

# Special cultural commons section: Roundtable discussion of Catherine Rottenberg's *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook*, Goldsmiths University Press (2023)

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs)**Catherine Rottenberg** 

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

**Srila Roy**

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

**Gabriela Méndez Cota**

Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico

**Zainab Naqvi**

Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

## Abstract

The following special section is a series of responses to Catherine Rottenberg's *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook* (Goldsmiths University Press, 2023). This is the second book in the 'This is not a . . . textbook' series (the first being on science fiction) which describes itself as not 'a purely commercial publishing venture' but also an 'outreach initiative in support of lifelong learning, and a mode of resistance against the marginalisation of the arts, humanities and social sciences in neoliberal economies'. The book consists of a series of entries on topics including families, bodies, sex/gender, motherhood, trans, disability, class, all pitched at an introductory level and written by academic scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds

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## Corresponding author:

Catherine Rottenberg, Goldsmiths, University of London, London SE14 6NW, UK.

Email: [c.rottenberg@gold.ac.uk](mailto:c.rottenberg@gold.ac.uk)

with a particular concentration in media and cultural studies. It is a book which is experimental in its format. The editor/curator, Catherine Rottenberg, is Professor of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her books include *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (2018) and *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side* (2014) and, with the Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (2020). For this section, we start with an introductory conversation with Catherine Rottenberg before inviting a series of scholars to respond to the book – Srila Roy (Wits University, South Africa) Gabriela Méndez Cota (Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico) Zainab Naqvi (Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom). They were asked to consider questions raised by it: their initial response, questions of in/exclusion, its relationship to further feminist issues or how it intersects with the conjuncture they are in as they understand it. To begin with, however, we asked Catherine Rottenberg about the text, its context and production.

### Keywords

feminism, non-textbook format, critical theory, Goldsmiths

## Conversation with Catherine Rottenberg

**EJCS:** What led you to put together this book?

**CR:** I was actually commissioned to edit the book by the wonderful editor at Goldsmiths Press, Sarah Kember. I was slightly reluctant at first, since I know just how much energy and curating goes into an edited book. I was persuaded fairly quickly though – both because I loved the idea of creating a space where we can discuss feminist concepts in non-academic terminology and because I was given a free hand to reach out to amazing feminist scholars, many of whom have had a huge impact on my own thinking and writing about feminism.

I will also say that it was ultimately through my exchanges with the brilliant contributors – and other scholars who were unable to contribute for various reasons – that I finally understood the potential power of the ‘this is not a textbook’ format!

**EJCS:** Can you outline and explain the rationale for the book’s format?

**CR:** Goldsmiths Press wanted to create a series that would reflect its commitment to supporting lifelong learning, and that underscores the importance of the arts, humanities and social sciences. The idea of the series, as I understand it, is to create a new kind of pedagogical resource – books that defy neat categorisations. ‘Traditional’ textbooks have historically offered the dominant perspective on topics while purporting to provide a comprehensive overview of those topics. When textbooks are successful and widely used, they have helped to shape what we consider to be ‘the canon’, and, in this way, they also help police the boundaries of what is deemed intrinsic to a topic.

As the series’ title suggests, the non-textbook attempts to do something different; it is meant to provoke; it does not try to follow any one narrative or genre; and it does not provide any definitive answers. It is not in the business of trying to create a canon or in providing readymade answers to challenging questions. Nor does it pretend to be comprehensive in any way.

With *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook*, we wanted to create a textually accessible and visually engaging (on a limited budget!) book. Each topic includes images or side boxes that highlight a certain aspect of the topic at hand, and each topic has a further ‘spread’, expanding on the issues in more creative ways – emphasising the different and sometimes conflicting approaches by drawing on biographies, case studies, images or timelines. The book is meant to be pitched for the lay reader at an introductory level yet it never ‘talks down’ to its readers. Indeed, the contributors have written entries that are simultaneously clear, sophisticated *and* provocative. The book is versatile and can be used in a classroom setting – either university or high school – as well as in activist spaces.

**EJCS:** The book comes out of Goldsmiths University Press, but recently Goldsmiths announced large academic redundancies. Can we use themes raised in the book to understand such events and/or how we should respond to them

**CR:** The threat of mass redundancies at Goldsmiths – which at the time of writing – are still pending, is, in my view, an attempt to rebrand the College. Goldsmiths is known, internationally, as a hub of creative thinking, research and activism – all of which interrogate how and what we learn, and the boundaries of what counts as ‘knowledge’. The College is particularly well-known for its Arts and Humanities departments. The current Senior Management Team (SMT), however, have been implementing policies that completely forsake the notion of Higher Education (HE) as a public good, introducing changes that are destroying programmes like Black British Literature, Black British History and Queer History. These programmes were the first of their kinds in the United Kingdom and ones that help to make Goldsmiths such a special place to learn and work. Of course, what is happening at Goldsmiths is not unique; it is part and parcel of the wider marketisation of HE and the transformation of universities into corporations which have recast students as consumers and introduced aggressive measures to contract the arts, humanities and social sciences.

Precisely because arts, humanities and social sciences cultivate critical thinking they have been systematically devalued – framed as ‘rip-off degrees’ by the former Tory government – while cutting-edge programmes, like the ones mentioned above, are being forced to shut down because they aren’t generating enough income to cover the costs of an increasingly large academic managerial class and an array of consulting firms. Goldsmiths’ senior management have aligned themselves with these processes and instead of building on the amazing talent within the college they have decided to rebrand the college by firing people and investing in ‘high value degrees’ like law and computing. This is a myopic, disastrous, soul-crushing agenda – and it will not only have long-lasting consequences for the 97 staff currently facing redundancy at Goldsmiths as well as everyone left behind but will have ripple effects across the sector.

On a societal level, the marketisation of HE in the United Kingdom has meant that our once public institutions – which, at least theoretically, were dedicated to cultivate intellectual curiosity – are increasingly discouraging and even silencing challenges to ‘common sense’ that is informed by the interests of the political and financial elites. On one hand, groundbreaking programmes are being eviscerated by people who have no understanding of the arts and humanities or their significance in producing meaning and beauty; while, on the other hand, fewer students are signing up to courses in these areas because they have been devalued for so long.

One of the book's main goals is to encourage readers to ask probing questions about feminism, oppression, cultural norms, and power. In this sense, *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook* can be situated within the long history of critical theory and radical thought – traditions that have always been concerned with trying to make sense of our world in order to better understand how to make it more just and egalitarian. In short, by offering readers a springboard for exploring the dynamism and complexities of feminist thought, I see this book as participating in wider struggles that are challenging the destructive forces currently emptying out our ability to think critically and creatively – forces, I might add, that are destroying our world.

**EJCS:** Are there other feminist issues which are becoming more conspicuous, since the book was published, that you think should now be addressed?

**CR:** One of the issues that has been very conspicuous and generated great alarm in the Global North has been the recent overturning of the constitutional right to abortion in the United States. This, as we have witnessed, has had a domino effect in the United States, with many states now passing draconian anti-abortion laws. The struggle for reproductive justice is clearly not a new struggle. But it has once again become a flashpoint between conservative and progressive forces, and a site where struggles around women's rights, bodily autonomy, heteronormativity, but also gendered embodiment more generally, are being played out. The fact that a basic right which we have taken for granted for a half century is being currently rescinded is incredibly disheartening and extremely frightening.

I also think that in the wake of Covid, there has been much more public discussion about and attention to the care crisis and the significance of care and care work for social justice. And while it is true that the preoccupation with care and the shock at how the social care infrastructure has been disembowelled by a range of austerity and neoliberal policies has waned since the height of the pandemic, I would argue that we need to do everything we can to reinvigorate these discussions. We now need to draw on a feminist vocabulary of care to help address the one catastrophe that none of us – and particularly the next generations – can escape: environmental breakdown.

So, as I state in my introduction, the book's goal is to spark readers' interest, curiosity and desire to know *more* about feminism. My hope is that this book will serve as a resource and a road map that will inspire each and every reader to continue exploring, thinking about, discussing and 'doing' feminism. It is not an end but a beginning. And it is meant for everyone.

## **I am a textbook but. . .**

Srila Roy

If, like me, you too were schooled in rote learning and through constant examination, you might well have an allergic reaction to textbooks. University was partly so freeing because there weren't any prescribed textbooks. But this isn't the case everywhere. Several university courses use standard textbooks for undergraduate teaching, with text-boxes, diagrams and tables (some even include quizzes).

Notwithstanding my reaction to textbooks, I have found the need for them from time to time – whether as a graduate student trying to find a quick definition of a term, or as

a professor in need of an intelligent way to explain something complicated to students (or to myself!). Who doesn't look up Wikipedia for a quick refresher on the history of 'sex testing' in competitive sport? Or, turn to the online *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* for both a precise and expansive entry on 'performativity'?

In other words, even as a textbook might appear to sacrifice complexity to fit a concept into a pre-given box – a literal textbox – it is arguably always the case that we need one within arm's reach (or rather, at our fingertips). The truth is we don't have very (or many) good textbooks that we can confidently share with our students, or recommend to a general, curious reader. On one hand, we might feel we are simply spoon-feeding our students who should, in fact, be researching and reading original texts. On the other hand, an encyclopaedia might seem like too much work and put off the reader from investigating an idea further.

This is the gap that *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook* seeks to fill. The title is itself testament to the contradictions and ironies of using textbooks, and thus its insistence that it is not a textbook at all. Not a real one anyway. Or, maybe even to say, *I am a textbook, but*.

Much like how young women, in particular, tend to say, I am *not* a feminist but . . . I believe in gender equality; I believe women are full humans and should be treated as such; I believe there should be no gender-based violence in the world; I believe in women's rights and autonomy over the body; I believe in equal pay for equal work and so on. We know this to be a common, even popular position for young women to have. Their responses evoke certain commonsensical conceptions of feminism and of feminists – as lesbians, bra-burners, man-haters, anti-shavers – that have proved far too sticky and enduring. If these descriptors seem anachronistic at a time when many in our classrooms are openly queer and 'woke', the F-word raises other kinds of questions for a younger generation of all genders and sexualities. Is feminism just about and for women? Who is a woman then and who gets to decide? Can I be a feminine woman and a feminist? Can men be feminists or just allies?

In other words, and as Catherine Rottenberg's (2023b) introduction to *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook*, notes, the F-word is a hardly self-evident or uncontested term: 'it has different histories in different countries and sometimes quite divergent definitions even within the same country' (p. 6). It also evokes strong emotions and equally strong investments and dis-investments.

I recently published a book on feminist and queer politics in globalised India, which I researched for nearly a decade (Roy, 2022). In that time alone, definitions of feminism – and what a feminist looks like – underwent a radical change. For instance, in the aftermath of the rape and murder of a young female student in Delhi towards the end of 2012, large numbers of ordinary Indians marched on the streets, calling upon the government to do more for women's safety and upholding their rights. Unlike previous protest action around similar issues, however, these marches were different: they were attended by young women *and* men; they moved from the street to the virtual and back; and their slogans included everything from greater freedoms for women to demanding the death penalty for perpetrators of sexual violence. Capital punishment has long been antithetical to the ideologies of progressive women's and civil liberty groups; calls for the death penalty made these protests distinctly *not* feminist to them.

Once again, we were faced with the question of what exactly *is* feminism? How could one version be compatible with capital punishment, while another completely incommensurate with it? At stake in these contrasting positions are divergent understandings of women's oppression itself. What in other words is oppression and how is it best resolved – through legal and carceral means? Through consciousness-raising or changing norms? At the time of the anti-rape protests in Delhi, we heard both sets of responses: from stricter legal punishment to changing paternal ideas around women's protection which inevitably arise as a response to sexual violence. Varied responses suggest varied ideas of oppression and even, as Rottenberg says, ideas around being human and building a just society:

All of these perceptions are also inextricably linked to how we envision a more just society and what we consider to be at the very heart of the struggle for social justice. So even though feminists tend to agree that women's oppression [. . .] must end, this seemingly straightforward statement is also misleading, since feminists often have diverging ideas about how to uproot women's revolution [. . .] (Rottenberg, 2023a: 9)

In short, she says, 'there is nothing simple or straightforward about feminism', and that is precisely what this non-textbook textbook attempts to capture, in presenting the thick debates and arguments that constitute feminism as a living, breathing practice of everyday life (besides an epistemology and a politics).

This is more difficult than it sounds. Take, for instance, the term 'intersectionality', which has become almost synonymous with feminism itself, and not only in the feminist classroom. The mainstreaming of intersectionality means that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the Global South must evoke the concept to attract Northern funders, on whose largesse their survival tends to depend. University management liberally litter their documents with words like 'intersectional' – and more recently in my context in South Africa, 'decolonial' – while stopping students from protesting on campus, whether on local issues like high fees or global ones like an ongoing genocide in Gaza. Sometimes, simply evoking the term intersectionality does the job of evidencing one's progressive credentials, or victim status, as the case might be. In the feminist classroom, students are often eager to apply an intersectional logic to locate the 'real' victim or to call out privilege. *In many of these contexts, using the term itself is enough; no more is needed to be said or done.*

In her 'short answer' on intersectionality, Simidele Dosekun locates these different positions before reminding us that intersectionality is not about diversity, or personal identity, or permission to narrate one's own social position, as a way of virtue signalling. Instead, she suggests that it is a 'tool for thinking in and about feminism [. . .] in short, intersectionality prompts us to think in more complex ways about power relations including power relations within feminism' (Dosekun, 2023: 55).

To tell the story of feminism is to centre such relations of power *within* feminism, without which we risk the kind of oversimplification and flattening that a 'real' textbook tends to be associated with. In a faux-textbook – a not real(ly) textbook – power relations within feminism are no afterthought or mere footnote; they are core to how we think about specific issues around which feminists have historically organised, or to

how the story of feminism has come to be told. With respect to the first, think, for instance, of sex work, which is covered by *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook*. Debates between those arguing for the recognition of sex work as work and those asking for its criminalisation are intrinsic to how sex work has been conceptualised at levels of policy, governance, media and by actors involved (cis and trans women sex workers; male clients). When it comes to telling feminist stories (see Hemmings, 2011), the wave model is a neat and tidy way to recount the evolution of Anglo-American feminism, but not without significant omissions and consequences. For one, the wave model gives the impression that feminism originates in the West and then spreads to the rest of the world. For another, it hides from view how internally contested feminist claims and struggles were in every ‘wave’. It is now widely known, for instance, that the suffragettes were also imperial feminists (cf. Burton, 1991) who argued for the right to vote on the basis of racial superiority. Women in the colonies pushed against their attempts to do so and called out the hypocrisy of Western women’s investments in ideas of international or global sisterhood.

Women in the post colonies still bear the burdens of these historical assumptions. They too have had to distance themselves from the F-word because of these imperial histories that rendered feminism in the rest of the world as simply derivative of the West. Because of the pervasive association of feminism with something Western (and even bourgeois), activists in ‘our’ locales have had to refrain from calling themselves feminists (even as struggles for gender justice have occurred throughout history and across cultures).

In my book on Indian feminism, I begin by noting how ‘our’ feminisms have been constituted in dialogue, even opposition with Western versions (and the decolonised nation-state); the ‘we’ of our stories constituting a perfect foil to the ‘me’ of white Western feminisms at scales both global and local. We have thus ended up speaking as if in one voice. But who is this ‘we’? This is a question the book seeks to both answer and undermine by showing how feminist identities and solidarities are undercut by various fault lines and relations of power, whether to do with location, language, class, caste or sexuality. These don’t make feminist solidarity a fiction, but do raise the stakes.

As Dosekun says

intersectionality is not about splintering feminism or causing or magnifying divisions between women. Quite the contrary: whilst it may be difficult or uncomfortable to see or admit that there are all kinds of tensions and inequalities between women and between feminists, doing so actually strengthens feminism in the end. (Dosekun, 2023: 53)

The stakes are higher than we might think. Feminist projects that have been rooted in and reinforced racial superiority have not only negated equal rights to ‘other’ women but have also denied their humanity and enhanced their victimisation. From the war in Afghanistan to the genocide in Gaza, we see how western stereotypes of Muslim women act to either legitimise war and occupation in their name, or deny their pain and loss in the service of colonial interests (or both; see Abu-Lughod). In their contribution to *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook*, Chiara Pellegrini says that the very survival of trans individuals ‘is at stake when we talk about gender’. Trans-exclusionary feminist positions do



not merely threaten the rights and safety of trans people, but threaten their existence as such. They go onto say that ‘a trans-inclusive feminism is the only feminism that adequately recognises these stakes’ (Pellegrini, 2023: 71).

Indeed, we can agree that feminists who share in majoritarian values and exclusionary practices are not feminist at all. But even for those who share in the same values – and experience parallel oppressions (Kelley, 2019) – solidarity is not a given; it has to be built, achieved, defended (Dosekun, 2023: 51). It is rooted not only in lack or negation, but in what is also possible and still-to-come. This is a future-oriented and vision-expanding utopian solidarity, or solidarity as world-making (Kelley, 2019). And the tools for it lie in rich and varied terrains of epistemic and political intervention – in the archives of social movements, in the words and voices of the marginalised, in revolutionary songs and poems, and more recently, in the digital. To these resources, we can now add (feminist and queer) textbooks that are not textbooks, but acts/practices in world-making.

## This is not a commentary on a feminism textbook

Gabriela Méndez Cota

I started to write this commentary one day after the democratic election of the first female president of Mexico. Over the past few weeks my intention had been to focus it on the closing chapter in *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook*, which is on technology, yet the election diverts my plans. I suddenly noticed the absence of a chapter dedicated specifically to feminist state-building, institutional transformation, feminist politicians and ‘femocrats’, which could have been placed, precisely, right before or right after ‘technology’. I wondered if it is just that UK-based feminists know all too well that successful stateswomen are unlikely feminists, or if the fraught question of government – including what to do about extreme political violence against women as diagnosed by Bates (2020) in *Men Who Hate Women* – belongs to a different sort of non-textbook. It might be due to space constraints that Heather Berg’s chapter on ‘work’, for example, mentions strategic and tactical forms of resistance to ‘gigification’, yet without a critical assessment of their current political efficacy and future horizons. Or it might be for more complicated reasons that Sara Farris refers to the concept of ‘class’ as ‘the elephant in the feminist room’. As she points out, neither a particularist, recognition-oriented focus on sex/gender identifications, nor a universalist or ‘white’ focus on abstract political equality, could grant feminism the achievement of the true equality that, it seems to me, *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook* invokes when it claims to be *for everyone*. If, as the chapter on ‘class’ reminds us, true equality (and liberty for all) is only achievable in a classless society, I agree with Amia Srinivasan that the question is not, today, ‘whether feminism can be a working-class movement, but whether a working-class movement can afford to be anything but feminist’ (Srinivasan, 2021: 175). Inspired by the recent Mexican election of a female *and* feminist socialist president, what I attempt in what follows is to make my reflection on feminist state-building (*and* textbooks) resonate – in a risky, speculative manner – with *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook* concluding scepticism at the idea that ‘technology’ will save the world.

In the past 6 years the Mexican ‘Social Movement for National Regeneration’ became the now hegemonic MORENA party, with the word *morena* referring, in Mexican



Spanish, to both a brown-skinned woman and to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Even if Claudia Sheinbaum, a Mexico City-based environmental scientist of Jewish heritage, had to be first anointed by the more widely known president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) as the most trustworthy continuator of the wealth redistribution agenda that goes by the name of ‘the Fourth Transformation of Mexico’ (4T), her winning of the popular vote does not fail to intersect with the so-called ‘historic’ feminism of Mexico: namely, that of predominantly white, urban, middle-class-women who developed, since the 1970s, a range of reformist methods to achieve their radical aims. It remains to be seen how the now officially ‘feminist’ government of Mexico will manage to contain the forces of global capitalism, including organised crime and its imbrication with state violence, US-imposed militarization, violence against women and migrants and environmental violence through extractive ‘development’ – the latter still championed by Sheinbaum’s own political party as the means of wealth redistribution. Her promised ‘economic revolution of women’ also remains uncertain given the larger structural dynamics. Will it be a step towards the ideal classless society, or a gender-brown-washing of the dissolution of 19th-century style, masculine-dominated biopolitics, into a sexbot’s mode of biopolitics within a planetary regime of uncontained or *total* capitalism?

In parts of the world, such as the United Kingdom, where new media technologies have long been the object of feminist reflection in academia, we now hear much about sexbots and little about feminist politicians. *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook* closes with a chapter questioning, precisely, the expectation that ‘tech will save the world’ through its artificial intelligence (AI) developments. If the dream of technological redemption belongs to a context of ‘public–private partnerships’ that shift responsibility away from governments and onto tech-finance corporations, how does feminism respond to that? Beyond a cultural analysis of technology, is there not a minimum wager on the capacity of feminists to exert political power within the far-from-ideal circumstances and constraints imposed by planetary doom? What would be the role of a textbook in that wager? And what would sexbots have to do with it?

In the early fifties, primary school textbook publishing in Mexico faced accusations of being a foreign-owned, profit-driven monopoly, at odds with the constitutional mandate of the post-revolutionary state to provide Mexicans with free *and compulsory* education. By 1959, President Adolfo López Mateos inaugurated a state takeover of textbook publishing, with the state not only unifying textbook content but also becoming the main publisher, printer and distributor of free *and compulsory* textbooks. Dissident voices promptly denounced that the takeover was an authoritarian gesture, a history that repeats itself today with the 4T. Already alarmed by the overt ideological bent of the so-called ‘New Mexican School’ – which claims to be a new paradigm of education focusing not on neoliberal excellence but above all on community values, including feminism and decoloniality – liberal educational experts and policy analysts have criticised the new ‘family’ of textbooks that was distributed nationwide in 2023 (this time accompanied, naturally, by an open access digital edition), underscoring their marginalisation of properly scientific and humanistic contents as well as their non-transparent design and evaluation. In that same year, while holding the party-conferred title of ‘Coordinator of the Defence of the Transformation’, now president-elect Claudia Sheinbaum declared that

the textbooks were to be distributed to all schools despite civil society's numerous criticisms and objections, because 'the children are not to blame for the textbooks becoming politicised'. In one of her last campaign tours, she declared that 'we are going to write history; we are going to place June 2nd [the day of her electoral triumph] in the books of our history, in the textbooks' (13 May 2024). Is there not something like an uncanny, a slightly robotic quality in the performance of a feminist politician which sounds very much like the same old nation-state biopolitics?

Suzanne Leonard's chapter on motherhood, in *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook*, is neither about textbooks nor about any given country's political history; what it does is contrast the Internet's 'mamasphere' with Pedro Almodóvar's mother-focused cinema. Yet motherhood – as Almodóvar's cinema suggests – might have another dimension between the experiences and expressions of motherhood under capitalism, and their cultural representation in literature or film. That could be the psychic dimension of politics as suggested by a woman scientist-politician who comes to embody 'motherhood' as state power, through a performance of caring for 'the children' and disavowing, in the process, the political nature of textbooks. For decades, psychoanalysts have taken the question of sexual difference as a question of the social bond – pointing out the decline of the name-of-the father under capitalism, and the symptomatic rise of a state-market maternalism in the political field. Given its fraught relationship with psychoanalytic discourse, feminism mostly continues to operate in precisely that hyper-conscious register in which all that can be questioned is whether the politicians are truly human(ist), truly committed to and genuinely interested in the country (i.e. the family), truly 'feminist'; in sum, whether they are 'good mothers' or bad. In the meantime, the bots do their job, engineering social perception according to economic criteria that might have nothing to do with such familial narratives of the modern biopolitical state.

I like to think about feminism in the way that Catherine Rottenberg describes it in the introduction to *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook*, as something that

comes to life when its boundaries are challenged and its key ideas are tested, since it is precisely the engagement with new ideas, self-reflexive critique and the beliefs of new generations of activists and thinkers that help transform our notion and our praxis of feminism. (8)

The textbook affair might be dismissed as a banal example of old nationalist rhetoric strategically addressed to working-class 'audiences', but it is meant to remind us that the old rhetoric of the family as the model of the political community now operates within the dynamics of a technoscientific engineering of politics not so much via textbooks as via platforms such as Tik Tok and X, one that increasingly undermines the actual agency of the traditional, hyper-conscious subject of political activism. And yet, if we think of it as an imaginary identification with 'women' as victims redeemed by hyper-conscious 'empowerment', feminism has clearly captured the hearts and minds of a good part of Mexican society. Alongside the denunciation of sexual violence, a fascination has grown with 'warrior' women, perhaps not so much (as in the Global North) with woman celebrities, entrepreneurs, politicians, scientists and so forth, as with mothers and daughters seeking justice against the most extreme forms of state violence, such as femicide and forced disappearance. While 'feminism' in this general

sense of a widespread fascination with victimised women and rising female power seems to have become established in Mexico – without, obviously, any guarantee of sustained support for the incoming feminist government – the rather fraught *histories* of feminism, of historical antagonisms (rather than ‘debates’) among feminists (on issues such as sex work or trans rights, but also class and race), remain the purview of a tiny elite of professional feminists. How does the traditional hyper-conscious subject of feminism – whether it is ‘white’, ‘of colour’, ‘liberal’, ‘radical’, ‘trans’, ‘trans-exclusionary’ or anything else – fare in the algorithmic environment, if not as a role-playing sexbot, sustained by millions of tiny invisible bots?

Amid planetary hopelessness, Mexico can currently boast of having elected a feminist government committed to policies of social justice and care, including paid leave for parents, affordable childcare, equitable health care, safe housing and quality education. My risky speculative question is not meant to discourage faith in what I regard, in fact, as an urgent feminist reinvention of the socialist state. At the same time, and on occasion of *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook*, what I want to bet on, rather counter-intuitively, is ‘feminism’ reconceived as a step back from the hyper-conscious, subjectivist register of politics, from ‘woman’ as a techno-solutionist fantasy, and as a creative way of coming to terms with ever larger, more complex, scales for not-always-thinking. Might the proliferation of *sex bots*, which coincides with the rise of women politicians, inaugurate a shift in feminist discourse towards an understanding of politics that is much more attuned to both its technological and its unconscious dynamics? It seems to me that the future of Mexican feminism resides in an intrepid exploration of this question, both at the practical level of movement and institution-building and at the level of speculative non-textbooks.

One like *Deseo y conflicto. Política sexual, prácticas violentas y victimización* (Lamas and Palumbo, 2023) already diagnoses, and counters, digitally engineered neo-essentialism and punitivism in Latin American feminisms, urging feminism to rethink sexual politics in terms of erotic justice, rather than of sexual panics and carceral statism. Another like *Briújula. Voces de la intersexualidad en México* (Inter and Alcántara, 2024) takes the feminist search for erotic justice beyond documenting the politicisation of, in this case, intersexuality, by arguing for a psychoanalytical de-medicalization of ‘sex’. Alongside feminist state-builders, feminist psychoanalysts, and inquisitive bots, these and other feminist non-textbooks may hold the keys to yet another iteration of feminist thinking, one which conceives itself as an existential task of radical equality, before and beyond any technological project to save the world.

## Dirty but make it more fashion? Reflecting on the ‘F’ word

Zainab Naqvi

Feminism cannot seem to catch a break. It is overloaded with baggage and ‘hot takes’, leaving us with the unenviable task of working with it while also supporting others to develop their understandings around it. My reflections are therefore centred around the ‘F’ word as it has become increasingly in vogue for mainstream media and celebrity culture. Popular culture and media have catapulted feminism into the limelight in recent years (Jackson, 2021). This is not unique to feminism; after all, we see the hold that other

concepts like intersectionality and decolonisation have also taken in mainstream consciousness. But arguably feminism has taken root in celebrity culture in ways that almost make it a 'gateway drug' to social justice struggles. There are some interesting themes flowing from this shift in feminism's status from dirty word to cultural darling. Feminism has long been framed as 'dirty' around the world, provoking negative and 'affect-laden responses' (Scharff, 2012: 1; Naz et al., 2022; Wing, 2002). What does it mean to describe something as 'dirty'? Typically, this signifies that a word is profane or obscene and therefore an unspeakable subject (Jay, 1980). Calling something dirty signifies that it is impure. The most marginalised and oppressed of us have long lived with assumptions and characterisations of dirt and impurity. As Lugones (1994) tells us:

If women, the poor, the colored, the queer, the ones with cultures (whose cultures are denied and rendered invisible as they are seen as our mark) are deemed unfit for the public, it is because we are tainted by need, emotion, the body. (p. 467)

Some commentaries tell us that the adoption of feminism by public figures and institutions could lead to more meaningful engagement with the cause (Gay, 2014). It makes feminism accessible outside of academic circles (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Feminism is for everybody as per bell hooks' words quoted at the start of *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook*. We might know this but now those who felt like it was not for them can also see themselves as feminists through the public figures that they admire. We now see less of the 'I'm not a feminist but . . .' rhetoric from people wanting to champion feminist principles while avoiding accusations of being a stereotypical man-hater (Cobb, 2015). There is now space to be unapologetic in our feminism – to no longer be afraid of the label or be associated with it. And yet, it provokes interesting questions about what it means for a public figure to 'use their popularity for a good cause', to borrow from the film *Clueless*. These popular feminists occupy a conflict-laden position. They benefit from the hierarchies of oppression that put them in the public eye, but they are not alone in enjoying such privileges – it is just that they are more visible (Hobson, 2017).

At the same time, we cannot deny the damage that popularity or mainstreaming can do to movements like feminism. It is difficult to disconnect the feminism from the marketing and branding opportunities it creates. Feminism is cool; being feminist is cool; and more importantly to the mainstream, it can be conveniently showcased and drawn on in non-threatening ways (Jackson, 2021). Feminism is easily made palatable not only to the masses but also the powerful actors and institutions shaping our societies and lives. 'Be feminist', they say, but also enjoy the trappings of consumerism, individualism and celebrity (Dejmanee, 2018). That is not to say that antiracism, for example, is not also susceptible to this treatment, but you are less likely to see male politicians wearing a 'this is what an antiracist looks like' t-shirt in a magazine spread.<sup>1</sup> This media performance runs the risk of presenting a feminism and feminist politics that might only make people conscious of gender inequality (Rottenberg, 2014), when we have moved past that to work against all forms of domination and oppression.

Isaksen and Eltantawy (2021) further observe the pronounced whiteness of most celebrities making feminism part of their brand image alongside their US location. Their white femininity and how this shapes their politics is overlooked leaving the consumer

with a particular conception of a cool, t-shirt wearing white feminist. The phenomenon of 'pink washing' also flows from this popular rebranding of feminism. By embracing feminism or other specific movements against social injustice that fit with the mainstream liberal agenda, the treatment of more vulnerable (and usually racialised) marginalised communities whose plight is not palatable to the masses can be obscured. Attention is drawn to the liberal causes leaving the less popular, less convenient issues in the dust. As we are told in *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook*, even the pink cancer ribbons which started as a form of breast cancer activism have been snatched up by corporations to increase sales (*TINAFT*: 135). The 'fame-inist brand' (Gay, 2014) should therefore be approached with caution, because it has the potential to undo feminism despite giving off the impression that it is well-informed and intended (McRobbie, 2004).

And so, the sanitised mainstream feminism that has the public's attention has not really shaken off feminism's dirty connotations. We might have less of the 'I'm not a feminist but . . .' discoursing from public figures now,<sup>2</sup> but that is because the feminism they are espousing is not of the dirty kind. It is the 'harmless' kind. The marginalised among us remain tainted along with our struggles for 'recognition of the interlocking of oppressions' (Lugones, 1994: 474). The feminisms that we deploy to resist the interlocking of oppressions are dirty. But the feminisms allowed into the mainstream, into our popular culture, they are purified and satisfy the urge of those in power to retain control over it and its expressions. Through this, we see that dirty feminisms give rise to an orientalist dualism between the 'cleanly "self"' and dirty "other"' (Halder, 2008: 69). Dirt and the descriptor dirty therefore mediate our position and belonging as feminists. It does not matter how popular feminism becomes, how stylish, it will never shake off its dirty, other reputation. All popular interactions with it are mediated through this and that is why, even with their limitations, books like *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook* are so important. To sift through the layers of sediment with the help of guides like this one, we can reclaim feminism, dirt and all. We can defiantly embrace it in transformative ways that sit with all of this complexity and contradiction in the spirit of this book. In the opening and closing of the book, bell hooks' statement that 'feminism is for everybody' takes centre stage: feminism is used by us, it inspires us and perhaps as *This Is Not a Feminism Textbook* suggests, we need to see its baggage as a political and theoretical strength. By accepting this, we can successfully pursue the modest yet realistic aim of the book to make people want to learn more about feminism. In doing so, we can move towards an approach of 'feminism by and for humans'. Humans are messy and dirty – our positions and politics are mediated by this. And that is exactly who feminism is meant to speak to and with: humans who are three-dimensional and therefore need three-dimensional feminism. Humans and feminists come together in political solidarity to support each other's causes and work collectively towards social justice. Feminism is for everybody – we connect with one another as we resist the 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' (hooks, 2000: 46). And in feminism we find a name and voice for our experiences: *ours*. Institutions and systems of oppression want to label us, call us other, dirty and unspeakable. But we challenge those who want control and purity by speaking for ourselves. We reject their ideals and part of this work is sitting with the complexity, discomfort and humanness of feminism. Feminism is for everybody, and it should therefore be accessible to everybody which is the message *TINAFT* wants to convey.

I end this reflection by expressing my solidarity with colleagues at Goldsmiths University and Goldsmiths University Press who are being subjected to the ‘biggest assault on jobs at any UK university in recent years’ because of administrative incompetence (Weale, 2024). Feminism is for everybody which includes our commitment to stand with and speak out for one another. And of course, this is not limited to the academy but to all of our people around the world being subjected to horrific and state-sanctioned forms of genocide, scholasticide, epistemicide, dispossession and so much more. We can do at least this much, say this much or what is the point of discussing the power and value of feminism for us as humans? Or of publishing books and writing papers about it?

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### ORCID iD

Catherine Rottenberg  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2196-3589>

### Notes

1. I refer here to the *Elle* UK Magazine feature in 2014 where politicians and celebrities were photographed wearing a t-shirt which had the words ‘this is what a feminist looks like’ emblazoned across it (Horton and Street, 2021). For more on celebrities, antiracism and the Black Lives Matter Movement see Sobande (2022).
2. By saying this I do not want to sideline or erase the fact that there are still many places where feminism remains a dirty word in the mainstream see, for example, Hurt (2024). I say this in the context of the feminist debates that the book is mainly in conversation with in the ‘Global North’.

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## Biographical notes

Srila Roy is a Professor of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Her latest books are the co-edited, *Intimacy and Injury: in the wake of #MeToo in India and South*



*Africa* (Manchester University Press, 2022) and the sole-authored, *Changing the Subject: Feminist and Queer Politics in Neoliberal India* (Duke University Press, 2022). *Changing the Subject* was the winner of the Distinguished Book Award of the Sexualities section of the American Sociological Association and the best book award from the Feminist Theory and Gender Studies section of the International Studies Association. She is currently writing a book on decolonial feminism across the Global South, for Wits University Press.

**Gabriela Méndez Cota** is a Lecturer and Researcher at the Department of Philosophy and at the Centre for Critical Gender Studies and Feminisms at Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México. Her work on feminism and gender has appeared, in English, in *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, the *Routledge Handbook of Ecocultural Identities* (2020) and *Política común: a journal for thought* (2024). As principal editor *Culture Machine*, between 2019 and 2021 she led a practice-based educational initiative on critical/feminist/intersectional perspectives of open access, which included a collaboration with the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University, United Kingdom, and resulted in a collective rewriting of *The Chernobyl Herbarium* (Open Humanities Press, 2015).

**Zainab Naqvi** is Reader in Critical Feminist Legal Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research interests focus on legal and judicial responses to minoritised communities in the UK.