

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Introduction: Nineteenth-Century Women's Campaign Writing: Broadening the Realm of Women's Civic Engagement

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<1>The 1918 Representation of the People Act, which granted some women the right to vote in general elections, has long been recognized as a landmark moment: one that tripled the electorate and ushered in a new era of representative democracy in Britain. The centenary celebrations of this event in 2018 harnessed renewed enthusiasm for women's political engagement – made evident in moments like the 2017 Women's March in Washington, D.C. – after shifts toward right-wing populism in Britain and North America. In Britain, cultural events and popular discourse focused specifically on the women's suffrage campaigns attached to the 1918 Act, even if, as Mari Takayanagi points out, this bill focused more on men's voting rights than it did on women's (116 – 8): the same bill that extended the franchise to some women over 30 also gave the right to vote to men over 21. In Britain, it would be another decade before women received voting rights equal to men's; and in many overseas territories and former colonies, Black and Indigenous women remained disenfranchised until the last half of the twentieth century.

<2>Such a focus on landmark political moments – points, for example, at which women or other marginalized groups were reluctantly admitted to established systems and institutions – may in fact reaffirm the very power dynamics they seem to challenge. Scholars have identified the difficulty in celebrating such watershed events in women's history, particularly when there are clear limitations on who is included in the category of “woman.” In the ground-breaking book *Ain't I a Woman* (1981), for instance, bell hooks reveals the ways that gender as a historical category is unstable because it is shaped by factors such as class, race and ability. Political landmarks in women's history, as hooks demonstrates, have exposed contentions and contradictions – particularly among groups with differing degrees of access to social power – more than they have demonstrated flawless unity. In the United States, hooks suggests, the women's suffrage movement in the early part of the twentieth century “had not drawn Black and white women closer together, but instead exposed the fact that white women were not willing to

relinquish their support of white supremacy to support the interests of all women” (181). Exclusionary frameworks based on race, among other factors, have persisted in women’s movements beyond the nineteenth century. The #MeToo Movement, as Alison Phipps reveals, was yet another landmark moment where white women co-opted the concerns of women of colour and used their proximity to power to centralize their own concerns. As Phipps comments, this is not an accident: “privileged white women also sacrifice more marginalised people to achieve our aims, or even define them as enemies when they get in our way” (3). At present, trans women face discrimination and exclusion in ways that echo historic debates about whose identities, expressions and bodies “count” as women: a category that has never been uniform or consistent. As Grace Lavery comments, “we’re not all the same underneath, and trans women are women” (418).[\(1\)](#)

<3>This special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* focuses on women’s campaign writing in the long nineteenth century, and aims to broaden understandings of women’s political participation to attend to the diversity of women’s civic engagement during the period. In doing so, it seeks to challenge conventional notions of what is defined as activism, who is recognised as an activist, and how – or indeed whether – such moments and individuals are commemorated by posterity. We are interested in the ways that closer attention to the rich diversity of women’s campaign writing in the nineteenth century offers an opportunity to think beyond the advocacy or disavowal of specific issues and instead to focus on the common strategies and shared practices that emerge across political positions. However, we do so with a desire to heed hooks’s call to resist the political ideologies and mythical histories that deny white women’s role in maintaining racial imperialism and white supremacy (120).

<4>This special issue spans the long nineteenth century to consider figures from Mary Wollstonecraft to Sylvia Pankhurst and a range of contemporary issues including abolition and anti-slavery, socialist feminism, anti-imperialism, and feminist theology. It also brings together writing across genres, as women’s campaign writing inhabited a variety of forms including pamphlets, periodicals, novels, scrapbooks, gift books, autobiographies and religious tracts. It is our hope that focusing on genres that have received less scholarly attention than the novel will offer an opportunity to ask new questions about the fields of women’s writing and nineteenth-century studies. More specifically, we hope that such a focus on a range of new textual materials might help to indicate ways that we might begin to “undiscipline” – that is, radically to rethink and remake – the field through attention to systems and structures of racialization, as recently outlined by Ronjaanee Chaterjee, Alicia Mireles and Amy R. Wong.

<5>Unconventional sources of literary or historical analysis, as Sarah Richardson demonstrates, can help to reveal the richness and diversity of women’s political activism in the nineteenth century (5). Women’s political writing across a range of genres in the nineteenth century – from campaign petitions and letter writing to experimental short fiction – demonstrates their own commitment to activism and the extent of their participation in public life. Not only did these forms of activism take place in a public sphere not distinct or separate from that in which men participated, as Anne Mellor argues, but their contributions to public opinion had a “definable impact on the social movement, economic relationships, and state-regulated policies of the day” (2 – 3). For this reason it is important to acknowledge the ways that, according to Mellor, women’s theoretical views also became social practice (6). One objective of this special issue is

to dedicate attention to the ways that women wrote theory into practice, but equally it aims to consider how the activist dimensions of women's writing are themselves a form of social practice.

<6>This special issue collects a range of essays that, in different ways, challenge the conventional distinctions that govern discussions of women's political engagement: private versus public realm, author versus activist, individual versus collective, and even liberal versus radical. In "A Woman of Letters: Mary Anne Rawson's Letter Collection and her Compilation of the Anti-Slavery Gift Book *The Bow in the Cloud*, 1826-1834" Eleanor Bird demonstrates that correspondence and the collective production of manuscripts and scrapbooks not only implies and refers to a political network beyond literary culture, but is a dynamic process that shapes the political consciousness of both writers and readers. In her examination of Rawson's correspondence and scrapbooks during her creation of the only known British anti-slavery gift book, Bird demonstrates that the anthology was not simply a commemorative text but an active political document, and that Rawson herself was not only an author, but in her authorship was also a campaign organizer for universal abolition.

<7>In "Scriptural Interpretation and the Formation of a Popular Women's Movement in Britain" Naomi Hetherington explores how interpretation of biblical texts offered opportunities to bring seemingly divergent ideological positions into dialogue. In the context of debates about scripture and theology that emerged in the nineteenth century, Hetherington explores how the popular women's movement reconciled scriptural teaching with gender equality. By focusing specifically on the Bible Readings column in the *Women's Penny Paper*, the unofficial organ of the early women's movement, Hetherington demonstrates that the biblical exegesis not only engaged women in a form of feminist criticism but in doing so also mobilized women politically. Yet women were not necessarily spurred into action in precisely the same ways, and the Bible Readings column revealed tensions and divisions between its readers. Even so, the debates that took place in the *Women's Penny Paper* indicate that although perfect harmony and consensus are not requirements for progress, a desire to minimize internal fractures among women is often vital.

<8>"Made Alive": Olive Schreiner's Dreams and the Embodied Vision of Equality" by Carly Nations also bridges the gap between political activism and literary culture already highlighted in Bird's contribution. Nations does so while interrogating Schreiner's own challenge to the distinctions between material and metaphysical experiences. While critics such as Virginia Woolf and Elaine Showalter have dismissed Schreiner's use of allegory in *Dreams* (1890) as disappointing in its apparent excessive sentimentality, Nations reveals the ways that allegory is the form by which Schreiner offers her most trenchant feminist and anti-racist criticism. Schreiner's abstractions are not in opposition to material representations, but instead work to reject colonialist discourse that renders some bodies – specifically white bodies and male bodies – more valuable than others. Schreiner's radical formal innovations indicate opportunities for social progress, and Nations draws on this relationship between the past and the present to question how present-day political discord and disunity might in part be a consequence of our own imaginative failures.

<9>We conclude this issue with two pieces that explore the commemoration of two women campaigners from either end of the long nineteenth century: Mary Wollstonecraft and Sylvia Pankhurst. Central to both contributions is the role that the writing of these two prominent figures has played in how they are remembered. “Remembering Mary Wollstonecraft” is a conversation between E.J. Clery and Bee Rowlett, who respond to the controversy around notions of appropriate commemoration that emerged upon the unveiling in 2020 of Maggi Hambling’s sculpture in tribute to Mary Wollstonecraft at Newington Green in London. The sculpture drew criticism from scholars and activists who believed the nude figure objectified Wollstonecraft and her legacy, but also from art critics like Jonathan Jones who declared themselves to be bored of statues as a form of commemoration. Clery and Rowlett set aside the debates that characterised its unveiling particularly with respect to what is an appropriate form of commemoration – representational statue or abstract sculpture – to focus instead on the ways that the material object and the moment itself both open up conversations about Wollstonecraft’s work to new and broader audiences. In this sense, the work moves beyond the individual artist as creator and offers opportunities for collaboration in the realm of discussion and debate. Clara Vlessing raises related questions about cultural memory in her article “Campaigns to Remember: Writing in the Afterlives of Sylvia Pankhurst” as she examines how Pankhurst’s legacy has shifted both in scholarship and public commemoration. While studies of Pankhurst initially focused on her own life, particularly in the context of her prominent family, Vlessing demonstrates that considerations of her personal life were eventually eclipsed by attention to her contributions to literary and political culture. As Vlessing demonstrates, the commemoration of figures such as Pankhurst is not merely retrospective analysis but instead demonstrates how remembering is a creative act that draws out the relationship between the past, present and future.

<10>The essays collected in this special issue, despite their differences, indicate shared feminist concerns in both theme and content. While Nations makes reference to Schreiner’s work on Wollstonecraft, Schreiner and Pankhurst are connected in their turn because both worked within a tradition of socialist feminism that recognises the interconnectedness of both class and gender as oppressive structures producing complex and deeply entrenched systems of inequality. As Nations demonstrates, Schreiner was also aware of the ways that the chillingly rational rhetoric of scientific socialism could be used to justify the violent and oppressive systems of racial imperialism that she witnessed living in South Africa. In a letter written to Havelock Ellis on 17 November 1915 from Cornwall, Schreiner distinguishes Sylvia Pankhurst, who is a “fine woman” and is “for peace,” from her mother and her sister, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, whom Schreiner accuses of deliberately cultivating a pro-war following to replace their diminishing feminist support (HRC/CAT/OS/5a-ii). For Pankhurst, as Vlessing demonstrates, the periodical press was an important method for both advocacy and organization. While Pankhurst’s first paper, *The Workers’ Dreadnaught*, focused on women’s rights and workers’ rights, she also established the *New Times and Ethiopian News* to garner support for anti-imperialist and anti-fascist causes. In the *Women’s Penny Paper*, women discussed and debated women’s rights in the context of scriptural precedent, and Hetherington’s article reveals that this activity produced a literary community that, if not always in agreement, was political as well as feminist in its commitment to thinking about gender as a category of analysis. The correspondence and scrapbooks related to the production of the anti-slavery gift book *The Bow in the Cloud* (1834), as Bird demonstrates, also produced a political community – and one that was

perhaps more radical than the published version of the gift book suggests. As Bird comments, Mary Anne Rawson's network during the production of this text was not restricted by gender. This highlights how, as Mellor notes, men and women ultimately participated in the same public sphere (2 – 3). All of the essays in this special issue demonstrate just how crucial access to and participation in the public sphere is for social progress – and, as a corollary, why this participation must aim to improve access for those people who, for whatever reason, face barriers to their engagement.

<11> This special issue was produced during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has thrown issues of persistent and structural inequality into sharp relief. While present-day campaigns such as Black Lives Matter have continued to raise awareness of structural oppression and violence, this has happened in a context of social, political and economic upheaval that has impacted most strongly on communities and groups who are already marginalized or vulnerable. Notably, progress towards women's equality has suffered around the world as caring and domestic responsibilities devolved disproportionately on women and girls while opportunities in education and work dwindled with a loss of financial support. A rise in domestic violence and abuse has also been reported. Earlier this year, in April 2021, *The New York Times* published an article by Claire Cain Miller and Ruth Fremson that followed up on interviews conducted with young women in 2016. Many of the people interviewed in 2016 expressed interest in traditional forms of political participation, such as running for public office or holding a leadership position in a high-profile organization. During the intervening period, however, many of the women interviewed had changed their minds. Miller notes that while all of the women interviewed believed it was important for leadership to be more inclusive than in the past, they were also conscious of the damaging effects of systemic racism and sexism. While some women were still interested in leadership positions, others felt more interested in lower-profile but nonetheless meaningful roles such as mentorship.

<12> While it is important to work for better access for women – and particularly women who are marginalized in multiple ways – to conventional leadership positions in political campaigns or organizations, the present reality is that women do not enjoy equal treatment or opportunities in these roles. Expanding our understanding of political participation and civic engagement to include a broader range of activities and contributions, such as those explored in this special issue, can not only help to make these processes more accessible, but also provides an opportunity to take account of the rich and diverse ways that women impact society both historically and today.

Notes

(1) Vivek Shraya explores these cultures of exclusion in *I'm Afraid of Men* (2018) and comments that such practices not only shape cultural history but also personal history: "I'm afraid of women who, when I share my experiences of being trans, try to console me by announcing 'welcome to being a woman,' refusing to recognize the ways in which our experiences fundamentally differ. But I'm especially afraid because my history has taught me that I can't fully rely upon other women for sisterhood, or allyship, or protection from men" (82 – 3). (△)

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