Editing Texts and the Arts in the Twenty-First Century
Special Issue from the Women Writing and Reading: Past and Present, Local and Global Conference
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The second volume of the Women Writing and Reading Magazine consists of three issues, showcasing material from the Women Writing and Reading: Past and Present, Local and Global Conference, which took place at the University of Alberta from May 4-6, 2007. Organized by Dr. Patricia Demers, Dr. Gary Kelly, Amy Stafford, and Sarah Jefferies, this three day international conference offered a forum for academics and the wider community to discuss issues around the theme of women as writers and readers. We invited contributions from a wide variety of perspectives—social, literary, artistic, historical, political, economic, scientific, legal, and philosophical—and asked the questions, “What, why, and how do women read and write? What conditions shape women’s reading and writing? What is the relationship between women’s reading and writing?”

The papers selected for publication in these three special issues of the magazine consider the above questions in innovative ways. They engage with the roles of women in literary, performing, and creative arts, and explore topics such as the role of women within the publishing industry, the ways in which technology facilitates scholarship on women’s writing, the importance of reading in various stages of women’s lives, and the recovery of marginalized women’s voices from various points in history. The first of these special issues takes as its theme, “Editing Texts and the Arts in the Twenty-First Century.”

The Women Writing and Reading Conference would not have come to fruition without the vision and hard work of our staff and volunteers. We would like to thank everyone who helped to make this event a success.

We would also like to thank our sponsors, who generously provided financial support for the conference: the Women Writing and Reading Project, RSC: The Academies of Arts, Humanities and Sciences of Canada, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the University of Alberta Conference Fund. We are also grateful to our partners: the University of Alberta Bookstore, the Edmonton Women’s Film Society, the Writers Guild of Alberta, and Adamant Eve.

Amy Stafford and Sarah Jefferies
Conference Organizers
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In 1930, publishing historian Frank Mumby claimed that publishers’ readers had “no power and no responsibility, in law. Yet their moral force can be great, and their responsibility can extend beyond the confines of the House they advise to the career of some famous author which they helped to mould” (286). Throughout the twentieth century, publishers’ readers remained elusive, anonymous figures. As a result, scant information is available about either their editorial practices or moral influence, and the details that are accessible, through research in publishers’ archives, for example, are “dispersed and fascinatingly sketchy” (Fritschner 45). Moreover, despite the recent rise in book history and print culture studies, the subdiscipline of publishing history – under whose umbrella scholars might investigate the role of readers within a publishing company and their larger cultural influence – remains “a significant gap in the perspective of many [Canadian] scholars” (Gerson 6). I contend that publishers’ readers lack a definite profile for two key reasons: the majority have laboured alone and “invisibly behind . . . [an] employer’s arras as the author’s unknown, unsuspected enemy” (Fritschner 45), and the standards they applied in assessing manuscripts, by which they indirectly characterized themselves and the companies they served, have been nothing short of “nebulous” (Fritschner 46).

Although relatively few readers’ reports remain in the vast Macmillan Company of Canada archive housed at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, it is possible to extrapolate from a cache of extant reports an understanding of editorial practices undertaken by Macmillan readers – the majority of whom were women – during the 1950s and 1960s. Vivian Holland, for example, assessed manuscripts for Macmillan, first as an employee and later on a freelance basis. Holland was an intelligent, incisive reader whose reports invariably found favour with general manager John Morgan Gray. Impressed by her confident and concise reports, Gray usually accepted her evaluation of a manuscript and did not seek the opinion of a second reader. By 1950, Macmillan was consolidating its reputation as a significant Canadian publisher and building its list of serious trade titles. Hence, Holland championed novels that were well written, free of slang, and “distinctively Canadian” (RR, 123 May 1950). Her interest in novels with “believable” plots and authentic female characters signalled the contemporary preference for realism over other literary modes.

When Holland left Macmillan in 1955 for family reasons, Korean-born Elizabeth Sturges was appointed her successor. Sturges’s reports were more elaborate than Holland’s, showed a depth of literary knowledge, and revealed more of her personality, in particular her sense of humour and acerbic wit. She, too, had little patience for “lead[en]” (RR, 30 Sept. 1957) manuscripts that were poorly written and, in keeping with Macmillan’s trade profile, endorsed serious literature over “light fiction.”

Sturges worked alongside Gladys Neale, who had joined Macmillan at the end of the Depression and by 1950 was manager of the company’s educational department. Highly influential, Neale was among the first women “to hold such a senior position in Canadian publishing without owing it to a husband’s influence” (MacSkimming, Perilous 52). Her business acumen was reflected in assessments that held all educational submissions to the highest literary and market standards. This essay studies the readers’ reports of Vivian Holland, Elizabeth Sturges, and Gladys Neale, three of Macmillan’s female readers, to show how their work from the 1950s and beyond helped articulate a modern literary aesthetic for Macmillan and contributed to its status as one of the most important Canadian publishing companies of the twentieth century.

In The History of Blackwood: Author-Publisher Relations in the Victorian Era, author David Finkelstein shows how literary/aesthetic value and material
production intersect to form a publisher’s “house identity” (20). The ideological and cultural influence of the Macmillan Company of Canada are accessible through its house identity, a term useful to the scholar who understands a publishing company as both arbiter of cultural taste – in issuing educational and trade titles that reflect specific aesthetic values, for instance – and a business – Macmillan was a successful publishing house that showed a substantial fiscal profit. Publishers’ readers, whose assessments implicitly and explicitly endorse specific literary genres and aesthetic values, assist in the formation of a firm’s house identity. As Linda Marie Fritschner attests, because they advise “on the acceptance, rejection, and revision of manuscripts,” publishers’ readers have “substantial power in shaping [editorial] policy within a publishing firm” (94).

In her landmark article issued in 1980 – it remains a seminal and penetrating analysis of the complex, culturally significant role of publishers’ readers – Fritschner identifies the primary functions of all publishers’ readers: to “evaluate solicited and unsolicited manuscripts” (50), to advise an “employer on the acceptance and rejection of manuscripts” (53), and “to procure manuscripts and authors for the company” (83). The responsibilities of all readers, regardless of compensation, remained consistent. Freelance readers, whose work fluctuated according to the whim or need of publishers, received less pay than their in-house counterparts who earned annual salaries. There was, however, a hierarchy, linked less to remuneration than to an individual’s gender, class, and cultural position, which served to differentiate among publishers’ readers.

Fritschner makes the categorical distinction between “influential” readers and “hack” readers. Historically, the influential reader was male. He regarded literature as art rather than commerce, enjoyed “direct contact” with authors, and served as a conduit between the author and publisher. In fact, Fritschner identifies the “prestigious” reader as “more an ‘author’s reader’ than a publisher’s reader.” In stark contrast, the hack reader was generally female. She was mindful of a work’s potential audience and probable profit, and she rarely met the authors whose manuscripts she evaluated. Since the publisher mediated between author and reader, the hack reader was “the publisher’s advocate not the author’s sponsor” (Fritschner 48).

Each of the women under consideration here functioned primarily as hack readers. Women such as Vivian Holland, Elizabeth Sturges, and Gladys Neale assessed manuscripts for Macmillan, but they were usually assigned writing by women and writing for children – judged to be less significant than serious poetry and fiction – and they were neither recognized nor remunerated as editors. In English Canada, the professionalization of editing – work previously undervalued since it was largely the purview of women – began in earnest in the 1950s and the first vocational editors were male.2 Little is known about female assessors whose editorial labours, less influential but no less important to Macmillan’s financial stability and reputation, were undertaken in the shadow of their male colleagues.

To recover their voices, we must turn to their readers’ reports where, despite their obscurity and in the process of discussing another’s work, they reveal much of themselves – rare details of their personal lives, their ideological convictions, and the aesthetic and cultural values endorsed by Macmillan.

Vivian Holland worked at Macmillan in the 1950s, left the company in 1955 for family reasons but continued her work sporadically as a freelance reader, and returned in the 1970s as in-house editor in the education department. During the intervening period, she moved with her husband, Donald Holland, to Evanston, Illinois, but once their son Timothy was born, the family returned to Toronto. Even as a young woman, Holland was a confident assessor of manuscripts whose reports show that she recognized the qualities of a superior manuscript. She understood the workings of the book trade – “that publishing is half the patronage of an art and half business” (Fritschner 53) – and the need, for example, to offset the cost of producing expensive juvenile titles through co-publication with Macmillan New York. Unfortunately, she claimed the New York office was often “hard-hearted” (RR, 31 May 1951) in its rejection of Canadian titles. She also intuited the importance of upholding the firm’s literary reputation and its role, partly moral, as arbiter of cultural taste, that a submission must “justify encouragement toward publication by Macmillan” (RR, 31 Aug. 1957).

Holland eschewed “light fiction” (RR, 23 Oct. 1954) in favour of realistic literature. Superior fiction, she believed, comprised a convincing, dramatic plot driven by interesting incident, fully developed characters, and a vibrant style. Highly moral in her literary judgment, she condemned writing that showed “the worst possible taste” (RR, 28 Nov. 1950). She abhorred the hackneyed plot, work that was shallow, gratuitously vulgar or obscene, or lacked authenticity, and a writing style that was either “flippant” or “facetious” (RR, 22 Feb.1952) and marred by errors in grammar and spelling. In her reports, Holland paid particular attention to the presentation of female characters, and appreciated a writer’s attempt to draw believable women over stock figures. At a time when readers and booksellers were asserting a taste for indigenous stories that evoked a sense of their place in an expanding and changing world, she also valued work that was identifiably Canadian in theme.

Holland’s assessments were concise and revealed little of her own personality, aside from a natural impatience with writerly vanity. Precise and clear, they reflected the qualities she admired in graceful prose. Holland lauded “polished” writing that “sparkled” (RR, 23 Oct. 1950; 20 July 1950). She liked colourful characters, such as Kenneth Orvis’s excellent portrayal of the villian in The Bite of the Silver Bee – “an interesting, wholesome outdoors story . . . which might well appeal to American and English children as to Canadian” (RR, 8 Apr. 1954). Rarely did she descend to the depths of insult, as she did in the case of a farming account by a Welsh immigrant to Canada – “Slangy, vulgar, illiterate. A genial moron. No” (RR, 15 June 1955) – or when she questioned a writer’s ideas – “The author asserts that she has been pronounced sane, but one wonders. . . . [She] has some extremely novel ideas which are too ridiculous to quote. I’m afraid she’s right off the rails” (RR, 19 Mar. 1953). Her disdain for unseemly manuscripts, especially where obscenity was “carried to . . . [ridiculous] length” (RR, 10 June 1953), was more often presented with tact.

As a publisher’s reader, Vivian Holland may have wielded less influence than her male colleagues, but their assessments reveal a mutual appreciation for Macmillan’s aesthetic values and an understanding of the character of the firm. It could be argued, in fact, that the “common herd of readers” (Fritschner 63), those women whose task it was to assess the bulk of manuscripts received by Macmillan, had the potential to influence a wide readership, less interested in poetry and serious fiction than adventure tales, popular history, and juvenile literature. Moreover, by endorsing publication of popular titles that conformed to the company’s notions of propriety and taste, they helped build a financial base that supported publication of Macmillan’s trade list
of important cultural texts.

Following an extended hiatus for family reasons, Vivian Holland returned to Macmillan in the 1970s to work in the education department under Gladys Neale. Her previous experience as assessor for Macmillan served well in her new editorial role, and she brought to her work the professional commitment and exacting standards evident in her reader's reports. As in-house editor, however, her responsibilities increased considerably. She corresponded directly with authors, oversaw the preparation of manuscripts for the printer, obtained illustrations, and guided manuscripts through the production process. Between 1973 and 1974, as general editor of the Great Stories of Canada series, she was responsible for the reissue of seven titles in the series and worked with an editorial team of three colleagues. She also became an author. *Time Trip*, an adventure story for children accompanied by study questions and activities, was issued by Macmillan in 1973. Holland's career, which spanned three decades of the twentieth century, charts the changing professional opportunities for women in publishing. As a reader of trade titles and later as children's author and in-house editor — the late designation of editor undoubtedly brought her satisfaction — Holland occupied an unacknowledged position of influence at Macmillan.

In 1955, Elizabeth Sturges was hired as Vivian Holland's successor. Born in Korea and raised in the United Church, she married into an old Newfoundland family. Her reader's reports convey a dynamic personality, vibrant sense of humour, and acerbic wit. Sturges appears to have been a cosmopolitan woman of wide-ranging interests. In addition to a deep knowledge of literature, she knew the geography of England, may have had a fondness for cats, and certainly knew "how to curry shrimp" (RR, 3 Nov. 1955). Like her predecessor, she relished her work as a reader for Macmillan and was a confident assessor of manuscripts.

Less concise than Holland, Sturges also brought Macmillan's high standards to her reading of various manuscripts. She, too, had little patience for mediocrity in content or style. Her disdain for "meaningless phrases" such as "unwashed aroma," "lacy curtains," [and] "overflowing with animal vigour and maleness" (RR, 10 May 1957), and her exasperation with a "dreary novel" (RR, 19 Apr. 1956) elicited a succinct response: "This MS is a lead coin, gilded, and drops with a very dull thud" (RR, 20 Sept. 1957). Sturges eschewed the use of vulgarity for its own sake, and often read a manuscript through a moral lens. She regarded one writer's treatment of petty thievery, for example, as "downright immoral" (RR, 14 Mar. 1956), and rejected another manuscript that indulged in "sentimental idealism":

> My own personal feeling is that students should not be encouraged in this art of facile over-simplification, at any age. They would gain more from a struggle with more subtle and complicated essays on human achievement. Too little is said of the acute discomforts of genius, quite aside from the practical difficulties which are overcome. (RR, 21 Feb. 1956)

Sturges's attention to a work's Canadian content and suitability as a Macmillan book surpassed that of Holland. She especially disliked books with a European or British focus. In her view, P. von Weymarn's *In Search of Highways* employed a disagreeable European syntax, and his "approach to the question of sons finding their life work and their women is also European" (RR, 3 Aug. 1956). She preferred books written for the Canadian market and, therefore, declined Elizabeth Sargent's *All Together with Annabelle* on the basis of its false depiction of Ontario's Muskoka region: "Muskoka is not seen through Canadian eyes and only English people would imagine that a house and cabin not built on a lake and a long walk from a ... pond ... would attract tourists" (RR, 3 Apr. 1957). Her reports also reflected a high-minded concern for Macmillan's reputation and whether or not a manuscript "would add to the prestige of either the author or his publisher" (RR, 14 Feb. 1956). In the case of inferior work, especially a novel of "endemic vulgarity," Sturges would declare, "[i]t is not our book" (RR, 11 Feb. 1957).

She may well have lurked as a "skeleton" (Fritschner 45) in her publisher's house, but Sturges brought to the assessment of manuscripts her literary acumen, as well as an intuitive grasp of the character of Macmillan. Her reports show "the way a firm's [house] identity, once established, exerts an influence over the type of book accepted for publication" (Fritschner 85). In 1947, when John Gray was appointed general manager of the company, Macmillan was recovering from the constraints imposed by the Second World War. Throughout the 1950s, Gray seized the opportunity of economic renewal and a heightened public interest in Canada to build a quality trade list of indigenous titles; in spite of "continuing problems" in Canadian publishing, he "oversaw the most prosperous and successful period in the company's history" (Whiteman xii–xiii). Gray was committed to issuing serious trade books that would articulate the country's maturing nationalism and appeal to a Canadian audience, works by historian Donald Creighton, playwright James Reaney, poet E. J. Pratt, and novelists Ethel Wilson, Hugh MacLennan, Adele Wiseman, Robertson Davies, and W. O. Mitchell, for example. With the assistance of dedicated readers who took pride in their work for Macmillan, Gray skillfully managed to consolidate the company's position as one of Canada's premier publishing houses, known for issuing culturally relevant books written by and for Canadians.

Sturges worked alongside Gladys Neale throughout the 1950s. With the exception of several years at the rival firm Clarke, Irwin, where she arrived in 1980 to rebuild the company's educational program (MacSkimming, *Perilous* 300), Neale's career was spent at Macmillan. Of Baptist background and a teacher by training, she graduated from Toronto's Normal School, taught for a brief period, but soon realized that she "wasn't cut out to be a school teacher" (MacSkimming, Interview 4). Having decided that she "really wanted to work with books" (MacSkimming, Interview 5), Neale secured a temporary position at Macmillan. Twice she held clerical contracts of two or three months' duration before being offered a permanent position. When she joined Macmillan at the end of the Depression, her weekly salary was $12.50, minimum wage for women at the time, and $2.50 less than she had been earning cutting and "run[ning] off stencils" (MacSkimming, Interview 4) at the Canadian Institute for International Affairs. She soon was transferred to the educational department, where eventually Neale became "one of most successful and respected educational publishers of her generation" (MacSkimming, *Perilous* 52).
Gladys Neale was an unusual woman for her time. Independent and resourceful, she was encouraged to pursue a career by her mother who regarded the position at Macmillan as a professional opportunity for her daughter. Ultimately, Neale also won the support of her male colleagues, but first she had to prove her worth to Macmillan. At a time when few women could do so, Neale traveled freely across Canada to promote Macmillan’s books. At first, she was accompanied by co-worker Ellen Elliott, but Neale soon journeyed alone, met with educationists and teachers, and in hotel rooms across the country displayed trunk loads of books. Given the obstacles she faced – a profound cultural bias against professional women, the threat of demotion in favour of male colleagues, the firm’s devaluing of her work, a lack of recognition, and lesser remuneration and company benefits – it is remarkable that Neale was known “as a formidable woman who grew more so with age” (MacSkimming, Perilous 52).

A senior employee and head of educational publishing, Neale was also a conscientious researcher. Her reader’s reports convey a keen understanding of the book trade, her initiative, sense of humour, and close connection to John Gray. While Vivian Holland and Elizabeth Sturges read trade manuscripts, Neale attended to the quality of educational texts, the potential of school books to reach a targeted audience, and their marketability. She believed, for example, that school books, like trade titles, ought to be written in a “vivid, dramatic and personal style” (RR, 17 May 1954) and eschewed work that was “prosaic and uninspiring” (RR, 16 Mar. 1950). She argued that students deserved textbooks that were informative and readable – regardless of subject – and that clarity did not preclude the presentation of facts in elegant, engaging prose that avoided the inappropriate use of slang.

Ever mindful of audience, Neale understood the various curricular needs of primary and secondary students. Had The Golden Trail: The Story of the Klondike Rush (1954) “told the story of one of the men who actually made the terrible trip from the Coast to Dawson [City],” young readers, Neale counseled, would find Pierre Berton’s rendering of “the first discovery of gold” (RR, 15 Nov. 1949) more exciting. Like Holland, she relished adventure tales. Farley Mowat’s Lost in the Barren Lands included “authentic material on life in the far north” that added “to the value of the book,” and the description of how the protagonists “used the resources of the country to survive” (RR, 10 Nov. 1954) would appeal to boys. A preference for authenticity did not dampen Neale’s appreciation for fantasy. Michael A. Hicks’s The Griffin Laughed, for example, was a delightful “mixture of ‘Once upon a time’ and modern day happenings” (RR, 28 June 1949). Manuscripts that combined genres were usually met with disapproval, however. Neale declined Anton Mohr’s Almost a Fairy Tale, neither “a good adventure story for boys and girls [nor] a travel book. There is too much fact mixed up with fiction” (RR, 9 Jan. 1951), and Elizabeth K. Hubbard’s Prairie Folk, which fell “between being a school text and a juvenile. . . . because it covers only a portion of the courses of study” (RR, 13 Mar. 1951) in the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

Since the success of an educational title depended on its acceptance by provincial boards of education – it was the rare text that could successfully straddle educational and trade markets – it is not surprising that Neale’s concern with a manuscript’s market potential exceeded that of either Holland or Sturges. Biographies of Canadians, for example, which were “much in demand” (RR, 16 Mar. 1950) by departments of education, schools, and teachers, needed to be accurate and interesting to be successful. Neale rejected Edwin C. Guillett’s Canada’s Literary Pioneers for its “boring” treatment of “obscure” individuals (RR, 15 Nov. 1948). Other works were judged as incomplete, poorly organized, or too ponderous to appeal to student readers. Although much of Neale’s energy went to evaluating school books – spellers, readers, history, geometry, and mathematics textbooks – she also assessed juvenile titles. Like Holland, when she encountered an especially promising children’s manuscript, Neale astutely proposed co-publication with Macmillan New York or Viking Press as a way to offset the cost of the work’s production.

Gladys Neale was cognizant of her accomplishment as an educational publisher. In 1998, a year before her death, she admitted to interviewer Roy MacSkimming, author of The Perilous Trade, a survey of English-language publishing houses of the twentieth century, that she became really a successful school book publisher. As a matter of fact, the school book department was the only profitable [department] in Macmillan . . . the only one making any money . . . . I always said that I made my contribution to Canadian culture because it was partly the revenues of the school book department which enabled John Gray to do some of his trade publishing. So I took a little credit. (MacSkimming, Interview 9)

Today, we admire Neale’s ambition and laud her pioneering efforts on behalf of Macmillan. Late in her career, Neale’s achievement was recognized by a number of her male colleagues, most notably by John Gray, who had appointed her head of Macmillan’s educational department and later a member of the company’s board of directors. In his memoir Fun Tomorrow, issued just before his death in 1978, Gray described Neale as “capable of handling . . . responsibility. . . . Attractive, hard-working, and forceful, she was . . . well known and much respected by educators across the country” (338). Twenty years later, Neale conceded, “it took him some time and hard thinking, but he finally ‘did right’ as far as I was concerned” (MacSkimming, Interview 13).

Difficult as it may be to assess the influence of the publisher’s reader, if we comb extant reports in publishers’ archives, she emerges – in shadow, if not in full view – from “the occult office, hitherto hermetically sealed, and hidden from all eyes” (Horne 183). They may have wielded less influence than their male colleagues, but readers Vivian Holland, Elizabeth Sturges, and Gladys Neale were instrumental in shaping the house identity and reputation of the Macmillan Company of Canada. Their incisive and cogent analyses of manuscripts and intuitive understanding of Macmillan’s “morality, standards, taste, and . . . literary tradition” had a profound impact on the company’s trade and educational lists. Moreover, as Fritschner insists, even unimportant readers have left an indelible imprint on literature, authors, publishers, and the public. . . . [Their work] reminds us of the complicated and circuitous journey of a manuscript from the time an author first thinks he has finished with it until the moment when a publisher tells him that he will undertake to publish it or refuses to do so. (94)

In fact, the readers’ reports of Holland, Sturges, and Neale provide evidence of the vital role of female assessors. Taken together, their reports show, in crucial detail, how each woman helped foster Macmillan’s literary aesthetic and its status as one of Canada’s leading publishing companies of the last century.

End Notes
1. The abbreviation “RR” refers to “Reader’s Report.”
2. Kildare Dobbs, for example, joined Macmillan in
the spring of 1953 and eventually became senior acquisitions editor.

3. See my article, “‘Head of the publishing side of the business’: Ellen Elliott of the Macmillan Company of Canada,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 44.2 (Fall 2006): 45–64, in which I discuss Elliott’s impressive twenty-seven year career at Macmillan.

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Works Cited


Historically, women have often performed important roles associated with the mediation of text, as translators, patrons, and compilers. This brief survey examines the mediating role of editor in two scholarly anthologies of Middle English literature, Jessie Weston’s *The Chief Middle English Poets* (of 1914) and Eleanor Hammond’s *English verse between Chaucer and Surrey* (published in 1927), which were compiled at a time when the study of Middle English was becoming more firmly established as an academic discipline and was changing from a primarily philological orientation that focused on text production towards a primarily literary-critical orientation that focused on interpretation. Both women were prominent medieval scholars of the early twentieth century; each of them was an influential proponent of her particular interpretation of medieval literary culture. The two anthologies represent twinned and opposed tendencies in medieval literary-critical study and textual editing history that have persisted since that time.

As authorities on the subject, anthology editors influence who and what, as well as how and by whom literature is read. The two anthologies appear similar in some ways at first glance and both were compiled for the use of students. However, the two editors are quite different in their selection of texts, the extent and types of supporting materials they supply, the ways in which they arrange their chosen texts, and in their assumptions of what constitutes effective, responsible textual editing. What they have in common is that both used the opportunity of editing an anthology to promote a particular interpretation of the nature of the literature of the medieval period and its relevance for the contemporary world. Jessie Weston and Eleanor Hammond were professional readers, critics, and editors who wrote literary history when they edited their anthologies of Middle English literature.

Anthologies are a utilitarian form of publication, but my interest is further validated by Eleanor Hammond’s claim that it is when the imagination is at the “ebb-tide” that one can see themes and movements most clearly. Anthologies often represent a conservative viewpoint; as when, in Weston’s anthology, she assures her readers that her selection is the result of extensive consultation with eminent British and American scholars. Yet, for all anthologies are sometimes slighted, they are also regarded as highly influential. During the so-called “canon wars” of the 1990s in American universities, anthologies were said to be implicated in politically motivated ideologies. Anthologies often explicitly claim authority for themselves and reading audiences often attribute authority to them. As Leah Price says, anthologies “determine not simply who gets published or what gets read, but who reads and how” (3). Anthologies are a nexus where powerful influences such as the book publishing business, literary culture, and academic institutions intersect.

Both anthologies under discussion were designed for student use, and by the early twentieth century, there were sufficient numbers to warrant the investment. Jessie Weston is able to draw on a large number of edited texts to create her anthology. Eleanor Hammond sees no need to provide biographies since the *Dictionary of National Biography* exists. She assumes that the student has access to the *New English Dictionary*, that he or she is familiar with Chaucer’s English, and can consult editions that have detailed bibliographies. None of these assumptions would have been conceivable had it not been for the nineteenth-century initiatives to produce grammars, dictionaries, and edited texts. Much of the groundwork having been done, it was an appropriate time to begin to interpret the materials from a literary perspective. Before comparing the two anthologies, it is helpful to have a brief idea of who these two women were.

Jessie Laidlaw Weston (1850–1928) was one of the foremost medieval scholars of her time, as explained by Angela Jane Weisl in her biographical sketch of Weston’s life and career. Although Weston never held an academic post, she mentored
students, published in scholarly venues, moved in scholarly circles, and was awarded an honorary advanced degree. She was an Englishwoman who studied in Europe and was acquainted with the most prominent French and German textual editors of her time. She was well-known as a translator of German, Dutch, French, and Middle English works, but her life’s passion was folklore. Her interest was in the relationship between history and myth, particularly in the Arthurian legends. Her most famous work is From Ritual to Romance (published in 1920), in which she claims that Arthur was an historical figure absorbed into pagan mythology and that the cup and lance of the Grail stories originated as pagan fertility symbols. She valued vigour, drama, and originality. She believed that free translations into modernized forms best reflected a medieval author’s intended purpose.

The relative de-emphasis of historical development reinforces the impression that all of these stories (or types of stories) influenced the storytellers of the time. Eleanor Prescott Hammond (1866–1933) was an American scholar who enjoyed a distinguished thirty-year career (only six years of which was spent in an academic setting). Derek Pearsall and A. S. G. Edwards have described Hammond as one of the foremost experts of her time on fifteenth and sixteenth-century manuscript production and circulation. Her other major work, the meticulously documented Bibliographical Manual of Chaucer (of 1908), is still a standard reference. She was the first person to identify the so-called “Marriage Group” of tales in The Canterbury Tales. Her name designates a prolific copyst (the “Hammond scribe”) of the later fifteenth century and a group of affiliated manuscripts at Oxford (the “Hammond group”). She was interested in socio-cultural explanations for literary phenomena, a vigorous proponent of objectivity in textual editing, and an expert in versification. She valued sensitivity, freshness, and rhythmical skill. She believed that a precise replica of the text was the only responsible way for a student to approach medieval literature.

Historical and biographical information helps to confirm and amplify the insights available from examining the elements that Gérard Genette terms paratextual, things like titles, prefaces, introductions, tables of content, indexes, and notes. In theory, each structural element can be examined in isolation, but in practice, each modifies the other; they are inextricable. Anthologies are a composition, and it is the relationship between the elements that creates the effect as much as the elements themselves. This comparison of the selection, arrangement, and textual editing policies of the two anthologies begins with Weston’s anthology.

Weston’s title, The Chief Middle English Poets: Selected Poems, newly rendered and edited, with notes and bibliographical references, belies the contents. Surprisingly, there are no works by the most pre-eminent poets; there is no Chaucer, Gower, Langland, Pearl-poet, or Lydgate. She slights aristocratic and courtly forms. Biographies are short and many works are anonymous. She includes Barbour’s Bruce, co-opting a Middle Scots poet into her designation of Middle English, but does not include any works by William Dunbar or Robert Henryson. It is not unusual for religious and lyrical compositions (like romances) to be anonymous, but Weston does not emphasize individual authors overall. Anyone expecting a literary gathering might be disappointed, but if the book was re-titled as “The Principal Aspects of the Middle English Poetic Environment” it might more accurately reflect the contents.

Instead of selecting works by the “Chief Middle English Poets,” Weston focuses on the types of writing then current. The types are gathered into six broad categories, which are: historical, legendary, romances, tales, proverbial and didactic, and religious and lyrical. Within each category, she tries to choose representative materials (including the best-known and some not readily available to the student) in order to demonstrate the rich and varied nature of medieval literature.

Although guided by professional opinion, Weston’s principal criteria for inclusion are that a text must be representative of medieval life, of historical interest, and have literary merit. She includes some lesser-known lyrics that were too good to omit. She adds the Bestiary because it had such a strong influence on medieval art and teaching. She includes a very high proportion of religious verse relative to secular verse, unlike the majority of anthologists who followed her. They may be anticipating that medieval religious verse will not be fully comprehensible or appeal to an increasingly secular and more diverse readership, whose familiarity with liturgy and Latin is possibly limited. Weston tries to include complete texts, if at all possible, considering that excerpting too often results in “mutilation,” which serves neither the author nor the student. She is particularly interested in texts that show early stages in the evolution of story cycles. As a passionate nationalist working just before the First World War, she does not include any French or Latin material or acknowledge European influences.

Weston translated freely so that medieval works could be easily accessed by modern audiences. She saw the works as alive; her text is for readers. Her supporting material is minimal; the focus is on the content, not the literal form. No footnotes or glosses are necessary or supplied, although there is a bibliography, an index of first lines, and an index of titles. Weston gathers together what she regards as the essential “speakers” or components in the Middle English dialogue, which accords with her awareness of the oral, communal nature of medieval culture and literature. She saw medieval works as living examples of the English national heritage and her anthology implicitly says to the reader, “Here is the matrix within which our stories originated. By reading this book, you can inhabit the medieval world of ideas and expressions.”

Within a primarily synchronic organization, Weston acknowledges development over time in her overall arrangement and within each category. Her book opens with histories which, for her, provide the nucleus of fact in romance tales. Histories are followed by legendary or saints’ lives, where there is also a factual basis, before the book moves to romances. Tales (primarily beast fables) are placed next, followed by proverbial and didactic works, with which they are associated. Religious and lyrical verse follows. The categories shade one into the next along a spectrum that modulates through degrees of abstraction, from most historically based towards entertainment, and from educational towards spiritual and celebratory. Intentionally, she does not draw sharp distinctions between literary types.

Within each category, Weston arranges the material more or less from oldest to most recent. For example, in the romance category, she begins with King Horn and Havelok the Dane and ends with the Arthurian stories. The relative de-emphasis of historical development reinforces the impression that all of these stories (or types of stories) influenced
the storytellers of the time. She is not specific about the relevance of the texts for the twentieth century, but the model conveys an idea of the pervasiveness and variety of influences on literature within cultures generally.

Weston accepts the work of previous textual editors and specifies which sources she used in endnotes. She then remakes the edited texts to create literature accessible to any reader prepared to cope with a slightly altered word order and pronouns like “thou” and “thee.” Her version has modernized language, modernized spelling, and full punctuation, while still conveying something of the flavour of medieval language.

Hammond’s full title reflects the contents of her anthology: English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey, Being Examples of Conventional Secular Poetry, exclusive of Romance, Ballad, Lyric, and Drama, in the period from Henry the Fourth to Henry the Eighth, edited with introduction and notes. Hammond’s purview is poetry of specific orientation and type, by prominent poets, during a discrete time period, from John Walton, whose work dates to about 1410, to Henry, Lord Morley, who wrote about 1545, omitting Gower, Wyatt and Surrey. She traces the Lydgateian tradition, in its (according to her) tendencies to dullness, standardization, and awkwardness. She has generous portions of Hoccleve and Lydgate and offers some Skelton, Hawes, and Barclay, along with a large selection of lesser-known poets and seven works by anonymous authors. Despite her admiration for the poets then known as “the Scottish Chaucerians,” she includes no Middle Scots poets. She does include French and Latin material, perhaps reflecting a cosmopolitan, international orientation. She specifically mentions that cost factors (for both the editor and the reader) influenced her choices. She confines herself to a compact single volume and avoids expensive inclusions, while supplying texts not generally available in what she sees as the neglected field of formal verse.

Hammond was innovative in her choice to focus exclusively on the time period of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. What her anthology lacks in comprehensiveness is compensated for by the coherency of its subject. Her arrangement is chronological but static to an extent, reflecting her belief that the failure of Chaucer’s English heirs and successors, their imitativeness, was a characteristic that prevailed for an extended period of time. She demonstrates degrees of dullness, irregular growth, and variations around dominant motifs. She names the period “The Transition,” which for her is the transition between the full flowering of poetic genius of Chaucer and that of Spenser.

Hammond believes her own time to be enduring the same kind of poetic exhaustion, the same “cramping of the spirit” she sees afflicting poetry of the later medieval era (ix). She characterizes both periods as suffering from a cyclical imbalance, a lack of equilibrium, a lack of sensitivity. To her, the emerging middle class of the later medieval period is similar to the proletariat public of her own age. The two times are similarly characterized by “unsettlement and exaggerated literary expression” (5). She terms the modern era a “hurried huddled age,” in which the middle class is dulled by “machine-service” and continually over-stimulated, if free from the inhibiting influence of the Catholic Church (6, 4). If the historical circumstances prevailing in her own time are similar to that of her chosen focus (if a bit more difficult in modern times), and if the poetry of her own time is comparable (and she believes it is), then, modern times may also experience an eventual release of independence, imagination, and energy similar to that the later sixteenth century saw with Spenser and then Shakespeare.

In Hammond’s view, the editing of Middle English is an ongoing and perpetually unfinished project. For her, each modern reader should have the challenge and pleasure of discovering the ambiguities rife in medieval texts and interpreting the texts for themselves. Hammond believes that textual editing is as likely to mislead as clarify. All of her texts were freshly produced, most directly from the manuscript source. She, like Weston, prefers to use whole texts when possible, or at least substantial extracts. She reproduces texts verbatim et literatim, exactly as written, including (especially) the virgules and points of the original punctuation (x). For her, the student “is then given his proper share in the editorial problem of following the medieval mind” (x). In her notes she records significant variants and the documentary details of her source, such as where words are inserted with carets, rubrics, and indications of authorship. When she finds it necessary to deviate from the exemplar, she encloses the emendation in square brackets and records the circumstances in a footnote. All expansions of abbreviations are signaled with italicized characters. Hammond supplies a substantial general introduction and each selection is prefaced by a precise examination of the evidence about the author’s life and works, with information about the documents from which she takes her texts. A third of the book is meticulous and erudite endnotes that draw on a very wide range of literary examples. She also supplies a list of abbreviations and references and a select glossary and finding aid.

The two approaches to medieval literature used by Jessie Weston and Eleanor Hammond represent opposites that have long prevailed in medieval literary studies. Textual editing tends to be oriented to producing either what the author intended to say or what a text ought to say. Editors differ in the degree of accommodation to a modern readership. Weston creates a reader’s text that brings together a number of types of literature current in the medieval era and re-fashions them so they can be appreciated by modern people. Hammond documents the literature of the later medieval period as an era that parallels her own time. There may now be a choice other than situating oneself along a continuum, but understanding the choices our predecessors made is an important preliminary step to imagining other options. One wonders if the editors of one hundred years ago had more – or less – intellectual opportunity than we do. Perhaps we are coming to a juncture where we can conceive of options unavailable to Jessie Weston and Eleanor Hammond.
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The Politics of Category Work
Much is at stake in the development of new technologies for writing and reading women’s literary history. The Orlando Project has been engaged in this endeavour for more than a decade: our efforts to date have emerged in the online publication of Orlando: Women’s Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present in 2006 (orlando.cambridge.org; see also http://www.cambridge.org/online/orlando online). This complex textbase, which at first glance resembles a conventional online reference work, is actually a complexly structured experiment in new ways of doing and presenting feminist literary history. This experiment continues not only with regular updating and expansion but also with new work by the project team towards the next phase of the Orlando history: the integration of sustained discursive history into the textbase. This paper surveys some of the major concerns associated with producing feminist literary history electronically and outlines some strategies we are developing for providing an interface for the discursive portions of the history.

As John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid argued in The Social Life of Information, digital technologies are caught up in powerful social networks, communities, support systems (or lack of them), and institutions. When a project is a feminist one, there are valid concerns regarding the digital medium itself. One is access: in North America, women equal or (for younger women) outstrip men in internet participation, but elsewhere this is not the case. If not in the academy or in business, in the home context it seems probable that women as a group own or have access to less powerful and less up-to-date computers than do men as a group. Even in Canada and the US, women are under-represented in science and technology education, as presenters at new technology conferences, and lag behind men as early adopters of technology, suggesting that there may be something of a disconnect between an experimental feminist digital project and its target user base. Even if this does not follow, since many feminists have found in digital media a hospitable space for exploring new modes of representation, expression, creativity, communication, and activism, social factors nevertheless have a profound impact (see Fernandez et al). What in a digital resource is readable, knowable, learnable and by whom is in large part a result of the ways in which the digital is socially embedded, as well as the particulars of the resource.

Technologies shape the academic world in large part via category work. As numerous scholars from Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star to Hope Olson have demonstrated, categories and classificatory systems have profound effects, whether we are talking about library cataloguing...
systems of apartheid or the conceptual organization of nursing as a discipline. Categories are never more powerful or potentially pernicious than when invisible and naturalized. Preparing material for digital presentation involves implicit or explicit category work that has a major impact on how a system looks and works, and what someone can do with it. The interface between a computer user and a system’s underlying design becomes crucial, then, if we agree with Andrew Feenberg that the technical codes of our culture are not neutral, and tend to naturalize and make routine “the pursuit of power and advantage by a dominant hegemony” (15). Since feminist scholarship aims to work against that hegemony, interface issues become vital.

**Orlando**

Feminist literary history investigates and seeks to elucidate the uneven historical operations of the contested category of gender, particularly in the field of women’s writing. It has important corrective work to do, since the stories told about literary history are still often unsatisfactory. To take just a few of the most egregious and persistent claims: women don’t write satire; women don’t write ambitious forms like epic; women are not helped but sometimes spoiled by training or learned skill; women are expressing their feelings, rather than influences, and their earliest work is often the best. Further, biographical discussions of women writers often exhibit a confusion between using knowledge of the material circumstances of composition to deepen understanding of finished work, and using this knowledge for special pleading, or to suggest that women need special forbearance in criticism of their work. These sorts of misconceptions, along with our desire to re-centre literary history on what has generally been treated as marginal or absent, drive our interest in fact and context, in filling out and complicating the picture in a careful and nuanced fashion. In an electronic environment, such a project must devise a means of doing so while making its own category work and structural principles as explicit as possible.

Orlando has done this in producing an extensive literary historical textbase. It is organized around a core set of biographical and critical entries on individual women writers, and in order to make it as user-friendly as possible, the interface resembles a standard literary reference work, as can be seen from a sample entry screen (Fig. 1).

**Orlando**’s text, organized as entries, timeline materials, and bibliographical information, can be sliced and diced into differently ordered or selected chunks, and navigated according to hypertext links. So, for instance, you can move from the Ada Byron entry front screen (Fig. 1) into the screen discussing her life, which contains a hyperlinked mention of her mother, born Anne Isabella Milbanke, whose much-contested name is sometimes given as Lady Noel Byron. Clicking on Lady Byron’s name takes you to a set of links offering, among other options, a timeline of Lady Byron’s life whose eight items are derived from the entries for her daughter Ada, her husband George Gordon Lord Byron, as well as those for Anna Jameson, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Orlando can be searched and reformatted dynamically into sets of excerpts based on various category markers embedded in the prose. These tags are XML (Extensible Markup Language) markup; they label not only the formal structure of Orlando materials (as does HTML or Hypertext Markup Language) but their semantic content. For instance, biographical entries are sectioned invisibly by the tagging with sixteen major topics (and more specific tags within those tagsets); discussion of writings draw on many more tags in the three areas of production, reception and textual features (Fig. 2). Such semantic tags allow for dynamic user-directed searching of the textbase according to a huge variety of criteria with varying degrees of specificity. You can survey all discussions of violence within the “Life” sections of entries, or you can gather together mentions of a particular publisher, say Smith, Elder, in the context of writers’ relationships with their publishers. Most inquiries will take multiple tacks, for instance, inquiry into the place of anthologies in women’s literary history. Suppose you wish to investigate the part played by anthologies in the production and circulation of writing by women. You might begin by searching

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**Fig. 1:** Overview screen for Ada Byron entry.

**Fig. 2:** Orlando life tagset and the writing (production) tagset
for writers whose entries are tagged for anthologization. This produces a list of 116 women whose entries mention the inclusion of their work in anthologies, more than 10% of the total (currently 870) of women with entries in the textbase. Looking at these results in the form of excerpts reveals 198 mentions: not every instance of the anthologization of work by a writer included in the textbase, but a wealth of reference to anthologies, some famous, some canon-making, some quirky, some specialized, etc. A search on “anthology” as an attribute of the tag <genre> yields 257 hits (again delivered in the form of excerpts) about writers who compiled anthologies (fewer than 257 writers, since some produced several anthologies). A search on anthology in the Author Summary tag whittles down those 116 plus 257 writers to 53 whose association with anthologies (nearly all as compilers rather than those included) was important enough to merit mention in a brief outline of their significance. Finally, a search on the word “anthology” within the Genre Issue tag gives a much more selective set of results, discussing such matters as what is important or desirable in an anthology, whether a lavish use of quotation can be regarded as equivalent of anthologizing, etc. This is just one quite simple example of what the semantic markup can do: other possible searches include London performances; writers politically active in particular causes or organizations; writers who quote other writers or are influenced by particular books; set in a particular place, and so on.

The Orlando team is now turning from the production of the more granular material in the form of entries (although we continue to add another 50 writers per year along with updating existing materials) to writing several books of continuous literary historical prose that are planned for both print and electronic production of the more granular material in the textbase, so the books must be “chunkable” while also making substantial arguments. Because the books won’t be easily sorted by name- or date-organized entries, chronological lists, or bibliographical materials, these lengthy texts will require a different set of navigational tools if the online version is to deliver a reading and usage experience in any way comparable in ease and efficiency to the printed version.

Interface principles

Both in the Orlando Project and more generally in a number of interface experiments, we have adopted a small set of guiding principles. First, we think it is important that the reader has more than one path into the text, and more than one form of the text available at the end of the path. For instance, Orlando contains three distinct groups of entry points, for searches directed respectively at finding out about people and chronologies, and for searches making expert use of the tagging to dynamically assemble subsets of the textbase which cut across individual entries. Most of
Orlando is available at what is essentially the paragraph, or several-paragraph, level of granularity, so that material can be read as usual in the context of longer documents, or else extracted from the longer documents and reassembled for reading as a series of paragraph-sized pieces that weren’t originally written together.

Secondly, rather than obfuscate or naturalize the category work performed by the system, we try to make the user interface transparent without being overwhelming. Our category work and the principles that inform it are available in a number of forms, so that users can assess how the system generates results and on that basis make informed choices and readings of the textbase.

Our third set of principles derives from previous work by Ruecker (2006) on rich-prospect browsing interfaces, where some meaningful representation of every item in a collection is combined with emergent tools for manipulating the display. In addition, the representations should provide access to further information. The dynamic construction of chronologies within the current Orlando is an example of this kind of manipulation. For the proposed interfaces that provide tag browsing and index browsing, the original meaningful representation consists of the items in the table of contents, and the emergent tools are the lists of tags and index entries that can be used to dynamically insert the contents of tags into the table of contents (TOC). Since each line in the TOC will allow access to the volume, we have also met the condition of the representation serving as a means of accessing further information.

Reading view
Our work on the Orlando Project offered the opportunity to explore the design of dynamic tables of contents. As mentioned above, the next phase of Orlando will involve writing and publishing a series of three volumes of literary history, intended for broad coverage of three historical periods and written for continuous extended reading. The volumes will be published in print form, but will also be available online for subscribers to the project. Our goal in the reading view (Fig. 3) is to provide an interface that resembles facing pages, with a number of additional features. The reader can, for instance, dynamically resize the text to a font size more convenient for reading, and an optional navigation feature based on the table of contents is provided on the left side of the screen, allowing the reader to move easily between chapters or other sections of the book. Readers can access this reading screen in several different ways, including directly from the list of volumes, indirectly through the dynamic table of contents, and with another degree of indirection through the index browser or tag browser, after identifying tag content of interest and clicking on it. Finally, these reading pages can also be accessed through other entry points to the project, many of which will offer the possibility of including the “histories” in the searches.

Dynamic Table of Contents (TOC)
While some readers will wish to access the online volumes sequentially, beginning at the first page and reading through, other readers may wish to dip into the books by using the table of contents. In this case, the proposed TOC is in effect a series of links that can be collapsed or expanded as the reader scans through for a chapter or section of interest (Fig. 4). Clicking on one of the expanded items will open the appropriate volume at the location indicated.

The use of a dynamic table of contents is not an innovation in itself, but represents what may be a necessary step in the process of encouraging the reader toward more interactive approaches to accessing online material intended for continuous extended reading. Such approaches are represented in our Orlando sketches by the Tag Browser and Index Browser.

Tag Browser
The proposed Tag Browser provides a degree of interactivity with the online table of contents that has not been widely explored, although the possibility for this new affordance is present in any collection with semantic encoding (Ruecker 2005). Our sketch for this interface (Fig. 5) shows the list of available tags on the right, with the table of contents for Volume Two in the central panel. The conventional TOC entries are in white, and in light blue are the first few words of content that has been tagged by the collection authors with the tag chosen by the user. In this case, the tags are “advertising,” which occurs three times in the document, and “earnings (literary),” which occurs six times. By clicking on any of the lines of text in the table of contents, the reader can choose to be linked either to that point in the document, or to a dynamically-assembled collection of paragraphs that contain the tag of interest.
Index Browser
While the Tag Browser provides access to spans of texts enclosed by tags, the Index Browser adds the concept of identifying locations of interest as points in the text rather than as ranges (Fig. 6). A typical index entry does not enclose a body of text but instead identifies a single location. This proposed interface combines both kinds of material in a single list, which has been moved here to a central location in order to better accommodate the greater number of items. The TOC here, as in the proposed Tag Browser, serves as the basis for showing prospect on the entire document, with tagged items or index entries dynamically inserted as the reader selects them.

TagCloud Creator
In the case of Orlando, the project members have the opportunity to provide translation of XML tag names into forms that are hopefully understandable by people outside the project. For other digital collections, it will be necessary to create an intermediate technology that can allow librarians to generate a meaningful selection of tags and rename them for general use (Fig. 7). Once the tags have been selected and renamed, they can be made available for an interface that allows readers to add or subtract tagged content from an existing table of contents.

Conclusions
Each of the interface sketches we’ve described here is at the beginning of our research life cycle, which moves from static sketches to kinetic versions to interactive prototypes, and finally into development systems available online to the larger community of readers. At each stage, we are able to carry out some form of user studies involving discussions about the functionality and the design, and in later phases we can measure actual use through screen captures and analysis of log files. The strategies that we are pursuing build on our previous understanding of the need to provide the reader with a range of possibilities, some of which are tightly coupled to approaches inherited from print, while others emerge from the new opportunities offered by working in a digital environment. The stages in the process, however, are also iterative, meaning that responses from prospective readers who act as our study participants will influence the direction taken in the next round of designs.

Given that our user group is predominantly but by no means exclusively female, we must ask also whether gender considerations in interface development extend beyond what we’ve outlined here, which are hardly gender-specific. For instance, studies have found that women tend to engage more in communication-oriented activities rather than information-seeking ones: might these sorts of factors have interface design implications? To historians with a strong sense of the changing constructions of gender, however, the question is a complicated one. It seems entirely possible that hypotheses about gendered interface design may reflect rather than trouble gender assumptions (Paskonen). These are complex issues that require extensive research into the myriad ways in which “technologies operate as a site for the production of gendered knowledge and knowledge of gender” (Wajcman 45). In the meantime, the Orlando Project’s expanding literary history will give priority to rich prospect and the transparent deployment of categories in our development of new interfaces for reading and engaging in feminist scholarship.

Works Cited


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Fig. 6: While the sketch of the Tag Browser provides access only through the tagged content, the Index Browser adds another level of sophistication, by including both tags and index items.

Fig. 7: The TagCloud creator is shown here in three parts, beginning at the top. It is intended to generalize the approach we’ve been developing for the Orlando volumes, by allowing the curator of any digital document tagged in XML to create an equivalent of the Tag Browser, which appears as a tag cloud and an interactive table of contents. A working prototype has recently been developed by Stéfan Sinclair at McMaster University (Ruecker and Sinclair 2007).
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Janet Cardiff’s audio tours, which predominantly occurred in the 1990s, were site specific, interactive works that relied on the production and subsequent reception of sound and voice in order to alter the visual environment in which meaning was produced. The self-described “walks” are grounded in a genealogy of past guided tours that are formatted under the heading of education. While Cardiff’s outdoor journeys have been connected to her other indoor ventures (such as In Real Time (1999)) that mimic the experience of audio tours in art galleries and museums, it is fair to say that the “walks” are not merely extensions of these indoor tours, but rather linked to other modes of exploration in urban environments, which were built around the masculine gaze.

The Audio Guides or Audio Tours banish static spatial limitations of the Museum, carry the body of the willing participant through an urban environment, and transform the space surrounding the body through a process of binaural recording techniques, where real-time sound from the environment is displaced by the recorded sound. Cardiff’s work produces fluidity both in the physical movement that is required to experience it and in the resulting shift in reception of location on the visual and aural registers. The sedentary meanings that are associated with specific places can be tampered with when background noise from a primary time and space is isolated and a new vocal track from a secondary time and space is layered over top. Furthermore, these “walks” suggest that the senses which guide the body through familiar or unfamiliar space are non-discrete. When there is uncertainty as to whether the visual corresponds with the audio, a shift in experience occurs and elucidates the relationship between hearing and seeing. One of the ambitions of this project is to separate the voice from speech and review its relationship to narrative. Without speech as the overarching concern for narrative, what remains is the relationship between aurality and the vocal body. The vocal body is the body that voices in a physical sense, and subsequently it is experienced through aurality, or what is taken in through the ear.

In addition to discussing the work of Janet Cardiff in relation to cinematic practice, the notion of a deconstructed narrative relies upon a strategy of feminist theory. Rather than referring to her work as “physical cinema” (as many art critics have), or movement with a soundtrack, it is of greater intellectual value to extend analysis beyond the technological composition of these works and into the broader feminist scope of narrative as a rich ground from which to demonstrate voice as an interruptive force within a normalized cultural construction. Cardiff’s “walks” construct meaning beyond the medium of which they consist. The use of binaural headphones and supplementary visual aids produce a listening and viewing experience that is unlike predominant cinematic practice. However, the value of the content, or what is transported by the artistic technology, becomes significant. In other words, the voice in the work of Janet Cardiff requires special attention, not because of how it is conveyed to the listener, but rather, because of the effect it has on narrative structure. The voice builds an acoustic space for the listener where the fractured narrative may be heard. To fracture or cause small breaks may disrupt the flow without destroying the form or shape of an existing body. Insofar as the “walks” function to push the listener along a determined path, they demonstrate how narrative performs this function despite the many vocal breaks that take place. The voice performs this function in several locations, and rebuilds said locations through the breaks in narrative.

The Missing Voice (1999–2000) and Her Long Black Hair (2005) are site specific, although in different countries, and they maintain the listener as a crucial aspect of the visual experience of a landscape. The Missing Voice: Case Study B (1999) is set in the large urban environment of central London (UK). Cardiff created this piece while she was living there; it was a response to living in a new city as a lone female and the specific feeling of paranoia generated by this experience. In this piece,
navigation (or walking) through the spaces of the city is explored in terms of the speech-act; walking becomes enunciation. Michel de Certeau argues that the city walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks’. The movement of walking through a variety of spaces can take any number of motivations or volitionary actions and subsequently holds the transformative power of ‘trying out’, ‘transgression’, and ‘respect’ that results in the construction of place. (Certeau 99)

Certeau then discusses the differences between strategy and tactic, where a power structure is played out between the overall strategists in government and the individual walker (whose movement is tactical and carves out a space of potential resistance). Her Long Black Hair is not unlike The Missing Voice in that both “walks” take place in economically powerful First-World urban centres. However, Her Long Black Hair is literally a walk in the park, as the walker is guided by the intermittent voices on the headset as well as some photographs. The Missing Voice is lifted from the film noir genre and Cardiff assumes the role of detective. The act of walking is combined with the act of listening as the participant forms new constructions of place on a path that is already laid out by the artist. The contract between disembodied voice and listener is then played out through directed movement. The participant, in order to experience the work as desired by the artist, accepts the voice as an authoritative one and conforms to the walking as requested. The possibility for transgression then comes not from the individual, but from a partnership between the artist and the listener/viewer.

While much of Cardiff’s work has been reviewed in light of the specific function that the listening device performs, its carriage of the voice and subsequent impact on the body cannot be resisted. This relationship can be described in terms of interactivity. For something to achieve interactivity, physical participation is required from the audience. Janet Cardiff’s walks add further complexity to this relationship as there is more than one stage of interactivity. Does the work become interactive when headphones are placed on the head or, does interactivity take place when the listener moves through various spaces on the guided tour? Conversely, what becomes of the inactive interactive participant who utilizes the headset but chooses not to follow the instructional voice? To consider interactivity provides a means for the exploration of Cardiff’s work where the various components of technology, movement, and proprioceptivity produce an interactive experience that is informed by the narrative or anti-narrative that occurs in the sound recording. The voice is contained and transferred by the technology, stimulates the proprioceptive sense and produces a bodily response that is dependent on the listener.

Walking through London and Central Park in The Missing Voice and Her Long Black Hair raise other issues of place, as urban areas are evocative of the flâneur and the specific history of the masculinist gaze in the urban environment. The flâneur has been a topic of much debate in terms of being both spectator and representation. For Griselda Pollock and Janet Wolff, the topic of the flâneur initially provided an historical window into the masculine public sphere and practices of visual consumption. Pollock, in citing Baudelaire states:

Thus when we come to read Baudelaire’s essay titled across Paris for the flâneur/artist, where women appear merely to be there as spontaneously visible objects, it is necessary to recognize that the text is itself constructing a notion of WOMAN across a fictive map of urban spaces – the spaces of modernity. (Pollock 101)

Similarly, Wolff confirms that the suggestion of a “flâneur/se” is difficult to embody. Despite the more recent argument that there is a greater intermingling of men and women in private and public spheres, the ability to look or gaze upon men as “visual objects” is untenable. One of the particular goals of Wolff’s work on flâneurism was to represent a view of women’s experience outside of the dominant representations of modernity. Although flâneurism is a nineteenth or early twentieth-century concept, Cardiff’s urban walks are connected to these notions because without providing a feminist historical account of visual practices in the urban environment, there can be no contemporary means of representing fictions or experiences outside of the masculinist gaze. The Missing Voice and especially Her Long Black Hair (which weaves Baudelarian ideas of what is “seen” into the audio experience) evoke that flâneur from the first person or embodied position of the walker. Flâneurism teaches that the practice of walking in the city is very much connected to the identity of the walker and not just to what is already in place and waiting to be seen. For example, without feminist critique, the “privileged” white male walker who walks through the city may become the flâneur and assert his masculinist gaze over an array of visual elements without inhibition. The female and/or non-white person walking in a city risks becoming the object of the masculinist or colonizing gaze and may even face threats to personal safety. While the flâneur has been linked to urban spectatorship, the connection has also been made to the ethnographer.

The possibility for transgression then comes not from the individual, but from a partnership between the artist and the listener/viewer.

After consideration of the various non-technological elements that converge in a Janet Cardiff “walk,” the voice is repeatedly returned to as the “substance” of each work. Insofar as Barthes (in Image, Music, Text) proposes a separation of the voice from speech and subsequently provides the word “substance” to describe the status of the voice, Cardiff’s voices are substantial. They go beyond words and provide an unexpected narrativization. The voices that she gathers for sound recording as well as those spontaneously experienced by the participant cause physical movement, initiate the contract between artist and participant, and instigate the proprioceptive sense within the body. Nonetheless, the voice remains bound by the format of the work, and it is the fractured narrative that gains its stuff and credibility from the voice. The narrative content of each work is closely linked to cinematic practice in terms of the relationship between audio tracks and visual surroundings. Cinematic genres such as “film noir” are cited in Cardiff’s work. Film noir maintains a single masculine narrative voice that forms a backbone for the visual experience on screen. However, Cardiff uses voice to break the narrative thread and saturate the walking participant with sounds on headphones as well as real time sounds from the local environment. This sound layering causes linear breaks in what has become an assumed succession of events.

“Voice is a language of its own” (Schaub 175). Cardiff makes this assertion with regard to the physical effect of experiencing the voice of the other. The
centrality of voice as a kind of kinesthetic language in its own right can be represented, not through the reductionary practice of phonetics, but through the utilization and transformation of cinematic apparatus. If the voice is indeed a "language," it is then best explored through absenteeism of the visual body. The voice minus a body positions the voice outside of the body but does not suffer the loss of impact, despite the loss of its producer. To the contrary, the disembodied voice gains an uneasy authority, and it can be argued that walking with the voice of a stranger results in a mediated intimacy. Cardiff attempts to answer the question: where is the voice? Her response: "It's in the listener's mind and in the digital information, but it also creates a third person, a third world, a mixture between listener and my voice." It is questionable whether this "third person" is achieved, as there are other circumstances, especially on the side of the participant, which shape this relationship. The authority of the female voice must be accepted by the listener. Articulation and reception are dependent on the set of power relations that occur between the two bodies involved. The feminine voice, much like the gaze, has historically been supplanted by the masculine voice, as psychoanalytic feminists will attest. There has traditionally been no position for woman to speak from.

While Janet Cardiff utilizes a cyborg metaphor to describe the connection between her voice and the listener, her work (from a critical standpoint) does more than produce a physical experience of voice. The voice is deeply involved in the narrative that plays out over the headsets. In forming the lead vocal representations, Cardiff's feminine voice as narrator is difficult to place. Once the headsets are in place, she is not an author to be read, she is a speaker. Speech and its ties to the metaphysics of presence are well known. Derrida has pointed out that speech carries with it full presence, both proximal and temporal. Conversely, writing is joined to absenteeism. Thus leading to the question: where does the disembodied voice of a woman fit in the narrative format through which it is received? The issue of masculine authority is continually raised in correspondence with the voice. A voice is not neutral, especially when placed in conjunction with narrative. The narrative voice as a tool of modernity was dominant and replete with a unified masculine tone. The voice in the narrative structures of history belong to an unidentified speaker who threads together a series of events and makes them refer to one another through a causal relationship. The voice is a linchpin for the narrativisation of events; it steers the narrative in a specific direction, providing connectivity for what may be disparate events.

The spoken mobile narrative brings forth issues that have not in the past been considered in relation to each other. The mobile listener, disembodied speaker, fractured spoken narrative, and changing visual surroundings provide ample areas for critical analysis of Cardiff’s work. In attempting to locate the critical tools to discuss her work one encounters the problem of looking beyond the terms that structure discussion on specific genres. Her work, despite being influenced by cinema, is not cinematic; it is experienced differently, because the listener enters into an environment that is always in flux. These “walks” also exceed the boundaries of an installation piece, as they are removed from the institutional setting and the expectations that arise in such settings. Cardiff’s outdoor walks are not spaces within spaces and, while the path which the listener is set upon is predetermined, the movement of people cannot be. Her work makes a mess of boundaries between artistic practices as well the interpretive tools given to define such practices. In order to remedy this situation of uncertainty when approaching the work of Janet Cardiff, the solution is to return to the voice, the key thematic element in her work. The voice, and particularly the feminine voice, has been historically and textually omitted because history has been a predominantly masculine enterprise. Emile Beneviste commented that without the mention of “I” or “you,” the speaker is not identified and the appearance of unity is maintained (Beneviste 218-9). Conversely, if the speaker wishes to intervene or influence the hearer in some way, the use of personal pronouns asserts a present tense and produces disunity, as the “I” of a sentence, the subject who enunciates, is not the subject of enunciation. When Cardiff inserts her own subject position into the narrative, an interruption takes place and a story unfolds. The story is carved out of a masculine cultural entity, and has the power to move the body of the listener in a precise way.

The position of Cardiff’s own voice as the audible narrative voice within the audio track raises another issue of proximity. The reception by the participant of the artist’s voice adds a further layer of meaning to the experience of the walk. However, the voice of the artist is the medium for this experience and enters into the articifice of the work. The narrator’s voice being that of the artist should not initiate a debate on authenticity, as the voice in this instance is the substance or material that pushes the movement of the participant. It is a crucial and unusual fact of Cardiff’s work that the voice of the artist is quite literally the voice of the artist. In literature, there is usually a distance between the reader and the narrative voice because the scene of writing is predicated on the absence of the speaker. Furthermore, the majority of popular film is a narrative medium without a narrator. Cardiff narrates through a rehearsed and written text. In Her Long Black Hair, the preparation for the final product is exact and laborious. Cardiff's script is written and then framed temporally to accommodate the choreography of the listener. This text is also temporally bound in the speed of walking and the distance to be walked. It can be argued that cinematic narrative is impersonal and machinistic due to the absence of a vocal guiding events. Cardiff’s walks use her voice and provide an artificial closeness to the first person events being described. The voice is received as organic and unrehearsed; the artifice and technology required to produce such a piece are untraceable.

The vocal body is the body that voices and contributes to the non-episodic continuum of sound we experience daily. In Cardiff's "walks," the substitution of headphones for the speaker's voice creates a disembodied voice. The voice resides somewhere between the vocal organs and the structures of language. To hear a voice without an owner produces a conundrum; the presence of the speaker is felt without the corresponding visual experience of viewing the articulation. To listen to a disembodied voice is to experience the other through an abnormal mode of representation. This begs the question: if Cardiff’s walking tour is an audio document instructing the listener to retrace footsteps, is the subject located in the visual experience or in the aural field? Furthermore, is the subject of the work the person who moves through space, or the artist? These questions are derived from the relationship between headset and mobile participant. The voices on the headset give structure to other real-time voices that are simultaneously heard. As a result, new environments are constructed through the duration, repetition, and temporality of this vocal overlapping.

Works Cited


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In 1619, the first slave ship from Africa landed in Jamestown, Virginia, beginning “more than two hundred years” of American slavery (Kolchin 3; Southern 1, 3). “Clamped in irons and wedged into foul vessels,” between ten and eleven million “living slaves crossed the Atlantic Ocean from the sixteenth . . . through the nineteenth century,” exiled from their homeland forever (Southern 3; Kolchin 22).

In “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said contends:

Seeing the world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal. (186)

The contrapuntal perspective of African-American slaves is evident in spirituals: folk songs that combine elements of “African musical expression” and a foundational Western religious narrative (Lovell 88; Kolchin 41).

In musical terms, counterpoint is created when two or more melodic lines, or voices, are combined simultaneously “punctus contra punctum,” or “point against point” (Machlis and Forney 21). The goal of counterpoint is to create a musical structure in which each part retains independence, yet also functions as a component of the whole. To understand spirituals, a scholar must listen to all of the voices they contain – literary, musical, and historical. This paper will employ a contrapuntal perspective to demonstrate how folk songs can allow literary scholars to hear the voices of historical figures, such as Harriet Tubman, who were marginalized because of their race or gender (Groos 10).

The musico-literary form of African-American spirituals was influenced most profoundly by the oral traditions slaves brought with them from Africa. According to the Western musical tradition, “folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission” (qtd. in Lovell 12). African-American slaves “were [predominantly] illiterate” and were thus unable to leave many written records (Kolchin 134). Therefore, “oral modes of communication,” such as singing, which were an important means of transmitting and preserving information in African society, gave slaves a connection to their past, while also enabling them to carry information with them when they were sold or transferred between plantations (Lovell 12; Sidran xiv). Due to their oral composition and transmission, as well as problems with the transcription process, spirituals are important examples of texts that do not fit into the “purview” of traditional literary studies (Groos 10). In Black Song: The Forge and the Flame, John Lovell Junior addresses this problem. He states:

As literature, the spirituals lack many of the qualities which academics require. They were not written down, book fashion. They were not in fashionable or, even, grammatically correct English. . . . Many times their language is not literary at all. Like most folk songs, theirs is the language of the people. The hope of their creators was communication, not inclusion in an anthology. . . . Even so, they possess a number of authentic literary qualities. They have poetic exaltation and often a care for language in the best poetic senses. They have definite themes and theme development. Borrowing from the Bible and other sources, they show a credible, and sometimes remarkable, adaptive style and result. (375)

The borrowing process that Lovell describes forms the crux of my paper. To explore the voice of Harriet Tubman, I will examine the literary and historical significance of the adaptation of Old Testament exile narratives into spirituals during the antebellum period.
Unlike the Israelites in Psalm 137 who ask, “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?,” African-American slaves “could and did sing the songs of the Lord in a strange land” by adapting Biblical narratives into spirituals (Psalms 137:4; Lovell 63). The Old Testament is a foundational canonical text in Western culture and presents a worldview in which “God, [is] the creator of all things, [and is] all powerful and just” (“Masterpieces” 3). In the Old Testament, the history of God’s “Chosen People” is controlled by an “omnipotent and omniscient deity” who liberates and rewards the faithful (Armstrong 55; “Bible” 48). As Said asserts, “Exiles feel . . . an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology” (“Reflections” 177). Biblical stories provided slaves with three important elements of this ideology: “symbolization of the deliverer or overcoming the oppressors, inspiration from notable accomplishments under almost impossible circumstances . . . and exemplification of the workings of faith and power” (Lovell 257). Notable examples of spirituals with Old Testament themes include: “Go Down, Moses,” which I will discuss at length in this paper; “Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel!”; “Sweet Ca-naan”; “Father Abraham”; “Oh, Didn’t it Rain”; “Balm in Gilead”; and “Wrestle On, Jacob.” The Biblical figures in these spirituals were admired because they represented solid traits of character [that were germane to the slave situation]. Noah [of “Oh, Didn’t it Rain” ... was admired] for his goodness, manhood, and concern for peace. Jacob [of “Wrestle on Jacob”] because he showed how a man could rise step by step. Moses [of “Go Down, Moses”] for his leadership and preoccupation with freedom [and ... Daniel [of “Didn’t my Lord Deliver Daniel?”] for his courage and wisdom. (Lovell 289)

By aligning themselves with Biblical figures, slaves were able to collectively identify with the experiences of Jews in the Old Testament. While any of the aforementioned figures would provide an interesting avenue of inquiry, due to the association between Moses and Harriet Tubman, it is the story of Moses on which I will focus.

Moses, whose story is found in the Book of Exodus, is the “man chosen by God to lead the Hebrew people out of Egyptian bondage, to preside over the Sinai ceremony constituting those people as the people of God, and lead the Hebrew people to the promised land” (Beegle 909). Moses’ victory over the Pharaoh and his escape to freedom in the first three sections of Exodus was a “favorite theme” in spirituals: “Go Down, Moses,” “Turn Back the Pharaoh’s Army,” “March On,” “When Moses Smote the Water,” “Did Not Old Pharaoh Get Lost?,” “Brother Moses Gone,” and “Come Along, Moses” are all examples of spirituals that explore this theme and thus they share a common set of symbols. Moses is the “symbol of deliverance of a whole people, of true leadership, and of the opportunity for each person to be free”; a “symbol of oppression overcome and destroyed” (Lovell 259). Egypt is “the land of slavery from which free men emerge, the land leading to the wilderness . . . the country symbolizing the drive for freedom . . . and the land of miraculous deliverance” (Lovell 258). The Pharaoh, like the slave owner, represents “earthly power to the highest degree” (Lovell 243).

African-American slaves were exposed to Christianity by the very slave-owners that oppressed them. Slaves in urban settings were often allowed to attend church, while in rural areas, they worshipped in segregated praise-houses, attended camp meetings, or worshipped unsupervised in “invisible churches,” which were often led by African-American preachers who stressed aspects of the Bible that applied to the experiences of the congregation (Kolchin 144). Note how the story of Moses is described by the speaker in this account of worship that was published in The Independent in 1862:

I witnessed . . . a party of forty-two men, women and children [who] arrived from South Creek on Pamlico River. After finding themselves really among friends, they joined in singing some of their simple chants and hymns; and when the party were being transferred to the shore, one of the women, with an infant at her breast, broke forth in exclamations of praise and thanksgiving to God, which in its simple pathos reminded me of the song of Miriam celebrating the deliverance of the children of Israel on the banks of the Red Sea. They walked in slow and solemn procession to Fort Clark, chanting as they went; “Oh! Ain’t I glad to get out de wilderness.” (Qtd. in Epstein, Sinful 259)

Harriet Tubman, one of the most famous conductors on the Underground Railroad, was born in Dorchester, Maryland, in approximately 1820. The granddaughter of slaves who had been brought to America from Africa, Tubman became a slave at an early age when she was “hired out as a baby nurse” (Sterling 744; Eggleston 121). In 1849, after “learning that she and her brothers were to be sold,” Tubman ran away to seek freedom in Pennsylvania (Sterling 744). From there, between 1849 and 1861, she operated a line on the Underground railroad, which consisted of a network of safe houses that “extended from the

Deep South to Canada" (Eggleston 121). It is estimated that in total, Tubman "made nineteen trips, freeing . . . more than three hundred slaves"; purportedly, she "never lost a passenger and . . . was never caught" (Sterling 744; Eggleston 121). This successful record of going down into the South to lead "her people into freedom" earned Tubman the name Moses, an association strengthened by the ascription of the spiritual "Go Down, Moses" to Tubman (Eggleston 122; Dixon 24). Scholars "have recorded how Harriet Tubman used 'Go Down, Moses' to call up her candidates for transportation to [the] free land" (Lovell 196).

"Go down, Moses" was the "first spiritual to be published with its music." It was entitled "The Songs of the Contrabands O Let My People Go," words and music obtained through the Rev. L. C. Lockwood, Chaplain to the Contrabands at Fortress Monroe . . . (1862)" (Epstein, "Slave" 692-93). While many different versions of "Go down, Moses" can be found in subsequent collections, I have chosen to focus on an arrangement by H.T. Burleigh (1866-1949) from the second volume of The Celebrated Negro Spirituals (1919) due to its concise format. The lyrics of this arrangement read:

When Israel was in Egypt’s lan’
Let my people go,
Oppress’d so hard they could not stand.
Let my people go.
Go down, Moses,
’Way down in Egypt’s lan’,
Tell ole Pharaoh,
To let my people go.

Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said,
Let my people go,
If not I’ll smite your first-born dead,
Let my people go.
Go down, Moses,
’Way down in Egypt’s lan’,
Tell ole Pharaoh
To let my people go! (21-24)

The famous refrain, "Let my people go," which is repeated twice in each stanza, is a direct quotation from Exodus 5:1: "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go" (Burleigh 21; qtd. in Dixon 27).
Since these words are spoken by God, for Christians they provide an authoritative Biblical precedent for sanctioning the liberation of God’s people from bondage. The direct adaptation of events from Exodus is evident in the second stanza as well; the last of the ten plagues is discussed in a line that reads, "If not I’ll smite your first-born dead" (Burleigh, "Go" 23). This line refers to the statement in Exodus 4:23: "If thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn" (qtd. in Dixon 27). Although this line provides a powerful threat, the two stanzas of "Go down, Moses" found in this arrangement do not dwell on the suffering the slaves experienced in captivity (1:18-20) or the plagues God inflicts "upon the oppressors" (7:14-11:10). Instead, they focus on the Hebrew slaves’ longing for freedom and, by analogy, the longing for freedom felt by African-American slaves (Lovell 326).

In "Go down, Moses," the collective yearning of the Hebrew slaves is expressed through the use of pronouns. It is notable that the slave "community" expresses its solidarity through the use of the first person possessive pronoun "my" (Margolin 591). The refrain, "Let my people go," is a notable example of this technique (Burleigh 21-24). This pronoun designates a community’s "shared sense of identity" in which the individual functions as part of the collective (Margolin 591). In stanza two the same refrain is preceded by the words, "Thus saith the Lord;" therefore "my" designates God’s authority over His people (Burleigh 21). Another level is added by the clause, "bold Moses said," which follows "Thus saith the Lord" (Burleigh 21). This stanza is structured so that the words of God are spoken through the prophet Moses; he is a "spokesperson" for God and God’s people (Margolin 607). According to this grammatical structure, the Hebrew slaves, God, Moses, and the contemporary African-Americans are part of the same religious community. To delineate this community from that of the oppressor, first-person pronouns are juxtaposed with second-person pronouns such as "your" (Margolin 607; Burleigh 23). As in Psalm 137, this juxtaposition creates a dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed: the Pharaoh and the Hebrew slaves in Biblical times and the slave owners and the African-American slaves in nineteenth-century America (Margolin 607).

I will now turn my attention to how Harriet Tubman used "Go Down, Moses" as a tool on the Underground Railroad, and how, by patterning her life story after that of Moses, a male Biblical figure with an authoritative relationship to the divine, Tubman was able to represent herself as a female spokesperson for the Christian African-American community in the antebellum period. In a biography of Tubman entitled Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman and published in 1869, Sarah Bradford describes how Tubman used a version of "Go Down, Moses" as "a code language for emergency." Bradford writes:

At one time she left her party in the woods, and went by a long roundabout way to one of the stations of the Underground Railway, as she called them. Here she procured food for the famished party, often paying out of her hard-gained earnings, five dollars a day for food for them. But she dared not go back till night, for fear of being watched, and thus revealing their hiding-place. After nightfall, the sound of a hymn sung at a distance comes upon the ears of the concealed and famished fugitives in the woods, and they know that their deliverer is at hand. They listen eagerly for the words she sings, for by them they are warned of danger, or informed of safety. Nearer and nearer comes the unseen singer and the words wafted to their ears . . . I gave these words exactly as Harriet sang them to me to a sweet and simple Methodist air. 'The first time I go by singing this hymn, they don’t come out to me,' she said, 'till I listen if the coast is clear; then when I go back and sing it again, they come out. But if I sing: Moses go down in Egypt / Tell old Pharaoh let me go; / Hadn’t been for Adam’s fall, / Shouldn’t have to die at all. Then they don’t come out, for there’s danger in the way. (Qtd. in Humez 234-35)

Notably, the importance of the story of Moses on Tubman’s passage through the wilderness was further enforced by the parallels she cultivated between her life story and that of Moses.

Tubman “closely patterned” her call to God “on the Old Testament narrative of the Lord’s call to Moses to take up the mantle of leadership found in Exodus 2:23-3:22 (Humez 152). Rosa Belle Holt describes this pattern in an article entitled “A Heroine in Eb ony” published in the Chatuaquan in July 1886. Holt writes:

[Tubman] said: ‘Long ago when the Lord told me to go free my people I said, ‘No Lord! I can’t go – don’t ask me.’ But he came another time. I saw him just as plain. Then I said again, ‘Lord, go away – get some better educated person – get a person with more culture than I have; go away, Lord.’ But he came back a third time, and speaks to me just as he did to Moses, and he says, ‘Har riet, I want you!’ And I knew than I must do what he bid me. Now do you suppose he wanted me to do this just for a day, or a week? No! The Lord told me to do it as long as I live, and so I do what he told me to.’ (Qtd. in Humez 151-52)
Passengers on the Underground Railroad also enforced the association between Tubman and Moses; some believed that, like Moses, Tubman had a special blessing from God. In an article entitled “Moses from the Rising Sun: The Antecedents and Advancements of the Coloured Race,” published in 1874, William Wells Brown wrote of an encounter he had in Canada in 1860 with a freed slave. He states,

> Of one man we inquired, “Were you not afraid of being caught?” “Oh, no” said he, “Moses has got the charm.” “What do you mean?” we asked. He replied, “The whites can’t catch Moses, [be]cause she’s born with the charm. The Lord has given Moses the power” (qtd. in Humez 259).

This quotation proves how the mythology surrounding Tubman evolved from the drawing of a parallel between the actions of a Biblical and contemporary figure, to a belief in a connection between Tubman and the divine. A critical reading of “Go Down, Moses” functions as a gateway into this important chapter of antebellum history and reveals the importance of evaluating how the adaptation process enables narratives to take on different meanings in different historical and cultural contexts – even when canonical narratives are adapted into marginalized genres.

In this paper I have aimed to demonstrate how spirituals, and other folk songs, can provide scholars with information about a marginalized female figure, whose voice might not otherwise be heard. To conclude, I will perform Henry Burleigh’s arrangement of “Go Down, Moses” to conjure Tubman’s voice today.

*Click on the image on page 23 to hear Sarah Jefferies, contralto, perform “Go down, Moses.”*

Works Cited


Ways of Seeing and Interpreting – More selected papers as well as video footage from the Women Writing and Reading: Past and Present, Local and Global conference. The second of these three special issues will explore different interpretations and visualizations of women's writing and reading.