

Hannah Stark
Feminist Theory after Deleuze
London: Bloomsbury Academic (2016)
ISBN: 9781472529220 (PB)

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Quote: "It is concerning that, in a book designed to make complex theories accessible to students, so much is left unsaid."

Deleuze's work is challenging to read. It is for this reason that books like Hannah Stark's *Feminist Theory after Deleuze* are so fascinating and necessary. Stark seeks to stay true to the purpose of the series, *Deleuze Encounters*, whose aim is to make Deleuze *accessible* to students and others interested in his work. In addition to the challenge of making Deleuze accessible, Stark takes up the further challenge of trying to explain key concepts in feminist theory. In short, there is much ambition to be found in *Feminist Theory after Deleuze*. Some sections of Stark's book do explicate some of Deleuze's key concepts clearly, but her book does not engage feminist theory with equal success. This compromises her ability to think Deleuze together with feminist theory and to conceptualize a more robust feminist theory with the inclusion of Deleuzian philosophy.

Stark begins the introduction by discussing her encounter with Deleuze where she felt a sense of "shock," not because Deleuze's words were disturbing, but rather because Deleuze caused her to rethink or recalibrate her philosophical approach. Deleuze, in essence, was a jolt to the system, and in turn, Stark wants to use Deleuze to "shock feminist theory into finding novel ways to think about sexual difference and what it means socially, philosophically, politically, and materially" (1). In order to administer this shock to feminist theory's approach to sexual difference, Stark approaches it first as a matter of showing how an engagement with Deleuze opens up new avenues for feminist theory; second, Stark is interested in showing how feminist theorists and theories have affected the scholarship on Deleuze, "inviting us to ask alternative kinds of questions about his work" (1). To her credit, Stark tries to preempt an obvious critique of her book by acknowledging how odd it might seem to turn to Deleuze, "a male philosopher, and one who did not have much to say explicitly about feminism . . ." (2). Given the West's privileging of the white male subject, "we could question what it means to turn to a male philosopher to articulate a feminist position" (2). Having incorporated Deleuze into my own

work on black feminist theory, I too am sensitive to this critique. Nevertheless, I am taken aback by Stark's rejoinder, which is worth quoting in full:

However, if feminist theory ignores male philosophers and the dominance of male voices in the history of thought, it risks complicity with the erasure of a history of male privilege. The reality is that patriarchy has constrained women's capacity to contribute to philosophical debates for far too long. To counter this, feminists should co-opt any intellectual resources in the service of challenging the systems which have marginalized them. (2)

After invoking Audre Lorde, Stark continues, "this cannot end with the material and 'realistic' condition of women under patriarchy. Feminist theory also needs to find a speculative register in which to imagine new ways to think, to create, to live" (2). This overarching view that feminism needs to be better, do better, and follow the light of Deleuze is the tone, belief, and energy that drives this study.

Feminist Theory after Deleuze is divided into six sections: "Thought," "Becoming," "Desire," "Bodies," "Difference," and "Politics." Each section itself is comprised of three chapters. "Thought" begins by asking a series of questions concerning the nature of thought and how thought is gendered. From there, Stark connects the gendering of thought to the Enlightenment and shows how feminist theory situates itself as a challenge to Western epistemology. The section concludes that Deleuze "is an extremely helpful ally" for feminist theorists who critique Western knowledge systems because Deleuze offers what Stark asserts is a "radical alternative to Enlightenment models of thought" (7).

Section 2, "Becoming," asserts that when Deleuze refers to *becoming* he does so in a way that is not a signpost for "being," "stasis," or "identity" (25). Nor should the assumption be made that *becoming* refers to a telos, growing toward, or anything else that would imply linearity. Rather, Stark argues, "Deleuze continually locates becomings in the middle of things" (25). Examining the work of noted feminists like Irigaray, Jardine, and Braidotti, Stark places Deleuze's *becoming woman* in another kind of dialogue with feminist theory--a dialogue that from Stark's perspective "determines that a Deleuzian feminism is fundamentally open to the future" (26); hence, feminism after Deleuze.

Stark's section on "Desire" begins with broad generalizations like the claim that "desire always tells us about sex, gender, and sexuality" (42) and uncontextualized discussions about women, media, and desire. Despite this clumsy introduction, Stark offers a strong reading of Deleuze's and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), but does not leave space to discuss what this reading does for feminist theory or how *Anti-Oedipus* "opens up new ways to think about eroticism and sexuality" (54).

Given my own area of interest, I was most eager to read Stark's fourth section, "Bodies." If nothing else, I admire Stark's boldness in claiming that "Deleuze radically challenges the conventional understanding of what bodies are and how they are socially organized into the sexed categories of 'man' and 'woman'" (61), even though I and other critical gender scholars might reserve such a claim for queer women of color and white feminist theorists. However,

Stark is correct when she argues that Deleuze complicates binary conceptions of the sexed and sexual body as well as the materiality of the body with the concept of the *body without organs*. Stark writes, "To realize a body without organs is to divest the body of the logic by which it is conventionally organized and understood in terms of organs, systems, and functions" (74). There are several problems with this section. First, it does not meaningfully acknowledge the many ways that feminist scholars like Elizabeth Grosz and others have already engaged Deleuze's notion of the *body without organs* and explored its application to materialist feminism. Stark--perhaps unintentionally--presents the *body without organs* as if it had been heretofore unmentioned by feminist theory and theorists, and thus brand new. This is clearly not the case. Additionally, there is an unfortunate undercurrent in this particular section of pointing out what feminist theory *misses* in its multiple critiques of the body; but, never fear, Deleuze is here to *save* and even *refresh* feminism because he "offers a version of the body that is active rather than passive and networked in relational structures rather than autonomous" (78). Stark concludes the chapter by stating, "Feminism, if it is to remain relevant into the future, must commit to a politics of difference in its richness and complexity" (78). True, but there is nothing new in this assessment. Furthermore, it is concerning that, in a book designed to make complex theories accessible to students, so much is left unsaid, especially the ways in which feminist theory--particularly as it has been articulated from margins--has in fact already theorized difference and multiplicity and continues to do so.

Focusing on "Difference" in section 5, Stark begins with a very facile definition of difference quoted from the *OED* and uses this definition to introduce a rather basic example of how difference arises through a comparison between women and men. "Within this framework the concept of woman is comprehended in relation to man, as a subject that has a sexed identity that is distinct from the identity of man" (79). From this rather simplistic and undeveloped discussion, Stark moves on to show how "Deleuze's concept of difference is radically at odds with this orthodoxy" (79). Even if one plans to make such a leap and even if the full philosophical history of difference as concept and theory might not fall within the framework of the book, it would have been better either to leave the first part of the discussion out or at least point out that there is an entire history that interested students can explore. As it happens, there is a lot to unpack in this section, including Stark's discussion of third-wave feminism under the subheading "Identity and political representation." What is striking about this particular section is that Stark's reference to third-wave feminism lacks context, sources, and specificity. Additionally, Stark's subsection "Intersectional difference" may also leave the reader confused. Stark does not refer to *any* black feminist scholars (Collins, Crenshaw, hooks) or black feminist organizations (Combahee River Collective) to ground the analysis of "intersectional difference" (a confusing combination of words). Later in the section, Stark discusses a "Deleuzian intersectionality" posited by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin as well as the excellent work done by Jasbir Puar. I want to be careful here about what I'm going to say because I do not want to frame intersectionality as dogma; nor do I want to hint that it is not open for critique. However, invoking intersectionality and then blatantly ignoring and erasing the black and black queer women who first articulated the concept is suspect and, quite frankly, not good scholarship. In the last section of the book, Stark takes up the issue of "Politics." It is a rather short section given the complexity of the topics--*feminist politics* and *recognition*--and Stark's attempt to discuss "the possibility of Deleuzian feminism against a 'politics of recognition'." It seems that each of these topics alone could have been the sole focus of Stark's text.

I am the kind of scholar who loves a challenging project, but I also think that focus is important, and this text lacks it. Nevertheless, any reader will appreciate Stark's careful ordering of the chapters to follow a consistent pattern. For students and newcomers to Deleuze, the book's structure and writing style provide a comprehensible primer on concepts that readers will hopefully encounter in a more in-depth manner during their later course of study. What I also appreciated and even enjoyed about the book were the moments when Stark was able to focus on one of Deleuze's texts or concepts and provide a clear and thoughtful explanation of it. Stark knows Deleuze, and this is where her thinking and writing shines so brightly. I hope to see more of this in her subsequent work.

However, my excitement wanes when Stark tries too ambitiously, albeit admirably, to think Deleuze together with feminism around the issues of thought, becoming, desire, bodies, difference, and politics. This for me is where both Deleuze and feminism are given short shrift. To carry out this project successfully, the book would need to be much longer than its current 140-pages. Although I realize that Stark cannot include everyone or explain everything in one book, there are a number of people whose work should not have been missed. Voices like Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Roberts, Jennifer Nash, Janell Hobson, and the Combahee River Collective should have been cited in this book, especially in the context of intersectionality, third-wave feminism, disrupting normative understandings of the category of woman, and bodies/embodiment. When the voices and scholarship of women and queer folks of color are missing although their labor is there, the readers at whom this series is targeted are getting a rather incomplete narrative of both feminist theory and Deleuze.