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Fuller's Reproductive Originality

Abstract: My focus in this talk is on the interrelation between Fuller's pedagogical process and her ideas on artistic creativity. Fuller's teaching methods—both her Socratic secondary school instruction and the series of Conversations that she held in Boston—depend centrally on the framework of the conversation and what she calls “knowledge reproduction.” In this presentation, I discuss Margaret Fuller's literary philosophy of creativity as it is reflected through the journals of students at the Greene School, a progressive co-educational school in Providence, Rhode Island where Fuller taught from 1837 to 1839. A close look at the school journals of one of her 16-year old students, Mary Ware Allen, shows that the reproductive mode of education and writing is a central focus of Fuller's pedagogy. These journals are not just a literal record of the practice of copying—their function in broad strokes is to paraphrase Fuller's lessons and to record passages from texts that the students have read—but they also function as a place to reflect critically on that copying. This self-reflection was crucial to Fuller and can help to explicate terms such as originality, reproduction, and creation in her literary canon. Ultimately, I argue, Fuller's teaching encourages students to reproduce forms and lessons in order to gain sense of their own personal voice and the limitations of the copy.

Biography: Christa Vogelius, assistant professor of American Studies, works on 19th century literature, gender, and visual culture. She is revising a book manuscript on the relation between forms of copy-work and ideas of women's creativity in the mid-nineteenth century. Her presentation “Margaret Fuller's Transnational Imagination” was chosen as the Best Paper (General Category) presented at the SSAWW Conference, Philadelphia, 2015.