

# Slow Thoughts for Fast Times

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## Margaret Fuller: Feminist Theory Years Ahead of Its Time

From the 1830s to the 1860s and the end of the American Civil War, Concord, Massachusetts was the nation's intellectual center. At the heart of its international fame were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. What is not as well known is that Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) was every bit as important to Concord's Moment as the bright light of America's distinctive intellectual life—brighter in the day than even its nearby Boston Hub.

Fuller was a popular lecturer, as well as a successful editor of *The Dial*, Emerson's transcendentalist journal. She was also a scholar who translated Goethe and wrote a biography of the German poet. She was a poet in her own right, as well as author of many non-fiction essays and, among other book-length works, one popular in her day and important still in ours. Plus, Fuller contributed literary and social commentary to Horace Greeley's *New-York Tribune*; and more. She died upon returning from Italy when her ship sank off Fire Island in 1850. She lived but forty years.

The relations among Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller served each in their way by being mutual in spite of their obvious differences. Still, Fuller stood out among the three, not simply because she did so much in so few years; nor because she was at least their intellectual equal; but because she broke the mold of Concord's transcendentalist attitudes—this by introducing what we now clearly recognized to be a feminist theory that became the central feature of her life's work.

Fuller's most famous book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1845, introduces the strange notion of a gendered soul as an active force that viewed gender relations as inherently social by understanding the degree to which male and female are fluid categories. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* includes what today theorists may recognize as a stunningly original passage:

Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical divide.  
But in fact they are perpetually passing into one another.  
Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid.  
There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.

Some today might consider Fuller's move here part of a deconstruction of the cultural norm of "the *ideal* man," as Fuller puts it at the beginning of the book. If so, it is also a historical claim that she is writing and living "a new hour in the day of man." More deeply, these lines by Fuller can rightly be considered a deconstruction, yes, but also a forerunner to feminist theory's important concepts late in the twentieth and early in the twenty-first centuries—fractured identities and intersectionality.

Think what you will of the term "deconstruction," it serves a good purpose when not weirdly misused. Deconstruction is not about tearing apart a concept in order to destroy it. Rather, deconstruction is breaking down a concept into its historical elements so that it can be used without corruptions that inevitably adhere to normative

ideals. Or, as Jacques Derrida put it, deconstruction means to put the concept “under erasure,” in the sense of removing what appears on the surface of an idea to get to the trace that underlies it.

There are deeply embedded terms everywhere in any culture. One of the most common in modern cultures is “man,” meaning generic Man. Fuller is doing more than calling out the essentialist notion of Man. She is rethinking by taking apart “man” as a conceptual notion in order to expose its several relations to “woman”—relations that prevent either from being distinct, separate, or abstract. Fuller is seeking thereby to uncover the trace elements that neither the categories themselves nor the ever more general idea of gender can convey. Again: “*There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.*” Plus, both men and women are real, specific, different, and complicated historical figures.

A good century and a half after Fuller, surprisingly original ideas came to the surface in a concept originated by bell hooks and broadcast by Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought* in 1990. The *matrix of domination*, as they called it, expressly argued that women of color who are pressed down by a dominating culture possess the knowledge and power to force political change. At much the same time, Donna Haraway’s 1985 *The Cyborg Manifesto*, in effect, rekindled a version of the kind of Gaia theory of Nature that Emerson first put forth. “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.” Then Haraway adds:

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. ... No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations... Nature and culture are reworked; the one no longer being the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other.

Haraway’s manifesto introduced the concept of *fractured identities*, which in turn took the *matrix of domination* one radical step further. If social relations are a matrix of vectors, then personal identities are necessarily multiple. Related to these two concepts is *intersectionality*, made famous later by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Though Crenshaw’s idea is a bit abstract, it serves to add to a conceptual tradition that was implicit in Fuller’s 1845 book.

If, as Fuller writes, “there is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman,” then, by extension, everyone is caught up, for better or worse, in a matrix that fractures the very idea of singularity with respect, not just to genders but to all the many—too many in fact—vectors that cut us apart: race to be sure, class of course, sexuality too, and so on. What *intersectionality* seeks to add is that the fracturing matrices come down, so to speak from the many structural elements at play in all complex societies.

It goes without saying that Fuller herself did not, and could not have, imagined this outcome. She was too much like the Concord transcendentalist oEmerson and, in a different way, Thoreau. But the seeds are there even if Collins, Harding, and Crenshaw grew their ideas from a soil seeded differently. Yet, writing with literary flare, Fuller makes her central theoretical point by proclaiming the nature of woman in an unmistakable allusion to the transcendentalist soul:

The especial genius of woman I believe to be electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency. ... More native is it to her to be the living model of the artist than to set apart from herself any one form of objective reality. ... In so far as soul is in her completely developed, all soul is the same; but as far as it is modified in her as woman, it flows, it breathes, it sings, rather than deposits soil, or finishes work...

Woman is not like man the dirt of sod, or the wolf, or the canker. Nor is she objectively One. Rather, in her electrical movement, she is Many. As we all, to varying degrees, depending on whether or not the more privileged among us can free themselves from the prison house of thinking themselves to be different, better, above. Fuller, by contrast: “Every relation, every gradation of nature is incalculably precious, but only to the soul which is poised upon itself, and to whom no loss, no change, can bring dull discord, for it is in harmony with the central soul.”