WOMEN'S EXPERIMENTAL WRITING

NEGATIVE AESTHETICS AND FEMINIST CRITIQUE

ELLEN E. BERRY

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Women's Experimental Writing considers six contemporary authors who use experimental methods and negative modes of critique in their fiction and feminism. The authors covered are Valerie Solanas, Kathy Acker, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Chantal Chawaf, Jeanette Winterson, and Lynda Barry.

These writers all share a commitment to combining extreme content with formally radical techniques in order to enact varieties of gender, sex, race, class, and nation-based experience that, they suggest, may only be "represented" accurately through the experimental unmaking of dominant structures of rationality. Ellen E. Berry extends the anti-social negative critique predominant in queer studies by offering an alternative archive of feminist negative literary practices and explores the consequences of joining an anti-social critique with radical innovations in literary and cultural forms. She argues that the radical aesthetic practices the authors employ are central to the emergence of contemporary Western feminisms and in doing so rectifies a critical neglect of contemporary experimental writing by women, especially in politicized forms, within the still-emerging postmodern canon.

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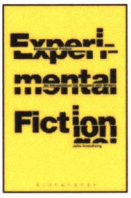

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Women's Experimental Writing

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Introduction: Situating Negative Aesthetics

Freedom is nothing if it is not the freedom to live at the edge of limits where all comprehension breaks down.

George Batille, *The Impossible*, 40

Women's Experimental Writing: Negative Aesthetics and Feminist Critique analyzes work by six contemporary authors who use experimental methods and negative modes of critique to innovate in the forms of fiction and of feminism: Valerie Solanas, Kathy Acker, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Chantel Chawaf, Jeanette Winterson, and Lynda Barry. The works I consider span the period 1967–1999, roughly the era during which contemporary Western feminisms emerged as a diverse set of political aspirations and practices, new knowledges and approaches to knowledge production, legal accomplishments, alternative institutions, oppositional discourses and other activist practices, critical theories, and complex cultural forms. The book traces one neglected tributary of this emergence by focusing on the nature of and rationales for these writers' strategies of literary negation in order to assess their feminist consequences and argue for the importance of negative literary, political, and philosophical critiques to the ongoing projects of feminist/gender studies.

Although they differ in many ways, the writers I analyze share a commitment to combining extreme content with formally radical techniques in order to enact varieties of gender, sex, race, class, and nation-based experience that, these writers suggest, may only be "represented" accurately through the experimental *un*making of dominant structures of rationality. Positioned as they are at the limits of traditional models of literariness, these works offer not a poetics of liberation but an aesthetics of negation in which style supports antisocial forms of radical refusal. Among other things, a careful

examination of these writers enables us to understand contemporary feminisms as carrying forward avant-garde agendas as they attempt to join radical social and radical aesthetic critiques—one hallmark of all avant-gardes. Collectively, these works allow us to historicize an ongoing tradition of radical literary expression within contemporary feminist cultural forms more generally. While two of the authors I consider—Kathy Acker and Jeanette Winterson—have received considerable attention in studies of contemporary fiction, there is no study that contextualizes their work in relation to other contemporary women who write in negative aesthetic modes. The contextualization provided by this book not only discloses an ongoing legacy of radical critique within contemporary women's writing, it also opens new perspectives on the work of these more well-known writers. For example, the radical voice that Acker constructs in *Blood and Guts in High School*, seems less sui generis when read in relation to the persona Valerie Solanas creates in her *SCUM Manifesto*. And both help to illuminate the "cruddy" affect disclosed in Lynda Barry's work.

Throughout this study I use the term negative aesthetics to refer to a varied set of thematic concerns (e.g., an emphasis on extreme, bizarre, or violent situations especially involving the female body; the traumatic and pathological nature of human relations within contemporary capitalist heteropatriarchy; anarchistic and apocalyptic visions); formal strategies (e.g., techniques for producing indeterminacy and lack of closure; strategies emphasizing silence, absence, loss, blankness, incompleteness, fragmentation; an antiliterary emphasis on crudeness, stupidity, irrationality, inarticulateness, unbecoming; thoroughgoing deconstructions of conventional genre forms such as the *Bildungsroman*); highly self-conscious and theoretically aware texts that emphasize varieties of feminist postmodernism such as the instabilities of the gendered subject in discourse or viral critiques and fatal strategies; self-consciously avant-garde or outsider angles of vision pushed to the limits of traditional genres, norms, and strategies for sense making. Taken as a whole, these textual features and political commitments constitute a radical critique of all structures of domination and inequality and thus produce a kind of extreme or limit feminism not easily assimilated within conventional rationalist frameworks.

The term postmodern—which I use throughout this study—refers to a diverse range of histories, theories, discourses, cultural, and artistic forms.

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First, *postmodernity* describes a historical period stretching roughly from the 1960s to the present and distinguished by a number of significant changes from former eras. These include globalization, a multidimensional set of social, political, economic, cultural, environmental processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges, creating a decentered, disjunctive, deterritorialized world of global flows, whose complexity makes them nearly impossible to map.

Postmodernism refers to a set of ideas, stylistic traits, aesthetic features and thematic preoccupations in contemporary art and culture. In literature this includes a radical suspicion of narrative form, including a narrative account of history. Emphasis falls on disruption of narrative hierarchy, causal structures, clear teleology, and realist characters. In their place are techniques that stress fragmentation, indeterminacy, dispersion, randomness, contradiction, ambiguity, irony, extremity; an emphasis on performative modes and reflexive structures; a valuing of hybridity and multiplicity as in hybrid genres, subjects, worlds. Thematic emphases on radical difference, heterogeneity, multimodality, instabilities of identity—suggest a breakdown in "the official story" as formerly repressed voices (of women, minorities, queers, outlaws of all kinds) emerge into the mainstream.

The various developments in philosophy and critical theory commonly grouped under the term poststructuralism also share a cultural ethos with postmodernism and they raise many of the same ideas. Features include antifoundationalism, a critique of all claims to universality or absolute truth. Such claims are disrupted through exposure of the unacknowledged assumptions and contradictions upon which they rest. Deconstruction emphasizes the instability and inexhaustability of meaning-making systems and it disrupts the pretense that language unproblematically reflects the real world. Language and other sign-systems instead construct meaning, truth, the subject, and history, and these meanings are themselves unstable, partial, changing, and situated. Any truth-claim or master-narrative therefore is partial, interested, and incomplete. An antifoundational emphasis also stresses the complexities and instabilities of identity leading to a deconstruction of the centered rational humanist subject. This marks a big departure from Enlightenment views of the self, which conceived of the subject as stable, unified, freely acting. The postmodernist subject is less a "self" than a site where

a series of languages, cultures, social structures interact. These structures are themselves shifting and mutable and always implicated within power relations. Deconstruction also fits into a more general postmodernism since it is part of that vast bringing forward of subjects and experiences that have been erased in the past or that existed on the margins of culture, as the texts in this study do.

Because even the most radical forms of postmodern stylistics have, arguably, become hegemonic, commodified to sell everything from breakfast cereal to hedge funds in a carnival of consumer multiculturalism, a number of contemporary critics have taken care to distinguish between postmodernism and various practices of a neo-avant garde during a postmodern moment. For example, in his history of the manifesto as a genre, Martin Puchner distinguishes between the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century, the resurgence of avant-garde energies in the 1960s and 1970s countercultures, and what he calls a "perennial avant-garde" impulse that may surface in any historical moment. Robert Siegle's *Suburban Ambush* analyzes what he calls "the fiction of insurgency" developed in the 1970s and 1980s in New York City among groups of artists and writers—including Acker and Cha. This "downtown writing" joins innovations in fictional form, an acute awareness of high poststructuralist theory, including, especially, issues of language and representation, and, crucially, a sophisticated critique of normative representations and dominant political structures.

Because postmodern critiques of the humanist subject arose at the moment when women, minorities, and other Others were coming into new social visibility, the contemporary literatures produced by gender, sexual, racial and other minorities often has been positioned in opposition to formally experimental work of the kind I examine in this study. The latter is frequently charged with being coldly formalist, willfully obscure, alienating and elitist—at best apolitical at worst actively oppressive. Identity based realist writing, on the other hand, frequently is directly autobiographical and confessional or couched in the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. These developmental forms of the minority experience encourage functional and content-based reading strategies, rely on reader identification with authorial selves or well-motivated characters interacting in recognizable social patterns, and promote narratives of emancipation or identity reclamation, the emergence of group solidarities and the

like. This pattern has been identified and discussed in recent studies of contemporary feminist fiction by Rita Felski, Lisa Hoagland, and Marie Lauret among others. In her study of feminist fiction in America, for example, Lauret identifies practices of a "radically other," "counter-hegemonic" feminist realism and cautions that we should not "assume that realism is always already reactionary, modernism and postmodernism always progressive" (Lauret, 44). However, because writing emerging from the new social movements has tended to be confined to a poetics of identity politics and a preference for realist forms (even if realist aesthetics are turned to counter-hegemonic critical ends), it has acted to render inaudible and invisible formally innovative works that also challenge dominant paradigms of power and privilege but do not embody their political content in conventional forms.

Unlike traditional realist genres, which have predominated in feminist literary histories of this period, what I'm calling negative aesthetic texts do not easily lend themselves to thematic summary or propositional content. Nor do they promote reader identification by, for example, proposing new images of minoritized subjects or the quest for liberation. Neither do they offer logical critiques of structures of domination, nor do they narrate full-fledged counter-histories, or elaborate agendas for the future. Rather, these texts propose a different kind of critique, one in which negative textual strategies are deployed in such a way that normative structures of perception and representation are rendered unstable, in the process revealing their limits or crisis points. This negative critique also applies to the narratives within which recent histories of contemporary Western feminisms have been couched, as I discuss below.

The texts I consider also make extreme demands on readers not only by denying us the familiar pleasures offered by realist texts and absorbtive reading practices but also by frequently asking that we invent new reading protocols capable of meeting their demands. Moreover, because these texts often are intensely intimate in their mode of address—from Jeanette Winterson's first-person narrator awash in a sea of multiple indeterminacies to Theresa Cha's traumatized and stuttering "diseuse" to Chantel Chawaf's terrifying "close-up" method—they depend for their effect on the reader's willingness to submit to their complex and demanding intimacies. That is, these texts not only encode extreme affects thematically, but they also mobilize a range

of often-discomforting affects on the reader's part and insistently remind us that pleasure and a sense of redemption are not the only outcomes of feminist readings. In this regard, Lynne Pearce's insights about a feminist practice of "implicated reading" have been influential. Pearce uses this term to refer to a dynamic, self-reflexive, interactive, and noninstrumental relationship between text and reader that foregrounds "the chaos and the confusion, the thrill and the anxiety, of *all* that it might mean to read as a feminist," the affective as well as the cognitive aspects of this relationship (Pearce, 1997, 3). In particular, Pearce figures the feminist reader as a lover "whose object is not to understand the text but to engage with it" (6). This means focusing on the emotional construction of reading, on "a whole range of emotional affects . . . including many negative ones" (Pearce, 11).

To clarify here, I'm not positing the existence of a female aesthetic as such—negative or otherwise—a position that claims a necessary or privileged relationship between gender identity and particular modes of expression. I agree with Rita Felski's fully materialist assertion that "it is impossible to deduce masculine or feminine, subversive or reactionary forms in isolation from the social conditions of their production and reception" (Felski, 31). But while no necessary relation exists between aesthetic innovation and feminist political critique, the texts in my study actively engage ideological questions by posing these questions at the level of the most fundamental assumptions of a patriarchal society as embedded in its codes of representation and structures of discourse.

Throughout the book I attempt to develop a politics of the negative aesthetic forms that emerge from these works especially as they embody previously unrecognized aspects of feminist cultural politics. While post-structuralist methods and assumptions are common in the realm of feminist theories, they have rarely been analyzed in feminist theory-fictions. I use this term to refer to texts that use fictional methods to elaborate the consequences of theoretical perspectives that would be difficult to represent in other than antirealist terms such as the extreme gender polarity found in the works of Solanas, Acker, and Chawaf. I also analyze how understanding the specific practices of negation deployed in these fictional texts helps to problematize in unique ways many of the more abstract and speculative claims made within feminist theory itself. Because these texts—extreme in form, content, and

mode of address to the reader—frustrate full comprehensibility and critical mastery, they also pose challenges to some of the underlying assumptions of politicized reading practices, including feminist ones. Approached in this way the texts become sites to witness, among other things, the display of political investments, projected desires, and unconscious affects on the part of critics—including those appearing in my own reading practices, which I reflect on throughout.

The book also means to help rectify a more general critical neglect of contemporary experimental writing by women—especially in its politicized forms—within the still-emerging postmodernist canon. I am indebted to previous feminist work in the area of experimental poetics and feminist avant-gardes including, Marienne DeKoven's *A Different Language*, Susan Rubin Suileman's *Subversive Intent*, Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs's *Breaking the Sequence Women's Experimental Fiction*, and Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue's *We Who Love to Be Astonished, Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*. These works have helped to establish the historical misogyny of male avant-gardes—"the exclusion of women from the centers of male avant-garde activity and their exclusion from the historical and critical accounts of that activity"—and have begun to map a history and a poetics of women's writing in experimental modes (Suleiman, 18). For example, the emphasis of Friedman and Fuchs's important 1989 collection—one of the first of its kind—is "archaeological and compensatory" as they reconstruct an eighty-year history of women who write in experimental modes, from Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and Dorothy Richardson to Christine Brooke-Rose and Kathy Acker, in the process overturning a common critical assumption that women have not written in experimental modes (xiii). Marianne deKoven's definition of experimental writing in *A Different Language* has been especially influential. DeKoven defines experimental writing as that which prevents "normal" (and normative) reading practices as it violates and reshapes not just the conventions of literature, but also the conventions of language itself. Radically experimental texts propose an encounter between text and reader for which there is no ready formula of interpretation. The mission of this vanguard writing is to challenge outmoded and restrictive aesthetic conventions and traditions (including outmoded ways of interpreting and evaluating literary works) and to open new possibilities of expression

and vision that are both aesthetic and ideological. However, I know of no work that focuses on negative strategies of critique in contemporary women's experimental writing in relation to the emergence of contemporary feminist discourses more generally.

Recovering a history of this form of critique seems especially important in our current moment as accounts of contemporary feminism's forty-year legacy become increasingly consolidated into what Clare Hemmings calls "consensus narratives of progress, loss, and return" that limit the ways in which the past, present, and future of feminism may be thought. Such narratives, as Robyn Wiegman notes, consolidate, order, and fix feminism's "at times chaotic diversity of critical and political activities into set pieces," that flatten and distort its "various and incommensurable deployments" (2012, 55, 116). The texts I consider allow us to recover some of this "chaotic diversity" by acting as one counterweight to these dominant consensus narratives not by positing full-fledged alternatives but by using radical expressive forms to show the limits of the storytelling function itself.

Similarly, collections such as *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme* have emphasized extremity as an international literary phenomenon, describing works that "do not merely reflect on violence, they seek it out, engage it, and, in a variety of imaginative ways, perform it . . . [enacting] an aesthetic that does not strive for harmony or unity but, instead, forces the confrontation between irreconcilable differences, most notably the difference between reality and art" (Durand and Mandel, 1–2) Extremity also has been discussed as a salient feature of contemporary culture more generally. For example, David Boothroyd analyzes features of the extreme as they emerge as a prevalent theme within "the contemporary nexus of popular, media, and consumer cultures," leading him to conclude that "[e]xtremity is . . . both our origin and our destiny" (274). The works considered in this study could easily be situated as examples of the contemporary extreme, adding to this tendency an analysis of the ways in which aesthetic extremity, thematic extremity, and political extremity interact and condition one another.

Politically and philosophically, this study has also been influenced by the recent negative or antisocial turn in queer studies beginning with Lee Edelman's radical critique of heteronormative common sense and reproductive futurity in *No Future* and continuing in the work of Heather Love

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