

PREFACE

Several essays in this issue of *Feminist Studies* explore the effects on women of social transitions in the Western hemisphere from the colonization of the Tsimshian people of Northwest Canada in the last century to changes in political regimes and legal codes in contemporary Nicaragua and Brazil. Court records and written constitutions provide evidence about women who broke laws and women who attempted to reform them. Other essays in this issue recur, although in disparate ways, to societies' attempts to deal with women who are perceived as unlawful, uncontrolled, or even monstrous; through the imaginary "bride of Frankenstein" or the female cyborg we can locate historically and culturally specific struggles over permissible definitions of gender and sexuality.

The first essay, Elizabeth Young's "Here Comes the Bride: Wedding Gender and Race in *Bride of Frankenstein*," addresses the camp horror movie of 1935 to show that its images of female and male monstrosity are deeply and contradictorily implicated with anxieties involving gender, sexuality, and race in the United States during the Depression. The plot involves a repeated pattern in which two men compete for a woman, who seems overshadowed by their bonding. Nonetheless, the monster "bride" achieves a moment of gendered power when she refuses the male monster and so refuses to be exchanged between men. This feminist reading of gender, however, must be modified to acknowledge other meanings within the film. The male monster puts the naturalness of heterosexuality into question and at the same time is coded as racially other to white Americans. Chased by an enraged mob, he becomes a persecuted fugitive and martyr; chasing a frightened white woman, he represents the terrifying image of the Black male rapist against whom lynchings in the 1930s were brutally directed. In this reading, the pale "bride" who rejects the male monster figures female assertiveness only by corroborating her racial role as potential white victim; and the film directs the spectator to feel horror, not at society's crime of lynching, but at its mythologized racial other. Young's analysis here revises those feminist film theories that assume an ahistorical psychoanalytic model of a unitary male gaze motivated by castration anxieties and reminds us that, whereas lynching actually dismembered and castrated Black bodies, the monster film encourages its spectators to enjoy its sexualized dismemberments and reassemblage of bodies. Thus

a "politics of genre" reveals that apparently fantastic Gothic horror movies can mediate the social tensions of their times more forcefully than realistic films.

Another "monstrous" configuration of sexuality and gender is the female cyborg or uncanny feminine machine. According to Judith Halberstam, in "Automating Gender: Postmodern Feminism in the Age of the Intelligent Machine," cybernetics reveals gender and its representations as technological productions and engages the postmodern subject in relation to feminist debates about technology and gender. Halberstam analyzes two related figures—the computer Apple logo, which displays the permanent "byte" of a knowledge not tied to any of the traditional polarizations of innocence and experience or reason and emotion or masculinity and femininity, and the English theorist of artificial intelligence, Alan Turing, who committed suicide by eating a poisoned apple. An esteemed code-breaker during World War II, Turing was considered a security risk during the Cold War because of his homosexuality, a condition the law attempted to "cure" through hormonal treatments. Halberstam sees Turing, the apple, and the female cyborg as emblems of the potentially liberating artificiality in postmodern technologies of gender and desire. Postmodern theory, she believes, challenges those forms of cultural feminism that continue to associate women with nature and science with masculinity. Whereas cultural feminists fear the seduction of woman into automated femininity and the loss of a natural female self, Halberstam suggests that the female cyborg reveals what patriarchal masculinity fears in both autonomous technology and in femininity and calls attention to the artificiality of all gender and to the political motivations of those who would blur gender into nature.

If anything can be called essentially female, menstruation would seem to qualify. Cynthia M. Zelman's short story, "Our Menstruation," humorously picks up the theme of cultural uses of biological female difference. On a sixth-grade kickball field, one girl's menarche becomes a rite of passage for all the girls in her class. Next, Natasha Saje's three poems on sex and reading add their own witty artistry to the play of bodies and representation.

The poems and short story exhibit the joys of women's humor and the difficulties of categorizing it in traditional male genres addressed by Eileen Gillooly in her review essay. Women's humor, she argues, does not fit the categories developed to describe men's

socially conservative comedies and ironies. Instead, women's humor covertly questions, destabilizes, and subverts cultural authority. Thematically, Gillooly discerns a discrete tradition of American women's humor through the centuries that targets the drudgeries and disabilities of women's experiences and their distance from romanticized cultural ideals. Such women's humor follows tactics of personal survival and political and psychological strategies for managing the anger of oppression.

The next review essay, by Christina Brooks Whitman, analyzes feminist jurisprudence, focusing on recent trends in feminist thinking about the law. Whereas in the 1970s egalitarian legal theory furthered feminist legal practice, the feminist jurisprudence of the last decade has been more successful as a critique of the philosophy and institutions of the law than as an aid to practical reforms. Much of current feminist jurisprudence relies either on male dominance theories concerning sexuality or on "female difference" theories positing women's interdependence. Some recent articles in the field turn from the rationalist, objective models of traditional legal discourse to more personal explorations that begin from the standpoint of the author's own sexual history or racial or class position. Open and challenging as these new approaches are, Whitman believes that feminist jurisprudence is presently stymied over the problem of real differences among women such that the laws that benefit some women may hurt others.

Jo-Anne Fiske's "Colonization and the Decline of Women's Status: The Tsimshian Case" rereads historical accounts and court records of a fishing and hunting people of the Northwestern coast of British Columbia to trace the changes in women's social position brought about by European colonization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Taking part in a debate within feminist anthropology regarding the relationships between women's economic roles and their social authority, Fiske hypothesizes that where women dispense patronage, they have political influence. Before colonization, some Tsimshian women held high status and wielded great economic power; they took part in potlatch ceremonies and even became chiefs. The fur trade brought prostitution to Tsimshian women, and conversion to Christianity further eroded their traditional economic and political status. Without romanticizing the inequalities within precontact Tsimshian society, this anthropological case study details the changes brought about

in women's status by colonization, which closed down traditional possibilities and replaced them with European modes of policing indigenous peoples.

Two other essays detail specific efforts to alter laws and transform social policies in contemporary Latin America. From her experience as a health counselor there, Lois Wessel comments on "Reproductive Rights in Nicaragua: From the Sandinistas to the Government of Violeta Chamorro." Nicaraguan women suffer from high maternal mortality rates from illegal self-induced abortions. Feminists have tried to alleviate this problem through campaigns for birth control education and safe, legalized abortions in hospitals and clinics, campaigns to which the Sandinista regime was somewhat more sympathetic than the Chamorro government. On the other hand, in response to the more restrictive conservative environment, women's organizations have grown more independent than they were under the Sandinistas.

Another dramatic political change in recent years occurred with the ending of the dictatorship in Brazil. Florisa Verucci, a Brazilian feminist activist, writes about "Women and the New Brazilian Constitution" of 1988, a Constitution awarding women substantial legal rights in labor and domestic matters, official recognition of the right to family planning, and a formal guarantee of equal rights and duties for women and men—that is, rights more advanced than those current in U.S. law. Verucci discusses the many areas not yet legally reformed, like abortion law, and the difficulties and advantages of the new Constitution's strategy of rooting women's rights in the family. A more central problem, however, is the disparity between the progressive new Constitution and many existing reactionary practices, customs, and even laws. Despite the breadth of these gaps, however, Verucci is confident that the new Constitution will help motivate the struggle for practical improvements in women's condition.

From the female monster or cyborg to the native American prostitute to the Latin American woman suffering from a botched illegal abortion, female sexuality has frightened patriarchal societies into attempts to control and criminalize women. However, resistant feminist energies continue to work in the buoyant creative writing and practical political and legal thinking represented in this issue.

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for the editors