

## Presentation Abstracts

### **1. ‘Sent to the Sewing Room, and Compelled to Work’: Institutionalized Women’s Labor in Nineteenth-Century American Hospitals for the Insane, Aimee Allard (U of Nebraska, Lincoln) [#6503]**

Perhaps nowhere is an analysis of Margaret Fuller’s and nineteenth-century women writers’ relation to and representations of labor more necessary than it is in American women’s asylum narratives of the period. From Elizabeth Packard’s 1868 memoir *The Prisoners’ Hidden Life; Or, Insane Asylums Unveiled* to Sophia Olsen’s *Narrative of Her One Year’s Imprisonment at the Jacksonville Insane Asylum* to Sarah Minard’s *Testimony* of her nine years in a state madhouse, it is in these nineteenth-century “madwomen’s” narratives that we encounter a complex critique of labor vis-à-vis sewing. Like them, Margaret Fuller viewed sewing as labor, her writing more concerned with a woman’s place in the “social fabric” of the nation (Fuller 110) than a woman’s skill at stitching fabric. Countless hours spent sewing made the “spirit faint from inanition,” she argued, limiting a woman’s intellectual pursuits and affecting her mental wellbeing (Marshall 73).

In my paper “‘Sent to the sewing room, and compelled to work’: Institutionalized Women’s Labor in Nineteenth-Century American Hospitals for the Insane,” I argue that Packard, Olsen, and Minard concurred with Fuller, their narratives illuminating the role of sewing within the asylum—it was at once a textile tedium designed to keep female patients busy, a punishment for women who dared to read or write, and a system of unpaid labor from which unscrupulous asylum superintendents profited greatly. For Fuller, sewing was a form of cloth confinement, so it seems only fitting that Packard and her contemporaries aligned needlework with straitjackets and fabric restraints. Giving scholarly attention to this unique corpus of women’s writing from the nineteenth century, one which Margaret Fuller’s treatises on sewing help shed light on, we begin to uncover important perspectives on institutional labor from women writers who were confined as much by lock and key as they were by needle and thread.

### **2. Solidarity across Classes and Women’s Labor, Hediye Özkan (Indiana U of Pennsylvania) [#6504]**

In her groundbreaking work, *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Margaret Fuller states that when women’s problems, status, responsibilities, duties and rights attracted thinkers and reformers, they started to point out to the questions of work, better education, and equal rights for women (11). Lillie Devereux Blake was one of those reformers and activists who wrote solidarity and intersection of working women from different classes in *Fettered for Life or Master and Lord*

(1874) in order to address various struggles of women within capitalist economy. She also portrays how these women challenge traditional gender roles in order to gain independence, better positions, social status, and self-fulfillment in a male dominant society. Blake presents solidarity among a suffragist doctor, a disguised journalist, a working-class teacher, two prostitutes, and a middle-class housewife by unifying them in terms of their participation to the work force and roles in their marriages. They are all restricted and oppressed mentally, physically, emotionally by both public and domestic forces. However, they identify themselves within the same group of women who suffered from the unjust social order. Blake intersects and bonds female characters under the roof of sisterhood in order emphasize that “Women are the best helpers of one another” as Fuller states (*Women in the Nineteenth Century* 172). Juxtaposing fact/fiction and history/literature, Lillie Devereux Blake voices female resistance and rebellion against patriarchy, constraints, and boundaries emphasizing the importance of community by depicting cooperation and partnership of working women through a subversive novel. Examining women’s paid and unpaid labor in domestic and public spheres, I will discuss how Blake approaches issues faced by women in the nineteenth century by using woman-slave analogy not only in a capitalist but also patriarchal society to reconstruct work, womanhood, and marriage.

### **3. The Disabled Superwoman: Disabling Domestic Labor in Mary Wilkins Freeman’s ‘Luella Miller’ and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s ‘No News’, Jessica Horvath Williams (U of California, Los Angeles) [#6505]**

In 1898, *The Daily Picayune* published a piece called “The American Wife” that rues the differences in cultural expectations of physical, mental, and emotional labor for American women versus their European counterparts. An American wife, it laments, must, as a matter of course, be “a paragon of domesticity, an ornament in society, a wonder in finance, and a light in the literary circle to which she belongs,” whereas European women need only shine in one category or another. Setting aside the assumed class notions embedded in its analysis, the article insists that the culture demands an unachievable “genuine ability,” setting up the notion that the work required of superlative domesticity is, in and of itself, disabling.

Yet when critics approach nineteenth-century American femininity and domesticity with a disability studies eye, however, they tend to focus on a culturally requisite frailty. While this trope is privileged in criticism, it is not the only one provided to us by nineteenth-century women authors, particularly around representations of domestic labor. In Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “Luella Miller,” Luella’s entire community takes on her daily domestic tasks only to felled, one by one, by mysterious illness, disability, and death. In Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s “No News,” domestic labor wastes Harrie, a harried doctor’s wife and mother of three, into a feeble, suicidal “skeleton,” while her husband takes up with her friend, Pauline. Pauline, Harrie insists, can only

maintain her attractive looks and attentiveness to Harrie's husband because she is outside of the domestic sphere; in particular, "she didn't have three babies to look after." Taken together, these stories push back against our notions of contemporary compulsory female frailty. Instead, they use the ideas of labor reformers, who addressed acquired impairments in factories and other industrial complexes, to explore the disabling working conditions of domestic spaces.