When I read Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) as an undergraduate, the book helped me identify as an academic feminist and a feminist literary critic. My personal feminism had kaleidoscopic textual beginnings involving Hélène Cixous, Ani DiFranco, H.D., Margaret Mitchell, Ntozake Shange, Virginia Woolf, and many others, but Gilbert and Gubar showed me the need for feminist analysis of literature and of its place in academic discourse. Twenty years after the book was published, it still possessed an immediacy that illuminated many of the sedimented biases and assumptions of the courses I was then taking to complete my English degree. In graduate school, I realized *The Madwoman in the Attic* had what I now view as a nineteenth-century bias, but it remained — and it still remains — a powerful touchstone for me.

The prospect of reading feminist literary theorists’ memoirs collected by Gubar, including an essay by her frequent writing partner Gilbert, appealed to me in what almost felt like the academic version of a reality television show or tabloid magazine. Now I would finally know about the real women behind the texts that had shaped the way I think about literature and the way I conceptualize myself as a woman, reader, writer, and professional. Gubar recognizes this impulse: “Since the people I contacted have achieved international reputations as pioneers in their various fields,” she says, “such introspection cannot but fascinate” (p. x).

But despite wanting to know who cooks in Gilbert’s household and how Nancy K. Miller cared for her father in a nursing home, I found myself wary of this methodology. In some ways, Gubar creates and solidifies a canon of feminist literary theorists in a fashion that is linear and hierarchical — two qualities that feminist theory has striven to subvert.

Placing feminist professors in a canon of sorts does precisely what other canon-making apparatuses do: it contains these women’s voices, catalogues or classifies them, and calculates a value for them. Moreover, several of the memoirists collected in this book highlight their own roles as trailblazers and identify themselves as small groups of select women who changed the nature of the academy. They also perpetuate the values they are criticizing by arguing that women need to “fight the battle in the Ivy League” (Jean Howard, qtd. in Ann Douglas, p. 180) rather than remain relegated to two-year colleges and non-tenure-track positions.

I do believe there is much room for improvement in how women are treated in the academy. Sexism, harassment, unequal hiring practices, and disrespect for contributions on topics about women, gender, and sexuality have all been tangled up in my professional growth, both in my experience and in my observations. At the same time, however, I believe feminist accounts of the academy can and should break down ideas about the superiority of some institutions over others in order to highlight the ways in which many of the ideas about prestige we harbor have been detrimental to women. This is something that Virginia Woolf recognized in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), yet we still struggle with knowing how to value the accomplishments of individuals who do not follow the fast-track academic superstar route.

Despite my overarching concern that a collection of works by “important women” (as the dust jacket calls them) marginalizes the voices of other women, I believe Gubar has collected memoirs that help breathe life into the theoretical issues these scholars played such an important role in introducing to academic discourse. She breaks them into two categories — “Personal Views” and “Professional Vistas” — and suggests that the contributors have all written works that meld “personal retrospective with cultural and theoretical speculations” in a “hybrid genre” that two of her contributors — Nancy K. Miller and Jane Tomkins — engendered in their earlier writings (p. xv).

The essays in the two sections touch on similar themes, of course, and this recursiveness is as useful as it is intriguing, for readers are invited to view the personal in the professional, and vice versa. The first section contains memoirs by Nancy K. Miller, Jane Marcus, Tania Modleski, Dyan
Elliott, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Patricia Yaeger, Jane Tompkins, Rayna Rapp, Sandra M. Gilbert, Leila Ahmed, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Hazel Carby, Neferti Tadiar, and Ann DuCille. Among these, I found Yaeger’s rivetingly personal, in part because she shows a tremendous amount of intrepidity in writing about a topic that has not been entirely transformed from a shameful, pathologized, embodied experience into theory. Yaeger states in the first paragraph that “bulimia was my path to feminism” (p. 51), a statement that is searing in its directness. She goes on to discuss the “spatial indelicacy of skin” in ways that oscillate between the personal and theoretical in a beautiful manner that highlights how much feminist theory is born of its authors’ bodies, while it is also what creates these bodies and (in Yaeger’s case, as in my own) saves them from the denigration that our culture so often perpetuates.

Spivak’s essay also offers a remarkably powerful analysis of the slippages and gaps between the personal and the theoretical. She explains, “My modest reputation rests on two items: my introduction to Derrida, and my commentary on Bhubaneshwari Bjaduri’s suicide. I am following that track still. Why did I not mention my relationship to her when I wrote of her? I wanted to see what would happen if I didn’t have that certificate of authenticity which would reflect more on the people’s approval of her than on me” (p. 120). Spivak thus acknowledges a need for detachment from the personal that is always also bound up in a desire to write and rewrite the personal so that key stories are told — and so that she, as a feminist and a theorist, can learn over and over again from her foremothers.

The second part of the collection comprises essays by Martha C. Nussbaum, Ann Douglas, Lillian Faderman, Jane Gallop, Annette Kolodny, Frances Smith Foster, Hortense J. Spillers, Tey Diana Rebolledo, Nancy J. Chodorow, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Linda Nochlin, Susan McClary, and Jill Dolan. Some of these memoirs are excruciating, courageous, and at times frustrating, for they reveal how detrimental women can be toward each other when professional stakes are high and they spotlight trends that should continue to enrage us. Kolodny’s essay describes how women placed in a context of academic hierarchy turned against one another to ensure their own survival in that male-dominated hierarchical framework. I found very powerful her description of the regret she felt that four young female faculty could not find support in each other, and I wondered as I read some of the other memoirs about how much progress we have made, for several of the essays focus on how women need to penetrate Ivy League colleges so that they can achieve success in the hierarchical terms that, again, so often break down relationships between women in a way that values the structure of institutions over more personal intellectual or academic pursuits.

Jane Gallop’s analysis of herself as a “feminist professor who was accused by two students of sexual harassment” (p. 190) provides a fascinating glimpse of the problems that emerge when the terms of feminism and our cultural expressions of it change. She identifies feminism as an intellectual category that is inextricably linked to the sexual, and she juxtaposes the almost-utopian feminism of the 1970s against 1990s academic culture, in which “charges of sexual harassment mingled freely with other complaints about manifestations of power” (p. 199). Gallop then provides a very significant assessment of how we need to embrace a gender-neutral formulation of sexual harassment” that does not punish a
woman simply (or, perhaps, not so simply) because “she is both sexual and powerful” (p. 202).

Susan McClary’s description of the unlikely trajectory she followed in becoming a “recognized feminist” (p. 310) is perhaps a unifying thread in these essays. Frances Smith Foster describes being asked whether she really belonged in “Black Studies or Women’s Studies” (p. 222); Martha C. Nussbaum says she can look back and see that she lived as a “prisoner of politeness” (p. 171); and Tey Diana Rebolledo recognizes that although “the feminist movement made [her] rethink [her] life,” she had to struggle for many years to gain “credibility as a scholar in Chicano/a studies” (p. 249). Each of these women, like the other feminist professors Gubar has brought together in True Confessions, views feminism as both a defining framework for her scholarship and as a sometimes amorphous discourse that can, if not adapted to meet the needs of our intersectional identities, exclude and disempower us as well.

By bringing together the voices of so many influential feminist professors, Gubar has shown the complexity of the role that feminism plays in the academy. Like The Madwoman in the Attic and other canon-making feminist texts from the 1970s, True Confessions charts new territory that we can begin to explore and renegotiate according to our own experiences of the personal and professional landscape we inhabit.

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