

Preface

For centuries, one of the feminist movement's most visible struggles has been for the right to participate equally in the civic, legal, and political institutions that shape women's and men's lives. If women's experience has been largely one of exclusion, it is also true that if we pay close attention to often neglected histories and texts, we inevitably uncover evidence of women's determined, rebellious, and often successful attempts both to join and to influence organizations that were originally designed—sometimes intentionally—to exclude them. This issue of *Feminist Studies* investigates some of the ways in which women, individually and in groups, fought and continue to fight to be recognized as workers, artists, socialists, and consumers. As the articles published in this issue demonstrate, those battles are always inflected by the politics of class, race, ethnicity, and by our relations—real or imagined—with the women who have gone before us. Two articles here examine contemporary academic feminism's debt to women writers of the eighteenth century, although warning us that we should be wary of our desire to find our own identities and concerns reflected in their work. As much of the creative work in this issue shows, relations between the generations are often a complex blend of desire, identification, and disappointment.

In 1929 Virginia Woolf, often seen as one of the foremothers of Anglo-American feminism, wrote in *A Room of One's Own* of standing under the "vast dome" of the British Museum Reading Room "as if one were a thought in the huge bald forehead which is so splendidly encircled by a band of famous names," not one of them, as Woolf scathingly points out, the name of a woman. In the first article in this issue, Ruth Hoberman looks at the history of women readers at the British Museum and contrasts the attitudes of the women who used it in the late nineteenth century with those of the next generation, among them Virginia Woolf and novelist Dorothy Richardson. Hoberman argues that a vital female culture flourished in the Reading Room in the 1880s and 1890s, despite the truculent opposition of male readers who accused women of crowding the reading room and sitting in seats other than those reserved specifically for their use. Men's resistance, in Hoberman's view, reveals the incompatibility between women's bodies, seen as

unruly and flamboyant, and the ideal of the rational (male) British citizen, welcomed into the bastions of British imperial culture, who was assumed to have no body at all. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, women such as Eleanor Marx, Clementina Black, Annie Besant, E. Nesbit, Olive Schreiner, Beatrice Potter, Alice Zimmern, and Beatrice Harraden triumphantly laid siege to the Reading Room and to its infinite resources; Charlotte Despard wrote in 1894 when she received her reader's ticket, "At last I determined to study for myself the great problems of society," This drive for inclusion contrasts with the attitude of the next generation, represented here by Woolf and Richardson, who criticized the Reading Room as a hopelessly patriarchal space and proceeded to imagine alternative spaces of their own.

Gestures of inclusion and exclusion are central to the next article as well, Xiomara Santamarina's "Behind the Scenes of Black Labor: Elizabeth Keckley and the Scandal of Publicity." Elizabeth Keckley, freed slave and seamstress to Mary Lincoln, published her autobiography, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, in 1868 to a storm of abuse. Santamarina argues that much of that disapproval stemmed from Keckley's insistence on her agency as a black female worker. Her critics were outraged not only by what they saw as her betrayal of her employer (Keckley wrote the book in defense of Mary Lincoln's attempt after her husband's assassination to raise money by selling her clothes), but also by her assumption that the intimate nature of her work established her social parity with the women for whom she worked, rather than her subordination to them. In Keckley's text we see her describing her work as, in Santamarina's words, "a form of self-production that countered mechanisms of racial and gendered inferiority," an explosive combination in the post-slavery years.

The forced invisibility within which nineteenth-century whites endeavored to confine black women such as Elizabeth Keckley might also be applied to the situation of white middle-class women of a certain age in Margaret Morganroth Gullette's essay, "Valuing 'Postmaternity' as Revolutionary Feminist Concept." Gullette argues that women in this phase of life, between the end of childrearing and "legitimate old-age," have been either ignored or demonized and devalued. This phase has lengthened as fertility rates have dropped and as health advances have increased the vigorous "midlife" years; yet even feminists have not focused on the postmaternal years for critique or amelioration. Gullette suggests the use of a new term "postmaternality" to render this phase visible. The insertion of "postmaternity" into our overview of life stages could have salutary psychological effects for both postmaternal women and their children. Recognizing this phase would put the burdens and joys of childrearing years into better perspective and ameliorate relations between postmaternal women and adult children by allowing both

to "let go" of the parent-child relationship and to "recognize" the "person" in one another. Gullette also suggests the possibility of forming a political collective based on postmaternal identity to work on important social issues such as tax relief for caretakers and fairer divorce and custody arrangements.

Another kind of political collective that asserted the right of women to be heard is the focus of Mary McCune's article, "Creating a Place for Women in a Socialist Brotherhood: Class and Gender Politics in the Workmen's Circle, 1892-1930." This mutual aid organization was established by Jewish workers in late-nineteenth-century New York to provide strike funds, sickness benefits, and burial costs to members. Organized into several branches, mostly in and around New York, it reached peak membership of 85,000 in the mid-1920s. Theoretically committed to equality, including equality between the sexes, the Workman's Circle nonetheless operated according to patriarchal principles that provided lesser benefits for women and assigned them to a separate membership category that lacked voting privileges. In response some women formed separate affiliates that allowed them to take leadership roles and broaden the scope of the Circle's activities by, for example, establishing Yiddish schools and a Social Service Department. Members of the affiliates faced the common dilemma of working-class women of maintaining activism while saddled with both paid employment and domestic responsibilities. After World War I, with membership lagging, the brotherhood finally turned to recruiting women and according them full membership. McCune argues that through separate organizations the women not only empowered themselves, they also transformed the brotherhood "into a more inclusive socialist brotherhood."

Exclusion of a different kind is highlighted in Janet Marstine's discussion of the paintings of Jane Orleman, a number of which are reproduced here. Orleman's raw, challenging pictures and the yard-art she has created with her husband Dick Elliott at their Washington home have attracted scant attention from the mainstream art world, where they have been mostly dismissed as the productions of "that child abuse artist," calling "not for a critique but for compassion." Marstine argues, however, that Orleman's work deliberately challenges the boundaries between art and art therapy and exposes the extent to which such distinctions inscribe oppressive assumptions about both gender and art. Orleman's archaic style disrupts any potential voyeuristic pleasure in her graphic and disturbing images, encouraging an uncomfortable identification on the part of the viewer with the danger and vulnerability of the little girls whose suffering she often depicts.

Identification is at issue again in the last two articles in this issue, which are concerned with the legacy of eighteenth-century British women's texts and what they can teach us about the unspoken assumptions

of our own politics and critical practice. Jean I. Marsden, in "Beyond Recovery: Feminism and the Future of Eighteenth-Century Literary Studies," argues that because we unconsciously want to find ourselves and our own concerns reflected in the writers we "recover" from the past, we often ignore writers such as Mary Pix whose conservative portrayal of gender difference is nonetheless both formally and politically radical in its exploration of contemporary issues such as class upheaval. The hidden agendas of twentieth- and twenty-first-century projects of recovery have often resulted in distorted feminist and literary histories, and Marsden calls for more historically nuanced work in which critics "look for difference as well as for the ways in which early women writers are 'like us,' even if that means giving up the ideal of sisterhood across the centuries."

In "Thinking Gender with Sexuality in 1790s' Feminist Thought," Katherine Binhammer, implicitly acknowledging Marsden's comments, returns to feminist texts of the 1790s, notably Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, to counter what she sees as the prevailing tendency to identify the study of sexuality as the province of contemporary queer theory and the study of gender with feminism. Binhammer argues that writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Mary Robinson, and others, far from being the "anti-sex" polemicists some 1980s' feminist have dubbed them, were engaged in constructing the gender identity of feminist subjects through a liberated sexual identity, which she calls a "mindful heterosexuality." Feminists in the 1790s were anxious to emphasize that the mind has no gender, and that women could be as rational and as intelligent as men. At the same time, their feminist ideal—the citizen-mother—was not asexual. It was only through education and the cultivation of a peculiarly feminine, rational sexual identity that women could achieve their full potential both as feminists and as women. Sexuality, then, for these writers, could not be imagined outside of gender; but, conversely, neither could gender be re-imagined except through sexuality. Masculine women met with approval only in so far as their masculinity was confined to their turn of mind; and effeminate men were regarded with disdain because their sexuality grew out of an illicit gender identification. Binhammer suggests that revisiting the work of early feminists can reinvigorate our current understanding of the relationship between gender and sexuality and complicate our sense of the intellectual and political connections between feminism and queer theory.

The two review essays in this issue explore provocative scholarship on two of the most entrenched identities ascribed for women—that of the shopper and the childbearer. In "Shopping for Identities: Gender and Consumer Culture," Anne Herrmann reviews four recent monographs that aim to illuminate consumer practices in different historical

periods from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the late-twentieth century and in various settings ranging from the United States, France, and England to Zimbabwe and Korea. Herrmann notes that in different ways, all four books show that "commodities are characterized by their dual nature: material composition and symbolic meaning." Thus "consumers shop not just for goods but also identities." However, as Herrmann points out, consumer practices are not just expressions of individual desires or wants, but are also ideologically driven. In Zimbabwe, for example, changing consumer practices form part of a response to colonialism. European notions of hygiene made certain commodities such as soap a necessity and distinguished between products appropriate for European bodies and for African bodies as well as between those for women and for men. In Korea, with an entirely different ideological agenda, women were encouraged to contribute to national prosperity by buying only Korean goods while at the same time practicing frugality.

In the second review essay, "Technologies of Pregnancy and Birth," Eric A. Stein and Marcia C. Inhorn review three recent books on the varied ways in which women's experiences of pregnancy and childbirth have been transformed by technological "innovations" in different times and places. The settings range from the contemporary United States, where amniocentesis to test for fetal "defects" has raised complex moral and ethical issues for pregnant women; to colonial Africa, where European colonialism introduced technological apparatuses, such as forceps and soap, which Congolese women both adapted to and resisted; and to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and North America, where the medicalization of childbirth can be traced through changes in design and ultimate elimination of the birth chair. Although all three stories tell of increasing technological control of pregnancy and childbirth, they also reveal the complexity of women's emotional, philosophical, and practical responses to the possibilities and limitations created by technology.

Identification with, and a creative return to previous generations, is the focus of one of this issue's short stories. In "Always Rinse Twice," Sherryl Kleinman recalls vivid childhood memories of clean floors and inky fingers. This tale of growing up in a Jewish family in Montreal is nonlinear, following a pattern of remembering. Kleinman's mother was a housewife whose energy and spirit were channeled into keeping a spotless home. Kleinman's father was a printer who hid behind his newspaper when his wife expressed discontent at their life together. Kleinman's two favorite tasks as a young girl were helping her mother polish the floor and helping her father collate inky pages and carbons. As a professor today, she is able to tie her "untidy, clean job" back to the work of her parents.

The other short story, "F---," by Roslyn Willett also tackles the chal-

lence of identity, this time from the perspective of a woman dealing with aging and depression. This is a poignant, at times funny, but also achingly sad account of a woman's struggle with loneliness, the loss of friends, her sense of irrelevancy, and the debilitating fear of the unknown. The story builds on a crossword puzzle motif, and just as the narrator attempts to recollect answers to her puzzle, we see how the struggle to recollect her own life becomes a desperate act of survival. As she writes, "I am like Sherlock Holmes. To learn a new thing, I must forget an old thing. I cannot forget old things. I must constantly refresh them, or I forget them even if I do not learn a new thing." As the story progresses, the scope of the narrator's life narrows and she increasingly loses touch with the "clues" that will make sense of her world.

The poems in this issue are also variations on the topic of memory. In Zan Gay's *Black Mulberry*, the poem contrasts a hunt for luna moths with the sight of dogs mating and a violent sexual encounter. Kelley Jean White offers four tiny vignettes in her poem *Topic Sentences*, then muses on finding a former lover's socks in the laundry in the poem, *Late*. In *Commitment*, Christopher Brisson chronicles the romantic escapades and sheltered life of Florence, a young New Bedford woman, in 1932. In a series of three family portraits (simply titled *I*, *II*, and *III*), Brisson also wistfully remembers his great-grandmother and grandparents. Alison Townsend travels back in her mind to her grandmother's farm, recalling summer reading and peonies in the poem, *In the Garden: Persephone Contemplates What Women Lose in Marriage*. In their explorations of memory, Kleinman's short story and these poems offer an alternative vantage point to reflect on the themes of exclusion and inclusion that are at the heart of this issue.

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