

## INTRODUCTION

### The Feminism of Uncertainty: I

#### Utopia, Activism, Uncertainty

To my initial surprise, I have been able to make a short list of preoccupations that have marked the thirty-five years of writing gathered here. First, as I reread these essays, now clustered together to form new patterns, everywhere I find the belief in the importance of imagining a better world—call it utopian yearning. But also everywhere here, this hopefulness collapses into utopia's common twin, ironic skepticism. This combination is wonderfully recorded in a typical remark of my parents' generation: "A new world is coming"—their dream of socialism—words followed over the years with ever-darkening laughter: "We should live so long." Next, running throughout, I find the assumption that, for me, feminist activism is necessary. (No doubt this is a choice, but it hasn't felt like one.) Finally, also all through, I hear a thrumming, inescapable, and sometimes much valued tone of uncertainty, an acceptance of the blundering in the dark that is part of all activism.

Everyone who engages in the tragicomedy of activism will negotiate the stretch between speculative desire and the shortfall of action in her or his own way. Happy endings require that one set sail toward a near enough horizon and keep one's eyes off the inevitable: failure, confusion, and the falling out of comrades. There is no right way to balance these things, and this book is not meant to be exemplary. What it does offer is a variety of descriptions of how one person has tried to locate feminism in her life—in situations that keep changing.

I have acted (and written) with passionate conviction while constantly wondering where such actions lie in larger schemes of things. Like Doris Lessing, a novelist whom I have treasured in all her phases, I am subject to

disconcerting shifts in my perception of scale. Today we marched against recent homophobic violence in Greenwich Village; tomorrow New York City is under water and men and women (if they are still so identified) are traveling over our momentary Bohemia in boats, gazing down with incomprehension at our ragged neighborhood through thirty feet of water. Does anything feminist activists once did shape what these travelers of the future are saying and doing?

As my friend V. says, who cares? For her, the only thing that matters is to be vital in one's own moment. The after-lives of our thoughts or acts are of no consequence. Since our being and intentions cannot be remembered or retrieved, what we do can never confidently be assigned a long-term value, pernicious or benign. Forget the future, V. says, as the future will forget us. But, then, V. is not an activist.

I became a feminist activist in 1969. My first consciousness-raising meeting in the fall of that year—quite by chance and thanks to the urgings of my friend Celestine Ware—turned out to be the founding of New York Radical Feminists. There's no counting the number of meetings that followed. (Once, a friend going in the other direction on the street called out to me in alarm: "Oh, dear. Am I missing a meeting?") Many have recorded what that time felt like: a love affair, a revelation, a little click of the lens that refocused everything. So now I was a feminist for life. But what would this mean? The particular rush I experienced in those first months couldn't maintain itself for two breaths. Sisterhood crumbled at a touch, weakened by differences of race, class, and political traditions, and also by damaged selves and the "tears of things." Our astonishing and bracing rage at patriarchy was necessary but insufficient for the long haul.

From 1969 onward, polemics and reviews poured from me, but all that is absent from this collection because it was champagne with a fizz that soon went. Though I didn't know it then, behind all that frenzy I was searching for ways to do feminist writing, teaching, and activism that would be resilient enough to sustain this love I felt for the women's liberation movement into a future I might happily inhabit. This book includes a sampling of my writing between 1978 and 2014. These pieces seem to me to explore a feminism I hope can endure yet be flexible enough to turn and turn about, through the shape-shifting of history, while remaining linked to my early utopian feminist desires, desires which linger even when they seem far to seek.

It would be easy to say that some ineluctable logic and beauty I discovered in my early encounters with feminism cured primal wounds and fueled my

continuous engagement. And, to be sure, that would be one piece of the story—though one can't help remarking that many women, even some who desperately need change, have seemed impervious to this allure. I suspect, rather, that to understand such a relentless commitment, I would need a longer narrative, a trip further back to my girlhood, when I had no conscious feminist ideas whatsoever—though perhaps I already had what I might recognize now as feminist feelings.

*The family breakfast table: My mother and father are sitting at the head and foot of this small table, I and my younger brother between them, say 10 and 5 years old. Our parents are both reading The New York Times, my father placid, enjoying his usual burnt toast with marmalade, my mother, increasingly agitated. She reads out something—probably about the evil of racism or the injustice of poverty or the stupidity of the government—and here is her often-repeated remark, which has mattered so much: “Something must be done!”*

Something must be done? Such a call to action requires quite a lot of unpacking. For a (newly) middle-class woman, the child of restless, unfulfilled, and socially powerless immigrants, a woman who observed with longing her father's exits from home to meet other men at the Working Men's Circle while her gifted mother stewed at home, a woman who became a communist in 1933 and passed in the late 1940s into anxious post-McCarthy retreat, a woman who then reinvented radical politics for herself hidden in this solid suburban scene, such words have many, layered meanings. What could this still-hungry mother of mine have imagined we at that table should or could do?

My father, also the child of struggling immigrants, and with progressive values himself, had no expectation that he could change the world; he was delighted to be part of it and, starting from scratch, to succeed on its terms. But on my mother's side the inheritance is clear: Changing the world is an absolute duty; and—though this part was never voiced—such work is also a deep pleasure, offering a path into a significant life. Looking back at this primal scene, the founding scene of “politics” for both my brother and me, I see how essential the Left-wing utopian dreams of my parents' generation were to us both. But the source of my feminism also makes an appearance at that breakfast table. Creative as my mother was in finding ways “to do something,” she was also constantly balked in her efforts to be an active, public being. She was, alas, merely a woman. When, finally, Women's Liberation took wing in all directions, her anger fused with mine; feminism was simply it for both of us, the best salve for our wounded hearts.

Guilt was an element in our activism too, of course. After all, how could we be sitting at this well-stocked table while so many we read about were suffering? But such guilt is well-trodden ground. And even in *extremis*, activism is not inevitable; some do, some do not. Let me return to family states of mind that were more productive than guilt in my activist life—and perhaps in the lives of others—the naïveté of utopian wishes and the vaunting desire for a life of consequence.

No activism is possible without naïveté, some faith in action in spite of rational assessments of what can actually be done. And, also, no activism without some grandiosity, some earnest belief in the value of making an unseemly display. It's easy to see activism as a fool's game, a piece of self-expressive insistence with no clear promise of bringing change—though a move to activism is always, itself, change. I think of the many years I worked to bring Gender Studies into full reality in a hostile or indifferent university environment, where feminism was seen as the height of unsophistication; I think of the early days of my work in postcommunist Eastern Europe where fine people (for example, the great Polish dissident Adam Michnik) laughed when they heard I was a feminist organizer. So silly was feminism that hostility wasn't even necessary. One had to be willing to seem ridiculous, extreme, grotesque. One had to be naïve enough to imagine that something could—and must—be done in this obviously impossible environment.

One way to make sense of this story of unwavering engagement, and to give it a meaningful arc, would be to assume that one moves from the innocent belief that one can direct change and the grand certainty that one is right, to critique, to knowledge of complexity, and to humility. But, for me at least, that is not how it has been at all. Of course one hopes to benefit from second thoughts, more experience, critical analysis—even from growing wisdom. One strives to understand scale, to recognize that even the most successful organizing is but a piece, of a piece, of a piece of larger events one can seek (but rarely expect) to shape—events that break apart into an infinite diversity of narratives. But all my years of activism have also been shot through with moments when I denied impotence and indulged in gormless hope, states of mind that sustained me through actions that came to little (like our theory/action group Take Back The Future's endless marches against the U.S. attack on Iraq, 2002–2006), and actions that may well have contributed in some solid way to valuable political shifts (like a bunch of friends sitting in the rain at Zuccotti Park trying to add “feminism” to the mix in the first astonishing weeks of the massive uprising known as Occupy Wall Street, 2011).

Recently, a friend told me, “Occupy is finished.” But how can she know? Occupy aspires to be everywhere; look for it under your boot soles. Occupy’s inventive, dispersed actions brought back into open, loud expression both rage at injustice and utopian hopefulness, feelings that had long been suppressed in public life. The energy that came from this return is incalculable. Skepticism about Occupy Wall Street is easy to justify, but rising expectations have a long reach.

My entry into feminist organizing in East Central Europe, described in several essays in this collection, depended on the entirely mistaken idea that the shock of postcommunism would awaken an idealism and political intensity similar to that of 1968 in the United States, a time of revelation I longed to revisit. This ignorance gave way to knowledge and disillusion at once, but it was too late. I was hooked by the entirely different desires and fears arising for new friends in actually existing postcommunism; I stayed to slog along with them in the messy *vrai*. But no move to a linear narrative is intended here, no direct line from wishful fantasy to sober truth. Recognizing limitation is sensible but it is also inadequate. Embarrassing as I sometimes find it, I don’t want to dismiss the value of the initial thrilling illusion; my ignorant excitement was determinative, and its ghost lingers in the work I continue to do in my activist travels in East Central Europe.

Uncertainty. Embracing uncertainty—since I can never get far beyond it—is both my temperament and the political aesthetic I can still sustain without tasting ashes. My field is literature, and the form I’ve been using for many years is the personal essay. What Doris Lessing has called “the small personal voice” is both a way of knowing and of exposing how little one knows. In these essays I have tried to offer unsettling details to mess up big stories with smaller ones.

At the end of her life, and in her most pained, apocalyptic mood, the feminist psychologist I have written about in this collection repeatedly, Dorothy Dinnerstein, saw uncertainty as our species’ only hope. Human beings can’t know if we can or will choose to save ourselves from ourselves. Uncertainty on this point is our best goad, both for acting, and for imagining a future.

Like many activists I know, I have written episodically, and I feel some consternation about the gaps. Why did I never write about my fifteen years in a small, consciousness-raising group; or about the smashing initial success of the Abortion Project that helped bring that right to New York in 1970 and the total failure of raising the same issue fifteen years later in Nicaragua; or

about helping to start Gender Studies programs in various U.S. universities and, later, in Budapest, Krakow, and Kyrgyzstan? It's easier to understand why I never reflected in print about my premovement choice to work on the Edwardians—my subject for years as a PhD student of literature—the end product a (horribly lengthy) study of modern irony: *Ford Madox Ford and the Voice of Uncertainty*. (How unconsciously, comically revealing to use the word “uncertainty” in the title of two seemingly unrelated—but at some depth perhaps connected?—books.)

What can I offer now to get back the texture of those early, unrecorded days of feminist organizing? Here's a flash of memory:

*I've been dispatched to organize a consciousness-raising group—the political form common to feminist action then—on New York's Upper West side. The twelve or so women in the room are nervous, but, in the wild zeitgeist of 1970, they intuit that they want this—whatever it is. I explain what these weekly discussions might do: encourage separation from the daily pressure to conform; suggest startlingly new subjects for thought and action; connect women to each other in entirely new ways; support new identities like lesbian, or divorced woman, or woman mad as hell—undermining shame.*

*One woman is by far the most voluble and challenging. She asks me question after question, throwing doubt on feminism as possibly absurd, hopeless, divisive. At first, I keep answering as best I can. After all, these worries have some heft. But suddenly I realize that the boyfriend she keeps mentioning is in the room; these questions are his mean jabs at her nascent feminist feelings. Desperately, she is asking me to put words in her mouth to take home. I stop offering answers, dropping a claim to authority that feels false. Instead, I turn myself into her collaborator, analyzing and criticizing the world from which these phantom questions come. I am handing her a tray of destabilizing ideas she might be able to serve up to her disparaging lover.*

*The meeting changes, becomes a discussion of the hostility they all expect to encounter beyond this room. The group is now established, and I move on to something else—at a speed that is urgency, but also youth.*

I find I want to add in retrospect: Youth, and the often-foolish certainties of youth. Our rising expectations were, as the boyfriend said, absurd—but also creative. The baby boom generation's dreams of total change, fostered by the careening growth of the postwar years in the United States, often led to success, which then some misread as the usual pace of victory. The

brilliance and daring of the civil rights movement showed the way, and other movements joined in the expansion of hope.

The revival of feminism in the United States was a zone of invention. When we started, the books we needed to read were out of print—and most had yet to be written, and are still being written now. Any historical record of women's past resistance to prejudice, insult, and invisibility was absent from public memory. Women's suffering—of violence, of humiliation—was unremarked and unremarkable. An aspiring woman's ambitions were risible. One had to discover confidence without supporting evidence. Congress was virtually an all-male space, and so was the newspaper, the doctor's office, the union; leaders were almost always—and expected to be—male, including those in radical movements. The first job was to denaturalize this enveloping reality, to bring it back into history—and into struggle.

From the beginning I could see that feminism was a polyglot undertaking. In the early 1980s when I did my first international feminist actions, the multiplicity of feminist ideas and projects became even more obvious. Movements for gender justice offered wildly divergent accounts of themselves. But this instability added to the fascination. And, for me, at that point, maintaining such excitement was key. The loss of momentum in U.S. feminist activism in the 1980s threatened me with sadness and loss. I had committed myself and had to rethink the possible during those acute backlash years.

So, like many other feminists of that time, I left town. I went to the women's peace camp on Greenham Common in England (1983, 1984) and sat in the dirt with feminists of very different traditions. As we huddled in our plastic tents and around our campfires, feminists visited us from all over the world. Wandering from gate to gate of a huge missile installation, we were like a peripatetic philosophy school, arguing constantly. The fundamental differences among women couldn't have been made more obvious. But unlikely alliances kept forming. At Greenham, differences in identity, ideas, and political aesthetics could sometimes be productive.

Back home in New York, I was very active in what became known as the feminist sex wars of the 1980s. The powerful outburst of feminist rage against pornography in those years struck me as an overheated reaction to the obvious news that sexism would be around for a very long time. Male violence hadn't significantly changed, but now we had brought it out into the open for all to see. Antipornography feminists were expressing their shock at male resistance to women's liberation: Men are violent! Their sexual fantasies are disgusting! Sex is violence! These constructions of male

sexuality struck me as the outcries of deeply disappointed people, who had hoped for so much more from feminist revolution. I worked for a number of years to counter what might almost be called a feminist sex panic: by participating in the planning group, convened by Carole Vance, of the Barnard Conference IX on sexuality (1982); by editing, with Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson, *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (1983); by running a seminar at the New York Institute for the Humanities, “Sexuality and Consumer Culture” (1982–1994); and by working in the activist group, the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce, (FACT, 1982–1986). Also in these years, I was writing about what core feminist problems and possible strategies were being obscured by a monolithic analysis of male sexuality. In a number of my reviews and articles from this period (I’ve included a typical one here, “The Beast Within,” and several studies of Angela Carter), I was trying to explore in literary criticism the sensibility we were developing at the Barnard Conference and in FACT. We were discussing the variety and the common unreadability of desire in both men and women and calling for more exploration, less censure.

It felt particularly thankless to have to criticize other feminists as committed as oneself for taking the feminist movement in what I saw as a moralistic and self-defeating direction. Antipornography activists seemed to have no such qualms; they proclaimed the feminist groups that criticized them as not feminist by definition; in one confrontation, I was heckled as a Nazi. One can’t help remarking that internecine fights are often the hottest—because of the tearing apart of what is also—in some ways—connected, and because other more powerful enemies are further off, indifferent, even harder to imagine as subject to change. Though we did angrily deconstruct the words of Ronald Reagan, we couldn’t make much of a dent in what he was doing. For us, his victory in 1980 ushered in decades of reaction. The antipornography position seemed to us to recapitulate and fuel a growing repressive and self-righteous atmosphere.

For better and worse, the sex wars seem to have been unavoidable. They revealed some of the deep differences among feminists and clarified the limitations of feminist discourse on sexuality. They pointed to the need for greater freedom of inquiry in what Freud called the most ragged aspect of human personality. But important as I think our quest was for less repression in those dark times and for a more exploratory and open feminist conversation about sexuality, the internal rift had its costs.

Luckily for me during this period of difficult and repetitive discourse war among feminists, I was also carrying on a continuous conversation with the

psychologist Dorothy Dinnerstein. I had interviewed her about her book, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*, in 1977. From then until her death in 1992, our endless talk branched and branched. Talking to Dorothy was, like Greenham, an ambulatory school. Her friends and students walked and talked with her along the palisades near her house and around the military installation at Seneca Falls in upstate New York, taking part in the ongoing women's peace camp there. Along the beaches of a Caribbean island, we walked, we talked, and she taught me to put on a mask and gaze for hours at life under the sea, a world I revisit whenever I can. How to see more and more—and differently—this is what the luminous Dorothy Dinnerstein had to teach.

Exchanges with Dorothy were free and speculative. She had a little loose love for all the world. When we went to see one of the early anti-Vietnam War movies, *Platoon*, I left the theater bubbling with outrage: That wasn't really an antiwar film as promised at all! The final images are all about male heroism—which only comes from being damaged and enlightened by war. The hero has come through, chastened but a Man. It's war that makes real men, etc., etc. After my fulminations were exhausted, Dorothy said, "Poor men." I said, "Poor men!?" "Yes," she said, "because they're so obedient." I was nonplussed. Why this of all the possible critical reactions after seeing this irritating film? "Well, in order to satisfy their fathers and each other they feel that they have to line up, armor themselves, and march off with their brothers to kill or be killed. Very few say no, though more have begun resisting in recent years, perhaps a symptom of a breakdown in gender rigidity." This train of thought seems obvious to me now. But back then, thinking about male insecurity, compliance, and passivity (traits on which women supposedly had a monopoly) opened up new questions, leading to an imaginative shift. Censoring pornography in order to discipline men seemed more and more off the mark. And the term "sexual deviance" became meaningless, an expression of fear about all sexuality.

On yet another track in these years, and very late in the game, I was considering having a baby, possibly influenced by a new pronatalism in my aging feminist generation, a shift in atmosphere that disturbed me and was suddenly everywhere—not only outside feminism's reach but also within. Dorothy had written about "the chagrins of the nursery" and here I was—my partner and I as ambivalent as ever—trying for motherhood, ultimately without success. This mixture of desire and doubts about that desire, oddly joined with the sex war struggles of the same period, gave rise to the section of this book, "Mothers/Lovers."

The years and years that feminists of my generation spent trying to get, then trying to keep, the right to abortion isn't recorded in the essays here. This demand had originally been a mere gateway to our wishes, and it was enraging, but also stupefying, to have to ask for something so basically and obviously just as, for example, funding for Medicaid abortions, which was lost in 1976, only three years after our Supreme Court victory in *Roe vs. Wade*. Much later, there I was again in our zap street theater group, No More Nice Girls, still asking for abortion—this time using satire and costumes to keep ourselves going. The pain, boredom, and humiliation of such repetitions seem to me to be largely unrecorded in feminist writing, though in 1923 Carrie Chapman Catt famously expressed the horror of such redundancy when she described efforts to get women the vote:

To get the word male . . . out of the Constitution cost the women of the country fifty-two years of pauseless campaign. During that time they were forced to conduct fifty-six campaigns of referenda to male voters; 480 campaigns to urge Legislatures to submit suffrage amendments to voters; forty-seven campaigns to induce state constitutional conventions to write woman suffrage into state constitutions; 277 campaigns to persuade state party conventions to include woman suffrage planks; thirty campaigns to urge presidential party conventions to adopt woman suffrage planks in party platforms, and nineteen campaigns with nineteen successive Congresses.

By the end of the 1980s, I recall: Exhaustion.

Then, in 1989, came the days of wonder. Whole populations were freeing themselves from totalitarian rule with hardly a shot fired. The excitement invaded politics worldwide and, on the Left, a political location in which I still securely if combatively reside, shock ruled. The end of Western communism broke apart the Left thinking of over a century. We were all in disarray, writing books with titles like *After the Fall*. My reaction was to go right over there.

This move, made as I've said in ignorance, in a fantasy of new beginnings (but there are no new beginnings—cancel that absurd, redundant phrase) began an important new phase of my activist life. In 1991, I cofounded the nongovernmental organization, the Network of East-West Women (NEWW), and in 1992 I began teaching a graduate course about “gender” every summer in Poland in Elzbieta Matynia's brilliant school, “Democracy and Diversity.” We set out to educate—and learn from—a whole new kind of person, one living, suddenly, amazingly, in postcommunism. What, we were

all curious to know, was “postcommunism” going to look like—globally and day-to-day? Nothing has been more difficult or more intense than working with the brave and inventive—and the sometimes isolated or openly insulted—feminist activists of East Central Europe. Stoned by skinheads on gay pride marches, viciously attacked by the Catholic Church, often viewed as monsters in their own communities, these friends continue to propose a feminism to me both familiar and constantly new.

During all these years of activism, I’ve been a college professor—of literature and of gender studies. Why “gender studies,” a controversial term? Some have feared that this newer name will once again make “women” disappear, a reasonable worry given the long history of such erasures. I have been a part of a number of collectives struggling to define and establish “Women’s Studies” or “Women’s and Gender Studies” or “Gender and Sexuality Studies” or, to include in this account an unusual effort at refinement, a “Gender Studies and Feminist Theory” program at The New School. (This MA program was canceled; some professors criticized feminist theory as bourgeois.) I prefer the term “Gender Studies” because, with Myra Jehlen, I am particularly interested in thinking about the line-drawing and blurring that goes on among various gender positions. Feminists have a positive stake in confronting the anxieties gender crossings arouse. In the face of backlash, using the word “gender” signals the possible value of this indeterminacy.

Has teaching students about gender been another form of feminist activism? I would like to maintain a distinction. There’s nothing to be gained either by fusing theory and practice or by putting them in competition. At the same time, in repeating, loaded feminist debates, I hear a recurring glitch, a recalcitrant something that reminds me of the enduring divides I describe in “A Gender Diary.” A constant wrangling about theory versus practice is endemic to our current social/political/institutional situations. We might as well embrace the complexity in current tensions between thought and action, and the ways in which we are often motivated—or forced—to move back and forth. Feminists in the university face a special dilemma. We have to trim to fast shifts in the shape of our schools, institutions which are, these days, endlessly stressed and over-stretched, constantly reorganizing themselves to sell their intangible wares and survive. The feminist professor must claim to have created fresh and innovative new turns of thought for each review period. She bites the hand that feeds her by critiquing the prevailing structures of knowledge, but she also knows she mustn’t bite too hard. Given the difficulty of the stance “Gender Studies” in the university—who,

after all, are its subjects, who its objects?—feminist professors are travelers between their roots in a great social movement and their equally important role as critics able to stand outside that fray, to create room for contemplation. In our insecure identity as both insiders and outsiders, at our best, we are among the most brilliant survivors in a tottering academic system.

I have navigated these dangerous waters with various personal solutions. (Activists once too idealistically said there are no personal solutions in a collective struggle.) It took years to get gender included as a category of study in my university. Balancing in air, I had to do this work while still insisting that any static concept of “feminist knowledge” offered no solid place to stand. In response to this dilemma, I have had a scattered academic life—only one foot in the academy, and the other—well, who can say where, given my picaresque activist career? Meanwhile, some of my colleagues in the university worry: Can teaching students and writing brilliantly about gender and race, as they do, count as politics? Is intellectual work and teaching *enough*? My response is: Why not? There’s no authority to define “enough,” and no one can determine the multiplier effect of our different locations. For now, no current utopian dream of synthesis (my usual temptation) can collapse what I see as a creative and uneven proliferation of feminist actions and theoretical speculations.

When the activist and the theorist are the same person, as they often are, these differences abide within. And, of course, these individual subjectivities are not stable or unitary—a common insight among theorists, but one that doesn’t always carry over into the space they (we) give each other for ambivalence or self-contradiction.

Finally, writing, imagining, theorizing, doing—all are, at some level, practice. Nonetheless, granting them their differences widens the space for feminism to thrive. Though the activist spectacle is itself a thought experiment, the theorist knows all the ways in which the activist may be naïve, choosing wrong targets, chanting misleading words, foolishly imagining changes that are undertheorized or ill-conceived. (I shudder at the memory of certain signs I’ve carried at demonstrations. Note to self: Irony doesn’t work on placards.) As the theorist knows, if wishes were horses, the poor would ride. There’s that gap the theorist thinks about all the time, between wishes and horses, while the activist rushes on with no time to write it all down or to correct direction.

Over the years, in the gender studies classroom, I’ve come to worry about our graduate students’ encounter with the theory/practice debates. Feminism is their legacy, but their brilliant education is constituting them

as infinitely skeptical subjects. How can one be a feminist, they wonder, when one has learned about the movement's past and present gross oversimplifications, about all the blinkered feminist moments—of racism, of positivism, of collusion with neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism? Should feminism be outgrown as a flawed artifact of bourgeois culture? After all this piercing, relevant critique, how can they do intellectual work intended to have an impact on women's lot without seeming to regress, to abandon knowledge of feminism's checkered history? How can feminism, the movement, the commitment, survive so much thoughtful deconstruction, so much knowing?

I offer students an example of how different modes can coexist and how historical opportunities for change may not line up with what one thinks one ideally should be doing. I have both cofounded an international non-governmental organization and written a savagely critical article about such international NGOs, pointing out the many limitations of these cross-border projects, and the on-the-ground reasons why one is often stuck with this flawed form. The analytic work of feminism continues at an ever-changing angle to the buoyancy of activist projects.

I try to reassure these serious feminist students that it can all be inside one life: One acts and is unavoidably disappointed. One sees the pitfalls and tries—and often fails—to avoid them. Out of my particular temperament comes this small suggestion: “Don't fear the lack of a good fit between thought and action. The distance between what you should do and what you can always yawns wide. Why assume a monolithic, coherent model for your own subjectivity when you are becoming so sophisticated about the patchwork of all consciousness?”

In recent years, feminism in the academy has taken many important and suggestive turns. These critiques have meant much to me, particularly the work on intersectionality, on queer theory, on the importance of affect to politics, on eco-politics and posthumanism, on the rich possible uses of our history, often to be reencountered in archives. In response, I have often changed my thinking about what and how to teach and about what organizing should—or can—be done. The essays collected here reflect different moments in this constant reassessment. Because feminism is a portmanteau term, describing varied long-term collective enterprises in which the building blocks—subjectivity, experience, nature, culture—are always being rethought and reengaged in daily living, a flat identity “feminist” can only be a general marker of changing interests and desires.

Dear Students, I would say, people who imagine change are of divided mind. Since there is no leader, no credentialing authority, no gatekeeper to say “No entry here; you’re not a real feminist,” fortunately and unfortunately, feminism can’t maintain a fixed stance and must always struggle for always-shifting affiliations and aesthetics. So—criticize away. Feminists need and will always have agonistic relationships not only with the world but among themselves. Don’t swamp with paralyzing doubt what might be your small piece of the larger, evolving project. Feminism is a sensibility, subject to constant revision, but very portable. Even as you change, you can take it with you.

## To The Archive

Utopianism is always addressed to the future, so when feminists wrote those revolutionary words in 1970, surely they were meant for us, the later generations.

—Kate Eichhorn

Take my life. But don’t take the meaning of my life. —Joanna Russ

. . . time makes what was mute talk. —Henry Shapiro

The living and the dead can move back and forth as they like.

—Austerlitz, W. G. Sebald

. . . The will to remember . . .

—Joan Nestle describing the moving force and multiple powers of the Lesbian Herstory Archives

A few years ago, a university bought my papers. Twenty-two boxes left the house—tapes of radio shows (now, amazingly, digitized), meeting notes, handwritten talks, women’s movement ephemera—from the U.S. in the 70s and onward, and from the first independent women’s movements in East Central Europe since 1989. There’s easily as much again still sitting in my apartment, all of it promised in the years ahead.

The difference this has made to me is remarkable. A deep shift: I feel rescued.

*Urgent group email. F.R. has died, and her books and papers are sitting on a curb in Greenwich Village, waiting for the garbage truck. Hurry, someone, to pick up this stuff. But it turns out we all continue to be desperately busy. No one comes.*

Before all those dusty files went to the archive, I feared collecting essays written over thirty-five years. The danger, I thought, would lie in melancholy—

both mine and the reader's. The voices of earlier selves would put me to shame and eager enthusiasms frozen on the page would remind me of possibly jejune passions that motivated me from my first political action, a ban-the-bomb vigil on the Cornell quadrangle in 1961—and onward for five decades. Could the essays I chose—published in such disparate and sometimes obscure places, at such different times, with such different motives—add to each other, travel, change their meaning in new combinations? Or would time prove a thief and rob them of all resonance in the now? Though others will have to answer such questions, the process of selection has taught me much. The way this book has been organized follows a train of thought about what categories have remained salient for me in the ups and downs of a long feminist history.

*A Gender Studies meeting in the mid-nineties: I've just been introduced to one of our new graduate students. When she hears my name, she gasps and blurts out "You're history!" Of course she immediately hears herself and rushes to apologize since, whether a specter from the past or not, I am still sitting there, one of the professors in her program. The concept "generations" may be misleading. In fact we are in this undertaking, call it feminism, together—changeable as it will no doubt prove to be.*

Teaching over decades, I have noticed the truth of Doris Lessing's observation that ideas move through societies like tides. There was the time in the early 1970s when I could disparage romantic fantasies to flocks of young students who greeted my skepticism with eager delight. Then, suddenly, as if a gong had sounded and hopes for new forms of fantasy had evaporated, my irony at the expense of romance fell dead in the theater of the classroom. Students looked uncomprehending, or anxious, or rejecting. To my shock, my tone of only a year before had turned out to be the language of another country, a bygone era. Expectations were closing down and it was becoming harder for young women to imagine autonomy as a source of pleasure rather than of shame or loneliness.

After some years of this sometimes-galling eclipse, again the times turned. Journalists and researchers started calling me because "I was history," and this new attention heartened me, however little, I told myself, that I actually cared about it. The glitterati came, and asked me questions that touched me deeply: "How did you make demonstrations happen?" I thought it odd that they had no idea of this, and then realized their brilliant machines and devices gave them means of assembling their large networks in ways that are entirely

different from the movement-building structures of the 1970s. To their wonderment, we had made an extremely durable social revolution before the invention of the Internet.

Because I have sustained a political passion like feminism through changing landscapes at home, through far-flung travels, through quite different stages of my life, I have taken a particular tour through the vagaries of time. But before the beautiful mess of the archive, all this material seemed trapped in a flattened seam of history. I felt pegged: “Second Wave Feminist,” “Socialist Feminist,” “Peace Movement Feminist,” “Anti-Antipornography Feminist” otherwise known to journalists as the “Pro-Sex Faction” (what hilarious nomenclature). I now think that the depression I was feeling was symptomatic of an actively regressive construction of time and history: the zeitgeist at the height of backlash was obliterating what had earlier felt thrillingly diverse. Backlash sought to impose linearity on stories that were never linear—so that feminism could be given an end. I felt superannuated and sorrowful and, as the feminist affect theorists so wittily say, such depression should sometimes be recognized as a political, not a private, feeling. (I want one of those wonderful buttons these feminists wear at demonstrations: “Depressed? Maybe it’s political.”)

When Rachel Blau DuPlessis and I sent out our call for activist memoirs around 1992, a collection that became *The Feminist Memoir Project*, we were trying to save a generation from an oblivion that seemed to be swiftly overtaking us, and at the same time, to take apart the idea that feminist activists in the United States in the 60s and 70s were in any sense a “generation” at all. They were never a single, coherent group or engaged on a central project. Feminist activists who had invented an astonishing variety of antisexist acts when such rebellions seemed new, were being shoveled together into a single group, the Second Wave, then criticized for movement exclusions, then slated—all together—to be conveniently forgotten. This narrowing of narratives deeply upset us, and we sought accounts of activist life from those early days—across differences of race, class, sexualities, local contexts, and diversities of both survival needs and utopian wishes. “*Take my life. But don’t take the meaning of my life.*” Which I would amend: Dear Young Feminists, interpret “the meaning” of our lives as you will, and as you need.

It helped that I had a young colleague, Kate Eichhorn, who wanted to hear such memories, with their feelings and contexts attached, and without apology. She was studying the informal creation of zines made by young Riot Grrrls in the 90s, and she found earlier feminist texts collaged there—a connection, a recognition, an appropriation, sometimes perhaps a turn or

return. The curiosity she and many others have shown in what her book calls “the archival turn in feminism” has brought water to what I feared would become a desert. No one can know what seeds future feminists will want to nurture or transplant from this garden. But my earlier dead-end feeling? Gone. Thank you.

The essays collected here are time-marked. Beyond some cutting of redundancies and some line editing, I haven’t revised them; they are not meant to offer an end point of accumulated feminist understanding. Because of their specificity, they are (somewhat) safe from certain crimes of anachronism, and reveal particular patterns and emphases in discourse that are otherwise nearly irretrievable. (Foucault’s “law of the sayable.”) Gradually, while choosing and arranging these essays, and inspired by conversations with young feminists who are already poking around in my archive, I began to feel that the concept “dated” was dated.

The essays represent (relatively) still points in a steady flow of activity, while the archive has no framing devices, no conscious pattern. Often, I suspect, the archive registers what one has chosen to forget and what must therefore be assembled by others (those fizzy, early polemics are no doubt in there in various drafts!). I feel both dismembered and connected to an unreadable future. There’s a sort of freedom in having no idea what is in those boxes of air checks, agendas, rough drafts. The essays are mine, but the archive is, ultimately, for others to mull over. The material to be discovered there is potentially new; these bits and pieces await. . . . Well, I can’t imagine who you will be.

Having my papers in the archives is a state of fluidity in time that I never dreamed of—and I feel all the anxieties and hopes that accompany stories without endings. I’m happy to have managed whatever distillation I could in the essays here. But I value, too, the flowing water not contained in jars.

2014