

RECLAIMING WOMEN'S BODIES: COLONIALIST TROPE OR CRITICAL EPISTEMOLOGY?

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In a path-breaking essay, 'The Virtual Speculum in the New World Order (1999),' Donna Haraway, one of the most important contemporary feminist theorists on the women's bodies and feminist politics of knowledge, links *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (the book and the slogan) to a critique of the feminist self-help, which was popular in US women's health movement during the 1970's.

Armed with a gynaecological speculum, a mirror, a flashlight, and – most of all – each other in a consciousness-raising group, women ritually opened their bodies to their own literal view. The speculum had become the symbol of the displacement of the female midwife by the specialist male physician and gynecologist. The mirror was the symbol forced on women as a signifier of our own bodies as spectacle-for-another in the guise of our own supposed narcissism. Vision itself seemed to be the empowering act of conquerors.

More than a little amnesiac about how colonial travel narratives work, we peered inside our vaginas toward the distant cervix and said something like, "Land ho! We have discovered ourselves and claim the new territory for women." In the context of the history of Western sexual politics – that is, in the context of the whole orthodox history of Western philosophy and technology – visually self-possessed sexual and generative organs made potent tropes for the reclaimed feminist self. We thought we had our eyes on the prize. I am caricaturing, of course, but with a purpose. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was both a popular slogan and the title of a landmark publication in women's health movements (Haraway, 1999: 67).

Although *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and gynaecological feminist self-help are not – and never were – identical, Haraway views them as expressions of the feminist politics of knowledge, which pervades the US women's health movement. Haraway admits that the notion of women recovering ownership of their own sexual and reproductive organs was a 'potent trope.' Moreover, she acknowledges that she is providing something of a 'caricature' in comparing this project to the 'whole orthodox history of Western philosophy and technology,' not to mention the nefarious masculinist colonial project of conquering land (nature) and peoples (natives), she, nevertheless, regards this as an important and, indeed, necessary intervention in feminist politics of the body.

Haraway's critique does not stand alone, but belongs to a broader discussion within poststructuralist feminist theory, which has been concerned with 'denaturalizing' the female body, with the rejection of 'experience' as basis for feminist knowledge projects, and with deconstructing women's position as autonomous epistemic agents.

Given the popularity of this much cited and often reprinted essay as well as Haraway's enormous influence, more generally, on feminist (body) theory, feminist epistemology, and technoscience politics, I will use it as a starting point to consider the gap between contemporary poststructuralist feminist theory on the body and women's health activism. After looking briefly at the features of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* as epistemological project, I examine discussions within contemporary feminist theory concerning women's bodies, the centrality of experiential knowledge, and the importance of women's epistemic agency. After exploring what has made this project problematic for poststructuralist body theorist, I will discuss some alternative theoretical approaches, which have affirmed and elaborated the epistemological project put forth by *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. On the basis of these alternative approaches, I conclude that Haraway's critique, while provocative, has not only failed to do justice to the kind of epistemological project which *Our Bodies, Ourselves* represents, but, more generally, has little to offer as epistemological foundation for feminist health activism, both within the US and abroad.