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## The Feminist Keyword Project: Literature Reviews as Feminist Praxis

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### Cover Page Footnote

Much gratitude to the reviewers and editors for their incisive feedback on this OTA. Thanks to my Critical Inquiry and Praxis students for their insights on the efficacy of this project.

## The Feminist Keyword Project: Literature Reviews as Feminist Praxis

### Introduction

In her work on the “intersectionality wars,” Nash (2017) analyzes feminist scholars’ contentious debate over the analytic’s definitional power, genealogy, and continued usefulness. These “wars” about intersectionality, a concept coined by Black feminist legal scholar Crenshaw (1989), track and contest its conceptual predecessors, methodology, and varied interpretations beyond Crenshaw’s original theorization. Nash argues that intersectionality is thus a dynamic site of meaning-making rather than a static framework: “we can consider intersectionality as a capacious feminist gathering that has become a rich location of myriad feminist conversations” (p. 126). Like intersectionality, all feminist keywords are collaborative, oftentimes fraught theoretical and political projects. As terrains of struggle, keywords generate a multiplicity of origin stories and narratives about their analytical power.

The Feminist Keyword Project is a scaffolded series of assignments that culminates in a literature review of the student’s chosen keyword. It is designed for intermediate undergraduate students who have acquired a foundational feminist vocabulary in their introductory classes. Building upon this baseline fluency, the project shifts students’ understanding of course concepts from a glossary of terms to politicized feminist gatherings. The project is informed by the tradition of the keyword entry genre to move students beyond merely defining their chosen term to narrating it as a site of feminist discourse in and outside of academia. In doing so, the Feminist Keyword Project engages students in the feminist praxis of research, writing, and citation.

This assignment was designed for a Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality (WGS) Studies course that includes units on feminist epistemologies and praxis, but it can be adapted across disciplines to classes that bridge their curriculum’s introductory and advanced coursework. The Feminist Keyword Project is uniquely tailored for intermediate-level undergraduate students in WGS and other fields, because it builds upon students’ foundational lexicon by attuning them to the academic and activist conversations that have shaped it.

### Rationale

The keyword entry genre is an important and well-established one in critical theory. In his germinal book, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Williams (1983) insists that a keyword project:

is not a neutral review of meanings. It is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at

once conscious and critical – subject to change as well as to continuity.  
(p. 24)

First published in 1976, Williams' *Keywords* established a template for fields to articulate a shared language, map sites of inquiry, and point toward future directions of knowledge production. The 2014 inaugural issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly (TSQ)*, for instance, offers a “curated collection” of keyword entries as “evidence of both the field's already established depth and maturity and its irreverent youthful vitality” (p. 15). The NYU Press Keyword series similarly extends Williams' approach; as of this writing, the series includes ten tomes dedicated to fields such as Media Studies, Disability Studies, and Asian American Studies, each working to introduce new readers to a field's core concepts and capture the genealogies and debates that animate its intellectual project.

The Feminist Keyword Project is inspired by the genre of the keyword entry to intervene upon students' notion that their growing feminist vocabulary emerged fully formed from the ether. It offers them an opportunity to contextualize terms as ever-evolving products of collaborative knowledge production and interdisciplinary cross-pollination. Moreover, the assignment invites students to flesh out terms' important historical details and polyvalent meanings that may have been glossed over in their first exposure to them in introductory classes or other sites such as social media. WGS students frequently encounter the field's keywords before entering our classrooms because feminist knowledge production is not bound to academia. As the Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective (2021) lyrically explains in the Introduction to *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*:

Feminist knowledge has always traveled from the shelter to the state and back again, from the psychoanalytic couch to the artist's body and back again, from the front lines of racial protest to the poet's notebook and back again, from the reservation to the courtroom and back again, from the kitchen table to the union boardroom and back again, from the dance floor to the text and back again, from the text to the bedroom. And back again.  
(p. 4)

The Feminist Keyword Project requires students to track this circuitous flow of knowledge to explicate when, how, and why their chosen keywords became sites of feminist discourse both within and outside of scholarly literatures.

Feminist praxis is not simply the application of academic scholarship to political action outside of the classroom, but how we enact intersectional feminist politics in scholarly practices. The Feminist Keyword Project requires students to execute research and writing as feminist praxis; at each stage, students must make critical decisions about how to narrate their findings and who to cite, and consider the intellectual and political effects of those decisions. Students undoubtedly encounter nonlinear and contradictory narratives about their keywords in their

research. Discovering that their keywords don't have a history, they have *histories*, confronts students with the fact that literature reviews are not exercises in objectivity. Competing narrative claims to "truth," Hemmings (2011) reminds us, open up and foreclose different intellectual and political possibilities. This project, thus, presents students with crucial questions: What is the nuanced relationship and difference between my keyword and related terms? Whose contributions am I centering and eclipsing in my literature review? What intellectual and political consequences are opened and foreclosed by how I tell the story of my keyword? This assignment not only reframes students' understanding of keywords as analytical inventions and terrains of struggle but also demands critical self-reflexivity in the research and writing processes.

### **Learning Objectives**

The learning objectives for this assignment are:

1. Define the features and significance of the keyword entry genre.
2. Map genealogies of feminist discourse in and outside of scholarly literatures.
3. Synthesize research to author a thorough yet concise literature review.
4. Execute critical self-reflexivity and feminist praxis through research, writing, and citation practices.

### **Explanation**

In what follows, I detail the Feminist Keyword Project's assignment instructions and its scaffolded components, including in-class activities and graded assignments.

Each student first selects a feminist keyword. This may be a concept born of academic scholarship (ex., the male gaze, compulsory heterosexuality), popular discourse (ex., mansplaining, girlboss), or one that has generated substantial feminist debate (ex., pornography, self-care). Students then research their chosen term's origins, genealogical development, and proliferation in and outside of academic spheres. The Feminist Keyword Project's final product is a five to seven page literature review of their keyword that details its emergence and importance as a concept around which feminist discourse is organized.

Students are encouraged to examine their keyword as an interdisciplinary feminist gathering by researching in and across the fields that have contributed to and applied it. I explicitly state in the assignment instructions that students can use published literature reviews/keyword entries on their select term as springboards into their research, but that these kinds of sources do not count toward their required number of academic sources; the expectation of this project is that students conduct their own extensive research rather than merely distill pre-existing literature reviews.

The final paper must integrate both academic and public-facing sources (such as zines, op-ed articles, blogs, social media posts, memoirs, etc.) as appropriate to the keyword's development and circulation. This requirement is important for three reasons. First, it encourages students to cultivate a broad textual literacy spanning academic and popular discourses. Second, it engages students in questions of credible authority, lived experience, and where theory is produced. Third, it would be impossible to author an accurate literature review of many feminist keywords if students were barred from integrating non-academic material, which is often ahead of and more accessible than scholarly literature. For instance, *misogynoir* (a popular selection among my students for this project) was coined by Bailey and first appeared in a 2010 blog post she published on *Crunk Feminist Collective*. The term then developed collaboratively in Black feminist digital spheres before appearing in academic literature (Bailey & Trudy, 2018).

In an effort to bolster students' skills as critical thinkers and researchers, this assignment is broken into several component parts. These in-class activities and graded assignments build toward the final literature review paper. I include all of the following in my course such that the project structures the second half of the semester. However, instructors may adopt some or all of these components as appropriate to their course design.

#### In-Class Activities:

- **Word Clouds:** After introducing the Feminist Keyword Project in class, students co-create word clouds using an online platform like Mentimeter to generate a preliminary list of potential keywords. We create three separate word clouds: concepts developed by feminist scholars in academic literature (ex., intersectionality, mononormativity, aggrieved entitlement), concepts originating from popular and activist discourse (ex., relationship anarchy, body count, queer), and concepts that generate feminist debate (ex., rage, virginity). I offer students a few examples of keywords in each category for clarification and inspiration.
- **Research Workshops:** Students attend workshops with university research librarians to learn how to find peer-reviewed academic sources, identify credible public-facing non-academic sources, and other essential research skills. Chomintra (2023) details a library instruction workshop on interrogating normative constructions of academic authority and cultivating a feminist citational practice designed for students completing the Feminist Keyword Project in my class; it is a phenomenal resource for professors and university

research librarians who partner to tailor feminist research and information literacy workshops to this specific assignment.

**Scaffolded Assignments:** The following graded assignments impress upon students that research and writing are iterative and reflexive processes. They also enable sustained professor-to-student feedback throughout the project.

- **Brainstorming Worksheet:** Students answer a series of questions about the feminist vocabulary they already possess, which words in our collaboratively-generated word clouds confound them, and their interests in and outside of WGS. This worksheet, which I administer through our online learning management system, assists students in creating a shortlist of keywords they are interested in exploring. Instructors can offer feedback at this early stage to help students whittle down their options, commit to a keyword, and begin research.
- **Abstract and Annotated Bibliography**
- **First Draft**
- **Peer Edits:** Students are instructed to move beyond copy editing to offer substantive feedback on the clarity of their peer's literature review and the voices/sources it centers and excludes.
- **Final Literature Review Paper**

### **Debriefing**

Debriefing is best integrated into the Feminist Keyword Project rather than conducted after the due date. As an ongoing practice, debriefing advances criticality and the development of skills for research as feminist praxis.

I debrief at each stage of the project: brainstorming, abstract and annotated bibliography, first draft, and final submission. This is achieved through in-class conversations and short written reflections. For example, after the submission of their abstracts and annotated bibliographies, I prompt students to conduct an intersectional, interdisciplinary audit of their bibliographies to assess whose voices they are centering and identify gaps in the communities and fields represented. I also instruct students to first explore academic scholarship on their keyword and, then, in a short homework assignment, identify a credible public-facing source and explicate what it evidences about their keyword's development or impact.

These debriefing reflections are framed by assigned class readings; in other words, students engage in course units that prompt new areas of inquiry and self-reflection as they incrementally complete the Feminist Keyword Project's component parts. These assigned readings vivify three core themes of reflection:

- **The keyword entry genre:** I assign excerpts from Williams (1983), as well as the introductions to and select keyword entries from *Keyword for*

*Gender and Sexuality Studies* (2021) and the inaugural issue of *TSQ* (2014). This unit familiarizes students with the genre in which they will be writing their literature review. I here emphasize that students are expected to conduct and synthesize extensive research rather than reproduce published literature reviews/keyword entries. In this unit, we identify the features of the genre and its function for both readers and the field.

- The politics of feminist terminology: I assign excerpts from Ahmed's (2017) *Living a Feminist Life* to support conversations on keywords as "problems with names" (p. 31), as well as Nash's (2017) "Intersectionality and its Discontents" on keywords as embattled intellectual and political projects.
- Feminist research praxis: This unit includes hooks' (1994) "Theory as Liberatory Practice" and Bailey and Trudy's (2018) "On misogynoir: citation, erasure, and plagiarism" to frame knowledge production as a political practice. Here, students discuss the politics of citation as central to the enactment of feminist research praxis.

Students not only reflect upon their own work but also their peers' throughout the project. This collaboration is facilitated by peer editing and informal in-class discussion. Peer edits offer students insight into the clarity of their literature review and the sources/voices they are privileging. Giving and receiving peer feedback moreover alerts students to sometimes unexpected connections between their keywords and exposes them to additional sources. Oftentimes, several students will select the same keyword for this assignment. I do not discourage this. After the final literature review paper's due date, students share their work with one another and discuss the research and writing challenges they encountered. Students who focused on the same term discover that they made different decisions about who to cite or how to narrate their keyword. Considering why they made, and the consequences of, these choices is a generative debriefing exercise that seals the project's core objective of enacting a self-reflexive feminist research praxis in the mapping of feminist genealogies of thought.

### **Assessment**

I assess the Feminist Keyword Project's final literature review paper using this rubric and offer written feedback on each of its criteria:

1. Provides an accurate and thorough overview of select keyword as a site of feminist discourse and debate.
  - Does the student accurately explicate the coinage/origin(s), development, and proliferation of their keyword?
  - Does the student carefully attend to their keyword's relationship to and difference from related terminology?



- Does the student examine their keyword in both academic and popular/activist discourse?
  - Does the student move beyond a summary of sources to synthesize research into a coherent narrative of their keyword as a site of feminist discourse and debate?
2. Research and/as Praxis
- Does the student cite the required number of peer-reviewed academic sources? Are these sources well selected to explicate the coinage/origin(s), development, and proliferation of their keyword?
  - Does the student cite the required number of public-facing non-academic sources? Are these sources well selected to explicate the coinage/origin(s), development, and proliferation of their keyword?
  - Does the depth and scope of the student's understanding of their keyword's genealogy demonstrate extensive independent research, or does the student rely upon citation of published literature reviews/keyword entries?
  - Does the student's research practice demonstrate attention to feminist citational politics by including key sources and justifying in their literature review the sources/voices they center?
3. Writing
- Has the student thoughtfully and thoroughly addressed feedback from the instructor and peer editor on their first draft?
  - Does the literature review include introduction and conclusion paragraphs? Do these introductory and concluding paragraphs include clear, concise "thesis" statements that provide a snapshot of their keyword as a site of feminist discourse and debate?
  - Is the literature review organized, polished, and free of grammatical errors?
  - Does the literature review abide by page length requirements?

### **Conclusion**

This assignment follows Nash's (2017) assertion that intersectionality is a feminist gathering with the pedagogical goal of deepening students' understanding of feminist terminology and feminist knowledge production more capaciously. If a feminist gathering is a community of people, the Feminist Keyword Project tasks students with identifying the scholars and activists who vivify their chosen keyword. If a feminist gathering is a place, students are to

discerningly sketch its analytical terrain like a cartographer. This assignment effectively teaches students in WGS and related classes how to carefully trace genealogies of thought in their field, a skill they will need to succeed in advanced, theory-based courses and original research projects.

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