theories and methodologies

# Feminism Inside Out

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IN AN UNDOUBTEDLY MISBEGOTTEN MOMENT, SOME MONTHS AGO I SET OUT TO PROTEST WIDESPREAD DISREGARD OR STEREOTYPING OF feminism (especially among those the age of my undergraduates) and to do so by means of the humor feminism supposedly dampens. It was to be a *Cosmo*-like or *DailyCandy.com*-type questionnaire that readers could fill out in the privacy of their own homes to ascertain whether they were vulnerable to any allegation that they were or could be considered feminists. The higher their score, the more secure they could feel. So, for example:

1. Young women date older men and vice versa because
   (A) these types of guys pay for everything. (1 point)
   (B) of the pharmaceutical and advertising industries. (1 point)
   (C) hey, like Paul Newman is a cool dude. (1 point)
   (D) old ladies are yucky. (4 points)
2. About men who leave the toilet seat up, I feel
   (A) they can be trained. (1 point)
   (B) compassion, as for those with Alzheimer's. (1 point)
   (C) the urge to remove the entire seat from the fixture permanently. (1 point)
   (D) nothing. (4 points)
3. I believe that my mother
   (A) is totally impossible. (1 point)
   (B) rocks. (1 point)
   (C) made good grits, latkes, casseroles, brownies, etc. (1 point)
   (D) got what she deserved. (4 points)
4. Were I to find myself pregnant, I would want to
   (A) celebrate. (1 point)
   (B) get an abortion. (1 point)
   (C) give the baby up for adoption. (1 point)
   (D) reach for a wire clothes hanger. (4 points)

You can see this was going nowhere fast, probably because (behind the veneer of not very funny joking) I was preaching (never a

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2006.121.5.1711 Published online by Cambridge University Press

good venue for me), in this case the proposition that the feminism you lose may mean your life. It's no laughing matter that the Supreme Court is being reconfigured, along with our traditional civil rights and liberties, by a president whose commitment to education remains in doubt ("You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test"), whose military aggression has harmed people here and around the globe ("I just want you to know that, when we talk about war, we're really talking about peace"), and whose tax cuts injure many health and welfare programs ("They misunderestimated me").[1] As large numbers of women are put at risk by the widening divide between rich and poor ("I know how hard it is for you to put food on your family"), by the incursion into civic arenas of religious ideologies that reinstate traditional sexual hierarchies while failing to mask proliferating ecological disasters ("I trust God speaks through me"), have the goals of feminists been put in jeopardy?[2]

But why, when I was asked to write about the role of feminist criticism in the academy, do I begin with the critical condition of feminism at large? Feminist criticism, it can be argued, has been phenomenally successful within the humanities in general and literature departments in particular. Through its astonishingly rapid evolution during the last three decades of the twentieth century, feminist criticism moved from a critique of male-dominated societal structures and disciplines to the recovery of female authors, from a reassessment of how we can conceptualize the cultural past in newly defined historical periods to an appreciation of the effect of gender on elite and popular genres. The influence of African American feminist thinkers (as well as Latina and Asian American scholars) sometimes preceded but then continually inflected the impact of Continental philosophy, gay studies, and queer theory on feminist speculations in every conceivable language and in numerous area studies. During the current institutionalization of women's and gender studies programs and departments, transnationalism has begun to modify not only feminists' approach to Western nations and issues of citizenship but also their attention to international, Third World contexts, as well as their analyses of the electronic and bioengineering technologies that increasingly affect our minds and bodies.

Though such an evolution might seem teleological, feminist scholars today continue to work productively in all these various phases of investigation. One of my younger colleagues, Deidre Lynch, assures me that every time she teaches Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, she and her students relish the excitement of recovery. Another, Margo Natalie Crawford, argues that unless ethnic studies programs connect better with women's studies programs and vice versa, feminist criticism may continue to be viewed too often as not only a white but also a whitewashing endeavor. Numerous articles and conferences prove the ongoing intellectual vitality of critique, recovery, reassessment, and the permutations that result from combining feminism with critical race, sexuality, postcolonial, and cultural studies. Indeed, the hybridization of feminist criticism constitutes its most heady current morphing, as feminists reconfigure such fields as trauma, composition, and media studies.

Yet a number of people understandably fear that nothing fails like success, a point made by a third colleague, Linda Charnes. So successful have feminist approaches been that if you poke a new historicist or post-Marxist, she suspects, you will probably dislodge feminist concepts that enable the new historicist or post-Marxist to deploy gender as part of her or his rigorous analysis of past, present, and future societal structures or aesthetic representations. Jennifer Fleissner, who recently joined my department, agrees that feminist arguments have become commonplace in the meditations of scholars "not 'self-identifying' as working on gender." Does

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2006.121.5.1711 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the integration of feminist methodologies into nearly all theoretical approaches mean that feminist criticism will wither away as an autonomous intellectual venture or get taken for granted and thus marginalized? Dramatic though the growth of feminist criticism has been, it remains vulnerable to the sort of assimilation that integration can produce, an incorporation into other enterprises that spells invisibility and a siphoning off of the political agendas and passions that fueled feminism from its inception. My friend Alyce Miller frets about how easily an academic field can lose touch with the grassroots social movement in which it originated, and she sometimes wonders (but only sometimes, she hastens to add) if feminists in the academy really care about women at all.

Despite such qualms, the great divide between the success of feminist criticism inside the academy and the backlash against feminism at large remains striking and disturbing. The rise of all sorts of fundamentalisms around the globe; the challenges to *Roe v. Wade* in the United States; the erosion of social services (especially for women with children and older women); the rollbacks of affirmative action; recurrent efforts to stigmatize homosexuals and curtail birth control as well as sex education, to police scientific investigations and reproductive technologies, to regularize illegal domestic surveillance, to outsource torture: the list could go on. This so-called conservatism is accompanied by another curious paradox—namely, that it occurs in an America just as transformed by the second wave of the women's movement as have been the humanists who serve it. Many middle-class women live lives now that were unimaginable before. How can this be, and what does it mean? Beyond the scope of this roundtable, these questions animated my recent effort to use Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* to measure our situation at the start of the twenty-first century against the condition of women at the beginning of the twentieth century in a book (forthcoming as I write this) entitled *Rooms of Our Own*.

My tentative title of the manuscript in progress, "A Feminism of One's Own," had been vetoed even by supportive readers ("no one cares about feminism any more"; "feminism is a turn-off"): did this mean that the usual sorts of theoretical and critical discourses in academic feminism—despite or because of their prominence—had started to seem predictable or formulaic? According to my friend Dyan Elliott, elite or specialized languages have displaced useful activism, as scholars "shadowbox" with each other. About the feminist critics who use these arcane languages, Christine Farris adds that they seem to be thinking back through their theoretical fathers rather than through their intellectual mothers. True, but to our colleague in common, Mary Favret, the problem is more pervasive than this, for feminist criticism as usual (even when written clearly and within a feminist intellectual genealogy) has grown old enough to feel as dated or dull as any other brand of criticism. Mary worries that feminists mainstreamed in the academy not only have lost their craziness, their outrageous ability to speak the unspeakable, but also have not sufficiently attended to the links between feminism and other powerful forces at work in the world, in particular terrorism and religion. Citing economic imbalances between the sexes in the United States and civilian deaths in Iraq, Purnima Bose agrees about "a kind of theoretical paralysis" that has distracted feminists from challenging "structural inequities at both the national and international levels"; "it is time" for feminist critics to "heed Barbara Harlow's more general call," Purnima urges, "to apply our close reading skills to those documents that affect our lives and those of others the most." Instead of fetishizing or savoring the gender categories that confine us, Judith Brown believes, feminist critics should interact with other activists involved in related but different struggles.

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Inside as well as outside the academy, it seems, feminism may have lost some of its charisma, in part because of the disconnection between inside and outside. What might be done about this situation? I would like to raise this question in the context of what another of our colleagues, Shane Vogel, reminds me should be understood as the multiple stakes and states of feminist criticism.

From its inception, feminist criticism addressed problems and audiences inside and outside the university. Indeed, such books as Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera* were exciting in part because the writers never identified themselves or their readers as academicians. To map the long prehistory of this second wave of expository prose, Sandra Gilbert and I have decided to open our forthcoming *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader* with a section that includes earlier creative writers reflecting on the impact of gender on their own and other writers' creative processes. (One benefit of collaborating with a poet is her determination to include creative writers in all critical forums!) When by the eighties and nineties feminist criticism became more specialized, more nuanced by approaches developed in such fields as psychoanalysis and anthropology, more inflected by what we all agree to call theory, especially by poststructuralism, it gained in sophistication but lost in outreach and perhaps in stylistic panache as well.

Curiously, too, in today's gender studies venues, literature and the study of literature—which played major roles at the inception of women's studies—have recently been supplemented and sometimes supplanted by other admittedly important areas of investigation: not only popular forms like advertising and film but also such subjects as medical and military practices; religious observances; marketing campaigns; corporate globalization; legislative disputes; and the mores governing business, culinary, fashion, musical, and sexual customs or trends. Traditionally, topics like these tend to be approached less by literary critics than by sociologists, economists, historians, and people in religious studies, the history of science, and folklore. The prominence of such topics in gender studies encouraged feminist critics to become more interdisciplinary, just as cultural studies propelled literary scholars to address multidisciplinary matters. And of course as print culture is modified or replaced by visual and electronic media, critics of all methodological and ideological leanings will grapple with new representations and formations.

But for feminist critics the stakes of relinquishing the aesthetic and the literary are unique and, to my mind, uniquely important because aesthetic issues and literary approaches have played an important part in feminist expository prose that seeks to negotiate among interrelated physiological, ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political concerns. Whether feminist critics continue to emphasize literary phenomena (as some certainly will) or expand our traditional subject of study to include nonliterary and nonprint phenomena (as some certainly will), we need to draw on our rich archive of expository feminist prose to deal with women's pressing problems in a manner that will make them meaningful to people inside and outside the academy. Now that only a handful of feminist journalists publish regularly, it is no wonder that the pages of most book reviews, magazines, and quarterlies are still dominated by male and sometimes masculinist columnists, as is the Internet. The financial setbacks of *Ms.*, the *Women's Review of Books*, *Off Our Backs*, and a host of small feminist presses only exacerbate the problem. With the deaths of Barbara Christian and Carolyn Heilbrun, as well as the debilitating illnesses of many others, feminists have lost some of our best advocates.

It is not easy to write a scholarly work in a manner that ensures it will be taken seriously

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by a general readership as well as by specialists in one's field. Nor should everyone make this attempt, since it can be risky (especially for the nontenured). However, for those with a gift for such experimentation and with the job security or chutzpah that makes it feasible, the payoff is something sadly lacking in much current criticism: the excitement of reading and the pleasures of writing. If you ask your colleagues what their favorite literary-critical books were this year, you may find quite a few pressed to come up with a title. If you ask them how their own writing is going, you may find quite a few deeply depressed not only because of stalled projects and stale discourses but also because of downsized lists at university presses without the resources to publicize books and at trade presses uninterested in scholarly enterprises. Perhaps publishing houses are cutting back on criticism; perhaps criticism is no longer selling or getting reviewed because the affective, emotional complexities of not only our private but also our pedagogic and collegial, our social and political investments have been severed from the scrutiny we accord literary texts. To the extent that we have been responsible for the commercial failures of literary criticism, what can we do to remedy the situation?

We who teach, savor, and explicate imaginative writing could try to solve these problems by putting to critical use some of the creative features that drew us to literature in the first place: characters and plots, imagery and point of view, not to mention the host of rhetorical strategies that we study in satires, novels, plays, and poems. Such feminist scholars as bell hooks, Nancy K. Miller, and Jane Tompkins push the critical envelope by deploying autobiographical forms, as do the critics Deborah McDowell and Leila Ahmed in their use of the memoir. There must be myriad ways for the more reticent to do this as well. In personal criticism and memoir, abstractions are transfigured into concrete instances and made accessible and vibrant. As the borders demarcating the personal, the political, and the professional shift or fuse, different differences become evocative. Might this also happen in less autobiographical forms of feminist prose? Why shouldn't we learn how to tap the aesthetic pleasures that originally drew us to literature? In search of intellectual stimulation and a sense of relevance, how could feminists dedicated to keeping our cultural past alive alter the future of literary criticism?

Although literature and the study of literature have lost their centrality in women's and gender studies programs recently, feminist literary critics still have a major role to play, in part by making resonant the repercussions of gender-related conversations in more recondite fields of specialization. Taking a page (or a chapter) out of books by historians and philosophers of science, a number of feminist literary critics are well positioned to interpret the important discussions about gender going on in biology and law, medicine and informatics for an educated audience insufficiently trained in these areas of expertise. Teaching, the classroom, our relation to the undergraduates in our discussion sections or to the graduate students in our dissertation seminars: these subjects could be more fully integrated into feminist criticism, as could our relationships with each other as colleagues and as citizens, especially during a period when the hierarchical and economic structures of the academy are exerting pressures detrimental to the equality that feminists always seek to foster. Given cutbacks in the humanities, feminists need to enter into conversations about education that will inevitably impinge on gender and sexuality, language and literature classes. Debating in particular what the teaching of contemporary and earlier literary forms means could involve us in discussions about the largely unaddressed subject of aesthetics—not just its ideological significance but also its affective import for people from various backgrounds and with divergent tastes and values.

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Needless to say, sometimes such experiments fail as abysmally as my F-word questionnaire. Yet to speak to or with other constituencies, it may be necessary at times to risk vulgarity or silliness, stridency or sentimentality. Lest adopting an unconventional tone or technique be derided (as watered-down pandering), consider again the urgency of tackling the tribulations contemporary women encounter daily: domestic and sexual violence; the nonexistence or erosion of civil, reproductive, and educational rights globally; the war-related calamities and casualties suffered by civilians, journalists, philanthropic volunteers, soldiers, and their families. Amid these disasters, the sense of collectivity I gain from the younger colleagues I mention here—who are only a smattering of the feminists at my school—braces me against what I daily hear on TV and read in the newspaper, which sometimes sounds like death sentences. Feminist critics today realize that we have never been cocooned within institutions of learning, that our job is not yet done, and that we must continue to use our interpretive skills to turn inside out the disorienting signs of our times.

## Notes

1. 21 Feb. 2001 (Weisberg); 18 June 2002 ("Remarks"); 6 Nov. 2000 (Weisberg).

2. 27 Jan. 2000 (Weisberg); 9 July 2004 (Brubaker).

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2006.121.5.1711 Published online by Cambridge University Press