

# preface

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF *Feminist Studies* presents an eclectic view of women's friendships from across Western history and from several different cultures. Several of the articles question whether identity or sameness is a prerequisite for friendship and ask what friendships across difference look like, including charting the difficulties of making and sustaining such friendships. The articles in this issue contrast the variety and functions of women's friendships with the narcissistic masculinist ideals of classical Western thought about friendship in which friends serve as reflections of a person — typically a male and upper-class person. The authors in this issue present women's friendships that are more pragmatic and more vulnerable and that contend more fully with difference. Some authors reflect on the high expectations placed on friendship within Second Wave feminism in the United States, noting how competition and feelings of betrayal can suffuse friendships; others trace more autonomous, productive, and forgiving contemporary visions of friendship.

The issue opens with Susan Van Dyne's archival study of student friendships in a pioneering US women's college, revealing how love, flirtation, and desire between women was expressed in Smith College's class of 1883. In another historical study, sociologist Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen contrasts the narratives of Norwegian girls and young women from the late nineteenth century with those of present-day women and girls, noting differences between rural and urban contexts. Ivy Schweitzer

surveys classical Western masculinist ideals of friendship from Aristotle to Montaigne and traces the transformation of this tradition into the present quest for equality without hierarchy. Alexandra Verini addresses models of female friendship in the European Middle Ages, arguing that Christine de Pizan and Margery Kempe illustrate a “viable female alternative” to classical models. The vulnerability of women’s close relationships comes to the fore in Nancy K. Miller’s moving elegies for deceased feminist friends, while Judith Taylor explores the more open and autonomous friendships adumbrated in contemporary fictions by Zadie Smith and Jillian and Mariko Tamaki, themes also addressed in Judith Kegan Gardiner’s review essay of advice books on friendships between women and other studies of women’s friendships. Richa Nagar’s interview articulates an ideal of feminist friendships that “enable continuous evolution of our beings and mindsets . . . without feeling threatened by one another.” If our articles focus on the close bonds between women, our News and Views pieces in this issue point to collective ties formed in response to political and social threats: Dalia Abd El-Hameed and Nadine Naber describe responses by Egyptian feminists to government crackdowns, and our forum “Orlando: Observances” offers a selection of first-person accounts from vigils organized to mark the massacre at the Pulse nightclub this summer. This issue also presents internal negotiations of identity, identification, and body image in Stephanie Han’s short story and in the vivid and bold transgressions of Wangechi Mutu’s collages as described by Sarah Jane Cervenak.

In “Abracadabra: Intimate Inventions by Early College Women,” Susan Van Dyne takes us on a fascinating journey into the “the early formation of a homosocial student culture and the bonds between women” at Smith College in the late nineteenth century. Mining an archive of diaries, letters, photos, and other materials from a group of friends from the class of 1883, she focuses on two kinds of written evidence: one, the inchoate expressions of homoerotic desire in one student’s journal at a moment when “lesbian” did not yet exist as an identity, and the other, a love poem to two students, written as a parody by one of their women professors, but which reverberated beyond the college and ignited male opprobrium. In her discussions of these developments, rather than ascribing identity, Van Dyne navigates the “messiness” of the archive, keeping her eye trained on the “only partially intelligible strategies of self-representation that can’t be translated or reduced to the modern

language of sexual self-recognition.” What is most surprising in her account is not that young women would feel desire for one another, nor that male peers or authorities might find this threatening, but that the fabric of the students’ homosocial community had such resilience, nurturing and accepting same-sex desire and the flouting of conventions of femininity across decades, even in the face of disapproval from the outside world.

Relying on interviews with living informants rather than historical diaries, sociologist Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen describes the differing patterns of friendship between three generations of young women in Norway, with cohorts born in the 1910s and 1920s, the 1940s and 1950s, and in 1971. During the lifetimes of these generations of women, Norway transitioned from a predominantly rural society to an urban one, with rising education and welfare and a highly gender-egalitarian order. This transformation did not emerge solely as a result of a deliberate agenda of social transformation but rather from “a gradual reconfiguration of relational practices, feelings, and horizons of meaning” that affected the young women’s responses to these historical changes. The oldest women interviewed recalled childhoods free of parental control where mixed groups of young people socialized, and the girls looked toward marriage with responsible providers, not with the boys they flirted with at village dances. In this cohort, the urban girls experienced more gender segregation, as their schools in the early twentieth century were divided. The next generation often described a best friend rather than the earlier girl groups, and their activities with other girls involved constructing heterosexual identities through makeup, clothing, and then dating. Years after marriage, many of these women stayed in touch with their girlhood friends, yet they also recalled more conflicts and rivalries with girlfriends than were reported by their mothers’ generation. The youngest cohort of women experienced tensions between closeness and independence in their friendships, and between “being alike and being different” — a complexity explored in other articles in this issue as well.

Ivy Schweitzer’s article, “Making Equals: Classical *Philia* and Women’s Friendship,” places “friendship with the Other,” especially among women in global, cross-cultural relationships, in the context of a long masculinist philosophical tradition. Schweitzer asks if women’s cross-cultural friendships can sidestep or even undo the effects of male domination and Western imperialism or whether they inevitably reinscribe

hierarchies of power. The deceptively egalitarian ideal of homophilia in classical literature, Schweitzer argues, posits friendship as public, political, free, and voluntary in contrast to the cultural constraints of family, marriage, and romance that supposedly bind women more tightly than men. Schweitzer argues that “the theme of equality, the source of classical friendship’s homophilia,” can be understood as “a site of utopian potential particularly hospitable to dissident groups such as women and feminists.” She suggests we redefine ideal friendship as a “deep-seated *fantasy* of similitude,” while understanding equality “not as sameness but as a utopian horizon . . . that rests fluidly or contingently on the embrace of differences.” Feminists of the later twentieth century, such as Carol Smith-Rosenberg and Audre Lorde, idealized women’s mutual friendships, but unrealistically high expectations often caused these relationships to founder. In the twenty-first century, in contrast, Schweitzer suggests that the anti-binary principles of queer theory can lead to new, more realistic, and more fulfilling friendship ethics based on collaboration and dialogue rather than on hierarchies. Based on the idea that each one of us contains “many selves,” Schweitzer claims, we can “reimagine friendship as a dynamic, improvisational, sometimes improbable process that operates outside the terms of self/other and sameness/difference and requires that we practice a form of self-exile or self-pluralization.”

Although the women of the European Middle Ages described by Alexandra Verini were deeply constrained by sexist, classical, and Christian ideology, Verini shows how both traditions offered opportunities for resignification. Christine de Pizan at the French court and Margery Kempe in late medieval England engaged with these sexist, androcentric traditions, reshaping them to expose the pitfalls that “sameness, rigidity and insularity” could inflict on a community. Pizan’s effort to legitimize her authorial role involved her replacement of the masculine tradition with a portrayal of friendship as a network of women who connected with one another with mutual regard, virtue, and knowledge across time and space. The bourgeois Margery Kempe emphasized varied and flexible models of reciprocity even with the dead. After bearing her fourteenth child, Kempe began having mystical visions that authorized her celibacy. She felt she derived blessings from deceased female saints and in turn could award them recognition through her witness. Both authors configured female communities that could offer women safe spaces and mutual respect. Verini concludes that these medieval women’s writings

demonstrate an “adjustable model of female friendship” in diffuse networks united by cross-class friendships and uneven reciprocities. Such relationships are adaptable and open to revision as they challenge “the rigidity of idealized androcentric friendship.”

Where the medieval writers discussed by Verini imagine mutual positive relationships between the living and the dead, Nancy K. Miller explicitly dwells on her own more ambivalent “elegiac” friendships with three women, all feminists, scholars, and writers, all now deceased, who were her close friends for years. For Miller these friendships were characterized by “intense identification, and competition, with each other, but also — this is harder to explain — *for* each other.” The friends were women who “believed in each other” through health, and, increasingly, severe illness, so that Miller finds herself already mourning herself as she remembers their affinities and her sense of loss. Miller speculates that friendship is not deeply dealt with in most memoirs “because friendship narratives, whatever their intensity, are difficult to plot; unless of course the relationship ends.” However, she does describe plot trajectories in the beginnings of friendships, work in common, moments of envy and competition, depression, rifts, “beautiful highs, devastating lows.” Some of the moments that Miller recounts attach to details of dress, shopping excursions, and other displays of gender, while in the background are other still-relevant relationships, with husbands and boyfriends, disapproving mothers, and literary predecessors such as Simone de Beauvoir. Most important for Miller — most to be remembered and most missed when lost — is the “constant and continuous dialogue” that feeds these friendships.

Judith Taylor brings these reflections on friendship to the present time in comparing girls’ relationships in two recent works of fiction, Zadie Smith’s *NW* and Jillian and Mariko Tamaki’s graphic novel *Skim*. Taylor uses Michel Foucault’s concept of going beyond “obligatory camaraderie” to examine agency and authenticity in friendships between young women that cut across racial and ethnic categories. Taylor sees the serious friendships around which these fictions center as entailing “commitment without enmeshment” and without either betrayal or heroism. These relationships can be more pragmatic, less intense, less tragic or ecstatic than those described by many feminists from the 1970s to the 1990s, and they are constrained less by a psychology built in childhood around intimacy between mother and daughter. In *NW*, Zadie

Smith shows the survival value and intermittent pleasures of friendship between two complicated girls brought up in British social housing, black Keisha (later Natalie) and white Leah. Natalie succeeds academically and economically; Leah rebels and refuses the motherhood that Natalie embraces. In *Skim*, the biracial Korean American Kim unites with her white best friend Lisa to gossip about other girls, yet Kim hides her crush on a teacher from her friend, her “secrecy” a “kind of self-regard.” The girls in these fictions go through attachment and disengagement but avoid heartbreak, disillusionment, and anger. They enjoy their common interests but allow space for autonomy to develop, balancing “their needs for self-determination against their desires to have a witness, a shared history, a touchstone.” As in the other articles in this friendship issue, Taylor contrasts these girls’ friendships with the inflated ideal of two identical souls merged into one that is praised by the classical masculinist tradition. Instead, these girl-“friends are more independent than interdependent, emotionally and corporeally distinct. And at different times, they fail to be supportive, accountable, or even honest, but they muddle through.” Taylor suggests that lowering expectations for women’s friendships may actually increase women’s enjoyment of them as well as their satisfaction with themselves.

The title of Stephanie Han’s creative narrative, “The Body Politic, 1982,” situates her Korean American protagonist Sabrina at a college in New York City where she claims her “ethnicity became [her] *raison d’être*.” Showing off her activist vocabulary, Han’s protagonist, Sabrina, struggles like many college-age women of her era to define herself through friendships, unwanted sex, political identities, and choices of self-presentation. Sabrina experiences the pressures of activist social ties that lead her further away from satisfaction with herself.

In “Like Blood or Blossom: Wangechi Mutu’s Resistant Harvests,” Sarah Jane Cervenak meditates on a series of artworks by a Kenyan-born artist whose complex collages portray disassembled and reassembled para-human bodies. Her artwork speaks to the experiences of African womanhood and the histories of colonialism, slavery, and violent coercion, but also of radical uncontainability and violations of spatiotemporal, Enlightenment logic. Mutu “harvests” and disaggregates images, “representing the primitivizing, racializing, and sexualizing disfigurements that come with being enfolded into another’s tapestry of who they think you are.” The collage technique has what Cervenak describes

as an “insistent multiplicity,” which “disturb[s] the notion of a center” and opens a space for immateriality and the “possibilities engendered by assemblies resistant to enclosure.” Cervenak’s review concludes: “If [Mutu’s] form cannot be wedded to the constraints of this world, it might achieve the sparkling grace found only when the frame is broken, the page is cut, the body becomes light.”

In her review essay, “Women’s Friendships, Feminist Friendships,” Judith Kegan Gardiner surveys six recent works on women’s affinities, which range from (a)historical compendium to humorous self-help guide, and from academic analysis to intimate testimony and auto-ethnography. The authors reviewed tackle issues including the shift from a time when only men were viewed as capable of real friendships to one where women are now seen as more skilled at relationality; political friendships across race, gender, and sexual identity; sisterhood among women of color; and neoliberal friendship. While these works offer us insight into strong connections among women, Gardiner finds that many reflect conservative norms, reinforcing gender polarities, heteronormativity, and racial exclusions in their conceptions of personal relationships. At the same time, some offer glimpses of new kinds of friendships that cross the boundaries of sex, gender, and age. Romantic views of friendship notwithstanding, Gardiner also points to friendship’s precarity “due to internal stresses, increasing pressures from the so-called double day of domestic caregiving and of paid work, and omnipresent media imperatives for women to be well-groomed and sexually attractive and for their relationships to be flexible and interchangeable.”

A more political side of women’s friendships is displayed in “Feminisms, Collaborations, Friendships: A Conversation,” based on a collective interview with feminist scholar Richa Nagar and Özlem Aslan, Nadia Z. Hasan, Omme-Salma Rahemtullah, Nishant Upadhyay, and Begüm Uzun (the Toronto Group) that extended as a dialogue across several years. In the interview, Nagar draws on her experience of collective authorship and building relationships across class, ethnic, institutional, and other boundaries. Reflecting on the challenges of negotiating across difference, Nagar asserts, “It is about unsettling and concretely grappling with spaces or stances that we wrongly assume to be pure or innocent or simple.” From these complex collaborations, feminist friendships emerge, friendships whose central characteristic is “a praxis of love that requires becoming radically vulnerable together.” Radical vulnerability

entails acknowledging the “ever-present possibility that the very trust and engagement that we invoke . . . can become hierarchical and exploitative if not interrogated, critiqued, revisited, and revised on an ongoing basis.” It is a “politics without guarantees” of safety, either from causing or experiencing pain, whose outcome is the “co-constitution of an inter-subjective space without a sovereign self.” While Nagar speaks most immediately of collective authorship, it is a model that extends to “situated solidarities” among feminists in widely scattered locales and locations.

The News and Views section of this issue contains a report written by Nadine Naber and Dalia Abd El-Hameed, feminists located in the United States and Egypt respectively, who themselves have a transnational friendship. Their contribution calls for an “accountable solidarity” with revolutionary Egyptian feminists being targeted by the authoritarian state. Such a transnational solidarity, the authors insist, must recognize that the repression of feminists and women is “part of a systematic assault on any and all remnants of the Egyptian revolution,” and that the fate of women’s rights is deeply intertwined with that of all struggles for democracy. Given longstanding and ongoing US support for the Egyptian government, the authors argue, “solidarity from the global North requires greater self-reflexivity and a politics of positionality that asks what responsibilities and what kinds of accountability are necessary, given the social location from which one is standing.”

The themes of responsibility and accountability also pervade our News and Views forum on Orlando. In the wake of the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in June 2016, many spontaneous vigils were organized across US cities and elsewhere across the globe. Given the transitory nature of public attention, our editorial collective felt that it was important to record the sensibility of such collective responses. We have compiled here a series of first-person accounts from a selection of vigils organized in the immediate wake of the massacre, including many held in the United States (Northampton, Tucson, San Francisco, San Diego, and Washington, DC, and vicinity), as well as in São Paulo and Hong Kong.

As we go to press, we also find ourselves weighed down by the images and numbers of unjustly murdered black lives. In the face of the long history of such deaths, the collective outcries of grief and anger have offered some hope of achieving long overdue change. It is all the more tragic then that it was at a Black Lives Matter protest that a veteran of the Afghan war chose to open fire on police. The long reach of the US



war on terror pervades and undercuts efforts to envision a better and more just life, just as it had in Orlando in the person of a shooter pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. In our spring 2015 forum “Teaching about Ferguson” (41:1), we noted that efforts to address race and police violence within the United States cannot be disengaged from the role of the United States in the world. That lesson continues to remain urgent.

Judith Kegan Gardiner and Millie Thayer,  
for the editorial collective