

PREFACE

Most Second Wave feminists have viewed prescriptive roles and role-playing behavior with antipathy, as limiting and inauthentic behavioral codes dictated by a repressive, male-dominant social order. But now this view, like so many others, is receiving critical scrutiny. Several contributions to this issue explore the transformative aspects of roles or find ways to make role play part of a search for alternate routes to authenticity. "Oral History and the Study of Sexuality in the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, New York, 1940-1960," traces the contribution of sexuality to the cultural and political development of a lesbian community. Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy suggest ways in which those butch-fem roles that offended many lesbian feminists in the 1970s helped to create an authentic lesbian sexuality and an independent lesbian culture in the intensely homophobic 1940s and 1950s, a culture crucial to the more oppositional political stance of the later period.

Playing in, and with, roles is also central to the art of Eleanor Antin, the subject of this issue's photo essay, "Eleanor Antin: Allegory of the Soul," by Josephine Withers. Over the past decade, Antin has created and developed three roles—the King, the Ballerina, and the Nurse—whose lives she creates, performs, records, and lives while crossing gender and racial boundaries. Antin's "theatre of the self" experiments with role play to construct alternate personas that expand and extend the self. Such fiction, Antin suggests, is as real as history. Similarly, in "The Art of Living, or A Slight Distortion of the Truth," Jane Lazarre experiments with fictional and autobiographical forms in order "to try to tell the truth." Adopting an "autobiographical" stance toward "Julia's" story about the traumatic end of a female friendship helps the narrator to work through a loss of her own. Boundaries between history and fiction, role and real, collapse. In a review essay on recent feminist criticism, Louise Yelin discusses more traditional forms of women's fiction by nineteenth-century British authors.

A second focus in this issue is on the intersection of race and gender. Both "Freedom's Yoke: Gender Conventions among Antebellum Free Blacks" by James Oliver Horton and "Feminist Friends: Agrarian Quakers and the Emergence of Woman's Rights in America" by Nancy Hewitt explore issues of racism and gender order in nineteenth-century antebellum American society. Horton analyzes the contradictory effects of racism on concepts of

masculinity and femininity in antebellum free black society. Hewitt, in a study that challenges the view that separate spheres fostered feminist consciousness, demonstrates how Hicksite Quaker women's belief in an egalitarian and less sex-segregated society moved them to become political leaders in women's rights and abolitionist organizations.

Additional complexities in race/gender issues are explored in two papers from a conference, "Women in the African Diaspora: An Interdisciplinary Perspective," held at Howard University in June 1983. Sponsored by the Association of Black Women Historians, the conference was the first of several on the lives of women of African descent worldwide. Bernice Johnson Reagon, historian and performing artist, presented one of the keynote addresses, "African Diaspora Women: The Making of Cultural Workers." Reagon stresses the significance of black women as spiritual mother/leaders in New World black societies. Niara Sudarkasa, an anthropologist who has pioneered in the study of African women's lives, provided a provocative African perspective for scholars studying women of African descent in New World societies. In "'The Status of Women' in Indigenous African Societies," Sudarkasa suggests that status in precolonial African societies was determined more in terms of age and rank than gender. These papers, along with eleven others presented at the conference, will appear in an anthology, *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, edited by Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, and Andrea Benton Rushing to be published by Howard University Press.

This issue also includes contributions to the continuing feminist discourse on the complex meanings of maternity in women's lives. Two very different essays document women's responses to the traumatic risks of motherhood. In "Under the Shadow of Maternity: American Women's Responses to Death and Debility Fears in Nineteenth-Century Childbirth," Judith Walzer Leavitt examines women's responses to the physical dangers of childbearing in a period when most women were repeatedly pregnant, and "a possible life sentence came with every pregnancy." To cope with the terror and trauma involved, nineteenth-century women created a woman-centered birthing environment which, Leavitt argues, was the basis for that "female world of love and ritual" celebrated by many feminist historians. This world was lost along with the terror

as childbirth was tamed and medicalized in the twentieth century. Hence the shock and raw power of Deborah Samuelson's autobiographical essay, "A Letter to My Daughter/Myself on Facing the Collective Fear of Being Different." Samuelson writes an anguished love letter to the daughter born with birth defects who was not "supposed to happen to me." Her letter records the pain and hostility of a mother/daughter relationship in a world where childbirth, now medicalized and privatized, is supposed to progress smoothly, and difference is threatening and denied. Only through her involvement in women's groups that re-create the collective support networks of nineteenth-century women does Samuelson find the courage to accept the reality of her daughter's difference and to attempt to rebuild their relationship with love.

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for the editors