

CHANGING VOICES AND STRUGGLES OF FEMINIST ACTIVISM

by Nancy Worcester

Maryann Barakso, *GOVERNING NOW: GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM IN THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. 192p. \$18.95, ISBN 0-8014-8910-5.

Jennifer Baumgardner & Amy Richards, *GRASSROOTS: A FIELD GUIDE FOR FEMINIST ACTIVISM*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005. 306p. \$14.00, ISBN 0-374-52865-9.

Diane Kravetz, *TALES FROM THE TRENCHES: POLITICS AND PRACTICE IN FEMINIST SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS*. New York: University Press of America, 2004. 226p. \$34.00, ISBN 0-7618-2773-0.

Vivien Labaton & Dawn Lundy Martin, eds., *THE FIRE THIS TIME: YOUNG ACTIVISTS AND THE NEW FEMINISM*. New York: Anchor Books, 2004. 346p. \$14.95, ISBN 0-385-72102-1.

When you hear the words “feminist activism,” what images come to your mind? Who are the feminists? What age are they/we? What are the strategies of activism, and which issues are worthy of feminist activism? How inclusive are the movements of feminist activism, and how important is it to participants that their own identity and/or their organizations be labeled as feminist or associated—or not—with a specific kind of feminism?

Any discussion of women’s movements and organizing would put something called “feminist activism” at the core of that work, but how often do we take the time to think about how the term is used differently by various groups in different historical moments? An unexpected reward of reviewing four new books on feminist activism was the reminder of how important and even inspiring it is to examine the changing meanings and struggles of feminist activism and the changing voices and faces of feminist activists.

The four books reviewed here were written for different purposes

and audiences. Maryann Barakso’s *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*, a scholarly book, examines one national organization from its founding in 1966 through 2003. Using more than three decades of NOW’s own archives, reading every relevant *New York Times* article published between 1966 and 2003, personally interviewing twenty people significant to NOW work at different levels and stages, and attending numerous national and regional NOW conferences, Barakso writes the history of NOW. Barakso’s goal is to demonstrate how NOW’s organizational structure fundamentally shaped its ability to do its work and its longterm viability, and how NOW was or was not able to provide leadership on specific issues.

Diane Kravetz’s *Tales from the Trenches: Politics and Practice in Feminist Service Organizations* explores the founding of five local feminist service organizations in Madison, Wisconsin, in the 1970s as symbolic of the long-lasting, radical impact of feminist ac-

tivists. Drawing on a wide range of data collection, questionnaires, and intense interviews with key participants in the founding of these organizations, community contacts, and professionals outside the organizations who worked closely with the organizations, Kravetz’s volume works to ensure that the role of 1970s radical feminists and the tenets of radical feminism that influenced the goals, services, and structures of different kinds of service organizations are remembered and celebrated.

The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism is a book of eleven new cutting-edge essays edited by Dawn Martin and Vivien Labaton of the Third Wave Foundation, with a foreword by Rebecca Walker and a coda by Wilma Mankiller. The essays (on hip-hop music, theater, alternative media, technology, workers’ rights, transgender rights, prisoners’ rights, immigration, reproduction, environmental issues, international activism, and the future of feminism) showcase how today’s young feminists’ multira-

cial, multi-issue, and multicultural work and thinking represent “a new movement whose conversation *is* race, gender, and globalization” (p.xxix). In describing their intention both to demonstrate an increasingly sophisticated understanding of “the complex network of gendered injustices” (p.xxix) and to acknowledge contradictions in a feminist future that is not “either this or that” but “this and that,” Labaton and Martin say, “Instead of presenting our readers with a singular vision of what we think the future of feminism is, we present multiple (and sometimes opposing) voices that together constitute a feminist possibility” (p.xxxiv).

G*assroots: A Field Guide for Feminist Activism* is a feminist “advice book” on how to be an activist, by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, the authors of the popular “third wave” book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and The Future*. Growing out of the authors’ extensive touring related to *Manifesta* and their subsequent very visible roles as spokeswomen to and for young feminists, *Grassroots* is designed to be accessible, inspiring, and full of practical ideas, demystifying activism for all the feminists who know they want to be activists but are not sure how.

Precisely because these four books were written for such different purposes and audiences and reflect different stages of women’s movements, I found it intriguing to explore what they help us understand about key recurring feminist questions. I have compared the books’ perspectives on violence against women (as an example of one specific issue different generations of women have worked on), definitions and meanings of feminism, and ways to more successfully create multiracial, multigenerational movements.

Violence against Women

Although violence issues could hardly be said to be crucial to Barakso’s history of NOW, this topic did illustrate how an issue very important to feminists proved to be controversial for the organization. Barakso mentions NOW’s work for both the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and its 2000 reauthorization and full funding as examples of the group’s important national legislative work. However, she also notes that NOW’s national visibility on violence issues, particularly related to sexual harassment, was often controversial both within the membership and outside. In describing Patricia Ireland, NOW’s acting president, as “the first leader of a civil rights organization to oppose President Bush’s (1991) nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas” (who was being accused of sexual harassment by Anita Hill), Barakso acknowledges that “[o]ther civil rights groups found it difficult to rally against Thomas... because they wanted to support an African American on the court” (p.112). Similarly, Barakso tries to capture the tightrope NOW walked in trying to be in the vanguard of the women’s movement, being accountable to a grassroots membership, and maintaining political independence from governmental institutions when she describes NOW’s very measured responses to Clinton’s alleged sexual harassments.

In contrast to Barakso’s brief mention of violence against women as an issue for NOW, Kravetz makes this issue core to her exploration of the founding of feminist service organizations in the 1970s. Three of her five in-depth case studies showcase violence-against-women organizing as a way many 1970s feminists believed they could change the world. Kravetz

interviewed the founders and early workers at a battered women’s shelter, a rape crisis center, and a rape-prevention ride service, finding that these women “viewed their work as part of the diverse efforts of feminists to radically change the power differences between women and men, differences that were supported and maintained by male violence against women. Eliminating the problems of rape and battering required no less than a radical transformation of society; helping women who were victims of male violence was one essential aspect of a much broader agenda” (p.27). The violence-against-women organizations she describes were typical of the many thousands of battered women’s shelters, rape crisis centers, and projects like the “Take Back the Night” marches that were organized throughout the U.S. and around the world in the next decades, giving much visibility to violence issues and providing many feminists with their first important steps as activists.

In order to appeal to young women and present activism as something quite new and different for this generation, both *The Fire This Time* and *Grassroots* seem to have initially distanced themselves from anti-violence activism, suggesting it was “old hat,” before they could move on to including it in examples of powerful new forms of young feminists’ activism. In her foreword to *The Fire This Time*, Rebecca Walker uses “Take Back the Night” as a specific example of **F**eminist organizing that never captured her imagination. In *Grassroots*, in helping young women identify their goals for their feminist organizing and see that the widest range of campaigns can be feminist, Baumgardner and Richards say,

Determining what makes an issue feminist is a central dilemma for budding women's groups...When people insist on "purely" feminist issues, they usually get down to just two topics to focus on: rape or abortion. (Or in the parlance of the women's movement, violence against women and choice.) Some students feel almost obligated to take on these issues. (p.63)

Having thus distanced themselves from these "expected" forms of organizing, the authors of both books then give examples of vibrant multiracial, multi-issue, anti-violence activism. In *The Fire This Time* we learn of feminists organizing against violence: as women defying the prison-industrial complex and the staggering increase in the number of girls and women caught up in the criminal justice system; in relation to organizing domestic workers who suffer high rates of emotional and physical abuse; in relation to protesting corporate globalization; and even by making violence against women a topic for hip-hop theater. In her essay "Can You Rock It Like This? Theater for a New Century," Holly Bass describes how Sarah Jones is shifting the boundaries of hip-hop theater in her solo hip-hop performance piece, "Women Can't Wait," in which Jones depicts eight women from around the world coming together to address the UN on violence (and sexually discriminatory laws) in their countries.

In *Grassroots*, Baumgardner and Richards give detailed descriptions of innovative ways young feminists are now organizing against violence. Many productions of Eve Ensler's *The*

Vagina Monologues have raised more than \$25 million toward violence-against-women projects through the V-Day College Campaign, which inspires and supports college students to do their own productions and donate proceeds to local antiviolence groups and initiatives. A German woman's success in getting thirty bakeries to distribute 330,000 bakery bags saying "Rape is Totally Unacceptable" (and giving hotline and anti-violence information) is given as an example of a project that, already replicated in several communities and countries, has the potential to be adapted almost anywhere.

Baumgardner and Richards devote a number of pages (pp.65–72) to specific details on improving sexual assault policies on college campuses. In this instance, they very positively frame present-day activism as something that can build on and complement the work of earlier feminists:

Sexual assault is a central theme for college students both because many young people have first hand experience with rape and because of a long legacy of feminist students organizing around the issue. We are fortunate to have vocabulary for things like date rape and a body of feminist legal theory about consent... The language, hotlines, and support for victims are all the legacy of a successful Second Wave of feminism that transformed campuses from places where girls were actively preyed upon, limited, and discriminated against to places where equality might reign. (p.65)

Diverse Meanings of Feminism among Feminists

The history of NOW is the story of an organization continually debating — and redefining its self-proclaimed role of being in the vanguard of the women's movement. As someone who has too easily labeled NOW a "mainstream organization," I found it fascinating to read Barakso's accounts of how much it has always been an issue for NOW to be *in* versus *outside* electoral politics and other avenues of the "decision-making mainstream of American political, economic, and social life." In noting that one of NOW's earliest founding documents emphasized the importance of women being represented in Congress, party leadership, and other mainstream institutions, Barakso remarks, "For these feminists, at this moment in history [1966], joining the 'mainstream' was a radical notion" (p.24). Then, in 1974, a time of internal divisions in NOW, Karen DeCrow was elected president, with the slogan "Out of the Mainstream Into the Revolution" supposedly demonstrating her "caucus's belief that mainstream political tactics could be effectively employed in the pursuit of radical social, economic, and political goals." DeCrow emphasized, "I stated, very clearly, all along, that what I wanted to do was not enter the mainstream in full partnership with men, but to change the mainstream" (p.61).

Barakso summarizes NOW's ongoing struggle to define its role as a vanguard feminist organization:

The National Organization for Women continues to be a lightning rod for critics of the feminist movement. It earns the wrath of those who feel the group is too radical, too

uncompromising in its focus on abortion rights “on demand” and on the rights of lesbian and gays, to the exclusion of the concerns of the “average” wom[a]n, such as pay equity, family and child-care issues, and employment discrimination. At the same time, the organization is denounced in other quarters for not investing enough in issues other than those concerning white, middle-class, middle-aged professional women. (p.121)

Since *Tales from the Trenches* is dedicated to making certain that the work and accomplishments of 1970s radical feminism are not forgotten, it of course emphasizes the significance of that feminist activism. In identifying different branches of feminism and “diverse meanings of feminism among feminists” (p.18), Kravetz reminds us of a time when it was important not only to call ourselves feminist, but also to label which kind of feminist we were. She describes two quite distinct branches of early-to-mid-1960s feminism. Large organizations like NOW, with elected officers, formal memberships, and local chapters, are characterized as the women’s rights organizations that “focused on improving the status of women through reforms in legislation and governmental policies,...to eliminate discriminations based on sex in education, employment, and electoral politics and to promote equal rights and oppor-

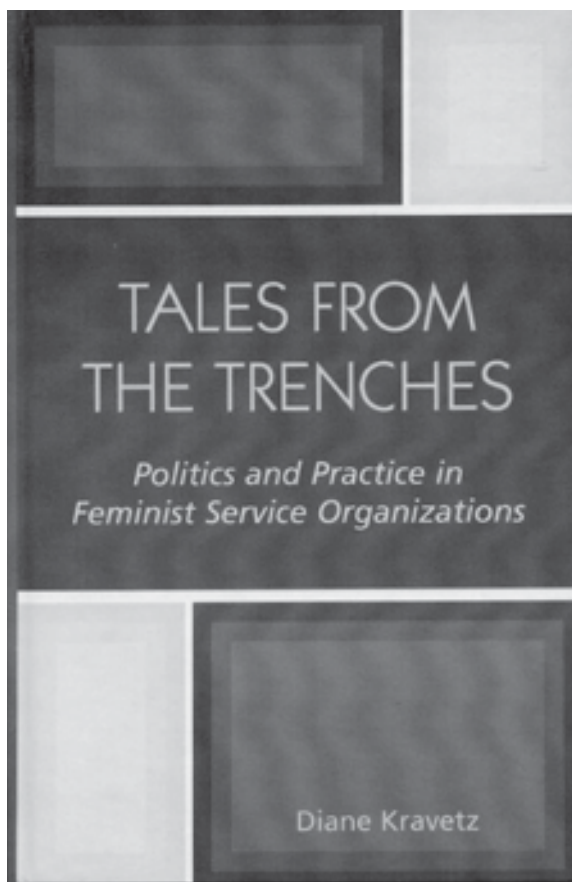
tunities for women...To achieve their goals, they pursued incremental changes and exerted traditional forms of influence” (p.5). In contrast, Kravetz highlights the women’s liberation branch of the women’s movement, which included smaller, decentralized, nonhierarchical grassroots groups with goals to

radically alter beliefs about women, to eliminate the oppression of women, and to transform personal relationships and social institutions to reflect feminist values. Many of the women involved in this movement were left-wing activists who had been involved in the civil rights,

anti-war and student movements of the 1960s and transferred their community-based political activism to issues of particular concern to women. (p.7)

Kravetz found in her interviews with radical feminists that the term “radical” was most often used for feminists who were working for changes in societal structures as compared to those working toward equality for women in existing systems. Being “radical” referred to members being explicit about their feminist beliefs and publically confronting patriarchal policies and practices. Being “not radical” referred to choosing to be less vocal about one’s feminist beliefs and having a willingness to adopt more conventional strategies, while sharing many of the beliefs and goals of those who were “radical.” (p.19) Kravetz concludes that “being feminist” was not a static state. People’s definitions of what it meant to be feminist and how it applied to their work changed and grew in the intense interaction of ideology and lived experiences.

The authors of *Grassroots* contend that young women are the group most likely today to be questioned about their comfort with calling themselves feminists, even though public opinion polls show women in this age group (ages 18–24) to be *more* likely than older women to feel positive about the label. The authors explain how “Third Wave” feminism differs from previous feminism: “The First Wave was about women’s rights to citizenship, the Second Wave concerned women’s equality, and the Third Wave



stresses the power and the responsibility of the individual” (p.21).

The Fire This Time makes room for many different definitions and identities of feminism, though always emphasizing the interconnectedness of issues and the need for multiracial, multi-issue, and multi-cultural work. In describing why they felt the need to create the Third Wave Foundation, Labaton and Martin explain,

We didn't have any complicated theories about how third wave differed from previous feminist uprising. Yet we were aware of the impact we might have on reinventing feminism for future generations of young people, who like us, had at times been burdened by popular misconceptions about the feminist movement. (p.xxiii)

Third Wave Feminism has been articulated as a generational difference — a reaction against perceptions about feminists that have permeated society, not the movement itself. Many young women's reservations about belonging to the feminist movement are not due to ideological differences but to misconceptions about feminists...Young feminists have shed the media-espoused propaganda about feminists but have taken to heart the criticism from women of color that the second wave was not racially or sexually inclusive enough. The addition of *third wave* in

front of the term *feminism*, for them, is a reclamation — a way to be feminist with a notable difference. (p.xxv)

Multiracial, Multigenerational Movements

One of the most powerful things about reading these books together is seeing the recurring theme of feminists identifying the importance of multiracial, multigenerational movements. Both *The Fire This Time* and *Grassroots* aim to create and reflect more inclusive feminist movements in which young women's voices are heard and the activism is relevant. Figuring out how to do this and to *really* have a “movement whose conversation *is* race, gender, and globalization” (*Fire*, p.xxix) feels even more urgent as both Barakso and Kravetz remind us that building more diverse movements has *always* been an issue for NOW and for the 1970s radical feminist grassroots organizations, even if they weren't ever as inclusive as they wanted to be. Barakso admits that there was always a tension in NOW “between claims to speak for all women and the limited success achieved in trying to recruit a more diverse membership, to participate in diverse coalitions, and to put issues of importance to women of color, lesbians, and working-class women on the policy agenda” (p.91), but she also emphasizes that NOW's membership and goals were more diverse than they are usually given credit for. Kravetz's *Tales from the Trenches* includes a thought-provoking chapter, “Building a Sisterhood Based on Difference,” that clearly identifies the 1970s commitment to diversity:

Being inclusive was an expectation they held of themselves

When we do not know about the important work women of color and white antiracists have done, we cannot be inspired by or build on it.

as feminists. To successfully work on behalf of women as a group required that members represent women in their diversities and address significant differences among women. (p.88)

In discussing the lack of success in building multiracial movements, Kravetz concludes that the 1970s feminist organizations she studied were more effective in handling homophobia than racism, and that lesbians were better represented in the women's movements than were women of color. Because this chapter examines a number of reasons why 1970s women's organizations were not successful in building more inclusive movements, this historical analysis raises important questions for today.

One problem with emphasizing the lack of inclusiveness in women's movements and the crucial need for more antiracist work is that most critiques make invisible the roles both of women of color and of white antiracists. (In different ways, both Barakso and Kravetz have tried to make women of color visible in their accounts.) When we do not know about the important work women of color and white antiracists have done, we cannot be inspired by or build on it. Two books crucial for teaching this history deserve mention: (1) Becky Thompson's powerful *A Promise and A Way of*

*Life: White Antiracist Activism*¹ offers readers two unique much needed perspectives: the “multiracial feminism” chapter (and other parts of the book) highlights the “emergence of the multiracial feminist movement, founded upon the creation of autonomous women-of-color organizations,” and the entire book makes visible the history and strategies of white people actively trying to work against racism and other forms of oppression. (2) *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice*² gives voice to the many African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latina women who have long been involved in struggles for reproductive freedom.

While both *The Fire This Time* and *Grassroots* appear to be calling for feminisms more inclusive of young women, I think the actual challenge is to build more multigenerational movements and develop a deeper understanding of the interconnections of issues identified as crucial by women of different ages and at different historical moments. None of these books addressed this. All four books do demonstrate the power of young feminists’ voices and action. While *The Fire This Time* and *Grassroots* are designed to represent critical thinking and many forms of activism by young women today, *Tales from the Trenches*, in noting the ages of the activists in different organizations, demonstrates that almost all of the work described was done by that era’s young feminists. Ironically, the issue of young women’s role in feminist movements seems to be as old as the movements, as Barakso writes that *one year* after its founding, “NOW began coping [my emphasis] with an influx of younger members who were attracted by the group’s position on reproductive rights and by

their own frustrations with other leftist civil rights and student groups that refused to address issues of women’s rights. The value, practices, and strategies these younger members brought with them also left a lasting impression on NOW” (p.14). As a present-day “older feminist” who has often wanted to remind younger feminists that I used to be their age, I look forward to movements that emphasize intergenerational collaboration on the widest range of feminist issues throughout the life cycle. As Baumgardner and Richards described the importance of having younger interns, I thought they might be starting to see the dilemma of age-specific feminism:

We get the perspective of women who on average are ten years our junior, which is increasingly crucial since even as we get older we are still considered generational spokeswomen and frequently asked what’s on the minds of young women. (p.82)

Understanding and Promoting Feminist Activism

On our bookshelves, in our conversations, or in our classrooms, these books have very different roles to play in our understanding and promotion of feminist activism.

Governing NOW is not the kind of book many people will sit down to read from cover to cover, but it will serve as a useful reference. As a whole, it will be of most interest to scholars of organizational structures and organizers thinking through the benefits and challenges of national organizations compared to more local forms. I recommend the first chapters and their excellent notes to the more general reader interested in women’s orga-

nizations for references to much scholarship on feminist movements. These early chapters self-consciously try to counter the widely accepted argument that NOW was founded by and only interested in white, middle-class, heterosexual women and their issues.

In an era when “the increasingly pervasive backlash against feminism has effectively erased the public’s understanding of the conditions of women’s lives prior to feminist change efforts” and “too many women are surprised to learn that the activism of radical feminists provided the roots for many of the attitudes, opportunities, and services they take for granted” (p.viii), *Tales from the Trenches* is especially important. The book’s use of well-chosen articulate, politically thoughtful, passionate quotes by 1970s activists can show students how 1970s feminism built the foundation for work they are trying to do today.

The combined richness of the powerful quotes, the theoretical framework, and the discussion of specific issues and questions related to organizing makes *Tales from the*

I think the actual challenge is to build more multigenerational movements and develop a deeper understanding of the interconnections of issues identified as crucial by women of different ages and at different historical moments. None of these books addressed this.

Trenches excellent for teaching the “Women’s Organizations/Organizing on Women’s Issues” unit for my Internship in Women’s Studies course. It answers such important questions as these: What did early “women’s organizations” organizers create in terms of both feminist service organizations and women’s culture? What did early feminist organizers leave in place for today? How have the principles of feminist organizing/women’s organizations influenced a much wider range of organizations and jobs? What “women’s organizing” has been institutionalized and what has been coopted? How have feminists done their work both *within the system* and *to change the system*?

Kravetz’s book also paves the way for students to think through the complexities of building on earlier work *and* adapting the principles to be more relevant for today’s activism. For example, Kravetz identified the principle of “women helping women” as core to how 1970s feminists identified their organizations as feminist. In an era when we are more careful to emphasize gender fluidity and a continuum of genders, articulate students are eager to debate the relevance of “women helping women.”

The Fire This Time will undoubtedly be the book that finds its way into the most women’s studies and feminist classrooms, because of the urgency and freshness of what it has to say, the high quality of many of the essays, and the fact that the topics lend themselves to the widest range of courses. Colleagues have successfully used individual essays or the complete text for introductory freshman seminars and upper-level women’s studies

theory courses.³ Some essays have already been reprinted in anthologies,⁴ and several have the qualities to become classic feminist references.

I would love to see Kathryn Temple’s brilliant “Exporting Violence: The School of the Americas, U.S. Intervention in Latin America, and Resistance” reach a wide audience. This essay builds on the feminist analysis of domestic violence as power and control to develop an understanding of U.S. foreign policy and globalization through the creation of a “Corporate Globalization Power and Control Wheel” and a discussion of the tactics of global abusers. “Exporting Violence” was the key transition piece for shifting my “Women and Violence” course to complex discussions of how to use a feminist analysis of violence against women to develop gendered analyses of societal violence, war, militarism, and globalization. Temple’s essay is a model of how to integrate theory and practice as she writes of her own politicization and activism.

Feminists of all ages will be inspired by this and other essays that show young activists finding and building extraordinary ways to shape a better world. I urge every reader to see how the issues they care about are represented in *The Fire This Time*. These essays and the excellent chapter of recommended organizations can energize us and give us new insights and contacts for the widest range of struggles that are considered worthy of feminist action today.

Grassroots: A Field Guide for Feminist Activism is designed to appeal to a wide readership, but its most unmistakable audience is the young women who loved *Manifesta*, flocked

to hear Baumgardner and Richards speak, and made the need for the book obvious whenever they asked, “What can I do? And how do I do it?” The *Field Guide* worked really well as a way to teach basic introductory service-learning issues in my internship course, because it is full of accessible, fun, explicitly feminist examples of activism. I was able to help my students pull out the “gems” of general principles about organizing and activism scattered throughout the book. Students love the stimulating, non-judgmental encouragement Baumgardner and Richards give them to feel good about the little or big ways they are living their feminism:

Being an activist in the world doesn’t have to be complicated and full of sacrifice; it can be as simple as influencing conversations around you. (p.186)

An activist is anyone who accesses the resources that he or she has as an individual for the benefit of the common good. (p.ix)

This book is full of very practical ideas for “making a difference” in the widest range of ways and places. It is at its best when the authors clarify complex issues such as how social justice organizations “can become themselves promoters of the status quo — because they have to sustain their own reason for being” (p.105). However, it is the many specific moving activism stories that will be the most inspiring and useful to most readers. Additionally, the up-to-date resource guide, which is exactly what many of us need within reaching distance, is an important selling point for *Grassroots*, much

as the excellent resource guide of *Manifesta* contributed to its popularity and impact.

Winona LaDuke's powerful introduction to *Grassroots* sets the inspiring, realistic tone for the book when she shares, "My activism is simply in my life — it has to be, or it couldn't get done." After describing her activist life, in which she writes her books at the same kitchen table where she feeds her five children and many Native community leaders, takes orders for alternative coffee, makes rawhide ornaments to support the White Earth Land Recovery Project she founded, and does maple syruping, LaDuke concludes,

You don't have to be Superwoman to change the world. You just have to take responsibility for your life and your community — and realize that you have the power to do so, even from your own sticky kitchen table. (p.xv)

Paradoxically, a strength of *Grassroots* also turns out to be its weakness. In working so hard to make activism feel easy and non-threatening, Baumgardner and Richards have missed many opportunities to demonstrate the joys of critical thinking. The authors have successfully written a book "demystifying activism for those eager to be involved but confused and possibly intimidated by what that might entail" (p.xviii) and "challenging the notion that there is one type of person who is an activist — someone serious, rebellious, privileged, and unrealistically heroic" (p.xix). With their keynotes assuring young women that "You Can Be a Feminist and Still Wear a Thong,"⁵ Baumgardner and Richards

have definitely carved out a unique niche in the young feminist world. A recurring theme of the book is to reassure the reader that it is O.K. to be a feminist and an activist even if one doesn't have all the answers and hasn't reached "moral perfection":

We realized that one of the main barriers to seeing oneself as someone who could truly make change in the world is that we feel trapped in our own contradictions. (p. xxii)

Of course, it is imperative to assume and acknowledge that we all have contradictions, but I was sometimes left unsettled rather than inspired by what Baumgardner and Richards *did* with their discussions of contradictions. It is important that this guide includes examples of activism in conjunction with corporate-chain America and from *within* big business, because this is how many people will do crucial activism. However, in too many places, *Grassroots* missed opportunities to use the contradictions inherent in our activist lives to encourage critical thinking and to model this critical thinking as core to feminist activism.

My vision for feminist activism is that we learn to be intrigued by our contradictions and use them to dig deeper for more sophisticated understandings of the systemic structures that perpetuate the status quo and constantly affect us, our daily lives, and our activism. My years of living and teaching activism have taught me that learning to ask the hard questions (knowing there will seldom be easy or clear answers) is part of the (fun, ago-

nizing) process of being an activist and learning to identify how the small acts we can accomplish today relate to the "bigger picture" and longer term struggles. Precisely because it will be the book that introduces many young women to activism, and because it successfully raises the issue of contradictions, *Grassroots* can, ideally, also stimulate discussions about curiosity rather than complacency in relation to contradictions. For that purpose, I plan to complement *Grassroots* with the "Be Curious!" theme I introduce in Women's Studies classes from Cynthia Enloe's "Being Curious About Our Lack of Feminist Curiosity":⁶

The moment when one becomes newly curious about something is also a good time to think about what created one's previous *lack* of curiosity. So many power structures — inside households, within institutions, in societies, in international affairs — are dependent upon our continuing lack of curiosity...I've come to think that making and keeping us uncurious must serve somebody's political purpose. I have also become convinced that I am deeply complicit in my own lack of curiosity. (pp. 2–3)

The Fire This Time demonstrates impressive ways today's young women and men are doing "social justice work while using a gender lens" (p.xxiii) and providing a "framework for looking at various tendencies toward domination, (where) feminism offers a central belief system that helps interpret how power imbalances affect our lives"

(p.xxvi). Similarly, I hope people introduced to feminist activism through *Grassroots* will see Baumgardner's and Richards' words — that activism “is challenging because you begin to question every decision” (p.188) — as a promise of a stimulating and rewarding life where critical thinking and being curious are core to everything one does.

All four of these books provide Women's Studies scholars, teachers, and students with new information and questions for appreciating, studying, teaching, or inspiring feminist activism. Reading them together can remind one of the value of asking and answering questions about feminist activism from very different perspectives, so that the changing voices and struggles of feminist activism remind us of both the important work that has been done and the work that still must be done.

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Notes

1. Becky Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

2. Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, & Elena R. Gutiérrez, eds., *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2004).

3. Personal communication with Estelle Disch, Professor of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and Nancy Kaiser, Professor of German and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

4. “Claiming Jezebel: Black Female Subjectivity and Sexual Expressions in Hip-Hop,” by Ayana Byrd, and “The New Girls Network: Women, Technology, and Feminism,” by Sharon Lee, are included in Estelle Disch, *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2006) pp.239–247 and 248–251.

5. “Feminism and Femininity, or How We Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Thong” was the title of the keynote speech Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards gave at the University of Wisconsin System Women's Studies Conference at UW-Stout, October 24, 2003.

6. Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in the New Age of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) pp.1–10.