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau, and Ann Snitow. "A Feminist Memoir Project." *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices From Women's Liberation*. Eds. Rachel DuPlessis and Ann Snitow. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998. 3-24.

Epstein, Barbara. "Ambivalence About Feminism." *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices From Women's Liberation*. Eds. Rachel DuPlessis and Ann Snitow. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998. 124-148.

"Extracts from *Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler*." *Radical Philosophy* 67 (1994).
Theory, Gender, and Identity Sources. By David Gauntlett. 2001. pars. University of Leeds. 5 April 2001. <<http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm>>.

Frazer, Mariam. "Classing Queer: Politics in Competition." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 16.2 (1999): 107-131.

Freely, Maureen. "What Kate did next - Kate Millett is broke; other feminist pioneers have killed themselves or gone mad, rejected by their disciples. What happened to sisterhood?" *The Observer* 3 January 1999.
Dow Jones Publications Library. Newman Library, Virginia Tech. 12 pars. 4 March 2001.
<<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.

Gauntlett, David. Theory, Gender, and Identity Sources.

2001. University of Leeds. 5 April 2001.
<<http://www.theory.org.uk>>.
- Gornick, Vivian. "What Feminism Means to Me." *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices From Women's Liberation*. Eds. Rachel DuPlessis and Ann Snitow. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998. 372-376.
- Grant, Linda. "Feminist who lit the torch Kate Millett inspired a Generation of Women. And Now She's Selling Christmas Trees to Survive." *The Guardian* 30 June 1998. Dow Jones Publications Library. Newman Library, Virginia Tech. 12 pars. 4 March 2001.
<<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.
- Gubar, Susan. "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998): 878-902.
- Hacker, Diana. *A Writer's Reference*. 4th ed. Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.
- Hanisch, Carol. "The Personal is Political." *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*. 76-78.
- - - . "Some Thoughts on What's Wrong with Feminist Theory Today and What It Will Take to Make it Successful Again." *So To Speak: A Feminist Journal of Language and Art*. 10.1 (2001): 30-42.
- Hartmann, Heidi, et al. "Bringing Together Feminist Theory and Practice: A Collective Interview." *Signs* 21.4

- (1996): 917-951.
- Hope, Diane S. "To Risk the Self." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 3 / 4 (1999): 243-248.
- Howe, Florence, et al. "Sexual Politics: Twenty Years Later." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 3 / 4 (1991): 30-40.
- Hunter, Joanna. "Women Find a Voice in the Protest Movement." *The Times of London News International*. 16 Novemeber 1999. Dow Jones Publications Library. Newman Library, Virginia Tech. 6 pars. 4 March 2001. <<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.
- Jagose, Annamarie. "Queer Theory." Australian Humanities Review. 7 pars. 3 April 2001. <<http://www.lib.Latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-Dec-1996/jagose.html>>.
- Jordan, Constance. Rev. of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, by Judith Butler. *Women's Studies* 22 (1993): 257-259.
- "Judith Butler." Altculture. 2001. 1 par. Automatic Media, Inc. 2 May 2001. <<http://www.altculture.com/aentries/j/juxbutler.html>>
- Kaplan, Ann. Rev. of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, by Judith Butler. *Signs* 17.4 (1992): 843-847.

"Kate Millett." Gale Literary Databases. Newman Library, Virginia Tech. 4 March 2001. <<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.

Kelly, Christine A. "Whatever Happened to Women's Liberation? Feminist Legacies of '68?" *New Political Science* 22.2 (2000): 161-175.

Kolodny, Annette. "Dancing Between Left and Right: Feminism and the Academic Minefield in the 1980s." *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1998): 453-466.

Leder, Sharon, Meta Plotnik, and Pramila Venkateswaran. "Changing Concepts of Activism in Women's Studies: Women's Studies in a Community College." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 3 /4 (1999): 185-201.

Leffler, Ann, Dair L. Gillespie, and Elinor Lerner Ratner. "Academic Feminists and the Women's Movement." 1973. 17 October 2000. <<http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/Nikki/academic2.html>>

"Let's Get Real About Feminism: The Backlash, the Myths, the Movement." *Ms.* September/October 1993: 34-43.

"The Liberation of Kate Millett." *Time* 31 August 1970: 18-19.

Lipovenko, Dorothy. "Goals still Elusive, Feminist Says." *The Globe and Mail*. 24 February 1984. Dow Jones Publications Library. Newman Library, Virginia Tech. 6 pars. 4 March 2001. <<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.

- Lloyd, Moya. "Performativity, Parody, Politics." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 16.2 (1999): 195-213.
- Long, Karen R. "An Intellectual's Brave View of Insanity." *The Plain Dealer* 26 June 1990. Dow Jones Publications Library. Newman Library, Virginia Tech. 11 pars. 4 March 2001. <<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.
- Long, Priscilla. "We Called Ourselves Sisters." *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices From Women's Liberation*. Eds. Rachel DuPlessis and Ann Snitow. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998. 324-337.
- McCaughey, Martha. "Getting Physical in Theory and Practice." Conference paper. Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association. Detroit, Michigan. October 2000. <<http://www.cis.vt.edu/ws/ASA/confpaper.html>>.
- McNay, Lois. "Subject, Psyche, and Agency." *Theory, Culture and Society* 16.2 (1999): 75-193.
- Meijer, Irene Costera, and Baukje Prins. "How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler." *Signs* 23.2 (1998): 275. Infotrac Expanded Academic Index. Newman Library, Virginia Tech. 29 pars. Gale Group. 9 March 2001. <<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970.

- Morgan, Robin. "Introduction: The Women's Movement."
Sisterhood is Powerful. Ed. Robin Morgan. New York:
 Random House, 1970. xiii-xli.
- Nangeroni, Nancy. "Transgender '95: A New Day Dawns."
Sojourner 21.6 (1996): 9-10. Contemporary Women's
 Issues. Newman Library, Virginia Tech. 21 pars.
 OCLC Firstsearch. 5 April 2001.
 <<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.
- Nash, Margaret. *Rev. of Gender Trouble: Feminism and the
 Subversion of Identity*, by Judith Butler. *Hypatia* 5.3
 (1990): 171-175.
- Nicholson, Linda. *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist
 Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Nussbaum, Martha. "The Professor of Parody." The New
 Republic 22 February 1999: 37-45.
- O'Reilly, Jane. "The Housewife's Moment of Truth." *Ms.*
 Spring 1972: 55-59.
- Orwin, Anne S. "Labor Roots and the Women's Movement: A
 Profile of Eight Midwestern Activists." *Women's
 Studies Quarterly* 3 /4 (1999): 268-274.
- Piercy, Marcy. "The Grand Coolee Damn." *Sisterhood is
 Powerful*. Ed. Robin Morgan. New York: Random House,
 1970. 421-439.
- Rhetoric Department. University of California at Berkeley.

9 April 2001

<http://rhetoric.berkeley.edu/Butler.html>.

Ring, Siobhan. "Seizing Academia for Social Change."

Women's Studies Quarterly 3 / 4 (1999): 230-240.

Rothenberg, Molly Anne, and Joseph Valente. "Performative

Chic: The Fantasy of a Performative Politics."

College Literature 24.1 (1997): 295-305. Infotrac

Expanded Academic Index. Newman Library, Virginia

Tech. 25 pars. Gale Group. 3 March 2001.

<http://www.lib.vt.edu>.

Sarachild, Kathie. "A Program for Feminist 'Consciousness

Raising'." *Notes From the Second Year: Women's*

Liberation. 78-80.

Segal, Lynne. "Generations of Feminism." *Radical*

Philosophy 83 (1997): 6-16.

Silliman, Jael, and Anannya Bhattacharjee. "Relocating

Women's Studies and Activism: A Dialogue." *Women's*

Studies Quarterly 3 / 4 (1999): 122-135.

Smith, Barbara. "'Feisty Characters' and 'Other People's

Causes': Memories of White Racism and U.S. Feminism."

The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices From Women's

Liberation. Eds. Rachel DuPlessis and Ann Snitow.

New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998. 477-481.

Stacey, Judith. "Is Academic Feminism an Oxymoron?" *Signs*

- 25.4 (2000): 1189-1194.
- Stanhope, Victoria. "Bad Writing or Bad Politics? Feminist and Postmodern Relations." *Off Our Backs* 29.8 (1999): 10. Infotrac Expanded Academic Index. Newman Library, Virginia Tech. 7 pars. Gale Group. 9 March 2001. <<http://www.lib.vt.edu>>.
- Stimpson, Catharine R. *Women's Studies in the United States*. New York: Ford Foundation, 1986.
- Thorne, Barrie. "A Telling Time for Women's Studies." *Signs* 25.4 (2000): 1183-1187.
- Tobias, Sheila. *Faces of Feminism: An Activist's Reflections on the Women's Movement*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1997.
- Trebilcot, Joyce. "Activism Broadly Defined." *Off our backs*. May 1986. 13.
- Wallsgrove, Ruth. "Activism Today." *Off our backs*. May 1986. 11-13.
- Welch, Penny. "The Politics of Teaching Women's Studies" *Women's Studies Quarterly*. (1999) 3 / 4: 70-75.
- Whelehan, Imelda. *Modern Feminist Thought*. New York: New York University Press, 1995.
- "Who's Come a Long Way, Baby?" *Time* 31 August 1970. 16-21.

Yeghiayan, Eddie. Bibliography of Works by and about

Judith Butler. 9 April 2001

<<http://sun3.lib.uci.edu/indiv/scctr/Wellek/butler/>>.

Appendix A:

The following tables are based on classroom discussions (about 45 students). Students were asked to list what they saw as the characteristics of males and females today in Table A. In Table B, they were asked to think of ways in which gender can be called into question.

Table C lists traditional notions concerning males and females and serves as a point of comparison in illustrating the extent to which my students agreed with these ideas.

Table A	
Characteristics of men	Characteristics of women
Aggressive	"bitch" if loud and aggressive
Independent	
Mechanical	
Scientific	Emotional / intuitive
	Social/interact
Apathetic / insensitive	Nurturing / caretaking
Egotistical / proud	Self-conscious / insecure
Non-hygenic (smell)	Hygienic/ (smell like potpourri)
	Jealous
Logical / rational	Illogical/ Irrational / Mentally unstable
	Manipulative / 2-faced
Moody	Moody
Strive for status / Competitive	Stick up for each other
Stoic/ Not talk about feelings	Sensitive / talk about feelings
	Vain / primping / concerned with beauty / appearance Better-looking
	Subject to more standards to live by
Behaviors	
Don't admit faults	Overreact
Deny femininity	Ask too many questions
Don't like to shop/ like to buy instead	Like to shop / materialistic
	Think they're fat
Bad listeners	Talk too much
Public leadership	Private (family leadership)
Like sports	

Table B: Non-masculine behavior	Non-feminine behavior
	Bodybuilding/muscles
Crying/ Being Sensitive	
Ear pierced	
	Big hands
	Fishing/hunting
Working as a nurse or cheerleader	Working in Construction
Going shopping	
	Pigging out
Long hair	Really short hair
Crafty	
Using lotion/beauty products	
	Spitting / burping
	Being loud/ aggressive
Hanging out with girls as friends	Hanging out with all guy friends
Wear a skirt	
	Sleeping around / talking about sex / enjoying sex
	Being the primary bread winner
Shaving legs	Not shaving legs
Watch soap operas	
Guys shopping	Watching football

Table C:	
Traditional conceptions of masculinity	Traditional conceptions of femininity
Strong	Weak
Powerful /active	Submissive/ passive
Athletic	Delicate
dominant	Subordinate
leaders	Followers
public	Private (domestic sphere)
technology	Nature
mind	Body
Big	Small/petite
Stoic	Emotional
Independent	Dependent
Competitive	Cooperative
Aggressive	Submissive
Actively sexual	Passively sexual

Rational/logical	Irrational/illogical
Apathetic	Sensitive
Mechanical	Non-mechanical
Scientific	Intuitive
Proud	humble
insensitive	Nurturing/ caring
Egotistical / individual	Community-oriented

Shannon Lewis

Current Address

106 Lucas Drive #8
Blacksburg, VA 24060
(540) 552-1117
shlewis3@vt.edu

Permanent Address

13318 Queengate Rd.
Midlothian, VA 23113
(804) 794-7880

Education

Master's Degree in English, Virginia Tech. Graduation May 2001.
Master's Thesis. *Revisiting Feminism: Academics versus Activism.*

B.A. in English, University of South Carolina with honors from South Carolina Honors College. Graduated cum laude May 1998. Minor in Women's Studies.
Undergraduate Thesis: *A Study of the Implications of Literary Revision.*

Related Experience

English Department, Virginia Tech. Graduate Teaching Assistant. 8/99-present

- Prepare class syllabus and lesson plans for the two class components of the First Year Writing Program.
- Instruct First Year students in writing, reading, revising, and thinking skills.
- Assign and grade 20 pages of formal writing and 30 pages informal writing per student per semester.