

Janet Sternburg:

An Inventory of Her Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

- Creator:** Sternburg, Janet, 1943-
- Title:** Janet Sternburg Papers for *The Writer on Her Work*
- Dates:** 1976-circa 2019
- Extent:** 7 document boxes (2.94 linear feet), 1 oversize folder (osf)
- Abstract:** The Janet Sternburg Papers consist of correspondence, typed drafts, clippings, research notes, and photographs documenting the production and reception of Sternburg's two-volume edited collection of essays featuring women writers from the 1980s and 1990s, *The Writer on Her Work*.
- Call Number:** Manuscript Collection (MS-54170)
- Language:** English
- Access:** Open for research. Researchers must create an online Research Account and agree to the Materials Use Policy before using archival materials. Original documents containing personal information, such as social security numbers, are restricted due to privacy concerns during the lifetime of individuals mentioned in the documents. Such documents have been photocopied and replaced with a redacted copy.
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Administrative Information

Preferred Citation: Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Janet Sternburg Papers for *The Writer on Her Work* (Manuscript Collection MS-54170).

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Processed by: Emma Hetrick, 2022

Repository: [Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin](#)

Biographical Sketch

Janet Sternburg was born in 1943 in Boston, Massachusetts. From a very early age, Sternburg enjoyed writing; especially poetry. She attended Connecticut College, but returned to Boston after her sophomore year.

In 1965, Sternburg moved to New York City and attended the New School for Social Research where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy in 1967. During the day, she was an associate producer at National Education Television where she produced and directed several award-winning films including *Virginia Woolf: The Moment Whole*, which was screened at the New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center in 1970.

Sternburg returned to writing poetry in 1972 and had several poems published in literary journals and anthologies, including in *Aphra*, one of the first feminist literary magazines. From 1974 to 1980, Sternburg was director of "Writers in Performance" at the Manhattan Theatre Club, where she pioneered presenting literature in dramatic forms. Based on the papers of Louise Bogan, Sternburg co-authored with Corinne Jacker a dramatic work, *What the Woman Lived*, which was performed in New York in May 1975.

In the late 1970s, Sternburg was inspired by the creative outpour of writing by women. She was interested in understanding the personal experiences of these authors; what inspires them, how they approach the craft of writing, how they "surmounted the shared obstacles of being a woman who writes." Assuming a book existed that explored these questions, Sternburg found that there wasn't one. She began working on a book she wanted and needed, *The Writer on Her Work*. Sternburg asked women writers—novelists, poets, essayists—with different backgrounds, who started writing at different points in their lives to "intentionally and directly" reflect on their writing and she hoped that the collection of essays "would celebrate diversity, but also suggest what women writers have in common." The volume was ground-breaking and well-received. Sternburg followed it with a second volume in 1991, *The Writer on Her Work: New Essays in New Territory*, expanding the scope to an international group of writers. Both of her volumes have been in continuous print since their publication.

In addition to writing, Sternburg was Program Officer at the New York Council for the Humanities in the 1980s, while also serving on the faculty of the New School. When her husband, Steven D. Lavine, became President of the California Institute of the Arts in 1988, they moved to Los Angeles.

In 1998, Sternburg began another career in photography and has had solo shows in cities across the globe. She combined her poems and photographs in *Optic Nerve: Photopoems* (2005) and later published a book of photographs, *Overspilling World* (2016). Additionally, Sternburg published two memoirs *Phantom Limb: A Meditation on Memory* (2001) and *White Matter: A Memoir of Family and Medicine* (2015).

As of 2022, Sternburg lives in Los Angeles, California and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

Sources:

In addition to material found in the collection, the following sources were used:

Janet Sternburg [writing website]. <http://janetsternburg.com/>

Janet Sternburg Photography [photography website].
<http://www.janetsternburgphoto.com/>

Poets & Writers Directory. "Janet Sternburg."
https://www.pw.org/directory/writers/janet_sternburg

Sternburg, Janet. *The Writer on Her Work*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980).

Scope and Contents

The Janet Sternburg Papers consist of correspondence, typed drafts, clippings, research notes, and photographs documenting the production and reception of Sternburg's two-volume edited collection of essays featuring women writers from the 1980s and 1990s, *The Writer on Her Work*. It is divided into four series: I. *The Writer on Her Work, Volume I*, 1976-2001 (bulk 1976-1980); II. *The Writer on Her Work, Volume II*, 1987-1996; III. Related Papers, 1972-2002; IV. Other Works by Sternburg, 1971-circa 2019.

The arrangement of the materials closely reflects Sternburg's own organization of her papers, as received at the Ransom Center. Where Sternburg provided a meaningful label for a grouping of material, that wording is used in the container list and is indicated in single quotation marks.

Series I. comprises the bulk of the material and relates to the original volume of *The Writer on Her Work*; it is divided into two subseries based on Sternburg's categories. Subseries A. Contributors contains Sternburg's book proposal, as well as notes about, correspondence and contracts with, and essays written by contributors to the volume. Of interest is the "Contributor notes" file which includes lists of possible writers Sternburg considered for inclusion. The "Correspondence" and author files are arranged alphabetically by the last name of the contributor. The first page of Toni Cade Bambara's curriculum vitae included her social security number and this was replaced with a redacted copy. Subseries B. Drafts and Notes contains notes, essay drafts included in *The Writer on Her Work*, often accompanied by correspondence, and Sternburg's Introduction. Some of the essays had been previously published and are photocopied drafts or published versions, while others were commissioned for this volume and contain original typescripts. Some works were typed on paper that has become brown and brittle; these were sleeved for preservation purposes. The contents are arranged alphabetically by the last name of the contributor. Also present are the proofs used

throughout the publication process.

Series II. relates to the second volume *The Writer on Her Work: New Essays in New Territory* and is divided into two subseries. Subseries A. Contributors contains Sternburg's book proposal, as well as notes about, correspondence and contracts with, and essays written by contributors to the second volume. The "Invitations to contribute and replies" folder contains copies of Sternburg's outgoing letters to an international and diverse catalog of writers and their response (if received). The "Correspondence" folder includes exchanges between writers and Sternburg throughout the editing process and often includes Sternburg's response to and edits for submitted essays. Some of the essays had been previously published and are photocopied drafts or published versions, while others were commissioned for this volume and contain original typescripts. All material in this subseries is filed alphabetically by last name. Subseries B. Drafts and Notes contains multiple drafts of the essays, along with notes, and is arranged alphabetically by the last name of the contributor.

Series III. Related Papers contains materials that are related to either or both volumes of *The Writer on Her Work*. It is arranged by category and includes writings by or about potential contributors who were considered for either volume of *The Writer on Her Work*, including Sternburg herself. Writings are often published copies or entire serials, rather than original typescripts. Additionally, advertisements and marketing material (including for the Norton paperback and 20th anniversary reissue), Sternburg's headshots and biographical information, material for events, articles, and reviews are present. Of particular interest are the letters from readers filed in this series. Correspondents include women who were political activists and feminist pioneers, as well as award-winning authors who expressed their gratitude to Sternburg for conceiving these volumes. These letters, and correspondence filed throughout the collection, are listed in the Index of Correspondents at the end of this finding aid. A roster for a 1980 course at the New School for Social Research entitled "Writer on Her Work" contained students' social security numbers. This was replaced with a redacted copy. There are two adaptations related to or inspired by the volumes. One is an adapted essay by Nancy Milford and the other is a play adapted by Marissa Chibas. Items are organized by date when possible.

Subseries IV. Other Works by Sternburg includes essays and articles about women in film, poetry, and women writers; many related to her groundbreaking volumes of *The Writer on Her Work*. Additionally, a small volume of Sternburg's poetry is represented in published form. There is an article from *Ms.* magazine that refers to one of Sternburg's films, *Virginia Woolf: The Moment Whole*, but otherwise there isn't any material related to her film productions. Sternburg, however, was the writer of a series entitled *The Independents Likely Stories*, which was hosted by actor Glenn Close, and that 1987 script is present. These works are listed in chronological order.

Related Material

Other Ransom Center collections with materials related to Janet Sternburg include the Julia Alvarez Papers, Diane Johnson Papers, and the Carolyn Osborn Papers. Many of the writers whose work is published in the two volumes of *The Writer on Her Work* are represented by material in other Ransom Center archives.

Separated Material

Unpublished, non-commercial audiocassette recordings were transferred to the Ransom Center's Sound Recordings Collection. They are cataloged in a separate database.

Unpublished, non-commercial VHS recordings were transferred to the Ransom Center's Moving Image Collection. They are cataloged in a separate database.

Index Terms

People

Ackerman, Diane, 1948- .

Atwood, Margaret, 1939- .

Bambara, Toni Cade.

Bengis, Ingrid.

Burroway, Janet.

Desai, Anita, 1937- .

Didion, Joan.

Doerr, Harriet.

Dove, Rita.

Ehrlich, Gretel.

Forché, Carolyn.

Gibbons, Kaye, 1960- .

Ginzburg, Natalia.

Godwin, Gail.

Griffin, Susan.

Hampl, Patricia, 1946- .

Hogan, Linda.

Johnson, Diane, 1934- .

Jolley, Elizabeth, 1923-2007.

Jong, Erica.

Kingston, Maxine Hong.

Kumin, Maxine, 1925-2014.

Le Guin, Ursula K., 1929-2018.

Milford, Nancy.

Moore, Honor, 1945- .

Morris, Jan, 1926-2020.

Mukherjee, Bharati.

Murray, Michele.

Poniatowska, Elena.

Rukeyser, Muriel, 1913-1980.

Sternburg, Janet.

Tyler, Anne.

Valenzuela, Luisa, 1938- .

Walker, Alice, 1944- .

Walker, Margaret, 1915-1998.

Williams, Joy, 1944- .

Subjects

Authors--20th century.

Authorship--Study and teaching.

Women authors--20th century.

Document Types

Book proposals.

Clippings.

Correspondence.

Manuscripts.

Serials (publications).

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'Correspondence,' 1976-1980 **Container 1.3**

'Contracts, Permissions, Copyright,' 1977-1979, 2001 **Container 1.4**

Author files (Essays, notes, bios)

Bambara, Toni Cade. Curriculum Vitae, 1978 **Container 1.5**

Burroway, Janet. Bio, 1979

Didion, Joan. Published articles, 1976-1979 **Container osf 1**

Godwin, Gail. Essay, notes, undated **Container 1.5**

Griffin, Susan. Essay, undated

Jong, Erica. Essays, bio, letter, 1978

Moore, Honor. Curriculum Vitae, undated

Rukeyser, Muriel. Essays, bio, 1976, 1979

Walker, Alice. Published essay, 1979

Walker, Margaret (married name: Alexander). Essay, bio, notes, undated

Subseries B. Drafts and Notes, 1971-1980, undated

Early drafts

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Milford, Nancy. The Lure of Other People's Lives (adapted essay, Vogue, November 1979). Entire issue **Container**
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Series IV. Other Works by Sternburg, 1971-circa 2019

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Book Reviews. Film Comment (July-August 1974). Entire issue	Container 8.7
Poems. Ordinary Women / Mujeres Comunes: An Anthology of Poetry by New York Women (Eds. Chiang, Esteves, Jones, Miles, 1978). Entire issue, book order form	Container 8.8
The Poetry Society of America Bulletin, Special Issue: Women Poets. Guest Editor Janet Sternburg (Winter 1981). Includes her introduction: Inside the Room of the Woman Poet (adapted from a lecture delivered at the Wesleyan Writers Conference, 1976). Entire issue	Container 8.9
Natural Affinities: Women's Studies and Public Programs (Federation Reports, May/June 1984). Entire issue	Container 8.10
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