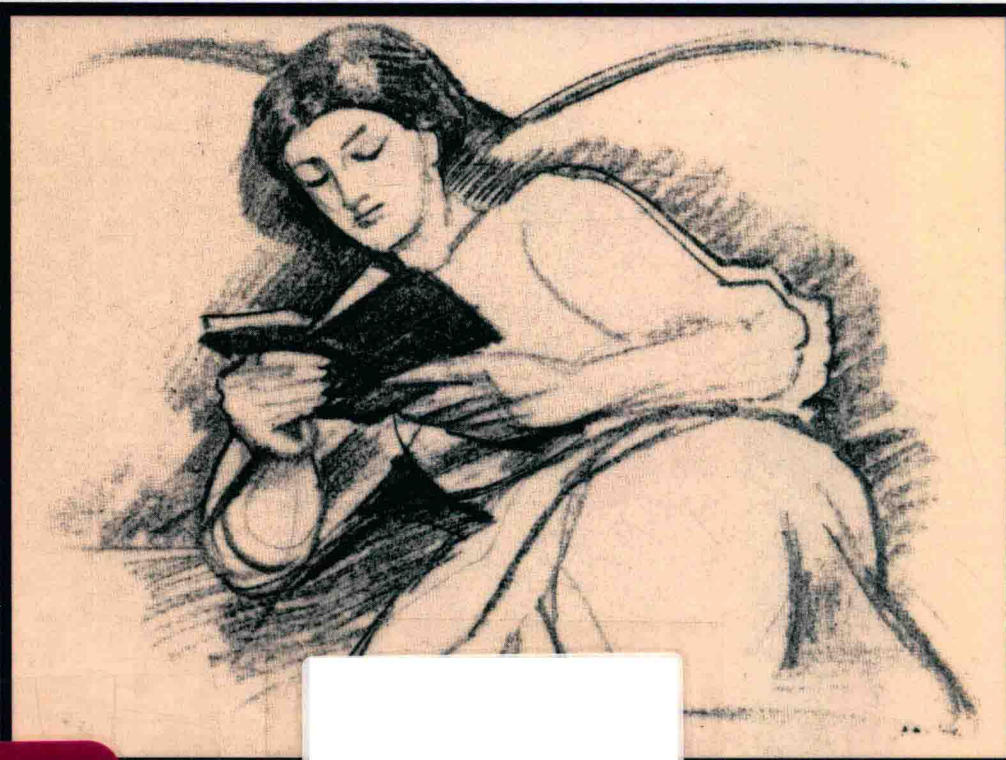


GENDER & THEORY

Dialogues on Feminist Criticism



Edited by

LINDA KAUFFMAN

Gender and Theory
Dialogues on Feminist Criticism

Edited by
Linda Kauffman

Basil Blackwell

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Chapel Hill, North Carolina
March 1988

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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Notes on Contributors	viii
Introduction	
<i>Linda Kauffman</i>	1
PART I REPRESENTING PHILOSOPHY	9
1 Revolution in Bounds: Wollstonecraft, Women, and Reason	
<i>Timothy J. Reiss</i>	11
2 Wollstonecraft Our Contemporary	
<i>Frances Ferguson</i>	51
3 The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticisms	
<i>Ellen Messer-Davidow</i>	63
4 Solidarity or Perspectivity?	
<i>David R. Shumwa</i>	107
PART II THE BODY WRITING/WRITING THE BODY	119
5 Me and My Shadow	
<i>Jane Tompkins</i>	121
6 Citing the Subject	
<i>Gerald M. MacLean</i>	140
7 Of Me(n) and Feminism: Who(se) is the Sex that Writes?	
<i>Joseph Allen Boone</i>	158
8 Men Against Patriarchy	
<i>Toril Moi</i>	181
PART III TRANSFORMING TEXTS AND SUBJECTS	189
9 Toward a Female Sublime	
<i>Patricia Yaeger</i>	191

Contents

10	At Risk in the Sublime: The Politics of Gender and Theory <i>Lee Edelman</i>	213
11	The Race for Theory <i>Barbara Christian</i>	225
12	Appropriative Gestures: Theory and Afro-American Literary Criticism <i>Michael Awkward</i>	238
	Index	247

Introduction

Linda Kauffman

Within the American academy over the past twenty years, we have witnessed the flourishing of feminist publications, the recuperation of lost texts by women, the reconceptualization of the canon and literary history, and the development of interdisciplinary methods of feminist teaching and research. Yet some of the most prominent feminist literary critics nonetheless feel that the force of feminism has been consistently blunted. In 1979, Carolyn Heilbrun addressed the administrators of English Departments as follows:

among all the changes of 'the life and thought of our age,' only the feminist approach has been scorned, ignored, fled from, at best reluctantly embraced . . . Deconstruction, semiology, Derrida, Foucault may question the very meaning of meaning as we have learned it, but feminism may not do so.¹

In 1980, Sandra Gilbert addressed the same forum, lamenting that while numerous new feminist journals had been established, and over a fifth of the panels at the Modern Language Association Conventions were now devoted to feminism, 'business goes on with the usual ferment over the new ideas of newly interesting men - Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, for instance - just as if no significant feminist transformations had taken place.'² But despite the fact that they each have a problematic (and quite different) relationship to feminism, neither Derrida, Foucault, or Lacan would deny that feminist transformations have taken place.³ In fact, far from conducting 'business as usual', post-structuralist, marxist, and psychoanalytic theorists have a pervasive engagement with feminism. It has radically transformed the classroom experience; one simply cannot teach now without acknowledging the profound impact it has had on all our lives. Gilbert, however, identifies three forms of the massive denial of

feminist criticism: indifference, apparently supportive tokenism, and outright hostility. In 1983, Elaine Showalter exposed both the indifference and hostility of male compilers of surveys of modern criticism who consistently exclude feminism from their anthologies, and she simultaneously took Jonathan Culler and Terry Eagleton to task for what she saw as their appropriations of feminist criticism for critical theory. Showalter saw treachery in both the male erasure and the male embrace of feminism. She argued that feminism has 'worried too much already . . . about communicating with the white fathers, even at the price of translating its findings into the warp of their obscure critical languages'.⁴ She also warned feminists to beware of a 'male theory' that would undermine the presumed authority and particularities of female experience. But Showalter confuses cause with effect, for rather than feminists 'translating' their findings, it is precisely the act of theorizing which has enabled them to frame the questions in ways that have radically altered our means of articulating perceptions of domination, subjugation, exploitation, and repression.

The efforts of Heilbrun, Gilbert, and Showalter to frame the issues of gender and theory in terms of female/male polarities resulted in antagonisms that were as simplistic as they were inevitable, for they ignored the complex and reciprocal interactions of feminist theory with critical theory. Those interactions are the subject of the essays in this volume. To assume that 'men theorize, women experience' is to remain trapped in the binary oppositions that theorists - whether explicitly feminist or not, whether male or female - have worked so hard to dismantle. Freud, Marx, Nietzsche and Saussure challenged our assumptions about what is 'natural' by examining the manifest and latent structures of the mind, of political economy, of philosophy, and of language. Derrida illuminated language's differences from itself; his critique of Western metaphysics - especially the desire to find a ground for being and an origin for languages - made possible the deconstruction of the centered subject. The notion of a fixed, unified sexual identity, as Lacan has shown, is as illusory as the myth of the unified subject. We have become aware of our construction as gendered subjects, in part because the symbolic order of language identifies us by the definitive opposition *man/woman*. Thus while the title of this volume posits a couple, *Gender and Theory*, and the book is arranged so that men respond to the essays of women and vice-versa, the structure is designed nevertheless to draw attention to such dichotomies in order to displace them by dissymmetry and dissonance. By enlarging the field of investigation, feminist theorists have revealed how elusive such terms are. To frame the debate as a dichotomy between gender

versus theory or women versus men is to evade the fact that the conflict is really between an ossified and hardly liberal humanism and the theories - marxist, feminist, and/or poststructuralist - dedicated to demolishing it. Since feminist literary criticism is justly renowned for its capacity for self-reflexiveness and self-critique, one of the dilemmas it must perpetually confront is how to maintain its capacity for intervention. New strategies of subversion must continually be invented, and feminist theorists must remain committed to their sense of the irreducibility of difference, while being receptive to theoretical reconceptualizations of subjectivity, alterity, and identity.

If feminist criticism is to continue to exert the enormous impact during the next twenty years that it has had in the last twenty, it must constantly renegotiate its relationship to its own history, to the canon of traditional practices, and to the dominant intellectual discourses of the present age. *Gender and Theory* interrogates the interrelations of feminism and critical theory by reconceptualizing subjectivity in historically and culturally specific terms, insisting upon situating subjectivity within political contexts and practices. The essayists self-reflexively confront their particular positions in discourse and as subjects, fully aware that such gestures can easily become empty pieties. In addition to fracturing the models of the binary pair and the unified psyche, the essayists variously expose the limitations of pluralism as a theoretical practice.

My aim was to select essays that critically intervene and displace each other, effecting analytical crises and forcing new questions to be raised. For example, does the fact that the essays by Jane Tompkins and Barbara Christian complement one another constitute a reappearance of the same kind of humanism one finds in Gilbert, Heilbrun, and Showalter? Furthermore, since they both attack the role and function of theory itself, and argue for the necessity of preserving the author and the female subject, what difference(s) does race make? Another challenge concerns male voices: are those voices providing new methods of advancing feminism, or is that purpose inevitably drowned out by the all too familiar sound of masculinist appropriation?

The male control of discourse is a problem as old as feminism, one particularly apparent in the polemic of Mary Wollstonecraft. In Part I, 'Representing Philosophy', Timothy Reiss and Frances Ferguson examine Wollstonecraft's use of the idiom of the Enlightenment. The crux of their disagreement is whether this idiom, for all its apparent disinterestedness, arguably perpetuates a patriarchal notion of rationality. Like Reiss and Ferguson, Ellen Messer-Davidow and David Shumway investigate the

philosophical bases of feminist literary criticisms. Indeed, all four essayists in Part I focus on discursive practices, arguing that theoretical conceptions of language are vital in order to analyze how representation functions; to delineate the subtle differences within feminisms; and to assess the complex relations of discourse to power.

In Part II, 'The Body Writing / Writing the Body', we are asked to consider whether we have become so intimidated by the threat of being labelled 'essentialists' that we have lost sight of the specific body writing, or, conversely, whether we have returned to an earlier stage of feminist criticism that highlighted the primacy of individual experience. That is the crux of the debate between Jane Tompkins and Gerald MacLean. How does one's conception of how the body is socialized, sexualized, and politicized differ, depending on whether one argues as a pragmatist (Tompkins), a marxist-deconstructivist (MacLean), or a materialist who writes on post-structuralism and psychoanalysis (Moi)? How is the very construction of the problem further influenced by gender, race, and professional status - as well as by the same kinds of unconscious collusion with the dominant ideology that Reiss finds in Wollstonecraft? The same questions inform Joseph Boone's analysis of men's relation to feminism.

Part III, 'Transforming Texts and Subjects', emphasizes the appropriation and reappropriation of literary genres and traditions. Patricia Yaeger and Lee Edelman discuss the influence of French feminisms, psychoanalysis, and lesbian poetics on the female sublime, approached from the vantage point of political engagement. The impact of critical theory on the construction of the racial as well as the gendered subject is examined by Barbara Christian and Michael Awkward. Perhaps before one can endorse the Barthesian 'death of the author', one must first overcome the effects of centuries of silencing; confronted with that dilemma, what strategies do Afro-American feminist critics and literary theorists propose? In what ways are Afro-American theory and Afro-American feminism complementary, and in what ways are they antagonistic?

Far from striving for pluralistic consensus, these essays provoke controversy. Since the purpose is to liberate dialogue, I have drawn on a dialogic model for staging these discourses, for 'dialogism' dismantles the notion of two coherent subjects engaging in a reciprocal, balanced, one-on-one exchange. Since none of us is a coherent subject, we are always *beside* ourselves, in multiple senses. What is mistakenly defined as 'internal consciousness', for instance, is so imbued with external discourse that it calls into question the entire notion of a unified psyche.

Instead, the psyche itself should be understood as a boundary phenomenon, a 'social entity', continually in the process of interpreting ideological signs.⁵ The contributors in this volume reconceptualize boundaries within the psyche and between self and other.

As if all these factors did not make the notion of dialogue complicated enough, each essay is 'dialogic' in another sense: it is followed by a response which demonstrates that another *logic* has been put into play, one that displaces and unsettles the initial argument, and reveals its unconscious resistances. Perhaps the most relevant model for this procedure is of a psychoanalytic *working through*: each essayist works through some of the most pressing theoretical problems in contemporary feminist and critical theory, and each respondent repeats the process, but with crucial differences which advance the argument in unexpected directions. This procedure, moreover, is not limited solely to each paired essayist and respondent: instead, the differences in their analyses lead other contributors to further interventions, and these debates spill over into the margins and the footnotes. For example, David Shumway challenges what he sees as the humanism of Ellen Messer-Davidow in ways that are similar to Gerald MacLean's critique of Tompkins. The limitations of methodologies that focus on individual identity are examined by Toril Moi and Michael Awkward, as well as by Shumway and MacLean. Joseph Boone's description of academic confrontations complements Lee Edelman's analysis of the sublime as a confrontational mode. Edelman's discussion of lesbian poetics, moreover, exposes the differences within feminisms. The opposition of gay men to phallic economies also alters the old binary oppositions. Patricia Yaeger's analysis of how modern American women writers appropriate the sublime mode can be contrasted to Michael Awkward's discussion of appropriative gestures in Afro-American literature and literary theory. In the construction of the volume as a 'whole', then, one never arrives at a point where one can fix - or has a fix on - the questions and answers; far from arriving at definitive solutions, the cumulative effect of reading and writing here is of resistance to certainty and stasis. One cannot find a point where premises can be taken for granted, or where arguments and conclusions can 'rest'.

Dialogism is the deployment not just of an alternative argument, or logic, but of an a-logic that contests the linearity, rationality, and objectivity of Western man and Western discourse. The theory of dialogism is complicated by the fact that each writer enters a pre-existing language system, which renders the concept of subjectivity linguistically as well as

psychoanalytically inflected. Julia Kristeva is the theorist who has perhaps best helped us to recognize that we are multiply fractured between unconscious drives and symbolic language. As Kristeva points out, 'as soon as the insurgent . . . speaks, it gets caught up in the discourse allowed by and submitted to the Law.'⁶ The contributors recognize their complicity in the very structures they are attempting to overthrow: structures of language and rhetoric, of contemporary critical theory, and of society's institutional apparatuses. Kristeva wonders whether in the women's movement there will be a:

different relationship of the subject to discourse, to power? Will the eternal frustration of the hysteric in relation to discourse oblige the latter to reconstruct itself? Will it give rise to unrest in everybody, male or female? Or will it remain a cry outside time, like the great mass movements that break up the old system, but have no problem in submitting to the demands of order, as long as it is a new order? (p. 10)

In the attempt to establish different relationships to discourse and power, males and females in this volume share in the unrest. Their motives, however, cannot be identical, nor do those who share the same gender or race necessarily share the same motives. Since some feminists suspect that male feminists are merely donning a new costume, or invading the 'territory' in order to appropriate it for their own purposes, these essays remind us that feminism is neither a territory nor a passing fashion that one can wear or discard in order to dress for success. Instead, it is a political movement, one that requires of its participants considerable awareness of the subtleties of their positioning in discourse and their commitment to action. As Toril Moi argues, the question of whether men can be 'in' feminism is wholly irrelevant; the real question is whether they can be against patriarchy.⁷

The essays in this collection portray women and men in the process of theorizing, an activity which is essential if we are to understand how contemporary struggles are historically linked to domination and oppression. This is another crucial aspect of dialogism: it occurs between specific speakers at a particular time and place. That is why I wanted to provide a format for dialogic encounters in a specific historical moment, to capture the living mix of contemporary voices and the social organization of experience. The essays collectively demonstrate that

neither gender nor theory, women nor men, feminism nor marxism, patriarchy nor capitalism can be conceived as monolithic formations. Such formulations merely disguise the specific operations of power and ideology. The question remains, as Kristeva notes, how to envision collective action without complacently submitting to another order. What is most distinctive about this volume is thus a sense of the urgency of these dialogic encounters and these analytical projects: projects which are theoretical because political and political because theoretical.

NOTES

- 1 Heilbrun 1979: 35.
- 2 Gilbert 1980: 20.
- 3 For Derrida's discussion of feminism and gender, see list of references below, and also Spivak's preface to *Of Grammatology* (1976: ix-lxxxvii) and Spivak 1983: 169-95. On Lacan's influence on feminism, see Rose 1986; Rose argues that while there is no 'denying . . . that Lacan was implicated in the phallogentrism he described', his views of femininity and female sexuality are profoundly significant for feminism: 'Lacan's writing gives an account of how the status of the phallus in human sexuality enjoins on the woman a definition in which she is simultaneously symptom and myth. As long as we continue to feel the effects of that definition we cannot afford to ignore this description of the fundamental imposture which sustains it', p. 81. Foucault (1980) discusses the impact of feminism, noting that:

the real strength of the women's liberation movements is not that of having laid claim to the specificity of their sexuality and the rights pertaining to it, but that they have actually departed from the discourse conducted within the apparatuses of sexuality. . . . What has their outcome been? Ultimately, a veritable movement of de-sexualization, a displacement effected in relation to the sexual centering of the problem, formulating the demand for forms of culture, discourse, language, and so on, which are no longer part of that rigid assignation and pinning-down to their sex which they had initially in some sense been politically obliged to accept in order to make themselves heard. The creative and interesting element in the women's movements is precisely that.

He argues that American homosexual movements, in contrast, reduce everything to the order of sex, but 'the women don't'. . . . Women on the other hand are able to have much wider economic, political and other kinds of objectives than homosexuals' (pp. 219-20).

- 4 Showalter 1983; see also Showalter 1981.
- 5 Bakhtin 1981; see also Emerson 1983.
- 6 Kristeva 1986: 10, hereinafter cited parenthetically in the text. Moi's translation.
- 7 Toril Moi, 'Men against patriarchy', ch. 8 in this volume.