ESSAY CLUSTER: THE FUTURES OF FEMINIST CRITICISM

Introduction

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IN May 2017, the annual City University of New York (CUNY) Victorian Conference addressed the history of Victorian feminist criticism. Our conference coincided with the fortieth anniversary of *A Literature of Their Own* and the thirtieth anniversary of *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, affording us a chance to think about the legacy of these groundbreaking texts. Elaine Showalter, Martha Vicinus, and Nancy Armstrong spoke about their struggles to establish and maintain Victorian feminist work in the twentieth century, often against outright hostility. We also heard about issues in twenty-first-century Victorian feminist practice: Alison Booth spoke about digital-humanities codification of Victorian women's lives, Jill Ehnenn discussed queer revisions, and Maia McAleavey explored new theories of relationality, while I gave a response to Armstrong's talk. Meanwhile, Carolyn Oulton's discussion of the ongoing struggle to canonize Victorian women writers spoke to the continuous work required to make Victorian women's writing familiar to the field. It was an emotional day, for we all recognized that this might be one of the last times that the founding generation could be together to share these stories.

When *VLC* offered us a chance to publish some of this work in a feminist cluster, three pieces stood out as already connected. Jill Ehnenn's "From 'We Other Victorians' to 'Pussy Grabs Back'" and my "Victorian Feminist Criticism" both argued for changes in the ways we understand influence and textual interrelationality. Both turned to ethics for an alternative model, both engaged alternative temporalities, and both used lesser-known Victorian writers as case studies. This convergence suggests that there may be a larger turn in the field. Meanwhile, Alison Booth's "Particular Webs" provides a third new paradigm, drawn not from ethics but rather from digital humanities, although sharing our

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desire to find a more capacious mode of categorizing. Booth explores how we recover women's writing in the digital era, rethinking archival practices and book history. Yet her work also intersects with mine and Ehnenn's in its emphasis on collectivity, its turn to a wider community —whether a crowd of women or of editions—in lieu of exalting a few chosen feminist role models.

We hope that these articles will contribute to a fruitful review of the critical protocols we already use, too often assumed rather than examined, and help the practitioners of a new generation of feminist criticism. The future of feminist criticism, as we see it, will have to cope with vast numbers: crowds of texts, editions, authors. It must therefore allow for interactivity, multiplicity, and variation. We advocate for Ehnenn's "grab," Booth's "mid-range reading," and my "community of care"—different ways of naming powerful feminist practices—and for leaving behind essentialist identifications of women, fantasies of exemplary feminists, anachronistic political formulations, and heroic rescue fantasies. All three articles debate how to handle a larger field of subjects while doing justice to them, and all three recognize that this project may require new rules and new practices.

When we held our conference in May 2017, we were reeling from a catastrophic election six months prior, as memorialized in Ehnenn's use of "pussy grabs back" and Booth's reference to "she persisted." Our conference felt like a deeply moving declaration that feminism had a robust life in spite of national events. It allowed us to assert that we were still here. Our conference honored the past, the founders of Victorian feminist criticism, and we claimed the present, asserting our own participation in the robust continuing tradition of feminist work. My hope is that the articles that came out of that conference can help guide us toward the feminist criticism of the future.

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