

## PREFACE

Five years ago *Feminist Studies* designed an issue on the theme of motherhood, a topic that has appeared in some form or another in almost every issue before or since. With this issue, and without any preconceived planning on the part of the editors, the question of motherhood once again occupies a central position in the journal. If the articles we have gathered together in volume 9, number 2, are representative of the current concerns of the women's movement, it would seem that beneath the surface of increased cultural attention to baby making, feminists are quietly reassessing motherhood. Our musings may signal a subtle but consequential shift in our consciousness of gender relations.

This reappraisal of motherhood is voiced in clear and moving tones by Shirley Glubka, in our first article titled "Out of the Stream." In recounting her decision to entrust the care of her child to another woman, Glubka shows us motherhood laid bare of mythology and yet heavy with thought and feeling. By speaking of maternity as work and making care of her son a deliberate decision rather than an unquestioned consequence of reproduction Glubka forces us to question our deepest assumptions about motherhood. Such a purposeful and courageous maternal act could hardly occur outside the context of feminism in the late twentieth century.

Other essays in this issue examine some of the conditions that have shaped maternal consciousness and organized parenting in the past. During the nineteenth century, as Michael Grossberg tells us, it was not the individual mother, but the state acting through courts, judges, and statutes, that claimed ultimate authority to decide "Who Gets the Child." Grossberg reminds us that a mother's legal claim to the custody of her offspring is both recent and tenuous, and that motherhood has never been a privileged female sanctum impenetrable to patriarchal controls.

At the same time that American courts were rewriting the custody laws as described by Grossberg, the conditions of maternity were changing in an even more fundamental fashion. The rapid decline in the American birthrate over the course of the nineteenth century was but one example of the demographic transition, a phenomenon that, as Nancy Folbre describes in "Of Patriarchy Born," has occurred around the world over the last two hundred years. Although it is understandable that mainstream social scientists have in the past failed to examine this phenomenon from the perspective of the female childbearer, it is

curious and lamentable that feminists have been so slow to explore the question of fertility. Fluctuations in the birthrate, as Folbre demonstrates, illustrate the double-edged quality of the mother role. Through their powers of reproduction, women intersect with social and historical change at a profoundly influential level. Yet decisions about procreation have been so penned in by a patriarchal society that it is impossible to determine just how women, as individuals and as a sex, have contributed to the decisions that affect the birthrate. Folbre's essay challenges feminist scholars to conduct the specific and detailed research which can create a feminist demography and foster understanding of this most basic condition of motherhood.

The question of motherhood is so central to the gender system that it appears in discussions that seem remote from the sphere of reproduction. As Anne Schofield discusses in "Rebel Girl and Union Maids," motherhood was very much on the minds of American trade unionists and labor organizers early in this century. Feminists within the Industrial Workers of the World wisely regarded reproduction and birth control as matters of concern to working women and men. But male Wobblies were heard to echo the sentiments of the more conservative American Federation of Labor which regarded women workers primarily as "future mothers." This dominant gender ideology played a role in inhibiting the unionization of women workers during the 1920s and into the militant era of the 1930s as described by Sharon Strom in "Challenging 'Woman's Place.'" Maternal consciousness and the mother role must be included within Strom's precise accounting of the forces that retarded the organization of women workers during the 1930s. Yet Strom's intricate answer to the question "When can women organize?" reminds us that motherhood is only one element in the very dense fabric of gender organization.

The final essay in this issue of *Feminist Studies* reveals how the quandaries of motherhood permeate the literature as well as the history of women. In "A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love," Hortense Spillers leads us deep into the text of three novels where we encounter a black female literary tradition populated with mothers. According to Spillers, Vvry Ware, the heroine of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, is "in maternal relationship to [the] profoundest needs and wishes" of the black race. Janie Sparks of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tries to elude the power of the selfless, nurturing model of black womanhood—a tradition

represented in the novel by her grandmother. Spillers argues that Hurston, writing in the 1930s, fails to create a fully independent and individual female character. It was only with the publication of Toni Morrison's *Sula* in 1973 that the power of black literary motherhood was dispelled. *Sula* vaults arrogantly over the whole ideology of the mother; not only is she happily childless, but she also watches impassively as her own mother burns to death. The reader watches yet another shocking maternal rite as *Sula*'s grandmother immolates her own son. Morrison's breathtaking artistry will not allow us to regard these women as villainous caricatures, nor to dismiss these acts as simply grotesque. The grandeur of *Sula*'s "outlawry" and all Morrison's daring images of women take black literature to a plane where the conventional symbolism of motherhood seems pallid and irrelevant.

Toni Morrison's imagination, like Shirley Glubka's decision, and the investigations of feminist scholars all indicate that we have reached an auspicious point in our history. We may be distanced enough from the myths of motherhood to make genuine, if still fettered, often agonizing choices about parenting.

We are also pleased to present in this issue creative work by Honor Moore, Marilyn Hacker, and several earthwork artists. Honor Moore's sestinas use a demanding, austere poetic form to convey subjects of intense passion, resulting in an unusual combination of desire and control. Marilyn Hacker's poem, an elegy for James A. Wright, evokes the possibilities of life's offerings. Here, among those offerings, are a complex definition of one's sexuality, travel and home, and friendship. The earthwork artists, as Josephine Withers explains, use established art forms in new ways to express a more organic connection to the world, so that this art is "in the world" rather than *about* it.

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for the editors