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Critical Response

I

What Ails Feminist Criticism? A Second Opinion

Robyn Wiegman

In "Murder without a Text," Amanda Cross (better known to academics as Carolyn Heilbrun) offers a tale of feminist generational fury and murder that might be of interest to readers of Susan Gubar's "What Ails [formerly "Who Killed"] Feminist Criticism?" (Critical Inquiry 24 [Summer 1998]: 878–902). Cross's murder mystery features a seasoned feminist scholar accused of bludgeoning a student to death. The murder takes place during a highly contentious women's studies senior thesis seminar, in which Professor Beatrice Sterling, an early Christian history specialist, has difficulty convincing students of the importance of academic research and canonical texts. To these students, as Sterling explains, "All history, all previously published research, was lies. They would talk to real sex-workers, real homeless women, real victims of botched abortions... When I suggested some academic research, they positively snorted:"

The students' refusal of the kind of scholarly apparatus most familiar to Sterling constitutes, within the narrative, a generational betrayal: "They spoke about early feminists, like me, as though we were a bunch of co-opted creeps;..." The kind of rudeness that is close to rape. Or murder" ("M," p. 130).

A number of colleagues have offered me useful critical and bibliographic commentary in the course of writing this response. I want to thank Lauren Berlant, Rey Chow, Tom Foster, Elena Glasberg, Caren Kaplan, Lynn Hudson, Jane Newman, and Jane Rhodes.


2. While space will prevent me from exploring in this response the full range of differences that coalesce around the self-reflective turn in feminist thought, I want to comment at least briefly on one aspect of the shift that accompanies the transition from the critique of patriarchal masculinism to internal struggle within feminism. In the former, feminism is embroiled, indeed embattled, in a heterosexual paradigm in which women's relationships to men are centrally interrogated. The latter mode of critique, however, is fundamentally a homosocial circuit in which feminism signifies from the conflicted terrain of relations among women. The fall that Gubar laments in "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" might be read, then, as a consequence of the disappearance of men and patriarchy in the key role of villains—a lament, in other words, that the predictable failure of heterosexuality can no longer guarantee feminist solidarity. In this context, we might understand the inconsistent role given to the lesbian, whose wavering presence (now you see her, now you don't) threatens to undermine from within the Edenic state of originarity unity and sameness.

Of appropriate manners. "The young are rude today," Professor Sterling says. "The odd part of this is that the most radical students, those who talk of little but the poor and the racially oppressed, are, if anything, ruder than the others, courtesy being beneath them." ("M," p. 130). In defining the affective register of feminist institutional relations as nonacademic, Cross's short story disturbingly deflects what are clearly important questions about the generational nexus of feminism, discipline, and method. What does it mean for feminism that the disciplinary structure of knowledge serves as the primary institutional form for producing feminist intellectual subjects? How does the political imperative of feminism work in tension, if not contradiction, with the critical and methodological demands of disciplines? And, perhaps most important, how can feminism productively negotiate the generational shift attendant upon its own institutional reproduction in the context of broader transformations in academic knowledge?

"What Ails Feminist Criticism?" offers a critical approach to these questions, even as its narrative of feminist literary criticism's fall from a mirthful unity to spirit-murdering factionalism tends to repeat not only Cross's fictional reduction of these issues to bad manners but also her story's dismissal of the agents of race-based critical analysis. In Gubar's view, feminists of color have used "a curiously condemnatory vocabulary," directing a "barrage of diatribes ... against white feminists" (pp. 888, 886). They have been "censorious about white thinkers engaged in purportedly antiracist and feminist meditations" (p. 888). They have "disparage[d] any feminist theory founded on equality" (p. 889). They have falsely and negatively essentialized white women, contaminating "feminist prose with self-righteousness," and using the language of antiracism, in Janet Todd's words, "to denigrate the feminist enterprise" (p. 891). At the same time, of course, Gubar's "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" takes aim at poststructuralists for creating a "language crisis" that not only obstructs affiliations with women outside the academy but performs a disservice to "libertarian politics and pedagogies" (pp. 881, 900). "Churlish or curt, its politically or theoretically correct jargon stifles rather than nurtures thoughtful interchange" (p. 901). Taken together, feminists of color and poststructuralists have made "women an invalid word" (p. 886).

Where Gubar's first version of this paper, delivered as a talk, featured these advocates as the culprits of feminist criticism's murder, the milder version of the story, published here in Critical Inquiry, casts postcolonial, U.S. ethnic, and poststructuralist criticisms as life-draining carnivores intent on consuming academic feminism's historically robust flesh. By 3. Attentive readers of Gubar's footnotes will note that I was an early reader of "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" before I was drafted by the editors of Critical Inquiry to formalize my response here. This is, then, not an impersonal second opinion. I have known Susan Gubar since the late 1970s, when I was an undergraduate major in English at Indiana University. About fifteen years later, I became one of her junior colleagues in that department. I am intellectually aligned with all of the perpetrators she cites in feminism's demise—African American feminist studies, postcolonial theory, poststructuralist, us studies—and I encouraged her to rethink nearly all of this essay's central opinions. I enter my disagreement into the public record not with the impulse to murder but rather from the desire to demonstrate that it is the narrative Gubar constructs, not these modes of inquiry—or academic feminism itself—that is disabling.

4. For important contributions to the conversation about generation and feminism, see Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue, ed. Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan (Minneapolis, 1997), and Barbara Christian et al., "Conference Call," Differences 2 (Fall 1990): 52-108.

5. Tania Modleski's Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age (New York, 1991) opened the decade with a lament about the undoing of feminism, leveling the charge against feminist poststructuralism on one hand and gender studies on the other. But where Modleski saw the poststructuralist evacuation of the category of woman as the "latest ruse of white middle-class feminism" (p. 21), Gubar sets poststructuralism in league with postcolonial and U.S. ethnic feminisms, indicting the way "racialized identity politics made the word women slim down to stand only for a very particularized kind of woman, whereas poststructuralists obliged the term to disappear altogether" (p. 901). For a counter to Modleski, from the perspective of lesbian studies, see Annamarie Jagose, "Feminism without Women: A Lesbian Reassurance," Cross-Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance, ed. Dana A. Heller (Bloomington, Ind., 1997), pp. 124-55.

For Susan Bordo, postmodernism has been the perpetrator and deconstruction the weapon in battering feminism into a more docile position, so disconnected from its earliest political urgencies has feminism seemingly become. See Susan Bordo, Unbearable Weight:
popularly sanctioned narrative, one that sacrifices the complexities and discontinuities of feminism’s institutional history for a plot formula that denigrates academic feminism’s internal conflict while simultaneously refusing to cast it dynamically mobile and historically transforming intellectual and political formation in positive terms. In doing so, “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” forfeits attention to the most important questions it might otherwise raise. For instance, what historical and political conditions have motivated the recent proliferation of identity forms and identifications, and why has theory been such a crucial site for feminist intellectual interventions? How has the imperative of intersectional analysis sought to link U.S. ethnic, postcolonial, and queer studies into a collaborative, if discontinuous, intellectual and political configuration, and what kinds of new and importantly interdisciplinary knowledges are currently being produced? If First World white feminist intellectuals have experienced these changes as a challenge to their self-representations and institutional relations, what ways of thinking about the formation of white subjectivity will better construct feminism as an inevitable site of struggle and engender a future no longer contingent on white women’s subjective or epistemological centrality?

These questions draw attention to the issues that motivate this dissenting opinion, foregrounding my critical interest in feminist knowledge production, institutional histories, intersectional and interdisciplinary analysis, and the necessary rearticulation of white feminist political subjectivity. In crafting this dissenting opinion, I hope to demonstrate that the critical anorexia lamented in “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” arises from an undernourished narrative of feminism, one that replaces, in strikingly anorexic fashion, a powerful body of scholarship with a fainting sister too weak to partake in feminism’s life-sustaining internal critique.

A History of Manners

It is perhaps no overstatement to say that feminist scholars in the 1990s have been preoccupied with narrating the history of feminism as both a political movement and an intellectual discourse. For those of us, junior and recently tenured faculty, who benefitted from the ascendency of feminist knowledge in our undergraduate and graduate training, the “fact” that feminism could be a legitimate object of study has had a transformative effect not only on the ways in which scholarship can be imagined but on the meaning of the university as a site of political intervention. To speak of generation, as both “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” and “Murder without a Text” rightly suggest, is not simply to produce an essentialist discourse about age and life cycle so much as to define the historical institutional conditions under which feminism has attained and sustained its status as knowledge. This is not to say that the contestatory nature of feminism in the academy has been superseded by its wholesale acceptance, but it is to explain why both fictional and academic narratives about the history of feminism bring so much generational anxiety and tension into play.

In “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” the anxieties that accompany generational transformations in feminist knowledges are located in a collect-
tivizing gesture that links U.S. ethnic studies, postcolonial theory, and poststructuralism as the "after" generation—"after" the initial heady days of feminism's radical incursion into the university. This critical linkage provides a new twist on the now familiar story of academic feminism's contemporary fall, creating a confluence among knowledge formations that are not often seen as collaborative culprits. More frequently, poststructuralism's tie to European philosophical traditions engenders a narrative of its white and First World complicity, thereby setting post-colonial and U.S. ethnic studies in an oppositional role to the domain of "high" theory. How, then, do these critical discourses come together to undo academic feminism in "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" Unfortunately, the answer to this question does not lie in an exploration of the political and intellectual content of the critical projects of ethnic, post-colonial, and poststructuralist studies. Instead, "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" launches its critique by focusing on the emotional and aesthetic rhetorical idioms employed by key figures in these fields. "I hope to show," Gubar writes, "that a number of prominent advocates of racialized identity politics and of poststructuralist theories have framed their arguments in such a way as to divide feminists, casting suspicion upon a common undertaking that remains in dispute at the turn of the twentieth century" (p. 880). Thus, the epistemological and disciplinary, not to mention political, differences among the scholarly archives of post-colonial, U.S. ethnic, and poststructuralist feminisms are diminished as "debilitating rhetorics . . . that made us cranky with one another," unpleasant idioms that ruined feminism's good mood (p. 902).

Because of this focus on rhetorical good manners, "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" misdescribes the very archive it hopes to historicize, providing a narrative of academic feminism that fails to render coherent the differential impact of ethnic, postcolonial, and poststructuralist knowledge on academic feminism in recent years. To begin to resurrect the critical projects of postcolonial, U.S. ethnic, and poststructuralist femi-

8. Gubar's organization of U.S. ethnic and postcolonial feminist thought into a composite category of "racialized identity politics" is problematic in a number of ways. It condenses the intellectual histories and social conditions from which ethnic and postcolonial studies have been generated, eclipsing the differing constructions of U.S. national identities and their contradictory relation to postcolonial frameworks. Racialization is not a uniform or universal process of economic and social disenfranchisement, as scholarship on issues of immigration, colonization, and national identity currently explores. Rosemary George, for instance, investigates the way that a racialized identity based on color is routinely resisted by South Asian immigrants to the U.S., even as the history of South Asian immigration must be understood in the context of both British colonialism and First World transnational capital flows. See Rosemary Marangoly George, "From Expatriate Aristocrat to Immigrant Nobody: South Asian Racial Strategies in the Southern Californian Context," Diaspora 6 (Spring 1997): 31–60.

9. Ella Shohat's introductory essay to her forthcoming edited collection Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age (Cambridge, Mass., 1998) offers one of the most comprehensive rearticulations of the history of feminist knowledge in the academy I have seen, taking seriously the political importance of intersectional and interdisciplinary analysis. Under the framework of multicultural feminism, Shohat does not seek an exaltation of feminism over multiculturalism; rather, her project foregrounds the imbrication of the two. Referencing the long tradition of the mobilization of difference within feminist thought (itself understood as a worldwide phenomenon that does not always call itself by its First World name), Shohat challenges the evacuation of race and ethnicity from the historical record, offering a powerful remapping of feminism that links postcolonial, U.S. ethnic, queer, and poststructuralist critical concerns. 10. In the process, the great paradigm shift that has accompanied the emergence of U.S. ethnic feminisms from the singular centrality of gender to intersectional analysis is not simply displaced, but patently belittled. For instance, in citing the "necessity of considering (without subordinating) race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation," Gubar describes how "some faculty" and "many students" reject

out-of-hand the scriptures of a given literary or theoretical work simply because it neglects to discuss x (fill in the blank—bisexual Anglo-Pakistani mothers; the heterosexual, working-class, Jews-for-Jesus community of Nashville, and so forth). Too often, each text becomes grist for a mill that proves the same intellectually vapid—though politically appalling—point that racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia reign supreme. [Pp. 890-91]

While it is always the case that critical modes of analysis spawn reductive and predictable scholarship (how many truly bad papers have we all read on Shakespeare's sonnets?), it does not follow that the existence of such scholarship renders illegitimate the intellectual value of the trajectories of analysis being pursued. 11. Gubar places both Bambara and Washington in a list of texts, including Lillian Robinson's Sex, Class, and Culture and Tillie Olsen's Silences, that "were based on Simone de Beauvoir's insight into women's alienity and spawned numerous analyses of the images and stereotypes of 'the second sex' in male-authored literature" (p. 882). While one does not doubt that de Beauvoir had a wide influence on feminist literary critics in the 1970s, it is a reduction of the critical contribution of The Black Woman: An Anthology and Black-Eyed Swans to situate their projects in a historical delineation that jettisons both the U.S. racial context

nisms requires undermining a number of Gubar's governing assumptions, not the least of which is her assertion that gender alone organized the initial influx of feminism into academe. In defining the first two periods of feminist literary criticism, Gubar cites the work of a number of black feminist scholars, including Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Christian, and Mary Helen Washington. But instead of reading these texts as evidence of an ongoing and always present critique of feminism's universalization of white women as woman, "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" assimilates them to a gender rubric that disdainfully refuses the intellectual imperative of an intersectional articulation; that is, it subordinates African American literary legacies to a second tier analysis—a "subtradition" (p. 884)—thereby ensuring that the first two stages of critique and recovery are free to figure "woman" as their primary organizing principle. Indeed, to take the lessons of the third
phase as critical ones concerning the always implicit racialization of gender requires due attention to those traditions (linguistic practices, symbolic systems, and textual predecessors) that give Bambara, Christian, and Washington their scholarly force.

By writing her history of feminist literary criticism from the celebratory vantage point of a gender privileged approach, Gubar restages the way that some First World white literary scholars have claimed the origins of feminism in the academy as their own. Like many originating claims, this one has been met with a series of critical responses, and a whole tradition in feminist knowledge—intersectional analysis—can now be cited as dedicated to transforming the popular equation of feminism with the analytic singularity of gender.12 Much of the scholarly work that has emerged in the last twenty-five years has offered us a way to link women to a wide array of political projects, thereby refashioning feminism as a term that can reference the community struggles and political labor of more than a select group of U.S. women. Where Gubar implicitly laments the move to intersectionality as the intellectual and political trimming of feminism, a more powerful interpretation would herald academic feminism’s encounter with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nationality as a critical reason it continues to exist. To read academic feminism this way means forfeiting the Edenic narrative and citing the multiple histories of struggle by, for, and among women as necessary to the vitality of feminist critique.

Crucially connected to the resignification of feminism as a multiracial and multiply situated political enterprise is the way we conceptualize the academy as a site of feminist political labor. “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” is rather contradictory on this score. It applauds the move to the academy in feminism’s halcyon years when new critical histories and unique women’s traditions were being forged across the disciplines. In that context, the academy is imagined not as a barrier but as a conduit for “the women’s movement,” that idealized referent that bears the stamp of the real and justifies the intellectual labor of feminists asking a variety of questions about women. Yet, Gubar argues, the influence of poststructuralist theory on various disciplinary knowledges has undermined the academy’s crucial role in extending the women’s movement by questioning various standards of feminism’s own identity politics. Thus, poststructuralism undermines the use-value of feminist knowledge, threatening “the relationship feminists within the academy have sought . . . with women outside it” (p. 881). Two problems arise here. First, Gubar assumes that feminist thought is valuable only when it responds to a scene of political production outside it. But why would the academy not be an important site for feminist transformation? At what cost do feminist intellectuals demean discussions about knowledge and power in the very institutions that patrol their intellectual labor? Most crucially, why abandon feminism’s early recognition of the importance of challenging traditional forms of knowledge to produce not only new knowledge but also new ways of knowing and new knowing subjects?13

These questions turn us to the second problem, which concerns academic feminism’s proper object of engagement.14 When “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” refuses theory and critiques the centrality of racial and national thought to academic feminism’s project, it circumscribes what feminism is allowed to know. In essence, it asks feminism to turn against knowledge in order to protect its political claims. But the academy is not a place outside or separate from the political, nor is its dedication to intellectual labor insignificant in the reproductive practices of a whole host of social dominations. To accept the fashionable criticism that feminism has no necessary truck with abstraction—that its political commitment must side solely with the concrete—is to limit the many political agendas of feminism to a homogenized, instrumental function. This is not to say that academic feminism can or should reject the importance of being in the streets, but it is to insist that we concede too much by dismissing feminism’s intervention in even the most abstract discourses of the contemporary academy. Feminism, 1 tell my introductory women’s studies class, must resist the impulse to reproduce only what it thinks it already knows; it must challenge the compulsion to repeat.15 This kind of feminism is and the African American studies movement. This is not to say that one must make "black" (and hence particular) every utterance by African American feminist scholars, rather. I am pointing to the asymmetry in the critical history offered by "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" in which racial specificity is absent as an issue or textual reference in the first two stages, while it oversaturates the third and fourth stages, where it functions as a symptomatic error. 12. Important recent texts in the intersectional arsenal, while too numerous to name comprehensively, include Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York, 1995); Women Transforming Politics, ed. Cathy J. Cohen, Kathleen B. Jones, and Joan C. Tronto (New York, 1997); Ann DuCille, Skin Trade (Cambridge, Mass., 1996); Avery Gordon, Haunted Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination (Minneapolis, 1997); Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York, 1998); Lisa Lowe, Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics (Durham, N.C., 1996); and Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics, ed. Joan Wallach Scott, Gora Kaplan, and Debra Keates (New York, 1997).

13. Ellen Rooney’s discussion in “Discipline and Vanish: Feminism, the Resistance to Theory, and the Politics of Cultural Studies” has influenced my understanding of feminism’s institutional intervention. She writes: “A critique of the politics of knowledge production is never merely a side-effect of political activity outside the university. . . . Feminist theory in the academy is constituted by the discovery that a politicized, theoretical intervention within the disciplines is unavoidable” (Ellen Rooney, “Discipline and Vanish: Feminism, the Resistance to Theory, and the Politics of Cultural Studies,” Differences 2 [Fall 1990]: 21).


15. Lauren Berlant argues that feminism has participated in the strategies of sentimental culture by presuming that an identity among women is an ideal state that can be
one that cannot be owned; its rearticulation does not mean that it has suffered and grown weak. Rather, it is a feminism that can be radically refunctionalized in the present, which means that its past is always and by necessity incomplete.

The (Lost) Literary Object

While much of "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" is centered on the changing nature of feminism's academic self-fashioning in the late twentieth century, there is evidence that more than feminism is at stake in this essay penned by a Distinguished Professor of English. In the celebration of the first two stages of feminist criticism—critique and recovery—we witness admiration for feminism's critical rebuff of the disciplinary practice of canonizing fathers and their bawdy, brilliant sons. English as a discipline was thus forced to yield up a history of mothers, literary precursors who could take their place in a revised set of the world's finest texts; it was made to acknowledge the language of gender that motivated the narratological apparatus of the text; it was even compelled to consider, as a reasonable aspect of literary discussion, the social constraints on women's education and literacy. But not until the denigrated third and fourth stages was serious pressure put on the literary as such. While Gubar does not detail the 1980s assault on the disciplinary presumptions of literary study, it is significant how powerfully postcolonial and poststructuralist theory each questioned the British colonial worldview that organizes "English" and the priority accorded the literary as the object of critical concern.

To read "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" as a lament for the lost status of the literary means diagnosing Gubar's own rhetorical devotion to a literary idiom activated by metaphorical and narratological tropes. In her pained reaction to the textual aesthetics of poststructuralist prose, Gubar establishes a methodological practice that yearns for textual pleasure, substituting the critical protocols of literary study for the content of academic feminism's political concerns. Judith Butler's work, for instance, is reduced to "mistakes in agreement" (p. 896), as if the meaning, force, and productivity of feminist theory can best be discerned at the level of stylistic conventions and grammatical norms. So implicitly insistent is "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" on the modes of inquiry of English as a discipline that rarely does the essay feel pressured to address the subject head on. Only once does this issue move front and center:

The consequence for criticism of a linguistic model deriving from philosophy has been to divorce feminist speculations from literary texts or to subordinate those texts to the epistemological, ideological, economic, and political issues that supplanted literary history and


Much of this critique of poststructuralism is propelled by the general public attack on the humanities, which continues to undergo a kind of radical reconfiguration of its historical relationship to national identity and culture on one hand and the corporate imperative for instrumental knowledge on the other. From this point of view, then, Gubar's explanation of the language crisis—that "economic forces . . . escalated the pressure always exerted on humanities scholars to produce a reputation by engaging in arcane, agonistic maneuvers or by feverishly finding innovative vocabulary" (pp. 900-901)—actually misunderstands the way the critique of philosophical language from within the humanities further undermines the tradition of humanistic inquiry she elsewhere defends by requiring uniform intellectual vocabularies. In a similar way, much of the current conversation about the declining role of the public intellectual positions itself as defending the threatened humanities while tacitly supporting the imperative to reduce critical fluencies by creating for the humanities a monodisciplinary discourse, one that can stand on its own in the mass-mediated commodity sphere.

18. Signaling "a conflict between what Butler seeks to argue and the terms available to her" (p. 897), Gubar reads Butler's antigrammatical strategy as a violation of both feminist and poststructuralist commitment, totalizing a multiple subject by transforming it into one. But a second look at Butler's pattern of disagreements yields a different story: in all of the examples cited in the text Butler reverses grammatical logic, refashioning the predi-
aesthetic evaluation as the topics of writing about women. Given poststructuralist assumptions ... it is not surprising that the aesthetic got marginalized and the first three stages of feminist criticism sidelined. [P. 896] 10

While no further commentary is provided to detail the disciplinary shift from English to philosophy being decried here (or the relationship of such cross-disciplinarity to the academic feminist project as a whole), the passage nonetheless crystallizes the crucial fact of the centrality of the literary to Gubar’s portrait of feminist criticism’s Edenic early years. Why else would the scholarly turn to “epistemological, ideological, economic, and political issues” be cast as part of academic feminism’s intellectual decline?

The perspective and priority of literary study cannot provide for academic feminism the point of view needed to negotiate the terrain of its own contemporary moment. This is not to say that Gubar’s concerns for the specific project of feminist literary criticism is not an interesting or important one, but it is to argue against the narrative production of the literary as the origin, source, and ultimate vitality of feminist knowledge in the contemporary academy. 10

Taking English as the institutional location from which we assess the impact of postcolonial theory, in particular, is nothing if not ironic, given the incongruence of wagering feminism’s
cate as the controlling subject of the sentence and thereby subordinating the grammatical subject. In so doing, Butler challenges, in rigorous poststructuralist fashion, the foundational logic of the subject so firmly ensconced in the structure of the English language.

10. Nancy K. Miller’s “Philoctetes’ Sister” argues convincingly that the aesthetic and the racial/political are not divisible elements of the literary text. “We need a revisionary ‘morality of the aesthetic’ that would produce a reading capable of interpreting . . . the marks of race and gender in the text as intrinsic to literariness itself” (Nancy K. Miller, “Philoctetes’ Sister: Feminist Literary Criticism and the New Misogyny,” Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Arts [New York, 1991], p. 115). In October 1998, the University of California, Riverside will host a conference, organized by Emory Elliott, entitled “Aesthetics and Difference: Cultural Diversity, Literature, and the Arts,” focused precisely on these issues. This conference signals a renewed interest in understanding how the ideological, the economic, and the political are imbricated in the question of the aesthetic.

20. I am not denying that literary study was more open to the productivities of feminist thought in the 1970s than many other disciplines, especially those in the sciences and feminization of the field. By the 1970s, English departments had already witnessed an inflow of female graduate students and professors, reflecting not a protofeminist disciplinary impulse but a more profound feminization of the profession that seems now to have culminated in a drastic shrinkage in the number of tenure-track jobs. Feminism has often benefitted paradoxically, from this kind of transformation in the gender division of labor, where women’s entrance into a field in significant numbers bespeaks a successful intervention even as the ideologies of gender have been forced to change under the material pressures of modernizing capital.

effectivity from within a knowledge formation so finely tuned to the exigencies of the First World nation. “English” is, after all, the culmination and preservation of a distinct history of literature’s privileged citation as “culture,” defining, as David Lloyd and Paul Thomas have recently observed, the educated person within the nationalist discourse of the modern state. 21 To the extent that postcolonial studies sees its intellectual project as a political engagement with decolonization, not only in terms of state practices and historical memories but also in terms of disciplinary formations, it is striking that so few departments devoted to literary study have been able to register what the postcolonial might mean to their disciplinary configurations. 22 Even the hiring of postcolonial theorists tends not to inaugurates a reconsideration of departmental organizations of research and teaching, as Irish, South Asian, and Native American studies, to take only three examples, are forced to remain uncomfortably within the nation-bound rubrics of the British and U.S. literary traditions. 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 forfeit from the outset feminism as a project that critically interrogates the institution’s disciplinary management of culture, gender, and knowledge.

From my perspective, which is one situated within the interdisciplinary project of women’s studies, feminism in the academy has for too long been owned by the disciplines and thereby disciplined, especially in the humanities, by the national rubrics that identify Western European, British, and U.S. culture as the center and substance of inquiry. 23 “Other” geopolitical sites of knowledge may be included, but these are “area” studies appended to a seriously truncated and idealized version of the West. That this idealized West is currently under assault on many campuses because of decreased student enrollments in courses that take Western culture as their center often means a reinvigorated claim to the historical hegemony of Western knowledges, not their rearticulation in


22. I have been a member of one department of English that used the insights of postcolonial theory to decolonize the conceptual structures governing undergraduate instruction, producing a course rubric for the major that replaced national and period specifications with the categories of history, theory, and politics. While this new rubric has problems of its own, it is nonetheless significant that the department’s organization of itself as a discipline tried to work against the inscription of English as the overarching signature for the study of literature and other textual objects. For more about Syracuse University’s curriculum, see Steven Mailloux, “Rhetoric Returns to Syracuse: The Reception of Curricular Reform,” Receptor Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998), pp. 151–81.

the context of new migrations of capital, people, and cultures. To hunker ourselves down in the disciplines, to cast a nostalgic gaze at a past that now finds comfort in the sanctity of discipline-as-home, to reject the compelling possibilities of new knowledges and knowledge formations; these critical positions abandon academic feminism to an institutional framework that is already out of step with the kinds of issues that such a political project must confront. By engaging the interdisciplinary and postdisciplinary implications of postcolonial studies and linking this to the intersectional imperative that enables feminism to think beyond a solo gender paradigm that has never been comprehensive enough, we begin to make good on academic feminism's longstanding goal of transforming, not simply individual disciplines, but the institution, its organization of knowledge, and the way in which we understand both the intellectual composition and possible histories of feminism itself.

**Feminism after (White) Injury**

In describing an academic feminist project that will fail to return to the literary to solve generational betrayal and metaphoric murder, I have been proposing a second opinion that finds a range of political and intellectual possibilities for feminism in the very postcolonial, U.S. ethnic, and poststructuralist practices that have been blamed for ruining feminist criticism's once vibrant health. But I have yet to adequately attend to the emotional level on which so much of "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" turns. I have deferred this discussion because of a certain trepidation. I have written elsewhere of the way that white women talk race to perform their antiracism for other white women, producing not new ways of understanding the construction of white subjectivities but highly symbolic burnings in which their own whiteness is essentially purified.24 Such a tactic may be personally gratifying, but my use of it here would do little to make sense of the way Gubar crafts whiteness as an injured identity throughout "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" Nor would it allow us to establish the discursive linkage between the production of an injured white identity and the new markedness of whiteness as a racial identity in the popular discursive terrain of U.S. culture. These issues are particularly important, it seems to me, in rearticulating Gubar's dis-ease with the rhetorics of race in contemporary feminist thought.

In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown tracks the changing discourse of democracy in the U.S. national political lexicon, analyzing the way injury-based claims to entitlement have come to supplant conversations about freedom. In her terms, injury is now the governing grammar of American democracy, which means that political power and redress are defined by a group's ability to demonstrate its identity status as an injured one. Since Brown's book was published in 1995, the grammar of injury has had its more significant conservative deployment in California, where Proposition 209 succeeded in outlawing affirmative action in public education and services. This application of injury to defend and extend the rights of the racially dominant group is spreading to other states and marks, quite literally, a historical shift in the way that white racial identity is rhetorically defined. Whiteness, so often the universal norm of the generic citizen, has been particularized as a consequence of both civil rights reform and the postsegregationist move to multiculturalism, with the result that whites throughout the U.S. are finding it increasingly difficult to isolate themselves from some kind of awareness of their own racial status.26 That this awareness takes shape in the popular imaginary as a discourse of injury and white "minoritization"—think here of the emblematic *Forest Gump*—is further evidence for Brown's claim. It speaks as well to the broad social context in which the feminist debate about the movement's early white hegemony must now be read, not only because any articulation of the past necessarily deploys itself in a potentially incongruent present, but also and quite importantly because the rhetoric of race outside academic feminism conditions the way feminism must position itself to productively contribute to an antiracist intellectual agenda.

All of this is to say that in "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" the author's identification with scholars from the first and second stages who have been critiqued on a variety of fronts inadvertently risks reiterating the marked identity formation of injured whiteness now dominant in contemporary U.S. culture. Writing of two essays penned by Chandra Mohanty and Hazel Carby, for instance, Gubar discusses how their critical analysis questioned "reductive images of 'the' Third World woman, but the way in which they did so explains why white feminists began to feel beleaguered by blatantly imperative efforts to right the wrong of black female instrumentality" (p. 889). Emphasizing other feelings of white feminists—their fear of "saying the wrong thing, of sounding racist"—Gubar suggests that the equality sought by feminism has been undermined by


26. I do not mean to suggest here that whiteness has never been particularized before in the U.S. Certainly segregationist practices produced whiteness as a "marked" category, as the declarative warning For Whites Only might forcefully suggest. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that white identity formation depends on the mobility of its ability to universalize and particularize, which means that in the current decade we are witnessing a powerful new configuration of white particularity and not its originary emergence. See Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity," *Boundary 2* 26 (Winter 1999).
the "diatribes" launched against white women by women of color, so much so that "the politics of racial authenticity may be experienced as an attack on feminism's endorsement of all women's right to self-expression" (p. 891). By couching feminism's political goal as a right not to freedom from domination but to liberal "self-expression," "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" equates feminism with white women and produces both as victimized and endangered. From this victimized position, all analytical moves made by feminists of color are assaults against feminism, not crucial contributions to its self-examination and articulation. Significantly, in "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" the category "feminists of color" quite literally does not exist.

The primary consequence of the emotional attachment to white injury in "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" is a portrait of relations between white women and women of color that lacks systematic analysis of race as a mode of domination. Carby becomes suspected of essentializing white women, for instance, because of "her conviction that 'white women stand in a power relation as oppressors of black women'" (p. 889). According to Gubar, such a conviction is opposed to "any feminist theory founded on equality," which means that it threatens the fable of foundational unity by raising the specter of women's incommensurate social power with respect to one another. What precisely is essentialist about Carby's claim? She is not saying that white women are naturally, primordially, oppressors; rather, she is identifying a structure of power, a "power relation," that for her necessarily conditions the articulation of feminist thought and social movements. Her "conviction" is therefore a contextualization, but in the emotional register of "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" it becomes an accusation, one that extends to the entire body of scholarship by feminists of color, those who, "though they sought to serve the interests of women of color... promoted consternation among white women" (p. 890). The shift here—from the intentions of women of color to speak for themselves to the effects of their discourse on white women—demonstrates, in symptomatic fashion, the inability of "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" to analyze race in a critical vocabulary divorced from white women's emotional centrality. Even a sentence that begins with the acknowledgment of the interests of women of color has white women as its critical destination.

This strategy of arrival is part of the circularity of the narrative formula at play in "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" forming the crucial return to the place of origins mapped out in the essay's opening pages. This place is one of racial "indifference," where white women aren't marked as such, and a project of defining women's literary traditions organizes the energies of feminist critics. Part of what injury speaks for is thus the emotional condition of being racially marked, which generates in both Gubar's essay and elsewhere a complicated mix of anger, guilt, and shame. "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" functions in many ways as an exorcism of these emotions, as Gubar ascribes anger to women of color and associates both guilt and shame with the emotional repertoire of the after generation. In so doing, she purifies her heroine—the first-stage generation—excluding it from the political responsibility that has accompanied white feminism's fall into epistemological contingency. By responsibility, I am referring to the necessity of disarticulating the history and meaning of academic feminism from the prototypical plot of white women's subjectivity.

In staging this reading of white injury, I do not mean to dismiss the emotional experience that motivates first-stage white feminist expressions of generational complaint. Feminism in the academy, after all, lacks the kind of institutional support that can guarantee its reproduction (which is one of the many reasons that its reproduction becomes the locus of so much discontent), and we have yet to adequately consider what constitutes, at this date, a continuing political intervention. These issues, combined with the vast transformation we have witnessed in the nature and visibility of public dissent of all kinds, encourages a certain feeling of feminism's fragility. While "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" misdiagnoses as illness academic feminism's difficult negotiation of these conditions, its sense that women's relationships to feminism are powerful forms of attachment and identification is right on the mark. We need to recognize that these attachments and identifications are crucial sites of difference and struggle, linking intellectuals to each other and to feminism through a wide range of emotional, political, critical, and institutional circuits. Such differences, like any others, do not render academic feminism mirthful and unconflicted, nor do they allow us to assemble a coherent, unified collectivity. What they do enable is an academic feminism unconstrained by the demand to be singular, which is, in this doctor's opinion, the most reassuring sign of feminism's good health.