

preface

IS THERE SUCH A THING as feminism in the mass media? What does it look like? These are some of the questions explored in this volume. Covering texts as diverse as Hollywood movies, Taiwanese women's magazines, the HBO series *The Sopranos*, and science fiction, the writers represented here all argue that in some complex way mainstream films and bestselling publications are developing their own feminist language, whose alphabet we still need to learn. Does the gendered violence in *The Sopranos* simply reproduce misogynist prejudice, or does it challenge it? Does the emphasis on beauty and fashion in the coverage of feminism in women's magazines in Taiwan challenge Western Second Wave ideals of what feminism should be? Is the Borg Queen in the Star Trek movie *First Contact* really a feminist role model? Are the beauty parlors in films like *Desperately Seeking Susan* and *Legally Blonde* represented as oppressive or liberating for women? Twenty-first century mass media offer possibilities for the creation of feminist spaces and the discovery of feminist voices that often constrain as much as they liberate.

In the first article in this volume, "Gangster Feminism: The Feminist Cultural Work of HBO's *The Sopranos*," Merri Lisa Johnson argues that the fifth season of the cult HBO series can be read as a sophisticated feminist analysis of the social, economic, and cultural roots of gendered violence. As Johnson demonstrates, there is a thin line between a media critique of violence and its reproduction in shows such as *The Sopranos*. She seeks to avoid a binary model of either subversion or containment and instead shows "how to read representations of violence as both reiterations of sexism and primetime challenges to sexism." The article is focused on the episode "University," in which Tracee, a dancer at the Bada Bing! is killed

by her lover, Mafia member Ralphie Cifaretto, while a second storyline follows Meadow, Tony Soprano's daughter, as she negotiates the social and sexual challenges of her first year at Columbia University. Johnson shows how "University" dramatizes the interdependence of brutal commercial spaces like the strip club and the apparently loving haven of the middle-class home. In her words, "Tracee and Meadow hold within their separate social roles traces of the other, calling the good girl/bad girl binary of traditional Western thought directly into question and . . . pointing beyond gender to class as a defining axis of feminine respectability." The episode can be read as an example of what Johnson calls "sex worker feminism," with Tracee's miserable end the result of "sex worker stigma, a combination of traditional misogyny and class disgust." However, immediately after Tracee's murder, Ralphie's own vulnerability as a working-class man is thrown into relief when Tony brutally beats him as a punishment for his treatment of Tracee. Tony's contempt for Ralphie and Ralphie's unsuccessful attempts to rise within the hierarchy of the Mafia family mean that Ralphie is forced to draw attention to his own aggression and masculinity in an attempt to increase his earning power. Like Tracee, he "barter[s] for status and wealth with his body."

The hidden connections between people and places are exposed again in Anjali Arondekar's provocative review essay, "The Voyage Out: Transacting Sex under Globalization." Arondekar reviews the works of three anthropology scholars who examine questions of sexuality and the queer in a global frame. Highlighting the turn to globalization in queer/sexuality studies, Arondekar assesses these monographs in relation to the "challenge" of global queer/sexuality studies; a challenge she articulates as one of moving from an "uncritically culturally appropriative relationship to spaces of difference, to a language of responsibility and situated knowledges." In her review Arondekar critiques the current scholarship in "global" sexuality/queer studies for its inability to move beyond nominal references to "colonialism and empire" and the absence of thick description and deep analysis necessary to exceed the "colonial landscapes" that ground each study. Arondekar sees great promise in the reviewed texts' theorizing of the intimate, the connections each draws between national

and local paradigms, and their attention to thinking cross-culturally about sexuality and views the “imaginative skills” each brings as moving to “displace and transform the negative inheritance” of the history of sexuality studies.

Arondekar’s essay is followed by Jennifer Scanlon’s article “‘If My Husband Calls I’m Not Here’: The Beauty Parlor as Real and Representational Female Space.” Scanlon analyzes the alternative fictional (and real) spaces for women offered by beauty parlors/salons. Comparing several mainstream Hollywood films (*Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Steel Magnolias*, *Legally Blonde*, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, and *Beauty Shop*) in which beauty parlors figure in real women’s lives, Scanlon argues that beauty parlors serve as sites of limitation but also of potentiality and promise. In her essay Scanlon examines the all-encompassing women’s culture and space represented in cinematic depictions of beauty parlors and investigates these representations of beauty culture as a process. The interactions between hairdressers and their clients and among the clients are not simply about accommodating normative ideals of femininity, but also are a means to negotiate and resist the status quo. Scanlon especially explores the intimacy of beauty shops as a space where fictional women search for a female solidarity that can mitigate class and race distinctions while also acknowledging the reality that the hairdressing industry has been and continues to be segmented by race and class. In the end Scanlon asks us to consider whether film viewers can “enact the cinematic promises of beauty culture given the complicated nature of social reality.”

A similar question is posed in a different context by the magazines examined by Fang-chih Irene Yang in her article, “Beautiful-and-Bad Woman: Media Feminism and the Politics of Its Construction.” In 2001, the Taiwanese edition of the women’s magazine *Bazaar* featured a fashion profile of Taiwanese feminist Chang Hsiao-hung, with a photograph of Chang beautifully dressed in a long black skirt and green scarf. Intrigued by the magazine’s emphasis on Chang’s love of expensive, luxurious clothes, Yang analyzes the feminist politics of international women’s magazines and self-help books in Taiwan in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, showing how Taiwanese feminism negotiates the relationships

between Taiwanese society, Western feminism, and consumerism. Fang argues that the Taiwanese media advances the “beautiful and bad woman” as the ideal feminist: “beautiful” because, in spite of her politics, she pays a typically feminine attention to her appearance; “bad” because she challenges restrictions based on gender. In an attempt to contain local feminist challenges by promoting “a man-loving lifestyle feminism conducive to global capitalism,” Taiwanese media feminism embraces some aspects of Western feminism while rejecting others. In order to understand the complexity of this move, Fang argues, we need to theorize media feminism in Taiwan in the context of neoliberal globalization.

Neoliberal globalization and race figure again in the review essay by Stephanie A. Smith. In her retrospective on Octavia Butler, Smith argues both for the need to more seriously engage science fiction/fantasy (SF/F) as a vital genre of U.S. fiction and for Butler’s place as one of the most prominent and provocative feminist voices within this genre. Characterizing Butler as the only “prominent, popular, female African American and decidedly feminist voice in the historically white male domain called science fiction and fantasy,” Smith suggests readers look to the ways in which SF/F allows for “good” authors to address the “political realities” of their time. More than this, Smith urges us to consider the ways SF/F facilitates critical analyses of racial/gender/sexual “Others.” Smith draws particular attention to Butler’s address of race as persuasively “complex and disturbing” and always framed by an acknowledgment of the roots of “racist fantasy” in the “violence of raced slavery” in the United States.

In a similar interrogation of the possibilities of SF/F, Tudor Balinisteanu focuses on SF/F cinema, in particular the ways in which one filmic example of the genre explores and explodes the woman : nature/man : culture binary through the figure of the Borg Queen from the film *Star Trek: First Contact*. In the film the Borg is a “cube-shaped planetary cyborg entity” that operates as a “physically melded consciousness under the rule of the Borg Queen.” In Balinisteanu’s deft analysis the Borg Queen offers a provocative twist on the recurrent myth that allies the “masculine” with science and technology, which then triumphs over the female/feminine—

identified as nature or chaos. Building on the work of Donna Haraway, among others, Balinisteanu argues that the “Cyborg Goddess,” the Borg Queen, refutes and overturns conventional gendered dichotomies and suggests the radical possibilities of a powerful alliance between female-identified nature, technology, order, and chaos. The “Other” constructed in *First Contact* is both the “feminine” or “female” as well as the Borg model of collective agency working in opposition to the dominant ideology of individualism and model of masculine decision making that conventionally divides the mind and body.

The creative work in this volume takes up the tension between constraint and liberation that all the articles to some extent explore. The violence of home is at the center of our creative writing; some texts, like Elizabeth Rees’s “Rolling Out the Dough,” also reveal the tenderness of female domestic spaces. Nancy White’s brief satirical poem, “The Wonder,” dramatizes the disgust a wife feels for the husband she seems still to love. This disgust becomes explicit sadistic fantasy in Suzume Shi’s “Husband,” with its opening image of the husband’s body flayed and sent flying into the sky. The predicament of daughters is examined too in Shi’s “Song,” about little girls cheerfully skipping rope as they chant a ditty about father-daughter incest and murder, and in Rees’s “Performance Artist,” in which a girl moves toward the food in her mother’s kitchen in the dead of night “like a well-trained thief.” “The Book of Love,” also by Shi, dramatizes the beauty and vulnerability of a young girl’s body, menstruating for the first time. K. Gorcheva-Newberry’s story, “A Matter of Hydraulics,” imagines a woman taking out on the bird her ex-lover gave her all the complex feelings of violence and tenderness that his abandonment has released within her.

Faith Ringgold’s series of painted story quilts, *Coming to Jones Road*, also tells a story of oppression, love, and liberation. Eight quilts and accompanying texts dramatize the journey of a group of slaves as they flee north in 1792. They end up on Jones Road in Englewood, New Jersey, a street to which Ringgold moved in 1992 and where she struggled to overcome her neighbors’ opposition to building a studio in which to paint. *Coming to Jones Road* depicts the beauty and the pain of her struggle and those of her

ancestors as they followed the voice of their aunt Emmy to walk to freedom. In Faith Ringgold's words: "In *Coming to Jones Road* I have tried to couple the beauty of the place and the harsh realities of its racist history to create a freedom series that turns all the ugliness of spirit, past and present, into something livable."

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