

Ann Powers

*YOU BETTER THINK: Why
Feminist Cultural Criticism Still
Matters in a "Post-Feminist,"
Peer-to-Peer World*

Tenth Annual USC Women in Higher Education Luncheon

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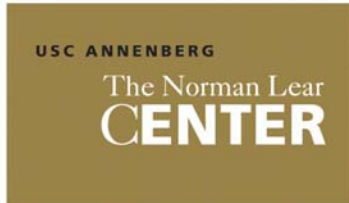
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YOU BETTER THINK: Why Feminist Cultural Criticism Still Matters in a "Post-Feminist," Peer-to-Peer World



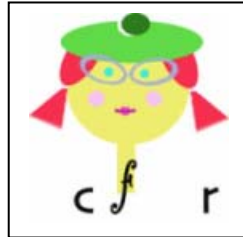
The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.



Popular Music Project

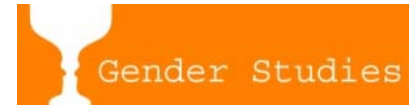
The Popular Music Project (PMP) is a one-stop home for the interdisciplinary study and analysis of popular music. Bringing together faculty and students from across the USC campus with musicians, critics, and industry innovators, the PMP takes pop music seriously as an object of sustained critical inquiry through a mix of public events, research projects, and Los Angeles campus residencies. The project's goal is to treat the making of pop music as a key site for education and pedagogy and for re-thinking questions of society, culture, history, and communication.



Center for Feminist Research

For 20 years, CFR has worked, together with the USC Gender Studies Program, to provide the University of Southern California's feminist community with research opportunities for the study of women, gender, and feminis. A variety of seminars, workshops, conferences, and informal gatherings have brought together a network of faculty, students, and members of the greater Los Angeles community who share interests and concerns about the operations of gender in our neighborhoods, our society, and our world.

CFR offers research support for USC faculty and graduate students, including special research fellowships for students in Communications and Cinema. Our Affiliated Scholars program offers access to USC facilities to feminist scholars from other academic institutions.



Gender Studies Program

Gender Studies at USC is an interdisciplinary program composed of faculty, students, and associated scholars who work together to examine the world through the lens of gender. We cross cultures, regions, periods, academic disciplines, and theories in order to study: the meaning of "male" and "female" as well as the actions of women and men. social roles and sexual identities in the contexts of race, class, and ethnicity. why and how gender has influenced who we are and what we do.

Gender Studies at USC was founded more than thirty years ago as the program in the Study of Women and Men in Society. Like similar programs in American universities, ours had two inspirations: The Women's Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which led to the creation of Women's Studies programs and feminist scholarship around the world; and the Gay Rights movement, which led to the development of Queer Studies programs, the study of queer theory, and LGBT organizations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Ann Powers Biography *Page 4*

*YOU BETTER THINK: Why Feminist
Cultural Criticism Still Matters in a
"Post-Feminist," Peer-to-Peer World* *Page 5*

ANN POWERS Biography



Ann Powers is Artist in Residence for 2008/09 at the Norman Lear Center's [*Popular Music Project*](#). Currently chief pop music critic at the *Los Angeles Times*, Ann began her writing career in the 1980s and since then has been on staff at *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, and *Blender*. For four years she was the senior curator at the Experience Music Project, an interactive music museum in Seattle. She is the author of *Weird Like Us: My Bohemian America* and coeditor of *Rock She Wrote: Women Write About Rock, Pop, and Rap* as well as cowriter, with musician Tori Amos, of the 2005 book *Piece by Piece*. Originally from Seattle, Ann now lives in Los Angeles.

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Ann Powers

Artist in Residence at
The Popular Music Project
USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center

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■ ■ ■

Last week I set aside a morning to write this talk, hoping to clear my head of its habitual static and access some deep thoughts about how my work as a pop critic relates to the larger, never-ending project of feminist cultural inquiry. I was in a hotel room in New Orleans, so my daughter couldn't run into my office and start yelling about princesses and Power Rangers, and I wouldn't have a deadline to meet until the evening. Having read a lovely and profound essay in the *New York Review of Books* by the novelist Zadie Smith on the plane, I was inspired (or so I thought) to take the long view, to consider the big picture, maybe even to quote a Frank O'Hara poem, as Smith had done.

But I am a weak woman. Fatal distraction was only a touchpad and a key click away. On Google news: Usher is telling his fellow R&B crooner Chris Brown to "have a little remorse" for assaulting his girlfriend, fellow singing sensation Rihanna, while Kanye West is defending Brown; at any rate, the pair seems to have reunited. On the *American Idol* blogs: photos have leaked of my favorite contestant, Adam Lambert, kissing his boyfriend at Burning Man – will this be the end for this year's most "theatrical" star? In my message box: reminders that I should be preparing for the night's assignment, a review of the first major concert



Judith Butler



Dick Hebdige



Britney Spears

Britney Spears will give since her public breakdown of 2007. I notice a preview video of the show's gone up on somebody's blog, bearing the headline, "Britney Shows Her Nipples."

This is the stuff of my daily life as a mainstream pop critic. It's not exactly what I meant to spend my lifetime contemplating. I had loftier ideals, or so I thought, as a graduate student at UC Berkeley, when I was enraptured by the gender-troubling discourse of Judith Butler and the semi-utopian subcultural talk of Dick Hebdige and the others at the Birmingham School. Nor do my current preoccupations have much to do (on the surface, at least) with the ecstatically oppositional art that first inspired me to make pop criticism my life, art made by willfully messed-up furies like Courtney Love, Karen Finley, P.J. Harvey and Kathy Acker. How did a self-respecting, punk rocking, street marching, clinic defending, act-upping feminist writer like me get to the point where she's seriously contemplating the state of Britney's nipples?

Let me defend myself by holding up some gems within the pile of tabloid scandal I just threw at you. By gems, I mean valuable food for thought within what seems like so much symbolic junk food, having to do with sexual liberation and gender equality. Almost always, a bigger story turns up within what seems like trivial distraction. The three I cited turn out to be classics.

Britney's the most obvious. She occupies the role of the tragic blonde, a stereotype born of Hollywood and the beauty industry, previously lived out by women she doesn't hesitate to reference – Madonna, whose triumph over it inspired Britney, or Marilyn Monroe, whose defeat must frighten her. Spears's career has been a textbook case of female exploitation, sometimes seemingly self-imposed, at other times external,

implicating her parents, her corporate sponsors, and of course, us, the drooling public.

For a pop critic, Spears is full of potential – not only because her music represents the priciest innovations in dance pop, but because she so easily embodies the culture’s anxieties about femininity in its Goddess Kali-like, three-headed manifestation: sexuality, motherhood, madness. We critics like our pop stars this meaty, this meaningful.

But Britney is also really hard to write about, because she’s such a source of mixed messages. Is she triumphing by returning to the stage, or being put out like an aging racehorse to win one last lucrative cup? Is her sexuality empowering, or debasing? Does it matter that she barely seems to participate in own recording efforts, or is being a first-rate avatar for other people’s creativity enough? Through Britney, the critic must face down her own attitudes about what makes an artist, and why we make and sustain certain stars.

Okay, moving on. Tabloid pop doesn’t age well enough for the critic to wait! The teapot-tempest around *Idol* singer Adam Lambert, which may be over by the time I give this talk, raises another set of questions about sexual identity and the public sphere. The 26-year-old contender and former *Wicked* cast member was already pretty much “out” by the time photographs surfaced of him smooching a boyfriend, in drag, and in further dishabille at Burning Man. But his very presence on *American Idol* brings up yet another set of fundamental question regarding sexuality and the public sphere.

Though a few Idols, most famously Clay Aiken, have come out after being on the show, an *American Idol* contestant has never uttered the phrase “I’m gay” on the program. What would it mean for a “family show” like *Idol* to embrace Lambert? How would it affect the jokingly homophobic banter between “metrosexual” host Ryan Seacrest and judge Simon Cowell? Such questions are just gossip on one level, but on another, they open up a new discussion about sexual identity and tolerance at a time when a film about San Francisco’s “gay saint,” Harvey Milk, was nominated for several Academy Awards – and when Proposition 8, which takes away gay people’s right to marry, still casts a shadow over California.



Rihanna & Chris Brown

And then there's Chris Brown and Rihanna. That one is tough to even talk about. I was working, writing about the Grammy Awards, when reports began circulating that the 19-year-old Brown had assaulted his 21-year-old sweetheart after a Grammy party Saturday night. I remember thinking, I hate this story. Brown and Rihanna are two seemingly sweet, clean-cut kids, role models – he's a popular artist on the Disney Channel, while she is a spokesperson for Cover Girl. He had talked in interviews about his stepfather's abuse of his mother; now he'd seemingly entered the deplorable cycle of violence, dragging with him one of the few pop ingénues not inclined toward stripper-like exhibitionism.

In the month or so since the attack, Brown and Rihanna's story has played out as part true crime, part celebrity romance. A photograph of the badly beaten victim surfaced, but days later it was reported that the couple had reconciled at hip hop mogul Diddy's Florida mansion. It's unclear whether he'll be prosecuted or, if so, if she will take the stand. Some "friends" of the couple have expressed anger at Brown, while others – Kanye West, explain yourself – have urged the public to "give him a break." In the midst of it all, their music is still out there, topping the charts, filling the airwaves, earning the love of young listeners. How do we absorb this story? And what does it mean for the couple's youngest fans, kids just getting ready to dance to Brown's "With You" at the prom, or tweens trying on their first eye shadow with Rihanna's picture pinned to their wall? This story allows for public discussion of domestic abuse – a plus, by feminist standards – but doesn't offer a very neat set of "teachable moments." Responding to this one, the critic must be supremely sensitive, without being afraid to take a strong stance.

You may ask the old-fashioned rock critic's question: what does any of this have to do with music? Have your doubts, say what they do is disposable pop. But in each case, it's music that made us care about these people. Chris Brown became the most commercially successful pop singer of 2008 by using his dancer's light sense of rhythm and teen-age boy's feeling for irresistible desire to craft hits like "With You" and "No Air." Rihanna's story tugs our hearts, in part, because of the tenderness of her biggest hit, a story of dependable love, "Umbrella." Adam Lambert will hang on to his *Idol* spot only if the American public realizes his is the most powerful voice to hit the show since Fantasia's. And Britney – over a decade, that tiny, insinuating, dirty-angel voice of hers has imprinted itself on our psyches, as powerfully as a certain movie star's, "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" did two decades before she was born.

I've just given you a dose of my daily medicine as a pop critic for a major metropolitan newspaper. It's my job to take seriously what others find frivolous, to find the meat in the music and stories that largely operate as diversions for other. That's not the only way to participate in what's become my life's work. Others become champions for under-sung geniuses and obscure communities, helping find audiences for deserving music that never made it into the mainstream. Still others take on the role of amanuensis to musicians themselves, telling their stories in biographies and graciously challenging interviews, digging into the details of the creative process. Some critics devote themselves to local scenes, becoming talent scouts and cheerleaders for the sounds in their own backyard. And there are those who do feel that their task to make a canon, to pull out what's timeless from the deluge of recorded music and devise systems to assess and rank it, so that it may live on in some definitive encyclopedia or hall of fame.

I've tried most of those approaches during the lifetime I've spent writing about music and culture. For now, the one that's most interesting has to do with chasing contradictions right in the middle of the mainstream.

Contradiction: that's the name of the game in pop criticism, because unlike high art, which maintains itself through long-established institutions and an underlying dedication to hierarchies

Pop music is the place where sexuality is most clearly on display in our culture, in all of its polymorphous, joyful, disruptive and often disturbing glory.



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of both taste and education, pop is messy, all-welcoming, generally amoral and addicted to the new. I continue to write about pop, in part, because it's a subject that allows me to write about everything, and to never question my own right, as a thinker, to make a noise.

I also stand up as a feminist pop critic not only because being a feminist is fundamental to everything I do, but because that position is the most excitingly contradictory of all. Pop music is the place where sexuality is most clearly on display in our culture, in all of its polymorphous, joyful, disruptive and often disturbing glory. It's also where racial and sexual stereotypes have proliferated, been challenged and morphed into different forms over a long history that began with minstrelsy and burlesque and has now seemingly come full circle with the likes of pop stars T-Pain and the Pussycat Dolls. To write about this material is to confront our deepest fears and dearest fantasies about pleasure and freedom. Sometimes it's ugly stuff. Sometimes it's hard to believe it can go as far as it does. But pop never allows for my sensibilities to harden, or for my ideology to overcome my intuition – it's too loud, too fresh with its tongue in my ear, for that.

The daunting task pop critics faced when the form was invented back in the 1960s – to prove this subject matter was worthy of serious inquiry at all, and then to determine the right voice in which to write, a tone that could express passion and humor, and be both informal and deep – persists. No pop critic has ever won a Pulitzer Prize, for example. But partly because of the legacy of great writers like Ellen Willis, Greil Marcus and Nelson George, and partly because their generation, which first embraced popular music as a source of spiritual succor and a catalyst for social change, has now inherited the earth, I'm not the outlaw I might have been twenty years ago. I'm standing here before

you, aren't I? It's a long way from the bathroom at the old New York punk club CBGB's, with no doors on the stalls.

Yet just as we've reached that sought after, potentially deadly goal – legitimacy – the very structures that make serious pop criticism possible are crumbling. I'm not here to talk about the disintegration of print media; I'm sure you can find a dozen other talks on that subject somewhere close by this month. I strongly believe that, whatever form our thoughts take, those of us who must continue to write seriously will find a way to do so. By the same token, times of scarcity rarely benefit marginal voices, and as far as feminists have come, in pop we remain mostly on the edges. I do worry that the niche-ification of the blogosphere and the decline of general interest publications will adversely effect the diversity of voices speaking and writing about the culture we consume.

Another problem facing feminist thinkers in all areas is the disempowerment of the term "feminist" itself. Many daughters of the second wave – especially those gifted and traditionally attractive enough to find success within mainstream popular culture – often find feminist criticism oppressive. "There's a stigma around feminism that's a little bit man-hating," the newly-minted dance pop queen Lady GaGa said in a recent *Entertainment Weekly* interview, "and I don't promote hatred, ever." She went on to say in that interview that because we have a black president, feminism may now be outmoded.

Older feminists pull their unbleached hair out over such declarations, but we need to recognize that younger women's experiences may be different than ours, that while only one look at that photograph of Rihanna's bruised face reminds us that sexual violence and oppression still exists, that the threat may feel different to girls who have always been told (by their feminist moms) that they can do anything. Again, contradictions: we'd do well to dwell on them, and talk about them with our younger friends and daughters, who can help us see how they manifest now.

One reason I continue to write about Britney Spears (even through gritted teeth) is that she *doesn't* offer me a fantasy in which I want to indulge. Her appeal, along with the rise of reality

show catfights over unworthy males, breast implants for college girls, and “real housewives” of any stripe, says a lot about how younger women negotiate the danger zone where liberation and self-annihilation merge. Some things stay the same, but some things change: one thing that has changed, in media-dominated American culture at least, is the idea of what a fulfilled woman wants and can be. Every feminist must respond to this shift in consciousness. Popular culture, and especially popular music, tracks its very flow.



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Feminist thinkers have many battles to fight right now. Writers who focus on popular culture have the specific task of helping people make sense of a content stream that more and more resembles the spew of a broken water main. We need to champion a multi-faceted version of media literacy. People need to know that what’s presented as free expression is often being sold to them; they need to learn how images and stories work to sell products, affect people’s self-conception and influence their judgment of others. If you have a small child, as I do, you’re blessed with a reminder of how intensely commercial media hits us, because with a child it’s all on the surface. “Mommy!” says my five year old, “did you know there is this place called Shakey’s, and you can go there, and have PIZZA?” I explain to her that the pizza at Shakey’s is not free. (At least they don’t have a seductive giant mouse, like Chuck E. Cheese.) And I try to put myself into her head-space when those intriguing offers to help me get a flat belly keep popping up on the side of my Facebook page.

I consider media literacy to be part of my role as a critic, not only in terms of exposing how capitalism works through pop and, now, interactive culture, but also in terms of tracing the long histories behind every hit song or beloved TV show or film. If you’re dismayed by a

seemingly moronic song like, say, Flo Rida's "Low," you may not particularly care that its rhythms relate to a history of street music and dance in the South that stretches all the way back to the 18th-century slaves who gathered in New Orleans' Congo Square; but tracing such a lineage illuminates the continued attractions of "the club" among African-American youth, as well as the way black men still find power and respect in public displays of grace and prowess – like dancing. Young girls who love Miley Cyrus have a new world opened up to them when they learn that long before she graced the Disney Channel, Dolly Parton and Brenda Lee were working similar spunky good ol' gal acts. If all this kind of contextualizing did was offer new pleasures to curious fans, that might be enough; but it also helps us see how ideas of beauty, power or status form through the popular arts over time.

There's another action those of us who take pop culture seriously can offer our readers, or students. We can present alternatives to what's easily accessible. Interactive media's new realities are fast dissolving the very idea of a mainstream – yet with so many alternatives out there, culture seekers can become overwhelmed and turn right back to what's most obvious. (This is how I comfort myself about the popularity of *Gossip Girl*.)

There's a lot of talk now about critics acting as curators, and I want to encourage all of us who interpret culture to see the politics in every curatorial act. Young women, particularly, need to hear the voices and see the faces of other women, who don't fit into the narrow roles still so common in a media world that remains patriarchal and profit driven. As some of you surely have experienced, all it takes is one Toni Morrison novel or Ani di Franco concert to set a young woman down an unexpected path.

As the role of the critic and the teacher and the reporter and thinker changes, I also hope we can find new power in community. You know how feminism is supposed to be about dialogue? The conversation becomes immediate and real on message boards and in email groups, on social media sites and blogs. Use Facebook not just to show off pictures of your kids but to share reports about what's happening to women in Myanmar, or in your own home town. Help each other

flesh out ideas and develop projects. Remember the original meanings of the words: link, connection, friend.

I belong to an email list called the Girl Group; it was established a few years ago by two writers, Daphne Carr and Jason Gross, to support feminists who write about music. The Girl Group has remained vital longer than any other email community of which I've been a part. Its members live, mostly in cities, all over the country. It's extremely non-hierarchical, made up of veteran journalists, publicists and academics alongside writers who've just published their first review. Nobody makes money from Girl Group – it hasn't been "monetized," as the cliché goes. But many women have found sustenance, both material and, dare I say, spiritual, through the list.

Might criticism itself evolve into a form of facilitating such group conversations? I have an ego, and it's tough to consider giving up my own space to put forth my own opinions and lovely turns of phrase. However, I'd prefer that future to one in which the "peer-to-peer" environment becomes nothing more than a new vehicle for corporate-sponsored conformity, or a site of status and wealth-oriented competition. I hope that these daunting times don't make us forget that technological change can make for positive new realities. If old media is dying, let whatever replaces it be something more multi-vocal, and therefore more enlightening.

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"Grace to be born and live as
variously as possible." – line from
Frank O'Hara's gravestone
■ ■ ■

Multi-vocality – that leads me back to that essay by Zadie Smith, which I mentioned at the beginning of my talk. Her talk was about Barack Obama, a figure surely more worthy of serious consideration than the likes of Britney Spears. But the point upon which her thoughts rested – that a leader like Obama, whose mixed identity allows him to empathize

with, and understand the voices of, many different kinds of people – that is my goal as a popular culture critic, too. I believe that pop culture is the place where many of our most potent conversations happen, about sexuality, race, consumerism, love, desire. Within the supposedly trivial pursuits of the popular arts, we relax, open up, and dare each other to be outrageous, emotional, imaginatively real.

Smith quotes a line on O'Hara's gravestone: "Grace to be born and live as variously as possible." Then she goes on to say, "But to live variously cannot simply be a gift, endowed by an accident of birth; it has to be a continual effort, continually renewed." These days we may feel inclined to hunker down within our own avenues of passion, and condemn others as indulgent, extraneous. But popular culture, from the grassroots to the mainstream, remains a space where the various life flourishes. For what I continue to learn from it, I plan to let it keep distracting me.