

# **NOSTALGIA AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE**

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The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism

Janice Doane & Devon Hodges

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FEMINIST THEORY



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**JANICE DOANE & DEVON HODGES**

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*Janice Doane &  
Devon Hodges*



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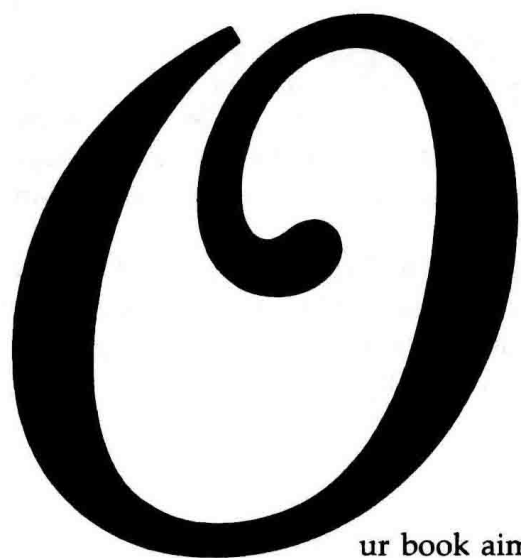
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To  
*the future:*  
Cecily, Sara,  
and Tristan

# ***Contents***

# *Preface*



ur book aims to show how poststructuralist theory can empower feminists by providing them with a way to analyze the strategies of representation. Interpretive strategies informed by poststructuralist theory have made it possible for us to conceptualize and discuss a frightening antifeminist impulse; we call it *nostalgic*.

Nostalgia, as we define it, is a retreat to the past in the face of what a number of writers—most of them male—perceive to be the degeneracy of American culture brought about by the rise of feminist authority. Without reading male writers, we could not have gauged the resistance to feminism. And we would not have known how feminist arguments about women's "difference" have been appropriated by antifeminist writers. Our work has thus led us to enter the current debate among feminists about the articulation of sexual difference: we question recent efforts in feminist writing to establish a unitary identity for "woman," "woman's sphere," or "woman's writing." At

## *Preface*

every turn, however, our work has been enriched by the very feminist authority that has so provoked nostalgic writers.

Our book is explicitly a collaborative effort. Not only is it co-authored but its existence has depended on the intelligence and support of many others. We are thankful to members of the Pembroke Seminar at Brown University, especially Joan Scott, Naomi Schor, and Elizabeth Weed for their friendship and critical acumen. We are also grateful to friends who read early drafts of the book: Steve Brown, Jan Cohn, Tania Modleski, and Bill Warner. The feminist literary theory group at St. Mary's College offered good advice about several chapters of the manuscript. In addition, two grants—Jan's fellowship from the Pembroke Center (1983–4) and Devon's research stipend from George Mason University (1985)—assisted our work.

We are also indebted to Ann Barr Snitow for her incisive comments about the manuscript. Her suggestions have made this a better book. For William Germano's generosity with both advice and support, we also owe a special debt of gratitude. Any errors that remain are, of course, our own responsibility.

While this book was being written, Tristan, Sara, and Cecily were born. Jim Mott and Eric Swanson assumed more than their share of the babysitting and so helped this book to completion. We greatly appreciate their practical and emotional support.

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# ***Introduction***



# N

ostalgia: *nostos*: the return home. Nostalgia permeates American politics and mass culture. While pulpits and podiums resound with the message that we need to restore American values and the American family, movies and television return us to the happy days of yore. This book explores a particular aspect of the contemporary effort to redeem an idealized past. As feminists, we argue that nostalgic writers construct their visions of a golden past to authenticate woman's traditional place and to challenge the outspoken feminist criticisms of it. *Nostalgia* is not just a sentiment but also a rhetorical practice. In the imaginative past of nostalgic writers, men were men, women were women, and reality was real. To retrieve "reality," an authentic language, and "natural" sexual identity, these writers fight the false, seductive images of a decadent culture that they believe are promoted by feminist writing. The battleground is representation itself: feminism is envisioned as a source of degenerate writing that threatens male authority. At issue

are basic questions about the authority of women's writing and the power of male discourse to define reality.

Nostalgia informs the literature in many disciplines. To represent this diversity, we have chosen to discuss an eclectic group of writers. All those we analyze are influential in their own fields and often beyond. Each writer presents an indictment of contemporary culture that depends upon opposing the "deteriorating" values of the present to the "truer" values of the past, and each characterizes the "liberated" woman as implicated in this movement toward degeneracy. But nostalgic writers are not derogative to feminism in a simple way—on the contrary, they may even seem sympathetic toward feminism. The novelists we discuss—Thomas Berger, George Stade, Dan Greenburg, Ishmael Reed, and John Irving—share with many feminists a humanistic concern to move beyond stereotypic roles toward a more authentic "human" self; literary theorist Harold Bloom provides a model of literature that excludes women yet has been adopted by feminists to help construct a literary canon for women; and cultural critics Christopher Lasch, Ivan Illich, and Brigitte and Peter Berger make arguments that coincide with the arguments of conservative feminists. Nonetheless, an antifeminist impulse informs the nostalgic works of all of these writers. Each is anxiously provoked by the proliferation of feminist texts.

An early articulation of this anxiety is provided by George Gilder in *Sexual Suicide* (1973), his trend-setting treatise linking the decline of America and the rise of "Women's Liberation." Gilder, a sociologist who has taught at Harvard, is an influential theorist of the New Right. Disarmingly moderate in some of his attitudes, he insists in his preface that some of his best friends are feminists.<sup>1</sup> And nineteenth-century women might have approved his message: men are aggressive and uncivilized brutes; women by nature are gentle nurturers who perform the important task of taming men through marriage. But twentieth-century feminists have, according to Gilder, monopolized the media to promote the more dangerous proposition that sexual identity is not in fact natural. The opening sentence of *Sexual Suicide* immediately sets up a contrast between his serious text and the "liberationist" claptrap he believes is promoted in the popular media:

It is time to declare that sex is too important a subject to leave to the myopic crowd of happy hookers, Dr. Feelgoods, black