

INVITED REVIEW ESSAY

## The Many Genealogies of Feminist Activism

*Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present, and Future of the U.S. Women's Movement.* Rachel F. Seidman. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019 (ISBN 978-1-4696-5308-2)

*Pushing Back: Women of Color-Led Grassroots Activism in New York City.* Ariella Rotramel. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020 (ISBN 978-0-8203-5666-2)

Breanne Fahs 

Arizona State University, Glendale, AZ, USA  
Email: [breanne.fahs@asu.edu](mailto:breanne.fahs@asu.edu)

(Received 12 September 2022; revised 24 February 2023; accepted 4 April 2023)

The stakes of feminist activism, and the fault lines within feminism, have a newfound significance in this cultural moment. In response to the fall of Roe, the ascendancy of incendiary far-right politics, and the mainstreaming of white-supremacist ideologies, grassroots feminist activism and its impacts have never mattered more. When reading Rachel Seidman's *Speaking of Feminism* and Arielle Rotramel's *Pushing Back*, both books that feature interviews and ethnographic work on feminists and feminist groups prior to the 2016 election (Seidman interviewed participants from 2014 to 2016, and Rotramel worked on this material primarily from 2007 to 2011), the gap between the pre- and post-2016 realities seems ever more stark. These books highlight feminisms just prior to the series of aggressive assaults that feminism (and all forms of social justice) would face following the 2016 US presidential election. Both serve as a kind of warning—feminists of all ages understood the hazards of fusing misogyny and white supremacy—and as capturing the histories of feminist activism before the cascade of traumas that would ensue from 2016 to the present day. In this way, feminist ethnographic work and interviews with activists operate as time capsules with unique relevance to the genealogical structure of feminist history and activism. By foregrounding women-of-color-led activism in particular, historians can trace in this period the movement from theorizing about intersectionality to enacting feminist activism that draw from experiences of marginalization. The significance of feminist work that built on, and contributed to, theorizing about intersecting identities and interlocking oppressions is brought boldly to life in these two texts.

Seidman's work, *Speaking of Feminism*, features 25 interviews that took place from 2014 to 2016 with US feminist activists in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. Each activist in her book had (or was developing) a strong national reputation for feminist activism and came from a variety of careers and professions: nonprofit leaders, writers, journalists,

union leaders, politicians, media professionals, students, and philanthropists. Nearly all comfortably claimed the label *feminist*, and within this framework, Seidman set out to speak to them about their relationship to feminism and feminist activism. Seidman writes, “The emphasis in these interviews is on understanding how people make sense of their own paths to feminist activism, the work that they do, the contexts in which they live, and how those contexts shape their thoughts and actions” (2). She illuminates how the women she interviewed had starkly different paths to feminism, as some discovered feminism in college whereas others came from refugee families or found feminism through single motherhood. These narratives about “goals, hopes, sorrows, frustrations, and joys” (10) featured feminists who grappled with conflicts within feminism, the assaults women faced from conservative and right-wing groups and individuals, and the meaning of early-twenty-first-century feminist work.

Structured in groups of activists based on age (40s, 30s, and 20s, respectively), Seidman’s book artfully traces the emerging tensions within this period of feminism. In particular, she highlights conflicts between online feminism as intertwined with face-to-face and in-the-streets feminism, and women’s struggles with social media alongside the high stakes of doing their work. Common threads running through the interviews, for example, include the hazards of Twitter and its volatility, the constant attacks by internet trolls, grappling with death threats, and the very real fear that women feel when using social media as a platform for their ideas and activist work. Further, Seidman highlights in these interviews a common theme within feminism: how to forge a career while also espousing feminist ideas. Unlike previous waves of feminism, where women did not have any blueprints for forming careers as public feminists, women in Seidman’s book grapple with how to earn money, maintain their feminist commitments, and build coalitions among activists. The stories by Samhita Mukhopadhyay, editor of *Feministing*, and Holly Kearn, founder of Stop Street Harassment, have particularly poignant cautionary messages about the stakes of being a public-facing feminist figure in this contemporary moment. (Kearn, e.g., had to contend with antifeminist claims that experiencing street harassment was a mere “compliment.”)

Notably, the women Seidman interviewed were all early- or mid-career feminists, and as she points out, no one was looking back on a finished career and reflecting on it. Instead, all were in mid-career as they were still evolving and changing. The cohorts she highlighted also cohere nicely, as the book features women in their 40s who had to largely forge their own understanding of public feminism and feminist careers, then women in their 30s who struggled to translate the grassroots nature of feminist activism to a more online-based younger generation, followed by activists in their 20s who came of age during the 2008 economic recession and thus carried more economic anxiety and well-earned cynicism about the future. (This has only become more pronounced in recent years as the American economy has saddled younger feminists not only with severe economic problems but also the pandemic, four years of a Trump presidency, and escalating impacts of global warming.) I felt keenly aware when reading these interviews of the foreshadowing of what was soon to come; the interviews occurred before the pandemic, largely before Trump, and in the more “comfortable” contexts of the Obama years. Women’s reflections on feminism showed a more optimistic slant as they grappled with righteous anger, dedication to feminist activism, and the joys of activist struggle. Seidman pointed out that this context helps to explain how the 2017 Women’s March came together so swiftly and with such massive turnout; feminist activists of this period were working furiously on

connections and coalitions, with savvy ways of understanding intersections and overlaps between feminists and feminist groups.

Many sections of this book stand out, particularly Rebecca Traister's and Soraya Chemaly's fascinating accounts of becoming activists and inventing new paradigms for feminist activism. Traister's claim that feminism is so contentious because there are so many women in the world and they all have differing allegiances and identities seems particularly prescient, as do Tara Hall's and Patina Park's conflicts about embracing the label *feminist* while working with communities of color (Hall's work with refugee women and Park's work with Native American women in Minneapolis), who often have different relationships to feminism and feminist histories. Many of these interviews serve as a meditation on intersectionality and the centrality of women of color feminisms, particularly as activists grapple with how feminism speaks to their communities and how to understand different paths to feminism. Further, the concerns of the younger activists serve as a reminder that no rights are ever stable and predictable, and nothing is guaranteed to last once it is earned. The younger activists' collective comments on the necessity of protecting abortion, for example, feel particularly painful to read and reflect on, as their optimism contrasts with the growing sense that an entire generation of emerging feminist activists will now come of age in a time when they no longer have guaranteed (and legal) access to abortion.

The strengths of Seidman's book lie in its emphasis on the deeply personal nature of how people come to feminist activism, and how people connect their personal experiences (e.g., trauma, inequality, and discrimination) with their later work within organizations and as writers and thinkers. Many of these interviews highlight women's reactions to, and reflections on, sexual assault, witnessing or experiencing violence, conflicts about motherhood, tensions within their communities and identities, feelings of regret or failure as they watch feminist successes evaporate, the necessity of earning a wage while doing feminist work, and the power of organizing and coalition-building. Although some of this material travels along well-worn feminist fault lines, much of it feels fresh and spirited, with new insights about how different cohorts of feminists are finding their way. This book implicitly argues that feminism is a genealogy, both within families (as many women, like Joanne Smith and Kenya McKnight, drew from their mothers' and grandmothers' ideas and activism) and between generations of feminist activists. Feminists can see their place in this moment, defined both by the generations that preceded them and in the paths they forge today for the generations to come.

Ariella Rotramel's *Pushing Back* draws on similar messages about the importance of coalition-building and organizing but does so more explicitly by foregrounding the work of women of color activists over a longer period (2007–2011) and location (New York City). Her book functions more as a case study that opens wider conversations about grassroots activism, whereas Seidman's work takes a broader approach throughout. Having a robust theoretical grounding, Rotramel draws from a framework of "queer motherwork," which melds theories of queer and care politics to work toward justice, power, and praxis. She uses this framework to outline the importance of thinking about motherwork not only as the care for one's own children but also as "cumulative efforts of a community made up of biological and chosen families, neighbors, friends, and strangers who find themselves taking up a shared cause like improving housing or street safety" (3). In this sense, queer motherwork expands beyond issues seen as typical for queer politics and includes workers' right to organize or the right of people to receive public assistance. Rather than being about queer mothers, queer

motherwork focuses on “building frameworks to contest power and inequity through an embrace of both identity and community” (3) while rejecting heteronormativity and the denigration of mothering and care. Using Patricia Hill Collins’s (1994) work and the Combahee River Collective (Combahee 1997) as a centerpiece, Rotramel thinks deeply about how individual and group survival are intertwined.

This text features the work of CAAAV, the Pan-Asian/American group called Organizing Asian Communities (formerly known as the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence) and MOM, the South Bronx’s Mothers on the Move/Madres en Movimiento, two small, women-led community organizations that forged progressive coalitions around issues such as workers’ rights, environmental justice, anti-police violence, and housing rights. Rotramel used ethnographic methods such as attending political events and rallies, joining in advocacy work, attending meetings, doing community outreach, and interviewing women involved in both groups. Her analysis focuses on what social justice work looks like when the emphasis is on coalition and solidarity rather than individual or identity-based work.

Rotramel’s most savvy analysis features the ways that women of color activists often focus on issues that are seemingly “outside” of typical feminist lenses, particularly housing rights, unionization, and environmental justice. Rather than arguing against the centrality of the more typical targets of feminist activism (e.g., abortion rights, LGBTQ rights, etc.), Rotramel highlights how coalitions like CAAAV and MOM ultimately lead to grassroots organizing that extends into issues of class, race, anti-violence, queer rights, and environmentalism. She makes a case for broadening the lens of feminist work, showing that when these groups imagine themselves as working from an ethic of care for their communities (e.g., imagining needs beyond legal remedies, envisioning intersectionality, and multiplicity of individual needs across identities), they can more fully see the broader needs of those communities.

Rotramel makes many powerful claims about the significance of these organizations, but one of the most impactful subtexts running throughout this book argues that activists coming from an orientation of queer motherwork see the world not as a space of theorizing (all too common among feminist academics) but as a set of broader needs that can be addressed when communities are envisioned more fully and globally. In other words, many of the successes of CAAAV and MOM occur when they work in coalitions with other groups, address needs that are seemingly outside of their purview, or consider the solidarity needs of their communities. The book opens, for example, with a description of CAAAV coming together to join with Black activists who wanted to hold an Asian-American police officer accountable for shooting an African-American man named Akai Gurley. Similarly, MOM’s organizing alongside the Urban Justice Center around access to public housing showed similar patterns of working in more holistic ways to address the needs of their communities. Rotramel constantly highlights the need for this more holistic way of looking at entire communities: how low employment and poor air quality connect, how pushing back against the state apparatus requires consideration of class, immigration status, and gender, and so on. She is interested not only in intersectionality as a theory, but also in the many ways that intersectionality can inform feminist activism in practice. Women of color are, she argues, uniquely positioned to understand multiple allegiances, conflicting identities, and the necessity of solidarity.

This book also shows the power of grassroots activism in major cities like New York City, and how so much of the radical activism that shapes our world comes from spaces where productive collisions between people, identities, and causes occur. I was

reminded throughout this book of the power of in-person, in-the-streets, on-the-ground coalition-building, and how the various in-your-face tactics used by CAAAV and MOM speak to some of the losses that occurred during the pandemic. Many activists have lamented that without the typical public spaces where people come together, shared grievances and overlapping social-justice causes cannot be adequately conceptualized or acted upon. Activists lose something when they exist more in our alienated, online-only silos. Although Rotramel never outright denigrates online activism, her work shows the profound possibilities of working on the ground in coalition-based ways.

Ultimately, Rotramel's text suggests that much of the uniqueness and effectiveness of these groups—their growing sense of power and bold forms of activism—drew from the energies of solidarity and coalition-building as well as the “care work” embodied through queer motherwork. Envisioning community beyond the immediate family and working to link arms with fellow activists in the struggle derive from understanding that activists must work across *and* within our groups to survive and thrive. There are lessons—hopeful and cautionary—in this framing, particularly as activists grapple with how to build on the insights of these kinds of groups as they look toward the future of feminist activism. Certainly, Rotramel and Seidman both highlight the central importance not only of women of color feminisms, but of the constant struggle to adapt to the contexts of our time, to join forces with others across identity lines, and to formulate a feminism that is brave, radical, and working outside the constraints of the insular academy.

## References

- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1994. *Shifting the center: Race, class, and feminist theorizing about motherhood*. New York: Routledge.
- Combahee River Collective. 1997. The Combahee River Collective Statement. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>.

**Breanne Fahs** is professor of women and gender studies and social and cultural analysis at Arizona State University. She has published widely in feminist, social science, and humanities journals and has authored six books: *Performing Sex*; *Valerie Solanas*; *Out for Blood*; *Firebrand Feminism*; *Women, Sex, and Madness*; and *Unshaved*. She has also coedited four volumes: *The Moral Panics of Sexuality*; *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*; *Transforming Contagion*; and *Burn It Down!* She is the founder and director of the Feminist Research on Gender and Sexuality Group at Arizona State University, and she also works as a clinical psychologist in private practice.