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To cite this article: Cassandra Laity (2018) Editor’s introduction: toward feminist modernisms, Feminist Modernist Studies, 1:1-2, 1-7, DOI: 10.1080/24692921.2017.1390870

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/24692921.2017.1390870

Published online: 14 Nov 2017.
Editor’s introduction: toward feminist modernisms

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When in 2012 we first began seeking a publisher for our proposed journal, we were told by a major press that Feminist Modernist Studies was “not needed” and librarians would not “know how to classify it” (?) We wondered how scholarship on modernism and feminism/gender/sexuality could be simultaneously unnecessary (e.g. already done, fully integrated into modernist studies) and not recognizable as a category of academic study. Yet, even modernist feminist critics confess that feminism/gender appears oddly “everywhere and nowhere” in nearly two decades of conference papers and publications emerging from the Modernist Studies Association (MSA) and its affiliated journal Modernism/Modernity (M/M).

Upon closer scrutiny of these and other “new modernist” venues, feminist critics note that gender issues are either largely omitted, summarily added on, or – within feminist scholarship – subsumed under modernism’s broader intellectual expansions into globalization, cultural studies, and interdisciplinarity. Feminism/gender rarely serves as a point of entry into the new modernisms, yet critics continue to do important feminist work. Indeed, ironically, as Jessica Berman observes in this issue, feminist inquiry actually “helped to make possible the transnational, along with other recent ‘turns’ … in modernist studies” and “it [tacitly] undergirds much of the best work.” Perhaps as Urmila Seshagiri suggests of the new modernism “one disciplinary process of expansion … overwhelm[ed] another.” Yet many feminist critics wary of being labeled old fashioned have felt pressured to authenticate their scholarship on women, gender, or feminist issues by establishing upfront its primary intent to illuminate other political, global, cultural, and interdisciplinary agendas. Accordingly, the gendered readings embedded (“everywhere”) in these modernist studies leave unspoken (“nowhere”) their often complexly interwoven implications, variously: for the sex/gendered constitutions of modernism; women’s roles in shaping modernity; the suppression and recovery of lost modernist women writers; or the ways in which taking gender/the body/women as a point of entry might expand and/or completely alter current definitions of modernism.

Setting aside the truth that feminist recovery work is never fully exhausted or “already done,” we have not yet witnessed an intensive, large-scale exploration of gender and modernism in literature, art, and cultural studies. With notable exceptions, the 1980s and 1990s’ surge of feminist inquiry during the self-described “post-modernist” era by definition evaded the modern period for the preferred study of Victorian, (queer) Decadent, and contemporary literature/culture/theory. Modernism was then out of fashion, equated with T.S. Eliot and the New Critics’ reactionary politics, elitism, and ahistoricism. Literary
scholars routinely disposed of the field by citing T.S. Eliot’s famous self-designation, “I am an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature and a royalist in politics.” Notably in the 1980s and 1990s, pioneering feminist critics such as Jane Marcus, Susan Stanford Friedman, Bonnie Kime Scott, Shari Benstock, and others began to explore the sex/gender politics of Anglo-American modernist women writers, including Virginia Woolf, H.D., and Gertrude Stein. Scholar/writers such as Gayatri Spivak, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldua showed us the way forward in postcolonial, African American, and ethnic studies, while Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and others pointed to new directions in social construction and gender/queer theory. However, undertaken during the postmodern era, feminist criticism of twentieth-century writers necessarily focused on uncovering the perceived postmodern progressive politics within the modern. And for feminist modernist scholars seeking jobs, publishing opportunities, or tenure in the 1990s, our best efforts lay in foregrounding the ahistorical linguistic/psychoanalytic strain of postmodernism, even as we treated uniquely modernist influences, aesthetics, culture, and historical events. Thus, at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century, it remained to conduct a large-scale feminist inquiry into an expanded conception of the modern period – its key players, political movements, aesthetics, geographies, and history.

With that (among other things) in mind, a group of us formed the Modernist Studies Association in 1999. Our first mission statement pronounced T.S. Eliot a “straw man” for a narrow, reactionary conception of modernism and broadly defined the MSA’s goal as bringing to bear on the modern period new developments in cultural, postcolonial, interdisciplinary studies with attention to issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and class (Laity, c. 2001). Immediately, works by Rita Felski and Janet Lyon among others garnered new attention to women, gender, and modern culture. Successively, the interdisciplinary and transnational, global “turns” brought an influx of women artists and culture makers worldwide into the new modernisms. However, nearly two decades later, for a variety of reasons – many attributable to the post-feminist climate – a full-scale, feminist modernist recovery has yet to occur; although modernism remains among the most popular fields of literary/cultural criticism. Following Felski’s pioneering work, new feminist modernist theories have been scarce. Moreover, particularly with respect to women’s writing, modernism has yet to witness an intensive, wide-ranging recovery of lost and underappreciated women writers. Those leading figures emerging from 1980s and 1990s’ feminist recuperative work – Virginia Woolf, H.D., and Gertrude Stein – remain the chief repositories for scholarship in Anglo/American women’s poetry and prose. (And for this reason, feminist critics working on them today may feel constrained by the perception that sex/gender approaches have “already been done.”) Despite ongoing work by Thadious Davis and others, African American women writers (and feminism) are consistently underrepresented in major modernist venues. Related to this, questions of form still exclude many women writers of all races and ethnicities from critical inquiry. Measured against Ezra Pound’s exhortation “make it new,” much women’s writing appears not “modern” enough, or paradoxically, too (quirkily) hybrid. As Kristin Bluemel and Phyllis Lassner assert in their below contribution on “inter/modernism,” “much of modern women’s writing and writing about women is interesting and important because it is not modernist in terms of style, politics, or coterie.” Modern women’s often politically driven prose may adapt traditional forms such as the regional, gothic, sentimental; or create hybrid forms, oscillating
between “high” and “low,” the experimental and the traditional. Indeed, under the weight of anti-feminist sentiment both inside and outside the academy, many feminist modernist critics confess to feeling beset by a paralyzing ennui – requiring the efforts of Madelyn Detloff’s below-described “strong armed Sisyphe,” rolling the rock up the hill once more.

Today, outside the academy, unfolding events worldwide, including the 2016 U.S. election and the current presidency, demonstrate that we are not post-feminist (or post-race). Protests such as the recent, massive 2017 Women’s March gave voice to the urgent need for a global, feminist intersectional awareness alongside issues of race, class, religion, ethnicity, and gender. Within modernist studies, during the roughly six years we floated our proposal for Feminist Modernist Studies, attention to women writers, gender, feminism, and modernism is finally gaining traction in new and existing venues.

Broadly our mission, both to pursue an in-depth, wide-ranging, rigorous feminist inquiry into modernism and to recover lost or underappreciated women writers, lies before us. And the many shapers of this journal-to-date share collectively a sense of exhilaration and celebration – per our cover image of Martha Graham dancers entitled “Celebration” – at the opportunity presented here to re-enter modernism from a sustained feminist/gendered perspective. The first journal of its kind, Feminist Modernist Studies seeks to stress theoretical, cultural, formalist, political, geographical, and archival approaches to gender, women writers, artists, and culture makers worldwide over the long twentieth century. Our scope is deliberately long, extending from the late-Victorian (1870s) through the early-twentieth-century, World War II, and Cold War periods to 1970. Drawing on our feminist critical mothers, and building on multiple open-ended definitions of modernism, we hope to provide an archive and a testing ground for new modernist scholarship. Definitions of modernism include – but are not limited to – new modernist expansions into cultural studies, interdisciplinarity, and globalism; “old” modernisms brought to bear on our feminist focus; “intermodernism’s” more political, late-modernist feminism; and any of the above definitions applied to the growing academic fields of ecology, disability, and LGBTQ studies. Our regular “Out of the Archives” section, edited by Urmila Seshagiri, extends our ongoing endeavor to recover lost or underexplored women writers. Each issue concludes with a section of formerly unpublished or untranslated work(s) introduced by a scholar(s) in the appropriate area of expertise.

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It seems fitting to introduce this inaugural issue with Adrienne Rich’s famous quotation on “re-vision” during another time of political ferment and renewed feminist protest (1971) – here as a gesture toward this issue’s dual project to re-enter a diversely defined modernism through a feminist/gendered lens and to recover underexplored modern women: “Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.”12 Broadly, the issue’s three sections bring to bear a feminist/gendered lens on the new modernism’s expansions into transnationalism, cultural and interdisciplinary studies; “intermodernist” World War II women writers; African American feminism; and issues of female/transgender embodiment. More specifically, it is worth dwelling here on the opening four position papers under “On the State of/Future of Feminist Studies,” which point to diverse ways forward from the present moment in
modernist studies (and beyond) – variously taken up by the six essays arranged under “Modern Women and Crossings” and “The Body and Embodiment.”

The first two position papers offer diverging examples of modernist feminist praxis and recovery work situated, respectively, within the new modernisms (Berman) and “inter/modernism” (Bluemel and Lassner). Jessica Berman’s “Practicing transnational feminist recovery today” identifies key challenges facing feminist, transnational critics of the new planetary modernisms before urging a feminist model for recovering women writers from the global South (drawn from her forthcoming edition of Iqbalunnisa Hussain’s 1944 novel *Purdah and Polygamy*). Surveying the largely Western legacy of 1980s “gynocriticism” and the present tendency within modernism to privilege empire over sex/gender concerns, Berman reminds us that gender and empire are “linked and intersecting critiques.” Berman’s own recovery model builds on contemporary theories of “transgender” identity, demonstrating how, within the narrative of *Purdah and Polygamy*, “Kabeer’s” independent, modernized wife “Maghbool” functions as a “trans” figure. Maghbool’s trans-body at once critiques the regimes of purdah and polygamy; makes visible Muslim women’s roles in modernizing India; and elucidates the entwined discourses of gender and empire.

By contrast, Kristin Bluemel and Phyllis Lassner’s “Feminist inter/modernist studies” urges feminist critics outside the new modernisms toward “intermodernism’s” more politically and historically specific explorations of women writers responding to World War II. Objecting to the new modernism’s stress on early-twentieth-century avant-garde experimentalism as a test of “modernism,” Bluemel and Lassner assert that “World War II and Nazi oppression compelled many women writers into new modes of expression.” Their ensuing, often politically driven forms experimented with hybrid genres associated with the gothic, fantasy and utopias; or used poetic/narrative fragmentation to evoke the wartime experience of trauma rather than avant-garde, aesthetic experimentation. Writers made visible by feminist intermodernism include Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Bowen, Storm Jameson, Phyllis Bottome, and the Holocaust poets.

The remaining two position papers both assess and offer ways to move forward from the “exhaustion” or ennui currently besetting feminist critics in LGBTQ criticism (Detloff) and African American studies (Thaggert). Madelyn Detloff’s “Strong armed Sisyphe: feminist queer modernism again … again” equates the distress enveloping queer/feminist workers today with what José Esteban Muñoz terms the minoritarian “depressive position” resulting from “historical and material contingencies that include race, gender and sex.” In particular iterations, this position can be “reparative” – cognizant of loss and insufficiency, nevertheless grounded in “love for the object.” She proposes that the queer feminist critic occupy a contiguous “Sisyphe position” in response to both the post-feminist era and “the shadow of fascism” in which “we are living and teaching” today. Detloff’s call for a strong armed, Sisyphean queer scholarship defines Sisyphe’s repetitive task of rolling the rock up the hill not as failure but a willful rebellion performed “for the love of the object.”

Similarly, Miriam Thaggert addresses the ennui specific to contemporary black scholars in “Black modernist feminism and this contemporary moment: Evie Shockley’s *the new black*.” She begins by identifying two threads appearing in current black literary scholarship: studies tracing the afterlife of slavery in African American literature and art; and those charting the significance of post-Obama America to the repetitive cycling
throughout black history of optimism followed by political/social retrenchment. Authors of these studies often express a “weariness” and “exhaustion” at the cycle of hope followed by melancholy and trauma. Noting that these provocative discussions have not fully engaged with black literary modernism, Thaggert focuses on poet Evie Shockley’s *the new black* (2011) as a feminist/modernist intervention in twenty-first-century discussions of blackness. Poems from the collection, including “my last modernist poem #4 (or re-re-birth of a nation),” trace cycles of success and retrenchment reverberating between modernism and the present – from D.W. Griffith’s classic 1915 film celebrating white supremacy, to the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance, to the lost women writers Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and Anne Spencer. While Shockley cautions against optimism, she evokes an ongoing lineage of black women writers and their fictional characters culminating in two young dark-skinned African American girls as possible “future trickster(s) of self defense.”

More briefly, within the framework suggested by these position papers, the first essay under “Modern Women and Crossings” – Rishona Zimring’s “Katherine Dunham’s Chicago stage: crossings to Caribbean négritude” – brings to bear on an African American feminism the new modernism’s attention to transnational geographies and urban space in the areas of dance and women’s life writing. Focusing on pioneering Afro-Caribbean dancer Dunham’s 1959 memoir of her childhood in Chicago, *A Touch of Innocence*, Zimring explores how Dunham kinesthetically maps the urban ghetto through the movement vocabulary of a dancer, providing a powerful critique of racism and female endangerment – even as she positions the black female body between urban confinement and Caribbean potentialities. Sarah Cornish’s “Fashion is Spinach, but style is politics: Elizabeth Hawes’s functionalist feminism” urges a socialist “intermodernist” recovery of famous fashion designer and subsequently red-flagged union activist Hawes’s books (published 1938–1941). Cornish traces the evolution in these writings of Hawes’s feminist politics from her fashion’s functionalist aesthetics to her World War II writings as a union activist. Vanessa Smith’s “Transferred debts: Marion Milner’s *A Life of One’s Own* and the limits of analysis” examines Milner’s *A Life* – a radical disciplinary- and genre-crossing attempt at psychological self-analysis written in the third person – whose title appears to borrow from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. Although she later trained as a psychoanalyst, Milner’s book proposes a mode of self-psychoanalysis that eliminates the analyst and the power relationship of transference. Part confessional memoir, Bildungsroman, and diary, with elements of mysticism and detective fiction, the book’s “transferred debts” appear to acknowledge the ambient “mood” of her foremother Woolf’s *Orlando* in its creation of “a case of one’s own.”

Essays in the final section, “The Body and Embodiment” address the still/always relevant issues related to modernist cultural constructions and feminist reconstitutions of the body/gender with attention to: queer/transmasculinities (Hovey), pregnancy and immigration narratives (Kingsley) and nude female sculpture (Waller) in the areas of film, popular culture, literature and art history. Jaime Hovey’s “Gallantry and its discontents: Joan of Arc and virtuous transmasculinity in Radclyffe Hall and Vita Sackville-West” explores modernist cultural figurations of Joan of Arc as models for a trans-man dynamic operating in the lives and works of Hall and Sackville-West. Widely popularized in film and World War II posters, Joan of Arc’s transgender dynamic associated a biological woman with masculine demeanor, strength, chivalry, and self-sacrifice for the greater
social good. Hovey explores the impact of Joan of Arc’s queer, transgender figuration on Sackville-West’s biography Saint Joan of Arc and Hall’s “Stephen” in the Well of Loneliness, including her role as a heroic fighter for queer social justice. Erin Kingsley’s “inside the centre of a circle: Olive Moore’s Spleen and gestational immigration” juxtaposes Moore’s character “Ruth’s” narrative of exile and immigration against her complex, ruptured narrative of pregnancy and childbirth. Arguing that these intersecting narratives pivot on a shuttling movement between center and periphery, Kingsley demonstrates how Spleen troubles fixed categories such as “woman,” “immigrant,” “other.” Susan Waller’s “The corset, the bicycle and the hottentot: Alexandre Falguière’s The Dancer and Cléo de Mérode’s modern feminine body” discusses the critical reception in 1896 to Falguière’s nude sculpture, modeled by rising star of ballet Cléo de Mérode, which critics labeled “deformed” and “damaged.” The figure’s proportions resonated in complex ways with discourses of dance, art, fashion, and anthropology, revealing changes in contemporary conventions governing feminine behavior many perceived as threatening.

Finally, the issue’s regular “Out of the Archives” section features Muriel Rukeyser’s formerly unpublished article “Many Keys” with an introduction by Eric Keenaghan exploring the essay’s argument for a feminist poetic “organic form,” “There is no glass woman: Muriel Rukeyser’s lost feminist essay ‘Many Keys.’”

Notes

1. Urmila Seshagiri made this comment to me when we were discussing her survey of special topics in Modernism/Modernity for her recent cluster in M/M’s Print Plus Forum, “Mind the Gap! Modernism and Feminist Praxis.”
2. Anne Fernald described gender as an “add on” in her introduction to a special issue of Modern Fiction Studies, “Women’s Fiction, New Modernist Studies and Feminism,” 229.
3. Seshagiri, “Mind the Gap!”
4. Many of us were first introduced to feminist disruptions of socially constructed female figures in Victorian literature and culture through pathbreaking works such as Gilbert and Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic or Nina Auerbach’s Woman and the Demon, which made an impressive, sweeping survey of demonic female figures in Victorian literature, art, theater, popular culture among other areas. Later in the 1990s with the rise of queer theory, Decadence was among the fastest growing fields in literary/cultural studies. See for example Linda Dowling’s Hellenism and Homosexuality and Richard Dellamora’s Masculine Desire. Many of us were reading and teaching contemporary criticism, including Adrienne Rich collections such as On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, Audre Lourde’s essays in Sister Outsider and Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua’s edition, This Bridge Called My Back.
6. H.D. was formerly known primarily as Pound’s creation and “the perfect imagist” poet of Sea Garden until Susan Stanford Friedman explored at length her career-long feminist politics and later poems in Psyche Reborn. Similarly, Jane Marcus’s exploration of Woolf’s feminism, anti-Fascism and pacifism in Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy forever changed the conception of Woolf as the high priestess of a rarefied apolitical art. See also Bennstock’s Women of the Left Bank and Scott’s edited collection The Gender of Modernism.
7. See Anzaldua and Moraga, This Bridge; Lorde’s Sister Outsider; and Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
8. See Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet and Butler’s Gender Trouble.
9. For feminist scholars working in the age of Lacan, this meant the French feminists’ and particularly Julia Kristeva’s pre-Oedipal semiotics. See for example Desire in Language.
10. See Felski, Doing Time and Lyon, Manifestoes.
11. See Davis’s most recent book on African American modernist writers, *Southscapes.*

**Notes on contributor**

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