

## *Introduction*

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This volume is timely. Right now, in the Anglo-American West, we need fresh and inclusive feminist thinking that engages with the twenty-first century's most pressing issues, including migration, racism, climate change, the results of austerity, and the pervasive sexual harassment that #MeToo highlights. *The New Feminist Literary Studies* steps up to this challenge, discussing these and other subjects relevant to contemporary western feminism. It contains work intervening in debates that shape the world we inhabit and contains urgent, important feminist scholarship. Each chapter was commissioned especially for this volume with the request both to reflect the field that its author is a specialist in and, crucially, to influence it. Thus, *The New Feminist Literary Studies* presents fresh directions for today's feminism across several disciplines and subdisciplines that intersect with literary studies, including environmental humanities, disability studies, and queer theory. It also fills a surprising gap. There are many guides to feminist literary analysis and companions or readers in feminism, primarily aimed at undergraduates, and there are a variety of edited collections in subfields that take a feminist approach.<sup>1</sup> There is also exciting contemporary feminist writing being produced by activists, often online and outside the academy.<sup>2</sup> However, literary studies lacks a volume of feminist essays concerned with addressing the twenty-first century and that presents established and emerging voices from different specialisms together, in one place, for an audience of academic peers.<sup>3</sup> *The New Feminist Literary Studies* rectifies this and will be of use both to feminists within the fields and subdisciplines represented here and to academics and their students working across literary studies more broadly.

The present moment for feminism is one of both great danger and great opportunity. On the one hand, the rise of populist leaders with a record of sexism and, in the case of Donald Trump, multiple accusations of sexual misconduct, legitimise a regressive political environment which denigrates women, objectifies us, and refuses to take our demands seriously.<sup>4</sup>

Evidence of threats to women's access to services, knowledge, and justice abound. One of Trump's first acts as US president was to sign a memo curtailing assistance to overseas abortion services.<sup>5</sup> Two years on and the banning of abortion in Alabama has cleared the way for several states to follow suit, making a Supreme Court challenge to *Roe v. Wade* likely.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Viktor Orban, the far-right prime minister of Hungary, has abolished gender studies programmes from his nation's universities, and more generally the disturbing rise of the far-right across America and Europe signals a significant threat to women's rights and autonomy.<sup>7</sup> In the UK, as in many other countries, intractable problems remain: recent statistics demonstrate that the gender pay gap is endemic, women still undertake the majority of unpaid reproductive labour within households, and domestic violence against women and girls remains widespread. Since the global financial crisis of 2007–8, the UK and many other European countries have enacted swingeing cuts to publicly funded services in the name of austerity, measures that continue to have a more adverse impact upon women than men, especially women of colour.<sup>8</sup> As these and similar examples demonstrate, feminism still has significant battles to win, and in some worrying cases recently – as with the abrogation of abortion rights in some states of the USA – to re-win. It is difficult not to find these circumstances alarming; it is sobering to recognise that women's hard-won legal rights and positions in society are more fragile than we might have supposed. If it has become a staple in these seemingly darkening times to fear a future descent into conditions akin to those described in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, we should heed Sarah Dillon's warning about contemporary feminist dystopias in her chapter here: 'the imagined worlds we find in them are no longer so far removed from a potential reality for Western women in the twenty-first century as they might have seemed a few decades ago' and, indeed, that 'if one takes an international perspective, such worlds have never in fact been very different from the reality of life for many women across the globe' (p. 172).

At the same time, feminists have achieved so much. Women are at the forefront of social change movements: significant global protests and campaigns have been initiated and led by feminists, such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and the Women's March.<sup>9</sup> Socially, attitudes are changing: people are more aware of the poisonous effects of racism, ableism, trans discrimination, and the inequalities of wealth distribution, and there is, broadly speaking, greater recognition and affirmation of minority voices than there historically has been. In terms of legal rights, there has been no better time to be a woman in the history of the West. The twenty-first

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century has even ushered in legalised abortion in the Catholic country of Ireland, which at the turn of the millennium appeared unachievable. Pop and film stars have aligned themselves with feminism in a manner that – while not unproblematic, as definitively demonstrated by Diane Negra and Hannah Hamad in their chapter here, criticising ‘The New Plutocratic (Post)Feminism’ – has nevertheless helped destigmatise self-identifying as a feminist for a generation of young girls. *The New Feminist Literary Studies*, then, is set amid and engages with this background of risks and achievements and, while this is a book concerned with feminism in relation to literary studies and the theories shaping that field, the political contexts of our times and their impact upon women’s lives and their representation inform every chapter in this volume by necessity, and often explicitly, such as Leigh Gilmore’s chapter on #MeToo.

There are, of course, different forms of feminism – political, theoretical, academic – and different forms of activism. A history of feminism can be told that emphasises its rifts and contortions, its arguments and divisions.<sup>10</sup> Knowledge of our history and of the different shapes feminism can take are crucial, not just to inform us of how far we have come and the mistakes that have been made but also to help us chart a better, more effective and collective feminist future. Certain chapters in *The New Feminist Literary Studies* are in dialogue with previous forms of feminist thinking, such as Marina Vishmidt and Zöe Sutherland’s examination of social reproduction theory today and Candice Merritt’s consideration of how ambivalent accounts of Black motherhood recounted in earlier feminist texts have not been the recipients of revival as frequently as other, more celebratory accounts have been, leading to a paucity of attention to the reality of Black parenting in the present. More frequently, though, the chapters featured in *The New Feminist Literary Studies* are critical of particular iterations of present feminism and call for feminist world-making aimed at radical structural change. Mijke van der Drift and Nat Raha castigate anti-trans and state forms of feminism, for instance, while Helen Hester and Zahra Stardust condemn anti-sex work feminists for the exclusions upon which their position relies. Both chapters argue against forms of feminism that reject the validity of the experience of other women, especially those women who are already stigmatised, in these cases, for being trans or sex workers. Several chapters – my own on feminist manuals and manifestos, Negra and Hamad on plutocratic (post)feminism, and Samantha Walton’s important chapter on feminism and the Anthropocene – sharply criticise neoliberal, capitalist and ‘lean in’ versions of feminism which uphold the status quo.<sup>11</sup>

The aim of *The New Feminist Literary Studies* is not simply to berate, even while criticism of some of feminism's current incarnations is unavoidable, but instead to invigorate contemporary feminist thinking. The feminist commitments that emerge from the chapters in these pages are transaffirmative and intersectional, attentive to how classism, racism, ableism, geographical location, and other forms of discrimination and privilege differentially shape women's lives. The book deliberately opens with a chapter detailing new theorisations of transfeminism by van der Drift and Raha, and includes later chapters by Julie Carr, Jill Richards, and me that analyse trans writing. Literature by Black, Latina, Indian and British South-Asian writers is discussed across different chapters in *The New Feminist Literary Studies* and Jill Richards's chapter on young adult fiction, taking a transnational approach, discusses books from all over the world. The work of leading feminist scholars of colour, such as Sara Ahmed, Patricia Hill Collins, Inderpal Grewal, Audre Lorde, and Jennifer Nash, is drawn upon in the following chapters, showcasing the continued foundational position these thinkers hold within feminism. *The New Feminist Literary Studies* is particularly attentive to how certain women are othered in society, literature, politics, the media, and public discourse.

This book is divided into three sections: 'Frontiers', 'Fields' and 'Forms'. 'Frontiers' contains chapters on issues and phenomena that may be considered, if not new, then newly and sometimes uneasily prominent in the public eye: transfeminism, the sexual violence highlighted by #MeToo, Black motherhood, migration, sex worker rights, and celebrity feminism. In Chapter 1, 'Radical Transfeminism', van der Drift and Raha argue that trans people need to demand more than assimilation to a liberal political project which excludes the most vulnerable from its benefits because they are not compliantly profitable. They propose instead thorough structural social change borne out of an anti-normative trans agency that expresses solidarity with others threatened under the current system, such as undocumented migrants. Their vision of transfeminism is committed to producing new relational modes, future forms of living not determined by logics of extraction and exploitation. Leigh Gilmore's Chapter 2, 'Graphic Witness: Visual and Verbal Testimony in the #MeToo Movement', works with two senses of the graphic: one that names the intimate nature of #MeToo's multiple testimonies to sexual violence, and the other that allows Gilmore to carefully analyse images produced in response to #MeToo by artists and media outlets. In a memorable metaphor that captures #MeToo's illumination of what was already known, she likens it to 'flipping on a light switch in a darkened room' (p. 25). Aware of the risks

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of #MeToo, Gilmore is nevertheless optimistic that its sheer scale, its collective resonance and graphic significance, marks a promising watershed moment in feminist history. She notes that it was a Black woman, Tarana Burke, who started the #MeToo hashtag, and it is to Black motherhood that Candice Merritt turns in Chapter 3 to discuss the need for Black feminism to make space for the ambivalence encountered during the course of childcare. The Black mother has embodied various stereotypes within the public imaginary and within the discourses of Black liberation and feminism, Merritt demonstrates, from the pathologised ‘bad’, neglectful mother and the mother who loses her child to racism, through to the powerful but dangerous matriarch or exemplar of normative domestic heteropatriarchy. These tropes have their histories, as Merritt shows us, and the discourses they serve – even in certain forms of feminist thinking – tend to gloss over or ignore more complex accounts of motherhood that admit to the sacrifices of self it entails. Merritt thus calls for new space to articulate ambivalent experiences of Black motherhood.

Fittingly, for a chapter in a section called ‘Frontiers’, Emily J. Hogg’s Chapter 4, ‘Feminism at the Borders: Migration and Representation’, is attentive to how actual borders and the differences between their enforcement shape subjectivity and the language used to represent it. She turns to the poetries of Warsan Shire and Vahni Capildeo and the life-writing of Valeria Luiselli, a Mexican migrant working as a translator in an immigration court for unaccompanied children who have crossed the border into the USA, in order to identify the counter-narratives to official and media reports of migration. These reveal the trauma of migration caused by sexual violence; searing experiences of racialisation; unrecognised connections between places usually considered on either side of a divide; and the creative potential as well as inevitable difficulties contained in the language used to describe those who migrate. Hogg’s chapter ultimately highlights how feminist writers attest to the injustice of contemporary bordering practices. Another marginalised group, sex workers, is discussed by Hester and Stardust in their Chapter 5, ‘Sex Work in a Postwork Imaginary’, where they trace the trajectory of sex workers’ rights campaigns within the wider context of work abolitionism. They note a lacuna in postwork theorising, which tends not to consider the crucial place of paid and unpaid social reproduction work in its visions of the future. For sex workers to advocate the end of sex work, however, sails dangerously close to the abolitionism of anti-sex work feminists. Hester and Stardust show how important it has been for sex workers to insist on what they do as work in order to launch campaigns and initiatives for better working conditions,

yet also how the kernel of a promising postwork position is identifiable within sex work advocacy. The final chapter in this section is Negra and Hamad's Chapter 6 on 'The New Plutocratic (Post)Feminism'. Training their focus upon so-called celebrity feminists such as Emma Watson and Ivanka Trump, they demonstrate how flimsy these plutocratic feminist principles are in contrast to the commitment these celebrities have to themselves as brands. While most of the chapters in 'Frontiers' are broadly optimistic for feminism's potential to forge new relational and structural forms to help women's lives flourish, wherever they are and whatever they do, Negra and Hamad's analysis shows that in the most publicly recognisable form of feminism, as adopted by celebrity avatars, there is much to deplore.

The chapters in the 'Fields' section of *The New Feminist Literary Studies* are, in many respects, also contemporary frontiers for feminist thinking. Yet these contributions are more specifically interventions into long-constituted or relatively new academic fields and areas of theory: disability studies, eco-theory, queer studies, and Marxist feminism. In her Chapter 7, 'Feminism and Literary Disability Studies', Susannah B. Mintz offers analyses of Ana Castillo's *Peel My Love Like an Onion* (1999), Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) and Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Talents* (1998). She explores not simply how carefully disability is represented in these books to avoid stereotypes, but also how these authors use disability to think through the creation of meaning, to open up creative possibilities for being that are so far underexplored. Such writers, Mintz demonstrates, offer new routes for the development of literary disability studies. Another field fertile for feminist intervention is tackled in Walton's Chapter 8, 'Feminism's Critique of the Anthropocene', the title of which indicates its scepticism of the dominant discourses that account for human impact upon the environment. Walton notes that alternative nomenclature for this period have been proposed – Plantationocene, Androcene and Corporatocene – to capture a more nuanced sense of blame and history than does the Anthropocene. Drawing upon Donna Haraway's recent work on the Chlthulucene, Robin Wall-Kimmerer's promotion of indigenous forms of knowledge, Stacey Alaimo's theory of transcorporeality, and Joanna Zylinksa's ethical critique of eco-theory's masculinist world-building, Walton provides an invigorating encounter with key contemporary ecofeminist thinkers that demonstrates the importance of critical feminist appraisal of the assumptions unpinning the field of eco-theory.

A rather different process of enquiry is provided in Chapter 9 in Sam McBean's personalised account of being on sabbatical in the USA at the

Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department at Stony Brook University in New York. McBean listens to lectures, reads, and ponders the current state of women's studies in the USA. Charting her way through the debates between queer theory and feminism over the genesis and ownership of the study of sexuality, McBean draws upon a range of feminist thinkers, from Robyn Wiegman to Jennifer Nash, from Gayle Rubin to Judith Butler and more, to demonstrate that the queer/feminist divide continues to be a productive 'pairing that does a lot of work' (p. 139) in the contemporary. The final chapter in 'Fields', Marina Vishmidt and Zöe Sutherland's 'Social Reproduction: New Questions for the Gender, Affect, and Substance of Value', intervenes in debates within Marxist feminism. Providing a brief history of the theory of social reproduction and its relation to capitalist accumulation, Vishmidt and Sutherland then dissect recent theorisations to propose that value is a social form and that gendering itself should be put into question, thus indicating a new direction for theorists in this field.

The last section of *The New Feminist Literary Studies* is dedicated to how feminists use different literary forms. Karen Schaller's Chapter 11, 'Feminist Dwellings: Imagining the Domestic in the Twenty-first-century Literary Novel', is an appropriate chapter to follow Vishmidt and Sutherland's theoretical discussion of gendered labour. Schaller analyses the politics of domestic settings in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005), Deborah Levy's *Swimming Home* (2011), and Miranda July's *The First Bad Man* (2015). She gives a nuanced account of how these texts neither sustain the domestic as a site of uncomplicated happiness nor dismiss it or its continued importance within women's lives, highlighting the tensions and contradictions that emerge when the setting of these novels is brought to the fore. Staying with the novel, Sarah Dillon, in her Chapter 12, 'Who Rules the World? Reimagining the Contemporary Feminist Dystopia', uses Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2017) as an exemplar of what she argues the genre sorely requires. For Dillon, feminist dystopias risk simply rehearsing or amplifying existing acts of violence against women. Instead, she argues, developing the work of Darko Suvin, feminist dystopias need to leverage a critical relation with the present. Novels, some of them dystopian, are also discussed in Jill Richards's Chapter 13 on 'Transnational Feminism and the Young Adult Novel'. Richards looks beyond the Anglo-American products in this genre, introducing readers instead to a range of texts from across the globe, including works set or published in Finland, Japan, France, Sweden, Nigeria, Denmark, and Canada. For Richards, these texts offer abundant opportunities to rethink gender and adolescence

as sites which are mediated by local contexts, the globalisation of finance and information flows, and international policymakers. She makes a compelling argument for why the transnational young adult novel is a genre to which feminists should attend more closely.

The final three chapters of *The New Feminist Literary Studies* move away from novels and deal with feminist writing from life, manifestos, and lyric poetry. My Chapter 14, 'Feminist Manuals and Manifestos in the Twenty-first Century' contrasts the two forms of its title. Assessing the commonalities of feminist manuals by Laurie Penny, Roxanne Gay, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Caitlin Moran, and Emer O'Toole, I show how these texts largely rely upon a forgetting of existing feminist knowledge and thus, while they may resonate or entertain, they fail to move feminist thought forward. By contrast, contemporary manifestos such as Sara Ahmed's 'Killjoy Manifesto', the Edinburgh Action for Trans Health manifesto, and the document 'Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation' all provide examples of galvanising demands for new, collective feminist futures. Feminist manuals frequently ground themselves in autobiographical disclosures. Kaye Mitchell's chapter specifically addresses two forms of feminist autobiography: the recent memoirs of feminists Andrea Dworkin and Lynne Segal, who are looking back at their activism and the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and deliberately innovative contemporary autobiographical writing by Chris Kraus and Kate Zambreno. Mitchell's comparison ultimately sides with Segal's collective memorialising, suspicious of the lonely, angry individualism of Dworkin and cautious of the seeming self-absorption and appropriation of other women's states on display in Zambreno and Kraus, despite the exuberance and risks of their writing. The last chapter in the collection, Julie Carr's 'Feminist Poetries of the Open Wound', examines accounts of trauma and damaging gendered experiences in lyrical work by Serena Chopra, Khadijah Queen, Aditi Machado, Lisa Robertson, and Nat Raha, the latter also a contributor to this volume. Carr uses a Kristevan and Butlerian lens through which to frame her close readings of these poets' work. The analysis is attentive not only to language's ability to express trauma but also to provide creative avenues through it.

Commissioning for *The New Feminist Literary Studies* sometimes took me pleurably outside of my own areas of expertise to read up on and contact leading and emerging feminist scholars working in the fields I had identified as absolutely necessary to include here. I initially approached individual feminists but was both surprised and gratified when four of my authors elected to co-author their chapters with others, a sign, I think, of

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heartening co-operation among feminist thinkers in the contemporary academy. Feminist commissioning is full of challenges, however. Women in academia routinely suffer from a range of structural inequalities and often bear the brunt of the workload burden, frequently having to take on far more of the affective labour of departmental life than their male peers.<sup>12</sup> Black and ethnic minority women, and trans and disabled women in the academy pay an even higher price for their place at the table. Mental health problems, overwork, stress, and exhaustion are common to women in academia, and not only because the workplace is white, cis, ableist, difficult to navigate for working-class women, and lacking in gender equality at senior levels. There are numerous structural problems within universities that disadvantage women, too many to list here. It is also the case that the under-representation of Black, ethnic minority, disabled, and trans women in the academy means that they receive more invitations to contribute to volumes such as these, to speak up as representatives for the scholarship they do, which is also sometimes scholarship about who they are. It is hard work for these academics, and so I am especially grateful to Mijke van der Drift, Hannah Hamad, Candice Merritt, and Nat Raha for writing for this volume. Many people have been involved in this book through its various stages, and I want to thank them all. May we all witness a better feminist future.

**Notes**

1. For examples of the former, see R. Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); E. Rooney (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For feminist subdisciplines, see examples such as K. Q. Hall (ed.), *Feminist Disability Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Bloomington University Press, 2011) and C. J. Adams and L. Gruen, *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
2. For example, see *GUTS* magazine, available at: [gutsmagazine.ca](http://gutsmagazine.ca).
3. There are edited collections on different areas of cultural production. See C. Dale and R. Overell (eds.), *Orientating Feminism: Media, Activism, and Cultural Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
4. M. Keneally, 'List of Trump's Accusers and their Allegations of Sexual Misconduct', *ABC News* (25 June 2019).
5. T. McCarthy, 'A Whirlwind Week: Trump's First 14 Official Presidential Actions', *The Guardian* (27 January 2017).
6. K. Reily, 'Alabama's Abortion Ban is Designed to Challenge *Roe v. Wade* at the Supreme Court. Here's What Happens Next', *Time* (15 May 2019), available at: [Time.com](http://Time.com).

7. M. Oppenheim, 'Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban Bans Gender Studies Programmes', *Independent* (24 October 2018).
8. 'Gender Pay: Fewer Than Half UK Firms Narrow Gap', *BBC News* (5 April 2019); E. Akwugo and L. Bassell, 'Minority Women, Austerity and Activism', *Race and Class*, 57:2 (2015), 86–95.
9. Black Lives Matter was founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. The #MeToo hashtag was first used by Tarana Burke, as Leigh Gilmore discusses in Chapter 2. All are women of colour.
10. For thorough accounts of rifts, difficulties and disagreements in feminism, see A. Phipps, *The Politics of the Body: Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014) and C. Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).
11. Editorial note: I have chosen to use 'Black' in my chapter and this introduction to underscore that to be Black is not the same as to be white in the West: it is not a neutral racial designation and can be capitalised to recognise this and its political importance. However, I have retained in individual chapters whatever the author has chosen.
12. For a statistic-rich study with international examples, see T. Vettese, 'Sexism in the Academy: Women's Narrowing Path to Tenure', *n+1*, 35 (Spring 2019), [nplusonemag.com](http://nplusonemag.com). Women are frequently asked to be departmental diversity representatives (usually assigned to BAME and/or LGBTQ+ women) or made responsible for student welfare. The extensive paperwork for UK's Athena Swan programme, an award recognising work towards gender equality in HE, is nearly always completed by a team of women. See also S. Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity Work in Institutional Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).