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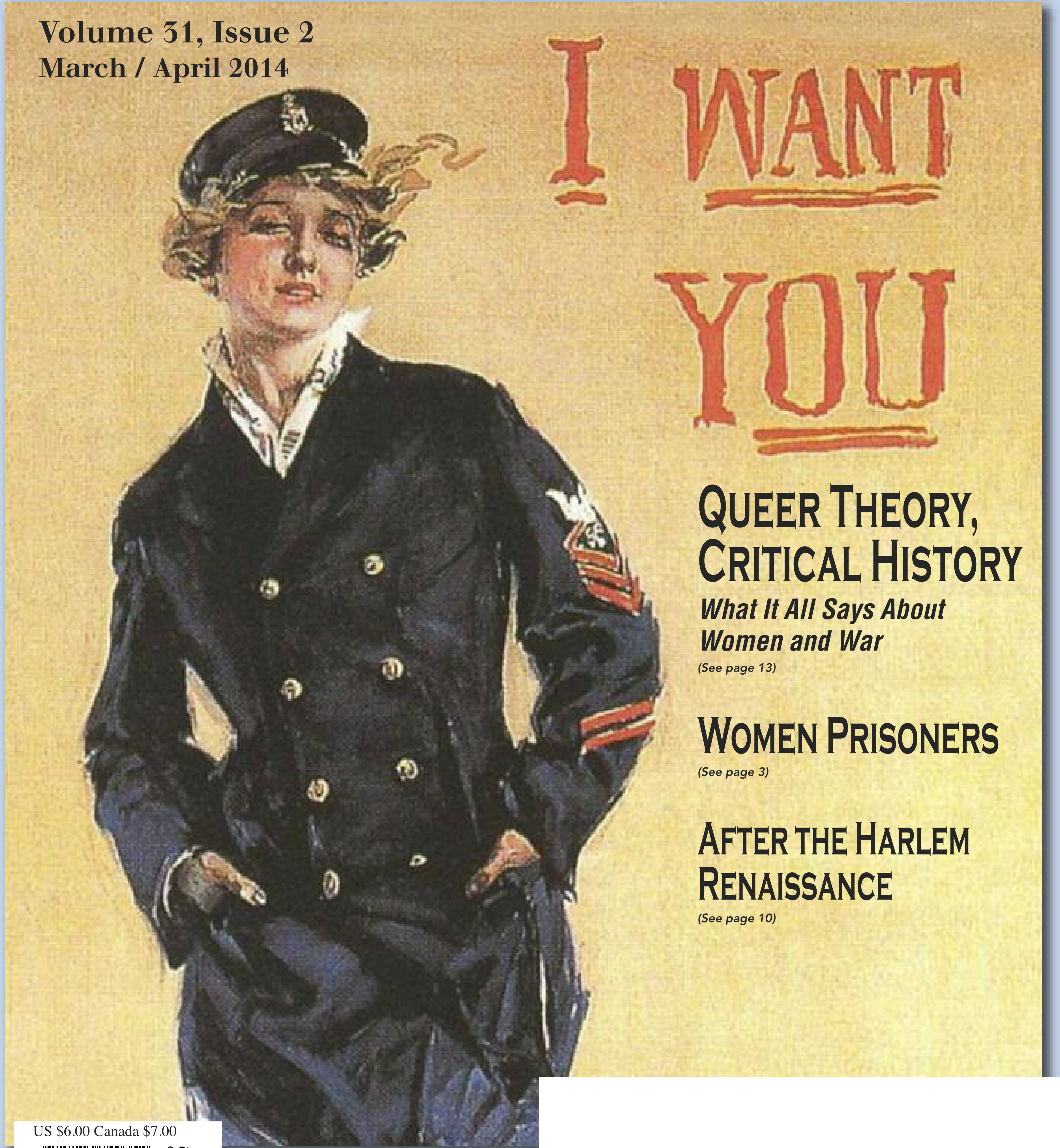

QUEER THEORY, CRITICAL HISTORY

What It All Says About Women and War

(See page 13)

WOMEN PRISONERS

(See page 3)

AFTER THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

(See page 10)

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Cover image: United States Navy recruiting poster, World War I.

LETTERS

Mistaken Identity

Anna Bahlmann

I was so pleased, and honored, to see a review of my book, *My Dear Governess*, in *Women's Review of Books* (January/ February 2014), and by such a fine Wharton scholar as Carol Singley. As a long-time reader of *Women's Review of Books*, I am gratified to have my book noticed there. I feel compelled to let you know, however, that the photograph you called "Anna Bahlmann" is actually of Lydia Abbot Bahlmann, Anna's sister-in-law. Regrettably, it has been for a long time mislabeled at the Beinecke Library, a problem that I hope is now resolved. I am attaching a picture of Anna Bahlmann, whom you will see is much softer and sweeter looking.

Warm wishes,
Irene Goldman-Price
Great Barrington, MA

Calling Attention to Rape

As I finished writing a history of the local rape crisis center from which I retired a few years ago, I was pleased to read Marianne Wesson's review (January/February 2014) of two books I cited in my introduction, *Rape is Rape: How Denial, Distortions, and Victim Blaming Are Fueling a Hidden Acquaintance Rape Crisis*, by Jody Raphael, and *Up Against a Wall: Rape Reform and the Failure of Success*, by Rose Corrigan My focus was on the books' subtitles which suggest, as did Wesson, that the more things change in rape crisis work, the more they stay the same. Politicians are now defeated when they make outrageous statements about rape. Sexual violence in all its forms is also more likely to receive media coverage than in the early days of feminism. What we continue to see, however, are many news articles about the pervasiveness of rape in this country and around the world, and the prevalent tendency to still blame the victims of these crimes. Even children are blamed for the sexual abuse they experience. I appreciate the work of authors who call attention to this issue, and the article in *WRB*, both of which call attention to rape.

Kathy Walker
Hampden, ME

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Incurable

Breaking Women: Gender, Race, and the New Politics of Imprisonment

By Jill A. McCorkel

New York: New York University Press, 2013,
271 pp., $23.00, paperback

Reviewed by Susan Sered

America's "race to incarcerate" (the title of a 1999 book by Marc Mauer, the executive director of the Sentencing Project) is a strikingly racialized national project—the "new Jim Crow," in author Michelle Alexander's words (*The New Jim Crow*, 2010). Alexander adds that "[m]ass incarceration is also a highly gendered national project." Far more men than women are incarcerated; men overall are incarcerated for longer sentences than women; men—in particular black men—are more likely than women to be stopped and frisked by law enforcement officers; and women inmates are substantially more likely than male inmates to have experienced sexual abuse and to live with chronic mental and physical illnesses. In all, writes Alexander, approximately 2.2 million people are currently in the nation's prisons and jails, and around 7 million Americans are under some form of correctional supervision, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Though women remain more likely than men to engage with the "benevolent" arms of the state—such as welfare and Medicaid—rather than its punitive ones, throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the rate of incarceration of women—and dramatically, of black women—has increased more rapidly than the rate of incarceration of men. During the past few years, male incarceration rates have gone down nationally, while female incarceration rates have mostly held steady—except for the rate of incarceration of white women, which is going up. This (albeit very partial) closure of the prison gender gap does not mean that women's and men's carceral experiences are the same. On the contrary, gender serves as the core organizing principle of prisons—as well as of homeless shelters, rehabilitation programs, and many welfare programs. Within correctional institutions, gender segregation is taken for granted; gendered messages are taught, drilled and expected to be internalized; and gendered standards for appropriate behavior are enforced.

While the structural inequalities of racism and sexism remain foundational to American society, the ways in which they are articulated change. In the early 1990s and again in the mid 2000s, Lynne Haney carried out studies of community-based residential facilities for women offenders, documenting how the ideological orientation as well as the day-to-day functioning of the programs became more restrictive. (See her *Offending Women: Power, Punishment, and the Regulation of Desire*, 2010.)

By the mid 2000s, the emphasis had switched away from teaching women job skills so that they could become independent, in line with the requirements of "welfare reform" as codified in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconci-liation Act (PRWORA). Instead, programs emphasized therapeutic counseling and learning to lose the so-called victim mentality. In these programs women were told that their illness (addiction) was due to their gender: to having been sexually abused, to having failed to learn healthy ways to express their anger, and to putting others' needs before their own. The goal of treatment—recovery—centered on learning to recognize and acknowledge one's many flaws: codependency, battered women's syndrome, and other gender-specific emotional propensities.

In *Breaking Women*, Jill McCorkel presents her observations and analysis of an experimental, privately run drug-treatment program for women, Project Habilitate Women (PHW), which pushes the gendered therapeutic rhetoric in a new direction. Drawing on a decade of ethnographic work inside a women's prison, she describes an intense, all-encompassing regime based on the notion that women addicts suffer from "diseased selves" that must be "broken down" (hence the title of the book), but that can never be fully mended. Unlike traditional rehabilitation, which assumes that people can fundamentally change, "[i]n habilitation … there is no hope that prisoners will become self-governing, rational, and autonomous subjects," writes McCorkel. Rather than cure, the aim of the program is to encourage women to acknowledge their fundamental disease, surrender to the program, and accept that treatment can at best keep their disorders at bay.

The move toward this sort of essentialist view of female criminality took place, McCorkel points out, as black women came to greatly outnumber white women in many prisons. Gender and racial essentialisms merged: as the black woman became "typical," the woman prisoner was no longer viewed as vulnerable and victimized (white) but rather as criminal and bad (black). Tellingly, in my home state of Massachusetts, where the large majority of residents both in and out of prison are white, the dominant prison discourse still casts women as suffering from illness and violence, not as incorrigible law breakers.

McCorkel does a superb job of bringing individual women to life for the reader, while simultaneously developing a strong and always readable theoretical analysis. In the culture of PHW, the diseased self has a broad range of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social deficits, including unconventional lifestyles and "confused" values. The holistic disease of addiction requires holistic cures. Thus, at frequent group therapy sessions,

> **"The staff call the women names; they are "Crack Whores, Bad Mothers, and Welfare Queens," writes McCorkel. The purpose of these insults is to bring "diseased" attributes to the surface so the inmates will recognize them."**

women are pressed to confess their "diseased" thoughts and actions. In public rituals of humiliation they are encouraged to hurl hurtful comments at a chosen target, ostensibly for her own good. The staff call the women names; they are "Crack Whores, Bad Mothers, and Welfare Queens," writes McCorkel. The purpose of these insults is to bring "diseased" attributes to the surface so the inmates will recognize them. Motherhood is especially targeted, with counselors repeatedly telling women (many of whom struggled for years to care for and protect their children from violent men and the ravages of impoverished neighborhoods) that their greatest crime is the harm they inflict on their children. They can't be "real" mothers, they are told, because they are addicts—an identity that supersedes all others. The women's sexuality is similarly criticized. They are told that the only positive sexuality is to be found in long term, monogamous, heterosexual relationships—an ideal that necessarily eludes women who are locked up in single-gender prisons and who (in many cases) were forced into sex work to survive.

Habilitation, as opposed to rehabilitation, uses surveillance, confrontation, and discipline to break down the self. In many ways, PHW and similar programs teach women to distrust not only themselves but also one another. McCorkel writes, "Toward the end of PHW's first year of operation, handmade posters and signs began to appear on doors and walls around the unit. The posters featured a painting of a large, blue eye with stenciled or handwritten lettering that read, "EVERYWHERE YOU GO, EVERYTHING YOU DO, KNOW THAT SOMEONE IS WATCHING YOU." In an especially powerful passage, she describes how each week a particular woman is singled out for enhanced surveillance with a note placed on her cell door so that all will know. One of the prisoners with whom McCorkel developed a long-term relationship explains, "Girls in here started dropping out like crazy and they [staff] wanted us to take responsibility for it. Like we're going to watch each other, everyone is a snitch. … Like they say, there are no friends in treatment."

Because she established such long-term relationships with some of the women, McCorkel was able to delve into the question of resistance to the Big Brother culture of PHW—although she acknowledges the limited power of the women to change their circumstances. Of the 74 prisoners she interviewed, thirteen reported that they at least temporarily "surrendered" to habilitation and completed the program. They used language such as "renting out your head" to describe the process. Even among the women who did graduate, just over half said that they rejected the program's core philosophy and that they made it through by faking it. Some women purposely broke the rules so that they could be expelled, since there was no mechanism for voluntarily leaving the program. They chose to go into the general prison population rather than remain in the ostensibly more benevolent PHW. In follow-up conversations held with the women several years post-release, McCorkel found that for the most part they had resisted the construction of the diseased self that they had been taught in PHW. At the same time, she learned how little in their lives had changed for the better: they were still poor, still marginalized, and still struggling and not even really scraping by.

Throughout the book McCorkel draws comparisons between PHW and twelve-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA). Like AA and NA, PHW identifies the individual self as the source of addiction; attributing one's problems to outside factors or social forces is dismissed as "denial." And, as in AA and NA, in PHW the addict is fundamentally flawed and will always need supervision and control (though in twelve-step programs that supervision is voluntary and shared, unlike in PHW). But that is where the similarities end. For McCorkel, the PHW assessment of addiction is a fundamentally a moral claim, which, she argues, distinguishes it from the less problematic AA understanding of addiction as an "allergy." (In the introduction to the AA "bible," the *Big Book* [1939], the organization's founder, Dr. Bob, considers alcoholism to be an allergy. However, the term "disease" is now commonly used in twelve-step literature and meetings.)

To my mind, it would strengthen McCorkel's argument to place PHW and twelve-step programs in the wider context of moral crusades *cum* health movements in the United States. The discourse preceding and supporting Prohibition, for instance, framed alcohol as a public health problem as well as a threat to American moral values. Alcoholics Anonymous grew out of the Oxford Group, a Christian fellowship espousing the view that sin is a contagious disease driven by individual self-centeredness. Building on the Oxford Group's theology and practices, the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous rest on the notion that alcoholism is a spiritual disease that requires the spiritual remedy of accepting one's limitations and turning to a higher power for help. This seamless integration of medicine and morality is deeply embedded in American culture, in which, as Susan Sontag has argued, sick people are blamed for causing their own illnesses through their irresponsible, promiscuous, or undisciplined behavior.

Coercive therapies such as PHW, McCorkel argues, are not alternatives to traditional forms of punishment but rather gendered extensions of them. Thus, while PHW claims to emphasize treatment over punishment, it in fact "collapse[s] the distinction between treatment and punishment," writes McCorkel. In many ways, medicalization and criminalization are two sides of the same phenomenon: both define and manage socially unwanted behaviors as expressions of personal flaws rather than as manifestations of social, economic, racial, and environmental inequalities and degradation.

The United States boasts not only the highest rate of incarceration in the world but also the highest rate of prescription drug use. One in five adults currently takes a psychotropic medication; in 2010 Americans spent $16 billion on legal antipsychotics, $11 billion on antidepressants, and $7 billion on drugs to treat ADHD (according to Brendan L. Smith, "Inappropriate Prescribing," in the *American Psychological Association* journal, June 2012). Here in Massachusetts, where more than half of incarcerated women are charged with a drug-related offense, 56 percent are treated with psychiatric medication in prison (The figures for male inmates is seventeen percent, according to "Massachusetts Department of Correction Prison Population Trends," 2011). PHW discourages the use of psychiatric medication, so it does not figure prominently in *Breaking Women,* but since it is such a central (and highly profitable) part of the treatment/corrections nexus, it will be interesting to see if similar programs embrace medication as part of the habilitation arsenal.

Breaking Women is a timely book. As much of the country has begun to move away from the "race to incarcerate" for a variety of reasons, including the high financial cost of keeping millions of Americans locked up, public conversations contrast "treatment"—benevolent, scientific, cost-effective and progressive—and "punishment"—mean-spirited, violent, racist, and a failure at reducing recidivism. Well-suited to broad neoliberal political and economic policies, including the move toward privatizing social services, programs such as PHW are becoming national models, despite the fact that they show no evidence of successful outcomes by any accepted measure. As McCorkel points out, the incurable, disordered self that will always need supervision and treatment is very profitable indeed for the private companies that provide an increasing portion of correctional and welfare services nationally.

Susan Sered is professor of Sociology at Suffolk University. Her books include ***What Makes Women Sick: Maternity, Modesty and Militarism in Israeli Society*** (2000); ***Uninsured in America: Life and Death in the Land of Opportunity*** (2005); and ***Can't Catch a Break: Gender, Jail, and the Limits of Personal Responsibility*** (forthcoming.)

Growing Up Right

Wrapped in the Flag:
A Personal History of America's Radical Right

By Claire Conner

Boston: Beacon Press, 2013, 264 pp., $29.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Kathleen Blee

In *Wrapped in the Flag,* Claire Connor recounts the pain of growing up in a household in which "all reason went out the window," as her parents slid further into the John Birch Society (JBS). Night after night, the family's living room was filled with conspiracy-minded adults determined to expose the network of Communists and internationalists that controlled the world. Their work was too important to be disturbed, even by the children, who were left to fend for themselves.

By the age of thirteen, Conner herself felt the tug of the radical right. Prodded by a mother who insisted that "we're doing this for you, young lady" and a father who brandished a JBS membership application, Conner officially became a Bircher. But her place in this political world was fragile. It was Conner, not the adults, who would be called away from meetings to tend to the younger children. The image is a haunting one. While her parents swap conspiracy tales with their fellow Birchers downstairs, Conner remains upstairs drying her toddler sister's body cast.

Wrapped in the Flag contains several stories. On one level, it is a painful memoir of neglect, laying out the resentment and confusion of a child whose mother seems more devoted to strangers than to her own children. Remembering her mother's battles with Chicago's schools over alleged Communist messages in textbooks, Conner recalls that "as my mother devoted more and more time to save 'the children,' she had less and less time for her children." This fits a common criticism of women activists on the right. Her mother, like Phyllis Schlafly and Sarah Palin in a later generation, is taken to task for the hypocrisy of claiming to save American families while being oblivious to the needs of their own.

Yet Conner's grievance is deeper, rooted in the uncomfortable memories of a childhood on the political margins. "For me, life would be perfect if my

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mother and dad gave up their politics and embraced the suburban life." Children of leftist activist parents often temper the hurt of being different with pride that their families stood up for moral principles. Many also find their parents' political efforts vindicated by the passage of time. Such compensations don't exist for the child of Bircher parents. The JBS's paranoia and nonsensical claims, including the purported Communist leanings of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, cemented its reputation as fringe group of political crackpots and made it the subject of continual exposés in the media. Even ardent conservatives found that distancing themselves from the JBS could bolster their own political legitimacy. All this left Conner no way to find merit in her parents' politics. Worse, she worried that her worst fears about them might be true, even that her father and his JBS comrades may have played a part in the assassination of President John Kennedy.

Conner moved from her parents' house in Chicago to the college they demanded she attend (but wouldn't pay for) in Dallas and into marriage and motherhood in Wisconsin. Along the way, she struggled to free herself from the weight of her JBS-obsessed parents and the avalanche of negative publicity their political efforts attracted. She struggled alone. "What happened to us kids ... [was] not on anybody's radar," she writes.

On another level, *Wrapped in the Flag* is an insider story of one of America's largest and most secretive radical right movements. At its peak, the JBS enlisted an estimated 80,000 official members with a much larger network of sympathizers, likely in the millions. Despite the vast number of people who were in and around the JBS in its heyday, very little is known about how it worked. The JBS always operated largely out of the public eye. It issued denunciations of school officials, Supreme Court judges, and government officials whom it considered agents of the Communist conspiracy. And it mustered its troops to support selected candidates, most notably Barry Goldwater, the Republican nominee for president in 1960. Such efforts were hatched in secret meetings of JBS leadership and enacted in gatherings carefully shielded from outside view.

By taking us into the Bircher meetings in her parents' house, Conner shines a fresh light on this chapter of radical rightist politics. For one thing, she shows that women like her mother were central to the spread of JBS ideas. Most accounts of the JBS focus on male leaders such as its highly visible founder Robert Welch. (Although there is speculation that women made up a good portion of its membership, this is difficult to verify because the JBS—still active, headquartered in Wisconsin—has been unwilling to release membership rolls or other records.) Conner depicts her mother as an energetic activist on her own account, not merely a pawn of her father or other JBS men. Fueled by her beliefs in strict Catholicism and strict conservatism, Conner's mother helped build a significant JBS chapter in Chicago. And she took firm action on her beliefs, unafraid to be seen as an annoyance even to officials in Conner's Catholic schools. To Conner, her mother's persistent effort to rid schools of all Communist influence was embarrassing. For the JBS, her tactics could be quite effective.

Conner's insider perspective also illuminates links among movements of the radical right over time. Histories of the American right after World War II commonly break at 1970. Before that date, a hierarchical Old Right preached the politics of nationalism, free enterprise, and support for the financial and political elites. After 1970, a more grassroots New (Christian) Right emerged that was energized by social issues. Conner's account suggests that it is misleading to overstate the divide between the old and new right. Her mother's efforts to cleanse school textbooks of Communist influence acquainted her with Norma and Mel Gabler, who became infamous with their campaign to impose conservative values on the textbooks approved for schools in Texas and elsewhere. Textbook politics also brought her mother into contact with Phyllis Schlafly, who subsequently headed the successful effort to block passage of the federal Equal Rights Amendment. Conner's parents were part of a shift to more orthodox Catholicism that opposed Communism, large government, and social-gospel Christianity, and favored business and just war; this helped usher in later Catholic-led efforts to criminalize abortion and block rights for sexual minorities. They also became involved with an American Party candidate who was exposed as a recruiter for the antigovernment Posse Comitatus, which subsequently was at the forefront of today's patriot/militia movement.

"Conner shines a fresh light on this chapter of radical rightist politics. For one thing, she shows that women like her mother were central to the spread of John Birch Society ideas."

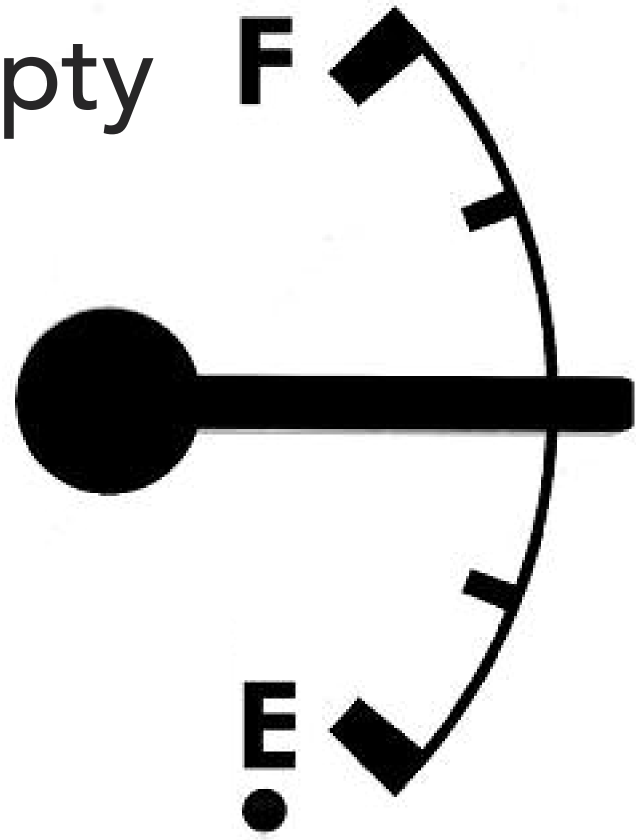
Perhaps the most compelling aspect of *Wrapped in the* Flag is its glimpse into the world of right-wing conspiracy thinking. Conner shows that conspiracies were everywhere in the world of the JBS, whose members needed no evidence to believe in them. In fact, the circularity of conspiratorial ideas meant that lack of evidence only confirmed the power of the conspirators to hide their actions. When the anti-Communist crusading Senator Joe McCarthy died, he must have been murdered by unnamed enemies. Racial segregation was a conspiracy of the Antichrist. Wars were sparked by the Illuminati, a secret society held responsible for a diverse set of historical events including world depressions and the French and Russian revolutions. Sometimes conspiracy thinking could lead to surprising conclusions. Since Birchers believed that Communists dominated US foreign policy, they concluded that the Vietnam War must be wrong, a logic that positioned them with quite unlikely allies.

Conspiratorial ideas, and the fear with which they are associated, connect the JBS to more extreme and violent fringes of the radical right. Conner's book has many revealing examples of this bridge. A founding member of Chicago's chapter of the JBS was a Holocaust denier; under his influence, Conner's parents flirted with the idea that the Holocaust wasn't so bad, that its negative image was contrived by powerful Jews themselves. The Southern-born Robert Welch fomented fear that race riots were the inevitable result of the changing terrain of race. "Thanks to Welsh, my parents were terrified," writes Conner; they began to pin their hopes on George Wallace and other white supremacists.

As might be expected, Conner eventually broke from the conspiratorial, insular world of her parents. Her journey away from Bircher politics had many causes. It was prompted by moments of disillusionment, as she realized the rigidity and often nonsensical nature of her parent's beliefs. It had personal triggers, as happened when one of her children revealed himself to be gay. And no doubt, Conner's distance from the world of the JBS reflected the virtual collapse of the group as its anti-Communist agenda lost steam and was replaced by different, no less dangerous forms of radical right-wing politics, such as white supremacism and the Tea Party.

Kathleen Blee is distinguished professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. Her books include ***Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement*** (2002) and ***Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*** (1991).

Half Full or Half Empty



Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Aging

By Lynne Segal

New York: Verso, 2013, 320 pp., $26.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Alix Kates Shulman

I was walking on a crowded Manhattan sidewalk on my way to see the new Woody Allen movie when a guy on a bike plowed his way among the pedestrians. I shouted out that he shouldn't be riding on the sidewalk but in the street. "Seriously?" he said, peering down at me, then he examined my face and spat out, "Old hag!" This was a first for me, so it took a moment before I realized my opportunity and shouted back "Ageist!" I doubt that the young man cycling away knew the word, if he even heard me, but for a moment I felt that old activist rush of triumph all the same.

Near the end of Lynne Segal's *Out of Time,* her thoughtful meditation on aging in the West, she briefly discusses political resistance as but one possible strategy for dealing with the indignities of old age. A longstanding socialist-feminist, activist, and intellectual, she is "mainly concerned with the ways in which conceptions of the elderly impact upon self-perception, sapping confidence and making it harder to feel that we remain in charge of our lives as we age." Part reporter on generational friction and cultural trends, part psychological interpreter of internal responses to aging (the "pleasures and perils" of her subtitle), Segal focuses on how aging affects the psyche and body politic rather than the physical or chronological body.

Her main method of inquiry is to examine the literature of aging, quoting freely from dozens of authors, female and male, on a wide range of concerns, with interpretive commentary of her own. She draws insight chiefly from literature (fiction and memoir), philosophy, and psychoanalysis, preferring them to social science, history, or surveys. To me, this approach makes *Out of Time* deeper and more thought provoking than many of the other books—some facile, some polemical—in the burgeoning library of aging. She derives the richest insights from those authors she considers at the greatest length—among them Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Philip Roth, May Sarton, and Jacques Derrida. From other witnesses her quotations are sometimes too brief to give a sense of the complexity of their thought or even the main import of the work she cites. Still, her method of summoning many voices and texts creates a welcome air of open mindedness and generosity. Rather than a sustained argument, her book is an engaged conversation with mostly contemporary writers about their personal, literary, and theoretical takes on many aspects of aging and old age.

In successive chapters she explores: the inner sense of age, intergenerational conflict, aging and sexual desire, aging and interdependency (including brief discussions of several works of mine), ways of resisting ageism and, finally, coming to terms with old age and the loneliness it often entails by "affirming life." But many more aspects of aging than I can list here are examined within each chapter, and the chapters overlap, expanding the conversation.

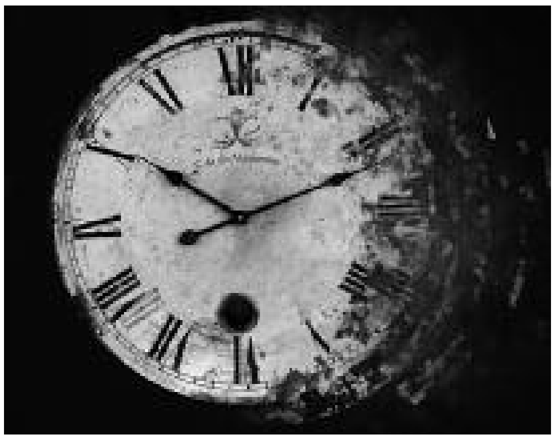
Now in her sixties, Segal does not define "old," citing writers as young as their late thirties (Rosalind Belbin) and as old as their nineties as witnesses to the feelings about aging she discusses. To me this makes sense, if by "old" one means feeling marginalized by age. When I was in my thirties, before I became a feminist, I felt older (in the sense of over the hill), less confident, and less in charge of my life than I do now in my eighties. Segal's book is an exploration of "the possibilities for and impediments to staying alive to life, whatever our age."

In her first chapter, called "How Old Am I?" Segal considers the strange fluidity of time, whereby each of us encounters at once all the ages and experiences we have lived through: "in our minds, we race around, moving seamlessly between childhood, old age, and back again," which makes it difficult to feel our age. She observes that we vary greatly in the way we view the relation between our past and present selves, some of us lamenting the passage of time, some of us denying it, some celebrating it, and some, like the writers she most admires, able to "simply affirm [old age] as a significant part of life." Later, Segal quotes Doris Lessing, echoing Simone de Beauvoir, describing "our sense that we have some unchanging inner core, making us never able to feel simply the age we are," and a number of respected writers attesting to similar feelings of timelessness. Yet, surprisingly, throughout the book she also considers the difficulty we have feeling our age to be a denial or disavowal: "It is this noxious slide between old age, dependency, inadequacy, and invisibility that is surely one of the reasons why old people so forcefully insist they 'do not feel old,' making old age something to be disavowed."

Segal tries admirably to be evenhanded and fair minded, listening sympathetically to an array of writers on most of the issues she raises, ever alert to the paradoxes inherent in the interplay of so many disparate voices. A professor of psychology and gender studies at Birkbeck College of the University of London, she offers subtle psychological insight in her discussions of many of the points of view expressed. But while she is ready to accept as simply true the testimony of those with whom she is temperamentally in tune, she tends to psychologize the feelings and attitudes of those with whom she is not, refusing to take their testimony at face value. Usually, this means siding with the pessimists in what she allows are "the battles between the optimists and pessimists addressing ageing and old age." Thus, she doesn't question the pessimism of Philip Roth, John Updike, and Martin Amis, who write of aging men's loss of sexual power as a universal male disaster, and similarly accepts at face value (and universalizes) the bitterness and sorrow of Simone de Beauvoir and Doris Lessing over their (presumed) loss of sexual attractiveness to men. But when it comes to Germaine Greer, Eva Figes, Alice Walker, and many other women who report feelings of freedom and relief that they are done with sex and sexual desire, she invokes such psychological mechanisms as denial and "self-protective renunciation" to explain away such emotions. She voices similar skepticism and suspicions of denial about those who claim to love their solitude—cautioning, "solitude can be wonderful, so long as we have some sort of community that will welcome our return"—or who embrace their aging with gusto, chiding, "it is a form of imaginative impoverishment to refuse to accept the tragic"—as if any mortal could!

Using adjectives like "upbeat" and "cheerful" as slurs, she seems to find the perils of aging more believable than the pleasures. This universalizing of some feelings and distrust of others, even those widely voiced, strikes me as an unacknowledged temperamental bias, of which each of us probably has at least one. Such biases, because so deeply ingrained, are hard to recognize, much less acknowledge or overcome; I recognize Segal's because hers is the opposite of mine. Fortunately, neither optimism nor pessimism, in their eternally noncolliding orbits, has a corner on virtue; equally adaptive, equally "true," they simply follow different paths, though this too is difficult to recognize from inside one's orbit.

The hallmark and strength of a book on aging written with Segal's temperament (and her left political sympathies and experience, which I share) is its compassion for the lonely, the forgotten, and the vulnerable. But how, given her temperament, will she pull off the promise of her concluding chapter title, "Affirming Survival"? How will she walk the "very fine line" she finds "hard to tread even at the close of this book, in trying to acknowledge the actual vicissitudes of old age while also affirming its dignity and, at times, grace or even joyfulness"? (Note that unconvinced "even.") She does it by reaffirming the values, the "essential elements of a good life," she has expressed throughout the book: friendship, mutual love, community, strong feeling—including the negative feelings of pain, anger, sorrow, and grief. Or, in words Segal quotes from Beauvoir, "One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion." Admitting with some embarrassment that the life goals she lists as essential are "the usual comforting clichés," and also conceding that old people frequently lack opportunities to pursue them, Segal is brave enough to embrace them anyway.



Alix Kates Shulman is the author of fourteen books. Her fifth novel, ***Ménage***, and the collection ***A Marriage Agreement and Other Essays: Four Decades of Feminist Writing*** were published in 2012. Contact her through her website, www.AlixKShulman.com.

Speaking Out and Carrying a Big Stick

Reviewed by Smitha Radhakrishnan

Pink Sari Revolution:
A Tale of Women and Power in India

By Amana Fontanella-Khan

New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013,

288 pp., $26.95, hardcover

In the dusty towns of northern India's badlands, Sampat Pal, a feisty woman with a big voice and a high tolerance for danger, has galvanized poor women to take vigilante action against their oppressors. Whether those oppressors come in the form of husbands, politicians, police officers, or other women in their own families, Sampat Pal's *Gulabi Gang*, or Pink Gang, an organized network of 20,000 women, is poised to take action against them. Since 2005, when the Pink Gang calls an action, hundreds, sometimes thousands, of women gather, wearing bright pink saris and clasping *lathis*, or long sticks, in their hands. These demonstrations have been so effective that the mere threat of an action or mention of the Pink Gang nudges corrupt politicians and police officers to do their jobs.

Amana Fontanella-Khan's new book, *Pink Sari Revolution,* narrates the story of pink sari activism from the perspective of its indomitable leader. We come to know Pal through a case she took up in 2010: that of nineteen-year-old Sheelu Nishad, who claimed that a local politician, Naresh Dwivedi, raped her. He charged her with theft, and she was jailed. As the events of Nishad's case unfold, so does the history of the Pink Gang and its complicated social and cultural context, and the story of Pal's life.

On the morning Pal begins working on Nishad's case, she wakes before dawn on chilly concrete, washes with bitterly cold water, and arranges her hair in a no-nonsense style, her brain working furiously the whole time. Although Fontanella-Khan has constructed Nishad's story from interviews carried out more than a year after the incidents occurred, it is full of detail: the balconies where political horse trading takes place; the thugs who threaten and abuse Nishad's father; the dusty police station where Nishad is being held.

Rape victims in India are humiliated when they take their charges to the authorities. Nishad is subjected to an unscientific "finger test," designed to undermine her character. Doctors insert their fingers into her vagina to determine whether or not she is "habituated to sex." Their perceptions of the size of her vagina are publicized and used to discredit her. Nishad and the Pink Gang members struggle for survival in a world defined by these kinds of harsh realities.

As Pal becomes more and more deeply involved in Nishad's case, Fontanella-Khan reveals the social mores that Pal has scorned, the allies and enemies she has made, and the fame she has enjoyed as she has pursued justice from the bottom up. Pal lives with a male colleague, Jai Prakash Shivare, and deflects criticism by calling him "Babuji," an honorific term reserved for fathers and older men. She challenges local leaders and marches bravely into police stations, which many women fear as places of condescension at best, abuse at worst. She is not a humble woman, and Fontanella-Khan presents her defiant confidence and self-congratulatory attitude sympathetically.

Pal and the members of her gang seek justice for themselves and their sisters. They take action on a wide range of issues: agitating for repairs to a central road, pressuring a family to accept a "love marriage" that violates caste norms, and in Nishad's case, supporting the release of a rape victim unjustly jailed. But their actions can also be ambitious and self-serving. In one incident, a gang member, Suman Singh, posing as Pal, threatens a bank manager with a Pink Gang action in order to secure money to pay off a loan taken out by her brother. Pal's rage at Singh's actions reveals organizational fault lines, across class, caste, and interpersonal relationships. Although Fontanella-Khan does not dwell on these issues, she says enough to suggest that Pal must pick her way through the politics and personalities of the gang members even as she develops her own brand of justice.

The male partners of Pink Gang members often challenge prevailing stereotypes. Babuji, Pal's main business associate and housemate, is soft spoken and gentle, leading from behind while Pal occupies the limelight. But he is always there in the background, supporting, and, when necessary, criticizing. Deepak Singh, Geeta Singh's husband, loves to cook and embraces the task with gusto while his wife is busy with her duties as a commander within the gang. Tirath Pal, Sampat Pal's son-in-law, keeps a log of who comes in and out of the police station where he works, and as such considers himself a "writer"—a detail that reveals both his diligence and his thirst for a professional identity. Of course, there are macho men in this tale, too, such as the alleged rapist Dwivedi; and there are men such as Pal's husband, Munni Lal Pal, so worn down by the stresses of life and age that they are little more than pawns, manipulated by the powerful. With its portrayals of these different men, the book is about more than the pink sari vigilantes: it reveals a society undergoing dramatic social changes.

Nishad's case provides fascinating—and at times, frightening—insight into the gender politics of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, which is known for pervasive corruption, even in a country where corruption is the norm. Nothing is as it seems on the surface. At first, Nishad seems to be little more than a victim of Dwivedi's, framed and manipulated. But the story is more complicated; she was romantically involved with one of Dwivedi's relatives and had a difficult relationship with her father, Acchhe Lal, a complex figure with opaque and shifting motivations and fears. But Pal takes up Nishad's case, with all its layers. A final, climactic Pink Gang collective action leads to Nishad's release.

The focus of this book is Pal. Although we meet fascinating characters along the way, they all seem to be sidekicks to Pal, just as Nishad's story is the vehicle through which we get acquainted with Pal. The narrative repeatedly pauses and turns to Pal's past. In one vivid flashback, she challenges the caste norms in the town to which she moved after her marriage. She places herself near the village well whenever the high-caste women are drawing water, forcing them to wash themselves repeatedly, to rid themselves of the impurity of contact with her. She is so relentless in exposing what she sees as the ridiculousness of such caste strictures that when the leaders of the village threaten her life, she relocates her entire family rather than follow the rules. In another vignette, she meets privately in Delhi with Sonia Gandhi, the head of the India

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COMING SOON: TECHNOLOGIES

*The Phoenix Award for Significant Editorial Achievement is given annually by the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.

National Congress Party and the widow of India's former prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi. She confidently offers Gandhi a pink sari as a gift, even though she is in awe of meeting such a powerful leader. Fontanella-Khan's artistic choice to portray Pal through these kinds of vignettes is distracting at times, but it effectively creates sympathy for Pal.

The book's title raises a question: are the Pink Sari Gang and Pal, with all her anti-establishment, pro-poor fire, truly revolutionary?

Probably not. Pal constantly flirts with a career in politics, and has run for office at least twice. Although she believes entering electoral politics will advance her quest for justice and equality, Fontanella-Khan reveals the shady deals, misrepresentations, corruption, and misogyny that characterize mainstream politics in Uttar Pradesh. No politician in the system is immune from the temptations and pressures of office. Would Pal be different? I was not convinced.

While there is no doubt that in this book, we catch a glimpse of the potential for poor and working-class women, organizing in groups, to profoundly influence the culture and politics of a region where justice is slanted shockingly against them, Fontanella Khan also exposes the limitations of such organizing. On the one hand, with a powerful cocktail of vigilante watchdog tactics, peaceful protests, and political deal-making, the Pink Gang mobilizes thousands of women who might not otherwise have a way to speak out against their shared oppression. But on the other, the women of the Pink Gang have multiple allegiances and thinly stretched livelihoods. Most have such limited means that coming to a protest means giving up a day's wage; when the Pink Gang calls a demonstration, it must provide food and transportation to make it worth the while of the participants. And when the women join together, they are unified more strongly in support of the charismatic figure of Pal than they are in support of any revolutionary ideals.

Hanna Rosin, the author of the provocative book *The End of Men* (2013), plugs the book by saying, "Fontanella-Khan brings to life a group of women who have overcome origins and odds most of us cannot even imagine to create a movement that might very well change India—and the West's image of what it means to be a Third World Woman." This book is clearly more about breaking western stereotypes than about revolutionary change. Any reader who comes to it with the idea that Indian women accept their oppression will certainly have that image revolutionized. Whether that revolution is equivalent to a revolution in India, however, is open to debate.

Smitha Radhakrishnan teaches Sociology at Wellesley College and is the author of the book ***Appropriately Indian*** (2011). Her research focuses on gender, culture, and the global economy in India.

Pearl Primus

People's Culture

Harlem Nocturne:
Women Artists and Progressive
Politics During World War II

By Farah Jasmine Griffin

New York: Basic Civitas Books,
2013, 256 pp., $26.99, hardcover

The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry

By Keith Clark

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press,
2013, 257 pp., $40.00, hardcover

Reviewed by Cheryl Wall

Despite the efforts of feminist critics—from Nellie McKay and Mary Helen Washington in the 1980s to Carol Henderson and Evie Shockley in the present—Ann Petry, the author of the classic novel, *The Street* (1946), still remains associated with the so-called Richard Wright school of naturalist fiction. Following Wright's breakthrough novel, *Native Son*, in 1941, African American writers were expected to depict the powerlessness of blacks under the onslaught of northern white racism. During her life, Petry rebuffed the association, insisting that while she admired Wright's fiction, she had never even met the man in whose literary footsteps she allegedly walked. Instead, Petry identified sources for her art in her rich family history: a great-great aunt was a conjure woman; her grandfather had escaped slavery; and her father, a druggist in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, once dared a white man who objected to a black man's holding that professional position and threatened to run him out of town, to try. In the 1940s, Petry, who had also studied pharmacy, traded Connecticut for Harlem, where she joined the staff of the left-wing newspaper the *People's Voice* and began to publish literary fiction, some of it inspired by the stories she reported.

Both Farah Jasmine Griffin in *Harlem Nocturne* and Keith Clark in *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry* expand our understanding of Petry (1908 – 1997), the woman and the artist. Griffin locates her in the world of Harlem, where she, along with the dancer Pearl Primus and the jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams, created innovative and politically conscious art. Unlike their precursors, the women of the Harlem Renaissance, these midcentury artists did not disappear after their initial success, but pursued long and fulfilling careers. For Clark, Petry is an unacknowledged literary foremother to contemporary African American women writers, including Rita Dove, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Suzan-Lori Parks. Not only does Petry depict complex working-class black female characters, she deploys classic gothic tropes in her fiction, which anticipate those Morrison embellishes in *Beloved* (1987). But most significant for Clark is Petry's expansive representation of black male characters: they are victims and villains, straight and gay, docile and assertive. Often they are a complicated amalgam of these types. Clark illuminates Petry's literary contributions, while Griffin limns the broader context in which Petry made them.

At the beginning of *Harlem Nocturne*, Griffin emphasizes that hers is not a group biography. Although Primus and Williams were occasional artistic collaborators, they were not close friends, and neither knew Petry. What links the three women is the backdrop against which their careers unfolded.

Harlem in the 1940s was a very different place from the fabled locus of the Jazz Age. Blighted by the Depression, it had become a site of economic and political struggle that intensified once the US entered World War II. Seizing the expanded opportunities of wartime, blacks in Harlem (and elsewhere) mobilized in pursuit of a "Double V": victory against fascism abroad and against racism at home. As during World War I, a wave of southern blacks migrated to the urban North, swelling Harlem's population and making social change all the more urgent. In the vanguard of the progressive movement were a number of left-leaning organizations; the most notable for the women who are Griffin's focus was the Popular Front, a coalition among antifascist groups that promoted what it called "people's culture," a concept that resonated with black American artists. Primus sought to blend West African and modern dance; Williams wrote music that drew on the traditions of blues and spirituals; and Petry's avid interest in history manifested itself in both her adult fiction and in her children's books *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (1955) and *Tituba of Salem Village* (1955), which told the story of the African woman killed during the Salem Witch Trials.

Griffin's approach is inventive. Rather than present chronological accounts of her subjects' lives, she focuses on the year 1943, an eventful time for Harlem in general (its anger exploded that summer in an historic riot) and for each woman individually. Griffin then traces each woman's career through the rest of the decade, and an epilogue ties up the resulting loose ends.

One advantage of this approach for readers is that we experience each life in three dimensions. For example, we sit in on Primus's interview with Barney Josephson, the owner of the legendary nightclub Café Society, where Billie Holiday introduced the antilynching song "Strange Fruit." We cringe as Josephson decides that Primus's dark skin and broad features do not conform to his standard of beauty. Then we catch our breath as Primus begins to dance. Josephson remembers that "she took one leap, one leg behind, both arms outstretched, and I thought she's going to go through the wall." He hires her on the spot. We stop by Williams's Sugar Hill apartment for a jam session that includes Jack Teagarden, Dixie Bailey, Tadd Dameron, Hank Jones, Dizzy Gillespie, and Milt Orent, who became Williams's lover. Well-chosen photographs stoke our imaginations. If we own any of Williams's recordings—or those of her famous peers—we can provide a *Harlem Nocturne* soundtrack.

MARY
records
45 R.P.M.
Side 2
MARY LOU WILLIAMS AND GROUP
Featuring LEON THOMAS, vocalist
"YOU KNOW BABY"

Deftly, Griffin sketches the personalities, aesthetics, and politics of each woman. Trinidad-born Pearl Primus (1919 – 1994) used "the language of dance to represent the dignity and strength of black people and to express their longing for freedom," Griffin explains. She choreographed dances to "Strange Fruit" and to blues singer Josh White's version of "Jim Crow Train." Griffin's descriptions are evocative:

> The dancer can move across planes of space; she can lie flat on the ground, writhing. She can stand flatfooted, twisting her body, arms wrapped around her torso and then flung outward toward her audience, before reaching up. And she can defy gravity, leave the ground, shoot into the air, into space.

Tracing her family history back to her Ashanti grandfather, a "voodoo" drummer in Trinidad, Primus became a scholar as well as a performer of African dance. She studied African sculpture to learn postures and angles. She did graduate work in anthropology during the 1940s, and with the support of the Rosenwald Foundation, which had earlier sponsored Zora Neale Hurston's and Katherine Dunham's fieldwork, pursued research in Africa. In the 1970s she earned the PhD in dance education from New York University. Primus was also a political activist, who joined several leftist organizations, including the Communist Party. That earned her the attention of the FBI and eventually the suspension of her passport. But before and after the McCarthy era, Primus travelled the world. Griffin considers her a foremother of African American concert dance, an opinion shared by Alvin Ailey, Bill T. Jones, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founder of the dance troupe Urban Bush Women, who have all choreographed dances in Primus's honor.

Mary Lou Williams

Mary Lou Williams (1910 – 1981) earned the sobriquet, "The Lady Who Swings the Band," during her years with Andy Kirk's Twelve Clouds of Joy, an ensemble that, along with the more famous Count Basie band, helped popularize the hard-driving Kansas City sound. Born in Atlanta and raised in Pittsburgh, Williams was on the road as a professional

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musician from the time she was twelve. In June 1943, she opened the first of many extended engagements at the Café Society. Increasingly drawn to the emerging sounds of bebop, Williams would stop by Minton's, the uptown club that served as the incubator for the new music, after her Café Society gigs. Bebop informs her orchestral composition, *The Zodiac Suite*, introduced on New Year's Eve 1945. A spiritual seeker and a political activist, Williams was dismayed by the gang violence and drugs that pervaded postwar Harlem. She experimented with various divination practices, opened her home to musicians struggling with addiction, and volunteered in the public schools. Jazz scholar Griffin rightly focuses on Williams's music, but she clarifies the relationship between Williams's artistic production and her personal choices.

Stylistically, the most inventive of Griffin's chapters is "Ann Petry: Walking Harlem." Here, Griffin eschews the distancing of academic studies. Instead, she addresses the reader directly: "So, let's take a walk with Ann Petry through Harlem. If it is a weekday we might head to the offices of the *People's Voice* ... located at 210 W. 125th Street." After leaving the offices, we accompany Petry to one of the social organizations where she served as a volunteer or to the American Negro Theater (ANT), where she performed in the long-running hit play, *Anna Lucasta*, which starred Ruby Dee. (Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, and Dee's husband, Ossie Davis, started their careers at the ANT.) We pass the Harlem Community Arts Center, founded by the sculptor Augusta Savage and directed by poet/painter Gwendolyn Bennett from 1939 to 1944, where Petry studied painting. Most memorably, we encounter the "too-too girls," young women who wear too much lipstick, whose dresses are too short and too tight, whose voices are too loud, and who embody the spirit of black urban life. Griffin notes the description of these girls in *The Street* and suggests that they are the counterparts of the three zoot-suiters in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952).

Ann Petry

Lutie Johnson, the protagonist of *The Street*, the first novel by a black woman to sell more than 1 million copies, walks this same Harlem. As Petry once told an interviewer, "I tried to include the sounds and the smells and sights of Harlem. I wanted a book that you couldn't put down once you'd started reading it." Griffin's astute analysis demonstrates how Petry achieved her goal.

Unlike Griffin, who discusses only *The Street* and "In Darkness and Confusion," a short story inspired by the Harlem riot, Clark analyzes Petry's complete corpus, including her two other adult novels, *Country Place* (1947) and *The Narrows* (1953). Clark also offers detailed analyses of her short fiction, ranging from the much-anthologized "Like A Winding Sheet" to the little-known "The Witness," published in *Redbook* magazine in 1971. The former depicts a black worker whose response to the corrosive racism he experiences on the job is to commit domestic violence, while the latter is a riveting account of a sexually repressed black elitist ensnared in a sex-crime spree engineered by the white teens he teaches and, subconsciously, desires. *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry* does what good literary criticism does—it sends readers back to the texts it analyzes.

Here they will encounter writing that treats diverse subjects, including the blues-playing pianist, Chink Johnson in the short story "Miss Muriel," who bemoans that "all us black folk is lost"; Link Williams, the young, Ivy League-educated black man who is targeted after pursuing an affair with a white heiress in *The Narrows*, which Clark deems Petry's best novel; and the corrupt white gentry of *A Country Place*, whose sexual transgressions receive the kind of microscopic attention often given to those of urban blacks. Petry's characters include domestic servants, laborers, teachers, soldiers, musicians, and owners of brothels and bars. Noting the recurrence of words like "fear" and "horror" in Petry's fiction, Clark is careful to point out that the chains that bind Petry's characters are both social and psychological. Lutie is more than a victim of "the street"; she is corrupted by her own desire for status and wealth. Petry, like Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, two writers Clark identifies as her literary precursors, understood the demons that are the underside of the American Dream.

Its grounding in masculinity studies enables *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry* to introduce a more daring and complicated writer than we have previously recognized. Among their many contributions, these books should retire the myth that Ann Petry belonged to any school other than the one she created. In fact, all the women of *Harlem Nocturne* are proud, bold, and autonomous artists. Describing a collaboration between Primus and Williams, Griffin writes that their relationship provided them with "the space to take risks, to be inventive, to explore, and even to be playful." *Harlem Nocturne* is written in that spirit.

Cheryl A. Wall, the Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English at Rutgers University, is completing a book entitled, ***On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: The Art of the African American Essay***.

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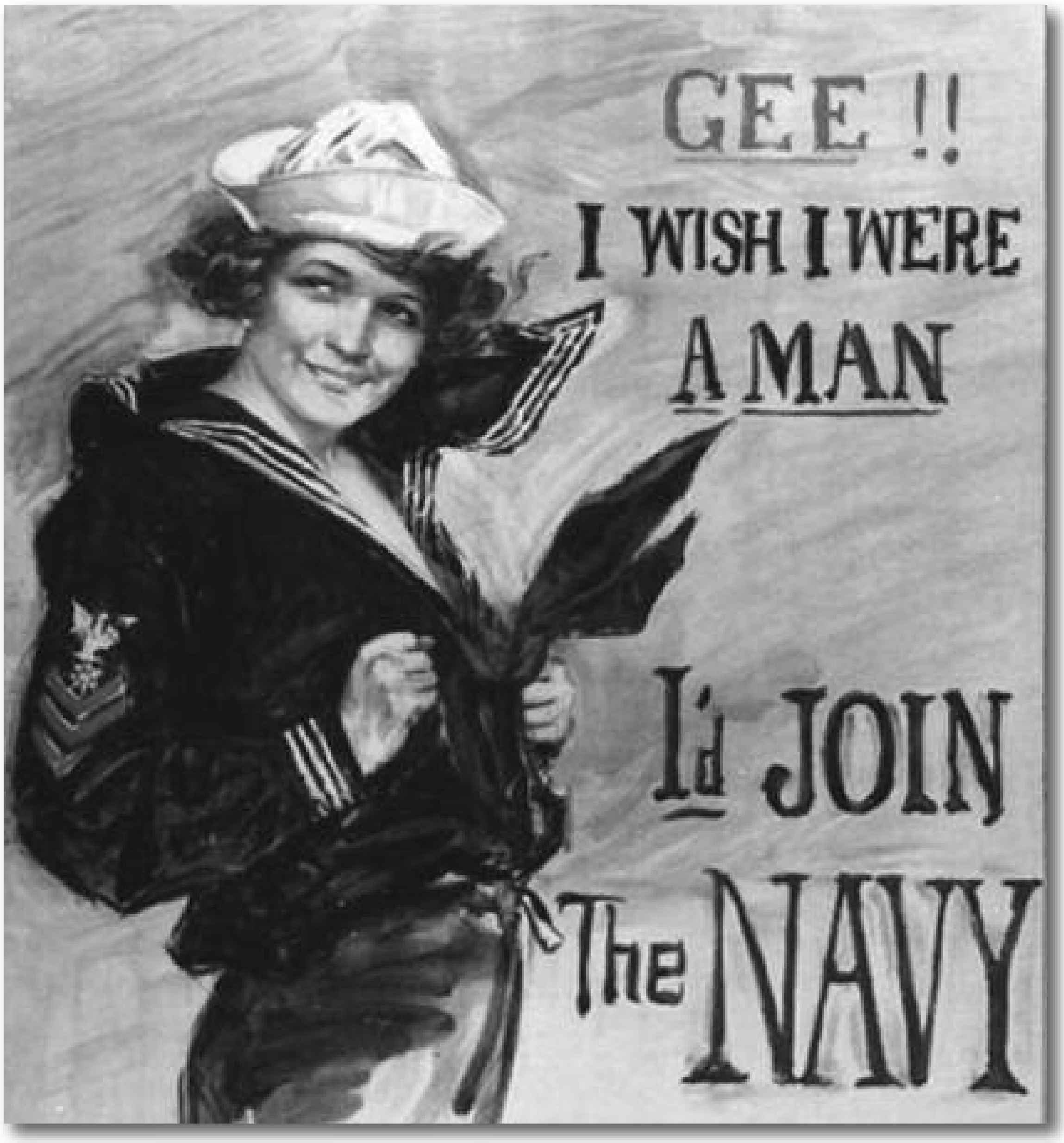
By Laura Doan

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press,
2013, 278 pp., $27.50, paperback

Reviewed by Martha Vicinus



World War I recruiting poster

This is a major book that undertakes the difficult tasks of summarizing current work in the field of lesbian/queer history and suggesting directions for future work. Laura Doan's *Disturbing Practices* joins Sharon Marcus's *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007) and Margot Canaday's *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (2009) in using close readings of literary and legal texts, popular culture, and newsprint to develop a fresh approach toward interpreting same-sex erotics.

The first half of *Disturbing Practices* is a series of tactful analyses of major contributors to the field of lesbian studies over the past thirty years, while the second half, focusing on World War I, provides examples of how a new approach, combining queer theory and critical history, might work. Although written in beautifully lucid academic prose, it is not an easy read, as Doan negotiates a generation of lively critical debate, some of which is bound to feel dated, overheated, or overtheorized. The book should be required reading, however, for anyone interested in how same-sex love has been understood today and in the past.

Doan repeatedly reminds us of how much we owe the pioneering historians of the 1970s, eighties, and beyond who have searched the past for identifiable lesbians. At the same time, she acknowledges and celebrates the intervention of queer theory, which called into question the notion of a "true self" waiting to be discovered. Previously, identity-based history had assumed that the sexual self was both knowable and visible, if only one looked hard enough. By problematizing identity, queer theorists opened a new, provocative approach to the historical past. As Doan notes, "[W]e can never forget that it is the queer researcher who constructs, rather than discovers the past." Queer history is a dialogue with the past rather than an excavation of forgotten heroines or events; it foregrounds the differences between how we think about sexual behaviors and how people in the past thought about them. For example, if sexual activity is defined as penetrative, then kissing and fondling between women may be seen as training for "the real thing" or simply as affectionate teasing. Or as something entirely different.

Even as Doan acknowledges the important breakthrough of queer theory, she argues for the similarities between these two approaches to the past. She labels identity-seeking historians creators of "ancestral genealogies" and queer historians creators of "queer genealogies." For her, one form of history writing does not supersede another; rather, different approaches to the past co-exist. Both perform important tasks. The ancestral historians scour the past for homosexual acts or identities, recuperating a hidden history; by making this past visible to us now, they serve the important political goal of affirming the long-standing existence of same-sex love. Queer theorists, in turn, seek to create a genealogy of feeling, privileging the queer author's emotional connection with specific people or events in the past. For example, queer medievalists speak of feeling the erotic touch of the past, in spite of, or because of, the fragmentary evidence with which they must work.

"Sexuality, unlike race or gender, is most often seen in terms of identity, rather than power."

For Doan, queer theorists fail to make a distinction between queer lives (queerness-as-being) and queerness in the past (queerness-as-method). I would add that acknowledging one's own queerness (queerness-as-author) does not necessarily yield a queer past, or even a past that resonates with the present. Doan finds that queer historians have too easily stigmatized traditional history as empirically based, confusing the writing of history by trained historians with such outdated beliefs that facts can speak for themselves or that history controls social and cultural phenomena.. In turn, as she notes, even the most theoretically attuned (nonqueer) historians have mostly cordoned off sexuality studies.

British ambulance drivers near the Front in World War I France.

Doan proposes a solution to this impasse: queer theorists and critical historians need to learn from each other. Addressing queer theorists, she suggests much greater use of what she calls "queer critical history," an approach that acknowledges, even embraces, the contingent nature of history writing. She calls attention to the profound changes in the field of history over the past thirty years, following the so-called "cultural turn" of the 1980s. In a sweeping move, "critical historians" came to question the status of evidence, of so-called facts, and of historical reality itself—a task that queer theorists were undertaking at the same time. These critical historians accepted the constructed nature of their project: all history, they argued, is a partial recreation of the past, written under circumstances that inevitably reflect present-day concerns and questions.

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Just as Doan calls on queer theorists to embrace these changes in history writing, she asks that critical historians acknowledge the queer critique of empiricist history. She is puzzled as to why historians are not more receptive to the queer criticism of identity history. She laments the fact that sexuality studies remain a subfield in history rather than a crucial category for historical analysis. Sexuality, unlike race or gender, is most often seen in terms of identity, rather than power. For most historians, it is a category tied to a specific political moment, an analytical framework that queer theory should have dislodged, but has not. Doan proposes that critical historians use queer theory to illuminate "aspects of the sexual past that resist explanation," and that this can "position sexuality as an essential concept in historical work."

In the book's second half, Doan sets herself the task of bringing together the insights and methodologies of both critical historians and queer theorists. She suggests that queer history practices can move lesbian/queer studies away from the genealogical and toward a more fluid, more provisional notion of how same-sex behaviors were understood in the past. Some readers will be frustrated by Doan's principled refusal to reach any conclusions in her case studies, but surely most will find exhilarating her effort to write a queer critical history.

Focusing on women who took nontraditional jobs during World War I, she argues that the war did not dislodge traditional beliefs about female behavior nor was it a watershed moment in the history of sexuality. Her meticulous research reveals instead a series of overlapping definitions, words, and categories for sexual behaviors; indeed, conflicting definitions of what constitutes normal or normative sexuality is a key subject in these chapters. Underlying her documentation is the argument that categories of sexual behavior could be unknown, partially defined, contradictory, or silenced.

Category confusion describes the response of the Hon. Violet Blanche Douglas-Pennant (1869 – 1945) to her abrupt firing, toward the end of World War I, from her position as the leader of the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF). At a time when she was investigating heterosexual irregularities between WRAF members and male officers, secret charges were made about her own sexual proclivities. Douglas-Pennant spent the remainder of her life fighting her dismissal, arguing that she had lost her job because of "secret and false allegations made against her 'moral character.'" In 1918 her formal protest was dismissed, but in 1931 her friends successfully appealed to Sir William Jowitt, the attorney general, to reopen the case. Jowitt, speaking in very modern terms, asked for "real evidence" that someone had called Douglas-Pennant a lesbian. But Douglas-Pennant and her friends had framed her firing in terms of the defamation of her moral character, not in terms of specific sexual acts or identities; thus, they could not supply such evidence. As Doan notes, for more than twenty years, Douglas-Pennant never spoke openly or explicitly about the accusations against her beyond vague references to the sexual; she believed she was the victim of pernicious gossip and was "ignorant or utterly unaware of her 'self' as a sexual being." Interestingly, in oral interviews in the 1960s, two members of the WRAF used names and categories from the 1960s to describe the unit's sexual atmosphere, saying they'd known numerous "lesbians"—a word never used publicly during or immediately after the war.

In her chapter on Douglas-Pennant, Doan carefully dissects the available options—in 1918, 1931, the 1960s, and today—tracing the very different ways in which sex, sexual behavior, and sexual identity were or were not known, and were or were not talked about. Names and naming could not resolve Douglas-Pennant's case, nor could they help Jowitt, much less a historian, to understand it. Doan considers her discussion to be "an exploration of what different questions or problems emerge in the refusal to name or the unavailability of naming." Quoting the historian Joan Kelly, she suggests "the value of a critical history practice interested in producing '*an undetermined history*.'"

This chapter is the highlight of the book for me. Doan's careful research shows time and again how uneven sexual knowledge was and can be, and how the process of self-naming is rare and sometimes a matter of hindsight. Moreover, who can say whether current categories of sexual knowledge are better or more accurate than those used in the past? Doan documents how social class, distinguished war service, or a good barrister often trumped questions of sexual behavior. As the "mother" of queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, pointed out years ago, we all embody many conflicting beliefs and identities. Douglas-Pennant and her allies could speak of her aristocratic *noblesse oblige*, her distinguished philanthropic record, and her moral and religious conduct, but not of her possible sexual identity.

It will be interesting to see what happens to Doan's plea that queer theorists and critical historians listen to each other, and whether sexuality itself will become a major marker for the study of the past. I remember the distinct discomfort of some of my male colleagues with my research into nineteenth and early twentieth-century same-sex relationships, and their reluctance to discuss how my discoveries might affect their work. Perhaps personal embarrassment is a prime cause for the continued marginalization of sexuality studies among historians. I am less confident than Doan about the possibilities for change, but the political turmoil over homosexual marriage has led to a renewed interested in the history of marriage here in the US and in other countries. The powerful social, religious, and economic institution of marriage has brought same-sex practices to center stage in ways that surely could not have been predicted twenty years ago. New and old definitions of marriage compete. Seemingly immutable religious practices and scientific classifications have undergone radical changes in a remarkably short time, yet former beliefs survive. Current sexual categories may well come to be seen as obsolete, even as many of us hang on to them. Twenty years from now, historians may see sexuality as a crucial category for study because it has become a major political issue. *Disturbing Practices* reminds us of just how historically contingent categories and institutions are, and how complex and contradictory our own thinking may be.

Martha Vicinus, professor emerita, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, is the author of ***Intimate Friends: Women who Loved Women, 1778-1928*** (2004), as well as of numerous articles on same-sex love in the past.

Curioser and Curiouser

Curious Subjects: Women and the Trials of Realism

By Hilary M. Schor

New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 271 pp., $65.00, hardcover

Reviewed by Jan Clausen

John William Waterhouse: Pandora - 1896

Throughout *Curious Subjects*, Hilary Schor maintains not only that the portrayal of female curiosity in the realist novel is a "powerful engine of plot-making and readerly desire," but also that the curious heroine plays a pivotal role in the formation of modern notions of female subjectivity. Through detailed considerations of canonical nineteenth-century English novels, she builds an intricate, elegantly woven argument, one that deserves attentive response from academic specialists. Given that I am no such specialist, but a feminist writer whose guiding belief has been that literature matters to our actual lives, my own approach must be not to inquire what *Curious Subjects* contributes to Schor's trio of disciplines (she is professor of English, Comparative Literature, and Law at the University of Southern California), but what it has to offer the Feminist Common Reader (to borrow, and tweak, Virginia Woolf's attractive phrase).

In keeping with Schor's characteristic delight in the play of paradoxes—she's attentive to the ways in which subject and object are forever changing places in the novels that concern her—she takes "curiosity" to mean several different things. It refers to the attitude of the heroine who is forever asking "Who am I?"—someone like Henry James's Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Schor argues that such characters, while severely constrained by a social order productive of endless "marriage plots," gain access to a crucial measure of choice in deciding the marriage question—an outcome with distinct advantages for their development as conscious subjects, even when, as for Isabel, the wedded state brings misery. At the same time, she asks us to consider such heroines' treatment as "curios," display objects valued for their oddity and delicate craft. The heroine's relationship to the various connotations of curiosity both illuminates the representation of women in the realist tradition and tells us something crucial about that tradition as a whole. Realism's ultimate task, Schor claims, is "to borrow from the forms of the familiar only to make it in turn 'strange and singular.'"

Curious Subjects takes the story of Bluebeard as the prototype of subsequent marriage plots, using "The Bloody Chamber," Angela Carter's feminist retelling of the tale, to show how the bride's defiance of her husband's injunction against entering the locked room becomes the crucial occasion of curiosity, affording a true knowledge of self and situation. Building on this foundation, the argument proceeds thematically through its exemplary English novels (and two, set largely in England, by the nominally American Henry James). Among the chapters I found most interesting are Schor's take on Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (considered as a novel that literally "tries" the heroine); *Alice in Wonderland* (counterintuitively presented as an example of realism, because Lewis Carroll treats Alice's compulsive scrutiny of her body's unpredictable shape-shifting as a "purely materialist question"); and *Vanity Fair* (Schor offers an intriguing reading of William Thackeray's sleight of hand with narrative perspective, pointing out that "seeing sharply is…demanded of the reader, whose curiosity forces her into an uneasy (and somewhat dangerous) alliance with Becky [Sharp] herself"). Coming full circle back to Bluebeard, we conclude the nineteenth-century tour with George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda,* both featuring brides whose costly access to authentic subjectivity is won by way of their disastrous marriages.

Employing a sprightly authorial persona and well-crafted prose, Schor artfully weaves the strands of her material, reading her chosen texts against each other, adroitly nesting them in her rich mix of legend, legal theory, historical context, and "curiosity." I enjoyed being guided by a learned but nonpedantic enthusiast who offered, in place of the thesis decisively argued, a delicate play of subtle illumination on layers of text.

So why did I come away from this book feeling as if I'd just been playing some clever, elaborate parlor game? Why, looking back, do I find myself thinking that the book itself is rather…*curious,* to use the word to evoke associations with ephemeral oddity? Schor's places considerable rhetorical stress on the urgency of her topic: "the more we think critically about the realist novel the

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more we realize that, in [Donna] Haraway’s terms, ‘the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion,’ and furthermore, that it is a struggle over life and death.” So why does *Curious Subjects* do so little to satisfy this Feminist Common Reader’s appetite for criticism attuned to the often hidden alignment between the narrative imagination and the life and death struggles of people who seldom get to star in the epics of their age?

Could it be that we are simply too far removed from the environments in which the realist novel was invented? Is the situation of genteel European women in the nineteenth century too unlike that of women today (barring the rare Duchess of Cambridge, or the imploding Wall Street consort played by Cate Blanchett in Woody Allen’s *Blue Jasmine*) for the marriage plot to resonate?

If Schor’s concluding chapter tracing the Bluebeard theme and female curiosity in recent works by writers like Margaret Atwood and Alison Bechdel were not enough to refute this notion, my own reading experience would suffice. Whether it’s Isabel Archer’s mysterious decision to return to slimy Gilbert Osmond or the resolve of Louisa Bounderby, née Gradgrind, to chuck her heartless capitalist keeper in Dickens’s *Hard Times*, the theme of female choice as reflected in this distant nineteenth-century mirror still rivets my attention. And so I must conclude that the problem lies with Schor’s oddly circumscribed approach to these books, the subjects they are (overtly) curious about, and the implications of curiosity itself.

The noun “women” in her subtitle is the first danger sign. Presumably Schor knows perfectly well that she is not in fact writing about an entire gender, but instead about the way in which a handful of authors imagined the experience of an elite minority who were, for better and worse, sufficiently well-placed to be able to stake their young lives on the success of a bourgeois marriage. But why conflate this obsessively represented figure with the fate of female subjectivity in general? Why, after all, isn’t Schor more curious about the reasons for the continuing cultural fixation on this peculiar hybrid of privilege and bondage? Under what conditions might the genteel heroine’s curiosity about her own unfree identity prompt in her a deepening curiosity about the identities and experiences of all the others who are being sacrificed to the patriarch’s controlling appetites? Were we truly serious—radically so—about the idea that realism possesses the potential to access the strange within the familiar, what might that look like?

An examination of *Curious Subjects* that takes seriously the asserted potential of realism to agitate for the overthrow of common sense from the soapbox of the familiar will uncover a number of curious omissions. Why does Schor’s account of the Bluebeard legend completely neglect his striking metamorphosis into a Turk with a scimitar, via a popular British stage production of 1798, as detailed by Casie E. Hermansson in her recent *Bluebeard: A Reader’s Guide to the English Tradition* (2009)? (This Orientalist twist to the iconic portrait of murderous misogyny is certainly worth remarking in an age when imperial feminists continue to imagine Muslim women as uniquely oppressed.)

In a detailed discussion of the history of curiosity, including its association with the Enlightenment-era cabinet (*Wunderkammer*) that held “the artist’s collection of rare objects, the budding scientist’s proofs of observation, the tourist’s memorabilia, and the affluent collector’s evidence of his own interest and wealth,” why does Schor never mention the colonial conquests that made all that collecting possible? Granted that curiosity has a colonial profile, what are the connections or contrasts possibly to be drawn between the fictional *Alice in Wonderland*, with its curiously proportioned English heroine, and the harrowing real-life story of Sarah Baartman, the African woman exhibited as the “Venus Hottentot” to European audiences whose “curiosity” about her fleshy buttocks served to confirm their sense of racial superiority?

Schor’s treatment of *Hard Times* comes closest to reading the curious heroine as having the potential to probe deeply into the contradictory relationship between her own fraught privilege and others’ immiseration: “What drives Louisa to want to see more, to seek out [the home of a factory hand], is more than pity,” Schor writes. “Rather, Louisa feels a curiosity born out of her sense of justice…as well as a sense of personal outrage at her [factory-owner] husband.” Yet rather than draw out the full implications of this insight, Schor spends most of her chapter tracing the novel’s oblique commentary on the limitations of statistical thinking and its echoes of John Stuart Mill’s critique of mechanistic pedagogy.

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After reading *Curious Subjects*, I was prompted to revisit Jean Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), that astonishing Creole riff on the Bluebeard story that functions in relation to *Jane Eyre* as both prequel and (post)colonial critique. I was repeatedly struck by the relevance of Schor's central frames—choice, subjectivity, curiosity, the key role of law—to this novel, in which the gothic horrors of bourgeois, European-style marriage are staged in the fiery light of slavery's cruel aftermath. A passage in which the novel's Bluebeard figure, an Englishman increasingly ill at ease in a West Indian setting, struggles to defend his European worldview from the threat he perceives in his wife's Caribbean outlook seems to offer a textbook illustration of the "trials of realism":"If these mountains challenge me, or Baptiste's face, or Antoinette's eyes, they are mistaken, melodramatic, unreal," he wants to believe. He immediately recalls, however, his wife's comment that "*England* must be quite unreal and like a dream [emphasis added]." Why, then, does Schor—ostensibly so concerned to trace out modern descendants of nineteenth-century fictions of female curiosity—relegate Rhys to a single sentence that includes a passing mention of her "disillusioned heroines"?

I say all this by way of saying that, for the Feminist Common Reader (or this one, at any rate), curious subjects need to be approached from a perspective that attends to all possible dimensions of their historical embedding, their intercourse with power. A failure to do so saps energy; it leaves the resulting work as hobbled and corseted as the life of an incurious Victorian bride, the sort to always mind the rules and never go near the bloody chamber. I can't help but think of such narrowness as symptomatic of an academic feminism increasingly isolated from even the memory of the types of activism that helped make feminist re-readings of nineteenth century novels feel urgent in the first place. The problem, of course, is not unique to feminism. I recently heard the historian John D'Emilio, as he reflected on the increasingly divergent paths of gay activism and queer scholarship, lament a trap he called the "abyss of professionalism." Could it be that Hilary Schor's ambitious project has fallen headlong into that very abyss?

Jan Clausen's ***Veiled Spill: A Sequence****,* a hard-to-classify work, genrewise, is forthcoming in 2014. She teaches poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction in the Goddard College MFA in Writing Program.

Risk-Taking Poets

In Broken Latin

By Annette Spaulding-Convey

Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press,

2012, 72 pp., $16.00, paperback

Exit Civilian

By Idra Novey

Athens: University of Georgia Press,

2012, 59 pp., $16.95, paperback

Odessa

By Patricia Kirkpatrick

Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions,

2012, $16.00, paperback

Grand & Arsenal

By Kerri Webster

Iowa City: University of Iowa Press,

2012, 79 pp., $18.00, paperback

Reviewed by Carol Bere

The state of contemporary American poetry, which is subject to periodic critical dustups, was front and center recently in Mark Edmundson's confrontational essay in the July 2013 issue of *Harper's*, "Poetry Slam, Or the Decline of American Verse," which generated a number of equally strong responses. Briefly, in his sweeping takedown of contemporary American poetry, Edmundson refers to the work of several established, influential, and accomplished contemporary poets—including the Americans John Ashbery, Sharon Olds, Robert Pinsky, W.S. Merwin, Jorie Graham, and Adrienne Rich, and the non-Americans Seamus Heaney, Anne Carson, and Paul Muldoon—stating that contemporary poets generally and some of these poets in particular are insular, occasionally opaque, inclined to play it safe, unable to move thematically beyond their own circumscribed perspectives, and unable to speak for the collective—or what he calls "the poetry of our climate."

Yet while concentrating on these big names and the need he sees for more public themes, Edmundson seems to overlook the fact that the contemporary poetry world is particularly active these days. Lesser-known poets are widely published in print and online journals, and by independent presses—hence, there are more ways than ever to discover and assess their work.

There is also the possibility that these poets will not look to Ashbery or Heaney (as Edmundson suggests they will) but rather will develop their own strategies—even, in some cases, speaking with a more public voice. Reading the first and, for the most part, second books of the four poets under review here—Annette Spaulding-Convey, Patricia Kirkpatrick, Idra Novey, and Kerri Webster—I'm struck by the versatility of their poetry, by their ability to move beyond a singular focus on personal experience, to take some risks, and to craft poems in which something is at stake (contrary to Edmundson's criticism).

In *Broken Latin*, Spaulding-Convey's first full-length collection, which was a finalist for the 2012 Miller Williams Arkansas Poetry Prize, the author powerfully explores her contradictory feelings of love, ambivalence, and dislike for the five years she spent in a Dominican convent and her ultimate disenchantment with the Church, which she considers to be an essentially patriarchal institution. Currently the co-founder of Two Sylvias Press and co-editor of the *Crab Creek Review*, Spaulding-Convey left the convent at 27, married, and had children. Controversies about the place of nuns in the Church couldn't be more current—yet with wit, understanding, and clear, direct language, Spaulding-Convey manages to avoid presenting a tirade. Rather, she challenges what may be idealized assumptions about the convent as a place of contemplation and service, focusing instead on real lives and the humanity of those drawn to join religious orders.

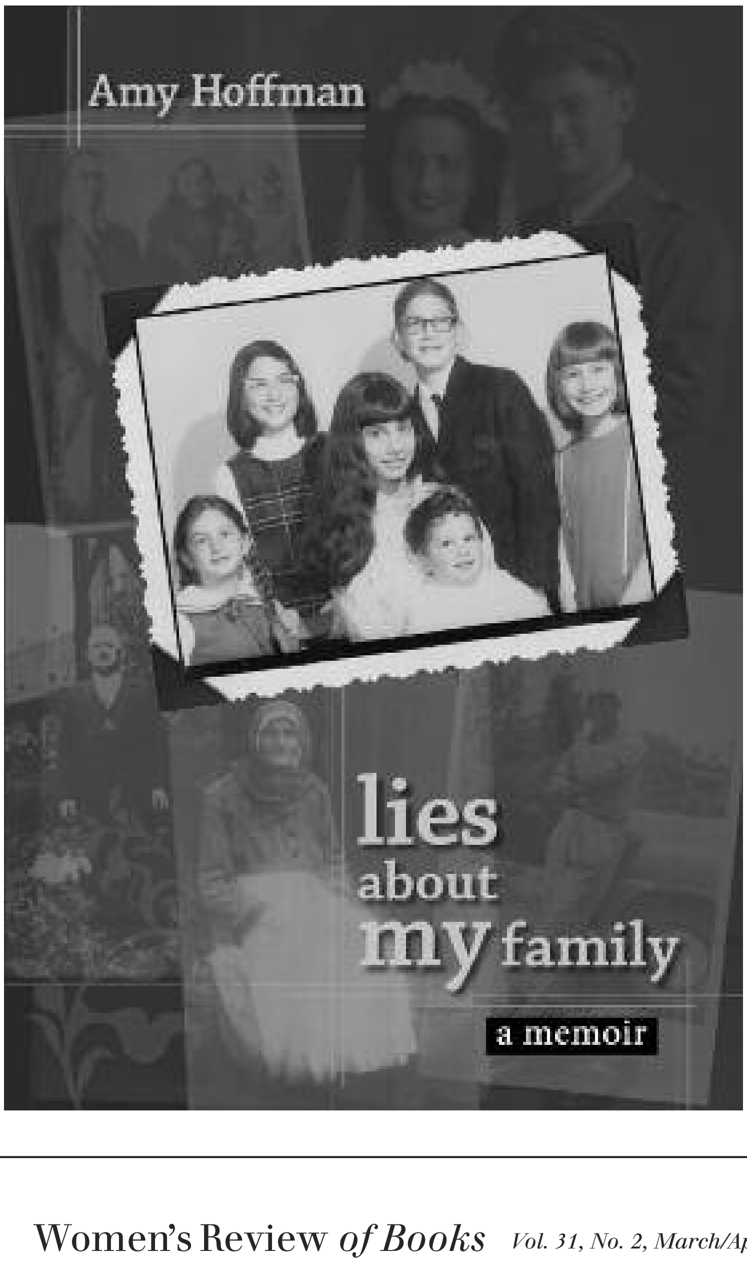
The collection is loosely structured on the consideration of opposites: faith/feminism; sex/celibacy; solitude/community; the convent/the outside world. Each of the four parts of the collection is introduced by a quote from a female saint, followed by a quote from an essential opposite—for example, Saint Teresa of Avila and Madonna; Saint Catherine of Siena and Anne Sexton—suggesting conflicting views of women or, more precisely, of the female body. "In the Convent We Become Clouds," for example, opens with the lines, "I lived with women who didn't move/their hips," and concludes, provocatively, with this suggestion of a dichotomy: "There are things we can't offer up—/ breast/ lips, voice…/the way we received communion/on our wet tongues/so that even the oldest priest/ will blush."

The status of nuns is contrasted with that of priests in "Everything Except Her Head," which quotes from a bulletin announcing a visit from Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict I), for which the nuns are expected to prepare desserts; and in "When the Priest Stays for Sunday Brunch," in which the servers "look like Our Lady/ of the Snows or Grace," and "the dish washers/ too plump and red cheeked/ for the dining room." Spaulding-Convey says that in this poem she wants to show that "societal norms of beauty were operative even in a convent setting," and also to suggest "the inequality between nuns and priests in terms of the power structure of parishes" (See http://donnamiscolta.com/2013/02/03/an-interview-with-poet-annette-spaulding-convy/).

In contrast, in "You Died Before I Sent a Card," she warmly remembers Sister Samuel, who taught her John Donne's poetry and "moved tradition like a stone." She describes this defiant nun as an outlier and wonders why she entered the convent in the first place: "I don't imagine you in heaven/ but you're riding that damn compass/at a carnival, hanging on/ to the sweeping arm/ looking as you did before the convent, Katherine Hepburn with red hair"—flirting "with the man making cotton candy," and wondering "*Is he God*?" Contrast this poem with "An Ex-Nun Resurrects the Dating God," in which Spaulding-Convey talks of her reentry into the "real" world, her understanding of the mixed messages of the Church, and her desire for a worldview that does not separate spirit and matter: "I want the body of Christ/ on my tongue, not the white wafer,/ but bread made of dark honey, whole wheat,/ the way the earth would taste if were flesh."

Reentry of a different sort informs *Odessa*, Patricia Kirkpatrick's memorable collection, winner of the Lindquist and Vennum Prize for Poetry. Minnesota-based Kirkpatrick is a poet, teacher, and editor, and her personal experience, her search for new forms, her effective use of myth, and her generally strong, declarative poems characterize *Odessa*. The events of her life are shattering: the death of her mother, the end of her marriage, her diagnosis with a brain tumor that necessitates a craniotomy and a long rehabilitation, and the loss of the teaching job she held for 24 years. Yet while *Odessa* is informed by these experiences, Kirkpatrick says that her book is not a transcription but rather an exploration of the experience "that is thrust upon us," of the notion of self, of the place of the individual in the world, and of the relationship of self to soul. (See http://milkweed.org/blog/interviews/six-questions-patricia-kirkpatrick/.)

The collection is named for the town in western Minnesota where Kirkpatrick went to visit the landscape of the writings of Robert Bly, Carol Bly, and Paul Gruchow. She found a small, sparsely populated town and surrounding area, from which the indigenous Dakota and later European



Lies About My Family

A Memoir

AMY HOFFMAN

With humor, insight, and honesty, a Jewish lesbian explores her family history

"The tales in this book, replete with conflicting versions and impeccable comic timing, have clearly been refined over multiple generations. Hoffman is at her hilarious best. Who would have thought that a memoir about a functional family could be so wrenching, and so hysterically funny?"
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"*Lies About My Family* is a marvelous, wonderful memoir. Hoffman has a way of depicting people and their foibles, strengths and courage and also what she perceives as their failures, but it is without rancor. There are no axes to grind here. The memoir is neither harsh nor pretentious. It simply is."
—Bettina Aptheker, author of *Intimate Politics: How I Grew Up Red, Fought for Free Speech, and Became a Feminist Rebel*

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> **“Odessa [the town] became for me life that is torn, lost, sometimes abandoned, sometimes reclaimed and transformed.”**

immigrants had been forcibly ejected. “Odessa [the town] became for me life that is torn, lost, sometimes abandoned, sometimes reclaimed and transformed,” Kirkpatrick remarks, in a comment that seems to relate directly to the psychological landscape of the collection. The quote from Louise Gluck’s *Averno* (2007) that prefaces the collection—“The songs have changed, but really they are quite beautiful/ They have been concentrated in a smaller space, the space of the mind”—suggests that that Kirkpatrick is in the autumnal period of life, under no illusions yet still open to new beginnings, as do these lines, from the opening poem, “Near Odessa”:

The gold fields lie down, flat but not empty,
and will be harvested later with blades.
Near Odessa
I come to a place where the end is beginning.
Where the light is absolute, it rises.

The various stages of estrangement and collapse of her marriage, which is ultimately reduced to a business in “The Attorney” and “Family Court,” are captured poignantly in one of Kirkpatrick’s frequent allusions to myth, “Persephone’s Entry,” in which the poet sadly questions herself: “Walking the corridor/ I go over and over in my mind. What I did./ What I could have done/ differently./ What I didn’t do.”

Kirkpatrick’s poems about her gradual reentry into the world after the diagnosis and treatment of her brain tumor are particularly affecting. She discovers that her relationship to language and to the writing process has been completely changed and wonders if she will be able to find words for basic existence, or as she writes in “The Amygdala Blues, “Not recognizing the familiar/ Not knowing what you can tell/….How will I know what your name is?” Initially, she wrote while taking drugs that she felt were inhibiting and occasionally brought on anxiety and hallucinations. As she continued her reentry, she discovered that she was helped by the use of form in her poems, mainly sonnets. The eight poems in the “Time of the Flowers” sequence end with these provocative, perhaps self-referential, lines from “The Fields”: “At the roof of the underworld, the self splits/ where flowers *rise on stems that thrust themselves/ above … grassland floor…. Aren’t the fields changed by what happened?* The earth, like the brain, lies in layers.”

Reentry into the world, escape from both literal imprisonment and the figurative prison of the self, are the generally unobtainable objectives considered in *Exit Civilian*, Idra Novey’s haunting collection, which was selected for the National Poetry Series. Novey, who teaches in the Creative Writing program at Princeton University and is also a translator, has said that while she may not have set out to write poems about imprisonment, the poems that she “kept returning to with intensity were the ones about prisons, and their role in the American imagination.” Similarly, the form—direct, spare prose poems—reinforces the sense of place, the experience of imprisonment, of not moving. (see *Guernica*, discussion between Idra Novey and Andrew Zawacki, July 9, 2013. http:/www.guernicamag.com/daily).

In “The Little Prison,” the opening sequence, Novey responds to “The Little Box,” by the Serbian poet Vasco Popa, a tutelary spirit of the collection. The first poem suggests the personal damage incurred between entrance into a prison and reentry into the world—or more often, transformation without exit: “Enter the prison a comma/ And you come out a question mark/ Enter a scallop and you come out the shell.” In her interview with *Guernica*, Novey speaks of the “bafflement” she experienced as a teacher in the Bard College Prison Initiative, which offers classes in five prisons in New York state. This feeling was not unique to her but experienced by all involved—inmates, teachers, administrators, and guards—who understood that “we were all prisoners to [the system’s] dysfunctions.”

In “Riding by on a Sunday,” Novey realizes that she wants to “stop longer,” but keeps biking past the prison, almost as an act of justification: “I tell myself prisons are inevitable and inevitably awful. Tell myself this thought.” Her disenchantment with the prison system notwithstanding, Novey’s poems record her increasing psychological involvement with her prisoner-students, her overall questioning of the system, and her concern about our collective responsibility as captors or judges—ultimately forcing the reader to consider or reconsider his or her biases. Novey may have been able to physically enter and exit the prison at will, she writes, but her “mind takes longer to leave.” Her compassion is implied in poems such as “Parole” and “All Ceremonies Start With Inspection,” in which Novey describes a wedding “dress pressed into a dented metal box. Bodice and satin balled for passage then a passing of body into dress and vestibule and then the picture.” Finally, in the simply stated, concluding poem, “The Last Beep and Door,” Novey watches the passengers on the M23 bus ride away from the prison, her belief reinforced that there is no escape, that imprisonment—whether actual or metaphorical—is our fate: “And the ride begins, gradual as a carousel. And all of us inside take/ on that carousel stillness, as if forty invisible horses were beneath us,/ and lifting.”

Grand & Arsenal, by Kerri Webster, which was awarded the Iowa Poetry Prize, is about more than the place it names; it is about the poet in that place and her paradoxical sense of impermanence, even vulnerability, as set out in the opening poem, “Invoke”:

Bless me I am not myself. These days. Objects
pile on my work-bench: a flame. A seed. A heart
… A fat key. A creamer and pitcher also.
A number of benches have amassed a fleet
of flatnesses, some pew, some
not so pew, one with the names of tools carved
into the wood…. I’m stripping
paint. Where the meters
are all broken find me.

Historical and literary references—to Matthew, Lucretius, and even Agatha Christie, in the wonderful “The Book of Agatha,” in which Webster considers the crime novelist’s eleven-day disappearance in 1926—extend the reach of actual geographical place. Yet much of the strength of the essentially questing nature of the collection can be attributed to Webster’s general emotional intensity and her command of various poetic forms. She uses short, declarative sentences in “Sea Voyage”: “I don’t understand blind faith/ or how much salt is in the sea/….The sky dresses as sea, which complicates everything/ I don’t know where to look”; while in the combined verse and prose poem “Seed Vault,” she writes, “I am a woman waiting for world’s end, assembling second hand matter in lidded jars.” These couplets, from the memorable “Postscript,” demonstrate Webster’s varied, often opposing, concerns, such as the spiritual and the erotic:

> **“Novey’s poems record her increasing psychological involvement with her prisoner-students, her overall questioning of the system, and her concern about our collective responsibility as captors or judges.”**

We looked for golden birds. We looked
  and looked
We issued threat advisories. Our survival kits

were beautiful: tin, tin, pocket mirrors, root
  foods

……………………………………………………

Made our ponchos watertight. Loved string,
  the way
it marshaled points into a line. Were thoughtless.
  Thought

of nexts. Rinsed, spit, pocketed. Rubbed
more.

……………………………………………………

Dipped the sponge in vinegar. Dipped the
  crusts in wine.
Anointed every inch. Set the torch alight.
  Logged off…

……………………………………………………

Were broke. Were broken. Tried to image
  ghosts. Measured
the particulates. Said what does that mean.
  And what does

that. Rubbed oil into our hips. Hands on our
  hips. Our hips
lifted to meet our hips, we gnawed the world’s
  bones clean.

Carol Bere is an independent scholar and professional writer. She taught literature and writing at New York University and Rutgers University, and was also an officer in a New York investment bank. Her articles and reviews have appeared in several publications including the ***Washington Post Book World; Boston Review;*** the ***Literary Review; Contemporary Poetry Review; Translation Review; Southern Humanities; Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons; Ted Hughes: Critical Essays; Sylvia Plath: the Critical Heritage,*** and in many international finance magazines.

A Girl Like You

By Trish Crapo

Gloria
By Kerry Young
New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2013, 400 pp., $15.00, paperback

The Spy Lover
By Kiana Davenport
Las Vegas: Thomas & Mercer, 2012, 299 pp., $14.95, paperback

My Notorious Life
By Kate Manning
New York: Scribner, 2013, 448 pp., $26.99, paperback

It's hard to put down a novel that begins: "I grab a piece of wood and I hit him. And I hit him. And I hit him." Maybe it was just lurid voyeurism that pulled me, riveted, through the first paragraph of Kerry Young's debut novel, *Gloria*: "And all I can hear is the dull thud like when yu bash open a ripe watermelon and the juice splash all over yu. And then I hear Marcia screaming as she trying to get out from under him." I didn't want to read it but I did. I *had* to. I had to know what would happen to Gloria and her sister Marcia after they ran from Barrington Maxwell's shed, past the hole in the ground where he burning the wood to mek the coal and into the trees, through the mango and breadfruit and banana and pear. We just tearing our way past everything.

But after my voyeurism ran its course, Gloria's voice, brutally honest, even when it comes to her own faults, and ringing with the rhythms of rural Jamaica, continued to propel the novel forward. When Gloria learns that a special police officer is being sent to Petersfield from Montego Bay to investigate Maxwell's murder, she and Marcia catch a bus for Kingston, hoping to evade the law and start over.

In Kingston, the sisters stay in the one-room home of an aunt while they look for work. For poor black girls in Jamaica in 1938, options are limited. Both girls work briefly as domestic servants, Marcia leaving her post because the woman of the house is cruel to her, Gloria leaving hers because the man of the house propositions her.

Gloria resists his come-on, saying, "You are my employer. You are a married man."

He responds, "Since when a thing like that matter to a girl like you?"

Gloria thinks:

> I dunno what kinda girl he think I am. Where he get the idea. I always dress prim in the little black and white uniform she give me. I act decent. I talk respectable. And the personal things I have to do I do in my room behind a closed door. So maybe it what Auntie say, I dripping di juice.

Almost from the novel's beginning, Gloria is presented as exceptionally beautiful, and this causes trouble for her. Men hassle her and women shun her, assuming she thinks she's better than they are or that she's purposefully leading men on. But every now and then her beauty comes in handy, as when an older Chinese man in a carriage rescues her from some "bad bwoys" who are taunting her in the street.

Gloria's coincidental meeting with Henry Wong, a successful grocer and wine merchant, will lead to one of the strongest friendships, as well as business relationships, she makes in her new life. Equally important are Sybil and Beryl, two women who run a brothel.

Though looked down upon as common prostitutes by many in Kingston, Sybil and Beryl present Gloria and Marcia with new models of independent women. Not only are they financially independent, they are intellectually progressive, informed and active in the struggle for social justice in Jamaica and Cuba. (An interesting interlude in the novel occurs when the women travel to Santiago de Cuba in 1960 to volunteer in Fidel Castro's rural education campaign.)

It is at the brothel that Gloria meets Yang Pao, a strong arm who provides protection to various businesses in Chinatown. Pao is known as a tough guy but when Gloria sees him practicing tai chi out the yard at the brothel, she sees a different side of him:

> I could see from the way yu was moving your arms and turning your body that what yu was doing wasn't making no war. It was making peace. And how I know was from the gentle beauty of your hands and the deep stillness of the energy in yu. That is what I saw from the kitchen window and later leaning up against the back door. Not Yang Pao Chinatown hoodlum but a different man entirely.

Young's novel follows Gloria through three decades, in which she is confronted with more than her fair share of hardships, both economic and personal. Throughout, the notion of "what kind of girl she is" expands into a more mature questioning about women's rights. Gloria values her independence and is not afraid to make decisions that go against the grain of what her society expects. But there are moments of joy for Gloria as well and plenty of surprises. Young conjures a complex community of people with all of the heartbreak, aggravation, and secrets of any community you know.

Axie Muldoon, the main character of Kate Manning's novel, *My Notorious Life,* is also a woman who rubs up against society's expectations and refuses to submit. Manning based her story loosely on true accounts of Ann Trow Lohman, who was born in England and, at the age of nineteen, in 1831, migrated to New York City. Lohman practiced midwifery, performed abortions, and sold medications to inhibit contraception in New York City during the latter half of the 1800s, and thus came to the attention of Anthony Comstock, the founder of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. As you might guess, nothing good came of that.

Manning's fictional version, Axie (her mother's nickname for Ann), was raised in the slums of New York City, along with her sister Dutch (short for Dutchess), and her brother Joe. The children are discovered begging for old bread outside a bakery by the Reverend Charles Loring Brace, a real personage, who decides it is in the children's best interest to remove them from their mother's custody and place them in an orphanage. It's not long before the siblings are packed off onto the "orphan train" to the Midwest, where Axie finds her sister and brother rudely torn from her and placed with different families.

At thirteen, Axie is not as desirable an adoptee as Dutch, seven, or Joe, just a toddler. Her strong personality and willingness to speak her mind earn her a reputation as a "hellion" among the quiet, rural families who flock to a church in Rockford, Illinois, to choose an orphan. The scene is not unlike what you might imagine slave markets were like: an old man sticks his finger into Axie's mouth to check the condition of her teeth, whereupon (very satisfyingly to this reader), she bites him.

Not having been placed in a permanent home, Axie and another orphan, Charlie, end up riding the train back to New York City. The ensuing story of Axie Muldoon's transformation from poverty-stricken street urchin into the wealthy and notorious midwife Madame DeBeausacq is a fascinating ride, told in Axie's no-punches-barred street brogue. Her run-ins with the law, including imprisonment, are a commentary on the rights of women during this time period, when even mailing condoms was considered pornography. And oddly, the fact that the middle letters of all of Axie's swear words are represented by asterisks makes the words seem *more* d***ning, not less.

The Spy Lover by Kiana Davenport is set during the Civil War. Working from stories from her family history, Davenport weaves together the lives of Johnny Tom, a Chinese soldier fighting for the North, who has been taken captive by the Confederate Army; Warren Petticomb, a young Confederate cavalryman who loses an arm in battle; and Era, a nurse with the Confederate Army who is working as a spy for the Union.

Era spies not so much out of political conviction but for a personal reason. She has disguised her loyalty in exchange for the Federals' promise to help her locate her missing father. Her double life forces her to keep to herself, spurning the friendship of the other nurses,

> [b]ut sometimes she is drawn to the laundresses, to their tired waltz as they pull linens from the lines—the way they hold sheets out and step to each other in an odd duet of matching corners, then step away to carefully fold the sheets and arrange them in piles. Or, she watches the whores who follow the Army, offering up their weary flesh. And she wonders, *Who is really the laundress? Who is really the whore? And who the spy?*

The Spy Lover proceeds alternately with the plunging pace of a war novel, the breathlessness of a romance, and the heartfelt purpose of a family saga, all the while maintaining a literary voice. The battle scenes are so well-written that they are excruciating, perhaps the only moral way to write a battle scene. Some of the narrative work is accomplished through letters that Warren, released from Era's care and sent back to the front, writes to her in his unschooled grammar:

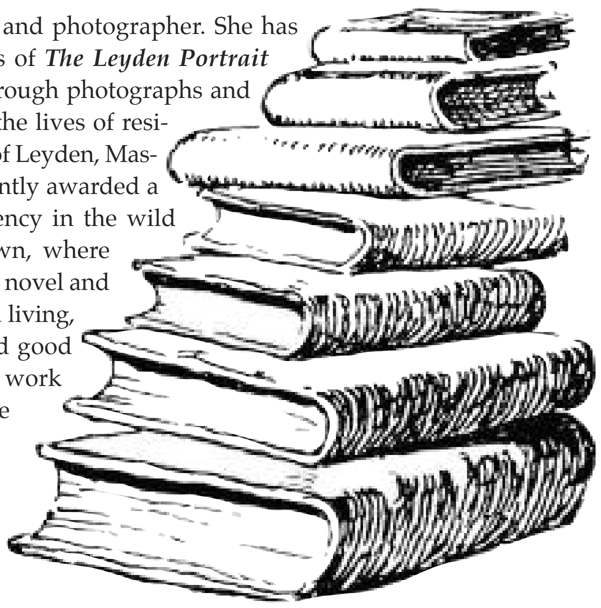
> *We departed Kentucky in driving rain impassabl fords retreating so slow our Army crept but five miles a day. Yanks cavalry harassing us at every mile. As Braggs rear guard under Joe Wheeler gods truth we fought 26 skirmishes in 24 days. A skirmish is a battle regardless what they call it. You can lose 1000 men a skirmish. I have killed so much I dont know how I stand myself.*

Returned to his regiment, Johnny Tom, too, contemplates the horror of the war as he sees men half his age killed in battle. The other soldiers notice Johnny Tom's concentration and calm. He tries to advise Casey, a boy he is particularly fond of:

> When wrong, apologize. When not wrong, not right, be still! Old Chinese proverb: "Nothing more accurate than silence." Most important: avoid cowardice in battle. Show courage at all times, even when scared! Courage is contagious like fire.

But courage, though necessary, isn't enough in the face of the bloodshed of the battles. As the three threads of the novel unwind and intertwine, Davenport creates an historical world dense with human emotion. I hadn't expected to like *The Spy Lover* as much as I did, perhaps because I had little experience with the Civil War era beyond black and white television documentaries. Davenport's novel, with its almost guilty page-turning intensity, brought the time period to life.

Trish Crapo is a writer and photographer. She has completed two volumes of ***The Leyden Portrait Project***, a series that, through photographs and interviews, documents the lives of residents in her small town of Leyden, Massachusetts. She was recently awarded a two-week artist's residency in the wild dunes near Provincetown, where she continued work on a novel and documented dune-shack living, using pen and paper and good old-fashioned film. Her work from this time will be exhibited at the Truro Public Library from May 25 through June 30.



POETRY

Ante Bellum

A week before I left the South
I drove my lover up to Oakley
Where Audubon once lived.
We strolled the gravel paths behind
A pair of preening peafowl.

When he wasn't drunk, my lover
Could be a bore. He lectured me
On John James' passion for killing
What he loved. Whistling their songs
As lures, he shot, lacking other

Means to still the birds he burned to
Watercolor. I was twenty
And sweating out the humid afternoon
Hand in hand with someone who—
As he lifted the cotton dress

Above my head that morning—said
I looked just like an angel. Sweet.
White cotton dress, thin as a sugar shell
Contained me at the center. Still
As we walked past the bloated beds

I must have known already: camouflage
The heart. Don't give up everything you feel.
The stone statues that observed us
With their smooth white eyes were also angels.
Ice-blue water coursed through their marble veins.

O Negative

No research supports the claim
That we're descended from gods
Though this would explain the rumor
We have psychic powers.

Car alarms wail
Like wounded beasts in our wake.
The radio's imprecations
Dissolve into static electricity.

Perhaps we dream of Atlantis
No more often than you do,
Are no more certain that dream
Is the word for memory
In an extinct language.

Our bodies are colder than yours.
Our eyes burn with a different light.
In the beginning, you gave us your children.
Our bodies killed all but the negative few.

Now, we nurture everyone.
When given our blood,
You thrive, though only another negative
Sustains the negative.

Charlotte Holmes's work has appeared in many journals, include ***Epoch, New Letters, The Sun, Grand Street***, and the ***New Yorker***. Her collection ***Gifts and Other Stories*** was published in 1993, and she has just completed her second collection, a book of linked stories about a family of artists. She lives in State College, Pennsylvania.

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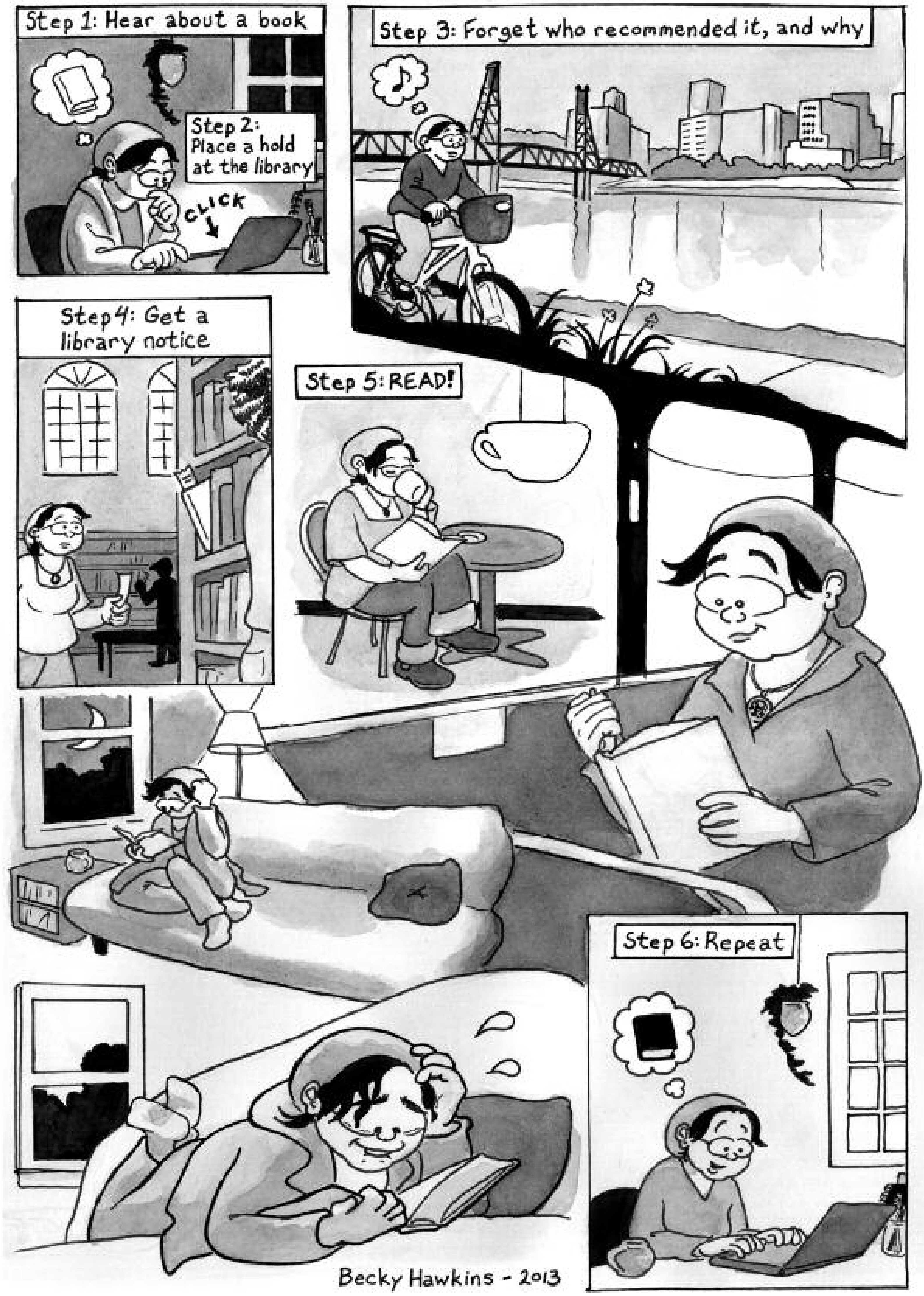

Step 1: Hear about a book
Step 2: Place a hold at the library
CLICK
Step 3: Forget who recommended it, and why
Step 4: Get a library notice
Step 5: READ!
Step 6: Repeat
Becky Hawkins - 2013

Becky Hawkins' autobio comics, travel stories, and watercolors chronicle her life in Brooklyn, Pittsburgh, Portland, and traveling the world as a cruise-ship musician. She has also contributed to *The Zinester's Guide to NYC*, *Tankadere*, and *The Strumpet*. She currently resides in Portland with Shoulder Angel, her comic co-star. Visit her website, frenchtoastcomix.com

Mother/Nature

Claire of the Sea Light

By Edwidge Danticat

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013, 256 pp., $25.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Tiphanie Yanique

The first time I encountered Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* was not as a novel. It was as a short story published in the Danticat-edited *Haiti Noir* (2010), part of Akashic Books' *noir* series, which spans the globe with titles such as *San Francisco Noir* (2005) and *Istanbul Noir* (2008). In her introduction to *Haiti Noir*, Danticat talks about the double meaning of the word *noir*, given the particularity of Haitian culture. *Noir,* in French, means black, and in Haiti, to be *noir* means to be Haitian—an insider to Haitian culture. Outsiders, regardless of race, are *blan,* white. More broadly, however, *literature noir* has come to mean writing that is about criminals and crime, usually the violent kind.

Claire of the Sea Light is Claire Limyè Lanmè, who attempts to run away when her father tries, with honorable motives, to give her away. There is no mistaking that this novel has its roots in *noir*—both kinds. This is a very Haitian-insider novel, set not in the country of Haiti at large, but specifically in the town of Ville Rose. It is structured as a collection of overlapping narratives about characters who are linked to one another in ways that are gravely intimate—though the characters themselves don't always know it. Anyone not from Ville Rose, and not enmeshed in its networks, is an outsider—even Haitians from the capital, such as the scientists who come to investigate a rash of frog combustions. Despite this specificity and the fact that I've never been to Haiti and am non-Haitian (the first time in my life I've been *blan*!), I felt deeply connected to both the setting and people of the novel. I could not stop reading, and when the book was over, I found myself inventing additional narratives about characters who were mentioned only in passing. Danticat's Ville Rose is that vivid.

The literary *noir* is about the horrors of which we're all capable. In this world, just about everyone, under the right circumstances, can be a criminal. Thus, the people of Ville Rose are murderers, liars, rapists, suicides, deceivers, back stabbers, bullies, and women who slap teachers in the face. Yet these same individuals are also loving parents, committed school principals, skilled journalists, successful business owners, dutiful maids, and daughters of dead mothers. As we come to understand these characters, we empathize with them—including, disturbingly, with the criminals. We don't want to be their victims, but we understand that they are working within their circles of personal justice. We empathize because we know that when there is no other choice, we, like they, would do awful things to save ourselves and those we love. The language in the book's most *noir* sections is simple and sinister: "There was no point in locking the door—she knew that now."

If *noir* is the style and setting of *Claire of the Sea Light*, then parenting and the natural environment are its intertwining themes. We find out early on that Claire's father, who becomes a widower at the same moment that he becomes a father, feels inadequate to serve as Claire's parent. Not only is he an illiterate, poor fisherman, but he is also a man trying to raise a girl child. He feels strongly that Claire would have a better life with a mother who would be an example of womanhood and who has the money to educate her.

As a mother, I myself cannot fathom the idea of giving up my child. And indeed, Claire's father tries very hard not to imagine what his wife would have thought of his action. He believes he is doing what is best. He picks a woman to be Claire's parent: a woman who has lost her own daughter, Rose. Every year on Claire's birthday, Claire's father seeks this woman out and attempts to convince her that his Claire can replace her Rose. Claire is grateful that "her father did not try to give her away every day." But this woman has her own grieving to do. Claire's birthday is also the anniversary of Rose's death. When we discover this, we know for sure that in the intertwining narratives of the novel, this day of birth and death will be a crucial one. Indeed, whenever Danticat is writing about Claire or Rose, her language is particularly lyrical and haunting.

The natural environment has its own *noir* narrative, and the parents in this novel include Mother Nature. And, like other parents here, who in attempting to save their children, do pitiful and often terrifying things, Mother Nature is relentless. The sea is overfished, and the lobster fishermen have begun to take even the lobsters full of eggs. People have to eat. Similarly, although the mountains are eroding, people have little choice but to keep cutting down the trees. "Help us find something to replace the wood we need for charcoal," they say, "and we will stop." There are also landslides, earthquakes, fungal diseases, dead frogs, and dying flowers. But on Claire's birthday, the sea retaliates with a tsunami and a drowning. Still, the sea continues to provide not only food but also a beach where children play, lovers meet, and the philosophically minded contemplate their own existence. Sometimes the sea is a *noir* coffin, and sometimes it is a mother's nurturing womb.

When Derek Walcott, the poet and Nobel Laureate from St. Lucia, was recently asked what makes Caribbean literature unique, he said simply, "It is the sea." Given this, it is strange that few novels by Caribbean writers actually make much narrative acknowledgment of this ubiquitous element. Perhaps this is because the sea, in the culture and creative thought of the Caribbean, has historically represented a highway either for transporting people in shackles or for migrants escaping poverty. The sea, then, must be approached with trepidation—in the literature it is generally the coffin, not the womb.

But as more Caribbean writers examine the landscape, the sea is gaining in vitality as a source of metaphor, character, and narrative. Walcott himself has led this movement, most significantly in his book *Omeros* (1992) which, although it is about migration and exile, is also about living off and by the sea. My own first novel, *Land of Love and Drowning* (forthcoming in 2014) is about the sea and its impact on the lives of individuals and their families in the US and the British Virgin Islands. Reading Danticat's novel, I was delighted to see connections between many of the motifs and metaphors I used and those on display in hers. Perhaps we're witnessing a new wave in Caribbean literature.

But the *noir* elements in *Claire of the Sea Light* are not to be left aside. The dead Rose, who is named after the village, and thus represents the land; and the motherless Claire Limyè Lanmè, who is named after and represents the sea, are the two pillars of the novel's overlapping narratives. In creating this structure, it is as though Danticat, who has two daughters herself, is writing against her greatest fear. I felt as though I were reading against mine.

Claire of the Sea Light, despite its shimmering title, is a dark novel, even as it is told simply, gracefully, and lovingly. This novel was released in August 2013, and *Haiti Noir 2*, again edited by Danticat, will be out in January 2014. Perhaps the two might be read as companions. *Haiti Noir 2* will likely be more gritty than the novel. As large and frightening as it is, *Claire of the Sea Light* is also heart breaking in its beauty, the way parenting can be—or the sea of the novel's title.

Tiphanie Yanique's first novel, ***Land of Love and Drowning***, is forthcoming in summer 2014. She is the author of ***How to Escape from a Leper Colony: A Novella and Stories*** (2010). Yanique is from the Virgin Islands and is a professor in the MFA writing program at the New School.

The Militant, His Wife, and His Brother

The Lowland

By Jhumpa Lahiri

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013, 340 pp., $27.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Valerie Miner

Jhumpa Lahiri's fourth book of fiction, *The Lowland*, could have been just a familiar tale about a young couple, baby on the way, immigrating to the United States. But with her rich sense of history and geography, Lahiri deftly reveals how Subash and Gauri Mitra's story is not so ordinary after all. The psychologically nuanced novel is about good intentions leading to calamity, about the heartache of living in a family of strangers, and about the surprising flares of hope that keep people afloat.

To understand the couple's tragic back story, we return to Subash Mitra and his younger brother Udayan, two boys growing up in the lowland of south Calcutta in the 1940s and 1950s. The boys behave like twins, answering to each other's names, making mischief at the nearby Tollygunge Club, studying hard to reach top colleges, and bantering back and forth about politics. At Jadavpur University, Subash excels at chemical engineering while Udayan studies physics and specializes in activism at Presidency College in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The edgy, politically driven Udayan dives deep into the Communist-influenced Naxalite movement, which is fighting for equal distribution of property and income.

Lahiri shines in her evocation of Calcutta's particular charms and challenges:

> East of the Tolly Club ... there is a small mosque. A turn leads to a quiet enclave. A warren of narrow lanes and mostly middle-class homes…. Once within this enclave, there were two ponds…. Behind them was a lowland spanning a few acres…. Simple huts stood there along the periphery. The poor waded in to forage for what was edible. In autumn egrets arrived, their white feathers darkened from the city's soot, waiting motionless for their prey.

Subash, though, finds his true home in Rhode Island, on the edge of the Atlantic, with its vivid seasons and luxurious spaciousness. There he flourishes in graduate school and begins a promising career in oceanographic chemistry. Along the way he shares a flat with an affable, disheveled Quaker activist, who teaches him about American driving, beer, and supermarkets. Very cautiously Subash gets involved with an older woman, Holly, who takes him on family outings, along with her son and dog; he learns to name the local seabirds and feels welcomed into his new life.

Meanwhile, in Calcutta, Udayan gets more entrenched with the Naxalites. He falls in love with the fragile, aloof Gauri, the sister of a friend. Increasingly militant and frenzied, he loses his fingers making a pipe bomb. He even involves the unsuspecting Gauri in his plot to assassinate a policeman. When Gauri discovers she is pregnant, the couple marry quickly, and Gauri moves into the Mitra household, where she lives under the vigilant and unwelcoming eyes of Udayan's parents. The police are "conducting searches at random, harassing young men on the streets. Arresting them, torturing them. Filling the morgues, the crematoriums. In the mornings, dumping corpses on the streets as a warning."

They are following Udayan. Not long after the wedding, Gauri and her in-laws watch in horror from the terrace of their house as the public story turns personal. They see Udayan hiding under water in the lowland. And they witness the execution as he is shot in the back.

While all of Lahiri's characters are nimbly drawn, Subash is especially poignant as the faithful one—dutiful son, brother, husband, and father. When he returns to Calcutta to commemorate Udayan's life and death, he learns of his parents' plan to take the child from Gauri. He informs her of their intention, offering her instead marriage and a home in the States. Clearly the upright Subash will be a loving father. Gauri, still grieving for Udayan and wedged between her desires to keep her child and to preserve her autonomy, reluctantly agrees to join Subash in Rhode Island.

Their American life is rocky from the beginning. Painfully aware of Gauri's trauma, Subash strives to give her privacy and make her comfortable, but she aches for independence. While he looks forward to fatherhood and a happy marriage, she yearns for the solitude to continue her philosophical studies. Gauri feels suffocated, living in the wrong country with the wrong man, carrying an accidental baby, whom the couple name Bela:

> Though she cared for Bela capably, though she kept her clean and combed and fed, she seemed distracted. Rarely did Subash see her smiling when she looked into Bela's face. Rarely did she see Gauri kissing Bela spontaneously. Instead, from the beginning, it was as if she'd reversed their roles, as if Bela were a relative's child and not her own.

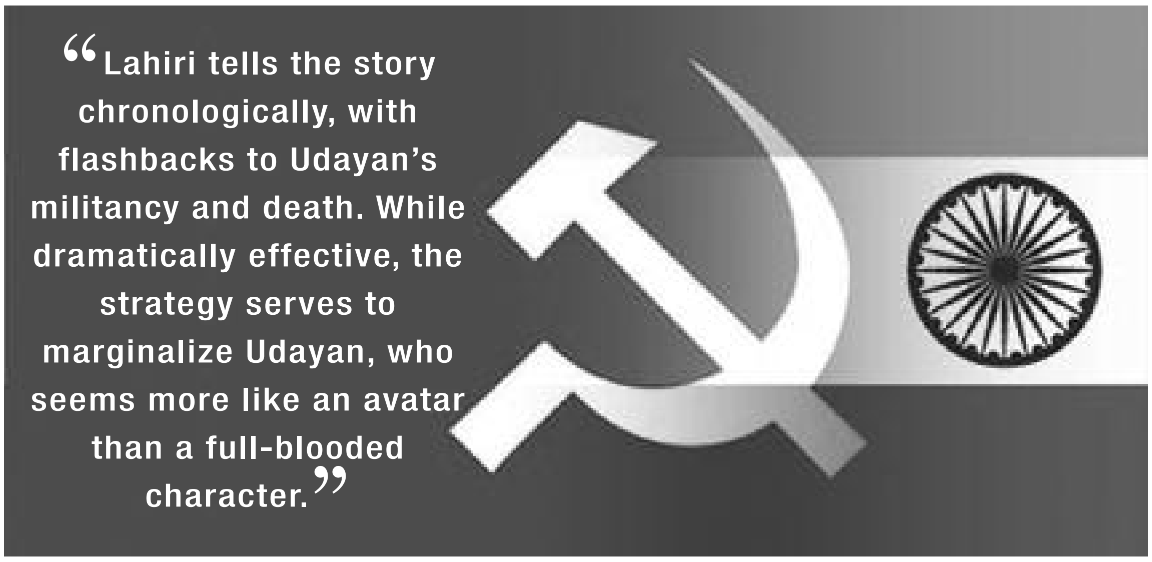
Gauri devises her own way to cope with motherhood: she leaves the infant at home for a few minutes, then for longer and longer periods. When Subash returns one day to discover Bela alone, he reorganizes his work schedule so he can do more childcare. Tentatively, Gauri starts to audit classes and eventually discovers meaning in life as she enrolls in a PhD program.

Bela, a bright, inquisitive child, develops a close bond with Subash. When his father dies, he takes his daughter to Calcutta. His mother, overcome with grief for both husband and son, hints to Bela that her biological father is Udayan, not Subash. It's a stressful time for all, so Subash and Bela are relieved to leave India, and look forward to their return to idyllic Rhode Island. They are shocked by what they discover:

> As they approached the house she saw the grass was waist-high…. Inside the house, they called out. There was no food in the refrigerator. Though the day was warm, the windows were shut and locked. The rooms dark, the curtains drawn, the soil of the houseplants dry.

Gauri has vanished and her closets are emptied.

> The letter had been composed in Bengali, so there was no danger of Bela deciphering its contents…. He was prepared to comfort her, to quell her shock, but it was she who comforted him in that moment, putting her arms around him, her small slim body exuding her concern. Holding him tightly, as if he would float away from her otherwise. I'll never run away from you, Baba, she said.



"Lahiri tells the story chronologically, with flashbacks to Udayan's militancy and death. While dramatically effective, the strategy serves to marginalize Udayan, who seems more like an avatar than a full-blooded character."

As time passes, everyone drifts apart. For years, Gauri leads a secluded, almost ascetic, life at a California college and makes no attempt to communicate with child or husband. Subash's mother develops dementia. Bela shifts into adolescent gear and then into her self-absorbed teens, demanding more space. She heads off to a midwestern college, then completely disappears. Subash grows older. And lonelier.

Lahiri tells the story chronologically, with flashbacks to Udayan's militancy and death. While dramatically effective, the strategy serves to marginalize Udayan, who seems more like an avatar than a full-blooded character. Likewise, although readers will sympathize with Gauri's harrowing journey, her utter reserve makes her difficult to know. Self-protective, angry, coiled into herself, she seems cold. There's something flat about her deliberate absence. She lost something with Udayan—a taste for life, a belief in happiness, an interest in others. All this is replaced by resignation and suspicion. More internal monologue might have offered readers access to her thoughts and feelings, and even created empathy with her numbness.

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The Lowland illustrates Lahiri’s progress—a widening compassion and a broader social canvas—since her successful debut 1999 short-story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*. *The Lowland* is a fine book. Still it’s hard not to contrast this new novel with the more intimate portrait of family grief during the Naxalite movement, the classic *Mother of 1084* (1997), by Mahasweti Devi, or with the more provocative examination of sibling political and spiritual struggle in Tahmima Anam’s *The Good Muslim* (2011).

Lahiri propels readers toward the end of the novel with compelling questions. Will Bela return to Subash? Will Gauri reconnect? Will Subash find solace? A few late grace notes offer hope as Lahiri skillfully concludes this sad portrait of the Mitra family. In the last pages, Subash is on a walking holiday in Ireland:

> He looks up and sees the brooding gray sky stretching over the earth…. Udayan is beside him. They are walking together in Tollygunge, across the lowland, over the hyacinth leaves. They carry a putting iron, some golf balls in their hands.
>
> In Ireland, too, the ground is drenched, uneven. He takes it in a final time, knowing he will never visit this place again. He walks toward another stone and stumbles, reaching out to it, steadying himself. A marker, toward the end of his journey, of what is given, what is taken away.

Valerie Miner’s is the author of fourteen books including the new novel, ***Traveling with Spirits*** (2013), set in an Indian Hill Station. Miner is professor and artist in residence at Stanford University and teaches in the low-residency MFA program at the University of Alaska, Anchorage. When she taught at the University of Calcutta, she rented a flat near the Mitra family home and swam regularly at the Tollygunge Club.

What Is Left Out and What Is Recorded

Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom

By Mimi Sheller

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012, 246 pp., $25.95, paperback

Reviewed by A. Lynn Bolles

“Citizenship” implies that an individual can live, work, and participate in the political life of a country, either by birth or later acquisition of these rights and responsibilities. In *Citizenship from Below*, the sociologist and historian Mimi Sheller asks, what happens when some are encumbered from performing their rights as citizens due to their gender, race, color, or class? She looks beneath conventional definitions of citizenship to examine how those “from below”—women, the poor, landless peasants—claimed their citizenship in material, political, spatial, and spiritual ways in post-emancipation Jamaica and post-revolution Haiti.

Framing her project, Sheller asks herself and other scholars to consider how the past is recorded, and who claims knowledge. Sheller challenges us to think beyond the use of official archives and plantation records as primary sources of documentation. In this text, she uses those records but focuses on those who usually do not appear in those them, particularly women. The African slaves and their descendents were silenced in the records of the day and later denied their rightful place in society. What legitimizes the perspectives and power of those who write histories? This is a pivotal point that this book makes in its use of a variety of sources and evidence to recount the past in a way that makes it a valuable and inclusive retelling of history. Sheller quotes the late Haitian anthropologist, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who wrote, in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), “[S]omething is always left out while something else is recorded.”

Most of the chapters of *Citizenship from Below* have already appeared in journals and edited collections, but have been updated with information from new archives and other materials.

Sheller’s chapters on Jamaica—“Quasheba, Mother, Queen”; “Her Majesty’s Sable Subjects”; and “Lost Glimpses of 1865”—provide new and perceptive interpretations of the events of “amelioration period” starting in 1834, leading up to final emancipation, in 1838. Sheller argues that to act and make claims as free citizens, political subjects must have confidence to engage in action on their own behalf. During centuries of their enslavement, Africans and their descendents engaged in acts of rebellion and various forms of passive resistance. These actions were countered by physical and mental brutality, exerted by slave owners as a way of systemic maintenance. Following emancipation, other kinds of physical and mental abuses by the colonial order continued. The denigration of the African past, the white-washing of conditions of enslavement, the demeaning of cultural practices of peoples of African descent and demoralizing of Blackness as an valued identity were all consequences of slavery. Emancipation was just a first step toward citizenship, because other sets of impediments remained. Religion as well as the colonial order imposed systems of family life and the division of labor that placed men as heads of households and women as good mothers and help mates. Individuals were defined by these social positions—which were often different from those in their communities of origin, that is, enslaved people. The intersections of color, class, ethnicity, and gender produced a society where social inequality was framed by the state, which defined who could own property, whose privacy was protected, and who could make contracts, oaths, and wills. Universal suffrage was not granted in Jamaica until 1944, a period way past the purview of this book. Nonetheless, as Sheller demonstrates, although most of the population were new black citizens, and thus politically disenfranchised, as “citizens from below,” they did what they could to use their own concepts of justice and collectivity to circumvent social and economic restrictions.

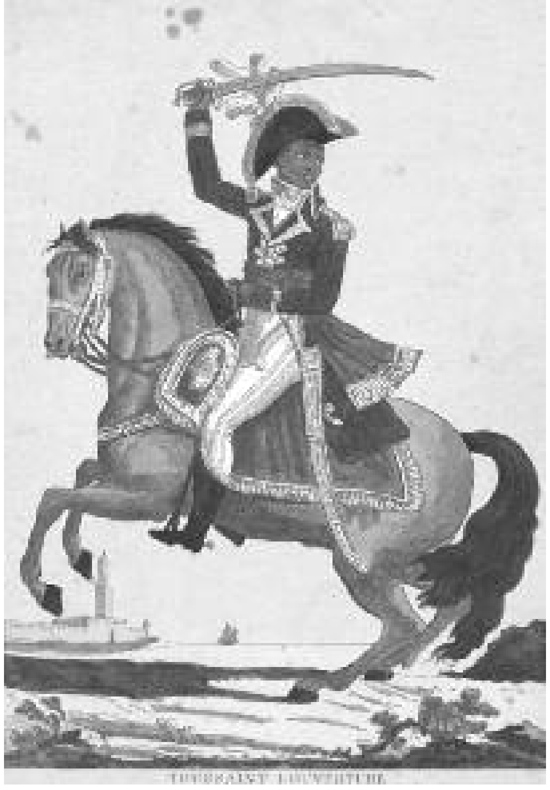
Postemancipation Jamaica included not only free blacks but also indentured, subcontinental Indians. Sheller explains that masculinity, in the context of the Christian family, became the physical and ideological representation of citizenship. This representation pitted black citizens against the "foreign" indentured Indians, who had different family patterns and were not Christian—privileging "native" Jamaicans.

Women's bodies were raced, classed, and codified according to where the women lived and how they made a living. Poor and working-class women and children benefited from their associations with fathers, partners, spouses, and other kin who were migrant laborers, such as cane cutters in Cuba or diggers on the Panama Canal (I wrote about this in my 1996 book, *Sister Jamaica*).

Women "from below" were significant in the turn of the twentieth century, rural-to-urban migration to Kingston, where an urban middle class was developing. Unfortunately, discussion of this new social and economic arena is missing in this text. Sheller does not examine how the presence of these working class and poor women was noted in historical records; what the responses were of the Indo-Jamaican and Chinese-Jamaican populations to the collapsing sugar economy in the late nineteenth century; or how they pressed for their rights as citizens in a colonial state. In the absence of this kind of discussion, Sheller limits her argument about the political efforts of women from below at that moment in time. She moves from historical documentation to a theoretical one, which loses some traction due to the lack of evidence.

As Sheller notes, colonialist accounts of the Haitian revolution, informed by racism and sexism, denigrated the first black republic. This kind of reporting to European and US representatives helped to divert the country from its intended path—from freedom to ongoing struggle. A counternarrative of the Haitian revolution is C. L. R. James's classic *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1963). It is often difficult for Caribbean writers and scholars of the Caribbean to interpret the Haitian Revolution using any other lens and frame of reference. However, Sheller does just that. She provides the foundation for a new, gendered political history of Haiti that exposes the double-edged nature of Afro-Creole masculine culture for women. For example, in the early days of the republic, Haitian independence became a matter of proving the state's "manhood": its ability to defend and provide for itself. Thus, Sheller writes, "[W]omen had no place in the construction of the nation and its moral destiny, except as mothers of warriors and symbols of the nation itself, which was envisioned as the 'great' mother of the people whom male citizens must venerate and protect." Relationships between men and women in Haiti became implicated in defending the Haitian state, which increasingly restricted the socially acceptable roles that women could play outside of the home.

In the chapter "You Signed My Name, But Not My Feet," Sheller focuses on the restrictions on mobility encoded in pass laws and the outlawing of traditional cooperative ownership of land. To circumnavigate these physical and spatial limitations, Haitians escaped from poorly paid plantation labor and began to cultivate coffee in terrain outside the purview of the ruling class. Of significance here is Sheller's account of the popular rebellions in 1843 – 1844, in which women were the central protagonists. For example, women had leadership roles in the Piquet Rebellion, and they seemed to reject the domestic ideology that confined them to the private sphere. Further, writes Sheller, "[T]he possible role of women in that movement also hints at a more egalitarian collective ideology and a more inclusive practice of citizenship from below" (184).



Toussaint Louverture leader of the Haitian Revolution

In the chapter "Arboreal Landscapes of Power and Resistance," Sheller analyzes space, landscape, and spirituality in terms of the wider Caribbean's flora and fauna. She presents a nature-versus-culture argument that is gendered and classed: men control landscape and nature by virtue of employment or livelihood—a legacy of the western colonial order and its mode of claiming and taming space at all costs. However, citizens "from below" lay claim to places even when they don't own them, marking them with indicators of family and community history, such as "navel cord trees," under which people buried newborns' umbilical cords. These kinds of rituals and markers created a sense of belonging to that space for individuals and families. The symbolic value of trees and animals, says Sheller, is fully embraced by those "from below," regardless of their positions in the larger social order. Lived space and the accompanying spirituality count more than ownership or the exercise of control over the land.

In the final chapter, "Erotic Agency and a Queer Caribbean Freedom," Sheller synthesizes her discussion of citizenship, gender, sex, and power. She argues that in both colonial and independent Caribbean states, the normative heterosexual performances of men and women limit sexual expression, or who can have sex with whom, under what circumstances. Today's gender roles have evolved from the postemancipation era, shored up by cultural practice, yielding a structure that denies women agency (I would add, across class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality) and permits all kinds of violence against them, including rape, incest, and other forms of inequality in the private and public spheres.

> **"Citizens "from below" lay claim to places even when they don't own them, marking them with indicators of family and community history, such as "navel cord trees," under which people buried newborns' umbilical cords."**

Referring to Audre Lorde's classic rendering of the erotic in her 1978 essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Sheller argues that the "use of the erotic" is not primarily about sex and sexuality but rather about the power of the body in action, a power women can exercise in relationships with others. After all, it is not below the navel but rather in the brain where ideologies are formed—which are then expressed socially and politically by the body.

Sheller asks, "Can a radical sexual citizenship transform heteronormative, patriarchal and racialized sexualities that have been defined, regulated, and deployed to control populations in both national and transnational arenas?" This question is central to the scholarship produced by the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IGDS) on the three campuses of the University of the West Indies. Sheller joins this conversation on sexuality and social justice, with *Citizenship from Below*, which will be a useful tool in such dialogues—as well as in the hands of those "from below."

A. Lynn Bolles is professor of Women's Studies at the University of Maryland College Park. Her research focuses on political economy of women and the African Diaspora, particularly the Caribbean.

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Permanence and Flux

Fools

By Joan Silber

New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013, 255 pp., $25.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Rachel Somerstein

In *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing* (2004), Norman Mailer's book on craft and literary criticism, he identifies the elemental qualities that differentiate the short story from the novel. Short fiction "has a tendency to look for climates of permanence—an event occurs, a man is hurt by it in some small way forever," he writes. "The novel moves as naturally toward flux. An event occurs, a man is injured, and a month later is working on something else." What's remarkable about Joan Silber's new collection of short stories, *Fools*, long-listed for the National Book Award, is that she manages to fulfill both registers: characters are hurt in some small way forever; a month later, they are working on something else.

Silber achieves a sense of permanence and flux in part because the stories in this collection, which range in place and time from the 1920s East Village to midcentury Paris, are linked through recurring characters. As an example, Louise, a child and minor character in "Fools," is the adult protagonist mulling different hurts in "Two Opinions." Theme also deftly links these stories, including such (permanent) peaks and valleys as intractable, zealous faith; entitlement; longing and desire. Most interestingly, people appall themselves, repeatedly. Silber takes on these small self-betrayals with a measured pace, neither lingering too long nor rushing to get them over with. These scenes, in which the characters are most clearly "fools," are among the best in the book. As an example, Gerard, the preternaturally doting father in "Going Too Far," talks about being a divorced dad and playing at shirking responsibility for his daughter:

> Once I was late to pick up Becky…, and another time I actually forgot it was my night and I didn't show up. How could I forget? I was too unfeeling and selfish to be anyone's father. I lived in this truth for a month and stayed away… I experimented with being a total prick.

And in "Fools," although the protagonist "assumed we [she and her boyfriend] would be together for life, no papers needed," she bows to her family's wishes that she marry him: "So, in the end, we were hypocrites for kindness. Both of us. Standing with my bouquet of orange blossoms, I thought: *I'm happy but I'm in disguise*. But probably many people feel that at their weddings." *Fools* is replete with these kinds of distilled insights into the characters' lives, which, writ large, reveal a profound understanding of the inner emotional world.

But Silber also achieves climates of permanence and flux in each story. Although these contradictory atmospheres could just as easily work against one another, in *Fools* they operate on parallel registers. In other words, these are not stories that want to be novels, or wannabe novels masquerading as stories, but hybrid genres all their own. Thus, although linked, the stories work, remarkably, as autonomous pieces. (In fact, before their publication in this book, many appeared on their own in magazines.) In that way, they fulfill the short story's tendency to "permanence," offering satisfying endings that do not require the other chapters to feel complete. Their flux comes from the stories' duration—like novels, they span the protagonists' lifetimes—and the author's abstention from neat resolutions or crashing crescendos of climactic scenes. "You don't know what you're going to be faithful to in this world, do you?" says Louise, in "Two Opinions"—a line that wraps up the events of her life so far, but that also implies doubt about her future, given that the story ends where it begins. Louise, like many of the characters here, lives with divided loyalties and acts according to contradictory, even polar-opposite desires. In that way, the stories' form—permanence/flux—echoes the characters' inner lives, which are at once contradictory, but also consistent and whole.

What makes this book such a pleasure is that its formal bravery is not at all obvious. On the contrary, the voice is calm, plainspoken, steady, even as the protagonist recounts betraying his wife (Anthony, "The Hanging Fruit") or unraveling her marriage (Louise, "Two Opinions"). The language is not spare, as in minimalist fiction by Amy Hempel or Raymond Carver, but straightforward, measured, unadorned, and full of meaning, akin to literary nonfiction at its best. Here is Anthony recalling his desire to quit college and his girlfriend's urging that he finish nevertheless: "'Think of it as a savings plan that will pay off later,' she said. We were both used to waiting. Being young then was waiting, it was the end of the fifties." In one sentence, Silber captures—and communicates—the feeling of youth in that era and conjures the tension that will explode a few years later. Later, Anthony describes impressing a woman he'd met the day before:

> She shivered with cold in her chartreuse topper, and I showed off by gazing into the window of some illustrious store on the Rue de Rivoli and buying her a very snappy red wool coat right then and there. I admired the casual way she slipped on different models, her lack of cloying thanks. Once the coat was bought, we were more intimately tied.

This earnest and plainspoken language patiently charts the formation of Anthony's new romance. It also subtly gestures to its era ("topper," "snappy") without announcing it. Its robust simplicity is rare in this era of the clever rebuttal, the ironic sound byte, the overly burnished (but ultimately empty) sentence; its closest cousin may be Joan Didion's literary nonfiction [*The White Album* (1979); *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (1968); *Salvador* (1983)], though Silber is less journalistic, and her first-person is less interested in itself than Didion's. Despite the many, very fine, recent examples of the linked short-story collection (Junot Diaz, Elizabeth Strout), I am hard pressed to name a contemporary fiction writer, writing in English, who sounds like Silber—another reason her book is such a delight.

At the same time, *Fools* is very much of the present. Current-day events affect the characters, including Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme, the September 11th attacks, and a contemporary *hajj* to Mecca. Historic events and personages, such as Sacco and Vanzetti, are present, too. But these real people and events feel organic to the stories, their influence on the characters natural and inevitable.

There is one misstep, in the title story, which only highlights how smoothly Silber integrates history into her fictions elsewhere: a few pedantic paragraphs on Dorothy Day, a recurring character who, in real life and in *Fools*, launched the Catholic Worker movement. Silber's narrator explains, "The paper was a runaway success, and within a few years they had launched their next project, Houses of Hospitality…. Dorothy Day was a famous spokesperson, traveling all over, a propagandist for Works of Mercy." This feels like summary, as though Silber feels she must persuade readers that Day ought to matter to them in the world beyond the book. The language feels artificial, the perspective an interruption of the protagonist's point of view.

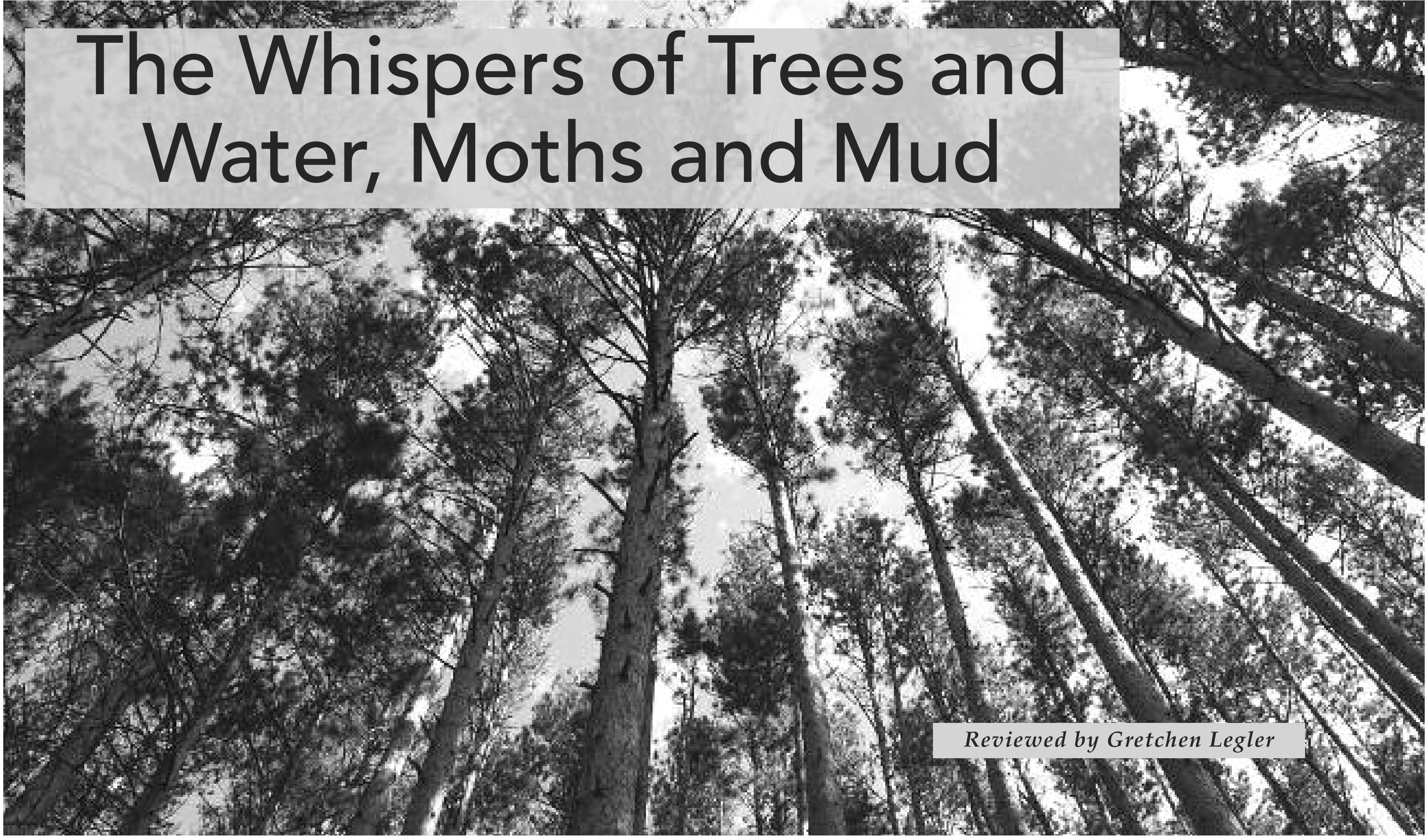
Compare this to Gerard, the divorced father and photojournalist in "Going Too Far," whose ex-wife and daughter, away in California, have converted to Islam:

> As it happened, I was stuck way up in East Harlem, shooting some cop talking about retirement benefits, when the World Trade Center was smashed to rubble by two planes. Once I could get through to Frances to make sure she was okay, once I called my mother in Florida to tell her I was fine, once they started flashing pictures of Osama bin Laden on the TV monitors at work, I kept thinking I had to get to California to protect Adinah and Becky from anti-Muslim bigots. They were sitting ducks, my girls.

History—in this case, 9/11—matters here because of how Gerard metabolizes it, what it means to him, and what it inspires him to do. This is the key to fiction that successfully makes use of real events to make meaning, which Silber does so beautifully in *Fools*.

Rachel Somerstein is a PhD candidate in mass communications at Syracuse University, where she studies visual culture. Her essays and criticism have appeared in ***Afterimage: A Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*, *ARTnews*, *n+1*,** and ***Wired***, among other publications, and her short fiction has appeared in ***Border Crossing***. She holds an MFA in creative writing from NYU.

The Whispers of Trees and Water, Moths and Mud



Reviewed by Gretchen Legler

Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History

By Nancy C. Unger

New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 319 pp., $24.95, paperback

The Forest House: A Year's Journey Into the Landscape of Love, Loss and Starting Over

By Joelle Fraser

Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2013, 16.95, paperback

Kissed By a Fox and Other Stories of Friendship in Nature

By Priscilla Stuckey

Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2013, 16.95, paperback

Gaining Daylight: Life on Two Islands

By Sara Loewen

Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2013, 140 pp., $15.95, paperback

These four works—one an academic text by an environmental historian, one a mix of memoir and scholarship, and two traditional memoirs—have in common their focus on women and nature. As we approach the 35th anniversary of Susan Griffin's provocative ecofeminist classic *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1980), it seems appropriate to consider these contemporary works in relation to Griffin's, and to ask what these works might reveal about the current state of thought regarding "women and nature," or gender and the environment. The ideas expressed in these works are not the revolutionary ones you might expect; in fact, they even take us back a few decades, reveling in the exploration of

connections between real bodies and real natures—terrain that has been contested for at least the last thirty years among feminist theorists.

In the early 1980s, Griffin's work was pivotal for feminist scholars, who were exploring the relationships among nature, culture, and gender, and it added fuel to the fiery debate between "nature" feminists, who believed that women gained power from their "essential" connection to the natural world, and both "radical" and "materialist" feminists, who believed that society would change only when belief in this presumed deep connection between woman and nature was demolished.

One of the things that emerged from this contested ground was a generation of feminist scholars who could barely bring themselves to utter the words "woman" and "nature" in the same breath—a response to the postmodern wind that blew through academia in the 1980s, creating much-needed reconsiderations of identities and meanings, and revealing such concepts as "gender" and "nature" as culturally constructed. Postmodernism brought with it this important critique of the material, but it also created an almost McCarthyite campaign against "essentialism": the idea that women's (and men's) essential nature is unchanging and universal, the result of biological and psychological characteristics; that gender is fixed rather than constructed or determined by culture. In that era, to be labeled essentialist could be a death knell for one's career as a feminist scholar.

So, rather than deeply explore possibilities of essential difference and other aspects of materiality, a generation of feminist scholars went running for cover in the realm of language, holding that not just *some* things, but *all things* were culturally constructed through word and image. The result, writes Stacey Alaimo, one of the recent influential thinkers in material feminism, is that feminism experienced a "retreat from materiality."

Alaimo and other contemporary feminist theorists now think that the so-called "turn to the linguistic and discursive" has run its course; the idea that everything is culturally constructed is perhaps not as useful as it once was. Some even posit that it was the wrong path in the first place. Susan Hekman, in her essay "Constructing the Ballast," in *Material Feminisms* (2008), writes, "We have become so concerned that the world, and especially the social world, is a linguistic construction, that discussion of the real seems like heresy," adding, "We have learned much about the social construction of women and reality, but the loss of the material is too high a price to pay for that gain." We need, Hekman concludes, "an understanding of reality informed by all we have learned in the linguistic turn."

The four works under consideration here all, in various ways, provide opportunities for thought-provoking reconsiderations of the material—bodies and natures firmly grounded in the real world; not so much returning to the material as reminding us that we were perhaps mistaken to believe we could leave it in the first place.

In her ambitious survey of American women in environmental history from the pre-Columbian period to the present, Nancy Unger names age, sexuality, material and maternal status, race, ethnicity, economic class, and gender as factors that played a role in women's interactions with the environment over time, yet seems in some ways to gloss over the difference that gender has made in this long, rich, and complex story. Is this due to a still lingering reluctance on the part of feminist scholars to claim the "realness" of gender and nature?

Various words are used (by Unger, by the women she writes about, and by the scholars she quotes from) to express the relationship these woman have with natural landscapes—"nurturer," "civilizer," "nature educator," "flower planter," "seed saver and exchanger"—but no matter what they call themselves, Unger shows, these women shaped environmental history because they were *women* and *mothers*—they cared about the futures of their children, their own reproductive health, the lives of nonhuman animals, and the safety of their homes and of the wider environment, in ways that their male environmental opponents did not. In this story a basic narrative reveals itself: those who have exploited the land have been mostly white men with money; those who have tried to protect it have been mostly women—white, free, enslaved, poor, rich, African American, heterosexual, Native American, urban, lesbian, rural, suburban, educated and not. The picture that emerges from Unger's work looks a lot like the picture Griffin paints in *Women and Nature*: American environmental history has been, from the beginning, a conflict that has pitted men against women—biologically, psychologically, economically, politically, and ideologically.

In her epilogue, Unger seems to miss an opportunity to more boldly synthesize her own findings. She declares that most contemporary environmental groups do the right thing by emphasizing the connections between the historical oppression and exploitation of women and nonhuman nature, and she applauds them for at the same time "debunking tired stereotypes" about the "essential" relationship between women and nature (women protect nature because they are nurturers and mothers)—yet her own work seems to reveal that those "stereotypes" might be rich ground for thoughtful consideration.

In her final paragraph, Unger gestures toward "women's nature writing" as a place where issues of gender and environment might play themselves out in interesting and complex ways, now and in the future—which is where the next three works in this sample come in.

While Unger's academic work in subtle ways shies away from the material question of the "woman and nature" connection, these memoirs embrace it unself-consciously and unapologetically. Their authors are women in landscapes, mothers of human children, and nurturers of other sentient beings—cats, dogs, birds, and foxes. In the past, I myself might have said that Joelle Fraser, Sarah Loewen, and Priscilla Stuckey engaged in "tired stereotypes" about women and nature by focusing on their embodiment as women in relation to the natural world, but now I believe that it's more interesting, instead of dismissing this as naïve, to ask instead what their stories offer us.

In *Kissed by a Fox*, Priscilla Stuckey is coming out of a divorce, grieving over the deaths of family members and beloved pets, recovering from a long and debilitating illness—and in the midst of it all, working on her dissertation. Her physical and emotional healing take place in relationship with the natural world, beginning with an enigmatic and profound meeting with a bald eagle that fundamentally alters her ideas about sentience, power, and human hubris. In another wonderful and disturbing encounter, at the wildlife shelter where she works, Stuckey is "French kissed" by Rudy, a red fox whom she has been feeding. The kisses continue as they become friends. Later Stuckey finds out that fox kits regularly do this when their parent returns from foraging for food—the kit is checking out what the parent has brought for dinner. "He was greeting me," Stuckey writes, "as a fox greets a trusted member of the family."

Stuckey's book provides an opportunity to ponder cultures that hold animistic beliefs about the natural world, and why animism (the belief that natural physical entities—including animals, plants, trees, mountains, rivers, and stones—possess a spiritual essence) is not a part of western thinking about nature. Stuckey asks, "When did human societies, and especially my ancestors in the Western world, stop listening to the whispers of trees and water, moths and mud?" Animism is a hard concept for westerners to swallow, Stuckey admits; it seems primitive, antiscientific, and irrational to believe that matter might in some way be sentient. But doesn't all matter have energy? Imagining a hike through a forest, Stuckey writes,

> Our attention gets drawn in by a certain tree. Is that because our mind chose that tree, or because the tree had the ability to draw our attention to it? The moment of noticing can be the act of an isolated human mind. Or it can be a moment of relationship, a meeting of two.

Stuckey warns about the dangers of the flight from the material, writing, “If worldviews are human approximations of nature rather than nature itself, then to mistake one’s worldview for reality is to repeat an error common to religion: the error of idolatry.” Citing the Buddhist maxim, “If you encounter the Buddha on the road, kill him,” she suggests that the western, Enlightenment-era view of nature as mechanical and inert might also deserve slaying.

Like Stuckey, Joelle Fraser seeks contact with the natural world as part of a process of healing. After a divorce that puts her on the welfare rolls and grants her only half-time custody of her young son, whose longed-for birth followed years of infertility, Fraser secrets herself away in “a beautiful and slightly dangerous place”—a one-bedroom house on 100 acres near Susanville, California, which is, she writes, “hidden, much like a nest, in the forest that begins here and continues for hundreds of miles into the mountain ranges of the northern Sierras and the southern Cascades…. truly on the edge of the world I knew.” Susanville itself is a strange town; it is also known as “prisonville” because it is the site of three prisons: more than ten thousand of its inhabitants live behind bars. Half of the town’s population is made up of guards and their families, and another big percentage consists of incarcerated men’s families, who have moved there to be near them. It is a town, Fraser writes, of “people in need,” including herself. Her need is to mend a broken heart, which she does in 39 short chapters that explore her life in relationship to her son, stray cats, birds, bitter cold, supportive friends, oddball neighbors, and trees and their scars.

Although she doesn’t succeed with perfect fluidity, we can see that Fraser tries, in the epigraphs that open each chapter, to link what is happening in her life with the wider world around her. The epigraphs reveal little-known botanical, geographical, and zoological facts gleaned from US Forest Service texts, works of literature, and field guides. The chapter “The Dark Season” opens with this epigraph:

> The Eurasian collard dove is a non-native species that has been able to adapt to many environments around the world, and across the United States, including the forests of California. The bird usually remains within close range of feeding and nesting sites. Though not without predators, it can persist in harsh climates, including the snows of winter.

This literary gesture asks us to make sense of the dove in terms of the woman and vice versa, to see both as adaptable, hardy, but not free from fear.

Fraser’s longing for full custody of her son is one of the book’s narrative strands: what it is like for a mother to lose her child. In exploring this wound, Fraser is drawn to the story of her great-grandmother Emma, who immigrated to the US from Sweden without her six children and worked as a maid in Michigan until she could send for them. In the chapter “Tree Scars,” Fraser and a US Forest Service biologist hike the mountains behind her house looking for scars on the trunks of trees caused by fire, logging, and old fence lines. The metaphor, coming directly from the natural world, serves her well. The injuries to the trees make them vulnerable to insects, disease, and fire—similar to the way Fraser’s trauma and loss make her vulnerable. Her unself-conscious reaching into the natural world for metaphor, information, and wisdom about what it is to be human brings us into the material world; hers is a commonsense way to make meaning, a natural act, which feminist scholars such as Alaimo might say feminists have neglected, in embracing a world constructed entirely of words.

The natural world as a sturdy source of knowledge is also the backbone of *Gaining Daylight*. In this moving, vibrant, beautifully written work, Sara Loewen explores, with intelligence, insight, and humor, “motherhood, marriage, salmon fishing, and life on two islands.” Her husband’s family has fished for more than thirty years in Uyak Bay, Alaska; when she married him, they built their own fishing cabin on the family’s site on Amook Island, off Kodiak Island, between the Pacific Ocean and Shelikof Strait. The family now lives there for half of each year. The weather is so bad and daylight so meager that even aspiring Russian fur traders packed up and left. Although she herself was born and raised on Kodiak Island, Loewen writes,

> I arrived illiterate to winds and boats and setnet fishing ... I am still adjusting to the isolation of a life surrounded by water, to days of slow rain that muffle the sound and steal color... I sometimes wonder if people are born for certain landscapes, if we can’t help being drawn to oceans or plains or mountains. I daydream of deserts and blue skies.

Her own unsolid hold on her identity and place in the world is mirrored in the fluidity of the water-filled landscape.

Loewen’s lyrical stories express the emotions of daily life: her fear when a storm catches her son and husband as they are crossing the bay by boat; her joy at getting her very own first skiff, an unsinkable Boston Whaler; her awe at witnessing, again, the return of migrating humpback whales; her sorrow at finding a dead whale washed up on shore. These tales are woven together with tales of the history of this region and its native people, the Alutiiq, and of sojourners, like the soldiers on the island’s World War II army bases. Loewen uses geography, land—the solid earth—as models for the structure of her book: “I read recently that an archipelago can mean a group of islands, or the water around them, or a collection of corresponding things, like these stories,” she writes. Her mediations consider the constant lure of a gentler climate (she wishes she could be an Alaskan who lives in Hawaii); the abundance and lack of light on her two islands, Kodiak and Amook; devastating events such as the eruption of the Novarupta volcano in 1912 and the tsunami of 1964. She ends with an essay about one of Amook’s charismatic mammal species—not the giant, ferocious Kodiak bear, but the raccoons, who are transplants, like herself.

Loewen, like Fraser and Stuckey, unapologetically looks for meaning in the material world, in the larger, solid universe—animals, rocks, trees, plants, water, storms, and volcanic eruptions. She especially draws connections between her identity as a mother and the motherhood she sees enacted by other creatures in her landscape. She writes:

> [A]s I nursed my first baby at the cabin, I felt as content as I have ever felt at our fish site, rocking Liam and watching the wind carry off the spouts of whales traveling out to Shelikof Strait. I can’t help but attach tenderness to images of mother humpbacks lifting their newborns to the surface, though it might be anthropomorphism.... I heard about a young humpback tangled in the seine of a local fishing boat last summer. The men on the boat said it cried like a wailing child as they worked frantically to cut away the net. Then its mother surfaced next to the calf, and immediately it calmed and was quiet. She stayed right there until her calf was freed.

In Loewen’s caution about anthropomorphizing, there’s a fear of being regarded as sentimental, essentialist, emotional, irrational. But we can see something else in all these works, including Unger’s: the perseverance of the material, the way it insists on itself, calls to us, as it did to these authors, to be included in the inevitably relational sense we make of ourselves in the world.

Gretchen Legler’s writing about literature and the environment includes two book-length works of nonfiction (***All the Powerful Invisible Things: A Sportswoman’s Notebook,*** 1995; and ***On the Ice: An Intimate Portrait of Life at McMurdo Station, Antarctica***, 2005), and scholarly essays that have appeared in anthologies and journals including ***Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE), The Polar Journal,*** and ***Readings Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism***. She teaches creative writing and literature at the University of Maine, Farmington.

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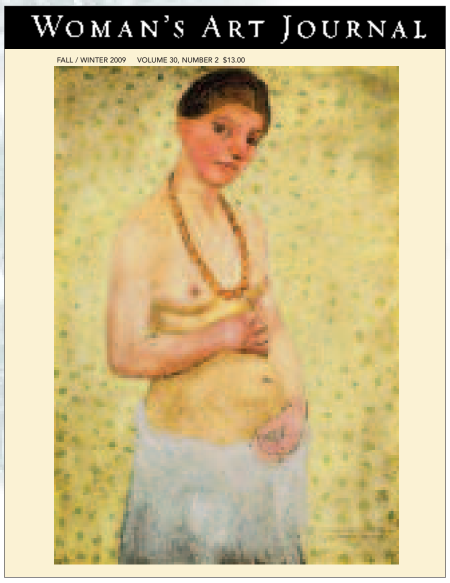

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