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Feminism and Feminist Scholarship Today

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Anti-racist feminisms in their plurality emerged within a larger political struggle that challenged the academy's exclusivity and imparted to it new desires to both theorize about freedom and labor for it. What Alice Walker called "womanism," bell hooks "black feminism," and the Combahee Collective "revolutionary praxis" entered classrooms a generation ago. Those in solidarity with such black feminisms, or in opposition, have learned from practices that understood the importance of autonomous intellectuals. With the return of the elite exclusivity of the academy, and the taming of radical politics in officially recognized scholarship, the transformative agency of feminist studies seems increasingly downplayed.

Diverse anti-racist feminist artists, writers, and activists—Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith—directly or indirectly contributed to feminist scholarship in the US academy. Few may be aware of the significance of such a lineage. If the academy becomes increasingly shaped by corporate culture, or state legislatures and budgets, and feminist scholarship follows the dominant trajectory, what are its dynamic contributions to human value and dignity?

Historically, feminist scholarship and intellectualism swam against the tide, into the academy. Overlapping and merging with black studies and ethnic studies, queer studies, labor studies, they coupled an ability to satirize imperial nakedness with an ability to organize intellectual, spiritual, and material clothing drives and food banks for the disenfranchised. Not embarrassed by personal disarray, operating a parallel universe as an alternative to the corporate-state academy, like an Octavia Butler novel, feminist studies could chart a future for critical, imaginative thinking in the pursuit of freedom and justice.

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