

## PREFACE

"Women's Right to Choose" has been one of the most effective slogans not only of the reproductive rights movement but also of late-twentieth-century feminism in the United States more generally. It signaled legislative victories and progressive changes in public attitudes. Although materialist and poststructuralist feminists have long questioned the limits of a rhetoric of choice, current conservative setbacks and reconfigurations in the postmillennial gender order make critiques of liberal ideas and strategies especially urgent. This issue of *Feminist Studies* dramatizes these questions with a cluster of articles discussing abortion, cosmetic vaginal surgery, and the gendering of children's toys. These articles also emphasize the power of visual art and rhetoric to ignite or quench political consciousness. Visual power is also strikingly in evidence in a very different context, that of Indigenous Australian women's art, the subject of one of two articles in this volume centering on Australia.

Are there parallels between the aesthetic motivations for more stylized labia among Euro-American women and African women who consent to female genital surgery? The limitations of liberal discourses of "choice" are examined by Simone Weil Davis in her comparative analysis of an increasingly popular form of cosmetic vaginal surgery known as labiaplasty in the United States and female genital surgery in parts of Africa. Davis problematizes the nature of consent by considering how the rhetoric of "consumer choice" is invoked by plastic surgeons who specialize in labiaplasty to generate anxiety in Euro-American women about the appearance of their vaginas. By detailing several striking aesthetic parallels in the motivations of African and American women to seek cosmetic surgeries on their genitals, Davis challenges "oversimplified binaries that divide women into civilized and un/civilized." She compares the Euro-American purchase of a "clean slit" to African-rooted female genital surgeries. She also challenges the notion of consumer "choices" and cautions us to examine the meaning of consent in the African and Euro-American context, arguing that "the motivations that impel African-rooted female genital surgeries and American labiaplasties should not be envisioned as radically distinct."

Whereas Davis is interested in how "consumer-feminist" discourses of choice can be appropriated in a commodity culture so that they actually infringe upon U.S. women's ability to consent to genital cosmetic

surgery, P. Lealle Ruhl is concerned with pregnant bodies and how "liberalism has never considered pregnant women." Ruhl reminds us that "pregnancy is simultaneously profoundly private and profoundly social; in order for liberalism to accommodate this paradox, a new formulation of liberal subjectivity is required." She examines a number of legal cases regarding fetal protection in Canada and the United States to argue that "liberalism remains stubbornly noncorporeal." We learn from this article that, paradoxically, access to abortion may intensify the regulation of pregnant women's bodies: "When women's access to abortion is allowed and defended, it corresponds to a much more rigorous standard of responsible behavior that links responsibility to the suspension of a pregnant woman's liberal rights."

The limitations of the rhetoric of choice are also examined by Laurie Shrage, who examines how "pro-life" groups visualize and popularize their rhetoric. Shrage argues that "feminist scholars have studied the cultural weapons of the anti-abortion movement, although this scholarship has yet to lead to new forms of rhetoric or activism in defense of abortion." If reproductive rights activists want to enhance their image, she suggests that they must adopt the visual and rhetorical strategies of "pro-life" propagandists. She examines pro-choice and anti-abortion art produced by artists and activists and offers some practical strategies for feminist visual artists devoted to "contesting the dominant cultural discourses of contemporary science, medicine, politics, and journalism." In addition to imagining several new Barbie dolls such as a "Mass Media Barbie, who screams about the medical risks of pregnancy and the need for reliable and affordable contraception," Shrage suggests a number of visual tools that could be deployed in the public debate over abortion. She concludes: "[F]or political purposes, we need to move feminist reproductive rights art out of journals and museums and into newspapers, bus terminals, the internet, film, and TV."

If Shrage sees feminist political potential in imagining a "Post-Porn Reproductive Barbie" doll with a nondetachable "Fetal Barbie" inside her, Wendy Varney looks at the other side of the gender divide in children's toys, analyzing the ways that toys marketed to boys inculcate an identification between masculinity and impervious metal machinery. These toys define ideal masculinity as robotic, competitive, tough, rational, authoritative, nonempathic, and self-justified by battles with others dualistically marked as pure evil. Despite current cultural images that point toward more flexible masculinities, Varney believes that toys that transform men into machines corroborate a regressive kind of masculinity and indicate some limitations on Donna Haraway's utopian vision of the cyborg. Mass-marketed toys, Varney claims, naturalize both technology and its social infrastructure and in so doing diminish and polarize the fantasies, expectations, and identities of girls and boys.

Thus, in this issue of *Feminist Studies*, Australian Varney describes

toys available through global markets; Ruhl takes a Canadian perspective on reproductive rights; and Shira Wolosky writes from Israel about American women's poetry, while one of the issue's two poets is also located in Israel. An article that specifically focuses its attention on national variations within feminism is Susan Magarey and Susan Sheridan's commentary on women's studies in Australia in its local, global, and regional contexts. The local scene of women's studies in Australian universities arises from a distinctive national history. Founded in the 1970s after strikes and political protests, women's studies courses developed into programs only in the late 1980s and influenced the development of multiethnic cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s. Now interdisciplinary programs paradoxically provide a conservative government with flexibility as public education budgets are trimmed. Australian feminism has always provided fertile ground for the transplantation of international feminisms, exporting as well as importing scholars and theories, and rewriting them in the process. In addition, Magarey and Sheridan outline three major, specifically Australian, contributions to Anglophone feminisms; these concern philosophy of the body, new feminist science studies, and feminism's relationship to the state—signaled by the uniquely Australian phenomenon of the "femocrat." Although the "global" in this analysis relates Australian theories to those of other developed Western countries, the "regional" focus recognizes Australia's geographic location in the South Pacific and its currently changing demographics, which invite feminists to "confront the challenge of language" from other assumptions than those of Anglophone supremacy.

How do Indigenous and non-Indigenous women painters and multimedia artists rewrite and transform patriarchal scripts of Aboriginal religion? Another Australian feminist featured in this issue of *Feminist Studies*, Diane Bell, contextualizes for North American readers the magnificent artwork of Indigenous Australian women within religious traditions of ceremony and connections to the land as well as within contemporary political struggles. In particular, she describes how Emily Kngwarreye and Topsy Napurrula Nelson, Muriel Van Der Byl, and Ellen Trevorrow have revitalized artistic traditions in Australia. As an anthropologist examining the religious lives of desert women, Bell intertwines her appreciation of Australian women's visual art and stories with her analysis of the cultural significance of their localized belief systems and global markets. Furthermore, she details the theoretical and political impact of the growing significance of Indigenous women's art in Australia.

Although most of the articles in this issue discuss the reign of rhetoric and imagery in recent popular cultures, Wolosky surveys a wide range of references and allusions to the Bible in nineteenth-century American women's poetry. Textual interpretation of sacred books is

hardly an outdated issue today, nor are flexible feminist assessments within and across communities of faith exclusive to our own times. Here Wolosky demonstrates a wide range of scriptural meanings altered by U.S. women asserting their rights of interpretation, so that, for example, they interpret the biblical Vashti as heroically maintaining her autonomy in comparison with the more conformist Esther. In the nineteenth century, the Bible provided a common American discourse for white Christian Julia Ward Howe, the author of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic"; for Jewish Emma Lazarus, best known for the poem in which the Statue of Liberty becomes a redemptive, Christ-like, female figure; for African American Christian women's rights and abolitionist activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper; and for other feminists as radical in their revisionary interpretations of a patriarchal God as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Emily Dickinson.

Feminist studies of U.S. culture and literature in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries more generally are the subject of the review essay by Dana D. Nelson. Beyond old fights over whether the "feminization of American culture" was "a good or bad thing," Nelson discusses a new "focus on the nexus of gender ideology with the production of national or citizen identity," especially as some gendered identity formations exclude some people on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, or class in the name of a universal subject. In the most recent work in American studies, she finds especially the idea that sentimental language, the "cult of the (white) mother," and the literature of domesticity were foundational to early national politics and crucial to defining democracy through sympathetic identification among men.

With startling imagery, poetry in this issue by Maureen A. Sherbondy and Rachel Eshed (translated by David Cooper) literalizes female bodies and symbolizes their surplus of meanings.

Judith Kegan Gardiner and France Winddance Twine,  
for the editors