<u>Not Here to be Nice: The Burden of Likability on Female Characters</u>
AWP 2020, San Antonio

<u>Panelists:</u> Camille Acker, Frances de Pontes Peebles, Melissa Rivero, Asali Solomon

<u>Event Outline</u>

Female fictional characters often have the added pressure of being "likeable." Readers, reviewers, and writing workshops frequently judge female protagonists based on a mercurial notion of likability. If a woman in literature is perceived as "unlikable," the character is panned, scorned, and resisted while male characters who project similar qualities are lauded as complex. What is likability? Why do we demand it? What are its perils and how can they be overcome? While some complex women characters are legends in fiction--Sethe in "Beloved"; Olive Kitteridge; Fleur in Louise Erdrich's novels, to name a few--their existence is complicated by the fact that arguably the most famous female characters--Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, Isabel Archer--are almost all written by men. Despite the evidence that complex women in fiction simply makes better fiction, and that character likability is not an aesthetic goal of serious fiction, many still use likability as a criteria for assessing female characters. This panel will discuss the benefits and challenges of writing complex women and girls; the yoke of likability and how it can be thrown off; how authenticity and complexity, especially in women of color, are judged by different standards; and how we can break through these barriers and deliver complex female protagonists who are allowed to make mistakes, have flaws, be nuanced and exciting, and are valued for their humanity, not their likability.

It is vital to understand the demands placed on female protagonists and authors (especially women of color), why these demands exist, and how they can affect and alter our work. The demand of likability can stifle the creation of authentic female characters. It can also affect the way a literary work is received--works with dynamic, complex, and flawed female protagonists are often judged not on the quality of the narratives themselves, but on the "likability" of the female characters. If we can unmask the demand of likability and understand why it is made, we can hopefully overcome it, gaining a wider scope for female protagonists and authors. As both readers and writers, we can learn to value complexity and humanity in female voices.

On this panel we will discuss how each of the authors creates complex and authentic female protagonists in her own work; if they feel pressure to create more "likable" female characters; how they respond to this pressure; and how to balance what the work requires with readers' expectations. We hope for this to be a lively discussion with panelists engaging each other and taking plenty of audience questions.

Readings: We will refer to each author's works of fiction. Please see some titles listed below, and refer to each author's bio for a complete list. Thank you.
Camille Acker

Training School for Negro Girls
Dismantle: An Anthology from the VONA/Voices Workshop

Melissa Rivero:
Affairs of the Falcóns

Asali Solomon:
Disgruntled:A Novel
Get Down (Stories)

Frances de Pontes Peebles:
The Seamstress
The Air You Breathe