

PREFACE

This issue of *Feminist Studies* presents a group of writings exploring some of the forms, contexts, and implications of women's political activism, now and in the past. Joan Tronto's review essay of six books on women's activism concludes that there is no single political strategy that has consistently proven itself and that different historical circumstances present different (and sometimes limited) opportunities for change. Tronto poses a set of important questions, all of them germane to the essays here: What constitutes a social movement? What is it that scholars look at when they "see" feminist activism, and how does class operate in defining the parameters of their vision? Is a "radical fringe" necessary to sustain more mainstream progressive political accomplishment? What conditions might engender and sustain a consciousness that transcends individualism and privatization? This last question resonates in a second theme uniting some of these essays—women's struggles for a collective cultural identity even in the face of postmodernist interrogations of identity itself.

The two pieces by Ailbhe Smyth and Molly Mullin on women's consciousness and women's political culture in contemporary Ireland suggest the relatedness, especially in a postcolonial and deeply patriarchal society, of the struggle for identity and the struggle for social change. Smyth offers a meditation, in her own voice and the voices of other contemporary Irish women writers, on the contradictory meanings of "Irishness" and "Womanness." The Floozie of Smyth's title is a Dublin statue of Anna Livia Plurabelle, the central female figure of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. The statue becomes for Smyth the multivalent image for proliferating constructions of Irish womanhood. Even as Smyth represents the impossibility of claiming a unitary identity, the chorus of voices she evokes imply that contemporary Irish women, at least those touched by feminism, do speak from a consciousness shaped by the shared circumstances of gender and nationality. Mullin's essay insists on the possibilities for an oppositional feminist discourse even amidst the fragmentation of organized feminist political activity. She analyzes in particular the deployment in contemporary Irish feminist art of the traditional image of the sheela-na-gig, which also flaunts itself on our cover in an American version by Nancy Spero. Mullin sees feminist artists' embrace of the irreverence and vulgarity of the sheela as part of an important struggle over the historical represen-

tation of both women and Ireland. Aware of the dangers of essentializing the female body and romanticizing the past, Mullin nevertheless insists that feminist representational practices are a crucial dimension of cultural politics—sometimes the only politics immediately feasible.

Lorrie Sprecher's poem, "Democracy," comments both playfully and painfully on the experiences of contemporary AIDS activists in the urban United States, who combine a cultural politics of representation with direct action. Her poem, like all the preceding pieces, assumes a connection between women's political consciousness and progressive political activism. But Kathleen M. Blee's essay on women in the 1920s' Ku Klux Klan movement reminds us that women's political activism is not inherently progressive. Blee's study reveals that right-wing women in the organization, Women of the Ku Klux Klan, effectively promulgated racist, anti-Semitic, and nativist ideas, while simultaneously advocating increased equity between white Protestant women and men. She argues that the extremism of these women is a not illogical extension of the nativism and racism within the suffrage, reform, and temperance movements of the early twentieth century. Feminist analysis, Blee suggests, must take into account the contradictory variety of women's political activism if it is to challenge reactionary movements in contemporary society.

The ways in which the racism of U.S. society is inscribed in and resisted by the consciousness of Black women are explored in the excerpts from Toi Derricotte's "The Black Notebooks." Interestingly, these passages bear a striking tonal resemblance to Smyth's evocative rendering of the dilemma of modern Irish women. Derricotte reflects on "what it means to be Black and light-skinned in a white, middle-class environment." These passages detail starkly the fear and shame, the acts of betrayal and denial, engendered in those who can sometimes choose to "pass" in a racist society. Less shaped by a postmodernist sensibility than Smyth's meditation, but like it evoking a conversation among those who share a particular cultural identity, Derricotte's journal is able at moments to assert explicitly, "This is what being Black is," and to find comfort in the commonalities of Black racial experience.

Patricia Moran's essay on Katherine Mansfield investigates issues of identity less from a cultural than from a psychoanalytic frame of reference; indeed, what is striking here is the apparent absence

from Mansfield's consciousness of a sustaining sense of collective cultural or gender identity. Moran discerns in Mansfield's writings a pattern of metaphorical obsession that approximates what we know today as anorexia, an obsessive revulsion against food and against an ostensibly devouring maternity. She locates in Mansfield's fiction a thematics intricately connecting maternal-filial relations, orality, and women's creativity—or inability to create. Reading this essay in the context of the others in this issue, one can easily conclude that Mansfield's class position in the cultural milieu of early twentieth-century England figures prominently in constructing this particular psychodynamic.

Regenia Gagnier's review essay of contemporary feminist autobiographies concludes this issue of *Feminist Studies*. Gagnier examines the implications of feminist thought for the construction of the female subject in the autobiographical genre. Just as Tronto suggests the importance to feminist political analysis of the poles of individualistic autonomy and collective struggle, so Gagnier finds in these autobiographies a range of narratives, from those privileging individual achievement to those inscribing, like Derricotte's *Black Notebooks*, a yearning for connectedness and commitment. Examining autobiographies representing diverse racial, ethnic, and class experiences, Gagnier calls for a greater understanding of the role of nationalism or citizenship in constituting feminist identities, and for an extended theorizing of "the feminist postmodernist self of diversity," in the context of other postmodernisms' insistence on the death of the author. Smyth's feminist postmodernist meditation on precisely those dual and sometimes contradictory allegiances of gender and nationality reads like a response to Gagnier's call. Feminist thought in recent years has questioned the association of political action with cultural identity. Perhaps it is time to reconsider their connection through developing more complex definitions of both.

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