

# **HOW BIAS SPREADS**

*from the canon  
to the web*

On the books we scan,  
and the culture we reproduce

by Natasha Berting

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>05</b>
<b>1: On the books we upload</b>	<b>13</b>
The Book: Its Past, Its Future	
An interview with Roger Chartier	14
The Digital Universal Library and the Myth of Chaos	
by Sanne Koevoets	28
<b>2: On the canon which excludes</b>	<b>41</b>
Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon	
by Lillian Robinson	42
I am a Woman Writer, I am a Western Writer	
An interview with Ursula Le Guin	70
Merekam Perempuan Penulis Dalam Sejarah Kesusasteraan	
Wawancara dengan Melani Budiarta	90
Linguistic Sexism and Feminist Linguistic Activism	
by Anne Pauwels	102
<b>3: On what the surface hides</b>	<b>143</b>
Windows and Mirrors by Jay Bolter, Diane Gromala	144
Performative Materiality and Theoretical	
Approaches to Interface by Johanna Drucker	150
On Being Included: A Phenomenological Practice	
by Sara Ahmed	182
<b>References</b>	<b>197</b>
<i>how bias spreads from the canon to the web</i>	3

# Introduction

# How bias spreads from the canon to the web

On the books we scan, and the culture we reproduce

The biggest book scanning projects in the world are led by private enterprises. The most powerful (and most successful) of them has already scanned some 25 million volumes, and intends to digitize every title ever printed, starting with those in libraries across the U.S. All of this is done under the idealistic mission 'to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.' But as Donna Haraway would tell us, 'universal' knowledges, or libraries, do not exist. When books are scanned, they are also selected, organized, classified, and indexed. Who and what are we losing in the process? Whose canon, whose words, whose biases are we reproducing first? Knowing that these texts are also being mined to create datasets and to train algorithms, what culture is being embedded into code? And ultimately, as power structures are passed from medium to medium: how can we reject what we inherit and create more inclusive knowledge spaces instead?

## The Book: Its Past, Its Future

### An interview with Roger Chartier (2013)

What is a book? And how has the digital age transformed what we read and how we read it? These are some of the key questions addressed by Roger Chartier in this interview. Besides the materiality and mutability of text, Chartier also examines the contemporary life of books online, and questions the digitization of 'all' printed knowledge by private enterprises.

To consider these questions, this reader is divided into three parts. The first deals with the way books are currently being uploaded into digital formats, and subsequently made searchable and accessible in online libraries. I chose Roger Chartier's interview on *The Book: Its Past, Its Future* for his thorough examination of how print and digital media produce meaning. He also introduces us to the Google Books project, and its basic limitations in language and attitude. The second text, by Sanne Koevoets, is more specific. It is a feminist critique of existing digital libraries, and delves more closely into the politics of selection and the way we tend to structure information.

## The Digital Universal Library and the Myth of Chaos by Sanne Koevoets (2014)

In this essay, Sanne Koevoets contextualises the myth of the universal library offers the FRAGEN database as an example of a feminist digital library which, through inclusive processes and chatty interfaces, is questioning and rejecting the biased structures of online knowledge spaces as we know them.

The next section of this reader focuses on the historical biases of the literary canon, which in itself has become somewhat of an institution. The books we call standards (and the conditions they subscribe to) are the ones we teach most in syllabi, and include often in anthologies. They even shape the very language we use. But until the feminist movements of the 1970s, most of the Western canon was male-authored, male-regulated and largely undisputed. The works I chose to include in this section expose the gender bias in literary tradition and the feminist efforts to reinsert women's voices into the pages of books and the words that fill them.

### **Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon by Lillian Robinson (1983)**

Lillian Robinson examines the exclusion, distortion and misrepresentation of women (as authors, subjects and objects) in the Western literary canon. She also charts a way forward for feminist criticism to reinsert the female tradition into the canon, while at the same time challenging the ideologies which are being reproduced by it.

*While Robinson's essay is more academic, Ursula Le Guin's interview with William Walsh is a personal account of her experience as a woman writer in a male-dominated field. Both pieces also touch on intersectionality, and give examples of the systemic disadvantage felt by queer and black writers in Western literary history. What is becoming clear at this point is that the majority of the books on our shelves do not reflect a balanced expression of the world. In other words, books are not a direct translation of human knowledge, just as technology is not that of science or logic. What we know, and what we read, is never value neutral.*

### **I am Woman writer, I am a Western Writer An interview with Ursula Le Guin (1995)**

In this interview, Ursula Le Guin speaks to William Walsh about her writing practice and women's role in Western literature. As America's preeminent science fiction writer, she discusses the female voices who have inspired her, those who have been forgotten or hidden by history, as well as her own experience with bias and privilege which 'always defends itself.'

*The following text is another interview, this time with acclaimed Indonesian literary critic, Melani Budianta. As an Indonesian woman, I find it very important to address the state of feminist literary critique in my home country. Without a history of suffrage but with more volatile political and religious tensions, equality in Indonesia is grounded in a different context. Here Budianta charts the rise and fall of Indonesian female authorship in the last century. The last text in this section looks at how the same power structures are found in and multiplied by the very language we use.*

### **Merekam Perempuan Penulis Dalam Sejarah Kesusasteraan An interview with Melani Budianta (2016)**

Teks ini adalah wawancara diantara Jurnal Perempuan dan Melani Budianta, seorang pengajar dan kritikus sastra ternama di Indonesia. Didalamnya, Budianta membicarakan perjalanan sastra perempuan dari tahun ke tahun, dari jaman Kartini sampai era kontemporer, dimana perempuan penulis Indonesia mulai lebih terlihat dan bebas berkarya.

### **Linguistic Sexism and Feminist Linguistic Activism by Anne Pauwels (2003)**

This chapter of the Handbook of Language and Gender is relevant not just for its study of the gendered nature of language, but also for charting the rise of feminist linguistic activism. Its key argument is that language can and should be reformed, if we are to 'challenge the hegemony of the meanings promoted and authorized by the dominant group or culture.'

**Windows and Mirrors  
by Jay Bolter, Diane Gromala (2005)**

Windows and Mirrors is a book by Jay Bolter and Diane Gromala exploring the computer as a medium and its capacity to both reflect and obscure 'a world of information.' In this extract, they question the history of transparency in interface design, and call for a more critical approach to what we hide and what we make visible online.

*With the problems exposed, the last section in this reader deals with potential alternatives and challenges to the status quo. If the content of the books we scan are exclusive and incomplete, how can we ensure that they are at least distributed and treated as such? The desire for seamlessness, efficiency and marketability has made most online spaces more opaque and self-referential. Search engines become echo chambers of what we already know, while web-sites become black boxes of code which we don't. I think that to open up any medium to more diversity, we first have to stop hiding the processes which currently govern them.*

**Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface, by Johanna Drucker (2013)**

This article outlines a critical framework for a theory of performative materiality and its potential application to interface design from a humanistic perspective. Performative materiality is based on the conviction that a system should be understood by what it does, not only how it is structured. In addition, the article takes a deeper look at how we might move towards integrating this model and critical principles into a model of humanistic interface design.

*Moving away from the world of book scanning and towards a theoretical framework for approaching diversity, this reader closes with a chapter from Sara Ahmed's book, On Being Included. In it, she writes about her experiences confronting the 'brick wall' of discrimination, and how it is through these very acts that knowledge about the wall is produced. In other words, if we want to expose the problems in an institution, we have to be willing to come up close against them. Eventually, this is the way we can learn 'how not to reproduce what we inherit.'*

**On Being Included: A Phenomenological Practice  
by Sara Ahmed (2012)**

In this section of her book, On Being Included, black feminist Sara Ahmed reflects on the experience of racism and sexism in institutional culture, and offers a critique of what happens when diversity is offered as a solution. She also suggests viewing diversity work as a practice of reorientation: that which generates knowledge of institutions and reveals their 'brick walls' through the very attempt of transforming them.

*1: On the books  
we upload*

# The Book: Its Past, Its Future

An interview with Roger Chartier

Roger Chartier, a professor at the Collège de France, examines the upheavals of the digital age which now confront us with an unprecedented question about the future of the written text: in its electronic form, should a text be fixed and immutable like a printed book, or can it open up to the potentialities of anonymity and unbounded multiplicity? What is certain is that the multiplication of editorial media, of periodicals and screens is diversifying the reading and writing practices of a society which, contrary to what is often claimed, is reading more and more.

## The Transformations of the Book

**Books & Ideas:** *I'd like to talk to you about the way in which the book as a physical object is metamorphosing nowadays under the influence of Internet technologies (e-books, print on demand etc.). Can you go over some of the changes the book has undergone since the invention of the codex [1]?*

**Roger Chartier:** The first problem is: what is a book? This is a question Kant asked in the second part of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and he defined quite clearly what a book is. On the one hand, it's an object produced by any kind of manufacturing process—manuscript copy, printing or even electronic production—and which belongs to whoever acquires it. At the same time, a book is also a work, a discourse. Kant says it's a discourse that is addressed to a readership and that always remains

the property of whoever composed it and can only be distributed under the mandate he gives to a bookseller or a publisher to put it in the realm of public circulation.

All the problems involved in thinking about it derive from this complex relationship between the book as a material object and the book as an intellectual or aesthetic work, because to this day that relationship has always been established between these two categories, between these two definitions: on the one hand, works that have a certain logic, a coherence, a completeness and, on the other, the material forms of their inscription, which in Antiquity and up to the 1st century AD were confined to the scroll. In this case, the work was very often disseminated by means of several different objects. Beginning with the invention of the codex (that is to say the book as we still know it, with notebooks, leaves and pages), the opposite situation arose: one and the same codex could—and this was actually the rule—contain several books in the sense of different works.

Chartier begins this interview by addressing some fundamental aspects of what makes a book a book. He defines the medium as having two levels of meaning: that of a material, manufactured object, and that of an intellectual or aesthetic discourse. Whether we are talking about an ancient scroll, a mass-produced paperback or an electronic publication, it is the complex relationship between these two aspects which greatly dictate how and what we read.

What's new about the present day and age is that this nexus between types of object and types of discourse has been severed, since there is a textual continuity to be read on a screen, and the material inscription on this unlimited surface no longer



corresponds to a specific type of object (the scrolls of Antiquity, manuscript codices or the printed book after Gutenberg). This now gives rise to disputes that may even have legal ramifications regarding copyright and ownership issues. How does one maintain categories of ownership in a work within a technology that no longer delimits the work the way an object like the ancient scroll or the codex used to do? This may also have consequences for the recognition of the status of scholarly authority. In the age of the codex, a hierarchy of objects could more or less indicate a hierarchy in terms of validity of discourse. There was an immediately perceivable difference between an encyclopedia, a book, a newspaper, a journal, a note sheet, a letter and so on, which were provided in material form to be read, regarded, physically handled, and which corresponded to registers of discourse that fell within this plurality of forms.

But today the sole object—and there's one right here on this desk—is the computer, which holds every type of discourse, whatever it may be, and which renders the continuity between reading and writing absolutely immediate. So we can enter into con-

*That the computer is now the 'sole object' through which we do most of our reading, means that it in today's media environment, it is the gatekeeper of almost every type of discourse. Instead of discrete texts in separate codex, the screen allows us to engage with a plurality and fluidity of information. This means reading becomes a more mobile, interpretive and reciprocal act. As such, our role and responsibility as readers also expands.*

temporary considerations, while returning to this duality that we often forget. This brings up the problem of the electronic book,

with a rematerialization in an order of objects like the e-book or the laptop computer, which are unique objects for every sort of text. So from here on, the relationship takes on new terms.

**Books & Ideas:** *Michel de Certeau draws a distinction between the written trace, which is fixed and enduring, and reading, which is of a transient nature [1]. But texts on the Internet are constantly changing. To stretch the point a bit, one might say the Internet is a world of "plagiarized plagiarizers." [2] Is this a major upheaval in your opinion, or would you say that over the course of history, and especially in the 17th century, the text has never been a stable form?*

**Roger Chartier:** Yes. In his distinction, Michel de Certeau refers to the roving reader who constructs meaning based on constraints while concomitantly constructing meaning based on freedoms, that is to say he "poaches." If we do poach, it's because there is a domain that is set, protected and off limits. De Certeau often compares writing to tilling the soil and reading to traveling (or poaching). This is indeed a view that has inspired works on the history of reading or the sociology and anthropology of reading, from the moment that reading was no longer enclosed in the text, but was the product of a dynamic, dialectical relationship between a reader, the scope of his expectations, skills and interests, and the text he is coming to grips with.

But this constructive distinction can also obscure two aspects. The first is that the poaching reader himself is rather strictly determined by collective determinations that are shared by interpretative or reading communities, so this creative freedom, this consumption that is production, has its own limits; it is socially differential. Secondly, as you say, this textual domain is a more

mobile terrain than a plot of land to the extent that this mobility actually did exist for any number of reasons. The technological conditions of text reproduction, for example the manuscript copy (a practice that endured till the 18th and 19th centuries), are amenable to this textual mobility from one copy to another. Apart from highly sacred texts, which have to be respected to the letter, all texts are open to interpretation, additions and alterations. In the first period of printing, that is to say between the mid-15th and early 19th century, print runs were still quite limited, for many reasons, to between 1,000 and 1,500 copies. From then on, the success of a work was ensured by multiple republications. And each new edition was a reinterpretation of the text, whether in terms of the letter of the text, which is modifiable, or even in terms of the physical aspects of its presentation, which are another form of variation. Supposing not even a comma is changed in a given text, changes in forms of publication—fonts, the presence or absence of illustrations, how the text is divided up etc—create a mobility in the possibilities of appropriation.

So we have compelling reasons to assert this textual mobility. There are other, intellectual or aesthetic reasons, too: up to Romanticism, stories belonged to everyone and texts were written based on formulae that were already there. This malleability of stories, this plurality of resources available for writing, creates another form of movement, which is impossible to confine to the letter of a text that remains forever stable. We might even add that copyright only serves to reinforce this fact. Which is paradoxical, of course, since copyright recognizes that a work is always identical to itself. What then does copyright protect? In the 18th and 19th centuries, it protected every possible form of printed publication of a text and, in our day, every possible form of publication period, whether it be a motion picture adaptation, a tele-

vision program or various editions. So we have a legal principle of unity that covers the indefinite plurality of successive or simultaneous states of the work.

I think we need to resituate contemporary mobility, with the electronic text, that polyphonic textual palimpsest, in a long-term conception of past textual mobilities. What remains of the question is the fact that there are constant attempts to reduce that mobility in the electronic world. This is the precondition for products to be saleable—the “*opus mechanicum*,” as Kant would have called it – and the precondition for proper nouns to be recognizable both as authors and as beneficiaries of their creative work.

In the context of book scanning culture, it's very interesting what Chartier says here about how we treat electronic text. Why do we still insist on such fixed ideas of ownership, and how does this impact the way books are distributed online? What would digital libraries look like if we break away from the conditions of 'saleability'? At the end of the day, the commercial aspect of book digitization has many implications.

Hence the profound contradiction that Robert Darnton developed between this infinite mobility of electronic communication and the effort to enclose the electronic text in mental or intellectual categories, but also in material forms that fix it, define it, transforming it into a plot of land on which the reader might poach—but a plot with sufficiently stable boundaries, limits and contents. Herein lies the great challenge, which is to determine whether the electronic text ought to be subject to inherited concepts and therefore altered in its very materiality, that is permanently fixed with built-in safeguards, or whether, conversely, the potentialities of this anonymity, this multiplicity and endless

mobility are going to dominate the uses of writing and reading. I think this is the focus of the contemporary discussion, uncertainties and vacillations.

**Books & Ideas:** *To end this batch of questions about changes in the book as a physical object, I'd also like to ask you about changes in the place where this object is traditionally kept: namely the library. In its Google Books Library Project, Google has scanned the collections of 28 libraries, including those of Harvard, Stanford and Oxford. This project has its (critical) proponents like Darnton and its opponents like Jean-Noël Jeanneney. Do you think Google is going to give rise to a global library that is open to everyone?*

**Roger Chartier:** Here again, underlying this project you'll find myths or figures of Antiquity, specifically that of a library that contains every book in the world. That was the plan of the Ptolemys in Alexandria. Google has subscribed to this prospect of a library containing every existing book as well as the books that may yet be written. Technically and ideally speaking, there's no reason to think that all the books that exist in one form or another couldn't be digitized and included in a universal library.

But one of the primary limitations is that the Google project is handled by a capitalist enterprise. It is governed by an economic rationale, even if that is not readily apparent, and that rationale may also govern the advertisers and media of this gigantic corporation. Furthermore, this is a project which, even if it claims to be all-encompassing, clearly favors the English language. As an ex-governor of Texas once said, "If English was good enough for Jesus, it ought to be good enough for the children of Texas." No doubt she'd read the Bible only in the King James transla-

tion and not the previous versions. The project is not presented along those lines, but still, given that the first five libraries chosen were Anglo-American, the bulk of the collections was inevitably in English.

So what are the possible responses? One suggestion was to reorganize national and European libraries in such a way as to come up with an alternative project. It was alternative in terms of language diversity and also because it was based more on public power and not on private enterprise. But presumably through these portions of universal libraries we could arrive at a universal library, even if it isn't unified by a modern-day Ptolemy. And there's no reason to think it couldn't be accessible in electronic form.

*Moving on to Google Books, the largest book scanning project ever undertaken, Chartier notes several potential problems. The first, is its capitalist framework, which takes power away from the public and puts it into a hands of giant, private enterprise. The second, is its bias for the English language. Google Books may seem like an attempt at a 'universal' library, but their scanning process betrays some obvious hierarchical attitudes. In terms of content, Anglo-American collections take top billing, and in terms of values, speed and profit are more important than transparency of process or even the quality of digitization. What results is less a universal library and more a bookshop with many blind spots.*

The question that follows from there is not only that of languages and responsibility, but also whether this universal library, which wouldn't need to be located anywhere insofar as anyone can access one book or another on his computer wherever he

happens to be, won't spell the demise of libraries as we knew them: a place where books are preserved, sorted and consultable. I think the answer is no, it won't. The digitization process makes an even stronger case for retaining the traditional definition because we always come back to a fundamental point, which is, as Don McKenzie puts it, that forms affect meaning. The great danger in the digitization process is to suggest that a text is the same no matter what media it is carried on. As crucial as access to digitized texts may be, I find that this digitization nevertheless reinforces the importance of preserving our cultural heritage, the successive forms that texts have had for their successive readers. The task of preserving, cataloguing and consulting texts in the forms in which they were originally published becomes an absolutely fundamental requirement, which reinforces the importance of libraries in preserving our cultural heritage.

Any number of examples can be adduced in this regard. In the 19th century, the novel existed in multifarious physical forms: serialized in weekly or daily supplements in the papers, in the form of publication in installments, in the form of books for reading rooms, in the form of anthologies of a single or several authors, in the form of complete works and so on and so forth. Each form of publication involves different possibilities of appropriation, different waiting periods, a different temporal relation to the text in question. The need to reinforce this role in the preservation of written heritage is not only a good thing for scholars seeking to reconstruct the history of texts, but also for the relationship current-day societies have to their own past, that is to say to the successive forms that written culture has taken in the past.

[...]

## What is reading?

**Books & Ideas:** *In a recent article, Robert Darnton says it's "important to get the feel of a book – the texture of its paper, the quality of its printing, the nature of its binding. Books also give off special smells." [2] Allow me in closing to ask you a personal question: what is your particular way of loving books? How do you read?*

**Roger Chartier:** *"Le moi est haïssable [i.e. egoism is odious]," somebody [i.e. Pascal] once said somewhere. By the way, I think this question is a booby-trap if you bear in mind what Bourdieu says about the biographical illusion. This type of question presumes you will give an answer in which, even if unconsciously, you construct an image of yourself. The main thing, especially in the first part of his observation, is that Darnton is relaying his own work as an historian. In the 18th century, as a matter of fact, as he shows in copious correspondence, many buyers of books were keen on this physicality, the nature of the paper, the ink and so on. All these elements, which inform the nostalgia of those who believe the book is already dead, give pleasure to certain bibliophiles and readers. To my mind, they are not to be taken so much from their affective side, this world of printed pages that we've supposedly lost, but from their intellectual side: the forms of inscription of a given text delimit or prescribe its potential for appropriation. This starts with appropriations at the most economic level, since the retail price depends on these physical features. A paperback doesn't cost as much as a hardback. Above and beyond the conditions of physical and economic appropriation, there are the conditions of the construction of meaning, which involve the choice of format, fonts, the division of the text, the use of illustrations and so on. So Darnton's remark, which lies on the affective*

level of an intimate relationship to the object, can be converted into a tool of knowledge.

As to your second question, I think the only answer is the one we mentioned earlier. Nowadays everyone is developing this plurality of relations to the texts they read in accordance with their concerns and their pastimes, their activities and desires. From this point of view, we read intensively and extensively texts that deserve to be regarded as legitimate reading material, and we place the others outside of these categories. Sometimes we hear a diagnosis that says we're reading less and less these days. That's dead wrong: no society has ever read as much, or published as many books (even if the print runs are tending down). Never before has so much printed matter been available at kiosks and newsstands, and never before have people read as much—thanks to the omnipresence of screens.

So it's completely wrong to claim that reading is on the wane. On the other hand, what's at stake in this sort of observation is the fact that the ones asking and the ones fielding this question often don't feel the same things are worth reading. Christian Baudelot has put out a book entitled *Et pourtant, ils lisent* ["And Yet They're Reading"], in which he stresses the contrast between statements by teenagers, especially boys who don't want by any

To close, Chartier dispels the notion that as a society, we are reading less. In fact, we are reading more today than ever. However, we are also doing so more unconsciously than ever. It seems that the more we communicate through computers, the less we question how this information exchange really happens, and who is being included and excluded in the process. In this reader, I hope to further question the power structures in the books we read and the way they are digitized and distributed in online spaces.

means to be pegged as readers (because that carries connotations of "square" bookishness and a conventional mindset, a culture they reject), and their actual behavior: at school, they read; in front of the screen, they read; and those who say they never read actually read a wide range of written matter. We find the same type of analysis in historical studies using interviews of readers born in the early 20th century in working-class and rural milieux.

This points up the tensions between what people say about reading, which always refers to a norm of scholastic and cultural legitimacy, and actual practices, which are boundless, widespread and diverse, and which take up a wide range of printed and written matter over the course of a single day or a lifetime. Defining legitimacy, the connect between what we regard as reading proper and the infinite amount of low-quality practices, which are reading practices all the same, may well be the great challenge facing contemporary society. The multiplicity of widespread practices and appropriations of writing can be viewed as a telltale sign of the fault lines running through society and of the very different resources thanks to which individuals can know themselves better or know others better. This is not a matter of contending that all the texts we read are of equal value, but I don't exempt myself from this tension between what we read for intellectual purposes or aesthetic pleasure and the countless low-quality texts we read over the course of a day in the press or on the web. This is an answer in which, it seems to me, the actual, individual case can help us think about practices of knowledge, which are what we have in common nowadays.

*Interview by Ivan Jablonka*

*Transcription by Émilie Boutin*

## Footnotes

[1] I.e. "books with pages that you turn as opposed to scrolls that you roll." R. Darnton, "The Library in the New Age", The New York Review of Books, Vol. 55, No. 10, June 12, 2008. – Translator's note

[2] Ibid.

# The Digital Universal Library and the Myth of Chaos

by Sanne Koevoets

An important narrative prefiguration of the library can be found in Jorge Luis Borges' short story *The Library of Babel* (1941, English translation 1962). The story figures a vast library that consists of hexagonal spaces along the walls of which stand an unimaginable number of books:

*The Library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols (a number which, though extremely vast, is not infinite): Everything.* (Borges 1962, 75).

Borges' Library has captured readers' imaginations for decennia with its promise of a Universal Library that can hold all of human knowledge (without any exclusions) on the one hand, and the realization that such a collection would be useless without an index on the other hand. Considering that even if the Library of Babel would hold only one 410 page book and every possible misprint of that book with one, two, three mistakes would occupy a larger space than the universe itself (Bloch 2008), the thought of having all that knowledge preserved in one space, with only an infinitesimal chance encountering even one meaningful text, turns hope into horror.

The promise of digital technologies to capacitate the storage of vast amounts of text electronically has, in the last century, re-

awakened the Alexandrian dream of a universal library. Already in 1945—a mere four years after Borges conjured up the philosophical problems posed by the idea of totality—Vannevar Bush considered the possibilities to devise a system (which he called the Memex) that could store massive amounts of data and make them available in a structure that resembles the World Wide Web (Vandendorpe 2009, 75). But David Langford's pastiche *The Net of Babel* by J\*rg\* L\*\*S B\*rg\*s (1995) suggests that such a digital Universal Library presents a similar conundrum. While net-librarians are no longer doomed to dwell in a seemingly endless labyrinth, and can engage the totality of everything that can be written from behind a screen: "chaos reigns throughout the whole vast informational sea; the tiny islands of meaning we have found are scattered like primes in the ocean of numbers, according to no visible plan" (Langford 1995, 5).

*This essay is a feminist critique on digital libraries written by Sanne Koevoets ; who is a researcher and lecturer on new media cultures and gender studies. I love that it begins with an excerpt from Jose Luis Borges' pivotal work 'The Library of Babel' (1941), a short story which figures a vast library that consists of an infinite number of hexagonal spaces, holding an unlimited number of books. But the promise of a 'Universal Library', which would hold all of human knowledge, has always been a problematic one. Even with the rise of digital technologies, with its capacity for storage and its sophisticated search tools, Koevoets argues that the reality is both more complex and more mundane than the dream.*

The digital Universal Library appears thus as the opposite of Eco's Aedificium: rather than being characterized by an excess of order to hide the lurking chaos underneath, the digital Universal

Library suffers from too little order, allowing chaos to reign free. In Jon Thiem's digital utopia, on the other hand, the modern crisis of knowledge has been resolved by sophisticated search tools "Universal Abstracts," and electronic reading programs that render all the knowledge in the Universal Library immediately accessible and intelligible" (Thiem 1999, 258). Here, the immediacy of the search tool reigns in the destructive effects of chaos.

The reality of the digital library, however, is both more complex and more mundane. While the fantasy of a (digital) Universal Library may be philosophically or metaphysically compelling, the politics of selection and access—and thus of ordering techniques—are ever present on the Web.

Sophisticated search tools, such as Google's personalization algorithms, increasingly define and dominate how information is presented to users. In *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you* (2011) Eli Pariser argues that the recent trend towards search personalization has the effect of "feeding back" the searcher's own previous preferences to them.

Additionally, Jose' van Dijek (2010) argues that Google Scholar uses popularity ratings as a way to rank scholarly articles online, and as such its ranking algorithm has become a co-producer of scientific authority. William Turkel even calls Google's ranking algorithm "the most pervasive source of bias in the history of research" (Turkel 2008, n.p.).

In face of these considerations, it seems about time to abandon the lofty dream of the Universal Library altogether. Neither the reality nor the aim of any real library has been aimed at universality since Alexandria, as Christopher Rowe has argued: "no matter how expansive in space and aspiration, every library is by definition selective in its collection of texts." (Rowe 2013. n.p.) Rowe's insight seems particularly pertinent to feminist libraries;

as such collections will tend towards specificity rather than totalizing inclusivity. But even such specific collections will have to engage the mundane reality of the electronic marketplace. As Marlene Manoff has pointed out: "[t]he consolidation of the publishing industry as well as the limited number of vendors selling database packages [has led to the situation that] libraries may only lease access to information rather than purchase it outright, they cannot preserve, archive, or guarantee future access" (Manoff 2001, 378).

*Next to the fundamental fact that every library is by definition selective in its collection of texts, Koevoets points out that technology is a social construct and thus not value-neutral. Our interactions with online spaces are governed by algorithms, which often conform to market forces and increasingly define and dominate how information is presented to us. In this way, largely invisible processes like ranking algorithms are becoming co-producers of authority, and to some, 'the most pervasive source of bias in the history of research.' This is one of my own strongest criticisms of the way information is presented to us online, and especially in Google Books, the biggest book-scanning operation the world has ever seen.*

Under such conditions, how can webs of feminist knowledge be represented online? The FRAMES on GENder in Europe project (FRAGEN) aimed to take an innovative approach towards constructing an online accessible database of core texts from the second feminist wave from all 27 EU countries as well as Croatia and Turkey. The project was from its get-go forced to face the Babylonian confusion of Europe's multilinguism, while negotiating budgetary limitations and strict copyright laws (de Jong et al.



2013, 77). The result of the project is a database of core texts and a website that gives access to the database from all over the world.

What stands out when accessing the website is that compared to *Sisterhood and After* it appears sparse in term of design and multimedia content. The information on the homepage states the aim of the project is to “facilitate comparative research into the history of feminist thinking in 27 EU countries plus Croatia and Turkey” and there is a mention of the project’s affiliation with the EU funded research project “Quality in Gender + Equality Politics” (QUING). It further states that the goals of the FRAGEN database is to: “create a database of the original texts on gender+equality frames that have emerged from feminist movements in Europe” and to “organize and facilitate open access for researchers to this database” (Fragen 2013).

*With the problems exposed, Ko-voets brings forward a case study called FRAGEN: The FRAMES on Gender in Europe project. The first, key difference between this project, that of the Google Books project, is that FRAGEN tends towards specificity rather than totalizing inclusivity. The second, is the issue of transparency. FRAGEN’s approach to selection does not pretend to be neutral nor exhaustive. So how can we design interfaces which are more open to investigation? What power structures should we question if we accept that all knowledge is situated and all libraries are excluded? How would this change the way we search for and consume information online?*

The “About” section of the website reflects on the selection criteria. First of all a selection was made of key figures within the 29 states. secondly insight is given into the criteria by which these key figures were asked to select texts for a “longlist,” then on how

“longlists” were pared down into “shortlists” of ten texts per country. The “About” section also gives insight into the construction of the “analytic descriptions” of texts. This description is of particular importance, as the sections on “copyright” and “digitization” describe. A “Creative Commons by non commercial-no derivative works” license was acquired, which allows FRAGEN-users to download and share the texts with others “for research purposes only, and as long as they link back to the FRAGEN database.” This also means that it is not permitted to change the texts in any way—the FRAGEN project was limited to upload and make available the texts only in the original language in which they were written. Here the power of digital copyright laws is made visible as a defining factor in how digital libraries can take shape.

The third section of the website allows access to specific countries and the texts that were selected and the fourth section allows a database search based on a keyword query: a list of countries, a list of all keywords, and the list of titles (in English). Clicking on a specific title brings up a page important information about the text. including the title (in the original language); author(s) name(s); a list of keywords; a link to the survey; and a short summary in English. While the majority of texts are not in English, the list of keywords, summary, and most importantly the survey give a lot of information about the text and the topics it deals with. The survey was filled out by local experts and gives insight in (among other things) the topics of the text according to Beijing’s critical areas of concern, the way gender is conceptualized in the text and how it is seen (or not) to intersect with other axes of difference. For a thorough description of the contents of the survey and its role in the selection and organization of the database, see De Jong, Meulmeester & Vriend (2013).

The combination of transparency given with regards to the se-

lection of texts as a collective, international effort and the way in which different local views and conceptualizations were used to provide access to the database via multiple routes of entry (for instance by country, author, topic: etc.) lends the database—which is for all intents and purposes a “finished” collection rather than a “living archive” that can grow and expand—a certain fluidity that the *Sisterhood and After* website lacks. This fluidity can be found in the way in which different queries can pull up different lists of European texts, and as such produce different representations of thematic “webs” or “constellations” within European feminist thought.

The last section of the website, “Research,” invites researchers from all countries represented in the database to reflect and comment on the shortlisted texts in a comparative way. As of yet, only one article is up (Kazinei 2013), but its inclusion on the website does strengthen the project’s claim to wanting to capacitate critical, comparative research. It also allows for the inclusion of shifting interpretations and new ways of framing to enter the database. This is another way in which the FRAGEN database and website are set up actively eschews claims to objectivity. Instead, the FRAGEN database clearly and explicitly invites reflection on

questions of (feminist) canon formation, the categorization of feminisms and feminist methodology (De Jong et. al. 2013- 80-82). Furthermore, FRAGEN engages in innovative ways with the privatization and control of the digital archive through copyright laws, and has developed alternative ways to make European feminist texts available across Europe within the strict budgetary limitations that libraries and archives are facing.

The FRAGEN database shows that in order to make feminist knowledge accessible online, not only the politics of selection, but also the politics of the index must be addressed. Rather than

imagining the Internet as an (utopian) anarchical, or a (dystopian) chaotic sphere, online feminist libraries have to thoughtfully engage the specific dynamics of privatization and technological control online when they develop innovative ways to preserve and disseminate traces of the women’s movement.

### **Digital feminist libraries as monuments: Representing webs of feminist knowledge online**

These two examples of digital feminist libraries together show the significant challenges of representing webs of feminist knowledge online. The *Sisterhood and After* website makes innovative use of multimedia. However, the way the materials are organized reproduces biases in the movement, and fixes them within its very structure. FRAGEN on the other hand, explicitly addresses such inherent dilemmas by providing a great amount of transparency with regards to the processes of selection and organization and thus inviting fundamental reflection on how such processes are nowadays situated within specific configurations of culture, politics, and technology.

But should these two spaces be considered “libraries” at all? If so, then certainly for different reasons. *Sisterhood and After* serves a clear monumental purpose: it makes the women’s movement visible online. Its use of feminist iconography and its presentation of video material invites a sense of engagement with the movement, FRAGEN on the other hand, is engaged in the other purpose of traditional libraries: the selection and dissemination of exemplary texts. The website appears far less monumental in scope: its design is sparse and functional, but its internal structure allows for the representation of webs of feminist knowledge in terms of different constellations of ideas, topics, frames: and aims.

Feminist researchers should take seriously the implications and fundamental assumptions that are built into the very structure of knowledge spaces, including online knowledge spaces. The way we can access and navigate webs of feminist knowledge—including their entanglements with cultural, political, and technological forces—through collections and indexes of feminist texts forms an integral part of our situatedness as researchers.

The last section of the essay focuses on the website of the database, an interface which allows and invites other researchers to reflect and comment on the library texts in a comparative way. This is another way in which the FRAGEN database and website are set up to actively eschew claims to objectivity, and to represent the constellations of feminist knowledge in all their partiality. In this way, Koevoets brings together issues of archive politics, bias in technology, and feminist methodology. I am especially interested by her critique on ranking algorithms and how it ties into her rejection of the 'universal' anything.

As Donna Haraway (1988) has argued, rather than imagining knowledge to spring from a "conquering gaze from nowhere" (Haraway 1988, 581), feminist knowledge practitioners should acknowledge and reflect on the partiality of their perspective. The spaces where and practices through which we search for knowledge through which we produce or which produce for us maps and overviews of webs of (feminist) knowledge: are important factors in the production of such partial perspectives. That is why library practices do not only include the librarian's and archivist's practices of selection, preservation, and organization, but also the practices through which researchers engage with the materials in libraries and archives, as well as with libraries and archives themselves.

## References

- Baider, Fabienne and Anna Zobnina. 2013. "(Re)searching gender in a library." In *Teaching Gender with Libraries and Archives: The Power of Information*, edited by Sara de Jong and Sanne Koevoets, 99-111. Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Baker, Nicholson. 2001. *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*. New York: Vintage Books/Random House.
- Bloch, William G. 2008. *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges' Library of Babel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Library of Babel." (1962) 1999. Translated by James E. Irby. In *Magic and Madness in the Library*, edited by Eric Graber, 75-84. Delhi NY: Birch Book Press.
- De Jong, Sara and Saskia Wieringa. 2013. "The library as knowledge broker." In *Teaching Gender with Libraries and Archives: The Power of Information*, edited by Sara de Jong and Sanne Koevoets, 13-30. Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1995. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- De Jong, Sara, Cé Meulmeester and Tilly Vriend. 2013. "Core feminist texts in Europe online: Teaching gender with the FRAGEN database." In *Teaching Gender with Libraries and Archives: The Power of Information* edited by Sara de Jong and Sanne Koevoets, 76-86. Budapest: Central European University Press.

Eco, Umberto. 1984. *The Name of the Rose*. Orlando: Harcourt Press.

—. 1986 *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*.

Eichhorn, Kate. 2013. *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books.

FRAGEN. 2013 "Welcome to FRAMES on GENDER."  
<http://www.fragen.nu/atria/fragen/> (accessed October 30, 2013).

Garcia, David and Eric Kluitenberg. 2011. "Tracing the [Ephemera]: Tactical Media and the Lure of the Archive." *Tactical Media Files*.

## 2: *On the canon which excludes*

# Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon

by Lillian Robinson

Successful plots have often had gunpowder in them. Feminist critics have gone so far as to take treason to the canon as our text.

— Jane Marcus<sup>1</sup>

*The lofty seat of canonized bards* (Pollak, 1827).

As with many other restrictive institutions, we are hardly aware of it until we come into conflict with it; the elements of the literary canon are simply absorbed by the apprentice scholar and critic in the normal course of graduate education, without anyone's ever seeming to inculcate or defend them. Appeal, were any necessary, would be to the other meaning of "canon," that is, to established standards of judgment and of taste. Not that either definition is presented as rigid and immutable—far from it, for lectures in literary history are full of wry references to a benighted though hardly distant past when, say, the metaphysical poets were insufficiently appreciated or Vachel Lindsay was the most modern poet recognized in American literature. Whence the acknowledgment of a subjective dimension, sometimes generalized as "sensibility," to the category of taste. Sweeping modifications in the canon are said to occur because of changes in collective sensibility, but individual admissions and elevations from "minor" to "major" status tend to be achieved by successful

critical promotion, which is to say, demonstration that a particular author does meet generally accepted criteria of excellence.

The results, moreover, are nowhere codified: they are neither set down in a single place, nor are they absolutely uniform. In the visual arts and in music, the cold realities of patronage, purchase, presentation in private and public collections, or performance on concert programs create the conditions for a work's canonical status or lack of it. No equivalent set of institutional arrangements exists for literature, however. The fact of publication and even the feat of remaining in print for generations, which are at least analogous to the ways in which pictures and music are displayed, not the same sort of indicators; they represent less of an investment and hence less general acceptance of their canonicity. In the circumstances, it may seem somewhat of an exaggeration to speak of "the" literary canon, almost paranoid to call it an institution, downright hysterical to characterize that institution as restrictive. The whole business is so much more informal, after all, than any of these terms implies, the noncomitant processes so much more gentlemanly. Surely, it is more like a gentlemen's agreement than a repressive instrument—isn't it?

But a gentleman is inescapably—that is, by definition—a member of a privileged class and of the male sex. From this perspective, it is probably quite accurate to think of the canon as an entirely gentlemanly artifact, considering how few works by non-members of that class and sex make it into the informal agglomeration of course syllabi, anthologies, and widely-commented upon "standard authors" that constitutes the canon as it is generally understood. For, beyond their availability on bookshelves, it is through the teaching and study—one might even say the habitual teaching and study—of certain works that they become institutionalized as canonical literature. Within that broad

canon, moreover, those admitted but read only in advanced courses, commented upon only by more or less narrow specialists, are subjected to the further tyranny of “major” versus “minor.

*When we talk about the canon, we are talking about the body of books, music, and art that scholars generally accept as the most important and influential in shaping Western culture. Thus, as a classification system, it is one which can both reflect and shape our biases and beliefs. Focusing on gender, what is the role of women authors in the literary canon? How does their exclusion or misrepresentation reflect the politics involved in canon-formation? And how has feminist criticism approached this issue historically? These are the central questions asked by Lillian Robinson in her essay, which also suggests an examination of the canon ‘as a source of ideas, themes, motifs, and myths about the two sexes.’*

For more than a decade now, feminist scholars have been protesting the apparently systematic neglect of women’s experience in the literary canon, neglect that takes the form of distorting and misreading the few recognized female writers and excluding the others. Moreover, the argument runs, the predominantly male authors in the canon show us the female character and relations between the sexes in a way that both reflects and contributes to sexist ideology—an aspect of these classic works about which the critical tradition remained silent for generations. The feminist challenge, although intrinsically (and, to my mind, refreshingly) polemical, has not been simply a reiterated attack, but a series of suggested alternatives to the male-dominated membership and attitudes of the accepted canon. In this essay, I propose to examine these feminist alternatives, assess their impact on the standard canon, and propose some directions for further work.

Although my emphasis in each section is on the substance of the challenge, the underlying polemic is, I believe, abundantly clear.

*...the presence of canonized forefathers (Burke, 1790).*

Start with the Great Books, the traditional desert-island ones, the foundation of courses in the Western humanistic tradition. No women authors, of course, at all, but within the works thus canonized, certain monumental female images: Helen, Penelope, and Clytemnestra, Beatrice and the Dark Lady of the Sonnets, Bérénice, Cunégonde, and Margarete. The list of interesting female characters is enlarged if we shift to the Survey of English Literature and its classic texts; here, moreover, there is the possible inclusion of a female author or even several, at least as the course’s implicit “historical background” ticks through and past the Industrial Revolution. It is a possibility that is not always hon-

*Robinson begins with an immediate dismissal of the idea of a naturally occurring, or indeed inevitable canon. Instead she positions the canon as a social and cultural construct, in which the ‘cold realities of patronage, purchase, presentation in private and public collections, or performance create the conditions for a work’s canonical status or lack of it.’ As such, she argues that the ‘apparently systematic neglect of women’s experience in the literary canon’ is a reflection of the dominant narratives embedded in the process of its making. Moreover, ‘the male authored canon contributes to the body of information, stereotype, inference and surmise about the female sex that is generally in the culture.’ This becomes even more concerning when we realize that the canon also exists in the institutional context, proliferated through syllabi and anthologies.*

ored in the observance. "Beowulf to Virginia Woolf" is a pleasant enough joke, but, though lots of surveys begin with the Anglo Saxon epic, not all that many conclude with *Mrs. Dalloway*. Even in the nineteenth century, the pace and the necessity of mass omissions may mean leaving out Austen, one of the Brontës, or Eliot. The analogous over-view of American literary masterpieces, despite the relative brevity and modernity of the period considered, is likely to yield a similarly all-male pantheon; Emily Dickinson may be admitted—but not *necessarily*—and no one else even comes close.<sup>2</sup> Here again, the male-authored canon contributes to the body of information, stereotype, inference, and surmise about the female sex that is generally in the culture.

Once this state of affairs has been exposed, there are two possible approaches for feminist criticism. It can emphasize alternative readings of the tradition, readings that reinterpret women's character, motivations, and actions and that identify and challenge sexist ideology. Or it can concentrate on gaining admission to the canon for literature by women writers. Both sorts of work are being pursued, although, to the extent that feminist criticism has defined itself as a sub-field of literary studies—as distinguished from an approach or method—it has tended to concentrate on writing by women.

In fact, however, the current wave of feminist theory certain key texts—both literary and para-literary—in the dominant culture. Kate Millett, Eva Figes, Elizabeth Janeway, Germaine Greer and Carolyn Heilbrun all use the techniques of essentially literary analysis on the social forms and forces surrounding those texts.<sup>3</sup> The texts regarded as "canonical" in the sense that all have had the culture as a whole, although the target being addressed is not literature or its canon.

In criticism that is more strictly literary in its scope, much

attention has been concentrated on male writers in the American tradition. Books like Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* and Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* have no systematic, comprehensive equivalent in the criticism of British or European literature.<sup>4</sup> Both of these studies identify masculine values and imagery in a wide range of writings, as well as the alienation that is their consequence for women, men, and society as a whole. In a similar vein, Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* examines ramifications of the tradition of "phallic criticism" as applied to writers of both sexes.<sup>5</sup> These books have in common with one another and with overarching theoretical manifestos like *Sexual Politics* a sense of having been betrayed by a culture that was supposed to be elevating, liberating, and *one's own*.

*In the second part of the essay, Robinson moves on to focus on several key feminist responses to the canon. Historically, the most common approaches were to 'emphasize alternative readings of the tradition, readings that reinterpret women's character ... and that identify and challenge sexist ideology,' and to 'concentrate on gaining admission to the canon for literature by women writers.' While both have produced successes in their own ways, Robinson's critique is that they do not sufficiently call into question the idea of the canon itself. The first focuses itself on a new reading of the existing standards, while the second often manifests itself in a case-by-case demonstration of certain writers, and a crusade to prove them 'good enough' to merit inclusion.*

By contrast, feminist work devoted to that part of the Western tradition which is neither American nor contemporary is likelier to be more even-handed. "Feminist critics," declare Lenz, Greene, and Neely in introducing their collection of essays on



Shakespeare, “recognize that the greatest artists do not necessarily duplicate in their art the orthodoxies of their culture; they may exploit them to create character or intensify conflict, they may struggle with, criticize, or transcend them.”<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, Milton may come in for some censure, Shakespeare and Chaucer for both praise and blame, but the clear intention of a feminist approach to these classic authors is to enrich our understanding of what is going on in the texts, as well as how—for better, for worse, or for both—they have shaped our own literary and social ideas.<sup>7</sup> At its angriest, none of this re-interpretation offers a fundamental challenge to the canon as canon; although it posits new values, it never suggests that, in the light of those values, we ought to reconsider whether the great monuments are really so great, after all.

*... such is all the worlde hathe confirmed and agreed upon, that it is authentique and canonical* (T. Wilson, 1553).

In an evolutionary model of feminist studies in literature, work on male authors is often characterized as “early,” implicitly primitive, whereas scholarship on female authors is the later development, enabling us to see women—the writers themselves and the women they write about—as active agents, rather than passive “images” or victims. This implicit characterization of studies addressed to male writers is as inaccurate as the notion of an inexorable evolution. In fact, as the very definition of feminist criticism has come increasingly to mean scholarship and criticism devoted to women writers, work on the male tradition has continued. By this point, there has been a study of the female characters or the views on the woman question of every major—perhaps every known—author in Anglo-American, French, Russian,

Spanish, Italian, German, and Scandinavian literature.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, it is an undeniable fact that most feminist criticism focuses on women writers, so that the feminist efforts to humanize the canon have usually meant bringing a woman’s point of view to bear by incorporating works by women into the established canon. The least threatening way to do so is to follow the accustomed pattern of making the case for individual writers one by one. The case, here, consists in showing that an already recognized woman author has been denied her rightful place, presumably because of the general devaluation of female efforts and subjects. More often than not, such work involves showing that a woman already securely established in the canon belongs in the first, rather than the second, rank. The biographical and critical efforts of R.W.B. Lewis and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, for example, have attempted to enhance Edith Wharton’s reputation in this way.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, no challenge is presented to the particular notions of literary quality, timelessness, universality, and other qualities that constitute the rationale for canonicity. The underlying argument, rather, is that consistency, fidelity to those values, requires recognition of at least the few best and best known women writers. Equally obviously, this approach does not call the notion of the canon itself into question.

*We acknowledge it Canonlike, but not Canonically* (Bishop Barlow, 1601).

Many feminist critics reject the method of case-by-case demonstration. The wholesale consignment of women’s concerns and productions to a grim area bounded by triviality and obscurity cannot be compensated for by tokenism. True equity can be attained, they argue, only by opening up the canon to a

much larger number of female voices. This is an endeavor that eventually brings basic aesthetic questions to the fore.

Initially, however, the demand for wider representation of female authors is substantiated by an extraordinary effort of intellectual reappropriation. The emergence of feminist literary study has been characterized, at the base, by scholarship devoted to the discovery, republication, and reappraisal of “lost” or undervalued writers and their work. From Rebecca Harding Davis and Kate Chopin through Zora Neale Hurston and Mina Loy to Meridel LeSueur and Rebecca West, reputations have been reborn or remade and a female counter-canon has come into being, out of components that were largely unavailable even a dozen years ago.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to constituting a feminist alternative to the male-dominated tradition, these authors also have a claim to representation in “the” canon. From this perspective, the work of recovery itself makes one sort of *prima facie* case, giving the lie to the assumption, where it has existed, that, aside from a few names that are household words—differentially appreciated, but certainly well-known—there simply has not been much serious literature by women. Before any aesthetic arguments have been advanced either for or against the admission of such works to the general canon, the new literary scholarship on women has demonstrated that the pool of potential applicants is far larger than anyone has hitherto suspected.

*Would Augustine, if he held all the books to have an equal right to canonicity . . . have preferred some to others?* (W. Fitzgerald, trans. Whitaker, 1849).

But the aesthetic issues cannot be forestalled for very long.

We need to understand whether the claim is being made that many of the newly recovered or validated texts by women meet existing criteria or, on the other hand, that those criteria themselves intrinsically exclude or tend to exclude women and hence should be modified or replaced. If this polarity is not, in fact, applicable to the process, what are the grounds for presenting a large number of new female candidates for (as it were) canonization? [...]

Those who are concerned with the canon as a pragmatic instrument, rather than a powerful abstraction—the compilers of more equitable anthologies or course syllabi, for example—have opted for an uneasy compromise. The literature by women that they seek—as well as that by members of excluded racial and ethnic groups and by working people in general—conforms as closely as possible to the traditional canons of taste and judgment. Not that it reads like such literature, as far as content and viewpoint are concerned, but the same words about artistic intent and achievement may be applied without absurdity. At the same time, the rationale for a new syllabus or anthology relies on a very different criterion: that of truth to the culture being represented, the *whole* culture and not the creation of an almost entirely male white elite. Again, no one seems to be proposing—aloud—the elimination of *Moby Dick* or *The Scarlet Letter*, just squeezing them over somewhat to make room for another literary reality, which, joined with the existing canon, will come closer to telling the (poetic) truth.

The effect is pluralist, at best, and the epistemological assumptions underlying the search for a more fully representative literature are strictly empiricist: by including the perspective of women (who are, after all, half- the-population), we will “know more” about the culture as it actually was. No one suggests that there might be something in this literature itself that challenges

the values and even the validity of the previously all-male tradition. There is no reason why the canon need speak with one voice or as one man on the fundamental questions of human experience. Indeed, even as an elite white male voice, it can hardly be said to do so. Yet a commentator like Baym has only to say "it is time, perhaps. . .to reexamine the grounds," *while not proceeding to do so*, for feminists to be accused of wishing to "throw out" the entire received culture. The argument could be more usefully joined, perhaps, if there were a current within feminist criticism that went beyond insistence on representation to consideration of precisely how inclusion of women's writing alters our view of the tradition. Or even one that suggested some radical surgery on the list of male authors usually represented.

After all, when we turn from the construction of pantheons, which have no *prescribed* number of places, to the construction of course syllabi, then something does have to be eliminated each time something else is added, and here ideologies, aesthetic and extra-aesthetic, do necessarily come into play. Is the canon and hence the syllabus based on it to be regarded as the compendium of excellence or as the record of cultural history? For there comes a point when the proponent of making the canon recognize the achievement of both sexes has to put up or shut up; either a given woman writer is "good" enough to replace some male writer on the prescribed reading list or she is not. If she is not, then either she should replace him anyway, in the name of telling the truth about the culture, or she should not, in the (unexamined) name of excellence. This is the debate that will have to be engaged and that has so far been broached only in the most "inclusionary" of terms. It is ironic that in American literature, where attacks on the male tradition have been most bitter and the reclamation of women writers so spectacular, the appeal has

still been only to pluralism, generosity, and guilt. It is populism without the politics of populism.

*To canonize your owne writers* (Polimanteria, 1595).

Although I referred earlier to a feminist counter-canon, it is only in certain rather restricted contexts that literature by women has in fact been explicitly placed "counter" to the dominant canon. Generally speaking, feminist scholars have been more concerned with establishing the existence, power, and significance of a specifically *female* tradition. Such a possibility is adumbrated in the title of Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination*; however, this book's overview of selected themes and stages in the female life-cycle as treated by some women writers neither broaches nor (obviously) suggests an answer to the question of whether there is "a" female imagination and what characterizes it.<sup>13</sup>

Robinson also questions the creation of the feminist 'counter-canon'. While 'the emergence of feminist literary study has been characterized, at the base, by scholarship devoted to the discovery, republication, and reappraisal of "lost" or undervalued writers and their work,' we must be careful how we treat them. How can we move the discourse on women's literature and the female tradition forward from being a separate cultural experience, to one which truly engages with literary history? And how we bring these knowledges online?

Somewhat earlier, in her anthology of British and American women poets, Louise Bernikow had made a more positive assertion of a continuity and connection subsisting among them.<sup>14</sup> She leaves it to the poems, however, to forge their own links, and, in a

collection that boldly and incisively crosses boundaries between published and unpublished writing, literary and anonymous authorship, “high” art, folk art, and music, it is not easy for the reader to identify what the editor believes it is that makes women’s poetry specifically “women’s.”

Ellen Moers centers her argument for a (transhistorical) female tradition upon the concept of “heroinism,” a quality shared by women writers over time with the female characters they created.<sup>15</sup> Moers also points out another kind of continuity, documenting the way that women writers have read, commented on, and been influenced by the writings of other women who were their predecessors or contemporaries. There is also an unacknowledged continuity between the writer and her female reader. Elaine Showalter conceives the female tradition, embodied particularly in the domestic and sensational fiction of the nineteenth century, as being carried out through a kind of subversive conspiracy between author and audience.<sup>16</sup> Showalter is at her best in discussing this minor “women’s fiction.” Indeed, without ever making a case for popular genres as serious literature, she bases her arguments about a tradition more solidly on them than on acknowledged major figures like Virginia Woolf. By contrast, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar focus, almost exclusively, on key literary figures, bringing women writers and their subjects together through the theme of perceived female aberration—in the act of literary creation itself, as well as in the behaviors of the created persons or personae.<sup>17</sup>

Moers’ vision of a continuity based on “heroinism” finds an echo in later feminist criticism that posits a discrete, perhaps even autonomous “women’s culture.” The idea of such a culture has been developed by social historians studying the “homosocial” world of nineteenth-century women.<sup>18</sup> It is a view that underlies,

for example, Nina Auerbach’s study of relationships among women in selected novels, where strong, supportive ties among mothers, daughters, sisters, and female friends not only constitute the real history in which certain women are conceived as living, but function as a normative element as well.<sup>19</sup> That is, fiction in which positive relations subsist to nourish the heroine comes off much better, from Auerbach’s point of view, than fiction in which such relations do not exist.

In contrast, Judith Lowder Newton sees the heroines of women’s fiction as active, rather than passive, precisely because they do live in a man’s world, not an autonomous female one.<sup>20</sup> Defining their power as “ability,” rather than “control,” she perceives “both a preoccupation with power and subtle power strategies” being exercised by the women in novels by Fanny Burney, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot. Understood in this way, the female tradition, whether or not it in fact reflects and fosters a “culture” of its own, provides an alternative complex of possibilities for women, to be set beside the pits and pedestals offered by all too much of the Great Tradition.

*Canonize such a multifarious Genealogie of Comments*  
(Nashe, 1593).

Historians like Smith-Rosenberg and Cott are careful to specify that their generalizations extend only to white middle- and upper-class women of the nineteenth century. Although literary scholars are equally scrupulous about the national and temporal boundaries of their subject, they tend to use the gender term comprehensively. In this way, conclusions about “women’s fiction” or “female consciousness” have been drawn or jumped to from considering a body of work whose authors are all white and

comparatively privileged. Of the critical studies I have mentioned, only Bernikow's anthology, *The World Split Open*, brings labor songs, black women's blues lyrics, and anonymous ballads into conjunction with poems that were written for publication by professional writers, both black and white. The other books, which build an extensive case for a female tradition that Bernikow only suggests, delineate their subject in such a way as to exclude not only black and working-class authors, but any notion that race and class might be relevant categories in the definition and apprehension of "women's literature." Similarly, even for discussions of writers who were known to be lesbians, this aspect of the female tradition often remains unacknowledged; worse yet, some of the books that develop the idea of a female tradition are openly homophobic, employing the word "lesbian" only perjoratively.<sup>21</sup>

Black and lesbian scholars, however, have directed much less energy to polemics against the feminist "mainstream" than to concrete, positive work on the literature itself. Recovery and re-interpretation of a wealth of unknown or undervalued texts has suggested the existence of both a black women's tradition and a lesbian tradition. In a clear parallel with the relationship between women's literature in general and the male-dominated tradition, both are by definition part of women's literature, but they are also distinct from and independent of it.

There are important differences, however, between these two traditions and the critical effort surrounding them. Black feminist criticism has the task of demonstrating that, in the face of all the obstacles a racist and sexist society has been able to erect, there is a continuity of black women who have written and written well. It is a matter of gaining recognition for the quality of the writing itself and respect for its principal subject, the lives and consciousness of black women. Black women's literature is also an element

of black literature as a whole, where the recognized voices have usually been male. A triple imperative is therefore at work: establishing a discrete and significant black female tradition, then situating it within black literature, and (along with the rest of that literature), within the common American literary heritage.<sup>22</sup> So far, unfortunately, each step toward integration has met with continuing exclusion. A black women's tradition has been recovered and reevaluated, chiefly through the efforts of black feminist scholars. Only some of that work has been accepted as part of either a racially-mixed women's literature or a two-sex black literature. As for the gatekeepers of American literature "in general," how many of them, in 1983, are willing to swing open the portals even for Zora Neale Hurston or Paule Marshall? How many have heard of them?

*Over the next several paragraphs Robinson turns to the issue of intersectionality. She goes deeper into the experiences of black and queer women authors, and questions the 'elite' as a social and literary category. She writes: 'Whereas many white literary scholars continue to behave as if there were no major black woman writers, most are prepared to admit that certain well-known white writers were lesbians for all or part of their lives.' This exclusion of certain social groups also has implications on the type of written word which is admitted into the canon. Speaking of the abundance of female-authored ephemera not classed as 'literature' Robinson explains that this is another way in which the female experience has been lost or omitted from mainstream history*

The issue of "inclusion," moreover, brings up questions that echo those raised by opening the male-dominated canon to women. How do generalizations about women's literature "as

a whole” change when the work of black women is not merely added to but fully incorporated into that tradition? How does our sense of black literary history change? And what implications do these changes have for reconsideration of the American canon?

Whereas many white literary scholars continue to behave as if there were no major black woman writers, most are prepared to admit that certain well-known white writers were lesbians for all or part of their lives. The problem is getting beyond a position that says either “so *that’s* what was wrong with her!” or, alternatively, “it doesn’t matter who she slept with—we’re talking about literature.” Much lesbian feminist criticism has addressed theoretical questions about which literature is actually part of the lesbian tradition, all writing by lesbians, for example, or all writing by women about women’s relations with one another. Questions of class and race enter here as well, both in their own guise and in the by-now familiar form of “aesthetic standards.” Who speaks for the lesbian community: the highly educated experimentalist with an unearned income or the naturalistic working-class autobiographer? Or are both the *same kind* of foremother, reflecting the community’s range of cultural identities and resistance?<sup>23</sup>

... a cheaper way of Canon-making in a corner (Baxter, 1639).

It is not only members of included social groups, however, who have challenged the fundamentally elite nature of the existing canon. “Elite” is a literary as well as a social category. It is possible to argue for taking all texts seriously as texts without arguments based on social oppression or cultural exclusion, and popular genres have therefore been studied as part of the female literary tradition. Feminists are not in agreement as to whether domestic and sentimental fiction, the female Gothic, the wom-

en’s sensational novel functioned as instruments of expression, repression, or subversion, but they have successfully revived interest in the question as a legitimate cultural issue.<sup>24</sup> It is no longer automatically assumed that literature addressed to the mass female audience is necessarily bad because it is sentimental or, for that matter, sentimental because it is addressed to that audience. Feminist criticism has examined without embarrassment an entire literature that was previously dismissed solely because it was popular with women and affirmed standards and values associated with femininity. And proponents of the “continuous tradition” and “women’s culture” positions have insisted that this material be placed beside women’s “high” art as part of the articulated and organic female tradition.

This point of view remains controversial within the orbit of women’s studies, but the real problems start when it comes into contact with the universe of canon-formation. Permission may have been given the contemporary critic to approach a wide range of texts, transcending and even ignoring the traditional canon. But in a context where the ground of struggle—highly contested, moreover—concerns Edith Wharton’s advancement to somewhat more major status, fundamental assumptions have changed very little. Can Hawthorne’s “d-d mob of scribbling women” *really* be invading the realms so long sanctified by Hawthorne himself and his brother-geniuses? Is this what feminist criticism or even feminist cultural history means? Is it—to apply some outmoded and deceptively simple categories—a good development or a bad one? If these questions have not been raised, it is because women’s literature and the female tradition tend to be evoked as an autonomous cultural experience, not impinging on the rest of literary history.

*Wisdom under a ragged coat is seldom canonical*  
(Crosse, 1603).

Whether dealing with popular genres or high art, commentary on the female tradition usually has been based on work that was published at some time and was produced by professional writers. But feminist scholarship has also pushed back the boundaries of literature in other directions, considering a wide range of forms and styles in which women's writing—especially that of women who did not perceive themselves as writers—appears. In this way, women's letters, diaries, journals, autobiographies, oral histories, and private poetry have come under critical scrutiny as evidence of women's consciousness *and expression*.

Generally speaking, feminist criticism has been quite open to such material, recognizing that the very conditions that gave many women the impetus to write made it impossible for their culture to define them as writers. This acceptance has expanded our sense of possible forms and voices, but it has not challenged our received sense of appropriate style. What it amounts to is that if a woman writing in isolation and with no public audience in view nonetheless had "good"—that is, canonical—models, we are impressed with the strength of her text when she applies what she has assimilated about writing to her own experiences as a woman. If, however, her literary models were chosen from the same popular literature that some critics are now beginning to recognize as part of the female tradition, then she has not got hold of an expressive instrument that empowers her.

At the Modern Language Association meetings five years ago, I included in my paper the entire two-page autobiography of a participant in the Summer Schools for Women Workers held at Bryn Mawr in the first decades of the century. It is a circum-

stantial narrative in which events from the melancholy to the melodramatic are accumulated in a serviceable, somewhat hackneyed style. The anonymous "Seamer on Men's Underwear" had a unique sense of herself both as an individual and as a member of the working class. But was she a writer? Part of the audience was as moved as I was by the narrative, but the majority was outraged at the piece's failure to meet the criteria—particularly, the "complexity criteria"—of good art.

When I developed my remarks for publication, I wrote about the problems of dealing with an author who is trying too hard to write elegantly and I attempted to make the case that "clichés or sentimentality need not be signals of meretricious prose, and that ultimately it is honest writing for which criticism should be looking.<sup>25</sup> Nowadays, I would also address the question of the female tradition, the role of popular fiction within it, and the influence of that fiction on its audience. It seems to me that, if we accept the work of the professional "scribbling woman," we have also to accept its literary consequences, not drawing the line at the place where that literature may have been the force which enabled an otherwise inarticulate segment of the population to grasp a means of expression and communication.

Once again, however, the arena is the female tradition itself. If we are thinking in terms of canon-formation, it is the alternative canon. Until the aesthetic arguments can be fully worked out in the feminist context, it will be impossible to argue, in the general marketplace of literary ideas, that the novels of Henry James ought to give place—a *little* place, even—to the diaries of his sister Alice. At this point, I suspect most of our male colleagues would consider such a request, even in the name of Alice James, much less the Seamer on Men's Underwear, little more than a form of "reverse discrimination"? a concept to which some of them are

already overly attached. It is up to feminist scholars, when and as we determine that this indeed the right course to pursue, to demonstrate that such an inclusion would constitute a genuinely affirmative action for all of us.

*In her conclusion, Robinson charts two possible ways forward for the feminist challenge to the literary canon: the continued development of the female tradition, and the simultaneous confrontation with 'the' canon. We have to champion women's voices, and simultaneously expose the processes which hide or obstruct them. Ultimately, literary canon formation is political in both its construction and its effect. The exclusion, distortion and misrepresentation of female authorship is at the same time reflecting and reproducing the dominant narratives about gender and race in our culture. This is extremely relevant in my reader because it exposes some of the potential limitations in book scanning culture.*

The development of feminist literary criticism and scholarship has already proceeded through a number of identifiable stages. Its pace is more reminiscent of the survey course than of the slow processes of canon-formation and revision, and it has been more successful in defining and sticking to its own intellectual turf, the female counter-canon, than in gaining general canonical recognition for Edith Wharton, Fanny Fern, the female diarists of the Westward Expansion. In one sense, the more coherent our sense of the female tradition is, the stronger our eventual case. Yet, the longer we wait, the more comfortable the women's literature ghetto—separate, apparently autonomous, and far from equal—may begin to feel. At the same time, I believe the challenge cannot come only by means of the patent value of the work of

women. We must pursue the questions certain of us have raised and retreated from as to the eternal verity of the received standards of greatness or even goodness. And, while not abandoning our new-found female tradition, we have to return to confrontation with "the" canon, examining it as a source of ideas, themes, motifs, and myths about the two sexes. The point in so doing is not to label and hence dismiss even the most sexist literary classics, but for all of us to apprehend them, finally, in all their human dimensions.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jane Marcus, "Gunpowder, Treason and Plot," talk delivered at the School of Criticism and Theory, Northwestern University, colloquium on "The Challenge of Feminist Criticism," November, 1981. Seeking authority for the sort of creature a literary canon might be, I turned, like many another, to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The tags that head up the several sections of this essay are a by-product of that effort, rather than that of any more exact and laborious scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> In a survey of 50 introductory courses in American literature offered at 25 U.S. colleges and universities, Emily Dickinson's name appeared more often than that of any other women writer: 20 times. This frequency puts her in a fairly respectable twelfth place. Among the 61 most frequently taught authors, only seven others are women; Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin are each mentioned eight times, Sarah Orne Jewett and Anne Bradstreet six each, Flannery O'Connor four times, Willa Cather and Mary Wilkins Freeman each three times. The same list includes five black authors, all of them male. Responses from other institutions received too late for compilation only confirmed these findings. (See Paul Lauter, "A Small Survey of Introductory Courses in American Literature," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 9 [Winter 1981]). In another study, 99 professors of English responded to a survey asking which works of American literature published since 1941 they thought should be considered classics and which books should be taught to college students. The work mentioned by the most respondents (59 citations) was Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. No other work by a black appears among the top 20 that constitutes the published list of results. Number 19, *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor*, is the only work on this list by a woman. (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 29, 1982.) For British literature, the feminist claim is not that Austen, the Brontës, Eliot, and Woolf are habitually omitted, but rather that they are by no means always

included in courses that, like the survey I taught at Columbia some years ago, had room for a single nineteenth-century novel. I know, however, of no systematic study of course offerings in this area more recent than Elaine Showalter's "Women in the Literary Curriculum," *College English*, 32(1971).

<sup>3</sup> Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970); Eva Figs, *Patriarchal Attitudes* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970); Elizabeth Janeway, *Man's World, Woman's Place: A Study in Social Mythology* (New York: Morrow, 1971); Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971); Carolyn Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). The phenomenon these studies represent is discussed at greater length in a study of which I am a co-author; see Ellen Carol DuBois, Gail Paradise Kelly, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, Carolyn W. Korsmeyer, and Lillian S. Robinson, *Feminist Scholarship: Challenge, Discovery, and Impact*, forthcoming from University of Illinois Press.

<sup>4</sup> Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Judith Fetterly, *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 4. In this vein, see also Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Woman* (London: Macmillan, 1975); Irene G. Dash, *Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, "Patriarchal Poetics and the Woman Reader: Reflections

on Milton's *Bogey*," *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 368-82. The articles on Chaucer and Shakespeare in *The Authority of Experience*, ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), reflect the complementary tendency.

<sup>8</sup> As I learned when surveying fifteen years' worth of Dissertation Abstracts and MLA programs, much of this work has taken the form of theses or conference papers, rather than books and journal articles.

<sup>9</sup> See R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); see also Marlene Springer, *Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Rebecca Harding Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1972), with a biographical and critical Afterword by Tillie Olsen; Kate Chopin, *The Complete Works*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Alice Walker, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," *Ms.*, 3 (March 1975), 74-75; Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978); Zora Neale Hurston, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing and Also When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive* (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1979), with introductory material by Alice Walker and Mary Helen Washington; Carolyn Burke, "Becoming Mina Loy," *Women's Studies*, 7 (1979), 136-50; Meridel LeSueur, *Ripening* (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1981); on LeSueur, see also *We Sing Our Struggle: A Tribute to Us All*, ed. Mary McAnally (Tulsa: Cardinal Press, 1982); *The Young Rebecca, Writings of Rebecca West, 1911-1917*, selected and introduced by Jane Marcus (New York: Viking, 1982). The examples cited are all from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Valuable work has also been done on women writers before the Industrial Revolution. See *By a Woman Witt: Literature from Six Centuries by and*

*About Women*, ed. Joan Goulianos (Indianapolis: Bobbs, Merrill, 1973); *The Female Spectator: English Women Writers before 1800*, ed. Mary R. Mahl and Helene Koon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> Nina Baym, *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-70* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 14-15.

<sup>12</sup> Myra Jehlen, "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 6 (1981), 592.

<sup>13</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> *The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets In England and America, 1552-1950*, ed. and introduced by Louise Bernikow (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1974).

<sup>15</sup> Ellen Moers, *Literary women* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976).

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>17</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1 (1975), 1-30; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). See also Janet M. Todd, *Women's Friendship in Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Louise Bernikow, *Among Women* (New York: Harmony-Crown, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> On the failings of feminist criticism with respect to black and/or lesbian writers, see Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *Conditions*, 2 (1977); Mary Helen Washington, "New Lives and New Letters: Black Women Writers at the End of the Seventies," *College English*, 43 (1981); Bonnie Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies*, 7 (1981).

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980); BlackSister, ed. Erlene Stetson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) and its forthcoming sequel; Gloria Hull, "Black Women Poets from Wheatley to Walker," in *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, ed. Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker and Beverley Guy-Sheftall (New York: Arbor, 1979); Mary Helen Washington, "Introduction: In Pursuit of Our Own History," *Midnight Birds* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1980); the essays and bibliographies in *But Some of Us Are Brave*, ed. Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1982).

<sup>23</sup> See Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been"; Adrienne Rich, "Jane Eyre: Trials of a Motherless Girl," in *Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979); Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to*

*the Present* (New York: Morrow, 1981); the literary essays in *Lesbian Studies*, ed. Margaret Cruikshank (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1982).

<sup>24</sup> Some examples on different sides of the question are: Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1976); Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* and her article, "Dinah Mulock Craik and the Tactics of Sentiment: A Case Study in Victorian Female Authorship," *Feminist Studies*, 2 (1975); Katherine Ellis, "Paradise Lost: The Limits of Domesticity in the Nineteenth-Century Novel," *Feminist Studies*, 2 (1975). See also Ellis's "Charlotte Smith's Subversive Gothic," *Feminist Studies*, 3 (1976).

<sup>25</sup> "Working/Women/Writing," in Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class, and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 252.

# I am a Woman Writer; I am a Western Writer

An interview with Ursula Le Guin

URSULA LE GUIN is America's preeminent writer of science fiction. However, one should not be confused and call her only a science fiction writer, because—as she will tell you—since the publication of her first novel, *Rocannon's World* (Ace Books, 1966), she has published more than fifteen novels, four collections of poetry, five short story collections, seven books for children, two books of criticism, screenplays, edited anthologies, and she has made a half dozen recordings. She has published more than sixty short stories in the *New Yorker*, *Tri-Quarterly*, *Kenyon Review*, *Omni*, *Redbook*, *Playboy*, and *Playgirl*. Her most recent books are *Going Out with Peacocks*, a book of poems from HarperCollins, *Wonderful Alexander* and *the Catwings*, a book for children from

*I am sad to say I've never read anything by Ursula Le Guin. It's no secret that male writers are more widely recognized and canonized than their female counterparts, but as 'America's preeminent writer of science fiction', it's telling that I'm not even moderately familiar with her work. In this interview, she speaks of her own experience as a woman writer, and points out the many others who have been undervalued in literary history.*

Orchard Press, and *A Fisherman of the Island Sea*, a book of science fiction short stories from HarperPrism.

In 1972 Le Guin won the National Book Award for *The Farthest*

*Shore*. In addition to being a five-time winner of the Hugo Award and a four-time Nebula Award winner, her other honors include a Newbery Silver Medal Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Prix Lectures-Jeunesse, the Gandalf Award for fantasy writing, and the Boston Globe-Hornbook Award. She holds a B.A. from Radcliffe College (1951) and an M.A. from Columbia (1952), and has taught at, among others, Mercer University, University of Idaho, Kenyon College, Portland State University, Tulane University, and Bennington College. Born in 1929, in Berkeley, California, she spent most of her life on the West Coast, and currently lives in Portland, Oregon, with her husband, Charles A. Le Guin, a historian. Her father was anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, and her mother, Theodora Kroeber, published *Ishi*, a national best-seller. This interview was conducted in Macon, Georgia, on 30 March 1993. It was a sunny and breezy morning as we sat outside in her mother's backyard in the shade—talking and drinking coffee.

**William Walsh:** *During the introduction of your reading last week, you mentioned the labels placed on writers by critics as well as the deficiency of the canon in regard to women. I would like to address both of these issues. First, I have read endlessly where you are considered a science fiction writer, and often that's the only category. I never thought of you in that single category because I first came to your essays. Do you find the categories limiting and how do you deal with this?*

**Ursula Le Guin:** Right from the start I've always written other material. I started out publishing poetry long before I published prose. I've never been known as a poet, and I'm always having to tell people I have four volumes of poetry, two of them hardback. So, OK, I'm mainly a prose writer—that's fine. The first two sto-

ries I published were within a couple of months, one was science fiction and one was realism. One was in a science fiction magazine and the other was in a university quarterly. One, according to the wisdom of the time, was respectable and the other was not respectable. But it's not the respectable genre that I get categorized in. There is something very strange about the whole process. I've always written realistic fiction, science fiction, fantasy, and books for kids, but the category that sticks is science fiction. I do write science fiction. Some of my books and stories are pure science fiction—I love the stuff. It's one of the things I do. There is something funny about this categorization—you get typecast like some actors. Poor Leonard Nimoy—nobody believes he has round ears. I began to see it as something not in relation to myself but this whole modernist, mid-twentieth-century idea of a canon in English literature, which, in fiction, is strictly realism, and everything else is subliterary, nonliterary. Maybe that was true in 1925, but it's just not true now. There is no way you can say that realism is the only literature going. I mean, most of our best novelists are not even writing realism anymore—writers like Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Leslie Silko. They are using realistic techniques to tell stories that are not realistic.

**WW:** *The fact is that it's very easy to categorize writers into genres and subgenres...*

**UL:** It's a neat way of sweeping things under the carpet, particularly for the academics and the more narrow-minded reviewers. Book reviewers are terrible about this. Take my book *Always Coming Home*, or Karen Fowler's *Sara Canary*, which is a knockout book—if they can perceive those books as science fiction they'll sweep them under the science fiction rug and then they don't

have to deal with them. Several reviewers have done that. *Sara Canary* is a good case in point because some people think it's science fiction and some people don't. There's a character who you can see as an alien if you want, but she may not be an alien at all, just a woman. It's a kind of litmus paper novel.

Its interesting to see how cultural biases reflect themselves in processes of classification. The way things are ordered and categorized often expose the attitudes of the dominant culture: these are the groups worth naming, and here is how we should speak about them. In today's age of book search, this issue of classification is even more pertinent. But instead of becoming more open, ranking algorithms and indexing processes are becoming more opaque.

I don't know why there is so much arrogance toward science fiction. People have come up to me and said, "You write sci-fi. My children read that." What am I supposed to say, "Isn't that wonderful! Of course, you're a grown-up and you don't read it." (laughing) There is equal or more arrogance toward writing for children. Often people say when they find that I write children's books, "I've thought of doing that" as if I'd go up to a dancer and say that I thought about ballet in my spare time. It's incredibly arrogant. Children's literature is as tight a discipline as writing poetry.

Another thing about science fiction and fantasy, you can't use the same critical apparatus to read it if you are seriously reviewing a book or teaching a book. For this you need some different techniques for understanding. In other words, you have to learn how to read a science fiction book.

[...]

**WW:** *When you are writing, either science fiction or realism, is there a different mindset you have to place yourself in so you can pull from a different world. With science fiction you have to expand the outer limits of what you perceive to be reality, as opposed to realism.*

**UL:** I don't see that opposition. Science fiction and realism are versions of the same literary trends—they both depend, in a sense, on science to tell us what is real. Before about 1700 all literature was basically fantastic. We had a religious consensus. The higher reality was a religious reality, the earth was basically a lower reality. There wasn't any science to tell you that this was possible or this was not possible. Sometimes it's difficult to tell fiction from natural history between the Middle Ages and the 1500s. Invention and reality are pretty much mixed together. As we began to move into the age of science, industry, and technology, we had a touchstone—yeah, this is possible—science says we *can* fly to the moon. Science also says that we can't fly to the moon on wings, flapping our wings and breathing, because there is nothing to breathe between the earth and the moon. That kind of voyage becomes strictly fantastic. You get a clearer line between realism and science fiction on one hand and fantasy on the other. However, since I write all of them, to me it's just a different mood—do I want to enter the commonly-agreed-to-be world or do I want to say, "Reader, come over here across the wall and I will make you a world that never could be. We both know it never could be, but we can enjoy it for itself."

Science fiction is always a metaphor. We are really talking about right here, right now. We call it the future because in what we call the future we are very free to move around and invent.

[..]

**WW:** *In your writing has anything come true that you invented or imagined without prior knowledge that this "thing" was a possibility, something that has later come true?*

**UL:** No, because I don't write high-tech science fiction. My technology tends to be complex and largely invisible. There's a kind of wiring diagram science fiction that goes into great detail about the technology of future spaceships and wars; it bores me to tears. In my book, *The Lathe of Heaven*, something happens but it's never quite clear what happens, in April 1998. It looks like we sort of blow up the world, but you can't be sure, because the book is full of dreams and visions, and you are never sure which is which. I wrote that book in the 70s when 1998 was a nice long way away. As it comes closer I start thinking: I hope we get through April 1998. (laughing) After 1998 my book will be a little bit different. Like Orwell's 1984; since we got through 1984 you have to read the book a little bit differently. It's more of a period piece than it was. But at least nobody can seriously believe that I am predicting, which I never was. I was telling a story.

**WW:** *I remember as 1984 started becoming more of a reality, everyone who had read 1984 almost feared the entire forthcoming year—the closer the world came to 1984, the more we feared what was supposed to be. I think everyone else was worried, too, that Orwell would be right because there were television shows, and newspaper and magazine articles appearing everywhere on the predicted doom of our individual freedom.*

**UL:** In a way it did happen. Orwell's original title was 1948. The publishers said he couldn't call it that, because that was this year. Orwell said that's the point. He was talking about what was really

going on, now, 1948. This is what I mean when I say the future is a metaphor.

**WW:** *That's like Heller's Catch 22. Arbitrarily it was changed, I believe, originally from Catch 19, because another writer published a book with "19" in the title, and now the term "catch 22" has become a cliché in the American dogma ever since.*

**UL:** That's a good story, but 1984 is kind of a pity. I can see why the publisher did it, but Orwell was right. He was writing about 1948 and all that it included.

**WW:** *It's interesting to observe how people believe Orwell was predicting the world's future when in fact he was describing the present, and, by an editor's decision, changed how we saw ourselves. I wanted to follow up my first question with the second part, which has to do with the literary canon, and for the most part, the exclusion of women writers.*

**UL:** There again things are changing. There has been a steady campaign mounted in the last ten to fifteen years by feminist critiques, both male and female, against that exclusion. It's beginning to be the old guard that says the only women writers are Austen, Brontë, Woolf, and maybe Plath. And Dickinson, of course. The only good women writers are dead virgins. (laughing) Not only dead, unmarried, but preferably childless. In other words, as much like men as possible. I don't know why this is going on. I really don't. It just seems so damn silly to me to leave out half our writers. Nearly half of our fiction has been written by women. Often while they were alive these women were beloved and popular, respected, but as soon as they died the lid went on.

There's been this whole process in the last fifteen years of rediscovering women writers who were either undervalued or just plain forgotten. A great case in point, Margaret Oliphant, a Victorian writer, who I think is better than Trollope, more varied, more interesting—a fascinating writer that no one has ever heard of. She was a better writer than Trollope, and she knew it. She said very bitterly, "I was paid for my best book what Trollope got for his pot boilers." And he ground out potboilers by the score. There has been a misogyny and a stupidity at work, which we are coming out of. And yet, when you look at the grants, prizes, and awards, it is still clearly male dominated. Just start counting the Nobel. A woman gets the Nobel once every thirty years. The prizes do not reflect the reality of who is writing.

*Here Ursula Le Guin begins to discuss more explicitly the role of women writers in the Western literary canon. She points out that though nearly half of American fiction has been written by women, their contributions continue to be widely undervalued and grossly underreported. Women writers are not getting recognized, paid or read as much as they deserve. Le Guin notes that things are changing, but the canon still does not reflect who is writing. Also interesting to see here the interviewer's comment about the few female winners of the Nobel, and Le Guin's answer: 'Sure, you can name them, but now start naming the men.'*

**WW:** *That's true, but it is changing. There's Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Mary Oliver...*

**UL:** Sure, you can name them, but now start naming the men. If my figures are right, publishing both poetry and fiction is about

fifty-fifty men and women, but prizes, grants, and awards are nowhere near fifty-fifty. I don't want a quota system, God knows. This is art we're talking about. But I really do believe that right now most of our best writing is being done by women. Anybody who is honest about fiction in America in the last ten years, and maybe poetry, must say look at these women writers!

It's explainable partly because of the feminist movement. We're learning how to write as women. A lot of us feel that we've found our voices. In poetry, I read men poets complaining about how narrow and tight the poetic canon is, but they're not reading the women poets. There's a big change going on and we are in the middle of this big change. I may be fighting a battle that has essentially been won, but most feminists learned to be cautious about that, because every time you think you have won the battle you suddenly find yourself right back where you were a generation ago and all the doors are closed again.

**WW:** *Nadine Gordimer won the Nobel Prize in 1991.*

**UL:** Before that it was Pearl Buck.

**WW:** ... *In 1938.*

**UL:** The Nobel is such a weird prize anyway.

**WW:** *It's interesting to see who has won the Nobel Prize at certain times. Isn't it a coincidence that Saul Bellow won it in 1976, an American winning during our bicentennial. Then, of course, Robert Penn Warren not winning, and he is perhaps our most distinguished writer.*

**UL:** Year after year, I and thousands of members of PEN [an international association that promotes cooperation among writers in the interests of international goodwill and freedom of expression] voted for Jorge Luis Borges, who was the obvious international candidate for the Nobel. They would not consider him. They didn't like his politics. I was shocked that Italo Calvino never got it. It seems they never give it to the really risky writers. Bellow is a safe writer.

**WW:** *I wasn't dismissing Bellow, and I do like some of his work, especially Herzog...*

**UL:** I am dismissing him just a little bit, because he is a really safe writer, sticking with mainstream male writing, what people are supposed to write about, what's accepted as the subject of writing. He hasn't taken any risks as far as I can see. He's safe as houses.

**WW:** *What types of changes would you like to see made with the canon?*

**UL:** We are in what we must call post-modernism. I hate the word. It's a stupid word. Maybe we can get a better name for what everybody is doing. People are writing differently and the genres are all merging. Magical realism is certainly one of the early signs of this, coming up from South America. We're mixing fantastic and realistic techniques to make a superreal picture of what's going on in the world. The old lines, walls, and pigeonholes just don't fit anymore. I don't know how criticism should be redone, but it should start by carefully reading and observing what is going on, instead of saying it's what everybody used to do and so they should be doing the same thing.



Reviewers tend to have trouble with a writer like Toni Morrison, getting a handle on her, because she is doing something truly new. This is always difficult. Virginia Woolf... it's taken us fifty or sixty years to figure out what she was doing in her novels. We are just beginning to get some good Virginia Woolf criticism, because she was way ahead of her time. Everyone said James Joyce is it. OK, he was it for then, but to me Virginia Woolf is still it, while Joyce is an interesting phenomenon historically. Woolf is still a writer who took risks that we don't even know how to explain. It's a matter of rereading, learning to read, and seeing what is there, instead of what "ought to be there."

Le Guin makes a connection here between the safe 'mainstream', and the dominant male tradition. They are so interconnected, and reveal a complex web of dependent conservative attitudes. Instead of turning towards differences, our society is one which often looks inward to what we already know and accept. We look for what is normal, what is tradition, who is familiar: While Le Guin's criticism is leveled at the literary industry, the same can also be said about the echo chamber of the internet.

**WW:** When I was an undergrad I had a very good teacher who approached literature as one entity, and within this entity there were subentities. We discussed literature as a whole; however, he set portions aside and told us that we probably would always see groups of writers, so here are the categories you're going to find and probably never escape: Jewish writers, women writers, southern writers, etc. It was a very thorough understanding of the literary scene, and we spent about half the time on women writers without really discussing them simply as women writers.

**UL:** This was when?

**WW:** Early 80s.

**UL:** In 1975 you would have spent a quarter of that much time. And in 1965 you would have read Dickinson.

**WW:** We studied O'Connor, Walker, Oates, Welty, McCullers, Bishop, Plath, and Rich. Others who slip my mind momentarily.

**UL:** There's women's literature, but there isn't men's literature. Modernism is male, white, urban, because anything that isn't urban is called "regional," and northern because it isn't "southern," and eastern because it isn't "western." There is a norm that is not honestly declared to be a norm.

**WW:** So if you want to be a writer with longevity you'd better be a white male living in New York City?

The privileged category becomes the norm. As Sara Ahmed writes in her book *On Being Included*, it becomes the burden of the oppressed to either let things go, insist on belonging, or embark on reforming the entire discourse. For women writers, the approaches have varied throughout history, from those who imitate men's writing to become more canonical, to those who passionately defend *l'écriture féminine*, and those who do the work of rediscovering and promoting women's work case by case.

**UL:** I think that's changing. The fact is in the 1980s most of the great American novels were written by women. But ten years ago

the literary establishment was fighting it. Some are still fighting it.

**WW:** *I don't know who or what controls these things, this governing device, but is it a fear that those who govern the canon won't be taken seriously if someone else is taken more seriously than themselves?*

**UL:** I suppose. Privilege always defends itself. You can see it as a gender thing; male dominance is deeply entrenched. But then you get other prejudices like the old *New Yorker* when they wouldn't publish anything that was identifiable as science fiction. The old *New Yorker* had a policy: No science fiction in this magazine. Why? What were they defending themselves against? It's an arbitrary hierarchy of privilege and excellence. If you stick to it long enough you convince people.

I think the movement is away from that. Of course, the movement begins not with the critics and reviewers, but with the writers. The writers are doing something else. They have been for years.

**WW:** *If you had your voice in the matter, instead of being defined by critics as a science fiction writer, how would you like to be defined?*

**UL:** Novelist, short story writer, and poet, because I do write in different forms. Then if they want to say realism, science fiction, fantasy, children's literature, that's fine—so long as the terms are used descriptively and not just judgmentally. Yes, I write science fiction. No, I'm not only "a science fiction writer." Don't box me in! However, I will get provocative and say I am "a western writer"

because we need to redefine that category. Then they say, so you write westerns? and I say no. I am a western writer. I was born in the West and lived most of my life here. I write as a westerner. And I will say yes, I am a woman writer. I finally learned how to say that when I was in my fifties. I am a woman writer, not an imitation man.

**WW:** *What do you mean by "imitation man"?*

**UL:** The canon was so male dominated and male writing was considered the only kind of writing, and women were only "good writers" as long as they imitated men. We all learned to do it except a few mavericks like Virginia Woolf, who never wrote like a man.

**WW:** *Do you mean using a certain male writer or male-authored novel as a criterion or guide to what should be written?*

**UL:** What interests men is what will interest the novel reader. That was the assumption. Thus, men are at the center of the book. This is something we have not really changed. If men are at the center of the book it's considered to be of general interest to the reader. If women are at the center of the book, it is considered to be of interest to women. *Searoad*—the book you have with you—I had to fight my own publisher from saying it was a book about women for women, and only women could possibly be interested in it. I said, "My God, my sales are generally pretty good. Shall we not try to cut them in half by saying stay away from this book, boys, you'll hate it?" In *Searoad* there are women who don't seem able to keep men in their lives or don't have very good luck with men, women who live alone. I think that's what some of the

reviewers and my editor homed in on, and why they said this is all about women. So what? There aren't any women in *Moby Dick*, but that doesn't keep women from reading it. Even if a book is mostly about women, like *The Color Purple*, which is very woman-centered, men read it. I know some men have trouble politically with the book, but aesthetically there's no barrier. There's a false rule. If it's about men everybody wants it; if it's about women it's only for women.

This is the typical chicken / egg situation all over again. Films and books are not being made with minorities at the centre because they 'don't sell as well.' But they don't sell because there are not enough being made. I do think that the media landscape has been changing for the better. And as it does, we see just how much of an impact it makes when a section of society feels represented, or seen in mainstream culture. I look forward to more women becoming authors of their own stories and images, whether it be in books or in technoculture.

**WW:** *This supersedes literature. Take the movie *Thelma and Louise*, for instance. Before I saw the movie almost every male friend of mine said it's a movie for women, and then women said *City Slickers* is a male movie. So it may not be only in literature but may encompass human nature in a social context.*

**UL:** Of course, *Thelma and Louise* had a threat element in it to some men. It was pretty blunt. (laughing) If you were in the theater, as I was the first time I saw *Thelma and Louise*, when all the women burst into a cheer when the women blew up the truck—if I'd been a man I would have thought: Hey, I didn't know

they were that mad. It was very impressive. I think a lot of women who saw that movie didn't know they were that mad until they saw it. That's why it's an important movie.

[..]

**WW:** *How do you view your readership?*

**UL:** I have a very loyal readership. People look for my books. So I learned from that how reciprocal an art writing is. When I started, it seemed very lonely, because you are writing in a void—you don't know who your readers are. I still don't know who my readers are mostly, but I have a sense of them being there. I do hear from them. I do know they are there. They buy the books. I have a much stronger sense now that it is the reader who completes the book for me. It's slightly mystical. I tell the story as well as I can and I do it as an end in itself. When I'm working on a story I don't think of myself or the reader. If I do, it's fatal. I'm simply making something, and I make it as well as I can. But when it's published you're sending it out into this void, hopeful it's full of readers. And the way they read it is what makes it a story. They finish it. If it's not read, it doesn't really exist. It's wood pulp with black marks on it. The reader does work with the writer. You can't help but get mystical about it, because it's such a strange process.

Where you feel it is in performance, and this is one reason why the older I get the fonder I am of performance art, either reading a story or an actual performance piece of poetry, poetry and music, poetry and dance, various things I've been involved in. It is a mystical experience when a performance piece and an audience work together on stage. It's this incredible energy where you give it to them and they give it to you. That's so addictive, as anybody who's into performance knows. What happens when you pub-

lish a book is the same thing, but it's continuous, and so mysterious because the audience is out there somewhere but you don't know them. And yet, it does happen. I think what I'm trying to say is that I hope this happens whenever I publish something. I hope the same energy begins to flow through my work to the reader and back to me, both empowering each other.

This performative, reciprocal view of the reader's role is something which comes up again and again in this reader. Text, like knowledge itself, does not exist in a vacuum. We always bring our own contexts into a reading, and together with the interface (whether it be a book or a screen), we make sense of the information. Knowing this, we can be much more critical in the way we tell stories.

**WW:** Your feminist views are forthright....

**UL:** Yes, I am a feminist.

**WW:** I've noticed that television and radio interviewers and newspaper writers act, when they hear someone is a feminist or when they mention it in an article, as though it were a profession one chose opposed to what one ought to be doing regardless. The media seems amazed or surprised by this. I've told my classes before that I'm a feminist, and everyone, male and female alike, breaks out laughing. I ask them what would they want me to be? Like being a humanist, it's something each one of us should naturally be doing, taking up a cause for oneself as well as for others. It just seems to me that the media is always in shock over feminism and has to ask a woman what drew her to be a feminist.

**UL:** Yes, I know. (laughing) It's like what drew me into breathing.

**WW:** I bring this up because I'm interested in your position on the feminist movement over the years, where it stands today, and where you would like to see it progressing.

**UL:** It'll take a few hours. (laughing) Briefly, I was slow and kind of stupid in some ways. This present wave of feminism started in the mid-60s. It was partly fueled by the misogyny of the New Left. There's no doubt about that. Women found themselves pushed aside. The men were going to end the war and run everything. A lot of anger came out of that. I was slow to get in, but there began to be questions: What are men? What are women? Are there essential differences? This obviously led me to write the first book of mine that really hit, had success, and has been in print ever since, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which is about people who can be either male or female for a few days a month. By the end of the book, most of the characters are both mothers and fathers. The book was a thought experiment. What if? What if there is no difference between men and women? Let's remove all possible biological and psychological differences and see what we've got. What we got was a novel I certainly enjoyed. But I didn't realize at the time that there was anything very radical about it. It was really the first book of its kind (except a science fiction book by Ted Sturgeon called *Venus Plus X*, which I didn't know when I wrote mine).

**WW:** In your writing, and this may pertain more to the science fiction, of all the things or ideas that you have thought of or worlds you have invented, when you wake up tomorrow what one thing would you like to see in place that we don't have today?

**UL:** This is looking at the utopian element in my writing?

**WW:** *Yes, because this establishes a multitude of dilemmas. We have the idea that we would like to cure world hunger but that doesn't take into account that we will have to cure world thirst also. If there is no disease, then no one dies and it creates a new set of problems, and then there is some other aspect that is troublesome.*

**UL:** That's the plot of *The Lathe of Heaven*, where the doctor keeps asking the guy who can dream true to cure this and cure that, and so he does and it always makes something worse, then he has to work on that one.

**WW:** *Exactly. If you bring one utopian aspect to the world tomorrow, what would it be?*

**UL:** I can't pick one because I don't think that way. It's all network. You know the butterfly theory—if you kill a butterfly in North Carolina, it may result in a typhoon in China. Small causes have very large results. To answer your question I can only talk about my book that is a pure utopia, my utopia, my dream world: *Always Coming Home*, where I took my Napa Valley of north California and moved it into an imaginary time, the “future.” I lessened the world population radically and let these people in the Valley develop a local culture, which isn't male or female dominated, and is pretty much consensual. They do a lot of singing and dancing and thinking. I created a “dream world” that I tried grounding absolutely and solidly in a real place, the Napa Valley, which I know stone by stone. Marianne Moore said real toads in imaginary gardens is what poetry is about. Well, what I did was

create imaginary toads in a real garden. I tried working out in that book the world that I think I would like best to live in. Although this one will do.

As I write this in 2018, which has been named 'the year of the woman' (have all the past years been years of the man?), I hope that equality between men and women can be more than just an 'imaginary toad'. Raising awareness about systemic bias, and the promotion of more inclusive canons (in literature, art, looking at gender, race, class etc.) are important acts of challenging the patterns in society.

# Merekam Perempuan Penulis Dalam Sejarah Kesusasteraan

Wawancara dengan Melani Budianta

Gejala semakin mencuatnya perempuan-perempuan penulis menandai adanya kebebasan ruang gerak perempuan untuk menulis apa saja. Fenomena ini berkembang menjadi apa yang disebut "sastra perempuan" atau "gaya penulisan perempuan". Perempuan menuangkan segala pikiran, imajinasi, ide, dan pengalamannya ke dalam tulisan dan kemudian dibaca oleh banyak orang. Proses perjalanan sastra perempuan tidak dapat lepas dari kendala-kendala yang mereka hadapi, terutama berkaitan dengan ukuran bahasa atau konvensi, gaya penulisan, editing, publikasi, dan promosi. Banyak sejarah kesusasteraan di berbagai negara yang tidak merekam perempuan pengarang. Bagaimana perempuan harus melawan segala tantangan ini dan pada akhirnya dapat mencuat seperti yang terjadi di Indonesia akhir-akhir ini. Berikut ini petikan wawancara jurnalis Jurnal Perempuan dengan Melani Budianta, seorang pengajar Sastra Inggris di Fakultas Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya Universitas Indonesia yang sekaligus dikenal sebagai seorang kritikus sastra[1].

**Jurnal Perempuan (JP):** *Bagaimana menurut Anda proses perjalanan sastra perempuan dari tahun ke tahun?*

**Melani Budianta (MB):** Kita harus melihat bahwa sastra adalah suatu kegiatan tulis menulis kreatif yang disosialisasikan melalui media ke masyarakat umum. Banyak produk-produk

tulisan ini yang dijual ke masyarakat umum. Lalu, mengapa masalah perempuan dipersoalkan? Di berbagai negara ada gejala umum, kurang terekamnya kegiatan tulis-menulis perempuan dalam sejarah kesusasteraan, baik dalam bentuk publikasi yang formal maupun yang diakui oleh kritikus sastra. Padahal, banyak perempuan yang sangat aktif di bidang ini. Di sinilah muncul pertanyaan tentang apa yang menjadi kendala. Kalaupun para

*Dalam wawancara ini, Profesor Budianta membahas status dan peran penulis perempuan dalam sejarah sastra Indonesia. Secara pribadi, ini adalah pertama kali saya mengalih fokus kepada kesusasteraan Indonesia, dan memang sangat menarik untuk membandingkannya dengan wacana dan kritik di Barat. Yang pasti sama, suara perempuan tidak selalu terekam oleh kritikus, editor dan badan penanganannya bidang kesusasteraan, suatu kelompok yang secara historis sangat terwarnai bias patriarki.*

perempuan memproduksi karya sastra, apakah berbeda dengan yang ditulis oleh laki-laki? Memang ada kendala-kendala yang bersifat kultural maupun sosial sehingga aktivitas kesenian kesusasteraan perempuan ini kurang terekam. Kendala-kendala itu berkaitan dengan kondisi perempuan di dalam masyarakat secara umum. Misalnya, perempuan bertheater pada zaman dan konteks masyarakat tertentu secara normatif tidak bisa diterima. Dalam kesusasteraan Amerika tahun 1890-an, banyak sekali perempuan berperan aktif menulis dan mempublikasikan karyanya di media massa. Tetapi, sejarah sastra tahun 1960-an hanya merekam sastrawan laki-laki. Mengapa?

Pertama, kritikus sastra pada waktu itu kebanyakan laki-laki. Editor majalah sastra dan pengajar sastra akademis kebanya-

kan juga laki-laki. Kedua, kurang terwakilinya perempuan dalam struktur yang menangani bidang kesusastraan. Maka, acuan yang dianggap baik dan bernilai tinggi diproduksi oleh suatu kelompok yang sangat terwarnai bias patriarki. Maka, kesusastraan yang dianggap hebat pada waktu itu ialah yang sangat menampilkan ruang publik, masalah-masalah umum dan sosial. Sedangkan, perempuan di era ini aktivitasnya di ruang publik masih terbatas atau memang dibatasi. Jadi, pengalaman hidup mereka sendiri sangat terbatas pada ruang domestik. Maka, kalau perempuan menulis, mungkin yang diceritakan adalah hal-hal yang berkaitan dengan kehidupan mereka sehari-hari. Akibatnya, ketika pengalaman ini dituliskan dalam kesusastraan, menjadi dianggap remeh, kecil, dan kurang bernilai tinggi. Bila ada pun, mereka menyamakan namanya menjadi nama laki-laki. Perempuan yang masuk dalam medan yang didominasi oleh struktur seperti ini banyak menghadapi masalah. Jadi, untuk menyuarakan apa yang dianggap penting bagi perempuan, kurang didukung.

Di Amerika, di tahun '70-an ketika maraknya gerakan-gerakan perempuan pada waktu itu, muncul kritikus-kritikus perempuan yang mulai mengangkat permasalahan ini. Perempuan kritikus ini kemudian mulai menulis kembali sejarah kesusastraan dengan menemukan kembali perempuan-perempuan penulis yang terkubur. Lalu, mereka mencoba mengangkat apa sebetulnya nilai yang bisa disumbangkan oleh para penulis ini. Dan, ternyata menarik sekali apa yang mereka ungkapkan. Kemudian mereka mempertanyakan kembali, seperti apakah tradisi penulisan perempuan? Apakah ada pola-pola tertentu, gaya tertentu yang memang berkaitan, bukan karena dia perempuan secara esensial yang tulisannya demikian, melainkan karena hidup yang terkungkung dan terkotak-kotak, pengalaman-pengalamannya

sebagai perempuan, seperti melahirkan dan sebagainya. Hal-hal apa yang secara khusus bermakna bagi para perempuan penulis dilihat dari generasi penulis yang satu ke generasi yang lain. Tradisi ini memang harus terus dibangun, karena tidak ada yang lahir dengan sendirinya.

*JP: Bagaimana sastra perempuan mempengaruhi gerakan perempuan?*

MB: Karya-karya perempuan yang disampaikan dan ditulis di dalam buku-buku ini pada akhirnya dibaca oleh masyarakat luas. Paling tidak, pembaca menghayati pengalaman yang ditulis itu, yang menjadi inspirasi bagi perempuan lainnya. Jadilah pengalaman perempuan yang tersuarakan dalam masyarakat. Suara ini menjadi inspirasi bagi perempuan lainnya, juga bagi kaum laki-laki yang selama ini tidak pernah terpikirkan oleh mereka.

*JP: Bagaimana signifikansi sastra perempuan bagi gerakan-gerakan perempuan di Indonesia?*

MB: Kita banyak mengenal sastrawan perempuan yang aktif sejak awal, seperti Selasih, perempuan pertama yang novelnya terbit di Balai Pustaka. Ia tidak sebatas menulis sastra, dalam aktivitasnya sehari-hari ia juga banyak memperjuangkan kepentingan perempuan, seperti aktif dan vokal dalam mengkritik DPR. Banyak juga perempuan penulis Indonesia yang posisinya naik-turun dalam periode sastra.

*JP: Pada periode apa perempuan mengalami zaman keemasan sastra?*

**MB:** Tidak ada istilah zaman keemasan, karena setelah itu perempuan penulis akan turun lagi pamornya. Tetapi, dalam setiap periode, sastrawan-sastrawan perempuan penting untuk diganti kembali, seperti yang dilakukan feminis sastra di Barat. Untuk

*Yang beda, adalah isu sosial dan politik yang mempengaruhi produksi sastra di Indonesia. Mulai dari jaman Kartini, dia yang membuka pintu untuk emansipasi perempuan pribumi, banyak perempuan penulis Indonesia yang posisinya naik-turun dalam periode sastra. Di-sini Budianta membicarakan Sariam Ismail, penulis Indonesia yang mulai aktif tahun 1930an dan tercatat sebagai novelis perempuan pertama di Indonesia. Sejak itu, juga banyak sastrawan-sastrawan perempuan yang telah diganti kembali. Tapi, proses ini tidak semudah di Barat karena kurangnya dokumentasi.*

melakukan itu, sebetulnya banyak medium kesusastraan yang tidak hanyatercetak atau dalam bentuk buku, tetapi juga berupa jurnal, seperti di daerah-daerah, banyak perempuan yang bermain di arena itu. Tapi, masalahnya di Indonesia mengalami kesulitan untuk menggalinya karena kurangnya dokumentasi. Padahal, majalah daerah banyak sekali, seperti majalah-majalah perempuan di bawah afiliasi partai politik tertentu. Di situ kita dapat melihat bagaimana posisi perempuan dalam sastra. Sebenarnya ini tugas kritikus sastra untuk mendokumentasikan dan mengangkat isu-isu tersebut sehingga dapat berpengaruh dan menjadi inspirasi bagi yang lain.

**JP:** *Pada periode kekuasaan seperti apa sastra mendapatkan kebebasan di Indonesia ini?*

**MB:** Apa, sih, yang disebut kebebasan? Mungkin ini berkaitan dengan konteks sosial politik yang ada. Sebenarnya sastra itu sendiri adalah kebebasan. Siapa pun boleh menulis, apa saja, dan bisa mengambil dari mana saja, tidak ada ruang-ruang yang menyekat-nyekat karena ini ruang imajinasi. Persoalannya ketika kita menulis dan mencoba mengirimkannya, kita dihadapkan oleh “penjaga-penjaga” di ruang publik. Di sinilah banyak perempuan merasa terdiskriminasi, bahkan secara internal seperti ada keraguan ketika ingin mengirimkannya, dengan menimbang, “Apakah pantas atau boleh dikirimkan?” Tentu saja perlahan-lahan dengan perkembangan zaman, ketidakbebasan itu semakin berkurang, melihat pendidikan perempuan semakin luas tidak seperti di zaman Kartini. Sensor-sensor pun mulai berkurang, terutama sejak turunnya Presiden Soeharto. Namun, bukan berarti sensor tidak ada, kadang sensor itu datang dari masyarakat sendiri.

*Isu sensor juga sangat menarik untuk dibahas kalau melihat konteks politik dan religius Indonesia. Dibawah Soeharto, ketidakbebasan naik. Sekarang, sensor malah datang dari masyarakat sendiri, yang menonjokkan kecenderungan ekstremis. Dalam satu sisi, memang ada lebih banyak sastrawan perempuan hari ini daripada sebelumnya. Ayu Utami adalah contoh satu penulis yang sedang naik daun karena tulisannya yang membahas seksualitas kaum perempuan. Tetapi, di sisi lain, suara kaum minoritas di Indonesia lagi sering dipendam. Lihat saja kasus Ahok.*

**JP:** *Apakah perempuan muda penulis juga memanfaatkan kebebasan itu?*



**MB:** Memang mulai muncul perempuan-perempuan muda penulis dengan variasi gaya yang sangat menonjol, dengan pembaca yang juga berbeda-beda. Ini hal yang sangat positif, mungkin karena anak-anak muda ini hidup di generasi yang tidak terlalu terhambat masalah gender; atau adanya kebebasan ruang ekspresi, seperti teknologi dan kehidupan yang kosmopolit.

**JP:** Kalau kita lihat Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari, Fira Basuki, Djennar Maesa Ayu, Dinar Rahayu, dan perempuan penulis lainnya, ada satu titik tentang seksualitas perempuan yang menjadi tema pokok.

**MB:** Itu hal yang wajar karena perempuan mempunyai hak atas tubuhnya sendiri. Tubuh perempuan bukan sesuatu yang tabu, tetapi sesuatu yang positif, perempuan mempunyai hak untuk mengapresiasi tubuhnya sendiri.

**JP:** Mengapa harus dimulai dari tubuh?

**MB:** Karena tubuh bagian yang paling dekat dengan perempuan. Dalam wacana-wacana lama, fungsi seksualitas perempuan dekat dengan melahirkan anak atau mereproduksi dan kemudian hidupnya diabdikan untuk membesarkan anak. Jadi, perempuan cenderung tidak memiliki hak atas dirinya sendiri. Gerakan perempuan sudah menunjukkan bahwa semua orang berhak atas tubuhnya. Perempuan juga berhak atas kesehatan dan kenikmatan tubuhnya sendiri. Mungkin ini menjadi baru ketika biasanya sopan santun terjaga, sehingga sedikit mengejutkan, barangkali. Tapi, buat negara-negara tertentu hal ini sudah lama terjadi.

*JP: Sastra perempuan mengalami proses liberalisasi, tetapi sebaliknya masyarakat menggalakkan sensor. Bagaimana sastra menyikapi ini?*

**MB:** Saya berharap mudah-mudahan tidak akan terjadi. Kalau sampai terjadi, maka ada kemunduran yang luar biasa. Satu sisi masyarakat cenderung konservatif, sisi lain ungkapan sastra semakin bebas, maka bagaimana dua hal ini dapat terjadi pada saat yang sama. Mungkin kesusastraan “yang bebas” ini pembacanya terbatas sehingga kelompok konservatif tidak akan membaca produksi seperti ini. Bila lingkungan konservatif merambah wilayah sastra kemudian menyempitkan ruang geraknya, ini yang sangat disayangkan. Imajinasi kita tidak terbatas dan bebas, dan pembaca tidak bodoh.

*JP: Bila sastra adalah refleksi dari sebuah renungan sosial, mengapa kebebasan karya-karya sastra perempuan menjadi ambigu dengan masyarakat kita yang konservatif?*

**MB:** Bukankah perempuan-perempuan penulis juga menuliskan persoalan-persoalan sosial itu sendiri? Ekspresi kebebasan mereka merupakan respons terhadap hubungan yang ada, jadi bukannya tidak berkaitan, seperti tokoh Shakuntala dalam Saman karya Ayu Utami, itu semacam reaksi atau resistansi terhadap hubungan perempuan dengan laki-laki yang tidak adil dalam masyarakat.

*JP: Apakah itu berarti ruang privat mulai banyak diminati oleh pembaca?*

**MB:** Masalahnya tidak lagi sekadar domestik dan publik. Sekarang sudah lebih longgar meskipun secara umum di masyarakat masih terjadi. Penulis-penulis muda tidak begitu mempersoalkan publik dan domestik. Mereka sudah banyak yang masuk dalam ruang-ruang politik dan sosial. Mereka itu generasi yang sudah bisa menikmati runtuhnya pembatasan yang kaku antara domestik dan publik.

**JP:** *Adakah perbedaan penulisan seksualitas perempuan yang ditulis laki-laki dengan penulisan seksualitas perempuan yang ditulis perempuan?*

**MB:** Sebetulnya ini perlu penelitian tersendiri. Begitu jelas dalam novel-novel umum, yang menonjol adalah perspektif laki-laki, sedangkan perempuan muncul lebih sebagai objek atau korban. Tentu menjadi berbeda dengan perspektif perempuan bahwa perempuan memiliki hak atas seksualitas dirinya sendiri.

**JP:** *Banyak anggapan, perempuan penulis bisa terkenal bila di bawah bayang-bayang penulis laki-laki yang sudah terkenal.*

**MB:** Itu berarti masih mempertanyakan dan meragukan kemampuan seorang perempuan pengarang. Barangkali ada anggapan, itu karena kehebatan seorang laki-laki di belakangnya.

**JP:** *Apa itu proses ketidakadilan?*

**MB:** Ya, dalam tatanan yang masih besar, artinya akan selalu harus dihadapi.

[..]

**JP:** *Sastra perempuan seperti apa yang Anda diharapkan ke depan nanti?*

**MB:** Saya mengharapkan akan semakin banyak variasi. Perempuan itu tidak cuma satu atau tunggal. Memang yang masih mendominasi sastra sekarang ini adalah perempuan-perempuan kota atau perempuan urban. Tetapi, di antara perempuan urban sendiri pun berbeda-beda di setiap generasinya. Ada yang religious dalam agama yang berbeda, mempunyai lingkungan sosial yang berbeda, dan pengalaman hidup yang berbeda pula.

*Yang memberi harapan, adalah keberanian penulis perempuan untuk terus bereaksi dan berkarya. Lewat tulisan-tulisan mereka, mereka menantang pikiran tidak adil dalam masyarakat. Akhirnya, Professor Budianta menutup wawancaranya dengan menutur harapan untuk kebangkitan variasi perempuan penulis di Indonesia. Saya sangat setuju dengan kata-katanya bahwa 'Perempuan itu tidak cuma satu atau tunggal.'*

Tema pengalaman antar generasi bisa diangkat oleh berbagai macam perempuan dan berbagai macam lingkungan sosial sehingga saya harapkan tidak pada satu arah yang tunggal, tetapi semakin ramai diikuti oleh berbagai macam perempuan penulis, seperti Nukila Amal yang memperkenalkan jenis penulisan yang baru dan berbeda dengan yang lainnya. Bagaimana dia menggali kembali sejarah Ternate dengan gaya penulisan yang lebih surealis daripada yang lain. Dia seorang apoteker yang tidak memiliki latar belakang sastra. Banyak anak muda berbakat bisa memanfaatkan ruang itu. Di luar negeri, gejala munculnya perempuan muda penulis itu sudah booming di Amerika sejak

tahun '80-an. Ini karena adanya pasar yang terbuka, antara lain pasar yang multikultural yang sangat haus dengan pengalaman spesifik dari warna lokal budaya tertentu. Kalau melihat tren semacam ini, kebangkitan variasi perempuan penulis akan segera muncul.

**Catatan Belakang:**

[1] Tulisan ini dibuat pada tahun 2003

Pernah diterbitkan di:

Jurnal Perempuan, No. 30, 2003. Jakarta: Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan.

Mereka yang di Atas Persoalan, Kumpulan Profil dan Wawancara Jurnal Perempuan. 2013. Jakarta: Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan.

# Linguistic Sexism and Feminist Linguistic Activism

by Anne Pauwels

## 1 Women and Men as Language Users and Regulators

The popular portrayal of women and men as language users has stressed their fundamental differences. A quick perusal of some writings about male and female speakers across languages (e.g. Baron 1986) leaves no doubt that men are perceived not only as powerful speakers but especially as authoritative language users. Women, on the other hand, are often seen as garrulous, frivolous, and illiterate language users. These popular stereotypes

*This chapter of the Handbook of Language and Gender, written by Anne Pauwels, is relevant not just for its study of the gendered nature of (male-regulated) language, but also for charting the rise of feminist linguistic activism. Its key argument is that language usage and rules can and should be reformed, if we are to overturn the semantic asymmetry of the sexes.*

gained in stature when they were endorsed by or validated in the “academic” and “scientific” literature of the day (for an overview see e.g. Baron 1986; Kramarae 1981). This “scientific” validation in turn led to the desire for the codification and regulation of women’s speech, and of women as speakers. Cameron (1995; this volume) as well as other scholars of language and gender have documented the many rules, codes, and guides that were devel-

oped to codify and control women’s language behavior over the past centuries. Essentially this action cemented men’s status as norm-makers, language regulators, and language planners. Men signaled their authority in language through their roles in the dictionary-making process, in the writing of normative grammars, in the establishment of language academies and other normative language institutions, and through their involvement in language planning activities.

The history of women as language regulators is very different. As stated above, women were subjected to linguistic regulation much more than men. However, women were given some authority in language regulation as norm enforcers: both as mothers and as school teachers (especially in elementary education) women were to ensure that children learned to use language according to the prescribed norms.

It was the linguistic activism associated with the women’s movement starting in the 1970s that posed the first major female challenge to male dominance in language regulation and planning. Women of all walks of life started to expose the biased portrayal of the sexes in language use and demonstrated that this portrayal was particularly discriminatory and damaging to women. Furthermore, their activities targeted the uncovering of the gendered nature of many linguistic rules and norms. For example, Bodine’s (1975) paper on “Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar” showed that sex-indefinite he gained its dominant status as generic pronoun as a result of male regulation. Baron’s (1986) comprehensive analysis of grammar in relation to gender similarly exposes androcentric practices. Another powerful expression of language regulation is the dictionary. Scholars such as Kramarae (1992), Pusch (1984), and Yaguello (1978) revealed sexism in lexicographic practices, especially in older versions of

dictionaries of English, German, and French: the works of the “best” male authors were a major source for dictionary definitions of words. Female authors or women-oriented publications (especially women’s magazines) were seldom included in the source material. These exposures of bias cast women in the role of critical commentators on “men’s rules.” Some women reacted to the bias by becoming *norm-breakers* who subverted established norms and rules: examples include the use of *she* as sex-indefinite pronoun, and in German, the introduction of the word *Herlein* (literally, little man) for a single man to match the existing *Fraulein* (literally, little woman - Miss).

The first section looks at the portrayal of women and men as language users and regulators. Until fairly recently, it is men who have carried the torch for and held authority over language. The historical exclusion of women from higher levels of education and professional life meant that it was men who became the norm-makers and codifiers of language. Even the dictionary-making process was one largely overseen by men. Examples don't often get more concrete than that.

Perhaps most threatening to men’s role as *norm-makers* were the attempts women made at becoming norm-makers themselves through the formulation of proposals and guidelines for non-sexist language use. Developing women’s own norms and implementing them across a speech community is clearly the strongest challenge, if not threat, to male authority in language regulation. This assumption is borne out by the often vehement reactions expressed by (male-dominated) language academies and other linguistic authorities against analyses of linguistic sex-

ism and against proposals for non-sexist language use (for details see e.g. Blaubeurgs 1980; Hellinger 1990; Pauwels 1998). In many negative reactions to the guidelines the author tries to discard a proposed change by questioning the linguistic expertise of the feminist language planner or linguistic activist. In other words, he or she expresses the belief that the female language planner does not have the knowledge or the expertise to propose new language norms.

In the following sections I will examine the language (planning) activities which were triggered by the newly gained female consciousness associated with women’s movements across the Western world during the 1970s and 1980s. I will also examine the extent to which their attempts at becoming normmakers have been successful.

## 2 Feminist Linguistic Activism – Non-sexist Language Reform

### 2.1 Feminist non-sexist language campaigns as an instance of language planning

It is important to acknowledge that the debates, actions, and initiatives around the (non-) sexist language issue are a form of language planning. The marginalization of feminist perspectives on gender and communication in the 1970s and early 1980s had a particularly strong effect on the recognition of feminist linguistic activism as a genuine case of language planning, in this instance a form of *corpus planning* (see Kloss 1969). In fact, “mainstream” literature on language planning either ignored or denied the existence of feminist language planning until Cooper’s (1989) work on language planning and social change which includes the American non-sexist language campaign as one of its case-studies.

It will become clear from the description and discussion below that feminist campaigns to eliminate sexist bias from language have all the trademarks of language reform. In my previous work (e.g. Pauwels 1993, 1998) I have analyzed feminist language reform using a sociolinguistic approach to language planning (e.g. Fasold 1984). The sociolinguistic approach emphasizes the fact that reforms are directed at achieving social change, especially of the kind that enables greater equality, equity, and access. Within this framework the language planning process is divided into four main stages. The *fact-finding* stage is concerned with documenting the problematic issues and concerns. The *planning* stage focuses on the viability of change as well as on developing proposals for change. In the *implementation* stage the methods and avenues for promoting and implementing the changes are assessed and the preferred proposals are implemented. In the *evaluation/feedback* stage language planners seek to assess to what extent the planning and implementation processes have been successful in terms of achieving the goal of the language planning exercise. This involves examining whether the changes are being adopted by the speech community and how they are being used.

## 2.2 Documenting sexist language practices

Exposing and documenting sexist practices in language use and communication has been, and continues to be, a grass-roots-based activity by feminists with an interest in language and the linguistic representation of the sexes. There is no denying that feminist activists in the USA were the trailblazers in both exposing sexist bias and proposing changes. Amongst a (linguistic) academic readership the works of Lakoff (1975) and Spender (1980) and the collection of essays in Nilsen et al. (1977) became the main reference points for elaborate descriptions of linguistic sexism

as it affected the English language. Other speech communities in which feminists took an early and active interest in exposing sexist linguistic practices included Norway (Blakar 1977), France (Yaguello 1978), Germany (e.g. Troemel-Ploetz 1978; Guentherodt 1979; Guentherodt et al. 1980; Hellinger and Schrapel 1983) as well as Spain (e.g. Garcia 1977). More recently the documentation of gender bias has spread to languages such as Chinese, Icelandic, Lithuanian, Italian, Japanese, Polish, and Thai (see Hellinger and Bussman 2001; Pauwels 1998).

Fortunately, by the 1970s, feminists had begun to actively challenge male dominance in language regulation and planning. Linguistic criticism became a pillar of the movement. Gender bias was exposed in many of the linguistic rules we take for granted, like the use of the sex indefinite 'he' instead of 'she'. As a first act of rebellion, some women began breaking these norms, in attempt to leave behind the role of critic, and to become that of regulator. In proposing alternative uses of language, feminists were threatening men's authority as norm-makers.

Feminist explorations into the representation of women and men revealed commonalities across speech communities as well as across languages. A striking feature across many languages and speech communities is the *asymmetrical treatment* of women and men, of male/masculine and female/feminine concepts and principles. The practice of considering the man/the male as the prototype for human representation reduces the woman/female to the status of the "subsumed," the "invisible," or the "marked" one: women are invisible in language when they are subsumed in generic expressions using masculine forms. Ge-

neric reference in many languages occurs via the use of forms which are identical with the representation of maleness (e.g. *he* as generic and masculine pronoun, generic nouns coinciding with nouns referring to males). When women are made visible in language, they are “marked”: their linguistic construction is often as a derivative of man/male through various grammatical (morphological) processes.

This asymmetry also affects the lexical make-up of many languages. The structure of the lexicon often reflects the “male as norm” principle through the phenomenon of lexical gaps, that

*In the next section Pauwels takes a closer look at non-sexist language reform, and its manifestations through the years. To begin, Pauwels notes that many of the early feminist language campaigns and activities of the 1970s and 80s were largely ignored by mainstream literature. One of the first sociolinguistic explorations into the lexical representation of women and men revealed a fundamental concept common across the world: that male was regarded as the norm, and female, as the derivative. Pauwels’ analysis of its impact is remarkable: ‘The practice of considering the man/the male as the prototype for human representation reduces the woman/female to the status of the “subsumed,” the “invisible,” or the “marked” one.’ Other expressions which reinforce women and men’s perceived value in society, are the lexical gaps in vocabulary to describe women in professional roles, and the more subtle ‘practice of semantic derogation which constantly reinforces the “generic man” and “sexual woman” portrayal.’ It’s true that words to describe girls and women are astonishingly quick to turn sexual and abusive. And see what happens when you use certain ‘feminine’ qualities to describe men, and vice versa.*

is, the absence of words to denote women in a variety of roles, professions, and occupations (e.g. Baron 1986; Hellinger 1990; Sabatini 1985; Yaguello 1978). The bias against women in the matter of lexical gaps is particularly poignant when we consider the reverse, namely, the absence of male-specific nouns to denote men adopting roles or entering professions seen to be female-dominant. The male lexical gaps tend to be filled rather quickly, even to the extent that the new male form becomes the dominant one from which a new female form is derived. An example of this practice is found in German where the word *Hebamme* (midwife) is making way for the new word *Entbindungspfleger* (literally “birthing assistant”) as a result of men taking up the role of midwife. Meanwhile a female midwife has been coined *Entbindungspflegerin*, a form derived from *Entbindungspfleger*.

The semantic asymmetry that characterizes the portrayal of women and men in language is of particular concern to feminist activists, as it is an expression of women’s and men’s perceived values and status in society. The core of this semantic asymmetry is that woman is a sexual being dependent on man, whereas man is simply defined as a human being whose existence does not need reference to woman. Schulz (1975) highlights the practice of semantic derogation which constantly reinforces the “generic man” and “sexual woman” portrayal. Schulz (1975: 64) finds that “a perfectly innocent term designating a girl or a woman may begin with neutral or positive connotations, but that gradually it acquires negative implications, at first only slightly disparaging, but after a period of time becoming abusive and ending as a sexual slur.” This practice has also been observed and examined for French (e.g. Sautermeister 1985), German (e.g. Kochskamper 1991), and Japanese (e.g. Cherry 1987).

Linguistic *stereotyping* of the sexes was also seen as problematic, especially for women as it reinforced women's subordinate status. Stereotyped language was particularly damaging to women in the context of the mass media and educational materials. It is therefore not surprising that both these spheres of language use were subjected to thorough examinations of sexism (see e.g. Nilsen et al. 1977).

Community reaction to these feminist analyses was predominantly negative: the existence of linguistic sexism was vigorously denied. Reasons for its denial varied according to the status and linguistic expertise of the commentator. Whereas non-experts rejected the claim on (folk) etymological assumptions, or because of an unquestioned acceptance of the wisdom of existing language authorities, linguistic experts refuted the claims by arguing that feminist analyses of the language system are fundamentally flawed as they rest on erroneous understandings of language and gender, particularly of grammatical gender. For example, the reaction of the Department of Linguistics at Harvard University to suggestions from students at the Divinity School to ban *Man* and generic *he* as they are sexist, and the reaction by the German linguist Hartwig Kalverkamper (1979) to a similar observation for the German language by fellow linguist Senta Troemel-Ploetz (1978), stated that feminist analysts held a mistaken view about the relationship between grammatical gender and sex. These denials were in turn scrutinized and refuted by feminist linguistic commentators who exposed historical practices of grammatical gender reassignment (e.g. Baron 1986; Cameron 1985) or who presented evidence from experimental work on people's perceptions of gender and sex in language (e.g. Mackay 1980; Pauwels 1998).

### 2.3 Changing language: How?

Most feminist language activists were and are proponents of language change as a measure for achieving a more balanced representation of women and men in language. Taking linguistic action to improve the plight of women was seen as an integral part of women's liberation. Furthermore, many language activists subscribe to an interactionist view of language and reality which has its origins in a weaker version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: language shapes and reflects social reality.

Despite this consensus on the need for linguistic action there is considerable diversity in the activists' and planners' views on how to change sexist practices in language. Their views on strategies for achieving change are shaped by many factors, including their own motivation for change, their understanding and view of language, and the nature and type of the language to be changed. Planners whose motivation to change is driven by a belief that language change lags behind social change will adopt different strategies from those activists whose main concern is to expose patriarchal bias in language. Whereas the former may consider linguistic amendments as a satisfactory strategy to achieve the linguistic reflection of social change, the latter activists would not be satisfied with mere amendments. Proposals for change are also shaped by one's understanding of the language system, of how meaning is created, and of how linguistic change occurs. For example, a linguist's suggestions for change may be heavily influenced by his or her training—training in recognizing the distinctive structural elements and properties of language such as phonemes, morphemes, and grammatical categories, and in recognizing how these elements contribute to creating meaning. Reformers without such training may focus their efforts for change mainly at the lexical level as this level is often



considered the only one susceptible to change. The nature and type of language also influences proposals for change: languages that have grammatical gender pose different challenges from those that do not.

Among this multitude of opinions and views on the question of change, three main motivations for change can be discerned: (1) a desire to expose the sexist nature of the current language system; (2) a desire to create a language which can express reality from a woman's perspective; or (3) a desire to amend the present language system to achieve a symmetrical and equitable representation of women and men.

Causing linguistic disruption is a strategy favored by those wishing to expose the sexist nature of the present language system. Its advocates claim that this strategy helps people to become aware of the many subtle and not so subtle ways in which the woman and the female are discriminated against in language. This disruption is achieved through various forms of linguistic creativity including breaking morphological rules, as in herstory (based on history), or grammatical conventions, such as the generic use of the pronoun she; using alternative spellings, as in *wimmin*, *LeserInnen* (female readers); or inverting gender stereotypes, as in "Mr X, whose thick auburn hair was immaculately coiffed, cut a stunning figure when he took his seat in Parliament for the first time since his election." The revaluation and the reclaiming of words for women whose meaning had become trivialized or derogatory over time (e.g. woman, girl, spinster) is another form of linguistic disruption, as is the creation of new words (e.g. male chauvinism, pornoglossia) to highlight women's subordination and men's domination.

More radical proposals have come from those activists who do not believe that the present language system is capable of

expressing a woman's point of view. They call for the creation of a new woman-centered language. Examples range from the experimental language used by Gert Brantenberg (1977) in her (Norwegian) novel *The Daughters of Egalia*, the creation of the Laadan language by the science fiction writer and linguist Suzanne Haden Elgin "for the specific purpose of expressing the perceptions of women" (Elgin 1988: 1), to the experiments in "writing the body" — *écriture féminine* — emerging from the postmodern feminist theories and approaches associated with Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray. To date these experiments in women-centered languages and discourses have remained largely the domain of creative writers.

So how can we change language? At this point, Pauwels lists several strategies which lend themselves to both the creation of a woman-centered language, to the reformation of the 'current language system' to achieve a symmetrical and equitable representation of women and men. These include language disruption (the insertion of new words, and alternative spellings to call attention to what Sara Ahmed might call the 'brick walls' of language, like 'herstory' or 'wimmin'), and experiments in creative writing (*écriture féminine*).

More familiar to the general speech community are feminist attempts at achieving linguistic equality of the sexes by proposing amendments to existing forms, rules, and uses of language (sometimes labeled form replacement strategy). Gender-neutralization and gender-specification are the main mechanisms to achieve this. Whereas gender-neutralization aims to do away with, "neutralize," or minimize the linguistic expression of gender

and/or gender-marking in relation to human referents, the gender-specification (also called feminization) strategy promotes the opposite: the explicit and symmetrical marking of gender in human referents. An illustration of gender-neutralization is the elimination in English of female occupational nouns with suffixes such as -ess, -ette, -trix (e.g. actress, usherette, aviatrix). An example of gender-specification in English is the use of he or she to replace the generic use of he. The application of both mechanisms has been confined mainly to word level as there was a belief that changes at word level could have a positive effect on eliminating sexism at discourse level.

Given the prominence of the linguistic equality approach and the form replacement strategy it is worthwhile examining which factors influence the feminist language planners in opting for gender-neutralization or genderspecification.

#### *2.4 Choosing non-sexist alternatives*

Social and linguistic factors play a role in the selection of the strategies. Social factors revolve around questions of social effectiveness: the chosen strategy should achieve linguistic equality of the sexes by both effecting and reflecting social change relating to women and men in society. This is particularly relevant with regard to occupational nomenclature. Linguistic factors focus on the issue of linguistic viability as well as on matters of language typology. Proposed changes need to take account of the typological features and the structural properties of a language; for example, languages which mark gender through morphological processes may have different options from those that don't. Linguistic viability is also linked to linguistic prescriptivism: proposed alternatives which are seen to violate deeply ingrained prescriptive rules or norms could obstruct or slow down the process of

adoption in the community.

Most non-sexist language proposals generated for a range of languages contain explicit or implicit evidence that these social and linguistic factors have played a role in the choice of the principal strategy (gender-neutralization or gender-specification). However, feminist activists and language planners proposing changes for the same language may differ in the priority they assign to arguments of social effectiveness and of linguistic viability, or how they interpret these concepts. This has led to debates about the preferred principal strategy. The Dutch and German feminist language debates are examples of the tensions about the choice of the main strategy for language change. Dutch and German are typologically closely related languages with a grammatical gender system. Languages with a grammatical gender system classify nouns into gender categories on the basis of morphological or phonological features (see Corbett 1991). Whilst many have claimed that a grammatical gender system which classifies nouns in the masculine, feminine, or neuter categories is a purely linguistic invention, and is not linked to the extralinguistic category of biological sex, Corbett (1991: 34) acknowledges that "there is no purely morphological system" and that such systems "always have a semantic core." This is particularly obvious in the gender assignment of human (agent) nouns, with most nouns referring to women being feminine, and those referring to male persons being masculine.

In the case of Dutch the grammatical gender system operates with a threegender system: masculine, feminine, neuter. However, Dutch does not mark the distinction between masculine and feminine nouns in relation to a range of qualifiers and gender agreement markers, including definite articles, demonstrative pronouns, and attributive adjectives. For example, both mascu-

line and feminine nouns attract the same definite article: *de*. This gender system is labeled common gender. In the case of human agent nouns grammatical gender largely coincides with biological sex. Dutch still has a large number of female human agent nouns (especially occupational nouns) which have been formed by means of a suffixation process involving suffixes such as *-a*, *-euse*, *-in*, *-e*, *-ster*. German also operates with a three-gender system: masculine, feminine, and neuter, but unlike Dutch is not of the common gender type. The grammatical gender assignment of human agent nouns similarly displays substantial overlap with biological sex. Although German also has a range of feminine suffixes including *-euse*, *-essje*, *-ette*, the most frequently used one is *-in*. Furthermore, this suffix is still very productive in the formation of feminine occupational and other human agent nouns, for example *Pilotin* (female pilot), *Polizistin* (female police officer).

In the Dutch debates proponents of the gender-neutralization strategy are in favor of phasing out the use of feminine forms of occupational nouns and of not using them in the creation of new female nouns. They promote the use of a single form to denote a male, female, or generic human referent. Their choice for this new gender-neutral form is almost invariably the existing masculine/generic form, e.g. *de advocaat* (the lawyer). They consider this strategy socially effective as it detracts attention from the categories of sex and gender which in their view ultimately benefits women. De Caluwe (1996: 40) claims that "it is even questionable whether women would be served by the practice of mentioning gender in each and every case. As long as women are not represented equally strongly among all occupations/professions at all levels. . . the feminine forms threaten to be seen as marginalized or even stigmatized forms" (my translation). The advocates of gender-neutralization also see this strategy as linguistically

more viable for the following reasons: gender-neutralization is more in tune with current structural developments in the Dutch language, which is becoming more analytic and is moving away from the use of gendermarking suffixes (Brouwer 1991). Choosing gender-neutralization also reduces speaker insecurity with regard to the formation of new feminine forms: as Dutch has many feminine suffixes language users often face the sometimes difficult decision which suffix to use: "Is the female derivation of *arts/dokter* (physician/ medical doctor) *artse* or *artsin/dokteres* or *dokterin*?" (Brouwer 1991: 76). Furthermore, gender-neutralization supporters claim that there is a definite trend away from the use of feminine occupational nouns among language users.

For the advocates of the gender-specification/feminization strategy (e.g. Van Alphen 1983; Niedzwiecki 1995), making women visible in all occupations and professions through systematic use of feminine occupational forms is seen to achieve social effectiveness. In response to claims from the genderneutralization camp that feminine suffixes have connotations of triviality, the feminization supporters respond that it is better to be named and to be visible in language, even if there are some connotations of triviality: Niedzwiecki (1995) believes that the latter will abate and eventually disappear when there is consistent and full use of feminine forms in all contexts. They are confident that this strategy is linguistically viable and do not believe that continued feminization is at odds with trends in the Dutch language. They rely on a study by Adriaens (1981) which recorded an increase in the number of feminized occupational nouns. However, judging by current trends in language use and by existing policy documents the gender-neutralization strategy is the one most likely to be adopted and implemented in Dutch-speaking communities (e.g. Pauwels 1997a).

In the German context the same social arguments are used by advocates of either strategy. The feminization supporters opine that their strategy is the more socially effective because it not only makes women visible and reveals that women are increasingly found in a variety of occupations and professions, but it also ensures that all occupations and professions are seen as accessible to men and women. Those opting for gender-neutralization in German claim that gender equality in language is best served by minimizing gender reference, especially in generic contexts. The linguistic proposals emerging from either side do include more

*In these campaigns, a crucial dilemma for feminists is the question of neutralization or feminization. Should we abolish condescending female versions of words, and use actor instead of actress, chairperson instead of chairwoman, flight attendant instead of hostess? In English, gender-neutralization of this kind has been the principal strategy in promoting linguistic equality. Though some consider this the most 'viable' strategy, I'm not so sure that it creates the right effect. Especially not if they use the existing masculine form as the new generic form. I'm inclined to agree with the feminization supporters, who 'respond that it is better to be named and to be visible in language.'*

radical suggestions than those found in the Dutch context. For example, the radical feminist linguist Luise Pusch (1990) proposes total or radical feminization by means of reversing the current practice of attributing generic status to the masculine form. In her proposal the feminine form becomes the appropriate (unmarked) form. Well aware of the radical nature of this proposal,

Pusch defends it as an important transitional strategy to rectify the many centuries of androcentrism in language. She asserts, somewhat provocatively, that this strategy is socially effective as it gives men the chance to experience personally what it means to be subsumed under a feminine form and it gives women the opportunity to experience the feeling of being named explicitly in generic contexts. She also defends the linguistic viability of her proposal by claiming that it is simple and does not involve the creation of any new forms.

A less radical version of the feminization strategy involves the explicit and consistent use of the feminine forms in gender-specific as well as generic contexts. In generic contexts preference goes to the use of gender-paired formulations (often labelled gender splitting) such as *der/die Lehrer/in* (the male/female teacher) or *der Lehrer und die Lehrerin* or the graphemically innovative *der/die LehrerIn*. This proposal is seen as a linguistically viable option since the German language system is suited for continued formation of feminine occupational and human agent nouns through gender suffixation. Unlike Dutch, German has a dominant feminine suffix which continues to be productive: the *-in* suffix. There is minimal speaker uncertainty in creating new feminine forms as speakers are not faced with making a selection from a wide variety of options. Concerns about the semantic ambiguity of *-in* are downplayed, as the meaning "wife of a male incumbent of an occupation" rather than "female incumbent of" is disappearing fast.

Whilst some gender-neutralization supporters follow the same path as their Dutch counterparts and accord the current (masculine) generic form the status of gender-neutral form, others make much more radical proposals. In response to a request from the Institute of German Language regarding eliminating

gender bias from occupational nomenclature, Pusch (1984) proposed to change gender assignment in human agent nouns (mainly occupational nouns). This would entail the elimination of all feminine forms derived by suffixation and a gender reassignment for the noun in generic contexts. The neuter gender is to be used for generic reference, leading to the following pattern: *das* Professor for generic reference, *die* Professor (instead of *die* Professorin) for female-specific reference, and *der* Professor for male-specific reference. Pusch argues that the use of the neuter gender in generic contexts is socially the most effective in conveying gender-neutrality. However, she is aware that a drastic overhaul of part of the German gender system may make this proposal less linguistically viable than others. Judging on policy initiatives in Germany, Austria, and German-speaking Switzerland it is the feminization strategy which is promoted more heavily.

Similar debates and discussions about the most effective and desirable strategies have occurred in relation to the French and Spanish languages, where regional linguistic differences (e.g. Canada versus France) have also affected discussion (see Pauwels 1998). In the case of English there has been little if any debate about gender-neutralization being the principal strategy in promoting linguistic equality. Discussions have been more about selecting alternative forms within the gender-neutralization strategy: for example, should the word *chairman* be replaced by an existing, semantically related noun, such as *president*, *chair*, or should a new form be created, for example, *chairperson*? Replacing generic *he* by pronouns such as singular *they*, by a new pronoun, or by generic *she*, *it*, or *one* is another example of this (e.g. Bodine 1975; Mackay 1980; Baron 1986; Henley 1987).

### *2.5 Implementing changes - guidelines for non-sexist language use*

A crucial component in language planning is the implementation of the proposed changes. Language planners need to identify pathways and mechanisms to implement their proposals so that these can reach and spread through the speech community. In many forms of corpus planning (e.g. orthographic reform) implementation is top-down with language academies and other authoritative language bodies leading, and educational authorities facilitating the implementation process. However, in the case of feminist language planning these language authorities were and are often strongly opposed and resistant to the proposed changes. Being principally a grassroots-driven phenomenon, feminist language planning had limited (if any) access to, and cooperation from, the main channels for the implementation of language change. These include the education system, the media, legislative measures, and linguistic authorities. Instead their main mechanisms for spreading change were, and remain, promotion through personal use, the use of role models, and pressure on key agencies to adopt guidelines for non-sexist language use.

The promotion of linguistic disruption and of a newly created woman-centered language was primarily achieved through personal language patterns, often in speech but mainly in writing. Prominent feminist activists who practiced forms of linguistic disruption became role models for and of feminist linguistic change. Mary Daly's (1978) linguistic practices in *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* are a typical illustration of this. Feminist publications - both academic and general - became vehicles for spreading feminist linguistic practices throughout the feminist community. For example, in its early publication days the German feminist magazine *Emma* played an important role in

familiarizing German feminists with, and promoting, feminist language change. The magazine practiced gender splitting, used the new indefinite pronoun *frau* (instead of *man*, meaning “one”), and created many new compounds with *-frau* (-woman) to make women more visible in language. The creative work of feminist novelists and poets such as Monique Wittig, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Gert Brantenberg, Verena Stefan, and others who experiment with new forms of language use is a further illustration of this.

*The last section of Pauwels' text deals with the implementation and effectiveness of the proposed changes. In this, we are faced with another 'brick wall', in the form of linguistic institutions, which are not traditionally open or gender-inclusive spaces. 'In many forms of corpus planning (e.g. orthographic reform) implementation is top-down with language academies and other authoritative language bodies leading, and educational authorities facilitating the implementation process,' writes Pauwels. It's also worth noting that the gender gap is similarly problematic in the media industries, whether it be print, television or web. As such the creation and promotion of a more equitable, female-oriented language has been the work of individuals, who make changes in their personal language patterns.*

Exerting pressure on key agencies in language spread became a prominent mechanism for the promotion of change emanating from the linguistic equality approach. Feminist individuals and women's action groups not only developed guidelines and policies on non-sexist language use but also acted to convince professional organizations and key agencies to adopt the policies. These language-oriented actions were often part

of general initiatives by women's groups to eliminate gender-biased practices from society. Early targets for feminist linguistic activism were publishers of educational material, the print media, education, and legislative writing. These agencies were targeted because of their key role in shaping the representation of women and men and because of their potential to facilitate and spread change through a community. Feminist language activists also used the introduction of Sex Discrimination, Equal (Employment) Opportunity and Human Rights Acts, and other legislative measures to demand linguistic changes. A case in point is the need to amend professional and occupational nomenclature to comply with Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Acts. Terminology commissions, education ministries, employment councils, language academies, and other public agencies charged with making amendments to official (occupational) nomenclature and terminology called upon feminist language planners to assist them in this task. This in turn triggered requests for non-sexist language guidelines and policies to be developed for other public and private agencies covered under EEO and antidiscrimination legislation. To date non-sexist language policies are in place in most public sector and in many large private sector organizations in English language countries. They are also increasingly found in European countries and in supranational organizations such as UNESCO (see Pauwels 1998; Hellinger and Bussman 2001).

### *2.6 Assessing feminist language planning*

The success of feminist language activism needs to be judged ultimately against the goals it set out to achieve. These include raising awareness of the gender bias in language and getting the speech community to adopt the proposed changes in a manner that promotes gender equality. The relatively recent nature of

feminist language planning activities (from the mid-1970s at the earliest) and the scant number of investigations (Fasold 1987; Fasold et al. 1990) to date which have charted non-sexist language changes make a comprehensive assessment of success or failure as yet impossible. Nevertheless some comments can be made with regard to evidence of a greater community awareness of gender bias in language. Furthermore, the findings of recent and current research projects (admittedly small-scale) can shed some light on the adoption patterns of some non-sexist proposed changes in the community.

### *2.7 Increased awareness of gender bias*

There is no doubt that in English-language communities and in some other speech communities (mainly European) the awareness of gender bias in language has been raised markedly as a result of feminist linguistic activism. Although many people still disagree with the claim that there is a gender bias in language, or refuse to adopt non-sexist language changes, they have nevertheless been made aware of the problematic nature of language in this respect. A growing number of people display metalinguistic behavior which points toward a greater awareness of sexist language. This includes apologizing for the use of generic he - some authors now feel compelled to justify the use of generic he in textbooks, or for using -man compounds in a generic context.

Others self-correct generic he constructions or comment about title use and gender stereotypes. Whilst many such comments continue to be made in a deprecatory manner they nevertheless show awareness of the problem. The community's awareness is also evident in surveys on issues such as gender stereotyping, masculine generic he use, linguistic asymmetries in occupational nouns, and terms of address and naming prac-

tices (for an overview, see Pauwels 1998). For example, in 1986, 13 per cent of 250 female respondents were not familiar with Ms as an alternative title for women; by 1996 this had decreased to 4 per cent of 300 women (Pauwels 2001a). It is not possible at this stage to discern whether this awareness has been raised more through contact with linguistic disruption strategies or through language guidelines striving for linguistic equality.

### *2.8 Adopting feminist language change*

Investigating the adoption of feminist language change is a much more complex issue. It involves exploring which types of feminist language change are being adopted: change resulting from linguistic disruption strategies, womencentered language developments, or form replacement proposals. It also requires investigating the process by which these changes spread through a speech community. Does change spread from public forms of written discourse to public speech? Which sector of the community leads the change and how does it spread from this group to other groups in the community? Furthermore, there is the fundamental question of whether the adoption and spread of non-sexist language through a community occurs in such a way that it promotes gender equality and eliminates the bias against women in language.

To date many of these questions have not yet been addressed and present an opportunity for further research, especially in communities which have witnessed feminist linguistic activism for a number of years. To my knowledge there have not yet been any systematic investigations into community adoption of changes linked to the strategies of linguistic disruption or womencentered language developments. In fact the linguistic disruption strategy was not intended to be adopted by the communi-

ty at large; rather, it was used by linguistic activists to raise the community's awareness, sometimes in a more provocative manner. There is certainly evidence that some feminist publications in English, German, Dutch, French, and Spanish continue to use linguistic disruption as a way of keeping readers aware of gender bias in language. Developing women-centered languages has remained a preoccupation of poets and creative writers.

*The effectiveness of these efforts are hard to judge, since studies on this topic are still in its infancy. Though people are more aware of gender bias in language, it is more difficult to measure how much this is changing the way they think of women's role in society. Pauwels asks, 'Does change spread from public forms of written discourse to public speech? Which sector of the community leads the change and how does it spread from this group to other groups in the community?' The writers' own study of pronoun uses by academics in 2000 suggest that it is women, not surprisingly, who lead the adoption of non-sexist alternative to the generic 'he'. So if we want to accelerate this reform, we'll have to address the representation of women in academia, and indeed in all fields of knowledge production.*

The adoption of proposals emerging from the linguistic equality approach and involving form replacements has received more attention. To date most such explorations have focused on the adoption and spread of non-sexist alternatives for generically used nouns and pronouns and on symmetrical naming practices or title use. The reduction or avoidance of gender-stereotyped language has also been examined. Although these investigations are relatively small-scale and mainly involve English, they never-

theless allow an insight into the issue of the adoption and spread of feminist language planning.

### *2.9 Non-sexist generic nouns and pronouns in writing*

The studies by Cooper (1984), Markovitz (1984), Ehrlich and King (1994), and Pauwels (1997b, 2000), among others, concern the adoption of non-sexist generic nouns and pronouns in English. All report a decrease in use of masculine generic nouns and pronouns in favor of non-sexist alternatives both in forms of written discourse and in public speech. Cooper's (1984) corpus of 500,000 words taken from American newspapers and magazines covering the period 1971 to 1979 noted a dramatic decline in the use of masculine generic nouns (including -man compounds) and some decline in the use of generic he. Markovitz (1984) and Ehrlich and King's (1994) work focuses on university documents and reveals that the use of non-sexist alternatives for masculine generic nouns and generic he had increased markedly. Pauwels' (1997b) survey of non-sexist generic nouns and pronouns in 2,000 job advertisements in Australian newspapers found a very high degree of use of such forms. Only 5.4 per cent of all generic nouns (i.e. 128 different occupational and human agent nouns) used in the advertisements could be considered sex-exclusive terms: there were a few instances of -man compounds and of -ess words. With the exception of chairman and handyman, all -man compounds occurred less than their gender-inclusive counterparts. There were many instances of -man compounds having been replaced by -person compounds such as chairperson, draftsperson, foreperson, groundsperson, handyperson, even waitperson. The investigation also showed that the (already) few female-exclusive terms had been abandoned in favor of gender-neutral ones. For example, there were no air hostesses, only



flight attendants; no salesgirls, saleswomen, or salesladies, only salesperson(s) or salespeople. The study also revealed zero use of generic he. In job advertisements generic he was replaced mainly by the practice of repeating the generic noun, although there were some instances of He/She.

In more recent work I have started to investigate the use of non-sexist alternatives to masculine generic nouns and pronouns in public, non-scripted speech (Pauwels 2000, 2001b). A comparison of (non-scripted) speech derived from radio programs and parliamentary debates recorded in Australia between the 1960s and 1970s and in the 1990s showed a steep decline in the use of generic he from the pre-feminist reform period (i.e. between the 1960s and 1970s) to the post-feminist reform period (in the 1990s). In the pre-reform period approximately 95 per cent of all generic pronouns were generic he. Singular they recorded less than 1 (0.4) per cent, and he or she only 2.25 per cent. The postreform period revealed a significant turnaround for singular they, which had become the most frequently used generic pronoun recording a 75 per cent usage rate. Generic he had dropped from 95 to 18 per cent, whereas he or she had increased only slightly to 4.5 per cent. The users of these pronouns were mainly educated speakers including health professionals, journalists, lawyers, judges, members of the clergy, academics, teachers, and athletes. Changes in the patterns of generic noun use could not be investigated as there were very few examples of morphologically marked masculine generic nouns in the pre and post-reform database.

Another recent study (Pauwels 2000) explored generic pronoun use by Australian academics and educators when they were lecturing or giving papers at conferences, or in workshops or symposia. This study revealed that generic he has become the exception rather than the norm, as can be gleaned from table 24.1.

**Table 24.1 Generic pronoun use by academics**

<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Number (2,189)</b>	<b>%</b>
Singular they	763	34.85
He or she	1,105	50.47
Generic he	258	11.78
Generic she	60	2.74
It	3	0.13

These investigations also reveal some difference in the choice of pronoun which is most likely linked either to type of speaker, or to type of speech genre, or both. Educators and academics display a greater use of he or she than other educated speakers, whose preference is for the gender-neutral alternative singular they. The observed difference may also reflect the type of speech genre: the first study (Pauwels 2001b) consisted mainly of parliamentary debates and one-on-one interviews on radio programs, whereas the second study (Pauwels 2000) focused on lectures in university or other educational settings.

The academic pronoun study (Pauwels 2000) also provided an opportunity to investigate which type of speaker leads the adoption of non-sexist pronouns. The study comprised 165 women and 187 men, which facilitated the examination of gender patterns as presented in table 24.2. Seven different patterns emerged from the data: (1) prevalent use of generic he by an individual, (2) prevalent use of generic she, (3) prevalent use of he or she, (4) prevalent use of singular they, (5) variable use of he or she and singular they, (6) variable use of generic he and singular they, (7) variable use of

he and he or she. There were a small number of speakers (9 women and 10 men) whose pronoun use did not reveal any discernible patterns. Although both women and men use nonsexist alternatives more than generic he, it is women, not surprisingly, who lead the adoption. Their combined use of non-sexist alternatives (i.e. patterns 3, 4, 5) is 82.34 per cent whereas that of men is 62.02 per cent. Another indicator of women leading this change is the almost complete absence of generic he among female speakers, whereas men still record 10.16 per cent use of this form.

### 2.10 Naming practices and titles

Another prominent aspect of feminist linguistic reform concerned naming practices and terms of address for women (e.g. Kramer 1975; Stannard 1977; Spender 1980; Cherry 1987). Symmetrical use of titles and terms of address for women and the elimination of derogatory and discriminatory naming practices were the goals of feminist linguistic activism. There is some evidence of change in this arena of language use as well: an increasing number of women adopt naming practices which assert their linguistic independence from men. Women are more likely to keep their pre-marital name after marriage; there is a growing tendency for the mother's surname to be chosen as the family surname upon the birth of children; naming practices which render women invisible (e.g. Mrs John Man) are starting to disappear.

Investigations to date have focused on the introduction and spread of the new title Ms as a term of address for women, replacing Miss and Mrs (for a discussion of the viability of Ms as a new title for women, see Pauwels 1998). Evidence from English-language countries (especially the USA, Canada, and Australia) shows that women are increasingly adopting the new title, with estimates for the USA ranging between 30 and 45 per cent (At-

**Table 24.2 Women's and men's use of generic pronouns**

<b>Pronouns used</b>	<b>Women (n = 165) (%)</b>	<b>Men (n = 187) (%)</b>	<b>Total use 565 (%)</b>
Generic he	0.6	10.16	5.68
Generic she	3.63	1.6	2.55
He or she	44.24	29.41	36.36
Singular they	17.5	16.57	17.04
He or s/xe/ singular they	20.6	16.04	18.18
He/singular they	4.24	8.5	6.53
He/he or she	3.63	12.29	8.23
No discernible pronoun pattern	5.45	5.34	5.39

kinson 1987; Pauwels 1987). For Australia I examined the use of Ms among women in 1986 and again in 1996 (Pauwels 1987, 2001a). In 1986 approximately 20 per cent of 250 women used Ms. This percentage had almost doubled by 1996: 37 per cent. The 1996 study also collected socio-demographic information on the Ms users, revealing that women with a tertiary education and between the ages of 25 and 65 (i.e. the working population) lead the adoption of Ms. Education was the most significant factor in determining title use. Age was also significant but because of the large age groupings it was not possible to pinpoint the most significant

age group for Ms use. Correlations between marital status and title use showed that Ms is being adopted first by those who fall "outside" the traditional categories of "married" and "single/unmarried," but Ms use is increasingly found among the latter groups. Although these studies reveal an increase in the use of Ms there is not yet strong evidence that Ms is in fact replacing the titles Mrs or Miss. At this stage Ms has been added as a new option besides Mrs and Miss with the latter titles unlikely to become obsolescent in the near future. As to men's use of Ms to address women, preliminary evidence from Australia suggests that few attempts are made by men to use Ms, even where a woman's preference for this form is known.

### **3 Are the Changes Effective?**

Investigating the effectiveness of the changes is the most important form of evaluation of the success or failure of (social) linguistic reform. Non-sexist language reform can be considered truly successful if there is not only evidence of the adoption of non-sexist alternatives but also evidence that these alternatives are being used in a manner promoting linguistic equality of the sexes. The investigation of the social effectiveness of non-sexist language reform is still in its infancy. The basis for most comments on the effectiveness of this reform is anecdotal evidence. For example, there is some evidence that the newly created -person compounds are not used generically but simply replace -woman compounds (Ehrlich and King 1994; Pauwels 2001a). Another observation is that some feminist linguistic creations are not used in their intended manner, leading to a depoliticization of these innovations: Ehrlich and King (1994: 65) comment that "while feminist linguistic innovations (such as feminism, sexism, sexual harassment, and date rape) pervade our culture, it is not

clear that their use is consistent with their intended, feminist-influenced, meanings." To what extent the current usage patterns of Ms are an indication of potential failure is less clear cut: it is certainly true that the feminist intention of Ms being a replacement for Miss and Mrs has not yet been achieved and may not be achieved for a long time. In fact at the moment it is being used as an additional option to the existing titles of Mrs and Miss, leading to even greater asymmetry than before. However, my research into the use of Ms does show that women who use Ms do so with its intended meaning. The effectiveness of non-sexist alternatives to generic he, especially he or she and singular they, has also received mixed feedback: studies into the mental imagery associated with masculine generic nouns and pronouns had shown that the use of more gender-inclusive or gender-neutral forms reduced the maleness of the mental imagery (e.g. Moulton et al. 1978; Hamilton 1988; Wilson and Ng 1988). Khosroshahi's (1989) study, however, revealed no real difference in the mental imagery associated with masculine generic and gender-inclusive or gender neutral generic forms, except in the case of women who had reformed their language. She concludes that the adoption of gender-inclusive/gender-neutral forms will only be effective if there is a personal awareness of the discriminatory nature of the other forms and there is a personal commitment to change. This view concurs with Cameron's (1985: 90) comment that "in the mouths of sexists, language can always be sexist." However, I do not believe that this observation is cause for a pessimistic assessment of the effectiveness of non-sexist language reform: there is evidence that feminist linguistic activism has raised the community's awareness of gender bias in language. There is also proof that those who adopt the changes do so because they are aware of the bias and have a personal commitment to change. Of

course, ultimately meanings are not fixed and will change over time and according to context. This applies as much to feminist meanings as to any other meanings.

In closing, Pauwels is cautiously optimistic. I share her attitude that we need to continue to confront patriarchic systems on every level. When it comes to the written word, that means looking at who is holding the pen (or writing the code) as well as what the pen is writing. By challenging language, that most basic component of human culture, we are 'challenging the hegemony of the meanings promoted and authorized by the dominant group, in this case men.'

#### 4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have discussed feminist linguistic activism as a genuine form of language reform, showing women in the new roles of critical linguistic commentators, norm-breakers, and norm-makers. Even if the ultimate goals of feminist language reform may not be achieved these linguistic initiatives and actions, many of which have been undertaken at the grassroots level, have made a major contribution to exposing the ideologization of linguistic meanings to the speech community at large and to challenging the hegemony of the meanings promoted and authorized by the dominant group or culture, in this case men.

#### References

- Adriaens, Geert 1981: *Vrouwelijke beroepsnamen in het Nederlands* [Female occupational titles in Dutch]. Unpublished thesis, University of Leuven.
- Atkinson, Donna L. 1987: Names and titles: Maiden name retention and the use of Ms. *Women and Language* 10: 37.
- Baron, Dennis. 1986: *Grammar and Gender*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- Blakar, Rolv M. 1977: *Spak er makt* [Language and power]. Oslo: Pax.
- Blaubergs, Maija. 1980: An analysis of classic arguments against changing sexist language. *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 2(3): 135-47.
- Bodine, Ann. 1975: Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: Singular "they", sex-indefinite "he", and "he or she". *Language in Society* 4: 129-46.
- Brantenberg, Gert 1977: *Egalias dettre* [Daughters of Egalia]. Oslo: Novus.
- Brouwer, Dede. 1991: Feminist language policy in Dutch: Equality rather than difference. *Working Papers on Language, Gender and Sexism* 1(2): 73-82.
- Cameron, Deborah 1985: *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. London: Macmillan.
- Cameron, Deborah 1995: *Verbal Hygiene*. London: Routledge.
- Cherry, K. 1987: *Womansword: What Japanese Words Say About Women*. Tokyo: Kodansha International.
- Cooper, Robert L. 1984: The avoidance of

androcentric generics. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 50: 5-20.

Cooper, Robert L. 1989: *Language Planning and Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Corbett, Greville 1991: *Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Daly, Mary 1978: *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press.

De Caluwe, Johan 1996: Systematische vrouwelijking van functiebenamingen? [Systematic feminization of occupational titles?] In *Taal en beeldvorming over vrouwen en mannen*. Zoetermeer: Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, pp. 39-41.

Ehrlich, Susan and King, Ruth 1994: Feminist meanings and the (de)politicization of the lexicon. *Language in Society* 23: 59-76.

Elgin, Suzette Haden 1988: *A First Dictionary and Grammar of Laadan*. Madison, WI: Society for the Furtherance and Study of Fantasy and Science Fiction.

Fasold, Ralph 1984: *The Sociolinguistics of Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Fasold, Ralph 1987: Language policy and change: Sexist language in the periodical news media. In Peter Lowenberg (ed.) *Language Spread and Language Policy*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, pp. 187-206.

Fasold, Ralph, Yamada, Haru, Robinson, David, and Barish, Steven 1990: The language planning effect of newspaper editorial policy: Gender differences

in *The Washington Post. Language in Society* 19: 521-39.

Garcia, Meseguer A. 1977: *Lenguaje y discriminación sexual* [Language and sex discrimination]. Madrid: Editorial Cuadernos para el Diálogo, S.A. Edicusa.

Guentherodt, Ingrid 1979: Berufsbezeichnungen für Frauen. Problematik der deutschen Sprache im Vergleich mit Beispielen aus dem Englischen und Französischen. [Occupational nouns for women. Problems for German in comparison with examples from English and French]. *Osnabrücker Beiträge zur Sprachtheorie*, Beiheft 3: 120-32.

Guentherodt, Ingrid, Hellinger, Marlis, Pusch, Luise, and Troemel-Ploetz, Senta 1980: Richtlinien zur Vermeidung sexistischen Sprachgebrauchs [Guidelines for the elimination of sexist language use]. *Linguistische Berichte* 69: 15-21.

Hamilton, Mykol C. 1988: Using masculine generics: Does generic "he" increase male bias in the user's imagery? *Sex Roles* 19: 785-99.

Hellinger, Marlis 1990: *Kontrastive Feministische Linguistik* [Contrastive feminist linguistics]. Ismaning: Hueber.

Hellinger, Marlis and Schrapel, Beate 1983: Über die sprachliche Gleichbehandlung von Frauen und Männern [About linguistic equality of women and men]. *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik* 15: 40-69.

Hellinger, Marlis and Bussmann, Hadumod (eds) 2001: *Gender Across Languages: The Linguistic Representation of Women and Men*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Henley, Nancy 1987: The new species that seeks a new language: On sexism in language and language change. In Joyce Penfield (ed.) *Women and Language in Transition*. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 3-27.

Kalverkamper, Hartwig 1979: Die Frauen und die Sprache [Women and language]. *Linguistische Berichte* 62: 55-71.

Khosroshahi, Fatemeh 1989: Penguins don't care, but women do: A social identity analysis of a Whorfian problem. *Language in Society* 18: 505-25.

Kloss, Heinz 1969: *Research Possibilities on Group Bilingualism: A Report*. Quebec: International Center for Research on Bilingualism.

Kochskamper, Birgit 1991: Language history as a history of male language policy: The history of German *Mensch, Frau, Mann, Madchen, Junge, Dime..* and their Indo-European cognates. *Working Papers on Language, Gender and Sexism* 1(2): 5-17.

Kramarae, Cheri 1981: *Women and Men Speaking*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Kramarae, Cheri 1992: Punctuating the dictionary. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 94: 135-54.

Kramer, Cheri 1975: Sex-related differences in address systems. *Anthropological Linguistics* 17: 198-210.

Lakoff, Robin 1975: *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper and Row.

Mackay, Donald G. 1980: Psychology, prescriptive grammar and the pronoun problem. *American Psychologist* 35: 444-9.

Markovitz, Judith 1984: The impact of the sexist language controversy and regulation on language in university documents. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 8(4): 337-47.

Moulton, Janice, Robinson, George M., and Elias, Cherin 1978: Sex bias in language use: neutral pronouns that aren't. *American Psychologist* 33: 1032-6.

Niedzwiecki, Patricia 1995: *Liandleiding voor de taalvervrouwelijking*. Deel 1 [Guidance for the feminization of language]. Brussels: Kabinet van Onderwijs en Ambtenarenzaken. Nilsen, Aileen P., Bosmajian, Haig, Gershuny, H. Lee, and Stanley, Julia P. (eds) 1977: *Sexism and Language*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Pauwels, Anne 1987: Language in transition: A study of the title "Ms" in contemporary Australian society. In Anne Pauwels (ed.) *Women and Language in Australian and New Zealand Society*. Sydney: Australian Professional Publications, pp. 129- 54.

Pauwels, Anne 1993: Language planning, language reform and the sexes in Australia. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics (Series S)* 10: 13-34.

Pauwels, Anne 1997a: Non-sexist language policy debate in the Dutch speech community. In Friederike Braun and Ursula Pasero (eds) *Kommunikation von Geschlecht - Communication of Gender*. Kiel: Centaurus, pp. 261-79.

Pauwels, Anne 1997b: Of handymen and waitpersons: A linguistic evaluation of job classifieds. *Australian Journal of Communication* 24(1): 58-69.

Pauwels, Anne 1998: *Women Changing Language*. London: Longman.

Pauwels, Anne 2000: Women Changing Language. Feminist Language Change in Progress. Paper presented at the First International Gender and Language Association Conference, Stanford University, May 2000.

Pauwels, Anne 2001a: Spreading the feminist word? A sociolinguistic study of feminist language change in Australian English: The case of the new courtesy title "Ms". In Marlis Hellinger and Hadumod Bussmann (eds) *Gender Across Languages: The Linguistic Representation of Women and Men*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 137-52.

Pauwels, Anne 2001b: Non sexist language reform and generic pronouns in Australian English. *English World Wide* 22:105-19.

Pusch, Luise 1984: *Das Deutsche als Manners-prache* [German as a men's language]. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

Pusch, Luise 1990: *Alle Menschen werden Schwestern* [All men will become sisters]. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

Sabatini, Alma 1985: Occupational nouns in Italian: Changing the sexist usage. In Marlis Hellinger (ed.) *Sprachwandel und feministische Sprachpolitik: Internationale Perspektiven* [Language change and feminist language policy: International perspectives]. Opladen: Westdeutscher, pp. 64-75.

Sautermeister, Christine 1985: La femme devant la langue [The woman before language]. In *Frauenthemen im Fremdsprachenunterricht* [Women's topics in foreign language teaching. Working papers]. *Arbeitsberichte* 3. Hamburg: University of Hamburg, Zentrales Fremdspracheninstitut, pp.

63-97.

Schulz, Muriel 1975: The semantic derogation of women. In Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (eds) *Language and Sex: Dominance and Difference*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, pp. 64-73.

Spender, Dale 1980: *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Stannard, Una 1977: *Mrs Man*. San Francisco: Germainbooks.

Troemel-Ploetz, Senta 1978: Linguistik und Frauensprache [Linguistics and women's language]. *Linguistische Berichte* 57: 49-68.

Van Alphen, Ingrid 1983: Een vrouw een vrouw, een woord een woord. Over gelijke behandeling van vrouwen en mannen en de konsekventies voor beroepsbenamingen in het Nederlands [A woman, a woman, a word, a word. About equal treatment of women and men and the consequences for occupational nouns in Dutch]. *Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies* 14(4): 307-15.

Wilson, Elizabeth and Ng, Sik H. 1988: Sex bias in visuals evoked by generics: A New Zealand study. *Sex Roles* 18: 159-68.

Yaguello, Marina 1978: *Les Mots et les femmes* [Words and women]. Paris: Payot.

### 3: *On what the surface hides*



# Windows and Mirrors

by Jay Bolter & Diane Gromala

## The Digital Experience

*Digital design should not try to be invisible*

Think of the computer screen as a window, opening up onto a visual world that seems to be behind or beyond it. This is the world of information that the computer offers: texts, graphics, digitized images, and sound. Concentrating on the text or images, the user forgets about the interface (menus, icons, cursor), and the interface becomes transparent. HCI specialists and some designers speak as if that were the only goal of interface design: to fashion a transparent window onto a world of information.

There are times, however, when the user should be looking at the interface, not through it, in order to make it function: to activate icons or to choose menu items, for example. At such

To better understand how biases are reproduced from era to era, print to pixel, we have to look at both the content as well as design of the medium. In this chapter of the book *Windows and Mirrors*, we are introduced to the history of transparency in interface design. Here, transparency is not meant in the sense of openness and explicitness of processes. Bolter and Gromala use it to describe a common attitude in digital culture, that of upholding the illusion of transparency – in other words, designing interfaces which present themselves as ‘transparent windows onto a world of information’. The danger in this, is when it conceals the constructedness of information and serves it up as truth.

moments, the interface is no longer a window, but a mirror, reflecting the user and her relationship to the computer. The interface is saying in effect, “I am a computer application, and you are the user of that application.” No interface can be or should be perfectly transparent, because the interface will break at some time, and the user will have to diagnose the problem. Furthermore, even when the interface is working, we should not allow it to take us in completely. If we only look through the interface, we cannot appreciate the ways in which it shapes our experience. We should be able to enjoy the illusion of the interface as it presents us with a digital world.

But if we cannot also step back and see the interface as a technical creation, then we are missing half of the experience that new digital media can offer.

The same would be true if we treated any other medium as exclusively transparent. When we watch a film, we can sometimes get so absorbed in the story that we may temporarily forget about everything else, even that we are watching a film at all. The film as an interface has become transparent for us. Sometimes, however, we want to step back and appreciate how the film was made. This awareness enriches the experience of the film, and not only for a small group of film scholars. Many viewers of this popular medium are eager to learn more about how films are made, and they can. If we buy the DVD version of *The Sixth Sense*, for example, the disk includes scenes left out of the final cut, an interview with the director, M. Night Shyamalan, and descriptions of the special effects. These segments ask us to reflect on how the film succeeds in scaring and fooling us. Popular interest in the process of making films, television shows, and music has increased in recent decades, so that we enjoy all of these media forms as mirrors as well as windows. The same is true of the com-

puter, itself now a medium. Every digital design functions as both a window and a mirror.

When we look in a mirror, we see ourselves, and we see the room behind and around us—that is, ourselves in context. Digital interfaces are like mirrors in the sense that they reflect the user in context, including her physical surroundings, her immediate working or home environment, and the larger environment defined by her language and culture. They do this work of reflecting whether or not the designers consciously intend it. Because the user brings all of these contexts to her interaction with any digital interface, the design cannot help but reflect them. The success of an interface, however, depends on the ways in which it can adapt to these contexts. The most compelling interfaces will make the user aware of her contexts and, in the process, redefine the contexts in which she and the interface together operate. This is where digital art can make a special contribution, because digital art is precisely the kind of interface that both reflects and redefines contexts.

If we only look through the interface, we cannot appreciate the ways in which it shapes our experience.

### **The Myth of Transparency**

#### *The history of disappearing*

Here's a parable about two contemporary interface designers. (We've changed the names and set the story in ancient Greece to protect our royalties.)

Two great painters, named Parrhasius and Zeuxis, entered into a competition to see who could recreate the most lifelike painting. Zeuxis offered for his entry a painting of grapes on a theater wall that was so successful that birds were deceived and flew

down to eat them. Parrhasius offered as his entry the painting of a linen curtain on the same wall. When Zeuxis saw it, he thought it was a real curtain and proudly ordered it lifted so that his painting of grapes could be revealed. When he realized his error, Zeuxis conceded the victory to Parrhasius on the grounds that he had fooled some birds, but Parrhasius had deceived Zeuxis himself, a fellow artist.

In the story, Zeuxis is great because he could make his technique disappear—make the viewer unaware that the grapes were really smudges of paint on a wall. His technique becomes transparent, and the viewer sees the grape as fruit. [...]

It isn't really our story. When the Roman author Pliny the Elder told it in the first century A.D. (in his *Natural Histories*), it expressed the almost universal attitude toward art among the ancient Greeks and Romans. But it is striking that the story could still apply to information designers today. Although such designers today are not (often) creating pictures of grapes—they are making textual and visual information available through their interfaces they still believe that the medium should disappear. For them, the ideal interface is a transparent window onto a world of data. The user is not supposed to notice the interface any more than the viewers of Zeuxis and Parrhasius noticed the paint on the wall.

It does not have to be this way, however. Painters do not have to aim for transparency, and neither do digital designers. The desire for transparency is a cultural and historical choice. In the history of Western painting and design, it is true, transparency has been the goal of most artists or designers, but some artists in other periods have had other goals. If those who design contemporary computer applications understand the history of transparency, they will realize that they too have choices in today's media environment.

### *The Computer Window*

Names matter. When interface designers chose *window* to describe the framed rectangles on the screen that present text or graphical data, they made a choice that had vast cultural significance. As a result we have spent the last twenty years opening,

*It's fascinating to me that the modern computer, in all its capacity to connect and empower, can also become traps of self-referentiality. As technology becomes more seamless and more 'user-friendly', it becomes essential that we all learn how to be critical of the structure of digital spaces, to become search-engine literate, and interface-conscious. After all, the web is today's cathedral of knowledge.*

staring at, resizing, minimizing and closing “windows”. The most widely used single piece of software is named for the metaphor that these designers came up with. They could have chosen *frame* instead of *window*, but that choice would have had just the opposite significance from the window metaphor. The reason is that a frame is what surrounds and encloses a window or a picture. The word *frame* reminds us of the interface, while the word *window* helps us to forget the interface and concentrate on the text or data inside. Just as we gaze through a window in the physical world, the GUI's window metaphor suggests that the interface can present data, words or images, as they “really are” – without distorting them. The words and images are “in the machine,” just beyond the window and available for our manipulation. [...]

### *The myth of transparency*

Digital design is an exercise in mythology, and among the digital mythographers were the creators of the GUI. The win-

dowed interface has defined the way we interact with computers for nearly twenty years. (And what else lasts for twenty years in the computer world, except FORTRAN and C, which seem to be immortal?) The entire World Wide Web was built on computers using some version of the GUI and is now visited by hundreds of millions of users through their windowed screens. The creators of the GUI realized a commanding digital version of the myth of transparency.

*Today, the 'myth of transparency' is the dominant narrative in digital culture and complex processes are made to appear simple. We lose sight of what and how decisions are being made – when information is ordered online, when books are categorized in digital libraries, or when our data is being mined. In this way, software recedes further away from hardware, and algorithms gather in black boxes. My question is, what alternatives are there for designing online spaces which challenge the status quo? Can better, more inclusive interfaces change what we read online and the way we do it?*

In calling transparency a myth, we mean to describe both its strength and its weakness as a design philosophy. A myth allows its believers to construe their experience in a convincing way. Myths are not lies, they are exaggerations or simplifications. [...] The danger comes when designers fail to recognize that the myth is a simplification of a complex reality.

# Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface

by Johanna Drucker

## Introduction

Three agendas intertwine in this piece: the desire to shift discussions of materiality towards a performative model while building on recent work on the topic; a recuperation into digital humanities of mainstream principles of critical theory on which this model is based; and some thoughts on how we might move towards integrating this model and critical principles into a model of humanistic interface design.

## Performative Materiality

In the mid-1990s, Matt Kirschenbaum rescued discussions of digital media from a major misconception rampant in then popular characterizations of electronic technology as immaterial. By calling attention to the material substrates of computing — its drives, tracks, disks, and fundamental physical supports — he made an argument for materiality as essential to the operation and identity of digital media.

In the 1990s, “electronic” writing and digital media studies were still relatively new, and a hyperbolic rhetoric based on a dubious binarism had come into play. Inscriptural technologies were being divided into “old” media (print, ink, manuscript) and “new” electronic and digital ones without careful examination of

the bases of these distinctions.[2] As a by-product of these binarisms, theorists and practitioners of hypertext and electronic writing had enthusiastically proclaimed the immaterial condition of the digital in what seemed a holy grail of différance, as if digital inscription were the demonstration of “pure” differentiation existing only as an abstract binary flux.[3] In a misfire of analysis, the capacity of electrical charge to create code through positive and negative values, the foundation of digital technology, had been

*Following Bolter and Gromala's critique on the computer as a medium, this piece by Johanna Drucker examines the materiality of digital artifacts and systems, and offers up new frameworks for a humanistic approach to interface design. First, Drucker calls to attention the literal, physical and networked qualities of digital media. She then introduces the concept of performative materiality: defined as the enacted and event-based character of digital activity supported by those physical conditions. Drucker's thesis is based on the conviction that a system should be understood by what it does, and not only how it is structured. As such, the way we design interfaces should also reflect their interpretive and relative dimension. 'Objects exist in the world but their meaning and value are the result of a performative act of interpretation provoked by their specific qualities.'*

described as immaterial. Many writers, including theoreticians schooled in the differential play central to deconstructive philosophy, simply described fungible, fluid, rapidly re-inscribable digital code as an immaterial medium, ignoring the physical realities that Kirschenbaum's nicely termed distinctions of forensic and formal materiality have put back into play [Paul 2007].

Not only are digital formats material, they are persistently and fundamentally so, as summed up in Kirschenbaum's phrase, "Every contact leaves a trace." Kirschenbaum's argument is organized around two aspects of materiality, forensic and formal. These are useful categories, and though they do not exhaust the discussion of material features and properties, summarizing his terms is a good place to begin. In Kirschenbaum's definitions, forensic materiality refers to evidence, while formal materiality refers to the codes and structures of human expression. The forensic elements of a document might include ink, paper, stains, fingerprints, other physical traces, while the formal elements would be the organization of the layout, design, or the style of literary composition, relations between image and text and so on. Both are available to description and analysis; neither is self-evident, each would have to be interpreted and placed in a continuum of other evidence or read in relation to other texts, images, documents and the cultural codes of their composition. This distinction is excellent as far as it goes, and useful for reminding us that digital media have these basic dimensions. But his description is grounded in ontology rather than performance, in a sense that the identity of material things resides in their properties and capacities, in what they are rather than what they do. My emphasis on the performative dimension of materiality is meant to extend, rather than replace, this understanding. Performative materiality suggests that what something is has to be understood in terms of what it does, how it works within machinic, systemic, and cultural domains.

[...]

The same change happened across other humanistic and social science fields and disciplines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as similar structuralist moves undermined the idea of

intrinsic value, replacing it with relative value in anthropology, economics, linguistics, and cultural studies, a crucial point of departure in our discussion, though far from its endpoint. Structuralism put the relativistic, systems-dependent approach to meaning production into play more than a hundred years ago. Meaning is use, as Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said, to which we can add, such use is always circumstantial and situational. This shift from an approach grounded in what something is to how something works changes the analysis of material evidence from iconographic reading to indexical reading, leading us into the lifecycle of production, use, control, resource consumption, labor, cost, environmental impact and so on — so that an artifact's materiality is read as a snapshot moment within continuous interdependent systems. Classic structuralism, as exemplified by Saussurean linguistics, de-essentialized and systematized the understanding of meaning as value, and performative materiality builds on that basic shift into the post-structuralist engagement with readerly production of texts, and beyond, to a probabilistic perspective that synthesizes these critical traditions with those of user experience. In addition, the fields of code studies, software, and platform studies are permeated with theoretical insights into the performative dimension of digital processing. Algorithms are instructions for processes, for performances, whose outcomes may usually be predictable, but of course, are as open to error and random uncertainties in their execution as they are to uncertain outcomes in their use at the higher level of their operation and use. To these approaches we can add certain strains of "new" materialisms, the emergent systems-thinking approaches coming from ecologies of semiotics and information, though not all of these share a performative dimension.

[...]

In a model of materiality as fundamentally performative, we can show how forensic, evidentiary materiality and formal organization serve as a provocation for the creation of a reading as a constitutive interpretative act. The specific structures and forms, substrates and organizational features, are probability conditions for production of an interpretation. Knowledge creates the objects of its discourses, it does not “discover” them. Constructivist epistemology shifts our attention from knowledge to knowing, from objects that are observer-independent to the recognition of observer-dependent process, or events. We recognize our readings as the production of effect, not a recovery of cause or an original thing. Objects exist in the world but their meaning and value

*It's also important here to place algorithms in context. Who is writing them, for whom and with what values? Programming is a field which relies heavily on its community. Codes are written, shared, then reused again and again through libraries and repositories. This is how you'll find the same data sets and training models reproduced the world over. Of course, this is also how biases and conventions can become so deeply embedded (and well hidden) in digital processes.*

are the result of a performative act of interpretation provoked by their specific qualities. To say that is merely to remind ourselves of what we already know: that we need to recover the lineage of critical theory that transformed the humanities from structuralism onward to understand digital objects and to design them. Without these intellectual strains, our thinking about digital matters proceeds as if the last century had not existed, and we were merely late 19th century naturalists on the trail of a new species of inscriptional and medial artifacts.

Recuperating the full apparatus of humanist critical theory for our understanding of digital materiality brings a host of methodologies into our analysis, and combines it with newer developments in code studies, complexity, and new materialisms. While it may seem flat-footed and pedestrian to march through these frameworks one after another, the exercise is meant to have the benefit of demonstrating the value of our critical heritage. After this summary review, I will turn my second agenda, to address ways in which the insights from critical theory could lead to a humanistic interface design, formulating an interface grounded in probabilistic and performative approaches.

So, touching on each of these critical approaches in turn, I will try to show their usefulness and relevance for critical study and design of digital media.

**Forensic materiality** draws on traditions of descriptive and analytic bibliography as well as physical and chemical analyses and investigations. It uses these techniques to attend to the specific properties of digital inscription. Forensic studies, literally speaking, are those concerned with the evidence used in legal arguments. Thus materiality at this level is concrete, subject to scrutiny, and available to observation through empirical methods. For a humanist, the extension of such a positivist approach to material has to be tempered with the recognition that no matter how self-evident a material artifact may be within the descriptive frames offered by forensics, the value of a text, even its content and meaning, is always a product of a reading within specific circumstances. And the value of forensic materiality depends on the same web of cultural associations and historically situated values as any other interpretative act. That an artifact has specific properties may be incontrovertible, just as in the contrast above between iron and steel. But what those properties mean is

very different from what we may imagine those properties are. In fact, the entire “is-ness” of materiality, grounded in assumptions of self-evident identity, is always subject to humanist critique, or should be, if critical methods are to prevail. Forensic analysis provides a foundation for other work, as does formal analysis of a text, image, situation, or event. But the caveat that nothing is self-evident and no value is intrinsic has to be kept in play. Expanded forensic analysis of digital artifacts allows access to the lifecycle of production. We can track the resources used, labor involved, shipping, transportation, manufacture, as well as providing a foundation for media-specific description and analysis [Bowers 1964], [Culler 1997].[4]

**Distributed materiality** focuses on the complex of interdependencies on which any digital artifact depends for its basic existence. In a distributed approach, any digital “entity” is dependent on servers, networks, software, hosting environments and the relations among them just as surely as a biological entity depends upon atmospheric and climatic conditions. An extension of forensic approaches, the distributed concept requires attention to the many layers and relationships of hardware, software, bandwidth, processing, storage, memory, and other factors. The distributed approach registers a shift from materiality grounded in a single feature or factor to an approach based on multiple systems of interrelated activity. Each of these is supported by technical things — substrates, wiring, chips, circuits, etc. — and relations. By its very character, distributed-ness disturbs assumptions of singularity or stability. A quality, materiality, whose identity depends on contingencies cannot be mistaken for a self-evident object. For instance, we understand the production of a play as a distributed material event, rather than as a fixed or static thing. We can understand all textual and material production in

the same way — as dependent upon interrelated systems and conditions.[5]

**Performative materiality** emphasizes the production of a work as an interpretative event. While Kirschenbaum, following generations of textual critics, refers to such formal properties of a work as its apparent organization, composition, use of media and materials, he knows full well that we don’t absorb a work in a mechanistic way. No text is “transferred” wholesale, like a bucket of coal being moved along a conveyor. The text of a book is not ingested by a sequential processing of its ascii string or by literal reading of each item on a page and each page in turn. Nor is a web page. Every person produces a work as an individual experience, according to their disposition and capacity. This should be obvious, but the mechanistic methods — such as eye tracking — used to analyze user experiences of websites seem to be premised on forgetting everything we ever learned from textual studies. The worlds of engineering and humanistic thought need integration.

At the formal level, a work is a set of encoded instructions for reading, viewing, listening, or experiencing. In a performative approach, the cognitive capacities of the reader make the work through an encounter. The humanist inventory of critical methods appropriate to such analysis is long and rich: textual studies in the traditional and more radical modes, from close reading and new criticism through the Derridian and DeManian deconstruction and poststructural play. Cultural studies has its role here as well, introducing that decentering that shifts the ground from under the certainties of a single worldview, faceting any object of study along lines of inquiry that relativize all judgments and values. Exposing the ideological assumptions of digital materialities and the strategies on which they claim and gain cultural authori-

ty is essential. The performance of a work provoked by a material substrate is always situated within historical and cultural circumstances and particulars and expresses ideology at every level of production, consumption, implementation and design.

*In this part of her essay, Drucker lays out the discourse on materiality and compares several key perspectives which developed over the last few decades. Literal approaches, like forensic materiality, are modeled on a mechanistic approach that presumes objects of perception are self-identical and observer-independent. This feels old-fashioned, and is definitely out of touch with my understanding of situatedness. Distributed materiality is more expansive, focusing on the complex relationships between software, hardware, network, servers and users. Performative reality takes a step further away from the literal, and emphasizes meaning which is produced by an event or provoked by code. As Drucker calls it, it is the integration of engineering and humanistic thought. To return to the context of the book scanner, I find myself questioning the performance of reading, the physical act of reproduction. Is it a matter of mirroring, disrupting, creating, poaching?*

The performative dimension also invokes cognitive studies, including radical constructivist approaches to knowledge. Here phenomenology, embodied-ness, and features of psychoanalytic insight have their role, demonstrating the unique and particular qualities of individual experience in their tensions with drives, desires, denials, and other qualities of mind. The cognitive production of experience is ephemeral, temporal, specific, but provoked by the formal, material properties that provide stimulation. The notion of cues and triggers, rather than structures of meaning,

informs this approach, and explains the force of performativity as enactment. We can think about the corrective introduced by Mary Carruthers into the description of memory theaters that, based on Frances Yates' understanding, had persisted for decades. Carruthers created a model of dynamic cues, rather than memory of structures, that is being borne out by new studies of memory and internet use.

We remember where and how to find or look for information, rather than remembering information itself. Thus performative materiality is always probabilistic, since it demonstrates the fact that material forms are only the site of potential for meaning production, not for transfer. Media are constitutive of meaning, they do not serve as a conduit or pipeline. Performative concepts of materiality engage this constitutive principle and the cognitive conditions of production through acts of reading or other embodied individual experience ([Carruthers 1998], [Carruthers 1990], [Austin 1962], [Butler 1999], [Glaserfeld 1995], [Maturana and Varela 1987]).

**Non-representational** approaches make a strong case for the impossibility that language, or any other symbolic code — graphical, visual, audible — ever represents a preexisting entity. “Representations” are presentations, rhetorical arguments expressed in graphical, textual, visual form. Cultural geographers, annoyed with the assumption that a map could represent a spatial experience, pushed for a non-representational approach that is particularly germane to virtual environments. The concept pushes attention squarely towards the codes and formal structures of those artifacts. This emphasizes the understanding that material forms create the mediating expressions that are transactional objects of meaning production. In such a framework, objects don't represent, they perform. Our critical focus attends to the expressions,



not their presumed referent, since the relation between sign and referent is tentative in any case. The emphasis on understanding artifacts as constitutive, rather than representational, forces us to look at them, to see how they work. As in looking at a cabinet of curiosities, we are well aware that the organization and layout creates a world view, it does not correspond to any order of things in the world (where dolphins are fishes, mermaids exist, and unicorn horns can be displayed next to those of goats). We can invoke Charles Peirce, and the notion of inference without causality, or abduction mentioned above, as one of the central tenets of this critical approach ([Thrift 2007], [Anderson and Harrison 2010], [Buchler 1940], [Gell 1992]).

*Non-representational approaches are worth noting because they force us to break apart signifiers from the signified. Through this lens, we are reminded that language in itself is a technology, and as Steve Rushton likes to say, alphabets are in themselves a kind of software. We learn to read, but also to interpret. As a feminist, theories of enunciation are particularly interesting to me. Enunciative approaches are all about power relations, the tension between subject and object. It is why, for example, the interview will always be a loaded format when seen from a feminist perspective.*

**Theories of enunciation** are drawn primarily from linguistics. They got purchase early on in visual studies and film as ways to analyze modes of address and point of view systems. They pinpoint assumptions about who is speaking to whom and for what purpose in any act of articulation (verbal, visual, demonstrative, etc.). Enunciative theories engage power relations immediately. They show how the subjected and the spoken, the positioned

and placed, the subordinate and the super-regulatory are dimensions of all speech acts — and by extension, all coded acts of cultural expression. Enunciative systems describe the spoken and speaking subject of language. What is it to be spoken? How is one's subject position created by a system of articulation? The return to the Foucauldian paradigm of the panopticon, and of other disciplinary regimes, provides one concrete example. But so does Barthes' study of mythologies and semiotic systems — the spoken subject of the fashion system, for instance, or the gendering system of cultural norms, all organize subject positions from which it is difficult to break. The "you" and "I" of speaking, now shifting in part towards the "we" of the hive mind, are indicative of change in the enunciative apparatus of the digital. They call all the more acutely for a critical approach rooted in humanities training, if only to adequately describe the unfolding phenomena. Theories of enunciation distinguish modes of discourse by attending to markers of identity, the use of first, second, or third person, various shifters and diectics, and other features of linguistic systems that identify and position speaking and spoken subjects.[6]

[...]

This outline of principles and critical approaches, though sketchy, is meant to prompt our collective memories towards reengagement with the critical apparatus of theory relevant to work with digital humanities. Engagement with digital media changes when we conceptualize our projects and problems in accord with these critical tenets. Not only is our view of digital objects changed, but we see the possibilities for using the digital environment to take apart the "is-ness" of things. We can shift from an entity-based to an event-based conception of media and demonstrate the radically constitutive, co-dependent relations of complexity we overlook when we take a web of contingencies for

a static, fixed, object of intellectual thought. Putting theoretical interpretation into dialogue with digital technology, we engage the opportunity for exposing the very processes by which its reification and reification through its means and media are taking place. We constitute our objects of knowledge through the acts of interpretation that pretend to be observations of what already is, though, perversely, the very act of putting humanists into digital projects seemed to bracket critical thinking from the design process (and take design out of the critical process). Here is where the challenge lies — not merely in critical analysis for the benefits of insight, but for the rethinking of design premises. How to bring these conceptions of materiality into the design of digital humanities projects? The answer is not to reinvent humanities theory, or critical epistemology, but to call it back into play in the design process.

Thinking about the latent potential in interface design is a good starting point. If we turn our attention to specific concrete examples, a Google search results page, the Chicago Encyclopedia, and Stanford's Spatial History Project site and projects to see how a generative relation between critical analysis and design possibilities could arise. Interface lends itself particularly well to this re-engagement since the whole notion of interface as a “thing” rather than as a space of constitutive production demonstrates the reifying effects of display and media in the digital environment. Interfaces are ubiquitous — in plumbing, appliances, vehicles, dashboards, and any device in which human actions have to be mediated in and through a space of exchange. A book is an interface, for instance, though its reified condition is equally pernicious, persistent and difficult to dislodge. We are aware that digital interface seems more mutable and flexible than that of a book, but is this really true? The interface is not an object. In-

terface is a space of affordances and possibilities structured into organization for use. An interface is a set of conditions, structured relations, that allow certain behaviors, actions, readings, events to occur. This generalized theory of interface applies to any technological device created with certain assumptions about the body, hand, eye, coordination, and other capabilities.

Approaches to interface design arose within the HCI community, with its emphasis on maximum efficiency in the user-centered experience. Since virtual cockpits to train soldiers using simulated combat missions and flight experience were first designed (some as early as 1929), or the earliest experiments for real time interaction with digital media in the days of Douglas Engelbart and Ivan Sutherland's experiments with head sets, pedals, mice, and screens, the dominant paradigm in the human-machine relationship has come from the engineering community.

*With the understanding that digital media has a vast performative potential, Drucker proposes a new framework for approaching interface design. The main question now is: how to bring these conceptions of materiality back into the design process? To answer, she turns her attention to an analysis of three concrete examples: Google search, the Chicago Encyclopedia and Stanford's Spatial History Project site. Over the next few paragraphs she will compare and contrast not just how these online spaces are structured, but how they perform, what human actions they provoke and what meanings they (re)produce.*

Leading practitioners in the field of visualization, such as Jakob Nielsen, Stuart Card, and Ben Shneiderman, have defined basic principles for design methodology and display that are pre-

mised on a pragmatic, but highly mechanistic, analysis of a user's abilities to process information effectively.

Their approach, applied to the vast numbers of tasks for searching, navigating, buying, and communicating online, is grounded in a user-as-consumer model, the assumptions of which do not match those appropriate to analysis of a humanities-based experience (where goals of distraction, engagement, flow experience and pleasure-driven activity are not goal-oriented, but motivated by the process). Criticisms from inside that community, such as the work of Jesse James Garrett (showing the confusion between an approach to interface design based on information versus tasks) or Aaron Marcus's group (analyzing cultural differences and their connection to interface functionality) have provided useful insights and pushed design principles to be more nuanced.

But the basic model of the user-centered, task-driven, goal-oriented approach to interface design remains. This approach has been adopted by humanists, particularly when the resources to do so are available, and this is the missed opportunity. The situation arises in part because the dominant vocabulary (graphical and conceptual) for interface design has come from the engineering community. The responsibility lies with the digital humanities community to invent graphical language suited to its critical principles, not with the HCI labs.

The same critique leveled by post-structuralists against New Criticism is pertinent to the critique of a formal structure that reifies behaviors and tasks in interface designs. The "text" of an interface is not a thing, stable and self-evident, whose meaning can be fixed simply by a detailed reading of its elements. An interface is a space in which a subject, not a user, is invoked. Interface is an enunciative system. Texts and speakers are situated within

pragmatic circumstances of use, ritual, exchange, and communities of practice. They are affected by it, and so is what they "read" or "receive" through an interface. How can the community of digital humanists take critical insights from literary, cultural, and gender studies into our current practice? If the object is merely to demonstrate that one may read an interface with the same techniques we used to read Young Mr. Lincoln or to follow old psychoanalytic or literary arguments into a new realm of semiotic analysis, a rather tedious and predictable path would lie ahead. This might have some value in the undergraduate classroom, as the unpacking of ideological subtexts fascinates the young.

But for those of us concerned with the design of environments for digital humanities and its research agendas, the stakes of this critical encounter are quite different. Can we conceive of models of interface that are genuine instruments for research? That are not merely queries within pre-set data that search and sort according to an immutable agenda? How can we imagine an interface that allows content modeling, intellectual argument, rhetorical engagement? In such an approach, the formal, graphical materiality of the interface might register the performative dimensions as well as support them. Such approaches would be fundamentally distinct from those in the HCI community. In place of transparency and clarity, they would foreground ambiguity and uncertainty, unresolvable multiplicities in place of singularities and certainties. Sustained interpretative engagement, not efficient completion of tasks, would be the desired outcome. Grounded in principles of interpretation and a theory of subjectivity, such an approach to design has yet to be developed. But it would expose the process of thinking rather than display fixed results of intellectual activity as if they were products.

This is not an argument in favor of bad, inefficient, or obstruct-

tive design. Nor is it a perverse justification for the ways in which under-resourced projects create confusion, as if that were a value for humanists. Quite the contrary. The challenge of creating an interface in which the performative character of interpretation can be supported and registered builds on demonstrable principles: multiple points of view, correlatable displays, aggregated data, social mediation and networking as a feature of scholarly work, and the qualities of games with emerging rule sets.

*Just like the desire for transparency, the idea that user-centered, task-driven and goal-oriented approaches are best is a cultural and social construct. Digital experiences do not have to be about functionality and efficiency, or entertainment. Google Books does not have to operate with the user-as-consumer model. Google Search does not have to focus on personalization. Ultimately, I like Drucker's idea of having more nuanced design principles, which are less governed by market forces, more open to content modeling, intellectual argument and rhetorical engagement.'*

The humanities embody a set of values and approaches to knowledge as interpretation that cannot be supported by a mechanistic approach to design. This is not just a semantic exercise, but a point of departure for implementation. The concept of performative materiality has a double meaning here. In the first sense, on which I have been concentrating, materiality is understood to produce meaning as a performance, just as any other "text" is constituted through a reading. That notion is fundamental to humanistic approaches to interpretation as situated, partial, non-repeatable. In the second sense, performative materiality suggests an approach to design in which use registers in the

substrate and structure so that the content model and its expressions evolve. The "structure of knowledge" becomes a "scheme of knowing" that inscribes use as well as provoking it. The idea of a user-consumer is replaced by a maker-producer, a performer, whose performance changes the game. This takes us back to some of the earlier theory of games, to the work of Brenda Laurel and others, whose theoretical training brought notions of subjectivity and performance into the study of online environments.

In suggesting directions for design, I do not claim to have a toolset of solutions, since that would put us right back into the HCI model and its problem-solving efficiency. Instead, my goal is to lay out some basic ideas on which to imagine a performative approach to materiality and the design of an interpretative interface. Such an interface supports acts of interpretation rather than simply returning selected results from a pre-existing data set. It should also be changed by acts of interpretation, and should morph and evolve. Performative materiality and interpretative interface should embody emergent qualities. Their form would be co-dependent with use, rather than structured to constrain or model specific behaviors or tasks. They should have the potential to be inflected — by subject positions, point of view, and acts of interpretation.

We can apply these critical concepts to design as well as to analysis, as in the case of suggestions arising from discussion of this Google search page in contrast to the Encyclopedia of Chicago and the projects on the Stanford Spatial History site:

**Forensic features:** these are not self-evident. Code does not show itself, nor does the infrastructure, so to analyze them fully would require study of the devices and systems in which the sites are generated, stored, displayed, accessed, refreshed. Forensic analysis can also be used to track the lifecycle of production of

digital technology and examine the connections between digital materials and resource issues, such as costs in ecological and human terms. A design challenge would be to have ways to show the history of the rewritable substrate and expose the palimpsest of traces held in memory. Google's forensic profile, with its data

*In this section Drucker suggests alternative approaches to each of the three previously mentioned web applications. The main goal is to imagine interfaces which 'support acts of interpretation rather than simply returning selected results from a pre-existing data set.' Looking at the forensic profile Google Search for example, Drucker suggests a move away from seamlessness, and towards chattiness. Exposing us to the history of other user trails, past searches, reactions and comments might lead to 'interesting interventions.' At the very least, it makes Google's processes more visible and tangible.*

gathering analytics, would look very different from that of the Encyclopedia and Stanford sites, which are largely designed for passive use. The appearance of seamlessness that the GUI presents in each instance is an illusion that covers a historical field of user experiences, but the Stanford site, in particular, with its showcase of authors, is impervious to trace-making records by users. The Stanford site is asocial media, and not meant to support debate or commentary. If interfaces were designed to expose the history of user trails, reactions, comments, that might provide an interesting intervention. Where on the search or home pages would we see the other histories of similar searches, our own or that of others? How would this display associate with other histories of a search or profiles of use?

**Distributed materiality:** The interrelation of forensic levels

and recognition of the many dependent contingencies on which we rely for a basic display and search pulls the study of search engines, information structures and organization into play. Google's offered ranking and ordering of results reveals only the tip of the machinations at work; the apparent simplicity of the display sits like a skin pulled over a mass of complexities; what are the contrasts? Alternatives? What are the terms of ranking and relations? How might they be altered or toggled in a meaningful way? The Stanford site offers display from a set of stored files with pre-packaged interactivity (the visualizations and faceted queries), but its relations are all structured by the content developers. The Encyclopedia draws on a repository whose combinatoric use is supported by dynamic, real-time APIs, but the files are probably all stored locally and well-protected by a fire wall. What contingencies shape the display, integration, operations? How will the

*Hugely relevant questions here on the politics of seamlessness: 'Google's offered ranking and ordering of results reveals only the tip of the machinations at work... What are the contrasts? Alternatives? Terms?' and 'What contingencies shape the display, integration, operations?' The potential for engagement is huge. And yet the reality is, Google is so opaque with so many of their processes and policies that we don't even know where their book scanning facilities are located. And we sure don't know what they're doing with their data sets. See Reader #5 to read more about the role of databases in today's information landscape.*

efficiencies of these sites shift with changes in scale? How inter-operable are any of the Stanford site's elements with each other at the level of data? How might responsiveness emerge from use?

**Performative** acts seem to get tracked by mapping the way people read a page or site, but this gives only a partial indication of comprehension or of what was actually “read” on a page. The performance of a text that results in its being remade in each instance of use is not a mechanical act, but a cognitive one. The structure of a Google search page is organized to steer reading and presentation of results. The Stanford site merely moves one through scrolled arguments. The Encyclopedia’s modular and elaborately cross-referenced data structure supports linked jumps from topic to topic, but lacks synthetic frameworks. The formal organizations designed for clear legibility, are also extensions of long traditions of western reading structures. The graphical languages build on familiar sidebar navigation and menu structures, as if gender, cultural codes, metaphoric use of terms and tropes, and their capacity to spin the message on the page were value neutral. But in fact, the graphical expressions organize

*I want to stress Drucker’s point here that interfaces instruct actions. In many ways, this is grounded in each site’s agenda, and is a manifestation of their ideology. Graphical languages build on familiar sidebar navigation and menu structures, as if gender, cultural codes, metaphoric use of terms and tropes, and their capacity to spin the message on the page were value neutral. But in fact, the graphical expressions organize hierarchy and structure dynamic relations. In the Google page, the flat-footed appearance belies its formal sophistication. Again, the illusion of transparency is promoted.*

hierarchy and structure dynamic relations and balances within the relations of the display. In the Google page, the flatfooted appearance belies its formal sophistication. The categories of every-

thing (called “web” in the menu bar), images, videos, news, shopping conflate typologies of media, genres, activities. The more delimited domains of Stanford and the Chicago Encyclopedia are designed around content and institutional identity. Stanford’s site privileges the institutional identity of the researchers and their place within that specific project’s support, so all projects are menu items on its platform. The Chicago Encyclopedia leads with the design of its content in a manner meant to encourage cross-reference. The cues for performance are organized around thematic categories and points of reference, while Google presents its menus as if the universe of the Web were simply structured in the way its representation suggests.

**Enunciative** dimensions of a page identify who speaks to whom and in what orders of language and enunciative modalities; whose voice that says “everything” “images” “news” are the fundamental categories of the Google-verse? The corporate entity of Google of course, but who or what does that mean? Who speaks the Encyclopedia? It addresses its audience with a civic voice, assuming a broad public whose differences are less important than its entitlement to access and education. The Stanford site brands its authors, each of whom is profiled in academic celebrity mode, and each of whom “speaks” their project in a voice that aggregates collective work and collaborative research into a text whose identity and position in the cultural universe assume a naturalized authority couched as discipline-specific expertise. The credentials of the “speakers” are visible, attached to the work, unlike those of the Google or Encyclopedia authors. The very notion of “authorship” in Google is usefully problematic. Tracking the processes of design in the corporate web would reveal many threads of power, pressure, contradiction. Porn, we notice, is not among the categories at the highest level of Goo-

gle search pages, nor are games, gambling, or social networking. The “I” of Google who creates the “you” of the user of the search engine has already interpolated the subject into the structure of the page in such a way that certain desires and interests are subordinated, even stigmatized. Orders of graphic modality and enunciation organize and argument. The top menu bar frames the whole Google world under a set of searchable categories. The sidebar, with its chronological order, is a log, a history, in which the past disappears below and the present continually refreshes above the long tail of the past. A click on the “All results Timeline” for a current theme or topic in the news (last week it was the British phone hacking scandal) gives a bar chart. Who identified the data that is displayed? After the fact? When? How does the historical trajectory of what is online match attention offline, and where is the full iceberg of the unrevealed tale? The visual suggests a slow buildup to the present scandal, but what happens out of sight is not necessarily of lesser import or scale than the flurry of attention generated by the scandal. Because Google presumes to present access to the “everything” of the web, its enunciative modalities are markedly different from those of the delimited domains of the Encyclopedia or Stanford Spatial History. But how do their rhetorics of visualization and presentation express an ideology — who speaks for whom where and how in these graphical and textual expressions? What is not able to be said in their forms and formats? What is excluded, impossible, not present, not able to be articulated given these structures? How can menu categories be altered to contrast one group of users habits to that of others? How do we get perspective on our own view? Point of view is structured into interface design but never exposed or marked conspicuously.

[..]

The implications for design? Engage with a way to shift from the univocal to polyvocal, introduce point of view systems within the interface so that all views are from the position of an observer, not assumed to be independent, autonomous.

*Again, enunciative dimensions bring us back to the context of feminism. ‘Who speaks for whom where and how in these graphical and textual expressions? What is not able to be said in their forms and formats? What is excluded, impossible, not present, not able to be articulated given these structures? How are things classified, and by which conditions? Who does it serve when the popular results get more popular and the others become invisible? Can we move away from aggregative approaches to agonistic models? If we were ever to achieve the dream of a Digital Universal Library, how can we ensure a truly inclusive and open interface for it? Drucker’s suggestions for more ‘constellatory’ and ‘polyvocal’ digital spaces might be a good start.*

Create fragmented and correlated points of view that resist self-evident reification. Create environments that are constellationary, so that diagrammatic relations can be used to re-order familiar conventions through acts of generative, performative engagement. We introduced these features into the first designs at SpecLab, into the now slider in Temporal Modeling, the more systematic integration of player point of view in the Ivanhoe design. Archaeologists concerned with the speculative nature of their models of reconstruction based on fragmentary evidence have been keen to find graphical conventions to show uncertainty in their digital models.

Multiple imaging modes that create palimpsestic or parallax views of objects make it more difficult to imagine reading as an

act of recovering truth, and render the interpretative act itself more visible. The task of modeling diversity, of exposing the differences among ontologies as ideologies, has a dramatic role to play in dislodging the centrism of western epistemologies, in particular those grounded in the administrative sensibility with its perverse attachment to control through standardization.

When we have humanist computer languages, interpretative interfaces, and information systems that can tolerate inconsistency among types of knowledge representation and organization of it, then the humanist dialogue with digital environments will have at the very least advanced beyond complete submission to the terms set by disciplines whose fundamental beliefs are antithetical to interpretation.

The critical design of interpretative interface means that we understand the task not just as an arrangement of things or a structure for the organization of behaviors and actions, but as the mobilization of a critical network that exposes, calls to attention, its made-ness — and by extension, the constructed-ness of knowledge, its interpretative dimensions. This will orchestrate, at least a bit, the shift from conceptions of interface as things and entities to that of an event-space of interpretative activity.

In summary, I am suggesting that we redress the odd amnesia that has come with the exigencies and tasks defined by digital media and recall our humanist commitment to interpretation. This means embracing ambiguity and uncertainty, contradictions and the lack of fixity or singularity. No file is ever self-identical, and certainly no file is ever the same twice. All expressions in human systems are constitutive, non-representational, and content models, forms of classification, taxonomy, or information organization embody ideology. Ontologies are ideologies, through and through, as naming, ordering, and parameterizing are interpre-

tative acts that enact their view of knowledge, reality, and experience and give it form. All acts of migration from one medium to another, one state of instantiation to another, are mutations. The antidotes to the familiarity that blinds us is embrace of parallax, disaggregation of the illusion of singularity through comparatist and relativist approaches, and engagement with fragmentation and partial presentations of knowledge that expose the illusion of seamless wholeness. Veils of maya are replaced with other veils of maya, we know this, but at the very least, acknowledging that creates a restless engagement with the acts of knowing. More attention to acts of producing and less emphasis on product, the creation of an interface that is meant to expose and support the activity of interpretation, rather than to display finished forms, would be a good starting place.

*Ultimately, addressing the re-production of bias on the web is a complex task that needs to be approached on at least two levels. First, in terms of content: what knowledge is being produced, what books are being scanned, which data is being recorded? Second, in terms of materiality: what interpretation does the interface allow? What does the surface reveal, and what does it hide? As Drucker so eloquently notes: 'Veils of maya are replaced with other veils of maya, we know this, but at the very least, acknowledging that creates a restless engagement with the act of knowing.'*

What is at stake here is that the model of materiality we have in mind shapes the ways we approach the design and use of critical digital media.



## Works Cited

Abbott, Craig S., and William Proctor Williams. *Introduction to Bibliographical and Textual Studies*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2009.

Anderson, Ben, and Paul Harrison, eds. *Taking-Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography*. London: Ashgate, 2010.

Austin, John L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

Baudry, Jean-Louis. *L'Effet Cinéma*. Paris: Editions Albatros, 1978.

Beardsley, Monroe. *Aesthetics*. New York: Macmillan, 1966.

Benveniste, É. *Problems in General Linguistics*. Translated by M.E. Meek. Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971.

Bolter, Jay David. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991.

Bowers, Fredson. *Bibliography and Textual Criticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.

Buchler, Justus, ed. *Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce*. New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1940.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Bynum, Caroline. *Christian Materiality*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

Byrne, David S. *Complexity Theory and the Social Sciences*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Mackinlay, Jock, and Ben Shneiderman. *Readings in Information Visualization*. Edited by Stuart Card. San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 1999.

Carruthers, Mary. *The Book of Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Carruthers, Mary. *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung. *Apparatus*. New York: Tanam Press, 1981.

Cilliers 1998 Cilliers, Paul. *Complexity and Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Clarke, Bruce, and Mark B. Hansen, eds. *Emergence and Embodiment*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Frost, Samantha. *New Materialisms*. Edited by Diana Coole. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Coward, Rosalind, and John Ellis. *Language and Materialism*. London and Routledge: Routledge and Paul, 1977.

Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Drucker, Johanna. *The Visible Word*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Drucker, Johanna. "Entity to Event: From Literal, Mechanistic Materiality to Probabilistic Materiality". *Parallax* 15: 4 (2009), pp. 7-17.

Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

Fuller, Matthew. *Behind The Blip*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003.

Alfred. *The Anthropology of Time*. Oxford: Berg, 1992.

Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

Glaserfeld, Ernst von. *Radical Constructivism*. London: Falmer Press, 1995.

Gleick, James. *Chaos: Making a New Science*. New York: Viking, 1987.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *Writing Machines*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

Heim, Michel. *Electric Language*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

Hoffman, Donald. "The Interface Theory of Perception". In Sven Dickinson Michael Tarr, Ales Leonardis and Bernt Schiele, eds., *Object Categorization: Computer and Human Vision Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. [www.veronadesign.biz/interface.pdf](http://www.veronadesign.biz/interface.pdf).

Holland, John. *Hidden Order: How Adaptation Builds Complexity*. New York: Basic Books, 1996.

Holland, John. *Emergence: From Chaos to Order*. New York: Harper, Basic Books, 1999.

Jenks, Chris, and John Smith. *Qualitative Complexity*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Kirschenbaum, Matthew. *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008.

Krug, Steve. *Don't Make Me Think*. Indianapolis: Que, 2000.

Landow, George P., ed. *Hyper/Text/Theory*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

Delany, Paul, and George Landow, eds. *Hypermedia and Literary Studies*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.

Laurel, Brenda. *The Art of Human-Computer Interface Design*. Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1990.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Anthropology*. New York: Cultural Division of the French Embassy, 1956.

Maturana, Humberto, and Francisco Varela. *The Tree of Knowledge*. Boston: New Science Library, 1987.

McCann, Jerome. *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

McGann, Jerome. "Texts in N-dimensions and Interpretation in a new key". Text Technology 12: 2 (2003), pp. 1-18.

McKenzie, D.F. Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Parikka, Jussi. "Operative Media Archeology: Wolfgang Ernst's Materialist Media Diagrammatics". Theory, Culture, & Society 28: 5 (September 2011), pp. 52-74.

Paul, Christiane. "The Myth of Immateriality". In Oliver Grau, ed., MediaArtHistories. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012. [intelligentagent.com/writing\\_samples/CP\\_Myth\\_of\\_Immateriality.pdf](http://intelligentagent.com/writing_samples/CP_Myth_of_Immateriality.pdf).

Saussure, Ferdinand de. Course in General Linguistics. Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Translated by Wade Baskin. New York: Philosophical Society, 1959.

Silverman, Kaja. The Subject of Semiotics. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Thrift, Nigel. Non-Representational Theory. London: Routledge, 2007.

Waldrop, M. Mitchell. Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Wikipedia. History of the graphical user interface. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_graphical\\_user\\_interface](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_graphical_user_interface).

# On Being Included: A Phenomenological Practice

by Sara Ahmed

In this conclusion, I offer a way of thinking about diversity work as a phenomenological practice. Diversity work does not simply generate knowledge *about* institutions (in which the institution becomes a thematic); it generates knowledge of institutions in the process of attempting to transform them. We could also think of diversity as praxis, drawing on a Marxist understanding of the point of intellectual labor: as Marx argues in *Theses on Feuerbach*, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world differently but the point is to change it” ([1845] 2009: 97; emphasis added). Drawing on this radical tradition, Paulo Freire defines praxis as “reflection and action upon the world *in order to transform it*” ([1970] 2000: 51; emphasis added). I want to offer a different way of thinking about the relationship between knowledge and transformation. Rather than suggesting that knowledge leads (or should lead) to transformation, I offer a reversal that in my view preserves the point or aim of the argument: transformation, as a form of practical labor, leads to knowledge.

The very labor of transforming institutions, or at least aiming for transformation, is how we learn about institutions as formations. We can thus think of diversity work as a “phenomenological practice.” What do I mean by this? Edmund Husserl in his Vienna lecture (presented in 1935 and published in the appendix of *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*) offers an important redescription of the phe-

nomenological method. He suggests that phenomenology has its roots in classical Greek philosophy as *theoria* or theoretical attitude. A theoretical attitude is a reorientation of a previous attitude, defined as “a habitually fixed style of willing life comprising directions of the will or interests that are prescribed by this style” ([1936 / 54] 1970: 280). An attitude is thus not simply a reflection on the world but is worldly: an attitude could even be thought of as institutionality, in which a norm is also prescribed as a style of life. A norm is how we are immersed in a life. For Husserl, phenomenology is defined as reorientation: “The theoretical attitude, in its newness, refers back to a previous attitude, one which was earlier the norm: [with reference to this] it is characterized as a *reorientation*” (280; emphasis added). The phenomenological attitude in reflecting on the previous attitudes is

In her 2012 book, Sara Ahmed examines how diversity operates in the modern world, and reflects on the experience of racism and sexism in institutional culture. In her last chapter and conclusion, she offers a new way of thinking about diversity work. Instead of viewing it as a praxis, or a ‘reflection upon the world in order to transform it,’ she presents a reversal: ‘transformation, as a form of practical labor, leads to knowledge.’ It is in moving the needle, that we get to know it.

thus a new style; a theoretical attitude is new in relation to what already exists because in reflecting on what exists, it withdraws from an immersion, such that an existence is transformed. In this new attitude the world becomes thematic, as what consciousness is directed toward. Husserl argues explicitly that such a new attitude is theoretical: it must, at least in the first instance, be “totally unpractical” (282).

We can offer a different angle on the task at hand by thinking about how phenomenology can work as a practice or even “practically” It is not simply that diversity workers are philosophers—in the sense of being reflexive and critical—in their attitude toward institutions (though they can be). It is not simply that they become conscious of what recedes from view. Rather, diversity workers acquire a critical orientation to institutions in the process of coming up against them. They become conscious of “the brick wall,” as that which keeps its place even when an official commitment to diversity has been given. Only the practical labor of “coming up against” the institution *allows this wall to become apparent*. To those who do not come up against it, the wall does not appear—the institution is lived and experienced as being open, committed, and diverse.

Diversity workers thus generate knowledge not only of what institutions are like but of how they can reproduce themselves, how they become like and keep becoming alike. We come up against the force and weight of something when we attempt to alter the conditions of an existence. But we can also come up against something in our experience of an existence. Doing diversity work is institutional work in the sense that it is an experience of encountering resistance and countering that resistance. Each new strategy or tactic for getting through the wall generates knowledge of what does or does not get across. Perhaps diversity workers aim to transform the wall into a table, turning the tangible object of institutional resistance into a tangible platform for institutional action. Thinking of diversity work in this way allows us to understand how speaking in the happier languages of diversity does not necessarily mean an identification with the institution but can be understood as a form of practical knowledge of the difficulty of getting through.

Getting people to the table by not speaking of the wall (by not speaking about what does get across) does not mean the wall disappears. Even if the wall is a metaphor for immobility, it can move. When practitioners overcome resistance, it seems to reappear elsewhere. Institutional immobility thus requires a mobile defense system. I described in chapter 1 how diversity workers have to be mobile: embedding diversity requires inhabiting different kinds of institutional spaces. The experience of physical mobility also involves the feeling of coming up against the same thing, wherever you come up against it. One of my primary aims has been to describe the physical and emotional labor of “banging your head against a brick wall.”

*To think of diversity as a phenomenological practice, is to frame it as an act of reorientation. In challenging attitudes of exclusion – or as Ahmed calls it, ‘stranger-making’ – diversity work is not only about looking at what is missing from view. It is also about acquiring a critical knowledge of the ‘brick wall’, the sedimentation of history which determines who belongs and who does not get across. Ahmed writes, ‘Only the practical labor of ‘coming up against’ the institution allows this wall to become apparent. To those who do not come up against it, the wall does not appear – the institution is lived and experienced as being open, committed and diverse.’ In our context of digital media, where software is opaque and algorithms reside within black boxes, this wall is particularly elusive. As such, it becomes even more important that we ‘generate knowledge not only of what institutions are like, but of how they can reproduce themselves, how they become like and keep becoming alike.’*

I want to expand the terms of my argument here by thinking of diversity work in two distinct but related ways. First, diversity

work can refer to work that has the explicit aim of transforming an institution; second, diversity work can be what is required, or what we do, when we do not “quite” inhabit the norms of an institution. When you don’t quite inhabit the norms, or you aim to transform them, you notice them as you come up against them. The wall is what we come up against: the sedimentation of history into a barrier that is solid and tangible in the present, a barrier to change as well as to the mobility of some, a barrier that remains invisible to those who can flow into the spaces created by institutions.

Ahmed expands her argument to address the many different kinds of diversity work. It can refer to work that has the explicit aim to transform an institution, such as Wikipedia’s efforts to close the gender gap in its editors, for example. It can also be what we do when we find ourselves outside a category of privilege, the strategies and tactics we learn to use when we are ‘stopped or held up by how we inhabit what we inhabit.’ This hits home for me, as a young woman of mixed Indonesian and Dutch heritage. This entire piece helps me place my own experience of being ‘othered’ within a theoretical framework; and I wish I had read it sooner. Ahmed also explains that diversity work can take form of a description, of how we experience life inside an institution which does not give you residence. In many of these encounters, for example when as a woman of color, you are not afforded the same professional courtesy as your white male counterpart, you have to decide whether to let the moment pass or take on the emotional labor of insisting on belonging.

Feminist and race theorists over generations have taught us that to inhabit a category of privilege is not to come up against

the category. What makes a lesson hard is what makes a lesson worth repeating. When we fail to inhabit a category (when we are questioned or question ourselves whether we are “it”), then that category becomes more apparent, rather like the institutional wall: a sign of immobility or what does not move. There is an implicit relation between categories and mobility that we can make more explicit. When a category allows us to pass into the world, we might not notice that we inhabit that category. When we are stopped or held up by how we inhabit what we inhabit, then the terms of habitation are revealed to us. We need to rewrite the world from the experience of not being able to pass into the world. In *Queer Phenomenology*, I called for a phenomenology of “being stopped,” a description of the world from the point of view of those who do not flow into it (2006: 140). I suggested that if we begin with the body that loses its chair, the world we describe will be quite different (139).

Diversity work can take the form of description: it can describe the effects of inhabiting institutional spaces that do not give you residence. An example: we are at a departmental meeting with students to introduce our courses. One after the other, we come up to the podium. A colleague is chairing, introducing us in turn. She says: this is Professor So-and-So; this is Professor Such-and-Such. On this particular occasion, I happen to be the only female professor in the room. And I am the only professor introduced without using the title. She says, “this is Sara.” In taking the space that has been given to me, I feel like a girl, and I giggle. It is a “girling” moment, to use Judith Butler’s evocative term (1993: 7). Girling moments do not stop happening, even after we have been pronounced girls. We can feel an assignment as an atmosphere. When you look like what they expect a professor to be, you are treated like a professor. A somber and serious mood fol-

lows those who have the right kind of body, the body that allows them to pass seamlessly into the category, when the category has a certain affective value, as somber and serious.

Diversity work can involve an experience of hesitation, of not knowing what to do in these situations. There is a labor in having to respond to a situation that others are protected from, a situation that does not come up for those whose residence is assumed. Do you point it out? Do you say anything? Will you cause a problem by describing a problem? Past experience tells you that to make such a point is to become a sore point. Sometimes you let the moment pass because the consequences of not letting it pass are too difficult.

[...]

To catalogue these incidents is not a melancholic task. To account for experiences of not being given residence is not yet another sad political lesson, a lesson of what we have had to give up in order to keep going. I suspect there is a loss at stake here, but it is not ours. The failure to inhabit the categories that give order to an existence or bring an existence into order can be understood as beneficial, not in the sense that this failure might propel us forward but that it might give us insight into the very system of propulsion, into what does and does not move forward. I realize how much we come to know about institutional life because of these failures of residence, how the categories in which we are immersed as styles of life *become explicit when you do not quite inhabit them*.

When the restrictions governing who can occupy a category become explicit, you are noticing what is around you, what gathers, but what does not ordinarily come into view. Over and over again, it is revealed to me: this institutional lesson, which is also a life lesson, of coming up against a category *in the very attempt*

*to make the restrictions more explicit*. How many times have I had male colleagues defending all-male reading lists, all-male speaker lists, all-male reference lists? To give an account of these defenses is to give an account of how worlds are reproduced.

[...]

The very tendency to “look over” how everyday and institutional worlds involve restrictions and blockages is how those restrictions and blockages are reproduced. It is not the time to be over it, if it is not over. It is not even the time to get over it. Social categories are sediments: they go all the way down, and they weigh some of us down. They might even appear lighter and more buoyant to those who can float, as if they are “above” them. Perhaps the experience of aboveness creates the impression of overness. Perhaps lightness and buoyancy are the affects of privilege—the affective worlds inhabited by those whose bodies don’t weigh them down or hold them up.

*Following this, Ahmed points out that collecting these accounts of countering and countering resistance, should be seen as beneficial, because they expose the system. Of her own experience, she writes that, ‘Over and over again, it is revealed to me: this institutional lesson, which is also a life lesson, of coming up against a category in the very attempt to make the restrictions more explicit. How many times have I had male colleagues defending all-male reading lists, all-male speaker lists, all-male reference lists? To give an account of these defenses is to give an account of how worlds are reproduced.’ The tendency to defend the status quo, to paint the critic as the problem, the feminist as the killjoy, adds another layer of complexity.*

We can also consider the language of critique and how it is assumed to be dated.

I think even within some feminist writing, the idea that we should be critical of sexism has indeed become understood as rather dated and even as a habit that is blocking us, holding us down, or keeping us back: stopping us from reading or engaging most positively, affirmatively, and creatively with the texts that are the objects of critique. It would be timely to restate the arguments that sexism and racism are not incidental but structural, and thus to understand sexism and racism requires better, closer readings of what is being gathered. To account for a situation—which is to account for the situated nature of knowledge—means we can offer “a better account of the world” (Haraway 1999: 187). Attending to the restrictions in the apparently open spaces of a social world brings us into closer proximity to an actual and material world. We need feminist and antiracist critique because we need to understand how it is that the world takes shape by restricting the forms in which we gather. We need this critique now if we are to learn *how not to reproduce what we inherit*.

A critical task is thus to attend to categories given that they do not have any ontological ground (we do not assume there is such a thing called white or black in advance, as it were). We attend to categories to understand how what is ungrounded can become a social ground (we know there is such a thing as being called white or black, and we know that the call “calls us” into different places). A phenomenological approach shows how a critique of the ontological basis of categories does not mean that the categories themselves disappear (see Alcoff 2006: 185). I would thus not argue, as Paul Gilroy (2000) does, that our problem is with the category of race itself and the solution is to unlearn the habit of using the category. To proceed as if the categories *do not matter* because they *should not matter* would be to fail to show how the categories continue to ground social existence.

An account of diversity as a phenomenological practice is an account of how racism is reproduced by receding from view, becoming an ordinary feature of institutional life. My critique of this disappearance can be related to wider critiques of the contemporary as postracial, or critiques in the United States of the discourse of color blindness (see Street 2007: 37; Eng 2010: x; Wise 2010). The very idea that we can see beyond race, or that we are “over race” is how racism is reproduced; it is how racism is *looked over*. Diversity work as phenomenological practice is a refusal to look away from what has already been looked over. Not all diversity work works this way, as I have shown in this book. Indeed, diversity work itself can allow institutions to “look over” racism. A practical phenomenology is also about witnessing labor: noticing how the responses to what we come up against can also cover over the signs of againstness. A recovery can be to re-cover, a covering over. At the very moment of “overing,” a category is redone. The reproduction of a category can happen at the moment in which it is imagined as overcome or undone. This is why the very promise of inclusion can be the concealment and thus extension of exclusion. This is why a description of the process of being included matters.

We are not just talking of the bigger categories, those that are reified as or in forms of life. What we need is an account of how smaller categories can become grounds of an existence. I might also be tempted to describe this book as offering a phenomenology of social perception. When given out or communicated, perceptions have a social life. Even ways of perceiving somebody as having certain kinds of qualities become objects in the world, tangible things. This could be about the perception of an individual, that tricky matter of reputation, how some individuals are given certain attributes (sometimes independently of



what they do, sometimes not), and how the institutional life of an individual person is partly about the value of that attribution. These little perceptions do stick to bigger categories or might be how those categories stick. A feminist colleague who attends her university's promotions committee tells me how you can "hear" how male and female staff are valued differently just by the kinds of adjectives used in the letters to describe their performances: descriptive words for men are upward, energetic, and thrusting, whereas for women they are quieter, more sedentary, closer to the ground. That gender becomes wordy should not surprise us. We can do gender through words, although this is not, of course, the only way we do gender.

Diversity practitioners have helped me understand how perceptions can have quite different social or institutional careers. A difference of perception can be the difference that matters. Whether it is the perception that is treated as the problem is a way of distributing a problem. Whether or not a perception is of a problem, it is about making some and not others into the problem. I have learned so much about how even the language of inclusion and repair makes those who are to be included into the problem. And once the "to be included" or "not yet included" are the problem, those who are already given a place by the institution are not only not the problem but can become the solution of the problem.

To account for the affective distribution of problems is an must be more than what is described (and perhaps dismissed) as "ideology critique," as a critique of what the surface hides. It would be to describe what "comes up" as a problem is already dependent on interests that cannot and will not be declared. In other words, it is a critique of *how things surface*, which is to say, a *critique of what recedes*. So, for example, whiteness recedes when diversi-

ty becomes a solution to the problem of whiteness. Note again, when institutions are working, the wall is what does not surface. The wall describes the tangibility of recession, a blockage point that is not seen when things are (assumed to be) flowing.

*The last section of the chapter deals with what happens when diversity is offered as a solution. In so much of Silicon Valley today, it has become a buzzword and a PR strategy. Ahmed warns us how 'even the language of inclusion and repair makes those who are to be included into the problem.' It even suggests that those who are already holding place in institutions, are the ones who can solve the problem. 'Whiteness recedes when diversity becomes a solution to whiteness.' So it is important for us not only to emphasize and critique what the surface hides, but also how things surface, and 'how not to reproduce what the we inherit.' As a student of Media Design, this critical eye is what I hope to develop sooner rather than later. With this research in particular, my aim is to question not just what a book is as a cultural artefact, but how its digitization expands its potential impact on society.*

I have suggested that when things become hard, we need description. One of my aims has certainly been to offer a description of what recedes when diversity becomes the view. But I do not simply want to give a descriptive content to this recession. I also argue that to account for what recedes is to offer a different kind of account. In contemporary social theory, the primary motifs for the social are of fluidity. social theory now tends to emphasize movement or mobilities (Urry 2007) or liquidity (Bauman 2005). At one level, the emphasis is part of an effort to depict social changes: the fast speeds of late capitalism, the precarious conditions of labor, the loosening of social ties. But these metaphors

also carry social theory in a certain direction. For example, Zygmunt Bauman has argued: “One attribute that liquids possess but solids do not, an attribute that makes liquids an *apt metaphor for our times*, is the intrinsic inability of fluids to hold their shape for long on their own” (in Gane 2004; emphasis added). Doing the research for this book has taught me about solidity, about how what appears as mobile and changing can *hold its shape*.

In the introduction to this book, I suggested that to account for racism is to offer a different account of the world. What are we accounting for? We are accounting for how a “holding pattern” becomes intrinsic. We are accounting for the difficulty of social transformation. We are also offering a different way of understanding the relationship between fluidity and solidity. An understanding can be practical. Diversity workers as institutional plumbers are the ones who point out what is getting blocked. To point out what is blocked is to be experienced as the blockage point, as the ones who are getting in the way of a flow. The flow, in other words, is a fantasy that is protected by blocking the exposure of the blockage. Diversity practitioners not only come up against the wall, as that which does not move, they are often themselves encountered as the wall, as obstructing the movement of others. [...]

Things might appear fluid if you are going the way things are flowing. When you are not going that way, you experience a flow as solidity, as what you come up against. In turn, those who are not going the way things are flowing are experienced as obstructing the flow. We might need to be the cause of obstruction. We might need to get in the way if we are to get anywhere. We might need to become the blockage points by pointing out the blockage points.

I end this book with a maxim: *don't look over it, if you can't get over it*.

## References

- Ahmed, Sara (2006). *Queer Phenomenology: Orientation, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Alcoff, Linda Martin (2006). *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (2005). *Liquid Life*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.
- Gane, Mike (2005). "Introduction" to Marcel Mauss's *The Nature of Sociology: Two Essays*, Oxford: Berghahn Press, i.x-xxii.
- Gilroy, Paul (2000). *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Husserl, Edmund [1913] (1969). *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W R. Boyce Gibson. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Marx, Karl [1845] (2009). *Theses on Feuerbach*, trans. Austin Lewis. Ellicott City, MD: Mondial Press.
- Street, Paul Louis (2007). *Racial Oppression in the Global Metropolis: A Living Black Chicago History*. Plymouth: Rowland and Littlefield.
- Urry, John (2007). *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wise, Tim (20ro). *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity*. San Francisco: City Lights. Bibliography

## References

Ahmed, S. (2012) *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. London: Duke University Press Books.

Bolter, J., Gromala, D. (2003) *Windows and Mirrors: Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.

Drucker, J. (2013) Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface. *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 7(1). [Online] Available at: <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/7/1/000143/000143.html> (Accessed 02/02/18)

Jablonka, I. (2013) *The Book: Its Past, Its Future. An interview with Roger Chartier*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.booksandideas.net/The-Book-Its-Past-Its-Future.html> (Accessed 01/23/18).

Koevoets, S. (2014) The Digital Universal Library and the Myth of Chaos, in: Olivieri D., Leurs, K. (eds): *Everyday Feminist Research Praxis: Doing Gender in the Netherlands*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Pauwels, A. (2003) Linguistic Sexism and Feminist Linguistic Activism, in: Meyerhoff, M., Holmes, J. (eds.), *The Handbook of Language and Gender*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Robinson, L.S. (1983) Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 2(83). <https://doi.org/10.2307/464208>

Walsh, W., Le Guin, U. (1995) I am a woman writer; I am a western writer: an interview with Ursula Le Guin. *Kenyon Review* 17(3/4).

Wijaksana M. (2016) *Melani Budianta: Merekam Perempuan Penulis Dalam Sejarah Kesusastraan*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.jurnalperempuan.org/9/post/2016/03/melani-budianta-merekam-perempuan-penulis-dalam-sejarah-kesusastraan.html> (Accessed 02/12/18).

## **IMPRINT**

### **Reader #4**

**How bias spreads from the canon to the web**

**On the books we scan, and the culture we reproduce**

Editing, design & production:

Natasha Berting (1992), is a graphic designer and writer born and raised in Indonesia to Dutch-Indonesian parents. Currently living in Rotterdam and studying media design. Definitely a feminist.

Open source typefaces:

Montserrat (Julieta Ulanovsky) and Kotta One (Ania Kruk)

Collection:

Reflections on Book Scanning: A Feminist Reader

XPUB Special Issue 05, March 2018

<https://issue.xpub.nl/05>

The XPUB Triannual

Team: Delphine Bedel, Natasha Berting, André Castro, Angeliki Diakrousi, Aymeric Mansoux, Michael Murtaugh, Alexander Roidl, Steve Rushton, Alice Strete, Zalán Szakacs and Joca van der Horst.

Main partner: WORM / Pirate Bay

Special guests: Manetta Berends & Cristina Cochior (Algorit group).

Thanks to Leslie Robbins, Simon Pummell and Frederic Van de Velde.

Printed at WdKA Publication Station

Publisher: XPUB, Rotterdam