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Beyond Inter/Disciplinarity: Feminist Cultural Studies and Innovative Poetics: Disciplinary Dislocations

Cultural studies has had a profound impact on other academic disciplines, including English and women's studies: it has encouraged literary scholars to move away from New Critical strategies of close reading and to question the highbrow/lowbrow distinctions on which literary canons were formed, and it has offered feminist scholarship a useful set of tools for examining the relationships among gender, cultural production, consumption and engagement. Although my own research on feminist poetics is located in English, it is strongly influenced by cultural studies and women's studies methodologies. The frameworks on which I draw in order to read and write about innovative feminist poetics come, for the most part, from cultural studies and from feminist theory rather than from literary theory. However, I often encounter resistance from these fields in my attempt to find a context for my work. Despite their interdisciplinarity, cultural studies and women's studies are founded in part on an "as yet incomplete promise of interdisciplinarity" established through the foreclosure of certain kinds of texts and cultural objects, including poetry (Godard 2007: 16).

While cultural studies has an expansive understanding of what constitutes a legitimate object of study, it has a difficult time accommodating poetry and poetics within its purview. There are obvious reasons for this exclusion: cultural studies engages with the lived material conditions of people's lives and with objects that have a clear popular or subcultural appeal. Poetry, in contrast, is generally perceived as elitist and as remote from everyday lived experience. Maria

Damon has examined cultural studies' resistance to poetics, arguing that cultural studies arose largely in opposition to New Critical approaches to reading poetry; cultural studies in the "Birmingham-school-neo-Marxist sense has focused dignified analytic attention on artifacts that had been considered beneath the purview of the academy ... because high literary arts, poetry chiefly among them, had long received their due" (Damon: 2009: 4-5). While this was true of the academy in the 1960s and 1970s, poetry occupies a more marginal place there today, where—even within English departments—it is taught less frequently than fiction. Moreover, most innovative poetics keenly resists a New Critical approach, instead demanding an approach that situates poetic texts as cultural texts that are actively embedded and engaged in the practices and politics of everyday life.

Women's studies shares cultural studies' hesitation to embrace poetry and poetics, in part because its origin narratives have, in the words of Barbara Godard, been "disciplined" by the social sciences, foreclosing humanities-based feminist scholarship in favour of praxis-based, social-science-oriented scholarship that "maps onto Women's Studies a longstanding Marxist suspicion of the superstructure where conceptual work occurs in a system perceived as distinct from the economy. This distrust of representation plays into ancient warnings of the dangers for the polity of the aesthetic with its affect and to modern assumptions of the lack of utility of poetry" (Godard 2007: 19). When women's studies *does* accommodate poetry into its purview, it tends to champion lyric confessional poetry, which can be recuperated by praxis-oriented scholarship through the feminist axiom "the personal is political" as an articulation of personal experience and struggle. Poetry that employs less straightforward modes of composition is often dismissed as inaccessible and thus politically ineffective, because even if these texts explore the politics of identity, they often do so in a way that is not reducible to the articulation of a singular lyric "I." Rae Armantrout questions this marginalization, suggesting that feminist and experimental writing might be "natural allies" and that experimental writing holds the potential to "seek a new view of the self," one that could be potentially liberating in its ability to challenge social codes (Armantrout 1988: 295-96). Accessibility and clarity are indeed complex issues, but there are numerous ways to shift our understanding of these terms; moreover, clarity and personal expression need not be the primary goal of politicized feminist writing or analysis. As a way of thinking beyond this impasse, I'd like to advance a feminist cultural studies of innovative poetics that can enrich and move beyond disciplinary limitations. In doing so, I hope to locate feminist poetics within a framework that offers dynamic investigations and productive, politicized interventions into contemporary culture, and to explore some of the tools and methodologies that innovative poetics can offer to feminist cultural studies.

Toward a Feminist Cultural Studies of Innovative Poetics

Innovative poetics might be said to comprise a kind of subculture within the field of poetry, on account of the marginal position it occupies in relation to mainstream poetry movements. Innovative poetics circulates through small-press publications and poetics journals (many of which exist only in online formats) and among a relatively small group of practitioners and readers. Critical discussions of this writing primarily occur in blog posts, email discussion-lists and online journals, rather than in peer-reviewed academic journals. Innovative poetics is generally excluded from discussions of national literatures, both in Canada and the U.S., although it is interesting to note that there is a great deal of cross-border exchange among readers and practitioners of this writing, in part because much of this exchange occurs in the deterritorialized domain of cyberspace. The fact that much of the production, circulation and discussion of this work occurs outside of academia and the mainstream publishing industry means that any equation of innovative poetics with elitist cultural institutions and so-called highbrow forms of literature is somewhat misleading. Furthermore, academic recognition and legitimacy are not the primary goals of practitioners of innovative writing, who for the most part question such forms of legitimization.

The New Critical strategies of close reading against which cultural studies reacts are of little use when engaging with innovative poetics, as these strategies cannot offer insight into the political and cultural contexts that inform this work, nor can they account for the procedural compositional strategies that many of these writers deploy to create their poems. Innovative poetics “approaches language as an inherent problematic and subject of inquiry rather than a mere vehicle for representation” and, as such, it holds great potential for thinking about the relationship between discursivity and modes of gendered, racialized, economic and cultural power (Eichhorn and Milne 2009: 9). Because innovative poetics extends language beyond representation and mimesis, it is a productive site for the articulation of fractured, multiple and posthuman subjectivities, and for the defamiliarization and interrogation of contemporary scientific, economic and political discourses that have been used to reinforce social norms and relations of power. Innovative feminist poetics extends the theoretical lines of inquiry that inform feminist theory, cultural studies and anti-globalization theory. It is process-oriented and focused on the materiality of language; these texts enact theoretical engagements *through* poetic process and procedure. This is where innovative poetics holds the greatest potential, but it also poses a significant conceptual challenge for the critic attempting to write about the work. Sianne Ngai has noted the “redundancy or obviousness” that results when innovative poetic texts are placed in dialogue with theoretical texts, because the fit seems too close (Ngai 2005: 308-309). One way to surmount this redundancy is to read innovative poetics not simply as poetry but as a kind of theoretical engagement whose methodology lies in a praxis of radical language play.

Feminism in innovative poetics is configured through and in relation to an array of social, ethical and political concerns—environmentalist, antiwar, anti-global, anti-capitalist, anti-racist and queer—that cohere in opposition to forces like neoliberalism and advanced capitalism. This writing exemplifies what Rosi Braidotti refers to as

an opening outwards of the process of redefining female subjectivity ... that calls for a broadening of the traditional feminist political agenda to include, as well as the issue of women's social rights, a larger spectrum of options which range from cultural concerns related to writing and creativity, to issues which at first sight seem to have nothing to do specifically with women. (Braidotti 2002: 83)

Rita Wong's *forage*, for example, sifts through the fragments of contemporary global culture, critically engaging with the legacies of colonialism, the exploitation of workers in developing nations, global capitalism and environmental degradation. While these are not gender-specific issues, Wong pays particular attention to their impact on women; she writes of "fold[ing] apologies and rice paper prayers / into small organic boats" to stop dioxins from entering the food chain and invading her mother's thyroid, aunties' breasts and grandmother's cervix (Wong 2007: 57). The body and subjectivity in contemporary feminist poetics are mediated by technology, industry, globalization and the marketplace; in this respect, feminist poetics intersects with feminist theorizing on technology, post-human subjectivity, the environment and globalization.

Wong develops a process-based poetics that treats language as a system akin to an ecology that she infects, pollutes and modifies; as with any ecological system, the import or redaction of elements effects flow and meaning:

jellyfish potato / jellypo fishtato / glow in the pork toys /
nab your crisco while it's genetically cloudy boys/
science lab in my esophagus / what big beakers you have
sir / all the better to mutate you with my po monster (20)

Wong splices words like a scientist splices genes, resulting in a powerful and linguistically playful critique of genetic modification and transgenic experimentation. Central to her poetic ecology is an attempt to displace the humanist subject seen as central to the "I" of lyric poetry, and to see the world through a "less human-centric lens" (Eichhorn and Milne 2009: 351). Wong develops a feminist politics and poetics that are intimately connected to her critique of the humanist subject. "Chaos feary" cultivates a process-based poetics directly inspired by Vandana Shiva's *Biopiracy*. Shiva links biopiracy to a form of liberalism exemplified in the philosophical writings of Locke and Hume. Wong, following Shiva, enacts a poetic biopiracy through playful but politically pointed language that challenges both the colonization of living organisms and

the implicit reliance on humanism and liberalism used to justify this biopiracy: “pyre in pirate bio in bile / mono in poly breeder in / womb” (37).

In addition to mutating language to explore genetic modification and applying the tactics of biopiracy to language, Wong uses poetic form to reflect powerfully on the politics of globalization. Through fragmentation and juxtaposition, she moves swiftly across different locations, meditating on the infinite connections between small daily practices and the politics of globalized labour to explore the implications of global and local power effects. Wong writes of the “military industrial complex embedded in [her] imported electronics” and of harmful toxins leaching into the groundwater in China where obsolete computers are shipped and dismantled (11). In a poem called “*sort by day, burn by night*” she writes of “bony bodies” inhaling “carcinogenic toner dust” and asks: “what if your Pentium got dumped in guiyu village? / your garbage someone else’s cancer? [...] global whether / here for there” (46-47).

Wong accounts for her location in terms of geographical space and historical time. She reflects on both personal history and the broader social histories of racism and colonialism. Paying particular attention to the relationship between language, domination and colonization, Wong plays across languages: English, Cantonese and the First Nations languages Halkomelem and Salish. In a recent interview, Wong talked about writing a poem with Halkomelem words “cracked into it or sprouting into it” as a way of using poetic form to enact a rupturing of colonial expansionist language (347). Inspired by Jeannette Armstrong’s essay “Land Speaking,” Wong wonders:

what it would feel like to try to crack English open and have Halkomelem or indigenous words come in ... language that is indigenous to the land wherever you happen to be living. That feels very fraught in the sense that you don’t want to be stealing the language when so much has been stolen. At the same time, you don’t want that language to die out either.... One has to think about one’s intention. Is it respectful? What are the possible outcomes of it? [...] I hope that if I venture into this experiment, it will generate a giving back to the language and cultures invoked. You can’t always control or predict that but you have to think about it. (Eichhorn and Milne 2009: 347)

In a poem called “forage, fumage,” the speaker asks, “how does one say *give back* in Seminole? In Salishan? Route through the land’s indigenous languages, bend english towards their spirits” (Wong 2009: 30). Reciprocity is an important aspect of Wong’s poetic ecologies; sustainability is not just about taking care of the environment, it is also about tending to the languages intimately connected with place that have been silenced through colonial violence.

While Wong’s *forage* explores the radical potential of poetic ecologies, Rachel Zolf’s *Human Resources* (2007) explores the radical potential of poetic economies.

Zolf plays with various economies—libidinal, financial, linguistic and gift economies—creating hybrid poetic economies that implicitly call into question the commodification of identities, politics, sexualities, bodies and words. *Human Resources* also enacts a politicized articulation of minoritarian identities (feminist, lesbian, Jew) and playfully yet subversively enacts becoming-machine. As such, *Human Resources* offers an incisive critique of capitalist cultures while simultaneously offering a productive space for the articulation of politicized, hybrid subjectivities.

Zolf uses searchable online databases to create poems out of vernacular speech, popular idiom and the language of advertizing and corporate communication, reflecting on the convergence of capitalism, sexism and heteronormativity in dominant linguistic and capitalist economies. Like Wong, Zolf develops a process-based poetics to challenge humanist understandings of subjectivity, but she does so by using computerized search engines and poetry generators to aid in her writing process, thus challenging the romantic equation of poetry-writing with creative inspiration. Zolf uses WordCount (a searchable internet database of the 86,800 most frequently used words in the English language) and QueryCount (a searchable list of the words most often queried in WordCount). She also uses a poetry generator to compose a handful of poems. Zolf disrupts the association of poetry with beauty and elevated language by composing poems out of obscenities, corporate communications, clichés and vernacular speech.

One poem in the collection comprises the most common queries of most common English words. It reads like a list of obscenities occasionally interrupted with articles, prepositions, numbers, religious references and proper names:

the W1 fuck Q1 of W2 sex Q2 and W3 love Q3 to W4 the Q4
 Vav is the star G4 Jew a W5 shit Q5 in W6 god Q6 that i it
 penis is cunt was a I ass for jesus on dog you pussy he
 hate be bush with john as me by hello at vagina have. (Zolf 2007: 48)¹

This poem reflects back to the reader the ugliness of a dominant linguistic economy, but Zolf is not attempting to hold up a moralistic mirror to provoke our horror over obscene language-use; rather, she makes poetry out of the linguistic waste that is not typically seen as poetic. The fact that these are the most queried words reflects a widespread cultural misogyny and homophobia, and a cultural obsession with sex. Zolf recontextualizes these words by placing them in a poem, where they become part of a critical commentary on language and culture. I read this as a feminist reclamation of language that is at once ironic and irreverent, and that speaks back to a cultural discourse rife with sexism, homophobia and religious zealotry.

Zolf quotes fellow Canadian poet Anne Carson: “What is lost when words are wasted? And where is the human store to which such goods are gathered?” and follows Carson’s question with her own: “Which words are gathered, the wasted or

the lost? ... When you 'cleans words and salvage what is cleansed' do you collect what's been scrubbed off or what remains?" (31). Zolf collects the scum. She sees herself as a gleaner, reclaiming words that have been devalued through excessive use and circulation. She does not evoke a nostalgia for a mythic time when words were valued. Rather, she plunders waste for its poetic and political potential. Zolf's gleaning is parallel to Wong's foraging; both entail sifting through the fragments of contemporary culture to compose poems that offer active theoretical and political interventions.

The impetus behind this collection of poems stems in part from Zolf's work in the field of corporate communications; until relatively recently, she made her living writing copy for bank brochures and corporate newsletters. Zolf invokes the Deleuzian trope of the "writing machine" that can "spew about anything: private jets, exquisite gardens, offshore banking havens, the Great Ephemeral Skin, how much we love our passionate ^(Q8992) francesca snazzy prat employees" (6). While Zolf is the author of each poem, she manipulates and rearranges found text and creates a bastardized poetic discourse. As a "writing machine," she recirculates words more often than she generates them, working against the notion of "poetic inspiration." Language is an economy; words circulate through this economy and, as poet, Zolf directs and channels their flow, often with the help of search engines and poetry generators. Some of the poems are partially composed of emails written by Zolf's former clients; other poems contain PowerPoint presentations lifted from a course she took on corporate communications.

Like Wong, Zolf uses innovative compositional strategies to displace the humanist subject. In one poem she cheekily writes, "you looked for subjectivity in 18th-century picaresques and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Thought one day the fridge would open and Self 14 the six-rayed star the world tented in us would emerge fully delineated" (88). Despite Zolf's playful displacement of "Self" throughout *Human Resources*, subjectivity is socially and materially grounded in the text. In addition to being a profoundly anti-capitalist project that seeks to interrogate and defamiliarize linguistic economies, it is also a feminist and a queer text that constantly draws attention to the ways in which female bodies—and especially queer female bodies—are discursively framed within a misogynist capitalist culture.

In some respects, Wong's and Zolf's poetics are starkly divergent. Wong urges us to slow down and pay attention to the rhythms of the body and the environment rather than caving in to the demands of a hyper-capitalist speed culture. In contrast, Zolf's poetics are frenetic—an element of the text that becomes especially apparent when one hears Zolf read aloud from *Human Resources*. However, both writers develop process-oriented and praxis-oriented poetics that are especially useful for thinking through the complexities of contemporary culture and politics. Contemporary innovative feminist poetics responds to what Braidotti

has referred to as feminist theory's "need for renewed conceptual creativity and for politically informed cartographies of the present" and holds the potential to open new theoretical vistas for feminist cultural studies (Braidotti 2002: 11). A feminist cultural studies of innovative poetics offers new and especially effective conceptual frameworks through which to theorize and counter nebulous, shifting, micro- and macro-political modes of domination and oppression. In its engagement with the textual fragments of material culture, its displacement of the humanist subject and its ongoing critique of relations of power, innovative poetics shares much in common with cultural studies. If, as Maria Damon argues in *Poetry and Cultural Studies*, cultural studies "rewrites the category of the aesthetic to place it in an active engagement with political, social, and economic realms, displacing aesthetic judgment as the centerpiece in analysis of expressive culture," then cultural studies and innovative poetics might be productive allies in the desire to disrupt and contest the status quo—not only to disrupt and contest the way poems are read (or not read) as cultural objects, but also to disrupt and contest the status quo of neoliberal culture (Damon 2009: 2).

Notes

1. The Ws and Qs that punctuate this poem indicate each word's ranking in the WordCount and QueryCount databases that Zolf used to compose the poems in *Human Resources*. The Gs that also occasionally punctuate the poem refer to "Gematria of Nothing," a third online engine that Zolf employed in the composition of these poems. Zolf describes Gematria of Nothing as "a bizarre Christ-, crow- and empress- laden attempt to co-opt the serious practice of Hebrew numerology and apply it to English words and phrases" (Zolf 2007: 93).

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