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Author(s): Susan S. Lanser

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# FEMINIST CRITICISM, "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER," AND THE POLITICS OF COLOR IN AMERICA

SUSAN S. LANSER

"The difference between mad people and sane people," Brave Orchid explained to the children, "is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over."

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, p. 184.

In 1973, a new publishing house with the brave name of The Feminist Press reprinted in a slim volume Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," first published in 1892 and out of print for half a century. It is the story of an unnamed woman confined by her doctor-husband to an attic nursery with barred windows and a bolted-down bed. Forbidden to write, the narrator-protagonist becomes obsessed with the room's wallpaper, which she finds first repellent and then riveting; on its chaotic surface she eventually deciphers an imprisoned woman whom she attempts to liberate by peeling the paper off the wall. This brilliant tale of a white, middle-class wife driven mad by a patriarchy controlling her "for her own good" has become an American feminist classic; in 1987, the Feminist Press edition numbered among the ten best-selling works of fiction published by a university press.<sup>1</sup>

The canonization of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is an obvious sign of the degree to which contemporary feminism has transformed the study of literature. But Gilman's story is not simply one to which feminists have "applied" ourselves; it is one of the texts through which white, American academic feminist criticism has constituted its terms.<sup>2</sup> My purpose here is to take stock of this

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criticism through the legacy of "The Yellow Wallpaper" in order to honor the work each has fostered and to call into question the status of Gilman's story—and the story of academic feminist criticism—as sacred texts.<sup>3</sup> In this process I am working from the inside, challenging my own reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper," which had deepened but not changed direction since 1973.

My inquiry will make explicit use of six well-known studies of "The Yellow Wallpaper," but I consider these six to articulate an interpretation shared by a much larger feminist community. The pieces I have in mind are written by Elaine Hedges, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Annette Kolodny, Jean Kennard, Paula Treichler, and Judith Fetterley, respectively, and their publication dates span from 1973 to 1986.<sup>4</sup> Reading these essays as a body, I am struck by a coherence that testifies to a profound unity in white, American feminist criticism across apparent diversity.<sup>5</sup> That is, although Hedges is concerned primarily with biography, Gilbert and Gubar with female authorship, Treichler with textual form, and Fetterley, Kolodny, and Kennard with interpretation, and although each discussion illuminates the text in certain unique ways, the six readings are almost wholly compatible, with one point of difference which is never identified as such and to which I will return. I will also return later to the significance of this redundancy and to the curiously unchallenged, routine elision from nearly all the discussion of one of the story's key tropes.

The theoretical positions that "The Yellow Wallpaper" helped to shape and perhaps to reify may be clearer if we recall some of the critical claims with which U.S. academic feminist criticism began. In the late sixties and early seventies, some academic women, most of them trained in Anglo-American methods and texts, began to take a new look at those works by men and a few white women that comprised the standard curriculum. The earliest scholarship—Kathryn Rogers's *The Troublesome Helpmate* (1966), Mary Ellmann's *Thinking about Women* (1968), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Elaine Showalter's "Women Writers and the Double Standard" (in *Woman in Sexist Society*, 1971)—was asserting against prevailing New Critical neutralities that literature is deeply political, indeed steeped in (patriarchal) ideology. Ideology, feminists argued, makes what is cultural seem natural and inevitable, and what had come to seem natural and inevitable to literary studies was that its own methods and great books

transcended ideology.<sup>6</sup>

This conception of literature as a privileged medium for universal truths was defended by the counterclaim that those who found a work's content disturbing or offensive were letting their "biases" distract them from the aesthetic of literature.<sup>7</sup> Feminist criticism was bound to challenge this marginalization of social content and to argue that literary works both reflect and constitute structures of gender and power. In making this challenge, feminist criticism was implying that canonical literature was not simply *mimesis*, a mirror or the way things are or the way men and women are, but *semiosis*—a complex system of conventional (androcentric) tropes. And by questioning the premises of the discipline, feminists were of course arguing that criticism, too, is political, that no methodology is neutral, and that literary practice is shaped by cultural imperatives to serve particular ends.<sup>8</sup> Although the word "deconstruction" was not yet in currency, these feminist premises inaugurated the first major opposition to both (old) scholarly and (New) critical practices, generating what has become the most widespread deconstructive imperative in the American academy.

Yet the feminist project involved, as Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn have put it, not only "deconstructing dominant male patterns of thought and social practice" but also "reconstructing female experience previously hidden or overlooked."<sup>9</sup> In the early 1970s, the rediscovery of "lost" works like "The Yellow Wallpaper," Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" offered not only welcome respite from unladylike assaults on patriarchal practices and from discouraging expositions of androcentric "images of women in literature" but also an exhilarating basis for reconstructing literary theory and literary history. The fact that these works which feminists now found so exciting and powerful had been denounced, ignored, or suppressed seemed virtual proof of the claim that literature, criticism, and history were political. The editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* had rejected "The Yellow Wallpaper" because "I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself!"<sup>10</sup> Even when William Dean Howells reprinted Gilman's story in 1920 he wrote that it was "terrible and too wholly dire," "too terribly good to be printed."<sup>11</sup> Feminists could argue convincingly that Gilman's contemporaries, schooled on the "terrible" and "wholly dire" tales of Poe, were surely balking at something more particular: the "graphic"

representation of "raving lunacy" in a middle-class mother and wife that revealed the rage of the woman on a pedestal.<sup>12</sup>

As a tale openly preoccupied with questions of authorship, interpretation, and textuality, "The Yellow Wallpaper" quickly assumed a place of privilege among rediscovered feminist works, raising basic questions about writing and reading as gendered practices. The narrator's double-voiced discourse—the ironic understatements, asides, hedges, and negations through which she asserts herself against the power of John's voice—came for some critics to represent "women's language" or the "language of the powerless."<sup>13</sup> With its discontinuities and staccato paragraphs, Gilman's narrative raised the controversial question of a female aesthetic; and the "lame uncertain curves," "outrageous angles," and "unheard of contradictions" of the wallpaper came for many critics to symbolize both Gilman's text and, by extension, the particularity of female form.<sup>14</sup> The story also challenged theories of genius that denied the material conditions—social, economic, psychological, and literary—that make writing (im)possible, helping feminists to turn questions like "Where is your Shakespeare?" back upon the questioners. Gilbert and Gubar, for example, saw in the narrator's struggles against censorship "the story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their 'speechless woe.'"<sup>15</sup>

"The Yellow Wallpaper" has been evoked most frequently, however, to theorize about reading through the lens of a "female" consciousness. Gilman's story has been a particularly congenial medium for such a re-vision not only because the narrator herself engages in a form of feminist interpretation when she tries to read the paper on her wall but also because turn-of-the-century readers seem to have ignored or avoided the connection between the narrator's condition and patriarchal politics, instead praising the story for its keenly accurate "case study" of a presumably inherited insanity. In the contemporary feminist reading, on the other hand, sexual oppression is evident from the start: the phrase "John says" heads a litany of "benevolent" prescriptions that keep the narrator infantilized, immobilized, and bored literally out of her mind. Reading or writing her self upon the wallpaper allows the narrator, as Paula Treichler puts it, to "escape" her husband's "sentence" and to achieve the limited freedom of madness which, virtually all these critics have agreed, constitutes a kind of sanity in the face of the insanity of male dominance.

This reading not only recuperated "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a feminist text but also reconstituted the terms of interpretation itself. Annette Kolodny theorized that emerging feminist consciousness made possible a new, female-centered interpretive paradigm that did not exist for male critics at the turn of the century. Defining that paradigm more specifically, Jean Kennard maintained that the circulation of feminist conventions associated with four particular concepts—"patriarchy, madness, space, quest"—virtually ensured the reading that took place in the 1970s. Furthermore, the premise that "we engage not texts but paradigms,"<sup>16</sup> as Kolodny puts it in another essay, explodes the belief that we are reading what is "there." Reading becomes the product of those conventions or strategies we have learned through an "interpretive community"—Stanley Fish's term to which Kolodny and Kennard give political force; to read is to reproduce a text according to this learned system or code.

These gender-based and openly ideological theories presented a radical challenge to an academic community in which "close reading" has remained the predominant critical act. A theory of meaning grounded in the politics of reading destabilizes assumptions of interpretive validity and shifts the emphasis to the contexts in which meanings are produced. A text like "The Yellow Wallpaper" showed that to the extent that we remain unaware of our interpretive conventions, it is difficult to distinguish "what we read" from "how we have learned to read it."<sup>17</sup> We experience meaning as given in "the text itself." When alternative paradigms inform our reading, we are able to read texts differently or, to put it more strongly, to read different texts. This means that traditional works may be transformed through different interpretive strategies into new literature just as patriarchy's "terrible" and repellent "Yellow Wallpaper" was dramatically transformed into feminism's endlessly fascinating tale.

It is, I believe, this powerful theoretical achievement occasioned by "The Yellow Wallpaper" that has led so much critical writing on the story to a triumphant conclusion despite the narrator's own unhappy fate. I have found it striking that discussions of the text so frequently end by distinguishing the doomed and "mad" narrator, who could not write her way out of the patriarchal prison-house, from the sane survivor Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who could.<sup>18</sup> The crucial shift from narrator to author, from story to

text, may also serve to wrest readers from an unacknowledged overidentification with the narrator-protagonist. For just as the narrator's initial horror at the wallpaper is mirrored in the earlier critics' horror at Gilman's text, so now-traditional feminist readings may be reproducing the narrator's next move: her relentless pursuit of a single meaning on the wall. I want to go further still and suggest that feminist criticism's own persistent return to the "Wallpaper"—indeed, to specific aspects of the "Wallpaper"—signifies a somewhat uncomfortable need to isolate and validate a particular female experience, a particular relationship between reader and writer, and a particular notion of subjectivity as bases for the writing and reading of (women's) texts. Fully acknowledging the necessity of the feminist reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper" which I too have produced and perpetuated for many years, I now wonder whether many of us have repeated the gesture of the narrator who "will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion" (p. 19)—who will read until she finds what she is looking for—no less and no more. Although—or because—we have read "The Yellow Wallpaper" over and over, we may have stopped short, and our readings, like the narrator's, may have reduced the text's complexity to what we need most: our own image reflected back to us.

Let me return to the narrator's reading of the paper in order to clarify this claim. The narrator is faced with an unreadable text, a text for which none of her interpretive strategies is adequate. At first she is confounded by its contradictory style: it is "flamboyant" and "pronounced," yet also "lame," "uncertain," and "dull" (p. 13). Then she notices different constructions in different places. In one "recurrent spot" the pattern "lolls," in another place "two breadths didn't match," and elsewhere the pattern is torn off (p. 16). She tries to organize the paper geometrically but cannot grasp its laws: it is marked vertically by "bloated curves and flourishes," diagonally by "slanting waves of optic horror like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase," and horizontally by an order she cannot even figure out. There is even a centrifugal pattern in which "the interminable grotesques seem to form around a common centre and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction" (p. 20). Still later, she notices that the paper changes and moves according to different kinds of light (p. 25). And it has a color and smell that she is never able to account for. But from all this indecipherability, from



this immensely complicated text, the narrator—by night, no less—finally discerns a single image, a woman behind bars, which she then expands to represent the whole. This is hardly a matter of “correct” reading, then, but of fixing and reducing possibilities, finding a space of text on which she can locate whatever self-projection will enable her to move from “John says” to “I want.” The very excess of description of the wallpaper, and the fact that it continues after the narrator has first identified the woman behind the bars, actually foregrounds the reductiveness of her interpretive act. And if the narrator, having liberated the paper woman, can only imagine tying her up again, is it possible that our reading too has freed us momentarily only to bind us once more?

Most feminist analyses of “The Yellow Wallpaper” have in fact recognized this bind without pursuing it. Gilbert and Gubar see the paper as “otherwise incomprehensible hieroglyphics” onto which the narrator projects “her own passion for escape.”<sup>19</sup> Treichler notes that the wallpaper “remains indeterminate, complex, unresolved, disturbing.”<sup>20</sup> Even Fetterley, who seems least to question the narrator’s enterprise, speaks of the narrator’s “need to impose order on the ‘impertinence’ of row after row of unmatched breadths.”<sup>21</sup> Kolodny implicates all critical practice when she says that the narrator obsessively and jealously “emphasiz[es] one section of the pattern while repressing others, reorganiz[es] and regroup[s] past impressions into newer, more fully realized configurations—as one might with any complex formal text.”<sup>22</sup> And Kennard states openly that much more goes on in both the wallpaper and the story than is present in the standard account and that the feminist reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is far from the final and “correct” one that replaces the patriarchal “misreading” once and for all. Still, Kennard’s position in 1981 was that “despite all these objections . . . it is the feminist reading I teach my students and which I believe is the most fruitful”; although suggesting that a new interpretive community might read this and other stories differently, she declined to pursue the possibility on grounds of insufficient “space”—a term that evokes the narrator’s own confinement.<sup>23</sup> In light of these more-or-less conscious recognitions that the wallpaper remains incompletely read, the redundancy of feminist readings of Gilman’s story might well constitute the return of the repressed.

I want to suggest that this repressed possibility of another



reading reveals larger contradictions in white, academic feminist theories and practices. Earlier I named as the two basic gestures of U.S. feminist criticism "deconstructing dominant male patterns of thought and social practice" and "reconstructing female experience previously hidden or overlooked." This formulation posits as oppositional an essentially false and problematic "male" system beneath which essentially true and unproblematic "female" essences can be recovered—just as the figure of the woman can presumably be recovered from beneath the patriarchal pattern on Gilman's narrator's wall (a presumption to which I will return). In designating gender as the foundation for two very different critical activities, feminist criticism has embraced contradictory theories of literature, proceeding as if men's writings were ideological sign systems and women's writings were representations of truth, reading men's or masculinist texts with resistance and women's or feminist texts with empathy. If, however, we acknowledge the participation of women writers and readers in "dominant . . . patterns of thought and social practice," then perhaps our own patterns must also be deconstructed if we are to recover meanings still "hidden or overlooked." We would then have to apply even to feminist texts and theories the premises I described earlier: that literature and criticism are collusive with ideology, that texts are sign systems rather than simple mirrors, that authors cannot guarantee their meanings, that interpretation is dependent on a critical community, and that our own literary histories are also fictional. The consequent rereading of texts like "The Yellow Wallpaper" might, in turn, alter our critical premises.

It is understandably difficult to imagine deconstructing something one has experienced as a radically reconstructive enterprise. This may be one reason—though other reasons suggest more disturbing complicities—why many of us have often accepted in principle but ignored in practice the deconstructive challenges that have emerged from within feminism itself. Some of the most radical of these challenges have come from women of color, poor women, and lesbians, frequently with primary allegiances outside the university, who have exposed in what has passed for feminist criticism blindneses as serious as those to which feminism was objecting. In 1977, for example, Barbara Smith identified racism in some of the writings on which feminist criticism had been founded; in 1980, Alice Walker told the National Women's Studies Associa-

tion of her inability to convince the author of *The Female Imagination* to consider the imaginations of women who are Black; in 1978, Judy Grahn noted the "scathing letters" the Women's Press Collective received when it published Sharon Isabell's *Yesterday's Lessons* without standardizing the English for a middle-class readership; at the 1976 Modern Language Association meetings and later in *Signs*, Adrienne Rich pointed to the erasure of lesbian identity from feminist classrooms even when the writers being taught were in fact lesbians; in the early 1980s, collections like *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* and *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* insisted that not all American writers are Black or white; they are also Latina, Asian, Arab, Jewish, Indian.<sup>24</sup>

The suppression of difference has affected the critical canon as well. In 1980, for example, *Feminist Studies* published Annette Kolodny's groundbreaking "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism" to which my own elucidation of feminist premises owes a considerable and respectful debt. In Fall 1982, *Feminist Studies* published three responses to Kolodny, criticizing the essay not only for classism, racism, and homophobia in the selection and use of women's texts but also for perpetuating patriarchal academic values and methodologies. One respondent, Elly Bulkin, identified as a crucial problem "the very social and ethical issue of *which* women get published by whom and why – of what even gets *recognized* as 'feminist literary criticism.'"<sup>25</sup> Bulkin might have been speaking prophetically, because none of the three responses was included when "Dancing Through the Minefield" was anthologized.<sup>26</sup>

All these challenges occurred during the same years in which the standard feminist reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper" was produced and reproduced. Yet none of us seems to have noticed that virtually all feminist discourse on "The Yellow Wallpaper" has come from white academics and that it has failed to question the story's status as a universal woman's text. A feminist criticism willing to deconstruct its own practices would reexamine our exclusive reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper," rethink the implications of its canonization, and acknowledge both the text's position in ideology and our own. That a hard look at feminism's "Yellow Wallpaper" is now possible is already evident by the publication in

1986 of separate essays by Janice Haney-Peritz and Mary Jacobus which use psychoanalytic theory to expose the limits of both the narrator's and feminist criticism's interpretive acts.<sup>27</sup> I believe we have also entered a moment not only of historical possibility but of historical urgency to stop reading a privileged, white, New England woman's text as simply – a woman's text. If our traditional gesture has been to repeat the narrator's own act of *underreading*, of seeing too little, I want now to risk *overreading*, seeing perhaps too much. My reading will make use of textual details that traditional feminist interpretations have tended to ignore, but I do not propose it as a coherent or final reading; I believe no such reading is either possible or desirable and that one important message of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is precisely that. At the same time, I concur with Chris Weedon when she insists that meanings, however provisional, "have real effects."<sup>28</sup>

One way back to "The Yellow Wallpaper" is through the yellow wallpaper itself: through what I mentioned earlier as the point of difference and the point of silence in the feminist interpretations I have been discussing here. I begin with the difference that occurs within and among otherwise consistent readings when critics try to identify just whose text or what kind of text the wallpaper represents. For Hedges and for Gilbert and Gubar, the wallpaper signifies the oppressive situation in which the woman finds herself; for Kolodny the paper is the narrator's "own psyche writ large"; for Treichler it is a paradigm of women's writing; and for Fetterley it is the husband's patriarchal text which, however, becomes increasingly feminine in form. Haney-Peritz alone confronts the contradiction, seeing the wallpaper as both John's and his wife's discourse, because the narrator "relies on the very binary oppositions" that structure John's text.<sup>29</sup>

It seems, then, that just as it is impossible for the narrator to get "that top pattern . . . off from the under one" (p. 31), so it is impossible to separate the text of a culture from the text of an individual, to free female subjectivity from the patriarchal text. Far from being antitheses, the patriarchal text and the woman's text are in some sense one. And if the narrator's text is also the text of her culture, then it is no wonder that the wallpaper exceeds her ability to decipher it. If, instead of grasping as she does for the single familiar and self-confirming figure in the text, we understand the wallpaper as a pastiche of disturbed and conflicting discourses,

then perhaps the wallpaper's chaos represents what the narrator (and we ourselves) must refuse in order to construct the singular figure of the woman behind bars: the foreign and alien images that threaten to "knock [her] down, and trample upon [her]" (p. 25), images that as a white, middle-class woman of limited consciousness she may neither want nor know how to read. In avoiding certain meanings while "liberating" others from the text, in struggling for the illusion of a fully "conscious knowing, unified, rational subject,"<sup>30</sup> is the narrator going "mad" not only from confinement, or from the effort to interpret, but also from the effort to repress? In this case, are those of us who reproduce the narrator's reading also attempting to constitute an essential female subject by shunting aside textual meanings that expose feminism's own precarious and conflicted identity? If the narrator is reading in the paper the text of her own unconscious, an unconscious chaotic with unspeakable fears and desires, is not the unconscious, by the very nature of ideology, political?

If we accept the culturally contingent and incomplete nature of readings guaranteed only by the narrator's consciousness, then perhaps we can find in the yellow wallpaper, to literalize a metaphor of Adrienne Rich, "a whole new psychic geography to be explored."<sup>31</sup> For in privileging the questions of reading and writing as essential "woman questions," feminist criticism has been led to the paper while suppressing the politically charged adjective that colors it.<sup>32</sup> If we locate Gilman's story within the "psychic geography" of Anglo-America at the turn of the century, we locate it in a culture obsessively preoccupied with race as the foundation of character, a culture desperate to maintain Aryan superiority in the face of massive immigrations from Southern and Eastern Europe, a culture openly anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, anti-Catholic, and Jim Crow. In New England, where Gilman was born and raised, agricultural decline, native emigration, and soaring immigrant birth rates had generated "a distrust of the immigrant [that] reached the proportions of a movement in the 1880's and 1890's."<sup>33</sup> In California, where Gilman lived while writing "The Yellow Wallpaper," mass anxiety about the "Yellow Peril" had already yielded such legislation as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Across the United States, newly formed groups were calling for selective breeding, restricted entry, and "American Protection" of various kinds. White, Christian, American-born intellectuals—novelists, political

scientists, economists, sociologists, crusaders for social reform—not only shared this racial anxiety but, as John Higham puts it, “blazed the way for ordinary nativists” by giving popular racism an “intellectual respectability.”<sup>34</sup>

These “intellectual” writings often justified the rejection and exclusion of immigrants in terms graphically physical. The immigrants were “human garbage”: “hirsute, low-browed, big-faced persons of obviously low mentality” “oxlike men” who “belong in skins, in wattled huts at the close of the Great Ice age,” ready to “pollute” America with “non-Aryan elements.” Owen Wister’s popular Westerns were built on the premise that the eastern United States was being ruined by the “debased and mongrel” immigrants, “encroaching alien vermin, that turn our cities to Babels and our citizenship to a hybrid farce, who degrade our commonwealth from a nation into something half pawn-shop, half broker’s office.” In the “clean cattle country,” on the other hand, one did not find “many Poles or Huns or Russian Jews,” because pioneering required particular Anglo-Saxon abilities. Jack London describes a Jewish character as “yellow as a sick persimmon” and laments America’s invasion by “the dark-pigmented things, the half-castes, the mongrel-bloods.” Frank Norris ridicules the “half-breed” as an “amorphous, formless mist” and contrasts the kindness and delicacy of Anglo-Saxons with “the hot, degenerated blood” of the Spanish, Mexican, and Portuguese.<sup>35</sup>

Implicit or explicit in these descriptions is a new racial ideology through which “newcomers from Europe could seem a fundamentally different order” from what were then called “native Americans.” The common nineteenth-century belief in three races—black, white, yellow—each linked to a specific continent, was reconstituted so that “white” came to mean only “Nordic” or Northern European, while “yellow” applied not only to the Chinese, Japanese, and light-skinned African-Americans but also to Jews, Poles, Hungarians, Italians, and even the Irish. Crusaders warned of “yellow inundation.” The California chapter of the Protestant white supremacist Junior Order of United American Mechanics teamed up with the Asiatic Exclusion League to proclaim that Southern Europeans were “semi-Mongolian” and should be excluded from immigration and citizenship on the same basis as the Chinese; Madison Grant declared Jews to be “a Mongrel admixture . . . of Slavs and of Asiatic invaders of Russia”; and a

member of Congress announced that "the color of thousands" of the new immigrants "differs materially from that of the Anglo-Saxon." The greatest dangers were almost always traced back to Asia; in a dazzling conflation of enemies, for example, Grant warned that "in the guise of Bolshevism with Semitic leadership and Chinese executioners, [Asia] is organizing an assault upon Western Europe." Lothrop Stoddard predicted that "colored migration" was yielding the "very immediate danger that the white stocks may be swamped by Asiatic blood." Again and again, nativists announced that democracy "simply will not work among Asiatics," that "non-Aryans," especially Slavs, Italians, and Jews, were "impossible to Americanize." The threat of "Yellow Peril" thus had "racial implications" much broader than anxiety about a takeover of Chinese or Japanese: "in every section, the Negro, the Oriental, and the Southern European appeared more and more in a common light."<sup>36</sup> In such a cultural moment, "yellow" readily connoted inferiority, strangeness, cowardice, ugliness, and backwardness. "Yellow-belly" and "yellow dog" were common slurs, the former applied to groups as diverse as the Irish and the Mexicans. Associations of "yellow" with disease, cowardice, worthlessness, uncleanness, and decay may also have become implicit associations of race and class.<sup>37</sup>

If "The Yellow Wallpaper" is read within this discourse of racial anxiety, certain of its tropes take on an obvious political charge. The very first sentence constructs the narrator in class terms, imagining an America in which, through democratic self-advancement, common (British) Americans can enjoy upper-class (British) privileges. Although the narrator and John are "mere ordinary people" and not the rightful "heirs and coheirs," they have secured "a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate," in whose queerness she takes pride (p. 9); this house with its "private wharf" (p. 15) stands "quite alone . . . well back from the road, quite three miles from the village" like "English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people" (p. 11). I am reminded by this description of another neglected "gentleman's manor house" that people "read about"—*Thornfield*—in which another merely ordinary woman "little accustomed to grandeur" comes to make her home. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is given a room with "gay blue chintz window curtains" that resemble the "pretty old-fashioned



chintz hangings" (p. 12) in the room Gilman's narrator wanted for herself; Jane is not banished to Thornfield's third floor, where "wide and heavy beds" are surrounded by outlandish wall-hangings that portray "effigies of strange flowers, and stranger birds, and strangest human beings,—all of which would have looked strange, indeed, by the pallid gleam of moonlight"—and where, if Thornfield had ghosts, Jane tells us, these ghosts would haunt. Like Gilman's narrator, Jane longs for both the freedom to roam and the pleasures of human society, and her "sole relief" in those moments is to walk around the attic and look out at the vista of road and trees and rolling hills so much like the view the narrator describes from her nursery in the writing that is her own sole "relief" (pp. 10, 21). It is from her attic perch that Jane feels so keenly that women, like men, need "exercise for their faculties" and "suffer from too rigid a restraint,"<sup>38</sup> as in her attic Gilman's narrator lies on the "great immovable bed" (p. 19) and longs for company and exercise.

But the permanent, imprisoned inhabitant of Thornfield's attic is not Jane; she is a dark Creole woman who might well have been called "yellow" in Gilman's America. Is Gilman's narrator, who "thought seriously of burning the house" (p. 29) imagining Bertha Mason's fiery revenge? Does the figure in the paper with its "foul, bad yellow" color (p. 28), its "strange, provoking, formless sort of figure" (p. 18), its "broken neck" and "bulbous eyes" (p. 16), resemble Bertha with her "bloated features" and her "discoloured face"? Surely the narrator's crawling about her room may recall Bertha's running "backwards and forwards . . . on all fours." And like Brontë's "mad lady," who would "let herself out of her chamber" at night "and go roaming about the house" to ambush Jane,<sup>39</sup> the "smouldering" yellow menace in Gilman's story gets out at night and "skulk[s] in the parlor, [hides] in the hall," and "[lies] in wait for me" (pp. 13, 28-29). When the narrator tells John that the key to her room is beneath a plantain leaf, is she evoking not only the North American species of that name but also the tropical plant of Bertha's West Indies? When she imagines tying up the freed woman, is she repeating the fate of Bertha, brought in chains to foreign shores? Finally, does the circulation of Brontë's novel in Gilman's text explain the cryptic sentence at the end of the story—possibly a slip of Gilman's pen—in which the narrator cries to her husband that "I've got out at last. . . in spite of you and Jane" (p. 36)?

Is the wallpaper, then, the political unconscious of a culture in



which an Aryan woman's madness, desire, and anger, repressed by the imperatives of "reason," "duty" (p. 14), and "proper self-control" (p. 11), are projected onto the "yellow" woman who is, however, also the feared alien? When the narrator tries to liberate the woman from the wall, is she trying to purge her of her color, to peel her from the yellow paper, so that she can accept this woman as herself? If, as I suggested earlier, the wallpaper is at once the text of patriarchy and the woman's text, then perhaps the narrator is both resisting and embracing the woman of color who is self and not-self, a woman who might need to be rescued from the text of patriarchy but cannot yet be allowed to go free. Might we explain the narrator's pervasive horror of a yellow color and smell that threaten to take over the "ancestral halls," "stain[ing] everything it touched," as the British-American fear of a takeover by "aliens"? In a cultural moment when immigrant peoples and African Americans were being widely caricatured in the popular press through distorted facial and bodily images, might the "interminable grotesques" (p. 20) of "The Yellow Wallpaper"—with their lolling necks and "bulbous eyes" "staring everywhere," with their "peculiar odor" and "yellow smell" (p. 29), their colors "repellent, almost revolting," "smouldering" and "unclean" (p. 13), "sickly" and "particularly irritating" (p. 18), their "new shades of yellow" (p. 28) erupting constantly—figure the Asians and Jews, the Italians and Poles, the long list of "aliens" whom the narrator (and perhaps Gilman herself) might want at once to rescue and to flee?

For if anxieties about race, class, and ethnicity have inscribed themselves as a political unconscious upon the yellow wallpaper, they were conscious and indeed obsessive problems for Gilman herself, as I discovered when, disturbed by my own reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper," I turned to Gilman's later work.<sup>40</sup> Despite her socialist values, her active participation in movements for reform, her strong theoretical commitment to racial harmony, her unconventional support of interracial marriages, and her frequent condemnation of America's racist history,<sup>41</sup> Gilman upheld white Protestant supremacy; belonged for a time to eugenics and nationalist organizations; opposed open immigration; and inscribed racism, nationalism, and classism into her proposals for social change. In *Concerning Children* (1900), she maintains that "a sturdy English baby would be worth more than an equally vigorous young Fuegian. With the same training and care, you could

develop higher faculties in the English specimen than in the Fuegian specimen, because it was better bred."<sup>42</sup> In the same book, she argues that American children made "better citizens" than "the more submissive races" and in particular that "the Chinese and the Hindu, where parents are fairly worshipped and blindly obeyed," were "not races of free and progressive thought and healthy activity." Gilman advocated virtually compulsory enlistment of Blacks in a militaristic industrial corps, even as she opposed such regimentation for whites. In *The Forerunner*, the journal she produced single-handedly for seven years, "yellow" groups are singled out frequently and gratuitously: Gilman chides the "lazy old orientals" who consider work a curse, singles out Chinatown for "criminal conditions," and uses China as an example of various unhealthy social practices. And she all but justifies anti-Semitism by arguing, both in her "own" voice and more boldly through her Herlandian mouthpiece Ellador, that Jews have not yet "'passed the tribal stage'" of human development, that they practice an "'unethical'" and "'morally degrading'" religion of "'race egotism'" and "'concentrated pride,'" which has unfortunately found its way through the Bible into Western literature, and that in refusing to intermarry they "'artificially maintain characteristics which the whole world dislikes, and then complain of race prejudice.'"<sup>43</sup>

Like many other "nativist" intellectuals, Gilman was especially disturbed by the influx of poor immigrants to American cities and argued on both race and class grounds that these "undesirables" would destroy America. Although she once theorized that immigrants could be "healthier grafts upon our body politic," she wrote later that whatever "special gifts" each race had, when that race was transplanted, "their 'gift' is lost."<sup>44</sup> While proclaiming support for the admission of certain peoples of "assimilable stock," she declared that even the best of "Hindus . . . would make another problem" like the existing "problem" of African Americans, and that an "inflow" of China's "'oppressed'" would make it impossible to preserve the American "national character." This "character," it is clear, requires that "Americans" be primarily people "of native born parentage," who "should have a majority vote in *their own country*."<sup>45</sup> Surprisingly perhaps for a socialist, but less surprisingly for a woman whose autobiography opens with a claim of kinship with Queen Victoria,<sup>46</sup> Gilman seems to equate class status with readiness for democracy. Repeatedly she claims to favor immigra-

tion so long as the immigrants are of "better" stock. In her futurist utopia, *Moving the Mountain*, for instance, a character remembers the "old" days when "'we got all the worst and lowest people"; in the imaginary new America, immigrants may not enter the country until they "come up to a certain standard" by passing a "microscopic" physical exam and completing an education in American ways. It is surely no accident that the list of receiving gates Gilman imagines for her immigrant groups stops with Western Europe: "'There's the German Gate, and the Spanish Gate, the English Gate, and the Italian Gate—and so on.'"<sup>47</sup>

Classism, racism, and nationalism converge with particular virulence when Ellador, having established her antiracist credentials by championing the rights of Black Americans, observes that "'the poor and oppressed were not necessarily good stuff for a democracy'" and declares, in an extraordinary reversal of victim and victimizer to which even her American partner Van protests, that "'it is the poor and oppressed who make monarchy and despotism.'"<sup>48</sup> Ellador's triumph is sealed with the graphic insistence that you cannot "'put a little of everything into a melting-pot and produce a good metal,'" not if you are mixing "'gold, silver, copper and iron, lead, radium, pipe, clay, coal dust, and plain dirt.'" Making clear the racial boundaries of the melting pot, Ellador challenges Van, "'And how about the yellow? Do they 'melt'? Do you want them to melt? Isn't your exclusion of them an admission that you think some kinds of people unassimilable? That democracy must pick and choose a little?'" Ellador's rationale—and Gilman's—is that "'the human race is in different stages of development, and only some of the races—or some individuals in a given race—have reached the democratic stage.'" Yet she begs the question and changes the subject when Van asks, "'But how could we discriminate?'"<sup>49</sup>

The aesthetic and sensory quality of this horror at a polluted America creates a compelling resemblance between the narrator's graphic descriptions of the yellow wallpaper and Gilman's graphic descriptions of the cities and their "swarms of jostling aliens."<sup>50</sup> She fears that America has become "bloated" and "verminous," a "dump" for Europe's "social refuse," "a ceaseless offense to eye and ear and nose,"<sup>51</sup> creating "multiforeign" cities that are "abnormally enlarged" and "swollen," "foul, ugly and dangerous," their conditions "offensive to every sense: assailing the eye with ugliness, the

ear with noise, the nose with foul smells."<sup>52</sup> And when she complains that America has "stuffed" itself with "uncongenial material," with an "overwhelming flood of unassimilable characteristics," with "such a stream of non-assimilable stuff as shall dilute and drown out the current of our life," indeed with "'the most ill-assorted and unassimilable mass of human material that was ever held together by artificial means,'" Gilman might be describing the patterns and pieces of the wallpaper as well.<sup>53</sup> Her poem "The City of Death" (1913) depicts a diseased prison "piped with poison, room by room,"

Whose weltering rush of swarming human forms,  
Forced hurtling through foul subterranean tubes  
Kills more than bodies, coarsens mind and soul.

. . . . .  
And steadily degrades our humanness . . .<sup>54</sup>

Such a city is not so different from the claustrophobic nursery which finally "degrades" the "humanness" of "The Yellow Wallpaper's" protagonist.

The text of Gilman's imagining, then, is the text of an America made as uninhabitable as the narrator's chamber, and her declaration that "children ought to grow up in the country, all of them,"<sup>55</sup> recalls the narrator's relief that her baby does not have to live in the unhappy prison at the top of the house. Clearly Gilman was recognizing serious social problems in her concern over the ghettos and tenements of New York and Chicago—she herself worked for a time at Hull House, although she detested Chicago's "noisome" neighborhoods. But her conflation of the city with its immigrant peoples repeats her own racism even as her nostalgia about the country harks back to a New England in the hands of the New English themselves.<sup>56</sup> These "'little old New England towns'" and their new counterparts, the "'fresh young western ones,'" says Ellador, "'have more of America in them than is possible—could ever be possible—in such a political menagerie as New York,'" whose people really "'belong in Berlin, in Dublin, in Jerusalem.'"<sup>57</sup>

It is no accident that some of the most extreme of Gilman's anti-immigrant statements come from the radical feminist Ellador, for race and gender are not separate issues in Gilman's cosmology, and it is in their intersection that a fuller reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper" becomes possible. For Gilman, patriarchy is a racial

phenomenon: it is primarily non-Aryan "yellow" peoples whom Gilman holds responsible for originating and perpetuating patriarchal practices, and it is primarily Nordic Protestants whom she considers capable of change. In *The Man-Made World: or, Our Androcentric Culture*, Gilman associates the oppression of women with "the heavy millions of the unstirred East," and the "ancestor-worship[ping]" cultures of the "old patriarchal races" who "linger on in feudal Europe." The text singles out the behaviors of "savage African tribes," laments the customs of India, names the "Moslem" religion as "rigidly bigoted and unchanging," and dismisses "to the limbo of all outworn superstition that false Hebraic and grossly androcentric doctrine that the woman is to be subject to the man."<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere, Gilman declares that except for "our Pueblos," where "the women are comparatively independent and honored," nearly all "savages" are "decadent, and grossly androcentric."<sup>59</sup> In one of two essays in *The Forerunner* attacking Ida Tarbell, Gilman identifies Tarbell's "androcentrism" as "neither more nor less than the same old doctrine held by India, China, Turkey, and all the ancient races, held by all ignorant peasants the world over; held by the vast mass of ordinary, unthinking people, and by some quite intelligent enough to know better: that the business of being a woman is to bear and rear children, to 'keep house,' and nothing else."<sup>60</sup> "The most progressive and dominant races" of the present day, she claims, are also "those whose women have most power and liberty; and in the feeblest and most backward races we find women most ill-treated and enslaved." Gilman goes on to make clear that this is an explicitly Aryan accomplishment: "The Teutons and Scandinavian stocks seem never to have had that period of enslaved womanhood, that polygamous harem culture; their women never went through that debasement; and their men have succeeded in preserving the spirit of freedom which is inevitably lost by a race which has servile women."<sup>61</sup> That the "progressive and dominant races" Gilman lauds for not "enslaving" women were at that very moment invading and oppressing countries around the globe seems to present Gilman with no contradiction at all; indeed, imperialism might provide the opportunity, to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak, to save yellow women from yellow men.<sup>62</sup>

In this light, Gilman's wallpaper becomes not only a representation of patriarchy but also the projection of patriarchal practices

onto non-Aryan societies. Such a projection stands, of course, in implicit tension with the narrative, because it is the modern-minded, presumably Aryan husband and doctor who constitute the oppressive force. But for Gilman, an educated, Protestant, social-democratic Aryan, America explicitly represented the major hope for feminist possibility. The superiority of this "wider and deeper" and "more human" of religions is directly associated with the fact that "in America the status of women is higher," for example, than in "Romanist" Spain.<sup>63</sup> Not all people are equally educable, after all, particularly if they belong to one of those "tribal" cultures of the East: "you could develop higher faculties in the English specimen than in the Fuegian." And Gilman's boast that "The Yellow Wallpaper" convinced S. Weir Mitchell to alter his practices suggests that like Van, the sociologist-narrator of two of Gilman's feminist utopias, educated, white Protestant men could be taught to change. The immigrant "invasion" thus becomes a direct threat to Gilman's program for feminist reform.

As a particular historical product, then, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is no more *"the story that all literary women would tell"* than the entirely white canon of *The Madwoman in the Attic* is *the story of all women's writing or the only story those (white) texts can tell*. "The Yellow Wallpaper" has been able to pass for a universal text only insofar as white, Western literatures and perspectives continue to dominate academic American feminist practices even when the most urgent literary and political events are happening in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and among the new and old cultures of Color in the United States. We might expand our theories of censorship, for example, if we read "The Yellow Wallpaper" in the context of women's prison writings from around the world—writings like Ding Ling's memoirs and Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina* and some of the stories of Bessie Head. We might have something to learn about interpretation if we examined the moment in Partnoy's narrative when her husband is tortured because he gives the "wrong" reading of his wife's poems.<sup>64</sup> We might better understand contemporary feminist racial politics if we studied the complex but historically distanced discourses of feminists a century ago.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps, like the narrator of Gilman's story, white, American academic feminist criticism has sought in literature the mirror of its own identity, erasing the literary equivalent of strange sights and smells

and colors so that we can have the comfort of reproducing, on a bare stage, that triumphant moment when a woman recognizes her self. Perhaps white, American feminist practice too readily resembles that of Gilman, who deplores that historically "we have cheated the Indian, oppressed the African, robbed the Mexican,"<sup>66</sup> and whose utopian impulses continue to insist that there is only "one race, the human race,"<sup>67</sup> but for whom particular, present conditions of race and class continue to be blindnesses justified on "other" – aesthetic, political, pragmatic – grounds.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" also calls upon us to recognize that the white, female, intellectual-class subjectivity which Gilman's narrator attempts to construct, and to which many feminists have also been committed perhaps unwittingly, is a subjectivity whose illusory unity, like the unity imposed on the paper, is built on the repression of difference. This also means that the conscious biographical experience which Gilman claims as the authenticating source of the story is but one contributing element.<sup>68</sup> And if we are going to read this text in relation to its author, we may have to realize that there are dangers as well as pleasures in a feminist reading based on a merging of consciousnesses.<sup>69</sup> Once we recognize Gilman as a subject constituted in and by the contradictions of ideology, we might also remember that she acknowledges having been subjected to the narrator's circumstances but denies any relationship to the wallpaper itself – that is, to what I am reading as the site of a political unconscious in which questions of race permeate questions of sex. A recent essay by Ellen Messer-Davidow in *New Literary History* argues that literary criticism and feminist criticism should be recognized as fundamentally different activities, that feminist criticism is part of a larger interdisciplinary project whose main focus is the exploration of "ideas about sex and gender," that disciplinary variations are fairly insignificant differences of "medium," and therefore that feminist literary critics need to change their subject from "literature" to "ideas about sex and gender" as these happen to be expressed in literature.<sup>70</sup> I suggest that one of the messages of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is that textuality, like culture, is more complex, shifting, and polyvalent than any of the ideas we can abstract from it, that the narrator's reductive gesture is precisely to isolate and essentialize one "idea about sex and gender" from a more complex textual field.





1. In an 11 Oct. 1987 *New York Times Book Review* listing of the best-selling works of university-press fiction for the past twenty-five years, "The Yellow Wallpaper" ranked seventh (145,000 copies) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ranked fourth (240,000 copies). These figures are all the more astonishing, because these two books have been in print for considerably less than twenty-five years and "The Yellow Wallpaper" is also reprinted in several anthologies. The top entries are Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (900,500 copies), Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October* (358,000 copies), and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (304,278 copies).
2. I use the term "American" here to refer not to the nationality of practitioners but to a set of practices that has dominated the discourse of feminist criticism in U.S. universities during the 1970s and into the 1980s. Elaine Showalter's *New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon, 1985) offers a representative collection of this work. When I say "academic," I mean a criticism aligned predominantly with professional-class interests and produced primarily for academic settings: "scholarly" journals, university presses, classrooms, conferences, colloquia.
3. Janice Haney-Peritz and Mary Jacobus have also written critiques of feminism's "Yellow Wallpaper." I thank the anonymous reviewer of my essay for *Feminist Studies* for introducing me to Jacobus's essay, which I had not seen before submitting this paper. I will discuss the two essays more specifically below.
4. The six critical studies, in chronological order, are Elaine Hedges, "Afterword" to The Feminist Press edition of "The Yellow Wallpaper" (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1973), 37-63; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 89-92; Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Re-Reading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," *New Literary History* 11 (Spring 1980): 451-67; Jean Kennard, "Convention Coverage or How to Read Your Own Life," *New Literary History* 13 (Autumn 1981): 69-88; Paula Treichler, "Escaping the Sentence," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3 (Spring/Fall 1984): 61-77; Judith Fetterley, "Reading about Reading: 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'The Murderers in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocinio Schweikart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986), 147-64. Similar, often briefer readings abound.
5. Kennard's essay is based precisely on this recognition of unity: she writes in 1981 that although her interpretation, Gilbert and Gubar's, Hedges's, and Kolodny's all "emphasize different aspects of the text, they do not conflict with each other" (p. 74).
6. Although "ideology" is now in currency through European theory, American feminism also used the term to designate what Catherine Belsey describes as the unacknowledged underpinnings of our social, political, intellectual, sexual, and emotional lives, our "imaginary relation" to real conditions, which presents "partial truths," smooths contradictions, and "appears to provide answers to questions which in reality it evades" (see her *Critical Practice* [London: Methuen, 1980], 57-58). For an early use of "ideology" as a feminist concept, see Sandra Bem and Daryl Bem, "Case Study of a Non-conscious Ideology: Training a Woman to Know her Place," in *Beliefs, Attitudes, and Human Affairs*, ed. Daryl Bem (Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1970), 89-99.
7. Certainly these values linger. One of the most revealing defenses of the now-old New Criticism appeared in a 10 July 1988 letter by John W. Aldridge responding to *The New York Times Magazine's* essay of 5 June 1988, "The Battle of the Books":

Our mission—if it had ever been defined—was to identify and promote the most artistically successful and esthetically satisfying works produced in that culture. It was also part of our mission to work as critics to try to educate public taste so as to be better able to make esthetic discriminations among contemporary works—in particular, to develop appreciation for neglected writers and to re-examine the work of those whose reputations had become overinflated. In the service of the first, we

had Malcolm Cowley on Faulkner, Edmund Wilson on the early Hemingway, Cleanth Brooks on T.S. Eliot, and Eliot on the metaphysical poets. In the service of the second, we had Wilson on Kafka and murder mysteries, Dwight Macdonald on James Gould Cozzens, Norman Podhoretz on the Beats, and, in more recent years, if I may say so, myself writing negatively on John Updike, Mary McCarthy, William Styron, James Baldwin, and some others. . . .

I do not believe that once in this long course of reassessment were considerations of an author's race, sex, politics, religion or ethnic origin allowed to intrude upon the process of critical judgment. All this is to say that criticism must, to deserve the name, be impartial and politically disinterested. When it ceases to be by yielding to external pressures, it abdicates its primarily responsibility as a monitor and conservator of taste. (P. 6)

8. In an essay that precedes Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* by a decade, for example, Fraya Katz-Stoker read in the agenda of New Criticism not only the attempt to hold poetry to a coherence absent in an era of fascism, McCarthyism, and world war but also an imposition on literature of the same political stance it sought to ignore. See "The Other Criticism: Feminism vs. Formalism," in *Images of Women in Fiction*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green, Ohio: Popular Press, 1972), 315-27.

9. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, "Feminist Scholarship and the Social Construction of Woman," in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985), 6.

10. Cited in Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: D. Appleton, 1935), 119.

11. The story was reprinted in *The Great Modern American Stories: An Anthology* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1920), vii; William Dean Howells, cited in Conrad Shumaker, "Too Terribly Good to be Printed: Charlotte Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *American Literature* 57 (December 1985): 588.

12. Anonymous letter to the *Boston Transcript*, cited in Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 120.

13. On the difference between these terms, see William M. O'Barr and Bowman K. Atkins, "'Women's Language' or 'Powerless Language?'" in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980), 93-110. On double-voiced "coding" strategies, see Joan Radner and Susan Lanser, "The Feminist Voice: Coding in Women's Folklore and Literature," *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (October 1987): 412-25.

14. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1973), 13. All references are to this edition; further citations appear in parenthesis in the text.

15. Gilbert and Gubar, 89.

16. Kennard, 74; Annette Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies* 6 (Spring 1980): 10.

17. *Ibid.*, 12.

18. See, for example, Fetterley, 164; Gilbert and Gubar, 91-92; Hedges, 55; Treichler, 68-69.

19. Gilbert and Gubar, 90.

20. Treichler, 73.

21. Fetterley, 162.

22. Kolodny, "Map for Re-Reading," 458 (emphasis mine).

23. Kennard, 78, 84.

24. Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *Conditions Two* (October 1977): 29-30; rpt. in *The New Feminist Criticism*, 168-85; Alice Walker, "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 361-83; Judy Grahn, "Murdering the King's English," in *True to Life Adventure Stories* 2 vols. (Oakland:

Diana Press, 1978), 1: 6-14; Adrienne Rich, "It Is the Lesbian in Us. . ." in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-78* (New York: Norton, 1979), 199-202; and "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5 (Summer 1980): 631-60; Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981); and Evelyn Torton Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1982). *This Bridge Called My Back* has been reprinted by Kitchen Table Press; *Nice Jewish Girls* is due out in fall 1989 in a revised third edition from Beacon Press.

25. Elly Bulkin, in Judith Kegan Gardiner, Elly Bulkin, Rena Grasso Patterson, and Annette Kolodny, "An Interchange on Feminist Criticism: On 'Dancing Through the Minefield,'" *Feminist Studies* 8 (Fall 1982): 636.

26. I am thinking in particular of Showalter's *New Feminist Criticism* (1985), which mentions the responses briefly in its introduction but does not discuss or excerpt them. Dale Spender's *Men's Studies Modified* (Oxford, England: Pergamon, 1981), which also reprints "Dancing Through the Minefield," was published before the responses to Kolodny appeared.

27. In "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another Look at 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" (*Women's Studies* 12 [December 1986]: 113-28), Janice Haney-Peritz argues from a Lacanian perspective that like the narrator, American feminist critics "see in literature a really distinctive body which they seek to liberate through identification" and which is "usually presented as essential to a viable feminist literary criticism and celebrated as something so distinctive that it shakes, if it does not destroy, the very foundations of patriarchal literature's ancestral house" (p. 123). In this process, says Haney-Peritz, gender hierarchies are not dismantled but merely reversed, and the material nature of feminist struggle is erased.

Mary Jacobus's "An Unnecessary Maze of Sign-Reading" (in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1986], 229-48), was, as I said earlier, introduced to me by an anonymous reader for *Feminist Studies*. Although my interpretation of Gilman's story is very different from Jacobus's, our analyses of earlier feminist readings are strikingly similar, and we focus on some of the same key elements of the tale. Because all three readings seem to have been undertaken independently of one another, they clearly signify a new interpretive moment in both feminist criticism generally and criticism of "The Yellow Wallpaper" in particular.

28. Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 86.

29. See Hedges, 51; Gilbert and Gubar, 90; Kolodny, "Map for Re-Reading," 458; Treichler, 62ff; Fetterley, 162; Haney-Peritz, 116.

30. Weedon, 21.

31. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing As Re-Vision" (1971) in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, 35.

32. Before 1986, only Jean Kennard had noted the degree to which "yellow" failed to figure in the standard feminist analysis (pp. 78-79). For other new readings of the long-unread trope of color, see Jacobus, 234ff, and William Veeder, "Who is Jane? The Intricate Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman," *Arizona Quarterly* 44 (Autumn 1988): 40-79. Sometimes readers associate Gilman's paper with "yellow journalism," but that phrase was not coined until 1895.

33. Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1975), 299.

34. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*, 2d ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 133, 39.

35. *Ibid.*, 42; E.A. Ross, *The Old World and the New*; John W. Burgess, "The Ideal of the American Commonwealth"; Owen Wister, "The Evolution of the Cow Puncher"; and

Jack London, *Burning Daylight*, all quoted in Gossett, 293, 307, and 219. See also Jack London's *Valley of the Moon*, quoted in Higham, 172; Frank Norris's *Collected Writings* and *The Octopus*, both quoted in Gossett, 219, 221-22.

36. Higham, 133. Roger Daniels and Harry Kitano, *American Racism: Exploration of the Nature of Prejudice* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 44; Higham, 174; Madison Grant, *The Conquest of a Continent* (New York: Scribners, 1933), 255; Higham, 168; Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), cited in Daniels and Kitano, 55; Lothrop Stoddard, cited in Daniels and Kitano, 55; Grant, *The Conquest of a Continent*, 356; and Higham, 166, 173.

37. See, for example, *Dictionary of American Slang*, ed. Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1960). The association of the color yellow with artistic decadence, which Mary Jacobus also suggests (p. 234), may not be irrelevant to these other cultural practices.

38. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1971), 86, 85, 92, 93, 96. Mary Jacobus also discusses briefly resonances between "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Jane Eyre*.

39. Brontë, 258, 249, 257-58.

40. I want to stress that my reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper" emerged from my experience of and discomfort with the text and not from prior knowledge of Gilman's radical ideology. When I began to imagine political implications for the color "yellow" in the story, I thought the text might be reflecting unconscious anxieties, but I did not expect to find overt evidence of racism in Gilman's writings.

41. See, for example, Gilman's "My Ancestors," *Forerunner* 4 (March 1913): 73-75, in which the narrator represents all humans as one family; "Race Pride," *Forerunner* 4 (April 1913): 88-89, in which she explicitly criticizes Owen Wister's *The Virginian* for white supremacy; and *With Her in Ourland*, *Forerunner* 7 (1916): passim, in which America is chastised for its abuse of Negroes, Mexicans, and Indians.

42. *Concerning Children*, 4, cited in Gary Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), 66. Scharnhorst gives much more attention to Gilman's racism than does Mary Hill in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860-1896* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980). This may be because Scharnhorst is dealing with the whole of Gilman's life and work, Hill with only the first half. But I do not want to rule out the possibility that Scharnhorst's gender and/or ethnic identity, or the five years' difference between his book and Hill's, made it easier for him to confront Gilman's racism.

43. Gilman, *Concerning Children*, 89 and 55; Gilman, in the *American Journal of Sociology* (July 1908), 78-85, both cited in Scharnhorst, 66, 127. See Gilman, "Why We Honestly Fear Socialism," *The Forerunner* 1 (December 1909): 9. This charge is also made of the Jews in Gilman's *The Man-Made World: or, Our Androcentric Culture* (New York: Charlton, 1911), 231. See Gilman, review of "The Woman Voter," *Forerunner* 3 (August 1912): 224; and see, for example, *Forerunner* 4 (February 1913): 47, and 3 (March 1912): 66. Gilman, *With Her in Ourland*, *Forerunner* 7 (October 1916): 266-67. See similar statements in "Growth and Combat," *Forerunner* 7 (April 1916): 108; and the following example from "Race Pride," *Forerunner* 4 (April 1913): 89: "Perhaps the most pronounced instance of this absurdity [of race superiority] is in the historic pride of the Hebrews, firmly believing themselves to be the only people God cared about, and despising all the other races of the earth for thousands upon thousands of years, while all those other races unanimously return the compliment." In at least one earlier text, however, Gilman does note without blaming the victim that "the hideous injustice of Christianity to the Jew attracted no attention through many centuries." See *Women and Economics* (1898; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 78.

44. Gilman, personal correspondence, cited in Scharnhorst, 127.

45. Gilman, "Immigration, Importation, and Our Fathers," *Forerunner* 5 (May 1914): 118; "Let Sleeping Forefathers Lie," *Forerunner* 6 (October 1915): 263 (emphasis mine).
46. Gilman, *Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 1.
47. Gilman, *Moving the Mountain*, in *Forerunner* 2 (March 1911): 80.
48. *Forerunner* 7 (June 1916): 154.
49. *With Her in Ourland*, in *Forerunner* 7 (June 1916): 155. It may not be accidental that Ellador changes the subject from race to sex.
50. Gilman, cited in Scharnhorst.
51. Gilman, "Let Sleeping Forefathers Lie," 261; Gilman, "Growth and Combat," *Forerunner* 7 (December 1916): 332.
52. Gilman, *Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 317; Gilman, *The Forum* 70 (October 1923): 1983-89; *Forerunner* 7 (October 1916): 277.
53. Gilman, "Immigration, Importation, and Our Fathers," 118; "Let Sleeping Forefathers Lie," 262; *With Her in Ourland*, in *Forerunner* 7 (June 1916): 153.
54. Gilman, "The City of Death," *Forerunner* 4 (April 1913): 104.
55. Gilman, "The Power of the Farm Wife," *Forerunner* 6 (December 1915): 316. See also "Growth and Combat," 332.
56. Gilman's autobiography echoes these sentiments when she names New York "that unnatural city where everyone is an exile, none more so than the American," and laments that New York has "but 7 per cent native-born" and that one-third of New Yorkers are Jews. When she travels one summer to coastal Maine, she "could have hugged the gaunt New England farmers and fishermen—I had forgotten what my people looked like!" (*Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 316).
57. Gilman, *With Her in Ourland*, 151, 155. Ellador's racism (and Gilman's) is often tempered with "fairness." Here, for example, Ellador insists that "I do not mean the immigrants solely. There are Bostonians of Beacon Hill who belong in London; there are New Yorkers of five generations who belong in Paris." But these seem to be exceptions, because only the immigrants belong elsewhere in "vast multitudes."
58. Gilman, *The Man-Made World*, 27-28; 136, 249.
59. Gilman, "Personal Problems," *Forerunner* 1 (July 1910): 23-24.
60. Gilman, "Miss Tarbell's Third Paper," *Forerunner* 3 (April 1912): 95.
61. Gilman, "Personal Problems," 23-24.
62. See Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice," *Wedge*, nos. 7/8 (1985).
63. Gilman, *The Man-Made World*, 136.
64. Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1986), 104.
65. Reading Gilman's remarks about polluting the melting pot, for example, helped me to see similarities between anxieties about immigration policy and anxieties about "letting too many groups into" the literary canon.
66. Gilman, "Race Pride," *Forerunner* 4 (April 1913): 90.
67. See, for example, Gilman, "My Ancestors," 74.
68. See Gilman, "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *Forerunner* 4 (1913).
69. The strongest articulation of the pleasures of such reading is Sydney Janet Kaplan's "Varieties of Feminist Criticism," in *Making a Difference*, 37-58.
70. Ellen Messer-Davidow, "The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticisms," *New Literary History* 19 (Autumn 1987): 79, 96.
71. Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 35.
72. Adrienne Rich, "Heroines," in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (New York: Norton, 1981), 35-36.