ELLEN ROONEY

Introduction

Feminist literary theory resists generalization. Perhaps because feminism has been such a prolific intellectual current and also because feminist critics have produced work of such extraordinary diversity, a remarkable range of scholars have tried to abstract the essential elements of feminist literary theory over the past two decades and more. Some of these scholars have worked in the mode of the collection or anthology, others by attempting their own synoptic analyses; at least one published a collection studying already existing critical anthologies.[1] Virtually all such efforts have been subject to strenuous critique and symptomatic reading, but they have simultaneously made important, even profound, interventions in the academic field of feminist criticism and beyond. Indeed, it may well be a rule of intellectual life that those books that are at some point most energetically critiqued, or even condemned, are precisely those whose very powerful impact must be, at whatever cost, undone, displaced, disavowed, in order to enable new work to find its point of departure.

Nevertheless, a glance over the history of efforts by feminist literary theorists to summarize their collective project reveals a marked and growing concern over the very possibility of such a synoptic view, a concern mirrored in the questions readers raise about the terms of inclusion and exclusion that govern any attempt to define the borders of feminism. The effort to propose a definition, genealogy or history of feminist literary theory, whether for the sake of pedagogy, political clarity or even to establish an intellectual rationale for the field as a whole, threatens to simplify what is, in a stubborn, perhaps ineradicable way, complex. In the proposal of a general account of feminist literary theory's proper form there is something that feminist theorists themselves do not relish.[2]

This may be in part because formulating useful generalizations about theoretical problematics so rarely seems to feature the kind of attention to textual detail or "literariness" that literary critics (including of course feminists) usually prefer as their intellectual practice. Barbara Johnson

acknowledges this longing for literariness – and connects it to the question of difference – in the preface to *The Critical Difference*:

> Difference is, of course, at work within the very discourse of theory itself. Indeed, it is precisely contemporary theory that has made us so aware of this. Theoretical pronouncements therefore do not stand here as instruments to be used in mastering literary structures. On the contrary, it is through contact with literature that theoretical tools are useful precisely to the extent that they thereby change and dissolve in the hands of the user. Theory here is often the straight man whose precarious rectitude and hidden risibility, passion and pathos are precisely what literature has already somehow already foreseen.[3]

Johnson warns her readers away from the expectation (or fear) that she will permit theoretical paradigms to pass themselves off as master texts, dominating literature and dictating in a mechanical, uninterrogated way the practice of reading. In the theoretical *tour de force* of readings that make up her book, Johnson scrupulously attends to the power of literature to read theory, to elude in some essentially unpredictable way even the most subtle theoretical problematic, and thus to contribute to a retheorizing, a reinscription with a difference, of theory's established points of departure. This difference that literature or "textuality" discloses within theory is bound up, she notes, with traces of affect: with pathos and passion, with a less-than-stable uprightness and with something laughable, as well. The literariness within theory does not conform to a strictly logical order.

Textuality, broadly defined in this way, is what makes not just literary but cultural studies generally, including feminist cultural studies, something other than sociology or ethnography. This is not merely an aesthetic distinction or a matter of taking pleasure in the text (otherwise known as "loving literature"). We lose the *evidence* of textuality when we read past or around its effects, when we "read without seeing," as Derrida puts it in his (perhaps) feminist book, *Spurs*.[4] Feminist literary scholars seek in everything they read the textual details that an empirical or sociological approach privileging a kind of "information retrieval" finds merely disruptive;[5] as a result, they may be particularly resistant to seduction by masterful abstractions of feminist theory's particularities. The exclusions that reductive generalizations can never entirely avoid disturb them.

Johnson's view is by now familiar to students of literature. That literariness inhabits theory; that theory is, in fact, a genre of literature and not a pure metalanguage; that reading transacts an exchange between theoretical texts and literary works, rather than simply applying theory to an abject text the better to illustrate theory's profundity: these propositions are widely acknowledged, if not always consistently put into practice. Feminist literary

theory belongs in a fundamental way to literary studies and thus participates in its disciplinary debates. (This is not simply a matter of being confined by disciplinarity; disciplines are knowledge-producing forms, with their own capacities for renewal and transformation.) But this emphasis on the way in which literature inhabits theory has a particular relevance to contemporary feminist literary theory insofar as it also inhabits feminist theory in general and participates in the interdisciplinary projects of women's studies and gender studies. On the one hand, literature and literariness, rhetoric and reading, are inescapable terms for feminist literary theory, especially in its academic avatars, which is the primary form in which it will be considered in this volume; Johnson encourages us to keep feminist theorizing attuned to the ongoing challenges of the literary. On the other hand, feminism has had an important and in many ways painful historical relation with the processes of abstraction and generalization that are most often (though too reductively) identified with theory as such, a history that is also the history of feminist literary studies.

The connections between difference and textuality – and the threat represented by their loss – have a particular resonance for feminist theory (in the academy and beyond). To take the United States as an example, the habitual definition or abstraction of "woman" by dominant white and middle-class feminist theorists in terms that excluded women of color, women of the working classes, and women living outside the metropolitan centers has marked feminist theorizing in virtually all its forms. This theoretical exclusion has by now been "interrupted" (to use Gayatri Spivak's term) by many critiques, emanating from figures ranging from Barbara Smith, Elizabeth Spellman, bell hooks, and Spivak, to Cherríe Moraga, Trinh Minh-Ha, Hortense Spillers, and Chandra Mohanty, to name only a handful. The racism and class bias, heterosexism and neocolonial privilege that underwrote these exclusions have been carefully disclosed and mapped; feminist theories that have eschewed similar exclusions and abstractions have been elaborated.

This critical work, however, has also engendered the insight that systemic exclusions are not easily repaired by a simple additive approach, by the "inclusion" of once marginalized women and communities in a renovated theoretical totalization. Indeed, the logic by which an essentially white feminism stands at the origins of feminist theory, renewing and reforming itself in response to the critiques of somehow belated women who introduce *their* differences into the established discussion, has radical shortcomings. These include (1) its distortion of the original work of feminists of color and postcolonial feminists for whom the fusion of questions of gender and questions of race or empire was not an afterthought (a topic Ann duCille

analyzes in her essay in this volume); (2) its erasure of the racial, national, sexual, and class inscriptions of white, middle-class, heterosexual feminists, who thus appear to have an unmediated and logically as well as politically prior claim to feminism as such – they are consequently confirmed as the unacknowledged norm;[6] and (3) its implicit underwriting of the additive approach (add race, add class, add religion, add "and so on") that sustains efforts to define women as such. As Sabina Sawhney remarks, the steady addition of "another item to the list of all 'others' – all finally to be incorporated into some version of a global McSisterhood" – cannot be any feminism's program.[7] If even well-intentioned gestures of inclusion leave undisturbed the assumptions that produced exclusions in the first place, how is feminist theorizing to proceed? What shall it take for its object?

Reading Johnson's remarks in the light of feminism's history of theory opens the question of how the problems of generalization and difference are bound up with the problems of textuality and rhetoric. How does feminist literary theory respond to the claim that the very definition of theory is subject to something other than a "straight" reading, that theory might be queered? What does the resistance to generalizing and abstracting mean for feminist literary theory? Is the persistent difficulty of presenting an overview of the field a symptom in its own right, a warning about the state of feminist theory today? Is there something "literary" about this difficulty? And what is feminist literary theory? I will tackle the last question first, since any conceivable answer requires us to enter the precincts of generalization.

Feminist literary theories

Women read. They write, too, of course: literature and criticism and theory (plays, newspaper columns, manifestos, annual reports). But it can be argued that feminist literary studies depends upon the premise that women read and on the conclusion that their reading *makes* a difference. (We will return to the importance of making.)[8] Feminist literary theory maintains that women's reading is of consequence, intellectually, politically, poetically; women's readings signify. This feminist insistence on the interpretative consquences of women's reading is quite different from the conclusions drawn by earlier commentators who also noticed women reading. For example, the rise of the English novel, in the eighteenth century, was accompanied by a stream of diatribes opposed to women's reading: on the social hazards of allowing women to read; on the importance of monitoring and censoring women's reading; on the threat that women's pleasure in reading represented to female virtue and domestic order. Similar attacks on women's literacy are of course still commonplace in many places around

the globe; not all women read. Jane Austen mocks these polemics on women's reading when she represents Mr. Collins's horror as the Bennet daughters hand him a novel to be read aloud after tea; to humor their guest, the family agree instead to a selection from *Fordyce's Sermons*. Such censorious concerns were aroused by fears of the impact that novels might have on their female readers: on their chastity, their docility, their submission to (often patriarchal) authority. By contrast, the woman reader as feminist is drawn to the promise that women reading will have an impact on texts.

Women read. Might we find in this remarkably simple slogan a rubric for the shared paradigm of feminist literary theories? Or do these two deceptively simple words also require to be read? Perhaps, as Hazel Carby observes about the project of black feminist criticism, this appealing slogan must be "regarded critically as a problem, not a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradictions."[9] Indeed, as she advances her interrogation of the forces shaping academic black feminist theory, Carby stresses that the meanings we can attach to the flat observation that black women read are not obvious or unified: "Black feminist criticism has too frequently been reduced to an experiential relationship that exists between black women as critics and black women as writers who represent black women's reality. Theoretically this reliance on a common, or shared, experience is essentialist and ahistorical" (p. 16). Carby's observations are exemplary of the feminist theorist's opening up of the "experience" of the woman reader. No sooner has the point been made that women read and that their reading introduces a difference into literary history and criticism, than the meanings of both women and reading are put into question. Women readers have not always made the difference that feminist criticism looks for.

What does the feminist critic mean when she says "women"? Biologically female persons? Individuals who have been socialized as "feminine"? Does that socialization vary when we understand women as always already raced, classed, and sexualized, and by *contradictory* processes, which introduce differences within every construct of identity, so that there is no singular woman reader, or singular white woman reader, or singular black woman reader, or singular lesbian reader?[10] Does the invocation of "women" announce simply that the category of gender is at work, conceptualized in an "intersectional" model that focuses on the interlocking (not parallel) constructions of race, gender, class, and sexuality, in an encounter in which each term is determined and determining?[11] Or perhaps "women" signifies sexual difference as it is figured by psychoanalysis or the critique of phallocentrism, which aligns femininity with the divided subject and invokes it to herald the ruin of any concept of identity or identity-based

reading.[12] This last option stresses the differences *within* femininity and masculinity, differences that phallocentrism masks in order to leave us with the illusion of a firm opposition between men and women and the fantasy of a feminine essence, of Woman as a unitary subject. Peggy Kamuf elaborates the literary-critical consequences of this deconstruction of the binary masculine/feminine in her essay "Writing Like a Woman." Kamuf challenges the "tautology," popular with many feminist critics, that "women's writing is writing signed by women,"[13] and she argues that this logic presumes that the literary text has "a father," that is, a legitimate parent who "represents . . . a clear intentionality, realized or given expression in the written work and recovered through the work of interpretation" (p. 297). In Kamuf's analysis the presupposition that identity and intentionality rule meaning is a specifically patriarchal myth that masks the instability and fluidity of all identity, including the identity of the woman reader. This last possibility raises the question of whether the practice of a "feminine" reading that abandons the myths of identity can be restricted to readers who are gendered as women in their social roles. Is the woman reader a critical hypothesis that is available to any and every reader, including men?

The phrase "any reader" is for its part no more transparent than the term women. As the impossibility of assigning a singular or proper identity to the "women" who read looms larger, another question arises: what does it mean to read? Does reading decipher textual codes firmly in place in a text that reflects its author's intentions? If so, is the reader's task to articulate those intentions as fully as possible? Or can the author's consciousness, her actual experience and deliberate ends, be bracketed, provided that we attend to historical contexts and ideological problematics? Without insisting that the text's meanings are contained by its author's explicit intentions, we might still preserve the fundamental objectivity of reading by placing texts firmly in historical contexts, in cultural fields or among socio-political forces that provide a horizon for interpretation. This kind of historicist model is powerful in literary studies at the present moment, and it has always been a rich source of interpretative insight for feminist readers. But is this process itself too indebted to the sociological reductions of the literary that we questioned above? Is there danger in the tendency to shrink textual effects to the already known, to what Ann duCille has called "the discursively familiar, . . . faithful representations of lived experiences in the social real"?[14] Formulated as ideology critique, such an approach can have a powerful, demystifying impact. But it may also threaten its textual examples with irrelevance: if ideological ruses are always already understood in advance, if ideology stands, as theory aspires to, in a position of mastery over the text, reading itself is redundant, another tautological

reiteration of what our theory of ideology has already rendered obvious and familiar.

Another possibility is the one held out by Johnson's jokes at theory's expense and made explicit in her *The Feminist Difference*:

> literature is important for feminism because literature can best be understood as the place where impasses can be kept open for examination, where questions can be guarded and not forced into a premature validation of the available paradigms. Literature, that is, is not to be understood as a predetermined set of works but as a mode of cultural work, the work of giving-to-read those impossible contradictions that cannot yet be spoken. (p. 13)

This reader has an active relation to the text, one that attends closely to the play of its signfiers, its contradictory movements, its capacity to surprise. Reading in this perspective is transitive: reading a text changes it. If women readers "make" a difference, it is because they read to undo previous phallic paradigms of interpretative mastery and to disclose as yet unimagined textual possibilities, possibilities that invalidate our "available paradigms" and leave ambivalence, conflict, and contradiction in place for us to explore. Literature as that which "figures the impossible" (Spivak, *Critique*, p. 112) is not literature that is apolitical or quietistic, for conflict and contradiction inhere in feminist politics; but it is a scene in which the already known can no longer be taken for granted.

In this last formulation, reading as a mode of work, as attention to the impasse, to the figuration of the impossible, threatens the transparency of categories like the (lesbian) woman or (black) women or even gender (in postcoloniality). Insofar as such categories imagine identity as rooted in an experience beyond representation, a unified experience given by some unmediated practice and not both formed and undone by language, literature is the site of their deconstruction as well as their renewal. Feminist reading here begins to complicate and unravel the very premises that first enabled it to get a purchase on textuality. Self-questioning and an unwillingness to settle in a single location are characteristic of feminist literary theories. They have not found skepticism to be paralyzing, for it is not only the identity of the woman reading that has been rethought. When feminist readers begin to argue that the women's readings matter to the meanings of literary texts, they are willy-nilly caught up in an argument about the manner in which men read (in the present and the past tense). Indeed, the feminist readers expose, by the difference of their interpretations, the *masculinism* of prior readings and readers. These prior readings had presented themselves not as the products of men accustomed to masculine privilege (so accustomed that their privileges appeared to them simply as nature), but as reading itself,

objective, humanistic reading, where men (or certain men, to be more precise) were presumed to represent the human. Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* cannily called this pseudo-objective reading "phallic criticism." Masculinity itself *as a gender* (rather than in the form of the generically human) is made visible in her critical rereading. Can we argue, then, that when a masculinist reading is exposed as such, we may presume that the agent of that exposure is a feminist critic? This, whether she is a woman or a man? And does this mean that the slogan "women read" should be rewritten as the slighty less elegant "feminists read"?[15]

It is clear by now that we can position "feminist reading" as the essence of feminist literary theories' program only in a very particular sense. While the feminist is always someone committed to the exposure of the masculinist (whether in the works of men or women), both of these terms – feminist and masculinist – are contested, as is the practice of reading, as I have been arguing. Feminist literary theories, then, are the theories of feminists struggling against masculinism and among themselves over the meanings of literature, reading, and feminism. While it is not possible to define the essence of feminist literary theory, there are a range of (competing yet characteristic) practices that emerge in the course of these struggles. By their presence in this contestatory field, one can recognize the feminist literary theorists.

Let us consider just two of the forms that this struggle may take: the interrogation of tradition and the revaluation of the aesthetic. The feminist interrogation of tradition and literary canons has taken multiple forms, and it will come as no surprise that the strategies feminist theorists have adopted are not entirely compatible with each other. Some critics have approached the problem by nominating marginalized or entirely forgotten women writers for a place within the standard canon, arguing that the excluded writers meet its traditional criteria. Others have proposed counter-canons of radically distinct traditions, seeking to dismiss once-revered figures from the syllabus. These approaches are corrective, righting the wrongs of exclusion and misreading, and they are obviously connected to feminism's "gynocritical" (Showalter) interest in women writers. On the other hand, some feminist theorists have mounted a sharp critique of the very notion of the tradition; they neither seek to place women in hegemonic canons nor to build counter-canons, arguing that any narrative of tradition (or traditions) will inevitably reinscribe ahistorical and essentialist assumptions about women's experiences.[16] This sharp dissent from the momentum of canon building frees reading from the teleologies of tradition and from the entrenched stereotypes of canonicity.

A second topos that appears in the wake of feminist reading – as a direct result of feminist reflection on the question "what is it to read"? – is

the critique of hegemonic aesthetic assumptions. Some feminist theorists propose rivals to the terms of hegemonic masculinist aesthetics, for example, championing sentimentality in the face of modernist distaste and condescension, or defending the marriage plot and a narrative preoccupation with subjectivity against a patriarchal nationalism's preferences for protest literature. Alternatively, a critique of the aesthetic may involve turning toward once-belittled forms, such as autobiography, slave narrative, diaries and *testimonios* (genres to which women in certain periods and places have had significant access), in order to disclose their substantial but overlooked aesthetic value. Or feminist literary theory may champion an avant-garde, as in the case of what French feminist Hélène Cixous calls *écriture féminine*, which she finds brilliantly embodied in the works of Jean Genet and James Joyce. All of these approaches intervene to redefine aesthetic value. But certain feminist critics have dismissed proposals to renovate the aesthetic, relegating aesthetic judgment to the history of taste. From this perspective, aesthetic values are inevitably compromised by ideology. Literary studies should report the facts of literary history understood as the evolution of imaginative discourses over time, just as history proper attends to social discourses. Historians do not dismiss objects of study on the grounds of aesthetic judgments, and the forms of feminist literary theory that emerge from this perspective would follow their lead, taking the form of cultural history.

Even this brief overview confirms that the perspective of the feminist reader has not tamed the heterogeneity of feminist literary theories. We can acknowledge the irreducible conflict in the field with the familiar gesture of pluralization: replacing the potentially monolithic concept of feminist literary theory with the multiplicity of feminist literary theories allows us to renounce any effort to totalize them or misrepresent them in a singular form. This is not a trivial gesture; the sheer wealth of material engendered by feminist literary studies across fields and national traditions, especially in a globalizing moment when "transnational literacy" (Spivak) is an urgent project, presents an empirical challenge that simply cannot be overcome. No approach can summarize this protean body of work or claim to represent it in its totality, and to signal this partiality in the form of the plural is useful. But, as even these two brief examples suggest, the difficulty of defining feminist literary theory is not, in the end, a matter of sheer quantity. The internal conflicts and varied, indeed, *contradictory* approaches (renovate the aesthetic/eradicate the aesthetic; reform or counter the canon/abandon the fiction of the canonical) that mark feminist literary theories are more daunting to the project of generalization than the sheer number of workers in the field.

Just as feminisms themselves are the work of widely divergent groups of women (and men), including women who oppose one another politically, work in different national traditions and transnational interstices, and face divergent social and political challenges, so feminist literary theories arise in multiple, contradictory, and even *opposing* contexts. The most sincere and well-meaning effort to represent feminism's heterogeneity by means of inclusive lists and expanded examples can only defer the inevitable moment of risking generalizations and testing their effects. Whenever we propose any definition, when we undertake to impose a name, to institute any identity or concept whatsoever, we must articulate some form of exclusion; identity, even in its most mobile and flexible forms, emerges from difference. And so we return to the problem of generalization with which we began. But now we are in a position to examine two radically opposed generalizations about the discursive field of feminist literary studies – and to consider their possible articulation.

To begin in the most abstract and what seems to be the least conceptually controversial register: while feminist literary theories represent remarkably wide-ranging, diverse, and contradictory projects, they are also increasingly pervasive and potent. Their impact on both the academic study of literature and the public discourse on letters and culture over the past nearly forty years has been deep and thoroughgoing and genuinely global in scope. Even a passing acquaintance with academic literary studies, course syllabi, degree programs, literary journals, and scholarly presses in a range of countries makes it clear that there is virtually no field of literary history, no national tradition, no subfield or genre that has been left entirely untouched by the discourse of academic feminist literary studies; outside the academy, as well, the impact of feminist thinking about literature is undeniable. What is more, the work of feminist critics in literature has influenced scholarship in a wide range of related fields, from history and anthropology to cinema studies and sociology, even as adjacent fields have influenced and critiqued feminist critics. Feminist literary theories have contributed both to the reorganization of the traditional study of national literatures and to the work of transnational cultural studies and theory.

Indeed, the visible impact of feminist criticism's intellectual-political-institutional projects has been so remarkable that it has made some of its own proponents curiously nervous. The assumptions, questions and intellectual programs put into motion by feminist literary theory are so entrenched in some contexts (in the US academy, for example) that more than one feminist has been moved to wonder if such institutional success, especially within university settings that early feminist scholars had hoped to challenge and even reorder, may represent a kind of historic defeat. Have