
Claudette Fillard and Françoise Orazi (eds.),
*Exchanges and Correspondence: The Construction of
Feminism*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars
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- 1 About two-thirds into *Exchanges and Correspondence: The Construction of Feminism*, in an essay entitled “Letter Exchange in the Life of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon: The First Female Suffrage Committee in Britain Seen Through her Correspondence”, Meritxell Simon-Martin refers to the “long tradition of female letter-writing” (193). Classic epistolary exchange is, of course, only the most literal form of “correspondence” that the various contributors to this volume are concerned with in the aftermath of an October 2008 conference held in Lyon, entitled “The Building of Feminism: Exchanges and Correspondences”. But it is also, perhaps, the most necessary form: the prerequisite condition for those other more immediate or indirect, personal or abstract forms of correspondence and discursive transmission—from personal meetings to citing one another or reading the same texts—that are equally relevant here, as in the development over time of any political or intellectual movement, large-scale consciousness-raising, or ideology. In an age of hypercommunication and Twitter revolutions, this collective reflection, with Simon-Martin’s article at its heart, recalls, at its best moments, the historically pivotal role of the postal system in the rise of subversive new ideas on women’s rights (and more) and the establishment of networks to promote these ideas over the course of the past two centuries (the period largely covered in this volume)—with particular weight given here to the mid-nineteenth century, as women’s movements were emerging on both sides of the Atlantic to the sounds of furious scribbling. Simon-Martin continues, retracing this momentum:

For most women, [...] ordinary letter-writing provided almost the only way in which to exercise their writing skills. [...] Women wrote letters unnoticed. Perfectly

ladylike, letter-writing was not regarded as threatening under gender hierarchies. Letter-exchange has potential disruptive implications, however. First, the wide range of functions and discourses blurred the dual definitions of gender traits and behavior. Women could confess secret passionate emotions but also reason on social and public issues. Letter-writing could be interpreted metaphorically as women freeing their minds from gender and patriarchal power when taking up their pens to express their thoughts. Being literate, able to put independent analytical thought into writing may have engendered a sense of personality, authority, and self-worth. [...Early] feminists [...] first expressed their anti-patriarchal thoughts through their private correspondence. (193-94)

- 2 These private exchanges in turn spun off into more public stance-taking in the form of letters-to-the-editor, petitions, chain letters and other writings that weave into the various webs of solidarity and debate treated in these pages devoted to “feminism-in-the-making”—the penning of feminist positions that at times predate the emergence of the term itself, making for its frequently anachronistic use here by numerous scholars who grant themselves the “linguistic licence”, referred to by the editors in their introduction, to do so.
- 3 The eighteen articles selected for publication represent diverse disciplines—notably history and sociology—under the interdisciplinary umbrella of gender studies, and area studies encompassing a broad geographical swath, with American and British settings predominating—alongside French, German, Russian and Eastern Europe contexts, frequently intertwined in a transnational perspective. A familiar constellation of events in the history of feminism provides the foreground or backdrop for a number of these case studies, which likewise feature recurring actors in proto-feminist and feminist movements.
- 4 Two key and not-unrelated dates emblematic of the simultaneous mid-nineteenth century struggles to abolish slavery and enfranchise women—the June 1840 World’s Anti-Slavery Convention held in London, and the July 1848 National Women’s Rights Convention held in Seneca Falls, New York—occupy a major portion of the book’s first section, entitled “Transnational Exchanges and Correspondence”, in essays by Bonnie S. Anderson, Françoise Orazi, Béatrice Bijon, Claire Delahaye and Carol Faulkner. Anderson’s work, presented in the opening article “From Letters to a Movement: The Creation of Early International Feminism, 1830 to 1860”, is exceptional in its “mapping of a movement that was multilingual, cross-border and self-aware” (2), in which, just to cite a notable handful of events, the Saint-Simoniennes and “Sisters of America” influenced Harriet Taylor Mill to pen and John Stuart Mill to disseminate “Enfranchisement of Women” for a British and American readership; German Free Congregationalists established kindergartens and women’s colleges; and feminist newspapers sprung up in France, the United States and Germany, in an astonishing dynamic that truly got off the ground with the European revolutions of 1848, creating the world’s first international women’s movement that “challenged the male dominance of Western culture and society in a way that would not be repeated until the late 1960s” (22). The latter three articles narrow the focus to the ways in which transatlantic sisterhood was borne out of the inspiration that first-wave British and American activists found in one another: Orazi writes of “reluctant” feminist Harriet Martineau’s two-year stay Stateside (1834-1836), where she developed a “less [stifled] version of the feminism her British public persona dared to voice” (85) while in contrast, Bijon and Delahaye ground their “American daughters, English mothers: England as a model for American suffragists” (98) in the idea that American feminists

lacked the militancy and daring of their British counterparts. Faulkner's revelatory essay, closing the first section, examines Quaker minister and radical abolitionist Lucretia Mott's correspondence with her allies abroad from 1840 to 1848, the years between her attendance of the World's Anti-Slavery Convention and her organization, with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, of the Seneca Falls Convention. Mott's exchanges with European reformers reveal how the London event—which the author places squarely in the “historical narrative of nineteenth-century feminism”—inspired her to launch “a transatlantic discussion of the individual relationship to the church and state” (126) that resulted in the latter convention.

- 5 Crisscrossing borders and eras, other essays in this section focus on German feminism as embodied by Alice Schwartz, who has been an actor in the rooting of American feminist ideas in a German reality in recent decades, as detailed by Claire Greslé Favier; while Cornelia Möser takes a comparative look at German and French importations and interpretations of gender theory—notably that developed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*—, the obstacles faced and fruitful debates aroused in each country. The complicated relationships between 20th-century feminists of the “East” and “West” are examined in two papers: Marie Fauvelle highlights the points of tension and attraction between early Soviet feminists and American figures like Emma Goldman; and Ioana Cîrstocea sheds light on “the discourses on women's condition” in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the “transnational dynamics” at work in the development of feminism in that particular sphere (77).
- 6 After an opening essay on Mary Wollstonecraft's influence on Elizabeth Cady Stanton that seems oddly placed, the second section, “Exchanges and Written Correspondence”, shifts the gaze to intranational networks such as the one surrounding early nineteenth-century “Literary Midwife” Margaret Fuller (146), whom Claude Cohen-Safir compares to Mme de Staël in certain key ways (notably, they shared a politicized conception of translation), and whose influence on Ralph Waldo Emerson in raising the transcendentalist philosopher's favorable view of the women's rights movement is subsequently examined in an essay by Marc Bellot. Emerson grew into a feminist sympathizer but could hardly have been called a feminist himself—unlike Wendell Phillips, whose “conversion to women's rights” (173) as an actor in the antebellum American woman's rights movement is detailed by Héléne Quanquin in an essay that provides fascinating insight into the awakening of the male abolitionist's proto-feminist positions. Meritxell Simon-Martin turns to mid-Victorian England, analyzing Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's personal letters and the new epistolary usages, such as letters-to-the-editor and chain letters, that she helped pioneer as tools for empowerment during the Women's Suffrage Campaign of 1865-1867. Such forms of expression ultimately served as precursors for the “discursive space” of the letters-to-the-editor pages of later publications such as *Ms. Magazine*, which came to represent a new outlet for the consciousness-raising of a readership of second-wave American feminists in the early 1970s, as subsequently laid out by Angeline Durand: she calls the three to five pages of readers' letters per issue a reflection of “the importance of writing as a form of social action in maintaining or promoting certain values” (226), echoing and expanding upon Simon-Martin's earlier words.
- 7 The universalism of the magazine's aims in addressing “all women, everywhere, and in every occupation” is challenged by the book's final section, “Exchanges and Correspondence between Feminism and Other Ideologies”, which analyzes how

feminist positions are appropriated or rejected by individuals, identities or groups —“interacting and overlapping” as they may be (5)—that “resist” major aspects of traditional feminist thought. Case studies in “conservative forces” clashing with feminism include Margaret Oliphant’s “utopian” visions of domesticity, which Zsuzsanna Varga pieces together out of perceptions of “prudishness” often held of the turn-of-the-century Scottish writer; while Anne Stefani analyzes the unambiguous “intertwining” of the struggles for racial and gender emancipation during the American civil rights movement for a population of southern women seeking to overthrow the forces of patriarchal oppression in the “Old South”. The complex interplay—sympathies and ambivalences—of this double struggle are present throughout the volume; and are notably tackled by H  l  ne Charl  ry in her work, which retraces how the “multiply-oppressed” position of African-American women, caught between “western white” feminism and the strongly patriarchal discourse of the Black Liberation movement, shaped the emergence of the black feminist movement starting in the late 1960s, in parallel—and not necessarily in opposition—to other women’s discourses. The tensions between feminisms are also treated by Simona Tersigni and Zahra Ali in the book’s closing essay on possible intersections between feminism and Islamism, a debate taking up increasing space in the public sphere in Europe in recent years, as attempts to define a feminism that counters the ethnocentric pretenses of traditional “universal” feminism have been multiplying in a transnational and postcolonial context.

- 8 With this transnationality, we come full circle. The obvious overlaps and interplays between the themes and subjects broached in these articles, which complement each other in a collection that works as a many-voiced dialogue, render the conventional division of this publication into three sections neither particularly revelatory nor necessary in editorializing the content; the richest textual juxtapositions that do occur are in terms of era and geographical spheres, with an obvious monopoly of Anglo-American content. The volume is at its most compelling when “exchanges and correspondence” actually refer to those “documentary sources long overlooked by historians” (1) that can shed new light on the plights of feminists over time. However, its methodological tools and topics remain firmly entrenched in familiar territory—a solid, if not groundbreaking, contribution to the history of feminist thought and action, with the briefest of glances given to current debates.

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Th  mes : Recensions

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