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Ann Cvetkovich, Susan Fraiman, Susan Stanford Friedman, Miranda M. Yaggi

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“Women as the Sponsoring Category”: A Forum on Academic Feminism and British Women’s Writing

Ann Cvetkovich,
University of Texas, Austin

Susan Fraiman,
University of Virginia

Susan Stanford Friedman,
University of Wisconsin—Madison

and Miranda M. Yaggi,
Indiana University, Bloomington

Foreword

Miranda M. Yaggi [MMY]: Sitting in the reading room of Indiana University’s Lilly Library, I stared transfixed at Sylvia Plath’s teenage copy of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*. Although routinely stunned and inspired by the gems I find encased in the Lilly’s collection — Mary Shelley’s hand-written note to Percy on the day of their elopement, letters from Virginia Woolf’s elegant hand — this marked an altogether different experience. More than the usual thrill of voyeuristic trespass, this time I had landed right in the middle of an electric debate. Plath’s energetic cursive characters covered the margins of page after page in blue fountain pen — conversing with Mill, responding to Mill, arguing emphatically the challenges to women’s liberty with exclamation points and a “bravo” here and starred passages there.

With ideas for the 2008 18th- and 19th-century British Women Writers Conference (BWWC), its theme of “Female Marginalia: Annotating Empire” already brewing in my head, I sat poring over Plath’s high-school marginalia wondering whether she ever thought, as she underlined those

This essay, a “digital forum” conducted by the authors as a year-long email conversation, extends the discussion begun during the plenary panel at the 2008 18th- and 19th-Century British Women Writers Conference (BWWC), held in Bloomington, Indiana.

passages and responded to Mill, that she would one day push the conversation about gender and individual liberty forward and, herself, become the main text that would prompt others to respond, question, converse, and annotate. Plath made me see the truly dynamic nature of margins at that moment. Wanting, then, to bring that same sense of dynamism and dialogue to the conference, I emailed Susan Fraiman, whose *Cool Men and the Second Sex* I had recently read and found quite provocative, asking if she would be interested in heading a forum devoted to exploring the margins of feminism in the academy. To my great delight, she agreed and brought on board Ann Cvetkovich and Susan Stanford Friedman. To further compound our excess of Susans, Susan Gubar delightfully took the helm as panel moderator.

Just as I had hoped, their opening-night plenary forum, “Feminist Theory Today: Its Margins in the Academy, Its Meanings in the World,” sparked conversations that threaded across the entire weekend. What follows is an extension of that conversation. Although we hope that the text as a whole offers some sense of cohesion, it is presented not as a definitive argument but rather as a fluid exchange of ideas meant to inspire further annotation and conversation.

MMY: After the conference, I found myself thinking about the shift in the history of ideas concerning feminist scholarship that your conversation illuminated. Arguing collectively for a move away from the priorities and categories that have traditionally defined this type of scholarship, each of you addressed the exciting possibilities of the field’s expanding archive. Susan Fraiman pointed out that “some very diverse” and “not necessarily woman-centered work” is happening under “the rubric of Women’s Studies” as well as under “the sign ‘woman.’” Making a similar call for reassessment, Susan Stanford Friedman insisted that while we could once justify grouping women writers together under the rubric “women’s writing” by a sense of their shared oppression, such a justification no longer works. We need to seek other, more broadly based frameworks, even as we affirm the necessity of scholarship on women as central to our agenda. Along a similar line, Ann Cvetkovich argued for the “extended types of representation” that we can begin capturing in our scholarship when the archive includes accounts of trauma and “public feeling.”

This invocation of category crisis and archive expansion left some conference participants, myself included, simultaneously inspired by the vista of possibility and perplexed about what this new map — with its shifting priorities, evolving vocabulary, and interdisciplinary expansion in the academy — means for our own work. What, if anything, still holds it all together? Although we understand that the rubric of gender remains ever-changing, how do we balance that necessity of change with a sense of scholarly coherence? Is change required by the material we investigate or, instead, by naysayers’ insinuations that gender-centered scholarship grows stale or humdrum in its transition from rebellious, marginal discourse to institutional discipline? How do we embrace a more flexible and capacious notion of Women’s Studies without relinquishing an important network of ideas and priorities which were once central to feminist literary criticism and to both reading and recovering women’s writing?

Susan Fraiman [SF]: I want to begin by clarifying what I mean by the “New Women’s Studies” and the wide range of work I see currently occurring under this rubric. I am using this term to describe what is arguably a new phase, the latest turn of the screw, in the development of scholarship arising from the 1970s Women’s Movement. As you know, while this scholarship began with a feminist critique of gender bias across the disciplines, its key emphasis for much of the 1980s was on putting women back into the picture, recovering women’s contributions to literature, their role in history, etc. The effect of this focus on women was not simply to add more data but also to suggest new ways of framing it. It is hard for us now to appreciate how radical this work was at the time, how many paradigms were shattered as a result, and what an uphill battle it was to establish Women’s Studies as a legitimate field of inquiry.

By the late 1980s, however, the category of “women” had come under fire for both theoretical and political reasons. It was decried on the one hand by poststructuralists as “essentialist” and on the other (more usefully, in my view) by minority women as a false universal — a term claiming to reference all women while actually excluding many. What followed for most of the 1990s was a period of soul-searching and productive re-theorizing. In English, our attention shifted away from women writers to the operation of gender codes in texts of all kinds and, under the influence of queer theorists like Judith Butler, to the troubling of fixed, binary views of gender. Drawing especially on postcolonial and critical race theory, we also began to think about identity in far more complex and contingent ways. Susan Friedman, in the opening chapter of *Mappings* (1998), offers a wonderfully cogent account of our various

efforts, culminating in the 1990s, to model the way gender gets produced in shifting relation to other axes of identity.

All of this left “Women’s Studies,” including scholarship on women writers, in a rather embarrassed position. To their credit, a few stalwarts — notably, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* and the BWWC — continued to hold the fort. But in many circles (though less so in the social sciences), it became virtually taboo, or at least sadly retrograde, to write a book, start a journal, or even teach a course with “women” in the title. This was true for a good 15 years. But it is my sense that things have recently started to change, that we may once again be willing to claim “women” as the rubric under which we do our work. My evidence of this shift includes Robyn Wiegman’s reinvention of Women’s Studies at Duke; the revival of two old-guard publications, *The Women’s Review of Books* and *Women’s Studies Quarterly*; such prominent books with “women” in the title as Paula Backscheider’s *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry* (2005) and Sharon Marcus’s *Between Women* (2007); as well as the launching of *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, a new journal edited by Mary Eagleton and Susan Friedman. This has all happened over the course of the last few years — so that is what I mean by the *New Women’s Studies*. You ask about “category crisis.” Perhaps I am being too optimistic, but I would actually describe this as an *emergence* from the category crisis experienced by many critics working on women, especially in the 1990s.

The key thing to emphasize, though, is that these recent developments are not simply a return to the early 1980s when “women” was a more or less stable, self-evident category — at least I hope not. To me, they are about finally being able to assume, without having continually to assert, that the category “women” is internally differentiated and necessarily provisional. In effect, the scare quotes can now come off — not because we reject the theoretical interventions of recent decades but, on the contrary, because they have become our feminist common sense. As an aspect of this, today we are far more sophisticated and flexible in our thinking about other kinds of identities, their intersection with gender and, in some contexts, their greater relevance. In short, we are once again willing to announce our interest in women writers, taking for granted that womanhood may mean many different things. At the same time, we no longer see it as the only thing that matters. Sometimes gender cries out to be foregrounded; when it does, we are not ashamed to say so. At other times we may get more leverage on a text by letting gender recede and bringing something else to the fore. These options are not mutually

exclusive. That is why I stress the broad range of topics and priorities — labor, transgender, diaspora, and many others alongside gender — that in 2010 are quite casually encompassed by, say, Duke Women’s Studies and *Contemporary Women’s Writing*. Taking *women* as the sponsoring category, we broaden our purview while also making sure that woman-centered scholarship does not fall by the wayside.

You ask about our expanding archive. Increasing the number of texts and kinds of genres we study has been part of the feminist critical project going back to our earliest questioning of the canon. It is an impulse stretching from Jane Tompkins’s 1978 defense of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (and other women’s novels disparaged as “sentimental”) to Ann Cvetkovich’s more recent recuperation of works by sensation novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon, visual artist and Lesbian Avenger Carrie Moyer, and filmmaker Frances Negrón-Muntaner, among many others. I do not know if you are familiar with *Orlando*, a digital reference work just out from Cambridge with entries on over 900 women writers.¹ Every six months, more entries are added, and thanks to its electronic form, there is no limit to how many women can be included. I think a changing, growing archive is the inevitable result of several factors, all of them illustrated by *Orlando*: the ongoing project of recovering women writers; the rise of critical frameworks for analyzing popular texts, historical documents, and global literatures; and the availability of digital formats, so that we are no longer bound by what fits between the covers of a book. I would note, by the way, that while some recovered texts may interest us primarily in relation to the history of ideas, a cultural studies perspective does not preclude, as is sometimes thought, discussions of form or even aesthetic value. So to me this kind of change (occurring across the board in literary studies) is exciting and important. As we know, women’s writing has often fallen outside or fit uneasily within traditional literary histories and genres — of necessity, feminist critics were an early driving force behind many of these revisionary moves, and I think we continue to benefit from them.

Susan Stanford Friedman [SSF]: Susan Fraiman has said it all, quite eloquently, and with a sense of exciting new possibilities — the resurgence of Women’s Studies under new rubrics and with new agendas and methodologies. I do not have the same sense she expressed of Women’s Studies or the study of women writings having vanished —

¹ See *Orlando: Women’s Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present*, at <http://www.ualberta.ca/ORLANDO/>.

perhaps languished is a better term — for 15 years before what she sees as a recent renewal. I suspect that a statistical study of books and articles published in literary criticism would show a continuing presence of titles on women writers during those years. The courses on women writers taught at my university, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, have continued with strong enrollments and very high demand, and graduate students have continued unabatedly to bring projects on women writers to me for approval. I have encouraged them, and they have got jobs and moved on in the profession. As a joint appointment faculty member budgeted in English and Women's Studies, I regularly teach undergraduate and graduate seminars on Women's Studies. What I see, looking back to the 1990s, is a steady and significant rise in M.A. and Ph.D. programs in Women's Studies (however named) and the definite beginnings of an institutionalization of Women's Studies as an inter-discipline or new discipline separate from disciplines like English or History. Women's Studies has experienced a steady but often-under-the-radar growth, especially at public universities, achieved in spite of the serious decline of funding for public education.

What I think Susan Fraiman has tapped into very accurately is the perception of Women's Studies — and, more specifically, the study of women writers — as *passé*, retro, old-fashioned, even “taboo”: in short, as no longer “hot.” As Sharon Marcus reflects in her contribution to Marianne Hirsch's *PMLA* Forum on feminist criticism, “When a critical school becomes the topic of a *PMLA* roundtable, it is safe to say that scholars currently consider it both solidly entrenched and dangerously diminished” (1722). Although Marcus and the other contributors to the Forum, including Susan Gubar, write against a fear that feminist criticism, in Marcus's words, “has lost” its “renegade dynamism,” the anxiety about feminist criticism as “yet another stale paradigm” remains (1722). Feminist criticism's success, its movement to the center, has become a measure of its marginalization. Susan Fraiman's description of this perception of women writers or of feminist criticism as yesterday's “cutting edge” captures a widespread fear that persists in spite of what I see as the steady growth of Women's Studies in the academy and in the republic of letters.

What this perception misses, however, is the way feminist criticism has changed with the times. There is a sea change in the study of women's writing, a change located in a series of transitions that are radically reshaping our field. To name just four of them, there is, first, the shift from national to transnational frameworks of interpretation, which brings

with it a host of issues related to empire and imperialism, migration and diaspora, racialization, capital, modernity, human rights, and multilingualism. Second, there is the rise of bioculture studies, which makes newly porous the relations between literature and science, between the human and the animal, posthuman, machine, and environment. Third, there is the movement beyond identity categories to the fluidities of the queer, the hybrid, the transgendered, the liminal. Fourth, there is the move away from the hegemony of print culture to the intensifying dominance of digital and visual culture that challenges the category of literature as we have known it. Rather than regard these changes as a force for the dissipation of women's writing as a category for research and teaching, I see them as potentially reinvigorating the gynocritical terrain of feminist theory and criticism.

To stay vibrant, feminist criticism has had to change with the times. But this does not mean the abandonment of women's writing as a viable category. What I suggest we change is our rationale for the category of "women's writing." Brilliant work from the 1970s through the 1990s created rationales for the category that worked explosively to wrench women's writing out of obscurity, trivialization, and misogyny; to understand subsets of women writers such as black women writers, lesbian writers, women of color writers, Latina writers, etc; and to examine ways in which women shared oppression or oppressed each other. Epistemologically speaking, what held this work together was the concept of women — or subsets of women — as an oppressed group and the critical examination of the consequences of oppression for women's writing or writing in general.

While I refuse to believe that the oppression of women is *passé* — indeed, our understanding of its planetary variations, brutality, and nuance is still developing — I also recognize that a lot of exciting work on women writers is not focused so centrally on oppression. This is not to say that such issues have vanished, implying a retreat from feminism's early renegade dynamism. Rather I suggest that there is a growing body of work on women writers that does not focus so centrally on issues of gender and other identity categories; instead, these issues are often woven integrally into other sets of concerns. This trend is very much evident in the work so far submitted to and published in *Contemporary Women's Writing*.

How does or should this shift in emphasis impact our earlier rationale for the category of women writers? The first step is to embrace the rich potential for feminist work in exploring all the ways that the category

of “women” is anything but fixed and certain, and is often in fact under intense scrutiny as to its viability and meaning even as critics continue to use it, amend it, morph it, and otherwise pressure it. And therein lie possibilities for innovation and new frontiers in all subfields of women’s writing — whatever the temporal or geographical boundaries.

The second step is to move beyond the implicit assumption that the main justification for the category of women writers is their collective identity as women marginalized by various axes of power. Instead, I suggest that we define women’s writing quite simply as writing *by* women rather than writing about *being* women. This definition opens up discussion of all the myriad dimensions of women’s writing, some of which may engage with gender, oppression, or being women, and some of which may not. This definition also fosters the reading or staging of dialogues among women writers — women as individuals, as well as women as members of different and often multiple communities — whether compelled or chosen. This definitional approach means that the ground of what is *feminist* in our criticism of women writers is shifting somewhat. Our feminism may now reside prominently in our continued insistence that women writers be addressed, supported, written about, listened to — in all their infinite varieties, including their non-feminist or even anti-feminist manifestations. In many cutting-edge critical discourses — e.g., globalization theory — the speed with which women can drop off the map takes my breath away. We may continue to do feminist analysis of what women write about being women or about gender. But our feminist project may begin and end in the assertion of women’s active presence as cultural producers on a planetary landscape, in all areas of human meaning-making.

Ann Cvetkovich [AC]: As the anxiety expressed by Miranda about “stale or humdrum” scholarship suggests, our plenary session might have seemed to veer in the direction of saying that women’s writing as a category is dead, and I am thus happy to have a chance to correct that impression! I would agree with Susan Fraiman’s assessment of the current wealth of work operating under the category of “women” and with Friedman’s apt summary of the many ways in which the study of women is part of a range of projects from transnationalism and bioculture to queer/transgender studies and digital and visual genres. In addition to affirming the ongoing, albeit shifting, vitality of rubrics for the study of women writers, I would like to call for a revitalization of the links between the study of women writers and feminist theory.

It has become customary to tell a certain story about what happened to the category of woman in feminist theory, which Susan Fraiman succinctly summarizes as a combination of critiques of essentialism from poststructuralist theorists and critiques of false universals from women of color. In my remarks at the conference, I highlighted the pivotal moment in my own career when "women" was replaced by "gender." I am from the generation that turned to popular women's genres — including domestic, sentimental, Gothic, and sensation fiction, which had sometimes been repudiated by an early generation of feminists — in order to track the cultural logic through which an ostensibly private life was in fact central to public debate. To put it in shorthand, the feminism of Virginia Woolf and "a room of one's own" became the feminism of Harriet Beecher Stowe and domestic economy; feminists turned their attention from Mary Wollstonecraft and the political treatise to Jane Austen and a more covert politics of drawing-room manners and the intimate public sphere documented in the novel. Rather than feeling drawn to search for and recover neglected feminist heroines, this generation of feminist scholars emphasized the social power of popular and denigrated cultural genres ranging from the conduct book to the novel. Women writers were still crucial, but they did not necessarily need to be unambiguously feminist icons. Influenced by poststructuralist theory, especially that of Michel Foucault, and focusing on gender more than on women, they emphasized that the social power of women's genres, which frequently trafficked in powerful emotional experiences both in the text and for their readers, was not always unproblematically feminist, was attached to consolidating and sustaining middle-class power, and could promote imperialist, nationalist, and racist agendas.

But it is important to remember that the framework of Gender Studies did not mean that we stopped studying women writers. To the contrary, they became more interesting as complex case studies with indeterminate politics, and the work of contextualizing women writers demanded attention to multiple factors that meant women were not simply heroines. Although we could no longer take the category of women's writing for granted as self-evidently transgressive, it remained an important site of scholarship. My project on sensationalism, for example, was still firmly grounded in the recovery of women writers. The prolific writings of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, for example, open out onto rich studies of popular genres, the history of publishing, and consumer culture, not just the oeuvre or life of an individual or singular writer.

Susan Friedman also suggests that the rationale for the category of women's writing has changed and that we have moved from taking women writers as a self-evident or necessarily subversive category to thinking of "writing *by* women" as serving many more purposes than "writing about *being* women." This position has been succinctly summarized by Cathy Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher in their edited collection *No More Separate Spheres!* (2002), which I regularly teach in both feminist theory and women's writing courses by way of establishing founding assumptions for feminist analysis. As part of a list of axioms for gender studies, Davidson and Hatcher suggest both that gender is integral to any critical analysis and that it cannot be studied independently of other categories: "Gender is a vital and interesting category of analysis. Whether in literary interpretation or in critiques of modernity or the public sphere, ignoring the role of gender diminishes the argument," and "insisting on gender as the sole factor motivating critical analysis has too often led to devaluing other factors. Gender, race, class, and sexuality are mutually constitutive" (23). Although these simple principles now seem relatively uncontroversial, it has taken many years of debate and struggle to turn them into "business as usual." I see them embedded in one of the other exciting changes that I would add to the list that Fraiman and Friedman have generated — the creation of a new generation of interdisciplinary departments and programs such as the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis at NYU and the Center for the Critical Analysis of Social Difference at Columbia, which incorporate research on women and gender into new forms of collaborative scholarship.

MMY: I am particularly interested in the harmonious note of celebration I detect across your responses about the present state of "exciting new possibilities" and "recent renewal." Is it fair to say that some of this exuberance stems from the shift away from theory's iron grip? No doubt, poststructuralist and deconstructionist methodologies have proven indispensable in advancing the vast spectrum of scholarship encompassed under the term "Women's Studies." By foregrounding the complicated and competing networks of codes, positions, and powers that generate socio-cultural meaning, such theory-driven work has made visible the very intersecting axes of identities that you have each addressed. The downside, however, was a looming anxiety marked by those ever-present scare quotes that Susan Fraiman sees now "com[ing] off" in the name of "common sense." Obviously, theory has not disappeared from the landscape, but perhaps the cult of Theory (with a capital T), as an abstract and *purposefully abstracting* force, is a trend now waning? In its wake,

Women’s Studies seems well-positioned to think self-reflectively both backward and forward — reclaiming some of what Theory’s anxiety previously tabooed and revising it toward new ends.

SSF: Miranda’s sense that the “cult” of Theory no longer holds sway is surely true, certainly in contrast to its heyday in the 1980s, as the somewhat nostalgic essays on “The State of Literary Theory” in *The Chronicle Review* reflect (June 13, 2008). However, I think the change is not from Theory to no theory, but rather from French poststructuralist theory of the 1960s–1970s to a range of interdisciplinary cultural theories that draw on anthropology, geography, media studies, visual culture studies, postcolonial studies, ethnic and race studies, gender and sexuality studies, and embodiment studies. Feminists today need a new kind of theoretical literacy, one in which French poststructuralist theory often still has some place, but not singular pride of place. One reason poststructuralist theory no longer serves as the primary source of feminist theory was the tendency of French feminist/poststructuralist theory (e.g., Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva) to essentialize “woman,” dehistoricizing and departicularizing “women” in assertions of universal notions of the feminine. While poststructuralist theory in general contributed to the destabilization of the category “women,” as especially evident in Judith Butler’s work, the feminist theory of women of color and “third world” women arguably did more to forge the discourses and politics of intersectionality and recognition of differences among women.

I continue to believe that the best feminist critical work frames its discussions of women writers or gender issues in relation to larger sets of questions, often precisely those raised in an array of cultural theories. For literary criticism in general, the production of yet another reading of a well-known text or a reading of a newly discovered text is often not sufficient to interest publishers — in journals or publishing houses. Reading texts remains the backbone of literary criticism, but not as an end in itself; rather, it is a way to engage broader questions of significance. Theory — in all its myriad forms — still has a strong role to play in showing what literature contributes to knowledge.

AC: While we may have resituated high poststructuralism, we have not left feminist theory behind, particularly if “theory” means the positioning of our work as readers of literary texts, including texts by women, within broader frameworks. This has long been the way I teach feminist theory — not as a body of sacred or canonical texts, but as a constantly shifting repertoire of methods and provocations that serve as the vehicle for creating research questions and forms of dialogue across genres, pe-

riods, and disciplines in order to answer the simple question “Why does this matter?” My own interest in pursuing feminist theory under the rubric of “public feelings” has been a way to think about how the history of women’s writing matters to a range of contemporary issues such as the relevance of the so-called private sphere of romance and domesticity to public debate and the ongoing persistence of sensationalism and sentimentality in popular culture. Moreover, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature remains a central testing ground for theoretical and interdisciplinary debates in sophisticated work by scholars such as Elaine Freedgood on objects and material culture (2006), Sharon Marcus on relations between women (2007), and William Cohen on the senses (2008).

SF: I want first to appreciate Susan Friedman’s point that the “new” Women’s Studies did not suddenly appear out of thin air. We might see it instead as the surfacing, cohering, and revalidation of wide-ranging, revisionary work being done all along. In this sense, at least some of what I am describing is not so much new as newly visible and assertive. Turning to Miranda’s question about theory, I think she is right to note a sense of greater spaciousness now that 1970s poststructuralism has ceased to be coextensive with an aggrandized notion of Theory. I agree with Susan Friedman and Ann, however, that what we have instead is a useful proliferation of theories and a toolkit of various methods — deconstructive reading among them. At the current moment, I see political as well as intellectual reasons for feminists to remain on theoretical alert. As Miranda says, we have got tremendous leverage from theories enabling us to historicize gender, to recognize it as a cultural artifact, discursive construction, and effect of performativity. Over the last thirty years, theory has helped to de-naturalize not only gender and other identities but also literary criticism, exposing the fallacy of claims to neutrality or self-evident “truth.” Arguably, the voicing of a constructionist perspective is all the more urgent now as a stay against the growing popularity of biologizing discourses such as evolutionary psychology. Whether in women’s magazines or in public policy debates, in academic circles or in the mainstream media, this highly influential “science” threatens to re-naturalize everything from masculinity to moral reasoning.

MMY: As we consider the proliferation of theories within women’s studies, not to mention the increasing flexibility for combining what were previously more insular theoretical tools, we might also do well here to take stock of some uneven development. Not all of our colleagues received the memo that women’s studies is resurging “under new rubrics.” I heard grumblings at the Plenary about the disparity between

what is valued at a feminist forum, such as the BWWC or Duke's workshop ("oh, well that's easy for *them* to say"), and what lands a job interview or finds a publisher. I wonder if we are currently coming up against a point of market saturation for candidates and projects who lead off with the words "gender" or "women writers." I have seen smart gender-driven projects shrugged off because they are not as "exciting" as literary criticism's newer interstices with science, medicine, digital humanities, object theory, etc. Surely, the age-old cycle of scholarly trends accounts for some of this market exhaustion, but I find it unsettling when scholars with interesting projects routinely report during Q&A sessions at the BWWC the difficulty in finding publishers for their work or of bringing women writers' texts back into print.

Furthermore, I worry, despite — even because of — the explosion in digital possibilities (which I energetically support in both my scholarship and my classroom), that recovery now operates on a model of breadth rather than depth — a kind of "Google effect." Once upon a time, recovery happened in successive layers of scholarly contribution and analysis; now it seems that a handful of articles and a chapter or two constitutes "recovered." More unsettling still, this was the first BWWC where I heard so many of the presenters themselves distance their work from feminist criticism (one graduate student noted to me that although she "works on women writers," she doesn't do "*that kind* of work"). So even as I have seen evidence of the kind of sea change within the field that Susan Friedman and Susan Fraiman describe, I have also seen an increasing anxiety about being associated with *that kind* of scholarship.

SSF: The rumblings Miranda reports hearing at the conference against feminist criticism and the distancing from it that some have experienced reflect, in my view, the need for feminist criticism to reinvent itself by engaging with newer discourses and methodologies — the kinds I enumerated above and many others. A feminist critic who uses a reading of women's writing to address widely debated questions in trauma studies, for example, will not have trouble finding a publisher. But a feminist critic who focuses on a woman writer's engagement with patriarchal poetics or articulates a female literary tradition may well have trouble because these issues have been explored so deeply at an earlier point in time — at least for literatures in Britain, the United States, and some parts of Europe. What makes the work seem old-fashioned is not that it is feminist, not that it is about women writers, but rather the particular questions it addresses.

From the beginning, feminist criticism's best work blended existing methodologies for reading literature (e.g., psychoanalytic, Marxist, ge-

neric, New Critical, biographical) with feminist questions, in the process upending many of those methodologies to create new fields, like life-writing and autobiography studies. Rather than having invented ourselves *ex nihilo*, the flint-like contact between feminist questions and existing ways of reading produced sparks, indeed illuminating and transformative fires, in the exhilarating early days of feminist criticism. I am simply suggesting here that we reinvent ourselves in the old way, by broadening our intellectual and political horizons to engage critically with other issues, discourses, and methodologies. This is what I take to be the force of Susan Fraiman's observation about the need to expand the archive of Women's Studies.

MMY: While I agree entirely that "What makes [a] work seem old-fashioned is not that it is feminist, not that it is about women writers, but rather the particular questions it addresses," I suspect there are modes of critical inquiry and vocabularies which, although still incredibly relevant and useful, get unfairly dismissed as "stale" because of their association with earlier stages of feminist criticism. So while we might find comfort in assuming that the quality of the question, and not the association with feminist criticism or women writers, decides a project's fate, I wonder if there is not an additional level of negotiation, some added obstacles, faced by those projects which find value in methodologies or vocabularies which, although updated and reinvented, remain linked to core feminist principles or practices. Even the word "recovery" can elicit knee-jerk distaste or disinterest if not immediately qualified as "digital" and dissociated from earlier modes of recovery.

AC: I agree with Susan Friedman that projects that focus exclusively on women writers are limited if they presume that a history of women's writing is sufficient justification for the project, but that there is plenty of room for projects that situate women's writing in relation to fields of inquiry such as the history of print culture, science and technology, or transatlantic studies. Archival and biographical scholarship that is informed by feminist and queer theory can lead to detailed case histories that unsettle received paradigms. Examples include Lisa Moore's work on the eighteenth-century garden designer and collage artist Mary Delaney and Lisa Cohen's work on Madge Garland, who was an editor at *British Vogue* in the 1920s; their investigations of women working in minor genres provide new insights into transatlantic feminisms, histories of sexual identity, and constructions of modernity and suggest that the archival turn in literary studies, frequently motivated by an affective relation to the past, constitutes an extension of theory, not its exhaustion.

SF: I second Ann’s earlier call for revitalized ties between studies of women writers and feminist theory. And if theory needs women, the reverse is true as well: recovery work on women writers needs to be theorized. As Susan Friedman suggests, readings of individual figures have far more resonance, and are certainly more publishable, when framed in relation to larger sets of questions — historical, narratological, etc. Her description of marketable versus non-marketable work seems to me entirely apt, and in today’s profession it would apply no less to a study of William Godwin than to a study of Mary Astell.

MMY: Turning away from the field for a moment, the undergraduate classroom strikes me as another important place to take stock of uneven development. I see an ever-widening gap between the two worlds of my scholarship and my teaching. As gender scholarship advances at light speed, each year I see freshmen increasingly unreflective (even stubbornly so) about their assumptions regarding gender and sexuality. While 1990s theory perhaps went too far in putting scare quotes around everything, the millennium generation seems unaware that there should be scare quotes around *anything*. With *Gossip Girl*, *The O.C.*, and an endless lineup of reality television shows ruling the media markets, shockingly traditional concepts of gender and sexuality are reemerging not only as the “natural condition,” but — like all good capitalist ventures — as the natural condition commercially enhanced.

SSF: I have also noticed what I see as a not entirely positive emphasis among students on sexuality and the body. What I mean by this is that my undergraduate Women’s Studies students in the interdisciplinary courses I teach in our newly named Gender and Women’s Studies Department are heavily into issues of body image, sexualities, violence against women, women’s health issues, etc. I find it much harder to interest them in other dimensions of women’s lives or in gender analysis more broadly. I think it is no accident that many Women’s Studies programs/departments have added “sexuality” to the title of their academic unit. I have mixed feelings about this because of course I support fully the exploration of sexualities and embodiment as a necessary part of gender studies, but I sometimes sense a narrowing scope of interests in students of Women’s Studies. I do not find this in my feminist courses taught through the English Department.

AC: This is a problem that I recognize in both undergraduate and graduate classrooms. Undergraduate students often arrive in our Women’s Studies classrooms with a need for basic training in the politics of sexuality, gender equity, and women’s culture, and we find ourselves

juggling between second- and third-wave feminisms in our teaching. Increasing numbers of universities have graduate programs in Women's Studies or gender and sexuality studies (and the politics of naming plays out some of the issues we have been discussing here); students who enter such programs are often, as Susan Friedman points out, most interested in exploring their own experiences and cultures and are sometimes resistant to the current emphasis on transnational and intersectional analysis. Yet, one of the roles of a feminist professor in the humanities is to shape feminism to different audiences and to be able to adapt to different levels of sophistication. Moreover, LGBT and queer studies are vital areas in both the graduate and undergraduate curriculum, and discussions of marriage politics and increasing LGBTQ² visibility in mainstream media benefit from the historical perspective provided by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century materials.

SF: Perhaps because I teach mostly English majors, my classroom experience has been more encouraging. My sense of contemporary media culture is also more mixed than entirely negative. Reality television, for example, strikes me as seething in contradiction. A crazy mix of things is routinely offered up as uncontroversial "Reality": from old-fashioned hetero dates, paid for by leering males, to lesbians who, as a matter of course, go house-hunting together in Des Moines. Likewise, among our undergraduates, I encounter conservative family values side by side with more flexible and, in some cases, post-identitarian views of gender, race, and sexuality.

Speaking of the classroom, I would say that it is there, above all, that I remain most obviously indebted to the first wave of feminist criticism on nineteenth-century British women writers. In my recent course on Victorian domestic fiction, for example, familiar topics included Margaret Oliphant's troubling of the marriage plot and exoneration of the "bad girl" in *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866). In my experience, students today are still very animated by the questions Oliphant and others pose about traditional female destinies; what is new since the early 1980s is our equal attention to the function in such narratives of domestic servants and colonial subplots. I also continue to organize my feminist theory course around primary texts by Jane Austen, Harriet Jacobs, Radclyffe Hall, and other women writers — in dialogue with theorists from Judith Butler to Chandra Mohanty urging us to interrogate the logic of doing so. Having

²LGBT and LGBTQ — acronyms for, respectively, "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" and "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer."

said that I still teach writing *by* women, I agree with Susan Friedman and Ann that this body of writing is hardly uniform. Instead of finding a feminist madwoman in the attic of every text, my students and I explore a range of rhetorical strategies and jumble of ideological views. Lest this conversation be too much an exercise in agreement, however, I will disagree slightly with Susan’s description of what distinguishes our criticism as *feminist*. Naturally I share her worried awareness that women, having been recovered, can easily disappear again overnight. I would nevertheless define feminist criticism as the practice not of claiming texts about being a woman or with a feminist thematics, nor of championing all writing by women on the sole basis of their gender, but of bringing *feminist values and concerns* to bear on our analyses of ideologically slippery and uneven works by women and men alike.

AC: The rise of Women’s and Gender Studies programs, we should note, has had a particular impact on the field of British women’s writing, which was once the major birthplace and stronghold for feminist theory across the disciplines; perhaps the field has lost its privileged place as the location for feminist theory, but this is partly because there have been welcome advances in other areas. Questions remain, however, about the particular place of scholarship on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers within innovative Gender Studies scholarship. At the plenary session, I wanted to encourage younger scholars in these areas to continue to see their work as contributing to the larger field of feminist theory that was so vitally inaugurated by a first generation of feminist scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Ellen Moers, Nina Auerbach, and Judith Walkowitz, to name just a few whose work has been widely read outside period-based literary studies. The collaborative work I have been doing under the rubric of Public Feelings, for example, draws on histories of the public sphere and takes up what Lauren Berlant (2008) has called “the unfinished business of sentimentality,” the need to explore the persistent presence of women’s genres within contemporary cultural representations. As a new articulation of feminism, the Public Feelings project is just one way that histories of British women writers remain relevant. I would maintain that feminist scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture are well-positioned to address issues ranging from contemporary women’s genres and feminisms to the role of gendered intimacies in human rights activism, and from the cultural memory of historical trauma to presidential politics.

MMY: Ann raises an excellent point for our closing comments: if we agree that the field of British women’s writing no longer operates as the

primary “stronghold” for feminist theory but that feminist scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture remain nonetheless “well-positioned” to address a range of issues critical to the study of gender, then what is it about these two particular centuries, approached specifically through the study of writing, which makes them so generative?

Virginia Woolf once cautioned, “Nothing has really happened until it has been described. So you must write many letters to your family and friends, and keep a diary” (Nicolson 2). The power Woolf invests in description as something which codifies experience, as that which makes something *happen*, speaks not only to the centrality of writing in the production of culture, but also to the variety of forms, from the very private to the consciously public, ultimately responsible for transmuting abstract concepts into “real” happenings. For me, then, one reason why scholars of eighteenth and nineteenth-century culture, and I would say of women’s writing in particular, remain so well positioned lies in their access to a significant site of cultural and institutional production which remains foundational to the ongoing ideological and material conditions still governing gender and sexuality. It strikes me, for instance, that contemporary debates over gay marriage, which connect glacier-like to a series of much broader and deeper anxieties ranging from religious doctrine to the latest battle ground over “proper” gender roles, still operate almost entirely within the discursive parameters first forged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, largely by women writers — Mary Astell, Jane Austen, and Margaret Oliphant not least among them. Mobilizing forms across the public/private spectrum, women writers of all stripes — progressive, conservative, and those inscrutably in between — *made* the modern institution of marriage “really happen” in all the ways which (for better and worse) still frame our engagement with it today.

SF: I think Miranda is right that these two centuries gave us an extraordinary body of writing on two intertwined issues that continue to resonate loudly with us today: the condition of women and the institution of marriage. Wollstonecraft’s 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was, of course, followed up some decades later by the first wave of the modern women’s movement, which would gain increasing momentum on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the Victorian period. As it happened, public debates, legal battles, and polemical documents concerning such issues as suffrage and marriage rights coincided with realist novels in an entirely different idiom, but likewise engaged with the struggle by middle-class women to reconcile their various ambitions — intellectual, vocational, sexual, and political — with received notions of proper femi-

ninity. Domestic novelists, committed to rendering the seemingly trivial interstices of everyday life, loaded courtship plots with commentary on everything from the 1832 Reform Bill to the paucity of wage-earning opportunities for genteel women. The effect was not only to validate the “private” sphere of household routines and intimate relationships but also (as Ann’s work so powerfully describes) to expose its inextricability from the public — offering early formulations, if you will, of the personal as political. What is more, to an extent that is still impressive — and by no means replicated in the culture industry today — many of the most compelling voices in this conversation were women.

SSF: It may seem churlish to conclude my portion of this dialogue by challenging the centrality of 18th- and 19th-century British women writers to feminist theoretical and critical work, especially given this issue’s relationship to the BWWC. It is not just that my field is primarily anchored in twentieth- and twenty-first-century women writers, but that the new planetary framework I have been developing in my work strives to challenge any form of core/periphery thinking. While 18th- and 19th-century British women writers provided much initial inspiration for the rise of second wave feminist literary theory and criticism, I want to argue for a global and polycentric framework for thinking about women’s writing, one that does not deny the Anglo-American significance but that puts that particular body of writing within a global epistemology which recognizes multiple centers, transnational circulation and agencies, and radically different agendas depending on geohistorical standpoints. To do this effectively, we need to “provincialize” what has been the core or center, to see the traces of the transnational in that core, and to legitimate the expansion of the archive of women’s writing and theories about it onto a planetary landscape. To accomplish this, the interdisciplinarity that Ann Cvetkovich calls for and the expanded archive of the newly reinvigorated women’s studies that Susan Fraiman has named are the necessary starting points for rethinking and justifying the category of “women writers” or “women’s writing.”

AC: Given that we have been so much in accord throughout this discussion, it is interesting to see a note of tension emerge. Since I agree with both Susans, I am inclined to let this tension stand rather than try to resolve it. Perhaps it can serve as a sign both of the usefulness of 18th- and 19th-century writing by women, especially to ongoing debates about romance, marriage, and domesticity, and also of the need to acknowledge the limits of the field with a productive humility. As someone who, like Susan Friedman, does not work primarily in the field but whose work and

teaching remain deeply informed by it, both the potential and the limits are a reminder of why eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers continue to matter.

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