

preface

FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP HAS BEEN LONG CONCERNED with the terms in which the past is presented and, more specifically, with how women's agency is suppressed or misconstrued. Authors in this issue take up what we call the politics of history and recovery across a range of genres: from historical fiction and literary, film, and art sources to ever-changing electronic archives. The issue opens with the late Diane Middlebrook's experimental exploration of the life and work of the first-century BCE poet Ovid. Middlebrook's provocative narrative begins with a fictional account of Ovid's birth from the perspectives of the midwife and mother, and it proceeds to surmise familial details about influences in the young poet's life and how they might have influenced his work. Middlebrook combines a close analysis of the recollection and metaphor that characterized Ovid's writings with extant secondary literature on ancient Rome to paint a vibrant picture of Ovid's early life and the particulars of the ancient Roman household and culture that surrounded him. In the process, Middlebrook persuasively demonstrates that communities of women were central to Ovid's life trajectory and his transformation from privileged child to epic poet. These communities of women included his mother, the various female intermediaries that introduced him to and integrated him into the broader Roman household, and the goddesses that were always present to guide, oversee, protect, and inspire. Middlebrook details the myriad ways that Ovid references the "social world" that women created for themselves within

the household, a world that was “largely concealed from the attention of men.” In doing so, Middlebrook’s work engages the long-standing question of how scholars might find sources for those who did not leave written records. Looking to literature for one answer to this question, Middlebrook finds that through his poetry Ovid illuminates the intimacies and complexities of the worlds of women that were rarely noted or documented in and for ancient Rome.

In “Trafficking in Truth: Media, Sexuality, and Human Rights Evidence,” Jamie L. Small shows how contemporary international human rights campaigns frequently blur the lines between fact and fiction. Analyzing the production and reception histories of two explicitly fictional movies and one documentary film about girls forced into prostitution, often far from their homes, Small reveals that the narratives constructed in these films are frequently reductive and do not allow for the exploration of the complex structural and personal forces that push young women into prostitution. Insisting on the need to recognize the violence that can be part of sex work, Small is nonetheless critical of how fictional stories become evidence in human rights campaigns that in turn bolster conservative political agendas. She is especially worried about the claims that the Academy Award-winning documentary *Born Into Brothels* makes to realistically represent the rescue of Indian children by a Western woman, the filmmaker/photographer. Voices that question the authenticity of such accounts are unable to enter mainstream debates, Small notes. Rather than recovering the voices and bodies of the oppressed, such filmic narratives and their use in human rights discourses enhance the divides between the First, Second, or Third World while often eliding the power dynamics central to these divides.

Diana Barnes takes up questions that scholars have raised over the last two decades about the significance of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to the history of inoculations and the history of medicine. Barnes uses these questions as a starting point for reexamining the terms on which an aristocratic woman of the eighteenth century led a public life, gained an education, and influenced medical practice in London. Even though British papers did not mention Montagu’s move to have her own daughter inoculated for smallpox for several years, oral reports of Montagu’s action and her witnessing

of inoculations in Constantinople circulated in elite circles. These reports directly influenced both scientific experiments and practices at the royal court. Through personal visits and the circulation of knowledge of her activities in influential social circles, Montagu, who had been disfigured by smallpox herself, played a significant role in the early history of inoculations. Barnes suggests that, in some ways, Montagu's eighteenth-century admirers presented this history more correctly than recent scholars.

Questions of recovery and discovery are at the center of Veronica Alfano's review essay, "Grandmothers in the Archive: Three Digital Collections of Women's Writing." Alfano is enthusiastic about the possibilities that such digital databases open, but also very careful in pointing out specific advantages and disadvantages in the ways they are organized. Her hope is that databases that make works by women writers more accessible will allow scholars to ask new questions, for example, about the genres in which women wrote, the themes they covered, or the ways that resonances between texts might relate to networks among their authors. With a much broader text base, Alfano is even ready to resuscitate such contested feminist questions as whether there was a "separate female tradition." For those entering the brave new world of accessing the past through the digital humanities, Alfano demonstrates important considerations. As useful as tags for texts are, for example, we need to be aware that they are also ideological constructions. Alfano convincingly argues that at their best such databases will allow scholars not only to broaden the canon that is read and taught but also to ask new questions that combine formal, material, and historical modes of analysis.

In her art essay, "Mary E. Hutchinson, Intelligibility, and the Historical Limits of Agency," Jae Turner pursues a specific project of recovery and reinterpretation, tracing her encounter with a New Deal woman artist who was fairly well known in the 1930s. Turner uses a combination of research on Hutchinson's biography—her relationships with women, as well as her position in the art world—and queer theory to read several of Hutchinson's portraits of male/female couples. Critics should neither see Hutchinson as a promoter of the comradely ideal nor recuperate her as a lesbian artist. Rather, readings of Hutchinson's couples need to allow for the possibility

that Hutchinson expressed both anger and ambiguity in her paintings, as well as in the ways she may have eschewed labels that had become more prevalent by the 1930s, such as *New Woman* or *lesbian*.

Allowing for ambiguity is also a theme in our second cluster on the “*Social Mobilization of Love*.” Several of the essays in this issue suggest ways in which the spiritual might be more fully employed in our activism—*as a means of interrupting simple binaries and seeking alternative methods for liberation*. Sharon Doetsch-Kidder asks that we shift our activist focus from the material to the spiritual in our efforts to create social change. “*Loving criticism*,” in her definition, requires a critique of binary thinking, a move beyond simple oppositional stances, and an acknowledgment that the “*oppressor*” and “*oppressed*” are both “*present in each of us*.” She asks particularly that we look to antiracist and multiracial feminism (remembering our roots) to find possibilities of change through love. Drawing on theorists such as Chela Sandoval, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde (among others), as well as interviews from her own projects, Doetsch-Kidder posits “*loving criticism*” as an alternative approach for promoting social change. She describes “*loving criticism*” as central to the “*self-nourishing*” work activists must do to maintain energy in their efforts to create and promote social change. “*Loving criticism*” is a practice and theoretical approach that refuses binaries and enables instead movements and actions beyond oppositional thinking.

Jeannie Ludlow’s commentary draws our attention to the abortion stigmatization that she argues is foundational to current anti-abortion rights rhetoric. This cultural stigmatization of abortion—and the concomitant denigration of women seeking to terminate pregnancies—is widespread throughout and beyond the United States. Like Doetsch-Kidder, Ludlow sees both material and spiritual consequences in this stigmatization—*as a state rationale for the closure of increasing numbers of clinics and as a framework that dramatically affects women’s ability to heal post-abortion*. Ludlow calls for “*new messaging*” from abortion rights activists and clinic providers to destigmatize abortion. Ludlow offers examples of this “*new messaging*” such as banners that protect women from the psychological harm that can be inflicted from anti-choice activists in the spaces surrounding the path to clinics. These banners read “*Good Women Have Abortions*,” among other messages, and suggest

Doetsch-Kidder's "loving criticism" put into practice, refusing the easy binaries of prochoice/antichoice and shifting the cultural exchange over abortion through an alternative route to social change that is "based in love."

Jennifer C. Nash's review essay intervenes in the scholarly and community debates about black sexuality. The reviewed works cover wide-ranging historical and contemporary subjects including contemporary popular cultural icons as "erotic revolutionaries" who celebrate black female sexual agency, black middle-class female subjects who strategically mobilize respectability, black female exotic dancers participating in the racialized and classed "desire industries," and black women's historical use of the "trickster" avatar to celebrate difference, enact sexual agency, and, according to Nash, "resist heteronormativity." Nash concludes her review by suggesting that there might be room for pleasure and desire in studying black women's sexual subjectivity historically and calls on scholars to connect the language of "pleasure" to that of sexual rights and make this "bridge" the "centerpiece of a black feminist political agenda."

The poems of R. Flowers Rivera and Rickey Laurentiis in this issue resonate in a different way with the theme of theorizing black female sexuality. They each introduce, in different registers, the pains that are intertwined with pleasures. In "Ode To Sue," the protagonist recoils at the figure of the "vixen" in a red dress, viewing her red "[m]outh, purse, nails, shoes" as "[T]antamount to blood on black soil." "Braiding Alexis" transforms the mundane act of hair grooming into a meditation on stories that can bring forth a "conflagration of tears," with the especially haunting figure of "the ululant one . . . who relinquished loving . . . women for one man." Finally, "Stung" grapples with the complex mix of emotions experienced by someone who is "colonized" by an obsessive desire, and whose body, upon surrender, presents "a readiness for death."

Michelle V. Rowley's compelling response to the Trayvon Martin tragedy asks that we pause in our rush to identify with Martin and instead interrogate the circumstances and context for his death. She suggests that we first attempt to comprehend the multiple layers of this tragedy. These layers include the parallels in questions about dress ("suspicious" or "seductive") and spaces traversed between Martin and rape victims—what makes public space the "wrong space"

for some young people? Rowley proposes that we consider the Martin case in the context of other brutal responses of state authorities to public protest and demands that we work to comprehend the hypermilitarization that has increasingly come to characterize our public spaces. Lastly, she suggests that we see the “poignant and appropriate” deployment of Trayvon as an “every(black)man” as an opportunity for communities to recognize and affirm historic connections.

Molly Talcott and Dana Collins’s photo essay “Building a Complex and Emancipatory Unity: Documenting Decolonial Feminist Interventions within the Occupy Movement” employs a “feminist curiosity” to explore the forms and possibilities of contemporary antiracist feminist resistance. Drawing on their own location as participants, Collins and Talcott share insights into activists’ discursive and spatial innovations. They document three kinds of feminist protest, using the reference point of the Occupy Los Angeles movement: interventions in the rhetoric of Occupy, women’s reconfiguration of masculinist spaces, and their distinctively embodied forms of political protest. Their photographs leave us with a vivid sense of how it is possible to use bodies as “platforms” for political expressions.

Contemporary activist, archiving, and artistic practices participate as much in strategic recognition, silencing, or recovery as did literary and historical texts in previous eras. As we hope this issue shows, feminist perspectives have much to contribute to analyzing such strategies, both in the past and in the present.

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