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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

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Not like Other Girls:
Feminist Modernisms, Domestic Labor, and the Trouble with Conventional Women
by
Ana Quiring

A dissertation presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
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Ana Quiring

Washington University in St. Louis

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Not like Other Girls

Feminist Modernisms, Domestic Labor, and the Trouble with Conventional Women

by

Ana Quiring

Doctor of Philosophy in English and American Literature

Washington University in St. Louis, 2022

Professor Anca Parvulescu, Chair

This dissertation demonstrates the centrality of conventional womanhood to feminist literary history. As women gained access to voting rights, universities, and professions in the early years of the twentieth century, some writers sought to distinguish themselves from old-fashioned, domestic women in order to fashion themselves as uniquely modern. *Not like Other Girls* argues that this gesture of contradistinction has formed a core component of the feminist modernist ethos, both for early century writers and their scholarly reception. In response to this rift between the modern and the conventional, the dissertation gives an account of conventionality's presence in modern feminist life. I argue that domestic labor forms a constitutive part of feminist studies and activism, especially beyond narrowly white, Western, and cisgender feminist orthodoxies. Through readings of texts by Virginia Woolf, Cornelia Sorabji, Doris Lessing, Alice B. Toklas, Monique Truong, Muriel Spark, and Zadie Smith, as well as an array of literary criticism, this dissertation illustrates the significance of conventional women's work and embodiment for an anti-racist and collaborative feminist politics.

Introduction

At the end of her landmark work of feminist theory, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf returns to Judith Shakespeare, her figure of suppressed female genius. Though she was silenced throughout literary history, Woolf claims, Judith's spirit lives on. Her inspiration should spur a new generation of women writers—presumably present in the audience of Woolf's lectures, given at two women's colleges at the University of Cambridge in 1928. Woolf writes, "She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed" (117). Woolf describes an inheritance shared between two groups of women: those women presumably made modern by their presence in the lecture hall, and those outside it, preoccupied with the ongoing demands of domestic work. This dissertation chronicles the feminist investment in the women outside the lecture hall: the extent to which a legacy of creative freedom like Judith Shakespeare's is truly shared by modernizing and conventional women.

Woolf has become the central feminist figure of the field called literary modernism, narrowly defined as the period between 1890 and 1945, and broadly defined as a seismic rejection of "traditional" values, lifestyles, and aesthetics, a process that continued long after World War II. In particular, this dissertation makes an intervention into the subfield of feminist modernist studies, a scholarly conversation begun in the 1970s with the advent of feminist literary criticism and institutionalized more formally today with its own journal and conference.¹ Feminist modernist critics denaturalize the masculinist assumptions often at work in modernist

¹ *Feminist Modernist Studies* was founded in 2017 alongside its partner organization and conference, the Feminist inter/Modernist Association (FiMA).

self-definitions, which assume that, as Rita Felski writes, “Woman is aligned with the dead weight of tradition and conservatism that the active, newly autonomous, and self-defining subject must seek to transcend” (2).² *Not Like Other Girls* takes its impetus from women writers’s rejection of this mischaracterization, and the avidity with which they do so. In both fiction and nonfiction modes, feminist writers during the modernist period and across the twentieth century take their own modernity, which takes myriad forms but is often imagined as concrete and consistent, as a central, obsessive subject. When a central character in Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962) proclaims, “I’ve decided that we’re a completely new type of woman. We must be, surely?” (3), she echoes, with irony and uncertainty, decades of defiant rejections of “the dead weight of tradition.”

If *Not Like Other Girls*, as its title implies, takes its inspiration from a disavowal, its primary interest is in the negative space left by that disavowal. Who are the women absent from Woolf’s lecture hall? Where do they come from? In historical reality, their experiences are diffuse and various. They rarely have the opportunity to speak for themselves and enter the historical record, too busy washing up and caring for children to fight for the rights to education and publication.³ As such, they are haunting presences in this dissertation, visible at its perimeter, not least in the ways they fed, clothed, and inspired the writers I study here. In literary history, however, the women absent from the lecture hall are omnipresent, obsessively catalogued by “modern” feminist writers. Women’s fiction is replete with wives, mothers, cooks, maidservants, daughters, seamstresses, and helpmeets. My survey of this writing demonstrates

² As Andreas Huyssen and others have argued, women have also become affiliated with mass culture and consumerism, the pernicious aspects of modernity that hampers true progress. See Walter L. Adamson, “Futurism, Mass Culture, and Women.”

³ I echo here foundational arguments made twenty years apart by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and Saidiya Hartman in “Venus in Two Acts.” Both articles consider the silencing of colonized women and enslaved women, respectively, as personages who history has prevented from narrating their own experiences.

the extent to which women fashioned themselves as modern, progressive, and liberated by their repudiation of these characters, an archive of personages I call “conventional women.” The character of conventionality developed in response to the widening of opportunity for women at the turn of the twentieth century. With the rise of the new woman figure and the New Woman novel, the advent of suffrage, access to universities and the professions for white women in England, traditional roles for women became less universal than they had been in the Victorian Era.⁴ As a result, those traditional roles were consolidated into an amorphous, often internally contradictory figure: a conventional woman. This figure became a stock character with literary purchase that was easily “read” in both texts and the political sphere. Dora Marsden, a radical suffragist and journal editor writing in 1914, perceived the opposition between feminists and conventional women to be quite clear, describing them as “advanced women” and “womanly women” (“Women’s ‘Rights’” 361). The most obvious traits of womanly women are easy to name; they are wives and mothers, with little interest in or little opportunity to join the workforce or voting, who gain their value from sexual viability and domestic labor. They pair femininity in its historical senses with an adherence to predetermined domestic and economic roles. This dissertation invests its attention not in these women’s lives as they were really lived. Instead, I catalogue the far-reaching literary tradition that arose over the course of the twentieth century to describe, valorize, diminish, and critique these women, all with the goal of forging a different path.

By invoking the social changes that characterized the early twentieth century and the period known as literary modernism, I am naming and entering a grand tradition of feminist writers who have done the same. These invocations often depend more on a romanticized

⁴ Sally Ledger writes about the New Woman figure in *The New Woman: Feminism and Fiction at the Fin de Siècle*.

remembering of the modernist era than on the events of that period itself. Modernism, institutionalized in the Euro-American academy as a time of bohemian lifestyles, aesthetic experimentation, and iconoclast politics, has been metabolized by feminist and queer writers to their own ends.⁵ For many of the writers I study, the modernist period took place almost exclusively in Paris, London, and the American northeast, and its denizens were all groundbreaking provocateurs. This narrowed, Eurocentric account of the period has reshaped modernism as a stylish and erudite inheritance for later feminist generations. Most significantly, modernist aesthetics, history, and celebrities have become resources for women writers and academics anxious to fashion themselves as modern.

Over the last twenty years, the field of modernist studies has defined itself by its expansions: temporal, geographical, gendered, and aesthetic.⁶ Ultimately, however, these scholarly gestures have failed to dislodge the centrality of modernism and its hazily defined modernity as first and foremost a *sensibility*: a slogan that writers across time and space have promiscuously borrowed with the aim of unconventional self-fashioning. In *Not Like Other Girls*, I bring these retrospective writers together, arguing that they instrumentalized the memory of Anglophone, Euro-American modernism in order to signal their own personal modernity. This pattern recalls one particular scholarly methodology: recovery, or the practice of returning to memory forgotten texts by women writers.⁷ Feminist recovery, the subject of my first chapter, constitutes a form of historical attachment analogous to that outlined by Heather Love in her book *Feeling Backward*: “As queer readers we tend to see ourselves as reaching back toward

⁵ For two central texts on the character of modernism, refer to Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, *Modernism: The Evolution of an Idea*, and Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture*.

⁶ See Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, and David James and Urmila Seshagiri, “Metamodernisms: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution.”

⁷ I am indebted in my theory of recovery to Jessica Berman, “Practicing Transnational Feminist Recovery Today.”

isolated figures in the queer past in order to rescue or save them,” she writes (8). All too often, these characters, with embarrassing politics or nervous denials, do not want to be rescued: “It is hard to know what to do with texts that resist our advances,” Love notes, giving a mission statement for her book (8). Much like in queer studies, where critics seek shared politics and ideals with their objects of study, feminist critics have turned to the modernist era to name a prehistory of their own modernity. This pattern recurs across the twentieth century, from Alice B. Toklas’s memoir-cookbook, where she recalls what she cooked Pablo Picasso for dinner, to second wave feminist texts, where writers as various as Mary Daly, Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark, Shari Benstock, and Betty Friedan perceive feminist modernist writers as their forebears and inspiration.⁸ Women writers, in and out of the academy, recruit modernist history as their own past, canonizing and distorting the period as a political and personal style. Their modernist-era heroines—like Woolf, Toklas’s partner Gertrude Stein, and their lesser known contemporaries—become their predecessors in their distinction, uniqueness, and separation from “other women.”

Observing the stylization of modernism for feminist self-fashioning has broader political stakes than those of simple historiography. In the era of modernist expansions, or the “transnational turn,” calling a text or historical figure modernist has become a *legitimizing* mantle, an interpellation that confers literary value as determined by the western academy. For instance, Susan Stanford Friedman claims the fifteenth century Indian poet Kabir as a modernist figure, likening his verse to early twentieth century jazz. According to previous definitions of the

⁸ In this dissertation, the phrase “second wave” refers capaciously to the feminist discourses of the 1960s-1980s, the period in which feminism achieved mainstream recognition as a political movement for the first time. Traditionally categorized into liberal and radical variants, second wave feminism also led to the professionalization of the field in humanities disciplines and the creation of women’s studies programs. The term “second wave” now sometimes carries a negative connotation, implying an old-fashioned or problematic heuristic. Some of its originators now resist the phrase. I use it here for its historical specificity and without condemnation. For more on the ethos and history of the second wave, see *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, edited by Stephanie Gilmore.

modern, she argues, Kabir would not qualify, he “represents ‘tradition,’ particularly the oral tradition rooted in folkways and communal life” (213). Friedman seeks to contradict this characterization, adopting Kabir into modernity, but why? Modernist studies’ greediness is heavy with ideological baggage. Although it has become a ticket to intellectual worthiness, Kabir ought not need to be called modernist to be worthy of study; his participation in cultural tradition and oral literature does not make him ignominious or historically inert.⁹ While I laud the intent of modernist studies’ global turn to discard narrow European narratives of modernity and literary development, to pursue this expansion under the mantle of modernist studies risks rendering it a colonizing embrace.¹⁰ Most importantly, it attempts to weed out the worthy, modern, progressive voices in global literature from the amorphous category of “the traditional.” And the traditional are often women.

Both inside and outside the “West,” itself a loose net through which many people pass, marginalized women most often carry the mantle of tradition. White academic feminists’ anxious determination to render themselves distinct from other women marks a familiar pattern. Successful, published, avant-garde, public-facing, largely white women have always required the labor of other women, largely working class and nonwhite, to give them the time to write. In modernist studies, to call a woman modern is to call her valuable, and implicitly *more* valuable than the women who made her tea. To be committed to anti-racist and decolonial scholarship is to give up the fetishization of novelty. This does not mean that working women did not contribute to cultural or literary modernity—on the contrary. This dissertation traces the ways

⁹ Outside of modernist studies, the field of world literature has increasingly sought to include orature and other traditional forms in their conceptions of literature; see Caroline Levine, “The Great Unwritten.” For more on the role of modernist innovation in determining historical investment, see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*.

¹⁰ For more on the colonizing impact of expansions in western literary studies, see Emily Apter, *Against World Literature*, and Aamir Mufti, *Forget English!* Notably, these critiques come from the field of world literature, and have not made conclusive inroads in modernist studies.

that “traditional” and colonized women’s work—both intellectual and domestic—was absolutely constitutive of feminist modernity more broadly. This argument runs counter to a longstanding feminist assumption: that modernity means departure, distinction from the old ways. Ultimately, *Not Like Other Girls* argues that decolonizing feminist modernist studies—making it both more intersectional and more historically sensitive—would mean dismantling the field’s central designation. It has become difficult to discuss the uneven, jerky progression of modernity without valorizing that movement—streamlining and smoothing it in our historical memory. Modernity and its literary instantiations (modernisms near and far) are terms for faction-making, not coalition-building. The texts we call both feminist and modernist give us the most valuable inheritance when they perform the failure of the distinction between modernity and women’s work.

The texts I study here accomplish this deconstruction in varying styles and scattered across decades. Woolf herself acknowledges the commonality between women, claiming that Judith Shakespeare “lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight.” In my texts, women writers deconstruct their own fashionable-ness, recognizing it as a function of tradition, whether in terms of labor, aesthetics, personal presentations, political affiliation, or all of the above. In short, they recognize (or fear to recognize) that their modernity is just as constructed, just as performed, as the conventionality of the women from whom they depart. Given the exalted attention women’s modernity has already received in feminist literary studies,¹¹ then, I retell its story in relief, turning my attention to these representations of conventionality, which are rich, complex, and historically precise, much like their foils.

¹¹ Consider, for instance, the exalted status of Virginia Woolf herself, whose avant-garde style and intellectual credentials have often made her a lodestar for feminist studies more broadly. See Naomi Black, *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*.

Conventionality is a many-textured historical phenomenon. Although has no essential shape, its practitioners often act as if it does, performing a kind of gender certainty with the hope of gaining security, respectability, and/or pleasure. Such certainty inevitably crumbles. The content of this performance varies. For one, its earlier chroniclers, namely second wave feminists of the 1960s and '70s, often neglected to apprehend both the affinities and profound disparities between middle-class women who choose conventionality and working-class women doing domestic labor to survive. These intimate inequalities emerge in literatures written by middle class women meditating on the domestic space, from the Parisian kitchen to the Indian zenana, where they are accompanied but not in conversation with their servant companions. Studying conventionality should attune us to multiple instantiations of femininity, a gender presentation undergoing rapid change in the early twentieth century, from the shape of the ideal woman's silhouette to the political capacity of "an educated man's daughter," in Woolf's parlance.¹² Centrally, femininity expanded its reach into queer communities, as the femme lesbian and effete homosexual became recognized types. The dissertation thus argues that studying conventionality can help us better theorize the category of woman writ large. Plotted throughout the dissertation, this argument is further developed in its coda. In Torrey Peters' 2020 novel *Detransition, Baby*, the central object of analysis in the coda, transgender women both embrace and trouble traditional forms of femininity as they seek to shore up self and community. One trans character identifies the most central feature of female conventionality, declaring: "I'm going to live and do like millions of women before me: I'm going to be a mother" (105). In this contemporary text, the tropes of conventionality form the core that connects women to each other across time and provide access to those seeking entry to womanhood—if only they can be white and bourgeois

¹² See Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938).

enough to adopt a child. This conclusion, with its meditation on the resonances of present feminist concerns with their modernist-era history, follows recent scholarship by David James, Urmila Seshagiri, Mathias Nigles, and Michael D'Arcy, which traces the persistence of modernist aesthetics and themes in twenty-first century texts.¹³

In giving this catalogue of conventionality's evolving features, my argument is relatively modest: that the term bears significant complexity for feminist studies. However, because I consider a literary and historical catalogue of conventionality as constitutive of feminist modernity, my argument becomes bolder: that any narrative of women's progress should center its drag, its aprons, its cookbooks, and dieting advice. Old-fashioned embodiments and labors are absolutely essential to radical change in feminist studies.

The Feminist Intimate Public: A History

In framing feminist modernity as an identification across time, I am indebted to queer and feminist affect theory, a subfield that has sprung up since 2000 to study emotions as structured by cultural attitudes toward gender and sexuality. Theorists like Lauren Berlant, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sara Ahmed, Kadji Amin, Elizabeth Freeman, Kathleen Stewart, and Sianne Ngai, who work on both literary history and contemporary culture, have made major contributions not only to the theory of emotion generally, but also to the particular power of minor, mundane, unpleasant, and ordinary affects. In so doing, they counter sweeping philosophical generalizations about subjectivity that have governed affect studies in the past in favor of more contextualized emotional formations, which are often the purview of marginalized people.¹⁴

¹³ Refer to James and Seshagiri, "Metamodernisms: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution," and Nigles and D'Arcy, editors of *The Contemporaneity of Modernism: Literature, Media, Culture*.

¹⁴ Some affect theorists use "affect" and "emotion" interchangeably, while others differentiate, with emotion representing culturally codified and structured feelings and affects their pre-cognitive intensities in the body (see

More often than not, bringing affect into view also invites questions about agency and subjecthood; feminist affect theorists often reject statements of perfect freedom or total predetermination. With attention to “lateral agency” by Berlant, “obstructed agency” by Ngai, “the middle ranges of agency” by Sedgwick, and “prepolitical forms of agency” by Amin, these theorists precede my work by deflating valorized and uncomplicated narratives of left political resistance in favor of attending to the ordeals of navigating late capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and the drag of daily life. This precedent is especially helpful to me in articulating the ambivalent relationships of desire and disgust that characterize so many women’s relationships to compulsory conventionality.

Quite often, this ordeal includes a lingering attachment to a lifestyle, object, or political belief we might deem “problematic.” Conventionality itself is one such attachment. I am particularly indebted to Berlant’s work on women’s subcultures of conventionality, in their case, especially on nineteenth century American sentimental literatures. Berlant bases their critique on the culture of collective feeling that allows white women to center their own emotions over political anti-racist action. They describe this shared emotional project as an “intimate public,” writing, “An intimate public is an achievement. Whether linked to women or other nondominant people, it flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x*” (viii). Although Berlant is most interested in the culture of sentimental abolition discourses among white women in the nineteenth century United States, their argument extends to all sorts of mainstream cultural feeling that would exalt femininity,

Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect”). Ngai conceives of the difference “as a modal difference of intensity or degree rather than a formal difference of quality or kind” (27) and I follow her thinking, using the terms in concert if not always interchangeably.

especially the desire for love, as the highest goal of a woman's life. I argue that feminism, too, is an intimate public, one with unsettlingly similar modes. Feminist literatures, especially those that meditate on modernism and modernity, comprise an "affective scene of identification among strangers," especially in the sense that many feminist writers imagine a collective of like-minded women who are invested in freedom from constraint and from *association with conventional women*. This intimate public is built on the writing of women in earlier centuries, as evidenced by Woolf's own writing on forgotten women writers of the 17th and 18th centuries (I explore this dynamic in Chapter One). However, the early twentieth century provided the material opportunities for these women to gather, to collaborate, and to form communities of authorship and readership, from the well-known, like the Bloomsbury Group or the Parisian Left Bank, to less mythologized, like modernist little magazines by feminist editors Jane Heap, Margaret Anderson, Dora Marsden, Harriet Shaw Weaver, and others.

The feminist modernist intimate public gained the most potency when feminism became institutionalized as a subfield of literary studies, during the 1970s. As women pursued PhDs in larger numbers and became English professors, they turned to earlier generations of unconventional women as sources of inspiration and identification, especially from the Victorian and modernist periods. This first generation of academic feminist critics was explicit about the distinction between imagined publics of women; it is no coincidence that Ellen Moers' 1976 book, one of the earliest in the field, is entitled *Literary Women*. Of these women she writes, "It was not that their lives were without the difficulties that plague other women—hardly; but they made those difficulties into resources with a wave of the magic wand of their—what shall we call it: Charm? Power? Egotism? Confidence? Pride? Genius? Or just plain luck?" (4). Moers imagines literary women as enterprising, resourceful, and talented, exemplary minds free from

the quotidian problems experienced by “other women.” Though a great deal of this era’s criticism featured nineteenth century writers like the Brontës, George Eliot, and Jane Austen, critics identified the modernist era as simultaneous with the advent of feminist professionalization and criticism. In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar called *A Room of One’s Own* “the Great Mother of all feminist critical texts” (xxviii). Some scholars viewed these figures as sources of feminist pedagogy and inspiration; Patricia Meyer Spacks writes of her own teaching, “If [my female students] can discover their kinship with women who have boldly asserted themselves as writers, they may be helped toward self-realization” (4). While feminist critics no longer admit such a degree of identification so explicitly, my study demonstrates the continued development of feminist modernity’s intimate public across time.¹⁵

In the 1980s, feminist modernist studies proper arose from this scholarly heritage. In its early years, the field emphasized rejection of the strict highbrow modernist canon, dominated by Joyce, Pound, Beckett, and Eliot. Shari Benstock argued that “the ‘reality’ of these years exists today as a set of *idées reçues* constructed largely by men” (29). Correcting that androcentrism involved renewed interest in British and American women writers who adhered to modernism’s aesthetic experimentation, including foundational 1980s books on HD and Virginia Woolf by Susan Stanford Friedman and Jane Marcus, respectively. When modernism was formally institutionalized in the late 1990s with the founding of the Modernist Studies Association and the *Modernism/modernity* journal, feminist modernisms diversified. Increasingly, the field became focused on feminist recovery. The field also expanded transnationally, inviting (and sometimes resenting) the influence of postcolonial studies in modernism.¹⁶

¹⁵ Modernism’s mythic status has lingered as a point of reference in contemporary nonfiction and criticism; see, for instance, Kate Zambreno’s work of critical autofiction *Heroines* (2012), with its personalized survey of “modernist wives” and Alison Bechdel’s meditation on *To the Lighthouse* in her graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?* (2012).

¹⁶ See Doyle and Winkiel, *Geomodernisms*.

Throughout its development, the field has struggled to resolve disagreements about periodization, with critics like Jane Garrity, Phyllis Lassner, and Kristen Bluemel arguing that feminist modernism should designate all early century women's writing, regardless of political or aesthetic affiliation. Others, like Stanford Friedman and Rebecca Walkowitz, have emphasized the temporal and geographical expanse of women writing in modernist modes. While I follow David James and Urmila Seshagiri's dual investment in delimiting modernism while cataloguing its traveling influence, I want to acknowledge this debate as an ongoing anxiety about institutional legitimacy. Feminist modernist studies has long held a frustration that the less avant-garde components of its scholarship may be misread. In the introduction to the first issue of the *Feminist Modernist Studies* journal in 2017, editor Cassandra Laity remarks that "many feminist critics *wary of being labeled old fashioned* have felt pressured to authenticate their scholarship on women, gender, or feminist issues by establishing upfront its primary intent to illuminate other political, global, cultural, and interdisciplinary agendas" (1, emphasis added). This dissertation, of course, gives an interested history of that wariness.

Feminists in the present day often decry old-fashionedness as a way to separate themselves from ideologies that trouble them: from "identity politics" to trans exclusive radical feminism, whose practitioners are now known derogatively as "TERFs." However, calling these troubling feminist attitudes "old-fashioned" posits a linear and progressive account of modern feminism, one which grows more inclusive, intersectional, anti-capitalist, and radical with each passing decade. Jennifer Nash has argued against this progressive account, demonstrating how clarion calls for "intersectionality," and the labor of the Black women who have theorized it, have been sucked dry as remedies for what ails Women's Studies. And as both Nash and Clare Hemmings point out, the "progress" and assumed success of feminism and intersectionality has

been used by university administrators to deemphasize the importance of women's studies and Black feminist intellectual labor going forward. As we may easily conclude, feminism has not succeeded or ended; it is very possible that we are still in our old-fashioned days. In response, my dissertation argues against a modernizing account of feminist progress; liberal white feminism is as powerful as ever, especially considering its appropriation by corporate brands as a cheery catchphrase. And as trans rights and feminism have progressed, they have been greeted by a new firestorm of TERF rhetorics, especially in the UK, where anti-trans feminists have nearly conquered the press. In consequence, while I acknowledge and laud the real growth of mainstream feminism as attentive to issues of race, class, and disability, I do not associate those developments with sleek modernizing progress. Black feminists have long acknowledged the centrality of old-fashioned labors as central to radical politics. For instance, the influential *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, founded in 1980 by Barbara Smith in conversation with Audre Lorde, takes an image of Black domesticity and conversation as its title. As Sara Ahmed writes of this legacy: "We assemble ourselves around our own tables, kitchen tables, doing the work of community as ordinary conversation" (581). Gloria Anzaldúa, a founding figure for Chicana feminism who published with *Kitchen Table*, wrote to third world women, "Forget the room of one's own—write in the kitchen" (251). These feminists of color conceived of their intellectual and political work as integrated with the rest of a household. To champion prosaic and historical feminism is not synonymous with the retrograde or hegemonic. Ultimately, I argue that the old-fashioned rigamarole of feminist scholarship is in no way incompatible with the other "agendas" to which Laity alludes. In fact, I am most interested in primary and secondary texts of modernism that imagine old-fashionedness—or, more precisely, the unspectacular

feminized work of care, attention, and repetition—as absolutely central to radical political movements in literary studies.¹⁷

To that end, I am also indebted to a more particular node of modernist studies which theorizes the unspectacular, often called everyday life studies or theories of the ordinary. Originally theorized by male continental philosophers Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Georg Lukács, and others as a crushing component of modernity, the concept has been adopted by feminist critics. Rita Felski acknowledges the historical habit of perceiving women as the victims of the everyday, writing, “Women, like everyday life, have often been defined by negation. Their realm has not been that of war, art, philosophy, scientific endeavor, high office. What else is left to a woman but everyday life, the realm of the insignificant, invisible yet indispensable?” (80). Simone de Beauvoir bemoaned the same problem, writing that womankind “is doomed to repetition” (82). In gendered frameworks and more generally, scholars often oppose modernity to everyday life and thus to the home; modernity occurs outside, in the rush of the city, street, marketplace, and colony. As Felski summarizes, “Modern feminism, from Betty Friedan onward, has repeatedly had recourse to a rhetoric of leaving home. Home is a prison, a trap, a straitjacket” (86). Women, implicitly, comprise the incarcerated, trapped, or straitjacketed.¹⁸

However, as modernist critics have pointed out, a great deal of modernist literature imagines ordinariness differently, troubling the barrier between the repeated domestic slog inside the home and the excitement of the outside world. Liesl Olsen writes that “literary modernism

¹⁷ The intimacy between feminized carework and radical politics has been espoused more explicitly by Black feminist thinkers than by feminist modernists, for reasons that form the core of my argument: namely, modernists’ anxiety about being legible as avant-garde and progressive, categories that can implicitly reinforce whiteness. I engage with Black feminist critics like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Alice Walker throughout the dissertation as a central influence for my thinking.

¹⁸ As influenced by activist theorists like Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Angela Davis, we might note that this generalized characterization of women tends to elide the particular experience of women who *have* been incarcerated or institutionalized, often for reasons of race, class, and disability. See Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* and Gilmore, *Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition*.

takes ordinary experience as its central subject” (3), even when it does so through disruptive and avant-garde stylings. For instance, modernism’s perhaps two best-known texts, *Mrs Dalloway* and *Ulysses*, both use a new-fangled stream of consciousness style to sketch characters who move in and out of the home over the course of a more-or-less ordinary day.¹⁹ Olsen describes *Mrs. Dalloway* as rooted “in Woolf’s desire to render the ordinary as an affective experience” (7). As Bryony Randall argues, the development of professions and education for women during the early twentieth century, as well as their increased access to literary publication, provoked new questions about women might encounter in their daily life. For the first time on a large scale, “everyday life” was not synonymous with domestic drudgery for all women (only most of them). As a result, despite its reputation for rapid and destabilizing change, the modernist era becomes a very apt moment in which to theorize everyday life. It is this paradox that proves most generative for modernist studies in general and for my project in particular. Modernist texts, especially those authored by women like Woolf, Stein, and their far less canonical cohort, obsessively track the interplay of ordinary experience with sudden, disruptive change. When Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway thinks, “In the middle of my party, here’s death” (186), she grapples with her ongoing work of social maintenance at the same time as a fragmented awareness of life’s fragility, namely, the fragility of Septimus Warren Smith’s war-induced shell shock suicide. This is the core of the feminist modernist project: a carefully balanced historical attention to the ongoing continuities of everyday life, namely the expected and unrewarded duties of feminized labor, and to the forces of modernization, war, colonization, and technology that interrupted those days.

¹⁹ Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935), which has been increasingly read in modernism’s transnational turn, gives a more realist and prosaic version of the single day modernist novel made famous by Woolf and Joyce.

Good Old-Fashioned Feminist Methods

I have described the intensity with which feminist modernist critics respond to these scholarly questions, with affects ranging from frustration and reluctance to identification and joy. My review of the field should reinforce the degree to which feminist modernist studies is indeed an intimate public, in Berlant's parlance. This formulation also structures my methodological interventions. Rather than framing modernism as an isolated period, I include its reception into my archive as primary texts, from metamodernist novels like *The Book of Salt* to second wave and later modernist criticism. Feminism's intimate investments make it necessary to muddy the distinction between primary/literary and secondary/critical texts. Thus I take feminist modernist criticism from Woolf onward as its own literary archive, a rich body of revealing writing on the nature of modernity for women. Inversely, I presume literary writing, especially Woolf herself, to be capable of theorizing larger historical movements than the constraints of plot and character themselves. I commit myself to literary history as a central methodological investment.

Throughout, I employ the central method of close reading: detailed attention to indicative passages of text. Elizabeth Freeman argues that this method has a distinct queer/feminist potential: "Reading closely means fixating on that which resists any easy translation into present-tense terms, any 'progressive' program for the turning of art into a cultural/historical magic bullet or toxin. To close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying" (xvi-xvii). In Freeman's gloss, to read closely and slowly is to immerse oneself in the historical tenor of a text, rather than rushing to instrumentalize language for a prepackaged political agenda. It emphasizes care and fidelity to the archive: feminized scholarly tasks. In that aim, close reading is willing to risk becoming old-fashioned: dallying in the past, rather than transforming the text into an anachronistic "magic bullet." Freeman's definition appears even more potent in 2022, when

universities increasingly devalue the so-called “soft skills” of the humanities, close reading included, and literary studies has exerted itself to develop more legible and quantitative methods like the sociological turn and the digital humanities. While these methodological developments are demonstrably useful, I value close reading’s unfashionable edge for the solidarity it represents with the conventional women who are my subjects.

Another node of my methodology concerns employing feminist and queer materials in concert. Many of the contemporary critics who have influenced my argument make their home in the world of queer studies, including Berlant and Freeman. Others, like Sara Ahmed, are staunchly feminist. Of course, the fields are impossible to separate, and belong to the same genealogy of scholarly thought; the distinction is vulnerable to deconstruction, as performed by Judith Butler in their essay “Against Proper Objects.” Most intriguingly, however, an implicit modernizing hierarchy has often characterized the development of queer theory from the 1990s to the present. The elite status of that field has sometimes pretended, as Butler summarizes, that “lesbian and gay studies improves upon the terms of feminism” (4). Lesbian and gay studies, shortly thereafter rebranded as queer theory and then queer studies, came to represent the expansive, poststructural, anti-normative, rock-and-roll updating of feminism. Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson argue that antinormativity is queer theory’s “most respected critical attachment,” an investment that has made great political strides but often neglected the experiences of those enfolded into “normativity,” from domestic workers to parents, by chance or marginalization.

More recently, critiques of queer theory's elitist bravado have abounded.²⁰ In his 2020 book *Poor Queer Studies*, Matt Brim points to his classroom at the underfunded College of Staten Island, part of the CUNY system, where a screening of the 2016 film *Moonlight* is interrupted by broken projectors, working students sourcing dinner from the vending machines, and one student "so pregnant she must periodically excuse herself to walk off her discomfort" (1). This scene, Brim claims, is the true site of queer studies, which operates far from the elite institutions that have produced the field's canonical texts and yet understands the values of queer antinormativity and anti-institutionalization far better. I am particularly invested in Brim's anecdote of his pregnant student, working through pain as she learns queer theory, as a model of feminist and queer thought's potential integration. If queer studies is to be updated from its millennium-era heyday, where major scholars proclaimed "Fuck the social order and the Child" (Edelman 29), it will require Brim's attention to his working class students, especially women, already embroiled in the social order and parenthood by both structural conditions and circumstance. It is no coincidence that the scene of poor queer studies as represented by Brim is a pedagogical one; pedagogy is often the feminized, nonvalorized, and "practical" component of intellectual life, a component increasingly performed in American universities by contingent labor. This population, compared to tenured faculty, is disproportionately women and people of color; according to a 2016 study by the TIAA institute, women hold 49 percent of faculty positions but only 38 percent of tenure-track appointments. Brim's pregnant student is doubly barred from the cutting edge of queer theory by her roles as student and parent. As Juana Maria Rodriguez has demonstrated, queer parenthood, the unloved and apparently assimilationist

²⁰ See Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*, Michael Snediker, *Queer Optimism*, Miriam Frank: *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America*, and Colin R. Johnson, *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*.

perimeter activity of queer life, is practiced by far more African American and Latinx people than white ones. Making space for so-called conventional and normative activities like parenting (and adjuncting) within queer activism has anti-racist implications. I am indebted to these critics for my conviction that an anti-racist feminism (and indeed, queer activism) sometimes risks its status as avant-garde, cutting edge, radical—this is to say, modern—in order to describe and advocate for women’s lives. It is possible, I wager, to take this risk without damaging one’s commitments to anti-capitalism, anti-racism, and anti-neoliberalism. As a result, though I draw gratefully on a wide array of queer theoretical texts, I make my primary scholarly attachment to feminism. In so doing, this dissertation places itself in continuity with a long heritage of women’s academic and non-academic work, much of it in some way groundbreaking, radical, quotidian, emotional, traditional, paradigm-shifting, and more.

Conventionality, Performance, and Class

Some of the feminists who belong to that heritage would deeply begrudge a characterization of both radical and quotidian; as I have argued, they derived a transhistorical sense of community through that grudge. To theorize feminist modernity across the twentieth century as a group identity does not invalidate its accomplishments or deride the power of affective connection. However, knowing this community well requires feminists—of all literary and theoretical affiliations— to take account of this group’s legibility through *contradistinction*. It relies upon the hazily defined conventional women, outside the lecture hall, in order to come into view. Too often, this dependence means mischaracterizing, even maligning, women doing conventionality, especially domestic work, as a means to self-important contrast. An entire genealogy could be written of feminists dismayed that Mrs. Dalloway, the protagonist of one of

feminist modernism's foundational texts, is planning a party—from Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet to Ellen Moers herself.²¹ And while these complaints most often characterize the second wave, suspicion of party-throwing domesticity has continued into later generations of academic theorizing, especially, as I have argued, in queer theory.²² Just as often, however, feminist writers evince a more ambivalent relationship to conventionality, resisting the urge to define themselves in strict opposition. Understanding the gestures toward an integrated feminism, which conceives of modernity and tradition as complimentary and interdependent, is as historically telling as it is politically crucial, for building a feminism fully attuned to the work of conventionality and the varied subject positions that inhabit it.

While queer theoretical critiques of normativity have guided my thinking, I want to develop a distinct theory of conventionality based in feminist history, one that emphasizes less the sociological data of the truly normative and more the culturally constructed imaginary of conventionality. Moers unhappily describes Woolf's protagonists Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay as "hostesses," a term Woolf's characters use for Clarissa herself; Peter Walsh derides Clarissa Dalloway by telling her, "She would marry a Prime Minister and stand at the top of a staircase; the perfect hostess he called her (she had cried over it in her bedroom)" (75). At the time of *Mrs. Dalloway's* publication in 1925, and perhaps at the even earlier moment Woolf is referencing in Peter and Clarissa's youth, "hostess" is already legible as an insult, a figure of uncreative conservatism. The associations with the hostess—connected to wealthy society, a domestic architect—suggest it as an upper-class predecessor to the middle class and midcentury figure of the housewife. The transition from hostess to housewife as domestic icon maps onto the rise of the middle class and its foundational role in constructing conventionality. As domestic

²¹ See de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949) and Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1970) in addition to *Literary Women* (1976).

²² See Lee Edelman, *No Future*, and José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

labor for women in the west transitioned from a universal necessity, in the nineteenth century, to an elite and highly visible form in the early twentieth century, to a marker of middle-class stability by the mid-twentieth. Before this rise, unconventionality was largely available to upper class white women who could rely upon servants to perform household labor. They could also afford to exercise public eccentricity, as wealthy women like lesbian salonist Natalie Clifford Barney and shipping heiress and poet Nancy Cunard did. After World War II, economic prosperity in the United States led to a growing middle class, and concurrently, the distinct figure of the housewife. This figure, canonized in popular cultures of the 1950s and deconstructed by second wave feminists in the 1960s, became the central icon of conventionality: someone who *eschews* the workforce rather than having no possibility of entering it. Conventionality thus arrives as a non-default option for women, one of several options.

However, the housewife, especially but not exclusively in the American context, represents an ideal more than a pervasive sociological reality for women. Consider the distance, for instance, between a landmark work of feminist mythologizing and a critique that uses statistical, historical fact. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) treats the universal problem for women at midcentury as their endless domestic drudgery in the home, cementing the image of the disillusioned—but well-skirted—American housewife. bell hooks' 1984 response critiques Friedan for her failure to consider the plights of working-class women of color, and points out that during the 1950s, more than a third of women had already joined the workforce. By any account, hooks is more attuned to the lived normative conditions for American women, from housewife work to a wide variety of jobs. But Friedan's book has defined the tropes of conventionality for decades, as I explore in more detail in Chapter Two.²³ Conventionality, thus,

²³ In a special issue of *GLQ* entitled *Queer Theory Without Antinormativity*, Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson have also explored the inchoate nature of “norms” as invoked by queer theory as a seemingly real and static metric.

both contains and exceeds the truly normative, and by midcentury, is imagined as at least partly a choice.

I have described conventionality as work; that work overlaps with but is not reducible to the work of household labor itself. It also requires a host of performed emotional realities. Affective labor, a feminist concept coined in the 1980s by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, describes the emotional performance required by women—most often the pretense of happiness and cheerfulness—to do their jobs. While Hochschild focuses her attention on professionalized women like flight attendants, household work requires affective labor as well. “The happy housewife,” Sara Ahmed writes, “is a fantasy figure that erases the signs of labor under the sign of happiness” (50). This fantasy is so toxic because it requires not only the back-breaking work of caring for the home but also unflinching pleasure in that work—turning work into hobby or even calling.²⁴ The assignment of conventionality has a fundamental affective component: the work of *feeling*, with confidence, complete happiness and satisfaction with life-as-it-is.

The trouble lies in the fact that life-as-it-is continues to shift under women’s feet, especially during particularly disruptive moments in cultural history, from two world wars to the sixties counterculture and more. In consequence, doing conventionality is the work of chasing a form of femininity that promises security and respectability even as it evaporates and transmogrifies in the rapidly changing modern world. It is an essentially modern position, and thus distinct from terms like “normative” and “traditional.” Its closest synonym is “old-fashioned,” a word that also connotes a life lived out of joint with the present. Like theorists of trans studies, who catalogue the ever-unfinished work of gender performance, I envision

²⁴ The exhausting physical, mental, and emotional labor of housework led to the Wages for Housework movement begun in the 1970s by Marxist feminists Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Silvia Federici. See Federici’s *Wages against Housework* (1975).

conventionality as a devotion to a ritualized norm that is impossible to complete. Butler writes that “to the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate” (17). Because conventionality is an even more rigidly imagined subcategory of gender, and is affiliated with “the traditional,” its expectations are rooted in the recent past, repeated and mutated through the litany of everyday life itself. Felski attributes to Lefebvre the belief that “everyday life is belated; it lags behind the historical possibilities of modernity” (82). Lefebvre thus conceives of women as outside modernity, a claim several generations of feminists, including Felski herself, have refuted. Nevertheless, if everyday life requires repetitions of the past, it is immensely difficult for women to be enmeshed in the daily work of femininity and accelerating modernity at the same time. As embodied by the literature I study, conventionality cannot be completed by the women who want to secure its promises, making them vulnerable to critique from both men who demand their labor and feminists who demand their amorphously defined bravery. Conventional women are thus tasked not only with the daily work assigned to women, from laundry to hostessing, but also the affective and performative labor of conventionality itself, trying to grasp at a particular iteration of it as it disappears.

Misreadings of Butler tend to attribute a great deal of agency to the gender-performing subject, imagining gender as a costume donned willingly each day. On the contrary, as Butler and their successors have argued, the conditions of performativity have already been inscribed for us, through the discursive laws of language itself. Kendall Gerdes writes that these laws have “the power not only to make bodies legible as having gendered characteristics but also to make gender itself take place through bodies. Gender is performative because it inscribes itself as a discourse each time it inscribes itself on a body, as a lived experience” (149). According to the

performativity theories Gerdes synthesizes, through the daily repetitions of lived experience, gender comes into view as a tangible discursive category.²⁵ Trans theorists have extended (and sometimes resisted) the performative theory of gender by arguing that the process of gender transition, from dressing as one's desired gender to facial feminization surgery, constitutes the material outcome of a performativity heuristic. These interventions on the body make real Butler's famously impenetrable theory. One trans entrepreneur, writes Eric Plemons, maintained a website including links to femininity coaches and a business making "custom corsets for atypical feminine bodies" (90). Of course, second wave feminists have critiqued the artificial and binding constraints of the corset for cisgender women for many decades. Every feminine body is atypically suited for the shape of the corset. And while trans women suffer from a far more publicly visible form of atypicality, the increased flow of trans scholarship can also articulate the impossibility of natural, ideal womanhood for people across the cis-trans spectrum. Conventionality, an even narrower, more ossified category than womanhood generally, requires constant performative actions upon the body, the household, and the self. It evokes repetition on several scales: lacing up the corset (or chic high-rise jeans) each day; evincing proper feminine politeness several times a day; setting the table as one's mother did; taking on the responsibilities that have occupied women for generations.

These repetitions of expectation do not feel volitional; they appear as the work required for nothing less than continuing the world as it is. Because women are so often attributed with

²⁵ Some trans writers, activists, and scholars have critiqued the centrality of Butler's now-ubiquitous performativity theory. In one critique, Dennis Schep paraphrases a trans poet who has proclaimed "Fuck you, Judith Butler" in a slam poem: "some need fixity, the poet explained, and the name Judith Butler had come to represent a body of work that generally supports a notion of non-fixity" (867). The appeal to gender coherence that the poet makes on behalf of trans people—"some need fixity"—reads as an acknowledgement of the comforts of conventionality for those to whom it was not originally afforded. Trans exclusive radical feminists have often criticized trans women who celebrate femininity for reinforcing the gender binary. However, for trans women, the chosen fixity of lipstick and dresses may represent a new life-affirming identity that both confirms and complicates gender types, just as other forms of performing conventionality may do. I explore this dynamic in more detail in the coda to the dissertation.

the responsibility of not only material sustenance but emotional comfort, the conventions of femininity are world-making. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Peter Walsh attributes to Clarissa Dalloway, a woman he has also derided as a “perfect hostess,” an amorphous, endless ability to sustain an emotional atmosphere; she is “purely feminine; with that extraordinary gift, that woman’s gift, of making a world of her own wherever she happened to be” (75). A central component of Clarissa’s power is her ability to anchor a party, to inspire Peter in a crowded room, to which Woolf alludes with the repeated phrase “there she was.” Thus the trait for which he has often criticized her, her penchant for elegant parties, also constructs the world of conventional feeling that he silently desires.²⁶ Conventionality, as embodied by Clarissa Dalloway, is expected and unappreciated work. It is also, by definition, unfinished and non-perfectable, since it requires women to rise to an invisible and shifting standard that, for instance, desires hostesses at the same time as it denigrates them.

If the society hostess epitomizes the modernist-era conventional woman, and the housewife her middle-class successor, the question is left of the role for working class women in conventionality. This dissertation is in conversation with, but not directly replicating, Marxist feminist debates on women doing domestic labor both in and outside the home. Critics Anca Parvulescu and Maria Mies have demonstrated that as white women in the west have increasingly joined the professional world, domestic labor has become the purview of women who are underpaid, immigrants, and/or undocumented workers. In some senses, conventionality becomes permanently inaccessible to working class women, especially those entrenched in economies crippled by global domination of the United States and other western powers. Mies

²⁶ A parallel dynamic exists in the justification for the British Empire, which often invoked the figure of the English lady as the beneficiary and inspiration for colonization. See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, and Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*.

points out that most women in the Global South will never be in the position to stay at home while a husband works; a single-income household is a luxury of colonizing nations. By that metric, a woman who works is not singularly enlightened or self-liberated, as second wave American feminists might frame her; she is simply working for sustenance. Mies writes that despite the pervasive need for women in the developing world to head their own households and earn wages, development efforts often pursue an idealized Western model of the male wage-earner and “his dependent housewife” (119). By this colonial imaginary, the sign of conventionality travels to a context where it is economically improbable. She writes, “The smaller the chance that most women in the Third World can become ‘real’ housewives [sic], the greater the ideological offensive today, propagated and spread by all media, to universalize this image as that of ‘modern, progressive’ women, of ‘good’ women” (120). In the contexts Mies examines, including rural Africa, Asia, and Latin America, development programs associate the emulation of western one-income households with modernity and progressivism, although this amounts to erasing women’s economic contributions and labor. By the logics of the neocolonial development machine, Western conventionality and modernity become entangled. The inverse is claimed by second wave feminists in the west, who often use “third world” women’s “oppression” as evidence of “global patriarchy” and thus the urgency of their own feminist project. Thus, it depends upon the direction of the gaze whether conventionality is associated with liberation or constraint. This collapse of the feminist modernity/conventionality binary is also at work for working class and immigrant women in the west, for whom the domestic sphere is often a professional space. While Clarissa Dalloway perfects her conservative and appropriate hostess role, her housemaid Lucy is at work.

The two predicaments I have described here—the impossibility of conventionality for working class and Third World women, and the crumbling fantasy for middle-class women who dream of being “conventional enough”—inevitably intersect, and usually in the kitchen. In several of the texts I read, women writers who *do* desire to present as conventional require both material and symbolic assistance from workers in the home. These workers, conceived as less literary and articulate than their mistresses, allow these writers to present as domestic heroines: not only the epitome, but the leader and architect, of the conventional feminine realm. They walk a middle line between their own literary aspirations and their clear commitment to shoring up existing narratives of feminine roles. Most often, domestic architects like Alice B. Toklas and Cornelia Sorabji rely upon the presence of racialized others—Vietnamese cooks for Toklas, and women living behind the purdah for Sorabji—in order to navigate their own mediated access to both conventionality and modernity. For women who want to retain the prestige of cultural tradition while making power for themselves, a tertiary presence, a racialized woman who can aspire to neither conventionality nor to modernity, must be present.

The Aesthetics of Conventionality

In the history I have given, conventionality has collected several key characteristics: it invokes repetition, historicity, the everyday, the feminine, and the unfinished. Based on these descriptors, it might seem straightforward to identify the aesthetic dimension of such a form. Is conventionality a literary genre? Does it have a recognizable formal style? I argue that conventionality’s formalism cannot be concretized so easily, for a few reasons. First, ordinariness and its more ossified feminine form, conventionality, emerge as components of a modernity that spans several literary eras. The cults of sentimentality in the United States and the

“Angel in the House,” a domestic figure originally named by Coventry Patmore in 1854, in England were foundational to the development of the conventional type. When modernism sharply departed from Victorian aesthetics, it retained and reshaped an interest in everyday life, embedding images of the ordinary in avant-garde texts like *Ulysses*.

However, a literary lineage that simply attends to the everyday could not be called a conventional aesthetic or conventionality genre. Berlant makes use of the term *genre*, writing that femininity is “a genre *like* an aesthetic one,” meaning “that it is a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances” (4). Berlant implicitly theorizes genre as a cultural contract activated by expectation and fulfilled by affective relief, and under this definition conventionality certainly qualifies. However, I have argued that conventionality cannot ultimately provide relief because its mandate is unfinishable; the women in the novels I study find it impossible to be *conventional enough*. Berlant argues that even failures of expectation reinforce the taxonomical power of genre: “the power of a generic performance always involves moments of potential collapse that threaten the contract that genre makes with the viewer,” they write (4). Because conventionality is a constructed and insecure category, I pose this threat of collapse as *the* central characteristic of conventionality aesthetics. Its presence is fundamentally deconstructive. Put another way, conventionality itself is not an aesthetics; it shifts with every other development of literary style. Instead, conventionality emerges formally in the anxious striving toward a conventionality that cannot be finally secured, whether by the incursions of modernity, willfulness, marginalization, or some combination.

In the nineteenth century American context, the grounds of Berlant’s theory, the result of this striving is a “jerky aesthetics” (5), with affective spikes of tears and melancholia that register the impossibility of fulfilling the feminine fantasy of love. I distinguish my work from Berlant’s

in part through the acknowledgement that the genres available to women writers splintered and proliferated by the twentieth century.²⁷As a result, modern conventionality does not constitute a coherent genre in the way that nineteenth century sentimentalism could. As my archive shows, conventional arrangements embed themselves in texts with many kinds of explicit and governing generic attachments: cookbooks, pamphlets, modernist novels, realist comic novels, short stories, literary criticism. Conventionality can lodge itself in all these genres as what Caroline Levine calls a social form; a “designed arrangement, deliberately crafted to impose order” (xi). This social form occurs across many different manifestations of literary form, as aesthetic and social arrangements intersect and overlap.

In the texts I read, the social form most often imposes itself on literary style with an affective clash, a disjunction in what Sianne Ngai would deem “tone.” Tone, she writes, “is reducible neither to the emotional response a text solicits from its reader nor to representations of feelings within the world of its story” (41). This ambiguity has made a historically difficult element to identify for critics. Ultimately, according to Ngai, tone “is a global and hyper-relational concept of feeling that encompasses attitude: a literary text’s affective bearing, orientation, or “set toward” its audience and world” (43). Developing a more precise methodology for describing this phenomenon is crucial for critiques of ideology, Ngai argues, and feminist critiques not least among them. Ahmed is perhaps the most prolific theorist of feminist and anti-feminist emotions, which become tones as they embed themselves in literary style. She writes, “When I think of my relationship to feminism, for example, I can rewrite my coming into being as a feminist subject in terms of different emotions, or in terms of how my

²⁷ Rachael Scarborough King has recently argued for a critical distinction between genre and form, writing that while genre signifies a wide-ranging cluster of characteristics, “form, meanwhile, designates a specialized, conventional arrangement that organizes a text” (262). Form, the “conventional” younger sister of the more expansive and variable genre, works well to describe the emergence of conventional tone in women’s writing.

emotions have involved particular readings of the worlds I have inhabited... Such emotional journeys are bound up with politicization, in a way that reanimates the relation between the subject and a collective” (171). Ahmed catalogues a series of feminist emotions that trouble the barrier between personal and general feeling. A feminist feeling, like a genre, is an assumed collective bargain that threatens to collapse. Conventional feeling works in much the same way. A threat to the collectivity of gendered tone appears as a breakage in form; feelings emerge from within the subject, who is neither entirely agential or trapped, to disrupt syntax, authorly voice, and other formal characteristics.

The paradigmatic example of conventional tone is one of feminist modernism’s most treasured catchphrases, the opening line of *Mrs. Dalloway*: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (3). While at first glance the sentence appears as an expression of feminist independence, Woolf crowds the sentence and its context with contradiction. First, she calls her protagonist by her married name, denoting the title of the novel, rather than Clarissa, as she often does in subsequent pages. She implies that Clarissa is acting in her married capacity as Mrs. Dalloway, a mantle that she wears uneasily over the course of the day. Second, the central verb in the sentence comprises not the errand itself but a discussion about it; it describes a conversation with servants. The sentences that follow make clear that Clarissa has been negotiating the day’s work of party preparation with her household staff. “For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming” (3). In this context, it becomes clear that Clarissa’s articulation of independence comes in a gracious offer to lighten her household staff’s load. These negotiations, carried out in the kitchen, often characterize the distribution of conventional labors. Much like Alice B. Toklas and Cornelia Sorabji, Clarissa is the architect of the domestic sphere, delegating its work to domestic

laborers and keeping some for herself as a sign of her femininity. However, this complex power dynamic remains implicit. The stream of consciousness style of Woolf's novel cleaves to Clarissa's perception of the morning, and the resulting sentence, "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself," thus articulates the conventional tone of a household chore. The sentence is a contract made both with servants and with her culture, which permits her to be independent only insofar as she is a domestic authority, carrying out a society party. Conventionality embeds itself in literary style as the fraught syntactical weight of a loaded promise. Because no woman can be conventional *enough*, or complete the hyper-gendered assignment, literature that represents and theorizes conventionality is often riddled with syntactical tension and disconnection. Woolf's inaugurating sentence, of course, depicts not the act of the purchase itself but the dallying conversation beforehand, an anxious and performative offer on Clarissa's part. The omission of this scene of domestic negotiation, represented in the text only as "Mrs. Dalloway said," epitomizes the disjunctures of conventionality aesthetics.

Chapters

Each chapter of *Not Like Other Girls* seeks out these disjunctures by chronicling a particular figure of conventionality through readings of two primary texts, from the modernist imaginary and beyond. Each chapter moves across space through its texts, with travel from Paris to colonial Saigon and back; from Kolkata to London; from London to a Massachusetts college town. They also move through time, tracing conventionality's evolution from a modernist-era text to one that responds to and updates those themes. The first chapter, a metacritical genealogy on the paths of feminist recovery scholarship, sets the stage for the next three, which trace an arc for women as they navigate their relationships to home, community, body, and professionalism.

The second chapter features the housewife trapped inside the house; the third takes on her conscription to the kitchen, even in a far more bohemian scene. The fourth considers the aftermath of kitchen success, from cooking to eating: the role of the fat woman in conventionality and feminism. These chapters take an irreverent approach to literary periodization and national boundaries, but each frames its conventional women as profoundly shaped by historical circumstances, namely with regard to race, war, migration, colonization, and the even more chaotic forces of identification and desire.

Chapter One, “Modernism’s Stranded Ghosts: Feminist Recovery and the Conventions of the Female Tradition,” frames feminist scholarship as its own set of primary texts, one that has profoundly shaped our literary historical understand of conventionality. I give a genealogy of feminist recovery, the method that undergirded the emergence of all feminist literary criticism in the 1970s and ‘80s. As prefigured by Woolf, whose satirical description of recovery gives the chapter its name, recovery critics pose themselves as the valiant and radical advocates of their comrades in history, quite especially modernist-era comrades. They thus imagine an intimate sisterhood of authors and critics—unconventional women, all—who are bound together by their distinction from ordinary life. The chapter follows the development of this intimate public and its centrality to the recovery method, even into the present. In the subsequent years of feminist scholarship, this foundational method was sometimes denigrated as naïve and unintellectual—no longer the modern innovation it had once been thought. This turn sets the stage for an ongoing problem for women: their unwilling conscription into conventionality as standards of modernity change. I then turn to alternative modes of recovery posed by Black feminists of two generations: Alice Walker and Saidiya Hartman, who imagine communion with the past as a more prosaic task, limited not only by the suppression of women writers but also by the Atlantic slave trade

and its lingering effects in American life. Both Walker and Saidiya Hartman identify modernist-era Black women writers as history's unreachable voices. Ultimately, the chapter argues that a more integrated and sustainable form of recovery would learn not to fear accusations of being "old-fashioned," and treat the recovery of forgotten writers as meaningful feminine and prosaic work in line with the other forms of care labor academia requires.

Chapter two, "Free Women Visit the Zenana: Cornelia Sorabji and The Colonial Heritage of the Trapped Housewife," places colonialism at the center of feminist modernist history. In this chapter, I explore the tradition of the feminist intermediary, a (usually white) woman who can enter cloistered and racialized female spaces like the harem and zenana and share her experiences with a broad western audience. This role, with a history that goes back to eighteenth century travel narratives, finds its zenith and exception in the writing of Cornelia Sorabji, a late Victorian writer, who was the first woman to attend Bombay University and to practice law in India. Sorabji, an Anglophile and proponent of empire, positioned herself as the exemplary Indian woman who could enter private Hindu women's spaces and advocate for them as barrister and writer. The chapter thus chronicles the necessity of these other women to prop up Sorabji's own exceptional status. This dynamic was adopted by second wave radical feminists who used anecdotes of "uncivilized" misogyny in nonwestern cultures to demonstrate the ravages of patriarchy. The chapter concludes with a reading of Doris Lessing's novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962), which anticipates second wave rhetorics of conventionality and their relationship to colonialism while chronicling the exhausting work of being "modern." Through this varied archive, this chapter argues for the centrality of the imagined colonized and oppressed woman as a driver of "modern" identity for western women.

The third chapter, “The Lesbian’s Wife: Alice B. Toklas and the Extralegal History of Gay Marriage,” follows the “wife” moniker in a new direction, to the domestic goddess in the kitchen. I study the iconic partnership of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas through Toklas’s eponymous cookbook (1954). I argue that this partnership, despite operating within the environment of bohemian modernist Paris, constituted a marriage that borrows from the gendered roles of heterosexuality. The domestic labor Toklas must perform makes it clear that it is possible to be a lesbian’s wife, where wife comes to signify a set of conventional responsibilities that make a household function and prop up the importance of the “husband.” This chapter further pursues the ramifications of this dynamic through a reading of Monique Truong’s metamodernist novel *The Book of Salt* (2004), which observes the Stein/Toklas household through the perspective of their Vietnamese cook. This book eloquently itemizes both the collaboration and hierarchy between Toklas and protagonist Binh in their domestic duties. In response, my chapter theorizes the wife as a figure who both benefits and suffers from the structure of that role, one defined by whiteness and middle-class status.

Chapter Four, “Fitting Through the Glass Window: Fatness and Professionalism in Muriel Spark and Zadie Smith,” finds the spiritual successor to Toklas’s rich French recipes in a catalogue of fat women’s relationship to conventionality. I read Muriel Spark’s *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), in which girls living together in London during World War II obsessively measure their weight as a marker of marriageability. Another character, who is “miserable about her fatness,” comforts herself by framing it a vector of her professional worthiness; she needs extra dessert as fuel because she does “brain work.” Spark’s novel complicates traditional associates of fat womanhood with dowdiness and matronliness, beginning to associate fatness with the resolute feminist who is unconcerned with beauty. The chapter thus explores the

contradictory associations of fatness with both tradition and modernity. I identify a source of resistance to this double bind through contributions from Black feminist theorists Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Kyla Wazana Tompkins, and Sabrina Strings. As manifest in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005), Black feminism conceives fatness as a form of embodied knowledge, a way to "go with the gut" that provides Black women forms of insights, pleasure, and community solidarity. Going with the gut means foreclosing any anxiety about being perceived as old-fashioned or conventional; it understands all work as brain-work (and body work) and thus any delicious dessert as worth eating.

The project's coda, "Feminism and the Mom Crush: Transgender Desire and Allegiance in *Detransition, Baby*," considers the gender dynamics of conventionality beyond modernism, in contemporary discourses on transgender feminism. In Torrey Peters' prizewinning 2020 novel *Detransition, Baby*, trans women experiment with conventional feminine embodiment and roles as the very means by which they can change their sex. Peters' willingness to court gender stereotype flies in the face of transphobic rhetorics that decry femininity as a way to decry trans people. Ultimately, understanding some trans women's alienation from the reproductive bodies they want helps us to theorize the distance all women may feel from the standards of conventionality, especially its most iconic role: that of mother. I argue that feminist literary history is predicated on a melancholic, even specifically transgender relationship to motherhood, a maternal lineage whose conventional strictures feminists both desire and resent. In effect, transgender motherhood exemplifies the radical possibilities of a feminist literary studies that thinks alongside rather than against conventionality.

Chapter One

Modernism's Stranded Ghosts

Feminist Recovery and the Conventions of the Female Tradition

In her essay "Lives of the Obscure," Virginia Woolf writes that readers sometimes turn to literary history with heroic impulses: "One likes romantically to feel oneself a deliverer advancing with lights across the waste of years to the rescue of some stranded ghost...waiting, appealing, forgotten, in the growing gloom" (106). Woolf describes the act of reading as a rescue mission: a rugged, well-lit adventure into the past. In this metaphor, Woolf lampoons the supposed inertia of historical personages and texts, awaiting rescue from the intrepid explorer of historical obscurity. "One," she says, implicating herself as well as her reader, likes to image that history *needs us*. The process of reaching back is powerfully charged with gratitude, power, and liberation. However, she points out, the texts we attempt to "deliver" are not always as grateful as they ought to be. "Whatever Mrs Gilbert may be doing," she writes of a chosen ghost, "she is not thinking about us" (107). Woolf describes with wry humor the one-sided attachment of historical research. As we reach back to our forebears, looking for connection or vindication, they so rarely reach back. Ultimately, Woolf's implicit question goes unanswered: how will we undertake historical scholarship without gratitude? If we cannot truly make contact, are we only ever looking for ourselves?

My study of feminist literary history and its conventional foils begins not with the spark of a genius's inspiration, but with its reception in the carpeted halls of American universities, a professional scene often on the hunt for gratitude. Feminist modernist studies is available to us as a historicized period because of the work of recovery critics beginning in the 1970s. I read the

critical tradition of feminist recovery as its own archive: a set of primary texts that articulate the values of modern womanhood in the context of the academy and the English discipline. Because all literary periods and movements are composed retrospectively, recovery scholarship is no afterthought, but rather the ground zero for constructing feminist modernist literature. The guiding principles for this period of construction reveal the value placed on modern and unfettered genius.

In this chapter, I read recovery scholarship, or the process of returning to memory forgotten “stranded ghosts” of literary history, as a formative practice for feminists seeking to make themselves modern. This method was among the first practices championed when women gained access to professorships in the 1970s, and it has continued to serve an important purpose—both historiographic and affective—for critics in the present. A proper history of the recovery method foregrounds its tropes, aesthetics, and affects as they coalesce into a distinct genre of feminist writing. A survey of its pioneers, from Woolf to the second wave to the present, demonstrates its most fundamental motivations: the desire for a transhistorical “female tradition” that spans at least two centuries. Recovery critics sometimes pose themselves as the valiant rescuers of Woolf’s “stranded ghosts,” and express the need to establish those ghosts as distinguished, artistic, and, in many cases, radical—different from ordinary women. The story of recovery becomes complicated when it was refashioned as a woman’s genre of its own, superseded and updated by more “modern” and rigorous scholarly methods, namely the arrivals of French theory and New Historicism. In 1990, Ann Ardis wrote that feminists were “trading their sensible shoes and their willingness to do the dirty work of literary historical housekeeping for the more glamorously abstract interests of French-inspired theory” (8). Here Ardis figures a desire for “abstract,” continental, elitist theory as a rejection of the domestic labor of literary

history, which is feminist academics' work by birthright. The cannibalistic system by which a mode of feminist scholarship, once the cutting edge, becomes "old-fashioned" mimics the wave-based narrative of feminist progress more broadly, a model that many feminists have deconstructed for several decades.²⁸ Ardis rejects that narrative, wanting to cling to intellectual housekeeping as feminists' responsibility and birthright. I want to entertain this provocative argument by reading recovery criticism generously, as a form of writing whose failure to make itself permanently or compellingly cutting edge is precisely what makes it valuable. Turning back to the old-fashioned in method and subject, I argue, can make us more rigorous historians as well as align us with the most marginalized voices in the literary past.

"Fate Has Not Been Kind to Mrs. Browning": The Origins of Recovery Scholarship

The conventional narrative of recovery scholarship, popularized as a major critical genre by the 1990s, is a tale of affinity: women scholars finding like-minded heroines in forgotten archives. Many women writers had written great works that institutional gatekeepers, who only valued the male classics, shut out of a restrictive canon. Take, for instance, the first sentence of Susan Stanford Friedman's 1981 book *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of HD*: "This book is about the making of a great artist, about the process of influence that led to the development of a major twentieth century writer whose works unfortunately still require considerable introduction because of their relative neglect in the annals and anthologies of literary history" (ix). This line encapsulates the central premise of the recovery genre. It argues for HD's status as a "great artist," a "major" writer whose innovations have meaningfully influenced twentieth century

²⁸ See Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* and Nancy Hewitt, ed., *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*.

letters. The sentence also makes clear Stanford Friedman's purpose in writing: a frustrated sense that HD "still" requires introduction despite her genius. Recovery thus announces itself as a corrective to the record as it stands. It makes this claim on the grounds of genius, distinction, and uniqueness. Ellen Moers makes this claim explicit by calling her collection of geniuses "literary women," writing, "It was not that their lives were without the difficulties that plague other women—hardly; but they made those difficulties into resources with a wave of the magic wand" (4). According to this model, great female artists share the predicament of other women, but manage to rise above it by dint of their genius. Holders of this view generally categorize their chosen geniuses as virtuosos, designers of the avant-garde or other innovators of the novel, usually from the Victorian and modernist periods: Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot; Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and Edith Wharton. These women are worth reading, they argue, because they fundamentally reshaped literary form as we know it, (implicitly) making them artistically and intellectually superior to other women.

As the character of that distinction becomes clearer, so does recovery critics' identification with their subjects, with what Jennifer L. Fleissner calls "an empathetic interpretive dynamic." In some cases, this identification presumes not only shared feeling or marginalization but collective political ideologies. Queer critics, Heather Love writes, "are in practice deeply committed to the notion of progress; despite our reservations, we just cannot stop dreaming of a better life for queer people" (3). This future-oriented political progressivism has a powerful impact on our relationship to the past. Looking for heroes is a fundamentally progressive mindset. We search for forebears in the hopes that we might ourselves become forebears to an improved feminist-queer movement in the future. Love seeks to deflate this liberal-progressive narrative of queer uplift by attending to texts that sever the affective link

between critical subject and historical object: texts and characters who “turn their backs on the future” (8). I want to read alongside Love’s argument; while she focuses on queer history’s melancholy, retrograde, self-identified perverts, I turn to old-fashioned women, contented housewives, lovers of empire and florid Victorian style. What do we make of women writers who did not critique power or desire radical liberation from suppression? Even more vexingly, who lived beyond the limits of what can be recovered? Nontraditional recovery critics have posed responses to these questions, not simply recently, as a corrective to the old-fashioned ways, but across the history of the genre. Three of these critics serve as my primary models: Woolf, Alice Walker, and Lisa Cohen. All three foreground the failures, impossibilities, and labors of recovery work, work that exists in continuity with other forms of feminized labor.

Virginia Woolf, perhaps the only modernist woman writer who has never needed to be rescued from obscurity, published recovery scholarship throughout her career. Her chagrin, in this case for the reputation of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, is familiar to anyone who has read an introduction to a new scholarly edition of a novel long out of print. “Fate,” she complains in a *Common Reader* essay, “has not been kind to Mrs. Browning as a writer. Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place. Elizabeth, so much more loudly applauded during her lifetime, falls farther and farther behind [Christina Rossetti]. The primers dismiss her with contumely. Her importance, they say, ‘has now become merely historical’” (202). Woolf anticipates the recovery genre with many of its primary features. She identifies Barrett Browning as a major figure in her time, a representative of the Victorian Era’s boom of published women writers. But since that heyday, readers have dismissed and forgotten her—and that in favor of a near-contemporary. The dismissal at the end of the passage elucidates the true risk of archival neglect. Not only has Barrett Browning fallen from public memory, but the

character of her dimming legacy has shifted. The primers go on to imply, Woolf writes, that Barrett Browning never properly learned “the value of words and a sense of form” (203). As an early example of recovery writing, this claim alights on two central frustrations of that genre. First, Woolf notes that the historical neglect of Barrett Browning has made her work and its study appear old-fashioned, “merely historical” instead of intellectually vital in its own right. Second, and as a result, this neglect has changed the quality of her reputation. She has become an archival curiosity rather than an innovator—an *example* rather than a pacesetter. Both of these demotions will characterize the critiques made by many recovery critics, especially feminist modernists. At stake in forgetting is changing the status of a woman writer from artist, a maker of change, to artifact, a byproduct of change. Woolf’s successors would go on to make artistry and formalist innovation central features of their own recovery practices.

On Not Being Northrup Frye’s Sister: Second Wave Feminist Recovery

Forty-five years after the publication of Woolf’s second *Common Reader*, recovery scholarship continued from a new vantage point: the professorate. One of feminist literary studies’ founding mothers in the academy, Ellen Moers, wrote that her book *Literary Women* (1976) concerned itself with “major literary figures” who “happened to be women” (xi). In so doing, she distanced herself from poststructuralist and psychoanalytic debates about the nature of womanhood already underway in French feminism, and, categorically, from the problem of gendered neglect. Although Moers’ book concerns itself with women already considered great, rather than those who need our advocacy, her title is instructive in the distinctions these critics valued. What renders “literary women” different from other women? Moers deliberates the question: “It was not that their lives were without the difficulties that plague other women—

hardly; but they made those difficulties into resources with a wave of the magic wand of their— what shall we call it: charm? Power? Egotism? Confidence? Pride? Genius? Or just plain luck?”

(4). While Moers identifies the privilege of certain writers who were “lucky by birth,” she remains most interested in an ineffable quality of literariness that distinguishes certain writers and makes them legible to our historical eye. Literary women, notable for their genius or charm, stand out from the rest and make it possible for us to collect them in a holistic literary tradition.

Other foundational critics in these early years foregrounded politics instead of literary genius, imagining a desire for liberation with all great woman writers. In *The Female Imagination* (1975), Patricia Meyer Spacks aimed to extend this community by the inclusion of her own students, writing, “If [my female students] can discover their kinship with women who have boldly asserted themselves as writers, they may be helped toward self-realization” (4). Many of the books from this era foreground the lessons learned from teaching new classes on women’s texts to largely women students. As a result, much literary historical inquiry on women writers worked as a kind of consciousness raising group, with texts traveling through time as anecdotal evidence to be shared with the collective. This format served inspirational for Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who wrote in an updated introduction to *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), “We decided, therefore, that the striking coherence we noticed in literature by women could be explained by a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society” (xii). Gilbert, Gubar, and their contemporaries would later face vehement critique on the narrowness and essentialism of their claims about women. But the polemical gesture to a “common, female impulse,” shared ambivalently by others like Spacks, Carolyn Heilbrun, and Elaine Showalter, allowed Gilbert and Gubar to make foundational critical maneuvers. Arguing for a female tradition rebuked

androcentric canons and illustrated histories of patriarchy and misogyny. But it also served as a primary justification for recovery itself. If women writers fell into a rich, cohesive history, highlighted by the major figures we already know, then *other writers worth reading* must lurk in that tradition as well. To resurrect the lesser-known writers of that tradition would be to reinforce the cohesion of the “female impulse to struggle free.” A claim to the female tradition, then, lays the groundwork for a recovery confirmation bias, wherein forgotten women writers are invited to be read in order to recapitulate and flesh out what we already know.

For Elaine Showalter, a recovery critic who championed greater breadth rather than the singular genius model, the “female tradition” represents an opportunity to venerate women writers with admirable politics rather than aesthetic perfection. She writes, “In the atlas of the English novel, women’s territory is usually depicted as desert bounded by mountains on four sides: the Austen peaks, the Brontë cliffs, the Eliot range, and the Woolf hills. This book is an attempt to fill in the terrain between these literary landmarks” (ix). For Showalter, a historical feminist criticism constitutes the work of completing the map, or connecting the dots, between the already-acknowledged great writers (all of them white, British, and, with the exception of Woolf, Victorians). Setting the stage for subsequent generations of feminist modernists, Showalter hypothesizes that feminist canonization has hinged on style rather than politics, and that the explicitly political feminist writers of the 1890s, for instance, “have not fared well with posterity” (194) because they “were engaged in the kind of quarrel that...leads to rhetoric but not poetry” (193). In this instance, recovery of these figures serves not to reinforce the accomplishments of Eliot and the Brontës, as Gilbert and Gubar would claim, but rather to subtly criticize those writers—Woolf especially—for a legacy built on style.

Showalter embeds in her historicist method an investment in feminist writing on its own terms, regardless of formal innovation. Woolf's writing may have been avant-garde in its style, and dominant in its legacy, but her individualist and androgynous bents make her an unappealing candidate for cornerstone of the female tradition. In her influential book, Showalter alights upon a central binary of feminist recovery scholarship up into the 2010s, especially in modernist studies. There are, she implies, two kinds of radical woman writer: the avant-garde stylist, and the political activist. This binary and its attendant contradictions will emerge more fully and with more affective charge in the context of the new modernist studies. However, Showalter identifies it here through her criticism of Woolf and advocacy for so-called "feminist novelists" like South African writer Olive Schreiner. For Showalter, too, this promotion is a matter of identification with the work of "rhetoric but not poetry." She admits in the early pages of *A Literature of Their Own*, echoing one of Woolf's trademark constructions, that she could not be "Northrup Frye's sister," an ideal feminist critic and a Judith Shakespeare for the academic context. Like politically minded and forgotten writers, early feminist critics were committed to the unglamorous work of historical inquiry, filling in archival gaps and reconstructing traditions, not revolutionizing the academy or literature itself. They avoid, too, the apolitical associations of Frye's New Criticism. Though we may question this characterization now, the old-fashioned designation was felt keenly both by recoverers themselves and their critics. Woolf's romantic notion of valiantly illuminating "stranded ghosts" had faded by the late 1970s and early 1980s, and in some sectors that romance was thoroughly redistributed to the realm of theory. A wave of American feminist theorists, often directly inspired by the French feminists, displaced the cultural historians during the 1980s.

These theorists used their methodological credentials to fine-tune arguments about the nature of womanhood, sexuality, and feminism, but they also leveled these credentials against their more historicist predecessors. In *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), for instance, Toril Moi comes to Woolf's defense by pointing to Showalter's lack of theoretical equipment and an alleged commitment to "traditional bourgeois humanism of a liberal-individualist kind" (6). She goes on to address the other major figures of Showalter's era, noting both their influence and their fading appeal. *Literary Women*, she argues, is "at times given to sentimental hyperbole" (54) and *Madwoman in the Attic* is "reductionist" in its favoring of depth-based paranoid readings (58). Despite Moi's critique of Showalter, her book corroborates Showalter's remark, drawn from Woolf, that every generation of women writers must kill their own Angel in the House, "that phantom of female perfection who stands in the way of freedom" (*A Literature of Their Own* 265). Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot's Angel was Jane Austen, Showalter writes. Her own, implicitly, is Woolf. Moi's systematic critiques of Moers, Showalter, Gilbert, and Gubar—for their failure to master the theoretical equipment that she articulates—demonstrates that she too has an Angel to kill, though she might disagree with the linearity of the premise. Of course, killing the angel of the house is tantamount to naming her as such in the first place: acknowledging her old-fashionedness as the reason she deserves to be cast off. Thus the generation structure of feminist theorization depends upon the angel figure—in their fiction, their mothers, and their teachers—in order to articulate their own positioning.

Of course, even outside feminism and its central metaphor of the "waves," many genres of criticism are formulated on successive movements of criticism and distancing from predecessors. Moi's indictments are not more unfair than new historicists lambasting the myopia of the New Critics. Nevertheless, these criticisms take on a peculiar gendered character, in large

part perhaps because feminist criticism always involved, transparently or not, the emotional involvement and identification of the critic. It is difficult not to associate Moi's complaint about Moers' "sentimental hyperbole" with the kind of sexist dismissal that has plagued women novelists, especially in the 19th century. Just as Moers is prepared to make a case for the distinctness of some "literary women," Moi and her theorist peers in the 1980s relegate feminist historicists to a category of old-fashioned, conventional, emotionally motivated women critics.

Recovery has had difficulty shaking this reputation in the intervening 35 years. Janet Todd identified these associations, ossifying into two kinds of criticism, as early as 1988. In fact, she takes the dismissal of this generation as a matter of fact, writing, "The early socio-historical criticism that is now denigrated formed the base and condition of later study, was in a way the begetter of us all, and so inevitably, *like a mother*, appears naïve in the light of changing modes" (1, emphasis added). Here Todd borrows the language of recovery's earliest architect, Woolf, who famously wrote that "we think back through our mothers if we are women." For Woolf, this language wields a historical and affective power that connects women across time. But by the time of Todd's writing, the recovery critics have become, "like a mother," matronly, out-of-date, and derided by her superior-feeling children. Todd attempts the difficult task of echoing critiques of the era's essentialism and over-identification with its subjects while simultaneously pointing to the latent misogyny that can animate those critiques. In effect, the same distinction Ellen Moers made between "literary women" and the less lucky—the geniuses we cannot discard and the other women who we inevitably do—is reproduced by feminists during the 1980s who present their theoretical acumen as the new standard of appropriate feminist alignment. These new feminists, Todd writes, "may use the distinguishing term 'intellectual'—a term hardly heard in the early 1970s—to describe themselves and *their separation from other women*" (1, emphasis

added). Theory, as Todd describes it, becomes a new avant-garde, dividing the deserving from the undeserving.

Finally, it is worth considering that the conflict between these two factions of the second wave results from underemphasizing the goals of recovery in particular. Though Moers', Showalter's, Gilbert's, and Gubar's books give accounts (and perhaps unconscious reflections) of an essentialist vision of womanhood, ontological claims are not the primary aim of those texts. These critics, and their less anthologized peers, write with the explicit aim of bringing women writers into critical conversation, and to unearth them from archival neglect. From a certain vantage point, they evince a workaday repair work to the archive, restoring its fullness in order for future critics to study it more narrowly. Once the academic chore of renaming an author, summarizing a novel not read by the audience, and beginning to engage with its text is done, subsequent readers can engage it with more theoretical paraphernalia. Recovery labor is maintenance labor, feminized and unspectacular. Seen from the perspective of 2022, where many scholars have argued for the centrality of feminized labor to academic innovation, we may view this tradition's simplicity or straightforwardness as a foundational building block, not a limitation.

The Prim Aunt in the Parlor: The Precedent of Victorian Recovery

The cadre of women cited together as the founders of feminist historical criticism shared a few specific traits. They gained purchase in elite corners of the academy in part through the support of their professor husbands. They were Americans, writing largely about British writers. Most compellingly, they focused their initial interest on the Victorian Era. The reasons recoverers chose this period are diagnostic about their own investments; so too does the

transplantation of the method into modernist studies reveal the preoccupations of that field. Though Moers, Gilbert, and Gubar made forays into other eras, and Heilbrun primarily worked on Woolf, all of these critics perceived a vibrancy and urgency in the Victorian Era that made it a natural host to the developing female tradition. Gilbert and Gubar called the nineteenth century “the first era in which female authorship was no longer in some sense anomalous” (xi). While they cite the proliferation of publication opportunity and financial security achieved by women writers in this era, Gilbert and Gubar perhaps also allude to the ideal proximity that the mid-nineteenth century poses for the late twentieth century critic. The novels of the Brontës and George Eliot are readable but remote, leave printed remnants but require our stewardship. In fact, Victorian recoverers used archival *urgency* as a primary rhetorical gesture. Carol Poster equates all other forms of scholarship with dillydallying: “While we theorize,” she writes, “unrecovered Victorian women’s writings, printed on acid paper, crumble into permanent and irretrievable oblivion.” Poster wields the fragile technology of Victorian Era printing as the unarguable motive for research. To this end, a century’s remove presents an ideal degree of separation, creating a narrow window of time for feminists to access the acid paper and pluck it from “oblivion.” She also emphasizes the caretaking work that these archives require. Feminist scholarship, like household maintenance, requires tidying, cleaning, and preserving, all done with supreme gentleness. She views this nurturing labor as infinitely more important than the cerebral, abstract posturing of theory.

The Victorian era’s vulnerability—its need for scholarly care—coincides with its reputation for conventional femininity, the zenith of domestic craft. Many Victorian recoverers set out to contradict dominant narratives about Victorian female domesticity and complacency. Because that myth exerted such influence at that time, it presented the ideal opportunity for

recovery critics like Gilbert and Gubar to upend it and find madwomen in every attic. The trouble, as many critiques of the practice have pointed out, is that Victorian women writers were *not* uniformly suppressed geniuses chafing for freedom. For instance, the popular and prolific Charlotte Yonge wrote in the service of the church and traditional family, leading Talia Schaffer to write, “No madwoman in the attic, Yonge was, if anything, the prim aunt in the parlor” (37). Schaffer contends with the uncomfortable fact that the ghosts we reach for may not confirm our politics or predecease our anti-hegemonic goals. The “prim aunt in the parlor” disrupts the feminist type with a kind of aggravating conventional aplomb.

Two Paths for the Avant-Garde: Recovery in Modernism

The foundational but shaky status of recovery in Victorian studies can serve as a point of departure and articulation for modernists. Does the modernist period have its own “prim aunt in the parlor?” Though we traditionally (and often still) use the term to mean the period between 1890 and 1945, with an emphasis on experimental aesthetics and urban modernity, the field’s critics have continually expanded and debated its borders, especially since the 1990s. Feminists have worked to debunk a prevailing field assumption, as summarized by Rita Felski, “that experimental art exemplifies the most authentically radical challenge to the authority of dominant ideological systems” (25). The recovery model offers concrete opportunities to thwart this thesis. The architects of modernist experimentalism, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, flirted with Fascism and used their avant-garde credentials as cudgels upon less elite writers. By contrast, the novelist and poet Sylvia Townsend Warner, who went out of print until feminist revivals in the 1970s and 1990s, used her realist style, sometimes with fantasy elements, to advance lesbian communist politics. The process of recovering more women writers can serve as a blunt

reminder of the narrowness of the existing modernist canon and the efficacy of nonexperimental forms. This reminder constitutes one of recovery's signature rhetorical moves: to present a case study that disrupts a widely accepted narrative about a period, form, or people group. Recovery functions by nature deconstructively, upsetting the uniformity of our historical understanding with a piece of archival show and tell. Though critics originated this method in narratives of rebellious Victorian women, modernism offers an equally ideal setting for such disruptions. As a period with historically narrow chronological borders and aesthetic characteristics, modernism has benefited since the 1990s from the kinds of expansion that recovery can fuel. That expansion means not only democratizing the voices represented or widening the number of texts we read, but also accepting the fundamental changes to modernist aesthetics and politics that those expansions require. Reading more widely in a particular historical range may damage the comprehensive power of a term like modernism entirely. Felski writes that years of feminist recovery in the early twentieth century has demonstrated that many of these women's texts "are less informed by the credo of modernist experimentalism than by alternative literary traditions such as realism or melodrama" (24). Are those texts then modernist? Critics have debated the question since Felski posed it in 1995, just before the founding of the Modernist Studies Association, with some feminists aiming to weaken modernism by expanding its definition, and others to delimit it by focusing on contemporaneous texts emphatically *not* modernist in style or approach.²⁹ Jessica Berman has argued that feminist and postcolonial scholarship incentivized modernism to expand in the first place (12). From this vantage point, recovery wields a fair degree of rhetorical power, or it aims to; illuminating an object from the archive implies that the period's self-definitions *must* attempt to enfold and categorize its texts. If, for instance,

²⁹ For a variety of interventions on the bounds of modernism, see Kristin Bluemel, *Intermodernism*, Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*, and David James and Urmila Seshagiri, "Metamodernisms."

modernism cannot describe or account for the feminist witchcraft fantasy of Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1926), then the period must either change or accept obsolescence.

The rhetoric of challenge that recovery poses to periodization can falter, however. No matter how fundamental a challenge an unread text can present to a period, a lack of widespread readership and interest can mitigate its impact. Very often the realist and middlebrow women's texts Felski describes seem to lack the complexity and density of a traditional modernist work like *Ulysses*. As a result, it is feminists who often fear and fight obsolescence. In fact, feminist critics often face the most longstanding forms of patriarchal dismissal (and internalized anxiety) when they attempt to expand a field. The first issue of *Feminist Modernist Studies* begins with the worry that studying women has become obsolete compared to other innovations. In her introduction, editor Cassandra Laity writes, "Many feminist critics wary of being labeled old fashioned have felt pressured to authenticate their scholarship on women, gender, or feminist issues by establishing upfront its primary intent to illuminate other political, global, cultural, and interdisciplinary agendas" (1). Laity describes an intellectual predicament wherein the study of women cannot stand on its own for fear of being called "old fashioned," a label she finds damning. In the new modernisms, Laity implies, the study of women must be tertiary, showcasing something other than itself. Underlying this statement is the common critique that transnational modernisms, which inundated the field during the 2000s, superseded and replaced feminist inquiry, pushing its practitioners into early obsolescence. And while Laity's piece responds to a contemporary crisis, it shares with many feminist critics the longstanding frustration that the study of women is also "women's work," and thus inevitably traditional, prosaic, and non-experimental. From this vantage point, the expansions of the new modernist studies are expansions *away* from (white, Anglophone) women writers and toward other archives

and methods that carry more institutional heft—namely, the heady expanse of cosmopolitan exploration and new avant-gardes. In what becomes a central interest of this project, Laity identifies a perhaps inherent enmity between feminist historicism and modernism. What can a field so obsessed with novelty, movement, and revolution do to protect the legacy of women—*especially* women not laudable and already recovered for radical aesthetics?

Understandably, feminist modernists and inter/modernists respond to this potential for denigration by refusing the old-fashioned in new ways. In effect, they pose the opposite of the old assumption Felski summarized, that experimental texts present the best opportunities for radical politics. On the contrary, these critics write, much like Elaine Showalter, that avant-garde style often *replaces* rather than articulates antihegemonic politics. This formula becomes potent around issues of class especially; the two undoubtedly canonized women modernists, Woolf and Gertrude Stein, invent new literary styles from the place of leisure and complacency.³⁰ Their activist contemporaries, like Townsend Warner, Olive Schreiner, Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, Naomi Mitchison, Storm Jameson, Rose Macauley, and many others, wrote arguably more realist and workaday prose that illuminated political causes like suffrage, the women question, pacifism, anti-Fascism, and socialism. In other words, they deserve recovery not because of their adherence to prevailing aesthetic standards but to the oldest cause of recovery as a practice: they mirror the political attachments of the critic. In effect, they replace the “radical” quality of avant-garde form with admirable radical politics. By choosing writers like these as most worthy of scholarly inquiry, feminists can stave off the label of old-fashioned; they pivot to a new form of radicality. From this vantage point, it becomes clearer why recoverers often seem to find in their

³⁰ Woolf’s political conscientiousness is debated by critics. As the tide has turned to venerating activist writers rather than exemplary stylists, her pacifism, anti-fascism, and feminism have been more emphasized. See Clara Jones, *Virginia Woolf: Ambivalent Activist*.

archives roughly the sort of politics they champion themselves. Finding historical precedent for their attachments might lend increased purchase and relevance in an academic environment so often indifferent to women's work.

Feminist critics in modernism have felt the urgency of avoiding obsolescence in the form of the label old-fashioned; they have converted this anxiety into an ongoing protest. The first feminist roundtable held at the Modernist Studies Association conference, in 2002, ran under the title "Is There a Future for Feminist Criticism in Modernist Studies?" Remembering this event, Pamela Caughie reflects, "The temporality of feminism seems to be consumed by frequently recurring moments of questioning its current relevance" (1). The habit has recurred in the programming of the MSA, which has also featured roundtables like "Whatever Happened to Feminist Criticism?" in 2004 and in 2018, "Do We Need a Feminist Roundtable?" These are merely a few events over several years at the same conference, but the titles suggest the degree to which feminism anticipates its own end. Knowing that cultures deem women old-fashioned and reactive so often, feminist critics expect and fight obsolescence with a kind of obsessive denial. Caughie attributes the continued power of the discourse to this cogitation, writing that "as long as we engage in these debates, feminism will be alive and more or less well" (1). Caughie's equivocation—that feminism will be "more or less well"—implies the way that we shape feminism by the way we defend it. A tradition of feminist roundtables that preemptively declare their own relevance demonstrates that the subfield has been constitutively shaped by more gendered synonyms for irrelevance: namely, old-fashionedness and conventionality. Though feminism was, in Showalter and Moi's day, the cutting edge, it has been superseded by other critical trends. And yet, Jane Garrity writes, "the labor of seemingly old-fashioned feminist recovery work is still far from done" (14). In order to get it done and make it legible, feminists

stage a perpetual state of emergency, where posing the question of relevance can extend that relevance a little longer.

Implicit and sometimes explicit in this emergency is the fear that other trends in modernism will push out feminist inquiry. Critics often levy this claim against the transnational turn, the most central of modernism's myriad "expansions," although queer studies, the digital humanities, and long temporal extensions are implicated as well. Garrity worries that an underread writer she deems worthy of recovery, Olive Moore, may not offer enough capitulations to trends, writing, "Does an Englishwoman's exile to Italy warrant attention within today's focus on transnationalism?" (20). Embedded in Garrity's question is the worry that a transnational emphasis will pull attention from the English women writers she prizes. She notes how Moore's work articulates critiques of empire and nationalism without becoming recognizably transnational in the way the field has come to venerate. But feminist writing throughout the new modernism expresses a fairly transparent anxiety that white women writers, mostly from England, will be forgotten in favor of figures from elsewhere. The ongoing emergency of recovery constitutes a central part of this fear—the sense that there are so many British women writers we have not yet read, making it destabilizing and hasty to move outward so soon. However, this resistance also demonstrates a genuine hesitation about intersectional scholarship, since a transnational turn in no way prohibits inquiry into women's lives and women's writing. It is perplexing to pose the two subfields as antagonists, especially when such excellent feminist recovery of non-Western texts exists, including Jessica Berman's work on Cornelia Sorabji, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, and G. Ishvani. Berman's study of these writers, despite her use of philosophical and theoretical frames, constitutes recovery work of the traditional kind, including putting out a scholarly edition (2017) of Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy* (1944),

which went out of print for many decades. If anything, working to recover English language texts beyond the Anglo-American context might merge these two fields and make a straightforward claim for feminism's relevance in the expanding modernisms. How might we account for ongoing reticence about this intersection?

In the simplest terms, this reluctance diagnoses an Anglocentrism that lingers in feminist modernisms. Despite the movements to transnational recovery made by Berman, Sarker, Susan Stanford Friedman, and others, many critics view feminist inquiry as a uniquely minoritized and unfashionable field. We can examine this sectarianism, however, with more than the instinct to condemn. As a literary body, discontented feminist modernism sheds some light on the way that the literary feminist community operates more widely. This group needs for its own coherence and relevance to rely upon the category of *woman*, as both the object of feminism and the archive of recovery.³¹ Sarker identifies this impulse, writing, "In worrying about the fate of 'women's literature' *per se*, we risk falling into certain essentialisms about identities of women" (10). To rescue their own work from the dust-heap of academic obsolescence, feminists had to concretize their archive as a singular body, *the study of women*. Despite expansive intentions, this consolidation had Eurocentric implications. We entertain the straightforward maneuver of extending across national borders to other women, but such a model of simplistic inclusion belies the way that the contours of womanhood shift across space and context. Berman poses the interrelated vectors of identity in the title of a 2016 essay, "Is the Trans in Transnational the Trans in Transgender?" Woolf's *Orlando* and Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy* help her answer yes, as crossing national and colonial borders resignifies gendered bodies. Understanding how

³¹ Judith Butler and others have wondered whether women, however defined, remain the primary object of feminism; shifting feminism's meaning to an approach rather than a population underlies Sarker's parallel argument here Sarker adapts the claim for her audience in historical literary criticism, who may be more apt to take feminism to mean the study of women writers. See Butler, "Against Proper Objects."

categories of identity affect each other does not render those categories inert or *démodé*, but it does diminish their singularity. To read gender as a characteristic dependent upon and constituted by other factors—not only national but colonial, historical, sexual, disabilities, class, and more—rebukes the clarity of Showalter’s “female tradition.” It damages the sense that we remain connected, intellectually, politically, and emotionally, to women writers in the past *simply because we are also women*.³²

There is another reason why transnational feminisms present such a challenge to a feminist intimate public of recovery. Feminist modernist critics pivoted from avant-garde aesthetics to other forms of admirable experimentalism, especially radical politics, in reifying their recovery public as modern and unconventional. But women outside the Anglophone west and in non-dominant communities within the west do not always express radicality, modernity, and feminism in modes immediately legible or comfortable to us. I explore this phenomenon in the next chapter, especially the extent to which “backward” and “archaic” gendered practices like sati, the veil, and female genital mutilation preoccupy white feminists in the west. The modernist-era Indian writer Cornelia Sorabji, the subject of Chapter Two, has been partly recovered, but her politics are troubling still. She challenges univocal expectations of feminist and anti-imperialist alignment, as she disdained feminism and wrote ambivalently about voluntary sati in her short stories.³³ The writers we can access outside the west, too, are often self-selecting for “compromised” allegiances, if we read primarily or only in English. Sorabji, for instance, one of the most voluminously published Indian women writers of English, used the

³² An intersectional approach also rebukes the clarity of the woman critic herself. Many different people, namely trans and nonbinary people, may participate in feminist recovery scholarship without ascribing or straightforwardly ascribing to the woman identity category. See Chris Coffman, “Woolf’s *Orlando* and the Resonance of Trans Studies.”

³³ See Susmita Roye, “Saint or Sinner? Suttee in the Depiction of Flora Annie Steel and Cornelia Sorabji.”

language out of her general esteem for the British Empire and as a signal of her unusually elite education. Of course not all women from the Indian Subcontinent write in English to suggest their fealty to the Raj. But Sorabji's availability for recovery, despite her imperfect attitudes, demonstrates the degree to which we shape feminist literary history by a reliance on global English. Anjali Arondekar writes on the intrigue of the colonial archive, "The critical challenge is to imagine a practice of archival reading that incites relationships between the seductions of recovery and the occlusions such retrieval mandates" (1). For some readers in the feminist modernist tradition, these occlusions include not only the distortions of desire or a white imperial gaze, but also the limitations of self-selecting English language texts and the murkiness of translation. This problem is amplified in the context of a historical period, even one as recent as the early twentieth century, when fewer women outside the west wrote in English than do today. We can only recover what we can read, and even then, it is often fraught to decide what we can read *responsibly*.

The Risks of Recovery: On Disappointing and Absent Archives

Feminist critics across time have used recovery to prove themselves relevant, contemporary, and in continuity with the female tradition they championed. The degree of reliance we express upon our archival figures can have a distorting effect. Politically motivated archival modes require a strict symbolic role from their objects. Their failure to complete it by exemplifying a kind of antihegemonic precedent for us, their successors, puts the entire field at risk. Queer studies scholars have identified the omnipresence of this risk, with its joint affective and political components, but feminists have been more reticent to do so. Kadji Amin writes of his antinormative queer hero, the galvanizing and disappointing Jean Genet, "The failure of my

object of study to behave in the ways that I hoped he would, his failure to consistently and routinely secrete political value was, I eventually concluded, not his alone” (5). Amin identifies one of the ways that recovery—or any kind of identity-based historical inquiry—relies on its objects as political models that illuminate a path for the critic to follow, consistently and without fail. The trouble, he writes, lies in “the ways in which we are all, even the ‘queerest’ or most subaltern among us, both good and bad subjects, imperfect, contradictory, and ‘ordinary’” (5). Queer studies must reconsider the ways it relies on “revalorizing deviance,” he argues, to account for these mundane failures.

Many feminists have taken advice like Amin’s and Heather Love’s, pointing out the disappointments or troubling affiliations in their chosen authors’ writing. However, the challenge that these realizations pose to feminist recovery are more structural. Feminist literary criticism was founded, and continues to operate, on the belief that women writers in the past shared in an intimate public of unconventionality merely by the dint of being writers. To write, within and against patriarchy, is a radical act. The political similarity we assume here is the primary means by which we can explain our historical investment. To loosen the demands of feminist mantle-carrying would damage the unity of the transhistorical affiliation upon which the field depends. The fragility of this system is embedded in the formal genre of recovery itself. Jean I. Marsden writes that so many contributions to a volume of recovery scholarship had an identical generic structure: “The majority followed a pattern in which the author presented a woman writer whom she had unearthed, described her work, and ultimately—inevitably—discovered that this early woman writer was a feminist... a foremother not just of feminism but, more specifically, of late-twentieth-century feminism” (658-659). The genre, as Marsden observes it, features a presentation of an unknown figure, often bemoaning her neglect, a history of her work, and then

a preordained discovery of political worthiness and precedent. Without the last component, the “secret[ion] of political value,” the recovery genre lacks an argument and a narrative thrust. The building of identification constitutes not only an affective community but also the methodological lynchpin that might make recovery legible as scholarship and not merely as the “women’s work” of archival show and tell.

The narrow constraints of the scholarly recovery genre lack the capacity to describe the risks, affective intensities, and caesuras that are actually intrinsic to feminist history. The vulnerabilities of this transhistorical community damage the political value that it aims to produce. These vulnerabilities fit largely into a few major categories, many of which have emerged in the history of recovery. One, a woman writer may demonstrate lamentable or embarrassing political allegiances. Two, her writing may be apparently apolitical or so ordinary as to flaunt a claim of innovation or noteworthiness. Three, a revelation from a writer’s personal history may contradict her writing or otherwise disappoint her recoverers. Four, and most destabilizing of all, so much that the fact cannot often be named: a woman may have been so occupied with quotidian labor or hampered by patriarchal expectations that she had her writing suppressed, destroyed, forgotten, or lost, or, failing that, she *never wrote at all*. Recovery’s dependence on a discoverable print archive and what it can record makes its reach severely limited, especially with regard to women’s history. Woolf identifies these inevitable gaps in *A Room of One’s Own*, writing, “For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children set to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it... All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded” (93). In *A Room of One’s Own* and in the *Common Reader*, Woolf plumbs the archives for her predecessors, women who wrote against suppression, even when they did not

have rooms of their own. She also acknowledges the limitations of these archives; how many more women never wrote because they were cooking dinner and looking after children, work of which “nothing remains?” We can extend Woolf’s argument to consider how many of these women were working class, impoverished, enslaved, or colonized. In many cases the trouble goes beyond re-discovering fragments of literary output. Saidiya Hartman writes that enslaved African women brought to the Americas not only lacked the opportunity to write, but their names and experiences often fall out of recorded history entirely, or are preserved only by their encounters with violence and power. “The archive is, in this sense, a death sentence” (2), she writes, of multitudes of people whose names we know only because they were sold, killed, or claimed against insurance. To recover the lives of these women, she argues, “is a story predicated on impossibility” (2). Her proposed method, critical fabulation, departs from recovery by foregrounding “narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in gaps or provide closure” (12). Recovery, by nature a narrative genre that arcs toward reclamation and interpellation by canon, cannot account for the splintering epistemological violence of the slave trade and racialization more widely. The work of recovery as we traditionally conceive it—finding manuscripts and published books gone out of print and introducing them to new readerships, often in the form of a new scholarly edition—appears as the narrowest and most myopic effort to reconstruct any sort of past. They reveal, too, the persistent whiteness and middle-class status of our most successful and ongoing recovery projects, especially in British literary studies. Black feminist studies constitutes a major, if not only, critique of this narrowness. Hartman and other Black feminists are working to recollect the history of a people made collective by a shared history of enslavement, diaspora, and segregation. They refuse to forget the lives of unnamed enslaved people, and their means of refusal exceed the three-part structure of the recovery genre. Hartman

combines rigorous research with an elegiac remembrance of women whose names she cannot know. Alice Walker, as we will see, worked outside academic publishing and made her recovery work far more visceral by traveling to the hometown of Zora Neale Hurston, Eatonville, Florida, to speak to the people who knew her and to attempt to find and mark her grave. Both of these approaches, while written in different eras, tenors, and intents, refuse the confines of academic propriety and detachment. Both meditate on the inevitable failures attendant in remembering Black women's history. They reconstruct peoplehood by reckoning with the *brokenness* of that people's history, the way histories of violence have restricted their access to it.

What feminist critics of (usually white) British modernism should learn from Black feminist writers is not only a mandate to intersectionality, though this too is key. Recovery must embrace the nontraditional literary methods that Walker, Hartman, and many others employ in representing forgotten actors of the past. Though we cling to Marsden's rigid recovery formula because of its pretensions to institutional legitimacy, something women scholars still sorely need to protect, the formula is demonstrably inadequate to its aims of representation. A more engaged and more honest recovery might require a critic to reflect upon her disappointed identification with a writer with rogue or simply confused politics. It might require the acknowledgement of historical mystery, or the grief of archival loss. It might require poetry. It might require, as Walker's recovery of Hurston did, travel, not to a prestigious library but to a snake-filled field in Central Florida, tramping through weeds to try and find an unmarked grave sunk in the dirt.

Marking the Graves: Exploring Alternate Recovery Methods

So many limitations, failures, and distorting desires inhabit the endeavor of recovery by its very nature. Feminist modernist studies, among other subfields, has attempted to grapple with

them in recent years, but the structure of recovery as outlined here makes this difficult to do. What would a more responsible, or a more honest, recovery methodology look like? We can attempt to reshape the field not in order to *fix* it—to detach it from its history, to ward off the specter of feminine old-fashionedness, or to outlaw problematic political attachments. Rather, changing recovery ought to stretch its limits, to make it visible as literary tradition that honors women’s work, and to gesture toward (if not “represent”) the lives and writing of more women. One model for these gestures comes from literary writing composed with an eye to its own histories, especially that written by Black feminists and womanists. In *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Alice Walker uses an eclectic variety of recovery methods to reconstruct peoplehood for African Americans. Though she is writing as an essayist and historian, her credentials as a novelist come to bear, especially in the context of stories that have not survived slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow. She writes, “I write all the things *I should have been able to read*” (13, emphasis in original). Fiction writing works to supplement that which cannot be recovered. Much of the inquiry Walker did into Black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston she did as research for a historical fiction short story. With the knowledge of Hurston’s life, Walker’s writing process makes explicit the transhistorical community of peoplehood that she describes: “I had that wonderful feeling writers get sometimes, not very often, of being *with* a great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them, and eager to let me know, through the joy of their presence, that, indeed, I am not alone” (13). Walker writes fiction in a recovering mode; the license of fiction and the undergirding of research dovetail to build a text that supplements and transcends the written archive. Showalter, writing around the same time, describes a similar community predicated on reading: “Victorian women writers, whom I thought of by their initials, CB, GE, EG, EBB, became my closest companions,

more real to me than my own sister” (xii). The difference between these communities is that Walker communes with her own “people,” or at least with the legacy of Black Southerners who shared many of her experiences. Showalter, by contrast, connects transatlantically, and with a greater historical remove; her intimacy is predicated not on racialization or regional experience but by feminist esteem and desire.

The parallel between these two transhistorical affective communities is instructive. They are quite similar, and to disparage Showalter for her rudimentary claiming of highbrow Victorian authors would belie the way this instinct still undergirds feminist scholarship long after the second wave. Walker’s version, however, which requires “being *with*” one’s predecessors, approaches historiography differently, and thus can imagine a form of recovery that can gesture to the archive’s losses. She enumerates these approaches across the essays in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, one of many books that not only *performs* recovery of writers like Hurston but also *theorizes* recovery, in this case through narrative descriptions of Walker’s own practices. Most famously, in 1973, Walker visited Eatonville, Florida, Hurston’s all-Black hometown and the setting of much of her writing. While there, Walker followed in Hurston’s anthropologist footsteps by interviewing town residents who knew Hurston and her family. She also located, in an overgrown, empty field, Hurston’s heretofore unmarked grave, and purchased a headstone that read,

Zora Neale Hurston
“A Genius of the South”
Novelist Folklorist
Anthropologist
1901 1960

The experience, Walker writes, was such that “normal responses of grief, horror, and so on do not make sense because they bear no real relation to the depth of the emotion one feels... There

is a point at which even grief feels absurd” (115). *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, long out of print, was reissued in 1979 by the University of Illinois Press, the same year *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* was published. In “Looking for Zora,” which catalogues her trip to Florida, Walker identifies and troubles the myth of the ancestral woman writer. Unlike the case of the Brontës, whose vicarage home has served as a museum and tourist attraction since 1928, remembering Hurston in her intellectual capacity requires Walker *to first find out where she is buried*. The multiple marginalizations Hurston experienced, and the diminished circumstances in which she died, mean that recovery in its traditional senses must be supplemented with travel, ethnographic research, and field work. For Walker and other recoverers of completely forgotten writers, recovery means not the special collections room of an elite library or the well-managed museum estate, but physical labor, wracked with discomfort. This academic labor echoes the feminized labor that so many women do in and out of the home that culture does not recognize as work outright.

Perhaps because of the physical and prosaic labor it required, Walker's recovery method incorporates an acknowledgment of conventional work and attachments into its value judgments. She anticipates the argument of Heather Love, who in *Feeling Backward* reprimands a score of gay and lesbian studies scholars, who seek lesbian forebears in history and read them with an eye toward restorative, progressive queer politics in the present. Long before the negative turn in queer studies, Walker identifies and lays aside this impulse. She takes a different approach in her essay on Rebecca Cox Jackson, an African American free woman, Shaker minister and autobiographer in the nineteenth century, who lived with her friend Rebecca Perot for many years. Walker writes, “There is nothing in these writings that seems to make Jackson [a closeted lesbian]. It would be wonderful if she were, of course. But it would be just as wonderful if she

were not” (80). Walker also names the historiographical questions later raised in queer studies, such as the distinction between an “erotic” connection and a “lesbian one.” She is also unabashed at declaring the affective pulls of the historiographical ambiguity. It would be *wonderful* if Jackson’s brave and unconventional life had involved a romantic intimacy that might resemble a modern critic’s. However, she tempers the instinct; it would be equally wonderful if Jackson were not a lesbian, and instead poses a challenge to the narratives of queer sexuality we are tempted to apply. The “we” here is especially white scholars of Black history, as Walker argues that “the word ‘lesbian’ may not, in any case, be suitable (or comfortable) for black women, who “surely would have begun their woman-bonding earlier than Sappho” (81). Jackson’s tendency to trouble historiographical labeling, then, signifies not her disappointments as a radical queer heroine but rather her rejection of white identity terminology.

Walker further explores the practical possibilities of womanist writing in a review of Buchi Emecheta’s novel *Second Class Citizen* (1974). Walker’s essay celebrates the novel for the way it “raises fundamental questions about how creative and prosaic life are to be lived” (70). Most centrally, Walker admires the way that Emecheta and her autobiographical main character, Adah, write with their young children around them. Emecheta’s professional and domestic compatibility, in fact, Walker attributes to a nonwestern understanding of work, and consequently, of feminism. She writes, “[Adah] integrates the profession of writer into the cultural concept of mother/worker that she retains from Ibo society. Just as the African mother has traditionally planted crops... with her baby strapped to her back, so Adah can write a novel with her children playing in the same room” (69). Here Walker extrapolates Emecheta’s Ibo context to a broader conception of the African woman in “traditional” history, an essentialized figure appropriate for Walker’s early womanism. If the African woman worker is

underdeveloped here, she serves as a rejoinder to Anglo-American second wave feminism, which sometimes emphasized the disarticulation of work and purpose from domestic and maternal labor. Emecheta's novel, while contemporaneous with Walker and thus not recovered per se, helps her to elucidate the longstanding (and often necessary) affinity between feminist writing and conventional work. In so doing, Walker elects herself and Emecheta to a tradition of women writers of color and women of color feminisms that acknowledge the collective power of antihegemonic political work that happens at home, with one's children around one, at the kitchen table.

What is especially instructive about Walker's non-recovery of Emecheta, alongside her essentializing rhetoric of the African woman, is the way she *disidentifies* with the writer. The dedication to *Second Class Citizen*, she writes, honors Emecheta's five children, "without whose sweet background noises/this book would not have been written" (67). Incredulous, Walker responds, "What kind of woman would think the 'background noises' of *five* children 'sweet'?" (67, emphasis in original). Over the course of the essay, and her reading of the novel, Walker comes to square this surprising dedication with the feminist mission that Emecheta describes. In other words, she lets her incredulity lead her to a more nuanced understanding of diverging feminist parenting and authorship among writers of African diaspora.

I do not aim to valorize Walker as the singular practitioner of commendable recovery, especially given her sobering recent endorsements of anti-Semitic speakers and literature.³⁴ What remains useful about her essays in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* is the way she *embraces*, rather than protests, the notion of preserving Black feminist history as prosaic work. Because of her success, she need not respond to the stresses of academic employment the way that many

³⁴ Walker endorsed the writing of David Icke, the author of fringe anti-Semitic conspiracy theories including a secret cabal of Jewish lizard people, in a 2018 *New York Times Book Review* interview, to much outrage.

literary critics do, of course. Nevertheless, we might learn from her the sense that to remember women's history, especially that of racialized and enslaved women, would require us to stop defending recovery from the critique of being old-fashioned.

Other recent scholarly work has taken up the problems of recovery even more explicitly than Walker did. In *All We Know: Three Lives*, Lisa Cohen biographies three under-known women adjacent to modernism. Because these women wrote but were not writers per se, especially in a sense that could be venerated by the periodization of their era, her methods must diverge from the traditional recovery mode. She writes, "While each one published, each also produced a body of thought that was not and could not be worked out fully on paper. As a result, each has been seen as not quite part of history, when seen at all. Juxtaposing their lives was a way to illuminate work that has not been recognized as such" (5). Cohen demonstrates how even relatively privileged women in the past may fail to register in a literary archive, despite their creative output during their lives. Her response, though it appears in a biographical mode, provides a useful rubric for future research; she juxtaposes more than one figure against another, so that their work outside of print is thrown into relief. For Cohen's three choices, Esther Murphy, Mercedes De Acosta, and Madge Garland—and perhaps for all women we want to recover—juxtaposition can facilitate a new goal for recovery projects. Cohen aims not to defend her objects as worthy of attention based on their radical and modern attributes, social and literary. Instead, she alights on a task we might take up as one of the most fundamental to feminist history in general: "*to illuminate work that has not been recognized as such*" (5, emphasis added). Cohen distinguishes herself from Woolf's heroic rescuer and Showalter's topographer of the female tradition. Her work requires different forms of attention and humility;

by introducing Murphy, De Acosta, and Garland to each other, she can perceive their contributions to culture without canonizing them as radical disruptors.

Cohen's book ascribes to the biographical genre as much as to the literary critical, and was published by a trade press, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. Could her methods, at once modest and broad, be convincingly transplanted into a more strictly academic scholarly model? One of the major constraints of the recovery process, as we have seen, remains the anxiety that feminists feel about institutional legitimacy. The traditional genre, which puts forth an exemplary and laudable woman as an essential case study, makes a claim as to the significance of the scholarship and the crucial identity of the recovering critic. This mode, which like all women's work has been called old-fashioned, is limited not because of its unstylishness but because it fails to account for the impossibilities and disappointments of giving women's history. To admit such an impossibility, as Hartman, Love, Amin, Walker, Cohen, and others have done outside the recovery model, would be to risk a graver dismissal than that of old-fashioned, and one that has similarly plagued women's work and interests. Recovery that admits to its inability to perfectly recollect and reproduce literary history might be called *unserious* or *unrigorous*. If we know how these critiques are leveled against women, and how feminists fear that these dismissals might lump them in with their others, conventional women, we may learn to fear them less. In consequence, we might embrace recovery practices that remember the past more equitably—that is, with an eye to brokenness, and the communities to which it gestures.

Chapter Two

Free Women Visit the Zenana

Feminist Intermediaries and The Colonial Heritage of the Trapped Housewife

In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan gives an account of the postwar baby boom that, for a moment, has a global perspective. She writes, “By the end of the fifties, the United States birthrate was overtaking India’s” (10). The statistic garners its potential to shock or impress because of the imagined uncontrolled population expansion of a developing nation like India. Friedan’s disinclination to further explain the comparison suggests the degree to which India in particular and the Global South in general served as benchmarks against which the rising superpower United States could define itself. She describes a post-war American landscape for a very particular kind of woman, a housewife whose invisible labor and pasted-on smile propped up the economic expansion of the nation. One of her most central characteristics, as Friedan describes her, is that she is trapped in the confines of the suburban house. “Many women,” she writes of the 1950s, “no longer left their homes, except to shop, chauffeur their children, or attend a social engagement with their husbands” (11). Friedan does not make explicit the relation between these women and their counterparts in India, falling behind in the birthrate. However, an awareness of the domestic women in the developing world shaped second wave arguments about the confined housewife. For Friedan, who has a vested interest in defying the expectation of copious childbearing, a commonality with India makes for an alarming statistic. As she sets the tone for second wave feminism’s priorities, Friedan also cements the presence of Orientalist referents in its rhetoric.

Where Chapter One surveyed the ideology of feminist recovery, this chapter gives a case study of its impact in transnational literary studies. I explore the role of colonial antecedents in developing the figure of the trapped housewife—a figure against which feminists could differentiate themselves during the height of the second wave in the 1960s and 70s. Comparison to a subjugated and Orientalized woman has always been a cornerstone of Western feminism, one that allows white Westerners to pose themselves not only as modern and enlightened but also as rescuers.³⁵ This comparison plays a part in the larger schema of Orientalism at large; Edward Said listed the harem first in a litany of “Oriental clichés” used by Western authors like Gustave Flaubert. Reina Lewis calls the harem “the most fertile space of the Orientalist imagination” (4). The centrality of this imagined space is borne out by its fascination for British women writers as well as men. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft asks with suspicion of her interlocutor, Rousseau, “Why then does he say that a girl should be educated for her husband with the same care as for an eastern haram?” (117). Many postcolonial feminists have critiqued the ethnocentrism and violence done by these comparisons.³⁶ This chapter builds on their work by considering how references to Orientalized forms of female confinement, especially the harem and Indian purdah, have shaped western feminism’s obsession with the trapped housewife. Because these references most often evoke constructed imaginaries of confinement, this chapter focuses its attention on discursive representations of purdah and housewifery rather than on accurate historical experiences of these customs. In fact, the distortion that literary representations cause is among the most important components of this history more broadly. I examine these distortions, and their influences across space, by reading

³⁵ In addition to Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, see Joyce Zonana, “The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the structure of *Jane Eyre*.”

³⁶ See Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*.

the short fiction and nonfiction of Indian activist and author Cornelia Sorabji, writing during the first three decades of the twentieth century, in dialogue with British author Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962). These women writers occupied idiosyncratic and quite different positions in the British colonial matrix. Sorabji, an Indian woman from an elite family, wielded her British education and allegiance to the Empire to secure her personal and professional authority. Often called the first woman to practice law in India, she relied on conservative Victorian sensibilities to reinforce her respectability. She is a prime example of the imperfect recovery subjects discussed in Chapter One. Lessing, born 53 years later to a white family in British-controlled Persia, spent her young life in colonial Rhodesia, and moved to England only as an adult. Her writing described a great deal of personal experiences with African colonialism that informed her feminist and communist positions. But these positions rarely considered in depth the experiences of Black women in colonized territories. Despite Sorabji and Lessing's contrasting roles within the empire, however, both built feminist and autonomous credibility by positioning themselves as intermediaries between two highly contrasted groups of women. They write to an audience of erudite Western white woman readers, and write *about* a set of women their readers, presumably, cannot access on their own: a community of racialized and confined women in oppressive domestic environments.

Their accounts of life inside feminine spaces—what Sorabji calls the *zenana*, a Hindi word for “women’s space”—offer opportunities for these feminist authors to thematize the role of women in developing modernity as intermediaries. This term, which I take from Jessica Berman’s writing on Sorabji, describes a self-assigned professional, literary, and affective role that a woman can claim. In these texts, the intermediary is also a narrative persona, a device that transcends the distinctions between author, narrator, and character, as all instantiations serve the

same purpose.³⁷ Berman, who featured in Chapter One as an exemplar of transnational feminist recovery, has theorized the intermediary role as a central component of women's writing on developing modernity in the Global South, particularly in India. In this chapter, I draw on Berman's formulation in order to further develop the centrality of conventionality, especially in the form of domestic confinement, to elucidating the intermediary position. Feminist intermediaries make themselves go-betweens for public and private spheres, using their social prestige and gender to gain authority in both. They are also often translators, either of language itself or of cultural norms. In effect, they secure the status of unconventionality precisely because of their insight into and superiority over the lives of conventional women. The intermediary role, as a history of travel writing demonstrates, is always already an Orientalist position. By taking on that mantle as an Indian woman herself, Sorabji cuts a narrow path between affirming the civilization of empire and putting forth her own native experience as crucial for reaching women in purdah, becoming a native informant. Lessing, for her part, traces the decline of the intermediary role, as the oncoming second wave ossified the housewife type and exploited racist divisions between women.

Reading Sorabji and Lessing with and against each other reveals a downward trajectory for the role of the intermediary over the course of the twentieth century. As access to unconventionality became more widely available, the status of conventionality—as epitomized by the stock housewife type—became more cemented in the Western concept of womanhood. This transition was facilitated by both economic and metaphorical linkages with women in the “Third World,” who Sorabji, Lessing, and many second wave feminists described as unchanging

³⁷ The term “narrative persona” has roots in narrative theory and in the writing of Vladimir Propp, who argued that fairytales needed only seven personae to compose their closed narrative worlds. As Berman implies, and my primary texts indicate, the intermediary is a central persona for the imperialist economy of women's writing about the Orient, a persona that presumes it can accurately report and encapsulate other personae.

and statically traditional. As Maria Mies writes, the economic role of the housewife derives directly from colonial exploitation. “Housewifization,” she argues, only became economically feasible in Europe and the United States because of the plunder of colonized peoples. As a consequence, the housewife cannot truly exist in the Global South, where “The vast masses of Third World men will never be in a position to have a ‘non-working’ housewife at home” (cite). In the early accounts of the harem-bound “housewives” of the Ottoman Empire, visitors emphasized the extreme opulence of the environment that supported and confined these women—opulence British colonialists wanted to steal. And although women have stayed at home, in both zenana and American public housing, despite poverty conditions, the housewife type depends on imperially funded myths of wealth and prosperity. As a result, a history of the housewife cannot be complete with an account of its exploitative global reach. The writing of Sorabji and Lessing demonstrates that such international economic imbalance has had a literary component as well, through the narrative of the feminist intermediary.

These writers choose complicity with an unusual degree of transparency; this makes their writing both historically valuable and incompatible with narratives of feminist heroism. Rather than adulating these writers as political exemplars, then, we can value the ambivalence and nuance they bring to the role of intermediary. Both women are writing at transitional moments in literary and political history: Sorabji between the Victorian and modernist/Independence movement, and Lessing between modernism and postmodernism, postwar and Cold War. In their meditations on the changing times, both writers pursue wider modernization and liberation for women while nonetheless prioritizing their own unconventional roles. Our measured response to their contributions reflects the reality that feminist modernism and modernity more broadly have

been a source of power only for women who could differentiate themselves from a cloistered, racialized throng.

Visiting Harems and Zenanas: A History of Intermediary Writing

Sorabji's pro-imperial politics suggest that we situate her, and the intermediary role, in a larger tradition of women's travel writing, which sets a generic and historical precedent for the dynamics at play in Sorabji and Lessing's own writing, as well as the larger second wave.³⁸ This genre is dominated, but not entirely, by white women, and nearly always perpetuates Orientalist types. When Mary Wollstonecraft warned against English women being like the women in an "eastern harem," she uses the harem imaginary as a tool of literary comparison, illustrating the character of rights-deserving British women in contradistinction to confined women in the Orient. Wollstonecraft makes a parallel negative comparison when she writes to her male reader, "let [women] not be treated like slaves." Wollstonecraft enacts an early instance of what would become a hallmark of white feminism; she wants to promote white women out of abjection and thus association with racialized, enslaved, and Orientalized (non)subjects. Importantly, she responds to a literary genre of women's travel writing already underway, a tradition that for several centuries shaped feminist writing about the Orient. British women travelers were more likely to visit harems in the Ottoman Empire than purdah environments in the Indian subcontinent, and thus the harem figures more prominently than purdah in these texts. Because entry to the harem was forbidden to Western men, Mary Roberts writes, they became an even

³⁸ Megan Behrent has argued that we can also situate the era of *The Feminine Mystique* and its attention to feminine confinement within the genre of the captivity narrative, as made famous by the Patty Hearst kidnapping case in 1974. In that case too, the salaciousness of a white woman's capture was heightened by the alleged presence of a foreign and racialized captor: the Symbionese Liberation Army, a group that turned out to be composed largely of white youth. See Behrent, "Suburban Captivity Narratives: Feminism, Domesticity, and the Liberation of the American Housewife."

more enticing fantasy (9). Women's ability to cross into these spaces gave them a source of power, one they often wielded to emphasize their own worldliness and experience. In 1716, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu traveled to the Ottoman Empire with her husband, the new British Ambassador. Her letters, detailing her visits to harems and baths, among a wide variety of other experiences, were published in 1763. The feminist recovery of her work commended her for her attentiveness to the lives of Turkish women and correctives to the exoticizing accounts of male writers of her day. Montague even uses her observations about Ottoman customs to critique British society; Turkish women, for instance, retained their own property after a divorce. After her initial recovery, however, postcolonial rereadings sought to point out her Orientalist impulses. Thisaranie Herath writes that "Female travelers did not completely dispense with the male fantasy of the harem; instead, they appropriated aspects of it to become equally as invested in the image of the harem as a place of mystery and intrigue" (35). Montagu inaugurated a lively genre that thrived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as imperial attachments to the Middle East increased. Heath argues that the Victorian obsession with separate gendered spaces made it difficult for British women to imagine the interior harem space as anything other than an oppressive regime, rendering its inhabitants subjugated inmates. "It seemed unfathomable to them," she writes, "that women cloistered away in a harem could exert even the smallest degree of influence outside the confines of their prison" (37). Characterizations of the harem emphasized sexual openness and excess, opulence, and a sensuous historical sensibility, a fascinating contrast to the perceived rapid modernization of Europe. Although harem travel narratives have received more scholarly attention, this tradition was carried on by Anglo-Indian writers as well, women like Flora Shaw and Eleanor Rathbone, who emphasized the tragic oppression of Hindu women under customs like purdah, sati, and child marriage.

Sorabji would later endorse binary conceptions of progress and backwardness in her nonfiction pamphlet *The Purdahnashin* (1917), observing, “You have the bustling practical West up against the brooding contemplative East” (29). In her affirmation of this Orientalist caricature, Sorabji made herself very friendly with Anglo-Indian and other white women who sought to describe Indian culture for a Western audience. Mary, 4th Countess of Minto, the wife of an Indian Viceroy, wrote a foreword for *The Purdahnashin*, recognizing the near-erotic thrill of Sorabji’s unparalleled access to the zenana: “Those like myself who have been privileged on rare occasions to pass over the threshold of the Purdahnashin zenana will welcome the opportunity of obtaining the further glimpse behind the veil which the following pages afford” (vii). For the Countess, Sorabji is an intermediary’s intermediary, pulling the veil back further than an Anglo-Indian woman could.

But the Countess’s efforts to cross the threshold are cast in shadow by the most well-known white chronicler of Indian women’s lives in the early twentieth century, Katherine Mayo. In 1927, the American Mayo published *Mother India*, a screed against India’s so-called cultural depravity, especially toward women. The book was a bestseller, and spawned many generations of defenses and rebuttals, including one from Mahatma Gandhi. Mayo based her book on a few months’ visit to India, and gives lurid accounts of her observations, presented as general fact. In what would become a hallmark of white feminism, Mayo uses descriptions of atrocities against women as evidence of India’s cultural backwardness and thus the impossibility of home rule. It is inconceivable to Mayo that a woman like Cornelia Sorabji could visit and advocate for women under purdah, rather than being one herself. (This is not to mention women like Sarojini Naidu, a poet and the President of the Indian National Congress in 1925, who pushed for independence when Sorabji did not). The authority that British women travel writers enjoyed in the eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries was eroding more visibly by the last decades of the Raj. Because of increased education for women, especially in English, writers including Sorabji, Naidu, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, and G. Ishvani, began to publish their experiences inside and outside of purdah, without the need for a white woman to visit the zenana and present her own view. Nevertheless, Mayo's account of India was taken up by the second wave with far more vehemence than Sorabji or any other Indian woman's writing. In effect, intermediary writing became a primary text with which feminists could support their arguments about global patriarchy. Radical feminists in the 1970s essentially continued the role of the intermediary in a theoretical mode, by using anecdotes of Eastern atrocities against women as evidence of gendered oppression. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak memorably described this frame as "white women saving brown women from brown men." In 1978, radical feminist Mary Daly called upon *Mother India* as indisputable evidence of patriarchy's global "horror show" (121). She focuses her attention on the already outlawed and largely obsolete practice of sati, where a widow—sometimes many decades younger than her deceased husband—is forced to join his funeral pyre. Daly relies on Mayo's multiply discredited account of sati from 1927 to argue that the practice continues: "it is not surprising," she writes, that 'practical *suttee*' has continued to occur among widows in India, even though the public ceremony was legally banned in 1829" (126). Many accounts give the estimated number of illegal sats in the late twentieth century in the single or low double digits, almost entirely an aberration. Daly, borrowing Mayo's distorted firsthand testimony, becomes an intermediary between her reader and Indian patriarchy by performing a contraction of historicity. In order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of global misogyny, the atrocities of the past must be brought into the present, presumed widespread and ongoing. Of Mayo and Daly's century-spanning collaboration, Joanna Liddle and Shirin Rai

write, “The subject Indian woman in a decaying colonised society was the model of everything they were struggling against and was thus the measure of Western feminists’ own progress” (499). This process is made most transparent, perhaps, by Daly’s defiant embrace of Mayo as the authority of Indian cultural practices, despite the abundant archives left by Sorabji and many more progressive Indian women writers. As Riddle and Rai argue, “The most significant aspect of this relationship is the exchange of orientalist power between the author and her source, in the process of which the Indian woman who forms the subject of the discourse becomes objectified” (513). This is to say, the feminist authority of white women like Mayo and Daly *relies* on the impossibility of an Indian woman’s independence, authority, or feminism.

This exchange of orientalist power, as Riddle and Rai term it, uses a refusal of historicizing context in order to highlight gendered violence. In this model, sati is no longer a long-practiced and historically situated tradition, but rather a clue that defends a singular thesis. This strategy is perhaps best demonstrated by the deliberately shocking title of Daly’s “Indian” chapter: “Indian *Suttee*: The Ultimate Consummation of Marriage.” Here child marriage is reduced to a grim pun, one that uses an orientalist generalization in the service of a more commonplace radical feminist condemnation of marriage. All marriage constitutes an abuse of womankind, Daly suggests, but the “horror show” of Indian customs makes the case especially clearly. She follows this chapter with one on Chinese footbinding and “African” genital mutilation before moving on to the atrocities of Europe and the United States. Her selection of the three non-American examples—two rising economic powers, often used as Orientalized fascinations to the West, and one undifferentiated ‘dark continent’—further demonstrate the bluntness of Daly’s racism.

Daly’s polemical flamboyance makes her an easy target for retrospective critique; additionally, she does not address housewives or purdah at length. But the explicitness of her

claims elucidates more subtle associations in her contemporaries. For instance, in Adrienne Rich's influential essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), in which she describes a "lesbian continuum," she also draws a parallel continuum of patriarchal oppression that spans from the housewife to the child bride enduring sati. She borrows a set of "eight characteristics of male power in archaic and contemporary societies" (638) from theorist Kathleen Gough and elaborates her own examples. One of the categories, which forms part of the core of this important second wave manifesto, assumes a linkage between Western and Orientalized forms of oppression: "*To confine them physically and prevent their movement*" (639). Rich's annotation details the examples of confinement: "By means of rape as terrorism, keeping women off the streets; purdah; foot-binding; atrophying of women's athletic capabilities; haute couture, 'feminine' dress codes; the veil; sexual harassment on the streets; horizontal segregation of women in employment; prescriptions for 'full-time' mothering; enforced economic dependence of wives" (369). Rich's two concrete examples are the same as Daly's: footbinding and purdah (she elsewhere lists genital mutilation, the harem, bride-price, geisha, and arranged marriage). She lists them alongside one European example, haute couture, and more general complaints of sexual harassment and economic dependence. Adding rape as terrorism, purdah, and compulsory motherhood to the same category, at the same register, indicates the vast and indifferentiated form of patriarchy that second wave radical feminists described. More importantly, however, this list demonstrates the degree to which atrocities from the east are used as wake-up calls to Western feminists. Required motherhood, housewifery, and absence from the workforce *are the same kind of harm* as purdah or the threat of rape. While Rich would probably acknowledge that this is a similarity in kind if not in degree, the list form is anchored by the conflating presence of these Eastern examples. The imagined harm of these

examples (which are often willfully dehistoricized) serves to throw the more quotidian harms of Western patriarchy into sharper relief, and to valorize the Western feminists who critique it.

Pioneers of postcolonial feminism like Uma Nayaran, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Spivak have made this argument for several decades. Many Third World and postcolonial feminists contest the authority of Western feminism to “teach” women that these institutions are oppressive. Nayaran writes, “My sense that marriage is an oppressive institution for many women is something that predates my explicit acquisition of a feminist politics, and is something I initially learned not from books but from Indian women in general, and my female relatives in particular” (9). Here Narayan reattributes the impetus for feminist positions from a literary and consolidated feminist authority and back toward intimate and informal traditions of wisdom and expertise, which are far more rooted in a cultural tradition than any globally reaching feminist thesis could be. This is a crucial distinction, because so many Western feminist calls for the liberation of colonized women tend to distort and consolidate their experiences. Mohanty writes that Western feminists have tended to homogenize the experience of women in the developing world into the single figure of the “Third World Woman.” She outlines:

This average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘Third World’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women *as educated, as modern*, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions. (22, emphasis added)

Western feminism, Mohanty argues, thus takes its identity from an explicit contrast with oppressed and constrained Third World Women. It is important to note that this contrast secures for white women not only the illusion of freedom but also, crucially, of *modernity*, in necessarily Western terms. As Partha Chatterjee and Kumari Jayawardena have argued, modernity took a different shape for colonized peoples now striving for postcolonial nationalism. This modernity

enlisted women to more ambivalent ends, making them beholden to both participate in the new modern state and embody the persistence of longstanding cultural heritage. White women in the West could exploit this dual responsibility by emphasizing their own distance from the burdens of tradition-bearing. By no coincidence, the rise of academic feminism in Western universities, in the 1960s-80s, overlapped with both the hasty canonization of the modernist period and the era of independence building for many postcolonial nations. Feminist discourses derive their urgency, as evidenced in the chapter on recovery, from the narrated arrival of women's modernity. As we have seen, feminist critics alighted upon early century white women's writing as a way to shore up their own sense of emergent modernity and agency, a tradition that relied upon the brown woman, oppressed by both colonialism and emergent militant nationalism, for contrast. In this way, these critics transformed the role of the intermediary into a literary historical methodology.

Twentieth Century Domestic Work: Modernism and the Development of the Housewife

In addition to the long arc of the feminist intermediary, there exists a parallel history of a female type that Sorabji and Lessing, read together, can illuminate: the canonization of the housewife. Sorabji's writing exists in loose relationship to literary modernism, since she rarely practiced the aesthetics of the modernist avant-garde that dominated the early-twentieth century highbrow in England, France, and the United States. However, she wrote with great attentiveness to emergent modernity in India, and her career, from the end of the 19th century to the 1940s, spanned nearly the entire period we call modernism today. That period, especially in Britain and the United States, saw a monumental change in the way households were run, and the positions

of women in domestic spaces. Lessened class stratification brought about a vast decline in domestic servitude in middle-class homes and with it, Mary Wilson writes, the arrival of widely used domestic technology to replace servant labor (2). As a result, far more middle-class women began doing their own housework and raising their own children. While servants still make prominent appearances in many works of women's modernist fiction (*Mrs. Dalloway* is about a housewife with abundant domestic help), the era heralded the decline of "the domestic" as a professional obligation for working class women and a resource to middle-class women. During the interwar period, home ownership became economically available to more British people than ever before. An entire magazine and periodical industry rose up to respond to this influx of new homeowners (and vacuum owners). But these publications were not exclusively conservative or invested in retaining tradition; one recurrent column in *Labour Woman*, for instance, focused on housewives' role in the Labour movement. Fiona Hackney writes that "'the housewife' was not a settled identity in the period but rather was shaped by experiences of place, generation, and social class" (208).³⁹ Modernism itself participated in this evolving type by explicitly theorizing the role of domestic labor in women's freedom. Wilson writes that "Modernist fiction demonstrates how a domesticity supported by servants actually helps to make possible both [a] critique of domesticity and the ideal of middle-class women's freedom" (2). And while the Victorian era had prized the wife as the spiritual and maternal center of the home, and the domestic sphere as distinct from the public, modernism began to test these boundaries. As the twentieth century proceeded, the Second World War meant that far more women worked outside the home. The influx of women in the workforce damaged the notion that the domestic

³⁹ William Carlos Williams's well-known Imagist poem "The Young Housewife" (1917) represents the housewife, dressed in a negligee, as a sexual temptation to the poem's speaker—certainly not the wide-skirted and well-heeled archetype that would only develop in the 1950s.

sphere was the only place for women to labor, either professionally or informally. But after the war, a great number of middle-class (largely white) women returned to the home, and this time largely without servant labor at all. During the 1940s and '50s, the housewife emerged more concretely than she ever had before, a consolidation of gender, racial, and class expectations. In the five years following World War II, Shelley Nickles writes, the suburban population increased more quickly than the general population, and a great number of the suburban-bound purchased washing machines and other modern conveniences for the first time (584). But economic upturn and the provisions of these machines can obscure the ongoing reality of a high workload for both working- and middle-class women, many of whom managed intricate household schedules and cooked even more than three times a day (Nickles 584). By the early sixties, Friedan's retrospective of the fifties was of a highly structured and restrictive gendered culture, where the housewife represented economic boon and endless drudgery simultaneously.

While Friedan represents the American model of liberal second wave feminism, a parallel movement was occurring in Britain, with key differences. Lessing's attunement to what would become the key talking points of housewife-centric liberal feminism suggests the transatlanticism of liberal feminism in the 1960s. In both countries, postwar economic boosts led to the increased fecundity of the nuclear family. Palestinian-British sociologist Hannah Gavron published a 1966 study, *The Captive Wife*, which detailed the social conditions for working class and middle-class women in 1950s and '60s Britain. While her study revealed that many conditions for women had been steadily improving since the 19th century, including smaller family size, access to birth control and education, and work outside the home, the expectation of childrearing kept them "captive" in the home. She writes, "Most mothers felt psychologically tied to their young children, and felt themselves compelled to stay at home whatever their own

personal desires. ‘Of course I must be with them all the time,’ said a teacher’s wife, ‘though I must confess that sometimes I *long* to get away’” (69). This personal account recalls the style of Friedan’s anecdotes, which cite the guilty, bewildered dissatisfaction of trapped housewives. But Gavron’s study also highlights some distinctly British conditions for young mothers. When asked if she believed her children would have a happier childhood than her own, one woman replied, “‘I was evacuated,’ said the wife of a sales manager. ‘I missed my parents and was very unhappy—thank goodness there is none of that for my children’” (65). Evacuations during the Blitz led to widespread trauma for British children; as a result, they felt compelled to compensate by providing an enriched and secure environment for their own children.

As many Black feminists have pointed out, the housewife was by far not the only professional available to or required of women at midcentury.⁴⁰ But the type had been cemented in the cultural imagination with a more fixed meaning than ever before, on both sides of the Atlantic. Sorabji and Lessing’s writing describes the arc of that concretization, and the roles of colonialism and intermediaries in that arc.

Behind the Purdah: Cornelia Sorabji and the Zenana Housewife

Cornelia Sorabji’s own biography attests to her qualifications as an exemplary intermediary. Born in 1866 to a prominent Christian-Parsi family, Sorabji was the first woman to study law at Oxford University and the first woman to practice law in India.⁴¹ She published

⁴⁰ For an influential critique of the second wave housewife argument, see bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*.

⁴¹ A minority religion and ethnic group with roots in a migration from Persia in the seventh century, Parsi Zoroastrianism has traditionally kept a distance from religious conflict between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in India. Sorabji perceived her own Parsi heritage (supplemented with a colonially imported Christianity) as contributing to her family’s exceptionality and civilization. In her autobiography, she writes, “Parsees have no social customs to which the West would take exception—unless, indeed, the disposal of the dead—exposure to a swoop of birds in a Tower of Silence—be counted as one such” (13).

several collections of short fiction, including *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1901) and *Sun Babies* (1904), as well as nonfiction accounts of her advocacy work, including *The Purdahnashin* (1917), and two autobiographies. Here I focus on her fiction and nonfiction work that describes purdah. Sorabji, an Anglophile and political moderate who opposed independence, was more concerned with social reforms for women rather than large-scale political change (Sinha 17). In addition to her writing, she served members of the “purdahnashin” as their legal counsel in matters of property ownership, and advocated for gradual improvements in education, especially on hygiene, disease prevention, and childcare. In her writing, she gives account of the purdah system as both romanticized and penurious. Purdah, the anglicized term Sorabji uses for the Hindi *parda*, for “curtain,” constitutes the practice of restricting women’s movements to the *zenana*, the inner quarters of a house. “Purdahnashins,” Chandani Lokugé writes, “were not permitted to cross the threshold of the *antapur* (inner quadrangle) into the outer apartments of the public male world, except on religious activities and special occasions” (xiii). The custom has roots in both Muslim and Hindu heritage but was primarily practiced by orthodox Hindus in north and central India. Sorabji, who hailed from a Parsi family, where women are not secluded, encountered purdah as an outsider. According to Lokugé, Sorabji’s intermediary role was also shaped by her education in England. She writes in her introduction to Sorabji’s autobiography, *India Calling* (1934), “When India ‘calls’ at the end of her ‘English period of training’, she returns to it in the public role, as a zealot of imperialism, ready to assume the white man’s burden... Simulating the colonialist, she claims the *purdahnashins* (the colonialist metaphor for primitive India) as her ‘portion’ and determines to find ways of ‘civilizing’ them” (xviii). By this account, Sorabji takes on the role of the white feminist intermediary quite directly from her encounters with British “civilization.” She thus wields her privilege as a wealthy, Parsi, British-

educated, and light-skinned colonial subject to make herself the go-between for the civilizing force of Western modernity and the primitive, mysterious women behind the veil. Her literary chronicles of purdah, then, work to secure her own status as advocate and unconventional woman. As a survey of her purdah writing demonstrates, this maneuver demonstrates the central role of colonial, racial, and caste difference in assigning modernity and backwardness to women. Because Sorabji was Parsi and had no caste herself, her descriptions of the Hindu system of purdah use the logics of caste to emphasize racial difference and regressive attitudes in her subjects.

In her introduction to Sorabji's autobiography, Lokugé situates her writing at a very particular moment in Indian and British history. Sorabji pioneered, she writes, an "Indian New Woman ideology constructed on the basis of the Victorian New Woman image of the Perfect Lady" (xxix). In integrating Sorabji into the British literary tradition to which she aspired, then, she belongs more to the late Victorian period than to modernist bohemianism. She was, by her own account, less interested in radically dismantling extant cultural systems, as the modernists were, and more interested in adding enlightened ideals and practices to the zenana in the hopes of gradually reforming it. In *The Purdahnashin* she writes, "As for the abolition of the Purdah system, I do not expect to see it in my lifetime, and I doubt whether it would be generally desirable, except after we have educated at least two generations of women behind the Purdah" (54). At the same time, Sorabji sees the work of slow reform as a necessary response to an emergent modernity in India. In the first line of *India Calling*, she writes, "I was born into a post-Mutiny world" (11). She thus situates her happy youth immediately after the unsuccessful Indian Rebellion of 1857, an early, foundational moment of unrest and dissent against British Rule.

Sorabji, a model of the Victorian New Woman, is very attuned to signals of 19th century modernization.

Jessica Berman, writing in a retrospective scholarly mode, rightly attributes Sorabji's modernist sensibility to her intermediary role. She writes, "Sorabji's early *purdahnashin* stories constantly return to the question of modernity, its effect on women, and the necessity of narrating the story of a modernizing domestic sphere from within the zenana" (153). According to Berman, this modernity is both collective and personal; it reflects the changing culture as it permeates the zenana, but it is articulated mostly clearly by the act of the individual narrator. But while Berman emphasizes the act of narration, I want to identify Sorabji's investment in the very gesture of *entering* the zenana as the moment of modernity. The moment of the *visit*—crossing to threshold to stage an encounter between the confined denizens of the zenana and the visitor—is the time when feminist modernity emerges. While modernity in the west most often stages this crossing as the confined woman *leaving* the domestic space, walking out into the modern city,, Sorabji reconfigures the transition. As a woman already endowed with education, professionalism, and authority, she crosses the threshold *back in*, visiting domestic space in order to empower its inmates. Sorabji thus positions the intermediary role and its signature maneuver, the visit inside, as the tools of reform that will radically redesign the nation.

Sorabji manages this maneuver in both her nonfiction and fiction. In *The Purdahnashin*, she calls her reader to begin the work of reforming India in the zenana, since "Woman is both the beginning and the end of Progress" (3). Sorabji makes women the core of a reform program that will secure the greater health of the nation. The core of Sorabji's feminist crisis is the isolation her *purdahnashin* experience. This isolation leads to a complete ignorance of modern medicine, childcare, global events, and, a peculiar obsession for Sorabji, the importance of fresh air. She

writes, “What is the zenana attitude for instance towards health, towards domestic sanitation, towards the care of children, towards education? The answer is simple. There is no knowledge at all in the zenana of these subjects, *as such*” (5). Any gestures toward health or sanitation, she writes, are made only in the name of religion. This emphasis on sanitation recalls the conclusion of Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935), an ode to the flush toilet as the technology of emergent modernity and liberation of untouchable castes in India. Sorabji represents the zenana as devoid of even the instincts to pursue greater sanitation. The visitor, then, who arrives armed with a Western education and disabused of superstitious notions, greets an entirely enclosed world, shut off from any influx of modern information or evolution. It is, according to Sorabji, a ripe opportunity. A cynical reader may conjecture that her reluctance to dismantle the system stems at least in part from her desire to retain her role as singular intermediary between the modernizing world and the seemingly static one. She makes this role fairly explicit in her pamphlet, situating herself and her reader as a unique set of activists who can negotiate between a binary grouping of two kinds of women: “We shall now presume that *we are a band of women anxious to help to bridge the gap* which lies between those who have the habit of going about the world without restraint and those who for generations have lived their lives under conditions which makes such un-restraint a sin” (35, emphasis added). She does not make precisely clear who will comprise this “band of women,” her readership, but since the pamphlet also gives advice to “English ladies” who may wish to make inroads in the zenana, it seems possible that she considers her audience primarily white English and Anglo-Indian women, a group with whom she identifies. Her adjudication of this group is expert; she elevates her own positioning by associating with a cadre of genteel English ladies, while simultaneously making herself an authority over them by virtue of her access to the zenana.

Since she has successfully positioned herself as the singular mediator between her English readership and the zenana, Sorabji can go about depicting the world behind the purdah according to her own experience and her own biases. What is most striking about her descriptions—in addition to her sometimes Orientalizing and trivializing perspective—is how her tropes of confinement and feminine domestic space anticipate the depictions of the housewife’s domain in second wave parlance. They yield a productive tension with the housewives that would earn the name. Women in purdah are often both bored and overworked; they are at the whims of young children and capricious husbands. Because they are confined, their emotions are often irrational and hysterical, seemingly confirming their unfitness for freedom. In addition, they feel trapped by their circumstances and prescribed life paths. In order to liberate them, Sorabji argues, we cannot simply turn them out of the house, but must reframe their understanding of gender roles. “She must realize that a woman has also other uses and functions in the world,” she writes (39). Sorabji thus positions herself and her readers as leaders of an early form of consciousness raising groups.

Her fiction represents the textures of this enclosed world, populated by veiled housewives, even more vividly. Her most-read short story, a piece from *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1901), entitled “Behind the Purdah,” takes as its primary event the visit to a royal zenana by a white British woman doctor. The denizens of this zenana are far more well-off than the purdahnashins she describes in her nonfiction, but they share the same ignorance and thus the same opportunity for the visitor to demonstrate her enlightenment. In effect, Sorabji’s short story stages an extreme and comical instantiation of Orientalist travel writing, where white women, the perfectors of the genre, are shown to be inadequate as visitors to the zenana. Since white women are her primary audience, Sorabji’s story takes a mutedly defiant tone of parody and

exaggeration as it represents the failures of white feminine/feminist intervention in purdah environments. The story follows Doctor Rebecca Yeastman, who has “the practical soul of the woman of business” (72), as she visits a royal zenana to investigate a case of suspected poisoning. The zenana environment is both luxe and backwards; the narrator emphasizes the location of its rooms as confined, remote, and mysterious. Rebecca’s guide “led her through such dark, intentionally devious passages that Rebecca, though excellent at locality, could never tell whether or not the room she finally entered was in the same building as the one she had left” (73). The women she encounters in the zenana are lethargic, irrational, and paranoid: convinced that one of their own, the Rani, or queen, has been poisoned, though Rebecca declares her merely “bilious” (73). Despite the speciousness of the accusation, the supposed poisoner is cast out of the palace and dies in exile. The contrast between the socially sanctioned, feminine, but unhappy space of the zenana and the terror of being cast out of it recalls the way that second wave feminists would describe the domain of the housewife. These women suffer, like Friedan’s housewives, from “hysterical dependence” on men (293), but being exiled from the domestic space means penury and unforeseen consequences because there are no other existing structures to support them. They exist in contrast to Rebecca, a woman who has chosen a profession other than marriage. She can visit and subsequently leave, while the purdahnashin are trapped.

At the first several glances, “Behind the Purdah” seems to endorse the most traditional pro-imperial stances that Sorabji herself adopted. The narrator consistently attributes calm, rational language to Rebecca, and hysterical, baffling associations to the palace and its inhabitants, affirming the east/west binary she would later claim in *The Purdahnashin*. Unlike the “intentionally devious” hallways that lead to the zenana, a London flat building is reasonableness itself: “Not far from Gower Street Station, in a comparatively quite corner of the

city of London, stands a great block of modern red brick. You are back again in the haunts of civilization now, and you press the electric button, which summons the accustomed porter” (75). This sudden cut between locales emphasizes the narrator’s dual perspective on the colonial center and margin. London, unlike the “Indian province” Rebecca visits, is named specifically; its architecture is geometric and square, unlike the “topsy-turvy” workmanship at the palace (71). She makes the comparison explicit by calling London “civilization,” and further articulates the point by the inclusion of electricity and a well-mannered porter to admit entrance to the building. Sorabji returns the story to London to follow the receipt of Rebecca’s letters by her friend, Marion Mainwaring. Despite her confident dismissal of the poisoning conspiracy theory, it becomes more and more difficult to determine the facts of the case, and the palace officials nonetheless exile the supposed perpetrator. Berman admits, “The doctor’s powers of observation and her attempts to tell a different story about the Rani count for nothing. The story thus seems to endorse an orientalist reading of the inscrutability of the zenana and the irrationality of its practices” (158). Berman goes on to suggest that the unreliable and shifting narrator of the story, and their inability to confidently determine sequences of events in the zenana, destabilizes the orientalist reading that Sorabji seems to put forward. While this may be true, we can also acknowledge that a disorienting narrative structure cannot automatically mount a subversive critique; nor is this likely to be Sorabji’s position.

Instead, we can locate the compelling wrinkle in the colonial scheme in the character of the feminist lady-doctor Rebecca herself. The narrator, evasive as she is, takes pains to poke fun at Rebecca, with her exaggerated rationality, incredulousness, and lack of expertise. Despite Sorabji’s own flair for a well-mannered and Victorian turn of phrase, it is difficult not to identify her teasing at Rebecca’s exclamatory letters to Marion, which make her sound less logical and

more gossipy: “But, alack!” my pride is turned to remorse!” she remarks (76). She begins one letter with comically imprecise exoticism: “Well, Marion, for all brainless unjust atrocities, commend me to sleek globulous Rajahs of Indian principalities!” (76). Rebecca’s letters are a form of women’s travel writing that reflect the most typical uninitiated Orientalism of the genre. What they reveal most acutely is the lady-doctor’s glaring *inadequacy* as a feminist intermediary to the zenana. She is unequipped with the cultural and interpersonal experience needed to mediate the complex hierarchy of the zenana. Susmita Roye notes that Sorabji is keenly attuned to Rebecca’s inadequacies; despite her pledge to work with natives in India, she has not learned their language and cannot communicate with her patients without constant misunderstanding. Roye writes, “This is a subtle but sharp censure of all those foreigners who profess an interest in India and India’s welfare but hardly exert themselves to actually build a bridge between the races through a better understanding and closer interaction” (133). We can read Rebecca’s ignorance as a critique of white visitors like Katherine Mayo, toward whom Sorabji had ambivalent feelings, sometimes collaborating and sometimes distancing herself. However, the obliviousness of a British professional does not in this case contradict the manifest backwardness of the zenana itself, which remains intact in Sorabji’s account. Despite Rebecca’s hyperbolic tone, the exile of the supposed perpetrator of a nonexistent crime truly *is* an “unjust atrocity.” The overall impression left by “Behind the Purdah,” then, is not that Western assumptions about Indian women are incorrect but rather that white women are inadequate to report on the zenana and its injustices. In making this case, Sorabji does not critique the inherent imperialism of representations of the zenana and the intermediary figure. She merely implies that British women are unequal to the task. It requires a different sort of figure—a visitor who speaks the language, and understands the customs of royal and poor purdah households alike, and yet has the higher

enlightenment of a Western education, and is removed from the crucibles of Hindu or Muslim customs. In short, Sorabji suggests, only she, and her fictional surrogates, can enter the zenana as reformer, advocate, and chronicler.

This argument makes “Behind the Purdah” (as a representative of Sorabji’s fiction more broadly) difficult to collect under the rubric of subversive feminist fiction. The story rewards attention to narrative complexity, irresolvability, and critiques of whiteness—all traits valued by the new modernist studies. Nevertheless, Sorabji’s unrepentantly exoticized accounts of the zenana demonstrate that she makes these gestures in large part to prop up her own role as unimpeachable authority on its culture. She remains a vexing figure for feminist recovery because her politics are elusive and self-serving. Another moment in “Behind the Purdah” can lead us to consider what Sorabji can offer as intermediary that white visitors cannot, namely her most notorious collaborator, Katherine Mayo, and ultimately how these women would be taken up by the second wave.

In one of Rebecca Yeastman’s letters to her English friend, she describes a play she has seen in the Indian province, “a pantomimic skit on the administration of justice,” where an English magistrate interrogates a criminal accused of killing his wife with the aid of an interpreter. The excerpt Rebecca recounts immediately cuts to the heart of Western moralizing about India:

MAGISTRATE. How old was your wife?

CRIMINAL. Ten years.

INTERPRETER (*fearing that the minority of the victim might heighten the heinousness of the crime, to a civilized mind*). He says, sir, she was an old woman, of some sixty-five years...

MAGISTRATE. How old is the prisoner?

CRIMINAL. Twenty-five years.

INTERPRETER (*interpreting again to fit his own ideas of what is best*). Prisoner same age as late corpse, your Honour, but looking very young. Vishnu—God, salt, preserve his life.

MAGISTRATE. (*whose eyes are opened by this blatant falsehood*). Hang the man—to-morrow, five a.m.! (77).

In this passage, the so-called natives express a comedic sensibility that Rebecca cannot quite grasp. “The moral of it all,” she concludes, “seems to be: when you do stoop to lying, take care that the lies have at least some semblance of plausibility” (78). Here Sorabji again demonstrates Rebecca’s inadequacy as an intermediary, which in this instance manifests as a failure of interpretation. She is unable to perceive the comedic frustrations of interfacing with a blunt-edged colonial authority, one with no knowledge of local customs or language. The primary source of dark comedy in this scene comes, of course, from the interpreter—the intermediary between the Raj and the native. The interpreter anxiously tries to anticipate British squeamishness about local marriage practices by fabricating a hasty lie. The falsehood does not fall apart until the magistrate’s ignorance is overcome by the visual evidence; the accused is not an old man. Enraged at having been deceived, the magistrate pronounces a death sentence based on the false testimony not of the accused himself but of the interpreter. Rebecca misunderstands the actual moral of the skit; the relation of authority between the colonizing magistrate and the accused has forced the interpreter into a comically impossible position. To attempt to mediate language between them is to—fumblingly, falteringly—attempt to reconcile deeply entrenched cultural taboos around gender and marriage.⁴² It is a mediation with the consequences of death.

⁴² For more on the inevitable chasms of translation, see Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*.

This passage crystallizes the difficulty of being a go-between for British and uneducated Indian people, further suggesting the impressiveness of Sorabji's own expertise. It is both telling and prescient that the issue that provokes this translation mishap is child marriage. Sorabji, in 1901, alights upon the Indian cultural practice that will animate subsequent generations of white feminists. But while Sorabji perceives the practice, which often accompanies purdah, as an embedded part of cultural traditions that must be reformed through education, her white interlocutors can only respond with the magistrate's confusion, lack of context, and damning moral outrage. This is not to say that child marriage did not occur in India, or did not constitute an ethical crisis in many instances. However, the intense and single-minded attention paid to this practice by writers like Katherine Mayo, Mary Daly, and Adrienne Rich, as we have seen, suggests the degree to which white feminists use the suffering of subaltern women to enunciate their own status as rescuers and intermediaries, voices for the voiceless.

The exaggerated claims made by Mayo on this subject, and Sorabji's eventual disdain for them, make clear their developing differences in approach to mediating the zenana. Mayo, an explicit proponent of the empire, uses a sociological tone to generalize the alleged atrocities she witnesses to the entire Indian population. She wields gruesome anecdotes of child brides abused by their elderly husbands to shock her American readers, with the clear aim of dehumanizing Indian culture. Of one man married to a child bride, she writes, "From their point of view he is a Hindu gentleman beyond reproach. From our point of view he is a beast" (page). Through this "them versus us" formulation, Mayo underlines the use value of these children's stories: to render the inhabitants of the Subcontinent and the Hindu religion morally bankrupt and subhuman. It was the extremity of such statements that led Sorabji, despite an initial collaboration, to distance herself from Mayo. Sorabji was the only Indian woman Mayo cited in

Mother India, in a relatively tame passage wherein Sorabji details the gendered dynamics of the zenana. Sorabji visited several times with Mayo in India. However, upon the book's release, Sorabji asked Mayo in dismay to refrain from using her name to endorse the book. Mrinalini Sinha writes, "Later in a letter to Mayo, Sorabji wrote 'as you know, I neither knew what manner of book you were writing, nor did I give you your illustrations or information'" (18). Her vexed relationship to the American imperialist demonstrates the instability and ambivalence of Sorabji's position. She favors Western interferences and critiques of old-fashioned customs but has the personal investment and experience to recoil from unabashedly racist mischaracterizations.

This habit can also explain in part why nonwestern writers from the early century did not immediately make the grade for feminist recovery as the likes of Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein did. Cornelia Sorabji, with her ambivalent attitudes to Indian cultural practices and her Victorian attire, cannot satisfactorily reflect the strivings toward modern legitimacy that feminist critics sought. Sonita Sarker writes that Sorabji's multiple positionings pose a categorial problem for the notion of "women's literature" in modernist studies. "Her gender, ethnic, and national/imperial identities mark her minoritized status while her class and educational backgrounds mark her privilege when compared with indigenous and even many British women. Moreover, her professional and cultural negotiation of the Victorian and Modernist world of letters and service raise questions about placing her in traditional frames of center and margin" (11). Sarker identifies in Sorabji a useful frustration of feminist modernism's categories of difference; what is most interesting about this portrait of a recovered writer is the fact that it is Sorabji's *conventional* qualities—her access to privilege and her Victorian sensibilities—that make her a model for Sarker's more intersectional and "minor" feminist modernist studies. She

is both more modern than the second wave could conceive, and not modern enough to satisfy the demands of later recovery efforts. This doubled insufficiency in actuality produces a subject positioning that, if not unequivocally politically ideal, is nonetheless particular and valuable. Sorabji offers to the conversation a special attunement to the predicament of the magistrate's interpreter: vexed by his dual loyalties to his countrymen and his employer in the colonial regime, duty-bound to both relay the truth and smooth over a cultural incompatibility. Sorabji made foundational contributions to the feminist cause against confinement, describing and embodying so many tropes that would remain important to second wave feminists several decades later. Because her work fell out of print fairly quickly, we must read her as prescient rather than truly influential. Her precedent also set the terms for the centrality of imperialism in this cause. However, second wave feminists in the United States and Great Britain did not, in large part, have her intimate experience of purdah or the veil. As a result, their connections between patriarchy in their own cultures and the legacy of colonialism relied on logics of displacement, as we have seen in the cases of Daly, Rich, and Friedan. Notably, this pattern transcends the barriers between radical and liberal feminists. Second wave feminists of all affiliations use anecdotal evidence of Third World women's oppression as a point of departure for describing their own conditions. Doris Lessing, with her own firsthand experience of British colonialism in Africa, embedded this practice in literary form. In *The Golden Notebook*, she anticipates many of the talking points of the second wave of the 1960s and '70s, with its strict delineation between free women and housewives. Simultaneously, she embodies the strange blindness to race that the vast majority of white second wavers demonstrated, as well as the colonial fantasies of entrapment that informed their perspectives. In this sense, Lessing both follows Sorabji's model and demonstrates the exemplarity of Sorabji's positioning. Without

Sorabji's unusual mix of first-hand experience and empathy with conservative reform politics, a feminism informed by colonial tales of confinement only serves to emphasize the plight of less confined white women. *The Golden Notebook* corroborates this fact with pessimistic clarity.

“A Completely New Type of Woman”: *The Golden Notebook* and the Threat of the Housewife

Lessing's work evinces a fraught relationship between feminism and colonialism, a link that reflects her uneasy affiliation with the Women's Movement more broadly. She was famously cagey about her work's commitment to feminism. Though *The Golden Notebook* has been called a hallmark text of second wave feminism, Lessing often contested that it was more invested in other subjects, namely communism. In her 1971 introduction, she writes, “This novel was not a trumpet for Women's Liberation. It described many female emotions of aggression, hostility, resentment” (xiii). It is *because of The Golden Notebook's* ambivalence to the women's movement in the 1960s that it rewards comparison to Cornelia Sorabji's writing. Both writers manage their uncertainty about emergent political movements by emphasizing their characters' differentiation from other women they encounter. I frame *The Golden Notebook* as a significant feminist text not because it is primarily interested in women's liberation or solidarity but because it tracks the signature obsession of feminists across time: the distinction between free women and conventional ones. The novel is thus feminist not in political ideology so much as subject matter.

This perspective is present in the formal fragmentation of *The Golden Notebook*, which features a frame novel, *Free Women*, supplemented by the protagonist Anna's four notebooks, which attempt to segment four areas of her life. The black notebook details her young life in colonial central Africa; the red notebook describes her affiliations with the Communist Party; the

yellow notebook records her drafts of an autobiographical novel; the blue notebook is a diary.⁴³ Finally, she attempts to combine the threads of her writing into one unified document, the golden notebook. In several parts of the book, Anna interacts with trapped housewives or women otherwise rendered as conventional and records their experiences as an intermediary through her writing. Because of her extreme reluctance to synthesize her experiences into a holistic worldview, she resists considering how her complicity in colonization has shaped her own personality and her perceptions of other women. Lessing's fluency in the modernist and first wave feminism of the early century means that she places her character and text in continuity with earlier gestures toward feminist liberation and anticolonial activism. The arc of that continuity is downward; she traces the failure of the intermediary type, and its potential to liberate both white and subaltern women. Anna Wulf leaves the confines of her urban home, but that freedom leads to consistent alienation and vulnerability. The intensity of this dissatisfaction also contributes to Anna's consistent failures of solidarity with both colonized women and housewives. Although she did not record having read Sorabji, Lessing builds on the work of writers like Sorabji and other women writers by indicating how the new roles for women they explored have calcified into strict categories governed by emotional identifications as well as social expectations. Anna's own desperate identification with "free" womanhood ironically distances her from women whose agency or freedom is incomplete or merely illegible to her. She thus refuses the role of the intermediary in any true sense, resigning it as a kind of relic of the early century. In the postwar era, free women cannot or will not "visit" confined women. Anna's own notebooks attest to the need for a mediating force to unite the sectors of her life and experience, but she relinquishes control of the task. Ultimately, *The Golden Notebook* leaves a

⁴³ The country or colony where Anna lives is not named; however, Lessing clearly draws on her own experiences growing up in a British family in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia).

central question unanswered: if the intermediary role becomes unpalatable or impossible, how will women of different experience and power speak to each other?

From the first page of the novel, when she insists to little avail that she and Molly are “a completely new type of woman,” Anna Wulf defines herself in opposition to a set of other women—an amorphous and threatening cadre of wives. The same is true for her friend Molly, who was once married to a wealthy businessman but is now a long-divorced Communist and actress. The narrator of *Free Women* divulges early on: “[Molly’s] source of self-respect was that she had not—as she put it—given up and crawled into safety somewhere. Into a safe marriage” (16). This description elucidates a great deal of Molly and Anna’s worldview. Molly derives her “self-respect”—and thus her sense of self—from her refusal to surrender to the infantilizing and protective state of marriage. Her choice to remain single, politically radical, and economically precarious thus constitutes a central part of her identity. (It is also available to her because her whiteness, class status, and association with her ex-husband protects her from true precarity.) This identification with freedom is accentuated by both women’s travel outside of England. Anna, in particular, seems to perceive her residence in colonized Africa as further evidence of her cosmopolitanism, Left politics, and personal mobility. From the start of the novel, colonial travel serves white “free women” at the expense of colonized women.

Anna herself feels freedom to be an isolating and unprotected subject position. Nevertheless, Anna consistently describes wives as far more profoundly trapped, with depictions that evoke the representations of purdah and the harem we have seen. Throughout the novel, both the actual presence of colonized women and their disembodied legacy through imperial rhetorics of confinement only serve to highlight the predicament of white women in England. One of Ella’s flings remarks when leaving her flat, “Well, back to the grindstone. My wife’s the best in

the world, but she's not exactly an exhilarating conversationalist." In response, "Ella checks herself, does not say that a woman with three small children, stuck in a house in the suburbs with a television set, has nothing much exhilarating to talk about" (435). In her unvoiced defense, Ella (through Anna) understands that the unseen wife has been held to an unfair standard. She cannot be a scintillating wit while simultaneously managing a household and three children, hardly able to leave the house. The presence of the television set drives home the particular midcentury modernity of this kind of housewife. Ella associates a lack of public movement with ignorance; it is difficult to become learned and worldly while "trapped" in a domestic space.

One of the most explicit ways Lessing anticipates the rhetorics of the second wave, including *The Feminine Mystique*, is by emphasizing the isolation and madness that housewifery can induce. In an often-cited passage, Anna encounters a series of trapped housewives while fruitlessly canvassing for the Communist party. This is the closest she comes to "visiting" a zenana-like space of confined women, as Sorabji so often described. In her red notebook, Anna reflects, "Five lonely women going mad quietly by themselves, in spite of husband and children or rather because of them. The quality they all had: self-doubt. A guilt because they were not happy. The phrase they all used: 'there must be something wrong with me'" (159). Anna is struck by this form of woman's unhappiness, so different from her own. In her stream of consciousness reflection, she identifies both the conventional and the feminist response to the housewives' predicament; they are going mad "in spite" of the benefits of husband and children, or rather, it is the demands of the family that are the cause of this madness. Anna, who has experienced similar emotions of guilt and self-hatred, nevertheless feels unnerved and distant by this encounter. Unlike the dauntless Rebecca Yeastman, she does not have the additional authority of whiteness and professionalism to protect her from association with these women.

Anna's visit is a failure because she fears sharing their predicament, and yet knows the alternative provides little relief. While Sorabji points out that Rebecca is an inadequate intermediary, she suggests that intermediary contact is feasibly made by the right candidate—a native informant like herself. Anna, on the other hand, fears the entrapping constraints of domestic unhappiness. She does not have the concrete and institutionalized superiority that Sorabji had over her *purdahnashin* acquaintances. She withdraws from canvassing, refusing to pursue the intermediary role further.

The amorphousness and pain of the housewives' feelings, which cause guilt and self-doubt, recall with vividness Friedan's description of "the problem that has no name." Part of the power of this unnamed problem, Friedan writes, is that before the 1960s, housewives' unhappiness received no public attention and was largely considered unexplainable. Housewives, as a social class in the United States and Britain, were represented as white, citizens, middle-class, protected by the family unit from the threats of financial or emotional insecurity. Their supposed happiness and security spoke to the very success of Western civilization. Friedan refers to a *Newsweek* article from 1960, describing the housewife figure: "She is dissatisfied with a lot that women of other lands can only dream of" (17). The problem of dissatisfaction has no name *because* a comparison with subjected third world women renders Western housewives so protected and respected. Friedan cites the article to register her frustration that the mass culture cannot conceive of American housewives' dissatisfaction. She pays less attention to the glib reference to "women of other lands," who, as an absent horde, throw the privileges of glum housewives into relief. Friedan has an anthropological keenness for American mass culture, and her findings show the inverse of her own mode of feminist contrast. The culture of the feminine mystique frames Western women as protected, cared for, and thus free; women of other lands

can only dream of such security. Friedan and Lessing, through Anna Wulf, make a crucial distinction: the security of the nuclear family, the suburban house, and Western “civilization” are no freedom at all. The consequence of this distinction is that, for feminists, conventional women in the West are no longer *safer* than third world women. Instead, their argument for feminist liberation makes housewives *more like* women in the third world. Third World women thus become an abstract heuristic of comparison.

The Golden Notebook also explores a component of midcentury feminism not available to American women: open participation in the Communist party. Anna Wulf interfaces with housewives because she is canvassing for the Party, and participation in left politics also provides her, Molly, and others the grounds to distinguish themselves from conventional women. In her notebook, she reports her encounters with the mad housewives back to woman in charge at the Party HQ: “She said: ‘Yes, whenever I go canvassing, I get the heeby-jeebies. This country’s full of women going mad all by themselves.’ A pause, then she added..., ‘well, I used to be the same until I joined the Party and got myself a purpose in life’” (159). This recorded bit of dialogue attributes a colorful bit of slang to the gesture of feminist differentiation. The plight of midcentury housewives is enough to give Communist women “the heeby-jeebies.” We might claim the heeby-jeebies, an American slang term that came into usage during the 1920s, as a specifically modern affective affliction of the feminist intermediary. Much like Rebecca Yeastman, encountering trapped women inside the house is enough to give their liberated visitors a creeping, unhappy feeling—one contrasted by relief when they can return to their own strongholds of modernity. These heeby-jeebies occur because the woman at HQ realizes that only her participation in politics, a vocation with purpose and collectivity, has prevented her from sharing their misfortune. Anna, whose ambivalent attitudes to the Party form a core

component of the novel, reflects that the women interest her far more than the particulars of the election for which she is canvassing. For her and her interlocutor, Communism is a means to an end—a social outlet, a gesture of antinormativity, and a way to disrupt their prescribed paths of domestic confinement and its associated emotional turmoil. But it also disrupts their opportunity for social connection with women who have chosen other paths.

Anna segregates her encounters with colonial rule from her Communist activities and most intimate relationships, as if hoping to prove that her complicity in imperialism has not influenced the rest of her life. However, the novel also embraces the destabilization of postmodernism; the separate notebooks inevitably bleed into each other. In the black notebook, where Anna describes her weekends at a hotel in rural central Africa with her group of white Communist friends, her hidden prejudices about race shape her experience of gender as well. She writes about the predicament of a man of the group's acquaintance, George; he is white, married with children, and lives with his family and the four grandparents in a small house in the country. Meanwhile, he has had an affair with the wife of the hotel cook, a young Black woman, who has had his son. Anna finds herself jealous and anxious about the affair, and records a tangled knot of reactions:

I was surprised to find I resented the fact that the woman was black. I had imagined myself free of any such emotion, but it seemed I was not, and I was ashamed and angry—with myself, and with George. But it was more than that. Being so young, twenty-three or four, I suffered, like so many 'emancipated' girls, from a terror of being trapped and tamed by domesticity. George's house, where he and his wife were trapped without hope of release, save through the deaths of four old people, represented to me the ultimate horror. It frightened me so that I even had nightmares about it. And yet—this man, George, the trapped one, the man who had put that unfortunate woman, his wife, in a cage, also represented for me, and I knew it, a powerful sexuality from which I fled inwardly, but then inevitably turned towards. (122)

Anna begins with a sheepish admission of racism—a resentment that George has chosen a Black paramour instead of her, or someone like her. Her sheepishness derives not from the bluntness of

the racism itself, but from the fact that she has conceived of herself as “free” of such prejudices, an enlightened young Communist and anti-racist. As she pushes deeper into the reflection, she realizes that her resentment has more to do with her own feelings about freedom more generally. Importantly, she poses this as a somewhat separate issue to her own racism. “But it was more than that,” she writes, segmenting her feelings. What George represents to her is an attraction/repulsion dichotomy for his “trapped” domestic life, and the way he has inflicted that entrapment on his wife. Anna perceives the horror of the extended nuclear family—becalmed in rural Africa without many white social outlets—as a nightmarish threat, especially for an “emancipated” girl. Her identification with gendered emancipation mirrors her assumption of freedom from racist feelings.

Nevertheless, these classifications prove insufficient, as she is pulled in by seditious feelings of resentment and desire. Notably, Anna is more attuned to the entrapment of George’s wife, who is “in a cage,” than the situation of his mistress, a Black woman with an illegitimate mixed-race son and no social protections. She remains outside the confines of the narrative. While this distinction reflects Anna’s racism, it also suggests that she most keenly perceives the danger of a form that she might also experience herself, through marriage and homemaking. A few pages later, she “think[s] of his wife, who made me feel caged” (127). The mere existence of George’s white wife, at home with her children, parents, and in-laws while her husband enjoys a colonial hotel, makes Anna herself feel caged. She thus articulates a continuity of oppression that extends as far as whiteness does; she fears sharing the conditions of gendered entrapment with other “kinds” of white women, but feels only resentment toward Black women. The sheer vehemence of her fear, which causes nightmares and the “suffer[ing] ... from a terror” of domestic caging, far outweighs her moral outrage at the conditions of settler colonialism she

claims to disdain. And yet, necessarily, these conditions are interrelated. In the traditional sense of feminist intersectionality, where vectors of oppression compound upon each other, but also in a more comparative sense: the predicament of Black women in colonized Africa are not, in Anna's view, trapped inside a house. Their presence as a mobile and occasional source of sex only *emphasizes the entrapment of the white wife*. In this formulation, a knowledge of colonial harm serves to illustrate a binary between free and bound white women, Free Women and housewives. Joseph Boone writes, "Anna 'imports' [her] knowledge of minority discrimination back to England... in the displaced form of sexual apartheid... Anna's awakening to her second-class status as a woman is profoundly if largely subconsciously shaped by her prior experience of racial discrimination in Africa" (267). Boone calls this displacement "substitutive logic" (267), a kind of comparison that then recenters the sexual revolution in Britain at the expense of colonized women, who experience multiple forms of apartheid simultaneously. This formulation is the opposite of Sorabji's and so many other intermediaries'; Anna does not visit the homes of Rhodesian women, and does not perceive them as nearly as trapped as British women are. Molly drives home this sentiment when her own travel has shown her the repression of England. She complains, "It's coming back to England again—everybody so shut up, taking offence, I feel like breaking out and shouting and screaming whenever I set foot on this frozen soil. I feel locked up the moment I breathe our sacred air" (13). Here, England and whiteness are associated with repression, conservatism, and tradition; the very forces confining women. They are also the forces that have shaped the ongoing (if declining) British Empire. Only when Molly and Anna return from their travels to the imperial seat do they feel how those imperial values are now impacting their own movement.

Based on the power of substitutive logics, it is evident Anna is a failed feminist intermediary to her colonial territory. Although she garners feminist identity by comparing herself to housewives, her experiences in Africa do not lead her to link her own liberation to theirs. In fact, she demonstrates a consistent lack of curiosity about the situation of African women and their living arrangements. Lack of curiosity would become a hallmark and critique of second wave liberal white feminism; in this way, too, Anna models Friedan's simple binaristic mindset. bell hooks wrote in 1984, "It appears that Friedan never wondered whether or not the plight of college-educated, white housewives was an adequate reference point by which to gauge the impact of sexism or sexist oppression on the lives of women in American society" (415). Anna even acknowledges her failures of empathy and interest near the end of the novel, as she descends into "madness." She meditates on her Communist hero, Tom Mathlong, an African revolutionary leader: "I tried to imagine myself, a black man in white-occupied territory, humiliated in his human dignity. I tried to imagine him, at mission school, and then studying in England. *I tried to create him, and I failed totally*" (570, emphasis added). Anna approaches the problem of empathy as both a political sympathizer and as a novelist; she puts herself in the position of the colonized subject and imagines his experience, but she cannot "create" Mathlong as a fully formed subject "in his human dignity." This failure is enough to contribute significantly to her mental breakdown.

The Golden Notebook describes an emotional collapse predicated by its protagonist's inability to connect across the various spheres of her experience. With the example of the colonial intermediary at hand, it has become clear that the crux of the problem lies in her inability to use her feminism—her status as a "free woman"—to secure greater personal

fulfillment as well as racial justice and empathy.⁴⁴ In this way, Lessing offers a preemptive diagnosis of the nascent liberal feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s. Anna Wulf fails to do what Cornelia Sorabji managed: to investigate and communicate the experiences of domestically confined women across class, racial, and national boundaries. This is not to uphold Sorabji as an exemplary of intersectional or modernist feminism, for many of the reasons I have detailed. Instead, the contrast between these two figures can lead us to a small and interrelated set of provisional conclusions. First, and most exciting for a feminist recovery of Sorabji: that she is capitalizing on the newly pliant status of (privileged, educated) women in the British Empire to demonstrate that the role of the feminist intermediary is *best performed* by a colonial subject: someone who serves as a benevolent arm of the empire but with the benefit of sharing the language and culture of the cloistered housewives she visits. While this activity would not register as a postcolonial feminist praxis as we currently understand it, it is significant to our understanding of colonized women's role in modernity, and especially the complexity and variety of colonized women's experience. White women, in the modernist era and afterwards—perhaps by definition—are unequal to the task of representing that variety without centering our position and impressions.

Sorabji and Lessing, read together, also work against presumptive narratives of feminist progress and roles for women. A teleological model of feminist development tends to attribute greater freedom and flexibility for women to the accumulation of decades and waves over the twentieth century. But Anna's failures—coming at the very moment of founding the sexual

⁴⁴ Sara Ahmed writes about the compulsion to happiness for housewives in *The Promise of Happiness*. By contradistinction, she argues, feminism's primary goal is not to secure happiness for women; in fact, being a feminist often involves taking on the roll of the "feminist killjoy." This suspicion of positive affect dates back to the second wave itself; Ahmed writes, "Friedan recognizes that some women may be happy as housewives—by saying this, she also implies that making women happy is not the point of feminism" (78).

revolution of the second wave—ultimately indicate the ossification of certain gendered types that, during the early decades of the century, had been in flux. She feels compelled to define herself so narrowly, against housewives and with Communism and Free Women, that, when these categories become hollow, she has little recourse to build a more improvised relationship to gender and sexuality for herself. Ultimately, the narrowness of these categories provided the impetus and energy for the second wave to begin, and to create their own categories.

When Housewives Leave the Zenana: Housework and Intermediaries Today

Recent scholarship in feminist studies has followed the new paths for domestic labor and colonialism. The housewife under global capitalism is rarely confined to the home; on the contrary, women's work is often the domain of migrant workers and poor women working in other women's homes. Anca Parvulescu has described the unfinished business of the second wave; while many middle-class white women in the West *did* find freedom from endless domestic chores, those chores were subsequently farmed out to immigrant women. As a result, the distinction between free women and housewives has been further revealed as a facile Western construction. If late capitalism has both revealed and destroyed the wholeness of the housewife's role, what then is left for the feminist intermediary to do? Sorabji assumed so much authority in the role because of her privileged positioning in Indian and English society. Her command of English, her Oxford education, and her Parsi heritage made her an uncommon (though not necessarily unique) go-between for women who would have had trouble understanding each other. The consequences of globalization mean that her accomplishments are no longer uncommon. Women in India and other parts of the Global South more and more often have the ability to speak, transnationally and digitally, for themselves. They may also have less

time to do it, as their responsibility as wage earners has increased under the crush of late capitalism. It is difficult to know, under these contradictory terms, who we might designate “free women.” When it comes to feminist intermediaries to (formerly, in name) colonized women, perhaps the best course of action is to relinquish the zenana as a myth that would emphasize intermediaries’ own freedom. In Sorabji’s story “Behind the Purdah,” Rebecca Yeastman glimpses for the first time the lethargic and opaque female society of the zenana and says, “These windows ought to be open and all these howling women turned out” (74). Though she makes this proclamation with irony and exasperation, it makes for a provocative and, perhaps, utopian image: when women come howling out of the zenana, feminist intermediaries will be put out of work.

Chapter Three

The Lesbian's Wife

Alice B. Toklas and the Extralegal History of Gay Marriage

Early in the pages of *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* (1954), its eponymous author follows a recipe for “Perpignan Lobster” with a wartime anecdote that elegantly metaphorizes her famous relationship with Gertrude Stein. During the First World War, Toklas and Stein had difficulty receiving the gasoline they were allotted from the French Army. Toklas resolved to appeal to the official in charge and procure the household necessity. This became her responsibility, she acknowledges, because of her partner’s disinterest. Toklas writes,

Gertrude Stein did not like going to offices—she said they—army or civilian, were obnoxious. To replace her, I had introduced myself with her official papers and had allowed the major to call me Miss Stein. What difference could it make to him.... At the last visit he said, Miss Stein, my wife and I want to know if you both want to dine with us some evening. It was time to acknowledge who I was. He drew back in his chair and with a violence that alarmed me said, Madame, there is something sinister in this affair. My explanation did not completely reassure him but Gertrude Stein waiting in Aunt Pauline in the street below would. I asked him if he wouldn’t go down with me to meet her. He did. Her cheerful innocence was convincing. (66)

This instance of mistaken identity suggests Toklas’s sanguine attitude to being subsumed into the Stein name and identity. “What difference could it make,” she muses, to be called Miss Stein as she carries out the real Stein’s domestic interests? Because she impersonates Stein in order to procure her household necessities, Toklas in effect becomes Miss Stein and *Mrs.* Stein at the same time, doing the labor of a wife under her “husband”’s name. Her lesbian relationship is not communicable to the army official, so in lieu of acting as Stein’s partner, Toklas appears as Stein herself. Toklas’s substitution is not legible to the army major, who is so struck by the queer

mistaken identity that he calls it “sinister.”⁴⁵ It requires Gertrude Stein’s masculine and unconcerned authority to pardon Toklas for the confusion.

The anecdote reverses the slippage of identity for which Toklas’s legendary “marriage” is well known. While Stein posed as Toklas in her authorship of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Toklas here becomes “Miss Stein.” Feminist scholarship has considered the degree to which Toklas did indeed participate in the authorship of her “autobiography,” through various forms of queer collaboration and inspiration.⁴⁶ If this critical tradition aims to identify Toklas’s agency in Stein’s work, this chapter takes a different approach: To what extent, domestically and literarily, did Toklas become Miss Stein, or, more to the point, Mrs. Stein? To what extent is it possible to become a lesbian’s wife?

By asking these questions, this chapter explores the perhaps most central subcategory of feminine conventionality, the wife, through an unconventional lens. Where Chapter Two considered the figure of the housewife in her most disempowered, incarcerated context, this chapter argues for the persistence of wifely labor beyond narratives of confinement, whether by religious restriction or middle-class propriety. Toklas’s life and writing give concrete evidence of lesbian wives: women who practiced a form of gay marriage long before it was legalized in the United States and France in the twenty-first century. As Toklas’s anecdote suggests, it is possible and necessary to historicize the structuring dynamics of gay marriage, here particularly lesbian marriage, across the long twentieth century. Through Toklas’s account of her life with Stein, I argue that the wife has an organizing power and distinct set of roles even outside the confines of

⁴⁵ In addition to commonly used definitions of the word “sinister,” including “senses relating to deceit, evil, misfortune, or foreboding,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives several alternate glosses with resonance here, especially “not in accordance with established doctrine; heterodox, heretical.”

⁴⁶ See Lynn Z. Bloom, “Gertrude Is Alice Is Everybody: Innovation and Point of View in Gertrude Stein’s Autobiographies”; and Chris Coffman, “Visual Economies of Queer Desire in Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.”

state-sanctioned heterosexual marriage. When critiques of gay marriage sometimes characterize marriage as a form of neoliberal indulgence, they neglect the apparently old-fashioned but true argument feminists have long made: that gay marriage can enforce an uneven distribution of labor, much like straight marriage.⁴⁷ Even in same-sex relationships and bohemian environments, the wife has a set list of tasks and powers. These tasks most often comprise uncompensated and undervalued domestic labor, performed with the clear intention of winning affection, belonging, and economic support. The wife seeks to distinguish herself from servants and staff by entering an affective economy; she is paid in love and recognition. Toklas's writing, namely *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, articulates the role of the lesbian's wife by cataloging the work Toklas performs in order to be recognized as Stein's marital partner.

An engagement with Monique Truong's 2004 novel *The Book of Salt*, which reimagines the Stein/Toklas marriage from the perspective of the Vietnamese cook they employed during their time in Paris, reveals the racial rhetorics that have made assimilationist and marital ideals for gays possible. Truong's novel, written during the height of the homonormativity debates and during the same year gay marriage was first legalized in Massachusetts, "writes back" to the Stein/Toklas marriage. Binh, who has left Vietnam after having an affair with a colonial French chef, facilitates the Steins' domestic arrangement with his unseen work and exotic novelty. His drudgery in the kitchen gives Toklas the ability to retain her status as Stein's partner, because she is an *amateur cook*: paid in love, in contradistinction to Binh's (under)paid servant role. In her revision of modernist history, Truong's novel thus demonstrates how racialized workers of all genders both shore up and deconstruct the role of wife in white gay marriages across time.

⁴⁷ See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?* and Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*.

I offer my reading of the *Cook Book* as a foil to queer theoretical trends of the late 1990s and early 2000s, which heralded the nascence of legal gay marriage and what Lisa Duggan termed “the new homonormativity.”⁴⁸ These theorists—including Lee Edelman, Michael Warner, and David Eng—warned of neoliberal assimilationist instincts for many gay people in the US, especially at the turn of the millennium. Marriage rights became a call for gays to enfold themselves in the privileges and prejudices of the state, at the expense of those who would not or could not marry. As these critics provide a crucial analysis of the changing visibility and legal status of gays, I echo their pessimism regarding the state’s interference in queer intimacy through marriage and other forms of respectability politics. However, this chapter holds this generalized pessimism in productive tension with a feminist attunement to the work of marriage, revealing how the structure of marriage travels into gay intimacy and risking reproducing misogyny within it.

By juxtaposing the representation of Toklas and Stein’s relationship in the *Cook Book* to feminist criticism of their work during the 1980s, I aim to articulate a modernist prehistory of gay marriage—necessarily a form of gay marriage afforded largely to middle-class and affluent whites—that begins in the early years of the twentieth century. I center on instances of queer marriage within modernism and its historical moment despite a much longer tradition of female and “Boston” marriages during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as those catalogued in Sharon Marcus’s *Between Women* (2007), for one central reason. The visibility of the Stein/Toklas marriage, and its mythic significance to later scholarly traditions, was facilitated by the rise of modernist communities like the Left Bank in Paris, which nurtured a number of same-sex relationships. Modernism was canonized, in large part by feminists of the 1980s, as a visibly

⁴⁸ See Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*

and explicitly homosexual movement. As Laura Doan has argued, the 1920s gave rise to a visible lesbian subculture in Britain (and beyond) for the first time, in large part because of Radclyffe's obscenity trial for the explicit accounts of inversion and lesbian sexuality present in *The Well of Loneliness* (*Fashioning Sapphism* 2). While neither Hall's characters nor Stein and Toklas represent the zenith of bohemian antinormativity—in fact, and importantly, both pairs embraced heterosexual gender roles—Hall, Stein, and Toklas's writing heralded a new visibility for lesbian partnerships.

Green Peas à la Good Wife: A Wife's Work in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*

Critics have long read Stein's 1933 bestseller, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, as a source of playful and experimental information on the Stein/Toklas relationship. The novel categorizes Alice alongside the wives that visited 27 Rue de Fleurus. Stein-as-Toklas writes, "The geniuses came and talked to Gertrude Stein and the wives sat with me" (105). Anecdotal evidence, as many Stein scholars have reported, has suggested that Stein enforced this division of conversation, not wishing to be distracted with the conversation of her interlocutors' female partners. Toklas as narrator stresses the resilience of "wife" and "genius" as gender categories: "The wives of geniuses I have sat with. I have sat with so many. I have sat with wives who were not wives, of geniuses who were real geniuses. I have sat with real wives of geniuses who were not real geniuses. I have sat with wives of geniuses, of near geniuses, of would be geniuses, in short I have sat very often and very long with many wives and wives of many geniuses" (17). The repetition of these two words forces them to hold up to scrutiny; sometimes geniuses are not "real geniuses," some wives are not wives. Nevertheless, Toklas's simple voice retains these terms as the organizing rubrics of hers and Stein's domestic and social arrangements. They in

fact replace the terms male and female as provisions of a binary division of gender role. *The Autobiography* does not, however, explicitly call Toklas a “wife” herself. She is implicated through proximity. Because Stein primarily focuses on genius—as a gender and social category—it falls to Toklas’s truly self-authored work to flesh out the role of wife that she played so faithfully. In the *Cook Book*, Toklas’s descriptions of her work in the kitchen serve as evidence of her wifely responsibility and skill.

The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book is replete with anecdotes that demonstrate the division of labor in the Toklas/Stein marriage. (Many feminist critics in the 1980’s, for reasons made evident by the anecdote above, refer to the couple as the Steins, a habit I adopt as an illustration of my argument.) Toklas repeats these facts without interest or regret. “It took me an hour to gather a small basket [of strawberries] for Gertrude Stein’s breakfast” (283), she reports dispassionately in one passage. One recipe is entitled, without commentary or explanation, “Green Peas à la Good Wife.” As Leon Katz and others have chronicled, Toklas remained absolutely loyal to Stein’s legacy and refused to speak ill of her after her death. She perceives cooking to be her domestic responsibility and cookbooks to be her literary realm, one with a concrete gendered alternative, writing, “Cook-books have always intrigued and seduced me. When I was still a dilettante in the kitchen they held my attention, even the dull ones, from cover to cover, the way crime and murder stories did Gertrude Stein” (39). Toklas describes her affinity for cooking as an obligation, but also as a genuine interest natural to her character. In addition, it constitutes a literary investment: a genre of lowbrow reading material that marks a break with the high modernist trappings of the Rue de Fleurus, as Stein’s detective novels were. Though she will later demure, “as if a cook-book had anything to do with writing” (298), the

form does mark a literary sphere that belongs to her and not to Stein, curled up with a more masculine pleasure-read.

All in all, the *Cook Book* is full of anecdotes that demonstrate a set of ossified gender dynamics, including stereotypes that have developed over the twentieth century. (Toklas mentions that Stein, like any husband in a 1990s sitcom, loathes asking for directions.) However, Toklas's cookbook also describes more subtle and unexpected wifely duties. Reading closely here reveals her incredibly precise and wry understanding of her wifely role. This role includes going to the army offices *as Stein herself*, becoming "Miss Stein" long enough to complete a domestic task but not long enough to accept a dinner invitation. Being a lesbian's wife also means taking on the work of reproduction, although at this time, long before the advent of state-sanctioned gay adoption or sperm donation, lesbian reproduction is more metaphorical. Toklas writes movingly, "The first gathering of the garden in May of salads, radishes and herbs made me feel like a mother about her baby—how could anything so beautiful be mine" (283). In their country home at Bilignin, the garden is Toklas's domain, where she gathers strawberries for Stein's breakfast and wonders at the beauty of new life. Toklas describes an upper-middle class notion of wifehood. At the summer holiday home, a luxury for the leisured, the vegetable garden serves as an extension of the kitchen, a feminine space for light work and enjoyment. Where gardening, for many working-class families across many cultures, is really farming, a full-time occupation required for sustenance or livelihood, for Toklas it is a ladylike and maternal activity undertaken for pleasure.⁴⁹ Her affective attachment to the garden, which flows through feminine and maternal channels, makes the domestic chore fundamentally different from a servant's work.

⁴⁹ This is not to say that the Steins' garden was entirely leisurely. During their time at Bilignin during the Second World War, it provided a great deal of their food supply under rationing. This shift in priority suggests the degree to which even middle-class wives are required to prop up the family during times of crisis.

Toklas exploits this dynamic to accomplish two things: to heighten the gender play in her same-sex relationship and to emphasize its status as a bohemian and upper-middle class arrangement. Both these goals serve one of her ultimate aims in writing the *Cook Book*: to preserve and enhance the legacy of Gertrude Stein. By underlining her nonprofessional culinary work, Toklas aligns herself with housewives in heterosexual marriages. First, in terms of gender play, she is happy to gather strawberries for Stein's breakfast, work that goes uncelebrated and unpaid, because it is *what a wife would do*. Her sly descriptions of the relationship itself, which do not confirm its sexual or marital nature, protect her from cultural censure while giving her freedom to play with wifely trappings. The *Cook Book* also touts the exemplarity and happiness of the relationship itself; Toklas does not desire compensation or literary exaltation because Stein is, by her evaluation, a good husband. Her generosity protects Toklas from thinking about the collective conditions of wives under capitalism. Second, in terms of bohemian and class status, Toklas exploits her role as an unpaid wife because she, as "companion" to a famous writer, can distinguish herself from the actual domestic laborers she employs. Though she shares what she cooks when Picasso comes for dinner, an unnamed servant will do the dishes. As a result, Toklas is part of the changing status of cooking under late capitalism, as it moves from domestic drudgery to a leisure activity enjoyed by those with the income and time to forgo frozen meals and fast food. Toklas, working during the early years of this transition, cooks sometimes because she must, and sometimes for sheer enjoyment. Her enjoyable cooking is supplemented by those who must cook for their livelihoods, namely poor women and racialized men. However, her status here is ensured only while Stein lives; her writing *about* this cheerful labor was undertaken during financial duress after Stein's death. Disinherited by Stein's family, Toklas turns to documenting their lives together as a way to extend its joys and its financial security.

Part of Toklas's presentation of culinary amateurism includes the necessity of kitchen ruthlessness. She titles one early chapter "Murder in the Kitchen," and shares her struggle to kill live game for dinner. Though the work is a little grotesque, it is unmistakably a feminine task. Like a made-up housewife who must keep the work of grooming and tidying behind closed doors, Toklas aims to protect Stein from the kitchen's gory truths. She writes, "Six white pigeons to be smothered, to be plucked, to be cleaned and all this to be accomplished before Gertrude Stein returned for she didn't like to see work being done. If only I had the courage the two hours before her return would easily suffice" (42-43). Toklas finds the job unpleasant and squeamish, but Stein's return gives her a motivation to complete the project. In the end, her ability to fulfill this domestic responsibility gives her a gruesome sense of pride. With dry humor she reflects, "It was a most unpleasant experience, though as I laid out one by one the sweet young corpses there was no denying one could become accustomed to murdering" (43). Toklas's comedic accounts of murder in the kitchen expand our definitions of traditional wives' responsibilities during the early twentieth century. While her role conscripts her to the kitchen, to sitting with wives and managing Stein's moods, those undertakings incorporate a wider breadth of skills than we might expect. Notably, this breadth comes not because of the inherent "queer" or bohemian nature of the Steins' relationship; rather, Toklas speaks for many wives, most of them married to men.

The most intriguing and opaque instance of Toklas's theorizing reveals the degree to which wives must manage the domestic scene. She begins by sharing her experiences with various pests; for instance, she must carve wasp nests out of the gooseberry trees at Bilignin. Gertrude Stein, she notes, does not like pests or insects of any kind. "She had no violent feeling about them out of doors, but in the house she would call for aid" (295), Toklas notes, identifying one dynamic in which the gender role has been reversed. Here her domain over the domestic

sphere extends to protecting Stein's delicate sensibilities within that space. Toklas follows this anecdote with another, without transition or comparison. The juxtaposition speaks volumes:

A charming story of wifely and husbandly devotion was that of two of our friends. She did not wish her husband to be bored, annoyed, or worried. When they were first married she allowed him to believe that she was very much afraid of spiders. Whenever she saw him disturbed she would call him with a wail, Darling, a spider; there, darling—don't you see it. He would come flying with a handkerchief, put it on the spot indicated, and, gathering up the imaginary spider, would throw it into the garden. The wife would uncover her face and with a sigh say, How good and patient you are, dearest. (295)

This anecdote, conveyed without name-dropping or context, gives an explicit account of marital gender theater. In Toklas's tale, the wife uses her feminine vulnerability to exact emotional authority over the household. Toklas demonstrates an ear for hyper-feminine endearments that characterize the heterosexual marriage; the wife "wail[s] Darling" and "dearest." The husband is protected from his own distress by summons to remove the source of his wife's distress. The anecdote renders the husband gullible and distractible; fascinatingly, however, it does not in fact demonstrate him to be emotionally fragile. While Toklas's story of course reflects the degree of emotional management performed by women in marriage, this version emphasizes the obsessive over-maintenance of the scene. The wife so detests her husband's emotional distress that she constructs a consistent lie *from the beginning of their marriage onward*. This despite the lack of a signal that the husband is known for troubling emotional struggles generally. The wife thus conscripts herself to a lifelong falsehood, substituting her feminine faux distress for any emotional variation on his part. Toklas finds this story "charming," and follows it with a non sequitur about rhubarb, suggesting that she deems this dynamic characteristic if not commonplace. It is difficult to ascertain whether she invites us to overlay the marital script upon her own relationship. She refuses, she says, to feign fear over spiders or wasps to flatter Stein's ego. To the contrary, it is she who comes to the rescue with a handkerchief. However, this

anecdote echoes the constant concessions Toklas *does* make to Stein's sensibilities, whether with regard to murder in the kitchen or keeping wives out of the salon. It attributes skill, foresight, and deception to these concessions, identifying them as an organized campaign of wifely authority that goes unnoticed by the wife's counterpart—whoever that counterpart may be, husband, partner, or also a wife.

One wifely responsibility Toklas documents will remain remarkable over the longue durée of gay marriage during the twentieth century. A wife, whether to a husband or to a genius, must manage the hiring and firing of household staff. As with a feminine and maternal kitchen garden, this job emphasizes the middle and upper-class nature of the wife role. Because gay marriage, both legal and extralegal, has so dominantly been the province of the privileged, we can recognize a lesbian's wife long before that legal term existed by her mixed authority in the domestic setting. Toklas is prosaically and performatively submissive to Stein; simultaneously, she wields confident authority over household laborers. As my reading of Truong's *The Book of Salt* will explore in detail, Toklas retains authority in her hierarchal marriage by exerting it over working class labor, especially that of colonial immigrants. Truong took the inspiration for her novel from passages in the *Cook Book* that describe this dynamic, which Toklas calls "our insecure, unstable, unreliable but thoroughly enjoyable experiences with the Indo-Chinese" (198). Though Truong's book will critique the imperial modernist powers the Steins represent, the *Cook Book* itself uses anecdotes of immigrant Vietnamese labor to more precisely articulate the mitigated power of the genius's wife. The Steins first hire a Vietnamese cook, Trac, when they lose several successive cooks to marriage. For the Steins, marriage arrives as a disruption of their domestic arrangement, which is both too ad hoc and too faithful to be sabotaged by the demands of legal marriage. A marriage requires a woman cook to return home and cook for her

husband, ending or pausing her professional career in order to restart the same work, unpaid, as a wife. These wives, since they pass out of Toklas's acquaintance, disappear from the *Cook Book*. In this household, legal, heterosexual, working-class marriage manifests as an inconvenience, one that leads the Steins to briefly embrace a colonial workforce. These encounters are "insecure, unstable, unreliable, but thoroughly enjoyable," as Toklas writes, because she finds her two Vietnamese cooks to be difficult to communicate with, prone to heavy drinking and shirking work. While Truong will give narrative backdrop to this behavior, for Toklas it serves as evidence of her transnational dabbling and of her domestic authority. Although Stein sits with the geniuses in the drawing room and Toklas with the wives in the kitchen, she still has staff under her supervision. Toklas is vague and generous to these servants, despite what she perceives as evident failings. Notably, she sources almost none of their recipes directly for the cookbook, citing a language barrier and secrecy on the part of the cooks. Her relationship to their culinary achievements is speculative; for instance she writes, "It was not from Nguyen that I learned, but this must have been the way he made: Fruit Sorbet" (200). As in each of Toklas's introductions to her recipes, she breaks her sentence in the middle, finishing it with the header title of the recipe that comes below, after a paragraph break. Thus her reflection on Nguyen's culinary achievements is abandoned mid-sentence to give a recipe of her own devising.

Beyond her encounters with the "Indo-Chinese," Toklas demonstrates the reach of a bohemian and middle-class wife to international and exoticized shores through her recipes. The *Cook Book* in fact traces the increasingly international foodways of France during the twenties, thirties, and forties. In recipes gathered from her time in the French countryside, Toklas catalogues the austere recipes indigenous to Provence; one soup requires only bay laurel leaves steeped in water, supplemented with salt and egg yolks. In addition, she traces the growing

presence of international ingredients, including those with recognizable colonial histories. Her “exotic” and non-native ingredients include okra, saffron, Jamaican rum, Cuban rice, and Chop Suey, all ingredients linked to British, French, and Spanish colonies. Some recipes, she writes, come from friends who have been installed in colonial outposts and returned with imported culinary expertise: “After two or three years in Indo-China or Africa they return not only with the recipes of the local cooking but with the materials unobtainable in France and a knowledge of how to prepare them” (22). For the Steins’ circle, colonial travel offers the occasion of culinary novelty, as well as the importation of exotic ingredients. She gives the example of one dish, mutton croquettes from Algeria. Another recipe series, on gazpacho, requires a haphazard survey of the Ottoman empire:

It occurred to me that it was evident each one of these frozen soups was not a separate creation. Had the Poles passed the recipe to their enemy the Turks at the siege of Vienna or had it been brought back to Poland much earlier than that from Turkey or Greece? Or had it been brought back by a crusader from Turkey? Had it gone to Sicily from Greece and then to Spain? It is a subject to be pursued. Well, here are the seven Mediterranean soups. (54)

Here Toklas serves as a culinary anthropologist, comparing the slight differences in cold Mediterranean soups. She acknowledges the transmission of the recipe along imperial lines, following crusades and sieges, but does not attempt to concretize the history herself, setting the question in passive voice, “It is a subject to be pursued.” Pursued, but, she implies, not by her. With a brisk “Well,” she presents the seven recipes, as if consigning her expertise to the strictly culinary. If the *Cook Book* serves a self-theorization of the lesbian wife’s role, here it emphasizes her interest in cosmopolitan homemaking but refuses the authority—and responsibility—of political history. Toklas’s entry on the seven Mediterranean soups also frees her from imperial complicity by narrowing her expertise to the so-called strictly domestic.

Furthermore, while she enjoys professional authority over her domestic staff, the claim to merely culinary knowledge helps her to obscure other class and racial inequalities under the rubric of shared domestic interest. For instance, in her description of the Steins' literary tour of the United States, she writes, "In Washington southern hospitality continued. There was no disparity between the inspired negress cook and the enormous kitchen over which she presided. The hospitality was so continuous that there was never time to ask her for a recipe from her vast repertoire" (138). Toklas presents this racist anecdote in the terms of complimentary generosity. The black chef is "inspired" and the ruler of a vast domain. Toklas even acknowledges her desire to learn from this woman's expertise; however, she is impeded by the "continuous" nature of the hospitality, too busy being doted upon to trade recipes. Toklas thus acknowledges the impenetrable racial divide between herself and black and Vietnamese kitchen workers. Her own labor in the kitchen, while arduous and often required, is nonprofessional, and thus not subject to rigid racial and capitalist scripts. This distinction is at the core of the nonlegal wife role more generally. Toklas's marriage is largely happy, and her wifely duties enjoyed. Therefore, she presents them as amateur hobbies, undertaken to please her partner. They are also supplemented by paid, not hobbyist, immigrant and native servant labor. As a result, she need not align herself with working class cooks who are too busy feeding a paying crowd to write down their recipes. The fluid, extralegal nature of her marriage allows her to present her kitchen work as both a household necessity and a leisure activity, depending on circumstance. The certainty of wifedom depends upon not viewing domestic tasks as true work. Toklas's *Cook Book*, with its refusals of expertise, demonstrates this axiom. The exemplarity of her arrangement becomes even more remarkable when both Toklas's life and the predicament of the wife generally became the province of second wave feminism.

Gertrude/Altrude: Second Wave Feminists Theorize Gay Marriage

When we view the Steins through the retrospective lenses of their reception, we can see that it was through the concerns of the feminism of the 1980s that their exemplarity was cemented. Toklas becomes visible as a subservient wife in part through the discourses of liberation for housewives explored in the previous chapter. Toklas aims to reproduce, in a queer and happier context, the plight of the trapped housewives described by those feminists. Unlike the Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s, Toklas insists upon remaining a nonprofessional domestic worker. Marxist feminists like Sylvia Federici would argue against this distinction, demanding that housework be treated and compensated as work. Federici writes of heterosexual legal unions, but the description she offers is instructive for a pre-legal history of gay marriage as well. She writes of “the peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital that creates the specific character of that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time so invisible” (17). Women do unpaid and unformalized work in the home that makes their partners available for wage earning under capitalism. Thus, though their work drives capitalist growth and supports men, it is not recognized as valuable or properly compensated. Toklas, who wants access to the category of wife, thus desires to reinforce the inequality that Federici outlines. She seeks to describe but de-professionalize her cooking in order to make her work “invisible,” just as Federici identifies for real wives.

Toklas’s refusal to complain about her uncompensated work cannot prevent her second wave reception from calling her a wife in no uncertain terms. In fact, feminist critics in the 1980s describe Stein and Toklas’s relationship as a marriage, and Toklas as a wife, with a clarity and certainty that disappeared with the advent of queer theory (and the possibility of legal same-sex

marriage in the United States). These critics, represented here by Catharine R. Stimpson and Shari Benstock, formed part of the feminist recovery project that was kickstarted by Moers, Showalter, and others in the 1970s and that became a major literary subfield in the 1980s, as explored in the first chapter of this dissertation. The confidence with which these critics catalogue this marriage gives us insight into the straightforward but extralegal imaginary of gay marriage that existed only until it became a (homo)nationalized possibility in the United States. This confidence also conveys the extent to which these critics relied on extant models of feminist analysis, like the figure of the housewife, to describe more ad hoc and unconventional arrangements. What is most generative in this reliance, however, is the demonstrable *effectiveness* of these paradigms. This is to say, staid complaints about the trapped housewife, jeremiads against conventionality, do have some purchase in describing and critiquing the Stein/Toklas relationship. They would be summarily dismissed by critics in the new millennium, with a vehemence that raises new questions about the role of conventionality in queer theory.

One of the most influential Stein and Toklas critics in the 1980s, Catharine R. Stimpson, made the husband/wife dichotomy a central part of her claim about the Stein mythos. In a 1984 essay, she cites an unpublished Stein manuscript discovered by Wendy Steiner where Stein has interlaced their first names as “Gertrice/Altrude.” The phrase has since been taken up as a representation of the collaboration and interdependence of the two women. Stimpson is interested in “Altrude’s” influence on Stein, but she unequivocally narrates the relationship as a marriage. With a compelling eye for the unfashionable, Stimpson characterizes the marriage as one shaped by the old-fashioned as by modernist bohemia. She writes, “Not surprisingly, given the period, the marriage was Victorian” (130). This enigmatic statement contradicts the mythos of 27 Rue de Fleurus as the domain of the experimental, Continental, and new. If Stein and

Toklas's marriage was Victorian, it was at least twenty years too late. They are, in fact, expat lesbians already out of vogue. While this description may be indeed surprising to those who know the Stein myth, for Stimpson it reflects an obvious and important truth. She writes, summarizing an uncited anecdote,

In Italy, as Toklas wept, Stein proposed that they live together as man and wife. Paradoxically, as their naked erotic impulses broke boundaries, they clothed themselves in language that redrew those very lines. As they violated the rules of sex, they obeyed those of gender. As they discarded heterosexuality, they enforced the codes of marriage. They were at once defiant and submissive, traditional and modern" (126).

Stimpson describes a conventional marriage proposal—an explicitly heterosexual one—that created the “paradoxical” foundation for their bohemian life together. The Steins clothed themselves in conventionality in order to protect their more deviant qualities. She perceives the conventional and unconventional to be in a compatible and compensating relationship with each other, a balance that the Steins effectively managed. Nowhere does Stimpson perceive this interest in “enforc[ing] the codes of marriage” or living “together as man and wife” to be at odds with what she claims as a recognizably lesbian relationship.

While later critics would raise important questions about gender identity and performance with regard to Stein, proposing that we could consider her a trans figure, Stimpson disregards the possibility. Stein was dismissive of male homosexuality, she writes, separated it from lesbianism, and “implicitly declared herself female” (129). Later conceptions of queerness and transness may take issue, justifiably so, with the uncritical female and lesbian labels Stimpson applies. But, as a representation of the 1980s perspective, it is valuable on two counts. First, Stimpson sees no impossibility in calling a monogamous lesbian relationship a marriage; in fact, she writes that Stein and Toklas *enforce* legal marriage's rigid codes. This description emphasizes the power of extralegal marriage before legal marriage is even on the horizon. Second, Stimpson views the

Steins' reinforcement of traditional, even Victorian norms, as a strategic choice that made their innovative personal and creative lives possible. She perceives an essential compatibility between lesbian normativity and groundbreaking art. With a certain canniness, Stimpson acknowledges the inequality structuring a Victorian lesbian marriage. She writes, "Probably Stein and Toklas would have been less celebrated, and thought more dangerous, if they had been more overtly egalitarian, if Toklas had stood less often in the background of their portrait" (135). In this formulation, Toklas's subservience is a willing sacrifice for the Stein legacy at large. Where Federici might emphasize the labor Toklas performed to give Stein the time to write, Stimpson attributes to her the symbolic labor of conventionality, a precaution against the image of radical lesbianism and thus cultural rejection. As a result, Toklas—and perhaps lesbian wives more generally—have a distinct set of responsibilities. They structure a marriage by performing its characteristic domestic roles; they sanction it by carrying an aura of traditional respectability; they serve their partners (husbands, geniuses, or also wives?) to give them the time to earn an income and produce significant work. Stimpson acknowledges that these responsibilities had the effect of subjugating Toklas to Stein's will and legacy, much as the wives of men have been subjugated. But since the consequence has been Stein's lesbian and experimental art, it is difficult to call the sacrifice unworthwhile. Toklas thus presents a vexing conundrum for the second wave feminist critic. That critic is attuned to the predicament of the wife. But she remains most committed to retrieving history's women geniuses, as we saw in the previous chapter. The circumstance of that woman genius having a subjugated wife of her own—not entirely unforeseen but unaccounted for—is difficult to incorporate into these dual investments.

Other feminists in this period approach this problem with similar vividness, struggling to articulate Toklas's place in the Stein pantheon. The best example, to my mind, is Shari

Benstock's foundational book *Women of the Left Bank* (1985), whose biographical tint gives compelling insight into this "homosexual marriage." Benstock argues that the Steins' marriage was a source of happiness and stability for Stein, inspiring her art and soothing her loneliness. Like Stimpson, she calls the relationship Victorian, but she has a wider scope of the lesbian marriages in Paris during that period, many of which did not follow nineteenth century gender roles. She writes, "The model for lesbian marriages was less often the heterosexual union than popular opinion would have us believe... Long-term alliances often were established on the grounds of common professional and intellectual interests" (176). She names other well-known partnerships of the time, including Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, Jane Heap and Margaret Anderson, Janet Flanner and Solita Solano, HD and Bryher.⁵⁰ Since these women often followed more obviously bohemian and non-Victorian models of monogamy (not to mention non-monogamy), Benstock implies that the Steins' husband/wife dynamic was particularly chosen, even unique. In a prescient maneuver, Benstock aims to historicize Stein's radical accomplishments without venerating her as a uniformly progressive figure. She writes, "Stein... was unconventional in her choice of a sexual partner, in her dress, and in her writings, but the coincidence of these oddities did not constitute a subversive feminism" (176-177). Benstock frames this distinction on the question of conventionality; Stein's unconventionality, she warns, does not guarantee a feminist worldview that would subvert patriarchy. As Stimpson would remind us, it was Stein's disinterest in subverting patriarchy in her marriage that made her other unconventionalities possible.

⁵⁰ Another long-term lesbian marriage, one with a pronounced butch/femme, if not husband/wife dynamic, was that of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, who do not make the list as they never lived in the Left Bank of Paris. Unlike the Steins, it was Townsend Warner, the feminine-presenting partner, who was the celebrated writer. Benstock also neglects to mention the long-term butch/femme partnership of Radclyffe Hall and Una, Lady Troubridge.

The question that remains for these feminists, working from a clear-eyed evaluation of Stein's mixed allegiances to the subversive and conventional, concerns Toklas's role. Benstock wants to argue for Toklas's agency and authority, speculating: "*And it can be assumed, I think, that Alice served as something more than a silent ear patiently attending her lover. She was, as all the evidence from the early poetry suggests, capable of asking pointed questions, of giving opinions on narrative structure and poetic methods, of participating in a dialogue of ideas*" (164, emphasis added). Benstock builds on textual evidence to point to Alice's influence, but her hesitance in measuring that evidence is striking. After a detailed narration of Stein's Victorian and husband-like qualities, she comes to a moment of uncertain speculation. "It can be assumed, I think," she posits, evincing a degree of wishful thinking in her estimation of Alice's power. Through her hesitation, Benstock articulates the lingering patriarchal overtones in the Steins's lesbian iconicity. The question of Toklas's influence goes essentially unanswered.

Despite describing a dynamic that the *Cook Book* bears out with canny foresight, Benstock and her contemporaries neglect a major source of information. Their irresolution derives from a lack of interest in the *Cook Book* itself, as well as Toklas's real-life autobiography, *What Is Remembered* (1963). Since, as we have seen, the *Cook Book* elegantly dramatizes both the scope and limitations of Toklas's power, its neglect constitutes a striking absence. This critical lacuna, far from rendering Benstock and Stimpson's work outdated or irrelevant, instead serves as a valuable tool for historicization. As the first chapter of this dissertation explored in detail, the feminist recovery scholarship of this era, especially that which focused on modernist studies, required the forces of personality and avant-garde literary output in order to build its myth of feminine exceptionality. While Stimpson and Benstock can identify Toklas as the casualty of this method, they do not correct it by detailed scholarly attention to her

more prosaic work itself. Melanie Micir has called Toklas's poverty after Stein's death, caused by failures of legal protection and the greed of the Stein family, a form of "queer disinheritance." Benstock's hesitation as she hazards a hypothesis of Toklas's state of mind, without citing her work, evinces a kind of queer critical disinheritance. While so many women writers have been neglected, by choice or sheer obscurity, the intense attention paid to Stein and yet kept from Toklas does well to articulate the predicament of the lesbian's wife.

"For Whom Would Marriage Be a Victory?": Homonormativity and Gay Marriage

Stimpson and Benstock wrote about the domestic arrangements of the Steins' marriage while queer theory was in its infancy. Soon, however, the new theoretical framework had progressed to critiques of gay monogamous domesticity akin to what the Steins represented. For queer theorists in the 2000s, who were confronting a now real possibility of legalized gay marriage in the United States (as well as Britain and France, slightly later), relations recognized by the nation state represented a threat to the radical queer dynamics they adulated. Critics such as Lisa Duggan, Michael Warner, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, Jasbir Puar, and David L. Eng wrote against the incorporation of gay intimacy into neoliberal American public life.⁵¹ This groundbreaking era of scholarship helped to define the anti-assimilationist and left politics of queer theory. However, it also sought to decry the advent of a social formation, gay marriage, that had already enjoyed a long and public life, albeit outside of legally recognized status. Homonormativity critiques often characterized marriage as a nonhierarchical container for turncoat liberal gays. This is to say, they sometimes failed to recognize what earlier feminists

⁵¹ Defining "neoliberal" would become a major part of these critical works. In addition to the larger definition of deregulated global finance and trade, for queer theorists neoliberalism often manifested as a preoccupation with personal identity, private life, and respectability politics.

could see: that gay marriage already existed from a labor perspective. As a result, they attempted, in a strange synergy with conservative legal action like the Defense of Marriage Act of 1996 (DOMA), to *prevent* the invention of a gay marriage that already existed in other forms. The *Cook Book*, as well as *The Book of Salt*, demonstrate that to dehistoricize gay marriage as new for the millennium ultimately elides more than a century of wifely responsibility, and the racialized labor that made that role possible.

One of the most consistent claims made by these theorists pertains to the privileges that marriage conveys. Warner argues that gay marriage cannot be a neutral choice for individual couples to undertake; if implemented, it has a necessary corollary effect for the unmarried and constitutes “selective legitimacy” (82). This contrast has purchase at both legal and cultural levels. Creating legal protections for married gays would implicitly strip them (once again) from the unmarried. It would also give the married a “sanctifie[d]” role in American public life, inviting them into a form of cultural legitimacy and conventionality that the unmarried could not enjoy. Warner poses to the gay marriage campaign, “For whom would marriage be a victory?” He implies that these divisions would benefit those who already experience privilege; namely gay people who are white, middle-class, US citizens (we could include cisgender as well). It is not necessary to contest the truth of this claim in order to suggest that gay marriage would not privilege all its participants equally. A feminist, especially writing during the second wave, might answer the question “For whom would marriage be a victory?” with a resounding: “for the husband.” Identifying gay marriage long before its legal status change demonstrates the importance of retaining this (perhaps unfashionable) feminist complaint. Although even the subordinate partner in a legal gay marriage would enjoy privileges that unmarried queers would not, she would not necessarily experience uncomplicated or unstructured access to that privilege.

Because Warner and his peers conceive of gay marriage synonymous with its legal instantiation, a state-sanctioned union that binds two spouses, they risk taking it as an empty vessel for the enemy categories of neoliberalism and the “sentimental rhetoric of privacy” (100). It is possible, however, to retain the urgency of Warner’s critique of marriage—which I echo—while also maintaining a feminist curiosity about how marriage works, and how its systems of power transfer from heterosexual to gay unions. This is to say, for a lesbian’s wife, such as Alice B. Toklas, gay marriage may give her a valuable veneer of respectability and protection while *simultaneously* conscripting her to uncompensated and unappreciated domestic carework.

Warner gestures toward this problem in a response to a pro-marriage argument, writing, “I have my doubts when legal scholar Cass Sunstein, for example, argues that gay marriage would redress gender inequality by ‘subverting’ traditional marriage, making it no longer the heterosexual matrix of gender subordination” (131). Warner’s doubt bears out the historical trajectory I have traced. He knows that marriage is a durable and imitable institution. Reproducing it as a same-sex formation cannot entirely “subvert” its longstanding inclination toward patriarchy. Duggan makes this claim more explicit, pointing out that the neoliberal and neoconservative arguments for gay marriage in the early aughts emphasized the role of the family private life as the unit responsible for protection, rather than robust social services and community safety nets. By inviting gays to invest in the nuclear family, Duggan argues, these pundits willingly propagate the myth of the private home, where “women’s unpaid labor absorbs the lion’s share of the burden” (65). If gays stop marching on public streets and begin making more pot roasts, the argument goes, they will become productive and profitable citizens. Such a campaign would damage everything antinormative, undomestic, and unconventional about the queer life these theorists champion.

I do not aim to contest this fear, which has been largely borne out since gay marriage has become the law of the land, and major banks and fossil fuels companies make branded Pride campaigns. I do, however, want to confront the provocative historical fact that Alice B. Toklas knows at least two recipes for pot roast. When she embarks on a wartime play-acting of gay marriage, taking her partner's place in a bureaucratic and social context with the French major, she loses her own surname in the process. Extralegal gay marriages like this might seem relegated to bohemian modernist contexts of the Left Bank, a sphere outside the reach of American anti-sodomy laws and puritanical religious codes. However, evidence suggests that gay marriage—at least as defined by same-sex monogamy with gender roles—appeared in other places too. Julian B. Carter has catalogued the gay marriage habits explored in Ann Bannon's 1950s and 60s lesbian pulp novels, writing that in these texts, "'gay marriage' signals an emotionally satisfying resolution to the common gay dilemma of how to be socially conventional while erotically and emotionally deviant" (585). This "dilemma" almost perfectly echoes Stimpson's description of Stein and Toklas's mixed investments. Before gay marriage became a legal, and thus truly public, possibility, its auspices of conventionality gave its practitioners the opportunity to protect their deviance through the play of normativity. Gay marriage during the twentieth century, then, is available to certain kinds of gay people who want to enjoy both sanctioned and unsanctioned pleasures. "Gay marriage has a history," Carter writes, and importantly, "as the homonormative fantasy of a safe white space between a queer rock and a heterosexual hard place" (588). For Bannon, writing for a mass market, pulp American audience at midcentury, and for Toklas, the privileges of gay marriage are for white people.

The role of race in homonormativity became a central part of queer theory's critique of gay marriage. Assimilationist movements, which David L. Eng calls "queer liberalism," relied on

the assumption of the “end of racism,” often coinciding with the election of Barack Obama, in order to focus on gay rights. “Queer liberalism,” Eng writes, “does not resist, but abets, the forgetting of race and the denial of racial difference. That is, the logic of queer liberalism in our colorblind moment works to oppose a politics of intersectionality, resisting any acknowledgement of the ways in which sexuality and race are constituted in relation to one another” (4). Eng critiques the single-mindedness of assimilationist gays, who perceived attention to other minorities to come at the cost of their own. As we have already seen, Toklas’s ability to self-fashion as a conventional and authoritative wife came through the racialized labor she employed. In the simplest terms, racism makes gay marriage possible. In a more concretely historical arc of gay marriage, we can say that very specific colonial and racist campaigns, from chattel slavery and segregation in the United States to the French colonization of Vietnam, made gay marriage function in its early twentieth century iterations. This is the claim made with lyrical power by Monique Truong in *The Book of Salt*. Published in 2004 during the height of anti-homonormativity theory, this novel draws on the Stein/Toklas myth to articulate the role of racialization and migration in queer history.

Miss Toklas and Her “Little Indo-Chinese”: Geniuses, Wives, and Cooks in *The Book of Salt*

Truong identifies in the Steins an ideal case study for their iconic status in the Western queer mythos, as well as for the unquestioning ways they benefit from their own whiteness and from French colonialism. This benefit comes most concretely through their employment of two “Indo-Chinese” cooks, mentioned in the *Cook Book*. Truong combines the cooks to become one protagonist, Bình, who must leave Vietnam after having an affair with a French chef. *The Book*

of Salt intertwines accounts of Bìn̄h’s family of origin and young life, his affair with the devilish chef Blériot, his travel to France, and his work as cook for “GertrudeStein and Miss Toklas.” Throughout the novel, Truong contrasts the canonical status of the Steins with the fate of racialized subjects who also create queer history. Bìn̄h has one memorable experience with another Vietnamese man in Paris, with whom he shares a rejuvenating dinner and an alluded-to public sexual encounter. At the end of the novel, he is identified by name—a pseudonym of the man who would one day return to Vietnam and become the Independence fighter and president Ho Chi Minh. Truong does not include that name itself in the novel at all. In his reading of the novel, Eng writes, “Truong’s refusal to name the man on the bridge presents us with a dialectic of affirmation and forgetting: How is it that Stein and Toklas can appear in history as the iconic lesbian couple of literary modernism and historical modernity while Bìn̄h can never appear and Ho Chi Minh must wait to appear? How is it that Stein and Toklas are placed in history while Bìn̄h and Ho Chi Minh are displaced from it?” (63). Eng helpfully explicates the critique of Western queer literary history that Truong puts forward in this novel. The modernist bohemia of Paris, mythologized across the twentieth century, came at the expense of colonial violence and exploitation both in France and abroad. In responding to Eng’s reading of *The Book of Salt*, I want to emphasize the ways the novel understands the role of colonialism in facilitating the role of the lesbian’s wife. As *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* alludes to more briefly, the work of racialized servants made Toklas’s authority and domestic comfort possible.

Bìn̄h’s outside perspective catalogues the rigid gender roles of the Stein household. He observes, “GertrudeStein and Miss Toklas own an automobile, but only GertrudeStein drives. Miss Toklas navigates. GertrudeStein has a love of the open road, but only Miss Toklas has the maps” (176). In this formulation, Bìn̄h attunes himself to the assumed roles of his Mesdames,

which fall along gendered lines. Stein, stylized throughout the novel as “GertrudeStein,” parodying both the *Cook Book* and the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, is in charge. She takes the wheel and displays an American and masculine affinity for “the open road.” However, Binh, who largely interacts with Toklas as his direct superior, is keenly aware of her own authority in the relationship. “Only Miss Toklas has the maps,” he notes, suggesting that in a riff on conventional wisdom, Toklas is the woman behind the genius.

Toklas’s feminine, navigational power also extends to her strict authority over Binh’s work and body. He reveals that he has experimented with self-harm, cutting his fingers with kitchen knives in an attempt to combat feelings of isolation and shame. When Toklas discovers the habit, her reaction mingles concern and scolding. Her servant’s habit is self-destructive and alarming; it also leads to a slightly bloody taste in the soup. As a result, Toklas subjects Binh to further surveillance. Truong writes, “Miss Toklas inspects my hands every day. First she checks my nails to see if they are cut and clean—I assume her previous cooks had to submit to this examination as well—and then she turns my hands palms up, a step she has added just for me, her ‘Little Indochinese’” (142). This daily routine clarifies the supervisory and racializing role Toklas plays in the kitchen. She checks for evidence of domestic cleanliness, and adds a special step for Binh, whose painful isolation, caused by his racial status and queerness, has led to another form of physical contamination: the spilling of his own blood. Kyla Wazana Tompkins has argued that narratives about eating and contamination often serve as the vehicles for racist anxieties, including the fear of having the Other incorporated into ourselves. Binh’s blood in the soup thus poses a threatening intimacy between white and nonwhite bodies, as the Steins might become what they eat. By preventing this contamination through her daily checks, Toklas merges the feminine and imperial components of her role. Ostensibly, she completes this daily

task in the spirit of nurturing care, to ensure that her cook is not harming himself. Nevertheless, the surveillance has a different impact. Binh says that he began cutting to reaffirm his own humanity in a colonial environment that renders him invisible or freakish. “Blood makes me a man,” he reflects (142). Toklas’s prohibition on the practice ultimately forbids Binh this affirmation of his embodied humanity, because his blood, the evidence of his suffering, will contaminate the flavor of her meals. Toklas has a responsibility, commuted by Stein, to uphold the culinary standards of the house. She exerts this responsibility on Binh and as a result, makes him “her little Indochinese.” Binh privately objects not only to the colonial moniker but also to the attribution, wryly pointing out that as expat Americans, the Steins have no real claim on him. “Madame,” he rejoins silently, “we Indochinese belong to the French” (142). Thus he acknowledges his colonial “ownership” to the French while resisting Toklas’s affectionate, possessive, racializing nickname. Stein and Toklas have each left the puritanical environment of the United States, which has the result of protecting their bohemian status at the expense of meddling in another country’s colonial scheme.⁵²

Despite the domination Toklas exerts, the work that Binh shares with her—feeding and fueling the genius—helps him to identify with her and understand the breadth of her power. Chris Coffman writes that “while registering Toklas’s capacity for cruelty to servants, Binh also offers a largely sympathetic portrayal of her embrace of the role of what we now call a ‘queer femme.’ He presents her subordination as active and chosen, a strategy for claiming power” (150). Coffman, who has also written about Stein as a transmasculine figure, identifies Toklas as a queer femme rather than a wife, inviting a degree of mutability into the relationship. This

⁵² The Steins, who represent the neo-imperial reach of the United States, which interacts with the French colonization of Vietnam, model a personal form of inter-imperiality, where colonial projects intersect and overlap with each other. See the 2018 special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on inter-imperiality, edited by Laura Doyle.

moniker is useful insofar as it is shared by Binh, who carries the mantle of femininity both by choice and racial stereotype. Like Toklas, Binh finds the possibility of security and intimacy through his feminine role. When he begins a relationship with an American iridologist he meets at 27 Rue de Fleurus, he aims to prove his usefulness in exchange for love. The iridologist, Lattimore, wants insight into the Steins, and Binh can provide it: “With my eyes opened, sensitive to these Mesdames of mine, my value to you I thought would surely increase, double and sustain itself. Value, I have heard, is how it all begins. From there, it can deepen into worth, flow into affection, and artery its way toward the muscles of the heart” (150). This painful passage reflects the affinity Binh senses between feminine labor—“value”—and protective love. He has identified the dynamic by which Toklas retains her amateur relationship to work, by serving as Stein’s beloved hobbyist cook and partner. Through his intimacy with Lattimore, Binh seeks a transmutation from servant to wife; the language of compensation becomes the language of affection. Though Lattimore’s racial identity is indeterminate, his Americanness, class status, and masculinity give him authority over Binh, who wants to earn his love through usefulness. The difference between this butch/femme relationship and the Steins’ is that Toklas’s role has been cemented by its early instantiation of gay marriage. The character of that marriage comes into relief by comparison to Binh’s liaison. Unlike the Steins, Binh and Lattimore’s relationship is secret, temporary, made fraught by a lack of shared language and class inequality. In this comparison, marriage is already a form of “selective legitimacy,” funneled through class and its attendant powers. The Steins can have a semi-public and ultimately famous relationship because of their compatibility of language, citizenship, connections, and class. Binh, by contrast, must labor for Lattimore’s affection in the off-hours from his work laboring for the Steins. He is

ineligible for the privileges of gay marriage because those who must sell their labor do not have the time to perform unwaged, wifely work.

Over the course of the novel, Binh comes to an even more complete understanding of his own role in the Steins' relationship—that is, his indispensability to Toklas's mixed power as a lesbian's wife. If Coffman identifies a degree of mutability in the Steins' gender presentations, it is in fact Binh's presence that concretizes them. Truong explores this dynamic in one tour de force passage, which describes a photo opportunity moments before the Steins depart for their American tour in 1934. A button on Stein's shoe has come loose:

Miss Toklas slides her hand out of my pocket, and she grabs onto my hand, the one closest to hers. She squeezes it twice in quick succession. 'Please, Bin, sew on GertrudeStein's button. We cannot have photographs of her looking so disheveled in this way!' is what Miss Toklas intends the first palpitation to say. The second, which is thankfully not as blood-stopping as the first, is less of a command and more of a plea: 'Please, Bin, sew on GertrudeStein's button. I cannot have photographs of *me* prostrated before her in that way.' Of course, Madame, of course. (255)

In this scene, Binh intuitively understands the dependence Toklas feels upon him. He invents the dialogue that he knows to be implicit in her hand squeezes. The first request demonstrates the responsibility Toklas and Binh share to maintain Stein's personal comportment and thus, her public reputation. Her imagined "we" invites Binh to a collaborative dynamic of feminine caretaking. The second request, however, is couched in the first person singular, separating Binh's work from Toklas's. And where the first concerns Stein's photographic legacy, the second concerns Toklas's own. "I cannot have photographs of *me* prostrated before her in that way," Binh imagines her saying. Through his years of service, Binh knows that Toklas will dispatch their domestic worker solidarity at a glance in order to avoid being perceived as a servant herself. She must outsource this gesture of demeaning servitude to him, an anonymous racialized body who will not be noted in a photograph of the genius and her companion. Toklas

knows—and Bìn knows she knows—that the distinction between wife and servant is thin and precarious. This is especially true in the prelegal era of gay marriage, where Toklas must appear publicly as “companion,” a position that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was as often a paid position between an upper class woman and a less advantaged one as it was an informal intimate connection. It strikes Toklas with trepidation that a photograph for posterity might record her “prostrated” at Stein’s feet, and thus leave her central role in Stein’s life misrepresented. Her status as wife is subordinate, to a degree, but it conveys more authority and equality than servanthood would. As a result, she requires Bìn to stoop in her place. “Of course, Madame, of course,” he thinks, answering the unspoken plea with weary understanding.

In its exploration of the race and class inequalities of queer life, *The Book of Salt* echoes the queer theory of its era. One thing the novel uniquely offers (in addition to its arguably more important exploration of subaltern queer identity and Vietnamese culture) is an intimate study of the dialectic relationship between two forms of queerness. Without the groundswell of legal recognition and neoliberal representation that remained 70 years away, gay marriage can only begin to appear on the scene through contradistinction. Eng writes, “As cook and caretaker in the couple’s residence and inner sanctum, Bìn exemplifies the world division of labor that both institutes and queers the very distinctions separating public and private” (70). This is to say, the very notion of a gay private life, in its early stages here, takes place in a necessarily transnational scene of exploitation and migration. As a result, Warner’s “corollary effect” for legal gay marriage in fact predates its legal status, but with a different direction of causation. Gays marrying in the eyes of the state would have inevitable consequences for the unmarried. By contrast, extralegal gay marriage requires first the *participation* of unmarriageable queers—those rendered ineligible through racialization, class, and access to culturally elite posterity—in order

to make itself visible. Through deep and violent irony, gay marriage becomes a community-wide and border-crossing affair.

Recovering the Lesbian Wife: “Miss Toklas is a Genius After All”

The casualties of creating a middle class gay private life, as Truong’s novel elucidates so well, leave the legacy of Alice B. Toklas in a difficult position. A genealogy of Toklas’s reception, concluding with contemporary feminist criticism, takes account of her changing status within the larger Stein corpus. That criticism, which I survey here, is diagnostic for the evolving perspective of feminist recovery scholarship more broadly as well as for histories of queer partnerships specifically. However, the warnings *The Book of Salt* poses to venerating Toklas should remain at the fore. Ultimately, the genealogy I have staged here plays witness to the necessarily irresolvable project of reclaiming wifehood (a white and bourgeois category) as a vector of feminist analysis without either valorization or elision of other peoples.

Toklas has been one subject of recent feminist efforts to recover modernist-era writers not originally considered avant-garde enough to merit attention. Micir catalogues Toklas’s work as Stein’s “secretary-collector,” a creative archivist who preserved Stein’s legacy in the face of “queer disinheritance.” Toklas also translated *Picasso*, a 1938 booklet composed by Stein in French, into English. Translation becomes another form of Toklas’s nurturing maintenance labor (Minjung You 1). Many critics, from Benstock to Lynn Z. Bloom and Sarah Garland, attend to Toklas’s influence on Stein, noting that she inspired as well as fueled the creation of modernism. Belinda Bruner takes the argument a step further, claiming that Toklas “did not merely influence Stein as Stein constructed her position as genius but *created* Gertrude Stein, as readers have come to recognize her, by seducing Stein through the realm of the sensual and introducing her to

its poetic possibilities” (412). Bruner attributes to Toklas great agency, imbuing the muse role with power to *create* a genius and inaugurate her art. “In falling in love with Toklas,” Bruner writes of *Tender Buttons*, “Stein falls in love with cups and boxes and drawers and lunch” (427). In this rereading, Toklas’s inducements to the prosaic and domestic are precisely the contributions that have made modernist experiment *Tender Buttons* possible. Implicitly, modernism thus depends on the presence of a wifely figure for its inspiration. Bruner and other critics also explore the modernist credentials of Toklas’s writing and cooking itself. Shannon Finck argues that Toklas, in documenting a process of tinkering with recipes, demonstrates a recognizably “experimental” art practice. Toklas writes in the *Cook Book* that her culinary repertoire “expanded as I grew experimental and adventurous” (29). Finck suggests that this innovation is compatible and even equivalent with Stein’s literary experimentation.

These critics implicitly demand the entry of cooking, and writing about cooking, into the cathedral of modernist value (however loosely defined). Their detailed attention to Toklas’s literary and domestic contributions far outstrip the limited interest demonstrated by second wave feminists. However, it is difficult to redeem Toklas as chef-experimenter, or as author-wife, without reaffirming modernism as a validating and legitimizing mantle. Toklas’s work serves as support to a canonical formation already vulnerable to skepticism and critique. In addition, any recovery of Toklas must not forget the recipes she has stolen and the labor she has depended upon. To my mind, *The Book of Salt* manages the complexity of this problem with the greatest vividness. Near the end of the novel, Binh reflects, “Miss Toklas is a genius after all” (253). This declaration refutes all conventional wisdom about the Steins’ marriage and legacies. It destabilizes the binary gender roles inaugurated by the *Autobiography*’s geniuses/wives dichotomy, and thus the homonormative marriage hierarchy of “the Steins.” Binh calls Toklas a

genius with regard to her care for Stein, anticipating what she will want to eat on her American tour. Implicitly, he elevates care work to the status of genius, a category of artistry that deserves accolades and posterity. Toklas should become embedded in the historical account of modernism, then, because of the masterful work of wifedom she has done for Stein. At the same time, by this metric Toklas joins a tradition of geniuses who have gained immortality at the expense of the non-genius facilitators of modernism, racialized and unnamed workers. By adding Toklas to that tradition, Binh makes a concrete fissure between himself and her. Despite their shared kitchen work, her status has joined her with the powerful.

Toklas's cookbook, by contrast, concludes with a now-famous demurral. She describes a conversation with friends in her garden that echoes the end of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. One asks, "But, Alice, have you ever tried to write." She replies, in the final sentence of the *Cook Book*, "as if a cook-book had anything to do with writing" (298). Many critics have refuted Toklas's final disclaimer, pointing out that the *Cook Book* has literary as well as historical (or culinary) value. It is, clearly, a canny and intentional refusal. If Binh calls Toklas a genius, she would deny that label in no uncertain terms. This is perhaps in part due to Toklas's unwavering loyalty to Stein's legacy; she positions herself as mere chronicler of an era. As an undercurrent of her loyalty, however, it seems possible that Toklas understands the trappings of the genius label. She does not want to be identified in that way. In this conclusion, Toklas chooses wifedom once again, with great clarity. This affirmation continues her posthumous loyalty to Stein, who remains the only genius of the marriage. In addition, Toklas perhaps recognizes the incompatibility of care labor with the genius label—no matter how Binh, with muted resentment, would try to impose it. The category of the genius, as so thoroughly embodied by Stein, is inhospitable to wifely work. First, because domestic labor is repetitive and short-

term, making it difficult to preserve in posterity. Second, care work is focused on relationality, as opposed to the singular exemplarity of the genius. These incompatibilities leave Toklas's legacy without a clear rubric for feminist recovery. Reframing care labor as an act of genius, as Binh does with biting disidentification, would misunderstand the true nature of Toklas's contribution. On the other hand, forgetting Toklas, or framing her as merely Stein's associate, would understate the value of her work. We ought to consider this difficulty as a challenge to the existing modes of valorizing recovery and allow Toklas to lead in a different direction. We should recognize her contribution for its insights into our own conditions of domestic (and academic) labor. Toklas's legacy serves as a template for queer intimate practices, where cooking, cleaning, bill-paying, and gasoline-shopping are as significant to a queer avant-garde as any poetry.⁵³ We can critique this role for its reliance on colonial histories while also recognizing its significance to the long history of gay partnerships that continues into the present.

⁵³ For more on the role of domestic documents in modernist archives, see Scott Herring, "Djuna Barnes and the Geriatric Avant-Garde."

Chapter Four

Fitting Through the Glass Window

Fatness and Professionalism in Muriel Spark and Zadie Smith

In her 1978 essay “The Uses of the Erotic,” Audre Lorde reflects on the erotic by turning a food memory into a metaphor. She writes,

During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it. I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. (45)

Lorde identifies a ration butter replacement, margarine, as the ideal metaphor for the transmission of erotic knowledge. The parcel of margarine takes on the language of a body—a body comprised of fat. Lorde kneads color gently into the “soft pale mass” of the margarine. Her language derives its power from the intimacy it evokes, leaving no corner of the margarine uncolored or untouched. Lorde writes elsewhere that “growing up Fat Black Female and almost blind in America requires so much surviving that you have to learn from it or die” (32). Lorde collects fatness, Blackness, gender, and disability as categories of difference that induce a kind of desperate education. This account of her adolescence casts a different light on the margarine metaphor, evoking the material conditions of many Black women’s formation: the intertwining of fat, color, and intimacy.

In this chapter, margarine becomes the fuel for the intersecting threads of fatness, race, gender, and citizenship over the course of the twentieth century. Though developed as an animal fat product in the nineteenth century, the modernized vegetable oil version became a staple ration

food during World War II as a dairy replacement. Eating margarine represented a necessary adherence to ration protocols and to the “war effort.” As lyrically described by Lorde through her description of coloring the fat, margarine also became a racialized and colonial product during this era. Elizabeth Collingham writes that during the war, “West Africa’s wartime export of over 400,000 tons of kernels a year represented an incredible cracking effort on the part of its women and children. British housewives had West African villagers to thank for their weekly supplies of 2-3 ounces of margarine which supplemented the butter ration of 4 ounces.” (140). Keeping white “British housewives” in cooking fat, Collingham argues, required the labor of Black mothers and children in West Africa. From a metaphorical perspective, the racial “color” that Lorde massages into her margarine already exists, as the food has been manufactured under an imperial regime.

Margarine is merely one ration food that makes appearances in both historical and literary writing; it features prominently not only in Lorde’s essay but also in Muriel Spark’s 1963 ration-centric novel *The Girls of Slender Means*. In this chapter, I argue that margarine metonymizes the roles of fat people in twentieth century Anglo-American culture. Whereas Alice B. Toklas could frame her work in the kitchen as both bohemian and feminine, the labor of a domestic architect, the cooks and eaters of margarine rarely had the same privilege. As an essentially modern and “unnatural” food cultivated under imperial and wartime circumstances, it indicates the fraught position that fat people, especially women and quite especially Black women, must occupy in mainstream cultures. In turning from cooking to eating, this chapter pairs two texts that meditate on the treatment and potentialities of fat: *The Girls of Slender Means* and Zadie Smith’s 2005 novel *On Beauty*. These novels’ fat protagonists occupy impossible positions in the matrix of “modern” womanhood. The fat woman challenges the

tropes of both modernity and conventionality. Fatness locates her outside of sexual desirability, as a traditional and matronly mother figure, and often, as racialized in contrast to the ideal white, slim body. White cultural obsessions with sleekness and slenderness render the fat woman as fundamentally *unmodern*, a remnant of a child-bearing, apron-wearing matron who cannot participate in contemporary feminist and queer movements or in the rigors of the global marketplace. Simultaneously, the prominence of margarine as ration and then diet food extraordinaire parallels the increasing rates of woman entering the professional workforce during and after World War II. Spark's fat protagonist justifies her own fatness (and eating of butter, not just margarine) because she has a career, wielding a professional prestige that renders her more modern than the "other girls" in her community. By this claim, Spark presages the stereotype of an unmarriageable fat feminist, reprehensibly agnostic toward the demands of traditional femininity. In my study of the tropes of female conventionality, fatness occupies a contradictory and thus central role. Ultimately, this contradiction represents an opportunity, as Lorde suggests. In her essay, massaging color into margarine becomes a ritual of self-knowledge: "the erotic such a kernel within myself." Lorde uses the medium of margarine as conduit to one of her most central theses: the value of a political ethos that values embodied knowledge, even "gut" instinct.

Drawing on this inspiration, I frame fatness in these texts and in Anglo-American culture more broadly not as a sign of dowdy nonmodernity, as ugliness, or as selfish ill-health, as the medical industry insists. Instead, fatness serves as a form of fuel, support, and cushion for woman, one that both connects them to conventional history and gives them the caloric energy to enter the (modern) professional sphere. Furthermore, fat women demonstrably reshape that sphere when they enter it, forcing the male workplace to reckon with their competence as a function of gut instinct, feelings, and appetites.

These two novels, despite different settings and dates of composition, both identify the centrality of temporality to fatness especially as it relates to myths of modernity and modernism. Both of these novels were composed after the heyday of literary modernism. For Spark the reference to modernism is primarily in terms of period, since she sets her novel in 1945, at the tail end of late modernism. For Smith, the reference lies in allusions to Forster's *Howards End*, a novel that heralds the early stages of modernism in 1910. Despite *On Beauty*'s contemporary time signature, both of these texts operate, in one sense or another, as historical novels, and ones in which fatness and its provocations are at the center. I argue that fatness, especially as carried by women's and racialized bodies, has the capacity to upset the coherence of modernism's central tenets. Most centrally, fat bodies dismiss the widely internalized value of sleekness. Anne Anlin Cheng writes that modernism across literature, art, architecture, fashion, technology, and other fields shared a preoccupation with a "dream of an undistracted surface." To this day, she argues, "we uphold some of the most basic tenets of this ideal in our celebration of the 'tasteful'... as the sleek, the understated, and the unadorned" (25). The protagonists of these novels, Jane Wright and Kiki Simmonds, are constantly confronted by the expectation of bodily sleekness and its associations with modernity and progress, and yet their fatness makes their own personal progress possible. The novels allegorize this conflict by referencing modernist aesthetics without due reverence, twisting and exceeding the highbrow constraints of the modernist novel.⁵⁴

Jane and Kiki elicit modernity's ambivalent and anxious attitude toward their bodies despite different relationships to professionalization and racialization. *The Girls of Slender*

⁵⁴ Of course modernist novels more widely rarely conform to the narrow and canonized typology of the modernist text; however, Spark's and Smith's novels demonstrate their awareness of this idealized aesthetic sensibility, whether or not borne out by the period at large.

Means explores the valorization of slimness as patriotism and modern femininity during World War II. At the end of the century, Smith's novel points out the increased burden on fat Black women to grease the works of modern American life while being perceived as libidinous and uncontrolled. Fat female bodies carry the heavy symbolic weight of conventional womanhood while facilitating the work these bodies do in the professional sphere. As a result, these novels revise cultural narratives of fatness as uncontrolled, decadent, and dissipated. They make the unsettling argument that fat womanhood disrupts the supposed sleekness of feminist progress. Instead, these texts suggest a more gradual and cumbersome progress—an arc of feminist modernity does not conform to mainstream modernist tropes of sleek, economical, effortless revolution.

A Thin History of Fat Women and Diets in Britain and the United States

Though the novels I read were composed after the heyday of high modernism, in the 1960s and 2000s, their conceptions of fatness have historical underpinnings in the early twentieth century. In fact, historians regard the early part of the century, as well as the years during and following World War II, as major turning points in Western cultural perceptions of fatness. During the nineteenth century, the U.S. and Britain venerated buxom and full-figured women for their associations with abundant childbearing and wealth. Accumulated fat served as a symbol of elevated status during an era of limited resources. However, as industrialization and global trade fueled by colonization began to bring a greater access to varied food, the reputation of fat changed. The implications for this change, at the start of the twentieth century, included more stringent definitions of femininity and whiteness. Laura Fraser writes that “Well-to-do Americans of northern European extraction wanted to be able to distinguish themselves,

physically and racially, from stockier immigrants” (12). The same was true for newly “modern” women, who began to enter the workforce and take on roles beyond motherhood. “They left behind,” Fraser writes, “the plump and reproductive physique, which began to seem old-fashioned next to a thinner, freer, more modern body” (13). During the 1920s and ‘30s, these body “types” became cemented by both consumer products and cosmopolitan trends.

“Something actually rodential began to characterize the upper lips of the women of the slimming era as they gnawed at the raw carrot and the herbaceous green,” popular novelist Fannie Hurst wrote in her autobiographical treatise on dieting, *No Food With My Meals* (1935), acknowledging the grotesqueness of a slimming mania that gripped her as well. The public penny scale and the bathroom scale were both popularized in this era, and diet drugs containing amphetamines were widely available. The calorie was wielded as a measurement of a food’s energy power. In culture and literature, the curvaceous but slender Gibson Girl and the slim, “boyish” flapper became the new standards of beauty, populating magazine illustrations and modernist novels.

The new expectation of slimness as beauty was exacerbated by two world wars that put rich food at a premium and made reducing food intake a matter of patriotism. Even in the Great War, before the intense rationing of World War II, Britain and the United States characterized fat as a risk to national security. According to Hillel Schwartz, “one of the American representatives to the 1918 Interallied Scientific Food Commission announced, ‘There are probably a good many million people in the United States whose most patriotic act would be to get thin gradually and gracefully and then to stay thin’” (142). Fat people, a presumed drain on national resources, constituted a risk to the war effort because of their failures of will. This shift in patriotic value was especially potent in the United States, still a developing superpower. Schwartz writes that

slimness came to be associated with the kind of national identity that had won the war, a victory that “confirmed efficiency and economy, balance and flow, lean strength and central command” (143). An updated vision of strength and efficiency led to ironic turns in women’s wardrobes and careers; during the war, in new jobs outside the home, they were encouraged to wear corsets “for support” (143). A garment that had long purported to restrict and control the female body was now marketed as a means to increased professional strength, as well as slimness.

At the same time that slimness earned its status as modern, desirable, and patriotic, it retained a dual status in the public consciousness just as fatness did. In fact, we might trace fatness’s doubled reputation as matronly and nonstraight, conventional and unconventional, back to portrayals of suffragettes in the early twentieth century. Anti-suffragette propaganda represented the crusaders as fat, dowdy, and undesirable, their rebukes to men fueled by their sexual rejection. *At the same time*, Amy Erdman Farrell writes, suffragettes themselves parodied anti-suffrage women as “fat, inferior, and resistant to progress, and the male anti-suffragists as selfish fat cats, greedy, dangerous, and stomping on the rights—and bodies—of their thin, civilized sisters” (83). In the warring propaganda of the era, one of the foundational moments of feminist history, fat is always double-valenced. It suggests the unappealingly antinormative and modern, a fat feminist who cannot win a man (a type that persists to the present day). Simultaneously, fat connotes the heavy and unimaginative weight of history. Elizabeth Freeman has written that these contradictory types have consolidated in the twenty-first century through the retrograde figure of the “lesbian feminist,” “whose despised pull backward on the politics of sexuality is supposedly equaled by the downward movement of her own body parts” (65). In both the suffrage movement and the age of queer theory, female fatness seems to consign women to temporal disjunction. Dowdiness, Freeman writes, becomes “an embarrassingly belated

quality of the lesbian feminist in the queer world” (92). The lesbian feminist recalls the suffragette because she simultaneously fails the demands of conventional, slim femininity and the radical, “modern” aspect of the “queer world.” Fatness means temporal alienation on two sides.

Brain-Work and Patriotism in *The Girls of Slender Means*

The characterization of fat as “treasonous” during wartime increased during World War II, with its intensified and prolonged rationing. Healthful and nutritious food was available almost exclusively to the rich, with the poorest third of the population in Britain scraping by on an emphatically unhealthy diet of white bread, margarine, jam, bacon, and tea (Collingham 351). At the end of the rationing period, and through the midcentury, the corporate dieting industry flourished, taking hold as the major sector of US and English economies it has remained. This explosion of dieting obsession, with books, courses, diet foods, and quack doctors occurred between the setting and composition of Muriel Spark’s *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963). Spark wrote about weight and body image over the course of her long career, often associating fatness, with varying degrees of comic irony, with social undesirability. In *A Far Cry From Kensington* (1988), the rigorous Mrs. Hawkins slims down by reducing her food intake by half, to dramatic results for her body and social standing. But it is in *The Girls of Slender Means* that Spark most fully develops a set of associations between fatness, feminism, and unconventionality. This novel demonstrates, with tragicomic canniness, how fat women carry forward both fat-borne energy and bodily shame into the post-war professional world.

Spark sets her novel in 1945, when “all the nice people in England were poor, allowing for exceptions” (7). Her subject is a London hostel for single women called the May of Teck

Club, a building opposite the Prince Albert Memorial that has survived several rounds of wartime bombing. The girls who live there work part-time jobs, hope to get married, and share a single designer dress between them, called “the taffeta.”⁵⁵ The exception is a sharp young woman named Jane Wright, who works for a publishing house but cannot fit into the Schiarapelli dress; she is persistently “miserable about her fatness” (32). Though only Jane is fat, all the young women obsess over their weights and compare dieting strategies. The activities and architecture of the club constantly encourage them to compare and regulate their bodies, implicitly part of the training that will make them marriageable women. Most notably, a few of the slimmest girls can use a narrow window in a lavatory on the top floor to access the flat roof and its scenic view. One girl, barely thin enough, slicks her naked body with margarine in order to slip through the window. The ability to slide one’s hips through the window becomes a marker of status, making literal the glass ceiling of mobility, access, and ascension that slim beauty constitutes. At the same time, the priorities and habits that make such slenderness possible count against the women in their professional and intellectual lives. Spark observes an ecosystem where a woman cannot be dedicated to perfect “poise” and to intellectual success simultaneously.

She makes this impossibility explicit in the character of Jane Wright, who evinces a direct correlation between her increased calorie intake and her professional accomplishments. In the simplest terms, Jane justifies her socially unacceptable body by conceiving of herself as more modern, empowered, and intellectual than other women. In one conversation about the club’s dessert offerings, the girls compare approaches to temptation. “I didn’t eat the bread-and-butter

⁵⁵ Spark’s use of “the taffeta” as a comic device anticipates and thwarts the trope of a true “one size fits all,” as made famous in the series of young adult novels and film adaptations *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2001-2011), which uses a pair of jeans that magically fit all body types to symbolize the connections of female friendship.

pudding,’ said Anne. ‘Bread-and-butter pudding is suicidal.’ ‘I only eat a little bit of everything,’ Selina said. ‘I feel starved all the time, actually.’ ‘Well, I’m doing brain-work,’ said Jane” (34). Jane acknowledges her inability to perform will power with the malnourished glamor of her colleagues, especially the hyper-poised and slim Selina. Nevertheless, she has internalized the need to demonstrate one’s compliance with the feminine mandate of dieting. Because she has not been able to comply, she puts forth her justification; she (implicitly *unlike them*), does “brain-work,” and needs bread-and-butter pudding to fuel her lively and hardworking mind.

Spark’s signature ironic wit comes to bear as she shares Jane’s internal monologue, casting doubt on the legitimacy of her sugar-as-fuel system. She introduces the character thus: Jane “spent much of her time in eager dread of the next meal, and in making resolutions what to eat of it and what to leave, and in making counter-resolutions in view of the fact that her work at the publishers’ was essentially mental, which meant that her brain had to be fed more than most people” (32-33). The weakness of Jane’s justifications suggests the degree to which Spark is inviting us to laugh at her. These justifications reflect, then, not a concrete cultural link between increased fuel and professional achievement, but rather the personal narrative Jane has built in order to shore up her sense of worth. In this way, Jane’s method of fueling her body does not conform to modernist industrial fantasies of efficiency and mechanization. Her fuel, in the form of a pudding full of what we might call “empty calories” and synthetic foods necessitated by rationing, does not in reality enjoin her to increased productivity or a mechanical organization. The energy it provides is more amorphous—as much about the pleasure of taste and the comfort of fullness as metabolic energy. As a result, Spark puts her emphasis on the fuel narrative as useful to Jane’s self-justifications. Like other feminist figures in previous chapters, from recovery scholars to intermediaries and avant-garde geniuses, Jane uses her brain-work—and the

bread-and-butter pudding that she claims makes it possible—as a source of feminist identification and vindication. She makes these internal claims to combat the exclusion she feels from the other women, both explicit and implicit. Spark’s free indirect discourse often picks up the casual cruelty of the club girls, as when she attributes a stray bit of dialogue to “Jane Wright, a fat girl who worked for a publisher and who was considered to be brainy but somewhat below standard, socially, at the May of Teck” (20). Jane’s obsession with her “brain-work” for a publishing house represents her attempt to counteract the pain of this exclusion by making herself superior in another sector.

Jane’s chosen phrase, brain-work, might help us explore the reputation of fatness and intellect in her historical moment and our own. In their influential work of cultural theory, *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant argues that unhealthy eating and fatness constitute responses to the exhausting labors of late capitalism—responses that give only momentary relief, not substantial political action. Because of the harm that wage work and other capitalist indignities inflict on the body, they write, we may seek ultimately fruitless “counterabsorption in episodic refreshment, for example in sex, or spacing out, or *food that is not for thought*” (119, emphasis added). Berlant represents “unhealthy” food, especially that synthetically produced by globalized foodways, as necessarily empty of political and intellectual value. Binge-eating they take as a prime example of their concept of “cruel optimism,” a structural, compulsive attachment to an object that inhibits one’s flourishing. The content of that object, they argue, is irrelevant; it is the structure of desiring something that hinders us which keeps us coming back to the object. Food, hence, cannot be for thought, only for a kind of empty self-soothing that shortens rather than sustains the eater’s life. However, Jane’s own habits resist the terms of Berlant’s formulation, and if we take her example seriously, as Spark does despite her consistent irony, it may revise

our understanding of fat's power. Jane posits that her diet—shaped by rationing, the Club's budget, and her sweet tooth—does inform her thinking. Her food is indeed *for thought* in that it feeds her intellectual life, both as a nascent professional and as an individual.

Even as Jane wields her brain-work as the evidence of her personal modernity, she remains beholden to culturally scripted shames around over-consumption. In fact, her personal negotiations with eating occupy brain space that she could better apply to other tasks. In one scene, Spark writes, “Jane paused for thought. She ate a square of chocolate to keep her brain going till supper-time... She regretted having eaten the chocolate, and put the rest of the bar right at the back of a shelf in her cupboard where it was difficult to reach, as if hiding it from a child” (49). Jane's feelings about her own body are divided between self-justification and self-flagellation, in large part because she has internalized the supposed moral imperative to dieting and slimness. In fact, Jane's struggle suggests that certain dieting tropes and narratives have a longer historical precedent than we might expect. Though Jane is hiding her chocolate before the rise of the corporatized diet industry, she anticipates its messaging. Namely, fat people are expected to live on the precipice of becoming thin. Their bodies become acceptable on the condition that they are temporary, a cocoon from which an appropriate, thin, “healthy” body will emerge. The conditional nature of the acceptance makes fat identity of an ongoing kind *syntactically impossible*. Lucas Crawford writes that “it is not even possible to say that anyone is fat; fat people are launched into the future anterior tense in which we ‘will have been’ fat” (448). The temporal confusion of this formulation has the effect of obliterating identity and solidarity between fat people or dieters. The fatty bread-and-butter pudding is rendered “suicidal,” an annihilating threat to the waistline and to selfhood. Spark's ironic flair for the hyperbolic slang of young women does nothing to temper the intensity of their dread.

The temporal disorder of the diet has a narrative, even generic structure, one that reproduces many of the literary innovations of the twentieth century. This narrative, not incidentally, emerged during the era of literary modernism in the 1910s and '20s, and intensified after World War II. Like modernism itself, the genre of the diet story promised its participants a revolutionary new life, resplendent with reinvention, mobility, agency, and freedom from the heavy weight of a stolid Victorian past. Unlike modernism, however, the diet withholds these possibilities until the body has been brought to heel. In order to enter modernity, the eater must change herself fundamentally, leaving the past behind with the pounds. The pull toward the future in this narrative is so strong that Schwartz compares it to science fiction, “extrapolating into the best and lightest futures” (4). Furthermore, he argues, dieting cannot incorporate any uninterrupted account of the past, because “each diet carries forward fantasies of a body released and transformed” (4). In response, one buzzword of the anti-fatphobic movement, “fat acceptance,” signifies not only an emotional or political sanctioning but also a resistance to feverish temporal reconfiguration. Fat acceptance requires people to recognize their bulk as a condition of the *longue durée*, and consequently to rewrite the “future anterior tense” of fat storytelling. Jane Wright, who attempts with mixed success to incorporate her body as a condition of her professional needs, represents an early gesture of what we may call fat modernity. Rather than shedding pounds in order to come into a new, revolutionized life of slim mobility, Jane takes fatness—with all its matronly, conventional associations—as a paradoxical condition of modernity for herself.

It is not incidental that Spark sets her most weight-centric book at the close of World War II. Her attention on the end of the war (not to mention the waning of the British Empire and of modernism) demonstrates the intensified scrutiny of nonnormative bodies in wartime. Rationing

and scarcity made slimness a marker of allegiance to king and country. Katherine LeBesco writes that during the war, being fat was a “nearly treasonable condition” (56). The visibility of fat on a body meant that civilians could be instantly evaluated for their loyalty to the war effort. The one male interloper at the May of Teck Club thinks with admiration of the Club’s slimmest and most glamorous inhabitant, Selina: “her body was so austere and economically furnished” (92). Selina’s body is not only sexually desirable and slim enough to slip through the top-floor window; it also anticipates with panache the austerity measures that would continue long after the war itself.⁵⁶

By contrast, Jane’s unruly body prevents her from interpolation as a true citizen. The obsessive management of rations in Spark’s novel serves to sublimate weight-shaming under the rubric of patriotism. This discourse is especially beloved of the Club’s middle-aged spinster residents, whose failures to secure either career or husband has made them lifelong practitioners of austerity. They are, perpetually, girls of slender means, and they enact these restrictions on the younger girls who may still have prospects for mobility. “Collie now said to Jarvie, ‘Are you going to waste your coffee with the milk in it?’ This was a moral rebuke, for milk was on the ration. Jarvie turned, smoothed, patted, and pulled straight the gloves on her lap and breathed in and out. Jane wanted to tear off her clothes and run naked into the street, screaming. Collie looked with disapproval at Jane’s bare fat knees” (77-78). In this conversation, Collie deflects her own frustration with rationing austerity—and with her friend Jarvie—by observing Jane’s fat knees as the ultimate infraction of the ration. To the spinster ladies, Jane embodies a threat to their way of life that in actuality comes from elsewhere. As the title of the novel plays on, the

⁵⁶ For more on austerity and gender in postwar fiction, see Andrea Adolph, “Austerity, Consumption, and Postwar Gender Disruption in Mollie Panter-Downes’s *One Fine Day*.”

crucible of wartime Britain evinces a slippage between literal and metaphorical slenderness, where economic and political constraints are conflated with constraints on the body. If World War II was in many regards a civilian war, its success can be measured and regulated on the compliant bodies of its citizens.⁵⁷ The May of Teck Club, designed to mold young (white, middle-class) women into citizen-soldiers, works as a microcosm of this war effort. Joori Joyce Lee writes that “in a time of economic constraints, [Collie and Jarvie] maintain the institution by forging a slender body, whether it be the female body or the institutional body, and by regulating any production of wastes” (251). Jane’s failure to adhere to ration protocol—which they assume but do not witness, since it is Jarvie who has wasted the milk—articulates the indignity of rationing and the war machine in general. And her fat knees offend them as the representation of a new generation of bare-legged women who do not ascribe to more conservative dress. In fact, we might think of “bare fat knees” as the epitome of fat modernity. Jane takes pride and identity from her status as a modern working woman, complete with newly short skirt-set. But her body does not conform to the slender terms in which such attire or professionalism seems appropriate, rendering a glimpse of her knee a paradoxical and infuriating object.

At the close of the novel, Spark fulfills the Chekhov’s Gun of the top-floor window in order to confirm the role of weight in women’s futures. An undetonated bomb, embedded in the garden during the Blitz four years before, is set off, creating a blast that sets fire to the club from the bottom up. Several of the characters are trapped in the top floor as the fire follows them. They gather in the lavatory; the slimmest girls slip through the window and easily escape to the neighboring roof. The rest of the young women must wait for the fire department to open the roof, a wait that grows increasingly dire as the minutes tick by, provoking hysteria in some and

⁵⁷ For more on World War II as a “civilian war,” and on the imperial and racial constraints of citizenship, see Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*.

poetic calm in others. Importantly, it is not only Jane who cannot fit through the narrow window; a variety of body types fail the extreme constraints of its diameter, only seven inches. The girls find the window to be a peculiarly discerning measure of sleekness; it “was known all through the club” that the maximum hip circumference is 36.25 inches, but even the precise measurement cannot fully describe the demands of the window: “As the exit had to be effected sideways with a manoeuvring of shoulders, much depended on the size of the bones, and on the texture of the individual flesh and muscles, whether flexible enough to compress easily or whether too firm” (123). The window allegorizes the ever increasing and unpredictable demands on a woman’s body for access to safety, legitimacy, and freedom. It does so with notably obstetric language, as the women are *born* out of the narrow canal of the window. These constraints target fatness but also have little regard for other kinds of body modification, namely the maternal body itself. One of the women, a visitor to the club, has recently become pregnant, and has expanded just enough to be unable to recreate her previous shimmies through the window. This predicament suggests that fulfilling the feminine task of child-bearing will in fact bar her from other forms of femininity and safety. The narrowness of the window punishes other traits beyond fatness and maternity; three of the women who cannot escape from the window are newly released from military work. Spark writes, “all three had the hefty, built-up appearance that five years in the Army was apt to give to a woman” (129). Patriotism and service to the war effort have not protected these women from the demands of bodily austerity. In fact, Spark suggests that real citizenship is inaccessible for women—at least those of slender means. Those who can escape through the window are treated as sexual objects; those who cannot are at the mercy of German bombs and delayed firefighters.

Only one woman dies in the fire, and Jane, scrambling up the firemen's ladder into a prolonged fat modernity, survives. The casualty is the poetic and pastoral Joanna, a vicar's daughter who gives elocution lessons. While Jane pushes her way up the ladder, "well built" and "healthy looking" Joanna continues to recite poetry until all the other girls have been rescued to stave off their hysteria. Spark goes out of her way to decouple fatness from inevitable death, refusing to doom Jane for the traits that have minimized her throughout the novel. Ultimately, it is Jane we see again in an occasional flash-forward framing device throughout the novel, much like the device used in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961). Spark uses these narrative disruptions to confirm Jane's ongoing life and professionalism postwar, a glimpse of the future not afforded to the other characters. But we get no glimpse of her personal life or updated dress size. Her "future anterior sense" does not require her to become thin in order to remain central to the story, but Spark cannot quite imagine a fat future either. By this gesture, the novel reasserts—with mortal stakes—the paradoxical status of female fatness during the period. Jane's body puts her life at risk and simultaneously gives her the kind of fuel (caloric and emotional) she needs to advocate and provide for herself.

Racialization and Accumulation in *On Beauty*

The years that transpired between *The Girls of Slender Means*' setting in 1945 and its publication in 1963 saw the meteoric rise of the dieting industry. As women became increasingly recognized as consumers, a market sector emerged to sell them the possibility of slimness.⁵⁸ At the same time, Schwartz writes, after the war women were expected to pivot from careers back to motherhood, and "the mother loomed even larger in the sad café of obesity. Generations later she

⁵⁸ Weight Watchers was founded in the early 1960s; Schwartz also writes that during the early '60s there was increased medical panic about childhood fatness. Exercise television and dieting books also exploded.

remains there still” (195). Motherhood, itself the most central trope of female conventionality, has often shared an association with fatness. In the British context this figure arrives from that of the celebrated rotund Victorian matron, made unfashionable in the twentieth century. On both sides of the Atlantic, fatness and motherhood became linked through their implications of feminine intractability and drag on resources.

But a history of fat motherhood after World War II, especially but not only in the American context, would be remiss without centering the roles of imperialism, race, and racialization. Legacies of imperialism reside in the backdrop of *The Girls of Slender Means*, in which “the taffeta” dress that the girls use as a metric of slimness is printed with an exotic “floral pattern as from the Pacific Islands” (89). A minor character dies after the main events of the novel in an uprising in Haiti, an abstracted and curious locale. Spark is just beginning to articulate the connections between women’s bodily management and the management enacted on racialized bodies under colonialism and racism.

To more fully explore this link, especially through the figure of the middle-aged mother, I turn to Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*. In her novel, set in 2005 but playing on EM Forster’s *Howards End* (1910), Smith updates Jane Wright’s experience of fatness and professionalism. Her protagonist Kiki Simmonds has completed a pattern of upward mobility alongside her weight gain, but her body remains overdetermined by demeaning tropes of Black womanhood and fat impotence. Smith encourages us to see weight gain—especially over the course of an adult life replete with struggle, work, and accomplishments—as *accumulation*, often reflecting the accrual of confidence and feminist identification. The conflict of the novel arises because Kiki’s surroundings, including her unfaithful husband, can only perceive accumulation as *baggage*—a betrayal, rather than a surplus, of modern femininity.

Smith establishes her first American-set novel as an entry in the ongoing work of African American history, and especially the American Black middle-class. Kiki lives with her white British husband, Howard Belsey, and three children in a fictional town analogous to Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is an art history professor at a prestigious liberal arts college; she is a hospital administrator. They live in a beautiful three-story house willed to them by Kiki's grandmother, who inherited it from a beneficent white employer. The décor of the house, which Smith often details in her sprawling realist style, affirms the arc of upward mobility that Kiki's family has accomplished. Howard and Kiki have hung a series of portraits in the stairwell: "After the children come four generations of the Simmondses' maternal line. These are placed in triumphant, deliberate sequence: Kiki's great-great-grandmother, a house-slave; great-grandmother, a maid; and then her grandmother, a nurse" (17). Kiki herself represents the final link in the chain, "a hospital administrator and final inheritor of 83 Langham Drive." Her portrait records her at the height of her power: "In the photo she is all teeth and hair, receiving a state award for out-reach services to the local community. A rogue white arm clinches what was, back then, an extremely neat waist in tight denim" (18). The house's décor narrates a linear progression of Black womanhood that gradually professionalizes care work, from enslavement in the domestic sphere to corporate administration of healthcare.⁵⁹ Kiki reaches the zenith of her family's mobility not only because she has become financially independent and kept her last name in the rubrics of second wave feminism, but also because she has received institutional recognition for the forms of work her ancestors have always done. Hers is a liberal, respectable form of Black success. The photograph that marks Kiki's achievement also records the height of

⁵⁹ This arc, which begins with chattel slavery, departs from Smith's other work in its distinct Americanness. In novels like *White Teeth* (2000) and *NW* (2012), Smith explores this theme in the British context, where Black fat bodies are associated less with Mammy domesticity and more with the Caribbean and West African diasporas and exaggerated foreignness.

her sexual viability: her exuberant “teeth and hair,” and most importantly an “extremely neat waist” that can be encircled by Howard’s proud—but disembodied—arm. Howard’s arm, while representing his absence from the achievement itself, also seems to sanction her and her achievement with its encircling of the slim waist. The trouble, for the Howard/Kiki marriage and perhaps for many Black women, is that Kiki’s professional achievement comes to mirror her physical accumulation, a bodily change that Howard will not sanction. The core tension of the novel exists between Kiki’s personal experience of her middle-aged body and that of those who read and judge her. She experiences her bulk as a byproduct of a full and complicated life, in which she feels at home. However, she is interpolated by a vast and often paradoxical set of racializing tropes, which are predicated upon and exaggerated by the presence of an American obsession, Black fatness.⁶⁰

In one early scene, Kiki demonstrates an awareness of her body’s signals that eloquently paraphrases the work Black feminists have done on Black fat womanhood. She attends a street fair with her son and becomes engaged in a bartering conversation with a man selling jewelry. As the conversation continues, Kiki identifies the role her body plays in the negotiation:

Kiki suspected already that this would be one of those familiar exchanges in which her enormous spellbinding bosom would play a subtle (or not so subtle, depending on the person) silent third role in the conversation... The size was sexual and at the same time more than sexual: sex was only one small element of its symbolic range. If she were white, maybe it would refer only to sex, but she was not. And so her chest gave off a mass of signals beyond her direct control: sassy, sisterly, predatory, motherly, threatening, comforting—it was a mirror-world she had stepped into in her mid forties, a strange fabulation of the person she believed she was. (47)

⁶⁰ For an in-depth history of the racism inherent to anti-fat prejudices, see Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, and Da’Shaun L. Harrison, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*.

This passage emphasizes the powerful and paradoxical implications that Kiki's body, especially her "bosom," conveys. The size of her chest both amplifies and dissipates its sexual power. It is her race, Smith argues, that makes sexuality one among a contradictory "mass of signals." The list of adjectives that Kiki's bosom "g[ives] off" run the gamut of racializing language applied to Black women over several generations. This is to say, Kiki carries, involuntarily, a form of somatic history with her bulk. In its associations with the "sassy," "predatory," and "threatening," her bosom references the Jezebel figure so often blamed for the sexual transgressions of white men. In the alternating adjectives, "sisterly, motherly, comforting," it recalls the figure of the mammy, a desexualized domestic laborer whose "body is grotesquely marked by excess," writes Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, and thus casts dainty white womanhood and childhood in relief (6).⁶¹ These two tropes, used as tools of cultural violence since the nineteenth century, purport to describe opposing forms of Black womanhood, although both are demeaning flat types. Deborah Gray White has argued that because Black women receive the distortions of racism and misogyny simultaneously, they are forced to carry the contradictory tropes of rapacious Black men and domestic, submissive white women (28). The confluences of these types arrive in the intersections of the Jezebel and mammy figures. As a result, Kiki, through the device of a large chest, must accept both tropes. We can note that once again, fatness can provoke paradoxical associations in its witnesses; Kiki's chest makes her desexualized and hypersexualized quite like Jane Wright's fat knees seem to propel her both in and out of modern relevance.

⁶¹ The fact that the mammy is a racist white fiction is perhaps emphasized by the consolidation of the trope over time; Wallace-Sanders writes that before the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, no mammy characters were described as fat (7). Afterward, this characteristic became a central component of the type.

However, the circumstances of Kiki's reception are particular, reflecting not only the entry of Black voluptuous desirability into American culture in the late twentieth century but also the legacy of African diaspora in the United States. Black viewers, representing several different eras of enslavement and migration, often regard her body with enthusiasm, reflecting a not universal but vocal valuing of large bodies by Afrocentric cultures. Andrea Elizabeth Shaw writes that in many West African communities, girls are prepared for adulthood and marriage by visiting fattening houses, where they receive social training as well as a rich diet to fill out their figures. Shaw argues that for these communities, the acquisition of maturity and education coincides with bodily expansion. She writes, "The physical fat that they take away with them on their bodies is a symbol of the cultural immersion that fattening houses represent and locate the girls in a specific aesthetic realm with Afrocentric roots" (7). A large or voluptuous figure, then, signals maturity, education, sexuality, and inclusion in the dominant culture. Shaw also points out that extreme thinness can read as desexualized or dangerous to an Afrocentric perspective. Shaw draws on the example of the fattening house as a largely metaphorical antecedent, and the case can illuminate Kiki's experience as well. Her weight gain has accompanied her arrival in middle age, with nearly grown children, professional achievements, and the confidence to rebuke (and potentially divorce) her unfaithful husband.

The most interesting consequence of this accumulation is its legibility and value to certain kinds of viewers—namely, to Black viewers, especially non-American Black viewers. Kiki's unlikely friend Carlene Kipps, a conservative woman from the Caribbean, compliments Kiki on her body, saying, "It looks very well on you. You carry it well" (91). When Kiki's own daughter decries her mother's lapsed beauty, the rapper-poet Carl reproaches her, saying, "Fat

ladies need love too” (139). Most directly, Kiki herself understands how different communities will read (or rather impose) different associations on her body.

But then, thought Kiki, they were brought up that way, these white American boys: I’m the Aunt Jemima on the cookie boxes of their childhood, the pair of thick ankles Tom and Jerry played around. Of course they find me funny. And yet I could cross the river to Boston and barely be left alone for five minutes at a time. Only last week a young brother half her age had trailed Kiki up and down Newbury for an hour. (51)

Here Kiki demonstrates her awareness of the mammy type and how thoroughly white Americans have been taught to recognize it. The truncated images of Aunt Jemima and the Tom and Jerry maid crop parts of the Black woman’s body as iconography for domestic labor. The whole body—especially the sensual curves of the torso—are eliminated. But young Black men who have received a more Afrocentric education can appreciate the aspects of her body that are invisible or undesirable to white men. The paradoxical reading, then, which perceives Kiki as “threatening [and] comforting,” jezebel and mammy, simultaneously, reflects a cultural cross pollination. As a consequence of diaspora, Western and Afrocentric standards of femininity have intersected to create an impossible ideal of beauty, which desires slimness and voluptuousness, exoticism and pale skin, at the same time. This hybridized expectation, which capitalizes on Black and brown bodies to serve Western capitalist interests, has synthesized the most famous bodies in contemporary celebrity culture. There is far more to be said about how we have transferred the oversized and voluptuous buttocks as cultural touchstone from the racialized and silenced Sarah Baartman (often called Venus Hottentot) to white self-promoting celebrities like Kim Kardashian West.⁶²

The trouble for Kiki, of course, is that she cannot and would not aspire to white-passing hybridity—she does not have an hourglass figure, a slim waist to pair with her rounded posterior.

⁶² In *White Negroes*, Lauren Michele Jackson writes that Kardashian West, who has persistently flirted with Blackness to enhance her celebrity, “is the stress test of racial formation. Kim is America.”

Instead she has a “gut,” in the most literal sense: an unmissable protruding belly. In consequence, her Blackness and fatness seem to reinforce and emphasize each other, and thus to further *articulate whiteness*.⁶³ The American obsession with an “obesity epidemic” has always reflected fear and disgust at non-white bodies. LeBesco writes that in the American cultural imagination, “Fatness seems... to render its inhabitants not racially adequate” (59). Elena Levy-Navarro argues that the specious and medicalizing term “obesity” “has helped to define what it was and is to be ‘white’ or ‘American,’ just as it helped to define what it was to be nonwhite or ethnic” (16). These distinctions draw on the figures of fat Black welfare recipients and other racist tropes, figures that demonstrate a fear of Black appetite. Critics like LeBesco and Anna Mollow have noted the shared eugenicist tendencies of anti-obesity and racist rhetorics. “Tellingly,” Mollow writes, “the behaviors to which fatness is commonly attributed replicate stereotypes of Black people as undisciplined and unable to control their appetites [because of supposed inborn physical deficiencies]” (106). The consequence of these discourses—which are both peculiarly American and felt in other diasporic contexts, as Smith’s British eye observes—again enforces paradox. Fat Black people are both rapacious and nonsexual, hyper-powerful and illegitimate.

Fatness dictates how race is articulated to such a degree that Smith identifies bodily disparity as the key conflict of her novel. Kiki and Howard have a mixed marriage, not only in race, national origin, and education, but in their experience of middle age. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Smith explained that she viewed Kiki’s weight a friction as important as their different races. “Their problem is that... she's getting older and that does different things to

⁶³ In *Fearing the Black Body*, Sabrina Strings writes that “the fear of the imagined ‘fat Black woman’ was created by racial and religious ideologies that have been used to both degrade Black women *and* discipline white women” (6). The trope of differentiation used by Jane to justify her body (“I’m not like those other girls”) worked through racialized dieting rhetorics to associate white racial purity with slimness. Strings takes her theory of “social distinctions” from Pierre Bourdieu; we find it too in the unhappy justifications of dieting women.

women than it does to men.” Smith expresses the consequences as a feminist critique of Howard, who wanly uses Kiki’s body to justify his affair with a petite white colleague. Kiki, with the perceptive authority of her middle-aged accumulation, understands the intersectional dynamics at play. In a marital argument, she says, ““My *leg* weights more than that woman. What have you made me *look like* in front of everybody in this town? You married a big Black bitch and you run off with a fucking leprechaun?” (207). Kiki’s comical epithet *leprechaun* pinpoints the Anglo/Irish intensity of both whiteness and slenderness that Howard’s chosen paramour exemplifies. Her contrasting type, “big Black bitch,” is less comical. Kiki’s anger in this confrontation arises from her awareness that her weight gain has conscripted her into rigid racial and gender positioning. “Big,” “Black,” and “bitch” come to require and confirm each other, piling up as the alliterative phrase that Kiki voices because Howard will not.

Howard’s disappointing response to his wife’s anger demonstrates the larger cultural response to fat womanhood. Namely, that fatness is illegible to him as a source of insight or power. It can only register as a betrayal of the very specific and exoticized form of Black femininity that attracted him, when she was “all teeth and hair.” Howard corrects Kiki’s angry rhetorical question: ““Well I married a slim Black woman, actually. Not that it’s relevant”” (207). He undercuts his own protest because he knows it is invalid, but nevertheless cannot help pointing out that Kiki’s current body feels like a denial of his initial interest. Kiki’s response is both instinctive and insightful: ““Holy *shit*. You want to sue me for breach of contract, Howard? Product expanded without warning?”” (207). She identifies how Howard has treated her as a “product,” and the expectation that she retain her market value by not expanding. But perhaps the greatest injustice of this conflict is not in Howard’s disinterest in his wife’s middle-aged body, but rather his inability to perceive the new capacities of that body in cognitive and

emotional intelligence, the “gut instinct,” or the kernel of the erotic within oneself, as Lorde would have it. Just as Jane Wright needs dessert to do her brain-work, Kiki has embodied insight predicated on both literal and metaphorical matters of the stomach.

Intriguingly, Kiki often has the chance to demonstrate this intelligence in conversation with another Black woman, her friend Carlene Kipps. In one scene, Kiki brings a pie to Carlene’s house to apologize after a misunderstanding. Carlene, who is in ill health, doesn’t touch the pie, but at the end of the conversation, Kiki “discover[s]” that she has eaten three pieces. The pie has served as a facilitator to the reconciliation between them. In another conversation, Carlene asks her politely, ““You are not a *little* woman, are you?”” (90). Kiki reflects that her unbothered response to the question comes from her un-little body itself: “Her gut had its own way of going about things, and she was used to its executive decisions; the feeling of immediate safety some people gave her, and, conversely, the nausea others induced” (90). Here, a discussion of Kiki’s literal bulk also illuminates the figurative powers of the gut. Kiki’s stomach has the authority to make its own “executive decisions,” a phrase that professionalizes a more colloquial version of the phrase: *to go with your gut*. In *Gut Feminism*, Elizabeth Wilson encourages feminists to engage with biology more substantively, and argues that the gut itself serves as a lynchpin between embodied and cognitive/psychological knowledges. “The gut is always minded,” she writes, “it ruminates” (22). Kiki extends this argument by conceiving of the gut here not only as a biological fulcrum but also as the term for a protruding stomach. The gut, framed this way, signifies a pronounced belly that demarcates the body as having a nonnormative shape and, thus, nonnormative knowledges. Kiki has refined her gut instincts through years of the labor and wisdom that life has engendered in her, giving those instincts “executive” authority. The method of that instinct involves attention to the “safety” or

“nausea” that others provoke in her. The mechanics of the stomach serve as the core of Kiki’s interpersonal evaluations.

This passage, which coordinates the intersection of the literal and metaphorical gut, can help us pose an important question about doing fat studies and fat history. More often than we discuss (and theorize) fat bodies, we use fatness as metaphor. Echoing Susan Sontag’s famous essay “Illness as Metaphor,” we can suspect the limiting qualities of a purely figurative interest in the stomach. That is to say, that fat people may have a more articulated sense of “gut” epistemologies that those considered thin. This is true not only because they can gauge a viewer’s kindness toward their nonnormative body, as Kiki does with Carlene, but also because a pronounced relationship to embodiment and food can offer increased clarity about these subjects. Food may in fact be for thought. Thinking about the fat body as a source of knowledge and sagacity, as it is for Kiki, can contribute to the Black feminist history of valuing embodied knowledge. The epistemology of the gut merely centers fatness in a larger tradition of revaluing women’s instincts. Audre Lorde deems this power the erotic, and calls it “a considered source of power and information” (285). Lorde identifies a key phrase for voicing as “true knowledge” the presence of the erotic: “It feels right to me” (287). Kiki takes up this form of knowledge and, because of her particular circumstances, locates it decisively in the stomach.

This frame also requires an adjusted view on the fat body as a historical archive. What does the fat body accumulate? Because they perceive exuberant eating as a soothing response to trauma, Berlant writes that fat represents “the congealed form of history that hurts” (142). Their reading, which is sympathetic (in a certain sense) to the plight of “overweight” African Americans, especially those living in poverty, considers fatness a legacy of trauma upon marginalized bodies, “congeal[ing]” as insulation against pain. Critiques of this argument, like

those made by Crawford and, arguably, by *On Beauty* itself, would take issue not with the theory of the body as an archive of its experiences. We have seen that bodies, especially fat bodies, accrue meaning and history over time. However, Berlant hazards an unhappily deterministic relation between fatness and pain. Crawford asks, “When all bodies are archives that do not just remember their pasts but are built of these pasts, why are fat bodies given nearly mythical powers to signify traumatic experience?” (454). As we have seen, the answer to Crawford’s question lies in the intertwining of Black subjection with the specter of fatness, making it a racialized flashpoint for fears about nonproductivity and excessive sexuality on the conservative right and abject suffering and moralizing health concerns on the left.

Smith’s novel refuses both of these accounts of fat trauma. Though others’ *responses* to her weight cause her pain, Kiki’s body itself represents a path of progress, confidence, and wisdom that has accrued over the course of her life. She says to Carlene, a complimentary observer, “‘It’s just me—I’m used to it’” (91). The “history that hurts”—racialization and objectification that is ongoing—congeals not on her body but in her husband’s response to it. Though Jane Wright is not quite able to appreciate her weight so fully, she too derives energy, warmth, and identity from her body. We might recognize the strides made by these characters—and the analogous strain of popular fat-positive feminism—as ultimately individualist, identitarian forms of feminist progress. But to dismiss fat as a component of feminist history or category of analysis on these grounds would be to misunderstand the degree to which fatness serves as a narrative juncture between individuals and collectives of women.

Although both characters incur the disapproval of objectifying men, fatness is often policed by other women. Fannie Hurst names this dynamic in *No Food With My Meals* when she writes, “A favorite hypothesis has it that, in the main, women dress and adorn themselves

primarily for the appraising eye of women. It is then also fair to assume that women reduce for women” (13-14). “Reducing,” then, is a collective enterprise presumed to be shared by women—an assumption so powerful that it can be used to target individuals who do not manage the task, and get fat. Jane attempts to invert this dynamic by perceiving her thin peers as empty-headed and shallow girls. She compensates for her unacceptable body by feeling intellectually and superior to the other women, transforming fatness into a tool of individual mobility. But neither she nor Kiki can conceive of fat mobility as a collective, organized undertaking in the way that diet-policing has often been. Both characters are aware of the immense historical and tropic burdens that their bodies have placed upon them, a heavy collectivity of large-bosomed women. In Kiki’s case, the association with the silenced and disembodied “thick ankles” of Black enslaved women and servants makes shared fat experience understandably uncomfortable. As a result, in both instances fat empowerment remains an individual enterprise, a sign of interiority, intellect, and maturity as distinct from other women. Noting that this remains true for Spark, reflecting on the 1940s, and Smith, on the 2000s, should suggest to us the isolating power of a fatphobic culture over the *longue durée*. Ultimately, this isolation reflects a larger predicament for women in the twentieth century, where being “modern” seems to require shedding both pounds and the heaviness of an association with other (undesirable) women.

The “Make It New” Diet: Fatness and the Idioms of Modernism

Although these texts were composed long after the traditional bounds of the modernist period, their citations of early-century events and aesthetics in conjunction with their fat protagonists consistently point out the internal contradictions of modernist ideals. We have seen this disruptive power over the course of this chapter, as when Jane Wright’s fat knees give her

more agency and freedom than Selina's willowy and "economically furnished" frame. Scholars of fat history consistently attend to the emergence of the slim silhouette as the correct way to embody modern womanhood beginning in the early twentieth century. Smith, who benefits from the hindsight of the fully canonized modernist period, often uses its catchphrases in revised contexts. Kiki's daughter Zora also struggles with her weight and self-presentation, and once reflects upon a disappointing outfit: "This was not what she had meant when she left the house. This was not it at all" (129). Zora's education in TS Eliot among other canonical figures has made their phrases available to her in describing late modern experiences that are also mundane, personal, and feminine. Smith expands the scope of the modernist reference in Zora's name, an unacknowledged tribute to Harlem Renaissance author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, a choice that suggests Kiki's commitment to Black feminist history as well as the centrality of early century literary history.

Despite the thoroughness of Smith's and Zora's education, the constraints of modernist precedent make clear the impossible criteria for fatness in modernism. At the close of Kiki's frank and painful argument with her husband, she describes a personal evolution that has empowered her but will not propel her to the total revolution that modernism would value. She pleads, "I don't want someone to have *contempt* for who I've become. I've watched *you* become too. And I feel like I've done my best to honour the past, and what you were and what you are now—but you want something more than that, something new. I can't *be* new" (398). Here Kiki confirms that the temporal revolution of a diet would indeed conform to the beloved modernist axiom to "make it new." In rejecting "contempt" for her expanding body, she denounces newness as a misogynistic desire for sexual novelty and viability in slim, compliant women. It is not necessarily true that Kiki "can't *be* new"; rather, she refuses to try. She turns away from the

highly structured narrative demands of the diet, her husband, and the modernist fantasy of revolution. Instead, she aligns herself with history, and with the racialized collectivity of “thick ankles” with which she ambivalently identifies. However, Kiki’s refusal of modernist-style revolution on Howard’s terms does not banish her from progress or from modernity more loosely defined. She views her own acceptance of Howard as the process of the accumulation of change over the *longue durée*. She has honored “the past, and what you were, and what you are now,” a narrative structure that *adds* rather than *replaces*. She perceives her middle-aged husband as an accumulation of traits (and pounds) rather than as an object that must be radically restructured in order to be compelling.

The same structure applies to Kiki and Jane as figures of fat modernity. They carry with them the history of heavy, matronly female bodies as well as the weight that sugar-as-fuel has brought them. The modernist contexts of these novels serve to illustrate the paradoxical status of these women as subjects and signifiers. Their weight only emphasizes the degree to which women are always required to carry the burdens of the past, both literally and semantically. Rita Felski writes, synthesizing the implicit claims of so many modern myths, “Woman is aligned with the *dead weight* of tradition and conservatism that the active, newly autonomous, and self-defining subject must seek to transcend” (2, emphasis added). Felski instinctively identifies women and the traditional position with “dead weight,” a phrase that connotes unwieldiness, lag, and lack of agency and subjectivity. Modernism, and the patterns of thought that linger long after its initial peak, recoil at the presence of *dead weight* as a threat to each aesthetic and ideological trait they prize. We fear fatness because it appears to threaten the entry of women into true modernity, and, implicitly, freedom and agency. Modernism so successfully valorized sleekness

and the “austere and economically furnished” in bodies, machinery, and aesthetics that we have been unable to dislodge them as standards of value.

These novels remind us that modernity and feminist waves have not in reality been built in sleekness. The weight of these characters and their work has never been “dead weight,” but rather the cushion and support for a great deal of personal progress. Their weight facilitates Jane and Kiki’s entries into certain forms of personal modernity—experiences that might become more collective with sustained effort from critics and activists. Doing feminist modernist scholarship, then, requires us to take account of the presence and the capacities of fat. Giving the histories of fat women’s experiences also necessities theorizing the presence of fat-as-metaphor in the period’s central underpinnings. Elizabeth Freeman, drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, writes that modernist styles tend to either burden or strip down syntactical structures. Some texts, she writes, “overloa[d] the dominant language to the point of explosion via neologism, hypotaxis, or semantic overpacking, as in the work of James Joyce. This is a kind of ‘fat’ aesthetic that rebinds fixed meanings and allows new associative chains to form” (xix). Another form, she writes, which pares the language down to a disorienting degree of ambiguity and repetition, as in the work of Gertrude Stein, could be called a “thin aesthetic.” This characterization might surprise the taxed reader of *The Making of Americans*, which seems to embrace excess as a modernist experiment. But Stein’s excess works feverishly to limit clarity and narrative order, always using more words to do so. In this regard, we might call Stein’s not a thin aesthetic but a *dieting aesthetic*. She restricts every component of her writing while remaining fat in the surfeit of her sentences. The effect is as disorienting on the page as it is for women who have been promised a diet as revolution only to discover that dieting, for both physiological and emotional reasons, is a lifelong and impossible endeavor.

What options remain open outside a thin or dieting aesthetic? The fat aesthetic, qua Deleuze and Guattari, slots comfortably into modernist formalist values, or even epitomize them, in the case of Joyce. But this heuristic becomes fraught, as Freeman implies, when fat aesthetics represent or merge with fat *bodies*. Though Joyce does celebrate the allure of the voluptuous Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*, he does not center his attention on her body's professional or nonsexual capacities. By contrast, Spark and Smith's novels about fat women, which sample the historical trappings and literary styles of modernism, ultimately exceed its formal constraints. In both instances, the authors court modernist formal tropes only to deflate or evade them. Spark gives an account of impoverished life in the city during wartime, but she refuses the modernist trope of singular, deep interiority for a single character. She also rebuffs modernism's persistent (if not universal) attitude of self-seriousness. *The Girls of Slender Means* instead surveys the thoughts and experiences of a coterie of characters, all of whom are characterized by groupthink, cliché, and mundane interests. It does so with a consistent attitude of humor that ranges from cruel and dry to slapstick. Smith, for her part, cites Forster with the frequent additions of references to popular culture, lowbrow slang, and excessive realist description that renders the novel sprawling as well as psychological, chatty as well as incisive. These are "fat aesthetics" that exceed what might be acceptable under the rubrics of canonical modernism.⁶⁴ As I have suggested, this excess occurs because Spark and Smith's styles stretch to describe the physical and cultural excesses of fat, female, and Black bodies. Kiki herself knows that her body poses a threat to syntactical coherence when she reflects that "her chest gave off a mass of signals beyond her direct control" and that "sex was only one small element of its symbolic range" (47). Kiki's body, coded as

⁶⁴ Notably, Spark and Smith's styles exceed modernism not necessarily because they appear after its historical height. Many novels written later do manage to mimic modernism's stylistic values, including Smith's own *NW* (2012). For more on modernism outside of narrow chronological boundaries, see David James and Urmila Seshagiri, "Metamodernisms."

triply threatening in womanhood, fatness, and Blackness, does not only coax reactions out of the men she encounters. It also poses a fundamental threat to the linguistic tools and literary traditions we have entrusted to describe bodies. Modernism, at the level of abstract ideal and at the sentence level, cannot contain these bodies.

Black feminism and modernism have both developed frameworks to value these explosive, uncontainable instances, whether linguistic or embodied. But the fat aesthetics and the fat feminist politics posed to us by Spark and Smith are not “self-shattering,” or anti-social, or obliterating to the self, in the ways that queer theory or Wyndham Lewis would venerate.⁶⁵ On the contrary, this fat *feminist* aesthetic prizes continuity and accumulation to the point of overload. This is why Smith can combine with aplomb nineteenth century sprawling realism, early modernist citations, and a keen awareness of American hip-hop culture. It explains, too, why Spark retrofits World War II with sardonic mean-girl humor. Fat feminist aesthetics spurn the diet’s authority to make it new in favor of *staying fat*, stylistically as well as physically. This means embracing anachronism, tonal shifts, and other forms that accumulate new meaning without dismissing the past. That is to say, the fat feminist aesthetic manages to do what Jane Wright, personally, cannot; it finds its way into modernity and power without disarticulating it from a matronly female history. Though these novels cannot quite imagine their formal accomplishments as liberating for a collective of fat women, we can take from them a possibility that is both aesthetic and political: a fat feminist agency where the things we have accumulated, however dowdy, come along with us.

⁶⁵ See Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” as well as other canonical works of queer theory’s anti-social turn, famously Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. For modernism’s fascination with obliterating the past, see the short-lived but paradigmatic literary magazine *Blast*, edited by Wyndham Lewis. For more on “obliteration” as a feminist and amateur critical practice, see Melanie Micir and Aarthi Vadde, “Obliteration: Toward an Amateur Criticism.”

Coda

Feminism and the Mom Crush

Transgender Desire and Allegiance in *Detransition, Baby*

In this dissertation, I have enumerated several paths by which modernism and feminism, intertwined in their fascination with female conventionality, flow from the early decades of the twentieth century to the turn of the twenty-first. In Chapter One, feminist literary criticism recovers modernist writers and brings them into the twentieth century as models for feminist intellectualism. In Chapter Two, second wave feminists of the 1960s and '70s rely on early century colonial writers like Cornelia Sorabji and Katherine Mayo to shape their evolving and Orientalized accounts of household confinement. In Chapters Three and Four, the meta-modernist novels of Zadie Smith and Monique Truong feature women (and racialized queer men) who perceive how their personal progress is intertwined with feminine work and feminine embodiment. These texts attend to modernism's ongoing influence on representations of womanhood. Rather than following these chapters with a conventional conclusion, I will conclude with a coda that performs the work I describe in a contemporary register.

My coda extends this portrait by thinking conventionality beyond modernism, and beyond the bounds of the biologically designated female body. In fact, I read conventionality as the practice by which gender transition—often a personally liberating practice—can occur. In Torrey Peters' 2020 novel *Detransition, Baby*, transgender women recognize their participation in womanhood's oldest rigamaroles, from the painful to the pleasurable, mundane, and inconvenient, as the very force that enacts their gender identity. In this practice, Peters echoes

some of the most longstanding arguments of queer and trans theory, namely Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity: gender (and indeed sex) as something we do, a discourse we reinscribe, rather than an ontological bedrock. In so doing, she troubles conventional trans narratives of selfhood which claim that trans people have been born in the wrong body and that transitioning has allowed them to find "who they really are." Peters' deliberately provocative novel updates this theory by confronting the stereotypes of trans femininity that have most divided feminists for decades. For her, gender confirmation can mean gender stereotype. To become a woman, her protagonist Reese *does what women do*. Furthermore, for her, the pinnacle of true womanhood lies in one particular choice. She tells her partner: "I'm going to live and do like millions of women before me: I'm going to be a mother" (105). Motherhood, perhaps the most important trope of female conventionality, has remained at the margins of this dissertation until now. This coda examines the role of motherhood in allowing trans women to affirm their gender, and the supposition that underlies that process: that female conventionality is vital and powerful for its capacity to make a woman out of you.

In this argument, I follow transgender theorists who have demonstrated the power of misogyny in anti-trans rhetorics. This is true even—or especially—for trans-exclusionary radical feminists, often known as TERFs. This acronym has come to represent a wide variety of anti-trans stances even outside the orthodoxy of radical feminism. As in the rest of my dissertation, where second wave feminist scholarship forms another set of primary texts and reveal longstanding feminist beliefs and biases, here the ur-text of TERF ideology, Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979) serves as a revealing object. This early text has remained at the center of radical feminist and anti-trans talking points for decades. Raymond refers to trans women by male pronouns and deems them "male-to-constructed-

females” (2). A major node of Raymond’s critique derives from her belief that trans women (“constructed female transsexuals”) perpetuate female stereotypes—types that conform to conventional femininity. She writes,

Many transsexuals said that they viewed themselves as passive, nurturing, emotional, intuitive, and the like. Very often, many expressed a preference for female dress and make-up. Others saw their feminine identification in terms of feminine occupations: housework, secretarial, and stewardess work. Some expressed feminine identification in terms of marriage and motherhood—wanting to ‘meet the right man,’ ‘adopt kids,’ and ‘bring them up.’ (78)

Raymond perceives these self-identifications as the fantasies of men who fetishize submissive femininity and choose to embody it themselves as a performance of that fantasy.⁶⁶ She characterizes trans women’s interest in traditional feminine activities as the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, a reductive and gruesomely disembodied account of womanhood. Notably, she applies none of the same scrutiny to transgender men. Author and activist Julia Serano, noting this discrepancy, writes, “I believe that [radical feminists’] preference for trans men over trans women simply reflects the society-wide inclination to view masculinity as being strong and natural, and femininity as being weak and artificial. In other words, it is a product of traditional sexism” (27). Elsewhere, Serano coined the now-popular word “transmisogyny” to signify the amplified misogyny that trans women experience. She argues that Raymond’s and others’ derision of trans femininity replicates the familiar old-fashioned misogyny experienced by all women—what she calls “traditional sexism.” The essential conventionality of transmisogyny helps to explain why TERFs and other radical feminists have often collaborated with Republican lawmakers and cultural commentators with the aims of denying rights to trans women and sex

⁶⁶ In the 1980s, sexologist Ray Blanchard would repackage this fetishization as autogynephilia, signifying a sexual pleasure that comes from perceiving oneself as a woman. This term is no longer used in medical or therapeutic discourses on trans people, but is endorsed by TERFs like J.K. Rowling, Julie Bindel, and Kathleen Stock.

workers.⁶⁷ These activists, while presenting their ideas as “radical,” replicate the most regressive attitudes to gender and sexuality, not to mention imperialism and racism. In 2020, Susan Stryker, transgender studies’ founding figure, described “transphobic feminism’s increasingly close association with reactionary ethnonationalism” (303). The hyper-scrutiny applied to trans women’s bodies mimics and intensifies eugenicist models of bodily purity already applied to Black and brown women. For instance, Black South African track athlete Caster Semenya, a cisgender woman with high levels of testosterone, has been subject to repeated invasive “sex verification tests,” and has in many cases not been allowed to compete in international competition.⁶⁸

In response to these transphobic rhetorics, feminists like Serano, Stryker, and Sandy Stone have pointed out that trans and cisgender women all experience sexist treatment. “The one thing that women share,” Serano writes, “is that we are all *perceived* as women and treated accordingly” (233, italics in original). Stone argues that “*As with genetic women*, transsexuals are infantilized, considered too illogical or irresponsible to achieve true subjectivity” (4, italics added). Thus, the reasons that trans people are deemed unreliable come to recall, with mimetic clarity, the reasons “genetic women” are unreliable. When Raymond expresses disgust for trans women’s longing for family, domesticity, and high heels, she implicitly derides those longings as expressed by cis women as well.

Detransition, Baby identifies the irony of Raymond’s frustration with impressive bluntness. The novel centers on Reese, a precariously employed trans woman who has broken up

⁶⁷ See Lorna Norman Bracewell’s essay “Beyond Barnard: Liberalism, Anti-Pornography Feminism, and the Sex Wars” for an account of radical anti-pornography feminists’ collaboration with right-wing American politics. More recently, author JK Rowling’s transphobic or “gender critical” views have been enthusiastically cited by conservative politicians who vote against bills for trans rights and protections. At the present, many states are passing bills preventing trans women and girls from participating in women’s sports.

⁶⁸ See Gerald Imray’s reporting for the *Associated Press*, “IAAF claims Olympic champion Semenya is ‘biologically male.’”

with her partner, Ames, when he detransitioned from female to male. Ames has begun an affair with his boss, Katrina, and accidentally gotten her pregnant. Unsettled by the notion of being a “father” to a baby, and knowing of Reese’s longstanding desire to be a mother, Ames proposes a queer family structure where he, Reese, and Katrina can parent together. The novel follows the three characters in the past and present of the narrative as they navigate their relationships to gender and parenthood. Peters provokes radical feminist ire by courting gender stereotypes like the spoiled sugar baby and oversexed slut (as well as the notorious specter of detransitioning).

Since trans women want to be read as women and assimilated into their experiences, Peters shows, her characters enter into tropes of femininity, vulnerability, and even unreliability in order to share in a kind of “female experience.” Reese is quite clear that she is not interested in revising gender norms according to the queer theoretical maxims she knows by heart. In fact, she is drawn to the most painful and shameful tropes of womanhood. In her relationship with a rich, bullying cis man, she derives pleasure from his manipulation and the threat of physical violence: “Reese wanted to end their games, to get hit in a way that would affirm, once and for all, what she wanted to feel about her womanhood: her delicacy, her helplessness, her infuriating attractiveness. After all, *Every woman adores a Fascist*” (59). This statement flies in the face of feminists across the radical-to-liberal spectrum who would seek to redefine the essential nature of womanhood. Reese is not interested in gender uplift; she wants the ugly parts. In reaching for the painful subjection of womanhood, Reese alights not only on the lurid tropes of film noir, but also on highbrow poetry. Her citation is Sylvia Plath’s galvanizing line from her 1960 poem “Daddy.” She excavates the canonical poetic texts of what Elaine Showalter might call the “female tradition” in support of her self-destructive impulses. Plath and Reese may not share chromosomal makeup, but they share the same sulky, nihilistic approach to heterosexual

relationships. Both perceive this approach as a banal, universal component of female conventionality.

Peters' novel is deliberately controversial with regard to Reese's chosen avenues to gender affirmation. However, the novel echoes recent work in transgender studies that reframes the method by which gender comes to be. In a study of facial feminization surgery (FFS), an elective procedure that slims the bones of the face, Eric Plemons argues for a recognition-based theory of gender. According to the trans women he interviewed, "To be a woman, they asserted, was to be recognized and treated as a woman in the course of everyday life" (11). Sex and gender are social categories reinscribed not only by Butler's nebulous "discourse" but by daily acts of recognition. This is why FFS is so important to many trans women, including the characters in Peters' novel; in daily life, others discern our gender not by examining our primary sexual traits but by looking at our faces. This fact, Plemons argues, dissolves the supposed binary between "enacting the role of a woman" and "becoming a woman" used in older sexological treatises. Transgender women become women when they do what women do, look how woman look, and are recognized as such.

When we acknowledge sex as a social, not purely biological category, the desire some (and certainly not all) trans women feel for the markers of conventional femininity takes on a different resonance. Participating in gender theater, from dresses to secretary work, becomes the means by which one truly changes one's sex. Many trans theorists resist the mechanics of this change for the way it can reinforce respectability politics in trans and queer communities. It can make transition available to the most beautiful and wealthiest of trans women, those with the resources with blend in. "The highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase h/erself," Stone writes, arguing that the goals of passing and assimilation can rob trans people of personal history

and collective identity. The tension between the personal and collective goals of transition animate *Detransition, Baby*. In fact, Peters describes the gap between theory and desire as the driving force of queer life. On the subject of FFS, Reese muses,

Call her a fraud, a hypocrite, superficial, but politics and practice parted paths at her *own* body. She would happily cheer on any other woman who flaunted her orbital ridge in the name of challenging cis-normative beauty standards, but she would have the first available misogynist dick of a surgeon burr her skull Barbie smooth. (198)

Reese has a sophisticated understanding of the cultural forces underlying FFS and other gender technologies, and she espouses solidarity with women who can aspire to more radical practices. However, she also understands the peace of mind a “Barbie smooth” browbone would give her. She cannot revolutionize gender and also save herself. In this formulation, the “misogynist dick” surgeon is not merely a necessary evil on the way to her goal; on the contrary, he produces it. Dealing with misogynist dicks in the medical profession has been the purview of women for centuries. Reese takes her place in that lineage.

In pursuing gender affirmation for herself rather than gender liberation for all, Reese identifies the tension that has animated each text in this dissertation. While she is intimately aware of more radical queer-feminist projects, Reese refuses to reorganize her own personal narrative in the name of collective action. I have argued that narrating the self as actualized, free, modern, and independent *requires* an imagined collective that must remain consistent, historical, bound by tradition. Unlike Cornelia Sorabji and Gertrude Stein, Reese does not want to transcend the bounds of conventional womanhood in order to make herself uniquely modern. She merely wants to join that collective, imagined or real. In effect, she seeks to participate in a radical collective of women, although the fertile ground for that collective comes from pain, inconvenience, performance, and ritual, rather than any purist core truth of womanhood.

The irony is not lost on Reese the one part of womanhood she desires most, motherhood, is the one most biologically improbable for her. It is also the element of femininity that seems most transhistorically consistent, essential, and thus desirable. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich writes of her own young adulthood: “I only knew that to have a child was to assume adult womanhood to the full, to prove myself, to be ‘like other women’” (25). As she defines it, motherhood invokes both personal fulfillment and social cohesion. Rich, who practiced a gentler form of transphobia than Janice Raymond and Mary Daly, centers womanhood in the womb. However, literary history is littered with wombless people who want both children and to be like other women. In fact, the taboo-breaking gall of modernist literature provided some of the first opportunities to articulate this desire with gynecological straightforwardness. Critics have increasingly read the character of abortionist-cum-narrator Dr. O’Connor in Djuna Barnes’ 1936 novel *Nightwood* as a trans woman. He admits, “‘In my heart is the wish for children and knitting. God, I never asked better than to boil some good man’s potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar. Is it my fault that my only fireside is the outhouse?’” (98). Some readers interpret the doctor’s longing as an expression of queer desire, an explosion of the new modern masculinity. Michael Davidson, for instance, includes him a modernist catalogue of “pregnant men,” one whose queerness is organized around reproduction (12). While he is careful to situate O’Connor’s gender identity within the Freudian discourses of the time, rather than an anachronistic label of “transgender” experience, Davidson’s characterization of O’Connor as a potentially queer, pregnant man does not capture the character of the doctor’s desire. O’Connor’s fantasy is not for radical queer reproduction, but for normativity. His longing for childbearing is for one among many domestic arts. O’Connor’s qualifications for womanhood include cooking, fiber arts, and childbearing, by the gynecological rhythm of the

nine-month pregnancy. In other words, two of his aspirations are within reach; the other is impossible.

O'Connor's only available form of gendered receptivity is sodomitical, "the outhouse." Barnes' scatological euphemism makes it clear that, in O'Connor's view, sodomitical intimacy happens in the degraded space of the outdoor privy, apart from the true domestic sphere, the true "fireside." For him, receptivity in sex is not enough to secure his role as the woman of the house. Thus, while he revels in cross-dressing, in corrupt and undereducated gynecology and abortion procedures, he abides in a melancholic desire for a womb. Despite the rapid shifts in transgender rights and identities in the near century since *Nightwood's* publication, *Detransition, Baby* expresses a similar melancholy. When Reese and Katrina debate their roles in their new family, Katrina demands supremacy: "I'm the one who is pregnant," she points out. Reese, so often blithe, chic, and ironic, receives this proclamation with sincere physical pain. She blurts out, "Don't you think I wish my body could do that?" (170). The simple longing for a different body, so often rejected by poststructuralist theories of gender and transition, appears in these two texts 95 years apart. Although contemporary Marxist feminists like Sophie Lewis have investigated both the potential and the harm caused by mass programs of pregnancy surrogacy, Reese is attached to a far more familiar and old-fashioned experience of pregnancy.⁶⁹ The desire for biological conventionality has remained a powerful presence in trans and queer life across time.

Nevertheless, both *Detransition, Baby* and other queer theoretical texts make clear that alienation from biological reproduction is not the purview of trans women alone. Reese confronts the self-centeredness of her own melancholy when Katrina, who has suffered a painful

⁶⁹ See Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family*.

miscarriage in the past, says ““So, let me tell you, Reese, if you think I don’t understand how it is to have a body that isn’t a home to babies, I do”” (172). Katrina, despite identifying as cisgender, experiences the trans spectrum by when her body fails to conduct the appropriate reproductive task. The category of “biological women,” so valued by TERFs, breaks down when women experience such a wide range of biological experiences and disabilities, some of which may seem disqualifying from the signal traits of the “female” body: namely, menstruation, penetrative sex, pregnancy, and birth. Katrina, whose body has historically not been “a home to babies,” links this so-called failure to Reese’s own gender melancholy, creating a continuity of experience between cis and trans women.

Race impacts people’s ability to consummate their gender through reproduction, as Katrina points out. Her Chinese grandmother, upon arriving in the US, “had to justify the basic desire to reproduce” (177). Implicit in her anecdote is the broader history of forced sterilization, mother-child separation, and other forms of reproductive violence performed on non-white people, especially Black women.⁷⁰ State biopower in its all forms—from denying poor women reproductive healthcare to fear over the growing Latinx population, a fertility that threatens white supremacy—refuses any woman the certainty that motherhood will come in its appropriate form and with its guarantees of domesticity, femininity, and fecundity. In consequence, both cis and trans women experience “real” motherhood as a legitimizing category to which they will never have full access. As the founding trope of conventionality, real motherhood exemplifies conventionality’s central trait; it is unreachable, unfinishable.

⁷⁰ The paradigmatic text on the material and taxonomical violence done to Black women and mothers is Hortense Spillers’ 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” More recently, in her 2021 book *Birthing Black Mothers*, Jennifer Nash argues that the image of suffering Black mother has become a form of political currency, while in reality, “What unites Black mothers is an intimate proximity to noncare that can manifest itself in an array of ways, ranging from medical indifference to forced Cesarean sections, from encouragement to *not* reproduce to systemic neglect of Black women’s pain” (3).

I want to conclude by suggesting that feminist literature's major coherent response to this alienation is modest, hopeful, amateurish, and desirous. *Detransition, Baby* crystallizes this affective response by coining a phrase with great theoretical purchase, one I want to borrow: the "mom crush." Reese feels a frisson of longing, neither sexual nor nonsexual, for Katrina as they shop for baby supplies. She is thrilled by the possibility of parenting together, of debating the merits of boxed macaroni and cheese for their child. Briefly, this fantasy seems to solve her problems:

Maybe a mom crush was all she ever needed, and if not, who cared that maybe she was lying to herself? Let that hunger—for a family, for a child, for others to make a place in their lives for her—quiet itself a spell in anticipation of a coming satiation. Sometimes the wonder over the object of a crush is indistinguishable from the simple relief that you are still able to leap into one at all. (267)

Reese places her desire in a pessimistic frame; her arrangement with Katrina is fragile and tentative, and the novel is deliberately vague about its long-term prospects. Ultimately, it is the longing itself that is sustaining, "all she ever needed." While it may not permanently heal her loneliness, a mom crush can "quiet" it in the hope of fulfillment. For Reese and Katrina, this fulfillment skirts the boundaries of romantic and sexual desire, the longing to parent, co-parent, and be parented, and the possibility of confirming one's gender by doing girly and conventional activities. The mom crush encapsulates these related longings as the yearning for mom-ness, a category that transcends any actual parenthood. For Reese, moms signify womanhood, intimacy, companionship, middle-class suburbia, and sexual appeal. For the feminist literary tradition, they signify far more. Woolf's often-cited claim that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" is not only a rubric for feminist genealogy but also for gender confirmation. The conditional phrasing of the edict makes it clear. Reese, who wants to know "if" she is a woman, thinks through her desire for motherhood in order to secure it.

Although Reese's mom crush exists in the peculiar context of her relationship with Katrina, in the mom crush, she alights on the affective force that has organized the feminist literary tradition. The mom crush is a prime example of what Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling," a shared and identifiable affect that belongs to someone or something—an era, a population, a generation, or a genre. In this case, the mom crush is both what unites feminist writers in periods of transition—such as the post-war obsession with the housewife-mother—and across time, the genealogical pull that leads us to think back through our mothers if we are women. The phrase is so apt because it confronts the feminist anxiety that women will be reduced to "wives and mothers," while acknowledging the intense and varied ties of desire that link us to our biological, community, and intellectual mothers. Alice Walker, whose prosaic methods of feminist recovery helped inspire my first chapter, credited this structure of feeling by titling her essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Framing a political or literary tradition as a maternal heritage is not new. A mother, and the desire for one, can be very transgressive things. Traditional accounts of maternal heritage tend to elide its ignominious (and thus queer and trans) components. A crush, on the other hand, is juvenile, embarrassing, unfulfilled, entangled with other unsatisfying affects, what Sianne Ngai calls "ugly feelings." A mom crush is an ugly feeling because it articulates, however hesitantly, the pull that feminists feel toward conventionality, an attachment tinged with identification, repulsion, contradistinction, and desire. Our mothers, and the conventional labors they represent, form the core of feminist theorizing. As Woolf, Walker, and the rest of my archive suggest, cataloguing and extending the feminist tradition is often prosaic, domestic work, the kind of work mothers and daughters do. In acknowledging that fact, we align ourselves with a broader tradition of

mothers and daughters, those who form our literary heritage and those who birthed and adopted
and fed and clothed us.

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