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Gender and Race in American Literature: An Exploration of the Discipline and a Proposal for Two New Courses

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The study of American literature is a relatively recent and provisional operation. Its canon, notoriously lacking in august Shakespeares and Miltons, has itself been produced by twentieth century revisionist scholarship. And its methodological spectrum has always included a study of literary texts as expression of larger myths and circumstances. In the very decades when literary studies were more generally ruled by a formalist preoccupation with the internal workings of recognized (white male) masterpieces, American literature was often wed to history and ideology because of a strong and innovative American Studies movement. Private as well as public writing, political rhetoric as well as fiction and poetry, were entered as evidence in such studies of "collective imagination" as R. W. B. Lewis's _The American Adam_ and Leo Marx's _The Machine in the Garden_.[1] Further, there was room for the author's own politics to emerge in these studies of collective America: the New Critical stance of objectivity was not the only order of the day.

Such openness to inter-disciplinary methods, formal variety, and partisan viewpoints can only be good news to feminist scholars seeking to explore the presence of women in American literature as characters, symbols, writers, readers. And yet the bad news about American literary studies is worse than the good news is good: this open and innovative scholarship has falsely represented a "collective" American culture in the creative work and experience of white English-speaking men. The Americanist's attention to myth and ideology has in fact centered on a single myth, that of the solitary but representative male figure on the physical or metaphysical frontier of the new world.[2] That this figure is an imperialist as well as a new-born Adam has sometimes been pointed out, but the groups that he has dominated rarely get

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to speak for themselves. Competing Spanish imperialists and conquered Native Americans and enslaved Afro-Americans exist as character-types and symbolic figures or tropes in the literary texts and the scholarship, but rarely as historically actual voices or imaginations. And women--half the population of all these coexistent populations on the American continent--also "inhabit"[3] the texts rather than create them, often inhabit them not as human presences but as images for the passive and possessed American land.

The special masculinity of this new-world myth has not just been imagined by twentieth century scholars: it exists in a major tradition extending from colonization to post-modernism. But scholars have endorsed the bias of artists, in fact intensified it by valuing the most masculine among them. D. H. Lawrence added as much masculine mythology to the American tradition as he found here when he wrote Studies in Classic American Literature, and Leslie Fiedler further defended the novelist as he-man in Love and Death in the American Novel.[4] Such overtly sexist books, however, hardly originated the masculine bias of twentieth century criticism. Long before Lawrence or Fiedler, the elegant Harvard philosopher George Santayana, speaking in California in 1911, looked eastward across the land and celebrated "the presence of a virgin and prodigious world" and Americans able to "experiment with her forces." From this vantage point Santayana was able to dismiss from modern consideration another American female, "the genteel tradition." Gentility, the "old mentality" of America as opposed to the "new," the intellect as opposed to the will, the colonial mansion as opposed to the skyscraper, was according to Santayana "the sphere...., at least predominantly, of the American woman."[5] This easterner was dismissing not only the literary work of actual women; he was also calling most eastern male writers (the Emersons and the Longfellows) metaphoric women. Fiedler later echoed Santayana as

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much as Lawrence when he defined America's major fiction as an effort by men to rescue their genre from "the genteel, sentimental, quasi-literate, female audience (female in sensibility whatever the nominal sex of the readers who composed it.")[6] The sixty years of scholarship and cultural criticism that followed Santayana's 1911 essay, as developed for instance by Van Wyck Brooks and Lionel Trilling, almost unananimously found America's good woman in the land itself and America's repressive wife and mother in the conventional consciousness called "gentility" or "sentimentalism."

If there is something admirable in the social reference and partisanship of twentieth century American criticism, then, there is also a narrow focus on and by white males that invites countering partisanship and new empirical study of the groups that this criticism has excluded. In the last ten years the field of American literature has begun such a process of transformation. Change has proceeded on several, only occasionally integrated, fronts: new theory and curriculum development coming simultaneously, though unevenly; feminists challenging the masculinity of the canon while Black Studies scholars challenged its racial bias, often without mutual knowledge and even without mutual sympathy. Meanwhile lesbian writers and critics have deplored the heterosexist bias of both of these groups and the absence of any consideration of lesbian literature. A new American diversity is already becoming available to us, though what it is beyond mere multiplicity, and how it will affect the way we teach American literature in colleges and high schools, is only beginning to emerge. Here we will present an overview of this process and describe two specific efforts at designing courses reflecting it.

The theoretical study of women and writing has proceeded in two major ways, identified by Elaine Showalter as "the feminist critique" and "gynocritics";[7] each has a special meaning and focus in the American field. The feminist critique began for all literary scholars as an analysis of the ideo-

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logical representation of women in male texts, a revisionary procedure that, in Sandra Gilbert's words, "wants to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority."[8] For Americanists, such studies focused early and vehemently on the portrayal of women and femininity in relation to the land. Judith Fryer wrote The Faces of Eve after realizing that "only Adam resided" in the new world garden of previous studies. Annette Kolodny, in The Lay of the Land, analyzed "the land-as-woman symbolization in American life and letters" out of a concern at once ecological and feminist. Kolodny's sub-title, Metaphor as Experience in American Life and Letters, is a pithy summary of what can only be called her American Studies method, her area of agreement with such predecessors as Marx and Lewis. But hers is also a study of "textuality and sexuality," a thorough-going challenge to Marx and Lewis. So is Judith Fetterley's valuable Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction, with its ringing manifesto, "Literature is political....American literature is male."[9]

The second type of feminist work, which Showalter has termed "gynocritics," is "the study of women as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psycho-dynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition."[10] This sort of work offers the possibility of a new American literature as well as a new vision of the old American literature. But it is just beginning. Nina Baym surveyed the entirely new field of popular "Woman's Fiction," while Emily Stipes Watts looked similarly at American women's poetry, going even beyond Baym in scope, however, by working out inter-connections

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between renowned and unknown women poets and contrasting their common tradition with that of the male poets. Ironically, when Emily Dickinson (surely our most celebrated woman writer) has become a focus of gynocritical scholarship, she has usually been seen in a British women's tradition rather than an American.[11] What has been uniquely feminine in American literature still largely evades definition. The contribution of lesbian writers to this tradition is just beginning to emerge, through such landmark studies as Lillian Faderman and Bonnie Zimmerman have done. We need too to understand the social functions and aesthetic qualities of those feminine-associated pejoratives "genteel" and "sentimental". Ann Douglas's The Feminization of American Culture, exemplifying the heroic scope and engaged social analysis of the American Studies method par excellence, turns out to echo its gender values as well: it examines the literary work of "sentimental" women and "feminized" men only to reiterate the contempt of her predecessors Santayana and Fiedler. Less polemic work on sources must come first, through such studies as Baym and Watt have done. The MLA Project on Regional Writing is a major effort of the sort that will eventually enable us to understand a range of life choices as they have been expressed in writing by American women.[12]

White American feminist scholars, however, have rarely worked out a simultaneous critique of American racism or sought to include black or Native American or Chicana experience in their reconstruction of a women's tradition. Meanwhile, in what might be called the racial analogue of gynocritics, Black Studies scholars have been discovering and interpreting their own tradition. But this effort has largely excluded women's experience. As a result our ignorance of writing by women of color is prodigious: again we are at the stage of just beginning to discover what might be studied rather than reaching conclusions. But the vitality of contemporary writing by women of color--and

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the radical dissent of their language "as experience and history in American life and letters"--can quickly be seen in recent collections by Mary Helen Washington and by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. Further, in a book like Dexter Fisher's monumental anthology The Third Woman, Americanists can begin to discover how the myths and narrative forms of the Native American, Black, Chicana, and Asian-American traditions have functioned in recent literature by women of all these groups: how non-white oral forms have met, absorbed, or overcome white America and its written forms under the circumstances of immigration, suppression, ethnic discrimination, sexism.[13]

Reading The Third Woman is, for a white female Americanist, like having minor characters or language tropes or empty spaces speak in their own right, almost as though Chingachgook's wife (Uncas must have had a mother) were to renarrate The Last of the Mohicans, or Aunt Chloe Uncle Tom's Cabin. Or rather as though the great-granddaughters of these characters, raised and educated in racially complex twentieth century America, were speaking their own stories and--retrospectively through these--stories of the past both like and unlike Cooper's or Stowe's. The interesting question, Alice Walker writes, is not just the difference between black and white literature, but "the way black writers and white writers seem...to be writing one immense story--the same story for the most part--with different parts of the immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives."[14] Finding and reading Alice Walker's story is precisely the work of a transformed study of American literature.

The danger with all such work is that it might remain in a ghetto, whether a ghetto defined by race or by gender. Just as Black Studies programs have tended to create worlds of their own separate from American Studies, so are the

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feminist critique and gynocritics reflected in a wide range of new "women's courses," whether located institutionally in their own programs or in traditional literature departments. That such courses have proliferated is a sign of the strength of the feminist project; conversely, however, it is also a weakness that their concerns are not shared by entire programs or departments in the humanities. A two-pronged approach is necessary: in addition to conducting courses and research on women's writing and writing by people of color, we must also work to transform our broader courses on American literature accordingly. We have made a beginning in the first of these efforts, but not equally the second.

Two recent surveys, independently conducted, indicate that American literature courses are with very few exceptions teaching only the white, male, canonical authors. Paul Lauter, Professor of American Studies at SUNY Old Westbury and an editor of Feminist Press, analyzed syllabi for fifty American literature survey courses taught at representative colleges and universities across the country; and he found that of the fifty most frequently taught authors, only six are white women (Dickinson, Wharton, Chopin, Jewett, Bradstreet, O'Connor), five are black men (Ellison, Wright, Chesnutt, Hughes, Cullen), and none are black women or representatives of any other non-white group. The Nineteenth Century American Women's Fiction Project, directed by Peggy McIntosh at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, analyzed forty-two syllabi and come up with data almost exactly corroborating Lauter's on gender: one out of eleven of the most frequently assigned authors is a woman. To the small extent that this picture has improved recently, according to Katharine Stanis of the Wellesley Project, it has done so because the anthologies used in 85% of these courses have begun to include a few more women writers, such as Margaret Fuller, Mary Boykin Chesnut, and Mary E. Wilkins

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Freeman. If the authors taught in American literature courses are to change, then so must the texts that are used to teach them.[15]

To date the only response to this need is the "Reconstructing American Literature" project directed by Paul Lauter. Indeed one aim of the present paper is to espouse Lauter's work, to offer a theoretical and historical argument for its necessity. The main purpose of his project is to design an entirely new American literature anthology that the Feminist Press will publish and distribute. At a 1982 summer institute at Yale a group of college teachers reached a consensus about the job of the new anthology. 1) It should in its choice of authors try to represent American diversity of race, nationality, gender, and class. 2) It should include a variety of non-traditional literary forms (non-traditional only with respect to the canon of American literature) such as creation narratives and rituals, folk songs, spirituals, journals, letters, diaries, and speeches. 3) It should treat familiar authors in unfamiliar ways: dropping frequently anthologized novels for shorter works by the same authors so as to create more space; substituting for excerpts from a traditionally American-mythic work like Melville's Moby-Dick his lesser-known "Tartarus of Maids," with its focus on women and industrial work; breaking down traditional groupings (Matthiessen's "American Renaissance"); creating new groupings on thematic or linguistic lines, so that a variety of authors will be paired or juxtaposed.[16]

Lauter's project is a massive and radical effort both in its offering of unknown or rarely available texts and in its systematic questioning of orthodoxy in approaching old and new texts. In both respects it is quite another thing from the already available anthologies, with their nominal and often patronizing representation of writing by women and people of color. Unlike these, it has chosen not to reiterate and reify theories about the essential

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American experience which have done so much to limit the kinds of literature that we now know how to value.

If the way introductory surveys are taught constitutes a valuable measure of change, however, it is clear that surveys need not be the only--indeed not the best--place to work out our own changes. Whether organized by gender, race, region, genre, period, or theme, all our courses need to join the enterprise of both finding new materials and interpreting their significance for the larger perception of American literature. In this spirit, each of the authors of this paper will describe here a particular course that she is now assembling. The two courses come from different experiences and aim for different immediate goals, but we feel a genuine complementarity between them. Deborah Lambert, recently doing work on several women writers, including the New Hampshire novelist and short story writer Alice Brown, proposes a course on New Hampshire Women Writers that focuses on the idea of regionalism in relation to women's writing; it also encourages students to take on for themselves the finding and interpreting of unstudied materials. Phyllis Cole, having recently found and analyzed the diary of Mary Moody Emerson, wants to assimilate this work and the work of many scholars on gender and race into a new study of American Romanticism.[17]

New Hampshire Women Writers: Recovering Lost Literature. In this course students study the writing and the lives of women who have lived in New Hampshire in the last century, c. 1850-1950. The emphasis in the course is on out-of-print writing and on non-traditional forms such as letters, diaries, and memoirs: on the forgotten nineteenth-century writers Edna Dean Proctor and Christine Parmenter rather than on better-known writers such as May Sarton or even Grace Metalious. The course responds to the need for a changed curriculum in American literature by asserting that unknown women in New Hampshire

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have produced writing worthy of being rediscovered and read, valuable enough to merit study in college. It teaches students to ask why some writing has been considered "literature" and other writing has not, and hence to question the definition of literature and the nature of "genre"; why certain writing has become part of the American canon, and other writing has not; and what they, and we, mean when we talk about "excellence" in writing. The course is intended to alter students' usually humble relation to "literature" and to embolden them to ask basic questions about the valorizing of particular genres, works, and authors in their society, how furthermore these processes affect writing done by women.[18]

Before students embark on individual research on a particular author, they are given some weeks of intellectual and methodological preparation. This process includes introduction to New Hampshire history emphasizing women's roles (material already available); instruction and exercises in the use of bibliographical and biographical materials; and preliminary discussion of the feminist assumptions that underlie the course. The general assumption is that the experience of women is a legitimate, though usually overlooked, aspect of teaching and research. Specifically, students are introduced to the idea of "regionalism". Is it, as Florence Howe has said, a "sexist slur" which implies that certain writers are minor? Why is it never applied to such obviously "regional" but "major" writers as Thoreau, Faulkner, or Frost? (The regionalism of Frost's "North of Boston" and "New Hampshire" poems would offer especially relevant cases.) What is the literary canon and who and what determine the literary reputations that eventually determine the canon? Students are thus prepared to engage in an analysis of forgotten literary work that asks why these works have been forgotten: have they perhaps been neglected because in some way they differ from, even, subvert, the established order?

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And what are the particular qualities and excellences of the works at hand? With this conceptual and methodological background, they are equipped to begin reading, discussing, and eventually evaluating the literary products and life-documents of the writer they select from a list prepared by the instructor.

I found the list itself easy to prepare: I began with the University of New Hampshire card catalogue and readily discovered names of New Hampshire writers in printed collections, often by long-forgotten nineteenth century or non-academic editors. The harder job is to track down actual out-of-print works and manuscripts of the writers, and at this point the instructor must share the work of excavation with a corps of students. They themselves, with the instructor's guidance, locate materials, compare published books with manuscripts, interview relatives and descendants, use newspaper and town files and records, and visit local libraries, historical and antiquarian societies, and attics, as necessary. To complete the individual projects, each student writes a brief biography of the writer studied, a description of her published and unpublished writing, and a brief comment on the writer's career. The conclusion of the course engages students in a discussion of types of literary merit and value, with the goal of developing criteria by which to evaluate the recovered literature and make selections for inclusion in an anthology of writing by New Hampshire women.

This course in women's literature reflects certain key attitudes and values. First, the course diminishes the distance between students and literature. Students are not reading "monuments of unaging intellect," compiled in large anthologies and pronounced great regardless of their own responses. Instead, students see that women living lives like their own in the communities they also live in have created literary works; thus literature comes to be understood as a part of life, not as a remote and mystical process. In fact students may respond positively to writing that their New-Critically trained

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instructor is not moved by. These differences of perception become an integral part of class discussion. Such a course also challenges the notions of what does and does not constitute "literature" and raises questions about "canon" and "genre" in concrete instances as well. It puts into question the matter of literary evaluation--and consequently the definitions of canon, genre, and regionalism. Students and instructors discuss (without guidance from critics, without Empson lurking in the background) what the values of a particular piece of writing might be--and whether regionalism, for example, is limiting or enriching, and whether such material should be included in American literature courses. Further, by engaging students in their own research, students have the experience of discovering and analyzing literary works and presenting them to others; each student becomes an expert on her own writer. Last, and perhaps most important, such a course affirms the value and the interest of women's lives, as well as women's literature.

American Romanticisms, 1815-1870. Organizing a course by period can be an unsettling act if historical contemporaneity is taken with a new seriousness. American literature in its romantic phase becomes interesting in a new way when we play off against one another the well-established "romances" of white male writers, the "sentimental" poetry and fiction of white women, and the black slave narratives (mostly by men, occasionally by women.) And this picture becomes even richer when we consider private writing as well as published, when furthermore we look at the emergence into printed form (under circumstances of white cultural imperialism) of two pre-literate, non-white American folk forms of great power, black spirituals and Native American myths and legends.

To achieve such a vision in a semester-long course is not easy, especially for a historic period where the familiar male writers look so much like a pan-

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theon. Selectivity will of course be necessary; most novels have to be sacrificed as whole texts in favor of shorter narratives, stories, poems, and chapters from novels; and these are organized so that gender and race become central issues of analysis as both theme and circumstance. Among the historical circumstancesthat the course tries to make clear are a commercial press relatively open to both men and women; the emergence through it of a male nationalistic romanticism and a female domestic romanticism, both secularizations of inherited Protestantism; and a national white imperialism toward blacks and Native Americans, variously sentimentalized and condemned in white texts and counter-attacked in black and Native American texts. The course does not abandon chronology, but violates it when occasion demands and organizes reading and classwork in thematically organized units. These are designed explicitly to clarify our ideas of gender and race in the texts and to avoid demeaning female or non-white subjects or forms. The traditional meanings of the term "romanticism" are used, enlarged, and questioned in the course. I keep it for its capacious ability to describe a literature of <u>feeling</u> (but now sentiment, domestic affection, religious enthusiasm as well as the much-celebrated "imagination") and a literature of <u>nature</u> (but now to include the actual voices of the women, blacks, and Native Americans associated with nature in the "civilized" white male literature of primitivism.) I teach Whitman and Dickinson at two points in the semester as a powerfully contrasting pair of romantic poets.

Here is an effort at a specific sequence. In the first six weeks of the course we discuss languages of feeling in relation to gender:

1. Literary nationalism and literary domesticity: journalistic manifestoes by William Cullen Bryant and Sarah Hale; Lydia Sigourney's domestic restlessness and sense of historical change in "To a Shred of Linen" and Washington Irving's legend of change and male wanderlust "Rip Van Winkle." Here stressing the separation of spheres by gender.[19]

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2. First-person voices and inner worlds: passages from diaries, autobiographies, poems in the American Protestant traditions, including Lyman Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Phyllis Wheatley and Rebecca Jackson,[20] Mary Moody Emerson and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Here exploring a less gender-specific world of consciousness, providing a context for analyzing the androgyny/masculinity of:

3. "Self-Reliance" as an American ideology: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature, "Self-Reliance," "The American Scholar." Then two challenges by women: Lidian Jackson Emerson, "The Transcendental Bible"[21] and Margaret Fuller, Woman in the Nineteenth Century (excerpt).

4. Childhood and death: native elegies by Wheatley and Sigourney; then a group all influenced by Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode": Emerson's "Threnody," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "My Lost Youth," Stowe's scene of Little Eva's death in Uncle Tom's Cabin, Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," Elizabeth Oakes Smith's "The Sinless Child."

5. Women as saint/witches, objects of spiritual/sexual desire. "New England tales" (all concerning Puritan "goodmen" and women, all tales of good and evil): Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown"; Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Hope Leslie (excerpt); Lydia Maria Child, Hobomok (excerpt); John Greenleaf Whittier, "Cassandra Southwick." Male destroyers: Hawthorne, "The Birthmark"; Edgar Allan Poe, "Ligeia."

6. Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, selected poems: both inheriting the Emerson legacy, each inheriting a gender-defined literary world as well.

Next come three weeks on Native American texts and on images of Native Americans in white texts, then a comparable unit on black texts and images.

7. Native American legends: female and male and social order in "The Red Swan," "The Ring in the Prairie," "Leelinau," "Manabozho." Using modern texts edited by John Bierhorst, but examining too Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's original (1839) collection. Attempting to define the literary qualities of myth (cf. Bierhorst, Lévi-Strauss[22]), comparing these with the "mercerized folklore" of Longfellow's adaptation from Schoolcraft, "Hiawatha" (excerpt).

8. The noble savage: James Fenimore Cooper, The Last of the Mohicans; Sedgwick, Hope Leslie. Male-male and male-female bonding in white primitivist romances.

9. Native and white confrontation and dialogue: treaty speeches by Chief Speckled Snake and Chief Joseph; Pontiac, "Paradise Opened to the Indians"[23] and Handsome Lake, "A Vision" (Native American millennialism before the threat of extinction: what becomes of traditional female and male roles in these new visions of endurance?); Henry David Thoreau, "Economy" and passages from Indian Notebooks--a white experiment in savagery as a means to romantic consciousness.

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10. Black spirituals: Afro-American song and millennial vision in response to enslavement by whites. Female and male singers and figures in the songs. Circumstances of gathering into print in the 1860's (cf. Schoolcraft and Native Americans in 1830's.)[24]

11. Slave narratives: Frederick Douglass, Narrative; Linda Brent, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. As autobiography and protest.

12. Anti-slavery as politics, religion, literature: excerpts from speeches and appeals by David Walker, William Lloyd Garrison, Lydia Maria Child, Frederick Douglass; Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The semester ends with three weeks that come back to the end of the period, now with a fuller sense of social and political issues.

13. Melville on work and slavery: "Benito Cereno," "Bartleby the Scrivener," "The Tartarus of Maids".

14. First-person female and the Civil War: Julia Ward Howe, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"; excerpts from Mary Boykin Chesnut's Diary, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's Gates Ajar, Charlotte Forten's Journal, autobiographical accounts by ex-slaves collected in The American Slave, ed. Rawick.

15. Whitman and Dickinson, selected poems, letters, essays: Whitman's proclamation of the private as public and national, Dickinson's intensification and expansion of privacy.

The problem of the course is to integrate the varieties of literary discourse in mid-nineteenth century America, to see it at once as one world and as many and unbridgeable worlds. The course is both an inter-textual study and, through particular literary texts, a study of social structure. How does a text serve the needs or express the strains of its writer or readers? What are the differences of form and function between literary myths and folk myths? What is there to appreciate and criticize in "conventional" and "unconventional" forms or points of view?

We see limitations in these two courses even according to the values that we have been setting forth here. Neither, for instance, gets a very firm grip

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on social class as a determiner of literary production or form; and neither explicitly uses lesbian writing or analysis. Phyllis Cole's does not enter into the Hispanic-American world, as it could well do in this period when the United States engulfed the Hispanic cultures of Texas and Florida. But such admissions do not lessen our confidence in the value of these courses as contributions toward a goal that will of course only be reached collectively. Our experience has been that new and unexplored literary territory lies just off the familiar tracks of New England literature and the American Renaissance.

But the particular collective project of which we have been part this year, the Mellon Seminar directed by Peggy McIntosh at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, helps us to realize that entering any new territory is not enough unless a thorough questioning of basic principles accompany the investigation. What will the study of literature look like if it is truly inclusive? Not only will new groups of writers be represented, but new genres. The genres of high culture will have to make room for the informal letter and diary, the folk song and legend, the political discourse, the best-seller. And these must become a respected part of literary study, in American literature courses as well as in American Studies programs. If we are truly interested in the diversity of lives revealed in American literature, we must be open to new forms of revelation.

And this openness will change our ways of responding to literature aesthetically. Traditional literary scholars see their work as the study of excellence in a received tradition. And this commitment represents a major barrier to curricular change: a barrier presenting itself both internally, in our responses as readers, and externally as well, in the English Departments that many readers over time have created. To this concern about maintaining and teaching excellence we have several responses.

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First, it must become part of the study of literary excellence to discover the ways that excellence is produced and defined by our literary institutions. Literary judgments must be seen within a cultural context of competition and change. Knowing that only the twentieth century has declared the excellence of Huckleberry Finn (despite its incompleteness of form) and the mythic reach of Cooper's novels (despite their woodenness of diction), we must avoid the arrogance of seeing any generation's judgments as the endpoint of change, and we must seek ways to make the politics of judgment part of our subject and its history.

Second, we need to test our own responses to any particular text by again being more historical: by attempting to recover (within the limits of historical knowledge) the text's significance and aesthetic force for its own author and readers. To an extent, as we started by saying, Americanists have done this sort of work for decades. But as studies of "collective imagination" are revealed to be studies of a dominant minority, we need to begin understanding quite new contexts of significance: for women, for working class readers, for Americans of color. Recent developments in semiotic and reader-response theory offer valuable tools for reading single texts in relation to collective cultural realities. Clifford Geertz was one of the founders of semiotic study when he urged anthropologists to "read" the signs and symbols of a culture the way literary critics read poems. We literary critics can in turn learn that readable signs exist in all parts of a culture, and exist furthermore as "webs of significance" as well as discrete artifacts.[25]

Finally, we do not wish to call a halt to aesthetic response, but to acknowledge a variety of excellences created by sensibilities nourished in different cultures and experiences. John Bierhorst, having clarified the

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figurative nature of Native American myth as geometric splitting and pairing rather than synthesizing metaphor, admits that such poetry might be considered either "too dry" or "admirably chaste." Nina Baym finds that Susan Warner's Wide, Wide, World, with its "well-turned sentences,...direct prose, pictorial vividness, and rhythmical clauses," announces "a literary talent unmarked by the alleged 'feminine' excesses of over-blown imagery and inflated diction."[26] While neither Bierhorst nor Baym attempts a sweeping redefinition of what is "too dry" or what is "over-blown," each is surely extending our knowledge of America's aesthetic as well as social diversity. Training ourselves in diversity is the essential challenge and self-enlargement.

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[1] Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 4; Lewis, The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

[2] Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," American Quarterly (Summer, 1981), 123-139.

[3] Adrienne Rich, quoted by Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations of the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," in Men's Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines, ed. Dale Spender (London: Pergamon Press, 1981), p. 23.

[4] Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (New York: Viking Press, 1968); Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Criterion Books, 1960).

[5] The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

[6] Quoted by Nina Baym, Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 309.

[7] See Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," Critical Inquiry 8 (Winter, 1981), 179-205 for an overview of the present state of feminist criticism. For another description of the modes of feminist theory see the Introduction by Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret Higonnet to The Re-

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presentation of Women in Fiction: Papers from the English Institute, 1981, New Series, no. 7 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. ix-xxii.

[8] Quoted by Showalter, p. 183.

[9] Fryer, The Faces of Eve: Women in the Nineteenth Century American Novel (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. vii; Kolodny, The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. ix; Fetterley, The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. xi-xii.

[10] Showalter, pp. 184-185.

[11] Baym, Woman's Fiction; Watts, The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977). Two studies that culminate British sequences with Dickinson are Margaret Homans, Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) and Sandra W. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). Amanda Porterfield sets Dickinson in an American tradition quite different from Watts's in Feminine Spirituality in America: From Sarah Edwards to Martha Graham (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

[12] Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York: William Morrow, 1981); Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Criticism," Feminist Studies 7, no. 3 (Fall 1981), 451-475.

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Two useful guides to the field of lesbian literature are Karen M. Keener, "Out of the Archives and into the Academy: Opportunities for Research and Publication in Lesbian Literature," College English 44, no. 3 (March 1982), 301-313 and Elly Bulkin, "'A Whole New Poetry Beginning Here': Teaching Lesbian Poetry," College English 40, no. 8 (April 1979), 874-888.

Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977); Leonore Hoffmann and Deborah Rosenfelt. eds., Teaching Women's Literature from a Regional Perspective (New York; MLA, 1982).

[13] Washington, Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor, 1975); Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (Watertown, Ma: Persephone Press, 1981); Fisher, ed., The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980).

[14] "Saving the Life that Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life," in The Third Woman, p. 152.

[15] Lauter, "A Small Survey of Introductory Courses in American Literature," Women's Studies Quarterly 9, no. 4 (Winter 1981), 12; McIntosh et al., "A Patchwork Piece: The Nineteenth Century American Women's Fiction Project," Women's Studies Quarterly 10, no. 3 (Fall 1982), 35-39.

[16] Angus Paul, "Institute Discusses New Anthology as Part of 'Reconstructing American Literature,'" The Chronicle of Higher Education 24, no. 19 (July 7, 1982), pp. 17-18.

[17] Lambert, "Alice Brown," American Short Story Writers to World War II, ed. William Grant, in Dictionary of Literary Biography (Detroit: Gale Research Co., forthcoming); Cole, "The Advantage of Loneliness: Mary

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Moody Emerson's 'Almanacks', 1802-1855," in Emerson: Prospect and Retrospect (Harvard English Studies 10) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 1-32.

[18] The aims and methods of this course are similar to those of the MLA Project on Regional Literature and to the Nineteenth Century American Fiction Project. For a theoretical discussion of these issues, see Lillian Robinson, "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon," Working Papers Series, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.

[19] See Watts, pp. 91-92 for the text of Sigourney's poem, and Fetterley, ch. 1 for a feminist reading of "Rip Van Winkle."

[20] Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Quaker Eldress, ed. Jean McMahon Humez (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981).

[21] In Ellen Tucker Emerson, The Life of Lidian Jackson Emerson, ed. Delores Bird Carpenter (Boston: Twayne, 1980), pp. 81-83.

[22] Bierhorst, ed., The Red Swan: Myths and Tales of the American Indians (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976); Schoolcraft, ed., Algic Researches Comprising Inquiries Respecting the Mental Characteristics of the North American Indians, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Bros., 1839); Lévi-Strauss, Mythologies, 5 vols. (Paris, 1964-).

[23] Included in Schoolcraft, vol. 1, pp. 239-48.

[24] See William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, eds. Slave Songs of the United States (New York: A. Simpson and

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Co., 1867.)

[25] Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (New York: York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 9, 5. For a feminist reading informed by reader-response theory, see Jane P. Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History," Glyph 8 (1981), 79-102.

[26] Bierhorst, p. 12; Baym, Woman's Fiction, p. 144.

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