

Academic Event Report

Ellen O Sullivan

Department of Sociology and Criminology, University College Cork

Event: The 16th Annual Feminist Theory Workshop (FTW)

Venue: Duke University

Date: 24th to 25th March 2023

The Feminist Theory Workshop (FTW) is a two-day annual conference hosted by the Department of Gender, Sexualities, and Feminist Studies at Duke University, North Carolina. Established in 2007, the FTW, now a mainstay of the feminist academic calendar, has featured distinguished speakers who are titans of feminist scholarship, including Hortense Spillers (Professor Emerita, Vanderbilt University) in 2007, Donna Haraway (Professor Emerita, University of California, Santa Cruz) in 2011 and Silvia Federici (Professor Emerita, Hofstra University) in 2018. I had the privilege of participating in the 16th Annual FTW (March 24th to March 25th, 2023) and flew to North Carolina for the event. The workshop was a hybrid event, and as well as having a substantial crowd physically present, there was a large and supportive online community in attendance. Across the two days there were five keynote speakers, smaller seminar sessions and a roundtable discussion. The keynote speakers were Professor Roderic Ferguson (Yale), Professor LaMonda Horton-Stallings (Georgetown University), Professor Sayak Valencia (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte) and co-keynote speakers Dr Nat Raha (Independent Activist-Scholar) and Dr Mijike van der Drift (Royal College of Art, London). The workshop focused on contemporary developments in feminist theory, especially concerning epistemologies of power and community, with the aim of finding spaces for connection and alternative pathways of growth in an increasingly polarised world.

Day 1: Professor Roderick Ferguson, Dr Nat Raha and Dr Mijike van der Drift

The first day of the FTW began with an organised lunch. This was a lovely way to meet other academics from all around the world, most of which were PhD students. In the afternoon, Professor Ferguson gave the first keynote speech. He focused on conceptualising masculinity, especially concerned with what he deemed the ‘super-patriarch’—an embodiment of psychopathy, the type of masculinity that takes lack of empathy, personal gain, and individualism to extremes, and a type of masculinity that neo-liberal capitalism depends on. Professor Ferguson agitated the narrative behind what is considered ‘psychopathic’ behaviour,

and while his talk received some pushback from the audience, it was a thought-provoking and transgressive lecture that encouraged a more critical view of both masculinities and clinical psychiatry. This critical approach to production of empirical knowledge was a common theme across all the keynote talks.

The second lecture of the first day came from co-keynote speakers Dr Raha and Dr Van Der Drift. They spoke of theorising their experiences as trans women and trans activists into the conceptualisation of ‘femme collectivities’, which is a key part of their co-authored book, *Trans Femme Futures: An Ethics for Transfeminist Worlds* (forthcoming, 2024, Pluto Press). ‘Femme collectivity’ in this instance refers to the supportive gatherings of women and femme-identifying people, and Dr Raha and Dr Van Der Drift pointed to the power and resistance that such collectivities can hold, as well as the potential transformative capacity of femme collectivity in a political sense. Like Professor Ferguson, they pointed to the need for new ways to extend knowledge.

Day 2: Professor Sayak Valencia, Seminars and Professor LaMonda Horton-Stallings

On the second day Professor Valencia and Professor Horton-Stallings gave talks. Professor Valencia began the morning session, and her talk focused on femicide and cultural representations of the murder of women. In particular, she called attention to the killing of trans women. Generally speaking, academic work surrounding femicide can be quite trans exclusionary, and in direct contrast with this Professor Valencia adopted and prioritised a transfeminist approach. She then examined masculinity in the context of gendered killings, calling us to consider what she called ‘neco-masculinity’—the interweaving of masculinist ideals and gendered violence, similar to Professor Ferguson’s analysis.

After this first talk, the seminar sessions began. Each seminar consisted of twenty to twenty-five people, and groups were assigned based on general area of academic expertise, so members of each group had some overlapping scholastic commonalities. Each seminar group was led by one of the keynote speakers. I was placed in Professor Valencia’s group, as I work primarily in gender-based violence. The seminar discussion focused on conversations around the talks already given, as well as a very pertinent exploration of what it means to be considered an ‘expert’ in any given field, especially concerning the act of witnessing. Some points that arose pertaining to this concerned the ethics of voice and narrative, and the role of the academic in legal settings, particularly in courts of justice. The seminar discussions complemented the content of the earlier talks and allowed space for the enactment of progressive ideas collectively and the querying of power dynamics.

Professor LaMonda Horton-Stallings gave the final keynote lecture in a talk that spoke to storytelling and cultural narratives, detailing the historical (but also contemporary) strong resistance to the storytelling and experience of Black women in academia, especially queer Black women. She also discussed the power of storytelling as a tool for positive political and social change, as well as addressing how storytelling can help to broach difficult topics with larger audiences, such as eroticism and sensuality.

Conclusion

The Duke FTW drew to a close on the second day with a roundtable of notable academics. These were Professor Amber Jamilla Musser (University of New York) and associate professors Sameena Mulla (Emory University), Juliette Singh (University of Richmond) and Kimberly Lamm (Duke University). Gathering the corners of discourse together, this discussion illuminated the key themes and shared motifs of the talks. The roundtable panel concluded that a feminist psychoanalytic approach was prevalent in the keynote lectures, and all of the speakers pointed to the harms that traditional (i.e. Freudian) psychoanalytic thought has brought to vulnerable communities. Finding spaces of resistance and new ways of conceptualising power and knowledge were also key components of the sessions. A further commonality of the talks was an evident attempt to carve out space for ‘political possibilities’, examining what those possibilities look like, and who they affect.

The FTW was a beautiful way to re-enter world of convivial academic connection after COVID-19 lockdowns. Participating in the workshop and sharing research and experiences with colleagues from around the world was a rewarding and enriching experience.

Ellen O Sullivan is a third-year PhD student in Sociology and Women’s Studies in UCC. Prior to beginning this PhD, she completed a master’s degree in Women’s Studies and her research analysed the media presentation of Incel homicide in America. Her PhD research focuses on the portrayal of femicide in Irish media, and how that representation informs our ideas about nationalism and nationhood. She has presented her work on gender-based violence, masculinities, and femicide both nationally and internationally. Currently, she is also working as a tutor in the Department of Sociology and Criminology, UCC.