Critical Response

II

Notations in Medias Res

Susan Gubar

Robyn Wiegman's response to "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" gives me the opportunity to amplify a number of points in a way the genre of the journal article generally prohibits, and so I thank her for writing it. I am grateful, too, for her piquant decision to begin with a murder mystery by my dear friend and mentor Carolyn Heilbrun, although (I hasten to add) I had no wish to bludgeon to death the critics whose language I took to task! For just as "Murder without a Text" situates interfeminist frustration within a classroom, I composed "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" as a reaction to distressing experiences that occurred within some of my graduate seminars.

What Robyn Wiegman calls my "focus on rhetorical good manners" probably proceeds from my wish to inculcate intellectual courtesy in my students (p. 368). Certain default positions in critical discourse had, I feared, become mind-numbingly common among some of the articles I had placed on syllabi: touting one's own virtuous radicalism by labeling all other thinkers in the field reactionary; pitting theory against practice or activism against scholarship; using one category of race, gender, nation, or sexual orientation to find the other terms wanting; exploiting identity politics to police who should be certified to produce various types of investigations; relying on arcane lexicons accessible only to the initiated; and tending simply not to do the research, not to footnote or acknowledge earlier thinkers in the field. This last observation does resonate with the dismay of Carolyn Heilbrun's feminist teacher—"When I suggested some academic research [to the women's studies students], they positively snorted"—and with the moral derived from her case by its detective, Kate Fansler: "They must require texts," Kate decides about the future format of senior thesis seminars.1 Whether their methodology is "archival" or "ethnographic," to use Wiegman's terms, scholars retain a responsibility to deal with what Heilbrun's fictional students discount, namely, previously published research in the field (p. 363).

Of course, feminists are not the only culprits here; however, their enterprise is my main pedagogic concern. It's not (or not only) the ruining of "feminism's good mood" (p. 368) that I dreaded in my graduate courses, but the damaging of our conversations—their integrity, elasticity, inventiveness, pertinence. Quite simply boring, such routinized default positions inhibit what one would ordinarily call thinking, making it hard for people to risk ideas that do not toe what is assumed to be a morally superior or epistemologically more sophisticated line.2 Yet despite my irritation with some current critical practices, just as Heilbrun's professor stands falsely accused of a crime she did not commit—"it all began to seem like a Kafka novel," she exclaims; "I wasn't guilty, but that didn't matter"—I am innocent of a number of the more serious charges Wiegman levels against me.3

Indeed, those charges combine to create an image of me as a prejudiced, doddering aesthete more interested in superficial manners than substantial intellectual issues, more nostalgic about conserving a mythic past than realistic about confronting an exacting future. Adopting precisely the dismissive tone I lamented in my essay, Robyn Wiegman uses Carolyn Heilbrun's story to frame me as an archaic nitwit who confuses

2. Patricia Yaeger captures my feeling that such formulaic posturing initiates a longing "for writing that is improper, unclean, illogical, politically suspect, full of raunchy anecdotes and abrasive logic." In particular, she yearns for criticism that "avoids the too anxious ablations of postmodern feminists so busy cleaning up each other's acts that they fail to see the mess and pollution lingering around the kitchen sinks of women still caught in the travails of a pre-postmodern world" (Patricia Yaeger, "Pre-Postmodernism: Academic Feminism and the Kitchen Sink," Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association 27 [Spring 1994]: 7).

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rudeness and rape. Needless to say, it is difficult to understand how anyone who has read my work could see me this way, so I take the caricature as a kind of straw woman on whom can be pinned a retrograde history of feminism. According to Wiegman, then, this pathetic scarecrow pines for a return to that Edenic time when feminism was an exclusive white girls’ club engaged in nonacademic forms of political activism. But, actually, instead of taking seriously the points I tried to make, Wiegman herself authors the racist and anti-intellectual narrative of feminist criticism’s history that she attributes to me.

I tried to make clear that each of the three stages of feminist criticism that I outlined—“critique, recovery, and the engendering of differences”—continues to make important contributions to our common enterprise. My tongue-in-cheek representation of the beginning of feminist criticism as a paradise lost was meant to capture the intellectual excitement of humanists during the seventies. Never do I “call for a return” to a “unified, originary, and uncontentious academic feminism” (p. 365) because, even if early feminist critics relished our new presence within the academy, we suffered the anxiety of being unenured in a system ruled by sometimes uncomprehending or hostile male administrators, the loneliness of being tokens in our individual departments, and the frustration of wanting to teach or research material not yet accorded scholarly acceptance. Just as important, from its outset feminist criticism included lesbian, African American, and postcolonial voices arguing against monolithic versions of womanhood. Jeannette Foster’s 1956 Sex Variant Women in Literature was reprinted by Diana Press in 1975, and in 1977 Audre Lorde published a piece entitled “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” about the need to “come more into touch with our own ancient, noneuropean consciousness of living.” In a 1979 collection of essays that Sandra Gilbert and I coedited, Gloria T. Hull began her contribution with the sentence “Black women poets are not ‘Shakespeare’s sisters.’” By 1981 the “Lavender Menace,” Ti-Grace Atkinson, and Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” had sparked crucial debates between straight and gay women, while Gayatri Spivak had taken the French feminists to task for their inadequate awareness of an “international frame.”


The fable of a blissful foundational unity that Robyn Wiegman ascribes to me contradicts the complexity of our early ventures. To be sure, analyses attentive to sexuality, race, and nation would go on to achieve greater prominence in the years to come, but how could this not be the case? Before the days of affirmative action, white feminists in higher education were a tiny minority and the number of black women was even smaller. Just as we needed the women’s movement to support feminist criticism within the academy, the subsequent gay rights movement and various multicultural forces at work in the world at large helped to fuel lesbian studies, queer theory, African American studies, and postcolonial criticism. That Wiegman castigates me for celebrating a “gender privileged approach” (p. 370) in my mapping of the history of feminist literary criticism sounds downright bizarre to me since the centrality of gender as a conceptual lens was what we black and white, heterosexual and lesbian feminist critics were so proud to be bringing into the critical conversation.

Not who said what but how they said it was my concern in “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” Not healthy differences of opinion or vigorously competing methodologies but narcissistic posturing and myopic absorption in scholastic matters were what I diagnosed, and, in particular, I focused on what I perceived to be pernicious critical discourses that increasingly set feminists at odds as the eighties turned into the nineties. First, without equating the approaches they generated, I looked at the egregious impact on feminist prose of some African American and postcolonialists’ allegiance to a diction of identity politics. When “critical election” and “critical abjection” characterize racial identity politics, I argued, scholarly discussion deteriorates into Professor A self-righteously touting her antiracist credentials as a representative of marginalized, racialized others, while Professor B guiltily acknowledges her racist background by apologetically quoting Professor A (“WA,” p. 881). Next, I focused on the regrettable stylistic influence of some deployments of poststructuralist methodologies. The strenuous display of counterintuitive maxims recycled as fias, the lapse into a logic at odds with normative syntactic procedures, and the yearning toward utopian ontological paradigms: all obscure what we have to say to one another and isolate us within sectarian dialects. At times, alas, critical election, abjection, and obscurantism turned academic feminists away from any subject other than their own internecine quarrels.

I couched my critique of current feminist critical dissension in an overview of feminist literary criticism in order to historicize it. By bracketing this fourth stage, I hoped to show that its rise might forecast its fall.

Furthermore, I self-consciously set out to compose my minihistory not to play into the impression that all early feminist thinkers were white or that the category of race operated destructively on the conceptualizing of gender. In no way, then, was my narrative meant to be a “dismissal of the agents of race-based critical analysis” (p. 364). Was I naïve in believing that I could launch a critique of some race-based critical analyses without being labeled a racist or, indeed, that I could engage in such a critique in the spirit of antiracism?8

Like most feminist critics, I am convinced that African American and postcolonial discourses have greatly enriched our investigations over the past several decades. Beyond the crucially formative contributions of the early writers I listed under the first two stages of feminist criticism—Angela Davis, Toni Cade Bambara, Mary Helen Washington, Barbara Christian, and Audre Lorde—the next, third phase (“the engendering of differences”) included Hortense Spillers and Deborah McDowell, Nellie McKay and Akasha (Gloria) Hull, who stand for a generation of scholars bringing race to bear on gender and vice versa. Far from “lament[ing] the move to intersectionality as the intellectual and political trimming of feminism” (p. 370), far from viewing “all analytical moves made by feminists of color [as] assaults against feminism” (p. 378),9 I celebrated the exciting work that attention to the intersection of race and gender has generated in many ethnic area studies and in a host of comparative contexts. Posing new questions, bringing new texts and contexts into the critical conversation, the scholars I located in the third stage tended to eschew, on the one hand, self-satisfied chastisements of white feminists and, on the other, self-promoting advertisements of their own ideological purity, dedicating themselves instead to raising the issue of feminists’ earlier propensity to universalize whiteness in such a newly nuanced way as to subvert it entirely.

At the end of “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” where I hinted at a critical evolution beyond that of dissension, I mentioned what I called “a virtual ‘racechange’ in feminist literary criticism” (“WA,” p. 901). An allusion to the visibility and importance of feminists of color in the engendering of differences, my term was also an attempt to foreground a new development that they helped bring about, namely, the surfacing of whiteness as a racial category. To be sure, male scholars such as David Roediger, Eric Lott, and Richard Dyer have played an important role in defining the parameters of so-called whiteness studies.10 At the same time, though, many women have made an enormous impact on feminist thinking about what it means that white people are as racially marked as blacks, although historically whiteness has been masked as a category. In the arts, Toni Morrison, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith have complicated not only our ideas about whiteness but also any confidence we might have had about being able to demarcate the white from the black.11 Despite my disparagement of certain rhetorical lapses, the best work of the African American and postcolonialist feminists I criticized—especially that of bell hooks and Hazel Carby—pioneered feminism’s racechange through the wide range of subjects they brought into scholarly discussions. Among white feminists, Barbara Johnson, Elizabeth Abel, and Jane Lazarre have sought out responsive languages to deal with racialized material without appropriating or displacing black subjects.12

Robyn Wiegman (whom I simply cannot call Wiegman, as if I haven’t personally observed and applauded her professional success over the past unceen years) has herself played a notable role in this last group. For this reason, I am baffled when she accuses me of employing “a discourse of injury and white ‘minoritization’ and then links that injury to “the emotional condition of being racially marked” (pp. 377, 378). What made possible the composing of my last book, Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture, was the consciousness I had of myself as racially marked in multiple ways, an awareness I gained by reading the thinkers I’ve mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Drawing upon insights that have shaped her work, too, I explored in Racechanges the rising anxieties of whites apprehensive about their own unmarked racial status, guilty about their racial marking of African Americans, and grappling with their

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8. Prefacing Rey Chow’s recent demonstration that “the multiculturalism of the 1990s carries with it precisely the kinds of idealizing tendencies that were at the foundation of the fascism of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s” is her troubled reaction to some early readers who believed that “only a ‘woman of color’ . . . could possibly mount a criticism of multiculturalism as such without getting into trouble, without being labeled ‘racist’” (Rey Chow, Ethics after Ideology: Theory—Culture—Ethnicity—Reading [Bloomington, Ind., 1998], pp. xxiii, xxii).

9. How can Robyn Wiegman claim that I “denigrate” the third stage (p. 566)—a word I would never employ, given its etymology—when I wrote about “the powerfully subtle methodologies provided by African American, postcolonial, and poststructuralist studies [that have] greatly enhanced the ways in which we think about culture and society, race and gender” (“WA,” p. 866)?


perplexed emotions through various representational forms of black envy, ranging from blackface impersonation in film to obsessive depictions of the black penis in photography to recurrent fantasies of giving birth to black babies in maternal narratives. Nothing surprised me more in the writing of this book than the cultural oddity that to mark the other often meant being marked by the other, especially in the intense representational interactions swirling around African Americans and Jews.

The title of my book was meant to supply a word to help us conceptualize the fluidity of race and racial consciousness. As a first-generation American Jew of parents whose families were killed in the Holocaust, I was racially marked myself; however, to the extent that Jews had paid for their ticket from the racism of Europe by becoming white, as James Baldwin first explained, I was unmarked. Yet being both nonwhite and white makes me decidedly uncomfortable with sentences like the last one, in which I employed what Nancy K. Miller calls the "as a" language of identity politics. According to Diane Elam, in some instances "identity politics promote the very stereotyping and tokenism that they allegedly fight against by trying to solve complex problems by merely invoking oversimplified labels." Equally skeptical about what Nancy Fraser calls "the banalizing tendencies of identity politics," Valerie Smith has pointed out that "the circumstances of race and gender alone protect no one from the seductions of reading her own experience as normative and fetishizing the experience of the other." Perhaps it was Patricia J. Williams’s fluctuating awareness of herself as both black and not-black that drew me to her work. In any case, a series of extended meditations by Williams on the mutability of racial consciousness has the potential to turn criticism away from the pigeonholing of racialized identity categories and toward a more nuanced conceptualization of various types of consciousness and politics, one that might not only allow for but actively foster the Interracial compassion this society needs so badly.

In one particularly resonant passage, after Williams has seen a document attesting to the property value of her enslaved great-great-grandmother, she dreams of an Auschwitz survivor’s paintings—colorful canvases she has admired, but each containing an uncannily empty patch in the shape of a human being:

all those vivid landscapes with the bare body-shapes, and suddenly my great-great-grandmother appeared in the middle of each and every one of them. Suddenly she filled in all the empty spaces, and I looked into her face with the supernatural stillness of deep recollection. From that moment, I knew exactly who she was—every pore, every hair, every angle of her face. I would know her everywhere. [RE, p. 209]

Although the palimpsestic vision resolutely refuses to reduce the Jewish to the African American experience, it keeps the two in dialogue. Thus, the revelation of a bare spot poignant enough to hold Williams’s own hurtful past gestures beyond "handwringing about subject position" (RE, p. 118) and toward the sort of malleability that occurs in Zora Neale Hurston’s sentences, "I remember the very day that I became colored" (emphasis mine) and "At certain times I have no race, I am me." Or in W. E. B. Du Bois’s refusal to dwell within an imaginative ghetto: "Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls."

Many thinkers have begun to conceptualize race in such a way as to honor the integrity of indigenous ethnic traditions while discrediting their isolation, purity, or irreducibility. In various ways, Woody Allen’s "chameleon," Charles Johnson’s and Ann Douglas’s "mongrel," Trey Ellis’s self "completely black again" (Patricia J. Williams, The Rooster’s Egg [Cambridge, Mass., 1995], pp. 192, 194, 194, 194; hereafter abbreviated RE). I discuss this passage in Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture (New York, 1997), pp. 257-58.


20. W. E. B. Du Bois’s stirring passage begins with the sentence, "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not" and goes on to ask, "Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly spleare and he winces not?"
For when certain poststructuralist perspectives harden into ideological positions or even quasi-religious pieties, they lose exactly the pliancy that most poststructuralists espouse as an antidote to speciously determinate or naturalized modes of thinking. (That is, when the playful indeterminacy of gender becomes axiomatic, it loses its playfulness and its indeterminacy.) Though poststructuralist feminists faulted their predecessors for producing reductive, totalizing, universalized, or essentialist definitions of gender difference, I sought to use the linguistic lapses I found in the prose of Spivak, Kristeva, Butler, and Haraway to demonstrate the difficulty poststructuralist feminists themselves have in avoiding reductive, totalizing, universalized, or essentialist positions. Nor should this surprise us since—regardless of their impressively acrobatic efforts—poststructuralists, like the feminist thinkers whose publications preceded theirs by no more than a decade, remain inevitably fixed in the terms the culture provides. That those terms persist—saturated with essentialist, racist, homophobic, and misogynist messages—adds to the societal importance of our attempting to achieve the sort of lucidity poststructuralist prose rarely exhibits.

To my mind, the contagiousness of poststructuralists' stylistic infelicities among their acolytes pertains to frequent problems that arise in multidisciplinary ventures touted as highly theoretical. Because such endeavors occur in the liminal space between disciplines, they risk evading the rigorous standards that would be applied by specialists in fields like philosophy, psychology, or political economy. It is, of course, easier to mimic sexist idiosyncratic locations and coinages than to understand the epistemological maneuvers upon which they may be founded. (Most feminist critics train in traditional departments; there are as yet very few Ph.D. programs in women's studies, where more sustained and rigorous training in the broad array of feminist thought and methodology might be expected.) Given the privileging of theory in departments of English, not only graduate students but many literary professors struggle to negotiate between macrotheoretical points and microtextual readings in mediations that sometimes threaten to sabotage the integrity of each attempt. Unfortunately, the use of literature as grist for a theory mill tends to grind out literary interpretations in a predictable theoretical shape. Another disturbing result of the privileging of "theory," a word—John Guillory explains—that we use "as the unifying name of manifestly heterogeneous critical practices," is that, as he puts it without emphasizing gender implications, those texts canonized as "theory" have been produced by "master theorists" such as Nietzsche, Saussure, Freud, Hei-
degger, Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida.25 Although Continental and methodologically diverse in their provenance, the theoretical assumptions of most feminist poststructuralists in the United States remain fixed on/ by often magisterially masculinist men.

Furthermore, as Guillory points out, "the agency for the dissemination of theory has remained departments of literature."26 Beyond my own personal history, perhaps this explains why Robyn Wiegman finds me so "insistent . . . on the mode of inquiry of English as a discipline" (p. 373): the poststructuralist feminists who recycle the thinking of Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida have made a particularly strong mark on feminist literary criticism. Yet despite my interest in English as a discipline and my qualms about the pitfalls of multidisciplinary research, I remain committed to the field of women's studies and fascinated by the innovative analyses currently issuing from areas outside of departments of English: studies of Middle Eastern and Eastern cultures, medicine, anthropology, and law seem to be especially important sites of knowledge now.

As a director of a women's studies program, Robyn Wiegman quite reasonably directs us not "to hunker ourselves down in the disciplines" (p. 376). But do I really need to defend English departments against the ludicrous charge that they should be delegitimized because of the nefarious past of the British empire?

For feminism to wed its academic worldview to the perspective of literary study in the context of the discipline's continued commitment to British intellectual and geopolitical colonialism is to foreclose from the outset feminism as a project that critically interrogates the institution's disciplinary management of culture, gender, and knowledge. [P. 375]

As far as I can remember, I have never asked "feminism to wed" anyone or anything. That issue of record aside, not only do I question the discipline's "continued commitment to British . . . colonialism" but I also wonder about the contemporary Labour government's and today's British citizens' "continued commitment to British . . . colonialism." Certainly my department of English (and maybe yours, too, if you are in one) has much to answer for, but neither the vexed history of why some Indians and Egyptians speak English nor last summer's return of Hong Kong to China can be located on that admittedly long list! (Just imagine—given this line of thinking—what American studies scholars could be held accountable for. Hey, what about religious studies professors?)

What I take more seriously is Robyn Wiegman's point that "the liter-
ary" can no longer be viewed "as the origin, source, and ultimate vitality of feminist knowledge" (p. 374). Not only have philosophy, psychology, political economy, linguistics, and the history of science produced some of the most influential theories, after all, but cultural studies has opened even retrograde literary types like me to the pleasure of exploring popular, visual, and utilitarian semiotic forms: movies, television, ads, magazines, newspapers, governmental documents, computer-generated genres, business brochures, even businesses themselves! Neither the aesthetic as a disputed category nor considerations of the contingency of aesthetic evaluation will drop out of critical conversations as noncanonical, nonliterary, nonprint texts enter into our feminist debates, I suspect; however, they certainly will be altered in the process. But why should we assume that the literary will immediately be either marginalized or displaced in feminist speculations? Although I have never claimed that literature functioned as the origin of feminist knowledge in a women's studies context, I do feel that most people who have dedicated themselves to teaching in English departments wish to continue studying and celebrating the poetry, fiction, and drama that have so enriched our own and our students' lives.

Now that ethnic parameters have widened and we begin to think about influences and interactions among various nationally inflected aesthetic traditions in a global scene; now that the concept of race has been debiologized and widened to include whites as well as blacks, Asians, and Hispanics; now that gender has been reconceived to encompass the history of the social construction of masculinity as well as femininity; now that lesbian critics, gay studies scholars, and queer theorists have denaturalized heterosexuality so we can study its representations and institutions alongside those of homosexuality; now that popular culture advocates have broadened the base of the arts we analyze, feminist critics will have to educate themselves in diverse ways. In this sense, yes, literary study of any ideological stripe progresses through a colonizing process that locates ever wider, more far-flung objects of investigation. And as with earlier forms of imperialism, this academic one is economically driven since we currently face such an appalling crisis in the humanities job market.

Scholarly articles get written for a variety of motives, some never expressed in print. One reason for my distress over the contentiousness of feminist infighting in "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" relates to my belief that such arcane skirmishes cannot possibly contribute to the health and welfare of the field or its recently trained professionals. Whether our graduate students aspire to jobs in English and comparative literature departments or in area programs like African American studies, women's studies, gay studies, or American studies, they face the traumatic effects of institutional downsizing. On the lecture circuit, a bemused Henry Louis Gates, Jr., used to lament the fact that when white women and

26. Ibid.
African Americans joined academic discourse, all of a sudden “the subject” disappeared. At the risk of sounding either paranoid or draconian, I would amend his point to speculate on the irony that when we feminist and minority newcomers start producing a good number of Ph.D.s in our various fields, the jobs vanish.

Although in departmental and area studies settings we continue to establish new majors and minors, certificates and degrees, our graduate students find it increasingly difficult to get any teaching jobs at all, much less positions in institutions comparable to the ones at which they have trained. To be sure, people in all fields feel distressed about the depressed job market in the humanities, but the situation seems particularly poignant for a field that has just gotten established. As departments shrink—losing “lines” and thus making it impossible to retain positions vacated through relocations and retirements—as more of our graduate students either drop out altogether or accept terminal contracts under exploitative conditions, as it becomes increasingly difficult to persuade publishers to print scholarly books that will not generate profits, as the budgets and the existence of the NEH and NEA come under attack, as affirmative action is subverted, the economy of the humanities discourages feminist critics from assuming that we will have successors and what successors mean—a future.

Without in any way blaming the victims of academic downsizing, we ought to address the oddity of an economy booming in a number of localities outside of education while many of our colleagues inside colleges and universities feel overworked and underpaid. Not only the recent culture wars but also the current job market crisis may force us to recognize that we should explain our importance to the society at large in order to gain the wide-based public support we need. In the context of the culture wars, Gerald Graff has argued that humanists bear some responsibility for our misrepresentation in the media: “Having disdained popular self-representation, we have predictably been inept in representing ourselves in the public sphere and thus made ourselves easy prey for those who would ignorantly or maliciously misrepresent us.” Given our historic ties outside the academy to the women’s movement, feminist critics have profited from a privileged access to the public sphere that has recently been obstructed, if not broken, by the esoteric methodological disputes I delineated in “What Ails Feminist Criticism?”

Housed in interdisciplinary area studies or in departmental programs, we feminist academics should direct our attention away from our internal disagreements and toward our common objective: to maintain the crucial importance of the study of gender as a central part of our undergraduates’ training. Where I find myself happily in concord with Robyn Wiegman, then, is in her belief that the “issue of reproduction is absolutely central to the tensions and anxieties that now accompany academic feminism,” for “feminism in the academy, after all, lacks the kind of institutional support that can guarantee its reproduction” (pp. 365, 379). (If one were in thrall to the spirit of contention, I can’t resist adding, whole tomes could be composed on the term reproduction not simply because of its biological and hetero-sexist assumptions but also because it conjures up a future of reiteration.) Whether or not I am personally motivated by generational trepidations—some of the critics I chided are older, some younger than I (measuring time in chronological and professional units)—many feminists of my generation share my apprehension about our ability to sustain the institutional continuity of feminism. At one of the sessions of “Feminist Criticism Revisited” that Sandra Gilbert and I organized for the 1994 Modern Language Association convention, a good number of the people who played pioneering roles in the establishment of feminist criticism during the seventies felt discouraged.

At the main forum, Barbara Christian led off with a passionate denunciation of higher education’s failure to nurture African American intellectuals: black feminist criticism may be high on the literary critical stock market, she explained, but very few African Americans number among graduate students and faculty in the humanities. Next, Jane Gallop stood up to admit that she would not deliver the essay she had composed because (and I quote in capital letters to capture her tone) it was “THE MOST BORING PAPER I’D EVER WRITTEN.” Nancy K. Miller revealed that she had not published her remarks earlier because she was demoralized by the amount of “trashing” going on in feminist

27. Johnson puts it this way: “just at the moment when women (and minorities) begin to have genuine power in the university, American culture responds by acting as though the university itself is of dubious value” (Barbara Johnson, The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated FD).

28. Documenting the overproduction of Ph.D. degrees in English, Carol Christ explains that “between 1988–89 and 1994–95, the number of jobs advertised annually in the Job Information List declined by forty-four percent; during the same period the number of Ph.D.s granted increased by fifty percent” (Carol Christ, “Retaining Faculty Lines,” Profession 1997, p. 58).


30. Elam is exceptionally insightful on generational conflicts in “Sisters Are Doing It to Themselves,” p. 50.

31. More recently, Nellie Y. McKay deplores the “frustrating . . . shortage of African American faculty members, a shortfall that negatively affects almost every white college and university across the country” (Nellie Y. McKay, “Naming the Problem That Led to the Question ‘Who Shall Teach African American Literature?’; or, Are We Ready to Disband the Wheatley Court?” PMLA 113 [May 1998]: 565). Only twenty-six Ph.D. degrees in English and American language and literature were awarded to African Americans in 1993–94 and only eighteen in 1994–95.
circles. Around 1985, Elaine Showalter added, she stopped producing feminist articles, worn down by hostile reactions produced by people who then turned around to ask her for a letter of recommendation. As if contextualizing their ennui, Florence Howe compared the 1990s to the 1950s, cautioning against cultural amnesia, careerism, and generational competition.

To Judith Newton, sitting in the audience, the most insistent note was “the schematization of wound and loss, as one speaker after another touched on the current lapse of historical memory, the rejection or loss of political heritage and commitment, feminist careerism and competitiveness, and the ingratitude of the young.” Yet another smart observer, Barbara Johnson, has viewed the very perplexity of the speakers at “Feminist Criticism Revisited,” as well as their common inability to define the feminist project, as cause for optimism, for she believes there is “something about contemporary academic feminism that requires ambivalence” (FD, p. 2). According to Johnson, ambivalence remains a necessity that demonstrates our commitment to a contradictory process of growth. “Once women begin to speak, we begin to differ with each other,” she reminds us (FD, p. 3). Such disagreements can be healthy when they testify less to our jockeying for professional attention, more to our collective investment in feminism’s societal importance.

Though we share a historical past of exclusion from higher education, what we feminists now face is a future in which our different roles mean diverse relationships to it. In this context, feminism has to incorporate a chorus of quite distinct, local voices addressing particular issues and contexts. As Lauren Berlant puts it (in an article Robyn Wiegman advised me to read in another context), “feminists must embrace a policy of female disidentification at the level of female essence. . . . We must align ourselves, in our differences from each other, to perform, theorize, constantly intensify the rupture of the private, and inhabit, as much as we can, the constantly expanding negative terrain that will transform the patriarchal public sphere.” Disidentification: the term means we will not always be in agreement, not always respect each other’s institutional choices, not always find ourselves on the same side of disputes, but we should not let these differences obscure our commonalities of history and purpose because, after all, our gains are so recently won and so very fragile that we need time to see what their fruition might mean. If we move too quickly along the trajectory Robyn Wiegman describes as a shift from “one generation’s critique of patriarchal masculinism” to “another’s interest in a self-reflexive articulation of differences among women” (p. 365), we are in danger of forgetting that masculinism remains alive and well inside and outside the academy.

Robyn Wiegman’s query—“which feminism will be reproduced? by whom? and with what (indeed whose) historical memory?” (p. 365)—remains a substantive one. I will answer it very tentatively here with (what else?) a poem, letting her opening allusion to Carolyn Heilbrun’s story and my final citation of an Adrienne Rich text speak to the continuing relevance of the literary. In “Final Notations,” the conclusion to her brilliant volume An Atlas of a Difficult World, Rich writes mysteriously about a procedure—“it will not be simple, it will not be long / it will take little time, it will take all your thought”—that might be an analysis of what the process of reading her own book entails. Yet I would like to interpret one stanza as an address to future generations of feminists about their encounter with a past that was my present.

How often, in the ever-recurrent mappings of the world, have women’s difficult achievements in the public sphere been forgotten, misremembered, depreciated? Will the next generation of academic feminists be able to counter that tendency by sustaining our intellectual heritage? “Gazing across at the newer generations,” Catharine R. Stimpson exclaims in a recent essay, “I feel enormous relief that they are there. For who wants to say something, as if it were new, and then have it disappear before it has a chance to get old? Moreover, women’s studies began as a revisionary act. So doing, it provided a model of thought as persistent revision, consistent correction.” People of my generation—though we dislike being put into either the elderly or the elder box—necessarily depend on the young to dispute, augment, and thereby stretch what we have produced so as to create new forms, innovative contents:

You are coming into us who cannot withstand you
you are coming into us who never wanted to withstand you

32. Miller, “Jason Dreams, Victoria Works Out,” Generations, p. 167. This published version of Miller’s talk begins by remembering that this forum was proposed to the Modern Language Association originally under the rubric “Feminist Old Girls; or, What Have We Wrought?” whose acronym FOG amused no one, distressed others, and was therefore ultimately revised in a way that “lost the reference to age and hierarchy” (p. 166).
37. Whether one is disparaged as old-fashioned or honored as the repository of wisdom, the role feels alien. See Joan W. Scott on the latter version, which she calls “not a position I like to be in, not one that feels legitimate to me” (Christian et al., “Conference Call,” Differences 2 [Fall 1990]: 82).