

Title: *Exile's Persistence: Margaret Fuller and the Public Trauma Culture of Expat Paris*

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Panel: Conditions of Exile in the Nineteenth-Century and Beyond, Sponsored by the Margaret Fuller Society for MLA 2023

Abstract:

The age-old story of the origins of high modernism faults the trauma of World War I as responsible for the ennui of the Lost Generation. Writers *felt* “lost” because they *experienced* loss: Of the friends and family members who died, of their mental and physical health in the wake of shell shock and dismemberment, and of financial security and the sense of a stable future (McParland, *Beyond Gatsby* 10; see also Malcolm Cowley’s *Exile’s Return*). This emphasis on wartime trauma as the primary catalyst for high modernist literature privileges the teaching and scholarship of men writers of high modernism who were supposedly close(r) to the battlefield. Julie Godspeed-Chadwick corrects this impression in her convincing argument for the traumatic effects of war on women who did not serve on the frontlines, notably Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and H.D. Yet, cultural trauma was just as much responsible for their excess of feeling and their feeling of emotional loss. In this paper, I consider how the emotional and physical proximity of high modernist women writers in expat Paris led to the formation of a public trauma culture à la Ann Cvetkovitch that uses the practice of disaffection – of unfeeling or disinterest as a means of self-preservation – to resist the everyday experiences of systemic oppression to which they are subjected because of their sex or sexual orientation (see also Yao, *Disaffected*). Yet I locate the evolution of this public trauma culture in the traditions of women’s travel writings, especially those of Margaret Fuller who served as a foreign correspondent and hospital volunteer during the Risorgimento (circa 1847-49). Just as Fuller re-formed American audiences’ perceptions of Italy from an arcadian landscape to a site of Republican values using wartime trauma as an opportunity for grieving (see Bailey, *American Travel Literature*), women writers of high modernism re-form audiences’ perceptions of Paris as the site of a decade-long soiree where anything goes in the wake of a grieving postwar generation. Women writers of high modernism capitalize on the transatlantic tradition of turning grief into grievance against a culture that refuses to reconcile with difference. A tradition that arguably has included the likes of Edith Wharton, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Elizabeth Gilbert. Yet we must credit Fuller with starting the project.

Bio: Dr. Stephanie Peebles Tavera is Assistant Professor of English at Texas A&M University–Central Texas. She is the author of *(P)rescription Narratives: Feminist Medical Fiction and the Failure of American Censorship*, which is forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press in July 2022. Dr. Tavera is also the author of the critical introduction for *Helen Brent, M.D.*, a novel by Annie Nathan Meyer that Dr. Tavera recovered with Hastings College Press and for which she won Honorable Mention for the 2021 Society for the Study of American Women Writers (SSAWW) Book Edition Award. She is an expert in the fields of American women’s literature, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literature, medical humanities, feminist disability studies, and crip affect, and has published work in *Legacy*, *Utopian Studies*, and *Science Fiction Studies* academic journals.