Women and Language

Essays on Gendered Communication Across Media

Edited by

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Introduction:
Women and Oral Culture

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Origins of Gendered Communication

Throughout the centuries the binary between orality and literacy has fascinated scholars and philosophers—all of whom have helped to construct and reconstruct this very binary. This dichotomy has acted as a foundation for various views concerning which medium of communication has been favored at a given time in history. Eric Havelock, and later Walter Ong, for example, argued that the transition from an oral to a literate culture in ancient Greece (from about the 6th century B.C.E. through the 4th century A.D.) produced changes in human cognition. Ong traces the history of this shift in his seminal text, *Orality and Literacy*, where he distinguishes between “primary orality,” or “the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print,” and “secondary orality,” the orality of “high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by ... electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print” (II). Ong begins with Plato’s belief that writing was a “mechanical, inhuman way of processing knowledge, unresponsive to questions and destructive of memory” (24). Plato, then, regarded writing in a skeptical manner. Many years later, with the invention of the Gutenberg Press in 1436, the printed word was made available to the masses. This invention played a crucial role in the orality/literacy binary switch: given the implications of such an invention, literacy now occupied the favored position in this binary split, a position it still occupies today.¹

As might be expected, this binary, like all binaries, has carried with it gendered implications. Women have historically been defined in relation to
the oral culture, in large part due to their exclusion from education, and therefore, from literary endeavors, while men have been aligned more with literary culture. Ong identifies a possible reason for this configuration that links print texts to education or knowledge more generally:

Print creates a sense of closure not only in literary works but also in analytic philosophical and scientific works. With print came the catechism and the "textbook." ... By contrast, the memorable statements of oral cultures ... tended to be of a proverbial sort, presenting not "facts" but rather reflections ... inviting further reflection by the paradoxes they involved [131–132].

When something appears in print, then, it seems more accurate and closer to the "truth" than something that is merely spoken. Therefore men, who have historically been the writers and readers of literature, have been more aligned with "truth," while women, who have had restricted access to such texts, have been aligned with more "reflective" materials.

The conflation of women with oral culture and, therefore, with the lower portion of the binary, has been scrutinized by scholars in recent years. While this project does not claim that women are always or should be aligned with the oral culture, it does trace this historical tendency and analyzes the negative connotations surrounding this conflation of women with orality. At the same time, the essays contained here seek to disrupt that very hierarchal binary that privileges traditional print literature/communication over non-traditional oral performance/communication. This collection aims to do this by updating existing theories of orality in the light of technological advancements that have altered communication practices on a large scale. Although these shifts in communication practices affect both genders, this anthology looks particularly at how the last century of technological inventions have specifically affected women's means of communication. One key argument running through this text is that the use of oral communication — either spoken, or appearing as dialogue in a novel, for instance — can be in actuality a strategic, empowering, and subversive act working against the mandates to participate in androcentric normative print culture.

Women's Communication as Marginalized, Restricted, and Silenced

The issue of gendered communication has for at least three decades been considered a feminist concern, as Deborah Cameron points out in her book The Feminist Critique of Language. Cameron begins her text with an ostensibly simple question: "Why is language a feminist issue?" (1). Of course, there is no single, simple answer to this question. However, one answer she offers deals with speech and silence, a theme that is considered at length in this present anthology. Cameron argues:

A claim that women are "silent" or "silenced" cannot mean that they are always and everywhere literally silent... It cannot even mean that there are no linguistic activities associated with women more than with men, for in fact there are many ... "gossip," keeping teenage diaries, and writing letters or cards to family members are among those that come to mind [3].

Cameron continues that these genres — diaries, letters, and so forth that have been linked with women — provide "a clue to one possible meaning of women's silence" because they "are not prestigious, and some (e.g., gossip) are actually disparaged" (3). Furthermore, Cameron notes, these are "private uses of language, confined to the space of home, family and immediate community... In the public domain, and especially the domain of official culture... the genres associated with women have little currency" (3). It is often noted that women have been excluded from many forms of public discourse in which men have always participated, religious and political discourses among them. Therefore, along with the literacy/orality binary, the public/private binary is at issue. In both cases, the upper portion of the binary is privileged while the lower is denigrated, the result being that women have been "othered" due to the perpetuation of stereotypes initiated by these binary pairs.

It may have been the case that women were aligned with the genres of diaries and letters, but it is certainly not the case that one can homogenize all writings by women — regardless of race, class, ethnicity, and sociocultural environment — into one group that fits into the category of "women's writings." An in depth discussion of autobiography — the umbrella genre that includes forms such as diaries and letters — is important here in that several of the texts analyzed in this collection have an autobiographical component: for example, one chapter is devoted to field research on salsa; another chapter studies author Julia Alvarez's life experiences as encapsulated in one of her novels; three chapters delve into non-fictional accounts delivered through letters and diaries; and one chapter offers an analysis of the closet drama through an autobiographical lens. Felicity A. Nussbaum contributes to this conversation, arguing that "one of the commonplace[s] of feminist criticism is the frequent claim that diaries and journals are an intrinsically female form, and that women's experience particularly lends itself to the diffuse for its expression" (152). Critic Estelle B. Jelinek, for example, claimed that women's autobiographies are "fragmented, interrupted, formless, and even when basically linear are anecdotal and disruptive" (qtd. in Nussbaum 153). Nussbaum, however, counters that this outlook "fails to account, on the one hand, for the large number of diaries and journals written by men, and on the other hand,
for many women’s autobiographies ... that display narrative closure” (153). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson similarly point out that “first-stage theorists of women’s autobiography” prompted “provocative questions” such as: “To what extent is women’s autobiography characterized by the frequency of nonlinear or ‘oral’ narrative strategies, unlike the master narratives of autobiography that seem to pose stable, coherent self-narratives?” and “To what extent is it characterized by frequent digression, giving readers the impression of a fragmentary, shifting narrative voice, or indeed a plurality of voices in dialogue?” and “Is the subject in women’s autobiography less firmly bounded, more ‘fluid’?” (10). They note, that this logic was questioned later, given that women of color were “rendered invisible in these accounts” of some sort of “uniform” women’s autobiographical writing (Smith and Watson 10).

Smith and Watson maintain that after this initial period of homogenizing women’s autobiographical writing into a single “type” of writing specific to women, in later years (the late 1980s), women’s autobiographical studies underwent a change with the advent of new theories concerning women’s writing. For example, in A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography (1987), Smith argued that, in an androcentric society, autobiographical writing has not been granted to women. Thus, women, who were “historically absent from both the public sphere and modes of written narrative” found it necessary to “tell their stories differently” (Smith 12). Françoise Lionnet’s Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture (1989) argued for a theory termed métissage, in which “marginalized subjects voice their lives” (Smith and Watson 12). Lionnet contended that “as historically silenced subjects, women and colonized peoples create ‘braided’ texts of many voices that speak their cultural locations diagnostically” and continued that métissage, or “viewing autobiography as a multivoiced act,” stresses “orality and the irreducible hybridity of identity” (Smith and Watson 12). Crucial to this collection, Women and Language, is the discussion of polyvocality. The argument here is that multiple voices — in the form of orality, literary writings in which the oral culture is stressed, and computer mediated culture — are used as a means to challenge gender ideologies. Specifically, these communication strategies are used strategically by women in order for them to (re)write their experiences.

Language and Identity: Gendered Communication as Performance

Often when a discussion concerning “women’s writings” surfaces, Virginia Woolf’s notion of the “woman’s sentence” is invoked. In A Room of One’s Own, Woolf contrasts her fictional author, Mary Carmichael, to the celebrated 19th century writer Jane Austen in order to speculate on the question of whether there exists such a thing as a “woman’s sentence.” Woolf notes that in Carmichael’s imagined novel, “The smooth gliding of sentence after sentence was interrupted” (80), which meant that Carmichael’s novel was nothing like Austen’s. But Woolf remarks that it is acceptable that Carmichael “broke the sentence” and indeed, even “the sequence” (81) because she did so “not for the sake of breaking, but for the sake of creating” (81). In these much quoted phrases, and in A Room of One’s Own in general, Woolf attempts to demonstrate that women have long lacked the material resources, time, and space to create, and therefore women wrote differently from men, who were afforded these resources. Woolf’s essay was published almost a century ago but she was hopeful that, given these resources — “a room of her own and five hundred a year” — women would create better texts than her fictional Carmichael within “a hundred years’ time” (94). Now that nearly a century has passed, it is time to question whether women’s texts have, indeed, “broken the sequence” of androcentric writing.

Sara Mills points out in her critique of Woolf that as with everything which is labeled masculine/male or feminine/female, these terms have very little to do with biological sex difference, but a great deal to do with assertions of power. In defining the female sentence we are not in fact defining a sentence at all, but defining females; this is just part of an ideological enterprise; we do not define males to anything like the same extent .... Defining the feminine sentence as lacking rationality, coherence, assertiveness and so on is an attempt to set up a particular subject position for females in the real world [76–77].

Mills is rightly arguing against a fixed definition of women. Certainly, while arguing for a “woman’s sentence” appears essentialist at first glance — as it seems to be grounded in the belief that women and men have innate differences linked to their biological makeup — one can also argue, as does Rachel Blau DuPlessis, that

To break the sentence rejects not grammar especially, but rhythm, pace, flow, expression: the structuring of the female voice by the male voice, female tone and manner by male expectations, female writing by male emphasis, female writing by existing conventions of gender — in short, any way in which dominant structures shape muted ones [32].

It is the last portion of this quotation that is crucial. Rather than arguing for an exclusively female form of writing (and therefore prefiguring the French Feminists’ desire to do so, as will be discussed later), Woolf is ultimately, it seems, arguing against “dominant structures [shaping] muted” voices. That is, at the same time that Woolf argues against women writing as men, she also invites women to write without considering their gender. Toward the end of her
essay Woolf makes this explicit, once again appealing to her Mary Carmichael for assistance: "... [Carmichael] had ... mastered the first great lesson; she wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself" (93, emphasis added).

The questions now become: can/should women write in an androgynous fashion? And does their identity as "women writers/communicators" matter? These questions—and possible responses—appear throughout the pages of this text. To sort out these questions and the varied answers, we begin with the premise that gender itself is not fixed; rather, it is an unstable, constructed category and always in flux. Judith Butler presented the now evident view shared by many feminists that "gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" in which "those who fail to do their gender right" (178) are "regularly [punished]" (178). Butler stresses that gender performances require a "stylized repetition of acts" (179, emphasis in original) which means, simply, that one's gestures, body language, and movements "constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (179) when, in fact, there is no such thing.

What, then, does this mean for "women's writings/communication"? It is Butler's contention that "one is a woman ... to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one's sense of place in gender" (xi). Part of the goal of this collection is to question this frame in order for women to (re)claim communication practices, whether these be gossip, garrulousness, or a less stigmatized tie to the oral culture. With the understanding that so much of communication in general is gendered and that the performance of that constructed gender expression is learned socially, this collection wrestles with the notion of an "authentic" voice, the idea of "women's writing," and with the criteria that would determine whether or not any product under either banner would be classified as "feminist."

The Questioning of (and Quest for) "Authentic" Voices, "Women's" Writing, and "Feminist" Texts

The debate over whether a voice can be authentic, let alone authentically female, has been documented at length elsewhere. Much of the early linguistic research studying differences between men and women's voices and communication practices is now viewed as essentialist. This would include studies relying on either the deficit framework, which suggests that women lack beneficial communication strategies that men often master; or the dominance theory, which suggests that women's communication is stifled in part because of men's linguistic capabilities to control communication settings (Cameron 14–15). Despite the criticism these studies have inspired, the mass of data collected on such communication differences (be they innate or constructed), is hard to overlook, and many of the essays here, specifically those in the first part of this text, return to this research either to recount, refute, question, or complicate it.

A similar debate fuels the discussion of the second part of this book: do women (or can they) write differently than men? Is there really such a thing as female or feminine writing? Many scholars have argued that there is. For example, in Feminist Stylistics, Sara Mills claims that there are distinct linguistic differences in the writing crafted by women. Decades earlier, as discussed previously, Virginia Woolf noted some of these differences, not attributing them to all women but some, arguing that certain women writers were able to craft "a new type of sentence which [was] looser and more accretive than the male sentence" (Cameron 65). Writing in between Mills's and Woolf's time period, the French Feminists suggested that such writing, which they termed écriture feminine, could be done strategically and could be used for a feminist and/or political means. Although the potential utility of this type of writing has interested many, its utopianism has caused it to be criticized by various scholars (Camron 9). The concept itself, women's writing, has been devalued because it suggests universality between all women and, therefore, all women's writing. This accusation of minimizing the differences among women is not a new one to be associated with the French Feminists nor is it unfamiliar to second wave feminists in general (the larger group of contemporary feminist thinkers of which they were a part).

This collection seeks to interrogate the notions of feminine voice and women's writing. For example, Chapter 2 deals with the authorial debate surrounding the Old English poem The Wife's Lament, specifically the arguments concerning whether or not scholars can determine if it was, indeed, written by a woman based on the writing style alone. Chapter 6 also explores the idea of an authentic voice and attends to how the war diaries written by a Vietnamese woman were published posthumously and marketed specifically as an authentic voice, one contrasted to the rhetoric concerning the war in Vietnam which prescribed pure heroics, sacrifices, and loyalty to the Party—all dictates more likely to have been associated with the writing of men than women. The question of what makes a voice authentic is therefore complicated when, as seen in this chapter, others co-opt that voice for their own purposes (in this case for economic profit and political reinforcement).

That writing can be productive, that it can accomplish tasks beyond itself, is also a common motif within this collection. Many have argued that this is exactly what a feminist text would do: be productive. Various essays
in this collection tease out what it would mean for a text to be feminist. Chapter 7, "When Talk Meets Page," draws upon Elizabeth Grosz’s definition that in order to be feminist a text must "render the patriarchal or phallocentric presuppositions governing its contexts and commitments visible," "problematize the standard masculinist ways in which the author occupies the position of enunciation," and facilitate the production of new and perhaps unknown, unthought discursive spaces — new styles, modes of analysis and argument, new genres and forms — that contest the limits and constraints currently at work in the regulation of textual production and reception [22–23].

It is particularly this last point, that such texts would facilitate new discursive spaces, styles, genres, and forms, that binds many of the diverse arguments in this book together.

As many of the essays analyze texts or communication practices that could be classified as feminist, this collection attends to the various functions of different communication practices appropriated by women. For example, the first part relies heavily on gossip scholarship which well covers the various tasks gossip accomplishes, such as information acquisition, group acceptance, social control, healing talk, aggressive play, and reputation monitoring (Goodman and Ben-Ze’Ev 4, 15; Spacks x, 34, 57, 64; Dunbar 123). Chapter 1 traces gossip’s association with women and discusses its role in both uniting and fracturing communities and social relationships. Chapter 2 switches to a male perspective and analyzes how the gossip of men, via lettered communication, provided solidarity between its participants through the reinforcement of norms shared by their social group, all the while acting in a way that "othered" those not belonging to that group — in this case, women. Chapter 12 considers gossip as a mechanism through which women, through their kin-keeping activities, access information needed to cope with their social worlds, to solve problems, and to deal with the people around them.

Other parts of this collection attend to how various functions of female communication may be considered more than just functional, but even subversive and hence possibly feminist. Continuing with the focus on gossip, Chapter 1 builds off Alexander Rysman’s claim that gossip itself can be considered a transgressive activity because it “develop[s] social ties outside the institution of male dominance” (176). Other chapters look specifically at actions, more so than words, and how certain performative behavior draws attention to, or overcomes, gendered norms. Chapter 5, for example, focuses on the manipulation of clothing and costuming, and Chapter 9 emphasizes female performance during salsa dancing to highlight gendered norms. And a variety of the analyses of print literature housed in Part II address the ways that women strategically use writing to further feminist agendas or to explore feminist themes. This part suggests that when one historically does not have (or has not had) access to the official written language (which is clearly seen in Part I’s focus on women’s forced indoctrination into gossip culture), oral communication arises as an alternate strategy. The strategic ways that such orality is translated onto the page — and the way that it transforms various written genres — is well explored here (see specifically chapters 7 and 8). Technology’s ability to foster spaces that can transgress gendered communication is explored in the second half of this text. For example, Chapter 12 discusses women’s appropriation of the landline telephone, the mobile phone, and email, and Chapter 13 argues that teenage girls reconfigure instant-messaging spaces, experientially and semiotically, to meet their own personal demands, interests, and goals.

**Navigating Through the “Spaces” in This Volume**

As a whole this collection rests upon the belief that “language shapes the representation of self” (Gluck 9). This collection is divided into four parts, each dedicated to exploring how women utilize language in various forms (spoken, written, non-verbal, mediated) to shape these representations of self or purposely shape them differently than cultural norms would dictate. The essays in this collection are arranged so that the analysis of this phenomenon can be traced through two different trajectories, both temporally aligned to some degree. The collection begins with a discussion of oral communication and then shifts to written communication and communication mediated through technological apparatuses. Each part is also arranged chronologically, tracing developments in each realm of communication. For example, the first part traces not only the history of the word gossip, but its association with women, and how it alters when gossip itself moves from the mouth to the page; the second part analyzes the writing of women across literary genres stretching from 18th century poetry to 20th century novels; and the fourth part traces communication debates and trends as technological devices from the landline telephone to the Internet blog became dominant fixtures in the cultural landscape.

Part I, Spoken Spaces: The Historicization, Evolution, and Gendering of “Gossip,” begins with Giselle Bastin’s chapter, “Pandora’s Voice–Box: How Woman Became the ‘Gossip Girl,’” which provides a historical context for the gendering of the term gossip. The notion that woman is considered a leaky vessel prone to spreading disorder and chaos is linked to etymological associations of the term “gossip” with “midwife.” Although gossip was traditionally
considered a female activity, research abounds on how both sexes have participated in the activities at nearly equal rates throughout the centuries. In "Just Like a Woman: Misogynistic Gossip in the Correspondence Between John Chamberlain and Dudley Carleton," Emily Ross studies the gendered communication between two men as showcased through letters from the 17th century. This essay analyzes instances of gossip present in their communication, exploring the relationship between gossip, misogyny, and stereotypes. The third chapter, "Paper cannot blush": Martha Fowke, an 18th Century Abandoned Woman," continues with an analysis of letters housing gossip, only in this instance they are those housing the self-gossip of their female writer. In this essay Earla Wilputte analyzes female letter writing practices during the 18th century by specifically examining the poet Martha Fowke's 1723 autobiographical letters which document the breakup of her love affair. Wilputte explores how letter writing permitted an abandoned woman to actively re-insinuate herself in another's mind through her imaginative language and imagery.

Part II, Literary Spaces: The Convergence of Orality and Print in Women's Writing, continues to look at the written work of female authors and attend to the way different genres allow for different gendered practices. In Chapter 4, "Delete as Appropriate: Writing Between the Lines of Female Orality in The Wife's Lament," Miriam Muth examines the steps by which phallocentric criticism has appropriated the surviving voices of female speakers from early medieval cultures by examining the The Wife's Lament, a tenth century Old English poem. Lindsay Yakimyshyn's "Voicing the Feminine and the (Absent) Masculine in The Concealed Facet," analyzes performative gender found in scripted closet dramas of the 17th century, looking particularly at Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley's The Concealed Facet, written during the English Civil War. Hanh N. Nguyen and R. C. Lutz also analyze a text crafted by a woman during war time in their essay, "The Wartime Diaries of Dang Thuy Tram: Extolling and Gendering the Heroine's Voice in Postwar Vietnam and Beyond." This chapter examines the diaries of Dang Thuy Tram, a 25-year-old doctor who treated injured soldiers in the war zone of Northern Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Although this text is written in diary format, a genre stereotypically associated with women, Nguyen and Lutz argue that much of the content within these diaries did not align with what one would expect to have been written by a woman during this time period. Chapters 7 and 8 focus their analysis on 20th century American novels that are often classified as feminist. Melissa Ames's "When Talk Meets Page: The Feminist Aesthetic of Adapted Narration and Language Play" analyzes literary works such as Zora Neale Hurston's modernist novel Their Eyes Were Watching God and Margaret Atwood's experimental postmodern novel The Handmaid's Tale, focusing specifically on their orality. Ames reads these literary works against the theoretical writings of the French Feminists to suggest that despite their different formats, their shared feminist stylistics point to a productive commonality often overlooked. In "Blurred Boundaries and Re-Told Histories: Julia Alvarez's How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents," Sarah Himsel Burcon examines Julia Alvarez's 1991 work, How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, and demonstrates how Alvarez uses both records and rewritten stories/histories by strategically employing memory and storytelling. Burcon analyzes the non-normative stylistics of Alvarez's novel, focusing on the effects its reverse chronological narration has on the reader.

Part III, Performative Spaces: Constructing and Instructing Gendered Behavior, moves away from the focus on the written word and turns to less traditional forms of communication. Alesia Whitmore's "Bodies in Dialogue: Performing Gender and Sexuality in Salsa Dance" starts off this part with an analysis that highlights the need to scrutinize body language and physical performance as a form of communication. This essay explores salsa dance, revealing the ways in which it is gendered much like oral communication. While Whitmore studies gender performance on the physical dance floor, Diana York Blaine studies gender performance on the mediated small screen. Her chapter, "Tell Me, Does She Talk During Sex? The Gendering of Permissible Speech on Dr. Phil," demonstrates that, rather than considering woman an active agent, Dr. Phil idealizes the silent female and reinforces a gendered hierarchy in which women are lauded for being the supporter of their aggressive husbands. This essay shows not only how gender is performed—as Dr. Phil performs his role as relationship counselor and the couples act as his raw material to mold—but it also shows how gender instruction and socialization occur (often problematically) through the medium of television. Analyzing another screen—that of the computer—Ashley M. Donnelly's chapter "Read My Profile: Internet Profile Culture, Young Women and the Communication of Power" offers a theoretical analysis of how Internet "profile culture" teaches young women to communicate, arguing that the communication that takes place within these sites limits genuine discourse and alters young women's concepts of what it means to communicate their sense of gender and agency.

Part IV, Technological Spaces: Transforming "Talk" in the 21st Century, the final part of this collection, offers an investigation into how advanced technology contributes to changes in gendered communication. In "Women, Kin-Keeping, and the Inscription of Gender in Mediated Communication Environments," Julie Dare contrasts early cybereulture theories, which constructed computer-mediated environments as liberating and potentially gender-neutral spaces, with empirical evidence that reveals how online communication channels actually reinforce gendered communication practices,
particularly in relation to women’s traditional kin-keeping role. In contrast to Dare’s findings, Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi’s essay, “Gendering the Construction of Instant Messaging,” analyzes the use of Instant Messaging among teenage girls and finds that the cultural stereotype of girls as friendly gossips gets resisted and transgressed in these spaces and that female IM users are able to construct a performative, mediated self that transcends traditional gender restraints. The final chapter in this collection takes on many of these issues and demonstrates their importance across cultural boundaries by analyzing the text-based interactions among a group of young mothers on a Brazilian blog. In “Gender Blogging: Femininity and Communication Practices on the Internet,” Adriana Braga suggests that this specific blog documents both a change in the traditional perspective towards femininity and at the same time a lack of direct action to change personal circumstances in any way that might be considered feminist. Braga ends her discussion with a call to action that echoes the women on this site, although their call to action relies on the next generation while Braga urges more immediate action.

This collection suggests that even in the 21st century all communication practices are tied in some ways to the cultural norms put in place by patriarchy. While the format the communication employs—the medium in which it is relayed—does influence its ability to subvert these cultural norms (as some communication practices do allow more or less strategic gender performance than others, and some inhibit or allow expression of self and affect more readily than others), there is no magic communication forum that frees the speaker completely from the constructed gender communication practices of his or her culture. And although technological progress does allow for increased communication in general, and more diversified communication in particular, technological apparatuses in and of themselves do not have the power to undo the cultural training that influences communication patterns.

**NOTES**

1. For a more in-depth discussion of this binary, as this is an admittedly reductive account, see the work of Éric Havelock, Walter Ong, and Marshall McLuhan.

2. But at the same time, Cameron notes, “The generalization that women across cultures are excluded from public and highly valued forms of speech... has been contested in recent feminist scholarship, and on this subject there is much still to know” (Cameron 4). Furthermore, silence can also be a form of power: “in situations where one is required to ‘confess all’ by a priest, therapist or officer of the law, for instance—silence is a strategy of resistance to oppressive power” (Cameron 4).

3. Mary E. Crawford’s *Talking Difference* addresses this framework.

4. See Deborah Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand: Men and Women in Conversation* for an example of this research.

5. Although the findings in such studies are too numerous to list, some noteworthy reported communication differences include: a greater rapidity of thought in female communication versus men (shown linguistically by pronoun use) (Jespersen 238); women’s tendency to shy away from offensive communication practices and vocabulary to the extent that they will actually “invent innocent and euphemistic words and paraphrases” (Jespersen 233); women’s tendency to laugh and smile more regularly than men during conversation, with women being much more likely to laugh on cue to men’s jokes in comparison to men’s lack of willingness to reciprocate in similar situations (Dunbar 182); or even men’s tendency to appropriate local accents while women tend to more readily retain a more standard, or proper, dialect (Dunbar 184).

6. For more information on the theories of the French Feminists, see Hélène Cixous’s “Castration or Decapitation?” or her *Reader: Lucie Irigaray’s The Sex Which Is Not One*; or Monique Wittig’s *The Straight Mind*.

7. This collection is not the first to analyze written and technological communication forms as a type of gossip. Patricia Spacks has analyzed the gossip contained in 18th century published letters, the link between biographical writing and gossip, and literature’s ability to transform “gossip’s preoccupations” and to dramatize “its operations” (69, 119, 261). Concerning the latter, Ned Schantz has argued that the novel in particular works “in the mode of gossip,” fixated on the private lives of people, and therefore participates “in disreputable feminine discourse” (17, 4).

8. The debates concerning how technology, and specifically, the advent of the Internet, has affected gendered communication is well documented elsewhere. It is often argued “that the virtual world, like the real one, is male dominated, while women remained second-class citizens as measured by their overall rates of active participation (posting) in many discussions” and that cyberspace itself is not a very “woman-friendly” environment (Spacks 6). This collection interrogates these claims.

**WORKS CITED**


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**PART I**

*Spoken Spaces: The Historicization, Evolution, and Gendering of "Gossip"*
When Talk Meets Page:
The Feminist Aesthetic of Adapted Narration and Language Play

Melissa Ames

In *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz addresses the somewhat problematic criteria that often label texts as feminist, feminine, or women-centered. She argues that the four most common determinants of whether a text can be classified as feminist circulate around the sex of the author, the sex of the reader, the content of the text, or the style of the text (Grosz 12). Grosz rejects these criteria in favor of the claim that in order to be feminist a text must “render the patriarchal or phallocentric presumptions governing its contexts and commitments visible,” “problematize the standard masculinist ways in which the author occupies the position of enunciation,” and “facilitate the production of new and perhaps unknown, unthought discursive spaces—new styles, modes of analysis and argument, new genres and forms—that contest the limits and constraints currently at work in the regulation of textual production and reception” (22–3). Grosz is correct in arguing that the first four mandates are insufficient in titling a piece feminist. The two resting on the biological anatomy of the producer or receiver of the text are problematic, for a male or female can create works of feminist intent just as both can consume them thereafter. Denying the fact that much of women’s media is tied to some common themes and/or subject matter would be to turn a blind eye to a very visible truth; to reduce works to their content alone, however, is to miss the bigger picture of how they operate. And here is where this chapter diverges from Grosz’s assertion that a feminist text does not have “a distinctively feminine style” (22). Although it is true that not all feminists text share “a distinctively feminine style,” many tap into common aesthetic stylistic practices to accomplish their goals—the very goals that Grosz claims make texts feminist to begin with (22, emphasis added). While this essay does follow Grosz’s call for anti-essentialist readings of texts that might be called “feminist” or “feminine,” it does not overlook the fact that a vast majority of them do use similar aesthetic patterns, nor does it rule out the idea that these styles themselves are functioning as feminist. To clarify, it is true that these texts are not feminine due to any anatomical means, but in practice (through their strategic design) they are historically feminist. It is often through adopting, and mutating, noticeably feminine stylistic trademarks that texts are able to draw attention to the androcentric positioning of the role of the author and the text’s inevitable tie to the patriarchal world in which it originates. But more importantly, quite often it is the text’s ability to capitalize on “distinctively feminine style(s)” that allows it to “facilitate the production of new and perhaps unknown, unthought discursive spaces” (Grosz 22, 23). I call these new discursive spaces, which feminist texts comfortably inhabit, the space in-between, and the process through which they are systematically created, *la production feminine*. I coin this term with the French Feminist’s concept of “écriture feminine” in mind. Whereas their term refers specifically to a type of strategic feminist writing, I alter the terminology to open up the possibility of other types of strategic feminist production—cinematic, televisual, artistic, etc. The notion of “la production feminine” would not exclude writing; it simply provides a broader (more functional) conceptual framework.

A key characteristic of such texts is that they are—in the terminology of John Fiske—productively. Fiske, speaking of television in particular, expanded on Roland Barthes’s conceptualization of readerly and writerly texts in order to theorize those that seem to be both simultaneously. Fiske explains that a readerly text is “one which ‘reads’ easily, does not foreground its own nature as discourse, and appears to promote a singular meaning which is not that of the text, but of the real,” while a writerly text “is multiple and full of contradictions, it foregrounds its own nature as discourse and resists coherence or unity” (94). Using these two notions, Fiske argues that a productively text combines the complex “characteristics of a writerly text with the easy accessibility of the readerly” and that it “relies on the discursive competencies that the (reader) already possesses, but requires that they are used in a self-interested, productive way” (95). The argument presented here is that most feminist texts reside in the space in-between readerly and writerly and are, therefore, productively; they consist of layered semantic levels, allow for multiple readings and interpretations, and promote active consumption, but they do it under the guise of simplicity with part of their surface goals (which are often the focus of analyses based solely on subject matter alone and not functionality) available
at a glance, easily consumed, and understood. Many texts crafted for women (the chick flick, soap, or harlequin, to list just a few) are often reduced to the latter half of this combination (their readerly traits), and it is only when these texts are more properly studied that the former (their writerly attributes) becomes noticeable and one can see that there is much more going on than first meets the eye with these feminine texts.

This chapter analyzes texts that fall on both ends of the spectrum — texts that are often juxtaposed against one another as arch enemies or polar opposites, narratives from across the aesthetic continuum of print literature. For example, Zora Neale Hurston's modernist novel Their Eyes Were Watching God will be read against a variety of novels—all of which might be classified as ethnic feminist literature. This part poses the possibility that authors of subordinate status (in relation to gender or race) might strategically utilize this space in-between to create producer texts that better meet the needs of their particular politics. When one historically does not have (or has not had) access to the official written language, oral communication arises as an alternate strategy. These authors acknowledge this historical fact and enduring communication tactic by highlighting orality and weaving it into their print fictions.

Crossing the literary divide, Margaret Atwood's experimental postmodern novel, The Handmaid's Tale, will be analyzed against selected excerpts of écriture féminine: works by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig. This grouping showcases the strategic ways that “speech” or “voice” is translated into (or encoded within) print. The subversive qualities of oral communication (even when transported onto the printed page) will continue to be discussed with these examples, as will the possible benefits of gendered communication patterns and/or stylistics.

The literature grouped with Hurston will serve as examples of works that would usually be classified as readerly (although not necessarily correctly so), while the writings of Atwood, Cixous, Irigaray, and Wittig will represent pieces more likely to be classified as writerly. By studying these groups together it will become clear that, though at a glance they appear quite different, they function in many of the same ways, share aesthetic practices, a certain politics, and work through many of the same women-oriented issues. Analyzing these pieces together makes it clear that similar stylistic practices are being used and shared social critiques are being carried through. However, seeking out similarities across the readerly/writerly, oral/print spectrums is not enough. In comparing the aesthetics of these works that could be classified as feminist, I will attend to the ways that the specific format/style of the product affects its utility. The question that surfaces is this: how does the complexity of a work in the same medium (i.e. from traditional storytelling to experimental postmodern narrative) affect the piece’s potential for subversive readings and/or oppositional use?

Talking Pages: Strategic Orality and Feminist Literature

That language is not an innocent tool — one operating without intent, without consequence, without covert agenda — is no longer a hidden truth. The task here is to see how language, in the form of storytelling on the written page, is acting as a tool for feminist means. The selected texts loosely termed “feminist literature” all share one hard-to-miss tactic: a stylistic device impossible to overlook that acts as the tie that binds them all together in a flexible union. Each of these texts, though printed and consumed via the typed page, capitalizes on the oral tradition often associated with women’s culture. The focus on orality is foregrounded rather clearly in Their Eyes Were Watching God, as the novel co-opts the oral nature of storytelling by having the tale (written in dialect) narrated through a conversation between long-time friends. In a quite different way, the idea of orality is translated into print in The Handmaid’s Tale because Atwood’s novel rests on the premise that the narrative itself came into being when cassette tapes housing a recorded version of the story by an anonymous narrator were discovered and the tale was decoded and transcribed. Since these two texts are quite different from one another it probably is not surprising that they have not been read against each other in other scholarly analyses. What is interesting, however, is that although much scholarship exists concerning Hurston’s use of dialect and the novel’s obvious focus on oral storytelling, Atwood’s text does not receive the same attention in this regard. Furthermore, it should be clarified that the majority of the work on orality in Their Eyes Were Watching God focuses more on the oral tradition in relation to African American culture and folklore rather than women’s culture and/or female storytelling praxis. One scholar who bridges the two concepts is Beverly Yvonne Lumumba. She reads Their Eyes alongside of other texts that she calls “listenerly” and demonstrates how they portray “the storytelling experience of the African American oral tradition and black feminist theory” (Lumumba 217). Despite the vast amount of research already done on orality in Their Eyes, what seems to be lacking are comparative readings that discuss the utility of this aesthetic and the probable reason that authors outside of dominant culture might find this stylistic device empowering.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of Janie Crawford, her journey of independent self-discovery and the pain, love, and loss that accompany it along the way. Like much of life and storytelling, her tale and travels are that of one circle: “Ah done been ruh de horizon and back” (Hurston 191). Written almost entirely in dialect, this text, as previously mentioned, foregrounds not only women’s oral tradition but also that of African American culture and folklore. Importantly, the entire text is told; it unfolds as an extended flashback narrative — in one single nighttime, catch-up porch conversation (just out of
sight and earshot of the gossiping community in the backdrop] between Janie
and her best friend, Pheoby. Janie's choice to break her silence and tell her
tale sparks the beginning of this novel and a plethora of scholarly debates sur-
rounding whether or not this act is self-empowering.

Scholarly analyses of Their Eyes differ as to whether Janie's story actually
has any power once she does break her silence. Many of the arguments focus
on Hurston's choice of point-of-view and its benefit (or lack thereof) for Janie
as a character, as well as its effect on the reader/listener (imagined or real) of
her fictional tale. Anne McCarran Drotel praises the work, claiming "Hurston's
third-person omniscient narrator creates a 'womanist' voice of an African
American woman who 'talks back' to both the white culture's racist expectation
of subservience and lack of 'civilization,' and her own African-American com-
nunity's sexism and colorist attitudes" (3027). Likewise, Christine Marie
Parke-Sutherland commends Hurston's use of this experimental point of view
to create what she calls a "relational 'we,'" claiming that this practice increases
the novel's overall effect on the reader (3599). Parke-Sutherland defines this
strategically used point-of-view as one that highlights the power/knowledge
relationship and the relational subjectivity "constructed between the verbal-
ideological worlds of authors, narrators, characters, and readers" (3599).
However, not all academics have praised Hurston in this regard. Ryan Simmons
summarizes the many criticisms of Their Eyes, analyzing at length Hurston's
curious choice of point-of-view. Many scholars have argued that in having
the tale told by an omniscient third-person narrator, rather than a first-person
one, Hurston implies that Janie has not in fact won her voice and self—a crucial
point of this work according to most feminist readings (Simmons 182).
Simmons questions whether "Hurston is intentionally illustrating 'women's
exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech'" (182). This
latter read would be quite different from this one, which sees Hurston's use
of the oral tradition—third-person narration aside—as highlighting women's
success within that communication milieu. Their Eyes illustrates women's
exclusion from the power of written communication and their subsequent
success in oral culture as a result. Hence, Hurston's blending of oral speech
and written word, to an extent that the former overpowers the latter in its
own genre—the print novel—can be seen as a purposeful acknowledgement
of (and rebellion against) this patriarchal communication mandate.

Although women may not have been given much of a choice concerning
their banishment from the realm of written word into that of the oral,
Hurston's novel demonstrates the accidental (and sometimes detrimental)
power women gained through this placement. This novel opens with a scene
that highlights the power of women's talk, in particular the gossip culture
into which they have been indoctrinated.

Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored
up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swal-
lowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing
tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking
without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song.

"What she doin'' coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress
to put on!—Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?—Where all dat money
her husband took and died and left her?—What dat ole forty year ol' 'oman
do'n'' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal..." [Hurston 2).

This novel uses the actual spoken words of the characters to showcase a nega-
tive side of women's culture where the dialogue between the female characters
broadcasts the ways women have been socialized to judge one another and
utilize their words as weapons in the task.

This text, although full of complicated nuances and important messages,
would seem to (at a glance) fall into the aforementioned classification of read-
ably. After all, the author does not strive to lose her reader, the storyline once
worked through is rather straightforward, and all narrative play (whether it
concerns the language of the narrative tale or the temporal disruption present
in the plot) can be overlooked if one focuses more heavily on storyline rather
than style. Although this classification makes sense, it could also be argued
that Hurston's text is actually producer— it is portraying itself as readerly
to undercut its writerly qualities.

Just as some literary works have their writerly characteristics overlooked,
so do some (seemingly writerly) pieces have their readerly traits ignored. This
is often the case with more experimental literature. The next pieces discussed
do not necessarily read with the same ease as a novel like Their Eyes; they
often remind readers of their status as text and highlight the use and abuse
of language. These more writerly texts come in the form of postmodern novels
like Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and more experimental, overtly feminist,
 writings by women such as Wittig, Cixous, and Irigaray.

The Handmaid's Tale shares some characteristics with Hurston's text; it
too is an oral story although this fact is only fully explained in its closing
appendix with the fictionalized part entitled "Historical Notes." It is the story
of a nameless narrator, allowed only the servitudinal name of "Offred" (depi-
ting her status as the property "of Fred," her master), and it begins in media res.
Readers meet Offred in the midst of the early years of the Gilead regime's
restructuring, and through her meandering story only learn bits and pieces
of the world she knew before and how her current reality came into existence.
It is the historical notes that aim to fill in the blanks. The appendix offers
readers "a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on
Gileadean Studies, held as part of the International Historical Association
The question surfaces: *what does writing itself do?* Is writing itself active enough; can it promote political change? On the benefits of writing, Cixous claims: “[w]hen I write, language remembers without my knowing or indeed with my knowing” (*Reader* xxii). It is a practice of “un-forgetting, of un-silencing, of unearthing, of unbinding oneself, and of un-deafening oneself” (Cixous, *Reader* 83). The follow-up question then might be: why struggle for a *female* writing? In fact, is such really possible? Teresa de Lauretis argues it is possible and beneficial: “[w]riting ... presupposes possession of the phallus — symbolically speaking; and for a woman to write is to usurp a place, a discursive position, she does not have by nature or by culture” (80). On the contrary, Wittig would argue *not* to embark on a quest for a specifically female form of writing, that such a thing does not exist, that the term *écriture féminine* is merely an academic invention, a term spawned in part from women’s domination and political backlash. She writes:

That there is no “feminine writing” must be said at the outset, and one makes a mistake in using and giving currency to this expression. What is this “feminine” in “feminine writing”? It stands for Woman, thus merging a practice with a myth, the myth of Woman. “Woman” cannot be associated with writing because “Woman” is an imaginary formation and not a concrete reality... “Feminine writing” is the naturalizing metaphor of the brutal political fact of the domination of women, and as such it enlarges the apparatus under which “femininity” presents itself [Wittig 59].

But as her statement implies, she is against the terminology and the conceptualization more so than the actual practice of women writing — or even in writing in a particular useful way. Wittig would not argue against the power of writing, but against the notion of a writing linked to the myth of Woman, one that would perhaps exaggerate culturally indoctrinated traits of said universal Woman. However, the practice (terminology aside) does not necessarily need to be seen as linked to the mark of gender. *Écriture féminine* is a political tactic; it adopts stylistic devices that may fly under the banner of feminine to some extent, but it does so for an ultimate goal. The aesthetic itself is *functional*, even if it does, indeed, have some underlying tie to stereotypes concerning the constructed genders. Also, despite her dislike of the term, arguably it is a practice that she actually carries through, for not many would find a problem with characterizing her novel *The Lesbian Body* as an instance of *écriture féminine* with its shared aesthetic trademarks and feminist motifs.

*Écriture féminine* allows for the expression of multiplicity, the sex which is not simply *one* or singular, as one of the many interpretations of Irigaray’s infamous title implies. Cixous writes: “[i]t is not a question of making the subject disappear, but of giving it back its divisibility” (*Reader* 29). *Écriture*
feminine allows the writer to step outside of the male logic, and it acts as a tool to allow “woman to negotiate a place for herself within a symbolic order designed to protect the masculine” (Cixous, Reader 71). It does this often by purposely sidestepping the linear narrative style of masculine authorship; it critiques the pronouns enforced by patriarchal culture; and it crosses subject matter thresholds crucial to feminist means. But écriture feminine is not alone in any of these goals—the end products of écriture feminine just broadcast their intent more vocally. All of the texts referenced here can be seen doing many of the same things.1

Where Spoken Speech and Written Word Align: Giving Voice to Feminist Themes

One common goal of all of these texts is to give voice to their female protagonist(s). By making these women speaking subjects, their identities are developed, and their stories are shared and hopefully remembered. Returning to the example of Their Eyes Were Watching God, although the experiences Janie has in Hurston’s novel are important, they have no power to affect anyone besides herself while she remains silent. In having Janie re-live her experiences through the oral recap to Pheoby, Hurston, like many feminist writers, develops the idea of speaking to share, speaking to be understood, speaking to pass on wisdom, and speaking in order to remember (and have others remember). Another excellent literary example of a text that tackles this goal is Gayl Jones’s novel Corregidora. This work (notably another text, created by an African American writer, that might be classified as “feminist”) attacks female orality from a different angle—through that of the blues song. Jones tells the tale of the protagonist’s, Ursa’s, struggle to come to terms with her own emotional and sexual trauma, the psychological repercussions of her abusive slave heritage (both on her and her maternal ancestors before her), and the daily fight to survive in the racist, sexist world that suffocates her ability to stand and speak on her own terms. To clarify, her story is not simply told—it is sung. Jones’s text is one of inner monologue juxtaposed with flashback and blues lyrics, repeating, circling back in the call and response refrain ways of blues music itself and, not unimportantly, feminist storytelling in general. Specifically, in Corregidora four generations of women share their stories through the lips of Ursa who has been trained to tell the tale over and over so as to “never forget” (Jones 9).2 The women whose pain and hardships are captured in Ursa’s tale are nameless throughout the text; they themselves remain for the most part voiceless, but her songs allows them and their story to exist, to matter, to live on. Both of these examples demonstrate the power of oral communication to translate experience and feeling from speaker to listener (fictional or real). While these two selections show storytelling between women taking the form of personal conversation and stylized performance, these are obviously not the only avenues for such moments of oral sharing to occur. Quite often (in fiction and reality) such moments of spoken “show-and-tell” are often more blunt and even didactic—as is the case in most spoken speech that takes the form of advice giving.

In The Handmaid’s Tale, the narrator remembers the years before the political upheaval and the family moments she used to share with her husband and feminist mother:

Her hair was gray by that time, of course. She wouldn’t dye it. Why pretend, she’d say. Anyway, what do I need it for, I don’t want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds’ worth of half babies. A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women (...) They aren’t a patch on a woman except they’re better at fixing cars and playing football, just what we need for the improvement of the human race, right? That was the way she talked, even in front of Luke. He didn’t mind, he teased her by pretending to be macho, he’d tell her women were incapable of abstract thought and she’d have another drink and grin at him. Chauvinist pig, she’d say. Isn’t she quaint, Luke would say to me, and my mother would look sly, furtive almost. I’m entitled, she’d say. I’m old enough, I’ve paid my dues, it’s time for me to be quaint. You’re still wet behind the ears. Piglet, I should have said. As for you, she’d say to me, you’re just a backlash. Flash in the pan. History will absolve me [Atwood 120–121].

Although this passage crosses the line between advice giving and preaching, the foundation still is the speaker’s experience. As in all advice, the narrator’s mother’s life experiences (her “story”) motivate the words she passes on to her daughter. And, as is true to some extent with all literary works, these words also stem from the social experiences (and resultant cultural commentary) of the author herself—for which the novel is often both praised and criticized.3

Regardless of the form of the speech (conversation, song, or diatribe), on some level the goal seems the same: to foster woman-to-woman bonds. Quite often these texts drenched in orality focus specifically on female storytelling as a device to create intergenerational bonds. While many feminist texts tackle this theme, it should not go unnoted that a vast majority of literary works that do so could be classified minority/ethnic texts. For example, Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine, Amy Tan’s The Kitchen God’s Wife, and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, to list just a few, all touch on the function of storytelling within family structures. Love Medicine incorporates the orality of women’s storytelling through the intergenerational story of two intricately linked Native American families, the Kashpaws and the Lamartines. It is a story of lying and truth telling, of secret keeping and secret sharing, of the power of words both said and unsaid. Similarly, although progressing in a slightly less complicated
fashion, *The Kitchen God's Wife* also foregrounds women's oral culture through the story of Pearl Louie and her mother, Winnie. Like Erdrich's story, this is one of two interwoven culturally hybrid families — the Chinese American Louies and the Kwongs. One final example of this nature is *The Color Purple*, which offers up a different type of orality, a type of talk/communication that relies on paper for enunciation. Walker's novel is comprised completely of letters — letters written by the main character, Celie, to God (in the vein of diary-esque entries) and her estranged sister, Nettie, and those of Nettie in return to Celie. All of these novels focus on oral storytelling's potential to bridge intergenerational gaps and foster close interpersonal bonds between women.

Beyond the focus on orality, these examples of feminist literature also share something else quite important: a non-traditional narrative pattern that connects them to writings of the French Feminists and the postmodern praxis of writers like Arwood. Although, like Hurston's novel, each of these works could easily (although problematically) be classified as "readerly," much is going on beneath their easily "read" storylines. For example, Erdrich's text has a fragmented nonlinear narrative style and incorporates several first-person speakers, constantly shifting points of view, both temporally and perspectively. Unlike Erdrich though, Tan tells her story exclusively through the alternating first-person narrative accounts of the mother-daughter pairing and capitalizes on the device of flashback to intersect the storylines. Walker's novel differs from the two examples in that it progresses primarily in chronological order. However, like Hurston, Walker uses vocabulary reminiscent of slave narrative and folk vernacular full of figures of speech and rhythmic patterns of African American women's culture and frames her novel in a very postmodern text-within-a-text fashion as the narrative unfolds through a series of "letters" by different characters. These examples again show the producerly status of texts written by authors outside of dominant culture. These novels — with their merging of oral and print culture — allow (and even covertly encourage) their straightforward narratives to overshadow their complex, strategic aesthetic design and (purposely) mask many of their underlying goals.

One of these goals is to entertain a theme that, at first, might seem to contradict their heavy focus on women's speech. All of these novels pose the question of when to speak and when to keep silent. In these moments, the focus is not on the affectually-charged nature of women's speech (and the bonds that such speech creates) but the political and/or personal implications of speaking up in general. In recent years, the practice of having female characters speak up when they normally would not has shifted from the private/personal realm into the more public/political realm. Many postmodern literary works aim to speak that which societal codes forbid, to break them down — hence, the emphasis on subject matter considered taboo and the call for using forbidden or unacceptable languages. This arguably is the battle cry of the French Feminists as well; it is the practice implemented in their *écriture feminine*; it is the practice carried through in more subtle ways in the feminist literature, walking a fine line between the oral and the written, the readerly and the writerly.

Until this point the analysis of these texts has focused on how they work, but it is also important to analyze why they work as they do. Their narrative structures are purposeful and often tied to the material they deal with. These pieces all offer up moments of social critique, many centered on patriarchal society and the constructed nature of gender created by it. Sometimes these motifs are the driving force behind the work, sometimes just a line tucked away to be teased out. At other times it is a recurrent tackling of important social issues. For example, Hurston addresses the double oppression (sexism coupled with racism) which women of color experience through this part of character dialogue:

"Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see..." [34].

She also addresses the stereotypes often associated with women and the inevitable shutdown that many women experience having to live out their existence in such rigid roles. Take for example this first spoken comment by Janie's husband Joe and her resulting internal thoughts "'Somebody go to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves'; "So gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush. The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again" (Hurston 71, 72). Although the various societal concerns these works attend to are important, the way these works operate is more so. These works enable feminist concerns to live on past the pages, the front and back covers that keep them bound, because the stories themselves do not end — like the problems they tackle, these pieces refuse to reach closure and, hence, refuse to conform to the standard of storytelling.

Walter Benjamin argues that "the art of storytelling is coming to an end," but ironically, the texts discussed here, very much in the vein of the oral storytelling tradition, reject this practice (83, emphasis added). Another crucial characteristic of storytelling for him is the practice of repetition: "[f]or storytelling is always the art of repeating stories" (Benjamin 91, emphasis added).
This, of course, is seen in feminine writing. Benjamin credited the written novel as the beginning of the end of storytelling — the death of this oral tradition — yet with écriture féminine and various forms of feminist fiction, the practice of storytelling is alive and well in print media. Concerning the repetitive endless nature of écriture féminine in particular, Cixous writes: women’s “writing also can go on and on without ever inscribing or distinguishing contours,” that “[f]eminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending; there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop, and it’s this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read: For we’ve learned to read books that basically pose the word ‘end’” (Reader, 44, “Castration” 53).

The non-normative, oral narrative pattern of feminist work is not the only characteristic worthy of attention. Like the written pieces, those resting in the visual arts realm also offer up hidden substance. Although this essay cannot do this discussion justice, other “feminist” texts can be analyzed to prove that the readerly and writerly blend — the producibly quality that is feminist art — is not tied to the written word (or the narrative tale) alone.

Conclusion

Returning to Grosz’s key assertions concerning what makes a text feminist, it should now be clear that much of women’s media actually fits her definition. The texts analyzed here, by addressing feminist concerns and foregrounding the constructed nature of gender, expose the phallocentric way in which texts do not have to operate. These women-oriented products raise questions concerning the authority, the fixity, of authorship and text — ironically (or not) very postmodern goals in general. And, most importantly, the pieces highlighted here prove that women’s media — with their new genres, forms, and mutated stylistic practices — offer up innovative discursive spaces and modes of reception. These pieces from across the spectrum show that although all feminist texts do not share “a distinctively feminine style,” they do operate in similar ways and do benefit by adopting shared feminine styles (Grosz 22, emphasis added).

It should also be clear from looking at these texts that the double stigma allotted to women’s culture, its lowered status acquired by its association with the less dominant gender, has helped the producerly nature of feminist texts to go unnoticed. All too often texts such as these are only seen for their readerly qualities — the ease at which they can be digested, the surface level, the stereotypically feminine traits they broadcast. This readerly side often overshadows the complicated underbelly of the individual texts where the writerly aspects are alive and thriving out of the limelight (or patriarchal searchlight). Of course, it is true that many texts operate in this producerly fashion. After all, when John Fiske coined the term he was talking about televised texts in general, and the majority of said texts are aimed at a mainstream (masculine) audience. But feminist texts do seem to systematically use this producerly space to their own advantage. These texts appear as a patchwork of meanings, interweaving levels that allow for diverse analyses and (active) use.

That many of these texts operate in this manner but are often only seen for their readily side is not necessarily a detriment, nor is it necessarily an accident either. The readerly trumping the writerly (at a glance at least) in feminist texts can be seen as a defense tactic, a covert strategy of la production féminine that allows much of their purpose to go unnoticed, unchallenged, and, hence, unfear ed by the police dogs in charge of securing the patriarchal status quo. So while many have been offended by the titling on women’s media as throw away culture desperately hanging onto the bottom rung of the lowbrow ladder, the eye rolling and balking that these texts receive could be seen as a hidden positive — for as long as these texts are considered of minimal importance, glanced at and discarded with a blink of an eye, they remain a powerful tool to continue developing feminist work like the cultural secret agents that they are.

Notes

1. To clarify, I am not the first to suggest that these texts in particular could be considered variations of écriture féminine. Elaine Neil Orr suggests that Furstson is a practitioner of écriture féminine in Their Eyes. Likewise, in The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood, the argument is made that many of Atwood’s texts showcase her continuing engagement with the concept of écriture féminine.

2. Jones emphasizes this theme of speaking to remember to the point of spelling it out quite literally: “My great-grandmamma told my grandmamma the part she lived through that my grandmamma didn’t live through and my grandmamma told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we’d never forget” (9).

3. Shirley Neuman argues that this disjunctive “novel hypothesizes the logical extension not only of Puritan government but also of the agenda articulated during the 1980s by America’s fundamentalist Christian Right” (857). Neuman views Offred, “a fictional product of 1970s,” as a clever representative of the backlash against women’s rights that Atwood would have witnessed in the early 1980s (856). However, Atwood’s text is not always praised in academic circles. Kim Loudermilk condemns Atwood’s response to (and corresponding narrative creation of) the feminist trends of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Loudermilk argues that Atwood creates a detrimental “feminist fiction” in The Handmaid’s Tale (4469). She defines this “mythologized version” of feminism as being “uniformly antimal, antisex and politically ineffective” (as can be seen in part by the mother’s tirade above) (4469). Loudermilk utilizes the term fictional feminism because she sees it as being “indeed, made-up” growing “out of fictional narratives, the stories we tell and are told about feminism” (4469). Far from being subversive and stimulating social change, Loudermilk reads novels such as Handmaid as working “to contain the potential of feminism to create any profound and lasting social change” with its perpetuated myths (4469).
4. Other scholars have noted this marriage of orality and print literature. In her study of Nora Zeale Hurston and Alice Walker, Africa Ragland Fine discusses the fact that “the relationship between oral and written communication is not a dichotomy, but a continuum when elements of both can coexist” (1999). Her theorization of this phenomenon, which she terms “second orality,” is much like my conceptualization of “producerly” texts. My reading of Their Eyes aligns with Fine’s argument that Hurston draws attention to “communication that encompasses both oral and literate elements” and through this process helps “shape the theme and purpose” of the novel (1999).

WORKS CITED


Neuman, Shirley. “Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and The Handmaid’s Tale.” University of Toronto Quarterly 75.3 (Summer 2006): 857–868. Print.


