

## American Studies and Women's Studies: Some Interconnections<sup>\*</sup>

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Before I begin, I would like to thank Professor Aruga and the members of the Japanese Association of American Studies for inviting me here today. This is my fifth trip to Japan and it is *glorious* to return again to the country I love so much, both for the kind men whom I have met there and the strong women who have become my friends over the years.

I would also like to begin with a brief anecdote. During my first trip to Japan in 1980, when I was an exchange professor at Kobe Jogakuin in the Kansai, I had the good fortune to meet several members of the Women's Studies Society of Japan. Like many Americans, I was sure that Japanese women had much to learn from American women but, fortunately, my new friends in WSSJ were patient with me. As I describe it in *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji: On Finding Myself in Japan*, they quickly "educated" me to the different ways in which Japanese women enjoy many benefits that American women do not — access to nationally subsidized child care, guaranteed maternity leave, relative safety from street violence and consequent freedom of movement, and, for many traditional Japanese women who do not work outside the home, decision-making control over family finances. It was only after I

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understood these *advantages* of the Japanese gender system that my friends in WSSJ were willing to let me talk about advantages of the system in the U.S. And then, after we had some common ground, we were able to speak frankly and openly about gender inequities in *both* of our countries and the ways in which women's studies, as an educational discipline, can help to make scholars and students aware of the ways in which inequality is encoded deeply and thoroughly in our cultures, whether Japanese or American.

It is with this caveat in mind that I wish to speak, today, about intersections between women's studies and American studies. What I would like to suggest is that women's studies — and, more politically, feminism — has, over the course of the past twenty years, inflected the discussion of American studies with a simple yet revolutionary question: "And what about the women?" Any topic posited as universal must pass this test of applicability. If a generalization about "America" does *not* apply to women, then we need what consumer advocates call "truth in labelling," an acknowledgment of the gender limits of the project.

This proposition may sound obvious enough yet its implications have changed the face of American studies in two crucial ways. First, women's studies scholars have analyzed a range of formerly neglected topics of specific concern to women and this research is now considered valid (even respectable) within the American academy at large. Second, and equally important, the theoretical questions raised by women's studies apply to *all* scholarly work. Of course it is still perfectly acceptable to do research that only concerns men but this work now must be described for what it really is — not simply "American studies" but, more particularly, "American studies about men."

That phrase "about men" makes all the difference. It underscores that a profound change has taken place, a change of the magnitude described by Stuart Hall in his influential 1980 essay "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms" and elaborated upon by Mary Poovey in her latter-day reflection on Hall, "Cultural Criticism: Past and Present" (1992). Both emphasize that the central element of groundbreaking intellectual work is a certain "untidy but characteristic unevenness of development." Intellectual revolutions are marked by "significant *breaks* — where old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes." The entrance of women's studies into the American academy in the late 1970s was precisely this kind of loose, uneven, untidy change. It marked

the beginning of a paradigm shift by which not only new forms of knowledge are being defined but also by which traditional and customary forms are being *redefined*.

What I will argue is that the second project of women's studies (that of redefinition) has been, in some ways, even more pervasive — and more controversial — than the first. Work on women can be ghettoized and ignored. But the question with which I began — “And what about the women?” — has the potential to call into question the validity of any study that (from naivete or malice) ignores it. Let me site two interesting recent examples. In the current (September 1993) issue of *American Literature*, William Andrews reviews *To Wake the Nation*, a landmark study by Eric Sundquist, a white scholar who analyzes African American literature. Andrews praises the book but devotes a substantial portion of his brief review to a serious reservation: although Sundquist skillfully analyzes ways in which black literature differs from white, his oddly exclusionary focus on African American literature only by men seriously jeopardizes the implications of his argument. Andrews suggests that it might be as careless to generalize across genders as it is across races. Does black women's literature have the same traditions as black men's, or is black women's literature more similar to white women's literature? If the latter, then is gender more powerful than race in determining literary traditions? And if so, how does this alter the import of this eloquent, exhaustive, and impeccably researched volume? The second example occurred in, of all places, *People* magazine, one of America's bestselling mass-market magazines, when a reviewer suggested that David Halberstam's encyclopedic *The Fifties* (1993) had to be supplemented with Brett Harvey's *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History* (1993). The reviewer noted, pointedly, that for all the wit and wisdom of Halbertam's tome, its odd avoidance of any serious attention to the women who lived during the Fifties made it idiosyncratic if not downright misleading.

In both the academic and the popular press, women's studies has changed American studies. And it should come as no surprise that the 1993 Program for the annual meeting of the American Studies Association reveals a number of panels that use the words “gender,” “women,” or “men” in their titles. Perhaps the prominent use of the word “men” is the most interesting development here since it foregrounds the ways in which scholars working *on men* have now realized that their work is every bit as gender-inscribed as is the work of women's studies scholars. Stuart Hall insisted in 1980 that cultural studies had changed the

paradigms of academic knowledge. Now, in 1993, I would argue that women's studies has changed what we analyze, why, and how. Analogous to the way in which American Studies has sought the interdisciplinary (or "de-disciplinary," in Cornel West's phrase), women's studies insists that we ask questions for which most of us were not trained — which means that we must also ask questions of our training.

For example, anyone interested in the history of the novel in English must take stock of Ian Watt's seminal *The Rise of the Novel* (1957). However, a women's studies perspective points up the glaring shortcoming in the book, one Watt signals himself when he notes that "until 1740 a substantial marginal section of the reading public was held back from a full participation in the literary scene by the high price of books; and further, that this marginal section was largely composed of potential novel readers, many of them women" (p. 43). For a page and a half thereafter, Watt offers many quotations to support his contention that there was a remarkable increase in women's literacy, learning, and novel-reading after 1740. After these convincing citations, he ignores the role of women as readers for the rest of his book and barely mentions women writers, even though some of the bestselling British novels of the late eighteenth century were, indeed, written by women. "Pamela, then, may be regarded as the culture-heroine of a very powerful sisterhood of literate and leisured waiting-maids (p. 47)," Watt notes but we hear nothing more of this "powerful sisterhood," except over a hundred pages later when Watt notes that "*Pamela's* success...was largely due to its appeal to the interests of women readers" (p. 151). Writing in 1975, Watt might be excused his schizophrenic tribute to and ignoring of the importance of women as writers and readers. Michael McKeon does not have the same excuse. His book, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600 - 1740*, was written in 1987. I want to say up front that McKeon has written a brilliant book. However, if Watts' decision not to write about women leads him to schizophrenia, McKeon's leads to total amnesia. Early on he dismisses early eighteenth-century accounts of the avidity of women readers on the grounds that "from Dante on, the fear that women's morals will be corrupted by reading romances is quite conventional, and its articulation at this time may provide evidence less of the rise of the reading public than of the persistence of anxiety about women" (52). Certainly McKeon is correct about anxieties but his sweeping statement is strange, to say the least. It runs counter to dozens and dozens of archival historical studies that do, indeed, confirm that women were reading and writing more in

the eighteenth century than ever before, perhaps more even than men of the eighteenth century. The most cursory glance at eighteenth-century leading library rosters shows that women were reading in great numbers. And the "Mothers of the Novel" series edited by Dale Spender and Janet Todd for Pandora Press is just the tip of a literary iceberg of eighteenth-century women's novel publishing.

How can one purport to write an overtly historical, sociopolitical, reader-oriented economic account of the rise of fiction and its reading public and not mention its most numerous practitioners (numerically, more women than men wrote novels in the eighteenth century) and, arguably, its most numerous consumers? This isn't sexism. This is *bad* literary history, pure and simple.

Henri Petter, in his *The Early American Novel* (1971), did far better in this regard than either Watt or McKeon. In fact, against the current of New Critics who insisted that James Fenimore Cooper was the "Father of the American Novel," Petter, in his more bibliographical and inclusive survey of the American novel before 1820, acknowledged that women were there — everywhere — as readers and writers. In the words of Jane Tompkins, Susanna Rowson is the "Father of the American Novel." There were many male novelists in the late eighteenth century too. Significantly, by paying attention to women, we can also see more clearly the obstacles that men were up against. As I show in *Revolution and the Words: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986), a number of early American men novelists were annoyed that novel-writing and reading was considered so much a female phenomenon. Some, like Hugh Henry Brackenridge, even exhorted their male readers to go ahead and just read a novel against all of the social proscriptions, an early example of Affirmative Action for male readers. Unlike over ninety percent of the novels written in America before 1820, *Modern Chivalry* was addressed explicitly to the male reader, not the female. And fortunately for Brackenridge, he didn't give up his day-job as a judge in favor of novel-writing: *Modern Chivalry* was a commercial failure.

Most male writers in early America took a different route, one we may call literary crossdressing. They wrote under female pseudonyms; or they wrote anonymously and *implied* that they were females addressing females; and/or (frequently it was both) they addressed their books explicitly to women, wrote about women characters, and championed the hot social causes for women of the late eighteenth century — seduction and ways in which seducers should be punished; improved female educa-

tion; and civic (female) virtue. Eighteenth-century English writers (male and female) did the same thing but neither Watt nor McKeon seems to have noticed what virtually *every* eighteenth-century writer (male even more than female, it seems) understood viscerally, economically, generically, aesthetically, and artistically. To read the eighteenth-century novel and not to see the pervasive role of women as readers, writers, or even protagonists is to *misread* what is explicit in eighteenth-century texts, whether authored by women or men.

Because women's studies remains a controversial field in many countries, I would like to make my point as clearly as possible here. I am not asking for a "feminized" or even a "feminist" approach to cultural history. I am asking for something much simpler and much more difficult: *accuracy*. Any history that excludes information simply on the basis of gender (or race or other such prejudices) cannot presume to be accurate. To return to Watt and McKeon: my admiration for their work is almost unqualified. These are two brilliant scholars. It pains me that their work — rationalized in different ways — should have a flaw, running almost like a fissure, through it. And that fissure is an unwillingness — or an inability — to account for women as readers and writers, a fissure made all the deeper by their unwillingness to admit that their studies are limited to novel-reading and writing by eighteenth-century men. If women's studies specifies its gender focus, then so also should studies related exclusively to men.

But there is a more profound problem here than simple mislabelling. Virtually all social historians (and the work of Lawrence Stone is here exemplary) have documented profound changes in the shape of the family and gender roles occurring almost concomitantly with the development of fiction as a literary form. In America, for example, literacy historians have suggested that, while white women's literacy was only about fifty percent of white men's in the 1790s, by 1850 white women's literacy equalled or surpassed that of white men, and was over ninety percent total. Equally profound are social changes documented by social historians such as Linda K. Kerber, Nancy F. Cott, and Carl N. Degler indicating that, over the same period, the birthrate in America declined by twenty-three percent (and by fifty percent before 1900), the most precipitous drop in birth rate recorded until the present era, and, before 1850, occurring without the use of any new technologies of reproductive control (such as the modern era's introduction of the birth control pill). All these historians argue that women were primarily responsible for the dramatic reduction

in family size and Degler notes that many studies have indicated that there is a correlation between the increase in female literacy and education and the decrease in fertility rates (i.e. educated women are more likely to take control of reproduction). Since the novel was one of the most popular forms of advocacy for the new ideal of the smaller nuclear family, it both reflected and, I would argue, influenced (and certainly reinforced) one of the most significant social changes of the century. Thus, to ignore the role of women in the cultural history of the nineteenth century is to write *bad* history — incomplete, biased, and inaccurate.

The origins of the novel should provide a cautionary note here. If women's role can be edited out of the beginnings of fiction, it can be edited out anywhere. But, to state the issue more positively, any historical era can profit by re-examination in light of women's studies. Abolitionism? We know Lloyd Garrison was not the only abolitionist. White women and women of color were both there — and the relationships among those groups (all the possible configurations of race and gender, not to mention class) make for an interesting, contentious, and complicated history. What about the Federal Writer's Projects of the Thirties, the first government-subsidized arts project in America? Much has been written about James Agee, Woody Guthrie, and others. But Zora Neale Hurston was also a FWP writer; Dorothea Lange and Marion Post-Walcott were both photographers subsidized through farm assistance programs to bring attention to the plight of American farmers. The whole decade of the proletarian Thirties looks different if we remember that women were there too — everyone from Meridel LeSeur in the U.S. to Dorothy Livesay in Canada. The Sixties? Black Power? The recent accounts by wives and girlfriends of some of the most important leaders in the Black Power movement complicate that particular chapter in American history as well. Indeed, no period, no subject is safe. Remembering women as producers and consumers; as shapers and dissenters; and as radical, liberal, or conservative forces in American history means that the whole study of America is wide open, with fascinating new questions that give us a better understanding of women *and* men in American history and culture.

*NOTES*

\* This is the text of Professor Davidson's address to the annual meeting of the Japanese American Studies Association on 2 April, 1994.