

The Transatlantic Women's Movement

Literary and Cultural Perspectives

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In 1968, Tammy Wynette co-authored and recorded “Stand by Your Man,” which forty-plus years later would be added to the Library of Congress National Recording Registry, an annual selection of recordings considered “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”¹ She appeared on the *Johnny Cash Show* (February 11, 1970) dressed in a sequined red cowboy shirt, her platinum blonde hair sprayed into a helmet framing her white-powdered face. Introducing her, Cash towers above her, while Wynette shyly compliments him on his recent awards. His famous deep voice goes soft and protective as he assures her that she deserves an award herself for the hit that remains controversial for its promotion of women’s subservience.² The Library of Congress calls it “an ode to the weakness of men, the strength of their women, love, loyalty and support,” but the description also notes that in the emerging Women’s Movement, “Stand by Your Man” created “dissent.”³ While Wynette’s woman stands by her man and forgives him everything, because “after all, he’s just a man,” many other American

1 “The National Recording Registry 2010,” *The National Preservation Board of the Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/nrpb/registry/nrpb-2010-reg.html>.

2 “Stand by Your Man.”

3 “The National Recording Registry 2010,” *The National Preservation Board of the Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/nrpb/registry/nrpb-2010-reg.html>.

women wanted to leave him behind and to change their own roles, visions and hopes.

When a rising number of women in North America and Europe joined the labor force in the 1950s and early 1960s, they could look forward to earning approximately 63% of what their husbands, boyfriends, brothers or fathers made.⁴ Still-at-home suburban wives and mothers felt a strange and inexplicable discontent, which Betty Friedan first diagnosed in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the exposé of (white) middle-class feminine lives that helped to ignite the Women's Liberation Movement in the US. Friedan argued that even white and middle-class educated women had to resort to marriage and children to locate an identity and a life, and she encouraged her large readership to "find themselves," to seek their own private and public paths to freedom and success rather than being defined exclusively by patriarchal norms and traditions. At the same time, grassroots inventions such as local women's houses, women's fairs, women's communes, and consciousness-raising groups barring male participation helped women to become aware of their limited opportunities. Feminists enacted a series of countermoves against gender oppression, including mass demonstrations, protests at beauty pageants, the symbolic burning of bras in the streets, and revisions of academic canons. The birth control pill, approved for contraceptive use in 1960, helped young women imagine identities not exclusively defined by wife- and motherhood and became a contributing factor to both the feminist movement and the sexual revolution of the 1960s. The drastic changes in women's roles and perspectives surfaced in literary and cultural texts on both sides of the Atlantic, where feminist writers and activists protested existing gender arrangements.

American writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton explored the problem that had no name, the frustrated women's lives in postwar America, though feminists of color would develop their own branch of "womanism."⁵ Brooks, Rich, and Sexton scrutinized in their prose and poetry a masked femininity, since the gender relations in the 1950s and early 1960s did not allow for the open resistance towards patriarchal power that exploded later, with feminist bestsellers such as *Our Bod-*

4 Source: U.S. Women's Bureau and the National Committee on Pay Equity. "Women's Earnings as a Percentage of Men's, 1951–2010," *Infoplease.com*, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0193820.html#ixzz1srL17GLP>.

5 Walker coins and defines the term in *Our Mothers' Gardens*.

ies, Ourselves (1971) by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and *Fear of Flying* (1973) by Erica Jong. Both feminist manifestos of sorts, they helped export the celebration of women's bodies and freedom to Europe. Across the Atlantic, the Women's Liberation Movement and the cultural works it inspired took on both similar and different forms. In Scandinavia, Alice Walker's emphasis on race and class found a special audience, as Nordic feminists combined their awareness of white middle-class women's oppression with an interest in African American women, defined as the ultimate victims of US patriarchal structures. In France, psychoanalytically trained feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous theorized a new language intended to articulate feminine bodies and experiences outside of "phallogocentric" linguistic orders. The cross-fertilization of American and European feminist ideologies made a lasting imprint on women's lives and futures on both sides of the Atlantic.

HOUSEWIVES AND TIGERS

In 1951 Adrienne Rich published "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," which in the 1960s became a favorite among the American and European feminist daughters who had witnessed first-hand their mothers' or aunts' frustrations. Rich's feminist classic takes up as little space as the title figure herself, who sits modestly on her sofa with her embroidery. Within this narrow textual and domestic space, Aunt Jennifer feels the burden of gender and role requirements as her nervous fingers try to pull the thread: "the massive weight of Uncle's wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand."⁶ Defined by her familial role and her husband's patriarchal inscription, she imagines alternative scenarios, represented by the needlework tigers of Rich's title: "Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen / Bright topaz denizens of a world of green." These formidable predators embody the emotions Aunt Jennifer herself can express only through art: anger, strength, daring, freedom. Rich herself admitted to wearing "asbestos gloves" when handling explosive artistic material she "couldn't pick up barehanded." She veiled her dissatisfaction behind the third-person narration and generational displacement of her "Aunt Jennifer" poem, in which

6 Rich, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers."

the aunt struggles with the needle, her “fingers fluttering through the wool.” Despite the resistance she imagines with fearless tigers, Jennifer cannot yet envision a female or feminist agent of revolt. The tigers “pace in sleek chivalric certainty” and thus subscribe to patriarchal traditions of chivalry. Though they embody Jennifer’s embryonic feminism, the masculine tigers frame her efforts by usurping both the first and the last lines of Rich’s poem. They will go on prancing after Jennifer’s demise: “When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.” As Thomas B. Byars argues, the tigers represent the individual artist’s effort to overcome women’s suppression, but they participate in masculine myths of honor and chivalry and also serve as colonialist icons. The ivory needle enabling them may cause Aunt Jennifer trouble, but the ivory implicates her with imperialism and capitalism.⁷ In Rich’s controlling symbols—the wedding band and the tapestry tigers—the personal meets the political in ways that cannot be resolved in 1951, but will dominate feminist fictions in subsequent decades. In its investigation and articulation of power, “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” suggests a relation between repression and rebellion, between the individual and the social, and between the personal and the political.⁸

Though rarely accorded feminist credentials, Gwendolyn Brooks called attention to the plight of housewives that the Women’s Movement would protest. In 1953, Brooks published the semiautobiographical novel *Maud Martha*, which contemporary reviewers saw as a ladylike celebration of marriage and domesticity in the face of adversity. In reality, this pioneering work deals with bitterness and rage, concealed with silence for self-protection. Mary Helen Washington notes that “what the reviewers saw as exquisite lyricism was actually the truncated stutterings of a woman whose rage makes her literally unable to speak.”⁹ Brooks’s protagonist rarely talks and never voices her opinion. She hides behind a mask of politeness and servility and consistently checks her own activities and desires. Instead of openly rejecting her husband, Paul, who is reading a book called *Sex in the Married Life* in bed and tries to interest Maud Martha in its possibilities, she gets up and asks “pleasantly”: “Shall I make some cocoa? . . . And toast

7 See “On ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,’” *Modern American Poetry*.

8 See Meg Boerema Gillette’s section in “On ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,’” *Modern American Poetry*.

9 Washington, “‘Taming all that anger.’”

some sandwiches?”¹⁰ This young housewife recognizes her own habit of manipulative reaction and resistance, and her desire to change becomes a plot incentive.¹¹ Maud Martha’s silences echo as well in the short, tight-lipped vignettes that often fill up only one page and a half, with blank sheets of paper articulating things unsaid or barely thought. Since no connections between vignettes exist, Maud Martha’s life appears frozen and fragmented, its flow as checked as her own emotions and reactions. Short main clauses, with only occasional frills, further testify to Maud Martha’s stiff upper lip and locked-up thoughts. She hides her disappointment with marriage and settles into pleasing and obeying her husband, though she feels imprisoned, cramped and “unexpressed” as a wife. She suffers and is still.¹²

Maud Martha implicitly communicates her romantic expectations, as well as her marital disillusion, through the tone of her internal monologs. In the vignette titled “if you’re light and have long hair,” she attends the Annual Foxy Cats Dawn Ball with her handsome husband, joining the twenty good-looking members of the Foxy Cats Club and their wives or girlfriends. Maud Martha enters the main room of Club 99, where the Ball takes place, and immediately responds to the romantic, even erotic, possibilities of this festive space: “the drowsy lights, the smells of food and flowers, the smell of Murray’s pomade, the body perfumes, natural and superimposed; the music, now steamy and slow, now as clear and fragile as glass, now raging, passionate, now moaning and thickly grey.”¹³ The lush style with which Brooks suggests her heroine’s romantic desires competes in this vignette with a more sober, even ironic, voice that expresses Maud Martha’s thwarted expectations. She notes that the Foxy Cats do little work except trying to be “hep” and that “each year they spent hundreds of dollars on their wonderful Dawn Ball, which did not begin at dawn, but was scheduled to end at dawn.”¹⁴ The event appears rich with romantic potential, but Maud Martha’s mockery suggests her disappointment. She recognizes her husband’s ambition, which involves neither social ascent nor loving his pregnant wife: “on the strength of his appearance and sophisticated

10 Brooks, “Maud Martha,” 193.

11 Washington, “Taming all that anger,” 250.

12 See Chapter 16 of Brooks, “Maud Martha” and Washington, “Taming all that anger,” 250–51.

13 Brooks, *World*, 210.

14 *Ibid.*, 206.

behavior at this Ball might depend his future admission (for why not dream?) to *membership*, actually, in the Foxy Cats Club!”¹⁵ Maud Martha conceals her cold and silent hate, which results in scorn and manipulation.¹⁶ Behind her feminine face, obedient and pleasant, hides a monster whose rage intensifies in the encounter with intra-racial discrimination at Club 99.

Contemporary critics saw the title figure as “a spunky Negro girl” whose life includes “disturbances” as well as “the delicate pressure of the color line,” but they focused on the optimism and the lyricism of Brooks’s fictional autobiography.¹⁷ Like her author, however, Maud Martha is dark-skinned, and in “if you’re light and have long hair,” her husband prefers the high-yellow Maella. Accordingly, Maud Martha finds herself up against several forms of discrimination: as a wife, as an African American woman, and as one failing the brown bag test that earlier in the century had kept dark members of her race from admittance or acceptance. Faced with double, or triple, discrimination, the cynical and hostile Maud Martha gives way to a kinder, braver, and more compassionate figure. She quietly articulates her own racial and gendered position, as Paul leaves the dance floor with the curvaceous, white-looking Maella:

“Not,” thought Maud Martha, “that they love each other. It oughta be that simple. Then I could lick it. It oughta be that easy. But it’s my color that makes him mad. I try to shut my eyes to that, but it’s no good. What I am inside, what is really me, he likes okay. But he keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I got for him. He has to jump away up high in order to see it. He gets awful tired of all that jumping.”¹⁸

Maud Martha gets tired herself. As the other to Paul’s self, she sees herself through his eyes and determines to achieve the housewifely excellence that constituted the feminine mystique in the postwar era. She struggles with gender issues relating to ideals of American beauty, to race, work, marriage, sexuality and reproduction, housework, media, consumption, and economy. Despite her artistic sensibilities and talents, she surrenders to domesticity and femininity by giving birth to a female child, not to a poem.

15 Ibid., 208.

16 Washington, ““Taming all that anger,”” [249].

17 Ibid., [249].

18 Brooks, *World*, 213–14.

She cannot voice the feminism that her author conveys in prose and poetry and instead produces a baby, though this conclusion to the novel is subject to interpretation.¹⁹ Childbirth might, in feminist terms, become a creative process, or an independent act of rebellion, the screams that accompany a new beginning or perhaps a powerful protest. But in the early 1950s, the African American world of Gwendolyn Brooks was ignored by mainstream white feminist protest groups, though she anticipates the themes of silence, the search for identity and creativity, and the personal and political resistance that feminists of all colors voiced later.

A decade after Aunt Jennifer and Maud Martha's domestic despair, Anne Sexton published "Housewife" (1962), which proposes that women marry houses rather than men. As Friedan would argue in *The Feminine Mystique* the following year, suburban housewives get hysterically attached to or consumed by these life partners. Sexton took up even less space than Rich and Brooks in describing their narrow existences:

Some women marry houses.
It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
A mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day,
Faithfully washing herself down.
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman is her mother.
That's the main thing.²⁰

Sexton's woman merges with her house, which becomes not just a life partner, but her own body: skin, heart, body waste, pink walls. The woman kneels and washes her house, while men thrust into the pink walls of her vagina, to enter their mothers through another birth canal. In Sexton's poem, the housewife nurtures, satisfies and mothers her husband. Indeed, she becomes her own mother in fulfilling traditional female obligations, domes-

19 For a series of interpretations, including more victorious readings, see Washington, "'Taming all that anger,'" 259–61.

20 Sexton, "Housewife," 1911.

tic and sexual. Through writing confessional poetry, Sexton explored her own struggles with motherhood, guilt, loss, suicidal depression, and death, and the ways in which women collaborated with their oppressors, or danced with their jailers.

Before the Women's Liberation Movement, Rich, Brooks, Sexton and others represented femininity (and feminism) as veiled, since their protagonists' hidden frustrations and desires could not be articulated openly. In "Womanliness as Masquerade" (1929), Joan Riviere theorized "womanliness" as a mask intended to hide a female masculinity offensive to the surrounding culture, such as ambition, success, or intellectual achievements. In a radical move, she equates womanliness with masquerade: "My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing."²¹ Stephen Heath explains this equation, or identification, between femininity and carnival: "In the masquerade the woman mimics an authentic—genuine—womanliness but then authentic womanliness is such mimicry, *is* the masquerade ('they are the same thing'); to be a woman is to dissimulate a fundamental masculinity, femininity is that dissimulation."²² Aunt Jennifer's demure face and fluttering fingers constitute, in short, her gender identity, just as Maud Martha's silences constitute hers. The mask *is* the femininity, and the covert feminism as well. Behind the mask is nothing; to be a woman is to wear a mask with which to meet masculine egos or desires. Taking off this mask reveals not an authentic face, but a non-entity or an abyss.

BODIES, DADDIES, AND FLIGHTS

By the end of the 1960s, the Boston Women's Health Collective began to construct a new identity for women by designing a female body. Immediately upon publication in 1971, *Our Bodies Ourselves* became a primer for the Women's Liberation Movement; by 1976, it had sold 850,000 copies. *Our Bodies Ourselves* openly, and insistently, bridged personal and political spheres by claiming the female body they had just discovered. Biology was no longer considered destiny, and the Women's Health group set out to

21 Riviere, "Womanliness as Masquerade," 38.

22 Heath, "Joan Riviere," 49.

reclaim their bodies and literally delve into their hidden power. In Boston and elsewhere, feminists converted physical and emotional weaknesses to strengths and tried to use themselves productively and actively. The introduction to *Our Bodies Ourselves* claims that new “task-oriented” activities have inspired in the authors a need for recognition and success, which an accompanying photograph illustrates. It depicts a young woman in sturdy work-clothes drilling a floor, surrounded by various phallic paraphernalia. Her body posture is masculine: legs crossed for drill access, right elbow raised dramatically, facial expression concentrated. Since her bare midriff and tumbled curls signal femininity, she signifies the androgynous, or cross-gendered, behavior the Boston Women’s Health Collective advocates: “Our new confidence has led us to rediscover physical activity, climbing, canoeing, karate and car maintenance, and to take care of ourselves.” Images of female bodies engaged in traditionally male activities prompted women never to be “weak, dependent and helpless again.”²³ A new generation of women sought strength in each other, in the plural “we” that writes and empowers its communal body. The authors of this feminist manifesto confess in “Learning to Value Ourselves” that their previously perceived inferiority was “merely a reflection of the way power is distributed in society.”²⁴

For women’s groups in the 1960s and 1970s, the feminist body represented a new frontier, an unexplored terrain wide open to investigation. The Boston Women’s Health Collective explains that “some of us have taken a while to get over our inhibitions about seeing or touching our genitals,” and an anonymous feminist testifies to similar embarrassment: “When someone first said to me two years ago, ‘You can feel the end of your cervix with your finger,’ I was interested but flustered.” Her story ends with success and the proud acquisition of a speculum. The detailed illustrations that accompany her narrative stress the close connection between female body parts and words. In these close-ups of female genitalia, the authors teach their readers the vocabulary of the medical profession: “Mons,” “perineum,” “pubic symphysis,” and more. By speaking their master’s language, feminist pioneers felt able to take control of uncharted terrain. They wrestled their bodies and themselves from the medical and patriarchal estab-

23 Boston Women’s Health Collective, *Our Bodies Ourselves*, 16.

24 *Ibid.*, 14.

ishment by surprising their doctors with a professional vocabulary and by challenging those who “appear outwardly pleased while continuing to ‘manage’ us with new tactics.”²⁵

Tensions between femininity and feminism remain. Throughout *Our Bodies Ourselves*, the authors try to escape traditional roles while struggling with hidden anxieties. Their uncertainty results in a series of confessions that modifies the dominant liberation narrative. The communal voice lets us know that “we still have many bad feelings about ourselves that are hard to admit” and that it is difficult “to erase decades of social influence in a few years.” Members of the Boston Women’s Health Collective protest adamantly that “we *can* take care of ourselves” and even tell readers that “we are forever fighting a constant inner struggle to give up and become weak, dependent and helpless again.”²⁶ The illustration called “Vulva,” a head-on view of female genitals, suggests this tension. Is the vaginal opening a gun firing directly at resisting readers, or a bullet hole hiding internal wounds or vulnerabilities? Like the text itself, “Vulva” represents simultaneously power and lack.

Feminists sought phallic power through rebutting Sigmund Freud, whose theories on psycho-sexual development they considered misogynist. In “On the Sexual Theories of Children” (1908), Freud first discussed the penis envy that he presented more fully in *On Narcissism* (1914).²⁷ He famously theorized children’s mental and sexual processes from the oral and phallic stages through the latency period. Critics of Freud zoomed in on the phallic stage, when the child is age three and a half to six years old and the penis becomes central to both boys and girls. In Freud’s analysis, the male organ triggers important, gendered discoveries, the Oedipus complex for boys and the Electra complex for girls. Anatomical differences between boys and girls had far-reaching consequences in the Freudian psychoanalytical project, which feminists in the 1960s labeled patriarchal and anti-feminist. By first contesting Freud, a whole generation of women defied other Daddy figures blocking their way. Frank Sinatra’s daughter, Nancy, sang that her boots were made for walking and announced to her famous father, his cohorts, and men in general, that “one of these days these boots are

25 Ibid., 19.

26 Ibid., 19, 16.

27 Freud, “On the Sexual Theories.”

going to walk all over you.” In her bestselling *Fear of Flying* (1973), Erica Jong mocked the psychoanalytical community of men, grabbed phallic sexual power, and inspired young women on both sides of the Atlantic with her flight from home.

Jong takes on Daddy Freud in the opening lines of her feminist classic: “There were 117 psychoanalysts on the Pam Am flight to Vienna and I’d been treated by at least six of them. And married a seventh.”²⁸ Jong mocks the 117 members of Freud’s profession, who in their “flatfooted literal-mindedness” have used penis envy to explain hers to herself: “You dream about breaking your leg on the ski slope. You have, in fact, just broken your leg on the ski slope. . . . But the broken leg in the dream represents your own ‘mutilated genital.’ You always wanted to have a penis and now you feel guilty that you have *deliberately* broken your leg so that you can have the pleasure of the cast, no? No!”²⁹ In having the psychoanalysts fly to Vienna, Jong highlights their alliance with Freud, who is part of her own intellectual and emotional luggage. She is Jewish and has residual sympathy for the father of modern psychoanalysis, who in 1938 fled from his office in Berggasse because of threats against his family. To purge herself, she links the psychoanalytical community to the Nazis and repeatedly quotes Sylvia Plath, her precursor in despair and revolt, as in the epigraph to Chapter 2: “Every woman adores a Fascist / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you.”³⁰ She links her flying psychoanalysts with Freud, with Fascism, and with marriage, thus taking on a full package of patriarchal fathers as she heads towards their terrain.

In Vienna, Jong’s heroine Isadora, possibly named after the corset-free, barefoot dancer Isadora Duncan, meets the sixties masculine ideal: long-haired, unambitious, empathetic, mobile, and, as it turns out, sexually irresponsible. Aptly named Adrian Goodlove, he represents to Isadora what Jong (in)famously labeled “the zipless fuck.” This incidental sex, with no guilt, no past and no future, supposedly gave women the same freedom as men and lustily dissolved the gender hierarchy that located women below men in terms of sexual and social power. “Sex is zipless,” Isadora explains,

28 Jong, *Fear of Flying*, 3.

29 Ibid., 7.

30 Ibid., 15.

“because the incident has all the swift compression of a dream and is seemingly free of all remorse and guilt. . . .” She continues:

Because there is no rationalizing, because there is no talk at *all*. The zipless fuck is absolutely pure. It is free of ulterior motives. There is no power game. The man is not “taking” and the woman is not “giving.” No one is attempting to cuckold a husband or humiliate a wife. No one is trying to prove anything or get anything out of anyone. The zipless fuck is the purest thing there is.³¹

What follows is a feminist road novel, with Isadora and Adrian crisscrossing European sites heavy with history and eventually unable to let go of their own. Only in motion will past, present and future merge into a Utopian bliss; at the end of the road wait husbands, wives, role expectations, and financial considerations. Nonetheless, *Fear of Flying* created a breathing space in which second-wave feminists might glimpse a more egalitarian future, which began with sexuality, the female body, and Daddy’s words. Like the Boston Women’s Health Collective and the readers of *Our Bodies Ourselves*, Isadora learns her master’s language.

Central to her feminist voice is Isadora’s own body, introduced in loving detail on the opening page of *Fear of Flying*, as the heroine describes her take-off terror:

My fingers (and toes) turn to ice, my stomach leaps upward into my rib cage, the temperature in the tip of my nose drops to the same level as the temperature in my fingers, my nipples stand up and salute the inside of my bra (or in this case, dress—since I’m not wearing a bra)³²

As in *Our Bodies Ourselves*, fear competes with bravery, icy toes with erect nipples. As the novel progresses, Isadora lets go of her husband’s hand and takes over his language. She often tells Bennett to marry “someone more phallic, castrating, and narcissistic” than herself and shares with her readers this secret weapon: “First technique of being a shrink’s wife is knowing how to hurl all their jargon back at them, at carefully chosen moments.”³³

31 Ibid., 14.

32 Ibid., 3.

33 Ibid., 8.

In the war between the sexes, mastering the master's language is mastering the master, or, as in *Fear of Flying*, becoming the master. Jong and Isadora are as wedded to obscenity as any Norman Mailer. Four-letter words fly across the pages, the airplane, European roads and into the motel bedrooms where Isadora engages in all varieties of the activity that Country Joe cheered at Woodstock. With linguistic promiscuity, Jong invites multiple registers of masculine expression into her text. But her declarative statements, foreign languages, satirical comments, all sprinkled with Yiddish, situate her among victims as well as oppressors. Like *Our Bodies Ourselves*, *Fear of Flying* remains suspended between erotic and linguistic assertion and its meek counterparts: insecurity and dependency. Isadora delivers italicized exclamations, an emotional overconsumption barely hiding the anxiety that ultimately ends her flight. On the last page of the novel, Isadora is taking a bubble bath in a London hotel bathroom. She is immersed in the luxurious fluids that French feminists associated with creative processes, but though she implies an open ending to her journey, and possibly her marriage, she is less than convincing. With her Tampax string, she fishes the water like a wounded Hemingway hero trying to overcome trauma and disillusion, and in the last sentence of Jong's novel, husband Bennet walks (back) in. Implicitly, the ending stresses the financial dependency that white middle-class feminists ignored, for a while. Isadora is sick of primitive lodging and broke, and the "fear" in Jong's title wins.

LITERARY COMMUNITIES

European women consumed Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, Erica Jong, Marilyn French, Germaine Greer, and other feminist writers and activists, but their path to liberation took other directions as well. In Scandinavia, young feminists discovered African Americans and found in their oppression a counterpart to their own. Anthologies such as *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975) and *Midnight Birds* (1980), both edited by Mary Helen Washington, collected the texts Danish women had xeroxed and distributed in women's houses and other feminist sites. African American women writers opened a window to Black America, and to the supposed Other in American life and culture, and in so doing also revealed to Scandinavian women their own oppression. Joyce Ladner's *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman*

(1971) helped to further the mixture of voyeurism, pity and admiration that sent Scandinavian feminists to the early works of Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, and especially Alice Walker. In her sociological study, Ladner concluded that black women had successfully adjusted to and then overcome the social and psychological conditions that had failed to promote their health, recognition or success. Her tone was self-assured in describing black girls in urban settings:

These young women talked about themselves as Black people in a very positive manner, but yet in a manner which strongly reflected the fact that was most important in their lives. Too much literature on identity has dealt with Black people as impotent, weak individuals who lack the power to shape their lives. These conceptualizations negate the fact that they are *creators* who act, instead of being acted upon. Their environment is not so overwhelming that they have relinquished all control over it.³⁴

Ladner's criticism of white America resonated with Northern European feminists, who saw themselves in homogenous societies beyond racial discourses and wished for the courage, the strength and the sass of African American sisterhood (fig. 1).

Mary Helen Washington identified in *Black-Eyed Susans* what African American women were *not* and thus exploded many stereotypes associated with women of her race. She is not Faulkner's Dilsey, the indestructible black superwoman. She is not the "super sex object," or "the domineering matriarch," or the "evil black bitch." But she might be the woman Zora Neale Hurston identified in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937): "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see."³⁵ In Washington's words, the African American woman was "not a woman with power, not a liberated woman (if liberation means the freedom to make choices about one's life), but a mule, picking up the burdens that everyone has thrown down and refused to carry."³⁶ But then she might be a crazed woman artist like those "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release," as Alice Walker

34 Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*, 106.

35 Washington, *Black-Eyed Susans*, x-xi.

36 *Ibid.*, xi.

Figure 1: Danish feminist artwork, produced at the women's festival on the island of Femøe, Denmark.



Photo by Miriam Dalsgaard/POLFOTO.

would claim in the 1970s.³⁷ Scandinavian feminists loved writings about African American women, who had been doubly oppressed and struggled with burdens white feminists could only imagine. Too young to have lived through the civil rights movement, they now sought out African American writers and activists who presented them both with the stereotypes at the bottom of American hierarchies and with the hidden potentials that Northern feminists now claimed for themselves. Obviously, middle-class feminists in Scandinavia were not the mules of the world, but they fought against the ideals of beauty that celebrated only the Barbie-dolls in their midst. They threw away their bras. They rejected the domestic work that bogged down women like Gwendolyn Brooks's Maud Martha, since field work in Hurston's Florida did not enter their vision and experience. They stopped picking up socks, found knitting creative or gave it up entirely, and flocked to university courses about women's oppression, at least in the Western hemisphere (fig. 2). In the process, they found their own foremothers, among them Isak Dinesen, in Denmark known as Karen Blixen.

37 Walker, *Our Mothers' Gardens*, 233.

Figure 2: Women's festival in Faelledparken, Copenhagen, 1974.



Photo by Morten Langkilde/POLFOTO.

Blixen had iconic status on the Danish literary and cultural scene, her skeleton-like frame, kohl-rimmed eyes and signature turban etched into the minds, if not the hearts, of all her fellow Danes. She suffered from syphilis, transmitted by her aristocratic Swedish husband, Baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke, whom she had married in 1913 to escape the boredom of her class and her native country. The marriage had been a practical arrangement, her money in exchange for his title and exotic possibilities. Their joint venture in Africa, the coffee plantation near Ngong Hills outside of Nairobi, had ended in disaster, as readers of *Out of Africa* (1937) will know. At the end of her life, Baroness Blixen had little feminist glamor. She was too sick, too old, too aristocratic, and too eccentric for most Danish feminists in the

1960s and 1970s, but her adventures, including her tragic affair with Denys Finch-Hatton, were powerful draws. She had traveled to America in 1959 and died in 1962 from malnutrition, but after her death, Danish women recognized that many of her stories, especially “The Blank Page” from 1957, had unmistakable feminist potential.

Dinesen, the pen name designed for American readers, sets this famous story in ancient times, in an all-female convent in Portugal, where the Carmelite nuns produce the finest flax of all. From this circumstance originates the privilege of procuring bridal linen for all royal Portuguese princesses through generations. Before a young bride receives her morning-after gift, high-positioned male officials, a Chamberlain or High Steward, inspect the sheet from her wedding bed and declare the princess to have been a virgin. The sheet is never again washed and its central piece is returned to the convent, where it is framed and exhibited in the secluded convent gallery. Adorned with a coroneted plate of exquisite gold, the long rows of gilt frames are, as the centuries pass, studied by queens, archduchesses and other high pilgrims, who find in the faded patterns the zodiac signs or the pictures their own imaginations and situations demand. Only one frame exhibits a snow-white piece of linen, without a name inscribed on its golden plate. And, Dinesen writes:

... it is in front of this piece of pure white linen that the old princesses of Portugal—worldly, wise, dutiful, long-suffering queens, wives and mothers—and their noble old playmates, bridesmaids and maids-of-honor have most often stood still.³⁸

“The Blank Page” became a feminist favorite for many reasons, its all-female textual universe among them. Dinesen focuses on women, whether trapped inside the convent or in marriage and motherhood, and her story unites generations of nuns, ladies and ladies’ maids across centuries, their life conditions the same despite the passing of time. The male gatekeepers—the inspectors of the bridal sheets—appear in the text only to fulfill their scrutinizing role. The story trusts the female point of view, and the women who pass through the convent gallery act as interpreters of the signs on the linen. They read what they need to read, and in deciphering the codes in front of them, they unravel their own lives. The many pieces of

38 Dinesen, “Blank Page,” 1394.

unwashed linen establish, like the story itself, an alternative history, or her-story. This story of female lives and texts exists, like Dinesen's story, in an indeterminate temporal setting, so as to subvert the linearity and the logic of traditional historical narratives. The nuns hang the artwork, the visiting ladies live it, their daughters and granddaughters learn from it, and they all collaborate as producers, writers, and readers.

This community of women transcends race, class, age, religion, and marital status. In the opening frame of "The Blank Page," an old "coffee-brown, black-veiled" storyteller begins her tale.³⁹ Towards its end, she encourages her audience to learn from it and recognize its wisdom. With the bridal centerpieces, generations of women have produced the linen with sweat or written their story with blood, their experiences inscribed with body fluids. But silence is also central to the story and women's mode of expression. The snow-white sheet speaks most eloquently of all the pictures in the gallery. Its silence communicates a hidden but articulate meaning, shared by the princess who lived it, the nuns who show it, and the ladies who study it. And Dinesen and her readers keep their tongues as well. At the core of "The Blank Page" is blankness, the spot where words give way to silence and to experiences that language cannot hold.

FEMININE LANGUAGES

French feminists would later theorize a feminine language (or *l'écriture féminine*) with which to write themselves. While American feminists were burning bras and writing escape novels, and Scandinavian feminists discovered Black America and hidden her-stories, French feminists embraced theory and poststructuralist fathers like Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. These daughters of prominent deconstructionists rejected Anglo-American activism and pragmatism and invented something new. This "newly-born woman" emerged in French feminist discourse not as a biological creation, but as a linguistic position available to all.⁴⁰ In her wo/manifesto "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), Cixous redefined the snake-haired Medusa,

39 Ibid., 1391.

40 See Cixous and Clément, *Newly Born Woman*.

who turned men to stone, from demon or witch into a feminist icon.⁴¹ Freud had associated the sight of Medusa's decapitated head with the terror of castration, but Cixous's laughing Medusa exploded traditional logic structures, celebrated chaos, and in the process subverted phallic power.⁴² Cixous herself laughs off both Freud and Lacan, both rooted in "the sanctuary of the phallus":

Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that their mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not dead-ly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.⁴³

In writing against "phallogocentrism," she and others formulated a theory of the unconscious, which Cixous called the "Imaginary" and Julia Kristeva "the Semiotic." In this pre-linguistic space, where gender identification has not yet occurred, French feminists located the language of the silenced Other, pregnant with meaning and body, which they encouraged women to explore: "And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it."⁴⁴ To articulate themselves in unconscious linguistic realms, outside of the phallogocentric order, French feminists wrote in circles and repetitions, in digressions and details floating in the sea of babble from which an author would be born. Let us lick her shoulder in the introduction to *Le Livre de Promethea* by Cixous, the H of this extract, long enough to suggest the flavor:

For a week H has struggled in vain. In all sincerity. As for Promethea, she is really the one who made the whole text already, the text from which I emerged just half an hour ago (my hair still clinging from the Atlantic and crystal flecks all over my body. Anyone who wants to know how this almost-finished work tastes would only have to lick my shoulder).

41 This text, originally written in French as "Le Rire de la Méduse" in 1975, was translated into English by Keith and Paula Cohen in 1976.

42 Freud, "Medusa's Head."

43 Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 255.

44 Ibid., 246.

I was saying: Promethea has already put in much that is hers and more, she drew unstintingly on her organs, her desires, her memory; the text can be said to be made, physically morally, nervously, and above all virtuously, mostly of her.

This is not a preface. It is just half a chance to tell the truth about the origin of the text that I am in the process of leaving this very instant—refreshed, tossed about, inundated.⁴⁵

This sample of *l'écriture féminine* gives to Cixous's readers the recipe that "The Laugh of the Medusa" also shared with women eager to be heard. In Cixous's Imaginary chaos, subject positions dissolve; H becomes Promethea, while "I" and "we" flow in and out of the site from which the text and its author(s) are born. Writing already exists, without the properties and ownership of phallic orders. It is a writing of the body, overflowing with feminine fluids: menstrual blood, milk, sweat, pleasure. As Cixous sings out in "Medusa," "She writes in white ink."⁴⁶ Cixous, H, and Promethea associate artistic activity with sexuality, with wetness and motion. In her pleasurable or libidinal economy, myths change, as when Prometheus turns into Promethea, and Medusa laughs at the "inevitable man-with-rock, standing erect in his old Freudian realm."⁴⁷ Laughter and silence, parentheses and omissions swim together into a new language, which allies itself with marginality, with bisexuality, which Cixous defines anew, as "the *other bisexuality* on which every subject not enclosed in the false theater of phallogocentric representation has founded his/her erotic universe." Her other bisexuality is "—of both sexes, nonexclusive either of the difference of one sex, and, from this 'self-permission,' multiplication and the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body."⁴⁸ Feminist theorists associated a writing of the body with confession, with autobiography, with pleasure or *joissance*. In the orgasmic realm of feminine writing, French feminists exploded linguistic orders associated with Logos and Phallos.

Cixous linked feminine sexuality and marginality with Africa as a "dark continent." Her intention was to deconstruct the "old Apartheid routine" that taught women wishing to speak that they ventured into terror and

45 Cixous, *Book of Promethea*, 5.

46 Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 251.

47 *Ibid.*, 255.

48 *Ibid.*, 254.

blackness: “because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can’t see anything in the dark, you’re afraid. Don’t move, you might fall. Most of all, don’t go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark.” In taking back contested terrain, Cixous allies herself with blackness: “We the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, or wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the beviés—we are black and we are beautiful.”⁴⁹ As “I-woman, escapee,” Cixous flees to Africa, where non-Western practices and sexualities might fare better, though this destination implicitly suggests her alliance with Western traditions. Cixous proceeds to construct a feminine writing in this dark utopia:

If a woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man . . . it is time for her to dislocate this “within,” to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. And you’ll see with what ease she will spring forth from that “within”—the “within” where once she so drowsily crouched—to overflow at the lips she will cover the foam.⁵⁰

Cixous, Kristeva and other French feminist theorists sought in their search for feminine expression to redefine genres, including the High Theory that signified authority and prestige to contemporary audiences. Unlike the tracts of Karl Marx or Jacques Derrida, their own theorizing aimed, like the woman overflowing at the lips, to participate in a libidinal economy, in which laws of profit, exchange, and grammar gave way for poetry and gift-giving. The textual bodies of French feminist writings celebrated excess, erotics, *jouissance*.

This joyfulness did not last. Ultimately, feminists in Western Europe and the United States faced a series of divisions within their own ranks and attacks from outside. Not only did womanists of color part from white sisters in the Women’s Liberation Movement, but Marxists split from Essentialists, working-class activists from middle-class academics, pragmatists from post-structuralists, eco-feminists from the rest, and on and on. Unlike other 1960s movements, however, the Women’s Movement radically

49 Ibid., 248.

50 Ibid., 246.

changed private as well as public life well into the twenty-first century, with its transatlantic revisions and re-imaginings of gender structures. As Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson writes in *Women's Movement* (2000), “there is no turning back to a pre-feminism world; but the way forward . . . does not necessarily point in one direction.”⁵¹ Feminists walked away from the Women's Liberation Movement along many paths, and their footsteps may be traced in political, cultural, economic and literary terrain. In the twenty-first century, many influential women—Hillary Clinton, Angela Merkel, Christine Lagarde among them—remain feminist icons, while a young author such as Yiyun Li calls attention to women's global struggles in China and Chinese America. In the end, Tammy Wynette's “Stand By Your Man” gave way to Helen Reddy's “I Am Woman,” released in 1971, which became a feminist anthem, with lyrics empowering the women who sought change: “I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman.”⁵²

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51 Macpherson, *Women's Movement*, 224.

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