

# in memoriam



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## Ann Snitow (1943–2019)

Janet Elise Johnson (Brooklyn College, CUNY) and  
Mara Lazda (Bronx Community College, CUNY)<sup>1</sup>

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Ann Snitow, Emerita Lecturer in Liberal Studies and Associate Professor of Literature at the New School for Social Research and Eugene Lang College, passionate feminist and scholar for almost five decades in New York City, fearless activist and mentor for three decades in Central and Eastern Europe, died on 10 August 2019.

### Improvising East-West Feminisms

A prominent literary scholar, Ann was not initially trained in or focused on the region of Central and Eastern Europe. Her most prominent work before the Germans pulled down the wall was a feminist anthology, *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (1983), coedited with Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson. *Powers of Desire* was an activist-literary-scholarly cri de coeur for a messy, embodied, and intersectional feminist politics of women's sexual pleasures. The editors' introduction engages in a conversation with various and contradictory Marxist experiments, but here, socialism was a theoretical or Anglo-American enterprise. Her chapter is (radically) literary, an analysis of the contradictory sexual fantasies of Harlequin romance novels.

Beginning in 1990, Ann turned her attention and energies to Central and Eastern Europe, after feminist writer and activist Slavenka Drakulić gave a speech to socialists in New York in the spring of 1990, waving a tampon and pad to point to Yugoslav socialism's failures to address gender inequality by not providing these kinds of products. An experienced feminist organizer, Ann wrote to Drakulić, asking what she thought was needed, to which Drakulić said, "To bring us together." Together, they founded the Network of East-West Women (NEWW) to support dialogue and exchange among feminist activists and scholars.

Over the next decades, Ann was the melodic structure in NEWW's improvisation of East-West feminisms. NEWW has had many innovative and collaborative projects, but perhaps the one that Ann loved best was the Book and Journal Project, which sent



over six thousand books and awarded over \$100,000 in small grants to feminist scholars and activists in the region. She ran the project out of her Manhattan apartment, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on multiple walls, and when money was short, she would buy books, just as she would sometimes pay NEWW staff out of her own pocket. For decades, her apartment served as a “hotel for feminists from the region” visiting New York City to seek an experience of feminism or needing a home away from home. Even as she was an engaged teacher and administrator at the New School—founding and leading the Gender Studies Program there—she would jet off to Prague or Krakow to bring money, to respond to requests for communication, or to teach her Theories of Gender class at the New School’s Democracy and Diversity Summer School.

Her experiences working across feminisms East and West led to what has been her most influential essay for the study of Central and Eastern Europe, “Cautionary Tales.”<sup>2</sup> It began as a riff on a list of “knotty problems” facing activists in the region that she’d been compiling over the years:

Feminists in the region had a discourse dilemma unfamiliar to their Western visitors: They couldn’t start with a critique of the patriarchal family, because the family had been the bulwark of resistance to communism and was the often-beloved place of privacy, trust, and survival. Nor could they use the old language of communist “emancipation,” because many remembered those old solutions to “the woman question” as crudely instrumental and hypocritical, not what women themselves had identified as being in their self-interest. Finally, they were tempted to embrace the general enthusiasm for new free markets, only to find that women’s fate in these markets was often the dark side of the new dawn. But how were they to mount a popular critique of the very freedoms so many others were celebrating?<sup>3</sup>

She asserted that Western “feminists are right to worry about the afterlife of their initiatives, the long journeys of their ideas.”<sup>4</sup> Ann was engaging in what have become the constitutive debates among scholars of gender in the region about these West-East encounters, as well as the reality of feminisms within state socialism.<sup>5</sup>

But her project was bigger; she offered “cautionary tales for committed feminists who hope feminist activism will prove agile enough, responsive enough to a changing situation, to last them a lifetime.”<sup>6</sup> “The best course for feminists is to embrace the doubts, to embrace the ‘homelessness’ of feminism”<sup>7</sup> in the reality that we are all “precipitously, ‘postcommunist,’ a state of confusion,” which she recommends that we “experience in the company of others.”<sup>8</sup>

## Rescoring East-West Feminisms

In 2004, as interest in the region waned from donors in the US and realizing NEWW’s commitment to shared leadership with scholars and activists in the region, Ann organized the move of the organization’s headquarters to Poland. While there have been lots of criticisms of Western feminist intervention in the region for being colonial,

NEWW is recognized for working to be as inclusive and horizontal as possible. As Ioana Cîrstocea argues (in this volume of *Aspasia*), “NEWW developed a genuine feminist community, created a space for transatlantic and regional dialogue, and became a hub for the circulation of information, contacts, and academic and activist publications dedicated to gender politics in the ECE region and beyond.” Nanette Funk, also active in NEWW’s founding and leadership, attributes this mostly to Ann’s efforts: “Her approach was one of active listening more often than speaking. It embodied the cognitive virtues of self-reflection, self-criticism and epistemic generosity.”<sup>9</sup>

Even as Malgorzata Tarasiewicz took over leadership in Poland, Ann kept traveling to the region to speak or engage with local activists. In 2016, Ann helped coordinate a 25-year-anniversary celebration of NEWW in part as a response to the “moral panic” about gender and nationalism in Poland with the return of the Law and Justice Party. Always the activist–scholar–public intellectual, she wrote about the event and the broader context for *Dissent*, staking a claim for feminism in Poland as a way of supporting local activists and scholars.<sup>10</sup>

## Retuning Scholarly Engagement

Unlike those of us armed with archival work, systematic sampling, or ethnography, Ann was creating her own genre on the region—the analytical personal essay—based on her deep interactions. Ann framed her engagement in the region from the perspective of her life’s “preoccupations” as a “naive” but also “ironic skeptic,” who was not afraid of “blundering in the dark.”<sup>11</sup> After feminism in the US slowed down in the 1980s, she, like many of us, came to study gender in the region, based “on the entirely mistaken idea that the shock of postcommunism would awaken an idealism and political intensity similar to that of 1968 in the United States,” but got “hooked by the entirely different desires and fears arising for new friends in actually existing postcommunism.”<sup>12</sup>

Her just published book, *Visitors: An American Feminist in East Central Europe* (2020), written as she wrestled with the consequences of cancer, is an exemplar of her genre. The book—a love letter, reflective and complex—is an account of dozens of Ann’s visits to the region, building NEWW, teaching students, and participating in protests, as well as her experience hosting visitors from the region.

She embraces the conundrum of the visitor’s position, building relationships, becoming part of a feminist community, acquiring a feeling of home in “my Krakow,”<sup>13</sup> but also never truly of it. “As friends were constantly to remark over the years of my frequent visits, I was always leaving, a form of innocence that, for good reason, never held up in court, but also a reality of nonengagement, an absence.”<sup>14</sup>

Ann, always in motion, found a sense of belonging in “the golden light, shifting down through the great trees” of Las Wolski, the forest at the site of the Krakow summer school and where her ashes were scattered: “In my solitary walks in Las Wolski, I have felt both alone and connected to the people I’ve visited again and again. The feminism I have brought home from our high spirits and the woods is, finally, about having a rich life, and about seeking happiness, a quest that keeps changing.”<sup>15</sup>

## Orchestrating More Feminisms

Ann leaves a huge legacy to the field of Slavic, Eastern European, and Eurasian studies in her generous, dedicated mentorship and teaching to hundreds of students, emerging scholars, and feminist activists, many of them in the region. In addition to her work with NEWW, she taught gender studies at the summer school in Poland for twenty-five years, upon the invitation of Elżbieta Matynia, the director of what is now called the Transregional Center for Democratic Studies at the New School.

As Lucie Jarkovská (Czech Republic) recalls, Ann was “a mentor to many, but never a mentor who stands above and judges. She is a mentor who inspires, enjoys everyone’s successes and never lets you feel you failed. She reaches the best in the people around her. And if needed, she gets you a place to sleep and a nice breakfast in the morning.”<sup>16</sup> Agnieszka Kościańska (Poland) extols: “Having [Ann] as a mentor has been transformative. I learned a lot about feminist theory and feminist studies of sexuality. . . . But there was something else, equally important, that I learned from Ann. What we do as academics makes no sense if we don’t transform it into knowledge that brings about change, that contributes to our fight against inequality, patriarchy, (hetero)sexism, and the backlash against liberal values.”<sup>17</sup> For Kateřina Liškova (Czech Republic), Ann taught her that “feminism is a way of imagining happiness, of opening up a public dialogue about what human happiness is.”

She also mentored us in her approaches to feminisms, scholarship, activism, and life, mostly through the Gender and Transformation: Women in Europe workshop at New York University’s Center for European and Mediterranean Studies. A joint initiative with NEWW, this workshop (which we have helped coordinate for the last decade) has continued for more than twenty-five years, an important forum for scholars, activists, journalists, and the public to examine gender equality in the region. Ann was not an official coordinator of the workshop, but she was the moral, emotional, and intellectual center of the conversation. She gave Janet, raised by conservative parents and trained as a political scientist, a more poetic lens and a glimpse into the fun of New York City feminist activism, shaping her perspective on the guerrilla feminisms of Pussy Riot and FEMEN. For Mara, meeting Ann came at a pivotal point in her career, disheartened by the isolation she felt pursuing the academic track. Ann showed her how interweaving scholarship and activism, academic and public intellectualism, was not only possible but positive.

Ann’s legacy will also be continued through the annual Ann Snitow Prize, “an award of \$10,000 for a person of extraordinary vision, originality, generosity, and accomplishment who is currently engaged in work that combines feminist intellectual and artistic pursuits with social justice activism.”<sup>18</sup> Embodying optimism and determination, fierceness and warmth, she will be an example to which we aspire.

### ◆ Notes

1. We’d like to thank Sonia Jaffe Robbins for her comments on this piece.
2. Published three times, as Ann Snitow, “Cautionary Tales,” in *Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting* 93 (1999), 35–42; Ann Snitow, “Cautionary Tales,” in *Women and Citizenship in Cen-*

*tral and Eastern Europe*, ed. Jasmina Lukic, Joanna Regulska, and Darja Zaviršek (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 287–297; and Ann Snitow, “Feminism Travels: Cautionary Tales,” in *Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 204–215.

3. Snitow, “Feminism Travels,” 205–206.

4. *Ibid.*, 213.

5. See Gesine Fuchs and Eva-Maria Hinterhuber, “Neoliberal Intervention: Analyzing the Drakulic-Funk-Ghodsee Debates,” in *Routledge International Handbook to Gender in Central Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, ed. Katalin Fábíán, Janet Elise Johnson, and Mara Lazda (Routledge, forthcoming).

6. Snitow, “Feminism Travels,” 212.

7. *Ibid.*, 214.

8. *Ibid.*, 204.

9. Nanette Funk, “Transnational Feminism and Women’s NGOs: The Case of the Network of East-West Women,” in Fábíán et al., *Routledge International Handbook*.

10. Ann Snitow and Kathryn Detwiler, “Gender Trouble in Poland,” *Dissent*, Fall 2016.

11. Snitow, “Introduction: Feminism of Uncertainty: I,” in *Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, 1-17), 1.

12. *Ibid.*, 5.

13. Ann Snitow, *Visitors: An American Feminist in East Central Europe* (New York: New Village Press, 2020), 111.

14. Snitow, *Visitors*, 83.

15. *Ibid.*, 186.

16. The comments from Jarkovská and Liškova are from letters written in support of our nomination of Ann for the Association for Women in Slavic Studies award for Outstanding Achievement in 2018.

17. Agnieszka Kościańska, “Sex for Fun: Reflections from Ann Snitow’s Przegorzaly Classroom,” *Public Seminar*, 12 August 2019, <https://publicseminar.org/essays/sex-for-fun-reflections-from-ann-snitows-przegorzaly-classroom/?fbclid=IwAR3Iq1QxEjaDHUKTI7xdY8Gaz1vOC8rCcLwgfls5SKrlCXqPsV-ikSuq7IM>.

18. For more on the Ann Snitow Prize, see <https://annsnitowprize.com/>.