

preface

BEGINNING THIS ISSUE is a cluster of essays that explore the politics of class in relation to women's work, state formation, and feminism. Other essays, commentary, art, and creative offerings address feminist conceptualizations of collective and individual subjectivity. Whether focusing on the erasures of social class in feminist scholarship or the inattention to gender in state socialisms or the disappearance of bisexuals under the sign of lesbianism or the silences framing discussions of transnational subjectivities, our authors speak especially to what has been left out of canonical feminist narratives and the ways these absences limit our research and, ultimately, our strategies for changing the world.

Leading off a group of articles exploring women's work, social class, and socialism, Basia A. Nowak and Wang Zheng focus on "women's work" in building socialist states in immediate post-World War II Poland and China respectively. Noting that the influence of women in socialist state formation has been either dismissed by scholars as insignificant or characterized solely as a "top-down" phenomenon directed by the patriarchal state, Wang and Nowak analyze women's labor within state-sanctioned and -sponsored national women's organizations. They argue that women's activism within this framework cannot be understood as simply flowing from the Communist Party's agenda. In her Feminist Studies Graduate Student Award-winning article, "Constant Conversations: Agitators in the League of Women in Poland during the Stalinist Period," Nowak concentrates her attention on the League of Women, Poland's "official, centralized, mass women's organization during communism." Central to Nowak's article are the "female agitators" who were critical players in the Party's propaganda efforts as well as key agents in promoting specific benefits for women. As Nowak's title suggests, female agitators used talking as a means both of informing women about socialist ideology and of facilitating their participation in building a socialist state. The "constant conversa-

tions” that described the form of these agitators’ work to “inform and educate” other women invoked particularly “feminine” modes of persuasion. The gendered image of women as “talkers” both aided and undercut the league’s efforts, as female activists had to balance the effectiveness of one-on-one and women’s-only group conversations with the negative stereotypes that characterized female talk as idle chatter or trivial gossip. Nowak’s insightful analysis suggests the need for greater attention to these early years of socialist state building and women’s position as critical actors in such efforts.

Covering the same immediate post-WWII period, Wang Zheng’s article, “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China,” examines women’s policymaking role in the socialist Chinese state. Through her study of the Shanghai branch of the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), Wang explicitly contests presumptions that the Shanghai Women’s Federation and its grassroots organization, the women’s congress, operated merely as “tools” of the Chinese Communist Party rather than as political actors. Although the League of Women in Poland distanced itself from feminism, the ACWF focused on “women’s issues” in order to defend its importance as a Party organization. With a general directive to organize people at the grassroots level, the Shanghai Women’s Federation created its own approaches toward mobilizing women through women’s congresses. Wang argues that the “vision and methods of organizing . . . were not granted by some abstract state patriarch” but rather emerged from these women’s organizations’ own initiatives. Critiquing definitions of “state feminism” that focus solely on democratic states and dismiss the possibility of feminist activism in socialist states, Wang persuasively characterizes the Chinese state as a “landscape . . . inscribed with women’s vision and accomplishments.”

Nowak and Wang show that binary conceptions of patriarchal socialism versus feminist-friendly democracy limit our understandings of women’s activities under socialist regimes. Frances S. Hasso confronts more current, and currently dangerous, binaries that oppose a dynamic United States to a supposedly static Islamic religion and Arab culture. In her extensive review essay, “Problems and Promise in Middle East and North Africa Gender Research,” Hasso argues that fracturing the “binary frame-

works” of “West/East, authentic/inauthentic, modern/traditional, resistance/abjection, secular/pious” is necessary to an adequate understanding of the region. She notes that the binary of “modernity” versus “tradition” elides “the often violent and repressive aspects of projects framed” as belonging to either camp, including those claiming a “feminist civilizing mission.” Pan-Arabist secular identities and Islamicist ones, she shows, are not opposed but may share totalizing and patriarchal impulses, limiting women’s abilities to express their own desires for nationhood. On the other hand, Hasso claims that an “interest in the everyday, subjectivity, and agency” distinguishes feminist scholarship in the field. Although scholars of sexualities in the region face special difficulties from censorship and restrictions on funding, they have produced exciting work through analysis and critique of religious and juridical texts and of popular culture.

A different challenge to the categories of conceptualization in U.S. feminism today is posed by Vivyan C. Adair’s provocative article, “Class Absences: Cutting Class in Feminist Studies.” Adair critiques the inattention to social class in women’s studies scholarship and teaching and moreover, that the very poor (women in particular) are erased when they are subsumed under the framework of “working-class studies.” After researching more than 200 women’s studies programs, including program objectives, syllabi, texts, and curricula, Adair finds that, even though all have an explicit “commitment to interrogate the interconnectedness of women’s experiences in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality,” a “focused attention” to class is “all too often absent from feminist studies.” This compelling essay asks why social class, especially poverty class, coverage is so minimal in feminist and working-class studies and calls on each of us to recognize the dangers in such omissions. Adair suggests that a first step to addressing these erasures is to pay more attention to the ways in which social class, like race, gender, and sexuality, is “both personal and structural”: such attention can create spaces within which poverty-class students and colleagues might “come out of the broom closet” and have their identities validated.

Validating their identities as workers was a primary goal of those women who organized the campaign for the unionization of teaching assistants (TAs) at the University of California at Santa Barbara, a campaign docu-

mented in Jeanne Scheper's essay "Visualize Academic Labor in the 1990s: Inventing an Activist Archive in Santa Barbara." Vivid and forceful posters from that campaign used images from popular culture to connect the teaching assistants with feminist and labor history and the legacy of organizing by people of color and other progressive groups. The battleground of TA unionization, Scheper writes, was gendered against the paternalisms of both the university administration and the union with which the teaching assistants were affiliated.

Social class and economic realities play a surprising role in Anita Helle's review essay of recent work about U.S. poet Sylvia Plath, who labored picking strawberries during her teen-aged summers and who kept exact notes about the money she made from her writing. Instead of the feminist icon of fierce creativity or the suicidal madwoman of popular dramatizations, Plath appears in Helle's "Lessons from the Archive: Sylvia Plath and the Politics of Memory" as an astonishingly productive, complex, and self-conscious literary worker. Not her corpse but her corpus of writing is the focus of recent Plath studies, which investigate much new material, including Plath's unpublished drafts and revisions, collages, photographs, and visual art, as well as her letters and diaries, and view these texts from more historically conscious perspectives than previously. "Plath's legacy," Helle judges, "provides an absorbing instance of archive formation as a cultural process" involving historical, popular, biographical, and fictional forms.

Women's work, subjectivity, and social class also appear as recurring themes in this issue's creative contents. Artwork by Callie Danae Hirsch attempts to capture the energies of personal identity through imagery evoking anthropological, spiritual, and natural forces. Poems by Paola Corso are more specifically historical. They dramatize the famous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911 in which 146 young immigrant women lost their lives in a Manhattan sweatshop whose doors were locked to keep them in. The "Triangle girls" speak in solidarity with today's sweatshop "girls girls" around the globe who have to work in unsafe conditions. Minnie Bruce Pratt's "The Dissolution of Old Ideas Keeps Pace" uses a quotation from the *Communist Manifesto* to alert the reader to the speculations on history hovering beneath the surface of a poem about spring blossoms; her other poems are equally resonant

about the larger implications of women's and men's work in the office or on the factory floor.

The pains caused by women policing other women as well as the joys of women loving women are among the contradictory emotions that Carolyn Pajor examines in her autobiographical essay, "White Trash: Manifesting the Bisexual," which appeals to feminist readers to realize that "lesbian isn't the only way to be gay. Lesbian isn't the only dyke."

Bonnie J. Morris, in her commentary "Valuing Woman-Only Spaces," also addresses relationships among women and, like Pajor, issues a manifesto for a position deemed a minority one among feminists, here specifically the question of the validity of "woman-only" spaces, along with the closely related and often highly charged issue of defining "woman." Asserting the importance of "woman-only" communities, whether spiritually, socially, or politically formed, Morris suggests that such spaces exemplify respect for women "acting as agents of their own cultural survival." Acknowledging the increasing fluidity of gender and sex, Morris examines the "woman-only" spaces of lesbian music festivals and focuses on the ongoing controversy at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival over the organizers' maintenance of a "woman-born-woman" policy for admission as an example of the conflict surrounding these questions. Noting her own support for this policy, Morris asks that whatever our position on the current debate we not lose sight of the historical significance of the Michigan festival for nurturing lesbian subjectivities.

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