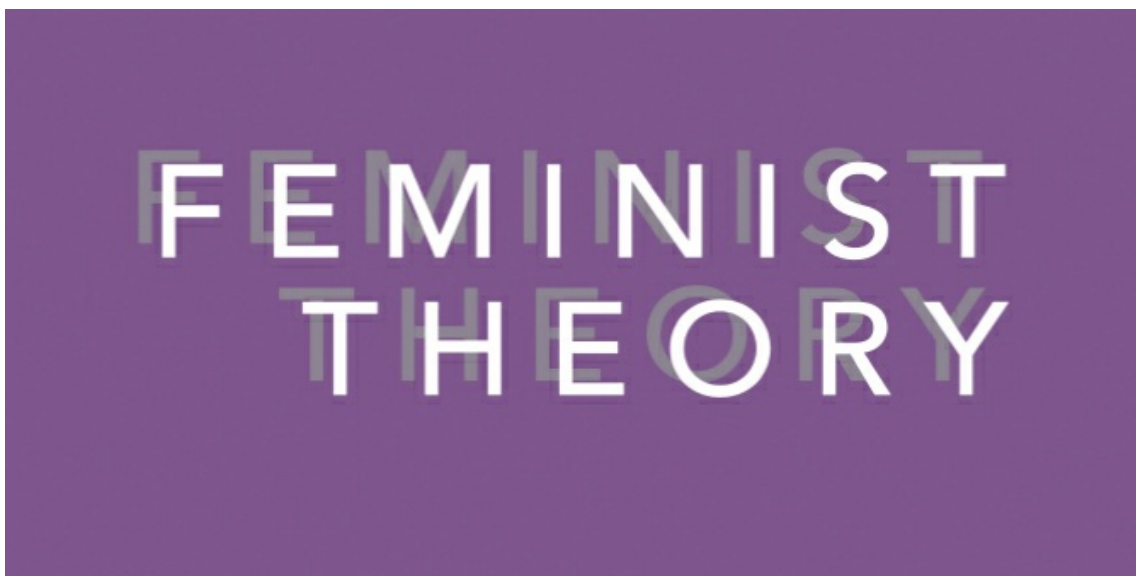


Feature: Q&A with Dr Katherine Farrimond, Book Reviews Editor of Feminist Theory journal

What is the value of the book review today? Is reviewing a form of critique and conversation particularly well-suited to feminist theory and practice? And what strategies might editors looking to feature more feminist scholarship consider in their work? In this Q&A, we speak to Katherine Farrimond about her role as book reviews editor of the journal [Feminist Theory](#).



Q: Could you briefly introduce *Feminist Theory*? How long have you been book reviews editor, and what is your process of commissioning reviews?

Feminist Theory is an interdisciplinary journal, and we publish articles that engage with feminist thought in all its complexity. It is edited by a feminist collective of junior and senior scholars working across literature, cultural studies, social sciences, gender studies, science studies and media and communications. In recent years we have published new work on the relationship between celebrity culture and feminism, on fat and feminism, the gender clinic, nostalgia and feminist activism. We have also just published a very exciting special issue on '[Black Sexualities](#)', which takes in musical theatre, Blaxploitation cinema, coalitional politics and speculative fiction.

I have been book reviews editor for two years now, and I have several processes for commissioning reviews. Sometimes I hear about a new book that would be of interest to our readers and then search out an appropriate expert using existing academic networks and scholarly associations, but I am also approached by potential reviewers with particular books in mind for review, which often brings publications to my attention that I wouldn't have found out about otherwise.

Q: In 2016, *The Times Higher Ed* published an article [proclaiming a decline in the status of book reviewing in academia](#). What value do you feel book reviewing holds today? Are there any aspects of the book review that make it a form of writing particularly well suited to feminist theory and practice?

I recognise a lot of what the author of the article describes here. The work of book reviewing is usually unrewarded financially, or in terms of prestige and promotion, or as notable additions to an academic CV, even as having one's own book reviewed positively plays a role in many promotions procedures. I disagree with the implication that the overrepresentation of junior academic book reviewers lowers overall quality, although I can believe it may create a *perception* of lower quality.

Book reviewing entails a sustained, thoughtful, critical and generous engagement with another scholar's work, and that to me seems particularly well-suited to feminist theory and practice, and is something that I would hope can be spread more evenly across the community of feminist scholars. The chief value of book reviewing is in its continuation of the conversation started in a book, in situating the work in wider discussions happening within the field and therefore of seeing academic books not as the final product of a singular genius, but as part of an ongoing, shifting, discursive and collective process of scholarship. This, I think, is partly why book reviewing feels like a collegial, feminist activity. Similarly, book reviewing holds value as a way of making often challenging, complex material accessible to a wider audience and thus can also be seen, at least in part, as a pedagogical act.

Q: *Feminist Theory* is an interdisciplinary journal – does this help with representing a diversity of feminist voices? Do you find it harder to cover feminist scholarship within certain disciplines?

My favourite thing about my role is that I encounter work from fields that are not my own (media and cultural studies), and I am consistently inspired and impressed by the range of work that I am sent. We have recently published reviews of books about reproductive technologies, the politics of 'opting out', romance novels, depression, terror and about psychoanalysis. Over the next year, I'm looking forward to seeing reviews published of books on topics from the notion of 'smart girls' and education, to motherhood, ritual and dreams. I've been surprised and very pleased to find that I am able to cover feminist scholarship from across the arts, humanities and social sciences, as well as feminist approaches to science and technology. Working as book reviews editor has really shed light on the extraordinary diversity of debate and engagement with feminist theory happening between and within disciplines.



Image Credit: ([Horia Varlan CC BY 2.0](#))

Q: Part of the remit of *Feminist Theory* is to cover 'work by feminists from all parts of the world'. However, academic publishing has been criticised for marginalising work from the Global South in particular. Have you felt aware of these regional hierarchies in your work as book reviews editor, and are there any strategies you use to ensure representation of global feminist scholarship?

This dynamic in academic publishing is something we are very conscious of at *Feminist Theory*. We are taking several steps that reflect our awareness of and commitment to representing global feminist scholarship, including our recent special issue on '[Southern Feminisms](#)', and the next few years will see more special issues that challenge these regional hierarchies.

In relation to book reviewing specifically, it is important to acknowledge the structures within which academic book reviewing often takes place and how it contributes to an uneven emphasis on feminist voices. Book reviews editors (much like other journal editors) usually take on the role as an unpaid and (very) partial aspect of their scholarship. They are often full-time or precariously employed university staff who are not given any workload allocation for their role, and so book reviews work can only take up a small amount of their already-pressured time. This means that they are reliant on certain mechanisms to ensure that the journal's reviews section is filled each issue. In my case, this means defaulting to books that I have been approached about by large, North American and UK-based publishers or by individual authors as well as to well-publicised new work by 'big-name' feminist theorists, all of which has implications for the reviews that are commissioned – there is certainly an unevenness to the origins of the books we review.

It's important that we develop strategies for challenging this, and I think change needs to start with publishers and our relationship with them as reviews editors. As reviews editors, we can contact the publishers we already have relationships with and ask them to prioritise sending books from scholars outside the UK and North America, as well as reaching out to publishers based outside these areas. Academics can also contact reviews editors to recommend new work in their fields, and authors can get in touch with reviews editors directly to recommend their book for review.

I'm conscious that the work of amplifying voices from outside the UK and North America should not fall on individuals, but I do think that collective feminist support of each other's work should be encouraged. Feminist citational practices such as those suggested by scholars like Sara Ahmed and Raewyn Connell – amplifying work by women and non-binary people, particularly people of colour, in our research, for example – are important. Book reviewing is part of this, and can be a valuable tool in decentralising the UK and North America in the picture of feminist scholarship. Do get in touch to tell me about new books that have come to your attention through your networks.

Q: Given continuing conversations about interlocking inequalities surrounding gender, race, class, sexuality, disability and so forth, does an intersectional approach shape your work as a book reviews editor?

It's extremely important to consider the diversity of scholarship that is reviewed in the journal, and to think intersectionally about whose books reach greater levels of visibility and prominence. However, as book reviews editor, my main contact is with reviewers, which means I have become increasingly aware of the very different circumstances under which people are writing reviews. As I discussed earlier, book reviews are rarely at the top of anyone's to-do list, and are not something that people are offered a great deal of institutional support with or recognition for. With this in mind, it is important to be conscious and considerate of the different pressures that people might be under related to career stage, levels of precarity and financial security (which, as we know, tend to relate intersectionally to gender, race, sexuality, class and so on), health, disability, family circumstances, which can all have significant impacts on people's capacity to write. As book reviews editors, I think we have to create the best environments to ensure that all reviewers are able to do their best work with reviews, and this means establishing a good dialogue with reviewers, offering feedback and constructive criticism and often having a flexible approach to deadlines, especially given that most are fitting this work in between any number of other commitments.

I think there is another area related to book reviewing which requires attention to intersectionality. One of the key ways I learn about new books is by hearing directly from authors. Self-promotion does not sit well with so many of us as feminist scholars, and this can be political but is often also emotional, and related to intersecting inequities of gender, class, ethnicity, age and so on. I am convinced that for scholars who so often work in undervalued, overlooked, easily dismissed fields of research to promote their own work and express pride in their critical achievements is a feminist act. It is also really important for mentors and supervisors to encourage first book authors to get their books reviewed. I love to hear from authors, so do let me know about your new book!

Q: Do you have any advice for book reviews editors who are looking to include more feminist scholarship when commissioning?

I would encourage book reviews editors to think about the structures and processes that bring books for review to their attention. If you rely on publishers to let you know about new books, tell them that you're looking to include more feminist scholarship. If you rely on authors to let you know about their books, consider asking some academic feminist societies or other organisations whether they could signal your interest on their mailing lists. Although feminist scholarship has the capacity to strengthen and transform our various fields, it is often siloed and marginalised. A journal like *Feminist Theory* is a vitally important space for the development of our work, but it would also be encouraging to see more books by feminist scholars reviewed in other kinds of publications as a way of opening up dialogue and beginning to think about how feminist work might inform our disciplines more broadly.

Katherine Farrimond is Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex. Her research focuses on gender, the body, genre and sexuality in contemporary popular culture. Her current research focuses on nostalgia, consumer culture and the femme fatale, and on feminism and the opinion economy. She has published numerous book chapters and articles on representations of girlhood, femininity and sexuality, and her monograph, [*The Contemporary Femme Fatale*](#), was published in 2017 with Routledge. She is book reviews editor for *Feminist Theory*.

Note: This interview gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.