A Reading List in Minor Field 2: Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (Feminist Scholarship)

Gender, Life Writing, and Self-Making

This list is comprised of both works of fiction and theoretical pieces that focus on the diverse ways in which gender is inscribed and imbricated into narrating one’s self and life writing. Gender informs strategies of resistance to various structures of domination, oppression, and structural violence, either directly steeped in or, by extension, derived from patriarchy as ostensibly the only imaginable—normative—symbolic order. More concretely, by gender I mean first and foremost the female as embodiment of difference, i.e. an agency in envisioning, advancing, and implementing radical alternatives in theory, arts, and societal practices. The ultimate goal thereby is to undo the entire epistêmê of MANkind and thus decolonize and liberate entire realms of knowledge, heretofore subjugated to the diktat of patriarchy. It is in this sense that one needs to understand the third concept featuring in the title—self-making—as an ongoing struggle for both attaining narratability of one’s self and visibility, acknowledgement, and recognition in society.

A bulk of these readings (e.g. Virginia Woolf’s classic essay-manifesto A Room of One’s Own) grapple with the nascent phenomenon of the woman writer as a hallmark of women’s emancipation and liberation in the first half of the twentieth century. The iconic œuvre of Colette and Simone de Beauvoir, potently articulating the experience of female writers qua women in the first place, is indicative of this particular train of thought. On the other hand, the term écriture feminine (women’s writing), coined by Hélène Cixous, challenges an automatic equation of non-phallogocentric writing with the gender identity of the writer (which explains the inclusion of Jean Genet into this section). Instead, écriture feminine predicates this inherently different mode of writing on a set of distinct characteristics, ranging from the medium (be that white ink or even menstrual blood) to its mediation through the body (My body is dispersed writings, to recall Cixous’s quote from Venue á l’écriture). I intend to interrogate the potentialities and limitations of such a daring take on gendering literature and taxonomizing it via gender difference by wondering whether écriture feminine effectively operates as a theoretical wager, an incentive or even a provocation which ventures to reshuffle and dismantle Western literary canon.

The overwhelming majority of the literary works analyzed here narrate the self on the verge of an asymptotical convergence between the fictional and the factual (as in Charlotte Delbo’s trilogy Auschwitz et après, Marguerite Duras’ La douleur and L’amant, Francophone novels of Judeo-Maghrebi writers). These narratives, crafted under the dire conditions of wartime and various forms of assault on humanity in the middle of the 20th century, are densely inhabited by the female gender of their authors. Criticism has initiated many discussions as to whether these works equal purportedly fictionalized autobiographies (cf. the French term “autofiction”), by breaking what Philippe Lejeune calls autobiographical pact, or if they should be nonetheless read and interpreted as approximations of fiction. Recently published Sharpe’s In the Wake, Preciado’s Testo Junkie, Nelson’s The Argonauts are gathered under the overarching
concept of *autotheory*, which claims to blur strict genre divisions by incorporating robust theories into a most intimate practice of life writing. With regard to both autofiction and autotheory, I intend to closely scrutinize the modus operandi of the narratorial stance and the very texture of these narratives.

In conclusion, theorizing difference as generic for feminism would remain incomplete without a recourse to the field of Black Feminism which systematically resists the coalescence of white supremacism with gender violence. The works of Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, and Saidiya Hartman expose the interplay of settler-colonial grammars and patriarchy in the femicidal un-gendering of Black women. Engaging Black feminists into this conversation, I feel compelled to draw some striking parallels between the experience of Black women, ubiquitously marked by the *afterlife of slavery* (S. Hartman) and persistent violence, and the complete un-gendering and dehumanization of Jewish women under the “Third Reich.” Bearing in mind C.L.R. James’ definition of Black Studies as an open and inclusive project of critique against the Western civilization, I am certain that referencing Black Feminism significantly enriches the genealogy of feminist life writing, offered in this reading list. Methodologically, the choice of readings relies on a strong comparative underpinning. Therefore, this collection of texts is inevitably multilingual and includes predominantly works of fiction and theoretical pieces, written in French, but also those in English (mostly non-fiction) and Italian.

I. Gender and Narrating One’s Self

• __________. Mrs Dalloway. London: Hogarth Press, 1925.
• __________. To the Lighthouse. London: Hogarth Press, 1927.

II. Écriture féminine, its Horizons and Limitations

III. Mothers and Daughters, Mothering v. Motherhood

IV. Autobiography, “Autofiction,” and Autotheory
a).
• ___________. *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*. New York: Routledge, 2002.


b). Judeo-Maghrebi Francophone works:


V. Black Feminism as a Radical Theory of Difference
