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Feminism and Feminist Scholarship Today

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RACHEL BLAU DUPLESSIS

Though I am a little shy of pointing this out so baldly, I come from a generation that helped to make a canon revolution in the university and in general culture—and I bring work to this table that contributed to that shift within twentieth-century Anglo-American studies. I am interested in maintaining what I have called feminist reception (gender-inflected reception of texts), though I am agnostic on feminist production—meaning any works that tell you how you should think. Interesting writing, interesting poetry is more complicated and less monochromatic than that.

If you want to make a canon revolution, time your life so you emerge professionally at a time of intense social change where—whether or not you are ready to make a cultural intervention or trained in how to do it—you just have to, and so you will! That’s a generalization from my generational experience. That is, my interests in gender, in modernist women, and in an array of poets were motivated by massive, staggering intellectual discontent that had a historical and social dimension. The best I can delineate several quickly overlapping moments that add up to my version of “the sixties” would be, first, a consciousness that the current, happening shifts in contemporary US poetries were NOT a feature of anything like my later undergraduate or graduate training. “The” university—my zone of choice—was at that point indifferent to or ignorant of the breakthrough Donald Allen anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960), put out by the popularity of *Howl* (1956 on), and ignorant of the reverberations of such work as Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” (1950), or even of later long poems by Pound and Williams. This (poetry) is where I began. Second, there was a generational increase of consciousness about the American War in Vietnam (to give it that name...) and its basis in massive lies, especially during the period of escalation in 1964-67. We all felt that public language was filled not with fact but with ideology (in Theodor Adorno’s definition), overcome with obfuscation, disinformation, and manipulation, and saturated in assumptions that had to be deconstructed for the health of citizens and the polis.

Indeed, in one of the first courses in Freshman Composition that I taught (at Columbia College in Columbia University, as one of the first three women preceptors allowed to teach in the English Department there), I analyzed *New York Times* news stories of—for example—the secret use of nerve agent VX (at the Dugway Proving Grounds, a biological, chemical, and radiological warfare testing site in Utah), a fact suddenly revealed when a lot of sheep died (almost 7000); and that was political allegory, too. Third, as I have elaborated in *Blue Studios: Poetry and its Cultural Work* (2006), with the growth of African-American political and cultural consciousness, there came the ancillary realization of female second-class civic status. In the university zone, this propelled both cultural and economic/political consciousness within that professional identity. For example, the fact that few women authors had been part of my required curriculum as an undergraduate or graduate student led to my curiosity and interests in rectification (once the canard of “but there was no one good enough” had been rejected as mystification). So after a dissertation on long poems by Pound and Williams (reflecting the first realization about poetry), I passed to the analysis of gender and ideology, by preference now using Raymond Williams’s dialectical definition. I became part of that new field of what was eventually called women’s studies. I have spent a good deal of my career in feminist analyses of culture and cultural products.

The intensity of revolutionary realizations emergent in that 1970-1990s cultural and political turn may not be as actively felt now. Still, there are many currents of great political and cultural liveliness.

Commitments are passionate, but there is something that differs from the moment of the sixties. Cross-national studies of many kinds (including postcolonial), class interests and struggles, renewed interests in religious cultures, the politics of exclusion and inclusion around ableist issues and a post-ableist set of realizations about networks of care in which we all are implicated, queer studies, and some of the political and ethical issues around the environment that propel ecological works and therefore criticism are all current centers of intense thought and action. Genders (including maleness and masculinity in this area), sexualities, and ethnicities were put on the agenda not by theory first (though thinking was involved!) but by praxis first, sometimes innocent but driven, and then by theory, with a strong sense of necessity. In my view, only a loop between action, choices, and practices and theory (including self-critique and evaluation) can bring about helpful continuations and changes in both a cultural and an extended field. So what now is the task? Pluralism and diversity are to be maintained and expanded by using the lessons of that efflorescence, though not so much by its emphasis on fixed identity groups but on the historicity of cultural products and their responsiveness both to the moment in which they were conceived and written and to our moment. A driven and excited intermix of cultural and political/social struggles brought us here; those origins need to be acknowledged. Such a dialectical loop between theorizing and practices needs continually to be active in a critical and “negative” way, not a positive and affirmative way. This is my feminist hope.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis is a feminist critic and scholar with a special interest in modern and contemporary poetry, as well as a poet and essayist. Her many books include *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (1990) and *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work* (2006).