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Book Review: Provocations: A Transnational Reader in the History of Feminist Thought

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***Provocations: A Transnational Reader in the History of Feminist Thought.* Eds. Susan Bordo, M. Cristina Alcalde, and Ellen Rosenman. 2015. UC Press. Oakland. 608 pages, with photographs, appendices and indices.**

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Cross Talk across Borders

Provocations: A Transnational Reader in the History of Feminist Thought contributes to the contemporary movement to engage feminist theory as a body of work unbounded by, though also informed by, the confines of the nation. While this text does adhere to a historical organization model, a choice made after much consideration by the editors, it resists centering the Western tradition and challenges binary thinking about the conversations between feminist thinkers of the false dichotomy “the West and the rest.” Susan Bordo, M. Cristina Alcalde, and Ellen Rosenman have edited this collection of feminist thought with an eye toward inclusion of transnational texts that does more than simply provide diversity; they foreground the cultural and historical differences out of which the works develop. The editors’ goals for the construction of this collection were to “make the study of feminist thought fresh, accessible, and provocative—and to encourage transnational interdisciplinary analysis rather than simply to represent ‘difference’” (xxiii). With an impulse toward highlighting the most influential and enduring issues in feminist thought, and toward including a range of genres such as manifestos, imaginative writing, cartoons and images, and philosophical essays, Bordo, Alcalde, and Rosenman have brought together an aggressively inclusive and thoroughly historicized anthology of feminist thought ideal for study and teaching.

The editors’ commitment to placing works in conversation through “cross talk,” or the practice of “interrelating works without submerging their particularities,” is manifested through the structure of each of the book’s five parts and 28 chapters (xix). Each chapter prepares the reader for the selections within it with an original introduction followed by a list of works cited or endnotes. Also included are several discussion questions intended to frame reading or to serve as a touchstone for discussion in the classroom. The editors provide historical and cultural context in the introductions, and also incorporate feminist readings of other scholars to highlight the various ways in which the selection has been read by critics over time. For instance, the chapter “Sor Juana de la Cruz: Early Feminism in the Americas or the Right of Every Woman to Study” addresses the work of only one early feminist thinker, but Mónica Díaz’s chapter introduction includes several critics’ readings of de la Cruz’s work, illuminating the feminist issues raised by the critical cross talk. Díaz addresses intellectual history in the introduction, the importance of recovering early works such as those of de la Cruz, and the question of whether one can call a thinker of the early modern period a feminist, a term developed out of twentieth-century women’s movements. Throughout the introduction, as she briefly glosses colonial and religious history of New Spain, where de la Cruz enjoyed a position in the elite society of Creoles (*criollos*), Díaz references scholarship on the writings of the author. She discusses feminist readings of *Primero Sueño* by Octavio Paz and Tamara Harvey, illuminating the critical colloquy on the poem, and in discussing

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the rhetorical moves that de la Cruz makes in *La Repuesta* (1691), relates Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell's argument that this response represents just one instance of her participation in the *querelle des femmes* (30-1). Their work places de la Cruz's intellectual pursuits and publications in the context of the medieval and early modern periods' "woman question," and reveals that her work and consciousness foreshadows our contemporary understanding of feminism (31). Through this brief intellectual history that Diaz intersperses into historical and cultural contexts of de la Cruz's work, in which she references several more works of criticism, Diaz reinforces how recovery work in the feminist tradition creates continuous opportunities for critical engagement with early feminist thinking.

The construction of a tradition is taken up repeatedly in this reader, which addresses one of the goals that Bordo, Alcalde, and Rosenman identified during early conversations conceptualizing *Provocations*. They heard their colleagues' concerns that students often move too quickly to dismissing earlier works in the canon of feminist thought, casting off works written before 1985 as "racist, heterosexist, essentialist, et cetera, et cetera" while taking their theory courses (xvii). The conversations between primary works continuously engage the question of how to value works that both make valuable contributions to the field and also contain problematic premises such as the ones students are increasingly sensitive to. One example of this is foregrounded in Ellen Rosenman's introduction to the chapter, "*A Room of One's Own* in Transracial Perspective," which addresses the work of another feminist foremother, Virginia Woolf, by placing *A Room of One's Own* (1929) in conversation with Alice Walker, a contemporary feminist who responds to her work in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Rosenman addresses Woolf's analysis of cultural forces and material conditions impacting her theory of a literary history of women, and in so doing, brings her early conception of a women's tradition into focus. The introduction also illuminates the issues Woolf raises that become central to the tradition of feminist theory, taken up by "Second Wave" feminists: Woolf's development of a theory of "difference," and her discussions of the historical oppression of women and the value of constructing epistemologies grounded in women's experiences (185). Blind spots and privileges many critics note that Woolf exhibits in *Room* do not detract from its relevance, and in furthering this fact, Rosenman includes a gloss on Alice Walker's response to the marked lack of class and racial considerations within the work. Set off in a text box within the introduction is a discussion of Walker's points as she talks back to Woolf, an excerpt in which she inserts Phillis Wheatley into Woolf's literary history, and a statement connecting both authors' insistence on the value of public recognition for women's creative work to contemporary "Mommy Wars" that create a false dichotomy between work at home and in public (186). Rosenman's attention to the way that Walker's thinking descends from and also challenges Woolf's highlights the tradition of conversations throughout the tradition of feminist thinking, and affirms the value of reviving and rereading works in new contexts.

Feminist thought is not limited to the strictly literary, however, and as such, *Provocations* includes considerations of the praxis of feminist organizing. M. Christina Alcalde, Srimati Basu, and Emily Burrill edit the chapter "Feminist Organizing around Violence against Women in Mali, Peru, and India," in which excerpts from a charter, a convention, and a street play are included. In providing an overview of feminist organizing in three countries, the editors illuminate the ways that international and national feminisms intersect and highlights the particular goals and challenges related to feminist organizing at the local level. Alcalde, Basu, and Burrill note the impact that the discourses and parameters developed during the United Nations Decade for Women, on the international scale, have on the activities of government and community

organizations at the national scale, and how these activities are also shaped in relation to each country's laws and infrastructure at the local level (411). The editors show how the long duration of Mali's postcolonial development-aid-poverty cycle impacts the source of domestic violence prevention monies, so that international funds for the improvement of the well-being of women are often slated for very specific, sometimes competing, goals. Widespread religious norms in Peru limits the focus on domestic violence to heteronormative families, and the extent to which dowry is embedded in the fabric of the culture of India contributes to a lag between institutional redress for domestic violence related to bride gifts and the elimination of the practice at the levels of the community and family. The significance of political negotiations at the borders of localized and international feminist discourses, activity, and laws in the form of material conditions in women's lives is emphasized throughout. The inclusion of sections from the *African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights* (1981) and the *Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará, 1994)* illuminate the direct result of feminist organizing for legal recognition of women's and children's rights, and the Indian street play, *Malini Bhattacharya, To Give a Daughter Away*, illustrates the use of performance art by community activists in an effort to interrogate the culpability of families in the perpetuation of dowry arrangements (409). The discussion questions for this chapter call for students to trace the ways that feminist thinking differs in relation to national contexts, and to compare without conflating. This chapter is representative of the ways that the *Provocations* reader seeks to reveal the differences in national cultural and historical contexts without submerging these particularities in the service of thinking about feminisms in transnational context.

Academics studying and teaching in the areas of Women's, Gender, and Feminist Studies will find this text immensely useful, as the original introductions and text clusters reframe familiar works in new ways, and bring newer works to the table, with the cross talk model illuminating new connections that have yet to be adequately explored in previous conceptions of the (often Western focused) canon of feminist thinking. The wide range of contributions from feminist thinkers across the globe, the insistent illumination of the conversations their works have with each other, and the accessible and engaging format and organization of chapters make this text is a wonderful touchstone for a course in transnational feminisms, appropriate for undergraduate and graduate readers. The fresh, well researched introductions to the selections provide a solid touchstone for further research on the readings under consideration, often with end notes to spur scholars on their way, and the indices contribute to the navigability of the text. The intertextual references across chapters contribute to a global cohesiveness of the text, which mirrors the transnational connections across the primary works *Provocations* reveals. Discussion questions ask students to respond to the selections in stimulating ways; to imagine authors on a discussion panel together, or even to apply cultural analysis from the authors to their own campus environment. Susan Bordo, M. Cristina Alcalde, and Ellen Rosenman have brought together a range of specialists to collaborate on the construction of a history of thought that is both impressive in its coverage and also rich with considerations of differences and convergences from the local to global levels of feminist organization.