Theories and Methodologies

Marxist Feminism in Flight

LISA L. MOORE

LISA L. MOORE is Archibald A. Hill Regents Professor of American and English Literature, distinguished leadership service professor, and chair of the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Texas, Austin. She is the author of *Sister Arts: The Erotics of Lesbian Landscapes* (U of Minnesota P, 2011; winner of the Lambda Literary Award), *Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the Novel* (Duke UP, 1997), and the poetry chapbook *Twenty-Four Hours of Men* (Dancing Girl Press, 2018) and is the editor of *The Collected Poems of Anna Seward* (Routledge, 2016).

The twenty-three white men and six "others" who taught courses or presented papers at the Marxist Literary Group Summer Institute in 1983 occasionally acknowledged the importance of feminism, postcolonial criticism, and ethnic studies but also, not surprisingly, often marginalized these lines of inquiry. For the editors of the 1988 anthology drawn from the proceedings, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, "protest movements centered around blacks, distinctly privileged and middle-class college students, and women" had "failed . . . to produce broad and pervasive political change" (Nelson and Grossberg, "Territory" 4). These "failures," asserted rather than demonstrated, were seen to require a rededication to a totalizing theory, but this time taking representation and culture into account more fully. Sensing the nascent pressures of globalization that they can't quite register, these thinkers seek a Marxism that can "reterritorialize itself" (11). Today, one hears the settler-colonial, not just Deleuzian, implications of this language, firmly inside rather than outside the machinations of racial capitalism and its gendered distribution of power. The feminist thinking about labor, capital, and materialism that would prove most influential in the 1980s was often happening in other places. But at least two enduring feminist statements were published in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?," an instant classic of postcolonial feminism, and Catharine A. MacKinnon's "Desire and Power: A Feminist Perspective," which had a different fate. In part because of MacKinnon's association with Andrea Dworkin and their collaboration on various antipornography municipal ordinances in the mid-1980s, her work was attacked by "pro-sex" feminists and fell out of fashion. Decades later, however, MacKinnon's incisive

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PMLA 140.3 (2025), doi:10.1632/S0030812925101223

understanding of the violence of patriarchy is newly appreciated. And perhaps surprisingly for those who associate "radical feminism" like MacKinnon's with trans exclusion, MacKinnon's "Desire and Power" comes to some of the same conclusions as contemporary transgender feminisms.

Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture is haunted by present absences. Michèle Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* was published by Verso in 1980,[1] and Barrett was one of the few women, and fewer feminists, invited to speak at the Summer Institute. However, her topic was not women's oppression, but, as her essay is titled, "The Place of Aesthetics in Marxist Criticism." Barrett was, at the time, rethinking "the treatment (or lack of it) of issues of ethnicity, race and racism" in *Women's Oppression Today*, which she later wrote was based on "important omissions" of data and "theoretical formulations . . . I would now regard as ethnocentric" (*Women's Oppression* 264). Her subsequent collaborative writings with Mary McIntosh directly addressed the politics of racialization in Britain (Barrett, Introduction xxiii). Perhaps in the thick of this reconsideration, Barrett did not choose to present her ideas about feminism at the US gathering in 1983 or to write about them for *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, except as transcribed comments after a talk by Christine Delphy. In their exchange, Delphy and Barrett agree that the feminist concept of gender as distinct from biological sex "has not taken off" as of 1983 (Delphy et al. 268). Delphy says that the concept is, at time of writing, about ten years old. Forty years later, I think that the distinction between sex, sexuality, and gender is well understood in academic, popular, and political contexts. But this understanding arrived by other routes that could be called fugitive.

Spivak led a month-long Summer Institute course titled The Production of Colonial Discourse: A Marxist-Feminist Reading, and her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," was probably the piece most likely to be xeroxed from *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* by subsequent generations of graduate students. It travels from the archives of the Raj to Jacques Derrida's critique of classical philosophy, while insisting at every turn on the writer's critical position as "a postcolonial woman intellectual" (297). The moments of self-situating, even of autobiography, are not many, but they represent an important feminist methodology that refuses the split between personal and political, theory and the body, and a gendered split between private and public spheres. Further, Spivak offers a critique of the violence of the archive, and the shimmer of methods of working with and against that violence, that continue to inform feminist work today. At the end of the essay, Spivak recalls a story she knows "through family connections," that of the Indian independence fighter Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri (308). Entrusted with a political assassination, Bhaduri instead chooses to kill herself, but waits until her body is menstruating so that everyone will know her action is not meant to thwart an illegitimate pregnancy. (Spivak is quick to assert that her example is "not a plea for some violent Hindu sisterhood of self-destruction" [307], but a call to resist accounts of Bhaduri's deed as "a case of illicit love" [308].) Spivak's brief gestures of historicizing official records, reading nonspeech actions contextually and carefully, and demystifying the abstract position of the critic by foregrounding the (brown, woman's) body, are important intellectual and political strategies still in use today.

MacKinnon was dismissed as an essentialist, radical feminist for decades, and this response is visible in her own incorporation of responses she received to her presentation at the Summer Institute, as well as in the transcribed comments of attendees. This emended, published version of her talk, "Desire and Power," defines both Marxism and feminism as "total theories" (107): in a famous formulation that first appeared in her landmark 1982 and 1983 essays in *Signs*, MacKinnon argues that "sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism" (106).[2] She concludes that patriarchy "creates gender, creates woman and man in the social form in which we know them to exist" and that "[h]eterosexuality is its structure" (107), that is, the "organized expropriation of the sexuality of some for the use of others" that "defines the sex—woman" (107). MacKinnon concludes, "Gender here is a matter of dominance, not difference" (108), a rebuke to the fashionable poststructuralist understanding of the day from the

perspective of a feminist analysis of power. Indeed, MacKinnon defines her approach as "post-marxist" (114). In her comments after the talk, MacKinnon remarks that she would like to "redefine what it means to be human" in a way that values "everything that women have always done but that has been relegated to femaleness or the feminine" (MacKinnon et al. 120), a formulation that anticipates the notion of "transfeminization" that I address below. Closer to today, MacKinnon has explicitly linked her work to trans rights: "Sexualized misogyny . . . works through anti-transgender bigotry" ("Exploring"). This is not a connection that could be glimpsed in 1983.

Marxist and socialist feminisms had been a lively field for at least two decades by then. Studies like Margaret Benston's on women's domestic labor; the wages-for-housework arguments of Peggy Morton, Silvia Federici, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa; and Barrett's important understanding of patriarchy as a lingering precapitalist ideology were being produced rapidly. Dual-systems theory—promulgated by the economist Heidi Hartmann and others—attempted to join Marxist materialism with feminist ideology critique. These thinkers turned primarily to Friedrich Engels's *The Origins of the Family* and Karl Marx's *The German Ideology* for their understanding of the role of gender in production and the reproduction of the social (Ferguson and McNally xviii). But the sociologist and art historian Lise Vogel, in her 1983 subcultural classic, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*, based her analysis on Marx's much more comprehensive, summary work: *Capital*. Vogel approaches *Capital* as a blueprint for further research, extending concepts found there and probing the volume's omissions, contradictions, and silences that can help scholars understand gender as a means of controlling "the biological, social, and generational reproduction of labour-power" (Ferguson and McNally xxiii). These writers were discovering that gender inequality, like racial slavery and settler colonialism, is an extractive institution for producing labor and laborers, and thus a key source of "the wealth of nations."

In a brilliant foreword to Paul Reitter's new translation of *Capital*, the political theorist Wendy Brown writes that in this late-life opus, Marx exposes the forces rendered invisible by capitalism's violent sundering of worker from means of production. Her essay concludes with a moving explication of the term *capital* as deriving from "head," as in "head of cattle," an ancient measure of wealth. The separation of capital and head from labor and body in capitalism is also a representation of the relations of bourgeois state (head and idealism) to civil society (body and materialism). "Heads cut off from bodies" is the mystification that motors capitalism. Whereas the production of capital requires the existence of labor (and the united power of labor is the existential threat to capitalism), in the "free" labor market it is the worker who is understood to need the job to survive. Not working to live, but living to work. Brown's poignant, almost poetic reading of the etymology of *capital* suggests the limits of social-scientific and legalistic Marxist frameworks. The lineages of Black, Latine, lesbian, and trans feminisms most influential today, like Spivak's formulations, show the value of letting a totalizing theory fail.

Black and Latine feminists in the 1980s developed a powerful term to critique and repair the alienation of the ideal from the material: *theory in the flesh*. For these thinkers, daily violence and oppression were not abstractions. The term appears in the 1982 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. The volume was created by two young Chicane intellectuals and poets, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, who called for "a feminist political theory specifically from [the] racial/cultural background **and** experience" of the contributors (lii). In her foreword, Moraga writes about the pressure to be materialist and revolutionary enough—signaling Third World and New Left Marxisms of the period as sometimes problematic parts of its context. Seeking freedom from those constraints, she defines "a theory in the flesh" as "one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politics borne out of necessity." Such a theory is "an attempt to bridge the contradictions of our lives" (xix).

Insisting on this understanding of materiality, Moraga and Anzaldúa speak directly to the economic stress out of which they created *This Bridge*:

> *How do you concentrate on a project when you're worried about paying the rent?* We have sorely learned why so few women of color attempt this kind of project—no money to fall back on. In compiling this book we both maintained two or more jobs just to keep the book and ourselves alive. No time to write while waiting tables. No time for class preparation, to read students' papers, argue with your boss, have a love life or eat a decent meal when the deadline must be met. No money to buy stamps, to hire a lawyer to "go over the contract," to engage an agent. Both of us became expert jugglers of our energy and the few pennies in our piggybanks: Gloria's "little chicken" and Cherríe's "tecate bucket." (liii)

Anticipating Brown's terms, *This Bridge* demands that readers see not just the ideas, not even just the book in their hands, but "what has brought any of this into being, the relations among these things, or the premises, conditions, dynamics, conflicts, and crises of the entire system" (Brown).

Another notable absence from the Summer Institute was Angela Davis, who had published *Women, Race, and Class* in 1981. Given that the Summer Institute was jokingly called "Commie Camp" and that there was probably no better-known actual Communist Party member in the United States at that time than Davis, her absence does raise the question of why. Davis, who had studied with Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno in the United States and Europe, and who had done prison time as a member of the Black Panthers, had impeccable intellectual as well as activist credentials. Davis taught one of the earliest women's studies courses in the country, at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1978, and at the time of the 1983 gathering was teaching ethnic studies at San Francisco State University. *Women, Race, and Class* was criticized by some Black feminists for focusing too much on the failures of white feminism, especially white feminist literary criticism, though such a critique was unlikely to have influenced the organizers of the Summer Institute.[3] Davis's 1998 book, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, was a landmark in cultural studies. Its demonstration of the sexual agency and imagery of sex between women that characterized Black women's blues, startling to many, quickly became irrefutable as these foundational artists became better known to academic and activist audiences in the queer theory generation through Davis's work. Perhaps it was just that Davis did not need the Marxist Literary Group to develop her analysis.

Today, the category "woman," as deployed in Barrett's and Davis's titles, is no longer self-explanatory. Thanks to pathbreaking scholarship in women's and gender studies and feminist, queer, and transgender theories over the last forty years, scholars understand binary gender not as a description of unalterable reality, which is how critics like Ellen Willis interpreted MacKinnon's "totalizing" theory in 1983, but as a system meant to create conditions of inequality, social and therefore potentially contingent.[4] Today, one sees the long reach of the disappearance of abortion rights in the United States, for example, and how it works alongside the incarceration of trans women in men's prisons, the refusal of the asylum claims of queer and trans migrants at the border, and the disposability of lives considered surplus to global capital.

This critique of binary gender was being established in venues created by the feminist literary activists of the period, in independent presses, bookstores, and journals, in consciousness-raising groups, safe houses, and activist collectives. One transformative text that explicitly identified these lineages is the Combahee River Collective statement, first published in 1979 in Zillah Eisenstein's landmark anthology, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. The collective was named for the Combahee Ferry Raid of 1863, in which the Underground Railroad leader Harriet Tubman, with a force of 150 Black Union soldiers, freed more than 750 enslaved people who were being transported through the South Carolina Low Country. These workers had been left behind when enslavers fled their plantations ahead of the Union Army. The escapees were initially skeptical of the intentions of the Union forces, but when they heard of Tubman's presence they waded into the Combahee River carrying food, supplies, and children to be taken on board the small number of Union ships deployed for the operation. Over the next two days, more than

750 people were resettled on St. Helena Island. This was a fugitive operation, led by a self-emancipated Black woman, drawing on the resources of the Union troops but with the distinct mission of creating more refugees from slavery. This is the tradition of Black feminist fugitivity claimed by members of the Combahee River Collective. While the analysis offered by their text was theoretical, their aims were material and overflowed the boundaries of existing understandings of class and sex/gender. In an early assertion of queerness as necessary to intersectional politics, they wrote, "we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (362). In addition to its critique of binary sex/gender, the intellectual influence of the Combahee River Collective is legible in the widespread use of the term *fugitivity* in Black studies today.

After *This Bridge*'s formulation of "theory in the flesh," the literary critic Hortense J. Spillers's 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," further specified the term *flesh* and deepened the engagement with theory. Spillers insists on the "New-World, diasporic plight" of "African and indigenous peoples" as both "a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile" as well as "*a theft of the body*"—in other words, a matter both of representation and of property and capital. Between captive and liberated subjects, Spillers posits, there is a distinction between flesh and body: "before the 'body' there is the 'flesh'" (446). Concepts of subjectivity fail before "the 'flesh' as a primary narrative," which means "its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hold, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard" (447). Although she doesn't address this directly, Spillers exceeds and shows the limits of psychoanalytic or other theoretically abstract notions such as "lines of flight" in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatari, insisting, like the Combahee River Collective, on fugitivity as an embodied experience: fugitives, fleeing captivity.

Saidiya Hartman acknowledges Spillers's influence on her 1997 study, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. This work centers Black women ontologically and historically, as those whose unfreedom and suffering are capitalism's defining acts of violence, social facts that are always hiding in plain sight. Like Spivak and Spillers, Hartman draws attention to harms and absences in the archive. Going further, however, she reads traces of Black women "creating transient zones of freedom" and achieving "fleeting, surreptitious, and necessarily incomplete victories" over domination, demonstrating the survival value and theoretical insight of "a politics without a proper locus" (51). Like Judith Butler and Spivak's recent collaborative work on statelessness, this line of thinking insists that attempts to reduce those not recognized by sovereign nations to "bare life" (in Giorgio Agamben's memorable term) never completely succeed and seeks to recognize the value of those lives, events, and actions. Hartman developed further the idea of "the revolutionary ideals that animated ordinary lives" in a book she describes as a "fugitive text," *Wayward Lives and Beautiful Experiments* ("Note" xv, xiv).

Drawing on the work of Spillers, Hartman, and others, Tina Campt, in *Listening to Images*, defines "fugitivity" as "the quotidian practice of refusal . . . of the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy" (42). In her analysis of an archival cache of passport photographs from a studio serving a Caribbean community in 1950s Birmingham, England, Campt reads the gestures and contexts of the images: "while the passport remains a document of permission, surveillance, and accountability, the fugitivity of these images exceeds this regulatory function" (32). These were indices of both the state and labor. Migrants recruited to alleviate Britain's labor shortage, the subjects of these photographs were legally defined as British citizens by virtue of their Commonwealth passports, by means of the British Nationality Act (BNA) of 1948. The refusal of social belonging they encountered from white Britons for the next decades indicates, as Campt puts it, that "the BNA of 1948 was an invitation never intended to be extended and never intended to be accepted" (56).

But the photographs, in Campt's reading, document "those who came, nevertheless" in search of "a future beyond Empire they sought to realize right smack in the heart of the metropole itself" (43). Their actions, she writes, were "a transformation of nameless colonial masses into a generation of black British citizen-subjects with planar, rhizomorphic, and fractal mobility" (43). Flesh, escaping to theory.

In developing her own concept of fugitivity, Campt draws on the debate between Butler and Athena Athanasiou in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, where Butler attends to acts by which "a collectivity refuses to stay in its proper place" (Butler and Athanasiou 21; see 20–23). Here, one sees how such concepts have a twin heritage in both Black radical thought and critiques of gender one could call transgender feminisms. Butler's 2023 book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, examines the global uptake by right-wing actors of attacks on transgender people as a proxy for authoritarianism. As the political theorist Paisley Currah notes, "It has become a commonplace of right-wing rhetoric to declaim that sex is the purview of God and nature rather than politics—but this insistence has had the paradoxical effect of making disagreements about the meaning of sex and gender part of our democratic life" (127). The material consequences for actual people are immediate and violent. Currah writes that "large numbers of people we call transgender are not so much gender revolutionaries as unwilling conscripts in these battles" (132).[5]

Currah compares Butler's understanding of transgender identity as a rhetorical tool with the more material approach in a recent book by the historian Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny*. Gill-Peterson argues that categories of sexual difference are both historically coterminous with and central to the maintenance of capitalism and racial hegemony. Like racial science, the science of gender and sexuality spread with European imperialism to become a staple of common sense in disparate geographic and cultural contexts. What Gill-Peterson calls a "materialist case" against trans misogyny (her term is "transfeminization") is needed to understand the persistence of income and political inequalities and interpersonal violence directed by men against women (viii). This is the persuasive claim that I find echoes MacKinnon's insights from her 1983 Summer Institute talk. For example, MacKinnon claims that "there would be no such thing as what we know as the sex difference, much less would it be the social issue that it is or have the social meaning that it has, were it not for male dominance . . . . By the way, I use the word 'male' as an adjective. My analysis of sex is social, not biological" ("Desire" 108–09). In Gill-Peterson's terms, the devaluation of the feminine and overvaluation of the masculine, both rooted in Enlightenment sexual science, organize the unequal distribution of rights, wealth, and safety today.

Following the Black feminist strategy of centering analysis on the most vulnerable, feminisms are taking many and mobile forms. Movements and theories like the Nap Ministry, rest as resistance, antiwork, postscarcity, queer migration politics, and family abolition help people recognize and exploit fugitive spaces in the interstices of capitalism. These are the lively threads of theory and practice that reveal capitalism's limits, exteriors, and failures.

"Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity" is the subtitle of Alexis Pauline Gumbs's *Spill*, a 2016 volume that deploys the resources of poetry in the work of freedom seeking for Black women and girls. Here, imagination is a tool for critique of "how we get played" by "the assembly line," "reproduction," and "capital slurred":

> what i mean is there is an original sin. or almost original if we could find a place to begin, trust, they would put it there. and the way we get human is as vile as swine slaughtered while walking the assembly line. it is slaveship womb work to make sure every time humans be what they be. the reproduction of the unfree orphan children of the sea with time to look but not to breathe. we weave a web of lies and whitewash it and give it to the birds. the second purpose of the word. The drunk contingency of capital slurred. have you not heard?
>
> we are not born. we are made. (that's how we get played.) (129)

Notes

1. Beginning with its second edition that appeared in 1988, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* has been partially retitled, after the colon, as *The Marxist/Feminist Encounter*. It is now in its third edition, with a foreword by Kathi Weeks.

2. See MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism" [1982] and "Feminism, Marxism" [1983].

3. As Joseph writes in the journal *Signs*, "Unfortunately, modern Black feminists and Black lesbian feminists are not mentioned" in *Women, Race, and Class* (134).

4. In her comments after MacKinnon's talk, Willis says that MacKinnon's "totalizing view of power" has led to "a politics of despair," and links MacKinnon's work with that of Andrea Dworkin (MacKinnon et al. 117).

5. A powerful argument about the necessity of transgender Marxism in the context of the "disintegration of material circumstances" in late capitalism can be found in Gleeson and O'Rourke (22). The essay in their edition that engages most directly with feminism is Raha's.

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