From the Editor: Remembering Shari Benstock

This issue of *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* is dedicated to the memory of Shari Benstock, who died this past spring. An eminent scholar of modernist literature, women’s writing, and feminist theory, she edited the journal from 1983 through 1986. Her publications are many and diverse, but she is best known for her magisterial study *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, published in the year she left the University of Tulsa for the University of Miami. Summarizing the nature and significance of this book is a task to which I feel unequal, at least without resorting to recycling the praises that have accrued over the almost three decades since its first reviews appeared. I will only report from a more personal perspective that this book is one of perhaps a dozen publications that stand out in my memory as framing my own entry into the field, even though I am not a modernist. When I started graduate school in 1992, the book seemed to be in everyone’s hands and on everyone’s shelf or desk. Few discussions of modernism proceeded without reference to it nor could much discussion of women’s literary history. My own sense of the book’s accomplishment was that in an era thick with the smoke and shrapnel of theory skirmishes and canon wars—the scholarly atmosphere of the 1980s—she completed a feminist revision of the modernist canon even as she exposed the masculinist terms by which modernism was defined. This confrontation with how the “working definitions of Modernism—its aesthetics, politics, critical principles, and poetic practices—and the prevailing interpretations of the Modernist experience had excluded women from its concerns” had influence far beyond the bounds of modernist study, as did her sustained exploration of the diverse ways by which the experience of being female could shape the content and process of writing.1

Less well known than *Women of the Left Bank* are the seven prefaces Benstock wrote to the eight issues (including one double issue) of *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* published under her editorship. I returned to those prefaces on the day I learned of her death out of a desire to reconnect with this particular chapter of her life and to appreciate more fully her particular influence on the journal. As was my reaction when I first read them many years ago, I was startled with their brilliance; sharp-edged, graceful, and brave, they are simultaneously inspiring and intimidating to one who would walk in the path she forged as feminist literary scholar and Editor of this journal.

Written in the years immediately preceding and coinciding with the publication of *Women of the Left Bank*, the prefaces are intimately connected to this study. When she introduced herself to her readers as the journal’s new
Editor in Spring 1983, she mentioned the project. Succeeding prefaces show her at work on the book, sometimes explicitly, as when in “Beyond the Reaches of Feminist Criticism: A Letter from Paris,” the preface to the Spring/Fall 1984 double issue, *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, she describes herself walking through the streets of Paris and then researching in the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet. The map of women authors, editors, and publishers from Paris’s early twentieth century seems to be superimposed on her walk through the city, her looking out the window of the library while she contemplates “Natalie Clifford Barney, whose house on the rue Jacob was a meeting place for French and American *literati*” or, of course, Gertrude Stein (p. 5). “Why is Gertrude Stein not a Modernist, not even a failed one?” Benstock asks (p. 14). The answer lay in Stein’s approach to language, her disbelief “in the indestructible relation between the word and its meaning,” a disbelief that linked her to later twentieth-century deconstructionist views of language even as it mandated a cracking open of a monolithic understanding of modernism (p. 14). At other times the connection between the prefaces and *Women of the Left Bank* is more implicit yet no less close, with the prefaces operating as workshops or laboratories for sorting out threads of Benstock’s argument, extending them to a longer and broader history of women’s writing. They offer a rich portrait of a sharp, exciting mind feverishly at work.

The reach of these prefaces, however, is far broader and longer than one place or one era. What most impresses about these writings is their range through literary history, their intensely dialogic engagement with the work of other scholars, and their persistent, unflinching examination of the hard questions introduced by feminist literary history and theory. In her first major preface, Fall 1983, she asked:

What is the province of feminist criticism? Is it an archaeological dig or something other (or more) than this? Is feminist criticism in the process of establishing a hierarchy of women’s writing that will keep some women’s writing and some forms of feminist criticism at the margins of the discourse and others at the privileged center?

Such questions demand a fierce and uncompromising self-consciousness in the feminist literary scholar, calling her to turn the analytic eye she directs at literature from the past to her own writing and her own interventions in the field. They also call feminists to vigilance about the hierarchies and erasures they might perpetrate even as they set about correcting such wrongs.

Her prefaces are immersed in the labor of thinking through what feminist criticism requires and entails, as in the one from Fall 1985, a meditation on two recently published treatments of relationships between women, especially “between women as writers and readers of each other”: Ruth
Perry and Martine Watson Brownley’s *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and Their Silent Partners* (1984) and *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers, and Artists Write about Their Work on Women* (1984), edited by Carol Asher, Louise DeSalvo, and Sara Ruddick. Through her comments on these texts, Benstock contemplates how feminist criticism might make use of the fact that “the patriarchal inscription of woman insists on defining her in duality,” shattering the myth of detachment that frames pre- or non-feminist scholarship (p. 189). Her vision of this more dialogic, intersubjective, and self-revealing scholarly stance is bold and optimistic:

In such a world, the critic would not be hidden from view by the literary subject, erased and subtracted from the interpretive act, translated from the first person to the third, but would rather be brought into view by the literary subject, in company with that subject. The critic’s authority would not hide itself behind the literary subject, drawing its power secretly and silently from that subject. (p. 197)

To be sure, her approach and her language in these prefaces are fully of their era. These writings of the mid-1980s precede the full development of queer theory, postcolonial theory, New Historicism, African American studies, and critical race theory, with their transformative effects on how we conceptualize woman or women, sex or gender, writing or authorship, not to mention subtler understandings of how texts can and do perpetuate all sorts of injustice. The canon of women’s writing is immeasurably larger and richer than it was, somewhat less white, a bit less focused on Western Europe and the United States (although still not enough); feminist criticism is both more and less visible, having been absorbed into and intertwined with other approaches.

But if the prefaces are of their time, they are far from satisfied with their time. They stretch beyond what has been realized and accomplished, straining to consider what has not been noticed, what can truly be undertaken, and what stands in the way of that undertaking. Through this indefatigable questioning, these writings call attention to matters still of urgent relevance today; for example in a meditation on the treatment of monstrosity in literature and in the self-regard of women writers, Benstock writes:

> Is there a way for us as feminist critics—as women writers—to examine the very assumptions that seem most persistently to hide from us, to dare confrontation with the monster that lurks within our writing, a monster who might reveal to us the ways in which we have cooperated in the creation of our own suppression, even as we write in defiance of that suppression?6

Even if the notion of what comprises feminist criticism has altered, as has the equating of the feminist scholar with the woman writer, this question from more than thirty years ago is still so important today. If Germaine
Greer eloquently and powerfully voiced the mandate of this journal dedicated to women’s writing, Benstock crafted the theory that has framed, sustained, and expanded that mandate.

Benstock concluded her final preface in Fall 1986 with this declaration: “I leave the editorship of Tulsa Studies in the hope that this revised women’s literary history may, indeed, be continued.” Certainly that revisionist project has continued, and it will yet further. She is owed much by those committed to feminist literary history and theory, and she will be missed.

The continued flourishing of this journal depends upon the vibrancy and commitment of its advisory and editorial board as well as its many specialist readers. In keeping with our practice of appointing three new members to the editorial board every six months to serve for three-year terms, I am delighted, on behalf of my Co-Editor Jennifer Airey and myself, to introduce six new members. These include those appointed for this issue and for the last one (Spring 2015), which was guest edited by Kerri Andrews and thus deferred our regular introduction of new members.


Ellen G. Friedman is Professor of English at the College of New Jersey. Her research has focused on women’s twentieth-century literature, particularly the female avant-garde. Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction (1989), coedited with Miriam Fuchs, introduces three generations of experimental women writers—from Virginia Woolf to Kathy Acker—in the monograph-length introduction, “Contexts and Continuities: An Introduction to Women’s Experimental Fiction in English.” Various sections of the introduction have been reprinted, and the book is now in Princeton University Press’s Legacy Series. She followed up this work
with articles in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Studies in the Novel*, *The European Journal of Women’s Studies*, and chapters in critical anthologies, as well as guest editing (with Miriam Fuchs) a special issue of *The Review of Contemporary Literature* on Kathy Acker, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Marguerite Young, and (with Richard Martin) *Utterly Other Discourse: The Texts of Christine Brooke-Rose* (1995). Additionally, she has published a book on Joyce Carol Oates and an edited volume on Joan Didion. Her interests extended to cultural studies, and she published *Morality USA* (1998) with Corinne Squire, as well as chapters on the postmodern cultural turn. Her pedagogical work includes essays in *Issues of Gender* (2004) and *Creating an Inclusive College Curriculum: A Teaching Sourcebook from the New Jersey Project* (1996), both of which she coedited, and essays in *Ms. Magazine*. She chaired the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies for eighteen years, developing a major in Women’s and Gender Studies for prospective teachers, and was also the founding director of her college’s minor in Holocaust and Genocide Studies. She serves on the editorial or advisory boards of *Modern Fiction Studies* and *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*. Her current project is a memoir about her family’s survival and exile during the Holocaust, titled “The Seven, a Family Story.”

Elizabeth Jackson is Lecturer in Literatures in English at the St. Augustine (Trinidad) campus of the University of the West Indies, where she also serves as coordinator of the undergraduate Literatures in English program. She has taught a range of courses in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British, American, Indian, and postcolonial literatures. Her research interests include gender and cultural identity from postcolonial and cosmopolitan perspectives, particularly in the area of South Asian and South Asian diasporic women’s writings. Best known for her book *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women’s Writing* (2010), she is also the author of several articles published in book collections and in journals, including *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, and *Women: A Cultural Review*. She is now writing a book titled “Indian Muslim Women Writing in English: Class Privilege, Gender Disadvantage, Minority Status.”

Maren Linett is Associate Professor of English at Purdue University, where she specializes in modernist fiction with emphases on disability studies and Jewish studies. Her publications include a book, *Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness* (2007), and many essays in journals including *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *Mosaic*, *Studies in the Novel*, and *James Joyce Quarterly*. She additionally has edited two essay collections, *Virginia Woolf: An “MFS” Reader* (2009) and *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers* (2010), and she guest edited a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on “Modernism’s Jews / Jewish Modernisms.” In 2014, the
Society for Disability Studies awarded her the Tyler Riggs Prize for best literary article published in Disability Studies Quarterly the previous year, and she currently is serving a three-year term on the board of the journal. She has just completed a manuscript titled “Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature,” and her newest project is entitled “Literary Bioethics: Disability, Animality, and the Human.”

Gabrielle McIntire is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Queen’s University in Canada. She is the author of Modernism, Memory, and Desire: T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf (2008) and the editor of The Cambridge Companion to “The Waste Land” (2015). Her published articles or chapters on T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and Nella Larsen have appeared in venues such as The Cambridge Companion to “To the Lighthouse” (2014), A Companion to Modernist Poetry (2014), Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters, Narrative, and Modernism/modernity. Her poetry has also appeared internationally. She has been awarded grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Banff Centre for the Arts, and she received the W. J. Barnes Award for Distinguished Teaching from her university. She serves on the editorial board of Twentieth-Century Literature and the T. S. Eliot Studies Annual. She has completed a novel, “The Music of Trees,” and she is writing a book titled “After the Death of God: Literature in an Age of Disbelief.”

Elizabeth Podnieks is Associate Professor of English at Ryerson University and in the joint program in Communication and Culture at Ryerson and York Universities in Canada. A specialist in modernist literature and in contemporary popular representations of motherhood, she is the author of Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart, and Anaïs Nin (2000), as well as articles in journals including The Journal of Popular Culture, Journal of the Motherhood Initiative, and The Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering. She is the editor of Rough Draft: The Modernist Diaries of Emily Holmes Coleman, 1929-1937 (2012) and additionally has edited or coedited two special topics issues of a/b: Auto/Biography Studies and several essay collections. One of these, Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture (2012), received the Outstanding Scholarship Prize in 2012-2013 from the scholarly association Women’s and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes, and another, Pops in Pop Culture: Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the New Man, is forthcoming next year. At present she is working on a monograph about representations of motherhood in modernist auto/biography and journalism. She is also developing a project to digitize and mark-up material in the Emily Holmes Coleman Papers at the University of Delaware Library.

As six members join the board, six complete their terms. Jennifer and I therefore would like to thank Carolina Alzate, Kristina Bross, Donette A.
Francis, Praseeda Gopinath, Miranda Hickman, and Christine Jones for their time, labor, support, and expertise over the past three years.

We also would like to convey our profuse thanks to Casie Trotter, who completed a three-semester term in the spring as Publicity Manager for the journal, and Lindi Smith, who has finished her term as Book Review Editor. We wish them both well in their future ventures. With goodbyes come greetings, in this case for Annie Paige, who began her term in August as Publicity Manager, and for Megan Gibson, our new Book Review Editor. All of our staff over the past year, especially Karen Dutoi, our Managing Editor, deserve our particular gratitude for the flexibility and good will they have shown while the journal transitions from one editorship to another during this two-year period of coediting. Cooperative labor almost always requires intensive communication and consultation if it is to succeed; that this time of coeditorship has gone so smoothly, and in fact been a delight to me personally, owes much to the patience every member of the *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* office has shown with the labor of communication, collaboration, and adaptation to change.

Shari Benstock’s penultimate preface to *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, titled “Representing Reality: Women Writers and Institutions,” called attention to “the academic environment that nourishes this journal” amidst a penetrating examination of the complexities that govern the relationships between women’s writing and institutions, especially universities and archives. Over the ten years that I have edited this journal, I also have been minutely aware of the institutional environment that nourishes it. While on many occasions I have expressed thanks to the University of Tulsa and especially to the office of the Provost, Roger Blais, for the support the journal receives, there is one person and one office I have not thanked enough. For many years the Graduate School has made it possible for *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* to fund an internship over the summer, allowing our Book Review Editor to work throughout the year. This summer funding has provided continuity in our operations, keeping the traffic of manuscripts and readers’ reports flowing without interruption and keeping us on a regular publication schedule. It also has fostered the integration of the educational and scholarly missions of the journal with at least one of our doctoral students in the office throughout the calendar year. Due to budgetary issues beyond the Graduate School’s control, this funding has shifted for at least the next year to the Office of the Provost, and I am most grateful to Roger for providing his support. I am long overdue, however, in offering thanks to the Graduate School, and especially to Janet A. Haggerty, Vice Provost for Research and Dean of the Graduate School, for
the decades of generous support they have provided to the journal. That the journal has prospered for so many years owes much to the priority the University’s administration, in more than one office, has made of advancing scholarly publication and feminist literary scholarship.

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NOTES


2 See Benstock, “From the Editor’s Perspective,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 2 (1983): “I am presently completing a study of the various contributions to modernist literature by women of the Paris expatriate community between the world wars” (p. 5).


6 Benstock, “The Feminist Critique: Mastering our Monstrosity,” 146; emphasis original.
