

## Starting Over: Feminism and the Politics of Cultural Critique

Judith Newton

University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, Mich., 1994

ISBN 0 4720 6482 7, £11.95 Pbk ISBN 0 4720 9482 3, £31.60 Hbk

I have been reading Judith Newton's work for some years now, and have always been stimulated and touched by it. Indeed, she is one of the people I have turned to for answers or for ways of approaching troublesome questions. This collection of essays is a useful map of her ideas and interventions in debates on both sides of the Atlantic about gender, class, race, history, and culture. Committed primarily to examining how power differentials of gender, class, and race inhere in the social field, Newton ranges over literary and other representations and social practice. As one of the proponents of materialist-feminism (*Towards a Materialist-Feminist Criticism*, with Deborah Rosenfelt, 1985) Newton has long endeavoured to show the links between high and popular cultures and between the cultural and the material. The clarion call to analyse 'meaning in the service of power' has not outworn its usefulness, while the attempt to position readings of 'literary texts in relation to other forms of public written representation and other forms of the material, in relation to (always constructed) social and economic relations' has had many followers.

This leaves Newton in a particularly good position to comment on new historicism and the new history, developments in the fields of literary and historical studies respectively. Indeed, I remember turning in 1987 to her piece 'History as usual? Feminism and the New Historicism', in the hope that she would explain to me this apparently new but disconcertingly familiar phenomenon. True to form, Newton argued that, despite its evident usefulness, new historicism was another version of what some of 'us' were doing all along (whether it was labelled the new art history, gender or ethnic studies, or, indeed, materialist-feminism). The often unacknowledged debt to feminist theory and practice on the part of both new historicism and the new history is a central theme of two other essays in the book. Newton manages to avoid sour grapes on this count, and instead lays out with devastating clarity how proponents of these methodologies who fail either to recognize their debt to, or to build on the implications of, feminist studies terminally limit the scope and effect of their work. On related but different lines, her analysis of feminist approaches to the textual (Mary Poovey and Nancy Armstrong) and social (Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall) inscription of nineteenth-century middle-class gender relations both analyses what is at stake in the differences between them but also shows how in combination their

emphasis on the mutual dependency of the public and the private has broken a 'taboo' of history. 'For there has been much less resistance (among women and men) to seeing class, race, or economic development as a force in constructing gender than to seeing gender or sexuality as a force in constructing race or class.'

In terms of ethnicity particularly Newton is frank about the positive impact of challenges to white feminism and writes stirringly of the importance of developing alliances, some of them unlikely, that can bring about change in the academy at the very least. Newton's concern with the material impact of scholarly work makes her discussion of recent trends in literary and historical studies particularly powerful. When so much of literary studies requires an élite education (Newton talks of the work required to translate the worst excesses of deconstruction so that her students can form an opinion of it) even to make sense of potentially radical critical practices, it is timely to read in Newton's preface a reminder that cultural criticism is a 'terrain of power'. Her work is informed by the recognition that this is a terrain in which 'some voices, themes, and reading strategies are more successfully authorized than others . . . [and] in which struggles over resources and unequal relations of gender, class, nationhood, and race enter into the production of competing public knowledges and expertise'. As I work with colleagues to redevelop the literature programme at my university, Newton's work lends support to our determination to study the high literary alongside the popular, the centre alongside the margins and to see literary texts in relation to other forms of representation and material practice. But it also emphasizes the need to prioritize this type of intervention in the academy so that a system of mass higher education (however poorly funded and contested) can actually address the material conditions of *its* production and the reading and critical practices that are undertaken by its participants.

The collection closes with a piece that tells fragments of Newton's own history. This was, of course, the piece that I turned to first and I found it charming, intriguing, and provocative. Her determination to inscribe the personal into her writing practice allows Newton the breadth and generosity of vision to recognize that the author of the text is never the whole story. This, in the context of building strategic alliances, means, in the case of male academics, finding a way to theorize the relationship between their texts that marginalize feminism and their daily support for women colleagues, students, equal opportunities initiatives, and/or anti-racist struggles. It is this type of work, detailed, personalized, textual, and material that characterizes the value of this book.

Reina Lewis