

BOOK REVIEW

## The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Philosophy

Kim Q. Hall and Ásta (eds). New York: Oxford University Press, 2021 (ISBN: 9780190628925)

Kathleen Lennon

University of Hull, UK Email: [k.lennon@hull.ac.uk](mailto:k.lennon@hull.ac.uk)

What are handbooks for? And who are they for? I have contributed to several. And over the last ten years particularly, they have spilled out of publishers. But I am just not sure of the point of most of them. The *Stanford Encyclopedia* seems to have a clearly defined role. If you are starting out researching a particular question, it gives you a map of the territory. It has the advantage of being online and updatable so some of its glaring omissions have been addressed in recent years. Are handbooks meant to be little encyclopedias that we (who? students? teachers? researchers?) use selectively in the same way? Does that mean it does not matter how they are organized? We can simply dip in? Or are they supposed to provide some kind of overview of the subject, a kind of summing up? And what do we do about the fact that, if these short entries try to be comprehensive, they end up as more or less lists of issues and publications, which are not a good entry point for introducing a topic to students, and at best, work as a checklist for a teacher/researcher. The best entries in this handbook focus less on providing an overview and engage the reader directly with an issue or question and provide some pointers to resources that might help to address it. You could imagine directing students toward such entries (for example, Gail Weiss, “Feminist Phenomenology,” Celine LeBoeuf, “The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir,” Axelle Karera, “Black Feminist Thought and the Politics of Refusal,” and others). They are engaging. But many more are overviews, which can lack a sense of engagement and pointers as to *why* issues are significant and which of the contributions made by certain thinkers were most important in shifting our understanding. First, I want to stress that the contributions are all careful, scholarly, well-researched, and professional. Providing overviews can be hard work, and a lot of hard work has been done. They provide a safe reference point to their individual areas. But I have some reservations about the overall content and organization of the volume.

A handbook is not like an edited collection; it is not engaged with a particular set of questions in relation to which the contributors can be read as in conversation. But it does have editors, and they have chosen the areas and organized the articles and have some vision of what they wish the collection to achieve. Here the area is feminist work in philosophy in the last fifty years (an exciting project) done by philosophers associated in some way with mainly North American Institutions, with some nods to the UK and Australia (less exciting restriction). The justification for choosing this body of work, with those boundaries, is both the situatedness of the editors and also

the claim that “feminist philosophy in North America and the United Kingdom has had, and continues to have, hegemonic influence on feminist philosophy in other areas of the globe” (4). This is, of course, a hegemony that the volume serves to further entrench by failing to include writings from around the globe, except as mediated through the texts of North American academics located primarily in university philosophy departments. Consideration of, for example, global justice, borders and migration, war and terrorism, human rights, networks of care, the environment, gendered identities, and the nature of knowledge are all skewed by these omissions. Moreover, despite the claimed range, UK and Australian writers don’t get much of a look in, and other European writers—for example from France, Holland, or Ireland—are barely mentioned. (Though Miranda Fricker’s seminal distilling of the concept of epistemic injustice [Fricker 2007] rightly finds a place, and Sara Ahmed’s intersectional phenomenology is referred to in several places [Ahmed 2017]). For someone like me, who has lived and worked as a feminist philosopher for those fifty years, there are some glaring omissions. In relation to Australia, Genevieve Lloyd’s groundbreaking engagement with the history of philosophy is not recognized (Lloyd 1984), nor the work of Moira Gatens and Elizabeth Grosz on the body (Grosz 1994; Gatens 1995). Also largely absent is consideration of the work of sexual difference theorists such as Luce Irigaray (Irigaray 1985). Consequently, the foregrounding of the imaginary by these writers and the discussion of the philosophical imaginary by Michèle Le Doeuff is lost (Le Doeuff 1989). But these are major feminist philosophical contributions that made much contemporary work possible. From the UK, Margaret Whitford’s response to Irigaray is not referenced (Whitford 1991), neither is Christine Battersby’s work on feminist metaphysics and feminist aesthetics (Battersby 1989; 1998), Alison Stone’s work, including that on birth (Stone 2019), or Stella Sandford’s mining of Plato to explore alternative possible conceptions of sexed difference (Sandford 2010). Also absent is recent work spanning Ireland and the UK on the body and shame (Dolezal 2015; Fischer 2018). It is not, however, just a case of omitting work from certain geographical locations. What was/is important can stand out differently from different localities. But the exciting, overflowing, and contradictory body of work that is the encounter of feminism and philosophy emerged via conversations across geographical and other boundaries. It was almost a mantra of feminist work to destabilize boundaries of all kinds. And working across these boundaries was enabling. The point I am making here is that if we wish to reflect on feminist philosophy over the last fifty years, a geographical restriction is not an obvious organizing principle.

To this criticism I would add another: The fifty years reflected here had a history. Feminist philosophy developed and changed in that time. It was rife with disagreements. It split into different approaches often linked to differing kinds of politics. There were conflicts and challenges and key adjustments made by some and not others. The difference between radical feminist positions and socialist and liberal feminist ones did not pass it by. The tensions between sexual difference theory (not in evidence here) and other kinds of poststructuralism have been key. The challenge to recognize black feminist thought and decolonizing projects as internal and not outside the project of feminist philosophy is ongoing. (The organization of this volume, and some of articles here, still suggests they are outside feminist philosophy. With some exceptions, such as Nancy Tuana’s “Feminist New Materialism,” the writings of women of color are not referenced in the chapters whose topics are not explicitly about raced or cultural positionality. So, there is no substantial engagement with writings by women of color in the

chapters on ethics or aesthetics, for example). Moreover, the transforming role of attention to (dis)abilities (Garland-Thomson 1997) is part of its history as, of course, is the development of trans studies. Talia Mae Bettcher's chapter makes the point that trans studies arose from anti-trans positions within feminist thought, including within feminist philosophy. This is echoed by Gayle Salamon, who points out that trans women have remained a constitutive outside for much feminist thought. These are places in the text where differences between feminists, including feminist philosophers, are signaled. But in general, the volume suggests an additive model of difference and diversity. Feminist contributions add perspectives and topics to philosophy. A plurality of methods and voices add to the insights of feminist philosophy. What is kept out is a sense of *the development of thought* over these years and the *conflicts* that have forced feminist philosophers to confront the problematic exclusions that some of our own practices and assumptions have generated, and the lack of homogeneity within feminist philosophers as a group.

I want to stick, initially, with questions about organization and boundaries, when turning attention to the contributions we do have here. But the choice of topics and their arrangements has served to reinforce a distinction between philosophy and its multiple others that, several of the contributions note, many feminist philosophers were keen to challenge. Much of the volume is arranged to consider feminist contributions to philosophical traditions, subfields of philosophy, and philosophical issues, where these areas are individuated independently of feminism. So, the field is established, and contributors have been asked what changes feminism brought. This approach is duplicated even in sections where the areas are themed, such as disability studies or war and terror. I think contributors must have been asked to give overviews of an area and then consider how feminist philosophers have contributed to it. So, the feminist contributions are necessarily additive: they add a few more possible moves and expand the topics taught under the module headings. They do not challenge the way the subject is conceived. Nor is much of philosophical methodology under scrutiny. The approach is predominantly analytic, but there are contributions from so-called "continental" thought and pragmatism. Despite disavowals, these methodological distinctions are upheld.

However, there are also places here where the possibility of a more radical challenge to philosophy's self-conception comes into view. The look back at women in early modern philosophy by Deborah Boyle reveals that traditions of thought have been excluded from its history because they do not permit positioning within the now canonical division of philosophical fields. The illuminating and engaging chapter "Native and Indigenous Feminisms and Philosophies" shows how the dominant model of the shape of the subject can be productively challenged, as the philosophical questions to be asked inter-inform each other when we attend to the everyday lives of our subjects of concern. "Core Native American action-based values include pluralism, intersectionality, interrelatedness, interdependency, affective knowledge, listening, belonging, home, autonomy, reciprocity, respect, harmony, cooperation, harmony and care" (159). These values provide us with the concepts to be explored and interrogated. This list is important: each of the concepts listed features in many other contributions to the volume. They come to the surface when we philosophize from multi-various feminist perspectives. What becomes clear from this contribution is that these areas for investigation, which derive from an engagement with lived experiences of particular groups of people, *undercuts the shape* of the philosophical domain, and *refuses* divisions between distinct methodologies, which the arrangement of the volume can otherwise appear to endorse.

The third place in the handbook where the shape of the philosophical field becomes radically rethought is in the final section, which is presented as explicitly interdisciplinary. As Bettcher points out in her contribution, much of key feminist philosophical work “has developed outside of the bounds of disciplinary philosophy in what has been called ‘theory’ or, as Butler calls it, ‘Philosophy’s Other.’ ([Butler] 2004)” (532). This is one of the sections where the volume seems most alive. I wish the illuminating entries had been given more space. This section includes Natalie Cisneros, “Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality and Feminist Philosophy”; Gayle Salamon, “Queer Theory”; Licia Carlson, “Feminism and Disability Theory”; Talia Mae Bettcher, “Feminist Engagements with Trans Studies”; and Elena Ruiz, “Postcolonial and Decolonial Theories.” But, despite their positioning, the sets of questions addressed in these chapters are *not* philosophy engaging with an outside. If we follow the model suggested by Native American feminist philosophy, they are the central philosophical questions, if we start our philosophical reflections with the challenges of the lives of those previously excluded from the academy. All of these contributions suggest that, if feminist philosophy is to be radical, the question is not only what the presence of feminist philosophers contributes to an already delineated philosophical or wider field. Rather, if you start with the lives and urgent concerns of particular groups of people, what philosophical issues arise and what multiple resources do we have that enable us to address them?

Perhaps we should reframe our questions then, and instead of asking what feminism has contributed to philosophy, consider this. In the past fifty years when, as feminists, we variously turned to philosophical thinking to find resources to address some of our most pressing concerns, what were some of the urgent questions and what resources could philosophy contribute? From Beauvoir onwards was the pressing question of what constitutes a woman or a man. Or as Linda Martín Alcoff puts it here, “beyond its activism and advocacy, feminism has always also been a research project engaged primarily with the human types we today understand in terms of the categories of gender and sexuality” (340). What role is played by biology and culture? Are these constitutions binary? And how do such constitutions work in relation to other aspects of our identity? How do they interweave with the instituting of relations of power and oppression? These concerns were immediately confronted with questions of differences within gendered categories, initially brought to the fore by the writings of women of color (Davis 1981; hooks 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Lorde 1984; Collins 1990/2000), who also highlighted the class nature of these categories. Writing across the board stressed the unstable nature of the boundaries between what appeared to be a binary of sexed difference. These issues cannot be addressed without asking philosophical questions about science and language and without employing phenomenological and poststructuralist resources. They cannot be addressed without the work of black feminists, decolonial theorists, disability theorists, and trans activists, all of whom are themselves challenging philosophy’s boundaries and self-definitions and whose own work incorporates resources from many different areas of philosophy and beyond. Materiality, disciplinary practices, linguistic structures, legal frameworks, distribution of resources, conceptions of rationality, feelings of shame, practices of exclusion, learned bodily responses, performative norms, declarations of rights, and damaging and empowering imaginaries all need to be considered, along with world traveling and *mestiza consciousness*. Reflecting on fifty years of feminist philosophy, we need to know the main questions, which thinkers were key, and which concepts proved indispensable. (All of which is, of course, contestable, but some narrative seems desirable.) I found

that the arrangement of this volume does not easily enable the significance of the questions to stand out, or the importance of certain interventions in shifting thought along, although there is much material here that illuminates them.

Regarding this set of questions, the arrangement of the handbook obscures some of the key moments of thought in feminist philosophy in the last fifty years. Judith Butler, who has been one of the most important figures in feminist philosophy in these years, is mentioned in many entries. But there is no careful exposition of her thought and its development and influence. You could read this handbook and not grasp how important and transformational her work has been. Even the concept of performativity must wait for the section on queer theory for clarification. And this section itself is part of the final chapters, which are deemed interdisciplinary and therefore not quite central, where philosophy strays toward its other.

Another key moment, in relation to constituting questions, is the challenge presented by the work of Maria Lugones, arguing that

colonialism did not impose precolonial European gender relations on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white colonizers. Thus, it introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production. (Lugones 2007, 186)

Lugones's work is referenced in several chapters. Here its key challenge to the premises on which feminist philosophy is based is highlighted in Cressida J. Heyes's late chapter, "The Body," which in a short space also has many other key issues to address. But this insight has implications for the way gendered terms are used in all the chapters and its significance gets lost.

Also problematic is the treatment of the concept of intersectionality. This concept, distilled by Kimberlé Crenshaw from a large body of work by black and Latin/a/o/x writers (Crenshaw 1989), is mentioned in many of the chapters. It is not given direct attention until the final "interdisciplinary" section, where it has to share an entry with critical race theory. So its necessity for addressing *all* of the concerns employing feminist perspectives is not made visible. Its importance gets lost. Salamon's key remarks in the entry on queer theory, concerning the complexity of its working, are easily missed. Salamon stresses, alongside the problems of additive models of identity, the very different ways in which distinct aspects of identification work. Gendered identities such as trans contrast with the constitution of racialized identities, for example.

Similarly, from this volume you would get no sense of the challenge to feminist philosophy, across the board, that was presented by the writings and activism of the trans community. Sandy Stone's 1989 "The Empire Strikes Back: A Post Transsexual Manifesto" also destabilized the foundations on which feminist philosophy had constructed itself (Stone 1991). It was a challenge to hegemonic forms of feminist philosophy then, and the consequences have snowballed right up to, and perhaps, most particularly into, the present time. Feminist philosophy is not a bystander here. It has provided some of the key texts against trans inclusivity. That needs acknowledgment. There is an excellent entry (again, in the final section), by Bettcher discussing the philosophical questions arising from trans lives. She highlights a problem with the treatment of trans lives by philosophers who sometimes simply use them as test cases for a favored theory. This is how references to trans writing emerges in some other sections of the book. Consequently, the radical reshaping of issues in feminist

philosophy that comes from attention to trans lives and the challenge they pose to its practice does not emerge in the handbook as a whole.

Along with questions, broadly, of the constitution of social and individual categories and the inequalities of power that are interwoven with them, another very large set of questions for feminist philosophers in the last fifty years has been to do with truth and knowledge. From the 1980s this has been a dominant area of concern. What difference does the social position of the knowledge-producer make to the content of the knowledge produced? A connected concern is how are we to defend questions of truth and legitimacy and illegitimacy alongside a recognition of the perspectivity of knowledge. Here the handbook does its job. The premise of this very volume assumes that the placing of feminist philosophers into academic philosophy departments will not leave the content of that subject unmodified. It is therefore unsurprising to find many entries in which such epistemological questions are highlighted (“Feminist Epistemology,” “Philosophy of Science: Analytic Feminist Approaches,” “Feminist Philosophy of Social Science,” “Bias”). There are many others that begin with a rehearsal of the epistemological questions and the emergence of standpoint theory and modified empiricism and the challenge of poststructuralism. A circle of moves here is important, needed to justify the claim that the producers of knowledge make a difference to its content and the consequent need for diversity among knowledge-producers. This is then illustrated by summarizing the differences feminist philosophers have made to the area under discussion. Not much has happened regarding this set of questions in the last twenty years, but it is right that their centrality to much feminist philosophy is acknowledged and discussed.

Currently the energy in epistemology has come from relating epistemic questions more insistently to wider issues of justice and oppression. Of course, these links were made in earlier work, but it then became preoccupied with traditional philosophical questions of objectivity and truth. Current work foregrounds the question of what kinds of harm are done by the exclusion of groups of people from the production of knowledge and culture, scientific and artistic, and from the failure of recognition of certain people as legitimate sources of knowledge (including knowledge about themselves and their lives). This also draws attention to the kind of losses that thereby accrue to a public understanding of what counts as knowledge and the role it plays in our variable lives. Most crucially this work highlights how epistemic and hermeneutic harms facilitate and enable bodily, psychological, and social harms of other kinds. Feminist work here is necessarily intersectional. In this volume the key contributions emerge from chapters located across the sections: “Black Feminist Philosophy and the Politics of Refusal” (Axelle Karera); “Latina/x Feminist Philosophy” (Andrea J. Pitts); “Native and Indigenous Feminisms and Philosophies” (Shay Welch); “Feminism and Epistemic Injustice” (José Medina); “Epistemic Oppression, Ignorance, and Resistance” (Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.); “Postcolonial and Decolonial Theory” (Elena Ruiz). These all make clear what is at stake in trying to make knowledge-collection and reproduction informed by the lives of those it has excluded. This is very pertinent to academic philosophy, which remains one of the areas least changed by the social movements highlighting epistemological oppression—this despite large numbers of women and a few people of color entering the profession.

José Medina focuses on the “host of issues we now call [following Fricker’s pioneering distillation] epistemic injustice” (408). He provides the historical context for these issues, stressing the scholarship and activism of women of color. This, he makes clear, was a history of *resisting* epistemic oppression. Medina quotes the work of



Audre Lorde (Lorde 1984), “her powerful discussions of being silenced and breaking silences” (411). He also mentions Patricia Hill Collins, (Collins 1990/2000), who stresses the importance of “speaking and listening” from the heart (412). The themes of resistance, of breaking cycles of ignorance, are also there in the other chapters listed. Karera discusses the politics of refusal: “for Black feminist philosophers, the key to successful production of philosophical work worthy of the name . . . entails the often-tenuous labor of categorically refusing disciplinary philosophy’s unwavering demand for legitimation” (109). She references the work of Alisa Bierria (Bierria 2014), who “aims to uncover the ‘living archives of scripts, representations and logics’ that obfuscate Black women’s agential authority and render their various choices, decisions, and plights socially and politically illegible” (111). The refusal highlighted in this chapter “also entails an accountability, care and responsibility, to conditions of epistemic inheritance. . . to think with Black feminist founding figures’ various interventions” (114). Pitts discusses Lugones’s concept of world traveling and the “‘risky,’ inhibiting, and often alienating practices that many Latina/xs and women of color engage in in their efforts to collaborate with white/Anglo communities” (124). This chapter, while highlighting the need for coalition work, also acknowledges “the complicated dynamics among communities of color” where feminist scholars “have also contradicted each other, and at times substantially disagreed with the methods, claims, and goals of one another” (120–21). She sees attention to this as one of the key components of Latina/x feminism. I would urge that it needs to be an important component of all feminist philosophy. Ruiz focuses on the “specific contexts, issues, and lifeworld concerns that ground anti-colonial feminisms,” rather than viewing feminist postcolonial and decolonial positions as internal moves within an already conceptualized European theory (541). This requires paying attention to a long tradition “of women’s theoretical and collective resistance to colonial rule in the Global South.” This is to guard against what appears to be a recentering of systems of thought to accommodate difference, without a decentering of “the very perspective negotiating the centering” (542). The dangers that Ruiz highlights here do not only pertain to postcolonial philosophy. They are dangers all philosophy, including feminist philosophy, faces.

The need, as Pohlhaus points out, is not just to provide “access to epistemic institutions as they are . . . reflecting the social valuing of particular groups of people over others” (421). Epistemological questions must be integrated into struggles for institutional change and social agency. What we were confronting fifty years ago and still in many ways confront now, within philosophy as elsewhere, is what Pohlhaus calls “structural ignorance.” Our institutions are structured in ways that exclude, interconnectedly, knowledge about and access to those many people who do not hold positions of power within them. This remains the issue even while feminist philosophy appears to be partially assimilated within a canon, but without destabilizing it.

In this review I have been critical of this handbook for its organizational structure, for some of its failures to clearly signpost the key issues, thinkers, challenges and disputes in feminist philosophy over the last fifty years. I have, of course, relied on my own perspective of what these issues are. I have also been suggesting that, although the volume shows some feminist thinkers as having breached academic philosophy’s defenses, this has been done at the cost of presenting other feminist philosophy as something not quite central: Black feminist thought, decolonial writers, native and indigenous thought, feminist disability theorists, queer philosophies, trans philosophies and, by its absence, feminist philosophy from the Global South. But please also note that in my articulation of these issues I have utilized contributions within the handbook.

There are treasures and illuminations here, profound writing and scholarship to be found, if not always presented in the way I would have found most perspicuous.

## References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a feminist life*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Battersby, Christine. 1989. *Gender and genius: Towards a feminist aesthetics*. London: Women's Press.
- Battersby, Christine. 1998. *The phenomenal woman: Feminist metaphysics and the patterns of identity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Bierria, Alisa. 2014. Missing in action: Violence, power, and discerning agency. *Hypatia* 29 (1): 129–45.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990/2000. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140: 139–67.
- Davis, Angela. 1981. *Women, race and class*. New York: Random House.
- Dolezal, Luna. 2015. *The body and shame: Phenomenology, feminism, and the socially shaped body*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.
- Fischer, Clara, ed. 2018. Special issue: Gender and the politics of shame. *Hypatia* 33 (3).
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. 1997. *Extraordinary bodies: Figuring disability in American culture and literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gatens, Moira. 1995. *Imaginary bodies: Ethics, power and corporeality*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 1994. *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- hooks, bell. 1981. *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. Boston: South End Press.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *This sex which is not one*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Le Doeuff, Michelle. 1989. *The philosophical imaginary*. Trans. Colin Gordon. London: Athlone Press.
- Lloyd, Genevieve. 1984. *The man of reason: "Male" and "female" in western philosophy*. London: Methuen.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister outsider: Essay and speeches*. Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press.
- Lugones, Maria. 2007. Heterosexuality and the colonial/modern gender system. *Hypatia* 22 (1): 186–209.
- Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. 1981. *This bridge called my back: Radical writings by women of color*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Sandford, Stella. 2010. *Plato and sex (Feminist ReVision)*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Stone, Alison. 2019. *Being born: Birth and philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stone, Sandy. 1991. The empire strikes back: A posttranssexual manifesto. In *Body guards: The cultural politics of gender ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub. New York: Routledge.
- Whitford, Margaret. 1991. *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the feminine*. London: Routledge.

**Kathleen Lennon** is Professor Emerita of Philosophy at the University of Hull, UK. She writes on the imagination, expression, embodiment, phenomenology, gender, belonging, and old age. Publications include *Imagination and the Imaginary* (Routledge, 2015). Her latest book is *Gender Theory in Troubled Times* (Polity, 2020).