

## PREFACE

In her review essay on feminism and sexuality in the 1980s, published in *Feminist Studies* in the fall 1986 issue, B. Ruby Rich noted how debates over sex, and pornography in particular, had divided U.S. feminists. "Good girls" appeared to be ranged against "bad girls" in a debate that was characterized by more heat than light, or to use Rich's metaphor, the women's movement was caught up in sex wars. This issue brings together a group of essays, creative writing, and reviews that address one aspect of this "war" – the problematics of heterosexuality. They point to the continuing centrality of sex as an issue for feminists, but they also indicate the growing complexity and scope of the subject.

Mariana Valverde, in her survey of the current sex debates, examines the range of issues covered by key spokeswomen, from Catherine MacKinnon to Rosalind Petchesky, from sex as inherently dangerous for women to sex as a right. She points to the need to reconceptualize the terms of debate, to turn away from narrow, essentialist definitions of women's bodies and instead to contextualize sexual behavior. She suggests that "the task before us is perhaps best envisaged as the effort to discern and bring about the conditions for a nonalienated sexuality, rather than as an attempt to maximize the sexual rights of individuals or groups."

Hilary Manette Klein, in "Marxism, Psychoanalysis, and Mother Nature," offers one explanation for why we may have been unable so far to conceptualize adequately the sexual freedom Valverde calls for. Klein traces important, if unexpected, similarities between Marx and Freud in their definitions of woman and her function in modern society. As she argues, both reify women as figures to be acted upon by men. In turn, feminist theories derived from either Freud or Marx contain, inevitably, their essentialist notions of woman.

If Valverde points to the necessity of reconceptualizing sexual freedom and Klein to the necessity for fresh paradigms, Leila J. Rupp's case history of Doris Stevens, a heterosexual feminist who attempted to combine her feminism with the new sexual freedom of the 1920-1940s, demonstrates how very difficult it is to live our ideology – and how contradictory that ideology may be. Xiao Zhou documents the impact of "Western" freedoms upon contemporary China's sexual and marital mores. Like Rupp, she concludes that "progress" in regard to "sexual freedom" may frequently be a chimera for women if it is not accompanied by commensurate changes in social attitudes toward, and economic opportunities

for, women. Even as we go to press, the brutal repression in China reminds us of the fragility of struggles for freedom and social change throughout the world.

Lizzie Borden, in her interview with Scott MacDonald, eloquently defends her controversial movie about middle-class prostitutes, *Working Girls*. Without denying the victimization of some women, she nevertheless emphasizes the importance of treating prostitutes as individuals fully capable of making their own decisions. Both she and MacDonald agree that the film underscores the vulnerability of men—a subject obliquely treated by Peter F. Murphy in his review of recent books on feminist masculinity. Murphy, like MacDonald, points to the contradictions inherent in female-male relationships in a society that so fetishizes sex and intercourse. Indeed, Murphy would probably agree with Rosmarie Waldrop, that rigid masculinity should “rust under the stairs”.

Coral Bracho's powerful poem is a literary response to what Murphy and MacDonald have identified as the awkward, too real, too bodily aspects of sexual intercourse—its “squishiness.” The poem suggests that even as we theorize about sex, we also hear/drink/feel/smell far more. Sharon Thompson's ironic and humorous treatment of the complexities of emotion, feeling, and desire in “The Old Age Home” reminds us that desire among the elderly remains one of our few taboo subjects. Robin Tolmach Lakoff, in her review essay “Women and Disability,” points to the multiple contradictions faced by disabled women; their desexualization by society is only one of many stigmas they must face. Carol E. Robertson's art essay, “The Māhū of Hawai'i,” forces us to recognize how deeply our approaches to sexuality and to the body have been rooted in Western notions of gender.

Discussions of heterosexual relations have changed dramatically since the early stages of the women's movement. Although the sexuality debates have moved out of the specialists' corner, we still appear to occupy only a few rooms in a very large house, to paraphrase Rich's conclusions in 1986. Strikingly absent are essays on or about lesbians, women of color in this country, and broader historical perspectives on sex and women. Nevertheless, we are pleased to see the parameters of debate enlarged here in such provocative and illuminating ways.

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for the editors