

# FEMINIST ENGAGEMENTS

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# FEMINIST ENGAGEMENTS

FORAYS INTO AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Shelley Fisher Fishkin

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FEMINIST ENGAGEMENTS

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of four feminists  
whose writing inspired me,  
whose friendship warmed me,  
whose encouragement spurred me on,  
and whose generosity of spirit humbles me still.  
In the order in which they came into my life:*

*Lillian Robinson (1941–2006)*

*Tillie Olsen (1912–2007)*

*Elaine Hedges (1927–97)*

*Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa (1942–2004)*

*A portion of the royalties from this book will be donated to the  
Lillian Robinson Scholars Program  
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# INTRODUCTION

**FEMINIST:** (adj.) embracing the assumption that women have the same human capacities as men<sup>1</sup>

**ENGAGEMENT:** (n.) a piece of business requiring attention; agreement to be in a specific place at a specific time for a specified purpose; a job or period of employment especially as a performer; emotional involvement; a tie of duty or gratitude; commitment; betrothal; the action of crossing swords; a battle, conflict, or encounter between hostile forces; the stage in labor/delivery in which a baby's head begins to descend<sup>2</sup>

## I. FEMINIST ENGAGEMENTS

I'M SADDENED WHEN A STUDENT PREFACES A COMMENT WITH, "I'M NOT A feminist but . . ." I'm dismayed when it becomes clear that for her, "feminist" is the "F-word"—a term to be shunned, despite the fact that she may hold attitudes that feminists have advocated for over a century. For me, the word brings to mind feats of daring self-respect and acts of courage, endurance and imagination; it conjures up a cast of remarkable extraordinary and ordinary women and men, bravely patient and bravely impatient; it suggests an abiding sense of social justice and passion for changing the world.

As Estelle Freedman observes in *The Essential Feminist Reader*, the word "feminism" was not used until the late nineteenth century, but the ideas it embodies have provoked debate for over half a millennium.<sup>3</sup> Her clear and simple definition of the term—"the belief that women have the same human capacities as men"<sup>4</sup>—makes it sound so unobjectionable that it is hard to imagine why the word has been so provocative, vilified, and fraught for much of its history.<sup>5</sup> As it turns out, the term is far from unobjectionable due to the pervasiveness of a constellation of attitudes—sometimes referred to as androcentrism or patriarchy or misogyny or male chauvinism—that have (a) denied that women have the same human capacities as men, (b) questioned whether they deserve the same social, political, and economic rights that men enjoy, and (c) ignored or erased women's experiences, voices, and contributions to society and the arts from mainstream narratives of human history and creative achievements. As British writer Rebecca West said in 1913, "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute."<sup>6</sup>

The perspectives inherent in what Charlotte Perkins Gilman referred to as "our androcentric world" were, for much of world history, as ubiquitous (and therefore viewed as unworthy of comment) as air. How do we learn to see air?

How do we come to understand that the conditions we face as individuals may be intimately linked to larger patterns in place for thousands of years, patterns so familiar and common as to seem unworthy of notice? How can we understand the world in which our mothers and grandmothers moved as vastly different from our own, yet umbilically linked to our own? Why should we try? Exploring these issues can give us a deeper understanding of our past and can help us craft a more socially just future.

This book is not an effort to define what feminism is and is not. Rather, it is a deeply personal book with humbler aspirations: it is the record of one American literary scholar's feminist engagements during the last decade of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first.

The most common meaning of "engagement" involves an agreement to marry. But an "engagement" is also an agreement to show up at a time or place for a particular purpose. It is a promise implying an obligation of action, a gig for a performer, an emotional commitment, a conflict involving armed camps. It is also a part of the process by which a woman gives birth to new life.

The feminist engagements in this book embrace all of these meanings. A promise to marry? Well, not exactly—but from the late 1980s, as my awareness of feminism deepened, I vowed to stick with the challenges it posed for the rest of my life. That commitment required me to "show up"—in person or in print, on various occasions, with a particular purpose in mind. Sometimes it obligated me to act. Sometimes it required me to perform. Sometimes it pitted me against hostile forces. What those engagements always did, unfailingly, however, was activate and energize my work as a scholar.

The essays in this volume are informed by a capacious interpretation of feminism. At its most rudimentary level, feminism is an affirmative answer to the question posed in the title of a little book of suffrage rhymes that Alice Duer Miller published in 1915, *Are Women People?*. At its core, feminism involves taking women seriously. Taking women seriously requires listening to their voices and refusing to let them be shouted down, redlined from the cultural conversation, or denied respect as authors and artists or as active thinking and feeling subjects. It requires recognizing and dismantling structures of gender-based discrimination and oppression and challenging the assumptions invoked to justify them. It requires making visible the largely invisible mental maps that constrict the canvases on which women—and men—can paint their lives.

## II. LATECOMER

I was fairly late coming to feminism as a subject of intellectual inquiry because, as my friend the late Lillian Robinson put it, I'd had all the disadvantages of a first-rate Yale education. I was a member of the first class of women to graduate from Yale College—the class of 1971—an experience that I discuss in the essay titled "Changing the Story" in this volume. Being in the first group of women in an institution that had barred us for the first 268 years of its existence was an



education in itself. But while we may have been living our feminism, we were not studying it; few women made it onto our syllabi, and even fewer made it onto the faculty. It would take a while for the feminist issues that were percolating furiously at places like San Diego State and Cornell (where the first women's studies programs were created) to have a visible impact at Yale.

The women's liberation movement, as feminism came to be known at the time, appealed to me greatly, but although I'd read about the existence of women's groups of various sorts around the country, I didn't know of any on my campus. At Yale virtually any extracurricular activity earned you a spot in the record books for having integrated a previously all-male enterprise.<sup>7</sup> When I saw a poster advertising tryouts for a Slavic Women's Chorus, inexplicably I showed up, auditioned, and joined. Only years later did I figure out why: to be in a room full of women at Yale in 1969, I had to learn to sing in Bulgarian!

No wonder I found it thrilling to march down Fifth Avenue with ten thousand other women the summer after my junior year, in August 1970, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of women's suffrage. But the battles our feminist foremothers had fought seemed fixed in the distant past, as one by one I broke down barriers and took jobs that had previously been held only by men<sup>8</sup> and as I watched women politicians, athletes, and authors chalk up a steady string of "firsts."<sup>9</sup>

My dissertation and my first book, which grew out of it—a study of writers who moved from journalism to fiction—was about men.<sup>10</sup> I was breaking disciplinary boundaries, melding journalism history and literary history, and challenging prevailing paradigms of both fields in the process. Where are the women? demanded an acquaintance—who would become an early pioneer in women's studies—when she met me socially as I was in the middle of my dissertation. Her question irritated me. It would be years before I uncovered the work of women who might have fit perfectly into that study. (Once I found them, they would be on my syllabi from that point on. But it took a while. Only later—much later—would I realize why they'd been so hard to find.)<sup>11</sup>

In 1985 I moved to Austin, Texas, with my husband and two young sons and took a job teaching part-time at the University of Texas. One day I stumbled upon a feminist bookstore on 6th Street called BookWoman. From then on, I made a point of stopping by BookWoman whenever my errands took me downtown. Turns out I'd missed a lot over the past seven or eight years.

I was not surprised: I had gotten my PhD in December 1977, the same week that my oldest son was born (the dissertation weighed considerably more than he had). His brother arrived five years later. What with learning how to be a parent, teaching part-time, putting major energy into my job (organizing conferences, symposia, and other events at Yale), and turning my dissertation into a book, I hadn't had much time to browse in bookstores.<sup>12</sup>

I was overwhelmed by the many books on the shelves at BookWoman that I wanted to read. The choices I made were eclectic and unsystematic but mysteriously fortuitous. Some invisible hand led me to bring home a paperback edition of *Silences* by Tillie Olsen, as well as three books that republished and recovered





work by writers I'd never encountered before: Elaine Hedges's edition of *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ann Lane's *Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, and Joyce Warren's *Ruth Hall and Other Writings by Fanny Fern*. It also led me to two collections of essays, Gloria Steinem's *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* and Lillian Robinson's *Sex, Class, and Culture*. I raced through each book, barely able to contain my excitement.

Olsen's meditation on all the blank pages in literary history spoke to my condition. How would writing happen when so much time was taken up with the juggling act of teaching and parenting and shopping and cooking and carpooling? I knew I had it relatively easy: I was teaching only part-time, one child was in school and the other in preschool, my husband loved looking after the boys and didn't mind doing dishes, and we were far from destitute. But how had other women not so situated managed to write anything at all? And when they'd actually managed to write—and write brilliantly, as Fern and Gilman had—why hadn't I heard of them? Fern had been the highest-paid journalist in America in the nineteenth century—a feminist satirist writing in the 1850s! And Gilman—how had I missed *her*? Hedges's brilliant deciphering of the ways in which gender was central to Gilman's chilling story "The Yellow Wallpaper" thrilled me. And I found the writings that Lane had collected in the *Gilman Reader* riveting. Both Gilman and Fern had made the same move from journalism to fiction that the men in my dissertation and book had, and I could have included them—but I hadn't known of their existence until now. How could that be?

I felt a pang of loss and longing when I read Gilman's proposal for housing complexes with communal kitchens as a way of making inroads into the interminable hours women spent shopping, chopping, and cooking for their families. I realized that I had been lucky enough to live in just such an environment for the past twelve years, since the job I'd held through graduate school and beyond came with an apartment in one of Yale's residential colleges, as well as substantial dining privileges. Would I have finished my dissertation *or* my book if the college dining hall hadn't simplified our eating arrangements, even after our children were born?

Steinem's satire, "If Men Could Menstruate" in *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* filled me with an unfamiliar blend of pleasure and anger—pleasure at its playful audacity, and anger at the truths it dramatized.

But it was Robinson's witty, bold, and erudite *Sex, Class, and Culture* that kept me up reading late into the night. My occasional perusal, on my own, of an iconic work of feminist literary criticism of the early 1970s like Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* not long after it came out (a book I found somewhat interesting, somewhat dull, and ultimately rather limited) had left me doubting whether feminist criticism was something I would ever engage in myself. But here was Robinson asserting that despite the fact that feminists tended to speak of Millet's book as "definitive and exhaustive," it might best be viewed as simply one possible approach among many.<sup>13</sup> "Much of what we have to do," Robinson wrote, "involves the rethinking of familiar material," in ways that go beyond simply





repeating the revelation of sexism.<sup>14</sup> I found Robinson's "forays into critical territory where social reality and cultural production share a common unguarded border" revelatory.<sup>15</sup> Her essay "Who's Afraid of *A Room of One's Own*" prompted me to read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* as well as Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (the first two pieces of feminist criticism read by Robinson herself). Woolf and Ellman helped inspire Robinson to move "back and forth between literary and historical events, between fiction, criticism, social theory, and personal experience" in these essays, and the result was much more lively and stimulating than any literary criticism I had ever read.<sup>16</sup> I had gone through graduate school at a time when "deconstruction" was in vogue in literature classes, a form of criticism that I found rather arid; it would be years before it would be displaced by the "new historicism," an approach that would be more to my taste. And while the field of American Studies had long explored the historical contexts of literature, at the time I was in graduate school, the field was still relatively untouched as yet by either feminism or women's studies, which was still in its infancy in the academy. This was particularly the case at Yale: cultural contexts mattered, in other words, but the gendered dimensions of those contexts generally did not.<sup>17</sup> Robinson reminded me of the importance of recognizing "those elements of a critical response that are shaped by our own participation in history" and of asking myself how my own life—as a woman at this juncture in time—shaped how I read texts of the past.<sup>18</sup> I found Robinson's goal as a feminist critic of literature and art ambitious and appealing: "What we are aiming at is not just a better way to read poetry or look at pictures, but a way to understand our own experience as historical beings."<sup>19</sup>

In 1986, Kate Adams, a student in my first graduate seminar, stayed after class one day, pointed to the syllabus, and quietly asked the same question I'd been asked years earlier but had resisted—"Where are the women?" This time I took it as a welcome challenge and began to look for them in earnest—and began to ask why they were missing not only from my syllabus but also from literary anthologies and from social and cultural histories. Omnivorously, I began to seek out and devour all the feminist criticism I could find, playing catch-up with a vengeance. The titles themselves were intoxicating, holding out the promise of new ways of reading, thinking, and seeing: *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction, Writing and Sexual Difference*; *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class, And Race In Literature And Culture*; *How To Suppress Women's Writing: The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*; *Woman's Fiction: A Guide To Novels By And About Women In America, 1820–1870*; *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*; *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers: 1630–1860*; *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*; *The Poetics of Gender*; *Provisions: A Reader from 19th-Century American Women*; *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*; *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*; *Women Writing in America: Voices in Collage*; *The American Narcissus: Individualism And Women In Nineteenth Century American Fiction*;



*Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives On Black Women Writers; The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory; This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women Of Color; Literary Women; In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens; The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination; Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*—all of which had come out during those years when my juggling act had made browsing in the library or bookstore a rare indulgence.

This heady brew of books made me think long and hard about the limited roles often assigned to women in books written by men, as well as the different—but often equally depressing—roles women often played in books by women themselves (like Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* or Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*). It made me think about all the books by women that weren't there—that had never been written or had been lost and forgotten—and the ways in which, for centuries, when they weren't ignoring this work, male critics had been misreading, marginalizing, or denigrating it . . . and I chose what seemed to me at the time a logical course of action: I decided to write a novel. Or, to be precise, to rewrite a novel. A novel that would answer the question, what would the story of the woman whose murder inspired Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* look like if it had been written by one of the many young women writers whom Dreiser both mentored and seduced?

Yes, it was an insane project. But I didn't know that at the time. I methodically collected as much information as I possibly could about a young woman named Grace Brown—the real-life model for Dreiser's Roberta Alden. I tracked down the transcript of the murder trial of Chester Gillette (Clyde Griffiths in the novel). I read all I could find about women factory workers in the early twentieth century. I read as many books as I could by and about aspiring young women writers in New York in the 1910s and 1920s. I even impersonated a former version of myself—the straight-shooting, respected Dreiser scholar I'd been when I wrote my dissertation and first book—during a visit to the Dreiser papers in the Special Collections at the University of Pennsylvania. This time (I was determined not to let them figure this out), I was undercover: I was really there digging up material about Dreiser's relationships with women in real life—women he seduced, women he mentored, women he plagiarized from—that I could use in my feminist novel.

I planned to open the novel with a critical preface by a myopic, misogynist male critic I'd invented, whose total misreading of the two texts that followed would be apparent to the reader by the end (he may have been my fictional creation, but over the next couple of years I was startled to meet several people who could have been real-life models for him). Next came a text that the critic presented as Grace Brown's journal, a previously unknown source that was clearly crucial to Dreiser as he crafted his book. Finally, I planned to include a document that the critic framing the volume deemed trivial, but had tacked on as an afterthought in case anyone was interested in the biographical details about Dreiser it revealed: a journal kept by a young woman who spent time with

Dreiser during the period when he was writing his novel. By the end of the book, it would be clear to the *reader*, however, that what the critic presented as “Grace Brown’s journal” was actually a *novel about Grace Brown* written by the woman writer who had written the journal appended as the final text in my book, a novel that Dreiser had plagiarized from when he wrote his own novel about Grace Brown, *An American Tragedy*.

Yes, it was complicated and cumbersome and ridiculously hard to do (Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* was the only thing remotely like it I could think of), but I forged ahead: it was too much fun to abandon. A bumbling male-chauvinist critic who knew a lot less than he thought he did, a shamelessly exploitative great writer as ready to steal a young woman’s ideas as he was ready to steal her virtue, a forgotten woman novelist whose fiction was misread as a real social document—my book had it all! The only problem was, I wasn’t a novelist. But I didn’t know that yet. All I knew was that trying to write this novel allowed me to imaginatively engage in what Adrienne Rich called “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.”<sup>20</sup>

My husband was offered the chance to be a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford in 1987 to 1988, and since I wanted to work on my novel and I figured I could do it anywhere, that was fine. However, since I was still ostensibly a teacher and scholar, albeit with a very part-time job, I figured it would be good to have a cover story. So I applied for an American Council of Learned Societies grant to work on a project that must have struck the committee that awarded me the grant as a natural extension of my first book, which had come out two years earlier and had won a prize: my project was titled “Blurring the Line: Journalism and Fiction in America.” It was a topic that interested me greatly, and I did, in fact, plan to explore it—after I spent a few months seeing just how far I could blur the line between criticism and fiction myself.<sup>21</sup> The only thing I knew about Stanford was that the back of *Sex, Class, and Culture* listed Robinson as an Affiliated Scholar at the “Stanford University Center for Research on Women,” which had recently been renamed the “Institute for Research on Women and Gender.” That was good enough for me. I applied to be a Visiting Scholar at the Institute and was accepted.

My desk groaned with books I’d sent from Texas, books I’d gotten during the previous summer at a feminist bookstore in Bridgeport, Connecticut, called *Bloodroot*, and books I found foraging in the stacks of Green Library at Stanford. They ranged from recently published ones like Irena Klepfisz and Melanie Kay-Kantrowitz’s *The Tribe of Dina* and Susannah Heschel’s *On Being a Jewish Feminist* to bound volumes of turn-of-the-century periodicals like *The Colored American*, which I mined for work by Pauline Hopkins, and copies of Gilman’s *Forerunner*. I participated in three feminist discussion groups. In a reading group run by Feminist Studies, we read and discussed books that ranged from Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* to Claudia Koonz’s *Mothers in the Fatherland*. In the Feminist Research Group at the Center for Advanced Study, I heard economist Barbara

Reskin describe her research on how the average salary in any given field drops as soon as women hold the majority of jobs in that field. In the Scholars' Seminars at the Institute, I heard philosopher Julien Murphy transform the seemingly unpromising subject of brain-dead cadavers into a *tour de force* examination of women's autonomy, reproductive freedom, and constructions of the female body. I heard Estelle Freedman give a sneak preview of her big book on sexuality that was about to come out. I heard Margaret Cruikshank speak on contemporary lesbian writing, Karen Offen on women in nineteenth-century France, Gloria Hull on black feminist criticism, and Edie Gelles on Abigail Adams. I spoke with Yoko Kawashima about feminism in Japan, and with Karen Skold about childcare policy in Silicon Valley. I gave a talk myself at the Institute on feminist humor, much of which made it into the essay on feminist humor in Part III of this book. Among other things, it included a discussion of Peg Bracken's *The I Hate to Cook Book*, a sly anticookbook cookbook designed to help women prepare meals that *looked and tasted* as if they'd spent the day in the kitchen, while in fact, they'd had the day to themselves. Since the proof of the pudding is in the tasting, everyone at my talk got to taste the result of Bracken's recipe for a dessert that tastes like a rich chocolate mousse but takes about five minutes to make.<sup>22</sup>

I bonded quickly with Carla Peterson, who was spending the year at the Center for Advanced Study, since both of us, in effect, were reinventing ourselves as scholars that year: my first book had been on writing by men, and I was now immersed in writing by women; Carla's first book had been on French literature, and now she was immersed in writing by African Americans, a body of work that had interested me for some time, as well. One day Carla and I took off for San Francisco, our destination a feminist bookstore called Old Wives' Tales—a store that, sadly, no longer exists. There was a stack of copies of a book that had just come out, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldúa, a writer familiar to me from the earlier book she had coedited, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. I started reading *Borderlands* in the bookstore, kept reading it on the way back to Palo Alto, and didn't put it down until I was finished—whereupon I started it from the beginning again. I decided to write about it that spring. The first essay in this volume, "The Borderlands of Culture," was the result.

### III. MENTORS

The novel was progressing (albeit slowly), and as a total-immersion exposure to feminism, my time at Stanford was turning out to be all I'd hoped it to be and more. But by December I still hadn't met Lillian Robinson. Turns out she did not show up at the Institute very often. But in December, at the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention in San Francisco, I spotted her name tag. We struck up a conversation in a noisy corridor and exchanged contact information. When the new year began, I started heading into San Francisco every week or two to chat with Lillian in her apartment there. I left each visit with a reading

list (I write about one such conversation in the headnote to “Theresa Malkiel’s *Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker*”). We continued the conversation, in person, on the telephone, and later, on e-mail for nearly two decades. Lillian was always willing to be a sounding board for my ideas and a first reader of whatever I was about to publish. She was also a demanding critic, calling out the “metaphor police” early and often. She shared Mark Twain’s view that “the difference between the almost-right word & the right word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning,” and loved spirited debates about the meaning of words—in English, French, Spanish, Italian, and Yiddish. Her willingness to put me in touch with her vast circle of friends immeasurably enriched the list of contributors to essay collections I have edited. In her hospital room, days before her death in 2006, we brainstormed on our final project together: the creation of a program in her name for visiting feminist scholars at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University in Montreal, where she had been principal for several years before her death.<sup>23</sup>

At that same MLA convention in San Francisco in 1987, I was several pages into delivering my paper on creative experimentation in American nonfiction narrative by W. E. B. Du Bois, James Agee, and Tillie Olsen (the first paper I ever presented at an MLA conference)—when a silver-haired woman with beautiful high cheekbones and piercing blue eyes entered the back of room. To my dismay, I quickly realized that the subject of my paper had just taken her seat in the audience. I nervously soldiered on, arguing that the blank spaces Olsen had left in *Silences* played a disruptive and defamiliarizing role not unlike that played by the unidentified bars of music with which Du Bois began each chapter of *Souls of Black Folk*, or the line of pure punctuation that Agee inserted into *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Would Olsen, famous for being blunt, denounce me in public for being all wrong about her? I was relieved when, at the session’s end, she came to the front of the room and gave me a hug: “You got it right!” she exclaimed. Finally, someone had recognized that she had been doing just what Du Bois and Agee had been doing, and for similar reasons. Had I known that both Du Bois and Agee had been extremely important to her? I’d suspected that, but, no, I hadn’t known. When she learned that I was spending the year in the Bay Area, she made me promise to visit her in San Francisco. I began to meet regularly with Tillie that spring at her apartment in San Francisco or at her home in Santa Cruz. “Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic” came out of those visits and the wide-ranging conversations we had about the sorry state of the world and what it would take to fix it, about juggling the challenge of being a mother and a scholar, about her work and its impact on others.

During one of our earliest conversations, Lillian had put me in touch with Elaine Hedges, who was organizing a session commemorating the tenth anniversary of *Silences* at the next MLA. Elaine, like Lillian, was a pioneering, meticulous feminist scholar who had done groundbreaking work in women’s studies and who was devoted to transforming the broader curriculum. I’m sure it was clear to Elaine how new I was to topics she had spent years thinking about, but she didn’t

hold that against me. What I lacked in knowledge, I made up for with enthusiasm. We decided to edit a book together—*Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*, in which “Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic” first appeared. We also decided to launch the first author society devoted to the work of an American feminist, The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Society (which is still going strong after eighteen years, organizing annual sessions at the American Literature Association conference and sponsoring quadrennial international conferences).<sup>24</sup> Elaine was an incredibly smart, gracious, and patient mentor and tutor, and the conversations we had during the years we collaborated on these projects helped make up for all conversations about feminism that hadn’t happened in graduate school.<sup>25</sup>

Back in Austin in 1989 after my year at Stanford, I sent a draft of my essay “The Borderlands of Culture” to Gloria Anzaldúa. I was thrilled that she liked the essay as much as she did, and that she suggested that we meet when she was next in Austin. I was certain that the ideas that she had limned in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* had profound implications for the way we thought about a range of issues involving ethnic and racial identity as well as gender and sexual orientation. I was awed by the ways in which Anzaldúa had somehow managed to turn the marginalization she felt—as a Chicana lesbian in a predominantly masculinist and heterosexist Chicano culture, as well as in a masculinist, heterosexist, ethnocentric, and monolingual broader U.S. culture—from a source of frustration and anger into a source of creativity and power. During the long, leisurely lunch we had that winter at Seis Salsas, a restaurant on South Congress, we shared thoughts about our current and future projects and hatched plans to embark on several ventures together, ventures that would make Gloria’s work better known in venues where it had not received much attention before.<sup>26</sup> Over the next few years, joint projects proliferated—sessions we crafted at conferences of the American Studies Association and the MLA, a minicourse we organized and taught together at the Centro de Investigaciones Sobre los Estados Unidos de América at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, etc.<sup>27</sup> I had little sense, when I first read it, that *Borderlands/La Frontera* would shape my research agenda for the next two decades. But I recognize in retrospect how much it helped me understand structures of knowledge that reified certain paradigms and certain voices while ignoring others—and how much it helped give me the courage to pursue the transgressive lines of inquiry that I have pursued ever since.

Between December 1987 and December 1989, I had met the four feminists to whom this book is dedicated. By the fall of 2007, all of them would be gone. From the time we met, Lillian, Tillie, Elaine, and Gloria each gave me encouragement, advice, respect, and friendship that I had no right to expect. Their work was a beacon of inspiration that helped light the way to my own modest contributions to the field, and that continues to inspire others. My affection for them has made the process of gathering these essays together and recalling the circumstances under which they were written both bittersweet and elegiac.



#### IV. STRUCTURE

Part I of this book, titled “Changing the Story,” includes five essays that explore, in a range of contexts, ways of revising cultural narratives that marginalize women writers or women, or relegate them to relatively limited roles. “The Borderlands of Culture” argues that when the history of literary journalism in the twentieth century is properly understood, work by writers like Olsen and Anzaldúa deserves to figure prominently. “Making a Change” examines the strategies one woman writer used to break out of the starkly limited roles assigned to women in journalism and fiction. “Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic” explores the ways in which Olsen’s *Silences* helped transform how and what readers read and how and what writers wrote in the late twentieth century. “Changing the Story” meditates on how thinking about the place of women in organized Judaism and of Jews in American culture led me to understand the necessity of revising both family rituals and broader cultural narratives about American life. And “Essentialism and Its Discontents” looks at the ways in which dominant paradigms for thinking about race in novels by African American women writers managed to redline important writers whose work didn’t fit the mold. Each of these essays posits a tentative answer to this question: how does the cultural conversation change when it is made to include women, women writers, and others who were previously left out?

Part II, titled “Men Reading and Writing Women/Women Reading and Writing Men,” features four essays that endeavor to extricate us from some of the insufficiently nuanced paradigms that informed the attention early feminist literary critics paid to the relationship between male and female authors both on and off the page. I don’t see the need to reject completely early critics’ complaints about the narrow array of roles into which women were often cast in fiction by Twain, or early critics’ largely unqualified praise for women characters created by Dreiser. But “Dreiser and the Discourse of Gender” and “Mark Twain and Women” demonstrate that two canonical, male writers had more interesting relationships with women in their lives and in their books than previously recognized. These essays also show that the impact women had on their work as writers and on the texts they produced turns out to be substantial—as is the influence that these men had on aspiring women writers. While the first two essays in this section offer a second look at gender issues in writing by men, the second two essays focus on writing by women. While early critics paid close attention to charting female traditions and genealogies in literature by women, they often neglected the ways in which work by women writers may have been in conversation with writing by men. “An Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston” and “The Bondwoman’s *Escape*” address this gap by exploring the roles that male precursors may have played in shaping work by both Maxine Hong Kingston and Hannah Crafts, and also examines Kingston’s decision to write a novel from the point of view of a male character.



Part III, “Humor and *Chutzpah*,” looks at some of the uses to which humor has been put by feminist writers and also looks at some feminist literary experiments marked by audacity and courage. “Feminist Humor and Charlotte Perkins Gilman” connects strategies Gilman uses to break through familiar assumptions about gender with strategies used by earlier figures like Fanny Fern and later ones like Gloria Steinem. Meanwhile, “Theresa Malkiel’s *Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker*” and “Erica Jong” look at the *chutzpahdik* temerity of two twentieth-century Jewish-American women writers. “Theresa Malkiel” probes the rationale behind this writer’s daring decision to write a novel that so effectively posed as the real-life journal of an anti-Semite that critics mistook it for a social document for nearly a century. And “Erica Jong” explores the double standard that led a woman writer to be excoriated when she did things for which a Jewish-American male contemporary was celebrated.

All of the essays in this book are historically grounded interventions into American literary history and culture that look at works of literature as “conditioned by historical forces, produced in specific material circumstances, serving certain interests and ignoring, threatening or repressing others.”<sup>28</sup> They are rooted in the belief that American literature, history, and social relations inform each other in key ways—a belief that is central to American Studies, my intellectual home. And they are informed by the assumption that issues of gender are central to all of these enterprises, that they matter, and that they merit our attention.

## V. THE LABYRINTH OF LINES

As I brought together these broad-ranging pieces, I was reminded of a favorite quote from the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges: “A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.”<sup>29</sup> The essays on American literature and culture in *Feminist Engagements* focus on genres including poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and drama, and integrate literary criticism, biography, social history, popular culture, and personal narrative. Most (but not all of them) were published between 1990 and 2004 in books focused on such disparate topics as twentieth-century literary journalism, Jewish-American identity, or the first novel by an African American; in journals in the field of American Studies or American literature; or in collections reevaluating the work of individual nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors. But taken together, they trace the face of one feminist scholar as the twentieth century ended and the twenty-first century began.

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