

INTRODUCTION: GENDER STUDIES, FEMINIST
PERSPECTIVES, AND CONTEMPORARY READINGS

Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida

where do we see it from is the question
Adrienne Rich

This issue of *Ilha do Desterro* assembles texts from different perspectives, which provide analyses of issues of Gender, Women's studies, and feminist criticism and give a specific focus on the literary and cultural production in the contemporaneity. It aims at opening a venue for debate in the field by including articles by scholars in Brazil and from English-speaking countries within an interdisciplinary perspective. It is organized around sections that have as a central focus issues of gender relations, representation of women, Women's studies, masculinity, and feminist criticism in interaction with other transdisciplinary studies in the field of literature, cultural politics, film studies, post-colonialism, travel literature, financial fictions, music, and translation. It addresses a multiplicity of codes, either social, sexual, racial or political through which feminist discourses that resist univocal manifestations become materialized. Some of the texts also foster a fruitful dialogue between Brazilian feminist criticism and the critical

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 42	p.009-017	jan./jun. 2002
------------------	---------------	-------	-----------	----------------

debate that takes place abroad, especially in English speaking countries. Some authors speak from their locus of enunciation – from where they see it –, providing a reading of texts that negotiates the differences in specific cultural contexts.

The world-wide tendencies at the beginning of this new century point to massive globalization of a market economy and a neo-liberal pluralism that often lead to an easy acceptance of concepts of multiplicity and desterritorialization. This view has the effects, many times, of reproducing and preserving a unilateral conception of the world, evoking an apparently plural universe that, nevertheless, reveals itself as spatially and temporally unified. Regarding gender studies and feminist criticism, it is of paramount importance to caution against such universalizing and generalizing tendencies. Contemporary feminist criticism, as the Brazilian critic Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda points out, is not limited to an agenda of vindication of equality anymore, going beyond this once primary concern by focusing nowadays on demands that center around notions of difference and diversity within feminism (11). Along the same lines, Donna Haraway describes an impasse within feminist criticism at the end of the twentieth-century. In her view, feminism has been metaphorically located “in the belly of a monster,” presenting a dilemma that demands that feminist critics adopt not only a critical but, above all, a political positioning. Haraway equates this “monster” that has hindered the development of feminism in terms of a specific location and a specific time frame: “the First World in the 1980s and after” (4). Such a critical position, as observed in several articles in this volume, will enable the visualization of a contemporary feminist criticism that can be articulated through its local specificity, rejecting the uncritical acceptance of external models and rethinking the notions of gender and difference as an attempt to get out of the “belly of the monster.”

Several critics have pointed out the relevance of gender studies and feminist criticism in changing the focus of the critical debate in contemporary agendas. Such importance is due to the interference of these theoretical formulations in the development of contemporary

criticism, such as postmodernism, post-colonialism and cultural studies (Hollanda, Said, Hall, Culler). Stuart Hall, for instance, establishes two highly positive and productive moments in the theorization of cultural studies – what he calls, “theoretical work as interruption.” This external interruption came first from the field of gender studies and feminism, and secondly, from ethnic and racial studies. Feminism, however, caused a major rupture in the theoretical path of cultural studies: “As a thief in the night, it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies” (268-69). The violence and force of the metaphor of invasion, desacralization, and illegal appropriation, employed by Hall, clearly refers the resistance that feminist criticism has had to face within the field of contemporary critical studies. It also points to the need for feminist critics to redefine this initial rejection as an unconditional acceptance, that is, the need to force the entrance to, to question pre-established assumptions, to interrupt the traditional theoretical flow, and, above all, to desecrate predominant values. The power of the metaphor of defecation vividly conveys the transgressive and abject act performed by feminist criticism in changing the discipline of critical studies in our contemporary world.

The first section of this issue, entitled “Feminist Criticism and Cultural Politics,” is devoted precisely to these issues, which are related to theoretical analyses of feminist criticism, Women’s Studies and cultural politics. The volume opens with an article by Sneja Gunew, entitled “Feminist Cultural Literacy: Translating Differences, Cannibal Options,” which ponders the role and future of Women’s studies. For her, Women’s Studies have focused on interdisciplinarity, involving scholars in the task of translations between the disciplines and in the need to rethink the curriculum. She also considers the difference between Women’s Studies as a subject area and feminism as an approach. Another central issue in the theorization of Women’s Studies is the concern about the differences within and among feminists – what Gunew believes is the focus of a so-called “third wave feminism.” She warns, however, about the danger of identity politics and embedded essentialism in what is understood nowadays as “global feminism.”

Considering Tsing's concept of "faithless translation," Gunew proceeds to analyze the interrelation between feminism and Women's Studies, focusing on the intersection of women, food and ethnicity, particularly the trope of cannibalism. In her view, the faithless translation inherent in the trope of cannibalism will help Women's Studies to reach beyond identity politics.

Barbara Godard also discusses the issue of translation, especially in an analysis of the works by Quebec women writers that are translated into English, both in Canada and the United States. She analyzes the indices of reception of these translations and the relation in the field of textual production of Quebec literature in English translation and the manifold intercultural relations. She points to the inherent feminization of Quebec literature in the field of cultural production and how the asymmetrical relations of power in Canada have been based upon the terrain of the politics of language. She shows how a feminist translation manages to engage in "interventionist practices of rewriting that draw attention to the process of translation," thus contributing to the questioning of the work of transfer and the circulation of a translated text in a new environment.

Rita Terezinha Schmidt, in "A crítica feminista na mira da crítica," fosters a dialogue with some critical writings about "Brazilian feminisms," presenting a lucid and highly provocative discussion about the production of knowledge about and by feminist criticism in Brazil. She addresses the issue of the importation of theoretical formulations by Brazilian critics, in addition to framing feminist criticism in a national context, providing a brief historical perspective of the reception of feminist criticism in Brazil and its development on national grounds. Schmidt claims that, far from being an uncritical reception, such importation of theory goes through a process of acclimatization in this new locus of enunciation. In the Brazilian scenario, feminist criticism has been responsible for the emergence of a literary criticism that has rescued the silenced voices of women writers in the nineteenth-century, thus being responsible for what she terms a "historical turn" in literary criticism in Brazil.

The second section, entitled “Women Writing: New Readings,” presents two articles which focus on nineteenth-century literature, offering new readings of women’s texts. Ana Lúcia Gazzola explores travel texts by women writers who came to Brazil during the colonial period, with a special focus on the letters by Jemima Kindersley, the first travel log on Brazil written by a woman, dated from the eighteenth-century. Gazzola points to the power mechanisms implicit in this colonial contact and claims that these travelers did not narrate their experiences in order to understand the New World but rather to legitimate the colonial project. By analyzing travel texts by women, Gazzola shows how they operate a double transgression: by traveling and by writing. However, they would very often have to negotiate between opposing forces – transgression and conformity to the ideals of femininity – and contradictory positions – justifying the colonial enterprise while simultaneously undermining it.

In a similar vein, Renata Wasserman explores the use of ambiguity in what she calls “financial fictions” in women’s writings by analyzing the novel *The House of Mirth*, by the American writer Edith Wharton. She shows how, despite tracing the plights and decline of a female character, the novel uses the world of business as its carrying metaphor. The female protagonist, by destabilizing the value statements and judgments pertaining to her class, performs a critique of the mercantilist American society in the nineteenth-century.

The next section provides readings of fictions by contemporary women writers that question issues of gender and representation. In “Bluebeards and Bodies: Margaret Atwood’s Men,” Judith Still analyzes the short story “Alien Territory” and the novel *The Blind Assassin* by the renowned contemporary Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. Rather than focusing on Margaret Atwood’s representation of women, Still chooses to center her analysis around the male characters and the masculine economy of quantifiable exchange and an ambiguous gift economy. By doing so, Still exposes the gender relations embedded in Atwood’s postmodern narrative, showing how intertwined and ambiguous the representation of both male and female characters are.

Susana Bornéo Funck shows how issues related to racial and ethnic differences and their correlation with social classes have become central in the theorization and political practice of feminism since the 1980s. She examines novels by contemporary women writers from English speaking countries – Margaret Laurence, Marge Piercy and Angela Carter, writers whose work are markedly informed by feminist concerns –, showing how issues of gender/race/class are problematized in their works.

Stelamaris Coser, on the other hand, addresses the issue of immigrant writing in the work by the Cuban-American writer, Cristina Garcia. By analyzing the narrative frame of Garcia's texts, Coser demonstrates how the author explores issues of gender oppression and segregation that opens up spaces of resistance for her female characters. The focus is on the stories told by contemporary women who are conscious of their new role as agents of their own destinies and who recreate, through their narratives, their cultural, historical and political heritage, as the analysis of *The Agüero Sisters* shows.

Izabel Brandão analyzes the novel *Perfectly Correct* (1996) by the English contemporary writer Philippa Gregory, who undertakes a rewriting of D. H. Lawrence's work. Focusing primarily on the Lawrentian short-story "The Virgin and the Gypsy," which is studied by the protagonist in Gregory's fiction, the author juxtaposes, by critically analyzing from a feminist perspective, the notion of Lawrence's "Dark Man" and that of the contemporary "New Man," a concept much in vogue during the nineteen-eighties and early nineties in the United Kingdom.

The section on "Post-colonialisms and Feminisms" provides readings of texts produced in the interface between these two theoretical stances. Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira discusses in her essay the interconnection between music and literature by comparing the use of music metaphors and the representation of feminine identity in patriarchal societies in the short story "Visiting the Hutterites" by the American writer Irene Wanner. Oliveira shows how this category of feminine identity, like atonal music, resists definition and depends on

an array of influential factors such as race, class and also religious aspects. She shows how traditional tonal music is often manipulated by oppressive forces as a means to mirror a stable and homogeneous community, only apparently without conflicts. Sandra Goulart Almeida analyzes Arundhati Roy's controversial first novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), showing how the author transgresses several social, historical and cultural codes of Indian society, thus destabilizing not only issues of gender and race but also those of the body politic and corporeal relations.

Peônia Guedes dedicates her article to the analysis of the new Indian immigrant in Bharati Mukherjee's fiction and how the author attempts to rewrite traditional and stereotypical paradigms of identities, pointing to the fact that identity is inherently a socially constructed phenomenon. She discusses the cultural hybridization of the new American and how Mukherjee's fiction discloses the new reality of a postmodern, globalized, multicultural country.

The section on literature and film begins with an article by Tom Cohen, who discusses the issue of female impersonation in Hitchcock's work, demonstrating how the director exposes the fabrication of gender positions and the performative nature of gender. He shows how the violence in Hitchcock, which is often directed at "woman," can be read in different ways and how the male position is not a given or dominant, but, rather, a fiction.

Sandra Guardini T. Vasconcelos, on the other hand, discusses images of femininity in the intersection between literature and cinema with a central focus on the canonical text by Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*. Vasconcelos discusses the myth of romantic love and the centrality of marriage in bourgeois England. She points to a continuous dispute, present in Austen's novels, between marriage of convenience and marriage for love, an issue that predominates in the eighteenth century. She explains how the novel reflects an ideology of the period in which the works were produced while simultaneously providing alternative stories of their culture and provisional possibilities for women. The film, on the other hand, does not do justice to the novel in

the sense that it provides an image of social harmony and reinforces an image of femininity that are absent from Austen's novel, giving a reassuring view of love and marriage.

The last section contains three reviews of books written by women that address issues about gender relations and feminist perspectives. It gives a sample of some critical production by women theoreticians from Brazil and from English speaking countries that tackle different and diverse issues. The first review is of a book by the Brazilian critic Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira, who discusses the question of gender and identity in the work of Chico Buarque de Holanda, Bertoldt Brecht and John Gay. It is followed by a review on Toril Moi's book, specifically the essays "What is a Woman? Sex, Gender, and the Body in Feminist Theory" and "I am a Woman': The Personal and the Philosophical" which focus primarily on the feminist work by Simone de Beauvoir, giving a rereading of her seminal work in the area – *The Second Sex*. The last article reviews the book by Alvina Quintana about Chicana literary voices, which testifies and demonstrates how feminist criticism has become a multilayered and plural field.

The articles here assembled discuss issues related to feminist criticism as a mode of articulation that slides and shifts, in a constant dialogue with other forms of expression and power relations. Contemporary feminist criticism has as one of its aims the task of forcing its way out of the "belly of the monster," that is, getting out of the impasse generated within feminism by developing mechanisms that will enable the theoretical investigation and problematization of multidimensional spaces, critically pluralized, in a constant internal dialogue with its many differences. This issue might figure as one of these instances.

Works cited

- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies." *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. London: Routledge, 1996. 262-75.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Hollanda, Heloisa Buarque. "Introdução: feminismo em tempos pós-modernos." *Tendências e impasses: o feminismo como crítica da cultura*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1994. 7-19.
- Rich, Adrienne. *An Atlas of the Difficult Word*. New York: Norton, 1991.