

preface

“STATE VIOLENCE IS CHRONIC,” writes Cynthia Wu in discussing institutionalized anti-Blackness and police killings.¹ This issue of *Feminist Studies* brings together a range of essays that explore possibilities for challenging chronic forms of state-sponsored, institutionalized, sexual, intimate, and symbolic violence in a variety of transnational contexts. The first cluster of pieces in this issue responds to the current moment in US regulation of women’s reproduction, focusing on its chronic racialized, classed, and gendered aspects. Heather Latimer draws attention to how the US “slave episteme” — the system of thought that constructed enslaved women and their fetuses as competing commodities — enabled the rise of antiabortion attitudes in the nineteenth century and deeply informed the antiabortion rhetoric of early white feminists. Kenneth Carroll’s poem meditates on a twelve-year-old boy’s dawning awareness of such violence, and particularly a young woman’s unsuccessful and near-fatal abortion attempt. The second cluster of essays in this volume examines gender and sexual formation, foregrounding theoretical possibilities for reconceptualizing dominant gender and sexual subjectivities. Khanum Shaikh and Akanksha Misra both explore contexts in which children learn to comply with and to challenge gender and sexual scripts — Shaikh focuses on how intergenerational domestic spaces in Pakistan serve as sites of gender/sexual pedagogy and resistance, while Misra draws on her work as a middle-school teacher in Turkey and a child-sexual-abuse-prevention trainer in India to underscore the central role that schooling plays. Patricia de Santana Pinho elucidates how global commodity culture also shapes processes of gender and sexual

1. Cynthia Wu, “State Violence Is Chronic,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 2 (June 2017): 295–97.

formation, focusing on beauty products, services, and procedures marketed as “Brazilian” in the United States. The remaining two authors in this cluster of essays — Sally Robinson and Cassius Adair — analyze processes of gender formation that foster toxic masculinity and discipline those who, in Adair’s words, “take strange and unexpected and non-linear paths in pursuit of [them]selves.” Robinson reviews five recent books that explore how specific communities of men and boys understand their masculinity, while Adair considers the affordances and limitations of conceptualizing trans subjectivity as either a chronic or acute condition, proposing that we abandon temporal frameworks. The third and final cluster of essays in this volume engages with questions of violence and gendered embodiment in zones of political conflict: Sonal Khullar analyzes the work of two contemporary women artists who live and work in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and Ambika Satkunanathan provides a gendered analysis of the recent Sri Lankan protests that emerged in March 2022. Zainab Saleh reviews four recent books that explore state disciplining, recuperating, and/or disposing of raced and gendered bodies.

The issue opens with a piece titled “Abortion Regulation as the Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Or, a Call to Make Abortion Natural Again,” in which Heather Latimer argues that the US “slave episteme” — defined by Alys Eve Weinbaum as the system of thought that regulated the bodies and reproductive capacities of enslaved women and constructed enslaved women and their fetuses as competing commodities — enabled the rise of antiabortion attitudes in the nineteenth-century United States and continues to racialize reproductive politics today. While abortion was largely considered a natural and ordinary part of reproductive management prior to the nineteenth century, fears about the reproductive autonomy of enslaved women contributed to a denaturalization of abortion and increasing efforts to criminalize it; as Jennifer L. Morgan argues, “to prevent a birth under the regime of hereditary racial slavery” was “to inflict damage on the regime.” Turning to the antiabortion rhetoric of early white feminists, Latimer argues that in the afterlife of slavery, the slave episteme made it possible to argue that “white women’s reproductive capacity was an economic and social resource in need of protecting.” Moreover, the slave episteme yoked women’s reproduction to the reproduction of racial categories, such that early white feminists constructed white women’s duty to reproduce as inextricably intertwined with their duty to reproduce whiteness and white supremacy. Given the central

role that the slave episteme continues to play in racializing and regulating abortion, Latimer suggests that we shift the terms of contemporary debate by moving away from concepts of “choice, privacy, and rights” and by re-embracing the idea that abortion is “natural”: both legitimate and in accordance with the natural world.

In Kenneth Carroll’s poem, “the truth about karen (1972),” the speaker takes us back to the summer when he learned that sixteen-year-old “karen” — the focus of his schoolboy crush — almost died from a coat-hanger abortion that a married deacon twice her age “promised . . . would work.” Once a firm believer “in the gospel of every R&B ballad,” the speaker recalls how the vicious “kitchen whispers” and karen’s “bulging form” left him cursing “the truth, & love” and wondering how karen could smile.

In the opening piece of the cluster “Gender and Sexual Formation,” “Intimate Critique: Toward a Feminism from Within,” Khanum Shaikh draws on her experiences of growing up within a Muslim family in Pakistan to theorize a framework she calls “intimate critique.” This framework emerges from Shaikh’s efforts to understand how spaces that enforce “the most hetero-patriarchal prescriptions of good womanhood” simultaneously serve as spaces in which girls and young women learn “to debate, to push back, and to argue among ourselves about how we could and must navigate the expectations structuring our lives.” Intimate critique enables analysis of both the “normative and regulatory structures of power within which intimacies are produced and sustained” and the intergenerational ways subjects learn to decode and resist “the workings of power from within,” “while navigating the emotional and political contradictions of mother-cultures, families, and religious scriptures — the ties that bind us — in both loving and oppressive ways.” Such a framework, Shaikh argues, renders visible how resistant feminist subjects come into being within contexts that do not prioritize the discourses of autonomy, choice, self-empowerment, and “the freedom-seeking individual” that continue to animate many Western-centric feminist discussions.

In “Embodied Histories, Erotic Disruptions, and Sexuality Education in India and Turkey,” Akanksha Misra adopts a South-South comparative feminist framework to explore two sites of gender and sexual formation: a sexuality education lesson for adolescents in Istanbul, Turkey, and a training about child sexual abuse in Hyderabad-Secunderabad,

India. Misra argues that sexuality education and sexual abuse prevention trainings overwhelmingly focus on biology and “biological explanations of psychological harm,” failing to emphasize the profound ways in which race, colonialism, gender, class, caste, nationality, and religion shape conceptions of the body. By depicting sexual desire and gendered sexual subjectivity as “natural” features of biological bodies, such trainings obscure the histories, desires, and experiences of nonnormative bodies and severely limit our understandings of sexual desire, embodiment, and sexual violence. Highlighting the experiences of two such non-normative subjects — a male student in Turkey who once identified as a girl and a Brahmin male teacher in India who is sexually attracted to lower-caste Indians — Misra argues that effective sexuality education requires a fundamental rethinking of the body “as living history that is constantly making and unmaking itself” through “newer articulations of historically contingent realities.” Furthermore, Misra calls for additional feminist interrogations of schools as sites that constitute “proper,” “normal,” and “abnormal” forms of gender and sexual citizenship.

Patricia de Santana Pinho’s “Labeling Brazil: A Nation’s Image on Beauty Products, Services, and Procedures” examines the “geopolitics of aesthetics” whereby “aesthetic meanings attributed to a nation reflect, to a great extent, its geopolitical position.” Focusing on beauty products, services, and procedures marketed as Brazilian in the United States, such as the Brazilian butt lift, Brazilian blowout, and Brazilian wax, Pinho shows how the capitalist process of “labeling Brazil” occurs through racialized, gendered, and sexualized geopolitical hierarchies. Through this labeling process, Brazil’s associations with nature, sensuality, racial mixture, and exoticism get mapped onto “the fantasized Brazilian female body,” creating a racialized, sexualized Other that, in turn, upholds global notions of white femininity. Through her transnational, feminist, cultural studies approach, Pinho thus illuminates how global commodity culture sustains hegemonic whiteness, and she offers a framework for exploring how the labeling of nations both reflects and reproduces geopolitical hierarchies.

In “Making, Unmaking, and Remaking ‘Men’: New Work in Feminist Masculinity Studies,” Sally Robinson reviews five recent books that explore “how men talk about their relation to dominant and subordinate ideas about masculinity” in different contexts: white, affluent, transgender men; trans men who occupy various racial and class positions; Black

boys in all-male public schools; young men involved in violent extremism; and young, straight, white men who participate in online “geek” culture. Two of the featured books analyze how specific communities of transgender men construct masculinity: Arlene Stein’s *Unbound: Transgender Men and the Remaking of Identity* and Miriam J. Abelson’s *Men in Place: Trans Masculinity, Race, and Sexuality in America*. The remaining three books explore how specific groups of men (and boys) reimagine masculinity in response to real and perceived threats: Freedeen Blume Oeur’s *Black Boys Apart: Racial Uplift and Respectability in All-Male Public Schools*, Michael Kimmel’s *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into—and Out of—Violent Extremism*, and Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett’s *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing*. Noting that straight white men tend to occupy a stance of “aggrieved entitlement,” viewing “even minor advances for women and people of color” as “depriving straight white men of what’s ‘rightfully theirs,’” Robinson hopes that foregrounding the thoughts and experiences of trans men and Black boys might help to “change the social and political calculus that rewards men for seeking to prove their masculinity” in violent ways.

Cassius Adair’s “Is Transsexualism Chronic?” explores a temporal contradiction at the heart of current US understandings of trans subjectivity. While US medical and legal systems assess the legitimacy of trans identity based on its duration, transness is simultaneously positioned as “curable” through medical transition and state recognition. Viewed within this contradictory framework, transness is both chronic (long-lasting) and acute (curable through access to appropriate medical resources). Through a close reading of Imogen Binnie’s novel *Nevada*, Adair argues that treating transness as an acute, curable illness privileges assimilation into the gender binary and suggests that only those who have not completed their desired treatments count as “trans.” At the same time, acute transness remains a fantasy for many trans people given “the violence of capitalist and racist resource distribution systems” that restrict access to the medical resources necessary for ameliorating persistent gender distress; in such cases, transness functions as a chronic condition, a somatic symptom of structural violence akin to chronic stress or chronic pain. As an alternative to these prevailing temporal logics of transness, Adair proposes that we divest from “systems that seek to stabilize our identities” and instead conceptualize transness as an “ongoing state of flux or

transformation.” By viewing transness as “a type of experience” rather than “a type of personhood” and by encompassing a wide array of bodily changes with variable durations within the category of “trans histories,” we might envision transness as “robust, omnipresent, and potentially showing itself at any time.”

The third cluster in this issue, “Violence and Gendered Corporeality in Zones of Political Conflict,” opens with Sonal Khullar’s “Journeys with Yal Devi: War, Peace, and Contemporary Art in Sri Lanka,” which features art by Jasmine Nilani Joseph and Geetha Kanthavel, both of whom are women artists, Tamil speakers, and former refugees who now live and work in Jaffna. Through detailed analyses of Joseph’s series of drawings, *Fence* (2016), and Kanthavel’s soft sculpture works, *War Is Beautiful* (2018–), Khullar argues that these artists offer a feminist critique of the “violent peace” that has followed Sri Lanka’s twenty-six-year-long civil war (1983–2009). Both artists depict violence as it is experienced in “minor keys,” as “process rather than event, everyday rather than exceptional, proximate rather than distant, in the present rather than the past.” Countering the reductive tendency to view art as merely a document of “ethnographic truth or sociological insight” — an approach that occludes possibilities for “aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual life in the Global South” — Khullar insists that art can reveal as much about conflict zones as “statistical accounts of war and peace” or “scholarly accounts of repression, disaster, emergency, and extraction”; indeed, both Joseph’s and Kanthavel’s art highlights how “conflict has been the catalyst for creative acts, for projects of desire, fantasy, whimsy, solidarity, resilience, critique, and feminist coalition in South Asia.” Furthermore, Khullar reads Joseph’s and Kanthavel’s art as examples of “feminist memory work”: local, quotidian, sensual, personal, even playful practices of memorializing historical and contemporary violence in South Asia. Drawing attention to such feminist memory work is crucial, Khullar suggests, because it produces “forms of knowledge and speech” that elude both state-sponsored “grand arches and great heroes” models of remembrance and the attention of the metropolitan art world.

Ambika Satkunanathan’s political commentary, “What Do Women Have to Do With It?: The Multi-Dimensional Nature of the Sri Lankan Crisis,” provides a gendered analysis of the origins and effects of the Sri Lankan protests that emerged in March 2022 in the city of Colombo and across the country. The protests garnered the support of a diversity of

social groups, resulting in former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation in July 2022. Satkunanathan situates these protests within the country's current economic crisis, which is a product of the misgovernance of the ruling political regime and its history of racist, patriarchal state violence. Her analysis illustrates how this violence is based on deeply entrenched systems of discrimination and marginalization against social groups such as Muslims and Tamils. In this context, she argues that women from communities that are marginalized within these histories experience multiple, interrelated forms of exclusion and violence, which are often erased by both local and international media and human rights groups.

Finally, Zainab Saleh's essay, "Gender Politics, Debility, and Violence," reviews four recent books that analyze how particular state and imperial powers govern through a "politics of disability and debility," which positions particular bodies and populations as subject to maiming, violence, and death. The first featured book, Jasbir Paur's *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*, focuses on the United States and Israel in arguing that disability and debility work hand-in-hand in "an economy of injury that claims and promotes disability empowerment at the same time that it maintains the precarity of certain bodies and populations precisely through making them available for maiming." Deliberately debilitating particular bodies—through the right to kill Black bodies in the United States, and the right to maim Palestinian bodies in Israel—is a key element in "the racializing biopolitical logic of security." The remaining three books featured by Saleh—Sherine Hafez's *Women of the Midan: The Untold Stories of Egypt's Revolutionaries*; Salih Can Açıksöz's *Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey*; and Sima Shakhsari's *Politics of Rightful Killing: Civil Society, Gender, and Sexuality in Weblogistan*—examine debility, gendered corporeality, and violence in the Middle East, foregrounding how bodies "endure dispossession and precarity to resist structures of power and build different futures and forms of community." These books analyze how various states adopt a "politics of embodiment," "with the aim of reshaping bodies and producing docile, governable subjects" by disciplining, recuperating, and/or disposing of particular bodies.

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