

# preface

THIS ISSUE OF *FEMINIST STUDIES* is particularly exciting for anyone with an interest in the ways that gender and the body are deployed within neoliberalism to bolster the state and market. The precarity of the body, the commodification of gender, race, and class, and the reengineering of masculinity are thematic engagements that inform many of the pieces in this issue. Charlie Y. Zhang presents hypermasculinity as an attendant feature of China's transition to a state market economy, and Elizabeth Schewe explores the vulnerability and dispensability of trans masculinity within neoliberal filmic frames. Catherine Rottenberg reflects on how popular feminism in our time has shifted from advancing freedoms to a highly individuated ideal of achieving personal balance. Michelle Meagher analyzes the work of three artists who playfully question representations of aging female bodies, while Elspeth H. Brown probes the affective labor that was key to the world of "brownskin" models in high fashion in the 1920s. The poets Mariana Sierra and Heather Holliger ruminate on the themes of commodification and terrorizing of bodies. Our issue commemorates the legacy of Audre Lorde this spring, on the eightieth anniversary of her birth, with contributions by Lyndon K. Gill, Aishah Shahidah Simmons, Dagmar Schultz, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who, in their respective arenas as cultural workers, filmmakers, activists, and academics, illuminate the richness of Lorde's words — which indeed both heal and serve as a clarion call to action in neoliberal times.

In the lead-up to the recently concluded winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia's anti-gay legislation drew widespread criticism internationally

from both governments and civil society. The celebration of the Olympics as a gladiatorial spectacle among nations, Russia's disavowal of queerness, and Putin's own well-documented embodied performance of nationalist hypermasculinity are a highly relevant context in which to read Charlie Y. Zhang's essay on the contemporary meanings of Olympic hurdler Liu Xiang's performance of masculinity. Zhang's "Deconstructing the National and Transnational Hypermasculine Hegemony in Neoliberal China" carefully tracks the Chinese media's treatment of Liu as brash, entertaining, and virile, in contrast to gender performances that foreground more stereotypically traditional Chinese traits — "humility" and a "reserved personality." Zhang provides an overview of how the category of gender (within all forms of state narration) has historically — from Maoism to neoliberalism — been imbricated in renderings of Chinese state identity, drawing attention to gender as a shifting formation with a differential value within the marketplace of identity. The piece points to the conjuncture between China's transition to a market economy and a reconstitution of masculinity that draws on terms that are more readily understood as Western representations of hegemonic masculinity. Zhang shows that, when taken up by the logic of the market, sport and sporting bodies do not stay within the confines of formal market activity but move, rather, into disciplining modes of governmentality where bodies learn their rightful shape and place in relation to the generation of profit and state identity.

The malleability of the body is also a broad theme in Elizabeth Schewe's "Highway and Home: Mapping Feminist-Transgender Coalition in *Boys Don't Cry*." Even though the film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) has been frequently taught, cited, and analyzed, Schewe offers a fresh angle with which to engage it: she examines the filmmaker Kimberley Pierce's decision to tell Brandon's story through the interpretive lens of a home/migration narrative. Noting the masculinized and racialized character of road trip narratives, Schewe points to the ways in which Brandon's personhood and broader queer possibilities are constrained and enabled by Pierce's narrative choices. Schewe opens up these limitations through a carefully applied intersectional analysis that blurs the dichotomy of home and highway, and points to the inherent danger that resides in both these locations for transgender subjects. This intersectional engagement further points to the erasures of blackness within a narrative form that has been racialized as white, and it highlights the contradictory formations

of white masculinity and the tensions that exist within hegemonic masculinity and homoerotic desire. Schewe's intersectional analysis highlights a number of the film's successes: the film's ability to render Brandon with a complex personhood; its sustained resistance to the highway trope as a narrative of linear self-discovery; and its delinking of queerness from white, middle-class respectability. Schewe also encourages a reading of the film for what she terms "useful meditations on both the necessity and the difficulties of intersectional feminist coalition building." In this regard, the work refuses to sidestep the tensions of competing bodies and values within political activism. She reads scene after scene to assess whose bodies are validated and whose become dispensable, interrogating at each turn the politics that inform these ontological cost-benefit analyses.

The productive analytical possibilities of an intersectional critique are again present in Elspeth H. Brown's "The Commodification of Aesthetic Feeling: Race, Sexuality, and the 1920s Stage Model." Brown engages the twin formation of the couture model/showgirl in the early nineteenth-century Broadway show *Ziegfeld Follies* and the subsequent emergence of the parallel "brownskin" version in Irving C. Miller's *Brownskin Models*. Brown's analytical approach to the subject formation of the couture model/showgirl unmasks the systemic production of middle-class white femininity as both a commodity and a desirable subjectivity. Brown offers a layered and intersectional reading of *Follies*, first by drawing out its production of whiteness and then by pursuing the missing signifier of blackness within the *Follies* itself—namely "the affective labor of black bodies that were otherwise barred from the Ziegfeld stage." Brown's approach to Irving C. Miller's *Brownskin Models* presents a comprehensive discussion of the ways in which Miller's revue was also engaged in the production and commodification of black femininity through the lens of modernity, cultural refinement, and upper-class markers. It frames Miller's production in the context of the "uplift" imperatives of the era and the prevailing anxieties of the hypersexualization of black womanhood. Brown also mines a very important irony—that despite the *Follies*' deployment of a black aesthetic in the production, such representation in Miller's *Brownskin Models* gets cast as not "authentically" black. Taken together, these three pieces very much capture what Jasbir Puar has referred to as the adaptive conviviality of the state and the market in relation to bodies.

Poetry, of course, is often a different way to analyze intersectionality and the experiences of women's lives. Mariana Sierra offers three poems that examine the fluidity of the body from a personal perspective. Sierra titles her poems with images that evoke optimism, vitality, and the giving of life, yet the text complicates those very images. Cinnamon-colored skin, pregnant bodies, and an aging mother find themselves at the center of her creative writing—incarnations of bodies that reflect the commodification of brownness as well as the fleeting embodied experience of pregnancy and meeting the end of life.

Picking up on Sierra's thematic poetry and drawing attention again to commodified bodies in motion, Michelle Meagher pushes against what she calls "the invisibility of old age." This art essay uses the contemporary art of Suzy Lake, Cindy Sherman, and Martha Wilson to explore how they, as feminist artists, are challenging what poet Marge Piercy recognizes as an aversion to old women's bodies (what Piercy calls "a slime of derision"). These artists collectively provide an opportunity to consider the cultural representation of old women, and how such women are rendered invisible and contemptible even when on display. Meagher's examination of these artists highlights the way that specific modes of representing old women can challenge the seemingly stagnant cultural visual preference for youthful white bodies. Meagher examines how women's shifting relationship to the male gaze can reshape our perspective on representation of women's bodies. Indeed, depicting and showcasing this instability of youth through aging is a wonderful and complicated feminist response.

Catherine Rottenberg turns our focus from visual representation of aging women to the spate of popular contemporary publications by US white, upper-middle-class women who identify themselves—and have been identified, however problematically—as voices of a twenty-first-century liberal feminism: Anne-Marie Slaughter, Sheryl Sandberg, and others. Rottenberg opens with a sustained examination of the implications of, and responses to, Anne-Marie Slaughter's 2012 article in *The Atlantic*, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." Although scholarly feminist work has long identified the notion that women could have it all as a myth, Slaughter's essay presents it as a feminist truism, only to go on to refute it—that is, the idea that women can be successful careerists as well as fulfilled partners and perfect mothers. From this point of entry, Rottenberg tracks a shift in the contemporary popular feminism from

claiming greater power for women to an emphasis on balance, well-roundedness, and well-being. This ideal — as with many ideals — represents a possibility available only to a highly privileged minority of women in the United States, but, as Rottenberg argues, it is upheld as a new normative model for all women. Rottenberg engages Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* and the role that affect plays in formulations that shift from women's rights, bodily autonomy, and freedom to balance and harmony. Such formulations clearly resonate with neoliberal individuated notions that those who want to succeed can do so through hard work.

This issue also commemorates the legacy of Audre Lorde this spring, on the eightieth anniversary of her birth. Lorde's oeuvre invites us as scholars and as general readers to consider mortality, gender, and the power of the erotic as a site of personal and political empowerment. Practicing intersectionality long before the term was invented, Lorde devoted her activism and literary work to understanding the multiple forces shaping her life and identity as a way to help many of us understand our own. Our cluster illuminates the generative power of Lorde's life: Lyndon K. Gill and Aishah Shahidah Simmons present moving reminders of how Audre Lorde's roles as a theorist, poet, and activist simply cannot be disentangled; filmmaker Dagmar Schultz takes us back more than two decades to the process of creating her recent film *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years*; and Alexis Pauline Gumbs poetically renders the significance of her two celebrated projects that explicitly honor and introduce Lorde's work to new generations. These contributions are drawn from, and mirror, several recent celebrations of Lorde's work: Hunter College's 2012 forum on Audre Lorde (a link to which is available on our website, [www.feministstudies.org](http://www.feministstudies.org)), a University of Toronto conference in 2012, Gumbs's Mobile Homecoming and School of Our Lorde projects, and a February 2014 symposium in the online forum *The Feminist Wire*.

Simmons's contribution to our cluster is excerpted from the text of her talk at the Hunter College event. Her powerful film, *NO! The Rape Documentary*, and her first film, *Silence... Broken*, were both inspired by Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, and Simmons shares how reading Lorde helped her to break her own silences as a queer African American lesbian feminist rape and incest survivor. (Her feeling of empowered and emboldened transition from a pre-*Sister Outsider* life to a post-*Sister Outsider* life may be familiar to many of our readers as well.) Simmons acknowledges Lorde's importance to many grassroots, action-based organizations

around the United States and the world, all of which break silences enforced onto LGBT youth, poor people, and people who experience personal and structural forms of violence. Lyndon K. Gill, whose essay opens this forum, viewed the livestream of this talk when reminded by his mother to do so. After a tender reflection on the personal significance of this event for him, Gill turns to consider Lorde's impact as a theorist and invites us to imagine how Lorde's life and writings were essential to our ways of understanding "queer" as "nonconforming" and embracing a multiplicity of identities at the same time. Dagmar Schultz's film *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years* has had a tremendous impact (and won awards) over the past year at its screenings in many locations, and her reflections are a reminder of the many different kinds of lives Lorde touched: Schultz recounts the many German feminists, both black and white, who revered Lorde. Our cluster concludes with the energetic poetic voice of Alexis Pauline Gumbs, whose Mobile Homecoming Project has created an innovative oral history archive of black queer elders and whose School of Our Lorde heals, empowers, and inspires community members using Lorde's ideas as a pedagogical force. Twenty-two years after her death, Lorde's spirit and words clearly continue to animate lives and minds and invite different but important perspectives on the ways in which gendered bodies operate in — and in resistance to — neoliberal norms and the engineering of gender, race, class, and age.

We close the issue with two sparse but evocative poems by Heather Holliger. "Quarantine" returns to the issue of terror — not a choice that a woman might make to assert agency, but how it is enforced externally and brutally, which is a theme at the heart of much of Audre Lorde's writings. Holliger's other poem in this issue, "Bones," raises up again the topic of embodied beauty, inviting us to consider, as the entire issue does, which bodies matter.

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