

[Esai]

Feminist Ways of Seeing: The Radical Potential of Zines

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INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING POST-POSTFEMINISM IN THE GLOBAL NORTH

In recent years, feminism has experienced a popular resurgence in the Global North as a result of increased visibility in the media and popular culture (Rivers 2017; Rottenberg 2018; Banet-Weiser 2018). Nowadays, it is not uncommon for celebrities to boast feminist identities or for mainstream media to cover stories about feminist issues. While some consider feminisms' re-emergence as a cause for celebration, others approach it with great caution. Furthermore, debates are rife about whether this current period of feminism is an extension of the third wave (or a "new" wave altogether), or whether we are in a period of postfeminism (or, post-post-feminism, for that matter) (Gill 2017; Rivers 2017; Rottenberg 2018). The focus of feminism has shifted away from the collective towards the individual, reconfiguring feminism as neoliberal and emptied of its radical content (Rivers 2017).

However, grand narratives – such as post-postfeminism and neoliberal feminism – are in desperate need of troubling as we become unable to account for more nuanced stories of contemporary feminism. Grand narratives are not only reductive because they fail to embrace difference within feminism today, but also because they render invisible the individual and shared resistance of feminists who are at least attempting to disrupt the current neoliberal system. They too erase the nuanced and intersectional ways in which feminists are thinking about and enacting their feminism(s) in their everyday lives. As such, we must remain sceptical

of grand narratives as they do not necessarily reflect the only possible stories of the feminist present (Hemmings 2011). As Rosalind Gill (2017) argues, we must "radically rethink" these narratives as we become increasingly unable to distinguish between neoliberal portrayals of feminists and feminists on the ground (p. 611).

However, as popular feminism continues to monopolise the mediascape, radical types of feminism continue to go unnoticed (with exception of high-profile campaigns such as #MeToo or the Women's March). For Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019), contemporary feminist visibilities exist "along a continuum" in which popular feminism gains extraordinary levels of public visibility and feminist activism receives little or no visibility at all (Banet-Weiser et al 2019: 7). In this way, popular feminism effectively renders other types of feminism as invisible. Through my Ph.D. research, not only do I aim to encourage feminists to construct alternative understandings of feminism, but I also aim to explore how contemporary feminists are enacting their feminisms in the everyday that often goes unnoticed by the media (Reger 2012). In this article, I aim to explore the radical potential of zines as tools for feminist imaginings, whilst addressing the question: is feminisms' radical potential really "lost"?

UNDERSTANDING FEMINISM AS A WAY OF SEEING AND IMAGINING THE WORLD

Based on interviews conducted with self-identified feminists in Melbourne in 2018, we found that some feminists understood feminism as a way of seeing the world (Molyneux & McCann

2019). Seeing the world through a feminist lens enabled feminists to identify social inequalities and to imagine alternative futures in which these inequalities did not exist. Ruby, for instance, expressed that a feminist lens enabled her to recognise structural inequalities and to envisage a society in which women were liberated from oppression. Whilst feminists had different ways of seeing the world, their lenses shared a commonality: a shared approach to interpreting society through gender that promotes social justice. While an appetite for collectivity is apparent here, these findings are not necessarily a cause for celebration, as a neoliberal framework does not necessarily condone radical feminist endeavours. However, we can remain cautiously optimistic that some feminists are at least attempting to resist by recognising structural inequalities and envisioning alternative realities that could potentially lead to action (Molyneux & McCann 2019).

However, the idea of a feminist lens is not new. Through utopian thought, a feminist lens can be understood as “a way of seeing and approaching the world” (Sargisson 1996:1) that allows us to imagine alternative realities that lead to transformative social change (Sanders 2007). Feminist ways of seeing can also be understood as social dreaming (Sargent 1975) and a yearning for an improved way of existing (Levitas 1990). Ernst Bloch (1986) understood utopian visions as the ability to imagine and restructure the world beyond our own experiences. Over the last century, feminist thinkers have expressed their utopian visions and desires through various forms of cultural production including fiction (and zines, as I will return to shortly); a classic example includes *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915), a utopian tale of a hidden women-only society in which reproduction occurs through parthenogenesis (in other words, self-ovulation). Utopian dreaming also has a long history in gender studies and feminist activism, and it has made a comeback in recent years despite critique.

Utopian thought has historically been dismissed by Marxists as idealistically detached from reality and in contemporary times as based on essentialist logic incompatible with addressing the

complexities of feminism (Burwell 1997; Kitch 2000). As Sally Kitch (2000) argues, feminists “love a utopia” because it represents a “near-perfect” feminist universe in which citizens abide by the rules of femininity (p. 1). According to Jennifer Burwell (1997), this is an essentialist representation of how society should be restructured based on dominant feminist discourses that emphasise notions such as unity and harmony. Scholars such as Kitch (2000) and Sanders (2007) agree that utopianism essentialises the experiences and desires of feminists through meta-fallacies in which “some women become all women” (Kitch 2000:5). It is further argued that feminist utopias ignore issues of intersectionality, privileging dominant narratives of a “perfect” future over the experiences and desires of marginalised feminists (Burwell 1997; Kitch 2000; Sanders 2007; Stein 2013). By adopting meta-fallacies, even in our feminist imaginations, we can effectively denounce difference in favour of essentialist narratives of unity and harmony.

There is no denying that many feminist utopias have lacked nuanced and intersectional approaches to achieving feminist goals. Gilman’s (1915) *Herland* is a classic example of a utopian text that has a complete disregard for the intersection of race; in fact, Gilman was known for having eugenicist tendencies (Seitle 2003). Whilst deeply disturbing, this is a prime example of what a feminist utopia should not look like. Instead of abandoning the idea of utopianism altogether, I argue that we should instead rethink the ways we engage with feminist utopianism. As Lucy Sargisson (1996) argues, we must trouble utopian meta-fallacies that fail to represent nuanced and intersectional imaginings of feminism. When telling feminist stories, whether they be imaginary or not, we must account for a variety of narratives including a constantly shifting social landscape, difference, intersectionality, conflicts, contradictions, messiness, and complexities within contemporary feminism (Sanders 2007). By doing this, we can create novel visions of the future that do not privilege certain narratives over others.

ZINE-MAKING AS AN INTERSECTIONAL TOOL FOR FEMINIST IMAGININGS

In recent years, the notion of intersectionality has been popularly adopted by the mainstream, arguably causing the appropriation and co-option of the term (Luft & Ward 2009; Bilge 2014; Kanai 2019). As both Alison Piepmeier (2009) and Akane Kanai (2019) argue, intersectionality has been flattened and emptied of its radical content to suit a post-race society that emphasises neoliberal brands such as inclusion, diversity, and multiculturalism as a way to sell consumer products and services. On top of this, as Sirma Bilge (2014) and Rachel Luft and Jane Ward (2009) argue, intersectionality has been appropriated by mainstream feminists where they have claimed the term as their own, causing the white-washing of intersectionality and the decentring of marginalised voices, essentially robbing the term of its meaning. Feminist zines are not exempt from these critiques; they too are not a “perfect” tool for envisioning feminist futures and are guilty of essentialising the desires of women through an emphasis on dominant feminist discourses, such as unity and sisterhood (Piepmeier 2009). Neither do they always provide intersectional analyses or elevate marginalised voices.

However, instead of rejecting zines altogether, I argue that we should rethink the ways in which we engage with these spaces. Zines provide a generative quality in which feminists can freely express subjectivities and intersectional critiques that pay attention to the axis of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class, otherwise unheard of in the mainstream media. Through the “pedagogy of imagination” (Piepmeier 2009:158), feminists educate their audiences on how society could be restructured, a form of political work performed through education. *The Evolution of a Race Riot (1994)*, edited by Mimi Nguyen, is an example of a riot grrl zine that provided a space for women of colour to critique and disrupt dominant feminist discourses and educate their audiences about white feminist privilege and the essentialism present in sisterhood narratives (Piepmeier 2009). By doing this, feminists are imagining a different world in which inter-

sectionality, instead of dominant discourses, chart the future of feminism.

Furthermore, radical potential is evident through the pedagogy of imagination. Zines not only offer hope for the future, but they also offer a way of educating others on how to change the world through discourse. However, to be effective, the pedagogy of imagination must be intersectional and this can be achieved by ensuring that zines consist of content that engages with intersectional analyses. When compiling feminist zines, we should pay attention to the fact that feminism has now “splintered” (Sanders 2011:4), or diversified, depending on how you look at it. However, I argue that understanding feminism in relation to difference is more productive than clinging to the idea that it is “lost”. As Linda Nicholson (2010) argues, we can best imagine feminist futures by looking through a metaphorical kaleidoscope, in which we can observe intersectional complexities through watching new patterns and colours emerge. This metaphor not only represents how feminism has evolved and continues to evolve, but it also allows us to explore and scrutinise the multitude of feminist ideologies that now exist. By doing this, we not only disrupt the grasp that dominant discourses have on feminist imaginings, but we can also carefully consider who our feminist visions include and exclude: are we imagining a feminist narrative that has been told a million times before, or are we embracing a future that allows novel narratives to emerge?

CONCLUSION: IMAGINING AN ALTERNATIVE INTERSECTIONAL FUTURE

When it comes to contesting mainstream feminist culture, there is a lot to grapple with: new wave feminism, post-feminism, post-postfeminism, neoliberal feminism, and an ability to resist the current conservative social climate. Not only must we resist these grand narratives, but we must also take responsibility for producing more nuanced and intersectional tales that disrupt mainstream discourses. By adhering to grand narratives, we reject the radical potential present in contemporary feminism

and deny accounts of more intersectional and nuanced versions of feminism. However, despite the grasp that dominant discourses have on contemporary feminist storytelling, there are still feminists who actively attempt to disrupt the neoliberal framework through envisioning different feminist futures. Whilst utopian imaginings are not exempt from critique, they do offer an alternative future that does not essentialise nor exclude the experiences of marginalised feminists. We must rethink and reimagine feminist utopias, whether it be through subcultural texts such as zines or more popular texts such as novels; at the core, zine-making is a type of political work that is about “re-envisioning and revising “feminism”” (Comstock 2001, p. 384).

In my opinion, imagining a feminist future involves narratives that do not exclude nor essentialise the experiences of feminists. Zines are a space in which feminists can express their intersectional, complicated, and contradictory subjectivities that are not often given attention within the mainstream media. Not only has the meaning of intersectionality been appropriated and flattened by the mainstream, but it has also been whitewashed by mainstream feminism. However, zines provide a space in which feminists can express their intersectional analyses and educate others about these away from the prying eyes of the mainstream media, which, within itself, has great radical potential. However, radical potential can also be found through an intersectional version of the pedagogy of imagination in which feminist zinesters can challenge mainstream discourse by not adhering to grand narratives that tell the same old stories time and time again. Through Nicholson’s metaphor of a kaleidoscope, we can recognise the different and complex patterns that occur within feminism and it is also a timely reminder that if we wish to imagine alternative feminist futures that are inclusive, we must take intersectional analyses in to account: because, as Karen Stein (2013) argues: “One person’s utopia is another’s dystopia” (p. 122).

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