This issue of Feminist Studies explores the ways institutions—legal, governmental, medical, educational, and household—participate in the gendering of bodies and are themselves gendered. At any given historical moment, dominant and resistant meanings of “women,” “gender,” and “sexuality” are socially and politically constituted in institutions through cultural struggles. The authors in this issue discuss how birth control, assisted reproduction, transsexual transition, hegemonic masculinity, abortion, and domestic violence are each articulated and contested in imperial law and economic discourses (Sreenivas), in medical procedures (Whitehead et al. and DasGupta), in university research regulations (Barnes and Munsch), and in the official practices of presidents (Mattingly). Our authors elucidate how such institutions are gendered, not just in terms of staffing by males, females, and nongender conforming people, but also in the ways they constitute gender relations in their everyday operations. The articles point to the continuing need for institutional histories and ethnographies that are feminist in conception and design. They also provide openings into more progressive gender and sexuality politics by underscoring the contradictions within all institutions.

Mytheli Sreenivas’s “Birth Control in the Shadow of Empire: The Trials of Annie Besant, 1877–1878” visits the contradictory history of institutions of reproduction control. She traces Besant’s contraception advocacy in the 1870s, reminding us of its intimate and unsavory entanglements with the politics of empire. Annie Besant is a complicated figure. South Asianists familiar with her later campaign against British colonialism in India might well be surprised by this earlier incarnation, but Sreenivas demonstrates how and why the early Besant held contradictory positions. As an individual, Besant questioned gender norms and challenged the inequality of women in marriage and divorce. She recognized sexual desire as “natural” (albeit only properly expressed via heterosexual marriage). Yet a signature feature of her political writing
was an embrace of neo-Malthusianism. Over the course of her activist life, Besant redirected her attention from poverty and women’s health in Britain to contraception as the solution to starvation and overpopulation in India. She did so in “a broader context in which a defense of empire and class-race hierarchy enjoyed far greater legitimacy than a critique of gender and sexual norms.” The repercussions of her actions were global: “Besant’s efforts rendered contraception into a sexual technology that claimed to address the economies of impoverishment in an emerging imperial world. Birth control thus emerged as both an imperial responsibility and as a demonstration of British humanitarianism in support of starving colonized populations.” Sreenivas explicates what the Besant trials reveal about the multiple histories of reproduction control and the conditions under which birth control continues to be both a technology for large-scale population control and “a vehicle for women’s reproductive freedom and gender justice.”

Institutions are saturated with power, but they are also arenas where political struggles between different social groups are staged. This is especially evident in White House politics in the United States. In the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter appointed a large number of women to bureaucratic offices. Many were feminists. Why did they fail to deliver gender justice? This is the puzzle Doreen J. Mattingly seeks to answer in “The Limited Power of Female Appointments: Abortion and Domestic Violence Policy in the Carter Administration.” The article is set in the broader context of a moment in history when the US feminist movement was moving from the streets to state bureaucracies, when women of color had broadened the movement’s mandate, and when the need for government programs to support poor women was a clearly articulated feminist goal. There was an excitement about transforming gender relations as feminists populated multiple organizations and came together to collaborate. However, two important legislative efforts — government funding for abortions for poor women and a national anti-domestic violence bill — failed. Mattingly traces the back and forth between Carter and his Assistant Secretary for Public Liaison, Margaret “Midge” Costanza, drawing on new archival sources. Mattingly’s article underscores how women in public office can be discursively valorized as symbols of change even while politically powerful men oppose meaningful policy that would provide women greater autonomy over their reproductive or violently transgressed bodies. Mattingly’s careful reconstruction of how
feminist efforts were undercut by a seemingly pro-women president and his staff sounds a cautionary note today, when abortion services in the United States are being systematically denied to women and anti-domestic violence programs are experiencing cuts.

The articles on Annie Besant’s birth control campaigns and on feminist officials in the Carter administration offer historical perspectives on the institutions of marriage and reproductive control. Liberty Walker Barnes and Christin L. Munsch’s article, “The Paradoxical Privilege of Men and Masculinity in Institutional Review Boards,” turns to the gendered investments of institutions in contemporary university settings. Barnes and Munsch argue that Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), which gatekeep all biomedical and social science research in US universities, are both gendered and gendering institutions. Since it is so difficult to do an ethnographic study of an IRB, Barnes and Munsch innovate: they do an auto-ethnomethodological study of IRBs by examining ten of their own applications for a series of methodologically diverse studies of masculinity, which were submitted to eight IRBs. They examine the “written correspondence from IRB committees; in-person and telephone conversations with IRB analysts (IRB office staff who manage applications and serve as liaisons between committees and applicants); and drafts of written consent forms, interview guides, experiment protocols, and debriefing scripts revised by IRB committees.” The authors designed studies that looked at men’s experience of infertility and “gender identity threat” to examine how men behave when their status as a man is called into question. They document in impressive detail how their IRBs regularly demanded protocol modifications that defended hegemonic masculinities, normed on a subset of white, middle-class, heterosexual, and financially stable men. Furthermore, the IRBs expressed concerns regarding the “sensitive” subject matter and the potential to “upset” participants and took measures to protect “men’s seemingly precarious masculinity.” Many of the modifications in protocols themselves served “to teach men ‘appropriately’ masculine behavior and to hold them accountable to it.” In this way, IRBs act as “gendering institutions that reify stereotypes and cultural assumptions about gender.” Paradoxically, IRBs, which were set up to protect vulnerable social groups, end up protecting privileged groups and, in the process, reifying gender difference and inequality. On a more hopeful note, the authors found that their male respondents actually embraced a whole range of masculinities in practice.
Who decides who deserves transgendered embodiment? In their article, “‘The Proof Is in the Pudding’: How Mental Health Practitioners View the Power of ‘Sex Hormones’ in the Process of Transition,” authors Jaye Cee Whitehead, Kath Bassett, Leia Franchini, and Michael Iacolucci examine the cultural power of “sex hormones” in crafting gender identities. Interviewing mental health practitioners who act as gatekeepers for clients desiring sex-change treatments, the authors discover a split between those therapists who believe the “binary essentialism” that hormonal processes produce gender identities and those who have more nuanced views of the relationship between gender expression, identities, and physical embodiment. Avoiding reductionist interpretations of trans embodiment and transition, the authors examine the cultural power of so-called sex hormones for both the clients and professionals involved. The “essentialist” practitioners they interview believe that brain structures and fetal hormone baths produce misalignments between original sex assignments and their clients’ gender identity, misalignments they believe can be “cured” with hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgery. In contrast, the few social constructionist therapists who treat transgender individuals are more likely to treat gender identification as “who you believe you are.” These beliefs about their gender, the social constructionist therapists think, can be aided for some of their clients by hormones acting as “semiotic agents in the process of gender transition”; that is, they see the hormones as producing social cues that are culturally interpreted and sustained, while others of their clients transition without either hormones or surgery. The authors of this study conclude that “deconstructing the binary essentialist hormone discourse need not pose a threat, but might actually improve access and equity in trans medical treatment.”

The three-poem performance piece “Motherhood Discourse as Neoliberal Project” by Meredith Rapport Gringle combines sophisticated poetic forms with a clear political message: the rhetoric of motherhood focuses obsessively on the individual woman’s personal choices but ignores their social contexts. In free verse, an ode reminiscent of a Shakespearean sonnet, and then a sestina with its carefully constructed repetitions, the piece’s formal strategies underscore its persistent message, one constantly being drummed into US women like the beat of the piece “Snare,” that mothers and mothers alone, not society or other relatives, including fathers, are responsible for keeping US children fed and well bred. Referring to liberal
feminist Sheryl Sandberg’s book, Gringle shows that mothers, whether “leaning in” or “opting out,” are nevertheless “barely hanging on” in a contemporary society that does not consider children as communal assets: “It’s not our job to support those babies.” Instead, mothers are encouraged to believe they can and should go it alone:

What works, for me?  
(others are none of my business)  
What matters is my family,  
My sweet babies are precious.

Sayantani DasGupta’s comic short story, “Christiane Amanpour and the Quest for the Jewish Egg,” reveals the paradoxical terrain of the search for up-to-date assisted fertility treatments in a context of religious injunctions fashioned for a quite different world. DasGupta wrote the story after learning about an advertisement in a college magazine asking for egg donors with red hair, blue eyes, and three Jewish grandparents. Building a short story around the compulsions that might have shaped such an advertisement, DasGupta fashions a narrator who delays starting a family in order to build a career as a “hotshot lawyer.” The narrator is driven by idols such as Christiane Amanpour, who was worshipped in her family as the epitome of a brave, accomplished woman. The narrator’s college romance with a married college professor results in an abortion, delaying her expectations of what a marriage, home, and family should be. Finally marrying late, she finds herself judged infertile and stymied by her doctor husband’s requirement that they have a “Jewish child.” The rabbi they consult insists that only the ova of an unmarried Jewish woman can be used in artificial insemination. Ironically reflecting on Amanpour’s example of sophisticated post-ethnic cosmopolitanism, the story ponders the weights of the narrator’s wish, the modern technologies of assisted fertility, and the ancient injunction to be “fruitful and multiply.”

A review essay on the subject of feminist humor takes a break from the scientific and medical themes in the rest of this journal issue. Citing queer and feminist theory, Kathryn Kein reviews three books attempting to reverse a long-standing belief in women’s — and particularly feminists’ — supposed humorlessness “at a moment of popular fascination with female comedians.” One book Kein reviews explores the relationships between “charged humor,” social justice, and cultural citizenship.
Another examines the purported binary between “pretty and funny” to analyze how six contemporary women comedians enact body politics, while the third book centers on the feminist and queer comic collaboration of Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner.

On a more somber note, our featured artist Carol Collins speaks to Feminist Studies editorial collective member Stephanie Gilmore about her artwork, her experience of cancer, cancer treatment, and recovery in relation to imagery from nature. Through her breast cancer treatment Collins experiences herself as “a warrior, a monk,” and a part of nature, even though as a Chinese-American woman of petite build she is more often perceived as one of many “Small Elegant Butterflies” — the title of another of her series. Collins says, “Cancer treatment is civil war in your body. Even if you win, you lose much.”

Our News & Views articles present feminist analyses of two events from the past six months. Claire Willey Sthapit examines the gendered impact of the April 2015 earthquake in Nepal, while Susannah Bartlow reflects on the whitewashing of an Assata Shakur mural at Marquette University in May 2015. Sthapit notes that the magnitude-7.8 earthquake that struck Nepal, killing almost nine thousand people and displacing over one hundred thousand, is a massive humanitarian disaster whose effects are compounded by disparities in the distribution of relief and the inadequate participation of women in decision-making processes. Bartlow links the climate of white fear that drove university officials to paint over the Assata Shakur mural with the wider urgent problem of superficial engagement with questions of racial justice.

— Judith Kegan Gardiner and Priti Ramamurthy, for the editorial collective