

PREFACE

This issue of *Feminist Studies* highlights the complexities facing feminists as both "insiders" and "outsiders." Those belonging to a particular race or culture are often forced to confront the racism or sexism of U.S. culture, and those who work from without must be keenly aware of the dangers of cultural appropriation. As Alicia Ostriker eloquently testifies in her prose poem, "I am and am not a Jew. I am a Jew in the sense that every drop of blood in my veins is Jewish. . . . But I'm not a Jew, I can't be a Jew, because Judaism repels me as a woman." Christine St. Peter expresses a different kind of ambivalence in her analysis of a white woman's volume of native American tales. She acknowledges that North American whites have "a long and sorry history of exploiting native lore served up as exotica to gullible searchers after religious experience in a sterile world" but concludes by finding Anne Cameron's mythmaking book "both defensible and useful."

Feminists are now engaged in examining the assumptions and prejudices we carry with us from the past, which necessarily affect our present and our future—as well as our interpretation of that past. Margaret Soltan examines her academic reification of nineteenth-century prostitutes in contrast to present-day attitudes toward prostitutes; she concludes that women can never be wholly analytic but must participate in "the cruelty of cultural narrative." Susan S. Lanser's careful rereading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's well-known "The Yellow Wallpaper" reveals a racist subtext unnoticed by prior white, middle-class, feminist critics, who have read the story as a triumph for Gilman and a centerpiece in a feminist literary canon. If Lanser demonstrates the pervasiveness of racism in the past *and* the present, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes reminds us that we have yet to accept the challenge black women in America present to both the "dominant cultural definitions of womanhood and to feminist theory." Yet, as she argues, a willingness to admit our differences and to accept the complexities of our inheritance can be radically invigorating.

The continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of people, events, and ideology is the focus of other essays also. Julia Emberley and Donna Landry underscore their own (false) expectations when they visited the women's peace camp at Greenham Common, even as they deconstruct the press coverage of the women and their cause. Saskia Grotenhuis speaks ironically of the

perceived gains for women's studies in The Netherlands; in spite of early institutionalization, women faculty and women's studies both remain marginal at Dutch universities. Mary H. Moran points to the long history of misinterpretation and misrepresentation of women's collective action in West Africa. The state structure inherited from the colonial period has served men well, but it has undermined women's traditional power, so that unilateral action must be, and is, taken by women. Nevertheless, she cautions against exaggerating the political success of these activities. These essays convey a somber sense of the limits of "progress."

Reinterpretation, however, is also a source of power for feminists. Cassandra Laity locates in the poet Swinburne's work, scorned as decadent by male modernists, an important source of the female modernist tradition as shaped by writers like H.D. Linda Nochlin, on the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, celebrates the French artist, Zuka, who reinterprets the French Revolution in feminist terms. Gay L. Gullickson in her review essay reminds us not only of what we share with the past but also our differences. As she says, we need to look again at both the too-familiar (the English suffrage movement) and the too-marginal (the French movements); the reinterpretation and recuperation of both traditions serve as salutary reminders of the long struggle for equal rights. If we are now more keenly aware of our differences than we were fifteen years ago, we are also more willing to acknowledge and to learn from them and from the more complex past compelled by this acknowledgment.

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for the editors