# PREFACE

In spite of every effort by politicians and the media to place "family values"—heterosexual, monogamous, religiously based marriage—at the forefront of the fall 1992 presidential campaign, the issue seems to have slipped in popularity among Americans. Perhaps too many of us exist happily in nontraditional families—even in "families we choose," to quote a recent book on lesbians and gays by the anthropologist Kath Weston. Nevertheless, accusations of homosexuality can still have a potent effect upon a politician's popularity; homophobia lies just beneath the surface of our political and social lives. In this special issue on lesbians, we find a polyphony of voices challenging the public discourse on sexuality, as constituted for mass consumption. The favorite empty phrases of politicians—family, choice, sexual behavior, public appearance—all have complicated histories and meanings.

In our lead article Martha Vicinus simultaneously affirms the multiplicity of lesbian identities and documents the "scripts" of modern lesbianisms. She brings to light the lives of cross-dressed actresses, bohemian experimenters, and "mannish" women-identified women. In the process she documents the longevity of the nature/nurture debate on the origin of sexual orientation and the importance of male theorists in setting the parameters of this debate.

From Harlem to Paris, urban lesbians of the twentieth century self-consciously emphasized the performative aspects of their sexuality. Both Michèle Aina Barale and Anne Herrmann explore gender as representation—as performance—rather than a fixed identity. Barale argues that Ann Bannon in her 1962 lesbian classic, *Beebo Brinker,* invites subversive readings by successfully separating gender from sexuality; Bannon's blurring of the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality destabilizes "male" as a category. Herrmann reads three novels of marriage between cross-dressed couples, suggesting the limitations of both performative and epistemological paradigms of lesbian subjectivity. Her interpretation challenges readers to rethink the meanings of cross-dressing in worlds where the object of passing as a man is to circulate a lie that conceals the truth of same-sex desire.

Heather Findlay, in her analysis of the recent controversy over whether lesbians should use sex toys, also considers the instability of representation and meaning. Her rereading of Freud's theory of fetishism, using paradox and parody, encourages lesbians to recon-

sider the possible uses of psychoanalytic theory. Cheryl Clarke's three poems articulate embodied lesbian sexualities that are alternatively ambiguous and well identified in their nationalities and class. Her poetry, in some senses, embodies the performative, unstable sexual identity that is examined in our literary criticism. Our art essay, drawn from *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs,* illustrates the centrality of sexual preference for contemporary lesbian photographers; but they also articulate through parody, satire, and self-reflexive irony a humorous distancing from social expectations of the lesbian and lesbian sexuality.

By asking to what extent romantic friendships were acceptable in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Western Europe and the United States, Lisa Moore extends and deepens the ongoing discussion of "Boston marriages." Her essay challenges the thesis that middle-class societies valued these relationships. She also explores the displacement of lesbian desire on to the body of the colonized or foreign woman in order to finesse the social and cultural tensions aroused by the possibility of white, British lesbian agency.

The managers and regulators of women's military participation in World War II also anguished over the dangers and possibilities of female sexual agency. Leisa D. Meyer's research on the Women's Army Corps reveals that military leaders' policies reflected and reproduced widespread fears about unregulated female sexuality. Corps administrators combatted public anxiety that the women soldiers were intended to meet the sexual needs of their male peers by promoting an image of controlled heterosexual femininity. Lesbian WACs struggled to develop a community and culture in an actively homophobic atmosphere. Susan K. Cahn's review essay focuses upon the importance of historically situated analyses of homosexuality. Like Meyer, she points to the value of exploring the nexus between public power and the lived experience of same-sex intimacy and eros.

Makeda Silvera's narrative on the invisibility of Afro-Caribbean lesbians foregrounds the tradition of silences that shrouded her foremothers. Her essay also speaks to colonization's legacy of racialized sexuality that still mediates efforts to define and construct a postcolonial sexuality. In her strength and sustained care for a dozen young and frightened U.S. soldiers, Gale Jackson's "Clove" is very much a kindred spirit to the "man royals" of Silvera's

youth. Jackson's short story creates a world where survival and resistance to U.S. imperialism profoundly shaped the lives and loves of two young Black lesbians.

M.V. Lee Badgett and Rhonda M. Williams's conference report documents economists' emergent scholarship on sexuality and sexual orientation. Work to date suggests that economists can illuminate the lives of lesbians but not without challenging some of the discipline's constitutive assumptions about the self-understanding of individuals, family formations, and individual behavior. This report brings us full circle: a conservative academic organization responded with covert and overt hostility that echoes the mass media's treatment of homosexuality. Yet in other academic arenas, gay studies has met with a favorable reception; indeed, the extraordinarily rapid growth and acceptance of queer theory in the humanities has been both heartening and disquieting. What does it all mean, and will it have any wider social impact? The answer lies in our shared political future. This issue brings together some of the riches of this new field, and marks the continued strength of a politically aware and personally engaged scholarship.

Martha Vicinus and Rhonda Williams,
for the editors