

## preface

NORMS CREATE CATEGORIES, and categories create norms. Such processes are circular, communal, and inflected by history and culture, as this special issue of *Feminist Studies* illustrates with respect to sexuality and gender. One roundtable of scholars debates lesbian history, turning the discussion of identities into a debate on the place of lesbian studies, and sexuality studies more broadly, in contemporary US universities. Another roundtable queries future directions for women's studies and sexuality studies; this forum becomes a lively discussion on the political effects of names and labels. Major essays in this volume advance our understanding of the possibilities present in non-solidified categories, such as gender identities formed by Thai women living in urban dormitories, or the increasingly expansive de-medicalized understanding of asexuality. Categories are also layered by historical and political contexts: an insightful review essay on "Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies" traces links between this new field of study and prior feminist theories and critical race studies. The ideas of Mary Daly, a pioneer of woman-centered theology in the United States, are re-examined for their subterranean streak of Roman Catholicism and even Mariolatry. The psych ward looms in another essay as a place where friendships among women are intersected by medical and bureaucratic lines of authority, while the poetry of women of color configures an additional perspective on feminist history and the texts

taught in gender studies courses. A poem in this issue, “Researcher as Hostess,” riffs on a graduate student’s multiple roles, while fluid identities influence even the art essay focused on the work of photographer Laura Molloy, the blurred faces of whose subjects remain as evocative as they are indefinite.

This issue begins with an essay that questions the blanket use of the category of “lesbian” for all female same-sex eroticism, as Megan Sinnott demonstrates the importance of using the categories of her subjects themselves. Relying on over two decades of her ethnographic research in Thailand, she analyzes the visibility or invisibility of female eroticism among women who live in communal settings. Such settings reshape the categories of public and private, destroying the binary that connects them with separate masculine and feminine spheres. Moreover, she questions the assumption that queer behaviors are invariably disruptive of heteronormative institutions such as marriage and the family. Thai parents who feel apprehensive about young women engaged in factory work or attending schools away from the family home often believe that in dormitory settings their daughters will be protected from male violence and premarital pregnancy. Many of their daughters form couples with one another that may be romantic and/or sexual. Some fall into gendered polarities between masculine “Toms” and feminine “Dees,” but many such couples avoid these roles and labels, and their members may or may not enter heterosexual marriages later. The very lack of specific labels or categories for most of these women facilitates fluid possibilities for homosocial bonding, sexuality, and romance throughout the course of their lives.

Contributors also take on questions of identity in the “lesbian generations” forum in this issue. The essays in this cluster emerge from a roundtable of the same name held at the 2011 Berkshire Conference of Women Historians. Contributors offer their reflections on a series of collectively generated questions concerning lesbian, transgender, and women’s history; lesbian and transgender identity; and same-sex and same-gender sexualities in a global context. Their aim is to point to better frameworks for thinking about sexuality, sexual and gender identities, and lesbian historiography. Many essays also speak to the tensions and overlaps between lesbian and transgender identities and histories within postcolonial global contexts.

Leila J. Rupp, the panel organizer, lays out a set of introductory suggestions for how to think historically about the category of women who erotically focused on women. In invoking her own term “sapphistries,” Rupp points to the “complex and complicated interaction” of the eroticization of “sameness and difference” as critical “patterns” for understanding these diverse stories. Nan Alamilla Boyd’s essay is concerned with the vexing question of distinct modes of identification—individual versus community—and she proposes that we think more carefully about lesbian history as the history of an idea, not a group. Boyd thus allows for a more robust exploration of the idea of “lesbian” as an aspect of neocolonialism. Ruth Vanita cautions against oversimplification when thinking about the colonial implications of “lesbian history,” pointing out problematic scholarly presumptions about globalization. Drawing on longer histories of globalization, Vanita asks us to understand the effects of colonialism within the broader context of the “millennia that preceded colonialism” and the importance of understanding that “the most productive framework for thinking about sex is to think of it as imbricated in speech, in play, in the idiom and conventions of the language with which one works.” Vanita’s piece is followed by Matt Richardson’s passionate plea for the need to deconstruct the “fixed imagined borders between sexual identity and gender identity” and to consider how studying the “messiness” of such boundaries might change women’s and lesbian history. Susan Stryker further reminds us that identities are complicated and that the “messily lived complexity of identity’s intermingled attributes” cannot easily be disarticulated. And from the “inalterable transhomosexual structure of [her] desire and bodily sense” she demands we move to a “queer, feminist, transgender analysis of contemporary society” from which we might launch a “radical, antireactionary, future-oriented, countermodern critique.”

Michael Hames-García reports with enthusiasm on the field of “Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies” that took shape in the 1990s and has now resulted in a multitude of provocative scholarly studies. This theoretically nuanced review of the field points out discontinuities between feminism, queer theory, ethnic studies, and critical race theory as well as their overlapping goals and origins. He insists, along with the authors he reviews, that “sexuality and desire cannot be adequately understood apart from ‘race, colonialism, and political

economy.” Such recategorizations are particularly acute in relation to indigenous studies, where struggles for sovereignty take a different form from the struggles of racialized US ethnic minorities, despite possibilities for fruitful alliances. Across these categories Hames-García urges conversations that can further comparative and coalitional work.

Also engaging with questions of queer subjectivity, Becky Thompson presents a highly personal account of how the past few decades of poetry by women of color illuminate a history of creativity and organizing in LGBT movement. Through pastiche and bricolage, she cites poems from the 1980s through the present that inspire her with their clarity and aesthetic force; she presents them as a deliberate plea to recenter the ideal of beauty in queer theorizing practice.

Elizabeth Hedrick argues that the time is ripe to explore the forgotten dimensions of Mary Daly’s work. Hedrick does not simplify or endorse the content of Daly’s work; rather she seeks to engage the “full intellectual context” of feminist theorist Audre Lorde’s critique of Daly’s work *Gyn/Ecology* and the responses of 1980s feminist scholars to the Lorde/Daly exchange. Hedrick sees Daly’s Catholic theological premises as clarifying both the argument in *Gyn/Ecology* as well as the reason for Daly’s inability to respond to Lorde in an open forum, but instead in a private letter. Hedrick notes that “Lorde’s letter put Daly in the position of either accepting the charge of racism or admitting her own Catholic bias—an impossible choice that rendered Daly effectively mute.” Hedrick especially draws our attention to elements of Daly’s feminism that have not been adequately examined or engaged, including Daly’s uncritical use of secondary historical sources that had been dismissed as inaccurate by a number of contemporaneous scholars; Daly’s critique of the modern academy; and her goal of moving beyond disciplines to a more expansive “transcending [of] disciplinary boundaries.” Hedrick hopes that the full intellectual context of Daly’s work and the controversies surrounding it will help feminist scholars and women’s studies programs more effectively examine the “shape of feminist discourse since 1980, as well its relationship to women’s studies as an academic field, in a newly detailed and productive way.”

Building on the theme of women’s studies as an academic formation, this issue contains a special forum on women’s studies programs in relation to sexuality studies programs and their respective

institutionalization. The participants in this forum—Breanne Fahs, Laura Briggs, Marilee Lindemann, Ann Braithwaite and Catherine M. Orr, Sharra L. Vostral, and Erica Lorraine Williams—are almost all tenured faculty and/or administrators at research universities across the United States and Canada, with the majority of participants appointed (at least jointly) in women’s/women’s and gender/women’s, gender, and sexuality studies programs. Some focus on the question of naming: should the “women’s studies” identity remain linked to feminism? How should programs make visible the significance of sexuality studies, queer studies, critical race studies, or postcolonial studies (and their respective theoretical bases) in such naming? Others take on the issue of resources: are interdisciplinary program mergers the way to survive in a fairly harsh economic climate? The long-standing question of integration or separation is the main issue for some, but is only a subtext for others. All six scholars engage to varying degrees with the question of strategizing for survival. Some argue for stealthy approaches—not explicitly naming or claiming feminism but integrating a feminist politics into courses and programs in order to appear less threatening to administrators and students. Others speak of the need to visibly articulate the feminist basis of “women’s studies” programs, particularly pointing to the institutional transformation of historically black colleges and universities via visible and vibrant black women’s studies programs.

CJ DeLuzio Chasin asks us to reconsider the “radical potential” of the category of asexuality. Like other essays in this issue, this one urges the deconstruction of binary categories such as homosexual/heterosexual in favor of the recognition of additional and alternative ways of being. According to Chasin, asexuals may be male or female, conventionally or otherwise gendered, romantic or not, and happy or not with their temporary or permanent orientations and proclivities without thereby being pathological or automatic subjects for psychological intervention. Ultimately, Chasin argues for “a world where being sexual is no longer mandated as a prerequisite of normalcy or intimacy and where nonsexual relationships are recognized and valued.”

Offering another distinct critique of medicalization is Alison Townsend’s creative account of the traumatizing world of the psych ward in “At the Bottom of the Ocean: Psych Ward, 1986.” The discovery of hierarchies of prestige and authority in the hospital in this

piece of creative nonfiction complements the edgy comfort of finding friends in such a setting.

Graduate student Sophie Tamas wryly presents the multiple roles she plays in her aptly titled poem “Researcher as Hostess,” in which she examines issues of “power, gender, loss, and cookies.” Nurturing her research subjects through baked goods, she remarks:

this is no simple ethic  
of care or reciprocity  
.....  
... They get cake  
I get their stories and a PhD.

Sam Maddra emphasizes the importance of “shifting focus” in an essay about the contemporary “snapshots” of feminist photographer Laura Molloy. Molloy defies the usual photographic aesthetic of clarity in favor of blurred faces and forms that question the usual categories of gender. The power of photographs is also one part of the story that Rachel F. Seidman’s essay relates as she narrates a classroom project that went viral and its impact on her students and on wider feminist discourses. Photographs document and illustrate the different faces and diverse responses to the question “Who Needs Feminism?” as thousands of people replied in an online dialogue to the students’ “PR campaign for feminism.” Seidman explains that asking “Who needs feminism?” rather than “Who is a feminist?” moved the participants “away from a claim of feminism as an identity and toward an idea of feminism as a toolkit, a community, a philosophy on which one can draw.” We close the issue with a reflection on the distinct features of antifeminist internet attacks on women, described by Karla Mantilla as “gendertrolling.” Complementing Seidman’s account of feminist activism via social media, this essay recounts a series of recent troubling misogynist attacks and analyzes them as a distinct phenomenon akin to older forms of street and sexual harassment. Taken together, these final contributions point the way to more expansive feminist futures.

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