

## PREFACE

In this issue of *Feminist Studies*, scholars and creative artists explore in multiple ways the question of agency and the limits and possibilities of both individual and collective resistance. We begin with Monique Deveaux's nuanced critical reading of Michel Foucault. Her exploration of feminist understandings of power, violence, resistance, and identity constructively engages Foucault's analyses of regulatory regimes, bodies, and the exercise of power. In a cautionary analysis, Deveaux argues that Foucault's models of power, although instructive, obscure many women's subjective experiences. Embracing his call to deconstruct our social identities, she critiques Foucault's treatment of sexual self-understanding as an incomplete rendering of the processes by which women are empowered. Deveaux's concluding argument challenges feminist appropriations of Foucauldian perspectives on power and the subject.

Whereas Deveaux affirms the potentialities of identity-based feminist struggle, Lorna Weir's essay challenges the assumption that identity-based politics define contemporary feminist activism. Weir's history of Canadian prochoice organizing reveals the vitality of a feminist political campaign that worked beyond "identity politics" to challenge the regulatory power of criminal law. Canadian organizers developed a working-class alliance that avoided class reductionism and generated a strategic political discourse that embraced women from several different communities.

Taking a more general look at egalitarian feminist organizations, Stephanie Riger asks how such groups are able to remain important sites for feminist movement and women's empowerment under pressures of growth. Through case studies, interviews, and published descriptions, Riger compels a rethinking of our assumptions about feminist organizations. She suggests that hierarchy and bureaucracy are not intrinsically antithetical to feminist principles and proposes alternative ways for organizations to advance.

The next two pieces extend the exploration of feminist agency beyond explicitly movement-based organizations and politics. Both the dialogue on murals and the analysis of Cassatt's *Modern Woman* reveal the cultural and ideological boundaries faced by women artists. Olivia Gude and Beatriz Santiago Muñoz explore the profoundly gendered and racialized politics of representation in the United States. Their reflections on some men's revealed inability to imagine women as public artists—"on the streets"—gives way to a discussion of images that problematize and disrupt traditional notions of women and community. John Hutton also explores the artist's potential to transgress normative boundaries as he

shows how Cassatt's images of women, working the land and passing the fruit of knowledge from mother to daughter, simultaneously employ and subvert late-nineteenth-century iconographic norms. Hutton argues that Cassatt's colorful images of active women enraged her critics because they rejected the "corpus of myths" that enabled her peers' works. Her "Eves" are active agents in the creation of a more egalitarian social order.

For Margaret W. Ferguson, however, a focus on women's aesthetic expressions raises questions about which "women's stories are being recovered now and why." In her review of four recent studies of Renaissance women writers, Ferguson lauds the attention to women's discursive achievements but questions both the efficacy of a Foucauldian theory of resistance for studying this period and a focus on "literate and economically privileged women" and "elite institutions." She challenges Renaissance scholars, herself included, to probe the limits as well as the possibilities of women's agency. Indeed, Ferguson suggests that scholarly "emphasis on individual women's 'autonomy'" may be a reaction to "a sense of despair about the possibilities of collective feminist action during the Reagan-Thatcher years. The Chinese poems from the Six Dynasties and Sung periods, presented here in English translations by David Lunde, suggest a cultural context that shares with the English Renaissance the possibilities of voice for a few privileged women. Although the poems often express sorrow or constraint, here too, the act of writing embodies resistance of a limited, textual sort.

The material limits on women's agency are more strikingly evident in the context of sexual abuse. Vivien Ng's study of abused daughters-in-law in nineteenth-century China explores the legal consequences of resistance in the specific context of a society in which the value on female chastity, and hence the proscription on rape, may conflict with the values of familial and patriarchal authority. As court records from Qing China demonstrate, such ideological conflicts seriously complicated efforts to redress cases of domestic sexual abuse: a woman who resisted could be prosecuted for the serious crime of failing in filial respect. Exploring cases in which a daughter-in-law resisted an attempted rape and in the process injured or even killed her attacker, Ng shows the "juridical juggling" by which officials attempted to reconcile what were, in these instances, antithetical social claims. At the same time, Ng documents the "fierce resistance" of the victims as well as the repercussions of their resistant acts.

Jane Hoppen's personal narrative and Cathleen M. Calbert's poem "Erasing the Music Box" make similarly stark the limits of agency from sufferers of sexual abuse. For child victims struggling against a "numb-

ness" that makes self destruction a constant possibility, to survive is to resist. The most ordinary act—a bath, a massage, a glance in the mirror—may become an occasion of terror, an encounter with pain. Hoppen traces eloquently the slow and uneven process by which a woman survivor might begin, through small acts of agency, to recover a sense of power. Such a process of recovery is just beginning for the baby "deep in love" with her father in Calbert's "Erasing the Music Box," as thirty years of repression break open after the father's death. No wonder that in "Dream Babies," when she creates the setting of a "Parenting for Teens" class in which children are given eggs to tend, the babies seem "much smaller than is safe." As these final pieces remind us, feminist thought must continue to recognize the "uneven developments" in women's agency and the sharp gaps that sometimes exist between individual oppression, transformative resistance, and collective empowerment.

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for the editors