

MODERNISM, GENDER, AND CULTURE A CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH

Edited with an introduction by Lisa Rado





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The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent. Modernism, Gender, and Culture

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MODERNISM, GENDER,
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A Cultural Studies Approach
edited with an introduction by
Lisa Rado

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The volumes in this series, Wellesley Studies in Critical Theory, Literary History, and Culture, are designed to reflect, develop, and extend important trends and tendencies in contemporary criticism. The careful scrutiny of literary texts in their own right of course remains a crucial part of the work that critics and teachers perform: this traditional task has not been devalued or neglected. But other types of interdisciplinary and contextual work are now being done, in large measure as a result of the emphasis on "theory" that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s and that has accelerated since that time. Critics and teachers now examine texts of all sorts—literary and non-literary alike—and, more generally, have taken the entire complex, multi-faceted field of culture as the object for their analytical attention. The discipline of literary studies has radically changed, and the scale and scope of this series is intended to illustrate this challenging fact.

Theory has signified many things, but one of the most crucial has been the insistent questioning of familiar categories and distinctions. As theory has grown in its scope and intensified in importance, it has reoriented the idea of the literary canon: there is no longer a single canon, but many canons. It has also opened up and complicated the meanings of history, and the materials and forms that constitute it. Literary history continues to be vigorously written, but now as a kind of history that intersects with other histories that involve politics, economics, race relations, the role of women in society, and many more. And the breadth of this historical inquiry has impelled many in literary studies to view themselves more as cultural critics and general intellectuals than as literary scholars.

Theory, history, culture: these are the formidable terms around which the volumes in this series have been organized. A number of these volumes will be the product of a single author or editor. But perhaps even more of them will be collaborative ventures, emerging from the joint enterprise of editors, essayists, and respondents or commentators. In each volume, and as a whole, the series will aim to highlight both distinctive contributions to knowledge and a process of exchange, discussion, and debate. It will make available new kinds of work, as well as fresh approaches to criticism's traditional tasks, and indicate new ways through which such work can be done.

William E. Cain Wellesley College

CONTENTS

ix GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

PART I. INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

THE CASE FOR CULTURAL/GENDER/MODERNIST
STUDIES
Lisa Rado

PART II. MODERNISM'S [EM] SPACE

Chapter 2

THE [EM] SPACE OF MODERNISM AND THE POSSIBILITY OF FLÂNEUSERIE: THE CASE OF VIÑA DELMAR AND HER "BAD GIRLS"

Kakie Urch

Chapter 3

THE ART(IFICE) OF STRIPTEASE: GYPSY ROSE LEE AND THE MASQUERADE OF NUDITY

Jennifer Blessing

Chapter 4

65 MODERNIST MEDIUMSHIP Helen Sword Chapter 5
THE "WIFE" AND THE "GENIUS": DOMESTICATING
MODERN ART IN STEIN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
ALICE B. TOKLAS
Margot Norris

79

Chapter 6

YOU MUST GO HOME AGAIN: DUTY, LOVE, AND
WORK AS PRESENTED IN POPULAR MAGAZINES DURING
WORLD WAR II

Susan Alexander and Alison Greenberg

Chapter 7

II 3 MADGE TENNENT: CONTESTED IMAGES FROM PARADISE
Bonnie G. Kelm

PART III. GENDERED MODERNISM FROM THE MARGINS

Chapter 8

149 MODERNISM OR MODERNISMO? DELMIRA AGUSTINI AND THE GENDERING OF TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY

SPANISH-AMERICAN POETRY

Patricia Varas

THE FACE AND VOICE OF BLACKNESS Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

PART IV. GENDER AND MODERNIST ARTS

Chapter 10

175 ENGENDERING A SCANDAL: THE CUBIST HOUSE AND THE PRIVATE SPACES OF MODERNITY

Elizabeth Louise Kahn

Chapter 11

199 WHITEWASH, RIPOLIN, SHOP-GIRLS, AND MATIERE:
MODERNIST DESIGN AND GENDER

Nigel Whiteley

CONTENTS

Chapter 9

161

vi

Chapter 12

GENDERED STILL LIFE: PAINTINGS OF STILL LIFE IN THE MACHINE AGE

Barbara Zabel

Chapter 13

247 DANCING FREE: WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN EARLY
MODERN DANCE
Dee A. Reynolds

PART V. GENDERED CRISSCROSS

Chapter 14

283 PRIMITIVISM, MODERNISM, AND MATRIARCHY
Lisa Rado

Chapter 15

301 "CIVILIZATION IS BASED UPON THE STABILITY OF
MOLARS": DOROTHY RICHARDSON AND IMPERIALIST
DENTISTRY
Kristin Bluemel

Chapter 16

"Dance, Little Lady": Poets, Flappers, and the Gendering of Jazz

David Chinitz

Chapter 17

337 THE ROOM AS LABORATORY: THE GENDER OF SCIENCE AND LITERATURE IN MODERNIST POLEMICS

Caroline Webb

Chapter 18

353 GENDERED RESTRAINTS: HEART OF DARKNESS AND THE ANOREXIC LOGIC OF LITERARY MODERNISM Leslie Heywood

375 CONTRIBUTORS

381 INDEX

PART 1. INTRODUCTION

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THE CASE FOR CULTURAL/GENDER/ MODERNIST STUDIES

Lisa Rado

If you look at it closely, the field of cultural studies seems a lot like an onion; when you peel away all its layers you won't find anything left in the center. As Simon During, editor of a widely read collection of essays on the subject, admits, this mode of criticism "possesses neither a well-defined methodology nor clearly demarcated fields for investigation" (During 1).

Part of the difficulty in defining cultural theory is the ambiguity of its own primary term. What, exactly, constitutes culture? Material history? Artistic expression? Popular social beliefs and practices? "The best which has been thought and said" (Arnold 6)? That it comprises all of the above and more for contemporary critics is evidenced by the fact that the essays in During's own encyclopedic volume are grouped according to categories as diverse as "theory and method"; "space and time"; "nation"; "ethnicity and multiculturalism"; "sexuality"; "carnival and utopia"; "consumption and the market"; "leisure"; and "media." Perhaps because of this amorphousness, the field of cultural studies lacks the singular deities and sacred texts that supply authoritative doctrine for orthodox followers of other socalled "high" theories.1 This discipline has its stars, of course, but they all have their own agendas, ideologies, and special interests. While Bakhtin and Stallybras and White focus on the relationship between high and low culture, Adorno and other Frankfurt school theorists focus on twentiethcentury cultural hegemony; Jameson centers on Marxism; Foucault on sexuality; Williams on the city; Said, Bhabha, and Spivak on postcolonial issues; Gates and West on African-American studies; Clifford and Geertz on anthropological approaches to culture; Lyotard and Hutcheon on the culture of postmodernism; Haraway and Laqueur on scientific approaches to culture; Sontag and Wicke on popular culture; Lears and Turner on American studies, and so on.

Cultural studies is thus less a theory than a loosely connected series

of critical approaches and methodologies whose only unifying principle is the assumption that since cultures have unique historical contexts, an understanding of these contexts and the interactions between them is central to the understanding of any form of cultural production. Even this general definition signals important problems, however. If cultural studies means the identification and understanding of cultural contexts, how much is enough to comprise or authorize critical certainty? In other words, to what degree must one explore national, racial, religious, ethnic, sexual, and other cultural discourses and identities in order to understand or make arguments about a particular individual or text? Despite the fact that it is based on the recognition of subjectivity and difference, the theory implies that the properly equipped scholar can still come to an objective understanding of at least some aspects of culture her- or himself. Yet without any scholarly consensus on formal practice, cultural studies remains open to charges that it is not only itself subjective and idiosyncratic, but also a potentially reductivist and exclusionary mode of inquiry that ironically has the capacity to fall prey to the same kind of ethnocentric bias that it condemns in other theories.

A more fundamental problem with cultural studies is that its claims are ultimately based on causal logic; in other words, arguments following the basic pattern of "x" cultural discourse(s) shaped "y" cultural text/idea/ value or vice versa. Yet as any student of philosophy knows, causal claims are notoriously difficult to verify, as they often rely on associative rather than empirical proofs. The task of proving agency, the actual link between cause and effect, is even harder when both sides of the equation are ideas or theories rather than physical objects or processes. Identifying proximate and remote causes of the form of an aesthetic object, the particular language of a text, or the central emphasis of a theory or belief system can at best be a matter of probability.

With all these shortcomings, why then bother to pursue a cultural studies approach at all? More particularly, why advocate its use for feminist critics, whose personal and political investment in both their scholarship and their audience is so very high? The answer, I will argue, is that despite its ambiguity and philosophical messiness, cultural theory remains the one critical mode that forces us to recognize that individual context matters. By "context," I mean the specific historical, environmental, and social circumstances in which a person or group of people are situated. Minimizing or denying the relevance of such information for aesthetic and/or textual interpretation, major theoretical "schools" including new criticism, poststructuralism, psychoanalytic criticism, and even some forms of Marxism and feminism end up homogenizing both language and human experi-

ence.² Their analyses are thus not only reductive and even potentially anachronistic; they actually silence important hidden discourses that exist behind, beyond, and around the text at hand. These discourses are crucial for any serious hermeneutical inquiry, for, as Homi Bhabha points out,

It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed "in-between," or in excess of, the sum of the "parts" of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? (2)

The voices of the "in-between" are precisely what gets left out if one adopts an ahistorical critical approach. That those voices are often gendered female is a fact feminists already know; however, understanding them in all their resonances demands a theoretical method that insists upon tracing their language, symbols, and emphases both to their relevant cultural antecedents and their multiplicitous allegiances to race, sexuality, class, nationality, and so on. This is not to say that all art is reactive. Certainly the dialogue between the aesthetic and the political or social works both ways and often consists of more than one conversation. Yet we simply cannot claim to understand any cultural communication without an understanding of the context of all its major terms.

Given that feminist theory is based on the reality of specific historical experiences of oppression, it would seem natural that a cultural studies approach would offer the best means of documenting and analyzing the manifestations of patriarchal persecution and feminist resistance. One cannot win a war without identifying the villain; unless feminist critics can illuminate the shadowy spectre of paternalism in all its incarnations, we cannot hope to see it vanquished or even to fully authorize our resistance in the first place. Yes, cultural theory has its limitations as a weapon in this struggle. Limited both by the bounds of causal argument and the problems of contextualization that I discussed earlier, it cannot promise to be our Excalibur. However, given that our other options involve using theories based on definitions of experience that are totalizing and incomplete, we cannot afford not to pass by this imperfect but potentially powerful tool. After all, even a slingshot is rumored to have brought down giants.

In addition to supplying an effective arsenal in the struggle to expose and defeat the laws of the fathers, cultural theory offers a means of getting beyond a number of frustrating problems plaguing current feminist theory today. Perhaps the most important of these is the debate over whether feminism as a practice totalizes (female) identity and in doing so reduces its relevance to concrete social problems and alienates numerous subjects from its potential rewards.³ As Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser have argued, "Essentialist vestiges persist in the continued use of ahistorical categories like gender identity without reflection as to how, when, and why such categories originated and were modified over time" (33). By better contextualizing such categories, cultural studies has the potential to preserve an identity politics necessary for ideological change while at the same time maintaining important distinctions between women that affect their experiences of oppression and empowerment. Teresa de Lauretis gestures toward this kind of practice when she describes in the conclusion of a recent article a theory

of the female-sexed or female-embodied social subject, whose constitution and whose modes of social and subjective existence include most obviously sex and gender, but also race, class, and any other significant sociocultural divisions and representations; a developing theory of the female-embodied social subject that is based on its specific, emergent, and conflictual history. (267)

Acknowledging the multiplicity of identity, cultural studies can thus work to replace binary, male-female dialogics with more complex constructions of gender that reflect the fact that "femininity... resides in the actuality of its multiple, diverse but determinate articulations, which are themselves criss-crossed by other cultural logics and hierarchies of power" (Felski 201).

Just as it can help provide a more historically specific account of women's experiences and articulations, this mode of criticism can also allow for a richer understanding of cultural hegemony, particularly related to issues of gender. As Judith Butler rightly insists, "it has become increasingly important to resist the colonizing epistemological strategy that would subordinate different configurations of domination under the rubric of a transcultural notion of patriarchy" (35). It is important because by preserving a unitary image of the Father and his Law, we considerably weaken our arguments with avoidable straw-man fallacies and end up alienating women whose experiences of oppression differ from the standard model. However, by carefully locating and identifying the patriarchy's various, ever-evolving discourses and strategies, we will have a more authoritative position from which to expose and critique even its most illicit, underground forms. Of course all forms of paternalism share the common factor of man's lack of recognition of female equality. Yet as theorists like Thomas Laqueur and

Gayatri Spivak have shown, how they articulate this ideology differs greatly from culture to culture and century to century. In a literary context, we must recognize that Mary Wollstonecraft's struggle was as rooted in mideighteenth-century British discourses of—for example—class, work, and sanity as Toni Morrison's is in late-twentieth-century Midwestern American discourses of race, media, and sexuality.

In addition to better documenting patriarchal repression, cultural studies assures a fuller recognition of women's contribution to culture than other critical modes by elevating the genres traditionally deemed "low" culture to the level of scholarly inquiry and debate. As theorists like Rita Felski and Suzanne Clark have pointed out, sentimental and other so-called nonexperimental discourses have "successfully functioned to promote women's influence and power" (Clark 38) despite the efforts of male culture-bearers to devalue them. Furthermore, by examining the total output of women's creativity over diverse fields such as literature, art, social science, and science, we can come to a much greater understanding of and appreciation for the contribution of women to a particular culture as a whole.

Finally, cultural studies offers a means to establish a far more complex understanding of the relationship between gender and creative production by viewing the imagination as a culturally constructed entity whose concerns extend well beyond the "anxiety of influence" generated by artists of previous generations. While I do not wish to undervalue Bloom's ground-breaking theory, I believe it is important that we acknowledge the rest of the story, which is that artists and intellectuals are human beings themselves situated within a complex network of historically specific interconnecting conversations involving, to use Trollope's phrase, "the way we live now." Understanding this means recognizing that the process of textual signification involves not only determining the author's voice, but uncovering the dialogic strands connecting the author to an ongoing conversation with historically specific partners, speakers, and listeners. To "read" a text or a work of art is thus to eavesdrop upon, to hear snatches of a much larger cultural interchange to which we must turn if we are to gain a more authoritative perspective on the function and meaning of gender in the production of a particular "speakerly" contribution.

Turning now from its appeal for feminist critics in general to its particular relevance for those of us engaged in the study of the modern period (1890–1945), I would like to sketch out why cultural studies offers a particularly rich approach to modernist art and texts. In my first collection, Rereading Modernism: New Directions in Feminist Criticism, I made a very impassioned case for the necessity of "a more historical and interdiscipli-