

# preface

AT A TIME WHEN ACCESS TO SAFE ABORTIONS is being curtailed in the United States under the pretext of a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this *Feminist Studies* issue focuses on abortion and women's embodiment. The essays by Melissa Oliver-Powell, Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, and Jennifer L. Holland each contribute new approaches to the still-vexed topic of abortion, positioning movements for abortion access in relation to historical and ecological change. Two collaboratively written essays, by South American authors María Fernanda Olarte-Sierra and Tania Pérez-Bustos, and by North American and European authors Laura Bisailon with six colleagues, both center the body within feminist labor, exploring how the embodied experience of work can also be a site of knowledge-making. Other authors push us to move beyond humanistic understandings of affect and the body in feminist work, as Nathan Snaza shows in a review essay of four recent books engaging "Biopolitics without Bodies." Poems by Rosetta Marantz Cohen, Darlene Taylor, and Abby Minor also feature experiences of bodily violence and bodily pleasure, while Ellyn Weiss discusses the distinctive representations of bodies in the visual art of Swedish-American artist Anna U. Davis. To close the issue, two News and Views pieces by Pang Laikwan and Sealing Cheng on the recent protest movement in Hong Kong provide two complementary perspectives on living through tumultuous political times. Our next issue will include content directly focused on the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the first essay, Melissa Oliver-Powell's "Beyond the Spectacle of Suffering: Agnès Varda's *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* and Rewriting the Subject of Abortion in France" addresses the complexities of anti-abortion

rhetoric in France. Placing Varda's 1977 film in the historical context of French nationalistic anxiety about low birthrates in the twentieth century, Oliver-Powell argues that the film deconstructs polarized narratives about abortion. While dominant cultural representations of abortion typically depicted it as the result of female irresponsibility or traumatic victimization, Varda's film rejects the binary concepts of villain and victim and questions the presumption that women always suffer when exercising their reproductive choice. Oliver-Powell situates Varda alongside the 343 eminent French female cultural leaders who composed a famous 1971 Manifesto publicly declaring themselves criminals for having had illegal abortions and presents simultaneous histories of French feminism and French cinema. Varda's film constructs a feminist representation of abortion that avoids foregrounding women's suffering and instead emphasizes empowerment and solidarity. Its narrative features two women friends, both treated unjustly by France's abortion laws, who participate in the movement for reform over a fourteen-year span. Varda represents the interplay of motherhood with women's lives as a continuum, not a disruptive episode, and she blends documentary-style devices with imaginative musical interludes: she shows actual women seeking abortions in Holland and includes songs about abortion, pregnancy, and motherhood. Oliver-Powell claims that Varda dramatizes unprecedented representations "of female friendship without pathology, of abortion without guilt, death or persecution, of motherhood without objectification. . . ."

A second essay, Rachel Hurst's "Abortion as a Feminist Pedagogy of Grief in Marianne Apostolides's *Deep Salt Water*," proposes that the championing of women's reproductive rights could better account for the context of difficult emotions and an imperfect world. Hurst uses reproductive justice approaches to critique simplistic rights-based arguments for abortion, premised on liberal concepts of choice and autonomy, which fail to understand the material conditions of poor women and especially women of color. Such analyses emphasize the necessity of rights discourses that include the right to bear and parent one's own children free from violence and economic hardship, and they advocate the transformative possibilities of acknowledging rather than suppressing women's ambivalence about their own abortions as well as others' choices. Hurst describes a collaboration between two contemporary Canadian feminists, writer Marianne Apostolides and visual artist

Catherine Mellinger, in their mixed-media text, *Deep Salt Water*, which is organized according to the weeks of a pregnancy and the aftermath of its termination. Rather than falling back into familiar polarizations for and against “choice,” they use the story of Apostolides’s abortion seventeen years earlier to consider how some women’s responses to the procedure convey feelings of loss that should not be ignored in the effort to keep access to abortion available to all women. *Deep Salt Water* is a dialogue between poetic and visual texts that engages complex emotional responses. Hurst argues that regarding abortion as a “grievable loss” with ecological implications can work to rebuff polarized politicizations of abortion. Her approach presents a form of “difficult knowledge” that is hard for abortion rights movements to assimilate, but it avoids relying solely on neoliberal conceptualizations of choice, rights, and individual responsibility. Hurst also proposes borrowing Indigenous feminist ways of conceptualizing fetuses in order to foreclose the antiabortion movement’s monopoly on powerful fetus imagery. *Deep Salt Water* places both the narrator’s life and pregnancy in the context of her individual embodiment and the wider context of ecological catastrophe, as shown in Mellinger’s beautiful yet enigmatic collages that connect the story of one woman’s pregnancy and abortion with global ecological catastrophe. The collages emphasize that individual women are not solely responsible for the social relations and consequences of their reproductive choices; those choices exist in broader temporal and political frameworks. Unlike pro-choice movements in the United States, the Canadian abortion rights movement emphasizes changing attitudes, not laws, and so avoids some of the polarizations familiar in the United States. Hurst concludes her essay by asking, “What is the difficult knowledge that makes speaking about abortion as a grievable loss so challenging?”

The third essay discussing abortion is a historical analysis of how children have been used in US anti-abortion politics. In her essay titled “Survivors of the Abortion Holocaust’: Children and Young Adults in the Anti-Abortion Movement,” Jennifer L. Holland explores how anti-abortion activists since the 1970s have targeted children as both potential perpetrators of abortion and also vulnerable to what they deem evil, liberal, atheist ideology. She links the politicization of children and efforts to bring them into the anti-abortion movement with broader trends in conservative politics at the time that cast children as the focus of

anti-feminist, homophobic, and racist discourse. Focusing on anti-abortion politics in Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona, the author explores how activists produced and mined a slippage between fetus and baby in order to politicize children within schools and homes. Her oral history-based research showcases the multiple tactics that activists used to get into classrooms and reach wider audiences, such as films and talks that presented anti-abortion messaging as objective. When schools started limiting this kind of access to classrooms, anti-abortion groups shifted to focus on abstinence-only sex education, targeting the curricula to include heteronormative patriarchal messaging about the dangers of sex, primarily abortion. Looking closely at the use of fetus dolls, Holland shows how the shift from fetus to potential baby or potential murdered child became realized. Abstinence-only sex education allowed anti-abortion activists a seemingly apolitical form of expertise through which they could more readily access schools and policy makers. Holland also explores how this activism targeted the home through books and pamphlets about biology and reproduction that provided different messaging to girls and boys as well as through other consumer items such as dolls and music. This normalization of anti-abortion messaging has not always been successful, but it has led to a visible youth constituency operationalized within the anti-abortion movement.

Our next set of essays on the complexities of embodiment begins with “Careful Speculations: Toward a Caring Science of Forensic Genetics in Colombia,” by María Fernanda Olarte-Sierra and Tania Pérez-Bustos. In this reflection on their previous research, the authors seek to move beyond feminist scholarship that focuses on legitimizing care as labor in order to explore care as an ethos and practice of world-making. They build on work about care from Latin American and North American science and technology studies to consider the ways that Colombian forensic geneticists analyze material evidence linked to ongoing political violence in the country. These forensic geneticists, who are mostly women, are crucial actors in reconciliation processes following political violence because of their work identifying the remains of victims. The authors want to consider both the caring and careful aspects of their interlocutors’ work and how these are part of knowledge production as well as how the labor of these practitioners is often marginalized or made invisible. By analyzing the forensic geneticists’ narratives, the authors show how these women’s affective relationship to their work leads them to

approach material evidence in ways that are both caring (attentive to others) and careful (cautious in order to reduce harm). However, the work of forensic scientists is marginalized in reparation processes, just as care is marginalized in the larger scientific community, rendering these workers doubly invisible. The authors also explore the activism of this labor, connecting it to the work of justice and the transformation of Colombian society away from political violence. At the end of the piece, the authors reflect upon how their own relationships with their research subjects has transformed their approach to research as Colombian academics, the topics they pursue, and the questions they ask. The authors show how knowledge production as embodied care work is intimately connected to their everyday lives, and an ethos of care is important in feminist commitments to social transformation.

The complexities of women's embodiment also feature in the collaborative essay by women academics from several countries who had an opportunity to discuss the material realities of their professional jobs during a sponsored retreat in Switzerland. Their argument is forecast in the essay's title, "Doing Academia Differently: I Needed Self-Help Less Than a Fair Society." These seven academics, Laura Bisailon, Alana Cattapan, Annelieke Driessen, Esther van Duin, Shannon Spruit, Lorena Anton, and Nancy S. Jecker, vary in national origin and professional rank but they bonded over their discovery that they had all experienced similar distresses, similar to the findings of feminist consciousness-raising groups in earlier generations. The collective determined that these problems were not just individual instances of bad luck but were socially produced by unsustainable professional demands brought on by overwork and burnout from the labor of intellectual and caring tasks within the neoliberal university. They describe their positions in the academic workforce as precarious, "overworked, isolated, and lonely." They argue that the "intellectual nature of academic work, with its emphasis on generating ideas, writing, and teaching, renders invisible" its "embodied, often sedentary nature." Because bodies and minds are never separate, they describe their experiences of physical difficulties resulting from the organization of academic institutions and from the continuing, but often unrecognized, allocation of care work to women. However, the collective also sees possibilities for improvement and redress through their collaborative deliberations. They conclude with the necessity of "Naming Harms" and "Resisting Together and Doing Academia Differently" in order to

improve the gendered experiences of academic women and defend against the neoliberal practices that dominate contemporary university environments. Their recommendations range from structural changes, such as collaborative projects and unionization, to avoiding words such as “busy” and “should” that can make women feel inadequate.

Pushing us to question the body and by extension embodiment, Nathan Snaza’s review essay explores how the body has been naturalized in feminist scholarship. The author puts in conversation Samantha Frost’s *Biocultural Creatures*, Michelle Murphy’s *The Economization of Life*, and two books by Ruth Miller, *Flourishing Thought* and *The Biopolitics of Embryos and Alphabets*, to reconsider what biopolitics could look like without presuming a naturalized, pre-political, pre-cultural human body. This move away from the body, Snaza argues, allows us to think “toward other — one could say both smaller and larger — frames for thinking about the circulation of power.” The reviewed books consider a range of topics, from molecular biochemistry, to the Gross Domestic Product, to data and embryo storage, but all fundamentally share a way of theorizing life that moves away from the body and from the racist, colonialist, and capitalist histories of “the human” in liberal politics and thought. This move provides openings for new forms of feminist biopolitics.

The creative writing in this issue reverberates with the themes of the essays centered on female embodiment and collective action. Rosetta Marantz Cohen’s poem “There Were Six of Us at Dinner” uses the traditional repetitive form of the sestina to attest to the satisfactions of a group of women who, looking back on their histories of sexual harassment, enjoy the supposition “that this was the best / Our lives would ever be.” The hint of past sexual violence is foregrounded in Darlene Taylor’s short and angry piece, “Blood on a Blackberry,” where the lost, violated girl remains unnamed, attention instead focused on the residue of the crime, her bloody slip, which elicits “coarse laughter” from a witness and a perpetrator. Abby Minor’s “Jump Rope Chant: A Cure for All Kinds of Stomach Aches, ca. 2000 BCE – ca. 2000 CE,” speaks to the theme of reproductive justice in a distinctive way: its structure mimics childhood jump-rope games as a celebration of the human body’s rhythmic motion and lists a number of plants and inanimate substances that were used to prevent pregnancies, drawing on cultural narratives across four millennia.

Throughout this issue of *Feminist Studies*, visual art complements themes in the scholarly and creative texts, as in Hurst's essay on the mixed-media collaboration by Canadians Marianne Apostolides and visual artist Catherine Mellinger. The art essay by Ellyn Weiss explores the ways that Anna U. Davis engages feminism, race, and migration in her mixed-media work. Davis was raised in Sweden and now lives in the United States. The author discusses Davis's biography and how her life experiences have shaped both the topics and methods of her art. Her bold, graphic collages explore alienation, embodiment/disembodiment, technology, medicine, and sexuality, complementing the essays and creative pieces in this issue well.

The two News and Views pieces on Hong Kong's most recent protest movement reflect complementary perspectives on its political agency and social cleavages as well as the potential to transform "Hong Kong" identity through shared political protest. Pang Laikwan's "Identity Politics and Democracy in Hong Kong's Social Unrest" argues that this movement has opened up a space for radical social transformation and an overhaul of existing social divisions. The movement protests an extradition law that symbolizes the Hong Kong government's unwillingness to challenge the mainland Chinese government but it does so by overcoming, through its inclusive nature, antagonisms defined by differences in social identity; it thereby crafts the kind of intersectional political alliance that feminists seek. Through a reflection on her own children's experiences of the political protests, including police violence, Sealing Cheng, in "Pikachu's Tears: Children's Perspectives of Violence in Hong Kong," asks how one can inform children about the events they are living through while also protecting them from the trauma of violence. She comes to the conclusion that children are fully capable of defying parents' interpretation of the world, acting as innovative moral agents. Both pieces make reference to the impact of COVID-19 on the protests. Our next issue takes up feminist responses to the pandemic more fully.

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