

PREFACE

Life passages for women, particularly those of midlife, are at the center of many of the contributions to this issue. The articles, not surprisingly, articulate public positions and subjective experiences that go against the grain of dominant notions of aging for women. We can expect feminist thinkers in the 1990s to be more sophisticated about aging and life stages than we were in earlier decades. As the college students and young working women who made up such a large part of second-wave feminism in the 1970s have reached their fifth and sixth decades, they have emphasized new issues: motherhood—often a midlife experience these days—menopause, women and medical technology, breast cancer epidemiology. (Media reviewers and journalists eager for an audience, for their part, have eagerly tarred the feminist movement with middle-age imagery: stodgy, rigid, worn out.)

Margaret Morganroth Gullette's "Inventing the 'Postmaternal' Woman, 1898-1927: Idle, Unwanted, and Out of a Job" is a perfect introduction to our "midlife" cluster of articles, exploring the process of constructing stigma and "problem" out of the routine chronology of women's lives. Gullette looks particularly closely at the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, so prolific in social and sexual taxonomies, when writers scrutinized with skepticism and hostility a social type they thought was rising to prominence: the still-vigorous mother whose children were grown, leaving her with an "empty nest." Clearly these writers, who included such notable progressive women as Ellen Glasgow and Dorothy Canfield Fisher, were responding to a social change which reached middle-class women first: as birthrates declined, women completed their childbearing (and childrearing) at an earlier point in their lives. Optimism, relief, and pleasure had marked this stage for previous generations of women; the early-twentieth-century observers framed it with condescension and concern. As Gullette concludes, after looking at the variety of women's texts that delineated "postmaternal" survival as a female "problem," critics have been very poor at "reading for age" and have indeed tended to identify with "the young." Age stages are yet another way in which "woman" needs to be deconstructed, she remarks.

"Going to the Source: Women Reclaim Menopause," Kathleen I. MacPherson's review article, looks at two recent edited collections which are efforts by feminists to reverse the construction of women's fifth and sixth decades of life as periods of disease, loss, and decay. These books, and their reviewer as well, attack the medical model of menopause symptoms which has led millions of women to estrogen and other hormone replacement regimes, and demonstrate the varieties of ways women in this and other cultures go through menopause. Black U.S. women are much less likely than white to get osteoporosis as they age; Mayan women in Mexico are free of hot flashes, possibly a result of their special high-carbohydrate and calcium diet during the relevant years. And, to keep the transition that menopause represents in proportion, MacPherson repeats the story of "Antonia," who barely noted her menopause. During those years she was risking her life daily by appearing at the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina to protest the disappearance of six family members.

Also located in midlife is Alicia Ostriker's "The Book of Life" and its accompanying photographs, by An-My Lê, of Sheila Solomon's wonderful sinuous sculptures (our art essay for this issue), representing many phases of Solomon's life as an artist, and as a mother, and of other "ages of women." In Ostriker's lush poem dedicated to Solomon, the artist's still-luxuriant early fall garden is the setting for ruminations on life, procreation, maturation, and death. The prayer for the coming of Yom Kippur, "Inscribe us in the book of life" for the year to come, marks the Jewish flavor of these lives but also the poet's recognition of the precariousness of her own—everyone's—life.

Creative work by Diana Hume George (poems from her "Burning the Photographs" series), by Jane Adan ("The Ambulance Men"), and by Judith Yarnall ("The Central Eye") also mark crucial life transitions. There is George's vivid re-creation of the breakup of a long marriage, Yarnall's haunting conversation with her dead mother about the splendor of a peacock's tail; Adan's autobiographical story of her fatally ill aunt's last trip to the hospital, as the family tried to re-create itself at Thanksgiving dinner.

Also in this issue is Marylynn Diggs's study, based on American novels from the 1850s through the end of the nineteenth century, of the portrayal of intense same-sex relationships between women. Diggs, challenging the widely accepted position that love and sensuality between women were tolerated as innocent and appropriate behavior until the early twentieth century, argues that even in 1850 romantic friends were often, if not always, viewed in terms of sexual pathology. In her view, the second half of the nineteenth century has to be seen as a period of active struggle for the acceptability of women's intimacies and the existence of lesbian sexuality. Lauren Berlant uses a queer vantage point to critique the legal concept of "privacy" which served as a cutting edge for progressive opinion after 1965 when it was used by the Supreme Court to "protect" the use of contraception in heterosexual intercourse; she goes on to look at obscenity law, attacks on recipients of funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the use of images of little girls as the cornerstone of anti-obscenity campaigns and what they tell us about the citizenship status of all the millions of women and men who live on the nation's sexual margins.

"Clitoral Conventions and Transgressions: Graphic Representations in Anatomy Texts, c1900-1991" by Lisa Jean Moore and Adele E. Clarke is both a deconstruction of the "naturalness" of anatomy—its texts and diagrams—and a detailed study of how the human clitoris has been depicted in major anatomy texts throughout the twentieth century. Anatomical delineation of women's genitals and female social destiny have gone hand in hand, the authors found. Since 1982 medical illustrators have been involved in a fierce backlash against feminist-inspired anatomies. The radically women-centered statements and pictures in *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971) was followed a decade later by *A New View of a Woman's Body* (1981), in which "the clitoris is the main character—front and center"—and the authors' collective obtained diagrams of engorged clitorises by masturbating together as a group and drawing what they saw. Since then, however, the medical texts have apparently fought back this image of active female sexuality and self-definition, and the clitoris has almost literally shriveled in successive medical texts, both in words and pictures.

Finally, by way of commentary, is anthropologist Gwendolyn Mikell's account of last year's travels in Africa and conversations with groups of feminist activists assessing their opportunities and searching for languages even in countries crushed by civil war like Liberia and Sierra Leone. Deborah Gordon's informative review essay, "Feminism and Cultural Studies," looks at the effect of the burgeoning of cultural studies programs on feminist thinking—an influence which has shifted much feminist interest to popular culture and cultural politics, sexuality, and colonial representation. Yet reviewing several recent anthologies in cultural studies, Gordon also demonstrates the rather marginal position feminist thought still occupies in many cultural studies circles.

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for the editors