

Feminist Making, Doing & Sensing



LAUREN GUILMETTE
& ADA S. JAARSMA EDITORS

*Experiments
in Philosophy*

Feminist
Making,
Doing
& Sensing



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LAUREN GUILMETTE AND ADA S. JAARMA, EDITORS

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Introduction

ADA S. JAARSMA AND LAUREN GUILMETTE

Art is argument. —CHRISTINA SHARPE

When we approach feminist philosophy as process, more than product, surprising discoveries emerge.

The spaces in which we undertake feminist philosophy reveal themselves as replete with resources to be tapped. The rooms where we meet—as teachers, presenters, facilitators, participants, and students—hold various design features that can spark thinking. Tables can be arranged into circles; floors can support lying and sitting bodies; acoustics can quiet or amplify sounds; materials can invite hands to draw, scribble, and scribe: They are places to share such creations with others. The material conditions of doing feminist philosophy are themselves philosophically significant, from the shifting of a room's setup to the topics that preoccupy our attentions and conversations.

Interactions with the structures around us can loosen and otherwise welcome insights that are not preset by the discipline.

Likewise, the rhythms by which we make and do feminist philosophical work—like annual conferences, institutes, and workshops—become sites for undoing and remaking. Curating a theme for a conference, along with decisions about how to adjudicate proposals, invite keynote speakers, negotiate catering, and undertake accessibility: Gatherings turn out to take shapes that, from the planning to the occasions themselves, hold significance for feminist philosophizing.

Foregrounding themes and thinkers, in ways that tangibly decenter disciplinary norms about content, authority, and belonging, can transform boundaries around what counts as feminist philosophy.

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How do we define *feminist philosophy*? Here we draw inspiration from Sara Ahmed's framing of feminism as an ongoing disruption of the status quo, rather than a fixed set of ideals. This disruption entails "asking ethical questions about how to live better in an unjust and unequal world," finding "ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems," and pushing against stuck habits of privilege that would resist imagining these familiar relations otherwise.¹

To these ends, feminist philosophers are increasingly drawing on experimental and arts-based methods to intervene on spaces and rhythms in the discipline. The spaces (with their resources and constraints) in which feminist work happens, along with the rituals in and through which this work takes place, are sites for creative and experimental thinking. Such thinking turns richly affective, somatic, biocultural, human as well as non-human, sonic, pedagogical, archival, gestural, and existential, as chapters enact the making, doing, and sensing of feminist philosophy. From doing stand-up comedy and creating mixtapes to writing poetry, knitting, telling nighttime stories and filmmaking to devising and deploying scores for performance art: The experimental and arts-based practices of feminist philosophers turn out to proffer a whole array of skills, experiential knowledges, concepts, and methods for undertaking work in the field. Amy Marvin, for example, draws on firsthand experiences of stand-up comedy to "do" feminist philosophy of humor.²

Philosophy becomes open for querying *as* practice. "What is 'doing philosophy'?" asks Cressida Heyes together with students, a question rarely posed in recognizably philosophical scenarios.³ Heyes asks the question in the context of an undergraduate course, based on years of yoga practice, in which somatic movements anchor philosophical inquiry. Anna Mudde similarly brings years of knitting experience together with feminist philosophy to posit *craft knowing* as embodied epistemology.⁴ Reading, so essential to and undertheorized within philosophy, can turn poetic and traverse disciplines. Texts as canonical as René Descartes's *Meditations* become newly salient for feminist thinking when philosophy's practitioners draw on training in poetry and comparative literature, as in the case of Kyoo Lee's inventive reading of Descartes, described as "exercise in orchestral use of interdisciplinary reason."⁵

What counts as "canonical" opens for querying as well. Kathryn Sophia Belle, for example, foregrounds the work of citations in amplifying and decentering the field's sensibilities around which texts, thinkers, and questions matter.⁶ Belle's own citational practices model how to engage

the field with creative insistence, especially in terms of Black philosophers and theorists. For instance, Belle's own work has challenged the line between the literary and philosophical, invoking Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, to make manifest the kind of book "that [Belle] wanted to read and should have been able to read."⁷ Among tangible features of the discipline, its scandalously overemphasized focus on white thinkers, something deserving of the moniker #philosophysowhite, presents a problem to diagnose, what Namita Goswami describes in this volume as an enshrining of "white mediocrity."⁸ Citational practices join an array of design and material choices by which to "do" feminist philosophy in ways that open and overturn the field's hegemonies.

.....

The methods by which feminist philosophers intervene on the spaces and rhythms of our discipline have two notable qualities in common.

The first quality is that they draw on tendencies that are set and shared, perhaps learned during graduate school, inherited from earlier generations, or gleaned from transdisciplinary borrowings. We attend and host conferences, lead and take workshops, read and write books; we initiate practices around accessibility; we take cues and outright lessons about methods from artists and researchers across the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. The term *form* is useful here, in the wide-ranging sense that Caroline Levine gives it: Forms shape and confine, forms connect and arrange, forms give order and produce affordances.⁹ Forms are so entangled with our work that, as Levine writes, it's an excellent idea to become "canny formalists."¹⁰ Each contributor to this book is, in one way or another, a canny formalist. Forms are sites of experimentation, resistance, and inquiry. For instance, Amanda Bennett takes up two forms in generative tension under the shared frame of weaving in her chapter for this volume: first, a literary sketch—a critical fabulation, to draw from Saidiya Hartman—from an archival image and, second, a series of crocheted mandala-shaped tapestries that meditate on healing and coalition-building through the insights of different feminist theorists.

Just as "art is argument," as Christina Sharpe posits in the epigraph, there are arguments (one of philosophy's key attachments) at play in how forms are taken up. Pointing to algorithmic thinking, defined as "step-by-step instructions to carry out a task," Nettrice R. Gaskins draws attention to the improvising and remixing that thinkers, artists, technologists, and

DIY innovators deploy from across Indigenous, African, and Latin diasporic communities.¹¹ From textiles to music, images, and dance, creative engagements with form involve material as well as conceptual innovations and, as Gaskins makes clear, hold tremendous import for disrupting unjust systems. In the often-disembodied context of philosophy, it can be empowering and paradigm-altering to affirm the material conditions by which such “making” occurs.

Another way to put this is in Aimi Hamraie’s instructive terms of *designers* and *makers*. Hamraie writes, “If feminist philosophers are to address disability in any meaningful way, I argue that they must understand themselves as designers and makers who are accountable for the material arrangements and practices upon which their scholarship depends.”¹² In this collection, we take Hamraie’s call to understand ourselves as designers and makers as a touchstone. When institutional structures and rhythms marginalize, exploit, or otherwise cause harm, feminist philosophers design new forms. Shelley Tremain’s influential “Dialogues on Disability,” for example, an online series of interviews that are conducted, crafted, and published by Tremain, is an important part of the emergence of “philosophy of disability” as a field.¹³ Other examples of this field-making labor by contributors to this volume include Talia Mae Bettcher’s work with trans philosophy and Perry Zurn’s work with curiosity studies.¹⁴

The second shared quality of these methods is that they depend on the provisional and the spontaneous, the emergence of what Sara Ahmed calls “the hap of what happens.”¹⁵ The hap cannot be staged fully or predicted in advance. For instance, in this volume Lynne Huffer reflects on her practice of *thought collage* following the writing of her book *These Survivals: Autobiography of an Extinction*. Building interactive art installations of fragments at other universities where she has also presented this research, Huffer invites viewers to join in a collaborative process of making that includes collage, experimental writing, and text-image juxtapositions to generate additional fragments, so that participants can join in the creative process. These installations are ephemeral, the length of Huffer’s visit, but participant-collaborators leave their fragments behind to be packed up and reengaged by others at the next installation. Also in this volume, Eva-Marie Stern and Shelley Wall celebrate the hap of scribbling, all too often minimized as a preparatory stage or warmup exercise, yet they contend it is a potent artistic expression that primes viewers to discern the spontaneity and emotion of the process, attending to the initial chaotic

state from which creation arises. Attending to happenings *as* philosophy disrupts the profession's stress on outcomes, like publications, and redirects attention to process and practice. This attention also becomes more inflected with acuity toward the relational, sensorial, and affective.

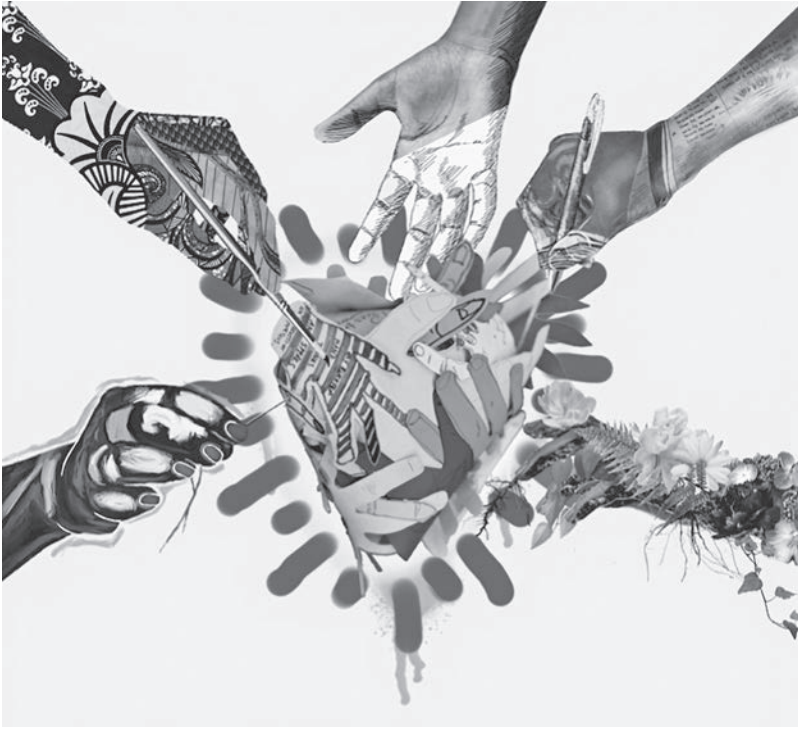
A focus on happenings also means that the roles feminist philosophers occupy, from editor or department chair to dissertating graduate student, can be full of creative potential in and of themselves. As she explores in her chapter in this collection, Natalie Loveless, who is trained as a performance artist, turned a year-long role as interim chair of a department into an art project. Tay Rogers, in the course of writing a philosophy dissertation, created a film collaborating with local artists; the film's music, composed and performed by Rogers, and the casting, cinematography, and editing reflect the hap of philosophizing and create the conditions for viewers to enter into philosophy beyond the usual modes. This book seeks to gather these kinds of projects, providing current and future students with examples of arts-based and experimental research in philosophy.

As Margaret Price explains in *Crip Spacetime*, a hap can be welcomed, even primed, through practices that express generative and pluralistic invitations into happenings.¹⁶ Price's chapter in this book introduces readers to *access priming*, a way to embrace the contingencies of happenings while also tilting dynamics and interactions in feminist directions. After all, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reminds us, "Any of us can fit here today and misfit there tomorrow."¹⁷ Happenings can mark an arrival, an exclusion, a new turn, each of which might be unexpected—and hold palpable stakes for practitioners and for philosophy itself.

A hap can, in other words, turn into something to think with and about. This book, for example, includes a visual chapter that looks to the happenings that sparked its making—events that would be ephemeral, lasting mostly in the form of memories of folks who were there—and presents these happenings as exchanges and prompts for readers.

.....

The origin story of this collection involves an interplay between *form* and *happenings*. We share this story as a way to draw readers into the sections that organize the chapters and formal offerings. (Because sections are forms, and because reading involves a hap of happenings, we hope that this book will engage readers in this interplay.)



I.1 Digital illustration of hands by Bailey Szustak.

During an annual meeting of philoSOPHIA, the year before we began working on this book, Qrescent Mali Mason mused aloud to us that *philosophy* had taken place earlier that afternoon—and that, while some participants had embraced this *hap* of happening, others had missed it entirely.

This embracing and missing were recognizable, more than usual when it comes to feminist philosophy events, because Qrescent had led a workshop that involved the creation of something tangible. While some left their artifacts behind, others devoted themselves to creating a shared artwork out of their pieces (depicted in the visual chapter that follows this introduction)—which turned into a visual inspiration for next year’s conference created by Bailey Szustak, a doctoral candidate in philosophy who’d attended Qrescent’s workshop (see figure I.1).

It is true, generally speaking, that creating something with paper and pencils or markers as part of a peer-reviewed philosophy workshop is not

usual practice. By naming the creating itself *philosophy*, Qrescent highlights the happening itself as vital, even essential, to what makes philosophy possible.

Qrescent's comment points to a kind of proliferating that we think is essential to feminist philosophical work. Indeed, the very echoing of the artifacts (hand-drawn and decorated "hands") in sculptures and conference art exemplifies something that every chapter in this collection explores in one way or another. Audre Lorde ascribes the generative impulse of creativity (from writing a book to putting a bookshelf together) to *erotics*.¹⁸ Qrescent's keynote talk, presented the following year and included in this book in adapted form, looks to Lorde's erotics, as well as to Sharpe's thinking about the haptic—what we can touch, see, feel—to note the sensorial, first-person as well as shared, somatic aspects of "doing" feminist philosophy. (The hand exercise itself is included in the visual chapter to follow, as well as another exercise that Qrescent developed as part of the keynote.)

Reflecting on this joyful proliferation through feminist making, we are reminded of the *cadavre exquis* that Surrealist friends created as a party game (Exquisite Corpse), a century ago, in which participants follow a set of shared constraints for collectively assembling images and/or words. Players of Exquisite Corpse would fold and turn a sheet of paper with only the edge of the previous contribution visible so that, when unfolded, the image is more-or-less continuous, thereby destabilizing inherited models of individual genius for a collaborative model of creativity.¹⁹ Like the Fluxus scores of artists a bit later in the twentieth century, the game is an interplay between form and happening.

It's unlikely, even hard to imagine, that a question-and-answer exchange following the presentation of an academic paper at a philosophy conference might feel like a game of Exquisite Corpse. These exchanges, after all, tend to acclaim a model of disciplinary expertise focused on individuals and rarely affirm creative or arts-based methods. Moreover, as Ela Przybyło's chapter explores, conferences require highly specific social skills and capacities, so specific that those whose skill sets and capacities differ are excluded, often to professional detriment. Margaret Price describes these demands as the *topoi* that suffuse academic life, from norms governing how we should interact (put forward as "collegiality") to norms shaping how we should present our ideas (put forward as "rationality").²⁰ This book suggests, conversely, that feminist thinking, when it's going well, can resemble an Exquisite Corpse game: collaborative, emergent, never in a

vacuum, working from the past and toward something, without that thing being filled in advance, attentive to how we are affected in process. It is strange in ways we didn't know we were waiting for—soliciting, perhaps, what Loveless calls “the affective discomfort of the uncanny.”²¹ One of us, Ada Jaarsma, ascribes the happenings that arise in classrooms to the almost-surrealist workings of our teacherly personas.²²

Attention to feminist making, doing, and sensing means engaging our situated bodyminds—and refusing practices that “disembody” philosophers and the work of philosophy itself. Each section of the book includes tangible examples of creative philosophical making; some chapters culminate in prompts, exercises, and activities as a way to embrace and encourage additional making. Readers are encouraged to dive in, choosing sections and chapters that speak to their own interests in philosophy, in feminist theory, and in forms of art.

Part I, “Priming and Instructions,” looks to events, like conferences, accessibility practices, and workshops, as occasions for amplifying and discovering the creativity of feminist philosophy. Part II, “Making with Texts,” gathers strategies from archival interventions to citational practices to expand the bounds of what counts as feminist, philosophical, and art. Part III, “Making with Others,” brings the chance element of working with others—from other people to other species, microbes, and technologies—in order to test and tune in to the political significance of feminist philosophical research.

Notes

Epigraph: Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 123.

As coeditors of this collection, we gratefully acknowledge the support of the Mount Royal University Library (its facilities, staff, faculty librarians, associate dean, and dean) for hosting our philoSOPHIA conference, “Feminist Making, Doing, and Sensing,” in March 2024 with care and generosity; we also thank the Office of the Provost and the Department of Philosophy at Elon University for providing essential support, as well as many additional departments, institutional grants, friends, and colleagues. The conference was, for us, a watershed moment of community and creativity in feminist philosophy, building on previous years of philoSOPHIA and other philosophical workshops. The collaborative thinking that it instigated in the year to follow (with those who were there, with those who Zoomed in,

with those we wish were there) is manifest in book form here. We also want to express our gratitude to our Duke University Press editor, Ryan Kendall, for her insight and support throughout this process; to our three anonymous reviewers, who gave generative feedback at proposal and manuscript stages; and to the editorial board for gifting us a great idea for a subheading, “Experiments in Philosophy.”

- 1 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 1.
- 2 Marvin, “Feminist Philosophy of Humor.”
- 3 Helberg et al., “Thinking Through the Body,” 265.
- 4 Mudde, “Crafting Relations and Feminist Practices of Access.”
- 5 Lee, *Reading Descartes Otherwise*, 12.
- 6 Belle, *Beauvoir and Belle*, 5.
- 7 Belle, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, xii.
- 8 Myisha Cherry and Eric Schwitzgebel, “Like the Oscars, #PhilosophySoWhite,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 2016.
- 9 Levine, *Forms*, 18, 22.
- 10 Levine, *Forms*, 150.
- 11 Gaskins, “Techno-Vernacular Creativity and Innovation,” 253.
- 12 Hamraie, “Beyond Accommodation,” 262.
- 13 Tremain, “Dialogues on Disability”; Tremain, “New Movement in Philosophy.”
- 14 Bettcher, “What Is Trans Philosophy?”; Zurn and Shankar, *Curiosity Studies*.
- 15 Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 41.
- 16 Price, *Crip Spacetime*, 166–67.
- 17 Garland-Thomson, “Misfitting,” 226.
- 18 Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic,” in *Sister Outsider*.
- 19 Kochnar-Lindgren et al., *The Exquisite Corpse*, xxvi.
- 20 Price, *Mad at School*, 6.
- 21 Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 51.
- 22 Jaarsma, “Design, Disability, and Play.”

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