

Surfaces



Introduction Roundtable 3

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LE FÉMINISME HORS DE LUI-MÊME
FEMINISM BESIDE ITSELF

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Introduction

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Regardless of one's take on the issue of feminist generations, I think we must recognize that the anxieties located in this session's title are felt by and have been articulated by many. A myriad of articles and dialogues might be pointed to: the *differences* "Conference Call"; Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, and Evelyn Fox Keller's "Criticizing Feminist Criticism"; Renate Klein's *Passion and Politics in Women's Studies in the Nineties*; Donna Landry's "Commodity Feminism"; Nancy K. Miller's "Decades"; and Madelon Sprengnether's "Generational Differences," among others. Darlene Hantzis and I have written an article responding to many of these pieces, recently published in Jeffrey Williams' anthology *PC Wars*. [[1](#)]

However, it is my suspicion that most of our discussions of feminisms and generations have-up to this point-been in conversation rather than in print. Some conversations, of course, have been staged public ones. E. Ann Kaplan and I put together a panel on feminisms and generations at MLA in 1993-a session that eventually grew into our forthcoming co-edited book by the same title. In 1994, the Women's Caucus of the Midwest MLA sponsored two sessions entitled *Feminist Generations/ Generating Feminisms*. The upcoming National Women's Studies Association conference features *Generations of Feminism* as an organizing theme. And most recently, a

conference entirely devoted to Feminist Generations has been announced for February 1996 at Bowling Green State University.

It is again my suspicion that many, many more conversations on feminisms and generations have happened (and are happening) as innuendo, hearsay, and gossip. I have certainly been a part of such conversations, primarily with my peers. There were times when we were anything but nice with our "us" and "them" rhetoric. My sense that this rhetoric has circulated on "sides" was confirmed last year when a prominent feminist inadvertently sent a private e-mail message to a high traffic listserv list-a nasty message decrying the evils of "younger feminists." Not surprisingly, I did not recognize myself in her characterization. This seems to me to be the crux of the issue of feminisms and generations: Few of us seem to recognize ourselves in the accusations and the caricatures. These stereotypes continue to circulate nonetheless and are by now well known. So-called "younger feminists" are not dutiful daughters, are careerists and theorists who are "not political enough," and are not sufficiently grateful to those who fought the battles that made their lives possible. So-called "older feminists" are bad mothers who long to see themselves in their offspring, who resent deviations from their second-wave plan, and who can't properly wield the power they've garnered. Certainly other features could be added to each list, and I invite the panelists and audience members to further articulate and perhaps debunk some of these stereotypes.

As Susan Stanford Friedman suggests in *Feminism Beside Itself*, "An effort to historicize the positions and perspectives of each generation could foster the multiplicity of generational voices rather than the silencing of one by another." [2] I hope that our discussion will productively engage how and why these perceived feminist generational divisions circulate, what generational explanations reveal, occlude, or perpetuate, and what it might mean to speak to-if not "talk through"-our supposed differences.

NOTES

1. "Conference Call," *differences* 2 no. 3 (1990), pp. 52-97. Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, and Evelyn Fox Keller, "Criticizing Feminist Criticism," *Conflicts in Feminism*, eds. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1-8. Darlene Hantzis and Devoney Looser, "Of Safer Spaces and Right Speech: Feminist Histories, Loyalties, Theories, and the Dangers of Critique," *PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy*, ed. Jeffrey Williams (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 222-249. Renate Klein, "Passion and Politics in Women's Studies in the Nineties," *Women's Studies International Forum* 14 no. 3 (1991), pp. 125-134. Donna Landry, "Commodity Feminism," *The Profession of Eighteenth-Century Literature: Reflections on an Institution*, ed. Leo Damrosch (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 154-174. Nancy K. Miller, "Decades," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 91 no. 1 (1992), pp. 65-86. Madelon Sprengnether, "Generational Differences: Reliving Mother-Daughter Conflicts," *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism*, eds. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 201-8.

2. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Making History: Reflections on Feminism, Narrative, and Desire," *Feminism Beside Itself*, eds. Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 11-54.

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