

Preface

The arrival of democracy in South Africa in the early 1990s began an era of hope and expectation for millions of South Africans, who during the previous few decades had endured the violent and unequal regime of apartheid. The new Constitution, adopted in 1996, is one of the most progressive national documents in the world, committing the new South Africa to establishing and maintaining equality in a wide range of contexts, including gender. This special issue of *Feminist Studies* examines the location of women in democratic South Africa, exploring and analyzing the relationship between political change and the lived experiences of South African women. What are some of the opportunities and difficulties of establishing a feminist state in a nation with such a long and profound history of institutionalized inequality? How effective have constitutional and legislative initiatives been in improving women's lives in South Africa?

Versions of four of the articles published here were originally presented at a conference in October 1999 called "Politics, Rights, and Representation: Gender and Race Equality in the United States, France, and South Africa," which was organized by Leora Auslander and took place at the Center for Gender Studies, University of Chicago. All four articles (by Catherine Albertyn, Shireen Hassim, Thenjiwe Mtintso, and Gay W. Seidman) take up in one way or another the question of the relationship between the state apparatus and grassroots women's movements and experiences. In this issue, these articles are complemented by a number of other pieces, including autobiographies and poems, which explore the evolution, during the early years of South African democracy, of a number of cultural and activist organizations: the WEAVE collective, the Philani Printing Project, the Association of Bisexuals, Gays, and Lesbians, and the Treatment Action Campaign. Political change of the kind we have seen in South Africa is always catalyzed by the consciousness, the courage, the imagination, and the actions of countless women and men, and one of our aims in this volume is to ask how this kind of energy continues to transform South Africa at the beginning of the new millennium.

Our opening article by Shireen Hassim, "The Gender Pact and Democratic Consolidation: Institutionalizing Gender Equality in the South

African State,” analyzes the obstacles to feminist action in a new democracy such as South Africa’s and argues that true equality can only be achieved if governmental initiatives are both shaped and supported by a strong women’s movement outside the structures of the state itself. Noting the many achievements of the African National Congress (ANC) government in the area of women’s rights (the establishment of the Office on the Status of Women, the Commission on Gender Equality, and “gender focal points” in a wide range of government departments), Hassim nonetheless documents growing frustration, apathy, and confusion among feminists both inside and outside government. She attributes many of these feelings to budgetary constraints and the adoption of market-led policies by the ANC government, but she also emphasizes the difficulty many feminist activists had adapting to work within governmental structures and demonstrates that the process of adaptation often involved a distancing from the grassroots feminist organizations in which these women had both learned to operate and from which they took their original inspiration. The South African Gender Commission, formed in 1996, offered the possibility of a radically new gender regime but, as Gay W. Seidman’s article, “Institutional Dilemmas: Representation versus Mobilization in the South African Gender Commission,” shows, was in disarray by 2000. Was South Africa simply another case of the subsumption of feminist goals to nationalist goals? Seidman argues for a more complicated explanation of the failure of the commission and shows how conflicts about the nature of feminism and larger debates about the relationship between the state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) affected the commission’s ability to function. The commission was, in effect, trapped between the contradictory goals of mobilizing support for “feminist” agendas and representing the “interests” of women. This essay thus raises important questions about feminist institutional design that go beyond the South Africa case.

In “Representivity: False Sisterhood or Universal Women’s Interests? The South African Experience,” Thenjiwe Mtintso, who was Deputy Secretary-General of the ANC and has recently been appointed South Africa’s Ambassador to Cuba, reflects on a similar dilemma to that raised by Seidman and, in her analysis of interviews of ANC activists, draws our attention to how the activists themselves struggle over questions of women’s interests and representation. The questions that are so urgently raised in a country with South Africa’s particular history are also being asked in countries such as France and India where the need for increased numbers of women in Parliament have been hotly debated. Theoretical questions about equality and diversity are given a pragmatic focus here as Mtintso argues for the importance of synergistic relationships between popular women’s groups, the feminist movement,

and women parliamentarians. She calls also for the development of new theory that can enable us to move beyond the “sterile debates” about essentialism and difference.

South Africa has one of the highest HIV/AIDS infection rates in the world, and two articles in this volume address the relationship between the epidemic and the construction of gender and sexuality. In “Contesting Democracy: HIV/AIDS and the Achievement of Gender Equality in South Africa,” Catherine Albertyn argues that gender inequality is one of the major causes of the disaster and calls for increased attention to the private sphere and to sexual cultures in South Africa to halt, or at least slow, the growth of the epidemic, noting that the devastation wrought by AIDS could well reverse all South Africa’s political and social gains. Women, particularly black women, are especially vulnerable to infection, partly because of their economic instability and partly because of the unequal balance of power between women and men in sexual and domestic settings. Significant improvement in women’s political representation and participation has had disappointingly little effect on their private lives and their intimate cultures, and Albertyn argues that women need to make strategic alliances in order to affect material changes that could make it easier for them to protect themselves from infection and to resist social and sexual subordination. The issue of HIV/AIDS is taken up again in “Midi and Theresa: Lesbian Activism in South Africa,” which presents autobiographical narratives by Taghmeda Achmat and Theresa Raizenberg, founder members in 1992 of the Association of Bisexuals, Gays, and Lesbians, and in 1998 of the Treatment Action Campaign, an activist group working to improve treatment for people living with HIV and AIDS in South Africa. Achmat and Raizenberg are one of the best-known activist lesbian couples in South Africa, and here they recount the history of their relationship and of their activist work, exploring the impact of their families, their religious beliefs, and their communities on their political and social consciousness.

In “Gender and Masculinity in South African Nationalist Discourse, 1912-1950,” Natasha Erlank also examines the evolution of political consciousness, but this time in the nationalist movement of the early decades of the twentieth century. Like Albertyn’s, her article makes clear that the public and the private can never be separated. Thus at key moments South African struggles for political inclusion took the form of demands for the restoration of masculine privileges. As in other British colonial contexts, South African elite men were influenced in complex ways by the domestic division of labor glorified in Victorian England, and sought to create a family life along those grounds that would effectively limit the role of women from the public sphere.

Often, it is in imaginative and cultural texts that we see both private and public worlds in the process of transformation. The impulses

behind such texts are sometimes conflicted and contradictory, but in a context such as the new South Africa they can sketch out a vision of the future that is both exhilarating and daunting. It is in art, after all, that writers and painters can both protest against their own realities, and imagine alternative, often utopian, lives and experiences. Three pieces in this issue, Smitha Radhakrishnan's "'African Dream': The Imaginary of Nation, Race, and Gender in South African Intercultural Dance," Barbara Boswell's "WEAVEing Identities," and Kim Miller's "The Philani Printing Project: Women's Art and Activism in Crossroads, South Africa," explore the politics and the possibilities of culture in the new South African state.

Radhakrishnan analyzes her experience as a member of the Durban-based intercultural dance group, Surialanga, that performed at Nelson Mandela's 1994 inauguration and pioneered the fusion of Zulu and Bharatnatyam styles. In Surialanga's pieces, classical Indian dance movements are combined with traditional Zulu styles as an image of South African interculturalism made possible only since the coming of democracy. Yet Radhakrishnan explains that this aesthetic fusion bears little relation to the lived experiences of the dancers themselves, Indian women and Zulu men. In spite of the intensity of their artistic encounters, for economic and structural reasons the two groups have little in common, and offstage social interactions are rare and often tense. Nonetheless, Radhakrishnan believes that the experience of the dance is transforming for audiences and sometimes even for the dancers despite their mutual mistrust. She ends with a description of a particular performance before a vast audience of schoolchildren whereby she and the other dancers, disoriented by rain and poor light, experienced "a rare euphoric moment of unity."

Questions of identity arise again in Boswell's article on the black women writers of the WEAVE collective. Even as South African authors become increasingly well-known literary figures (as we write this, J.M. Coetzee has just won the Nobel prize for literature), black women writers are still invisible. Boswell addresses the dilemmas of identity and writing with which these black women writers, who are often uncomfortable with the label "writer," grapple. Boswell argues that more important than publishing, for black women writers, is the act of writing, for it is only in writing that they can claim for themselves a space hitherto denied them. The collective asserts the identity of "black" to counter the various color gradations imposed by the apartheid system, even as they accept blackness as a fluid and situational identity. Yet identifying as "black women writers" may in fact re-inscribe them in the marginal location they already occupy. The constant awareness of the Janus-faced effects of their identity forms the crux of the political and creative struggles of the WEAVE group. We include in this issue poems by some of the WEAVE writers, Roshila Nair, Diana Ferrus,

Malika Ndlovu, and Gabea Baderoon, who present us with searing images of lives of struggle under a brutal colonial regime, the birth pangs of a newly democratizing nation, and of emancipatory promises as yet unfulfilled. In these poems we see the power and diversity of South African women's poetic voices as they carry forward the tradition of writers as the conscience of the nation.

The art essay in this issue also shows the generative and empowering potential of culture. Kimberly Miller introduces us to the Philani Printing Project, created initially to provide skills training and printing facilities to unemployed mothers, that has resulted in art now widely recognized as an "important part of the country's new visual environment." The hand-painted wall hangings, T-shirts, pillowcases, and aprons are political and autobiographical in nature. Miller considers four Philani works that address AIDS, crime, domestic abuse, and women's rights. The works and their presentations consistently do more than raise awareness, argues Miller. Rather, this art incorporates the histories of past struggles and "instructs viewers on how and where to wage an effective protest." The success of the Philani project thus stands as a persuasive argument for transformative potential of art, for those who produce it and those who experience it.

Special thanks are due to one of our consultants, Gay W. Seidman, whose expertise, hard work, and generosity helped shape this special issue. Her contribution to the volume goes far beyond the article we publish here.

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for the editors