

Intimate Politics in Anglophone Women's Writing
(University of Paris-Nanterre, 23-24 September 2022)

An international conference organized by FAAAM (CREA, EA 370)

In nineteenth-century romantic literature, especially poetry and personal writings, the notion of intimacy was understood as springing from the depths of an individual, untainted by cultural forces (hence closer to nature). Yet, as a number of studies have shown—most notably Foucault—intimate relationships are the product of social power structures deriving from a patriarchal gender hierarchy and reinforced by class and ethnic divides. The second-wave feminist slogan, “the personal is political,” coined by Carol Hanisch in 1969, drew our attention to the fact that aspects of women’s lives—housework, sex, familial relationships, etc. —were shaped by broader forces. We therefore invite scholars to examine “the personal is political” in all forms of women’s writings in English.

In *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (2007), Eva Illouz argues that the gender divisions that replicate the public and private spheres as well as divisions of labor are also based on emotions, without which men and women would not reproduce their roles and identities. An intense emotional culture participated in the development of capitalism. Twentieth-century America in particular witnessed the invasion of the public sphere by (Freudian) therapeutic discourse while, on the other hand, the private sphere was invaded by economic discourse. Thus, the private sphere of emotions was subjected to intense rationalization.

Furthermore, the multiplicity of sexual and gender expressions in the twenty-first century challenges normative assumptions of intimacy that privilege heterosexual relationships and the biological family unit, consider binary cisgender identities as given, and view sexual or romantic desire as the only ground for developing intimate relationships.

We invite participants to submit proposals treating the following themes:

1) The disclosure of intimacy as a double-edged sword for women in patriarchal cultures: empowerment, emancipation, but also increased vulnerability/exposure, backlash, commodification of intimacy. The #MeToo movement has considerably amplified the risks and benefits of disclosure. Women’s personal writings are especially subjected to this double bind.

What definitions of intimacy do women’s writings offer? How are the paradoxes of intimacy interwoven in women’s writings, negotiated within the constraints of gender, ethnicity and class? How can women writers represent the experience of intimacy (between resistance to disclosure and the need/desire to recount)? What innovative narratives of intimacy do queer identities give birth to?

2) Intimate spaces: one of the ways in which we experience and conceptualize intimacy is through space (public and private spheres, and so on). Intimate relationships involve ideas of proximity and distance. Moreover, intimacy creates space. Historically, the birth of a private, intimate culture in the eighteenth century correlates with the transformation of the private abode: beds began to be relocated to more private rooms, and separate spaces for hygiene were created, to name but a few changes. Just as social spaces are ideologically constructed so that they reproduce gender divisions and roles, so too are intimate spaces. Thus, home has been considered as the female domain because of the representation of women as carers/nurturers. This representation conceals power relationships, and the fact that intimate spaces, like any other space, are heterogeneous and precarious (Rose 1993). Investing women with the role of carer/nurturer grew out of their capacity to reproduce, the uterine space being a site of much conflict and contention. Perceived as the presumed source of hysteria, of women's assumed propensity for the domestic (Erikson's inner space) and of the promise/threat of maternity, also described as the cave of the lost Sibyl in Mary Shelley's introduction to *The Last Man* (1826), the uterus is often used as a metaphor for literary gestation. The body, and particularly the female body, with its convex and concave forms, its recesses and enclosed spaces, is often associated with the private and the intimate. As Gilbert and Gubar have pointed out, spatial imagery of enclosure and escape has characterized much writing by women (*Madwoman* 1979: 83, 85). From Charlotte Perkins Gilman (*Yellow Wallpaper*, 1892) to Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 1985), heroines have been restricted to rooms and roles. For female artists, the presence or absence of intimate spaces has affected their creative output, as Virginia Woolf powerfully demonstrated in *A Room of One's Own*. Because of the elusive nature of spatial intimacy, women writers have sometimes imagined utopian/dystopian worlds to represent it. In Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's feminist utopia, *Sultana's Dream*, women rule the world as society lives peacefully and prospers through their inventions of solar ovens, flying cars, and cloud condensers, which offer abundant, clean water to the population of "Ladyland." And the men, who are deemed "fit for nothing," are shut inside their homes. Participants may also question the role of virtual spaces in favoring/impeding intimacy.

3) Narrative intimacy: According to Lauren Berlant, the concept of intimacy rests upon the development of a story and a narrative. As the reader is not passive in the construction of meaning, reading can be viewed as an intimate experience. Creating and entering a relationship with a reader is sometimes a very strong motivation behind the act of writing—Ruth Ozeki has spoken of writing "embodied prose in order to elicit the same kinds of strong, physical, emotional responses, from the reader" ("Literature is a Kind of Mirror," 2016). On the poetic side, in *milk and honey* (2014) and *the sun and her flowers* (2017), the "instapoet" rupi kaur devised a poetic space combining text and image to recreate personal experiences of – occasionally traumatic – intimacy, which readers have shared and responded to. What kinds of "engagement" (Rita Felski 2008) can occur and develop throughout the reading process and beyond it? To what extent is intimacy created by narrative techniques? What issues of power are at play between (female) author and reader/public? What narrative voices shape intimacy? Participants may also examine experimental, genre-defying works that women have used to turn intimacy and emotion into political concerns.

Genres to consider: theatre, poetry, personal writings (diaries, letters, memoirs), first person novels, autofiction, science fiction, epistolary novels, experimental, genre-defying works, prison narratives....

Please send a 300-400-word abstract (for a 20-minute presentation followed by 10 minutes of question/discussion) with a short bio-bibliography to: faaam.nanterre@gmail.com

FAAAM (Femmes Auteurs Anglo-AMéricaines) is a research seminar whose members share an interest in women's writing and gender. We have published, in the wake of our two previous conferences,

Women's Life Writing and the Practice of Reading (Palgrave Macmillan 2018)

<https://link.springer.com/book/9783319752464>

&

Text and Image in Women's Life Writing: Picturing the Female Self (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021)

<https://link.springer.com/book/9783030848743>

Deadline for submissions: February 28th, 2022

Notification of acceptance: March 31st, 2022

Language of the conference: English

Organizing and Scientific Committee:

Claire Bazin (Université Paris-Nanterre), Nicoleta Alexoae-Zagni (Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis), Valérie Baisnée (Université Paris-Saclay), Corinne Bigot (Université Toulouse - Jean-Jaurès), Stephanie Genty (Université d'Évry-Paris/Saclay), Nathalie Saudo-Welby (Université de Picardie Jules Verne)

Select bibliography:

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Boling, Patricia. *Privacy and the Politics of Intimate Life*. Cornell UP 1996.

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