Introduction: *Desire and Domestic Fiction* after Thirty Years

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This cluster of essays arises from a special session I organized on behalf of the Society for Novel Studies at the 2018 Modern Language Association annual meeting. These pieces vividly demonstrate that Nancy Armstrong's first book, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, published by Oxford University Press in 1987, continues to inspire live thought. Armstrong's book has provoked ongoing explorations into the history of human inequality, of human beings as sexed and gendered, and, on a scale closer to *MLQ*, this thinking embraces the history of the novel and the ways critics and scholars study the novel as form and institution. Inspired by Armstrong, the essays that follow devote sharp attention not only to key terms from literary study, such as *bildungsroman* (Ian Duncan), but also to key terms from law, such as *contract* (Deidre Lynch); from philosophy, such as *agency* (Rachel Ablow); and from sociology, such as *institution* (Jesse Rosenthal).

Desire and Domestic Fiction stands out as an event in the history of novel criticism. Beyond its large impact on publication, the book possesses continuing relevance, as these essays attest. In addition to the author herself (in a remarkable reflective response), five scholars of the novel all eagerly discuss this old book, which came out when we were much younger and the academy was much different. None of us five has studied or taught with Armstrong, and our PhDs span four decades, from 1974 to 2009. Back in the 1980s the study of the novel had not come to dominate literary study to the extent it now does, yet when Armstrong's book appeared, novel criticism was burgeoning and innovative. Those new studies in the 1980s took inspiration from the rise of feminist scholarship and also from the theory movement. Feminism and theory,

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separately and together, began to transform the perspectives and protocols of literary history. Engaging psychoanalysis and Marxism seized our attention, as in Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious* (1981), and so too did the work of Michel Foucault, which Jameson kept his distance from. Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985) made enlivening use of René Girard's theory of mediation to achieve what seemed major feminist claims, until a few years later Sedgwick's Foucauldian *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) made clear that she had already been gestating queer studies. Bruce Robbins in *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (1986), Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987), and Michael McKeon in *Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (1987) together yet diversely brought Marxism to the fore in major works of literary history. In *The Novel and the Police* (1988) D. A. Miller made Foucault relevant in the most unlikely works of Victorian fiction, and Miller's claims continue to engage discussion in Ablow's and Rosenthal's essays. Armstrong's work made its mark in a strong field.

From our perspective thirty years later, the big change in novel criticism, as in much more of literary studies overall, has been the emergence of postcolonial studies and world literature as contrasting and combined perspectives that make questionable the primary focus on English literature shared by almost all the brilliant, and still influential, works just mentioned. Moretti and Robbins themselves have done much to make this change, which became inescapable just beyond Armstrong's 1987 work, with Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992) and Edward W. Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Armstrong herself responded to this change in her editorship (starting in 1996) of the flagship journal *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* and in her formative role in founding the Society for Novel Studies, which has now held four biennial conferences. Yet from our later perspective, we can see a missed opportunity. Jameson's (1986: 69) controversial essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" speculatively contrasts Third World national allegory to a model of depoliticized First World literature that might seem drawn straight from Armstrong's pages:

> One of the determinants of capitalist culture, that is, the culture of the western realist and modernist novel, is a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and

> that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power: in other words, Freud versus Marx. Our numerous theoretical attempts to overcome this great split only reconfirm its existence and its shaping power over our individual and collective lives. We have been trained in a deep cultural conviction that the lived experience of our private existences is somehow incommensurable with the abstractions of economic science and political dynamics.

No one at the time developed this connection to ground further debate concerning how best to characterize both the "First World" and the "Third World" sides of the contrast. Does Jameson's characterization—so close to Armstrong's—hold for the whole First World, or only for the Anglosphere? Duncan in this collection addresses German and French materials to complicate the specifically English history and form Armstrong delineates, and much more remains open to develop.

Desire and Domestic Fiction identifies itself first of all as an ambitious work of feminist studies. Its epigraph (Armstrong 1987: 3) cites a pregnant moment from Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own*, heralding: "The middle-class woman began to write." Armstrong's most unforgettable line from *Desire and Domestic Fiction* roundly affirms female agency: "The modern individual was first and foremost a woman" (8). Woolf's strong writing boosts the energy of Armstrong's, and Armstrong's striking critical prose sets a standard those in this cluster try to live up to. As Ablow summarizes Armstrong's achievement, she refuses "the language of victimization" and emphasizes "determination rather than overdetermination." In Duncan's essay, Madame de Staël's Corinne laments "the soul-stifling pettiness of English provincial life," which leads him to conclude: "It is one thing to read an Austen novel, another to have to live in one." Lynch opens up alternatives to the form of sexual contract Armstrong analyzes, going back to "that early eighteenth-century era when liberalism was shiny, new, and strange." For Rosenthal, Armstrong helps him solve the puzzle of why "successful professional criticism seems to insist on personal secrets while maintaining that such secrets lie outside its proper discourse."

Polemically, and with a power to disturb in 2018 no less than in 1987, as Ablow's essay demonstrates, Armstrong insists that her history shows female power, not victimization. To tell this feminist story, Armstrong relies on a nearly tacit Marxist underpinning: her large structure shows first a shift from aristocratic to bourgeois hegemony and then the

imposition of bourgeois values on the working class. Women gained power, but hold the applause, because only bourgeois women got to wield it. Armstrong gives Marx virtually no textual mention (you will not find the name in her index), but the major British Marxist Raymond Williams provides arguments crucial for Armstrong. Citing Williams's *Long Revolution* (1961), Armstrong (1987: 264n22) states, "I have used, as the conceptual backbone of this book, his concept of a political revolution that took the form of a cultural revolution." Yet Williams deals little with individual psychology and largely ignores Freud. Armstrong therefore goes beyond Williams to find in Jameson's "political unconscious" a mechanism that she relies on (36). Jameson's book emphasized containment; Armstrong takes that a long step farther with her extended analysis of domestication. She relies also on the English Marxist historians E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm for her economic and social history. Jameson helps her extend that into the history of subjectivity, and then Foucault gets star billing for the crucial argument that "sexuality is a cultural construct" (8) and therefore has a history. This historical perspective allows Armstrong to distance herself not only from Ian Watt's classic *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) but also from what had already become established feminist criticism, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Foucault also undergirds Armstrong's key argument concerning the power of discourse, namely, that written representations can bring cultural formations, such as "the individual," into reality. This argument concerning discourse allowed her to read conduct books alongside novels: in her argument both participate in a single discourse before the separation of literary from nonliterary so important for academic literary criticism.

The 1980s produced big thinking about the novel in feminist first books other than Armstrong's. In eighteenth-century studies, Carol Kay's liberal but not Marxist *Political Constructions* (1987) combined political theory and political history. For the nineteenth century, Catherine Gallagher's *Industrial Reformation of British Fiction* (1985) reinvigorated Williams's concerns but still without the history of subjectivity. Yet Armstrong envisioned her subject on a much bigger scale than even these outstanding period studies, for they accept the barrier between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies which Lynch laments in her essay in this collection. Just when emergent New Historicism nearly convinced everyone

that history means unpacking relations among the most surprising things that all happened at one single moment, Armstrong opened things up diachronically. If *Desire and Domestic Fiction* included dates in its subtitle, they would be 1688–1987. Armstrong's constructive power to build a large-scale historical argument, virtually unparalleled for conjoining feminism, Marxism, and Foucault, combined with acute close reading, defined the book's achievement and impact, distinguished it within its crowded field of outstanding work, and ensured that it would remain productive long beyond its first appearance.

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