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Introduction: Symposium on Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, Twenty-Five Years Later

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Introduction:
Symposium on *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*,
Twenty-Five Years Later
Lori Watson

First, I would like to thank the editors of *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* for agreeing to publish this symposium and allowing me to guest edit it. The papers collected here, along with Catharine A. MacKinnon's response to them, grew out of a book symposium on *Toward* held at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in the spring of 2015. I was, then, a member of the Pacific Division program committee, and as such had the opportunity to organize invited sessions for the program. Given complete carte blanche to organize sessions, I conceived of this "dream session," featuring MacKinnon's groundbreaking work and initiated the invitations. Amazingly, everyone agreed to participate, including MacKinnon. After that session, a philosopher approached me and said, "How did you get MacKinnon to come to the APA?" My reply: "I asked her."

When initially brainstorming about possible sessions, a symposium on *Toward* leapt to my mind for two reasons: first, as a feminist scholar, this book has been ground zero for my work since first reading it as an undergraduate. Whether others take up its charge or not, it certainly serves as a reference point, a fundamental orienting text, for many, many others. Second, it seems to me that many of the current "cutting-edge" topics in philosophy—testimonial injustice, situated epistemologies of the oppressed, exploration of the policing of the boundaries of philosophy in the service of dominant groups, ideology, propaganda, the concept of "woman," and indeed much else—owe an intellectual debt to *Toward*, one often unacknowledged. Many of these topics are deftly analyzed in *Toward* explicitly, and some, such as testimonial injustice, not called that in *Toward*, find their first expression or proto-expression in MacKinnon's words. Thus, paying homage to this text, explicitly acknowledging our intellectual debts, seemed to me well overdue.

The papers collected here by Natalie Nenadic, Susan Brison, Elena Ruiz and Kristie Dotson, and Clare Chambers engage, with great care, the substance of MacKinnon's views across a wide range of topics. Nenadic's paper is a truly original contribution, developing an account of the shared philosophical method between some continental approaches to understanding and analyzing the phenomenology of the lived-experience of persons (as members of groups) and MacKinnon's feminist method. Along the way, Nenadic also does a remarkable job of explicitly

drawing our attention to the ways in which MacKinnon's analysis of gender was intersectional from the beginning and never reductive (though some critics have consistently and mistakenly claimed it was). Nenadic's careful reading and exposition of these aspects of MacKinnon's view provide what one hopes will be taken up as the complete rejoinder to those critics who continue to misread, in this and other respects, *Toward*.

Susan Brison's piece takes its title from one of the epigraphs that begin Chapter 5 of *Toward*, on "Consciousness Raising"—the poem "Artemis" by Olga Broumas. "We must find words or burn," Broumas writes and Brison demonstrates. "Sisterhood," as a concept of feminist solidarity, is not as frequently invoked as it once was, in part due to the ways in which marginalized women have articulated their exclusion from such sisterhood, both in practice and in theory. However, I think the concept can be articulated in an inclusive and open way (as Nenadic's piece beautifully shows), and it is the word that kept coming to my mind as I first heard and then read Brison's piece. Sisterhood is often forged through taking up a cause together, in the flesh and face to face, but as all of us have surely experienced, it is also created and sustained through words and texts, which can create a bond through great distance, whether distance of geography or time. *Toward* has been, and will continue to be, that bridge through geography or time for many. Brison articulates what no doubt many readers of *Toward* have felt: an igniting of our own feminist consciousness raising, a text to return to for sustenance, and a powerful call to action—we will be silent no more.

Elena Ruiz and Kristie Dotson's piece seeks to articulate the grounds of "allyship" among MacKinnon's work and feminist decolonizing work, especially as done by women of color and feminisms situated in the context of liberatory struggles of the Global South. They lay out a very careful and illuminating exegesis of MacKinnon's critique of dominant epistemological norms that serve to reify and "universalize" dominant perspectives, which are actually partial and in service of power. While they argue for the liberatory potential of exposing the false universality of epistemologies of dominance, Ruiz and Dotson warn that the very project of giving voice to new ways of knowing, grounded in the experience of subordinated groups, runs the risk of falling back into a false universalization, marginalizing those subordinated through multiple intersections of power (sex, race, class, geo-political location, disability, and so on). They lay the groundwork for future work on coalition building among various (and internally diverse) groups, acknowledging that while such work is fraught with difficulty, it is necessary.

Clare Chambers's piece queries whether, and if so, what, moral theory underlines or emerges from MacKinnon's political critique. Chambers insists that if, after all, "the personal is the political," then individual "choices" call for political critique, especially when such choices reflect or support unequal power dynamics.

Another way of stating Chambers's line of inquiry is as asking, what are our individual, moral duties under systems of oppression? Where and when do we have duties to resist? Where and when are we condemnable for our complicity or failure to resist? Building on this line of inquiry, Chambers asks what we should make of our own (and others') gender presentations, under current conditions, extending this line of questioning to "who counts as a woman?" Here she explores the possibility of a trans-inclusive feminism and a feminism-inclusive trans politics.

As tempting as it is to offer my own responses and replies to the numerous issues raised in these papers, readers here have the benefit of Catharine MacKinnon's direct engagement and response. Anyone having previously read any of MacKinnon's work surely knows that in addition to the depth of their substance, they also stand out for their style. Susan Brison remarks on this briefly in her piece; one rarely finds substantive writing of the sort MacKinnon is known for with the flare of style with which she consistently punctuates her pages. One doesn't exactly expect to laugh out loud when reading a book entitled *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, but indeed the wit peppered throughout the compelling prose provides opportunities for relief, a welcome respite against the gravity of reality simultaneously documented and explored. Her reply here, once again, does not disappoint, combining substance with style in the way we have come to expect from MacKinnon.

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