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political hystories

introduction

This special issue draws together six essays selected from papers delivered at the international conference we organized at the University of Wales Swansea in August 2003 on the subject 'Hystorical Fictions: Women Writing History', and additionally includes two interviews with contemporary women writers for whom politics – be it of gender, genre, sexuality or globalization – is an important element to their work. The essays consider the nature of private and public, national and international, colonial and post-colonial pasts and histories as they are and have been written by women novelists, journalists, political activists and autobiographers. If the past is by definition the origin of the present, this issue asks what kind of theorized view of personal-and-political, ethnic, class-related and (inter)national history women authors offer us. Our introduction begins by raising some general points about the relationship between politics, history, feminism and writing (a relationship conceptualized in our term 'hystorical fictions'), before offering a brief overview of the articles which follow.

the political, the hystorical and the feminist

> There are three ways in which feminist historians have altered our perceptions of the past. First, feminist historians redefine methods and categories – in particular, the concept of periodisation … Second, feminist historians focus on sex, along with race and class as a category of analysis, to reject platitudes about woman's nature … Finally, feminist historians transformed our understandings of social changes and of how, as domestic and public spheres diverged, women lost control over production, property and their own persons.
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> (Humm, 1995: 123).

Feminist history, as Humm's tripartite definition suggests, has as its central concern the intention to re-examine the role, position and experience of women throughout the past. It seeks to combine its challenge to prevalent constructions of the concept of 'woman' with wider understandings of the marginalization of other individuals from 'mainstream'/malestream society and it is determined to place such a re-evaluation into a public and political context. Our argument in this special issue is that these elements of the feminist historian's purpose are shared by the authors of feminist literature

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more generally, be it factual or fictional, popular or academic; that women writers are producing new hystories which are intimately connected to feminist politics.

The question at stake in such re-evaluations of the past – in the sense of both long-term history and the more recent historical present – from a female perspective is a fundamental one: what is a woman, or, perhaps more pertinently, who are women and what is their 'experience'? In 1988 Denise Riley raised just such a point in her book *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*. She argued that 'not only ''woman'' but also ''women'' is 'troublesome' as a critical term (Riley, 1988: 241). Part of the implication of Riley's point resides in the issue of the specificity of female experience and women's history, and the dangers inherent in collapsing that varied past into a single term. Riley's argument was picked up by the theorist Judith Butler (see also Stanley, 1990), who agreed with Riley and argued that

> If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive ... because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constructed identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.
>
> (Butler, 1990: 3)

In rearticulating the need to recognize the 'intersections' between the issues of gender and other social marginalization, Butler asserts the importance of placing feminist approaches to the historical into a wider cultural and political context. If 'women' cannot be reduced to a single term, then neither can their histories, or for that matter the pasts of other oppressed groups within and across different societies and cultures. The specific story must therefore be related to the wider history of society/ies and culture/s. It is through bringing together such groups in a recognition that history as it is/has been predominantly written elides the potential of certain elements in a given society that feminism has a political strength through its activists.

Yet the question of activist politics and feminism has been a vexed one in recent feminist history. Gabriele Griffin argues that questions surrounding the issue of 'feminist activism' in the 1990s raised concerns over 'three factors: a discontent with the present, and possibly the past; a desire for improvement in the future; and a (self-)questioning in the face of struggle' (Griffin, 1995: 1). That the relationship between past, present and future articulations of feminist arguments should be at the centre of this '(self-)questioning' should not be surprising. Following several decades of reclaiming previously unacknowledged, sidelined or even deliberately repressed social and cultural histories of women, feminism's need to turn a self-reflective eye upon its position was inevitable. But the various

responses to such questioning opened up debates between those who felt that (white, Western) feminism had 'gone too far', was unclear in its purpose or was even 'dead'. The growing support in Western societies for a philosophy of 'post-feminism' coincided with a series of other 'posts' ranging from the increased influence of post-modernist thought to theories of a new age, post-history. The political economist Francis Fukuyama's claim in 1989 that with the close of the Cold War the West was witnessing 'the end of history' prompted feminist thinkers to consider the impact of this on the position of women, and feminism's engagement with the tenets of post-modernism. While Fukuyama could write 'What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government' (Fukuyama, 1989), it was also imperative for feminists to debate whether 'the universalization of Western liberal democracy' in its present form was necessarily a positive end to feminist aims. As the political scientist Seyla Benhabib has argued, in accepting a 'convergence between feminism and postmodernism' feminists would need to accept, amongst other things, the 'death of history', which would 'threaten not only to eliminate feminist theory as a distinct enterprise, but to dissolve its emancipatory goals in the process' (Brooks, 1997: 42–43). The danger is that in accepting the *status quo* or invoking the cause of a 'post-feminist' political stage for women, feminists themselves also grant acceptance to a current position for women that does not build on the relinquishing of the oppression of the past, nor does it develop a positive imagining of the future. It leaves us aimlessly lost within an imperfect, post-modern, present.

The debate is an ongoing one which has caused several activists and thinkers from feminism's own recent past of the 1970s and 1980s to come forward. Prominent among these is Germaine Greer, who in 1999 published *The Whole Woman*, the sequel to *The Female Eunuch*, aimed at arguing against a feminist politics of equality and instead for an active feminism of liberation. Liberation feminists, Greer argues, 'did not see the female's potential in terms of the male's actual; the visionary feminists of the late sixties and early seventies knew that women could never find freedom by agreeing to live the lives of unfree men' (Greer, 1999: 2). The fact remains that by embracing, for example, a politics of capitalism or mainstream 'liberal democracy', women do not embrace freedom and may in actuality be contributing to the continued exploitation of other women and men of different races, ethnicities, sexualities or religious beliefs. It is also true that such an action negates the feminist politics of history and offers little hope for the future. This is the theme which the articles in this special issue address.

politics, hystory, literature: the essays

> It's out of … individual particulars that fiction is constructed; and so is autobiography, including the kind of autobiography we are each always writing, but haven't yet got around to writing down; and so, too, is history. History may intend to provide us with grand patterns and overall schemes, but without its brick-by-brick, life-by-life, day-by-day foundations it would collapse. Whoever tells you that history is not about individuals, only about large trends and movements, is lying. The shot heard round the world was fired on a certain date, under certain weather conditions, out of a certain rather inefficient type of gun.
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> (Atwood, 2005: 211).

Margaret Atwood's cautioning words about the dangers in historical narrative of mistaking the general as of more fundamental value than the particular bears specific importance to the cause of women's history and women's future; this is the same point made by Riley and Butler. History is inevitably and always about the actions of the individual. The slave woman who fights back, or indeed the slave woman who cannot fight back while she is being raped by the overseer, is as significant a figure in history as the man who shot John F. Kennedy. That this history has different levels, consequences and spheres of influence is not the point. From a humanist and feminist perspective both events are part of a shared (though often denied or uncharted) common past. It is here that literature, by which we mean both the creative or imaginative, the factual or documentary writings of women, holds its radical potential. The written word, and for that matter the oral narrative, is a testament to experience and to life itself in its gloriousness and its suffering. More importantly, the act of writing, recording, charting and documenting is a political act precisely because it brings about a connection between the consciousness of author/story teller and reader/listener. H*istory* is on the one hand nothing more than a tale, and yet on the other it represents the only means available for individuals to communicate the past to the future: the narrative of the individual to the collective.

The purpose behind such a narrative impulse is as multifaceted as the experiences conveyed by it. Some write from a personal need to find meaning in the past, explanations for the present or potential for the future. Others write from a desire to create a kind of historicist activism, 'correcting' or at least arguing for restitution concerning the events of a history from which their subject position has been excluded, abused or victimized. In many cases, and in several of the works discussed in this issue, the reasons behind the (re)writing of a particular version of history are unclear and the ramifications of the act of writing may be found in both personal and political results. What does link each of the texts and authors analysed here is the fact that they all seek to reposition the figure of 'woman' – contested though the meaning of that term might remain – in relation to a wider national or international understanding of the past.

We begin with an essay by Angela Kershaw entitled 'Simone Téry (1897–1967): writing the history of the present in inter-war France'. Téry was a French journalist and novelist who, in the 1930s, became interested in left-wing politics and joined the Communist Party. She worked as a correspondent for *L'Humanité* as well as for *Vendredi* and *Regards*; the latter post took her to Spain during the civil war. Her subsequent works, *Front de la liberté: Espagne 1937–1938* (1938) and *Où l'aube se lève* (1945), form the basis of Kershaw's analysis of Téry's desire to write the history of the present. Kershaw's article serves as a useful starting point because of the way in which it offers a timely reminder that questions surrounding the authenticity of female (literary) political engagements have a long-term history even within the 20th century.

From the haunting and ghostly presence of female writing in the inter-war period in Europe to the bloody history of the Native American past may seem like a great leap, yet the connections are there. Rebecca Tillett's article on the Native American Indian writer Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) draws on the critical response to Silko's narrative in order to undertake a sustained analysis of the wider-reaching implications of the novel. Spanning five centuries and charting the exploitation of both dead and living, Silko's tale is also deeply concerned with the repercussions on modern America of the continuing and conscious repression of the voices of the past.

The traumatic narrative of a tortured, abused and de-humanized group is also the subject of 'Blood and tears in the mirror of memory: Palestinian trauma in Liana Badr's *The Eye of the Mirror*' by Marie-Luise Kohlke. This essay is a challenging piece of criticism which inflects elements of traditional Holocaust and trauma research onto a discussion of Palestinian oppression at a specific historical moment (1976) and into the present. Kohlke's argument is not that the prominence or particularity of the Holocaust or its analysis should be undermined but rather that later acts of extremist violence – up to and including acts of genocide – against a particular race or culture need to be placed in a closer context to it. The discussion of Badr's novel presents such an analysis by focusing on the important role that women play in such circumstances and their fundamental position as shared carriers of the memory of trauma for future generations.

Like Kohlke's essay, Sophie Smith's interview with Nawal El Saadawi, conducted in Cairo in early 2006, focuses on non-Western women's relationship to the past. The interview highlights the continued importance of international and particularly Middle Eastern feminist activism in demonstrating to the women of the West how precarious their own relationship to political, social and sexual freedom remains. El Saadawi's trenchant views are representative of a wider body of feminist thought which is in danger of being subsumed under current constructions of Islamic fundamentalism and pervasive contemporary images of the 'clash of cultures' invoked in the so-called 'war on terror'. Given her international political prominence, El Saadawi's thoughts on the dangers

facing not only women but humanity across the global political sphere are a timely warning at a moment of continuing Western warfare on 'Other' races and nations.

America is invariably the Western nation at the forefront of conflicts between nations, races and religions across the globe, and the following two essays turn our attention to the history of the United States and its problematic relationship with its own ethnic and immigrant heritage. Marta Vizcaya Echano's essay on Jessica Hagedorn's *The Gangster of Love* (1996) focuses on Hagedorn's attempt to undermine notions of subject-specific cultural authenticity and identity, and its implied historical value in the creating and sustaining of the Filipino-American community's ethnic and racial past. Sarah Wood's essay discusses the African-American writer Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979) as a text which explores the boundaries of generic experimentation between historical novel, science fiction/fantasy and slave narrative. Butler's aim, as Wood details, is to stimulate debate around the issue of slavery and its ongoing legacy in modern American (and beyond) in order to interrogate the continued marginalization of black women in the US and Western society more generally.

With our next essay we initiate a move back to Europe, and specifically the relationship between Britain and its colonial past in the work of Doris Lessing. In 'Remembering home', Susan Watkins reminds us of the important role Lessing has had throughout her writing career in exploring and experimenting with genres for not only aesthetic but also political reasons. As the author who first used the term 'the personal is political' in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Lessing has continually sought to blur the boundary between the realms of autobiography, fiction and factual writing. In many ways she highlights the issue that Atwood raises concerning the representation of the particular and the general in historical narrative. Watkins's analysis, especially the way in which it deals with the nature of 'home' and identity in Lessing's recent writing on Zimbabwe, demonstrates the similarities between Lessing's post-colonial acts of remembrance and the responses to memory by African-American writers such as Toni Morrison.

This special issue concludes with Lucie Armitt's interview with Sarah Waters. The interview was conducted at the inaugural conference of the new Contemporary Women Writers Network held at the University of Wales, Bangor, in April 2006. Waters's prominent position as a contemporary fiction writer who succeeds in bridging lesbian, generalist and academic audiences means that she is perhaps the ideal person to make the link between the political and the popular, feminist theory and the mainstream. As she explains to Armitt, her background and training as a former academic is still a part of her writing, keeping her aware of the multiple (political, sexual) interpretations that can be attached to her work. In publishing this interview, it is also a pleasure to be able to support a new body like CWWN: such an association devoted to the vibrant creativity and

experimentation to be found in the diverse range of contemporary women's writing now in the marketplace – some of it discussed here – is long overdue.

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn

editor biographies

Ann Heilmann is Professor of English at the University of Hull. The author of New *Woman Fiction* (Macmillan, 2000) and a study of *Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird* (Manchester University Press, 2004), she is the general editor of Routledge's Major Works 'History of Feminism' series, and has edited two essay collections, *Feminist Forerunners* (Pandora, 2003) and (with Margaret Beetham) *New Woman Hybridities* (Routledge, 2004). Other editorial work includes five special journal and four anthologies, most recently *Anti-Feminism in Edwardian Literature* (Thoemmes Continuum and Edition Synapse, 2006, with Lucy Delap and a contribution by Sue Thomas). She is now completing, with Mark Llewellyn, a multi-volume critical edition of George Moore for Pickering and Chatto.

Mark Llewellyn works in the School of English at the University of Liverpool. His research interests range from conceptions of authorship in 17th century poetry to contemporary women's writing via the work of the Anglo-Irish novelist George Moore (1852–1933). He has published articles in each of these fields (in the *Journal of Gender Studies, Philological Quarterly, English Literature in Transition,* and *Victorian Poetry*) and has co-edited (with Ann Heilmann) special issues of *Women: A Cultural Review, Women's Writing* and *Critical Survey*.

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