

CHAPTER TWELVE

Writing

AIMEE ARMANDE WILSON

A student enrolled in a class titled “Writing by Women” could be forgiven for thinking this class is interchangeable with one called “Women in Literature.” Yet, the subtle differences in title imply not-so-subtle distinctions in approach. “Writing by Women” suggests a focus on authorship. In other words, the author’s gender is the primary criterion by which texts would be selected for inclusion or exclusion. The subject matter addressed by these texts is secondary. By contrast, “Women in Literature” implies a dual focus on both subject matter and author. This course would presumably address the depiction of women within works of literature by men and women, as well as literature written by women, and perhaps even the role of women in the literary profession. Both course titles rest on the assumption that “women” is an identifiable and valid category around which to build a course, an assumption challenged by post structuralist critics. These titles and the methodological approaches they imply outline the main debates waged and questions asked about writing within feminist circles.

In sum, debates can be placed into three categories: those addressing “writing” as a literary tradition (recovery of writing by women as well as patterns in the depiction of female characters); those addressing “writing” as a gendered style (whether women write differently than men); and those questioning the validity or utility of gender as a concept for analyzing writing. Overlaps between categories exist, of course, and debates are often much messier in practice than these categories suggest, but this framework is nevertheless useful for understanding the broad strokes of feminist thinking about writing. This chapter will provide a historical overview of these three categories while also discussing, in turn, modern inflections of these debates as regards the most important factor affecting writing in the twenty-first century, the internet.

“Writing” in this context most often refers to literature—texts that are purposefully creative and imaginative—yet, the term occasionally, and increasingly, connotes texts produced for other purposes, such as communication, self-expression, or as an aid to memory. Examples of these other kinds of writing would be letters, diaries, and shopping lists. These genres are particularly relevant when addressing the subject of women writers since women have historically been less likely to produce creative texts and to have their lives written about by others. Theorists focused on authorship and subject matter increasingly value these varieties of ephemeral and private writing as important records of women’s lives.

Post structuralist conceptions of “writing” are more complex and deserve a brief explanation. Generally, post structuralists reject the notion that writing is a straightforward means of communication or self-expression. For these theorists, a word does not

signify directly, does not point to an object or idea in the world in a one-to-one correspondence. What one person means by “mother” can be quite different from what another person means, and even one person’s use of the word “mother” can conjure several different concepts at the same time (this variability is key to much poetic language). Far from orderly systems, languages are highly variable and imprecise. The relationship between the word “dog,” for example, and actual dogs is arbitrary; there is no reason why these particular animals should be labeled with the signifier d-o-g. In this line of thinking, words do not contain meaning in themselves but derive meaning from their position within the language. A young child’s notion of “dog” may be so capacious as to include every animal that is soft and walks on four legs. Over time, however, the child learns that the signifier “dog” does not include animals with hooves nor animals that meow. The meaning of “dog” rests on its difference from “sheep” and “cat.” Similarly, “woman” has historically been defined in patriarchal societies as the opposite, negative, or inverse of everything that defines “man”: if men are strong, women are weak; if men are rational, women are illogical. The word “man” has meaning only by virtue of what is not man. This point has important implications for the concept of “women’s writing” since, according to this line of thought, “women’s writing” continues to define women against men. “Women’s writing,” then, is a category that inadvertently subjugates women because it continues, implicitly, to define writing produced by women as marginal, as somehow different from the patriarchal norm.

RECOVERY AND WOMEN’S LITERARY TRADITIONS

In 1979, Elaine Showalter argued for the importance of scholarship on writing produced by all women, not just the “great” authors. She claimed, “Before we can even begin to ask how the literature of women would be different and special, we need to reconstruct its past, to rediscover the scores of women novelists, poets, and dramatists whose work has been obscured by time, and to establish the continuity of the female tradition from decade to decade” (“Toward” 137). Showalter’s argument echoed Virginia Woolf’s well-known declaration on the subject of a female canon: “we *think back through our mothers* if we are women” (75). At the time Showalter was writing, feminist recovery efforts were well under way, having begun some twenty years earlier in the 1960s. Labeled “gynocriticism” by Showalter, feminists attempted to understand “women *as writers*, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women” (“Feminist” 248). The central questions asked by gynocritics are “how can we constitute women as a distinct literary group?” and “What is *the difference* of women’s writing?” (248). The latter question highlights a principle that unifies gynocritics: writing produced by women is fundamentally different from that produced by men and therefore deserves its own canon, traditions, and methodologies for analysis. Showalter distinguished gynocriticism from feminist criticism, which she defines as scholarship concerned with demonstrating the ways in which literature and literary scholarship has demeaned, belittled, or otherwise maligned women. Today, however, few feminists maintain this distinction, siding in favor of “feminist criticism” as an umbrella term covering both types.

In an attempt to define a female literary tradition, scholars such as Showalter, Susan Gubar, Sandra Gilbert, Alice Walker, and Shari Benstock spearheaded efforts to recover—that is, bring to greater public attention—forgotten or overlooked women writers. The works of writers such as Kate Chopin and Zora Neale Hurston are in print today largely due to recovery efforts.¹ The need for recovery stems from multiple causes. First and most

obviously, skilled women writers have always struggled to find publishers and audiences due to persistent efforts on the part of patriarchal societies to silence women. The issue is magnified for poor women and women of color. When women did manage to find publishers and audiences, their writing was routinely discounted as trivial or unsophisticated. In nineteenth-century America, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne lamented the “damned mob of scribbling women” whose works were somehow not as good as his own (“scribbling”) and, simultaneously, competed with his works for readers (Baym 64). Finally, for many years, scholars considered the writing most commonly produced by women—documents such as letters, diaries, and recipes—to be unworthy of scholarly attention. (Many critics implicitly hold this opinion still today.) Men also produce ephemeral and private writing, of course, but they were much more likely to also produce public documents that would “count” as important, if not in the literary realm than in the historical one. Recovery of women’s literary contributions and ephemera is perhaps the most successful and influential endeavor of feminist literary criticism.

Nevertheless, these early efforts to understand women’s writing—like Western feminism in general—were insufficiently attentive to the differences between women, particularly regarding race and class. For instance, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* was widely influential in and out of academia. In it, Gilbert and Gubar craft an argument about women and authorship that revises Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* from a feminist perspective. Throughout the book, Gilbert and Gubar implicitly assume that female authors share a common experience with regard to literary tradition and that all female readers react in the same ways to the books they read.

In the early 1980s, feminist critics began critiquing the idea of a common “sisterhood,” of which *Madwoman* was but one expression among many. bell hooks, for one, argued that mainstream feminism paid little attention to the ways in which black women’s experiences were different from those of white women, saying “the upper and middle class white women who were at the forefront of the movement” failed to grapple with racism (87) and, as a result, “the Sisterhood they talked about has not become a reality, and ... the hierarchical pattern of race and sex relationships already established in American society merely took a different form under ‘feminism’” (121). As Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* made clear, black women’s creativity in the United States is as much a product of gender as it is a product of slavery and the continuing existence of racism. Gloria Anzaldúa’s proposed solution to the oversimplified “sisterhood” was to recognize and embrace differences. She argued that Mexican-American women are “*atravesados*,” or people who make a home on the borders of geography and culture. Anzaldúa broadened this idea into a promotion of “*mestizo*” thinking which, she argued, eschews binaries and embraces mixed ethnicities, sexualities, and nationalities. Attention to difference is a central aspect of recovery efforts today, but it remains a difficult and incomplete project. Electronic recovery projects provide new opportunities for recovery because the internet is, in a sense, inherently *mestizo*, crossing geographic borders in an instant. Yet, as I will discuss, these efforts are only as diverse as their creators make them. Exclusionary practices are often replicated, not erased, from electronic forms of communication.

In the twenty-first century, recovery efforts continue to occupy the traditional publishing landscape but they have also moved online. For example, Persephone Books, based in London, publishes beautiful editions of “neglected fiction and non-fiction by mid-twentieth century (mostly) women writers” (“Welcome”). In the electronic realm, the *Orlando* Project is a compendium of biography and criticism on British women writers

with a specific emphasis on recovering neglected authors (“Scholarly Introduction”). The Women Writers Project, based out of Northeastern University, is a similar resource for early modern women’s writing.

It may come to pass, however, that recovery efforts in their current form are less necessary since so much writing is now electronic in the form of blogs, emails, and social media posts. These genres make writing by women more widely accessible than it has ever been. Instead of recovery, then, curation is likely to become paramount in electronic environments where the quantity of available information is overwhelming. The proliferation of voices online makes finding the most interesting, relevant, and thoughtful writing difficult, especially since the provocative tends to drown out the thoughtful. The work of people curating electronic-based writing needs to be a process of filtering *forward* quality writing, as opposed to filtering *out*, as in traditional publishing practices.²

Furthermore, all the prejudices that exist in traditional realms—sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, and so on—are, if anything, exacerbated by the anonymity allowed by the internet. The voices of straight, white, cis,³ and Anglo-American writers overshadow those of women, people of color, and LGBTQ folks. Since 2010, the VIDA organization has tallied the bylines and book reviews in major literary publications to document gender disparities. As would be expected, men’s voices dominated. Many of the outlets included in The Count have since improved their ratios—some drastically—but disparity still exists across the field. In 2015, the organization began including race and ethnicity, sexual identity, and ability in the count and found similarly dispiriting results.⁴ Therefore, continued vigilance in the vein of hooks, Walker, and Anzaldúa is necessary. As always, the writing filtered forward will only be as diverse as the curator’s determination to make it so. In 1983, when Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked, “Can the subaltern speak?”—a question interrogating the extent to which people on the margins of society can have their voices heard—the answer was no. Because access to the internet falls largely on economic lines, and power dynamics on the internet replicate many of the same inequalities that exist offline, the answer is still, to an extent, no. Yet, because of the relative democratization of the internet, writing produced by women, including marginalized women, has a greater chance of attracting a reading audience because of the ability to bypass the publishing industry.⁵

THE “WOMAN’S SENTENCE”: GENDERED WRITING STYLES

In 2011, Nobel-prize winning author V. S. Naipaul said, “I read a piece of writing and within a paragraph or two I know whether it is by a woman or not. I think [it is] unequal to me.” He went on to say that writing by women is, to his mind, hampered by their “sentimentality” and “narrow view of the world” (quoted in Fallon). The sexism in these comments is both shocking and deliberate; Naipaul surely knew they would feed into a long line of arguments discounting women’s writing as too emotional. Galling as these comments are, they do raise a different, relevant question: is it inherently sexist to argue that writing produced by women is different from that produced by men? Virginia Woolf implicitly answered in the negative when, in 1929, she made a feminist argument in favor of women writers looking to other women for inspiration, arguing that there is “no common sentence ready for [a woman writer] to use” because “the weight, the pace, the stride of a man’s mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully” (AROO 75). In this way, she advocated for the delineation and definition of the “woman’s sentence.”

Many feminist critics have entered the debate over the existence of a “woman’s sentence.” For as many theorists arguing that such a sentence exists, and that identifying and valorizing it is a liberating project, just as many theorists argue against it on the grounds that such a pursuit is based on historically determined stereotypes about men and women rather than inherent qualities. For this latter group of theorists, such “inherent qualities,” or traits that all women share, do not exist. There is simply too much variation among people who identify as women. Attempting to identify commonalities based on anatomy essentializes women and thereby operates in service of oppression rather than liberation. It is worth noting the dearth of discussion over the “man’s sentence” or male writing. Rather, men’s writing is assumed to be a reflection of patriarchal culture’s positioning masculine values as neutral, standard, or the norm.

Among those critics arguing for the existence of a woman’s sentence, disagreement arises over the origins of the difference from men’s writing. Some critics argue that these differences stem from structural inequities in patriarchal societies that lead women to experience the world in identifiably different ways. In the 1980s, critics emphasized the mother-daughter relationship as key to understanding the distinctiveness of a female aesthetic (Showalter, “Introduction” 7). Barbara Smith argued that race as well as gender must be accounted for, stating, “Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share” (174). She goes on to say that this common approach constitutes a specifically “Black female language” that is distinct and worthy of its own body of scholarship.⁶

In contrast to these experience-based theories, French feminists emphasized the role of the body in linguistic differences. The theories of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, in particular, have been enormously influential, giving rise to countless extensions and revisions. Kristeva’s argument is rooted in linguistic structure. She claims that language is heterogenous, that is, composed of distinct but related functions, which she calls the *symbolic* and the *semiotic*. The *symbolic* is that which is colloquially thought of as language, writ large: the syllables, words, and grammar rules that constitute spoken and written language. For Kristeva, however, this definition of language is incomplete. Aspects of language, she argues, exist in excess of or outside the boundaries of this system, aspects that cannot be contained nor repressed by linguistic rules. These excesses are the “rhythms, intonations, glossalalais” of speech (158). They are not meaningful in the way that words, syllables, and phonemes are signifiers that point to a signified. Rather, the *semiotic* arises from the body, from its chaotic drives and functions. In scientific language, the *semiotic* is repressed in favor of the *symbolic*, but can never be repressed completely; poetry, conversely, gives precedence to the *semiotic* (160).

The *semiotic* is associated with the feminine, specifically the maternal, because it is the language infants use before learning the *symbolic*. Kristeva, who is also a psychoanalyst, argues that children begin to use *symbolic* language when they realize they are distinct from the Mother (understood as both an archetype and the individual person) and that the Mother does not always understand nor immediately satisfy the child’s needs. Satisfaction of those needs requires communicating them; communicating them requires leaving the primary *semiotic* state and entering the *symbolic*. Kristeva links the *symbolic* to masculinity because it is associated with rules and prohibitions, with the law-giving function of the Father. The child’s entrance into the *symbolic* realm—learning to use language—thus “constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother” (Kristeva 161). The *semiotic* cannot be repressed

entirely, however. These random and unavoidable interruptions of the *semiotic* into *symbolic* language give rise to new meaning. The ruptures, Kristeva argues, are revolutionary and generative. Without the *symbolic*, all signification would be babble or delirium. But, without the *semiotic*, all signification would be empty and lack sense in our lives (Oliver 153–4). Ultimately, signification requires both the *semiotic* and *symbolic*, the feminine and the masculine. As Kelly Oliver explains, these gendered associations have real-world implications for artists. If a woman identifies with the *semiotic* in her work, if she creates texts that are nonrepresentational and experimental, she risks not being taken seriously by the social order. Because men are more closely identified with structured, “civilized,” *symbolic* language, they have more latitude to be experimental (155).

Like Kristeva, Cixous’s theories about writing are rooted in the body. Yet, unlike Kristeva, who argues that all language is composed of feminine and masculine aspects, Cixous argues that certain types of language express the female body—what she calls *écriture féminine* or feminine writing—while most other types of writing manifest patriarchal values. Men are capable of creating *écriture féminine*, but women have easier access to it by virtue of their embodiment. Cixous begins with the long-standing tradition of characterizing the female body as leaky, messy, dirty, or impure because, as she argues, it is overflowing and multiple: menstrual fluid, breast milk, tears, laughter, and the potential for multiple orgasms. These very same aspects of the body, Cixous argues, are what make women potentially disruptive to oppressive regimes:

Because the “economy” of her drives is prodigious, she cannot fail, in seizing the occasion to speak, to transform directly and indirectly *all* systems of exchange based on masculine thrift. Her libido will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think. Because she arrives, vibrant, over and again. (264)

Women’s difference from men, their leakiness, is powerful and generous rather than degraded and disgusting. What is needed is a reevaluation of the female body. As Cixous puts it, “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and laughing” (267). The first step in this dramatic reevaluation of female embodiment is women writing in and through their bodies. The result is *écriture féminine*, writing that is anti-representational, complex, contradictory, and concerned with contingency rather than representation, with cooperation rather than mastery.

In contrast, masculine writing, according to Cixous, emphasizes linear argumentation that demonstrates mastery. It is singular rather than multiple (the “thrift” in the quote above, referring to single orgasm), reductive rather than overflowing (eliminating doubt and confusion), and closed rather than leaky (neatly presented argument with a definable beginning, middle, and end). Common to both Cixous’s and Kristeva’s theories is the notion that writing produced to suit patriarchal ends arrests the full potential of language, particularly those aspects of language based on play, enjoyment, rhythm, and humor. Writing the woman’s sentence means bringing these aspects of language—so common in childhood—back into regular use.

Influential as Kristeva and Cixous have been, many feminists take issue with theories such as these. A main point of contention is the assumption that linearity, multiplicity, abstraction, and other such qualities are gendered in ways that are linked to the body. Critics argue that theories based on the body are essentialist and anti-feminist since attempts to define women by their biology have so often been used to oppress women (consider the way childcare has long been undercompensated on the grounds that such

care work is “natural” to women). Moreover, even if multiplicity, circularity, and cooperation are reclaimed as powerful disruptive forces, the concepts of the “woman’s sentence” or *écriture féminine* are still based on the idea that “woman” is a definable category. What happens with women who are not capable of childbearing, producing breast milk, or achieving multiple orgasms? Are they not fully women? What about transgender men who menstruate?

In the 1990s, theorists influenced by post structuralism answered questions such as these in ways that challenged the very notion of “man” and “woman” as identifiable categories. In this vein, the work of Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick became foundations on which the fields of gender studies and queer theory were built. For these theorists, gender is powerful but it is also a cultural construct rather than an immutable fact arising from the body. As Butler puts it, “because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (190). From this perspective, both gender and sex vary so widely, are such shifty categories, that attempts to identify a “woman’s sentence,” a style of writing common to all women, are pointless, and the terms “women” and “men” are so plastic as to be useless at best and, at worst, harmful to individuals who do not fit neatly into one category or the other.

The implications of these arguments on feminist criticism have been multiple and momentous. Indeed, they bring into question the validity of the entire enterprise of recovery because the very category of “women’s writing” is suspect. What does it mean to delineate a tradition of women’s writing if we can’t even agree on a definition of “women”? For feminists in the twenty-first century who maintain the legitimacy of the endeavor in light of post structuralist critiques, the answer to this question most likely references cultural differences. In other words, even if “woman” is a shifty, nonbiological category, people perceived to be female are treated differently in patriarchal societies than are people perceived to be male, and these differences affect writing styles in ways that merit study. These differences are not thought to be monolithic nor universal, but they are nevertheless present and significant.

In Naipaul’s aforementioned comment, he criticized women’s writing for being sentimental. This aspect of his comment needs further glossing. Writing produced by women is frequently characterized as emotional, private, and autobiographical; unlike in Cixous’s *écriture féminine*, these aspects of “confessional” writing are seen as weaknesses rather than revolutionary strengths. In a word, writing by women is often labeled “confessional,” a term that has become an assertion of power over women by delegitimizing their writing. Susan Gubar theorized that centuries of artists, implicitly male, positioning the female body as the subject of art or as the blank page on which the artist’s creation is inscribed has led “many women [to] experience their own bodies as the only available medium for their art, with the result that the distance between the woman artist and her art is often radically diminished” (299). Gubar goes on to say that this close association of text and female body is what leads so many women artists to choose “personal forms of expression like letters, autobiographies, confessional poetry, diaries, and journals” (299). It is true that many women choose “personal forms of expression,” but many others choose impersonal or public forms of writing, such as journalism or biography. These writers do not fit neatly into Naipaul’s or Gubar’s frameworks but they are not less “womanly” for their choice of genre.

Although the intensely personal, confessional style that characterizes most blogs and social media posts is practically synonymous with many people's understanding of "women's writing" (for right or wrong), blogs and social media posts are nevertheless designed to be public, and often with political intent. These genres therefore necessitate new answers to old questions about privacy, power, style, and gender. At the least, writing produced by women in the twenty-first century is likely to bring about a change in either the connotation of the term *confessional* or a reevaluation of what constitutes personal writing. Blogs, tweets, and posts have replaced diaries for many (though certainly not all), and the easy accessibility of these forms allows larger numbers of people to create written records of their private lives. Interestingly, research indicates that women have historically been heavier users of social media than men, but the gap is decreasing quickly. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that, by 2016, 72 percent of women in the United States used at least one form of social media, compared to 66 percent of men ("Social Media Fact Sheet"). As men increasingly engage in this kind of public, diaristic writing, the association between "confessional writing" and women will necessarily become more tenuous. This is not to say that women writers will cease to be delegitimized, but that the label "confessional" or "personal" is less likely to be the tool for that delegitimization.

Virginia Woolf argued that women are drawn to write novels because it is a newer genre than poetry and theater, less concretized by the weight of tradition and more amenable to new approaches such as those imagined by women writers (AROO 76). A century later, the same theory might apply to writing found on blogs and in social media. The short, episodic form of the blog/social media post is easier for caregivers to create (overwhelmingly women, still). Furthermore, these genres are low-stakes and take little start-up time and money, which means women—historically lacking in encouragement, role models, and resources for writing—can more readily try their hand at it without much risk in terms of money and time. Of course, most blogs and posts will never amount to more than momentary records of interest to a small audience, but a growing number of people receive book contracts after creating a successful blog or website that addresses intensely personal issues in a manner some might call confessional. "Mommy blogs" like Heather Armstrong's *Dooce* have been particularly lucrative, and Julie Powell's *The Julie/Julia Project*, in which Powell documents her attempt to cook every recipe in Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in one year, is a well-known example of a popular blog-cum-book (and eventually movie). While these blogs address subject matters that would historically be classified as "women's issues," female bloggers deal with many other issues, of course. For instance, the writer behind *Baghdad Burning*, a blog that later became a book, is known only by the pseudonym Riverbend and, at the time of writing the blog, was a young Iraqi woman living in Baghdad. She began the blog in 2003 to chronicle her life during the US occupation (Ridgeway xi–xii). While Riverbend's gender is certainly important to the unfolding events, her subject matter ranges far beyond those issues typically called "women's." Indeed, war is considered by some to be a "man's" issue, but such labels imply that Riverbend either cannot or should not write about war, an implication that is facile and erroneous.

The public nature of such "confessional" writing is not without risks. The personal essay boom of the late aughts and early teens is a case in point. Essays that were personal, shocking, and often gross mushroomed in this era's clickbait culture. As Jia Tolentino points out, these essays were most often written by women: "an ad-based publishing model built around maximizing page views quickly and cheaply creates uncomfortable

incentives for writers, editors, and readers alike ... The commodification of personal experience was also women's territory: the small budgets of popular women-focussed [*sic*] Web sites, and the rapidly changing conventions and constrictions surrounding women's lives, insured it." Writers who produced essays of this sort often endured significant emotional tolls as reader reactions ranged from dismissal and teasing to outright scorn, disgust, and threats. "Placing a delicate part of your life in the hands of strangers didn't always turn out to be so thrilling," writes Tolentino. "Personal essays cry out for identification and connection; what their authors often got was distancing and shame." Whereas Tolentino argues that this toll helped to bring about an end to this particular iteration of the personal essay, Arielle Bernstein argues that it has simply passed into a new phase. She claims, "what we are instead experiencing is an evolution—of writers being encouraged to not simply mine personal feelings for a quick click, but to make connections between the personal and the political more explicit." Like the second-wave feminist mantra "the personal is political," these writers strive to show the ramifications of political actions on the individual's daily life. Increasingly, feminist critics are acknowledging that this kind of middle-brow writing is an important cultural artifact and worthy of scholarly attention.

The shaming experienced by bloggers is only a small aspect of the violence that often accompanies online writing. Cyberbullying and stalking are rampant, with women, people of color, and LGBTQ folks receiving death threats with disturbing regularity. For example, in 2012, Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist media critic, launched a Kickstarter campaign to study gendered tropes in video games. Her campaign, while financially successful, also brought her a steady stream of death, rape, and bomb threats as well as other forms of harassment that continue today (Parkin). While many media outlets have promised to curb online harassment, it generally continues unchecked, due in part to a lack of ability or, at times, a lack of willingness to punish harassers as criminals (Sweeney). Sexism is also an issue behind the scenes of the internet. Numerous studies document the gender disparities in Silicon Valley (McGee). Those women who do enter the profession often endure hostile work environments. For example, a recent study by a Facebook engineer found that "code written by female engineers at the company gets rejected 35 percent more often than that written by their male peers" (Cauterucci). (The study's author attributed the discrimination to knowledge of the writer's gender, not to a difference in the way women write code). Women's careers are thus hampered by the same gender bias evident in traditional publishing spheres.

Furthermore, Anne Balsamo notes that many hackers believe that "hackers are gender- and color-blind due to the fact that they communicate (primarily) through text-based network channels" (147). Balsamo refutes this claim, stating, "this assertion rests on the assumption that 'text-based channels' represent a gender-neutral medium of exchange, that language itself is free from any form of gender, race, or ethnic determinations. Both of these assumptions are called into question not only by feminist research on electronic communication and interpretive theory, but also by female network users who participate in cyberpunk's virtual subculture" (147). The technology might be new, but the cultural biases are old.

The complicated relationship between embodiment and identity online is usefully highlighted by electronic writing styles that are self-consciously literary and/or formally experimental. Electronic literature, also called e-lit, is "digital born," a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer"; most definitions of e-lit "exclude print literature that has been digitized" (Hayles 3). Writers of electronic literature are increasingly taking advantage of the internet's affordances to play

with form in ways that involve the body. As Hayles explains, authors are using sound and animated text; incorporating game elements; and constructing three-dimensional spaces in which users can interact with the words in a narrative (7–11). Another form of e-lit, called “locative narrative,” takes advantage of mobile technology to tell stories as listeners follow a specified route (Hayles 11). The genre of locative narrative, like e-lit in general, will only become more immersive as the power and ubiquity of electronic technology increases. Already by 1984, Donna Haraway could persuasively argue that our bodies were hybrids of machine and flesh: “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (150). Haraway contends that this border between machine and flesh has been a fraught, contentious one, “a border war” (150), similar to the ways in which identity is often a source of contention among feminists. This need not be the case, she argues. Focusing instead on affinities that exist across and between identity categories, including gender, offers a way around binaristic thinking (me/you, us/them, man/woman, white/black) that has historically organized Western societies. Immersive varieties of literature, along with other technological developments using the internet, will only intensify the fusion of machine and flesh; this, combined with the ease with which people can adopt and shed personae on the internet, makes it plausible to argue that the internet will hasten the dissolution of binaristic thinking, an eventuality that would surely be welcomed by post structuralists.

Yet, in many ways, identity—or at least the stereotypes associated with an identity—is further entrenched, enacted, and defended online. Sherry Turkle, for example, shares numerous stories of people who adopt online identities with genders that are different than their “real life” identities. The ability to play with identity is lauded by many media theorists, yet, as Turkle notes, such gendered “passing” requires adopting and adhering to rigid gender codes, particularly as regards communication patterns. She states, “To pass as a woman [in an online chatroom] for any length of time requires understanding how gender inflects speech, manner, the interpretation of experience” (212). Turkle notes that some regular users make a game out of trying to guess the “real” gender of the person behind the online identity, and do so along stereotypical lines. For instance, one user judges others based on the assumption that men care more about physical appearance than women: “Pavel Curtis . . . observed that when a female-presenting character is called something like FabulousHotBabe, one can be almost sure there is a man behind the mask” (211). As this example suggests, attempts to pass as a different gender often reaffirm stereotypes about gendered writing patterns rather than affording experimentation and novelty. In this sense, the “woman’s sentence” risks being defined by stereotypes about women rather than the sentences women actually produce.

Neither moving away from binaristic thinking, as many post structuralist critics desire, nor revaluing those binaries, as many other feminists hope to see, will be a quick process. The internet facilitates people’s *ability* to play with identity, but having the ability to change one’s identity does not mean people will want to do so, nor does it mean people will cease judging others based on the identities they assume. As with airplanes, stem-cell research, and other life-changing technologies, the capabilities afforded by the internet outpace ethical and legal decisions about the desirability of these capabilities. Feminist ideas about writing are an important aspect of this theorization, particularly as the relationship between bodies, identities, and writing is further stretched, tangled, and revised by technological developments.

NOTES

- 1 For more on Chopin's recovery, see Toth, pp. 402–6. On the recovery of Hurston, see West, pp. 229–48.
- 2 I draw the term “filter forward” from library and information sciences discourse, where it is often used in reference to the work of open access publishers such as the Public Library of Science.
- 3 Schilt and Westbrook explain that “*Cis* is the Latin prefix for ‘on the same side’. It compliments *trans*, the prefix for ‘across’ or ‘over’. ‘Cisgender’ replaces the terms ‘nontransgender’ or ‘bio man/bio woman’ to refer to individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity” (461).
- 4 For more information, see www.vidaweb.org.
- 5 I say “relative democratization” because large numbers of people across the globe—including portions of the United States—cannot access the internet on a regular basis.
- 6 While disagreeing with Smith on the existence of a “Black female language,” Deborah E. McDowell agrees that literary criticism, including feminist literary criticism, has largely ignored or maligned black women writers.

WORKS CITED

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th edn. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, [1987] 2012.
- Balsamo, Anne. *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995.
- Baym, Nina. “Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors.” *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter, 1st edn. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, pp. 63–80.
- Bernstein, Arielle. “The ‘Personal Essay Boom’ Is Dead. Long Live the Personal Essay!” *Salon*, June 11, 2017.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, [1990] 2006.
- Cauterucci, Christina. “Analysis Suggests Code from Female Facebook Engineers Gets Rejected More Often than Code From Men.” *Slate XX Factor*, May 3, 2017.
- Cixous, Hélène. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” *French Feminism Reader*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, pp. 257–75.
- Fallon, Amy. “VS Naipaul Finds No Woman Writer His Literary Match – Not Even Jane Austen.” *Guardian*, June 1, 2011.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, (1979) 2000.
- Gubar, Susan. “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity.” *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter, 1st edn. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, pp. 292–313.
- Haraway, Donna. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, [1984] 1991, pp. 149–81.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 2008.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman*. London: Pluto Press, [1981] 1987.

- Kristeva, Julia. "From One Identity to An Other." *French Feminism Reader*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, pp. 158–65.
- McDowell, Deborah E. "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism." *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter, 1st edn, New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, pp. 186–99.
- McGee, Suzanne. "Silicon Valley's Gender Problem Extends Beyond Pay Gap." *Guardian*, March 6, 2016.
- Oliver, Kelly. "Maternity, Feminism, and Language: Julia Kristeva." *French Feminism Reader*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, pp. 153–8.
- Orlando Project. "Scholarly Introduction." Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Parkin, Simon. Gamergate: A Scandal Erupts in the Video-Game Community." *New Yorker*, October 17, 2014.
- Ridgeway, James. Introduction. *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*. New York: Feminist P, 2005, pp. xi–xxiii.
- Riverbend. *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*. New York: Feminist Press, 2005.
- Schilt, Kristen, and Laurel Westbrook. "Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: 'Gender Normals', Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality." *Gender & Society* 23.4 (August 2009): 440–64.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *Critical Inquiry* 8.2 (1981): 179–205.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Introduction: The Feminist Critical Revolution." *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter, 1st edn. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, pp. 3–17.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Toward a Feminist Poetics." *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter, 1st edn. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, pp. 125–43.
- Smith, Barbara. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter, 1st edn. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, pp. 168–85.
- "Social Media Fact Sheet." *Pew Research Center*, January 12, 2017.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Champaign, IL: U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.
- Sweeney, Marlis Silver. "What the Law Can (and Can't) Do about Online Harassment." *Atlantic*, November 12, 2014.
- Tolentino, Jia. "The Personal-Essay Boom Is Over." *New Yorker*, May 18, 2017.
- Toth, Emily. *Kate Chopin*. New York: William Morrow, 1990.
- Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.
- "The Vida Count." VIDA.org. VIDA: *Women in Literary Arts*.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Mariner Books, [1983] 2003.
- "Welcome." Persephone Books. London: Persephone Press.
- West, M. Genevieve. *Zora Neale Hurston and American Literary Culture*. University Press of Florida, 2005.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Ed. SusanGubar, 1st Harvest edn. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 2005.