

PREFACE

The articles included in this issue of *Feminist Studies* confront the problem of the representation of women of color. Eroticized; exoticized; turned into objects without names, histories, or languages, women of color have often been silenced, or romanticized, constrained by the conditions of an imperial world in which all resources needed for human development are marked and distorted by power differences. These power differences shape the problem of what counts as a representation of, about, or by women of color by feminists, regardless of their own backgrounds.

In her reading of the life story of a Mexican marketing woman, Ruth Behar ponders the confession of rage and redemption with which Esperanza presents her. Collaborator and confessor, anthropological guide and witness, Behar attempts an analysis that honors the violent spiritual and sexual economies within which one enraged and vindicated woman constructs a narrative of her own empowerment. How can an outsider interpret and share the story of a woman from another culture, confronting both her oppression and her agency? Can the objectification of the circumstances in which an indigenous woman chooses to present herself be short-circuited by a scholar who is exquisitely conscious of Eurocentrism?

Veena Talwar Oldenburg also engages the problem of representing women's agency to choose their life's work under oppressive circumstances. In collecting and situating life histories of courtesans in Lucknow during the period of the end of British colonialism and early independence in India, the feminist historian walked through the looking glass of female subordination conventionally held up as women's lot in South Asia. In the commercialized sexual economy where Lucknow's courtesans made their homes, great material and political resources were amassed by women who could mock male power and considered their vocation an honorable and silenced escape route out of patriarchy. (How) can historians and anthropologists collect and interpret life stories as a method allowing women to represent themselves? (How) do our research agendas shape the resistance and transformation of what we can learn about women from backgrounds very different from our own?

The problem of shaping life stories is also central to the interpretation of literature by and about women from racially and culturally oppressed groups. To hear the silences and voices of Japan-

ese North American women writing about their female kin, Asian American feminist critics must first confront the gender stereotypes created by their brother male critics intent on attacking racial bias. Shirley Geok-lin Lim argues for a more complex and contradictory Japanese American selfhood, once gendered relations within Asian American communities are placed at the center of the analysis. She examines the mother texts through which Japanese North American authors personified women intent on protecting themselves and their daughters. At the heart of their work is the horror of World War II: is it better to remain silent or to speak of the deaths at Nagasaki in Japan, the shame of the concentration camps in North America? To address this tension, Lim examines struggles for identity, assimilation, and cultural resistance that link and divide three generations of women represented in two groundbreaking texts.

Anne E. Goldman also pays close attention to the construction of women's lives in literature, in this case, slave women's lives. In analyzing literary production and reproduction in *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*, Goldman describes the creation of a language at once powerful enough to translate the almost-unspeakable oppression of slavery and constrain that oppression so that mothers can project a selfhood and make choices surrounding their children. Defiant and productive, the language of maternity empowers the subjects of these haunting novels. In Goldman's analysis, such language marks slave women and the authors who imagine them as at once the objects and subjects of expropriation and resistance.

Telling a life story is never a transparent act, as the excerpt from Jewell Parker Rhodes's forthcoming novel, "Marie Laveau, Voodoo Queen," makes clear. Here, ancestral secrets, mysterious disappearances, and the power of religious practices to shape a young girl's understandings of herself are beautifully conveyed. Marie's grandmother both protects and manipulates the young woman, in the dangerous and empowering bayous of early-nineteenth-century Louisiana. Her education at the hands of the older woman produces a passionate curiosity to explore the taboos that kinship and culture impose. Silence is central to Marie's emerging identity and is represented in the center of the text.

In his essay on representations of Middle Eastern women, Irvin Cemil Schick calls our attention to overlapping, contradictory critical discourses. He reviews a series of books and essays that extend

and deepen the project of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, while insisting on the critique still needed of feminists' construction of Otherness in representations of Middle Eastern women. This project is central to feminist autocriticism, where consciousness of Eurocentrism has by now entered our own counter canon. Can we move beyond a representation of the problem of representation?

Powerful forces with which Third World feminists sometimes find themselves allied make the problem of how women's oppression is represented an always timely one. Sonia E. Alvarez focuses on women's participation in the Brazilian People's Church. There, the progressive climate of liberation theology offers strong resources for the self-organization of women, who have been active participants in the Ecclesiastical Base Communities. Encouraged in their critique of injustice and poverty, aided in their attempts to provide services to women and children in poor neighborhoods, activist women are nonetheless actively discouraged from examining the specifics of gender oppression under church auspices. The very tools of critical consciousness encouraged by progressive theology are resisted when they lead women toward an examination of male dominance and violence and struggles for their reproductive rights. Women can represent themselves as religious activists, but they cannot represent themselves as *women* in the eyes of their church.

Collectively, these articles move us beyond the debates about who may "speak for" Third World women, women of color, and women from racially and culturally marked traditions. They suggest that the problem of "tonguelessness" (Anne E. Goldman's term) can only be confronted through a self-conscious and historical understanding of the practices by which some women come to represent themselves and others to learn from those representations. The politics of representation at every level, from text creation to anti-imperialist struggles, remains central to the theoretical and practical education of feminists.

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for the editors