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Confronting “White Feminism” in the Victorian Literature Classroom

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I think of feminism as a fragile archive, a body assembled from shattering, from splattering, an archive whose fragility gives us responsibility: to take care. (Ahmed 17)

<1>The transition to virtual learning in Spring and Fall 2020 intersected with international protests for racial justice and, more locally, Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong’s call to “undiscipline Victorian Studies” by “interrogat[ing] and challeng[ing] our field’s marked resistance to centering racial logic” (370).⁽¹⁾ More specifically, they call for “illuminat[ing] how race and racial difference subtend our [Victorianists’] most cherished objects of study, our most familiar historical and theoretical frameworks, our most engrained scholarly protocols, and the very demographics of our field” (370). Since then, numerous virtual roundtables and panels have convened to discuss critical approaches to race within Victorian studies and to ponder the relevance of contemporary social justice movements to a field whose borders are historically drawn. This essay emerged from one such panel and offers practical suggestions for reframing pedagogical approaches to Victorian feminist discourses in order to “center[] racial logic” and “illuminate how race and racial difference subtend” those discourses.⁽²⁾ Its suggestions are certainly not meant to be exhaustive, but simply to offer one set of practices for making the Victorian literature classroom more responsive to contemporary conversations about race and gender.

<2>While scholars have long been doing work on race and gender in Victorian literature and culture, the recent confluence of highly visible racial justice protests and social justice movements like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #SayHerName; the radical and violent acts of emboldened right-wing extremists; and a raging pandemic that has brought racial and economic disparities into sharp focus have lent these subjects a sense of urgency and specificity. Students are the ones who create much of this sense of urgency, since many of them are entering the classroom with preconceived ideas about race and gender that have been formed around recent events and the popular responses to them. It would be inaccurate and foolish, of course, to suggest that students are only now attuned to the dynamics of race and gender, or only now concerned about uneven distributions of power. However, I posit that the events listed above have generated a distinct set of concerns that students (at least mine) frequently invoke in the classroom and in response to course readings, including concerns about racial justice,

accountability, exclusion, and visibility. Importantly, feminism has also recently become more visible and palatable in popular culture, in part because of the #MeToo movement's focus on the pervasiveness of sexual assault and the need for perpetrators to be held accountable, and in part because of the embrace of feminism by high-profile celebrities like Beyoncé and Taylor Swift.(3) In response, many faculty are considering how to meaningfully address recent calls for racial and gender justice in the college classroom.(4) The particular, and related, issue I take up in this essay is the presence—and problem—of *white* feminism in the Victorian literature classroom.

The Problem with White Feminism

<3>White feminism is a phrase that has recently entered the popular lexicon, although the phenomenon it describes is hardly new.(5) The phrase is used frequently on social media platforms and in internet takedowns of pop feminism to describe a feminism that centers the experiences of white, middle-class women whose racial and economic privilege grants them the spotlight.(6) Within the paradigm of white feminism, though, whiteness is not made explicit. Instead, “woman” is presented as an uninterrogated, monolithic figure, and all difference (of race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and class) is thereby erased; the multiple, intersecting vectors of identity are obscured.(7) The phrase “white feminism,” first and foremost, acknowledges the racial politics that are often obscured in mainstream feminism, but the phrase also signals broader concerns about privilege, exclusion, and access. In their article “‘White Supremacy in Heels’: (White) Feminism, Supremacy, and Discursive Violence” (2020), Dreama G. Moon and Michelle A. Holling explain how white feminism relies upon white epistemologies, which are then easily reproduced:

Indeed, a central problematic within (white) feminism is its reliance on and grounding in a white epistemology . . . White epistemology is grounded in a way of knowing and understanding the world that colludes with and/or rationalizes systemic processes that uphold and reproduce racial inequality and white supremacy. The frame, as a masterful deflector, makes seeing deep structural racial inequalities difficult even while it provides users a convenient language, rationale, and perspective for maintaining everyday discrimination and related racist practices. (254)

<4>Likewise, Rachel Cargle and Koa Beck have recently written popular articles and books on the subject of white feminism (Beck's book was released in January 2021, and Cargle's book is scheduled to be published later this year). Cargle became a highly visible public figure after a photo of her and her friend Dana Suhow at the 2017 Women's March went viral; in the photo, Cargle is holding a sign that reads “If you don't fight for all women, you fight for no women.” Suhow's sign reads “Protect: Black, Asian, Muslim, Latinx, Disabled, Trans, Fat, Poor, Women.” Cargle now has an impressive 1.8 million followers on Instagram (where she routinely posts about white feminism) and a popular (and frequently sold-out) lecture entitled “Unpacking White Feminism.”(8) In *White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind* (2021), Beck defines white feminism as “an ideology; it has completely different priorities, goals, and strategies for achieving gender equality: personalized autonomy, individual wealth, perpetual self-optimization, and supremacy. . . . It's a specific way of viewing gender

equality that is anchored in the accumulation of individual power rather than the redistribution of it” (xvii).

<5>If feminism necessitates activism, then activism for whom and to the exclusion of whom? I invoke the phrase “white feminism” in this essay precisely because of its currency in popular culture as a phrase that interrogates the way pop feminisms implicitly focus on white middle-class female experiences. Hence, my aim in this essay is to consider how to meet students where they are in this moment, to think critically about what ideas and experiences of racial and gender justice they are bringing to the classroom (along with the popular lexicon they may use to articulate their ideas and experiences), and to brainstorm how Victorian studies curricula might deploy strategic presentism and feminist theory to offer students a space for thinking through their own historical moment.(9)

<6>Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong argue that one step contemporary Victorian studies scholars might take toward “centering racial logic” is to heed Sara Ahmed’s call for a feminist citation practice (381). In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Ahmed powerfully asserts that “feminist theory is world making”: “Feminism is at stake in how we generate knowledge; in how we write, in who we cite. I think of feminism as a building project: if our texts are worlds, they need to be made out of feminist materials. Feminist theory is world making” (14). For Ahmed, feminist theory allows readers to see and interpret the world differently and to bring new worlds into being. The feminist materials that build new worlds, she argues,

could also be called feminist classics. By feminist classics, I mean feminist books that have been in circulation; that have become worn from being passed around. I do not mean classics in the sense of canonical texts. Of course, some texts become canonical, and we need to question how these histories happen, how selections are made; we need to ask who or what does not survive these selections. But the texts that reach us, that make a connection, are not necessarily the ones that are taught in the academy, or that make it to the official classics edition. Many of the texts that connect with me are the ones assumed to be dated, to belong to a time that we are in no longer. (17)

This archive of feminist classics has the power to “make community” and is comprised of “books, yes, but they are also spaces of encounter” (17). Ahmed’s theorization of the purpose and power of feminist classics is germane to my purpose here because she envisions the feminist archive not as a staid, monotonal relic of the past, but rather an instrument for sustained (and sustaining) feminist assemblages. I want to suggest that building a Victorian literature curriculum offers a powerful opportunity to engage in world-making, and one that can benefit from being built with “feminist materials.” Most undergraduate students enter a Victorian literature classroom with little to no knowledge of the subject, and faculty build a world for them to explore.(10) What should that world look like? How should it be constructed? Whose experiences and voices are valued, and whose are dismissed? What balance should be struck between positivist historicism and strategic presentism? And, finally, how can ideology be distinguished from knowledge so that faculty do not risk reinscribing historical processes of dispossession and injury?

<7>In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000), bell hooks defines feminism as “the movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression” (33). Ahmed adopts this definition in *Living a Feminist Life*, arguing,

Feminism is necessary because of what has not ended: sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression. And for hooks, ‘sexism, sexual exploitation and sexual oppression’ cannot be separated from racism, from how the present is shaped by colonial histories including slavery, as central to the exploitation of labor under capitalism. Intersectionality is a starting point, the point from which we must proceed if we are to offer an account of how power works. (5)

When I categorically refer to “feminism” in this essay, I am invoking Ahmed’s and hooks’s definitions of the term, in conscious counterpoint to “white feminism.” I will also follow Ahmed’s use of the phrase “white feminism” to describe feminism that attempts to separate or elide race and racism from its analysis of “sexism, sexual exploitations, and sexual oppression” (5). Examined through this lens, most Victorian feminisms—which I define here as Victorian imaginative literature and Victorian theory about “sexism, sexual exploitations and sexual oppression”—fall under the classification of white feminism because they elide issues of race and racism within their analyses and implicitly identify white women as their subjects.

<8>One issue at stake in this discussion (and in the classroom), of course, is that “race” as an analytic category is unstable and historically specific. Racial difference was understood differently in nineteenth-century Britain than it is in twenty-first-century America, and racism was deployed differently in these contexts as well. While students may be tempted to transport racial categories across geographical and temporal boundaries by mapping their contemporary understandings of race onto Victorian representations of race, a careful pedagogy will warn against the uncritical transfer of racial categories from one historical period to another because such practice holds the risk of essentializing racial categories rather than interrogating them. Understanding how the nineteenth century “consolidated a modern idea of race” necessitates teaching students to understand race and racialization as signifying more than a hierarchical ordering of somatic racial features and instead as a technology of domination, via Michel Foucault, and racism as “the exercise of [this] biopower” (Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong 370; Foucault 255).

<9>And, importantly, it also means teaching students to perceive whiteness as a racial category and essential to the class discussion on race. As scholars like Gayatri Spivak, Moira Ferguson, Anne McClintock, and Jennifer DeVere Brody have demonstrated, the construction of race in the nineteenth century was intimately bound to the construction of gender (and vice versa), and the emergence of Victorian feminist discourses was intimately bound to imperialist and racist logic.⁽¹¹⁾ Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong suggest that, despite the impact of this groundbreaking scholarship, Victorian studies “remains a field that is more at ease speaking about gender (construed as race-neutral) than about race. Victorian studies is thus severely behind the times in understanding and highlighting the differential construction of femininity across race and space” (374). Replicating this critical stance in the classroom, I want to suggest, risks reinscribing the notion that gender is a “race-neutral” category and perpetuating the idea that feminism is for white women. Foregrounding the racial logic of Victorian feminist

discourses in the classroom—confronting white feminism—on the other hand, can offer a bracing corrective and a powerful entry point for the feminist assemblages envisioned by Ahmed.

<10>In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), hooks identifies a gap between the theory and practice of feminism in the classroom, asking “of what use is feminist theory that literally beats [students] down, leaves them stumbling bleary-eyed from classroom settings feeling humiliated, feeling as though they could easily be standing in a living room or bedroom somewhere naked with someone who has seduced them or is going to, who also subjects them to a process of interaction that humiliates, that strips them of their sense of value” (65). Left unacknowledged and unchallenged, the race and class politics of Victorian feminisms might result in humiliation, exclusion, and white validation in the classroom. Many years ago, I had a student who paid for college by doing sex work. When we got to our unit on prostitution, they were understandably put off by the rhetoric used by Contagious Diseases Acts reformers and by many of their classmates. They aired their grievances with the class. I will admit that, until that very moment in class, it had never occurred to me that first one of my students might be employed in the sex work industry and that second I needed to think about a more expansive and inclusive framework for discussing sex work in the classroom. As a white, middle-class professor at a majority minority university, I have had many similar moments when encountering the racial politics of Victorian feminisms; I had never, for example, given much thought to John Stuart Mill’s use of the slave metaphor to describe the position of white women until a student raised their hand and, when called on, said “Okay, that’s fucked up.” Indeed, it is. And so was the fact that I was only then seeing it. As feminist theory and cultural critic Amy M. Carillo Rowe explains,

[T]he narrowly defined concerns that emerge out of the mono-dimensional location occupied by White feminists, “speaking for” feminists more broadly, (re)subordinates non-White women for whom gender oppression is only one of several axes of marginality that they must negotiate. White women do not necessarily recognize the ways in which racist and (neo)colonial histories and contemporary cultural practices produce White privilege because they do not experience race-based subordination. The unnamed experience of racial privilege through which White women often secure institutional mobility may incline White women to buy into racist and color-blind myths of meritocracy, the American dream, and individual exceptionalism. Such assumptions tame the political edge of feminism because subordination of women of color is too easily located within the individual and not the (neo)imperialist institution. (69)

The problem of white feminism in the classroom extends, of course, beyond the course material and to teachers (like myself) whose position in the classroom allows them to “speak for” feminists at the same time that their racial privilege may obscure the role of whiteness in that feminism. It is worth considering how white instructors, who make up the majority of the professoriate,⁽¹²⁾ may be buying into these myths of meritocracy and reifying them in the classroom via modes of presenting, in this case, Victorian feminisms.

<11>A sophisticated and timely antiracist feminist pedagogy, though, can invite a more expansive engagement with feminist ideas and offer students the tools to critique the racial logics of Victorian feminisms without accusations that they are being anachronistic or destroying

something that is sacrosanct. Below, I consider ways to reframe the approach to Victorian feminisms in the classroom in order to, first, acknowledge and unpack the white epistemologies at their heart; and, second, to open up space for students to explore “a past that is not past” by offering not just a theoretical reorientation to the subject, but a temporal one (Sharpe qtd. in Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong 369). Doing so requires a move away from positivist historicism and towards a strategic presentism that challenges the teleological model of feminist thought: a model that suggests progression from singular to multifaceted or, in terms of this essay, from an outdated white feminism to progressive intersectional feminisms. The positivist historicism model not only discourages students from recognizing white feminism in their own historical moment (by situating it as a thing of the past), but it also elides the work of BIPOC feminists who have long been practicing more inclusive and activist feminisms. In the remainder of this essay, I want to offer three broad modes for confronting white feminism in the Victorian literature classroom: structure (course content), theory (organizing framework), and intimacy (prior knowledge).

Structure, Theory, Intimacy

<12>If, as Ahmed suggests, feminism is a “fragile archive” that requires great care, how does one effectively organize, responsibly preserve, and safely deliver that archive to students or, more importantly, teach students to be archivists themselves? In the world-building exercise of creating Victorian literature curricula, reading lists are arguably the most important construction materials. The archive of Victorian feminisms offers its readers both obstacles and affordances. Observing both (and simply acknowledging their co-existence) can grant insight into the racial politics of twenty-first-century feminisms, helping students “anachronize the present” in order to think critically and strategically about feminism’s—as opposed to white feminism’s—aims (Ehnenn 56).⁽¹³⁾ White feminism is hard-baked into not only many “canonical” works of Victorian feminisms, but also into the way they are often positioned along a historical continuum of feminist thought. In other words, there is a problem of both content and presentation. A broad survey of the field reveals that it requires significant effort to find Victorian feminist discourses that fall outside a historical framework of white, middle-class subjectivity.

<13>Most of the writers commonly identified as Victorian feminists in scholarship and practice (Frances Power Cobbe, Emily Davies, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, Harriet Taylor Mill, J. S. Mill, Josephine Butler, Clara Collett, and Millicent Garrett Fawcett, to name only a few) are white and middle-class. Similarly, most of the Victorian heroines readers might identify as having feminist sensibilities occupy a similar subject position (Jane in *Jane Eyre* [1847], Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss* [1860], Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm* [1883], to again name only a few). Indeed, it is a safe wager that the vast majority of Victorian feminists taught in literature courses are, in fact, white, middle-class women.

<14>The problem of representation is, to a certain extent, a result of the fact that course reading lists are often limited to texts that are in print and widely available. For Victorianists, the majority of these texts are written by canonical white authors. As a case in point, popular anthologies like the Norton and Broadview group some readings into thematic units and, within Victorian anthologies, one of those units is typically on women or the “woman question.” Nathan Hensley’s recent reader’s report for the *Norton Anthology of English Literature, 10th Edition*:

Volume E, The Victorian Age astutely points out that this particular category is “committed to . . . the perspective of bourgeois white women” and notes that the experiences and voices of non-white Victorian women are absent from the volume altogether. Even a cursory glance at the Norton table of contents reveals a preoccupation with the problems of white, middle-class women: marriage, education, economic autonomy. Rarely mentioned are slavery, domestic violence, sexual violence, hunger, family planning, or social justice.

<15>This problem is exacerbated by the inclusion of thematic readings on some of these topics in other sections of the anthology, specifically in sections on industrialization and empire, an organizational strategy that, perhaps inadvertently, identifies such issues as outside the purview of Victorian feminisms. If courses are organized according to this logic, the organizational strategy itself reinforces the understanding of feminism as white feminism, the liberation of middle-class white women. In the *Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, volume 5, for example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (1848) is included in the section on Barrett Browning rather than the section entitled “Contexts: The Place of Women in Society,” which Barrett Browning’s section happens to be positioned next to. Rather than read Barrett Browning’s poem as one that informs students’ understandings of women’s issues in the period, then, the structure of the anthology encourages students to read it as a poem about other things. The plight of an enslaved woman and her child are structurally positioned as outside the purview of feminist examination. And the same holds true for writing about working-class women, like Annie Besant’s “The ‘White Slavery’ of London Match Workers” (1888) and Ada Nield Chew’s “A Living Wage for Factory Girls at Crewe” (1894). In the 10th edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* mentioned above, these essays are included in a section entitled “Industrialism: Progress or Decline?” and so the material suffering of working-class women is structurally positioned as a class concern (under the topic of industrialization), not a feminist one. In *Impossible Purities* (1998), Brody explains how “[i]n order to investigate the extent to which Victorian publics may have been familiar with representations of black caricature . . . require[d] a move away from canonical texts, such as novels, to other cultural works. Those texts that are more ephemeral—such as theatrical performances, cartoons, and private papers—prove here to be valuable cultural sources” (10). One way of expanding the scope of the Victorian feminist archive is to utilize more ephemeral texts in the classroom, via research on digitized newspapers and periodicals (when such resources are institutionally available). Crafting assignments that ask students to research specific issues relevant to Victorian feminisms in, say, *The Times* database or the *British Newspaper Archive* will likely yield a more diverse range of perspectives.⁽¹⁴⁾ Relatedly, creating an assignment that asks students to rewrite anthology sections on Victorian feminisms (built from class readings and independent research) would empower them to create their own archives.

<16>The representational challenges of the Victorian archive are compounded by the treatment of white-centric texts as race-neutral or, more relevant to my purposes here, the treatment of Victorian *white* feminisms as simply “feminism.” This can be particularly problematic when Victorian feminisms are positioned as the antecedents for contemporary feminism, which, by default, establishes for Victorian feminisms’ purveyors and subjects a proprietary relationship to feminism more broadly. The historical ordering of feminism, then, hazards reinscribing white supremacy via its teleological logic; put more simply, Victorian feminisms might escape critical

scrutiny because they are perceived as providing the foundation for a more progressive feminism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As I began to explore earlier, this approach creates two potential problems. First, the white racial logic at the heart of Victorian feminisms remains unacknowledged (or at least easily dismissed) on account of its position on the earlier end of the historical timeline. Second, the white racial logic at the heart of much contemporary feminist thought remains unacknowledged because of its position on the “progressive” end of the historical timeline. The tools (i.e., feminist theory) that allow students to locate the white epistemologies that undergird Victorian feminisms can also be used to help them locate white epistemologies elsewhere and in their own cultural moment.

<17>It is helpful, then, to think about the feminist archive not as fixed and historically determined, but rather as representing what Kathy Psomiades refers to as a “mode of reading that neither aims to reconstruct the past as it was, without ‘projecting’ present concerns on it nor that aims solely to critique the past as a way of avoiding its errors. Rather it suggests that a vital ongoing engagement with the past is what opens up futurity” (455). It is common, for example, to think about the development of feminist thought as occurring in waves that proceed chronologically.⁽¹⁵⁾ Typically, Victorian feminisms are lumped in with the first wave of feminism, said to begin in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and focused on political and legal inequities, primarily suffrage, and sought expanded employment opportunities for unmarried, white, middle-class women. This structure risks reinscribing the white epistemologies of white feminism by first, anchoring feminist thought to a timeline of historical progression, and second, relegating the work of BIPOC feminists to the margins because they do not fit neatly into the waves paradigm. Instead, they are positioned as “special” feminisms, and the whiteness inherent in white feminism is again rendered invisible by its designation as simply “feminism,” sans the modifier. Using contemporary feminist theory to call out the unmarked whiteness in Victorian feminist discourses is one way to approach the problem. Such theory can include the Victorianist scholarship mentioned in the first half of this article, but it might also expand beyond traditional literary and historical scholarship and include more mainstream contemporary feminist theory that consciously responds to the problem of white feminism to help students begin to think about feminist thought across time and space.

<18>Faculty might, for example, ask students to analyze Victorian literature through the lens of what Moon and Holling call the “victimology of (white) feminism”: “The narrative of ‘white victimhood’ is a longstanding staple of white supremacy. . . . Given that white racial identity relies on a discourse of white victimization as a foundational mechanism, unsurprisingly, this narrative has found a home in (white) feminism wherein (white) women are portrayed as victims of (white) patriarchy” (255-56). In her article on white feminism in *Harper’s Bazaar*, Cargle lists several microaggressions by which this victimology is made evident: tone policing, spiritual bypassing, white savior complex, centering, and white woman tears. Asking students to use Cargle’s article as a lens to read Victorian texts might help students see race and analyze white epistemologies in discourses wherein whiteness is often read as invisible and, for that reason, not interrogated or even acknowledged. For example, faculty might encourage students to think critically about the white savior complex, spiritual bypassing, and centering in texts as diverse as Josephine Butler’s *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* (1910), in which Butler recounts her work on prostitution reform in the nineteenth century, and George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), wherein the young Maggie Tulliver imagines herself the queen of a group of

“gypsies” she meets in the forest (114). For a more pointed example, students might use Cargle’s model to analyze the relationship between the mixed-race protagonist Olivia in the anonymously published *The Woman of Colour* (1808) and her white sister-in-law Mrs. Merton, whose racism often manifests in underhanded manipulation via centering and tone policing.

<19>Of course, the point is not to suggest that white women in the nineteenth century did not suffer oppression, but rather to demonstrate how victimhood was instrumentalized for the purposes of racial solidarity. Introducing contemporary and accessible feminist theory in this way can broaden students’ understandings of the scope and purview of feminism and give them the tools to meaningfully critique exclusionary white feminism, both in the Victorian era and now. Faculty can give students the tools to see race and analyze white epistemology by providing an organized framework for reading and responding to the material, asking questions like “how is feminism defined in the text? What are its stated objectives?” but also “what are its unstated assumptions?” Not only “who/what is defined as a feminist or subject of feminist concern in the text?” but also “who/what is left out and how do you know?”

<20>One example of an exercise that encourages this mode of analysis is asking students to critically analyze the use of the slave metaphor to describe white women’s oppression in Victorian feminist writing and in contemporary feminist discourse. In *Subject to Others* (1992), Ferguson provides a genealogy of white women’s deployment of the language of slavery from the seventeenth century onward, arguing that this use “betrayed traditional white supremacist attitudes and a continued sense that the language of slavery most aptly encoded white women’s oppression” and was increasingly deployed to agitate for women’s rights (23). A lesson plan or assignment that asks students to read examples of the slave metaphor in Victorian feminist writing (examples can be found, for example, in Mill’s *On the Subjection of Women* [1869], Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, and Frances Power Cobbe’s “Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors” [1868]) alongside the tone-deaf *Suffragette* movie promotion in 2015 that featured white actresses Meryl Streep, Carrie Mulligan, and Romola Garai wearing t-shirts with the Emmeline Pankhurst quote “I’d rather be a rebel than a slave”;⁽¹⁶⁾ Ijeoma Oluo’s chapter on intersectionality in *So You Want to Talk about Race* (2018); and Ferguson’s genealogy in *Subject to Others*. This assemblage will encourage students to understand the specific historical deployment of racialized language to achieve feminist aims, but then to move outward and consider its affinity with its more recent usage.

<21>Another, and perhaps more subtle, space where the epistemologies of white feminism can be located in Victorian imaginative literature is in its focus on (white) characters and not on systems. Catherine Rottenberg has persuasively shown how contemporary neoliberal feminism has intensified emphasis on individual growth over systemic change (a position that also marked mid-Victorian liberal feminism). In its promotion of “individuation and responsabilization,” neoliberal feminism “forsakes the vast majority of women and facilitates the creation of new and intensified forms of racialized and class-stratified gender exploitation, which increasingly constitutes the invisible yet necessary infrastructure of our new neoliberal order. It is important to stress—even at the risk of repetition—that neoliberal feminism is an unabashedly exclusionary feminism” (21, 20). Neoliberal feminism encourages women to “lean in,” without acknowledging that in order to “lean in” one must already have a seat at the table; in other words, neoliberal feminism encourages women *who already have power* to leverage that power

in order to accumulate more. This model—popularized by writers like Anne-Marie Slaughter and Sheryl Sandberg in the early 2000s—casts feminism as an individualist endeavor and often one that aligns with the aims of late capitalism. Its emphasis is on thriving, not surviving. The aim of contemporary neoliberal feminism is a “happy balance” and the “‘woman’ problem . . . no longer appears to be about equity (between men and women or among women themselves), women’s rights, women’s autonomy, or rethinking how we understand emancipation, but about affect, behavior modification, and well-roundedness” (Rottenberg 51, 42).⁽¹⁷⁾

<22>Given the high profile of neoliberal feminism in this particular moment, students may enter college courses with the idea that feminism is about women’s individual ambition and their ability to achieve happiness through work/life balance, an agenda that elides race and racial justice entirely.⁽¹⁸⁾ Within the Victorian feminist canon, “deep structural racial inequalities” are often difficult to see and the trope of the white heroine who overcomes hardship to achieve marriage and happiness is anchored to liberal individualist characteristics like perseverance, intelligence, and industriousness. Such narratives neatly align with and conform to the neoliberal feminism of the present moment, making them potentially easy for students to identify with and recognize as “feminist.” *Jane Eyre* is a perfect example of one such narrative, and yet, as Spivak has so powerfully demonstrated, Jane’s happiness is also dependent upon the oppression and death of a racialized woman who is subordinate to Jane, a paradigm that continues to resonate as the labor of poor women and women of color is often prerequisite for the career success of professional white women.⁽¹⁹⁾ Olivia Loksing Moy’s “Reading in the Aftermath: An Asian American *Jane Eyre*” offers a fascinating analysis of Patricia Park’s neo-Victorian novel *Re Jane* (2015), which reimagines the story of *Jane Eyre* with a Korean-American orphan as its center. By making the protagonist a nanny for a wealthy white woman (a gender studies professor, no less), the novel provocatively engages questions about the extent to which the professional success of white women in the twenty-first century is dependent upon the labor of poor women and women of color. A Victorian literature curriculum that pairs the Victorian *Jane Eyre* and the twenty-first century *Re Jane*, alongside Moy’s and Spivak’s critical essays, and asks students to think about the female character foils in both (Jane and Bertha in *Jane Eyre* and Jane and Beth in *Re Jane*) is another approach to establishing that white feminism is “a past that is not past” (Chatterjee, Christoff, Wong 369).⁽²⁰⁾

<23>As I explained above, one important way to confront white feminism in the classroom is through the organization and positioning of course materials. To use an example from one of my own classes, I asked students why the economic insecurity of *Jane Eyre* was registering for them as feminist concern, but the enslavement of Mary Prince in *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) was not. The specificity of the slave narrative, my students argued, made it not a feminist text but an abolitionist text; the purported “universal” relatability to women of Jane’s struggles, on the other hand, they perceived as feminist. *The History of Mary Prince* calls for substantive systemic change, while *Jane Eyre* calls for the improvement/development of the individual woman. The cultural imperative to see feminism as an individual endeavor rather than a collective movement for social justice is evident in my example and highlights that the word “feminism” remains a common stand-in for what, in practice, is white feminism. A thoughtful and well-executed feminist pedagogy can offer students a broader understanding of the aims and purview of feminist inquiry. Faculty might encourage students to confront this imperative by interrogating what constitutes a feminist issue; this can be accomplished by pairing either novel with Mikki

Kendall's chapter "Solidarity is Still for White Women" and Beck's chapter "Who Gets to be a Feminist?" and instigating careful discussion of the preconceptions about feminism that students bring to the class and the course readings. Such discussion can be cultivated by asking students to create an archive of popular representations of feminism, from sources like social media sites and consumer marketing, and then to consider how such representations influence their reading of historical literature.

<24>Instructors can also use contemporary feminist theory to reframe discussions of Victorian prostitution so that ideas about sex work as inherently exploitative and anti-feminist, and sex workers as necessarily helpless victims or depraved fallen women, are not inadvertently replicated and reinforced. Popular readings on Victorian prostitution (particularly the work of writers like Josephine Butler, Henry Mayhew, and Charles Dickens) universally condemn sex work and cast it as a blight on society. When teaching the material, there is danger of reproducing their conservative attitudes towards sex work as "vice" and sex workers as an immoral and corrupt (or helpless and vulnerable) group in need of reformation, especially because such ideas still predominate popular thinking on the subject.⁽²¹⁾ Introducing modern feminist theory that challenges the division of body/mind labor and posits the idea of an "erotic capital" that is adjacent to "human capital" may encourage students to think more openly and broadly about the contingencies of sex work and the religious and political motivations for its condemnation.⁽²²⁾ While essays critiquing women's working conditions (like the essays by Besant and Chew mentioned above) are often lumped into textbook units on work and industry, writings about sex work unfailingly end up in units on women and the woman question in Victorian literature anthologies. Although both subjects involve the monetization of women's bodies, one (sex work) is presented as about *women* while the other (factory work) is presented as about *work*. A more inclusive approach to the subject would aim to simultaneously teach the Victorian perspective on prostitution while also prompting students to think critically about the economics of sex work, allowing for the possibility of regarding sex workers as autonomous agents. How might one encourage students to think critically about the representation of sex work(ers) in Victorian literature, rather than unthinkingly absorbing them or allowing them to confirm preexisting biases? In other words, how does one encourage students to see Victorian writing about sex work as ideology, rather than knowledge?

<25>One place to begin is by simply asking students to think about the divisions between different kinds of labor: Why is the physical labor of the woman who works in a factory or as a seamstress considered different than the physical labor of the sex worker? Why did the Victorians consider one a feminist issue and the other a labor issue? Where might resonances of this thinking be observed in our own time? Students might be asked to compare representations of women who labor with their minds and women who labor with their bodies: for example, to compare Josephine Butler's subjectivity with the subjectivity of the sex workers she writes about. Who is allowed a complex inner life and who is reduced to the exigencies of their labor? Similarly, one might ask students to comparatively analyze the writing of Contagious Diseases Acts (CDA) reformers in the nineteenth century and the website of the English Collective of Prostitutes, an organization comprised of sex workers who fight to decriminalize sex work and provide safe working conditions, in the twenty-first century. How do the rhetorical strategies utilized in the reform efforts of the English Collective compare to the rhetorical strategies utilized in the rescue efforts of Victorian CDA opponents? Does it matter that one group is

comprised of workers within the industry, while the other is comprised of middle-class white people (mostly women) outside the industry? A strategy for introducing these questions would be to read and watch contemporary feminist texts, like Victoria Bateman's chapter on sex work in *The Sex Factor* (2019) and *Live Nude Girls Unite!* (2000), a documentary about efforts to unionize exotic dancers at the San Francisco club The Lusty Lady, alongside Victorian representations of sex work. As in the examples above, broadening the scope of the feminist archive allows students to see the fault lines in Victorian feminists' thought and begin to think about their aftershocks in our own time.

<26>The subject of feminist inquiry should also extend beyond the Victorian feminist archive and into the classroom itself and the experiences that students bring to it. Feminist scholars, including hooks, Ahmed, and Kendall, conceive of feminist theory as something that students learn experientially, meaning they often arrive in classrooms with some understanding of feminist theory that they have garnered from their lived experiences. For today's students, that knowledge might be gained from social media sites like Instagram where #feminism has been used over 11 million times, or TikTok where videos tagged #feminism have been viewed more than 2 billion times and where videos calling out sexism are frequently trending. Even students who do not consider themselves feminists (or who regard feminism with suspicion and antipathy) will likely enter the classroom with some preconceptions about what feminism is and what it means to be a feminist. Often, though, those personal experiences are dismissed as outside the purview of academic work. Fostering a more inclusive understanding of feminism means admitting diverse voices into the classroom, including the voices of students, and designing curricula that allows students to build bridges between their lived experience and the course content, which they might perceive as disconnected, especially in a Victorian literature course.

<27>One way to help students do this, and to help students create intimacy and community, is to create Personal Learning Networks, small groups of students that work together throughout a unit or the course. To encourage a bridge between their lived experiences and the course content, instructors might ask students to answer introductory questions like (these are modeled on a technique from James Lang's *Small Teaching* [2016]):

- What do you know about feminism, and what do you want to know?
- What do you know about Victorian women, and what do you want to know?
- What do you know about Victorian feminism, and what do you want to know?

The idea would be for students to begin to think critically about what prior knowledge they bring to the classroom (including the knowledge of lived experience), how that informs their interpretation of the course content, and how they might build upon that knowledge through exploration of new texts. This assignment also allows students to get to know one another and to begin to think about the benefits of collaborative learning and the relevance of the course material to their lives.

<28>While Victorianist scholarship for many years turned away from experiential modes of inquiry, recently there has been a renewed interest in subjective criticism.⁽²³⁾ Texts like Annette R. Federico's edited volume *My Victorian Novel: Critical Essays in the Personal Voice* (2020)

provide a model for students to engage meaningfully and affectively with imaginative literature. In her introduction, Federico suggests that “[t]o be able to reflect with intellectual curiosity and emotional wonder on the reading experience may be the most important qualification for a literary critic. And encouraging a similar habit of reflection in others may be the most essential thing we do as teachers of literature” (23). It is also, I want to suggest, one of the most essential things a feminist teacher can do. Inviting students to share their personal experiences implicitly acknowledges that feminism “has always been an unstable signifier” and thus is continually in the process of being retheorized and renegotiated (Rottenberg 170). Validating the multiplicity of voices and experiences in the classroom is a way of enacting inclusive feminism, at the same time as students are critically engaging with feminist thought. Andrea Kaston Tange’s “Identifying as a Reader” (2020) is a terrific personal exploration of her evolving relationship with *Jane Eyre*; she explains how her initial experiences with the novel helped her become a feminist and then powerfully reflects on her present “discomfort . . . in [Jane’s] happy ending” explaining “[i]t is the necessary discomfort of appreciating that feminism is far more complicated than glorious rebellion, and of acknowledging that the triumph of any one woman may come at the silent cost of many marginalized others” (36-37). Experiential writing can help readers confront how their “most cherished objects of study” may leave them feeling both inspired and dispirited (Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong 370). Like Kaston Tange, a student might find in *Jane Eyre*’s fiery individualism a catalyst for their own feminist development, while simultaneously learning about the complex and troubling dynamics of white feminism. Providing space for students to affectively reflect upon such complexity in the “feminist classics” they read for class is to implicitly acknowledge the “splattering” and the “shattering” of the feminist archive. This messy work is unavoidable when building a world from feminist materials (Ahmed 17).

World Building: Always Occurring, Never Neutral

<29>As I conclude this essay, it is easy for me to imagine the critiques that might be lodged against it (is it possible to conclude an essay otherwise?), and I’d like to end by addressing one of these imagined critiques: namely, that building the Victorian literature curriculum with feminist materials is too narrowly construed and too politically motivated. There is too much material to cover in a Victorian literature course, one might argue, to create space for the kind of work I describe here. However, this critique reveals a troubling belief that the classroom is a politically and theoretically neutral space to begin with, which it certainly is not. To suggest that feminist materials are too partisan to effectively build a Victorian literature course is to ignore the specific properties of the building materials alternatively proposed. (To wit: it’s easy to overlook the murder of elephants from within the Ivory Tower.) hooks’s critique of pedagogical strategies that reinforce normative, bourgeois values is relevant here: “There is little or no discussion of the way in which the attitudes and values of those from materially privileged classes are imposed upon everyone via biased pedagogical strategies. Reflected in choice of subject matter and the manner in which ideas are shared, these biases need never be overtly stated. . . . Silencing enforced by bourgeois values is sanctioned in the classroom by everyone” (*Teaching to Transgress* 180). Utilizing feminist theory to critically examine the racial logics of Victorian feminisms and validate students’ lived experience of feminism helps foster radical inclusion in the classroom. Approached with thought and care, such strategies have the potential to make Victorian literature more interesting, relevant, and empowering for students.

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Notes

(1)Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong’s essay first appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* on July 10, 2020.(△)

(2)I use the phrase “Victorian feminist discourses” (and, elsewhere, “Victorian feminisms”) throughout the essay to describe the wide range of nineteenth-century writing about women’s oppression, gender inequalities, and the emerging women’s rights movements, including but not limited to: discourses around the woman question; the new woman; the Contagious Diseases Act; the Langham Place Group; the socialist tradition of feminism; and women’s suffrage. Since the term “feminism” was, of course, neither used until the very end of the nineteenth century, nor in popular circulation until the beginning of the twentieth century, it is, therefore, anachronistic, strictly speaking. However, I choose to use the phrase “Victorian feminist discourses” rather than “Victorian proto-feminist discourses” for two distinct reasons: (1) for the sake of clarity and concision, and (2) because the term “proto-feminist” invokes a historical teleology (from elementary to advanced) that this essay elsewhere resists. For more on the historical development of feminist discourses and campaigns in Victorian England, see Levine and Caine; for an overview of the historical development of feminist discourses and campaigns in nineteenth-century America, see Cott.(△)

(3)Rottenberg explains how feminism (and the term “feminist”) have suddenly gained popularity and acceptance: “This research odyssey began in 2012 when, after a long period of latency in which few women—let alone powerful women—were willing to identify publicly as feminist, the status quo began to change both rapidly and dramatically. All of a sudden, many high-profile women in the United States were loudly declaring themselves feminists, one after the other Feminism had suddenly become acceptable and intensely popular in ways that it simply had never been before” (4-5). Beck similarly suggests, “By the time Beyoncé took the stage in the 2014 VMAs, the groundwork was already being laid for aligning feminism with corporate interests and individuals’ corporate ascensions. After years of feminism being ‘radical’ and ‘militant,’ it was suddenly in” (103). The #MeToo movement has, at the same time, made many students more attuned to issues of sexual assault and harassment in Victorian literature. Given the confluence of these developments, it stands to reason that many students will be more interested in feminism and feminist issues (like sexual assault and harassment) and that interest may find its way into the classroom. For another critique of the neoliberal slant of recent popular feminism, see Crispin.(△)

(4)For more on “Victorian Literature in the Age of #MeToo” see the special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* co-edited by Kellie D. Holzer and myself in Summer 2020. The essays

in that special issue provide examples of the kind of strategic presentism one might practice in the classroom.(^)

(5)Indeed, the problem has long been identified within Black feminism. See, for example, Carby, Collins, Lorde, hooks, and Morrison. For more recent work in the field, see Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn's edited volume; Gay; and Kendall.(^)

(6)Early criticisms of the #MeToo movement provide an interesting and relevant case study. Shortly after the #MeToo movement gained visibility in 2017, it came under fire for centering the stories and experiences of white, middle-class women and obscuring Tarana Burke's role in the creation of the #MeToo movement. See Burke, Garcia, and Hubbard.(^)

(7)I am here gesturing to Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, first espoused in her 1989 paper. See also Nash for a timely and relevant critique of the deployment of the term in contemporary feminist scholarship. Nash points out that while "'intersectionality' has become a scholarly buzzword, the notion that identity is formed by interlocking and mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality has pervaded black feminist scholarship for decades" (3).(^)

(8)See Meltzer.(^)

(9)In their manifesto, the V21 Collective offers strategic presentism as an alternative to the "positivist historicism" that they argue dominates Victorian studies. They define positivist historicism as "a mode of inquiry that aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past," while presentism reveals "an awareness that our interest in the period is motivated by certain features of our own moment." See "Manifesto."(^)

(10)See [Kappes](#), [Pedersen](#), and [Valdez](#) in this special issue for examples of world building through syllabus and assignment construction.(^)

(11)Hall explores the complexity of race in the nineteenth century, and explains (via de Groot and Stepan) how gender was foundational to the establishment of racial thinking in the period:

Nineteenth-century discourses of sexual identity and difference, as Joanna de Groot has argued, drew upon, and contributed to, discourses of ethnic and racial identity and difference; these analogous languages drew on understandings of both domination and subordination. The scientific theorising which was so strategic to understanding human variation, Nancy Stepan notes, depended heavily on an analogy linking race to gender: women became a racialised category, and non-white people were feminized. Similarly, class divisions were racialised, the poor constructed as "a race apart." (Hall 17)

Spivak has also shown how the development of "feminist individualism" in the nineteenth century was dependent upon the logic of imperialism; the emergence of the nineteenth-century white feminist subject was dependent upon her difference from the "native female" (244, 245). McClintock similarly demonstrates how in the age of Empire, "race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be

simply yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego. Rather they come into existence *in and through* relation to each other—if in contradictory and conflictual ways. In this sense, gender, race and class can be called articulated categories” (4-5, italics original). McClintock masterfully argues that, although white women in the nineteenth century were certainly subject to a particular set of gendered inequalities (married women’s property laws, legal and political disenfranchisement), “Nonetheless, the rationed privileges of race all too often put white women in positions of decided—if borrowed—power, not only over colonized women but also over colonized men. As such, white women were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting” (McClintock 6). Brody has shown how constructions of gender and sexuality in Victorian culture “focused on the utility of ‘black’ women (mulattas, octoroons, prostitutes) for the (re)production of certain forms of English subjectivity. Through readings of literary, visual, and theatrical texts, [she] shows how ‘black’ (racialized and sexualized) women were indispensable to the construction of Englishness as a new form of ‘white’ male subjectivity” (Brody 9). Brody uses Morrison’s theorization of a “real or fabricated Africanist presence” in *Playing in the Dark* to make an argument about English national identity, arguing that “A comparable ‘real or fabricated Africanist presence’ played a role in the construction of Englishness” (Brody 11). Ferguson’s work on British women writers and colonial slavery reveals how white women’s participation in anti-slavery debates “contributed directly to the upcoming struggle for white women’s rights in Victorian England and the near-exclusion of black women from that debate,” arguing that “By the end of that near two-century period in 1834, women’s involvement in emancipationist agitation, discursive and otherwise, made agitation for their own suffrage a logical next step. Female authors accrued cultural power, gained a reputation as polite nay-sayers to illegitimate authority, and aligned themselves with like-minded rebels” (5, 19). For a brilliant examination of white women’s relationship to slavery in a US context, see Jones-Rogers.(^)

(12)According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a part of the US Department of Education, “[o]f all full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in fall 2018, some 40 percent were White males; 35 percent were White females,” meaning BIPOC scholars make up only twenty-five percent of the total full-time professorate (“Fast Facts: Race/ethnicity”). Those numbers varied even more as regards rank, with white males making up more than half of those designated full professor. The study only designated male and female with no mention of individuals who identify as nonbinary or gender nonconforming.(^)

(13)In her insightful and forward-looking article, Ehnenn offers a “fivefold guide for feminist scholars who study the past,” and the first item on this list is to “Anachronize the present in order to find ways to change it” (56). One way to anachronize the present, in the context of my essay, is to challenge, in classrooms and curricula, the teleological model of feminism that necessarily positions contemporary feminist thought as more progressive (and less problematic) than Victorian feminist thought. Instead, the classroom can offer a space for, in Psomiades’s words, “defamiliarizing the operation of locating ideas in time” (443).(^)

(14)See [Das](#) and [Kappes](#) in this issue for examples of such assignments.(^)

(15)The waves of “feminism”—primarily white feminism in their focus—are roughly defined as follows: a first-wave feminism that spanned the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, and emphasized institutional inequalities, particularly suffrage, for unmarried, white middle-class women; a second-wave feminism that began in the 1960s and called attention to a broader range of issues, including domestic violence, reproductive justice, women’s employment, and sexual assault and harassment; and a third-wave feminism that began in the 1990s and explicitly challenged feminism’s focus on white, middle-class women, emphasized rape culture and gendered violence, and reclaimed domesticity and other traditionally gendered spaces and activities. From the nineteenth century onward, mainstream feminisms are punctuated by the development of feminist movements—Black Feminisms, Socialist Feminism, The Combahee River Collective, Woman of Color Feminisms, and Queer Feminism (to name a few)—meant to represent women excluded by mainstream white feminism. Central to these movements is a critique of mainstream white feminism’s focus on cisgender, white, economically-privileged women and a call for a more inclusive feminist agenda. Writing in 1980, for example, Lorde argued that “Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power. As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become ‘other,’ the outside whose experience and tradition is too ‘alien’ to comprehend” (177, italics original). The Combahee River Collective’s Statement (1977) makes a similar claim about white women’s feminism: “One issue of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women’s movement. As black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism” (329). As these quotations demonstrate, the problems of white feminism have long been acknowledged within the feminist archive; as Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong explain, though, that acknowledgment has been slower to take hold in Victorian studies.(△)

(16)See Gajanan.(△)

(17)As Carby writes, “In other words, of white feminists, we must ask, what exactly do you mean when you say ‘WE’??” (233). For this reason, unthinking deployment of the first-person plural when the referent is unspecified has been suspended for all essays in this special issue; see the introduction for a detailed discussion of this decision.(△)

(18)Kendall critiques “mainstream feminist writing” (which she elsewhere refers to as “peak white feminism”) for the way it frames what counts as a “feminist issue”: “We rarely talk about basic needs as a feminist issue. Food insecurity and access to quality education, safe neighborhoods, a living wage, and medical care are all feminist issues. Instead of a framework that focuses on helping women get basic needs met, all too often the focus is not on survival but on increasing privilege. For a movement that is meant to represent all women, it often centers on those who already have most of their needs met” (xiii). White feminism here aligns with mainstream neoliberal feminism in its prioritizing of women’s autonomy and self-development, over systemic, institutional change. See note 16 for a discussion of “we,” which remains unspecified in the context of Kendall’s quotation.(△)

(19)See Rottenberg, ch. 6.(△)

(20) Another interesting text to pair with *Jane Eyre* is *The Woman of Colour*; the novels share some striking similarities—both, for example, feature a hidden first wife who disrupts the marriage plot—that throw their differences into sharp relief. (△)

(21) Sex work has long been a contentious issue within feminist theory. Many second-wave feminists, like MacKinnon and Dworkin, categorically condemned sex work as exploitative and demeaning, the apogee of patriarchal dominance. In her interview with Angela Davis, Brooks explains, “Mainstream, white, middle-class feminists of the 1960s and 1970s dominated the discussions on feminism and defined the feminist issues of the era. As a result, sex work was primarily viewed as something that objectified and dehumanized women” (181). Davis suggests that, during the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s, “issues related to the sex industry were raised in the context of the discussions around sexual violence” and that discussions of pornography in that period “laid the ground work for moving feminist discourse on the sex industry outside of the vexed framework of morality” (184). Since then, some feminists, including Davis and Nagle, have argued for the decriminalization of sex work and its establishment as a legitimate form of employment, moving the discourse away from the “vexed framework of morality” and towards a broader feminist framework for thinking about sex work. For analysis of race and erotic capital, see Brooks, *Unequal Desires*. For analysis of how prostitution is deployed in Victorian discourse about public morality, see Nead. (△)

(22) See Bateman, ch. 5, and Hakim. (△)

(23) For sustained analysis of experiential knowledge in Victorian scholarship, see Tromp. For a broader argument about the value of the hermeneutics of recognition, see Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, Introduction and ch. 5, and *The Uses of Literature*, ch. 1. (△)

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