

PREFACE

Feminism grew by articulating women's common interests in resisting common oppressions, and it has matured by questioning its categories of women, of oppression, of resistance, and of commonality. In this issue of *Feminist Studies*, Cheshire Calhoun argues that feminism's insistence on including all women "under the sign 'women'" effaces lesbian difference: not only seventies' celebrations of womanhood but also nineties' post-modernisms inhibit lesbian representation. "The feminist frame itself operates . . . to closet lesbians," she argues, and antiessentialism, too, has "worked *against* theorizing lesbian difference, because the construct "difference" presupposes a disanalogy between sexual orientation and race, class, ethnicity" so that the lesbian becomes a kind of ideal difference-sensitive feminist whose own difference does not matter. Ultimately, what represents the lesbian most powerfully is not same-sex desire but a position outside the binary gender categories of "woman" and "man," exemplified, for instance, in such tabooed contemporary practices as cross-dressing and sadomasochistic role playing and in the "third sex" theories that arose at the turn of the century.

The next two essays and the first poem in this issue focus on this earlier historical period, primarily in the United States, when popular representations of women were being reconfigured. Susan Swartwout's poem, "Louisiana Ladies' Watermelon Tea—1890," imagines from today's perspective bygone women together in a moment of joint, subtly subversive pleasure. Each of the essays examines a different female social "character" between the 1910s and 1930s that responded to changes in demography and the economy so as partially to escape from the dominant middle-class norms of heterosexual romance and nurturing motherhood.

Claire Bond Potter's essay on "gun molls" in the thirties extracts the stories of women who consorted with gangsters from FBI reports and other documents. Vulnerable to legal prosecution and to violence from their boyfriends, these young women nonetheless led sufficiently glamorous lives to evoke the envy of many staid working-class women. Stigmatized by the authorities, the "gun molls" attempted to justify their loyalty to male gangsters as the result of romantic love and to regularize

their situations by adopting the language of marriage and the family. The assumption of these traditional roles helped to protect the women from police prosecution and gang reprisals, and the loyal gangster "widow" might even inherit a share of the criminal booty. Although the "molls" tried to pass as conventional wives, sociological theories of the period "linked female criminality to 'perverse' sexualities, gender confusion, and a desire for male power," and the "molls" were often shown wearing breeches, smoking cigarettes, and holding guns.

An earlier female "character" who could also be found wearing pants or aiming a gun was, according to Nan Enstad, the working-girl heroine of subscription magazines and silent movie serials in the 1910s. Not the more familiar figure of the passive maiden in peril tied to the railroad tracks, this plucky stenographer or telegraph operator needed no male rescuer. Like the "gun moll," she reveled in travels and exploits that were usually restricted to men. Unlike "molls," however, she avoided heterosexual romance in favor of the "delightful, tingling romance" of her "insatiable craving for adventure." Gregarious and competent in the new heterosocial office, the working-girl heroine "exuded a new sexual autonomy when she climbed on top of train cars" or foiled bank robbers with pistol in hand, and she proudly showed her strength when her flexed muscles burst apart her dress sleeves. By offering women these "fantasies of work, respect, adventure, and power," Enstad argues, the American popular culture industry "profited from the painful contradictions in working women's lives" at the same time that it opened up for them "a space of spectacular play with codes of gender and sexuality."

Such "painful contradictions" are found, as well, in the life of a South American working woman in the short story "Mery Yagual (Secretary)," written by Mónica Ortiz Salas and translated by Kathy Leonard. Mery works constantly to transform her name, appearance, family, and potential lovers in order to seem "less 'Indian,'" but her obsessive self-scrutiny shows itself as simultaneously self-deluding.

Cate Whitemore's "From Venus to Penis" turns instead to a woman looking at herself as an artist. She discusses reflections and perceptions of the female nude by male artists and then self-reflections as a female artist who portrays herself in the

nude. In her essay, Whittemore says, "my paintings are about giving myself permission to look at everything."

Natasha Sajé's poem, "Then What Is the Question?" is an answer to Whittemore: "to read writing you need a mirror, the way you do to see your own face." In Jamaican author Opal Palmer Adisa's poem, "Pleated Skirts," the mirror that reflects a young woman's face is that of her schoolgirl friend, their closeness echoed by the uniform pleats and lace stockings in Kathy Sloane's photograph.

This issue of *Feminist Studies* also focuses on Caribbean women. Rights of representation in language and experiences explored by Caribbean women's writing are just two of the issues addressed by editors and contributors of the four anthologies reviewed by Maria Helena Lima. Lima surveys nation language, colonizer language, woman as author, and ever-evolving Caribbean feminist literatures. This essay looks at criticism, short story, poetry, and novels as the authors redefine and define the "struggle Caribbean writers face at decolonizing self, language, and history." Photographer and social activist Celia Escudero-Espadas portrays women in countries in conflict—the United States, Spain, El Salvador, and Mexico—not as victims, but as active participants in struggle.

"From its inception the Haitian state has operated through the discrimination and exclusion of women," says Carolle Charles. In her essay, Charles analyzes the roots and dynamics of Haitian women's collective actions which led to the end, in 1986, of thirty years of dictatorship. The gendering of state violence under François Duvalier's regime constructed women as political subjects. The growth of Haitian diaspora communities in New York, Boston, Miami, and Montreal enabled the gender struggle to develop a feminist consciousness. This movement transcended the social divisions of class, race, and color of Haitian women into political action. The article provides a feminist understanding of Duvalierism and authoritarianism in Haiti. It is hoped that with the return of Aristide to the island, Haitian women can "reconquer some of the space gained before the coup."

The issue concludes with Laura Suzanne Gordon's poem, "Mass Murder," which also talks about women in defense of themselves against aggression. In this poem, the perpetrators

are contemporary gangs. Finally, Gordon's poem, "The Third Dance," begs the reader to contemplate the routine, the mundane, and the spectacular as ways to reason and to search for the meanings of life. "Dancing in the dark night in the snow, I seem to be walking slowly, but I dance. . . ." In many ways, each of these authors contributing to this issue seeks to "dance," to seek new ways of seeing, analyzing, and articulating feminist meanings of life.

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for the editors