INTRODUCTION

According to Sandra Harding (2008), a well-known feminist scholar in science studies, feminist scholarship and Science and Technology Studies (STS) have a lot to learn from one another. Despite the past few decades of feminist efforts to integrate gender, race, and class into analyses of science and technology, these themes remain largely absent in mainstream STS. Feminist scholarship, Harding suggests, still has much to teach STS about how science and technology are shaped by gender, race, and class and the importance of politically informed methodology. Conversely, Harding argues that feminist scholarship has much to learn from the questions that STS poses about how science and technology are organized, practiced, and constructed within the Western world. Through this, Harding offers a hopeful vision of further dialogue between STS and feminist scholarship.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is a theoretically informed approach in STS that has been used most often to study the rapidly changing worlds of science and technology. ANT has been heralded by some as the best theoretical advancement in STS thus far (Sismondo, 2010). However, despite its apparent success in the field of STS, feminist scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s raised sharp criticisms of ANT for its disregard of gender (Wajcman, 2000) and power inequalities (Casper & Clarke, 1998; Star, 1991), and for its apolitical and “insufficiently radical” orientation (Wajcman, 2000, p. 452). From these critiques, it would seem that
feminism and ANT are incommensurable. But perhaps, as this paper will explore, this need not be the case.

This paper takes up Harding’s (2008) hopeful projection and imagines a meeting between the seemingly divergent fields of feminist scholarship and Actor-Network Theory. I will examine an empirical project that calls for an engagement with both ANT and feminism. Through the lens of this empirical project, I will consider what these diverging theoretical and methodological traditions can learn from one another. I will consider three methodological questions that an alliance between ANT and feminism would raise for any research project: 1) Where do we start our analysis? 2) What can we see once we have begun? 3) What about politics? Through these questions, I will explore how ANT and feminism challenge and potentially speak to one another.

FEMINISM AND ANT

Feminist scholarship and Actor-Network Theory stem from very different political, intellectual, and historical traditions. ANT grew predominately out of the intellectual movements of post-structuralism and constructivism (Law, 1999). Feminist scholarship, on the other hand, grew from a social and political movement that hinged on eradicating gendered inequality (MacKinnon, 2005). While branches of feminist thought have similar to ANT drawn on post-structuralism and constructivism (e.g., Haraway, 1991; Butler, 2004; Mohanty, 2003), others have been built from theoretical traditions such as Marxism, existentialism, and psychoanalytic theories (Davis, 1981; de Beauvoir, 1957; Benjamin, 1988).

Feminist scholarship is a diverse field made up of many distinct empirical, theoretical, and methodological approaches. To refer to feminist scholarship as a unified tradition of thought and practice is therefore a simplification of its diverse history. In a similar way, the diversity in ANT studies makes the approach difficult, if not impossible, to define in broad terms (Law, 1999). The diversity within these two fields can present a challenge for creating dialogue between them. This paper will therefore utilize very particular definitions of feminist scholarship and ANT. These definitions are not intended to erase the diversity within these fields, but rather, allow for an exploration of what lies between them.

Feminist scholarship will be defined in this paper as a field that examines power relations of gender, race, and class through the lens of marginalized perspectives. This definition is drawn from Feminist Standpoint Theory, a theoretically informed methodology, which is deeply rooted in Marxist epistemology that assumes that the oppressed and/or marginalized see relations of power most clearly (Harding, 1991a). Standpoint Theory is defined as “thought that begins with the lives of the oppressed” (Harding, 1991a, p. 56). Women, racialized minorities, and other marginalized groups are assumed by standpoint theorists to have the capacity to see mechanisms of oppression in ways that dominant groups cannot. The oppressed are assumed to have “epistemological privilege” on dominant, oppressive relations of power (Brooks, 2007, p. 69). As this paper will show, this branch of feminist scholarship raises particular challenges for ANT.

ANT will be understood in this paper as a deeply theoretical methodology often used to explore the messiness of scientific practice and technological innovation. ANT, like feminist Standpoint Theory, does not provide an explanatory framework for empirical realities, as social theories often do (Law, 2007). Nor does it provide a rigid set of methodological rules for studying associations (Latour, 2005). Rather, as Law (2007) suggests, ANT is a “toolkit for telling interesting stories” (p. 1). ANT provides tools for tracing “actors”, both human and non-human, and the ways they work collectively in “networks” of action (Latour, 2005, p. 5). Research in the field of ANT often tells stories of the “complexities”, “translations”, and “multiplicities” found in science and technology (Law & Mol, 2002, p. 7).
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