

## Introduction

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On December 6, 1989, Marc Lepine shot fourteen women at the Ecole Polytechnique of the University of Montreal, accusing his victims of being “feminists.” Refused admission into the Ecole Polytechnique, he sought to destroy the women admitted into the competitive engineering school. Taking individuality and rationalization to its extreme, Lepine murdered those “feminists” who represented for him a challenge to masculine control. The gender polarity that Lepine constructed destroyed him; he committed suicide after his rampage because he could not imagine recognition of the “other” — women, feminists — in his fantasy of autonomy and power.

Lepine’s anti-feminism took the most radical form possible — assassination — but we would argue that a new and violent backlash against feminism takes place in linguistic as well as psychotic forms. This anti-feminist backlash is addressed in the following chapters, which deal with the various stances feminist critics take in arguing for *and* with a feminist dialogics. No ahistorical or singular method, feminist dialogics challenges the assumption in contemporary culture of a monolithic or univocal feminism.

Moreover, feminist dialogics — as the authors conceive of it here — overcomes the public-private split which has become part of the rationalization of daily life. As Jessica Benjamin argues, “The public world is conceived as a place in which direct recognition and care for others’ needs is impossible — and this is tolerable as long as the private world ‘cooperates’” (Bonds of Love 197). The public sphere becomes alienated, atomized; the private sphere, a compensatory, but inadequate sphere. Feminists turn to Bakhtin’s notion of the word and dialogue in order to break down this separation of public rationality and private intersubjectivity. In using Bakhtin’s theories to address this split, feminist critics advocate taking on rhetorical or dialogic authority

(see Bizzell, Spivak) that would reinvent a shared ethics within intersecting public and private worlds. Although we live in the midst of critical skepticism, where our focus on difference has dominated discussion, we might turn now to feminist dialogism to make a case for egalitarian values, values which might heal a rationalized world which buttresses male domination. As Benjamin has it, “the underlying structure of male domination is so depersonalized and has so little, apparently, to do with individual men” (215). Feminist dialogics, thus, works to uncover not just masculine bias but a more subtle and seemingly neutral rationality, an impersonality that pervades all social life, depriving both males and females of recognition from each other. The loss of recognition — erroneously blamed on feminists leaving the private sphere and entering the public space of the engineering school — led Marc Lepine to murder. The larger issue is the failure of a masculinized or rationalized public language (what Bakhtin would call the authoritative voice) that is split off in cultural representations from the private voice (Bakhtin’s internally persuasive language). A feminist dialogics would bring these two languages together in dialogue.

The conjunction of feminist and Bakhtinian theory leads us to an investigation of the ways in which dominant culture has incorporated feminism as a threat. That perception of threat speaks to the authority feminism has claimed in critical and popular culture. The violent example of the killer in Montreal is not merely a sensational or random event. Rather, we can draw from it to see how feminism has been incorporated in contemporary discourse — from *Die Hard* to Supreme Court appointments. The chapters in this book show how to resist that cooptation and insist on an empowerment of feminist voices. Violence is not the only response to feminism, but its intensity testifies to the fear that feminism might indeed change the status quo, as various feminisms already have.

The following chapters show the process by which feminism has changed the way we envision the world and point to ways in which changes might still occur. We find that feminist dialogics takes into account both recent critical work on standpoint theory and dialogic criticism. Standpoint theory argues that we must acknowledge our positionality — our identity politics — as the beginning of critical agency and action. Dialogism, Bakhtin’s theory about encountering otherness through the potential of dialogue, is central to feminist practice because it invites new possibilities for activism and change. Dialogism — like standpoint theory — has as its base the understanding that people’s responses are conditional, human circumstances are irreducible and contingent. Dialogic consciousness or standpoint depends neither

on essentialism nor truth, but on context and condition. A feminist dialogics is not just agonistic or oppositional; it also suggests an identity in dialectic response, always open and ongoing.

Why a feminist dialogics? Why now? One of the questions plaguing feminism has been the interrelation of theory and practice, especially in the light of violent attacks and critical offenses. And in arguing for a feminist dialogics, we have been careful to address this problem in order to work toward a theoretical practice and a practical theory that allow feminists to intervene in the transmission of the status quo. The models advocated here allow us to consider agency and resistance in the process of cultural formation and critique. These chapters hold the view that resistance is determined by positionality and that the factors of race, class, and gender affect the form resistance takes in language. Resistance is not always voiced in authoritative or public ways; what is crucial to a feminist dialogics is the idea that resistance can begin as private when women negotiate, manipulate, and often subvert systems of domination they encounter. Both private and public discourses are means of cultural resistance and intervention. As many of the chapters in this collection show, speech is not always a sign of power, or silence a sign of weakness. Rather, the contexts of silence and speech determine gendered relations. Resistance to dominant ideologies can potentially lead us to rethink human agency and lived experience.

This book is devoted to a pedagogical as well as a political imperative. In seeing the connection between the material conditions in which feminist literary critics work and the subjects they study (gendered objects and subjects themselves), feminist dialogicians make a case for a critical subjectivity that shows genders, classes, and races in dialogue rather than in opposition. But even in opposition, the authors of these chapters do not see dialogue as shut off or shut down, but in process, in flux. That is, the feminist dialogic analysis of these works all point to a way of reading that recognizes dialogue's political and social force.

*Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic* takes as its starting point a critical theory and practice that show the dialogic authority of gendered voices. For feminists, Bakhtin's theories of the social nature of the utterance — of both the inner and outer words — provide a critical language that allows us to pinpoint and foreground the moments when the patriarchal work and the persuasive resistance to it come into conflict. By highlighting these contradictions, a feminist dialogics produces occasions for the disruption and critique of dominant and oppressive ideologies. The conflict of discourses in a novel, the inevi-

table polyvocality of a genre that reproduces language as a web of communications between narrator and narratee, speaker and listener, character and character, and even (implied) author and (implied) reader, does reveal the dominant discourse. For example, we expect the “inevitable” happy ending of marriage in nineteenth-century fiction as the voice of that discourse. At the same time, however, the novel’s polyvocality can indicate potential resistances to oppressive conventions in interpretive or discourse communities — such as an individual character’s response to that social dictate, or a disapproving narrative tone.

A feminist dialogics is, above all, an example of the cultural resistance that Teresa de Lauretis argues is a necessary strategy for feminist political practice. For the object is not, ultimately, to produce a feminist monologic voice, a dominant voice that is a reversal of the patriarchal voice (even if such a project were conceivable), but to create a feminist dialogics that recognizes power and discourse as indivisible, monologism as a model of ideological dominance, and narrative as inherently multivocal, as a form of cultural resistance that celebrates the dialogic voice that speaks with many tongues, which incorporates multiple voices of the cultural web.

This collection of thirteen chapters on Bakhtin and feminism combines theoretical definition with the praxis of a feminist dialogics. The first four chapters explore the conjunctions of feminist theory, Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism, and the social dimensions of language, providing theoretical models for the practical criticism to follow. Diane Price Herndl’s argument for a feminine dialogic poses the question, “Does the novel use a feminine language, or is the feminine a novelized language?” Price Herndl sets up a dialogue between Bakhtin’s theory of novelistic discourse and feminist criticism’s own dialogic, suggesting that the intersection of feminism and Bakhtin reveals the politics of both literary history and academic discourse. Taking up Price Herndl’s call, Suzanne Kehde’s and Patrick Murphy’s works argue for the social and political importance of uniting Bakhtin and feminism. Kehde sees Bakhtin’s theory of parody as a way to “empower the feminist critic at least to listen to marginalized voices,” and she applies her theory to Henry James, arguing that “the context of parody may free submerged voices” in “novels where we may suspect the parodic effect is not part of the authorial intention.” In the same vein, Patrick Murphy argues that “pluralistic humanism has run its course,” and he responds by combining “ecology and feministics” to “break dialogics out of the anthropocentrism in which Bakhtin performs it.” He claims that “eco-feminist dialogics,” “a liveable critical theory” that emphasizes recog-

nition of the “other,” the non-human subject, can reform our self-centered conceptions of nature and ecology. Gail Schwab’s essay disputes the common critique of Luce Irigaray’s theories — particularly her theory of *l’écriture féminine* — as “apolitical and essentialist.” Arguing for the “dynamic political potential of dialogism,” Schwab details the connection between Irigaray’s politics, her dialectic style, and feminist dialogism, and concludes that “no other feminist writer is so profoundly dialogic.”

The next chapters explore a range of English and American texts to demonstrate the intersection of feminism, Bakhtin, and literary history. Deborah Jacobs’ essay on Dekker and Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl* demonstrates how the ahistorical, “novelized” reading of pre-novelistic texts transposes “historically specific values onto representations of the pre-bourgeois subject,” thus “mass-reproducing the transhistorical thematizing of the world” that limits texts — and voices — to essentialist, gendered meanings. Josephine Donovan defines literary style as “resistance to subordination,” claiming that “paratactic, non-subordinating sensitivity” in the style of early women writers like Margaret Cavendish illustrated the difference between authoritative or public discourse and private, internally persuasive language without privileging either voice, and thus contributed to the creation of the novel as a “dialogic, counterhegemonic” genre. Peter Hitchcock defines dialogism as “nothing if not the concretization of text and context,” arguing that “without a specific socio-historical context,” dialogism “simply has no meaning.” He studies Pat Barker’s radical dialogism in order to explain her attack on the economic failure in Britain and its effects on working women’s lives, thereby linking fictional and political praxis. Jaye Berman cites the active role of women in postmodern comedy and parody as a sign of the contemporary failure of authority. She claims that the female characters in Donald Barthelme’s parodic fiction engage in carnivalesque dialogism and masquerade as a means of critiquing the dominant, patriarchal culture through speech, through “polylogues” that are neither patriarchal monologues nor feminist discourse. Susan Sipple’s essay combines historical research on pre-Depression female hobos and Depression-era female transients, with a focus on Meridel Le Sueur’s social fictions about Depression-era female transients whose “bodies stand as signs of the failure of capitalism and patriarchal control.” Their “grotesque” behavior subverts the cultural expectations of the female — and maternal — body. Brenda Daly analyzes Joyce Carol Oates’s dialogic exploration of the “social aspects of homeostasis” through the male voice in *Wonderland*, a novel with two versions: the first ends with monologic triumph, while the

revised edition “replaces univocal closure with the ambivalence of dialogue.” Sheryl Stevenson extends Bakhtin’s theories of language as “the constituting element of a radically social psyche” into modernist fiction and feminist issues. Brigid Brophy’s novel *In Transit*, according to Stevenson, questions the monologic construction of gender in a language that is always “in transit,” resulting in “linguistic leprosy” and “gender-amnesia.”

The last two chapters — by Mary O’Connor on black women writers and Louise Yelin on Nadine Gordimer and apartheid — are the most explicitly political, arguing (as Schwab does) for the feminist dialogic as the most radical political feminist strategy today. O’Connor asks how we can define female solidarity and female self-definition in a culture that silences both, using Bakhtin’s model of the self as an intersection of conflicting voices to explain the multivocal empowering of black women through “dialogized evaluation” in works by Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange and Gloria Naylor. Yelin, focusing on the intersection of monologism and dialogism, European “center” and colonial “margins,” illustrates how Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter* allows us to revise Bakhtinian concepts to include race and gender as central elements of the social heteroglossia, and thus enable the “dismantling of apartheid” through “vocal and collective opposition.”

Patricia Yaeger’s “Afterword” returns the collection to its opening, to the question of the political implications of feminist speech, as she celebrates the “noise and nuisance of the dialogic.” Discussing the place of a transsexual in definitions of “woman,” and the relation of disabled (differently-abled) women and conventional romantic fiction that demands an idealized sexual body, Yaeger recognizes the necessary dialogue among feminists. Feminist dialogics becomes a way of recognizing competing voices without making any single voice normative. Resisting and subverting the monologic speech that produces silence, these chapters celebrate the personal and social power of feminist dialogics.

### Works Cited

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