

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Devoney Looser, E. Ann Kaplan, eds. *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. xii + 343 pp. \$23.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-2899-5; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-2898-8.

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In *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, editors Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan address what they see as a deficiency in feminist academia—a lack of cross-generational discourse. Consisting of eighteen individual articles by academic scholars in various fields, this book considers both the historical path of feminist thought, as well as impressions on the current state of feminism. The wide-ranging topics included—from history to psychology, literature to film, theory to television—help to make *Generations* a useful book to students of all ages and all disciplines. In their preface, Looser and Kaplan explain that the book “seeks to bring those conversations to the fore and to explore the terms *feminism* and *generation* in order to further conversation about these stereotypes and our supposed feminist divisions and impasses” (p. x). This focus on the definitions of terms like feminism and generation, and first-, second-, and third-wave, is maintained throughout the book, acknowledging the need to have a common understanding before any beneficial dialogue can take place. The primary attribute of this book is the explanation of the need for such a dialogue in the academic world, and providing a starting place for it. Where *Generations* falls down, however, is in an overall lack of conversation between the contributors themselves. These issues will be developed further in this review, as the strengths and weaknesses of the book are considered.

Along with their preface, the editors also provide three different introductions to the book (one collective, one by each of the women). The first of these is comprised of e-mail messages exchanged between the women over a five-month period in 1995. In this dialogue, which is clearly a microcosm of debates which they hope their book will provoke, they work out and

refine the questions they would like to address in *Generations*. As members of different generations of feminists, they consider the differences in education, environment, and experience that often limit interaction between generations of women. They agree, however, that these differences should be the material that enriches discussion in academia, rather than detracting from it. They also illustrate another of their main collective points—the value of the internet. As feminist thought itself has evolved, so too has the method of transmitting new ideas. E. Ann Kaplan in particular stresses the benefits of e-mail in making connections with international feminists, as the sphere of discourse continues to widen.

Despite the value seen in international dialogue, *Generations* remains a decidedly American book. There are some foreign contributors, and a few articles on foreign topics, but as the center of feminist theory remains the United States, this is the best location to begin such a conversation. The various generations or “waves” of academics discussed in the book are also represented in the contributors. The varying perspectives provide a valuable cross-section of feminist thought from the last thirty years, as they challenge assumptions made in the past, and about the past.

Unfortunately, what the book lacks, is a format that will produce the dialogue searched for in both the title and the introductions (in hindsight, I might suggest an article-response-reply set-up for similar works in the future). While each feminist offers her viewpoint on the issues of generational transmission of thought, there is no forum for rebuttals. Though most do their best to frame their personal argument in the context of opposing views, the type of organic conversation seen in the first

introduction is lost in the remainder of the book.

One exception to this is the article entitled "Talking Across" by Jane Gallop and Elizabeth Francis. As a "distinguished professor and advanced graduate student" respectively, their piece addresses the very cross-generational dialogue espoused by the book (p. 46). The chosen form of this article is a tape-recorded conversation between the two women. Off-the-cuff, but with a definite purpose, the discussion reveals much about the judgments made by both older and younger feminists. The dialogue encompasses two main themes: the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women and stereotypes of graduate students/the institutional organization of feminism. The pairing of Gallop and Francis is ideal, in their opinion, as they are not mentor-student, so they can more openly criticize the outcomes of the generation gap in feminism, without actually attacking each other. Francis acknowledges the existence of a "utopian meaning" in the idea of "engaging in a productive exchange" between generations of feminists, but that is exactly what the purpose of this article, and *Generations* as a whole is trying to do (p. 112).

Another interesting take on the question of cross-generational discourse is Barbara A. White's contribution, "Three Feminist Mother-Daughter Pairs in the Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century United States." The three pairs in question are Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Harriot Stanton Blatch, Lucy Stone and Alice Stone Blackwell, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Alfreda M. Duster. With lives covering 168 years of history, these women's lives and works give a good background to the course of modern feminist evolution. White breaks her study into three sections: one on the mothers, one on the daughters, and one on "Conflict or Concord?" (pp. 283-85). Particular to the selection of these women is the fact that, except for Lucy Stone, all of the women were writers, leaving a wealth of material on their feminist views. White considers the transmission of ideas from one generation to the next, in the most intimate of rela-

tionships. She concludes that there was "greater closeness and less mother-daughter conflict in the feminist pairs I studied than I had initially expected to find" (p. 283). This historically-based perspective is beneficial to *Generations* as a whole, because it reinforces the notion that there is a modern generation gap in feminist theory that is unique to 1990s academia.

The rest of the contributors offer well-formulated, well-supported positions on the state of feminism in the academy or feminist thought. Though they generally do not address the same particular topic or example, they do provide a wide range of opinions on the same overarching conversation. *Generations* is at its best as a contribution to a greater dialogue of feminist ideology. While *Generations* may not be discursive within itself, it certainly lends fuel to the many conversations in academia, whether inside or outside the classroom. The book should find an important niche in women's studies or women's history courses as a starting point for further dialogue across the generations represented in its pages.

One cautionary point needs to be made, however. The intended or targeted audience of *Generations* seems to be that of Loose and Kaplan's "academic peers" (p. x). Though insightful in the area of the history of feminist ideology, it is not geared for those with only a passing interest in the topic. Often heavily laden with postmodern (or even postfeminist/cyber-age) terminology, many of the articles address those already within the world of feminist academia. Keeping this in mind, and supporting one of the major themes of the editors, *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, when taught by first or second-wave feminists, should help to bridge the gap to those embarking upon a career as intellectual feminists.

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