

Introduction

Feminist Literary Criticism, Liberation, and Social Change

Carlyle, hearing from Emerson that Margaret Fuller had agreed to accept the universe, pounded out “By God, she’d better!” But now our minds work against Carlyle in the anecdote. Why should Margaret Fuller accept the universe? And why should Carlyle insist upon her doing so?

—Mary Ellmann, *Thinking about Women* (1968)¹

And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.

—Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (1978)²

Because the counterstance stems from a problem with authority—outer as well as inner—it’s a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, “Borderlands/La Frontera” (1987)³

How can we eliminate the inequities affecting women, nonbinary individuals, and minorities who live in a world limiting their opportunities and oppressing them in violent ways? The epigraphs provide three, not wholly distinct, feminist responses to the problem of gender-based and other social inequalities, responses formed during an age that witnessed the US civil rights movement and the emergence of a women's liberation movement. Mary Ellmann questions male authority that represses women, Audre Lorde understands the dangers of those speaking out against established authority, and Gloria Anzaldúa acknowledges that liberation could include reconciliation, estrangement, or moving to a new "territory" to escape from cultural domination. These statements appeared in critical works addressed to general audiences and to scholars who observed cultural factors shaping attitudes toward women and minorities in literature, media, and culture. While supporters of women's rights in the United States and Great Britain helped many women gain voting, property, marital, and other legal rights, advocates in the 1960s and later, as the epigraphs demonstrate, continued to press for equality, concentrating their efforts on raising women's consciousness, inspiring collective action, and aiming to achieve legally sanctioned equal rights. In a period that also witnessed the strengthening of the US civil rights movement, the authors of these epigraphs, and many others, developed feminist criticism targeted at moving the sex/gender system toward equality.

Tracing how feminism fares in fiction, *Feminism's Progress* looks at fictional information—plots, characters, settings, and voice—in selected narratives that incorporate discussions and illustrations of women's empowerment, social collectivity, equality, resistance, and other issues important to supporters of women's rights and feminists of different waves. Fictional texts from the nineteenth century to the present—novels, stories, television shows, and films—identify social problems such as bias, discrimination, and violence, and explore feminist arguments promoting gender equity in marriage, education, careers, and politics. My subject includes representations of suffrage movements and women politicians in discussing fictions that recommend reconfiguring the sex/gender system and encouraging individuals to act collectively and cooperatively with others to ensure an equitable future for all.

Many theoretical accounts of gender, literature, and culture and fictional texts have helped shape my understanding of feminism—how to define it, ways to evaluate its appearance in literature and media, and its application as a reading strategy. Moira Ferguson explains in the preface

to her anthology of British women writers: “By feminist I mean those ideas and actions that advocate women’s just demands and rights, or that counter or offset, at any level, the socio-cultural, sexual and psychological oppression and exploitation of women.”⁴ Rachel Blau Duplessis offered a dynamic account of feminism in a 2015 interview: “For me feminism is sex-gender justice intertwined with social and economic justice, and it involves female co-equality with males amid female differences, the positions working in endless dialectical movement. Women’s gains in agency, co-equality, and legal redress should not come at the expense of others who endure social wrongs, although there is undoubtedly some cost to people’s claims of power-over-others and to their claims of interpretive hierarchies of importance where women rank as lesser.”⁵ Sharing a core belief in feminism’s focus on advocacy, equality, and opposition to inequity, these definitions align with the succinct one provided by bell hooks: “feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.”⁶ Identifying problems and recommending solutions, print and televisual fictions assert feminism’s potential to eliminate sexism and overcome gender inequities.

Referencing critical disparities between women and men in private and public spheres, many realist fictions produced in the United States and Great Britain advocate for women’s rights and point to social marginalization by class, race, and other social characteristics such as sexual orientation, sexual identity, age, and disability status. Narratives inspire hope in a feminist future by noticing barriers and positing facilitators affecting women’s empowerment and gender equity. Fictional texts identify the possibility of cultural change over time, largely by encouraging women’s participation in education, work, and governance. Narratives illustrate inequities and identify social capacities to effect political change, noting the ways in which reforms related to equality and equity are proposed, if not instantiated within the texts. Fictions nevertheless provide readers with hope for the success of feminist ideas, despite deferring their development to the future.

Some critics and scholars subsume various forms of feminism as living under one banner, while others recognize types of feminism, with differences pertaining to cultural contexts or political principles. The perspectives of early feminist scholars who addressed gender issues in literature remain salient, although we now recognize that diverse social dimensions combine to oppress individuals and that all women are not the same. Catherine Belsey acknowledges, “Women as a group in our

society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses.”⁷ Recognizing that not all women are similarly situated and that earlier feminists sometimes exploited and/or marginalized women of color, scholars writing since 1989 incorporate Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s term *intersectionality* to consider the “layers of oppression” caused by gender, race, ethnicity, class, immigration status, and sexual orientation and to acknowledge multidimensional social characteristics of a person or persons.⁸ Third-wave feminism includes supporting more recently developed principles: recuperating dimensions of femininity, stopping demonizing pornography, democratizing sex work as a viable occupation, and appreciating the fluid aspects of gender identity.

Readers assess fictional information in analyzing representations of political ideas and actions; more specifically, they evaluate characters that serve as role models, understand point of view in conveying strategies to navigate society and institutions, and regard plots as situated case studies exploring problems and prospects for women. Additionally, many fictions suggest improvements to establish gender equality. My argument links discussion of cultural practices, reform attitudes, and texts in ways similar to the connections Laura Fisher makes in *Reading for Reform*, which examines “the rich interplay of reform institutions and US literature” that “brimmed with oppositional energy” and inspired progressive reforms in the period between 1890 and World War I: “Reformers of the Progressive Era . . . rushed to devise new institutional forms for ameliorating the social ills that ailed the nation and that had transformed their cities and towns.”⁹ She contrasts earlier nineteenth-century reform efforts as sentimental and focused on individuals, while in the 1880s and 1890s “activist energies shifted both rhetorically and practically from individual victims to the health of the whole civic body.”¹⁰ Citing the Occupy Wall Street movement, she allows that “recent events point to the enduring cultural afterlife of uplift institutions and reform literature.”¹¹ Fisher builds on chapters detailing the connections between literary texts and reform practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with a “Coda” describing the Tenement Museum and other contemporary cultural initiatives.

A key element of fictional narratives promoting progressive cultural reforms involves representing circumstances influencing historical inequities so that readers and viewers can recognize cultural forces shaping individuals and the need for social groups to shift attitudes and develop opportunities. Simone de Beauvoir remarks in *The Second Sex*, “One is

not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.”¹² Fictional representations identify biases that should be eliminated and structural improvements to be adopted so that woman is no longer treated as the Other. Supporting Beauvoir, Rosi Braidotti characterizes the work of women’s and gender studies in changing cultural assumptions: “The feminist position ever since the eighteenth century has consisted in attacking the naturalistic assumptions about the mental inferiority of women, shifting the grounds of the debate towards the social and cultural construction of women as being different.”¹³ Fictions explore the ways that reconfiguring social and economic opportunities for women could adjust cultural attitudes about women and minorities to establish an equitable society.

Texts advocating political and social reforms prompt audiences to act on feminist principles to overturn traditional sex/gender hierarchies. Many feminist literary critics have advanced such arguments over the past fifty years. In 1979, Annette Kolodny acknowledged the “pace of inquiry” in feminist literary studies from 1969 to 1979 as “fast and furious,” noting “the diversity of that inquiry easily outstripped all efforts to define feminist literature criticism as either a coherent system or a unified set of methodologies,” and understanding that under feminism’s “wide umbrella, everything has been thrown into question: our established canons, our aesthetic criteria, our interpretative strategies, our reading habits, and most of all, ourselves as critics and as teachers. To delineate its full scope would require nothing less than a book—a book that would be outdated even as it was being composed.”¹⁴ Kolodny thus affirmed the capacious, evolving nature of feminisms that influence texts, interpretation, reading practices, and individuals, acknowledging that the dynamic dimensions of feminisms make it difficult to form a coherent, comprehensive account.

By interrogating the status quo and representing imaginary, even radical, possibilities for individuals and society, feminist literature inspires readers to think beyond existing attitudes and conditions and to develop an ethics of equity. In 1988, Barbara Christian pointed to playfulness: “writers/artists have a tendency to refuse to give up their way of seeing the world and of playing with possibilities; in fact, their very expression relies on that insistence. Perhaps that is why creative literature, even when written by politically reactionary people, can be so freeing, for in having to embody ideas and recreate the world, writers cannot merely produce one

way.”¹⁵ Laurie Finke recommended in 2018 that feminists should build on Donna Haraway’s recommendation to reconstruct knowledge: “I believe it is important for feminists to go beyond simply showing the myriad ways in which the sciences and other institutions have oppressed women; the more difficult task is to rethink the boundaries separating different cultural practices, to examine how structures of knowledge function as strategies of oppression, and to explore how feminism might help restructure larger cultural institutions.”¹⁶ Realist narratives supply information revealing oppression and proposing equity, providing readers with opportunities to contemplate social changes in fiction and to enact them in life by restructuring social systems.

Representations and Social Change

Feminist scholars in literature and cultural studies acknowledge that the key means of creating social change requires influencing individuals’ thoughts about sex and gender, particularly in being attentive to culture and language. Judith Butler considers the cultural shaping of gender as demanding “a compulsory performance of sex” that is related to language and to cultural ideologies, as she concludes in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” (1991).

If a regime of sexuality mandates a compulsory performance of sex, then it may be only through that performance that the binary system of gender and the binary system of sex come to have intelligibility at all. It may be that the very categories of sex, of sexual identity, of gender are produced or maintained in the *effects* of this compulsory performance, effects which are disingenuously renamed as causes, origins, disingenuously lined up within a causal or expressive sequence that the heterosexual norm produces to legitimate itself as the origin of all sex.¹⁷

In regarding sexuality as a cultural performance, Butler helps us recognize the arbitrariness of heterosexuality, of assigning gendered roles for women and men, and of assuming a binary system of sex/gender as biologically determined. Thirty years after Butler wrote about gender insubordination, concepts of gender variance and gender fluidity are widely accepted.¹⁸ The complexities of gender expression produced a cultural shift from a binary

system to a spectrum of gender diversity recognizing human attributes such as transgender, nonbinary gender identity, and gender nonconforming.¹⁹ In objecting to rigid sex/gender roles, feminist ideas helped eradicate cultural prohibitions, doing so by informing theories, practices, and literature to validate difference, diversity, equity, and inclusion.²⁰

As universities and governments decrease financial support for the humanities, it has become difficult to persuade individuals that literature and media provide critical knowledge, useful information, and designs for the future.²¹ The first decades of the twenty-first century have been dominated by economic (recession and inflation), environmental (climate change), and health (pandemic) challenges along with violent internal and international conflicts, concerns that elevate the importance of scientific and technical knowledge making. Defending humanities study as an equally valid and relevant pursuit, Butler in a spring 2020 *Academe* article argues that teaching literature develops students' critical inquiry skills and refines their moral sensibilities.

Sometimes only imaginary worlds can shed light on history or modes of life, on moral dilemmas and emotional realities, including, for instance, the animate and vocal traces of the history of subjugation in novels by Toni Morrison. They chart human longing and aspiration and constitute modes of linguistic or representational experimentation that depart from established schools and methods and make their mark by doing so. They leave reality behind on purpose in order to bring to the fore the possibilities of the materials and media through which we generally represent reality.²²

Asserting the power of imaginative literature to explore human emotions and ethical ideas in nuanced ways that disciplines dominated by facts do not pursue, Butler credits fiction for teaching and persuading by resonating with the audience's experiences, emotions, and observations. One can also add "desires" to this list of audience expectations, following Ann Ardis who references Roland Barthes's discussion of "classic" nineteenth-century realism in distinguishing between representation and figuration: "To figure something is to give up the pose of objectivity to acknowledge that you are not simply reproducing something that exists in the 'real' world. Figuration means acknowledging the subjective desires that inform your textual constructions of the world."²³

Realist literary and media fictions incorporate feminist principles and values within stories about sympathetic characters navigating social inequities that readers recognize. For example, *This Is How It Always Is* by Laurie Frankel combines a dramatic story about a family, contemporary medical and cultural information, and advice about bringing up a transgender child. The 2017 novel focuses on well-meaning heterosexual, progressive parents raising five children, one of whom transitions and has difficulty managing interactions in elementary school. In an interview, Frankel explains her aim: "So one of the things that I hope is that people who read this book will read it and forget about the transgender issues and just be in the embrace of this family and realize that this family is like all families: They love and they keep secrets from one another and they protect one another and they struggle with how to do that and they have these challenges. And it's hard, but it isn't scary and it isn't abnormal at all."²⁴ Characters in the book include an American social worker and a Thai medical caregiver whose informed perspectives about biology and culture are represented in conversations with the parents who struggle to manage their preconceptions and preferences while striving to protect their child's interests.

Frankel's progressive parents resist traditional gender roles and encourage their children's creativity. The physician-mother and writer-father have different perspectives on Claude becoming Poppy. After ten-year-old Poppy is outed as having a penis when she is in fourth-grade, Rosie and Penn debate how they should help their child grow up mentally and physically healthy. A practicing physician, Rosie recognizes that gender dysphoria "is a medical issue, but mostly it's a cultural issue. It's a social issue and an emotional issue and a family dynamic issue and a community issue. Maybe we need to medically intervene so Poppy doesn't grow a beard. Or maybe the world needs to learn to love a person with a beard who goes by 'she' and wears a skirt."²⁵ Rosie's husband Penn looks for information about vaginoplasties, assuming the world is unlikely to change anytime soon; he ends the conversation about whether surgery is necessary with this question: "How do we learn to live in that world and be happy anyway?" The deus ex machina in the novel involves a trip to Thailand, during which Rosie works as the doctor in a clinic aided by a Thai caregiver, the amazingly adept in all things K, who is a kathoey.²⁶ K informs Rosie that Thai culture offers Poppy another way, a middle way that allows being transgender or embracing both genders. The novel teaches readers about a transgender child's emotions and about parents'

caring for an offspring who transitions, arguing that societies should evolve to be more accepting of varied gender identities and expressions.

Representations of Oppression

While Western philosophy and religion have long identified paths of righteous action with the possibility of creating “the beloved community,” some fictions that focus on women’s oppression emphasize social and political divisions without supplying solutions to eliminate gender inequities.²⁷ Alexandra Alter reviews a number of books constituting a “new canon of feminist dystopian literature” that “reflects a growing preoccupation among writers with the tenuous status of women’s rights, and the ambient fear that progress toward equality between the sexes has stalled or may be reversed,” and she notices “a growing wave of female-centered dystopian fiction, futuristic works that raise uncomfortable questions about pervasive gender inequality, misogyny and violence against women, the erosion of reproductive rights and the extreme consequences of institutionalized sexism.”²⁸ Many science fiction novels highlight the elimination of women’s rights and contribute to the genre of dystopian narratives about women’s disempowerment.

Fictional representations identify women’s oppression in the past, present, and future. Margaret Atwood’s speculative fiction *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) represents plausible circumstances repressing women in Gilead, a totalitarian, theocratic state understood as a future version of the US.²⁹ This book provides a classic study of how “power operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime” by outlining how religious fundamentalism could enslave many women by forbidding them access to money, work, and romance.³⁰ The novel concludes with the handmaid Offred’s escape from being a breeder to an uncertain end; however, the 1990 film adaptation (Dir. Volker Schlöndorff), starring Natasha Richardson, depicts Offred’s escape. Atwood’s fiction has also been transformed into an opera, radio play, ballet, and stage play, and most recently inspired a popular streamed series, which tracks the novel’s plot in the first year of the series and enters new territory in later seasons. The popularity of the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*—first streamed in 2017 and with season five released in fall 2022—emblemizes for many viewers and critics the backlash against women taking place in political discourse and legislative actions.

Referencing fall 2018 Washington, DC, protests following Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court that took place around the US Capitol, Sophie Gilbert acknowledges, "for the most part, women connected with *The Handmaid's Tale* in this moment because the path of history seemed to be suddenly pointing the wrong way. That's why protesters in white bonnets and crimson gowns have become the uncanny visual motif of women demonstrating in the Trump era."³¹ Protesters wearing the distinctive costuming of Atwood's fictional female characters embody fears of a nation dominated by elite, white male rulers enshrining gender discrimination into law as legislatures attenuate or eliminate reproductive and other rights. In May 2022, after *Politico* published the leaked Supreme Court draft memo by Justice Samuel Alito who argued for overturning *Roe v. Wade*, protesters wearing white bonnets and crimson gowns appeared in front of Justice Amy Coney Barrett's home.³²

In her introduction to the 2017 edition of the novel, Atwood acknowledges that the possibility of a future theocratic, antiwoman state, seemed "fairly outrageous" in 1984 when she conceived the premise of the book in observing efforts in the US to control women's reproduction. Nevertheless, she resists the notion that the book offered a prediction: "No, it isn't a prediction because predicting the future isn't really possible: there are too many variables and unforeseen possibilities. Let's say it's an anti-prediction: if this future can be described in detail, maybe it won't happen, but such wishful thinking cannot be depended on either."³³ Future oppression of women is not inevitable, for, as the epilogue to the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests, individual effort, collective action, and the formation of resistance groups offer protection and enable political changes to effect gender equity. Atwood's 2019 novel *The Testaments* provides both a prequel and a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* describing Gilead's early days during which women were imprisoned or executed in presenting three intertwined first-person testimonies of how corruption in Gilead and its continuing domination of women inspire rebellion. Both novels embed personal accounts of women's oppression within frameworks of legal testimony and academic discourses from a later period during which women have achieved equality and are once again able to become social, academic, and political leaders. As Michelle Goldberg asserts, "Rather than a warning, it reads, in 2019, like wish fulfillment. Instead of a new glimpse of hell, it's a riveting and deeply satisfying escapist fantasy. . . . 'The Testaments,' it turns out, isn't a dystopian work at all. It's utopian."³⁴ Atwood's fictions, like others considered in this book, hold

out hope that society could eliminate present-day repressions of women and marginalized minorities to enable a future state based on equity.

Rollback of Rights

Even readers dispirited by legal decisions that limit women's reproductive choices and empowerment can hope for gender equity and fight against the further diminution of women's and minority rights. In her October 9, 2018, *New York Times* column titled "How Do I Explain Justice Kavanaugh to My Daughters?," Jennifer Weiner argues that "The spectacle of this confirmation has reminded us that to many people, women's suffering is a joke." Yet Weiner concluded her column, published after Kavanaugh's swearing-in as a Supreme Court Justice on October 6, 2018, an event that took place one month before the much-anticipated November 6, 2018, US midterm elections, by recalling details from the Congressional testimony of Christine Blasey Ford, who accused Kavanaugh of attacking her: "Speak up, even if those in power do not want to listen. Speak your truth, even if men laugh. Be loud, even though power prefers girls quiet. Speak up, even if they call you strident or shrill. Don't let anyone put a hand—real or metaphorical—over your mouth. March, demonstrate, chant, shout, vote. And maybe someday, you, or your daughters, or your daughter's daughters will be the ones with the last laugh."³⁵ Encouraging women to look forward and to engage in collective action, Weiner hopes that justice long denied will eventually prevail.

Similar encouragement to persist and resist patriarchal domination appears in fictions that identify the social and legal limits that women have confronted and continue to face, as literary and media scholars publishing after 1968 acknowledge. Peter Rabinowitz explains, "It is not exactly that women's lives are inappropriate to narrative fiction. We have canonical plot structures that deal with women who ruin themselves in adultery (*Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*) or who remain self-sacrificially steadfast even under extreme adversity (Southworth's *Changed Brides/The Bride's Fate*). But the potential roles for women in such plots are restricted." Rabinowitz quotes Alice Jardine: "If the author is male, one finds that the female destiny (at least in the novel) rarely deviates from one or two seemingly irreversible, dualistic teleologies: monster and/or angel, she is condemned to death (or sexual mutilation or disappearance) and/or to happy-ever-after marriage. Her plot is not her own."³⁶ Rita

Felski makes the related point that “It is not very difficult to show that complaining about the sexism of the Western canon is not an especially sophisticated or fruitful idea. . . . No writing is immune to criticism, but a serious engagement with feminist scholarship requires more than bluster and invective.”³⁷ Clearly, the limited possibilities and expectations for women in many fictional narratives reveal historical restrictions, but these limitations are often supplemented with visions of possibility.³⁸ Complementing the observations of Rabinowitz, Jardine, and Felski that many fictions detail women’s oppression, and noticing the rise of dystopian fictions speculating about the dismal future of women, this book examines narratives that point to the future success of feminism in producing progressive social change.

I argue that there is an underrecognized category of realist narratives that describe improvements to enhance gender equity and that suggest if certain reforms are enacted, there will be positive outcomes for society. A narrative of this type illustrates a sympathetic protagonist, usually a woman, navigating a difficult environment and confronting bias and discrimination, while acknowledging that greater opportunities could be available if reforms such as abolition, enfranchisement, educational and work opportunities, and reproductive freedoms are established and prompt a shift in social attitudes. While dystopian fictions show society in retrograde, other fictional narratives depict women’s opportunities, rights, and responsibilities to persuade readers there will be a feminist future. Historian Christine Stansell begins her book *The Feminist Promise* by recognizing that “Feminism is one of the great and substantial democratic movements, a tradition of thought and action spanning more than two hundred years. Its reach is huge, because it addresses the claims and needs of half the population. At its best, feminism incorporates men as well, to make it a politics of universal aspiration.”³⁹ Referencing barriers and injustices that individuals confront, fictional literary and televisual narratives endorse women’s aspirations and outline reforms that make gender equity a plausible prospect.

Yet while feminism appears as a promising development in many fictions, its fulfillment is often denied in the timelines of narratives. Rebecca Coleman and Debra Ferreday acknowledge Angela McRobbie’s account of “a double entanglement” that affects feminism’s fortunes in culture.

In Western post-industrial countries, feminism is involved in a “double entanglement,” where it is at once “taken into account”

and “repudiated.” Focusing particularly on media representations of gender, femininity and sexuality, McRobbie suggests that certain aspects of feminist critique (including, but not restricted to, critiques of heteronormativity, the standardization of a beauty ideal and restricted access to public spheres of education and work) have been so widely incorporated into mainstream culture that they are seen as arguments that have been won.⁴⁰

Thus, feminism appears as both accepted and dangerous according to this account. Despite general familiarity with feminism, defined as a restructuring of society according to gender equitable, nonhierarchical, and inclusive norms, it has not yet developed to its full capacities, and we await the social changes it will foster in its mature state.

Feminism in Society

Pointing to historical disparities between women’s and men’s lives, realist fictions identify role models and acknowledge critical strategies to establish gender equity, including implementing material and attitudinal changes to enhance the lives of women and underrepresented minorities. Janet Todd points out that “Feminist literary history is not a study of women as nature or of a natural woman, but of women intervening in culture, making culture, and being naturalized by culture in subtly different ways at different times; it is the study of codes that intervene between subjectivity and history and help to fashion both.”⁴¹ Literary criticism recuperating submerged feminist narratives contributes to activism by deciphering these codes and pressing for social, cultural, and political reforms. I originally considered titling this book “Feminism’s Long Arc,” adapting the civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s well-known statement, which is based on a passage from a sermon by nineteenth-century abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. King claimed in several speeches: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”⁴² In 1853 Parker published “Ten Sermons of Religion”; his third sermon “Of Justice and the Conscience” mentions the arc of the moral universe: “Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I

cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”⁴³ Feminist narratives considered in this book take a long view, identifying the necessity for reforms and forecasting the inevitability of prospective changes that enable gender equity.

Today many people accept that individuals should have equal opportunities in education and at home and work as well as equality before the law, although feminism and its ideological principles are not always well understood or supported.⁴⁴ There is not one feminist ideology or movement, as centuries of arguments addressing social inequality and gender equity continue to combine with diverse religious, political, and cultural values to produce a variety of feminisms and an understanding of intersectional and global feminisms. Roxane Gay acknowledges that feminists should know that their goals may not appeal to all while understanding that feminist principles and practices should be inclusive and should respect diversity.

Feminism is a choice, and if a woman does not want to be a feminist, that is her right, but it is still my responsibility to fight for her rights. I believe feminism is grounded in supporting the choices of women even if we wouldn't make certain choices for ourselves. I believe women not just in the United States but throughout the world deserve equality and freedom but know that I am in no position to tell women of other cultures what that equality and freedom should look like.⁴⁵

In short, feminist ideas adapt to individual situations and social contexts, depending on specific values that endorse enhancing gender equity and increasing opportunities for women of all ethnicities, classes, gender identities, and sexual orientations. Benefits would accrue to all, for under the rubric of feminism, gender equity should also include releasing individuals, regardless of gender, from the constraints of sex and gender stereotypes and upturning other social hierarchies that oppress or marginalize individuals and groups.

The history of feminisms is intertwined with past cultural and political discriminations, including those related to race and ethnicity. Although suffragists in the United States and Britain began their reform efforts as dedicated abolitionists, many white women later advocating for enfranchisement objected that they could not cast ballots while Black men

could. During the Reconstruction period in the US, instead of working collectively with underrepresented minorities, some suffragists applied ideologies of Social Darwinism and eugenics to support discriminatory attitudes toward immigrants and persons of color.⁴⁶ Arguing against such discrimination, Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892) explains that Black women suffer doubly based on race and gender.⁴⁷ The nineteenth US constitutional amendment enacted in 1920 granted women the right to vote, a right that white women exercised more easily than other women. Similar measures passed in 1918 and 1928 ensured the vote for some women in Great Britain. Yet enfranchisement did not resolve all inequalities based on sex, and many restrictions continue to hinder women of color, disabled women, and lesbian and trans women.

Inequalities appear magnified in the digital age as we are enabled and constrained by a plethora of information sources, including social media used by individuals and groups publishing sometimes fake or questionable views without editorial review.⁴⁸ Given that human beings are political, as Aristotle recognized long ago, our social media communications and "like" preferences reveal our political inclinations, which tend to be partisan and polarized.⁴⁹ The United States and Britain are divided nations, with the latter also experiencing a generational split on many political issues, including gender equity, given a growing Labour movement attracting younger citizens and a definitive split among voters about Brexit, Britain's exit from the European Union.⁵⁰ A similar generational divide in the United States affects choice of political party, revealing increased frustration with two-party dominance and the structural limitations of the electoral college.⁵¹

Contemporary public discourse includes a range of presentations, publications, and compositions endorsing feminist principles. Speeches such as Emma Watson's at the United Nations in 2014, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Ted Talk and 2012 book *We Should All Be Feminists*, and Facebook/Meta board member Sheryl Sandberg's 2014 *Lean In* book, website, and original Ted talk are available to anyone with a device and internet access and are widely influential, particularly with young people.⁵² Popular music also reflects and refracts social, economic, and political concerns related to gender, incorporating elements from others' works. As one reviewer explains, Beyoncé's 2016 video album *Lemonade* has "underlying themes of modern feminism, monogamy, and the numerous pleasures of sex"; "the daring 'Flawless' opens with a portion of the previously-previewed and already-confrontational 'Bow Down' before segueing

into a TEDxEuston talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, placing a boldly feminist credo right in the middle of one of the most important pop albums of the past five years.⁵³ News stories about the May 2018 royal wedding between Great Britain's Prince Harry and American television actress Meghan Markle (now Duchess of Sussex) often mentioned the latter's feminism and sometimes noted her 2015 speech in which she honored her role as United Nations Women's advocate and declared her feminism.⁵⁴ In this way, celebrity endorsements of feminist principles inspire audiences and have extensive cultural reach during a period in which "Every single day there's a new instance of gender trouble," as Roxane Gay acknowledges.⁵⁵

The 2015-2016 political campaign of Hillary Clinton, the first woman to run for president as a standard bearer of a major United States political party, and the subsequent election of Donald J. Trump, an avowed nonfeminist, misogynist, and sexual predator, to that office focused public attention on questions of gender and power, including "how can we improve the representation of women in government and enhance gender equity in the public sphere?" After the election, news stories detailed sexual assaults and sexual discrimination affecting women (and men) of different ethnicities and classes working in various fields. Employing the hashtag #MeToo, news articles, Tweets, or blog posts relevant to the discussion of gender equity, sexual discrimination, and sexual harassment regularly appear. But reading accounts of nondisclosure agreements, abuses, settlements, and punishments for malefactors may not offer satisfactory conclusions for survivors or lead to specific reforms increasing women's political power. Eliminating abuse and discrimination and creating equal social, economic, and political access and opportunities for women remain unreached goals in many places.⁵⁶ Realist fictions illustrate problems individuals and institutions should address and outline recommendations offering hope.

Images of Equity

Forecasting progress, print and televisual fictions discussed in this book note prospects for social reform and imagine the inevitability of gender equity in ways that recall King's statement "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." His statement was on my mind while I reviewed media coverage of various Women's Marches held on January 21, 2017, the day after Donald J. Trump's presidential inauguration and

one hundred years after suffragists' 1917 protests at the White House.⁵⁷ Social-media assisted organizers of and attendees at the 2017 Women's Marches that took place around the world, and television news disseminated photos and video of large, diverse crowds demonstrating for progressive causes opposed to Trump's agenda. Greater numbers of women and men turned out in Washington, DC, for the 2017 Women's March than did for the previous day's presidential inauguration of Trump, indicating significant opposition to the outcome of the 2016 US national election and signaling resistance to his many campaign proposals directed at dismantling or restricting progressive policies, including those related to provisions of the Affordable Care Act, immigration orders, accessible national borders, women's right to equal pay and reproductive choice, climate change controls, banking regulations, and other legislative and executive decisions.⁵⁸ Motivated by anger at Trump's politics, discourse, and personal behavior, protesters at the 2017 Women's Marches decried issues of misogyny, sexism, racism, and anti-immigrant sentiments and expressed fears of fascism and authoritarianism.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the Trump administration from its earliest days sought to cancel Obama-era initiatives, including environmental and other regulations, while also changing immigration policies and pressing Congress to fulfill the Trump campaign agenda.

In January 2017, women's marchers followed in the footsteps of approximately 5,000 women who protested Woodrow Wilson's opposition to women's suffrage in a January 1917 parade in front of the White House, a demonstration that took place before that president's inauguration. Eleanor Flexner describes the occasion:

With that dramatic sense which always characterized her suffrage work, Miss [Alice] Paul chose the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, since Washington would be filled with visitors from all over the country. When Mr. Wilson reached Washington and found the streets bare of any welcoming crowd, he is said to have asked where the people were; he was told they were over on Pennsylvania Avenue, watching the woman suffrage parade.

As it turned out, they were doing more than just watching.⁶⁰

Flexner notes that one newspaper account of the 1917 parade reported, "No inauguration has produced such scenes, which in many instances amounted to nothing less than riots," while another stated, "Many of the

women were in tears under the jibes and insults of those who lined the route. . . . Few faltered, though some of the older women were forced to drop out from time to time.”⁶¹ In contrast, the January 2017 Women’s March in Washington, DC, was less violent and inspired fewer incidents than other protests, perhaps because police were reluctant to arrest women in pink hats.⁶²

Not every protest movement develops visual markers, but many use images to galvanize supporters such as the red cloaks and white bonnets donned by feminist protesters emulating signs of oppression in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Early twentieth-century British suffragists encouraged wearing certain colors to promote the cause of votes for women: “The British women’s suffrage colors were purple, white, and green. Purple, white, and gold were the colors of the American suffrage movement.”⁶³ US Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton evoked the history of suffrage when she wore a white suit during a critical presidential debate in October 2016, and “the internet goes crazy.”⁶⁴ Acknowledging the long, difficult history of the suffrage movement, many women in the US Congress wore white on Election Day 2016, on the evening of President Trump’s first joint address to Congress in early 2017, and during the inauguration of the 2019 Congress, which included a record number of Democratic women and minority Congressional representatives elected.⁶⁵ Continuing the tradition, on November 7, 2020, Kamala Harris, the first Black woman and first person of South Asian descent to be elected as vice president, wore a white pantsuit and pussy bow blouse in introducing the president-elect Joe Biden, who defeated Donald Trump in the 2020 election.⁶⁶

A vibrant political symbol of gender resistance, the pink pussy hat crystallized feminist concerns motivating the March for Women held on January 21, 2017, coming to public attention in the weeks before the demonstration. A bright pink hat designed by a knitting teacher developed into the Pussyhat Project, coordinated by activists Jayna Zweiman and Krista Suh, who shared the design in social media and in news accounts.⁶⁷ The hat symbolizes resistance to misogyny, recalling a comment made by Donald Trump about his approach to women: “Grab ’em by the pussy. You can do anything.”⁶⁸ According to Diana Pearl, “The hope . . . is that the pussy hats will live on as a symbol of feminist activism for far longer than just the day of the march—or even the length of the Trump administration. ‘My dream is that a grandmother will give her granddaughter her pussy hat, and say ‘I wore this on January 21, 2017’

Suh said. ‘I hope it has an impact for generations and leads to the change that we are all hungry for.’⁶⁹ Reminding observers of Trump’s comment while reclaiming femininity and feminism as pretty in pink and eager to protest, the hat was a practical, powerful symbol; after all, wearing a wool hat helps a marcher cope with winter weather. The hat’s adoption in different climates reflects a collective commitment to fight for equity.

The easily imitated and portable pink hat connected protests around the world and through time. Photos from different marches on January 21, 2017, and the anniversary march on January 20, 2018, document the many marchers who wore pink hats and carried posters displaying related progressive images and messages.⁷⁰ The hats were in greater abundance in wintry climates than in summer ones, but pops of pink color stand out in many newspaper photographs and television coverage. The pink hats and their representations on protest signs and other graphics objected to Trump’s harassment of women, signaling revolution and change. *The Atlantic* magazine reproduced a photograph of the Eiffel Tower as a backdrop for the sign “Women of Paris: Nasty since 1789,” while a *New York Times* photo taken in Fairbanks, Alaska, offered an explicit reminder of Trump’s Access Hollywood comments: “Women’s Rights are not up for grabs.”⁷¹ Many protesters drew parts of women’s anatomy on their signs to protest control of women’s bodies.

Whether one recognizes a pussy hat as having kitten ears or as resembling a uterus is in the eyes of the beholder, the hat became an inspirational symbol protesting misogyny and aiming to promote gender equity. The February 6, 2017, *New Yorker* cover illustrated the pink pussy hat on a woman of color in an image updating the Rosie the Riveter image, which has figured since World War II as a symbol of woman’s empowerment. Françoise Mouly, the magazine’s art editor, commented about the cover: “Abigail Gray Swartz, who marched in her state capital of Augusta, Maine, was inspired by the spirit of the day to paint ‘Rosie the Riveter’ as a woman of color wearing a knitted pink cap.”⁷² *The grio* described Swartz’s *New Yorker* cover in a January 28, 2017, post as follows:

The image is not only significant because of its feminist message but because of the message of intersectionality at a time when feminism is coming up against the problem of how to address the fact that women of color have historically been left out of the movement and even actively pushed out of it. Some critics of the march noted that there needed to be more of a place

for women of color and others, and this image takes that need and puts it on the cover.⁷³

Underlining the common cause of women does not mean that all women are the same; instead, connecting women in different circumstances and providing access to resources establishes a larger community fighting various forms of discrimination, bias, and abuse. The imagery utilized to represent intersectional politics grafts a new symbol (the pussy hat) on to a transformed vision of the well-known older representation of Rosie the Riveter, reminding us of women's contributions in times of conflict.

French scholar Maurice Agulhon explains that "Political imagery may be considered a marginal subject but perhaps it would be better to describe it as a frontier zone."⁷⁴ Images are especially important in a televisual and social media age, and their employment builds on a convention in realist fictions of representing the visual markers of protest.⁷⁵ As a symbol of resistance, the pink pussy hat is akin to the red Phrygian cap denoting liberty, an item from the classical period that was transformed by revolutionaries in late-eighteenth-century France. Representations in art and literature document that the red cap became an important feature recalling revolutionaries' heroic fight for liberty in the 1780s; it was later associated with the Marianne figure depicted in Eugène Delacroix's painting *Liberty Leading the People* (1830).⁷⁶

Contemporary protest marches, including the 2018 Women's Marches held in various cities, carried forward the pussy hat as a symbol along with other messages from the January 2017 Women's March, including "Not My President," "Feminism Is Equality," "A Woman's Place Is in the Revolution," "Women's Rights Are Human Rights," "Trust Women, We Will Not Be Silent," and "Nasty Woman."⁷⁷ The last is a phrase that Trump used during the presidential campaign to describe Hillary Clinton, who lost the election although she won the popular vote. Despite Trump's intent to demean Clinton with the epithet, "nasty woman" became a positive label for many because the phrase identified a woman who raised unprecedented sums to run for office and to persist in the race despite being troubled by a complicated history as a first lady and being challenged within her own party by popular progressive US senator Bernie Sanders.⁷⁸

Why don't women speak up more? A 2017 Women's March sign in Cleveland, "Women Want to Be Heard #Just Listen" and the sign "Hear