The articles in this special issue on Sex and Surveillance explore the myriad ways in which states, corporations, and other institutions have sought to define, constrain, and exploit sexual expression and gender deviance. In the cases discussed here—for example the Boeing Corporation’s policy on gendered attire, the regulation of male homosexuality in cold war Germany, the medicalization of asexuality, or the ideological policing of “safe spaces” at an unnamed Midwest college campus and at feminist gatherings in the United Kingdom—sexuality raises multiple anxieties and becomes an instrument for the advancement of other agendas. Whether that other agenda is corporate profits, as in the case of the Boeing Corporation, a “healthy” nation, as in the case of postwar Germany, or white privilege, as in the case of the Midwest campus, the location of sexuality at the intersection of private experience and public life has made it both vulnerable and extraordinarily resilient in the face of social, legal, and economic attempts at control.

We open with Polly Reed Myers’s discussion of the events leading up to a landmark case in transgender law, “Jane Doe v. Boeing Company: Transsexuality and Compulsory Gendering in Corporate Capitalism,” which came to trial in 1990, five years after Jane Doe first filed a lawsuit against Boeing claiming they had discriminated against her when they fired her for violating company dress codes. Jane Doe worked as an engineer at Boeing between 1978 and 1985. In 1984, she decided to undergo gender reassignment surgery from male to female. Her doctors required her to live as a woman for a year before they were willing to perform the surgery, and in 1984, she informed her supervisors at Boeing that her appearance would gradually change. Jane Doe struggled to comply with the conflicting orders of her doctors and of her employers, who stipulated that even during the period of her transition, she continue to wear male or “gender-neutral” clothing. Compliance was difficult, partly because her Boeing supervisors themselves seemed uncertain of the distinction between female and male attire, even as they continued to insist on the importance
of a binary division between male and female. In November 1985, Doe came to work wearing a pink pearl necklace and was fired. After initially losing her lawsuit against Boeing in 1990, she won on appeal, but that decision was reversed in 1993 by the Washington Supreme Court, which ruled that Boeing had made reasonable accommodations for Doe’s “gender dysphoria” and that they had not discriminated against her when they fired her. Myers reads this case in the context of a capitalist division of labor based on gender and sex norms that are tirelessly policed at the local level in an attempt to prevent the disruption of company profits. For her, the case is not so much about gender norms—although they were certainly invoked repeatedly both during Doe’s last year at Boeing and during the trial—as it is about the negotiation of gender identity in the context of capitalism and the intersection between management policies—or lack thereof—and more informal workplace relationships. Gender emerges in Myers’s article as the unstable product of a series of interlocking and often conflicting power structures whose contradictions were peculiarly and revealingly highlighted in the Jane Doe case.

In a complementary set of articles, Robert G. Moeller and Jennifer V. Evans trace the effects of the decriminalization of male homosexuality in post-World War II East and West Germany. In his introduction, “The Regulation of Male Homosexuality in Postwar East and West Germany,” Moeller provides a brief history of Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code that made sexual acts between men a crime throughout Germany following unification in 1871. Some intellectuals and a thriving gay subculture challenged criminalization. The Nazis squashed this subculture, expanded Paragraph 175, and viciously persecuted male homosexuals. After 1949, each of the newly founded German states had to come to terms with these legacies. As Moeller reveals in his article, “Private Acts, Public Anxieties, and the Fight to Decriminalize Male Homosexuality in West Germany,” the repeal of Paragraph 175 for adults in the late 1960s in West Germany was driven by concern for the privacy of the modern citizen and an effort to separate West Germany from the Nazi past. Those arguing for repeal fostered the masculine ideal of the heterosexual father and provider and reinforced images of homosexuals as deviant. On the other side of the Iron Curtain, reform of Paragraph 175 came earlier, as Evans shows in “Decriminalization, Seduction, and ‘Unnatural Desire’ in
East Germany.” But here, as in West Germany, fears of seduction, especially of young men, drove persistent images of homosexuals as corruptible, while a broad range of institutions worked to exclude homosexuals from their ranks. The implications of these articles go beyond the German case. State socialism and liberal democracy were each preoccupied with the specter of seduction, and both Moeller and Evans warn against taking the decriminalization of male homosexuality as a measure for the liberation of male homosexuals. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, the sexual revolution of the late 1960s was in fact a heterosexual revolution.

In their review essay, “Friendship and Lesbian Studies,” Suzanne Raitt and Claire Buck juxtapose two ground-breaking books, one by Martha Vicinus and another by Sharon Marcus, on same-sex relationships between women in England. Raitt and Buck locate Vicinus’s “sprawling” exploration of memoirs, court transcripts, and novels, which reaches from the late-eighteenth to the early-twentieth century, in a lesbian studies paradigm that has the recovery of a broad range of same-sex commitments as its goal. By contrast, Marcus’s account covers a narrower time period but a broader set of institutions, from heterosexual marriage to toy culture. Marcus argues that women’s same-sex relationships were not always acts of resistance against Victorian norms, but that they could coexist with and indeed even bolster the heterosexual marriage system. Raitt and Buck read the differences between the texts partially as expressions of different politics: a strong lesbian, separatist, and antipatriarchal impetus with roots in the 1970s and the contemporary movement for the recognition of gay marriage with its strong assimilationist tendencies. In the end Raitt and Buck laud both books in all their differences as “models for all of us who aspire to reconstruct the bewildering complexity of Victorian women’s erotic, emotional, and social lives.”

The complexity of women’s lives and attachments is at issue once again in Evelyn Torton Beck and Deborah S. Rosenfelt’s reflections on the art of Hungarian ceramicist Margit Kovács (1902–1977). Stumbling on her work almost by accident during a visit to Szentendre, Hungary, Beck and Rosenfelt were mesmerized by the tenderness, subtlety, and power of Kovács’s hundreds of human and mythical figures, as well as by the beauty of the decorative and household objects that she lovingly created out of terracotta and fireclay. Kovács had a particular interest in sculpting
figures of women, and while Beck and Rosenfelt are reluctant to call her work “feminist,” since Kovács herself would probably not have used the term, they nonetheless found in her work an exploration of different forms of female power as well as of female intimacy and of women’s relationships within groups. They were especially struck by Kovács’s numerous sculptures of mothers and daughters, which respond to the many political shifts in Hungary during Kovács’s life, as well as to the experience of watching her own mother—with whom she lived for most of her life—grow older. Excited about introducing the work of Margit Kovács to American audiences, Beck and Rosenfelt show how her art speaks across national boundaries to dramatize the enormous range of women’s emotional lives, from the stability and serenity of Nursing Mother (1948) to the grief and exhaustion of Alas! (1973).

In “(Un)Covering Normalized Gender and Race Subjectivities in LGBT “Safe Spaces,”” Catherine O. Fox in collaboration with Tracy E. Ore explore the theory and practice of the campus “safe zone” and look at the ways in which white heterosexual and gendered privilege is often as powerful, and goes as unchallenged, within safe zones as in the wider community. Their case study is the organizing of a student-run LGBT conference on their college campus, and the conflicts that emerged as a result of what Fox and Ore see as an under-theorized conceptualization of “safe space” in the planning of the conference. When LGBT students started to work on the Midwest Bisexual, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, and Ally College Conference (MBLGTACC), which they called Building the Bridges to Bring It All Together, they discovered that in spite of their efforts to build a safe space, some of the organizers experienced the group as intermittently racist and sexist. Three students—a straight woman of color, a gay man of color, and a white lesbian woman—read an open letter of resignation to the steering committee and demanded that the committee address its own practices, which they explained made them feel anything but safe. Fox and Ore attribute the splintering of the group to the persistence of unexamined binaries in the conceptualization of the “safe zone” of the conference. As they note, safe spaces are often dedicated to reinstating privileges for specific members of the group who have felt threatened in the wider community, without sufficient attention to the varied and intersectional ways in which gays, lesbians, and queers experience, and
resist, their oppression. “Safety,” they argue, often works to protect the ignorance of white gay men rather than to promote the well-being and comfort of all LGBT people. Calling for a new investment in the concept of the safe(r), rather than the safe zone, Fox and Ore seek to make intersectional analysis central to the discussion of safety so that safe zones can better protect the interests of all members of the community while continuing to encourage dialogue about the concept of safety itself.

In their ambitious commentary, “New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice,” Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks make the case that “asexuality”—the inability or unwillingness to experience sexual desire—needs a place in scholarly inquiry and radical politics. The small but growing international community of people who identify as asexuals has recently gained media attention; it projects varying visions of asexuality as a conscious decision or as an innate condition. Cerankowski and Milks strive to go beyond important efforts in social psychology to de-pathologize asexuality, suggesting that serious engagement with asexuals and asexuality will transform both feminist and queer studies.

Sexual vulnerability is at stake also in Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall’s interrogation of how three autobiographies by subaltern women resist a politics of rescue that tends to reinforce hierarchies between racialized groups, colonizer and colonized, First and Third World, the West and Islam. “Girls in Crisis: Rescue and Transnational Feminist Autobiographical Resistance” proposes a feminist genealogy challenging rescue narratives that exemplify developmentalist, neoliberal ideological formations. The latter figure the Western or white rescuer as more developed than “girls in crisis” and do not take the specificity of girls’ circumstances into account. Juxtaposing three female autobiographies from three different contexts (the pre-Emancipation American South, 1970s Guatemala, and 1980s Iran) that all continue to have broad U.S. and international appeal, Gilmore and Marshall track the multiple readings that each of these narratives allows. Each autobiography troubles simplistic modes of identification as well as universalist understandings of girlhood. As Gilmore and Marshall argue, Jacobs and Menchú in their pedagogic calls for solidarity do so with more clarity than Satrapi, whose account of gender surveillance in post-revolutionary Iran has at times been appropriated by conservatives in the United States.
The creative work in this issue also explores the relationship between sex, surveillance, and self-protection. In her poem, “Sex Ed on the Porch-steps,” Shelley Puhak imagines a series of encounters or close encounters between a teenage boy stalker and his adult female neighbor. His furtive presence in her backyard results in his neighbor embarking on her own project of surveillance, ending in a tense stand-off in which the two simply stand, listening to one another’s silence. Silence is at issue again in Aimee Parkison’s “Harassment,” which—echoing Fox and Ore’s interrogation of the meanings of “safety”—examines campus responses to a disruptive male student in a creative writing program. Marilyn Chin’s “Fox Girl” imagines a girl in the shape of a fox marking her harasser with her scent so that he is permanently repugnant to every other student he tries to abuse.

Finally, in our News and Views section, “Transgender and Feminist Alliances in Contemporary U.K. Feminist Politics,” Deborah M. Withers tracks conflicts about the inclusion of transgender people in feminist physical and virtual spaces, forcefully arguing that transphobia is inimical to feminism. Readers might want to put Withers’s support for polytrans friendly spaces in conversation with the discussion of safe spaces in Fox and Ore. The obituary of Marilyn Buck continues our tradition of remembering Feminist Studies authors, in this case an activist and prisoner who turned to poetry in the face of surveillance.

The authors in this issue on Sex and Surveillance analyze the intersection between gender and sexual expression in relation to institutional structures that, to use a Foucauldian term, in different ways seek to “discipline” unruly bodies. They uncover complex patterns of compliance and resistance, exposing the ways in which local struggles engage with corporate, national, and/or international politics. As this special issue makes clear, such engagements defy easy categorization or explanation.

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