

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 23 (2009)

Artikel: Introduction
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-389621>

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Introduction

The title of this volume, *Writing American Women*, can be read in at least two different ways. One is a verbal reading, according to which someone “writes” American women; another is adjectival, according to which American women write. The essays collected here take both approaches. Some are about women who write and about the biographical, editorial, historical, and geographical conditions informing that writing; others are about the way that women are represented by themselves and by others. Many are about both at once. Our title embraces the grammatical ambiguity offered by “writing” and offers it as a playful rhetorical gambit for a volume that reflects the ongoing struggle among feminists and other literary scholars to resist the overdeterminations of the either/or logic that permeates our language.

If the word “writing” offers a welcome ambiguity, the other two words of the title raise more troubling questions. The notion of a national literature, especially “American” (with its presumptuous appropriation of all the ethnicities and languages spoken within its borders and its equally presumptuous exclusion of the other continent that bears its name) has come under intense scrutiny in recent decades. Texts that might once have unquestioningly been read as American are now read with a view towards their transatlantic, transnational, bilingual, multicultural, and/or postcolonial articulations.

The term “women” has been questioned with equal rigor and passion and has been all but abandoned in contemporary investigations of gender and sexuality. Pressure has been exerted on this categorical term from a wide range of quarters, including feminists themselves, recently seconded by gender critics and queer theorists. So, one might wonder, why “Writing American Women”? What use is there in retrieving these untrendy categories ostensibly tainted with traces of sexual essentialism and American exceptionalism?

The short answer is that it hadn't been done before. The conference of the Swiss Association of North American Studies (SANAS) from which this volume takes its title was the first in Switzerland to focus exclusively on the writing and representation of North American women.¹ An important colloquium on "Gender" had taken place in Switzerland a few years earlier, bringing together the intellectual and personal energies of thinkers such as Judith Butler, Elizabeth Bronfen, and Jennifer Hornsby.² Internationally, gender-oriented analysis has gained widespread acceptance in the fields of English and American literature. Yet, we felt that the study of "women writers" was not co-terminous with the inquiries of gender criticism. Like Elaine Showalter, whose magisterial literary history of American women writers, *A Jury of Her Peers*, came out while this volume was in production, we believed that scholars still had much to learn from putting women writers back into the conversation with each other that they had begun historically and would continue to pursue if we gave them room to do so. We were delighted with the results of this choice at the conference as suggestive patterns, shared concerns, and subtle connections came into view. Many of these emerge with equal force and eloquence in this volume.

The longer answer to the question of why we chose to focus on "writing women" paradoxically emerges from our attempt to get beyond dichotomous thinking. Contrary to popular wisdom, the 1970s feminist project of reconsidering neglected women artists and feminist perspectives is neither dead nor done teaching us how to think critically about how women write. A wide array of entrenched and misleading assumptions about women's creativity and expression is still confounding women writers and feminist critics with energy-draining double-binds. Thinking about women writers in relation to each other and their shared if not necessarily coherent experience of gender helps undo the real obstacles that women writers historically faced in their pursuit of literary careers and critical recognition.

Yet the category of "women writers" remains necessarily unstable and problematic. As Phyllis Rose pointed out twenty years ago, many

¹ Although relatively new to Switzerland, research on American women writers has been developing steadily in the United States. Since the late 1990s, the Society for the Study of American Women Writers has been organizing biennial conferences, and the journal *Legacies* (now the official publication of the SSAWW) has been published since 1983. In 1993, a conference in San Antonio organized by the American Literature Association resulted in a volume, *Speaking the Other Self: American Women Writers*, edited by Jeanne Campbell Reesman.

² Organized by Professor Margaret Bridges (University of Bern) at the Schloss Münchwiler from 28 to 30 May 1996, this conference also featured talks by Diane Elam and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and was aimed primarily at Swiss doctoral students.

women writers don't want to be "Women Writers" and would feel as unfairly limited by such a label as male writers who found themselves discussed only as "Male Writers" (*Writing of Women* 161). Such categories seem to assign women some essentially female characteristics that override their complexity and individuality as human beings. A volume such as ours thirty years ago might have attempted to explore the notion of a distinctly female voice or an *écriture féminine*, as Hélène Cixous called for in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975). The essays in this volume approach the question of women's writing in a far more historicized way. We recognize that women writers are embedded in a particular place and time and that their writing is shaped by specific institutional, cultural and publishing dynamics. There is no shared female style or theme or voice, nor would anyone wish there to be. Women writers, like all artists, are best defined by their unique talents and signature styles rather than their similarities.

Nevertheless, American women writers have shared an awareness of writing from a position of marginalization and of engaging directly or indirectly with a skeptical male literary establishment even when writing immensely popular works. This has resulted in an ambivalent but sustaining sense of sisterhood with other women writers, as well as a distinctly unsisterly desire to *not* write like them (which has been explored by critics such as Betsy Erkkila). Yet in spite of women writers' struggle not to be defined primarily as women writers and confined to a female literary ghetto, it is fair to say, as Elaine Showalter does in *Sister's Choice* (1991), that women's writing is produced within a complex intertextual network" (17-18).³ This network has been a transatlantic one from the

³ Studies of American women writers can be said to have begun in 1883 with Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Our Famous Women*, a collection of portraits of successful authors such as Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Prescott Stofford (as well as several artists and activists). The writers of the pieces were themselves all famous women and included Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Larcom (a poet discussed by Mary Loeffelholz in her contribution to this volume). Another important milestone in women's literary history is Helen Waite Papashvily's *All the Happy Endings: a Study of the Domestic Novel in America* (1956), which anticipated later feminist rereadings of the domestic novel by arguing that it subverted male control of women and patriarchy. The contemporary wave of interest in American women writers came on the heels of Patricia Mayer Spacks' and Ellen Moers' groundbreaking studies of women's writing (which included but did not focus exclusively on American women), *The Female Imagination: A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing* (1972) and *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1976), respectively. The major studies and anthologies of American women writers include: Laura Chester and Sharon Barba, eds., *Rising Tides: 20th Century American Women Poets* (1973), Emily Stipes Watts, *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* (1977), Nina Baym, *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (1978), Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), Mary Kelley, *Private*

start, with English writers such as the Brontë sisters and Virginia Woolf playing a central role in the intellectual life of American women authors. It has also become an increasingly multicultural and even global network, as African American, Latina, Native American, Asian American and other ethnic women's writing joins the conversation with its many diverse voices and histories. The result is something that Elaine Showalter calls "The American Female Tradition," a vital archive of texts that is inseparable from the literary history of American literature as a whole but which also forms patterns and narratives of its own (*Jury* xv).

One common theme sounded by many women writers as well as the scholars who write about them is the questioning, blurring and transcending of the binary oppositions which have often defined women as the Other of universal, neutral and default humanity, and have divided women from each other according to ruthless oppositions (e.g. virgin/whore, beautiful/ugly, straight/lesbian). Nearly all the essays in this volume reflect the conviction that binary thinking is too limited to grasp the complexities of real historical experience and especially of gender. This collection reveals the extent to which post-structuralist insights have been absorbed into literary study, especially Jacques Derrida's critique of the arbitrary yet totalizing power of the linguistic structures initially identified by structuralism as natural and universal. It is fair to say that we are all post-Derrideans now insofar as we are all acutely suspicious of how binary schemas (cultural hierarchies masquerading as simple oppositions) operate at every level of thought. We find ourselves

Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America (1984), Judith Fetterley, *Provisions: A Reader from Nineteenth-Century American Women* (1985), Lucy Freibert and Barbara White, eds., *Hidden Hands: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1790-1870* (1985), Barbara Christian, "Afro-American Women Poets: A Historical Introduction" (1985), Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986), Michael Awkward, *Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels* (1989), Joanne Dobson, *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-Century America* (1989), Shirley Lim, ed., *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (1989), Sylvia Watanabe and Carol Bruchac, eds., *Home to Stay: Asian American Women's Fiction* (1990), Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (1991), Elizabeth Ammons, *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn of the Century* (1991), Elaine Showalter, Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz, eds., *Modern American Women Writers: Profiles of their Lives, from the 1870s to the Present* (1993), Karen Kilcup, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: An Anthology* (1997), Jeanne Campbell Reesman, *Speaking the Other Self: American Women Writers* (1997), Paula Bennet, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology* (1998), Dale M. Bauer and Philip Gould, *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing* (2001), Mary Loeffelholz, *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry* (2004), and Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (2009).

identifying and dismantling them at every step, or at least attempting to midwife their own self-subversion, though they never seem to cease reappearing. This battle with binary oppositions sounds the ostinato throughout this volume.

Although the academic study of women writers is a fairly recent enterprise, American women have been writing since they first arrived in the New World. The first published American woman writer, Anne Bradstreet, frequently acknowledged the importance of her immigration to the Massachusetts colony to her sense of self in her personal letters. The very title of her book of poems, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America, By a Gentlewoman of Those Parts* (1650), defined her as an American writer. Bradstreet acknowledged and addressed her position as a woman writer even more explicitly and struggled with the double consciousness (to borrow W.E.B. Du Bois's phrase) specific to women writers, always acutely aware of how they would be judged by unsympathetic male authorities. Hence Bradstreet writes: "I am obnoxious to each carping tongue/Who says my hand a needle better fits,/A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,/For such despite they cast on women's wits:/If what I do prove well, it's won't advance,/They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance." As the "carping" voice of the male reader finds itself woven into the very fiber of Bradstreet's prologue to *The Tenth Muse*, men's voices, perhaps less critical but equally competitive, often find their way into women's texts through a variety of mechanisms. As Dahia Messara demonstrates in her essay on three female captivity narratives, including Mary Rowlandson's, influential clerics not only edited, introduced, and published these texts, legitimizing them the way slave narratives would need to be authenticated two centuries later, but they also co-wrote them to various degrees, often thereby inserting and advancing their own political and theological interests. The attention that Messara brings to the cultural, institutional and editorial contexts for the production and publication of women's writing is revisited throughout this book.

The opening essay of the volume, Mary Loeffelholz's "Sisters of Avon," was delivered as one of the plenary lectures of the conference and establishes many of the concerns of the volume as a whole: the negative and defeating stereotypes dogging women's writing, both in their own time and in contemporary critical practice, the importance of autobiographical and self-reflexive writing to women writers, and the public, political, and social functions of writing in general. Loeffelholz's work represents an important continuation of what Elaine Showalter called "gynocritics," the project of recuperating and re-valorizing women's texts, but it also performs the far more radical gesture of turning critical attention to the very terms by which we evaluate a text

("Toward a Feminist Poetics" 131). It is one thing to recuperate writers, such as Emily Dickinson or Edith Wharton, who share the stylistic and thematic preoccupations of modernism (whose values still inform every aspect of our discipline); it is entirely another to question the modernist conventions which were used so aggressively to disenfranchise women poets from American literature and to propose a Lucy Larcom or Jane Ermina Locke for reconsideration. These two writers, together with the later poet Amy Lowell, share a geography (Lowell, Massachusetts), a vocation (poetry), and a critical history of being labeled "poetesses," the highly ambivalent word which has been used to dismiss as often as to describe women poets. Loeffelholz's essay examines how each of these three gifted writers reflected on and struggled with the meaning of her own marginalization as well as with the status and function of poetry in a wider cultural and commercial context. The stakes of this investigation are extremely high and imply a radical rethinking of literary history as we know it.

Long considered a kind of prose poetess for the young (prolific, sentimental, commercially successful, accessible), Louisa May Alcott is the subject of the next two essays, both of which grapple with her paradoxical gender affiliations. Although Alcott's best known work was the children's classic *Little Women* (1868), which offered an ambivalent mix of Christian moralism, Victorian femininity and gender-bending revolt, she has become a more enigmatic and complex figure since the publication in the 1970s of her long-forgotten gothic and romantic thrillers. Maria-cristina Bertoli and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet address some of the same issues and examine the same texts, yet with dramatically different results. Bertoli reads Alcott through the rich tradition of the androgyne, thus linking her to Plato, Coleridge, Jung and Virginia Woolf, while Soltysik's essay stages an encounter between feminism and queer theory, exploring their convergences and divergences in an attempt to assess the relative potential of each to account for Alcott's many paradoxes. Together the two essays display the wide range of approaches for studying gender and sexuality to emerge from feminist criticism.

As our title suggests, writing about women writers is often inseparable from writing about how women are written. Boris Vejdovsky's essay on Edith Wharton and Henry James focuses simultaneously on Wharton as writer and as acute observer of the woman as aesthetic object. Beginning with an anecdote about Wharton's reluctance to reveal her writing to Henry James at their first meeting, Vejdovsky's essay compares James's explorations of the relationship between the male writer/artist and his female model/muse with Wharton's own treatment of the same theme but from the perspective of the muse. What emerges is a sense of the female writer's unease with any facile opposition be-

tween subject and object, writer and written; in short, with the logic of the either/or.

An even more direct theoretical assault on binary thinking is articulated in the next essay, Kimberly Frohreich's comparative analysis of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) and its later Hollywood, literary and Broadway adaptations. The binary oppositions in this book are familiar to all, especially and unforgettably the Good Witch and the Bad Witch, one of which is beautiful and good, the other ugly and bad. Frohreich points out that Baum's original story was in fact more complex and potentially progressive than the version we all know from Victor Fleming's 1939 movie, which conflates feminine beauty, desirability, and merit with pink bejeweled fluffiness on the one hand, and female independence and power with monstrosity, on the other. Frohreich's careful survey of the adaptations of Baum's classic culminates in a nuanced discussion of the recent Broadway musical *Wicked* and the ambiguous politics of commercial postfeminism.

If the representation of women in both high culture and popular culture remains tenaciously wedded to stereotypes of women as passive and pretty objects of male desire, real historical women have combated such stereotypes in many different ways. Manuel Brito's essay on women editors in the Language poetry movement examines the little-known history of women in control of the means of poetic production. Continuing in the tradition of Harriet Monroe of *Poetry Magazine* in the nineteen-teens and nineteen-twenties, two experimental women poets, Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian, edited two Language poetry magazines, *Poetics Journal* and *Qu*, in the 1970s. Steeped in Anglo-American feminist politics, both strove to create a sense of community and collaboration between poets, readers, editors, and fans. An integral part of this effort was the desire to undermine the barrier between writers and readers as well as between the theory and the practice of the new poetics. Harryman's and Hejinian's power to shape and nurture this vital poetry movement serves as a poignant marker of how far women had come since the Puritan captivity narratives in terms of their ability to participate as equals in the world of letters.

Another figure who personally presided over a cultural sea-change in attitudes and opportunities for women writers is Kay Boyle, who began her career as an expatriate poet and fiction writer associated with modernism and the Lost Generation. A tremendously prolific, polyvalent and politically radical writer, Boyle suffered the same neglect as many other women authors who did not strictly adhere to the aesthetics of irony, ambiguity and enigmatic density favored by modernists and New Critics. Like Larcom and Alcott, Boyle's cultural capital (to use Bourdieu's now famous term) diminished quickly in a literary economy where

politically engaged women writers had a tenuous stand. Thomas Austenfeld's essay asks for a re-consideration of this complex figure whose writing career continued to develop well into the 1970s. One of her last novels, explored in detail in this essay, addresses the increasingly timely topic of prisons and prison literature. Austenfeld demonstrates how Boyle participates in an essential American genre that evokes Hawthorne and Thoreau, and suggests that Boyle's semi-autobiographical novel of her and her daughter's experiences of imprisonment may contain important lessons for us.

The formal aspects of autobiography emerge with particular clarity in this volume. Not only do women writers seem to favor this genre, they also bring a thoughtfulness, complexity and sophistication to it that is brought sharply into focus in Ilona Sigrist's essay on Mavis Gallant and Nancy Huston. Comparing the work of these Canadian writers, both of whom experienced a life-altering move from one culture and continent to another, Sigrist examines their complex relationship to, and self-conscious staging of, their autobiographical selves. Not only cultural displacement, but the pressures of gendered subjectivity and the fractured nature of language itself contribute to the heightened sense of linguistic and literary intensity that emerges from the work of these two authors. In fact, the issues of divided subjectivity that are addressed in Sigrist's essay recall the way in which fluid and heterogeneous conceptualizations of the writing subject are raised by women writers from the earliest captivity narratives to the transcendental and modernist models of the self that appear in Louisa May Alcott and Virginia Woolf.

American film-maker Kym Ragusa's recent personal memoir, *The Skin Between Us* (2006), also raises similar issues of autobiographical self-division and performance, with the added complication of a biracial background. Francesca De Lucia explores Ragusa's staging of the many-layered confrontations between her Italian American and African American families and cultural inheritances, illustrating in the process how the long-immutable opposition between white and black is in the process of becoming anachronistic in contemporary America.

Ever since Maxine Hong Kingston's haunting *The Woman Warrior* exploded onto the literary landscape in 1978, Asian American women's writing has established itself as a powerful presence in North American literature. Sämi Ludwig's essay on Hawaiian-Japanese-American writer Lois-Ann Yamanaka closes the volume with a discussion of binary oppositions and the violence that they engender which echoes many of the issues discussed in this collection. Yamanaka's novel, like Alcott's *Little Women*, is a female coming of age story about a tomboy and her equally unconventional male best friend. Unlike Alcott's Jo, however, Yamanaka's Lovey is working-class, Japanese-American and speaks (and

writes) Pidgin Hawaiian, which adds another layer of social marginalization to her experience of adolescence. Ludwig's analysis addresses the issues of violence and empathy which frame the novel's exploration of several binaries, including parent/child, human/animal, haole (white)-/Hawaiian, and finally, the one that seems to underscore them all, male/female. The essay allows the volume to end with the discussion of a novel that brilliantly exemplifies the current state of American women's writing: exploring complex ethnic and racial identity issues, directly or indirectly rooted in the writer's personal experience, attentive to regional accents and local languages, and finally, grounded in feminist consciousness while probing political, ecological, social, and linguistic issues that build upon and take writing American women far into new territory.

Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet
Thomas Austenfeld

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