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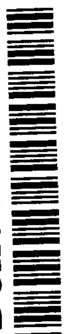
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Chapter 9

The long goodbye

Against personal testimony or, an infant grifter grows up

Linda S. Kauffman

> We lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now. We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it.
>
> *Margaret Atwood*, The Handmaid's Tale

> I feel like a lot of people have kind of napped through the Reagan years, politically. You know how you feel when you wake up from a nap, sort of real disoriented and cranky and stuff? That's how this time is striking me.... As I looked around I saw things weren't the way they were being described at all. You remember that old 'safety net' thing they used to talk about? You don't hear about that any more. People fell right through.
>
> Laurie Anderson, 16 March 1990

Since this essay is written against the grain of individualism, novelistic discourse[1] and personal testimony, let's dispense with the personal immediately: for 400 years every male Kauffman was a Protestant minister and missionary. Racking his brain to invent the occupation that would be most rebellious and least remunerative, my father became a Bible salesman. I was his side-kick: together we sold Bibles and religious paraphernalia to servicemen in bus stations up and down the Southern California coast, pitching piety and scoring sales, though privately we scorned the suckers. My job: to "look innocent." I was 5. (One item I remember vividly: a trippy 3-D color picture of Jesus that lit up when you plugged it in; to my infant eyes, Jesus looked like a psychedelic cartoon, "turned on" in both senses of the word.) Since he had the I.Q. of a genius, my father disdained bosses and nine to five routines: instead, he worked successively in various kinds of sales, and, as our fortunes declined, as a milkman, cab driver and grifter. My most vivid childhood memories: the glittering marquees on the strip in Vegas, especially the huge cowboy tipping his hat at the Golden Nugget, who reminded me of Howdy Doody, and the Silver Slipper, which reminded me of Cinderella. Another sublime memory is the Long Beach Pike, a pretty seedy scene in those days; my antics amused the carneys while Dad conned the sailors, all of us grifting according to

our gifts. From the age of 11, I worked nights in his janitor business, cleaning banks, offices, and the model homes spreading over Orange County, California, in the 1960s like mould on cheese. Although legitimate, this job was the most humiliating: how dare the morons traipsing through these houses look at *me* with pity, while I cleaned around them? While polishing the tellers' windows in banks, I cultivated murderous fantasies, malevolently sizing up the huge fortress-like safes and thinking, "*Let's blow this sucker up, Dad*!" Once he began to drink and gamble in earnest, we successively lost the furniture, the car, finally the only house we'd ever own. My mother and I waitressed for $1.25 per hour each, and ate at the restaurant, since the only staple in steady supply at home was vodka. Once the newspapers and telephone were cut off, we lived in virtual seclusion. Long before Reagan invented the rhetoric of a "safety net" for the "truly needy," we had fallen right through.

Depending on my mood, my past strikes me as having all the makings of an Arthur Miller tragedy or Beckettian comedy. I developed a chameleon-like ability to move up and down the socio-economic ladder, for I was raised to imitate the gentility of my reverend ancestors, despite our chronic lack of cash. In the 1950s, I remember literally being homeless (I was so young, I thought we were "camping"); but eventually we managed to "pass" in the middle class, living largely on credit. No wonder my doctoral dissertation was on Dickens and Faulkner: my family alternately resembled the Micawbers and the Pockets, the Compsons and the Snopeses.

As the last sentence indicates, I clearly believe that our intellectual work as feminists is directly related to our personal histories; that our subjective experiences influence our politics, that our psychic traumas affect our teaching and writing.

So what's my beef?

First, I dislike the "our" in the previous paragraph: among many other assumptions it takes for granted, the one that is probably most accurate is therefore most troubling: "we" all do the same kind of labor, that is, feminist work in higher education in America. Are "we" feminist scholars solipsistically talking only to ourselves?

Second, it's too easy to validate my credentials. My checkered past is too easy to transform into a Nixonian Checkers speech of bathos. By insisting on the authority of my personal experience, I effectively muzzle dissent and muffle your investigation into my motives. "I've suffered more than you" is a false (albeit fashionable) piety, as if we needed to (or could) distance ourselves from bourgeois banalities. It elicits a phony competition to prove that "I was poorer than you." (My mother used to joke, "I was so poor, I didn't have a mother.")

Third: the facts of my life and hard times rearrange themselves generically into one of several novelistic lines, including, but not limited to, the following:

- The nobility of suffering.

That's the first lie: suffering never ennobles, it only humiliates, and – if you're lucky – enrages.

- Ms Horatio Alger: anybody in America can rise to the top with hard work, and fulfill the American dream.

That lie disguises the randomness of existence: it is only by chance that I am not a welfare mother, a stripper, or a waitress. In this light, the fact that I am white and was at least able to forage in the middle class considerably outweighs the fact that I am female. The lie's corollary: I raised myself by my bootstraps; so better had you – what we might currently call the Clarence Thomas syndrome.

- Revolutionary impulses led me to the university.

In fact, I sought the university precisely because I saw it as a haven from the chaos and craziness of "real life"; far from scorning "the ivory tower," I was, I smugly thought, fleeing into one. Unfortunately, carrying on the Kauffman trait of exquisite bad timing, shortly after I arrived at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1967, police and National Guard patrols put the university under siege: classes were suspended, curfews imposed, students were beaten and arrested. As the Bank of America burned down, the National Guard murdered a student who was trying to *protect* the bank's precious property. Kevin Moran perished, but the bank rose from the ashes with a new fortress-like design within weeks.

- The anti-war movement radicalized me.

I have no nostalgia for those years (1967-71). They were as close as I ever want to come to total chaos: one couldn't depend either upon the students, the police or the National Guard for rationality, much less protection. Incredibly, scarcely twenty years ago some Americans found it normal to be murdering students on campuses, from Kent State to Jackson State, from Augusta to Santa Barbara. Not only did I learn how quickly a police state can become the norm, but I discovered how many Americans would avidly support one.

- Out of the impassioned radical evolved an impassioned feminist.

I owe to my mother whatever semblance of normality my childhood had; I owe my feminism to her fierce insistence that I escape the traps that thwarted her, and to the model my older sister provided of an escape route: studying English literature.

At the time, that solution did not seem nearly so quixotic as it seems in retrospect: in 1972 we naïvely believed that the university was the most egalitarian of institutions, the one most receptive to social change and justice. Instead, it turned out to be among the most reactionary and entrenched. In contrast to law school and medical school, which at least rely on quantitative measurements in evaluation, English departments in those days relied on vaguely F.R. Leavisite criteria involving qualitative response to "felt life." Leavisite standards still dominated English departments in the 1960s and 1970s, and – make no mistake – they still dominate in the evaluations of many full professors to this day.

My sister, Kay Austen, is now an ex-English professor. While tenured at the University of Hawaii, she fell ill. The University seized the opportunity and terminated her in retaliation for her affirmative action work. For the past ten years she has battled paralyzing illness while waging a sex discrimination case of *Bleak House* proportions against the University. Court testimony revealed that the University conspired to deny her health care when her condition was "gravely life-endangering." Testimony also revealed that they considered putting her under

surveillance when she was living 6,000 miles away. Whether she ever finally "wins" this case or not, the University remains the victor – precisely by forcing each individual victim of discrimination to go through the long, arduous process over and over again.[2] I want feminist scholarship to reach an audience that transcends the academy, but that doesn't prevent me from mourning the decimation (I use that word literally) of a generation of feminist scholars who have been exiled from academic life by sexual harassment, retaliation and discrimination in the past twenty-five years.

Is it even possible to write against the grain of individualism? When you read my opening gambit, didn't it make you (whether you know me personally or not) want to know more? That is precisely my point: there is something fatally alluring about personal testimony. Even theoretical texts can be co-opted by critics who insist on interpreting in the same old way. It happens to feminists, materialists, poststructuralists alike. One reason I devoted the past decade to writing about love and epistolary fiction was to see whether it was possible to wrest signification away from representation by demonstrating that even love – the emotion that's supposed to be the most private, the most authentic, the most inviolate – is artifice, a construct. The French have known this for a long time: "Some people would never have been in love, had they never heard love talked about," said La Rochefoucauld. Consider Roland Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*: Barthes' aim was to emphasize the fragmentary and discursive aspects of the text, rather than to create the lover-as-hero, because:

> If you put the lover in a love story, you reconcile him with society because telling stories is a coded activity. Society tames the lover through the love story. I took Draconian measures so the book would not be a love story, so the lover would be left in his nakedness, a being inaccessible to the usual forms of social recuperation, the novel in particular.
>
> (Barthes 1985: 302–3)

But (here's the grifter's voice again): Americans are hooked on authenticity and sincerity. Ironically, in the English translation, Barthes' "Draconian measures" are co-opted from the title forward: *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* makes the lover, not discourse, primary; it reduces his analysis to psychology, when his aims were figural and structural. It suggests that we are reading the real sentiments of a lover named Roland Barthes, as if he were merely a love-lorn columnist, some French version of Ann Landers or Dr Ruth Westheimer.

Imagine substituting the word "feminist" for "lover" in the passage above: you reconcile the feminist to society because telling stories is a coded activity, as I tried to demonstrate by highlighting the implied narrative lines in my own history. Society tames the feminist through the story in particular, the allure of personal testimony in general. Are feminists succeeding in finding ways to make their work inaccessible to the usual forms of social "recuperation" – a word that in French simultaneously connotes co-option? Lest you accuse me of setting up a minor strain in feminist criticism as a "straw woman," I am arguing that such recupera-

tion infects not just feminist criticism, but reader-response criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, materialist criticism, *and even poststructuralism*. Let me take another improbable example: At a conference, Jacques Derrida hears the rumor that he is in analysis; he asks,

> Who am I and what have I done so that this might be the truth of their desire? ... This must signify something not negligible in the air of their times and the state of their relation to what they read, write, do, say, live, etc.
>
> (Derrida 1980: 203)

I have purposely seized upon Barthes and Derrida because poststructuralist strategies are supposed to *preclude* the kinds of responses I am describing. Even if "we" (and here my presumption is glaring) are poststructuralist, postmodernist, anti-humanist feminists, "we" are avid consumers of true confessions, suckers for sentimentality. (As you'll see below, I am not in the least exempt from these lapses myself.) How can I as a feminist describe and account for "the air of [our] times and the state of [our] relation to what we read, write, do, say, live, etc." more precisely? A few symptomatic reflections follow.

One can obviously use the personal voice without forgetting history, society, politics. More difficult to resist is the temptation to view the personal as inherently paradigmatic, the individual life story as coherent, unified, morally inspiring. It makes us see similarity where in fact there are only differences – irresolvable, irreconcilable differences at that. Invocations to personal experience are appealing because they imply that one can surmount injustice and triumph over adversity. In fact, most disappointments last a lifetime, and many injuries are irremediable. The older I get, the less I'm able to construct a moral even to my own story that doesn't lie with every word. As Laurie Anderson says about New Yorkers, "There are ten million stories in New York City, and no one knows which is theirs." The air of our times and the state of our relation to what we read, write, do, say, live, involve our saturation in images and in the cult of personality. Protests, movements, ideas are reduced to "Entertainment Tonight" sound-bites; one's image is tagged, marketed, commodified. (*Look what happened to Jesus!*) In the eighteenth century the quintessential medium was the essay; today it is the celebrity interview. We live in a society that no longer nourishes itself with beliefs but with images; the image always has the last word (Debord 1967; Barthes 1985). Have feminists defused the power of the image? Hardly. Can they do so? Probably not. But many have been engaged for the past decade in deconstructing the images in advertising, cinema, literature and popular culture through which femininity is constructed. Other feminists, however, reduce "Theory" to a passing fad, philosophy to a season's fashion.

Right now, I'm haunted by one particularly audacious image, publicizing a new magazine called *Allure*. It features a Chinese woman in Maoist dress in a grainy black and white photograph. One spot of vivid color relieves her (primitive, totalitarian) drabness: her lips are a vivid red. The copy reads:

> Why 6,000,000 women who used to carry a little red book now carry a little red lipstick. Beauty makes a statement. And when nail polish becomes political, and fashion becomes philosophy, Allure magazine will be there. With reporting about fragrance and fitness, cosmetics and culture, travel and trends. Allure: the revolutionary beauty.

How are we going to confront the fact that feminism has become another product, and that we are implicated in its commodification? That's one thing I hoped *Feminism and Institutions* would do: front the facts of complicity with social institutions, examine the complexities of shifting allegiances and conflicting commitments by engaging men and women in dialogue (Kauffman 1989b). Complicity is not a pleasant topic. One of the sobering discoveries I've made as a feminist is that institutions shape us more than we shape them. No one in 1972 could have predicted that feminism would make such remarkable inroads in our educational, legal, civil institutions. Nor did anyone dream that the Equal Rights Amendment would fail, that the nation would so passionately embrace neo-conservatism, that the world would be gripped again by the fervor of fundamentalism. Despite our desire to believe in the myth of (Enlightenment) progress, such are the facts. One of the profound paradoxes confronting feminists in the 1990s is that despite the massive transformations feminism has wrought, we are facing increasingly intransigent conservative powers that will remain in force far into the next century. (If he lasts as long as Thurgood Marshall, Clarence Thomas will be on the bench until 2031.) I wanted to see if it was possible to protest against feminism's commodification *and* to attack the premises of bourgeois individualism – the cornerstone supporting the American mythology of the individual as a unique, coherent, unified self.

One of the ways that feminism obviously co-operates in promoting that ideology is through literature. The case of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* is illustrative. The novel, published in 1962, is usually heralded as one of the first manifestos of the modern women's liberation movement. Anna Wulf is represented as suffering a schizophrenic "breakdown" at the hands of sexist society; since her "illness" results in a paralysis of the will and a writing block, evidence of her "cure" is that the novel commences with her novella "Free Women." Fiction is thus reduced to a tragic representation of life; "life" is reduced to a tale of individual malaise. The implicit message is that you cannot change society, only yourself. Such interpretations perpetuate narcissism and personal passivity instead of inspiring political action and social change (Ohmann 1983; Newton and Rosenfelt 1985). In fact, the novel is a sustained critique of subjectivity and of the individual's obsession with the personal. Ella (one of Anna Wulf's multiple "selves") reflects, "How boring these emotions are that we're caught in and can't get free of, no matter how much we want to" (Lessing 1962: 318).[3] Far from focusing on the individual, the novel disassembles the history of the twentieth century, ranging from Stalinist Russia to Algeria, Korea, China, Africa, America and Indochina. Lessing insists that what we call the psyche is influenced as much

by social, political and economic traumas as by the personal. Here's an antidote to individualism from Lessing herself:

> When *The Golden Notebook* came out, I was astonished that people got so emotional about that book, one way or another. They didn't bother to see, even to look at, how it was shaped... .What I'm trying to say is that it was a detached book. It was a failure, of course, for if it had been a success, then people wouldn't get so damned emotional when I didn't want them to be.
>
> (Howe 1967: 311–13)

Lessing's only failure, in my view, was to underestimate readers' and reviewers' capacity to fold all attempts to go beyond what is now known as "the representational fallacy" back into the criteria of bourgeois realism – the view of literature as a reflection of individual experience. Elaine Showalter, for example, insists that Lessing "will have to face the limits of her own fiction very soon if civilization survives... .Either she will have to revise her apocalyptical prophecies (like other millenarians), or confront, once again, the struggling individual" (Showalter 1976: 313). But in Lessing's view, it is precisely the ideology Showalter endorses which may lead to apocalypse, for the individual cannot be confronted in isolation, separated from a complex matrix of international politics, environmental issues, multinational economics and global military conflict. Margaret Atwood chillingly depicts the consequences of that ideology in *The Handmaid's Tale*: apocalypse is inevitable if we continue to be sunk in subjectivity. Atwood almost seems to take Showalter's ideas to their absurd but logical conclusion; the novel is a sustained parody of the theory of gynocriticism: "You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant" (Atwood 1986:127). In many ways, the same prophecies Lessing made in 1962 are reaccentuated and defamiliarized by Atwood twenty-four years later: organizing military coups, destabilizing governments, resettling "undesirables" and repressing civil liberties have all come to seem "normal." When *The Handmaid's Tale* appeared in 1986, few of us were aware of the extent to which her dystopia was already a reality in some parts of the world: Nicolae Ceausescu forced women to bear up to five children to increase the nation's power, and women were subjected to forced gynecological examinations every three months to make sure they hadn't had abortions. The enormity of these crimes has only come to the world's attention since the Rumanian Revolution in 1989, although Atwood explicitly describes these horrors in the novel's historical note:

> Rumania ... had anticipated Gilead in the eighties by banning all forms of birth control, imposing compulsory pregnancy tests on the female population, and linking promotion and wage increases to fertility.
>
> (Atwood 1986: 305)

Lessing and Atwood wonder what drives people collectively to embrace their own repression. What vicissitudes of psychic life account for the appeal of fascism? Experimental novelists have been trying to lead us away from the ideology of individualism and towards avant-garde conceptualizations for the past seventy-

five years, but academic critics have frequently recuperated and reprocessed them like American cheese – bland, but familiar. As a feminist literary critic I want texts to challenge the boundaries of realism, of genre, of narrative, not to subordinate the (anti-representational, anti-bourgeois, anti-narrative) other into the same – the same old story.

In the past decade, many feminists have either challenged or surmounted the dichotomy between Anglo-American New Criticism and French poststructuralism. Many more (myself included) have practically re-tooled in order to incorporate materialist analyses. Didn't we say goodbye to personal testimony, with its valorization of the power and autonomy of the individual psyche, a long time ago? As Teresa de Lauretis observed in 1984:

> What we call "Experience" should instead be defined as a process shaped coequally by the relation of the inside and the outside: Experience has a mobile relation to the reality it encounters, the subjectivity it assumes, and the discursive practices within which it unfolds. Subjectivity is constructed from experience, but what one comprehends as subjective are in fact material, economic, and interpersonal social and historical relations.
>
> (de Lauretis 1984: ix)

In fact, however, the appeal to the personal and the concomitant repudiation of "theory" seems to be making a pretty snappy comeback, presaged in 1983 by Elaine Showalter's "Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year," which warns feminists of the "seductions" of "male Theory" in general and poststructuralism in particular (Showalter 1983). The notion that feminists are being "seduced" by so-called "male Theory" has persisted throughout the decade. Barbara Christian reinforces Showalter's view that "Theory" is a passing fashion when she argues that literature has been taken over by western philosophers who are intimidating people of color, feminists, radical critics, and creative writers with a language "which mystifies rather than clarifies our condition, making it possible for a few people who know that particular language to control the critical scene" (Christian 1989: 229).[4]

In my view, the languages of critical theory are difficult because of their foundations in disciplines which were long isolated from literary studies. That the New Critics actively sought such isolation for ideological purposes has been well documented.[5] But the sentiment is none the less representative of a current *strain* (in both senses of the word) in feminism. Seduced by "male Theory," we have lost touch, so the argument goes, with the revolutionary fervor of the first wave of feminism, and only by once again focusing on our own consciousness, can we recapture the spirit of an earlier age.

But isn't it at least possible that rather than blaming ("male") Theory, we must confront a totally transformed economic and historical moment? The only sure thing about all idyllic epochs, as Raymond Williams once observed, is that they are always gone. Let's face it: that's true of feminist idylls too. Perhaps we should recall some of our mistakes in the idyllic old days, like Patricia Spacks' disclaimer

that she did not discuss the work of black women in *The Female Imagination* because she was "reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences [she hasn't] had" (Spacks 1975: 5). Remember the searing question Alice Walker asked? "Spacks never lived in 19th century Yorkshire, so why theorize about the Brontës?" (Walker 1983: 372). Walker attacked the theoretical weakness and unexamined assumptions of bourgeois individualism in (white) feminist literary criticism. (Below, I discuss some mistakes in my own earlier scholarship.)

In "Me and My Shadow," Jane Tompkins similarly warns that theory is "one of the patriarchal gestures women and men ought to avoid." She argues that "the female subject par excellence, which is her self and her experiences, has once more been elided by literary criticism" (Tompkins 1989: 122).[6] To Tompkins, feminism's function is to facilitate self-discovery about one's victimization at the hands of patriarchy, to idealize woman's superior moral sense, her "Sentimental Power" (Tompkins, 1985).[7]

The cumulative effect of this approach is to discourage investigation of any complicating factors that may weaken the stance of victimization or moral superiority. It avoids the complicated question of collusion and complicity either in one's own oppression, or with institutions. The underlying premise is that writing reflects a world already bathed in the emotional light that the solitary woman projects. This strain of feminism thus resurrects the mirror and the lamp of Romanticism, the movement most closely aligned with the expressive theory of art. The criteria of value are sincerity and authenticity, which inevitably lock us back into the very dichotomies (male intellect versus female intuition; head versus body, etc.) that so many other feminists have spent so much time trying to dismantle. Ironically, the argument that women can only write about themselves has been the cornerstone of *sexist* criticism of women writers since Sappho (Kauffman 1986). This hyperbolically sexualized rhetoric none the less persists, refiguring the feminist as Clarissa, virtuous victim who must vigilantly ward off the masculine seductions of loveless, disembodied "Theory." Nancy Miller confesses, "Barthes has seduced me"; she also refers to "the appeal of a headier (sexier ...) destabilization from deconstructive, psychoanalytic, and neo-Marxist perspectives... .The chapters of this book all testify to my awareness of their seductions" (Miller 1988: 3, 17).[8] If we keep perpetuating this tired rhetoric, feminist criticism *will* – like Clarissa – end up starving itself to death.

What "male Theory" is hurting most, such critics agree, is women's *feelings*. Says Tompkins: "I'm tired of the conventions that keep discussions of epistemology ... segregated from meditations on what is happening ... inside my heart ... I have to deal with the trashing of emotion, and with my anger against it" (Tompkins 1989: 122–3, 138). Christian's words are almost identical: she yearns for the integration "between feeling/knowledge, rather than the split between the abstract and the emotional" (Christian 1989: 229). This integration, she argues, would allow the black woman to "pursue herself as subject" (ibid: 235). Such protests belie a nostalgia for a clear, transparent language that never did exist. Self-division does not result from some plot by theorists to persecute writers.

Instead, the vicissitudes of psychic life are far more complex, as is language's mastery over us, with all its internal tensions and contradictions. The yearnings for integration and unity fly in the face of the discoveries in linguistics, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism about the construction of the subject – namely that we are always *beside ourselves* in multiple senses. Striving for integration through self-expression can only be viewed as a quixotic enterprise when one considers the structure of the unconscious. The political efficacy of such self-regard (in both senses of the word) is also questionable. Moreover, what is happening "inside our hearts" is as much subject to convention as are discussions of epistemology, as my discussion of love made clear earlier. The ideology informing such yearnings for integration is seldom made explicit, nor is it clear how such integration could advance the collective cause of social justice for women, African-Americans, or African-American women.

To return to my discomfort with the use of the collective "we": how can "we" overcome the tendency to be hermetically sealed, like Clarissa in her coffin, in academic obsessions? The last thing I want is for feminism to embalm itself by becoming the new orthodoxy. On the one hand, we maintain that the university is a microcosm of society; that the work we do in academia is political work. I think that is true. Nevertheless, social injustice and racial inequality cannot be conflated with a contest of faculties – a distinction Tompkins, Christian and Miller all blithely ignore. Tompkins confesses that she once told a panel at the Modern Language Association Convention to " 'get theory' because I thought that doing theory would admit us to the big leagues" (Tompkins 1989: 122). Nancy Miller's concept of politics is bounded in a nutshell: the seminar table and fellowship panel: she broods over "problems between 'us' and 'them' [which] loomed large in institutional terms – tenure, promotions, journals, fellowships, etc." We can't do political work within the university unless we constantly remind ourselves that it is a sphere of relative privilege and entitlement – a reminder which makes it difficult to sympathize with Miller's unabashed confession that "To the extent that I was vividly untenured, I of course worried at all times about everyone" (Miller 1988: 13). Beyond the politics of the profession – ranging from Christian's indictment of those whom she perceives as controlling the "critical scene" to MLA panels and academic "big leagues" – lies a vaster political arena and a harsher national mood. The allure of personal testimony makes it easy to conflate the *feminist* with the *academic* perspective. Like looking through the wrong end of a telescope, all one sees is in miniature.

Radical work goes on in universities, but only if one turns the telescope around. One of the advantages of the theoretical project of dismantling traditional disciplines and of undoing the traditional divisions – the *disciplining* of academics – is that the interrelations between culture and society, power and ideology can no longer masquerade as innocent or invisible. Whereas Christian protests that "there has been a takeover in the literary world of Western philosophers from the old literary elite, the neutral humanists" (1989: 225), she does not seem aware that "neutral humanists" is a *non sequitur*, if not an oxymoron. Christian is dedicated

to offering new readings to promote a black female literary tradition, but new readings alone will not ensure the preservation of that tradition. Ironically, Marxists, feminist theorists, African-Americanists, and students of popular culture have all contributed to exposing what is at stake in the production of literary texts and movements. One of the most exhilarating facets of reconceptualizing academic study today is the opportunity to help students comprehend this process and to demystify its operation. Continually exposing and undermining the construction of knowledge is vital to every project of redefining feminism. That project is perpetual – and perpetually threatened by co-option and commodification.

One strain of feminism that has been commodified most successfully is the therapeutic model. Tompkins chides those who see pop psychologists such as M. Scott Peck and Leo Busgalia as "mushy" and "sentimental" (Tompkins 1989: 138), but she fails to see how by endorsing them she uncritically perpetuates individualism. What cannot be ignored is how such books promote that ideology: the individual – removed from history, economics, *and even from the unconscious* – is depicted as someone who always has choices, and whose choices are always "free." Adversity is merely the product of a "bad attitude, negative thinking, or low self-esteem." To be a subject (to recognize oneself as a free and unique being) is itself an effect of subjection to ideology. In this light, it is clearly a delusion that by throwing off the straitjacket of formal expository prose, anyone will be revealing her "true," unique self. Writing about yourself does not liberate you, it just shows how ingrained the ideology of freedom through self-expression is in our thinking.

It's worth mentioning the other bestsellers which have proliferated recently, disseminating similar messages: *Men who hate Women and Women who Love them; The Dance-Away Lover; The Peter Pan Principle; Smart Women, Foolish Choices; Men Who Can't Love;* and *Women who Love too Much.* One cannot ignore the ways in which these books exploit feminism as a commodity, complete with sophisticated and expensive marketing research campaigns to target consumers. Indeed, the audience for such books seems to be insatiable. Not only are these books targeted for an exclusively female audience, but they are relentless in their insistence on "normality" – not to mention heterosexuality. In the guise of teaching women how to deal with their feelings, these books feed on the media hype about the so-called "man-shortage." They assiduously avoid analysis of historical and socio-economic factors, reproducing instead the tired stereotypes of Woman as Victim, as masochist, as "Love Junkie" who needs to be "cured" of her "addiction" to love through a strict regimen of group therapy and confession. Femininity as disease: where have we heard that before? These are the books that are seriously engaged in reproducing femininity for mass-market consumption.

What is not negligible in "the air of our times and the state of our relation to what we read, write, do, say, live, etc." is how resilient individualism is, and how relentlessly it co-opts feminism. While we are being exhorted to focus on our feelings, a lot of people are falling through the cracks in our society. It is no

accident that the hysterical hyperbole about "family values" reached its apex just as the actual kinship system began to recede (Mitchell 1975:227–31). The same anomaly applies to individualism: the hyperbole about the individual masks an alarming erosion of civil liberties in the United States. The bathtub has been gradually heating for some time now.

• September 1989: the US Court of Appeals overturns a lower court order to shut down the "high security unit" (HSU) at the Federal Correctional Institution in Lexington, Kentucky. Designed specifically to control women convicted of politically motivated crimes, the HSU has been denounced by the American Civil Liberties Union as a "living tomb"; by Amnesty International as "deliberately and gratuitously oppressive"; and by the Soviet Union as a US human rights violation. Gilda Zwerman's extensive research on women in American prisons reveals that this High Security Unit

> utilizes and manipulates the "terrorist" label in order to justify the "special" treatment of political prisoners [and represents] an expansion in the use of incapacitation, surveillance, and deterrence as mechanisms for social control and repression to a degree heretofore unprecedented in the U.S. correctional system.[9]

Along with Alejandrina Torres, a Puerto Rican nationalist, Susan Rosenberg was HSU's first inmate, and remained there for nearly two years. Convicted of carrying weapons and explosives for a radical group, Rosenberg is serving fifty-eight years for a crime that – had she "merely" been a terrorist at an abortion clinic – would have garnered her a suspended sentence.

• 7 October 1989: The Senate passes a House-approved amendment, sponsored by Senator Jesse Helms, preventing federal funding of "obscene" art, and requiring all recipients of National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities grants to sign an affidavit certifying that the monies will not be used to produce works that contain "depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific merit." Reminiscent of the loyalty oaths of the 1950s, the three categories are presented as if they were synonymous "perversions"; who will define "serious merit" remains unspecified. The cumulative effect is to force artists to steer clear of what they think the public might find indecent, which is a far broader category than obscenity.[10] Playwright Arthur Miller observes that self-censorship is already so widespread that it has allowed freedom to be "killed without a trace."[11]

• 6 February 1990: A bill introduced in the Washington state legislature, sponsored by Republican Jim West, would make it a crime for people under the age of 18 to engage in sex, including "heavy petting." The fine: 90 days in jail and $5000, unless they decide to marry.

• 21 April 1990: The Rev. Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association target photographer David Wojnarowicz's work by taking two ho-

mosexual images out of context from a larger collage and mass-mailing the enlarged images to every member of Congress, as well as to 178,000 pastors on the American Family Association's mailing list. Wojnarowicz, now dead from AIDS, filed suit and won a Pyrrhic legal victory: Wildmon was asked to send a "corrective letter" to his subscribers and Wojnarowicz was awarded one dollar.

- September 1990 to January 1991: eleven out of fifteen fundraising letters from three leading Religious Right groups targeted homosexuality as the most dangerous menace within America today.[12]

I am not implying that these incidents are unproblematic. They are not equivalent to one another. They may not even be among the worst examples of the current state of affairs. I've purposely included injustices that might not normally be regarded as specifically *feminist* concerns, because it is precisely the interconnection of feminist issues with other injustices that urgently needs our attention in the 1990s. My examples are symptoms of other dilemmas facing the nation: how far are we willing to go in suspending the Constitution to combat drug trafficking, pornography, public health, crime? Wherever we turn, the most vulnerable institutions and individuals are under attack: not just the arts and humanities, but women, children, immigrants, the aged, the poor, the infirm. The aim is to widen the net of surveillance, to create language and action that transforms police campaigns into a " 'war on ' " (fill in the blank). We no longer question either the desirability or the necessity of surveillance and punishment. What does it say about our society that we can only conceive of social problems and solutions in terms of crime and disease? When the infrastructure of our cities is collapsing, when millions are hungry and homeless, when our financial institutions are imploding, how do we still find the means to siphon off enormous resources to fund preposterous pornography commissions, to put rap singers on trial, to demand urine samples from employees, to persecute those with AIDS? The right has replaced the specter of communism with enemies from within – within the body politic and within the body: leftists and feminists within the university, micrological bogeys, viruses in the immune system, in computers, in the womb (Haraway 1989; Petchesky 1987; Treichler 1988). Under the banner of "normative health," repression is proliferating at a prodigious pace.

I'm conscious of the paradox involved in engaging in a critique of individualism on the one hand, and arguing for the preservation of civil rights on the other. The mythology of individual freedom and choice is inflated in direct proportion to the erosion of civil liberties, which are undergoing the most massive assault since the McCarthy era. That assault is intricately interwoven with an assault on the poor, the disenfranchised, the intellectually, politically and sexually suspect. The right has turned the rhetoric of equality against its citizens: "equal rights for unborn women" and "crime victims' rights," like the "Pro-Life" anti-abortion campaign, cunningly disguise the repression which is actually being promoted. To offer one more example: the Senate Judiciary Committee, whose wisdom and good judgment is so fresh in our minds since the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill

travesty, will soon vote on a "pornography victims' compensation act," which would allow the so-called "victims" of pornography to sue producers and distributors of films, books, etc. "The Accused" is one type of film that could be removed from shelves, since it depicts a gang-rape.[13] For the first time in history, the logic of civil rights is turned *away* from its traditional support of expression: censorship would mean a *furthering* of civil rights (Downs 1989: 60). Feminists can protest against these repressions without necessarily endorsing the ideology of individualism. We can agree that the individual is the product of power, and still recognize that, today in America, that power is becoming increasingly concentrated among fundamentalists and conservatives, whether one turns to education, politics, religion, media, advertising, economics or the law.

What can I as a feminist literary critic do? I can address the misapprehensions of representation: What has led us to view symbols and representations as dangerous menaces, the dissemination of which must be controlled? I can use my own personal history in a critique of the underlying assumptions about person and story, as I have tried to do here. Moreover, I'm the perfect candidate to consider critically "women's ways of knowing" and "sentimental power" because my first book, *Discourses of Desire*, was at some points an implicit endorsement. In one passage, I remark:

> I have tried to expose the devaluation of the sentimental as another form of repression, with ramifications as serious at the end of the twentieth century as sexual repression was at the end of the nineteenth.
>
> (Kauffman 1986: 316)

I now see that such an approach to sentimentality has led in directions I couldn't have predicted – although I now think I should have been able to predict them. Feminism's greatest strength has always been its capacity for self-critique, and it would be a great pity to see that capacity muted by the insistence on consensus. Feminist criticism has confronted numerous dilemmas in the past decade: how to engage in poststructuralist theory without losing sight of the material body? What does it mean to be constituted as a subject in and of language? Which texts (and which ideologies) survive and why? I think we still have the most to learn from the ruptures, limitations, and contradictions in our thinking. In *Special Delivery*, I propose and enact a conscious strategy of what I call "infidelity": one can show how one's own arguments may subsequently become inadequate; one can even confess how one's desires may be in conflict with the theoretical stances one endorses. One can highlight rather than blithely eliding the paradoxes that are irreconcilable, the consequences that are irremediable. As *Special Delivery* went to press, I discovered a similar argument in Sandra Harding's *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* In a chapter entitled "Reinventing Ourselves as Other," she exhorts us to provide "traitorous" identities and social locations, and to engage in traitorous readings of the assumptions we make in and about texts (Harding 1991: 288–95). Such assumptions include racist, regional, heterosexist and sexist assumptions. I would add that sexism infects both genders; as a discursive construct, can't we

finally put to rest that *bête noire,* "the white male"?

As a feminist, I have not everything to do, but something. Even while endorsing poststructuralist strategies, I cannot wait for the revolution that has no model, to come before I act. (But I *can* continue to deconstruct the terms in which the arguments are framed, and the assumed ideology underlying them.) Rather than contributing to the successful working of the machinery of society, I want my work to be a counterfriction to the machine. Despite the fact that my family were the black sheep of generations of Protestants, I wholeheartedly endorse the word's etymology in *protest.*

We are living in a politically exhausted culture, and still responding to it with exhausted genres. Personal testimony can sometimes be eloquent, but it is not an infinitely inexhaustible genre. Too often it reinforces the blind belief that we are all intrinsically interesting, unique, that we deserve to be happy. My happiness, frankly, is not very important in the grand scheme of things. I never thought feminism was about happiness. I thought it was about justice. The times demand a frontal attack on the complex political alliances – civil, legal, economic, educational, religious – that are acting in conspiracy, explicitly and implicitly, to boil us alive. Atwood is right: it takes effort to ignore, and a united front ill serves feminism at this particular historical moment. While some warn against betraying "mothers," or trashing the "sisterhood," this merely reveals the relentless rhetoric of familialism (another staple of bourgeois ideology) in yet another guise. Meanwhile, far more serious betrayals are unfolding before our eyes. When I began this essay, the Helms debate was just heating up; it already seems long ago and far away. In fact, as you read them, didn't the dates I mentioned seem antiquated? Have they already ceased to alarm us? Now, in September 1991, it is abundantly apparent just how cheap and easy personal testimony is: Clarence Thomas is relying on the same maudlin strategy to silence dissent at the confirmation hearings for his appointment to the Supreme Court. Deflecting every political challenge, every question of intentionality, and every issue of constitutional interpretation, he invokes the supreme authority of personal experience: nobody knows the troubles he's seen because he's from Pinpoint, Georgia, son of a sharecropper. His invocation to personal authority disguises his opportunism, his indebtedness to the civil rights movement he now repudiates, his cynicism. Today's grifters aren't in Vegas; they're testifying in a circus-like atmosphere[14] on Capitol Hill.

Feminism is far more than the effort to "express" "women's personal experience," and its "territory" extends far beyond the bonds of family, beyond the lecture hall, beyond academia. Growing up among grifters, I learned early how illusions are fabricated, how false piety smells. That doesn't mean I have no illusions, no hopes, dreams, etc. It does mean that I want continually to cast doubt on the status of knowledge – *even as we are in the process of constructing it* – a perpetual project. By resisting the flattering temptation to talk solely to and about ourselves, we can concentrate on defying repressions that have already come to seem "normal." The pace of contemporary events is like a speeding convertible; we can

ill afford to be enchanted by the rear-view mirror. Rather than mythologizing ourselves or the past, can't we total those disabled vehicles and – at long last – wave goodbye to all that?

NOTES

1 The connections between the ideology of bourgeois individualism and the novel as a genre have been made by Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987; Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction*, New York: Methuen, 1987; and Linda S. Kauffman (1992), among many other recent studies.

2 In March 1991, Kay Austen won ten years' back pay, ten years' future pay, and extensive damages in the first court ruling to find the University liable for sexual discrimination. Federal Judge Samuel P. King ruled that Austen was subjected to "harassment, retaliation and discrimination" by her department chair, and the judge went on to castigate the entire university: "the record is clear that the University of Hawaii administration closed ranks to support him against her."

3 My views of *The Golden Notebook* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are developed in greater depth in Kauffman (1992).

4 *Gender and Theory* is structured dialogically so that each essay is followed by a critique: see Michael Awkward's "Appropriative Gestures: Theory and Afro-American Literary Criticism," in response to Christian, and Gerald M. MacLean's "Citing the Subject," in response to Tompkins.

5 See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983; Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983; and Janet Batsleer, Tony Davies, Rebecca O'Rourke and Chris Weedon, *Rewriting English: Cultural Politics of Gender and Class*, London: Methuen, 1985.

6 I suspect (and sincerely hope) that I am the "unfriendly reader" to whom Tompkins refers in her essay, because critique is an invaluable aspect of engagement between women who are friends as well as feminists; conversely, by generously playing a the role of "unfriendly reader" of *Special Delivery*, Jane immeasurably improved my book.

7 See also Mary Field Belencky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, New York: Basic Books, 1986. Carol Gilligan's work has also been instrumental in promoting this view; in addition to *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1982), see "Joining the Resistance: Psychology, Politics, Girls and Women," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29: 4 (fall 1990): 501–36.

8 In *Getting Personal*, Miller recycles the same rhetoric to defend Tompkins and attack Gerald MacLean in their exchange in *Gender and Theory*. For an alternative interpretation, see Mary Poovey's review article in *Modern Philology* (May 1991): 415–20.

9 Cited by Patricia Golan, "American's Most Dangerous Woman?" *On the Issues* 13 (1989): 15–21.

10 *The New York Times*, 10 November 1990.

11 *The Washington Post*, 13 November 1990. The *New York Times* reported on 18 September 1991, that government documents were released which show that the National Endowment for the Arts bowed to political pressure in rescinding the grants it had initially recommended for Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes and Tim Miller (*New York Times*, p. Bl, 3). The next day, the Senate voted 68 to 28 to prohibit the NEA from awarding grants that would promote materials that depict "sexual or excretory activities or organs" in an "offensive way". (*New York Times*, 20 September 1991, p. B2).

12 *Right-Wing Watch* 1:4 (February 1991): 2.

13 *The New York Times*, 7 November 1991.

14 Or should I say *peep*-show atmosphere? After this essay went to press, the Senate Judiciary Committee was forced to postpone the Senate vote in order to give the appearance of taking sexual harassment seriously: law professor Anita Hill testified that Thomas sexually harassed her when she worked for him in the Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission – the very agency which is supposed to investigate such abuses. On 15 October, 1991, the Senate confirmed Clarence Thomas's nomination by a vote of 52–48. The same senators who glossed over Thomas's credibility when he insisted that he never discussed Roe v. Wade felt no compunction about trying to destroy the credibility of Professor Hill, labelling her a "perjurer," a "fantasist," and alluding repeatedly to her "proclivities." Ironically, in the kangaroo court of the media, Clarence Thomas "won" because his testimony was passionate and personal: as if suddenly remembering that he was black, he compared the Senate hearings to a "high tech lynching." Anita Hill was deemed too cool, dispassionate, impersonal. Few spectacles so vividly demonstrate the abuses of personal testimony; with this one, I rest my case.

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