INTRODUCTION

Few critics would disagree today with the assertion that the last decades of the 20th century witnessed a significant transformation of Western culture, bringing a radical change that affected our notion of literature, and therefore, of the canon. Postmodern thought and related theoretical movements, such as post-structuralism and post-colonialism, had a tremendous impact on the humanities, on the ways we had so far conceived the world and its various representations. Within that general reorientation of epistemology, gender studies, and very specially, feminist production, began to play a central role in all fields of knowledge, moving from previously precarious positions on the fringe to the mainstream of academic research. A telling illustration of such movement from margin to mainstream, more than 80% of the contributions to the *PMLA* Special Millennium Issue (2000) to evaluate the state of literary studies in the past century dealt specifically with gender issues: “In these thirty years,” Florence Howe (“Looking Backward” 2000: 2007) writes in this context, “we have taken giant steps to reclaim some of what women lost to patriarchy over the past several millennia. Only with continuing energy, optimism, and intelligence and by resisting backlash as well as despair and amnesia will the women of the twenty-first century complete the task begun”.

That seems to be specially the case of Canada and the United States, where feminist scholarship has insistently brought to the foreground the complex relationship between canon and power, uncovering the patriarchal ideology of our literary and cultural traditions and pushing the current questioning of the Cartesian subject in directions never explored before. Extending to the gender arena the poststructuralist approach to reality, culture, and identity as always already constructed in and by language, North American feminists have consistently challenged our grounds of thought, unveiling canon formation as an ideological operation and arguing thus for its revision. A focus on the relationship
between canon and power becomes thus paradigmatic of the larger changes mentioned since it has also opened the field to an ever-expanding interdisciplinarity, based, in turn, on our awareness of the constructedness of the subject through multiple and interacting constituencies such as class, race, gender, and so forth.

In their analysis of the factors determining this shift of feminist theory and criticism from the marginal position occupied in the 1970s to the prominent place enjoyed two decades later, Kaplan and Rose (1990: 127) mention a notable increase in the number of women both in the profession (entering the academia) and in the MLA, where they have been very active since, taking institutional responsibilities and participating in the decision-making organs. The alliance of different forms of feminism with political activities that generated wide support in the social spheres outside the academia, as well as the important body of research and scholarship produced in those decades across various disciplines, also notably contributed to the consolidation of the field. Still, Kaplan and Rose commented in the early 1990s, it remains unclear whether the evident move from the fringe to the center of literary studies can be taken as empowering (that is, as an expansion of the field) or as a cooptation (by a field still dominated by white male critics anxious about maintaining their power). In the latter case, the dimensions of the shift, they argue, would be only relative:

We are compelled by the terms of our own argument, no less than by the force of the evidence we have examined in these chapters, to refuse to make any predictions. If, as our survey of literary history indicates, the process of canon formation and reformation is an organic and ongoing process, then even if—as we have also argued—there is something novel about the current confluence of political interests of groups previously excluded from the academic/cultural hegemony and theoretical challenges to humanism and positivism, what we are now going through feels unprecedented only because we are so involved in our moment in history that we have not yet put it into perspective. (Kaplan and Rose 1990:158)

Written more than fifteen years later, the essays in this collection contribute to that desire to put changes into perspective. In their diverse topics and approach, they address a range of key issues around the relationship between gender and canon in the North American literary and filmic production of the last twenty five years. The case of Canada constitutes an exception to the rule here, for the prominence of women writers and artists in the Canadian canon is unquestionable even in the earliest stages of its young history (see Gerson 1997). Contemporary artistic production in Canada and the United States constantly addresses that relationship, stressing the necessity to find critical alternatives which account for the multiplication of references, for the proliferation of positions, and for the new forms of thought. Invariably based on close readings
of the texts/films in question, these essays implicitly define gender in the most encompassing sense, which would include traditional (white and middleclass) feminist analyses, queer theory as well as studies of masculinities. They thus reflect and embrace the opinion that, by the end of the 1980s, the emergence of gender studies as a promising new area of research and critical inquiry, one in which both men and women had a space, expanded the feminist agenda from the study of the female subject to the analyses of the various social constructions of gender, including masculinities, studies of sexuality and sexual orientation. If the rise of feminist studies in the 1960s produced an important degree of animosity on the part of the white heterosexual male critic, this new shift generated even more resistance from the traditional sectors, who feared the disempowering of their own identitary position, and perceived the further critical turn as ultimately castrating and depriving them of a safe position from which to speak: “How does a straight man react responsibly to articles on the creative, existential, and hermeneutic experience of women and homosexual?” exclaims Sandy Petrey in the early 1990s. “Straight male engagement,” he further complains, “is often not a concern for criticism consciously and confidently directed elsewhere” (Petrey and Kahn 1993: 219).

Additionally, the essays that follow evaluate and articulate from a variety of angles the influence of gender studies on the current process of canon renewal, drawing connections across disciplines as well as between gender theories and other contemporary discourses such as post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and globalization studies. We believe it is the strength of much feminist work of the last decade to have traced a firm alliance with racial and cultural minorities. Together, they have gained both relative power and a sense of solidarity in their common claim that the canon should open up to include the works of the previously excluded. It is thanks to their joined effort that most of us are now able to agree that “a canon constructs value as much as it reflects value; that the canon is contingent not universal; that the canon is a fiction about aesthetic and intellectual supremacy” (Stimpson 1992: 266); or, to put it simply, replicating Paul Lauter’s famous assertion (1991: 261), that “literary canons do not fall from the sky”. Thanks to the firm alliance between feminists, scholars of race and ethnicity and postcolonial theoreticians, we are now able to imagine new configurations of the literary and the cultural: “It is now time to devise more coherent theories of literary value, maps of the good that are neither cut in stone nor scuffed in sand” (Stimpson 1992: 267).

Twenty five years later, the task, however, is far from complete, and the continuation of intense debates on the nature and ideology of canons reveals the great complexity of the question (see Harris 1991). In his seminal study of Western canonical structures of thought, Paul Lauter argues for the value of comparative approaches as more democratic methodologies to study the
contemporary reformation of the canon. These would involve the critical scrutiny of Western literary studies, the notions of mainstream and minority, as well as imply comparative strategies of learning. A comparative approach, Lauter (1992: 269) writes, “offers, in fact, not the false tranquility of settled traditions, but the ferment and passion of a struggle over what shall be honored by calling it ‘culture’ or ‘literature’ or ‘history’; what shall be esteemed by describing it as canonical; what shall be dignified by including it in college curricula, reading lists, and cultural catalogues”. A most graphic instance that canons are indeed constructed, a group of American universities worked during the 1990s in the “curriculum integration” or “curriculum transformation” projects to change the content and methods of the regular courses taught, to include new approaches and new authors (special attention being given to the author’s race, gender, and/or class). An attempt to produce the change of mentality necessary for the transformation to successfully take place, these projects involved a good number of scholars, who were generously funded to read new material being published and discuss their opinions in “faculty development” seminars.

Needless to say, the category of gender played an essential role in the transformation of scholarship intended by those projects. That gender intersects with other constituencies of identity, like race, culture, class, age, or even, region became soon evident in the work of feminist critics of different social, racial, and cultural backgrounds, who, already in the 1980s, insisted on the idea that feminist theory had been mainly white and middleclass. In the United States, it was African American critics and activists, and very specially Alice Walker’s *womanism*, that produced the most effective feminist counter-discourse against the ethnocentric bias of their Anglo-American sisters. They were soon followed by Chicana writers and critics who felt excluded from the ongoing rise of a powerful Chicano movement with a continuing (and unquestioned) patriarchal basis. The strong social orientation and constant activism of these forms of feminisms have always prevailed over the various theoretical impasses we have experienced in recent years (see Aldama 2005). A decade later, in Canada, the critic and writer Arun Mukherjee would altogether reject feminist theory on account of its colonizing ethos, for “[i]ts project of ‘recovering’ and interpreting women’s writing has often rubbed [her] and many other women of colour the wrong way” (1994: viii). The canonical texts of white feminism would then be complicit with the imperialist discourses: “Even though feminism and feminist literary theory are seen as radical discourses,” Mukherjee continues, “I, as a non-white woman am forced to retain an oppositional stance to them as well” (1994: x).

Equally radical in her critique of Western liberal feminism as a classist and racist movement, Marlene Nourbese Philip (1997: 12) does not dismiss, however, the potentiality of the movement “to bridge some of those gaps –race and class for instance–isolating communities and audiences”. Feminism, she argues, “could, in
some instances, promote that ‘common base’ through which experiences might be shared”. The more encompassing and inclusive the feminist works, the closer we will be to the establishment of a “true feminist culture”, whose goal, Philip (Phillip 1997: 13) maintains, would be to bridge racial and class differences:

We are a long way from a true feminist community, and even further away from a true feminist culture—one that would not, as it has tended to do, emphasize one aspect (the white and middle class) of that culture, but a culture in which the word feminist is enlarged to include those groups which have, to date, been excluded. When that is accomplished –the establishment of a true feminist culture– we shall be a long way towards having audiences who are able to complete, in more authentic ways, the works of artists \textit{whatever} their background.

Critiques like these ones have had a crucial effect in the production of the past few years, triggering a self-critical attitude within the various feminist movements and producing a number of studies that revise and question the privilege of the white middleclass female subject from the very critics that had upheld such a position in the recent past. Such is the case, for instance, of Sara Mills’s latest work (2005), a study of gender and colonial space in which the aboriginal approach to spatiality, the classed nature of colonial societies, and the colonial woman’s complicity with Western conceptions of the landscape are given special attention. “Because ‘class’ is almost invisible to the constituents of a particular classed society,” argues Cranny-Francis (1995: 66) in a different context, “it is therefore one of the most difficult markers to deal with”. Consequently, a considerable body of research is being done in areas in which gender intersects with class, race and culture and in issues, such as domestic violence, where not one single constituency can be considered in isolation (see, for instance Sokoloff and Pratt 2005).

Elsewhere, a focus on region (as opposed to nation) may also produce important challenges to the dominant (white male) canon both in Canada and the States, where the “continued defining of the canon in terms of enclosure implicitly rejects works with different formal structures, whether or not they were written by white males” (Bredahl 1989: 5). Similarly, recent theories of globalization are now taking into account the gender and ethnocultural bias of much of the previous work being done. Drawing on women’s traditional connection to the domestic, the local, and the small details of everyday life, a feminist perspective on global issues would necessarily draw attention to the local context, where actual, effective action can take place. And, in fact, as Paul Jay (2001: 40-42), has commented, the most challenging work being done in these areas is coming from feminist scholars, who question the supposedly liberating effect of popular male-dominated theories of globalization, view local cultures as sites of potential resistance, and propose the empowering of
communities to confront the replication of a colonial experience under the guise of the newly labeled and much-invoked globalization.

Where will we go from here? The possibilities are many and can take us in very different, even, opposing, directions. The essays in this collection mark the persistence of old sites of struggle within gender studies and point to the existence of new ones. From there, the road opens in front of our eyes.

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The authors that contribute to this volume set out to show how certain cultural determinations may diminish our capacity to interpret our experience, and, in so doing, they also underline the dangers of imposing a role in the name of a standard. The question of who –or what– gets to be representative is a worthy one, pointing directly to our archaeologies of meaning. It unearths zones of awareness –dominant stories to tell and to reproduce– and also zones of “unawareness”, experiential material which has been neglected or underaddressed because it might not be easily accommodated into our patterns of knowledge.

In “Hanging out The Laundry: Heroines in the Midst of Dirt and Cleanliness”, Aritha van Herk makes us see more profoundly through the power of a metaphor which brings together the realms of hygiene and of canon construction. She proposes to examine more closely the actual chores involved in the abstract term “domesticity” so that we become aware of the impositions of our civilization and its canons: she demonstrates the importance of laundry and its potential to signify in connection to our literary and cultural standards. This article figures hygienic practices –the removal of dirt– as conceptually close to the sanitization processes of canon-making, which favor only a few representative images and plots. Once filth and the agents in charge of its erasure are brought to the foreground, we are able to realize what kinds of effacements have been committed in the history of the literary canon and of feminist theory.

Van Herk warns us against the dangers of an acquiescent feminization of the canon, where the only heroine admitted for entrance has been one that undertakes the “universal story” of the psychological journey towards wisdom. The heroines allowed this redemptive pattern are tied by the demands of the conservative narrative of suffering followed by redemption –or wrongness followed by reformation–, a dignified emotional trajectory mainly available for the middle class condition and therefore exclusive of other kind of women which had to permanently deal with the excrescence of society. Thus, soiled linen and other unacknowledged items of domesticity previously “beneath” consideration resurface now to show us who has made the dirt of the privileged invisible. They are maids, servants, criminals, outcasts, immigrants who, by virtue of their gender, but also because of necessity and of punishment, have
been devoted to washing away the bodily fluids which stain the clothing of respectable members of the community.

“Hanging out The Laundry” deals with a variety of narrative genres and nationalities which document the eradication of dirt: the films Quills (2000) (American) and The Magdalene Sisters (2003) (British/Irish), the novels Alias Grace (1996) (Canadian) and Joan Makes History (1988) (Australian), the short story collection China Dog (1997) (Chinese Canadian) and the memoir The Woman Warrior (1975) (Chinese American). Van Herk disengages these narratives from the inertia of ready-made symbolic interpretations on domesticity in order to unearth the real mechanics of gendered labor. In doing so, she teaches us to be watchful over the stories and the female characters we accept as worthy and to be more attentive to the kind of knowledge emitted by marginalized figures. These figures, necessary but unwanted, provide us with unsuspected perspectives to learn about life and its demands and they most significantly disclose our complicity in creating elitist cultural patterns.

The question of representativity also permeates the essay “Blood Road Leads to Promise: A Gendered Approach to Canada’s Past in Gail Anderson-Dargatz’s The Cure for Death by Lightning”. Through a thorough reading of Anderson-Dargatz’s novel, Eva Darias Beautell shows that Canadian foundational myths of the wilderness are made to mean differently when engendered, her proposal being to pay attention to those contemporary authors whose renderings of Canadian nature expand our understanding of the wilderness beyond the parameters set by Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood, and also beyond other contemporary fictions which unquestioningly celebrate a return to an idealized nature. The essay collects the traditional meanings associated with nature and strips them off their universality, demonstrating the oxymoron implied in traditional associations of women and nature on the one hand, and women and civilization on the other, as well as the danger attached to analogies that have historically served to justify ecocide and patriarchal domination. Additionally, a close examination of the contradictory symbology which springs from a feminized nature (both as nurturing and as evil) unveils women’s complicity with a pattern of thought aimed at their very submission.

And so it happens in The Cure for Death by Lightning (1996), a novel which Eva Darias uses to claim that the remnant of aggressiveness and exploitation deriving from our models of interaction with nature can only be deconstructed through a recognition that they are gendered; only then can we become aware of unsuited and damaging views both for humanity and for nature. Men’s violence against nature and animals and women’s compliance with this order are seen as the result of an inability to question the foundations of available cultural discourses. In the essay, these discourses are located within the Canadian literary tradition and its views on wilderness and pioneer life to show how Anderson-
Dargartz contests the conventions of women pioneer writing and homesteading plots by means of combining alternative gendered and Aboriginal perspectives. In the process, Eva Darias probes the relevance of the novel’s rearticulation of Canadian myths and of environmental symbolism in order to appraise its contribution to the Canadian contemporary literary panorama.

Similarly concerned with Canada’s foundational discourses, the essay “Surviving the Metaphorical Condition in Elle: Douglas Glover’s Impersonation of the First French Female in Canada”, by María Jesús Hernáez Lerena, studies Glover’s text, a story set against the failures of early colonization of Canada, in order to show how the current rhetorical environment interacts with the writing and the reception of contemporary literature. Given the fact that nowadays the production of literature has to co-exist with tremendous amounts of theory and criticism, with this essay, María Jesús Hernáez proposes not so much to extricate the uncomprehending cultural and gender models which literature exposes as wrong but to observe how the specific questions which assail feminism and post-colonial criticism –how the weight of ideology– shape the creation and understanding of narrative nowadays. In Elle (2003) the reader finds the case of a Renaissance French noblewoman, Marguerite de Roberval, empowered with today’s vision but restricted to her sixteenth-century role as an exile into an empty piece of land not yet turned into nation. Her fated destiny is made more acutely painful because this woman is aware that she has been turned (and will be turned) into an over-symbolized semiotic field, the perfect icon for a feminist or post-colonial approach.

María Jesús Hernáez holds up this novel as an example of how contemporary novels absorb the style of thought and vocabulary of another genre, the ideological and cultural critique, and how criticism itself is integrated into the plot and becomes of primordial narrative interest. The essay poses the question of whether fiction runs the risk of evaporating when the narrative openly undertakes the discussion of feminist and post-colonial issues, and this perspective brings about a discussion on the modes of addressing the past favored by recent fiction. Marguerite’s situation –trapped in her condition of historical artifact– and her analytical superpowers are made to function as a parody of current academic clichés, but are also lyrically fused with the perceptions of her ordeal in such a way that the novel manages to create a dialogue between two overlapping kinds of discourse, that of a mainstream cultural reading and that of an unmediated first-person account of deprivation. The description of the nature of this dialogue as informative of the kind of readers we are nowadays is the main purpose of the essay.

Vicente Rosselló Hernández contributes to this volume by introducing masculinity studies and also a filmic genre, the documentary, often neglected as source of information for gender identity theory and analysis. His essay offers a
comprehensive view of the male studies project in North America and a detailed examination of its connections with the documentary through a three-layered approach which includes: an assessment of the state of the discipline at the moment, an analysis of the epistemological tenets of the documentary, and a commentary on three examples of documentary film—American and Canadian—which revolve around the topic of hyperbolic masculinity. The conclusions ultimately reached in the final textual commentary will precisely inform us on the degree of incisiveness and sophistication of masculine studies nowadays and on the ideological obstacles which may eventually make the deconstruction of masculinity ineffectual.

After tracing the beginnings of male studies and locating the problems which have hampered the development of the discipline (both deriving from the impact of feminist theory and from other kinds of internal resistance), Vicente Rosselló discovers the theoretical possibilities of a corpus which, being traditionally associated with objectivity, has recently come to realize the need to make a move towards less essentialized claims to knowledge. The new “marking” of positions which previously went unmarked—such as gender and nation formation—make the three films under examination particularly fitful to observe to what extent the recent documentary industry gets involved with the representation of gender. The three films are the mockumentary film *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) by Rob Reiner, the Canadian documentary *Project Grizzly* (1996) by Peter Lynch, and the Oscar-Nominated *Murderball* (2005) by Henry A. Rubin and Dana A. Shapiro.

After this study on the codes of masculine representation, two essays on what could be considered the most feminist of all subjects, the intricacies of the mother-daughter relationship, follow, which focus on the difficulties involved in the fabrication of identities within the constraints of gender. In order to show the importance (both epistemological and emotional) of the daughter’s relationship with the mother, Dulce Rodríguez González and María Henríquez Betancor gather the examples of eminent American women writers whose artistic production has revolved around a different plot from that of the romance, officially sanctioned for centuries as the main source of human drama.

“The great theme is not Romeo and Juliet”, Anne Sexton claimed, and in “The Dismantling of the Oedipal Dyad in Two American Women Poets: The Dynamics of Maternal Desire”, Dulce Rodriguez registers the implications of this shift of focus from the traditional couple to the mother-daughter dyad through a close reading of two poems by two American writers: Anne Sexton’s “The Double Image” and Alicia Ostriker’s “Listen”. The article points to a blank in Freud’s work which leaves many aspects of femininity unstudied and directs the reader’s attention towards Lacan’s recontextualization of Freud’s theories within a linguistic ground. It then proposes subsequent feminist reworkings of these theories as offering a more complete perspective from which the critic can
understand the complexities of symbiosis and identification. The essay draws our attention to an often overlooked source of oppression for women: an archaic and rigid conception of the bond between mother and daughter that needs to be reconceptualized.

Upholding the life of Chicana writer and critic Gloria Anzaldúa as an example of endurance and survival over multidirectional patriarchal attacks, María Henríquez focuses on how Anzaldúa’s difficult relationship with her mother was further complicated by issues of poverty, race, and sexual orientation. With a clear emphasis on Anzaldúa’s ability to confront the destructive power of that unrevised emotional bondage, the essay “Too Bad Mibijita Was Morena: Anzaldúa’s Autobiographical Encounters with Her Mother” discusses the contribution of Chicana writers to the genre of autobiography at the end of the twentieth century in a context of ethnic and class marginalization. Anzaldúa’s rebellion, both against restrictive upbringing patterns of gender and cultural behaviour and against white mainstream definitions of identity, shows the continuing relevance of the construction of the female subject as a legitimate and representative plot of our contemporaneity.

This book closes with a challenging essay which invites readers to try to comprehend gendered identities beyond the limiting possibilities of language and story. In choosing Robert Kroetsch’s poetic text The Hornbooks of Rita K. (2001), Mladen Kurajica puts gender construction in a different context, a mental space where energy has not yet solidified into formulation or concept. Through a critique of the cultural schemas of western logics and a revision of the constraints involved in the Derridean notion of difference, this essay finds philosophical support to argue that it is possible to escape polarizations and to think of the different forms of existence not as structures or categories but as flows.

In order to escape story, inevitably fossilized after so many centuries of cultural assertion, Kroetsch’s heroine disengages herself from any organizational principle, proposes simultaneity over direction and silence over codified thinking, and thus claims that silence, randomness, and latency are generators of vital possibilities outside established cultural discourse. Mladen Kurajica traces the implications of this proposal which shakes up previous gender-based notions of affirmation and foresees a path free from teleology, a road to silence as an expression of freedom. By making the effort to think of reality without the tools we have always used, this essay adds a fresh final touch to the collection because it names the coordinates within which we have been made to understand reality, it shows the dangers of our ideological allies, and it suggests new ways of thinking about the self, the gendering of the self, society, and history.

Every essay that follows works under the assumption that literature and film reach beyond and across aesthetic pleasure and make us see through the conventions by which we have been trained to think. Literary and cultural
conventions are in themselves complicitous carriers of dangerous metaphors and plots which can keep us blind to the event of otherness and to our own possibilities.

Eva Darias Beautell and
María Jesús Hernández Lerena

Works cited


