

## PREFACE

This issue of *Feminist Studies* addresses two major concerns of feminist thought: the nature, even the existence, of difference between women and men—and among women ourselves—and the relationship for contemporary women between our workplaces and our emotional lives. Two essays here caution against careless assumptions about the existence of cognitive differences between women and men. Such assumptions are examined with special care by Joseph Alpers in our lead article, "Sex Differences in Brain Asymmetry," which exposes the biases of scientific thinking about sex differences in the supposedly neutral study of the functions of the brain's right and left hemispheres. Alpers's essay should help all of us in our efforts to counter scientism and the growing faith in so-called scientific rationality about sex differences and sexual preference. Conversely, it should also caution us against an emphasis on difference uninformed by an understanding of the scientific complexities of the concept. Sexual difference is also examined in our Commentary section by a study group whose members analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*. Like Alpers, they are concerned with the potentially antiegalitarian implications of work that valorizes difference. Gilligan's work, they feel, has lent itself too easily to popularization by those wishing to defuse its feminist insights. Both essays help us to understand better how scientific research on difference can be used and abused.

Although we must recognize that the concept of difference has serious dangers, we also know that the assertion of women's difference in specific historical contexts has engendered important forms of autonomous organizing. Martha Ackelsburg's examination of the interwar anarchist organization *Mujeres Libres* reminds us of the difficulties women have traditionally faced within leftist organizations that pay lip service to the emancipation of women. The specifically feminist demand of *Mujeres Libres* was the insistence that women must prepare for the revolution by understanding their own oppression. Women leaders fought successfully against male anarchists who refused to see any differences between women's needs and their own; "difference" in this context became an important political issue. Temma Kaplan's study of the socialist origins of International Women's Day points to a similar example of the use of "difference" as a political strategy.

The issue of difference emerges too at the level of personal rela-

tionships. The differences between women and men in psychosexual development have been acknowledged as a fundamental source of difficulty in heterosexual relationships, but what of the absence of such developmental differences in relations among women? Joyce Lindenbaum, a practicing therapist, addresses herself here to the problem of counseling lesbian couples who have in many cases failed to achieve any difference—any distance—between one another. Lindenbaum suggests that respectful competition might help to overcome the loss of self felt by many women in lesbian relationships.

Leslie Rabine is concerned less with the psychosexual differences between women and men than with the locus of their erotic encounter in the contemporary workplace, and with the mediations of that encounter in romantic fiction. Building upon previous feminist analyses of Harlequin Romances, Rabine offers one of the first interpretations of the theme of sexuality in the workplace, an issue commanding increasing attention as more and more women attempt to balance the competing demands of work and love. Her analysis advances our understanding of the subtle relationship between women's personal desires for a different world order and our daily working lives. In recent years, Rabine argues, Harlequins have increasingly addressed the alienation of ordinary working women, purveying fantasies that enable women to imagine a different world, one in which the emotions matter more than workplace rules, the boss is as subject to "irrational feelings" as a woman, and a woman can gain some control both of her boss and her work through love. Rabine's analysis moves us beyond instrumentalist notions of mass culture which interpret romance fiction solely as a dangerous anodyne.

Our review essays complement each other, both reminding us that we have much to learn from our literary and artistic foremothers. Hortense Spillers makes valuable connections between the literary traditions of black women and the jazz singers who have been such an important part of black culture; she asserts that the study of the "lives and lines of artistic kinship" of black women writers and singers "suggest our mutual entanglements in a fabric of feeling and effort that had claimed us even before we knew our own names." Carolyn Burke too forges new connections in her review of new books on the poets Mina Loy, Marianne Moore, and Laura Riding. Arguing that our interest in confessional women

poets has made it difficult for us to hear "differently pitched poetic speech," she demonstrates the special strengths of modernist poets who "do not assert the self in writing, who instead write in part to bring into question the very notion of the self." Burke's essay returns us, then, to the issue of difference, suggesting that, to the extent that "female" has been construed as "subjective," the quest for a "female" language and voice may have obscured the merits of poets who wrote in a deliberately objective mode.

The art featured in this issue is selected from "Paris, Enigme," etchings by Yael Braverman Bennegadi. This issue also includes poems by Rae Armantrout, Lisa Bernstein, Toi Derricotte, and Lyn Hejinian. Ranging from the unmistakably confessional tone of Bernstein's "Victory" to the obliquities of Hejinian's "Paradise," they, along with Bennegadi's etchings, cumulatively suggest that contemporary women poets and artists have availed themselves of both the stances toward subjectivity identified by Burke.

Like Alpers, we suspect that the very category of "difference," to the extent that it implies biologically based distinctions between women and men in cognition and capacity, may prove finally to impede rather than to further the quest for knowledge and for equality. Like Rabine, we look to the contexts of daily life to help us understand the capacities and visions of the "private" self. But the issue is far from closed, and the more we know about our own, and society's, assumptions about "difference," the better equipped we are to work toward our own visions of equality.

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for the editors