

Susana Bornéo Funck¹

¹Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, SC, Brasil

Cristina Scheibe Wolff¹

¹Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, SC, Brasil

Feminisms in Uncertain Times

It is undeniable that the world – at least the world available to us – is undergoing a period of uncertainty and contradiction, in which many of women’s political gains, especially those of the second half of the twentieth century, are being questioned as the political and religious mood in many cultures becomes increasingly more conservative.

Even so, one finds many positive points in the struggle for women’s rights. More than ever, young activist groups use social media to spread their ideas and promote empowerment campaigns through blogs and personal pages. A quick search in the Internet reveals significant numbers. A search in Portuguese for “blogs feministas” shows 4,030,000 results. If we use English (“feminist blogs”), 15,900,000 results are obtained. Among the 20 top, according to Feedspot (2018), we find *Feministing*, with posts about intersectional issues, sexual violence, transgender rights and reproductive justice; *Gender Matters*, from India, committed to the empowerment and basic rights of young girls and women; and *MsAfropolitan*, which connects feminism to broader critical views on culture, society and politics from an African perspective. These are only three brief examples of the great variety of feminist activism around the world.

Also worth mentioning are the campaigns against sexual and moral harassment and violence, such as the #Me too and Time’s up movements which sprang up in the United States, and, here in Brazil, the struggle against harassment on the streets, public transportation and the workplace, of which the #DeixaElaTrabalhar (Let her work) launched by female sports journalists is the most recent example.

Added to these initiatives, we must also stress the increased visibility of Black and LGBTI+ activisms, which have gained momentum both in social movements and in academia, and intersectionality as the major focus of contemporary feminist agendas.

In politics, even though Pedro Sánchez, in Spain, recently indicated women to eight of his ten ministries, and the cabinets of Justin Trudeau, in Canada, and Emmanuel Macron, in France, both with 50% of women, made the headlines of international news, recent data reveal that no country in the world reaches such numbers in terms of National Congress or Parliament. In fact, 73% of the countries have less than 20% of these positions filled by women (PAXTON, Pamela; HUGHES, Melanie M., 2007). And these are, in most cases, elective offices.



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In a similar fashion, it is easy to observe that the growing presence of female leadership in social networks and the numerous campaigns for gender equality are negatively balanced by an upsurge in racist, homophobic and openly sexist attacks. And that campaigns against violence and harassment have not been able to assuage the high rates of femicide and of hate crimes against gays, lesbians, and trans people, statistics in which Brazil does not fare very well.

On the basis of this brief overview of recent gains and losses, we could say that we remain “dancing through a minefield”, as Annette Kolodny (1980) described feminist criticism in the early 1980s.

In this context of a difficult and uncertain world, the Instituto de Estudos de Gênero (Institute of Gender Studies) of the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (Florianópolis, Brazil) hosted, between July 30th and August 4th, two joint events: the 13th Women’s Worlds Congress, held for the first time in South America, and the 11th Doing Gender International Seminar, the largest meeting of its kind in Brazil. With the theme “Transformations, Connections, Displacements”, the events gathered over 9,000 participants among activists, artists, academics from Brazil and other 32 countries.

WW/FG was a *sui generis* event that conjugated three different dimensions of feminism: the academic-scientific, the political and the artistic. Each participant was able to access conferences, round tables and academic research communications, as well as participate in forums and workshops where issues of activism were addressed and activists were the protagonists. We also had musical, theater and dance performances, an art exhibition and audiovisual and photography exhibits. Feminism and women’s issues were thought, felt, experimented and, principally, debated. And we all had the opportunity to participate in a great march downtown Florianópolis, with more than ten thousands participants: the Women’s Worlds March for Rights, that can be visualized on the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swuHNUZ9z4c&feature=youtu.be>.

In order to illustrate, although in a limited way, the international scope of the events, the *Revista Estudos Feministas* selected eight of the papers presented in English for this “Special Section”.

We start with Clare Hemmings’ paper, presented as the opening lecture of the events, the title of which – A Feminist Politics of Ambivalence: Reading with Emma Goldman – appropriately addresses the uncertain times we are going through. As in her recent book *Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence & the Imaginative Archive*, Hemmings (2018) argues – with Emma Goldman (anarchist activist who died in 1940) as a guide – that it can be politically productive to embrace and theorize uncertainty, and even ambivalence, in relation to gender equality and feminism.

Focusing on the ambivalence of Goldman’s feminism, on the gaps of her critical stances, allows us, according to Hemmings, to deal with the contradictions of politics and theory, foregrounding complexity and deferring the desire to resolve paradoxes, as in the case of the relations among race, displacement, class and gender in current intersectional approaches. An interesting recipe for our difficult times.

Paradoxes are also pointed out in Rekha Pande’s article on the history of feminism in India. In its First Phase (1850-1915), in the pre-independence era, the struggle for women’s rights was part of a wider movement of social reform. However, if on the one hand there was a tendency to assimilate progressive Western ideas, on the other there was a need to reinforce a cultural identity other than that of the colonizer. It was in the Second Phase (1915-1947), with Gandhi’s non-violent resistance, that women gained more political participation. As stressed by Pande, the fight for independence mobilized a large number of women, who

nevertheless had to fight on two fronts: in the streets against the English domination, and in their homes against patriarchy.

In the second half of the twentieth century, after India's independence in 1947, several laws were passed to improve the situation of women. More recently, successive governmental plans have addressed the problem, such as the 2002-2007 Plan, which guaranteed access to information and resources as a way for more gender equality, the 2007-2012 Plan, which focused on female empowerment, and the recent 2012-2017 Plan, which took measures to promote health, education, urban sanitation and governance.

But, although Gender Studies were included in the educational curricula and India can count with 163 Centers of Women's Studies, governmental funds for the sector have been undergoing successive cuts, generating great uncertainty as to the maintenance of the programs established by the Five-Year Plans. In spite of the bleak situation, concludes Pande, the women's movement in India brought important issues to the surface and gave more visibility to the need of gender equality.

Public policies are also the major concern of Patricia Muñoz-Cabrera and Patricia Duarte Rangel in "Gender Justice in Argentina, Brazil and Chile", as they analyze the governments of Cristina Fernández (2007-2011; 2011-2015), Dilma Rousseff (2010-2014; 2014-2016) and Michele Bachelet (2006-2010; 2014-2018), respectively. Starting from a theoretical discussion of the limited role of women in the formulation of public policies, the authors examine the feminist contributions in the fields of economic autonomy, violence and health, questioning the correlation between governmental agencies for women's rights and gender equality, and the persisting discrimination in countries that were governed by women in Latin America.

As examples of improvement, Muñoz-Cabrera and Rangel highlight efforts toward the inclusion of women in the labor market and, in both Chile and Brazil, the passing of laws and regulations for domestic workers. They also emphasize income distribution and poverty eradication policies, as well as programs for the control of domestic violence in the three countries. However, they see these improvements as still based on essentialist concepts, without considering the plight of black women and men, native peoples and non-heterosexual minorities. The major problem, according to them, is still the lack of intersectionality in the field of gender justice.

This same justice, in the context of human rights, is the focus of the article "Human Rights and Violence against Women", in which Dandara Oliveira de Paula examines the political context of the movement's emergence with the founding of the United Nations after World War II. As she points out, although the 1948 document stresses universality and equality of rights in terms of human dignity, it took about thirty years for the violations against women to be considered. The 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women', issued in 1979 and signed in 1981, was the first international document geared specifically to the rights of women. Its main objectives: to promote gender equality and to fight discrimination.

In spite of the many initiatives that followed this document, such as the World Conferences on Women (Mexico City, 1975; Copenhagen, 1980; Nairobi, 1985; Beijing, 1995) and the creation of the UN Women by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010, little progress has been made since the recommendations need to be implemented by each member country individually. In Latin America, in spite of the efforts of the Organization of American States, much remains to be done in terms, especially, of violence against women. As emblematic of this struggle, the article presents and discusses the *Campo Algodonero* case, in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, the first in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to recognize the crime of femicide and the vulnerability of the lives and integrity of women.

Governmental policies and human rights are no doubt important arenas for the achievement of basic feminist rights. But we cannot forget that political struggles also take place in the realm of ideas, of the narratives that circulate in society and that have a fundamental role in the construction and deconstruction of social and sexual identities. Gender, as we all know (and theoreticians are too many to refer to here), is a form of representation that needs to be negotiated in concrete contexts. As Elle Shohat (2001) warns us, in an interview to *Revista Estudos Feministas*, "What we imagine is very real and reality is imagined. We need to constantly negotiate the relation between materiality and its narrativization" (p.156; my translation). Thus, we turn our attention to two articles on literature that take up relevant gender and sexuality issues in non-hegemonic contexts where race and nationality intersect.

In "A Detour in Longing", Nathália Araújo Duarte de Gouvêa examines the relationship between gender, sexuality and lesbian desire in *What Night Brings* (2003) by Carla Trujillo (2009) and *Gulf Dreams* (1996) by Emma Pérez (1996), two United States authors of Mexican descent. In extremely conservative communities, their protagonists seek to explore their sexuality and understand their forbidden desires, as they become aware of the patriarchal and sexist environment which surrounds them.

Doubly oppressed, as Chicanas in a predominantly white society and as women in a conservative family setting, they adopt transgressive and critical attitudes as a means of resistance and survival. Although both are coming-of-age novels, they differ in their characters' acceptance of a lesbian identity, for while Pérez' protagonist ends up understanding and taking up her homosexuality, Trujillo's opts for the heteronormative script in order to be socially accepted.

Such diasporic intersections of gender, race and nationality are also present in the article "Voices that Matter", in which Flávia Rodrigues Monteiro analyzes the novel *The Buddha in the Attic*, by Japanese-American writer Julie Otsuka (2011). Centered on two main topics – the practice known as *Picture Bride* and the concentration camps for Japanese-Americans during World War II – the narrative is basically told from a first person plural point of view, with occasional inclusions of other voices. This, according to Monteiro, "is a narrative that describes a collective experience but avoids essentialisms." Although the women in the novel are of different ages, professions and geographical origins, they all speak of their lack of power both in the fields and at home, having to act under a double oppression: as women in terms of gender, and as diasporic subjects in terms of nationality.

Closing this "Special Section", two articles of a more descriptive character address major areas of feminist agency: publications, and international congresses and networks. In the first, "Vicissitudes of Internationalization: Academic articles in Brazilian journals", Mara Coelho de Souza Lago, editor of *Revista Estudos Feministas*, gives an overview of the 25 years of the periodical, emphasizing its close connections with the Instituto de Estudos de Gênero (Gender Studies Institute) of the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina and with the Doing Gender International Seminar. Besides stressing the voluntary, collective and interdisciplinary activities of REF, Lago presents detailed information about the different sections of the journal, the academic areas covered, as well as a general profile of authorship according to fields of knowledge. The text presents a thorough picture of one of the best two feminist journals in Brazil. Especially important is her evaluation of the impact of the North-South internationalization process imposed by the main indexers and by the institutions that define educational policies in the country, since the intense dialogue maintained by the journal with other Latin American countries is not duly recognized. Uncertain times.

In "How It All Began", Marilyn P. Safir, of Haifa University, Israel, describes the birth of the Women's Worlds Congress (WW), and of the international network WOWS (Worldwide

Organization of Women's Studies). As organizer of the First WW, Safir highlights the enormous difficulties of putting together an international event without technological devices such as DDD, fax or internet. But the *First International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women: Women's Worlds* did occur in Haifa, from the 27th of December of 1981 to January 1st, 1982. Other meetings followed in the Netherlands (1984), Ireland (1987), the United States (1990), Costa Rica (1993), Australia (1996), Norway (1999), Uganda (2002), Korea (2005), Spain (2008), Canada (2011) and India (2014).

As early as 1985, the idea of an international network to bring together various Women's Studies organizations began to take shape. With the help of several regional and national groups, Wows was proposed in 1995 and officially launched at the 6th International Congress, in 1996, in Adelaide, Australia. Since then, Wows has supported the international meetings, the 13th of which took place here in Florianópolis, in 2017,


It is from this most recent Women's Worlds, which happened concomitantly with the 11th Doing Gender Seminar, that the articles of this "Special Section" were selected. We hope they may illustrate the uncertainties of contemporary feminisms in a pleasant and instructive way.

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Susana Bornéo Funck (sbfunck@gmail.com) holds a BA in English from Mount Holyoke College, a BA in Translation from PUCRS, an MA in English and a PhD in the Humanities from the University of Texas at Arlington. She did postdoctoral research at Brown University. She taught Literatures in English at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) and Discourse Studies at the Catholic University of Pelotas (UCPEL). Retired since 2014, she still participates in the editorial board of *Revista Estudos Feministas* and in the Gender Studies Institute of UFSC.

 0000-0002-5444-2520

Cristina Schelbe Wolff (cristiwolff@gmail.com) is Full Professor of History Department at Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), Brazil and has a Productivity in Science Fellowship of CNPq. She did her PhD studies in Social History at University of São Paulo (USP,

1998) and was Visiting Researcher at University of Rennes 2, France (2005 and 2018), University of Maryland, at College Park, USA (2011) and Fullbright Chair of Brazilian Studies in the University of Massachusetts, Amherst Fall 2017. She is in the Editorial Board of *Revista Estudos Feministas* and is a member of Institute of Gender Studies (IEG) e and Laboratory of Gender and History Studies (LEGH) of UFSC. Actually, she develops research about Gender, emotions, feminisms and dictatorships in the Southern Cone.

 0000-0002-7315-1112