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Toward a Feminist Turn

KRISTA COMER

With minor editing for publication, I have let this piece stand largely as it was delivered in 2015. It seemed fitting, however, to amend a postscript. There I reflect on what I learned from the reception of this talk and others like it that I gave shortly afterward. The intervening presidential election of 2016, and the new worldwide feminist resistance set in motion by it, offer one answer to a central question posed here: What will it take to bring feminism out of the shadows? The need for less “stuck” and predictable conversations about feminism is a priority. The times call out to all feminist killjoys! —K.C.

The charge of this genealogical plenary is an “anniversary charge,” to take the long view and ask ourselves: What critical works and theoretical approaches have been important to the field of western American literary and culture study, what is important currently, and what could or should we do in the future? Those questions ask us to think about but also beyond the Western Literature Association as an organizational and intellectual enterprise.

My own interests are in feminist thought, and I make several claims. One is that it would benefit scholarship in US West studies to put feminism on the agenda not only of this fiftieth anniversary conference but especially of the future agenda of western studies. Feminist thought *as feminist thought* is not much on the table these days, and this is not a western studies phenomenon exclusively (American studies, for all its innovations, shares similar limits). Feminism’s embattlement no doubt is a sign of the postfeminist times in which we live and the chilling effect of postfeminism on political climates, including in universities. Doing feminist work, making the case for it, has gotten harder. Embattlement also owes to the complexities of feminist theory itself and its own genealogical quandaries and theoretical paradoxes. For example, is working

on “women” as opposed to “gender” theoretically naïve? That is a question, one we don’t take up in western literary studies much since “women” is usually taken for granted. I too invest in “women” as an ongoing profound social and ontological category, but, in contexts of feminist studies, one must make a case. As postfeminism lives into what looks like a third decade, many feminists ask anew in what relation we situate our work, or ourselves, to feminist studies as a field, or to explicitly feminist epistemologies? If we work on women, do we do so as feminists or as scholars of feminist studies as a discipline, or as critical race feminists, Indigenous feminists, material feminists, and what differences, in which contexts, do such distinctions make? What about feminist thought in relation to queer and/or transtheory, to studies in gender, or to masculinity?

Obviously in fifty years Americanist literary scholarship has seen a lot of critical turns, and scholarship on the West tracks in relation to them. Most of us will know recent major turns—toward “theory” and poetics, and an expansion of materials considered legitimate evidence, including popular culture and literature, diaries, visual culture; toward race and gender as analytics; toward the sociality of space; toward the transnational / hemispheric / critical regional; and recently, the turn toward comparative settler Wests, trans-Indigeneity and an ethics of refusal, and queer dwellings and rurality. Feminist work on the West has been entangled in all of them, as have “they” been entangled in and often brought about by the innovations of feminisms, including especially the work of women of color feminism and, in a related but distinct category, the work of Indigenous women and Indigenous feminism.

I want to gesture to the arc of that work and urge an invigoration of explicitly feminist thinking, even a feminist turn. The reasons to do this seem obvious. A “feminist turn” would transform studies of the West by moving in feminist directions the fields in which West study is embedded and embattled: Indigenous studies, settler theory, border theory, transnational and critical global studies, cultural geography and space/place studies. These fields have feminists in them, and yet as fields they don’t articulate themselves through feminist studies. It would also transform feminism itself by explicating what vision of knowledge or social justice it offers in

2015. A turn of this kind would deploy feminism as an opportunity for more engaged, public, methodological, and intellectual practices and would expose as weak the idea that feminism is a special interest project, a narrow identity concern. As long as feminism is made partial in this way, speaking for only this or that, another presumed center persists and operates as the real topic, the larger or more pressing “we.” A feminist turn would also retrospectively inform how we think about founding moments and field imaginaries of the organization when it began in 1965.

Consulting institutional memory as well as scholarly archives, the early years are narrated around female leaders in the organization: Mary Washington, Bernice Slote, and Helen Stauffer. All were WLA presidents between 1975–80, Slote’s papers are housed at the University of Nebraska; she wrote about Willa Cather. She wrote poetry. I could not find much about Mary Washington, but Helen Stauffer will be remembered as a Mari Sandoz scholar and a mentor. Like Slote, Stauffer was interested in women writers who took up issues of violence, sexuality, and gender in relation to aesthetics. Lawrence Lee, also a president, published *Women, Women Writers, and the West*, a book of collected essays in 1979. I remember finding that book as a graduate student in the mid-1990s and writing Larry Lee, who responded kindly about helping along my work. Ann Ronald, the Edward Abbey scholar, environment scholar, and among our strongest leaders, was WLA president in 1984. Ronald has been a feminist friend to many, including me. Activities of mentoring, and scholarship on women writers, constitute feminist legacies.

Feminism as an explicit critical approach arrived with Annette Kolodny and Melody Graulich—both then at the University of New Hampshire. Kolodny’s work brought force and depth, with *Lay of the Land* (1975) and *The Land Before Her* (1984), as well as with her classic statement “Dancing through the Minefield” (1980). Kolodny’s monographs cleared the table with a kind of one-two punch of, first, a field-transforming critique of the “land as woman” metaphor and, next, a remapping of the earlier period through texts by settler women. Kolodny posed metaquestions about the complex powers for storytelling of female fantasy

and desire alongside crucial questions about how to theorize across race/Indigeneity when archival sourcing and scholars' skills did not match. Kolodny's theoretical work in "Dancing" was equally important: there she laid out the ongoing concerns of feminist scholarship: the interface of theory and practice, the risk and rewards of diverse methodologies, the game-changing claim that all knowledges are situated. From emphases on sexual stereotyping and "image critique," feminism moves rapidly to the insight, as Kolodny writes, that "literature [is] a social institution; embedded not only within its own literary traditions, but also within the particular physical and mental artifacts of the society from which it comes" (4). "Everything has been thrown into question," Kolodny tells us, "Our established canons, our aesthetic criteria, our interpretative strategies, our reading habits, and most of all, ourselves as critics and as teachers" (2).

Melody Graulich's theoretical interests emphasized issues of authorship and literary publics. A Mary Austin authority who recovered *Cactus Thorn*, and the editor for many years of *Western American Literature*, Graulich published extensively in feminist journals and in edited books about women's literature and gender and race issues as they inform history, readership, and visual culture. It was Graulich's work about Wallace Stegner's legacy that I first read as a graduate student, and it was her I went to visit in New Hampshire from nearby Providence, Rhode Island, searching for and finding feminist friendship about being from the West.

In the same early 1980s to early 1990s period, feminist historians, too, were occupied with histories unknown and unreflected in field paradigms. But historians had a larger critical mass in universities than did critics, and they immersed their work directly in questions of race and in histories of conquest—texts with clear if loose western geographies like *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) found discussion in western history more than in literary study (Moraga and Anzaldúa). Judging from how many historians linked their work to prominent contemporary civil rights and Indigenous writers, literature (though rarely criticism) seemed to set a new standard in the present for how feminist historians might conceive the past. If feminist literary critics pondered the viability of a "fe-

male aesthetic,” women’s “counter-traditions,” and “resisting readerships,” historians worked toward a cross racial “Women’s West” (Armitage and Jameson), a West of networks and cross border kin circuits (Deustch), a queered cultural space and homosocial everyday world (S. Johnson). New Western feminist historians centered the importance of Chicana, Asian American, and Indigenous women’s presence to theories of conquest and race formation and white womanhood (Ruiz and DuBois; Pascoe; Jacobs).

Significantly, decolonial thought in this period erupts explicitly from Indigenous feminists (Trask; Smith; Mihesuah), and Chicana feminists (Perez; Sandoval), though little makes its way into the confluence of feminist critical geographies that mark a pivot point toward studies of the twentieth century and contemporary cultural scenes. The civil rights critical race paradigm holds sway. Still, this confluence allows for new feminist work in US West literature and culture (Comer, “Landscapes”; Georgi-Findlay; Norwood and Monk), film (Tompkins), border geographies (Brady), critical Pacific study (Lowe), and critical theory (Campbell). Masculinity becomes a serious topic (Mitchell; M. Johnson), as does heteronormativity (Handley). Just as quickly, though, questions of national and transnational crossings, as well as of globalization and its remapping of world politics, suddenly alter how regions function relative to nations. Feminist perspectives find themselves again in the margins (Soto). Steve Tatum’s work on postregions, taking off in part from Spivak and theorizing the vulnerability of subaltern women’s labor—grapples with the change. And it’s *this* critical regional shuffling of the world order, and with it the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, that brings questions of sovereignty so prominently to the political fore. No longer feeders of or peripheries to national financial metropolises, regions under globalization band together into economic and political blocs, like NAFTA, CAFTA, and the EEC. This changed situation governs cultural and social life in the present and is a major context out of which recent theoretical keywords of the field have been produced: “critical regionalism,” “postwestern,” and, judging from its currency, “sovereignty.” What relation do any of these new emergent analytics have to feminist thought?

Let me hold off on answering that question a moment to appreciate what we have on hand here at this conference. There is no absence of “women writers” broadly conceived, and certainly many approaches to women’s cultural production, including gender/sexuality and notably, for this conference, Indigenous approaches, including LeAnne Howe’s Tribalography. We have scholars like Jane Hafen, Susan Bernardin, Lisa Tatonetti, Joanna Hearne, and more recently Kirby Brown and, of course, Chad Allen to thank for this. And it is a huge accomplishment, fifty years in the making, to center Indigeneity at this conference.

As a kind of self-checking exercise, I went through the conference program with a yellow highlighter. There is a clear presence of individual papers and whole panels organized around gender, women, sexuality, masculinity, intergenerationality, and what we might broadly term “intersectionality” (class, race, gender-entwined analyses). But there is also a near-total absence of the term “feminism” or explicit conversations in panel and paper titles with the larger theoretical apparatus of feminist studies, critical race feminisms, intersectional feminisms, or Indigenous feminism. I have noted this absence at the WLA over the last few years, noted it in titles and in paper content and to some degree in my own work. Clearly a feminist impulse is in my mind, it’s likely in others’ minds, and at times it is made explicit: for instance, in president-elect Linda Karrell’s call for feminist and queer studies approaches for WLA Bozeman 2016. Clearly it’s prominent either now or in the past, for works of many scholars here, including Judy Nolte Temple, Audrey Goodman, Susan Kollin, Victoria Lamont, Christine Bold, Cathryn Halverson, Kayann Short, Priscilla Ybarra, and Randi Tanglen. Advanced graduate students and recent PhDs seem committed to and well trained in feminist directions too: including Paul Wickelson, Will Lombardi, Brittany Henry, Lorena Guthereau, Elena Valdez, Julie Williams, Scott Pett, and Elisa Bordin at the University of Verona, as well as Merche Albert from the University of Basque Country, who traveled last year to the United States to spend five months studying with me, specifically about feminism. And yet we are not regularly bringing attention to and prioritizing or practicing citation of our feminist genealogies.

What would it take to bring feminism out of the shadows?

One: The effort needed is collective and cannot be the province of a single scholar or single period or field. So, how to set in motion this sea change? Two: How shall we distinguish work on women from work within feminist studies, including work with texts by women of color as distinct from working from critical race feminist approaches? Three: How can practices and epistemologies of engagement (praxis) so central to the founding of feminist thought serve as innovations that create productive methodological openings and highlight “West” as the contested space it is? Four: How can an archive of materials that knows something about and explicitly cares about women’s lives and feminist questions figure as evidence (as it does not now) for the claims made through the conceptual keywords of our field? My own work of recent years responds to that question (“Thinking Otherwise”; “Place and Worlding”). Five: How can those who wish to do so engage the limits of certain fields, for instance the field of transnational studies in American studies, by taking seriously the feminist concerns of postcolonial, Native, and critical race and Latin Americanist scholars? Finally: What can we contribute to theorizations of place, critical regionalism, and sovereignty? This critical site with such important material effects and anchor points remains a key area, since scholarship in general undertheorizes place, if it is theorized at all, or sees “place” as naïve, “local,” “parochial.” Between material feminism, Indigenous theories of place, critical race postpositivism, and newer work in feminist/queer dwelling, there is a lot to work with in order to move in directions of decolonial Wests.

Postscript. Looking back, I did not anticipate the stir this piece would generate, the whispered hallway conversations after the fact in which people took me aside, anxiously, to express like-minded but secret and seemingly illicit solidarities. This tone carried on after WLA in other talks and other Q and A’s. Clearly it was feminism, the “f” word, setting people off—its instant associations with white Eurofeminisms or with feminism as a form of settler whiteness, even when those feminisms were not ascendant in the genealogies that had just been addressed. Certainly, the anxiety about

white feminisms is not new; it matters, and white feminisms have much to answer for. At the same time, a predictability or reactive discursive dominant about the compromises of feminism has come often to preclude more considered thinking, and that reactivity is a problem.

Back to the question: What would it take to bring feminism out of the shadows? The crisis of the 2016 election, and the feminist mobilization and worldwide Women's Marches of 2017, offer ongoing answers. A certain malaise and fatigue—generated by twenty years of battling postracial and postfeminist neoliberal orders—has been interrupted. Amid these changed circumstances, where will critics and engaged scholars stand in relation to producing knowledge? Critical disinterest is not neutral or benign since it lends itself to larger postfeminist silences and misinformation. Torpedoing feminism as always white is not by definition antiracist or progressive. It may be “just” antifeminist; and it also may be an erasure of women of color feminisms.

The scale of mobilization witnessed in the Women's Marches is hardly spontaneous. Some of its histories are visible in this essay. As genealogies go, this piece has limits—if one wants a critical history of the field in its engagement with women writers, Victoria Lamont's stellar synthetic article “Big Books Wanted” is a go-to reference. It's generally compatible with this one, even as I have tried here for something else: for challenging the absence of feminist analytic frames and asking how we unframe what we have and, in that process, shift the field and the spaces called “West.” When feminism is continually criticized and reconstituted as “white feminism,” what Other feminisms are sacrificed? Can we stop dooming feminism, expecting perfection not expected of other major complicated liberation projects, to see what is on offer instead?

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