

City University of New York (CUNY)

**CUNY Academic Works**

---

Women's Studies Quarterly

Archives and Special Collections

---

1981

## **Racism and "Universality" in Literature**

Sue Gambill

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/497>

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

## READERS' SPEAKOUT

### A NOTE ON THE PERILS OF PUBLICITY: THE FEMINIST STUDIES PROGRAM AT STANFORD

We of the Feminist Studies Committee at Stanford were recently delighted with the interest the announcement of a Program in Feminist Studies evoked in the West Coast media. Having worked hard to put together what we feel will be a stimulating and important program, we took real pleasure in the opportunity to communicate our accomplishments and plans.

But since news often travels faster than understanding, we feel it necessary to clarify our status. First, the Feminist Studies Program has Non-Degree-Granting Status, meaning that students graduate with what is technically called an Individually Designed Major with a Concentration in Feminist Studies. Non-Degree-Granting Program Status is often assigned by the University to programs seen as new and experimental; should student interest and curricular development warrant it, we may apply for full Degree-Granting Status.

A second issue concerns the label "feminist," which for us connotes a questioning of gender roles and expectations and not simply a focus on the deeds of women. In using a "political" term, we hoped to signal our critical intellectual perspective, and our belief that feminism must lead at once toward interest in and advocacy of women *and* toward a new set of questions and perspectives with which to understand the world. Feminist questions of this latter sort are being raised in the three hundred or so women's studies programs around the country. We see ourselves as integrally connected to these programs. Our choice of name was meant to clarify and not to differentiate ourselves from their efforts.

Finally, the press reports of the Feminist Studies Program discussed the contribution of key members of the faculty without communicating fully the importance of student effort and concern. We would not have a program now were it not for the enthusiasm with which our feminist-oriented classes have been received. The present program reflects the work of staff and both graduate and undergraduate members of the Feminist Studies Committee. Continuing and active student support is essential to our efforts.

*Estelle B. Freedman (History)*

*Michelle Z. Rosaldo (Anthropology)*  
*Stanford University*  
*Stanford, California*

### RACISM AND "UNIVERSALITY" IN LITERATURE

As a white writer I want to speak to white feminists about the literature we read, write, print, and teach. Robert E. Hemenway, in his book, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), exposes and criticizes the assumption that "... the Black author must transcend race in order to write universally. . . . Even such a brilliant poet as Gwendolyn Brooks has been advised that if 'being a Negro' is her subject, then she is somehow prevented from creating great literature . . . that the ultimate transcendence is to not write about Black people at all, believing for some reason that white people carry no racial identity . . ." (p. 307).

This sounds familiar—women writers know what it's like to be criticized for being trivial, not "universal" or "humanist." Yet, how often do we fight sexism with our left hand and perpetuate racism with our right?

Imagine this: one of your friends begins to read a story she wrote: "I had been at Margaret's all morning when I got a call from Tammy to come on down to the corner where some dime bags were going real nice. A lot of folks on the street, Marcy in front of his place, some kids on roller skates, couple of guys at the curb in a convertible, with shades and looking suspicious, when up walks this Black guy. . . ."

Stop the story. Let's look at this: We're in this neighborhood where we've just been introduced to six or seven characters and suddenly a Black man appears in the story. Does the reader ask what racial or ethnic group the other characters belong to, or why only the Black man is identified racially?

Let's assume the other characters in the story are white. The white narrator goes through her environment, looking out of white eyes. Other characters are not identified as white because the narrator assumes that everyone sees with white eyes, and is the same. When the Black man appears, he is set apart, different, labeled as "other."

This is a kind of racism that is difficult to expose because it is passive. There are no obvious racial slurs. Rather, the racism emerges from deep and typically hidden assumptions about whiteness as "universal."

The "universal experience" is a myth that perpetuates white male-centered standards, experiences, and culture. The myth, like the

melting pot myth, nullifies rich cultural diversity. We cannot speak to universality, we cannot touch on emotions that all people can relate to, *unless* we delve into the depths of our diversity. To write and teach literature without a critical perspective in this respect is a form of racism.

*Sue Gambill*

*Cortland, New York*

### THE FEMINIST WRITERS' GUILD

*Only Your Pen & Page Love You?*  
*(and sometimes your typewriter)*  
*No Longer!*

The epigraph above over a sketch of an amazon writer rising from her typewriter has graced the bright orange flyers issued by the Feminist Writers' Guild since 1978 when it first came into being. From a group of women in Berkeley, California, then one in New York City, the national sisterhood of feminist writers has grown to a membership of over 1,000.

The 1981 National Steering Committee met May 8-10 in Milwaukee, site of the third largest chapter, to plan new goals and schedule projects which emphasize education, political action, and services to members. The FWG presently includes sixteen local chapters with memberships ranging from ten to 150, as well as individual at-large members. The National Steering Committee is elected by FWG members through a ballot included in the newsletter and is composed of both chapter and at-large representatives to reflect the needs of the membership as a whole.

Membership in the Feminist Writers' Guild is \$12 yearly (\$6 for low-income or unemployed women) and \$20 for institutions. The dues are deductible because the FWG gained nonprofit status this year. The FWG exists to promote the work of all women and feminist writers including all minorities by age, class, race, sexual preference; Third World women; and women writing in isolation. The FWG encourages the literary expression of female experience and is dedicated to writers' critique and support networking, readers' networking, and the sharing of practical information on feminist writing, publishing, grants, and so forth, through a national newsletter issued three times a year.

New projects include a *Directory of Members*; the first FWG literary anthology, due to  
*(continued on page 46)*