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978-0-521-55688-0 - Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference: Transatlantic Culture, 1919-1945

Alice Gambrell

Excerpt

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Introduction

Cultural histories of academic feminism have only recently begun to be written, and this volume is intended (albeit largely in indirect ways) as a contribution to that ongoing effort. It contains analyses of responses by a diverse range of interwar women intellectuals to major early twentieth-century conceptions of difference and alterity – responses that, in recent years, have repeatedly been cited by academic feminists as precursors to contemporary critical practice.¹ Through the course of separate chapters on Leonora Carrington, Ella Deloria, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), Zora Neale Hurston, and Frida Kahlo, I will develop a series of analytical procedures meant to encourage a varied and unsettled understanding not only of these earlier figures and their work, but also, more provisionally, of how women intellectuals in recent years have created and disseminated new academic-feminist methodologies through a process of reading, writing, and (in Teresa de Lauretis's phrase²) "*thinking within and against*" dominant theoretical vocabularies within which questions of "difference" are, as is now largely understood, insufficiently problematized.

The narrow purpose of the project is to address the question of what it meant, during the 1930s and early 1940s, for women to work within the boundaries of schools, movements, or disciplines in which, under more usual circumstances, they would have occupied the position of "Other": the object of investigation, the eroticized source of inspiration, the respondent in – though rarely the initiator of – an interlocutory exchange. Within the purview of the project, I include texts by women anthropologists who did fieldwork in their "home" communities (Hurston and Deloria); women who played the peculiar dual role of student–analysand to Freud as he

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was struggling to solve the “riddle” of femininity (H. D., as well as other women students of Freud to whom she responded); and women publicly associated with the brand of Surrealism set forth in the late thirties by André Breton, who throughout his career had been fascinated by marginalized forms of knowledge (Carrington and Kahlo). Prized in their own time – though in troubling and paradoxical ways – for the experiential immediacy that they would supposedly contribute to a series of cultural practices within which the pure value of “experience” was itself being regarded with increasing skepticism, all of these women engaged in difficult, charged intellectual exchanges whose valences I will go on to measure in the following chapters. I refer to this brand of intellectual affiliation as “insider-outsider” activity, borrowing (for reasons that I will explain in chapter 1) from ongoing social-scientific arguments about the many philosophical and political ramifications of texts produced by credentialized investigators who travel to sites more or less familiar to them in order to perform their professional research.

Many commentators, of course, have addressed these and related issues in the context of *contemporary* cultural life. Examples can be located across a range of fields: de Lauretis’s and Gayatri Spivak’s mid-eighties writings on the conflictual relationship between the hypothesis of “woman” and the activities of women within the practices of psychoanalysis and deconstruction; Kirin Narayan’s complex early nineties answers to her crucial question “How Native is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?”; and many others. Recent forms of insider-outsider activity, I would argue, have in fact dominated academic feminist work during the last decade-and-a-half, in the widespread practice of “talking back” (bell hooks’s phrase³) to prominent male, euroethnic theorists whose conceptions of “difference,” as feminists across a range of positions have repeatedly demonstrated, require strenuous and ongoing interrogation. I have noticed again and again, however, that the characteristic debates embedded within contemporary versions of feminist insider-outsider activity – which themselves encompass shifting valuations of theory and experience, simulation and authenticity, philosophical negation and practical affirmation – are typically marked off as “new” or “emergent” or peculiarly “postmodern,” when in fact they have a long, fraught history. Tracing out one part of that varied history is the broader purpose of this volume.

I focus, in these pages, on work by five interwar women who ascended from obscurity to heightened visibility during the mid-

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eighties – the banner years of academic-feminist back-talk – and whose privileged status during that period suggests a partial historiographical frame through which recent critical practices and methods might be contextualized and comprehended. The interwar period comprises a transitional phase during which many of these more recent discussions were beginning to assume (but had not yet solidified) their now-distinct contours. We can observe this process in miniature by looking briefly at Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Storyteller," a touchstone in many recent debates about the meanings of "modernism."⁴ There, describing the aftermath of World War I, Benjamin mourned the widespread postwar "[de]valu[ation]" of "experience" – a condition whose most catastrophic consequence, he argued, was a sudden "[in]ability to exchange experiences" in the form of storytelling.⁵ The raw material of storytelling consisted, for Benjamin, of "[e]xperience which is passed on from mouth to mouth"; he suggested that in the wake of the war, an unmediated faith in the truth of "experience" was abandoned on the battlefields of Europe, which young soldiers left behind equipped with a keen and entirely new sense of their own vulnerability to violent, all-encompassing, and mostly invisible forces that operated far beyond the scope of their control. Interwar insider-outsider activity, as I will go on to argue, prompted a peculiar reengagement of the newly devalued phenomenon of "experience" – one that both accepted and interrogated the terms of the devaluative process that Benjamin in many respects accurately describes.

Benjamin's, of course, was an early formulation of one of the key tenets of many more recent descriptions of conventionally "modernist" practice, which tend to feature (here, I quote from Eugene Lunn's oft-cited 1985 itinerary) the condition of "*Dehumanization and the Demise of the Integrated Subject or Personality*."⁶ It is significant, I think, that Benjamin locates a version of this "*Demise*" in the figure of the young European soldier, for whom the "full corporeality" of "experience" has given way to a more skeptical sense that "experience" is always shaped and mediated by determinants far larger and more powerful than his "tiny, fragile human body."⁷ For during the last decade many more critics working to reassess these conventional definitions of "modernism," following Nancy Hartsock's much-admired 1987 account of "Minority vs. Majority Theories" of modernity, have argued that losses suffered by those at the centers of metropolitan cultural life – represented in this instance by Benjamin's homeward-bound soldiers – were matched and perhaps determined

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by new gains made by those previously silenced and relegated to the margins: "Why is it," Hartssock famously asked, that "exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes 'problematic?'"⁸ The significance of Benjamin's remarks, in light of Hartssock's analysis, might better be taken as local and specific, rather than as more broadly generalizable to the "modernist" condition.

The women whose work I will go on to discuss, however, cannot be situated comfortably within either Lunn's account of the pervasive disillusionment at modernism's center, or within Hartssock's description of the newfound empowerment of those on the margins: their varied intellectual affiliations caused them to vacillate between those two poles. As I will go on to argue in fuller detail in the following chapters, their articulation into interwar metropolitan intellectual life was in large part premised upon the expectation that they would serve as containers, transmitters, or translators of the very forms of experiential immediacy whose purported loss Benjamin mourns; the texts that they produced, however, often worked in subtle ways to undermine that expectation.

In one of the most difficult and suggestive passages in Benjamin's essay, these sorts of tensions are precisely evoked; Benjamin argues that "the storyteller" might best be imagined not as a unified type, but as a composite of two opposed, exemplary figures from the prewar past – the homebody, on one hand, and the wanderer, on the other – who contribute to the storytelling process forms of knowledge that are both familiar and strange, domestic and exotic. Benjamin's privileged example of conditions that enable the "interpenetration of these two archaic types" lies in the "trade structure" of the Middle Ages, where the "resident master craftsman" and the "traveling journeymen worked together in the same rooms."⁹ Benjamin might productively have looked somewhat closer to home, as the "interpenetrat[ing]" activity that he describes quite precisely evokes the situation of the insider-outsider:

"When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about," goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions.¹⁰

Insider-outsider intellectuals, whose value consisted in their simultaneous distance from and intimacy with the subjects of their own

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inquiry – in “stay[ing] at home” and in “go[ing] on a trip” – thus enacted a version of Benjamin’s lost art of “storytelling” that was in part simply compensatory, in part highly complex, and in the process performed their work atop one of the most volatile philosophical faultlines within present-day remappings of the field of “modernism.”

Surrealists, ethnographers, and psychoanalysts all trafficked in “experience “passed on from mouth to mouth” – in other words, in the collection and dissemination of testimony about the lived immediacy of those on the peripheries of metropolitan cultural life: hysterics, nonwestern peoples, children, the masses, those who comprised the now-familiar litany of “Modernism’s Other[s].”¹¹ Although Kahlo, Carrington, *et al.* were important agents in this process, what they brought to it was not an uncritical engagement, but rather a methodological skepticism borne out of their awareness that their task was to supply frequently romanticized, purportedly authentic vestiges of a form of experiential immediacy that was, in Benjamin’s terms, newly devalued within the very institutional contexts in which they worked, even as it was ardently sought after as a compensation for the widespread postwar sense of loss.

As such, interwar insider-outsider activity was inevitably fraught with ambiguity – philosophical, political, and otherwise – which partly explains why recent critical arguments about Kahlo, Carrington, *et al.* have vacillated so sharply between polarized claims that their work was either resistant or collaborative, subversive or complicitous. I will show in the following chapters how these contemporary debates, while never fully resolvable, can at the very least be clarified by much closer attention to the shifting disciplinary contexts within which these women’s work was performed. Central to my own analysis will be a consideration, mapped in much fuller detail in chapter 1, of the problem of female intellectual affiliation; this emphasis is meant to enable, most crucially, a tracing out of the “latent self-presentation” (the phrase is Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s¹²) that appears in these women’s works as a critical countercurrent to the more clearly legible, more easily recuperable aspects of their “storytelling” practice.

Historian E. H. Carr, writing in the early sixties, argued that “the function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past,” but instead, to put the past to work in the services of “understanding the present.”¹³ This volume, from its beginnings, has been motivated by the concerns of the present time;

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its execution, moreover, has been framed by two distinct moments in the development of academic feminism. I began working on the earliest version of this project in graduate school during the mid-eighties, at a time when the most influential feminist commentators were largely preoccupied with the manner in which questions of gender and race were elided within the dominant theoretical vocabularies of the time: primarily those of Derrida, Foucault, Freud, and Lacan. "Theory," as Deborah McDowell recently put it, had come to constitute itself in "*a very particular practice*" (emphasis added).¹⁴ The following chapters began, as such, as a historically displaced effort to comprehend the attraction felt by the most influential feminist theorists of that period to particular analytical paradigms within which, in de Lauretis's oft-quoted words, the position of woman is "vacant," and "cannot be claimed by women."¹⁵ The project developed over time into a more sustained and systematic effort to provide a partial critical genealogy of the kinds of debates over the competing values of "experience" and "theory" that have framed academic feminism during the last fifteen years; this is an opposition that has its own lengthy and entangled history – a history that has both enabled and excluded certain kinds of discussion, and that needs to be examined concretely and in its own right.¹⁶ I complete this book, finally, in the wake of at least one influential call for an end to one of the major forms of theoretical engagement that inspired my own retrospective examination of these issues: philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's 1994 critique of de Lauretis's oppositional reengagement of psychoanalysis in the 1994 volume *The Practice of Love*.

Using psychoanalysis as her test case, Grosz asks more broadly in her essay whether persistent feminist and lesbian interest in "extend[ing] one model of power, particularly a masculinist text, so that it covers domains and objects hitherto left out or unthought," might still serve some useful purpose, or whether, to the contrary, such interest might in fact serve primarily in order to "shore up and support a discourse whose time has come . . . to resurrect a theoretical paradigm facing its limits."¹⁷ In her published response to Grosz, de Lauretis argues in detail, to the contrary, that psychoanalysis is still necessary and useful, if only when read in stringent and subtle ways against its own grain. In this important exchange, neither of these two major theorists, both of them operating at the top of their form, succeed in persuading me that these fraught questions have yet been answered. Grosz's terminal declaration of

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the “limits” of the psychoanalytic paradigm, while powerful and provocative, nonetheless fails to account for the long history of intellectual and political innovations made by women who deployed a particular practice or technique whose usefulness was largely perceived as being spent. De Lauretis, on the other hand, provides a strong and witty defense of her own reengagement of psychoanalysis; to Grosz’s broader questions, however, she responds in notably distanced ways, filtering brief but pivotal portions of her argument through quotations from reviews of *The Practice of Love* published by other feminist writers.¹⁸

At the same time, however, both Grosz and de Lauretis offer hints of a way beyond this apparent impasse, some of which I will pursue in the following chapters. Most importantly, while Grosz makes the crucial point that reading psychoanalysis against its own grain often serves to create a specious homogenization of the irreducibly diverse category of “women,” de Lauretis responds that her own work engages in dialogue not only with psychoanalysis, but also with

works by other lesbians and feminists ... be they theorists or poets, novelists or critics – [which] constitute the epistemological terrain of [her] own thinking no less than do the more prestigious writings of Freud, Lacan, or Foucault.¹⁹

De Lauretis’s contemporary version of insider-outsider practice, in other words, affiliates itself in *multiple* ways – not simply with psychoanalysis – a condition, I will go on to argue in the next chapter, that has been crucial to the development of insider-outsider activity throughout this century; to read her work (as Grosz does, in this instance) solely as an oppositional encounter with a dominant “masculinist” paradigm is thus to overlook one of her central procedural complexities. In light of the irresolution of the Grosz/de Lauretis debate, however, I suspect that during the next few years the questions raised within it will themselves loom large in academic feminist discussion. Eventually, perhaps, they will also serve to generate new forms of feminist-theoretical activity, along with a newly configured canon of feminist-intellectual precursors far different from the one I will go on to investigate in the following chapters. In large part, then, I offer the following analyses as an alternative to the opposed options set forth by Grosz and de Lauretis: I will suggest, instead, that a series of local, specific, and historically informed considerations of the ways in which insider-outsider debates emerged during the interwar period – only to mutate,

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eventually, into the forms within which feminist-theoretical analysis is now habitually practiced – might contribute in clear ways to an understanding of where we came from, and also, albeit in much more tentative ways, of where we might go from here.

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1

“Familiar strangeness”: women intellectuals, modernism, and difference

It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder. It was like seeing your sister turn into a 'gator. A familiar strangeness. You keep seeing your sister in the 'gator and the 'gator in your sister, and you'd rather not.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)¹

Repeatedly throughout her career, Zora Neale Hurston used this startling trope – a perfectly ordinary person, metamorphosing quite suddenly into an alligator – in order to call attention to the irreducible complexity of African-American cultural identity. In the passage that appears as my epigraph, Hurston's narrator describes the attitudes of the people of Eatonville, Florida towards their new mayor and his wife, Joe and Janie Starks. With their freshly painted two-story house, complete with his and her spittoons, the Starks display an abundance of “power and property”² previously unknown to any among Joe's largely working-class constituency. In Janie's case, this sense of uncanniness is heightened by the fact that she is a woman; while Janie, like Joe, is separated economically from the broader community, the narrator claims specifically that it is “any *man* who walks in the way of power and property [who] is bound to meet hate,” leaving her position rather more ambiguous than her husband's.³ Janie and Joe – both of them familiar to the community by virtue of being “one of your own color” – are nonetheless estranged from it by virtue of their relative wealth; they embody a disruptive paradox – what Hurston calls a “familiar strangeness.”

Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* during a respite between the composition of two book-length ethnographies: *Mules*

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and Men (1935), comprised mostly of a study of rural African-American oral traditions, and *Tell My Horse* (1938), an extended scholarly treatment of "Voodoo and Life" in mid-thirties Jamaica and Haiti. An African-American woman raised in the postreconstruction South, who was trained in literature and anthropology at Howard, Barnard, and Columbia, and who performed social-scientific research on a variety of western-hemispheric black traditions, Hurston was constantly aware of and attentive to the mixture of "familiar[ity]" and "strangeness" that marked her real and imagined encounters with the subjects of her nonfiction research, as well as those of her fictional writings. Working part-time in a discipline that stressed the importance of the "native point of view," Hurston nonetheless produced a series of books and essays that called into question the possibility of rendering that other perspective in any singular, monolithic way. Despite this, however, Hurston was routinely praised by contemporaneous academic authorities, reductively and with palpable condescension, for the experiential immediacy of her writings – for their "intimate," "true," and "revealing" qualities.⁴ Her complex scholarly and fictional formulations were oftentimes received as representative truths, spoken by an insider.

For entirely different reasons, Hurston went on to achieve in the late seventies another form of representative status – as an intellectual heroine, a foremother, and (in both quotidian and otherworldly senses) a "familiar."⁵ Not without reason, Hurston's concerns – as a scholar working within the boundaries of an academic institution that othered her – remained significant long after her death in 1960, seeming closely akin to those of a diverse range of women intellectuals who came of age during the mid to late seventies, and who turned increasingly during the last two decades towards critical reexamination of dominant theoretical paradigms for the analysis of "difference." Since the time of her scholarly reclamation, critical reassessments of Hurston's ethnographies have revolved around the question of the extent to which Hurston either complied with or managed to resist the institutional imperatives that supported anthropological research performed in the United States during the thirties. In the decade and a half since Hurston's work came back into print, the tone of those reassessments has turned increasingly pessimistic: Hurston's reevaluation began with a chorus of critical praise for her brilliant subversions of conventional ethnographic practice; it then shifted into a second phase of cautious reconsideration; in the third and most recent phase, finally, many of Hurston's