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Thinking Gender Panel Reviews

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Dirty Work: Women and Unexpected Labor

THE PANEL “Dirty Work: Women and Unexpected Labor” featured historically invisible women workers in occupations considered dangerous and highly masculinized. Moderator Sarah Haley, Professor of Women’s Studies, UCLA, described the panel as raising important questions about recovering agency for women who engage in “deadly work.” Panelists included Shelly M. Cline, Department of History, University of Kansas; Katie Smart, Department of History, University of Houston; Jason W. Sampson, Department of History, University of California, Riverside; and Saridalia Giraldo, Department of Political Science, San Francisco State University.

NOT A FELLOW MILITARY OFFICER, NOR A LADY

Shelly Cline’s paper, “Working Girl: Sex Discrimination in Auschwitz,” examines gender discrimination faced by women guards in the Auschwitz concentration and death camps. Cline argues that the image of S.S. women has been misinformed: these women were neither incompetent nor raving mad and given over to brutality. Rather, women guards were perpetrators who were also subjugated by male colleagues.

Women guards, mostly from blue-collar backgrounds, were recruited by the S.S. or volunteered. At Auschwitz, women guards oversaw female prisoners at a ratio of one guard to over four hundred captives, compared with one male guard

to only twenty-two male prisoners. S.S. women guards occupied a “middle area that lacked a conceptual framework”; they were neither *women*, as wives and mothers in service to the *Reich*, nor *comrades* to the male officers and overseers with whom they shared rank. Women appointed as camp overseers were met by hostility and skepticism from their male colleagues. Their presence was seen as an affront, as lessening the prestige of the post. Women guards received little if any support from colleagues or higher-ranked officers, and instead were despised as an inefficient bunch of “flustered hens.”

Women guards adopted different strategies to cope with gender discrimination in the camp and gain the approval of male colleagues and supervi-

sors. Surviving prisoners describe women guards changing their behavior in presence of male guards to appear more “animated”; this behavioral change was often punctuated with excessive violence or prisoner humiliation. Cline described one woman who, after commanding her dog to fatally attack a prisoner, announced to a male colleague, “This is my work.” Another strategy used by women guards was the employment of female prisoners as assistants in order to improve efficiency. Whatever their strategy, women’s efforts to gain recognition were fruitless. Remarkably, however, women guards did not deny or shift the blame when on trial after the war. The Allies granted S.S. women the equality denied to them by the Nazi party, and as full participants in genocide, women guards were executed alongside men.

“MANAGING SLAVES IS A TROUBLESOME BUSINESS”

In her paper, “‘De Old Devil’: Female Slaveholders, Violence, and Slave Management in Louisiana,” Katie Smart challenges the consensus about the lives of plantation mistresses. Smart refutes the common idea that women managed slaves only after the start of the Civil War. Her research paints a portrait of the plantation mistress that contradicts popular and sympathetic representations of slave masters’ wives as confined to their homes. Additionally, Smart’s research challenges

the notion that mistresses “humanized” slaves. She finds that plantation mistresses in Louisiana undertook the necessity of slave management before and during the Civil War and did not shy away from using violence to secure slavery’s continuation.

Smart uses the letters that plantation mistress Trefina Fox wrote to her mother in the period before the Civil War to demonstrate that plantation mistresses were comfortable in their roles and regularly used violence as a means of “slave management.” In her letters, Fox complains bitterly of slave management as her “greatest struggle,” attributing her increased workload to the laziness of her slaves. These letters reveal not only the extent of Fox’s household responsibility but also the constant pressure of slave resistance. Slaves employed various tactics to undercut Fox’s authority and carve out moments of relief. Smart’s research also demonstrates how power and authority is directly related to management tactics. When one of Fox’s slaves, Maria, ran away after her mistress beat her (though less severely, as Fox explains, than Master Fox would have), Trefina Fox’s authority on the plantation was diminished. Fox’s power was further undercut outside the plantation when Maria’s escape and subsequent hiding-out on a nearby plantation was discovered to have been facilitated by fellow, neighboring slaves.

A LONG TRADITION OF FAMILY LABOR

Women’s entry into the coal-mining industry in the 1970s has been seen as boundary-breaking, but in his paper, “Colliers in Corsets? Uncovering Stark County’s Nineteenth-century Coal-mining Women,” Jason W. Sampson, University of California, Riverside, shows that sex segregation in coal mining is a relatively recent phenomenon. Sampson uses census data and death records that account for 15 women who worked in mining in Stark County, Ohio, between 1870 and 1900. Sampson argues that women worked in the mines not as a challenge to gender norms but within an accepted tradition of family labor utilized in times of economic stress.

Just as women miners in the 1970s experienced challenges, especially gender-based harassment, women miners in the latter part of the nineteenth century overcame obstacles to attain employment with a mine. In some U.S. states women were forbidden from working in mining, and even when laws were not in place, powerful ideals of true motherhood and the separation of gender spheres kept women from seeking mining work. Sampson stresses, however, that gendered ideals of womanhood, though powerful, were also flexible; he argues that gender roles in the mining community were fluid. In the face of tragedy or severe financial constraint after a period of mining strikes, for

example, women worked alongside their brothers, fathers, and husbands without repercussions.

Sampson lists the names of at least half a dozen Stark County women miners, including one girl: Mary McBride, who beginning at age eight worked for less than four years as a trapper (a person who opens and closes vents). Sampson stresses that Mary's employment with the mine was a temporary stopgap in a time of crisis and wasn't the beginning of a career in mining. Women's income earned at the mine contributed to a household economy in need; their employment was not indicative of a fledgling women's movement, though, as Sampson demonstrates, their inclusion sheds light on how the meaning of women's labor has changed over the past two hundred years.

Both perpetrators and victims

The final panelist, Saridalia Giraldo, discussed the roles and demobilization process of women combatants in Columbia. Giraldo describes her paper, "Demobilized Women Combatants: Lessons from Colombia," as a case study that can be used to assess the situation of other women in armed conflicts. To contextualize the Colombian case, Giraldo explains that Columbia has been embroiled in a 50-year conflict that has resulted in over 70,000 deaths and over 400,000 disappearances. Much of the fighting and kidnapping has occurred in non-urban areas. To further shape the

background of her study, Giraldo stresses the conservative and patriarchal character of Colombian society. This character, she explains, shapes both the recruitment of women as combatants and the demobilization process.

Women combatants are both perpetrators and victims. Giraldo explains that women are perpetrators when they voluntarily join illegal armies to emancipate themselves from poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and violence at home. Some women join to demonstrate their ability as warriors and to gain respect from guerilla combatants. Other women are recruited by force. Giraldo says that girls as young as eight years old are often kidnapped by combatants and forced into lives of sexual slavery and mental and physical abuse.

In the process of demobilization by which combatants abandon armed conflict and attempt to rejoin civil society, women face a "triple disadvantage." The role of Colombian combatants is gender-specific, and women who chose to engage in the conflict are seen as deviant; upon demobilization they are often shunned by their families and denied contact with their own children. Contrarily, Giraldo adds, men combatants often receive accolades from their communities upon demobilization. Women who demobilize also fear being killed, tortured, or recruited again by active illegal groups—both the deserted group and enemy forces. Because of this, women often move

to urban areas in an attempt to disappear.

Finally, women combatants are challenged by a designated governmental process of demobilization that excludes the unique experiences of women. In conclusion, Giraldo suggests that the Colombian government must gender-sensitize the demobilization process for women and provide special considerations for women's unique needs in order to ensure their safe reincorporation into civil society.

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Women's Rags: High-Brow, Low-Brow and OCD Publics

THE PANEL “Women’s Rags: High-Brow, Low-Brow and OCD Publics” brought together panelists whose work deals with diverse and converging forms of media including comic books, crime novels, graphic novels, and zines.

The first panelist, Julian Gill-Peterson from Rutgers University, presented a complex argument against problems he sees in queer genealogical analyses of Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Explaining what he saw as a production of “proto-gay” childhood subjectivities in analyses of *Fun Home*, Gill-Peterson instead suggested a view drawing from the writings of Henri Bergson, particularly the notion of virtual time and memory as an inventory to deal with child-

hood difficulties. The presentation argued for a more complex method of understanding adult memories of childhood, and most significantly, in granting more agency and subjectivity to children (or at least, to adult reconstructions of childhood memories and events). Gill-Peterson focused his concluding remarks on the case of Bechdel’s childhood Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, which had been viewed as symbolic of her proto-gay repression by previous analyses of *Fun Home*. He argued instead that even as a child, Bechdel represented herself as aware of her repetitive behavior, and that pigeonholing her disorder as symptomatic of her “proto-gay” status is reductive.



Peter Lee from Drew University presented on the portrayals of female characters in certain crime comic books from the 1950s. Lee explained the popularity of American crime comics during the anxious cold war period, when the changing social and economic status of women was creating great shifts in American society. Creators of these comics portrayed the underlying tensions and conflicts by creating two main types of female criminal characters: the first were women breaking from the cage of their gendered sphere by engaging in brazen criminality and overt sexuality, who were always eventually married or jailed, neutralizing their transgressions but not erasing the challenge to convention that they represented. The second type were long-suffering, hard-working wives chained to domestic roles, often

used as foils for the brazen female criminals. Lee explained the censorship that came on the heels of these crime graphic novels, silencing aspects of these types of female characters.

The third panelist, Claire Rolens from UC San Diego, presented on Dorothy Hughes's 1943 novel *The Blackbird*, proposing it as a work that challenges typical notions of patriarchal dominance in crime thriller novels of the 1940s and films noir. Rolens described the plot of *The Blackbird*, in which the female protagonist must fight for her own survival while attempting to ascertain which of her two lovers (who Rolens describes as *hommes fatales*) is really a Nazi agent looking to kill her. Drawing from feminist film theory (particularly in relation to Classical Hollywood and film noir) Rolens posited that the female protagonist of *The Blackbird* directs a sexual gaze and desire toward a masculine other, with the female character acting as storyteller and detective in a reversal of the typical film noir structure.

The final presentation of the panel delivered by JoAnne Gordon from The University of Ottawa was on the topic of zines that dealt with topics of sexual assault and the ways in which certain zines challenge dominant discourses on that topic, offer concrete tools and examples of collective work, and how they represent changing discourses and responses to sexual violence. Gordon began her presentation with an acknowl-

edgement of the use of Native lands by the academy and specifically to the Native peoples who had once populated the land where UCLA currently stands. Gordon also warned her audience that her presentation covers sensitive subjects that may be alarming to some and that they should feel free to leave at any time. Using three zines used as tools by community workers, Gordon analyzed both their design and content for the ways in which they contribute to new notions of how people communicate about sexual violence. For example, one zine included a particularly useful list of questions that prompt the reader to examine his/her methods of communication and listening. Another section of a zine dealt specifically with how perpetrators of sexual violence can understand consent and also heal themselves (something very

rarely communicated in other forms of literature on sexual violence).

Panel moderator Yogita Goyal gave thoughtful feedback to each of the panelists and posed questions for each to answer before opening up to the audience. Goyal asked Gill-Peterson to discuss the panels and texts in *Fun Home* and how they might relate to the notions of time/space he put forth. He also responded to an audience question about the possibility of expanding his research to include post-humanism and the ways in which scholars like Jack Halberstam create an idea of a hermetically sealed past that are unconvincing, and that scholars are now looking more ahead towards the future than back towards the past.

Professor Goyal next asked Peter Lee about the role of race in the comics he analyzed, and about the readership of the comics. Lee explained that the comics he analyzed were almost entirely based on middle class or poor white characters, with occasional exoticized “others” or non-white communist characters. As far as readership, Lee explained that the comics were very popular, but it is difficult to ascertain any demographic information about readers or their responses since the only source for this type of information would be the letter columns in the comics themselves, which tended to only publish positive reviews highlighting the educational value of the comics.

Next, Professor Goyal asked Claire Rolens to discuss the role of a female author in a genre known for its misogyny, citing Steig Larsson’s *Millenium Trilogy* as an example. Rolens explained that she did not want to overstate the radicalness of *The Blackbirders*, pointing to the fact that the female protagonists and plotlines in Hughes’s novels often exhibit traits similar to the normal structures in crime novels, such as desire for motherhood and domesticity and romantic endings.

Finally, Professor Goyal asked JoAnne Gordon to explain the conditions of production and readership of the zines she analyzed. Gordon responded that zines are, by nature, ephemeral, hard to track, and often don’t have publication dates. They are accessed through word of mouth, online, or in independent or feminist bookstores. Gordon emphasized that she has found these particular zines useful in her work as an organizer/supporter and that the lack of publishing structures make them more effective and political.

Each of the four panels focused their analysis on forms of literature that are usually seen as ephemeral or pulp popular material (or, in the case of *Fun Home*, a work from 2006 directly responding to the classic marginalization of the graphic novels that actively works to elevate the form). The panelists’ attempts to re-claim these forms as ripe for academic analysis, particularly

analysis that focuses on issues of gender and equality, opened up fascinating lines of inquiry and pose new questions for researchers dealing with these forms of media.

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GRRR(L) Futures: Subcultures of Rebellious Women

THE PANEL, moderated by Mishuana Goeman, Assistant Professor in the Department of Womens Studies at UCLA, looked at various iterations of rebellious women, from musicians, to academics. The presenters in this panel included Chloe Diamond-Lenow, a graduate student at UC Santa Barbara in the Department of Feminist Studies, Shelina Brown, a graduate student in the Department of Musicology at UCLA, Alice Royer, a graduate student in Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA, Jonquil Bailey, a graduate student in the Department of English at University of Virginia

TELLING STORIES ABOUT FEMINIST FUTURES: FROM ANDROCENTRISM TO ANTHROPOCENTRISM

The first presentation of the panel, given by Chloe Diamond-Lenow, examined the nature of women's studies, and all of its iterations, in an effort to argue that the feminist epistemologies and methodologies developed within women's studies can be successfully applied to other fields to produce new feminist work. In her argument, Diamond-Lenow singles out the developing field of critical animal studies as a prime area of inquiry that would benefit from the adoption of feminist epistemologies and methodologies. She also argues that work in women's studies would likewise benefit from the intellectual frameworks that critical animal studies is grounded in.

Jacques Derrida. Photo by Ben Oswest on Flickr

Critical animal studies is an academic field that, in a very simplistic sense, rejects the androcentric focus of the vast majority of academic disciplines and instead attempts to collapse the categories and boundaries that separate humans from non-humans. This particular field of study emerged, similar to women's studies, from the social justice movements focused on environmentalism that materialized in the 1960s and 70s. For a bit more context on the foundations of critical animal studies, one of field's most influential works in this field is Jacques Derrida's essay, based off of his address to the 1997 Crisy Conference, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (More to Follow) where he says, "There is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit. We have to envisage the existence of 'living creatures' whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity."

Diamond-Lenow, a career student of women's studies, feels that both women's studies and critical animal studies could benefit with an academic engagement with each other. She argued that with the dynamic feminist epistemologies and methodologies available in women's studies discourse combined with a history in feminist theory that questions andocentrism, women's and feminist studies engagement with critical animal studies would produce a more vigorous critical theory for feminist thinking.

She concluded her presentation by offering some suggested questions that could engage both women/feminist studies and critical animal studies. These questions include how media reports on "gay penguins" at the zoo inscribe discourses on sexuality or monogamy, how discourses frame "gay marriage" through ascribing representations of bestiality to it, or what representational politics are involved when BBC names a panda as one of its top women of the year.

COOL MOMS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC TAKE ON CONTEMPORARY GRRL PUNK POLITICS

The panel continued with a shift away from the theoretical work of constituting academic disciplines to an exploration of identity politics in a Los Angeles-based, DIY girl punk band Cool Moms. The presenter Shelina Brown, the drummer/guitarist for Cool Moms, discussed the formation and style of the band in the context of experimenting with new forms of musical expression and redefining the roles and power structures in traditional punk rock bands. Peppered throughout the presentation were clips of the band performing to show of the musical and performance style for those who may not have been able to identify "post punk, no-wave punk rock ... 4/4 rock drum patterns...trebly guitar... dissonant bass lines" without seeing and hearing the band perform.

Brown's described the key features of the band that constituted its experimental style to display how the freedoms gained from experimentation had other, more negative side effects. When the band formed, the members decided to be experimental with the structure and musical style to curate a carefree, youthful character for the band. To accomplish this, they decided to each take up instruments that were not their primary instruments and share vocals instead of appointing a front person. These decisions opened up many musical possibilities for the band derived from simple instances like physically being in a different place while the band performs and rediscovering the excitement of learning to play a new instrument. However, "switching up instruments" is not as innocuous as it seems at first glance. In fact, Brown describes many interpersonal problems surrounding how to divvy up performance time for the bandmates that shared guitar and drum responsibilities.

Brown took the time to Pauline Oliveros' ideas about active and receptive models of music making. Brown's summation explains that in western rock bands, the guitarist and lead vocalist are often thought to be the active creative members of a band while the bassist and drummer are thought to be passive in the creative process. Also, because the drummer is often located in the back of the stage during a performance, they are then seen as the least important band-

mate. Understanding this issue, as well as other gendered conceptions of how music should be created and performed helped Cool Moms retain the experimental, feminist, youthful character they were striving for all along.

(DIGITAL) REVOLUTION GIRL STYLE NOW!: SUB-CULTURES, SOCIAL MEDIA, SUBJECTIVITY AND THE VIDEOS OF SADIE BENNING AND THIRZA CUTHAND

In this talk presenter Alice Royer looks at how subcultures, particularly feminist artists, function in today's digital society compared to the social networking from the riot grrrl subculture of the 1990's. In particular she argues that even though today's form of digital social networking could, in fact, bolster the sharing of multimedia work, there is an anemic and decentralized quality to digital subcultures when compared to the riot grrrl community.

To illustrate her point Royer takes the example of two video artists – Sadie Benning and Thirza Cuthand who both use similar cinematic techniques and autobiographical content to review how the various technologies that contribute to social networking affect their belonging to a specific community. Royer first looks at Benning's career as a video artist in the 90s and how even though the riot grrrl aesthetic permeated her work, she was always on the outskirts of that particular subculture. Royer attributes Benning's outsider status in

Cool Moms

Thirza Cuthand's blog

the riot grrrl subculture to the medium of her work, in that the riot grrrl subculture used physical ways of distributing materials and Benning's video work was diminished in the subculture, not because her work didn't fully subscribe to the riot grrrl aesthetics or she herself wasn't directly involved with other riot grrrls, but because it was more difficult to distribute her work to a large number of people. On the other side of the spectrum, Thirza Cuthand's work is quite easy to distribute to large groups of people by way of Web 2.0 social networks. However, she is not situated within a specific community or subculture, and while she promotes herself and her work online she does not have a huge community of people who follow her filmmaking activities. Royer notes that a subculture or community like riot grrrl could help a younger generation of video artists take charge of the technology they use to create social change.

A NEW KIND OF PLEASURE: FEMINIST STORYTELLING IN LIZZIE BORDEN'S *BORN IN FLAMES*

In the final presentation of the panel, Jonquil Bailey argues that Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), a feminist science fiction film, provides a new and unique way to portray women in film. Bailey focused her presentation on analyzing the film techniques that Borden uses throughout *Born in Flames* and how those cinematic techniques both afford the audience pleasure as

well as providing enough detachment to give the audience room to critically assess the film's female characters. Bailey also argues that the film's narrative structure and the fact that there is no one central character provides the audience with the space to focus on the film's central theme: a feminist uprising and social movement within the film's universe.

The film itself follows various members of a feminist movement in New York City during a post-social-democratic revolution era where the Social Democrats push propaganda that denies

sexism and discrimination against racial and sexual minorities. The feminist movement dubbed the Women's Army uses protests and media to shed light on the joblessness and the underrepresentation of women. Bailey argues that because the film refrains from focusing on one character to drive the story and instead moves through the narrative using multiple women in diverse situations, providing examples of women in physical demanding jobs, or of women exploring their sexuality, Borden strips the female body of naturalized meanings and creates a larger possibilities for female experience and expression within the film. Bailey also discusses how this decision to focus on many female characters rather than one gives the audience the opportunity to identify with, rather than one single woman, the category "woman."

Bailey also argues in her presentation that Borden's construction of the erotic gaze in this film breaks the power dynamic this technique usually produces by, rather than using the heterosexual man as the possessor of the gaze she lets the female characters both be subject to the gaze as well as possessors of it. Bailey claims that this new gaze, give the audience the chance to look in many different ways at the female body as well as look at the female body with new eyes. Bailey also makes it clear that though the film employs the erotic gaze, it does not do so in a

way that reduces the female characters to only their sexuality.

Ultimately, Bailey concludes that the film creatively appropriates traditional film techniques to reinforce and emphasize women's agency, women's diversity and individuality, and creates a "unique and alternative way to view women in film."

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