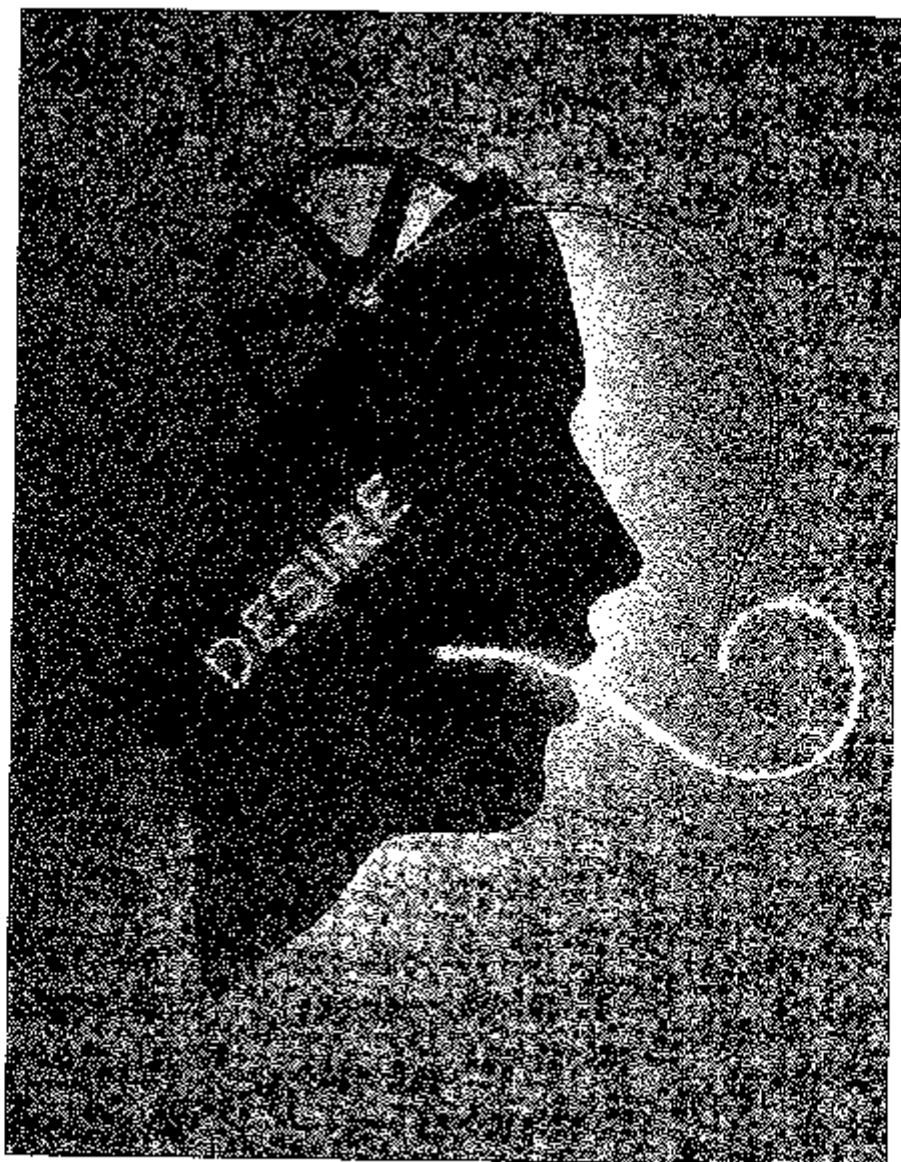


# SIGNS

Journal of Women in  
Culture and Society



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### Dying to Tell: Sexuality and Suicide in Imperial Japan

[The Japanese] play up suicide as Americans play up crime and they have the same vicarious enjoyment of it. They choose to dwell on events of self-destruction instead of on destruction of others. . . . [Suicide] meets some need that cannot be filled by dwelling on other acts.

[Benedict (1946) 1974, 167]

To mention suicide and Japan in the same sentence is to bring to bear a set of stereotypes that continue to shape Western perceptions of non-Western cultures.

[Wolfe 1990, xiii]

### Introduction: "Homosexual Elegy"

**O**n February 17, 1935, the humor column of the *Asahi Shinbun*, a nationally distributed daily newspaper, was devoted to spoofing an attempted lesbian double suicide that had taken place about three weeks

Archival and field research in Japan for parts of this project were facilitated by the following grants and fellowships: Japan Foundation Professional Fellowship (June–September 1987); Northeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies Grant (June–September 1987); Social Science Research Council Research Grant (June–September 1987); University of California, San Diego, Japanese Studies Program Travel Grant (Summer 1987); University of California, San Diego, Affirmative Action Faculty Career Development Grant (July–September and November–June 1990); Fulbright Research Grant (January–August 1990 and September–October 1991); University of Michigan, Faculty Research Grant, Center for International Business Education (June 1992); University of Michigan, Center for Japanese Studies Faculty Grant (June 1994); Warner-Green Foundation for Anthropological Research, Regular Grant (Fall 1995); Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, Advanced Research Grant (Fall 1995), and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (1996–97). A greatly truncated version of this article was presented at the American Anthropology Association annual meeting, December 2, 1994, in Atlanta. Parts of this article appear in my new book, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Populist Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). I wish to extend a special thanks to Celeste Brusati for her insightful comments, and I owe hearty thanks to the editors of and reviewers for *Signs*. All translations from Japanese to English are mine except when noted otherwise. Japanese names and authors published in Japanese are presented with the family name followed by the given name.

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result.<sup>1</sup> More attention to race would enhance Whiting's contextual framing and her interpretation of particular pieces. For instance, she interprets Wesselmann's *Great American Nude #52* (1962) as promoting a "male spectatorial position" (75), but it might also be seen to promote a white-supremacist spectatorial position that is available, if differently, to both women and men, since it depicts a white heterosexual couple presiding over a cocktail party at which a naked dark-skinned woman is splayed out between their gaze and ours. Similarly, while Whiting discusses the homoerotics of Andy Warhol's camp, her persuasive argument that Warhol empties the personal out of celebrity images suggests that another queer topic, the closet case, bears discussion, as does the proof-of-heterosexuality undertone in the construction of other Pop artists as masculine.

*Gendered Objects* also bares missed opportunities. Juliet Kinchin's essay on nineteenth-century interior design and Mary Schoeser's on the shifting gender of tight leggings both make observations about orientalizing interpretations of objects deemed unfit for men that could be pursued further. Lee Wright's essay on the suit exemplifies the book's tendency largely to bypass queer and transgender coding adaptations. Two notable exceptions are Paul Wells's analysis of shifting gender poses in Tom and Jerry's co-mitship and Angela Parrington's attempt to situate contemporary perfume ads within "the current production of ambiguous and multiple" sexualities and gender poses (205). Her emphasis on the consumer's creation of multiple selves, however, does not fully take into account how often people seem to experience their own gender expression, trans or otherwise, as natural or authentic rather than (or in addition to) culturally produced.

Nonetheless, I highly recommend both of these books for individual and classroom use. Although the operation of gender in conjunction with race and sexuality needs to complicate their accounts, they are accessible to readers without training in art or design, and they provide extensive evidence about how gender works through, and throughout, the material particulars of daily life. ■

<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Cronuz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 78; Michael Grunwald, "Character Emerges in a Uniform Town: Everytown USA Marks 50th Year with Spirit of Individuality," *Boston Globe* (October 13, 1997), sec. A, p. 1.

*Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*. Edited by Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert. London: Routledge, 1997.

*Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture*. Edited by Lynn Hershman-Leeson. Seattle: Ray, 1996.

Steve Jones, *University of Illinois at Chicago*

The number of books about what is variously called the Information Age, the Digital Age, the Internet Revolution, Digital Culture (or what I have termed "CyberSociety" and "Virtual Culture" in some of my own work), is growing almost as quickly as the Internet itself. Scholarly books about what the Net has wrought vie for shelf space with trade books about how to wreak change for fun and profit by using the Net. *Processed Lives* and *Clicking In* fit the former category, as books seeking to understand the transformation of social relations brought about by new forms of computer-mediated communication. *Clicking In* is a fine compendium of what most of us have already heard and read about the new forms of social relations online and the changes to offline social relations occasioned by new media technologies. *Processed Lives*, however, contributes new theoretical and practical insights about the experience and understanding of these technologies.

*Processed Lives* seems to be a volume in the tradition (intentionally or not— it's difficult to tell from the title) of *Processed World*, one of the finest examples of thoughtful periodical literature that the zine world has thus far given us.<sup>1</sup> Page after page of that zine takes the reader to the likes of factory assembly lines, corporate offices, and showroom floors. In *Processed Lives*, the destinations are the Internet, Web sites, media installations, hospital labs. The most successful chapters are ones grounded in the bodily practices and disembodied experiences of new technologies.

The editors, Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert, establish the book's tone in their introduction, noting that it is nearly as difficult to get through a day without machines as it is a day without gender: "We live in a world not only structured but saturated by technology and gender, the characteristics and consequences of which are explored in this anthology" (2).

<sup>1</sup> *Processed World* was a collectively edited and irregularly published fanzine that, during the 1980s, provided tales from what it termed in its subtitle "the underside of the information age." In 1990 an anthologized set of articles from it appeared in a book titled *Post-Subjectivity: The Processed World Anthology*, ed. Chris Carlson (London: Verso).

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Unfortunately, they do not further explore the notion of saturation, pulling up short—as do many of their contributors—just when things get interesting. Nina Wakeford, for instance, in an otherwise engaging essay about women, networking, and grr's, claims, "We are in need of a more radical reconfiguration of the relationship of (woman)/woman/machine rather than solely concentrating on man/woman/machine" (63), but she does not provide suggestions for beginning that reconfiguration beyond creating metaphors, a form of creativity many others call for. What, though, does it mean in practice to create and/or transform metaphors, particularly in a late capitalist Fordist society like the United States, where the manipulation of symbols is so common as to render them entirely fluid? Is there a role for public intellectuals in that creation? To her credit, Wakeford is engaged in such work on the World Wide Web, but her essay does not provide substantive description of that work.

Perhaps part of the problem lies in the way the work of Donna Haraway haunts this volume. The editors quote from her classic essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs": "We are now in a world constituted by what Donna Haraway has called 'the scary new networks [of] the informatics of domination [which mark] a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information society—from all work to all play, a deadly game'" (8). Many of those pursuing an academic life have felt this for a long time, well before the widespread use of new communication networks. Social scientists, natural scientists, humanists are always, always, engaged in the very world that is the object of their study, continually blurring the line between work and play, often in ways that are used against them by competitors for intellectual turf and/or the public mind, trapped between the "all work" of the "ivory tower" and the "all play" of the "real world" (a game that is particularly deadly come the time for a tenure decision). The contributors could have strengthened their work by being more self-reflective and attending to the ways in which their work is implicated in Haraway's "scary new networks." Instead, one can feel Haraway's presence between the lines, but it is not here with sufficient force.

The greater concern in this book, of course, is not a debate about academic life and public intellectuals but a more fundamental question: How do we remake our identities in light of the new technologies? As Christine Lamblyn notes in her essay, "Remote Control," memory, values, and identity are at the forefront of both academic and popular discourses about the Net and cyberspace. "We trade in our subjectivities for exquisitely simulated projections," she writes; "Our desperately nostalgic attempts to save the old gender categories and personas, even when these categories and personas are variously matched to bodies of either biological sex, only lead

to their being continuously recycled and evacuated at ever increasing speeds. . . . The power of our bodies is reduced to a matrix of apparatuses and functions" (43). This is the reason Haraway calls new networks "a deadly game." Are we in a time and space in which the symbolic is actually finite, no matter how fluid it is? And, if so, can we create, reconfigure, transform metaphors and meanings without, as Lamblyn puts it, evacuating our bodies?

Indeed the most noteworthy achievement of *Processed Lives* is that it asks such questions throughout. When the discussions do pull up short it is not because the book fails to answer them (they are without satisfying answers, at least for now) but because more and better questions need to be asked in the field as a whole.

Lynn Hershman-Leeson's *Clicking In*, however, does much less to motivate the reader to ask these questions. A good collection of classic articles on cyberculture and interviews with leading theorists and writers, the book is useful for teaching, especially given the varied perspectives it brings forth. The editor's intention is "to frame the impact and changes that are currently in process" in a digital culture (vii). Frame it does, and like most frames, this one is static. That is not a terrible thing, of course, and the snapshot of digital culture that it frames is useful. An important question is whether the "framer" has appropriately composed, focused, and timed the shot. Leeson has.

Leeson's book is like "a kind of browser" (viii) organized around underlying themes of identity, community, art, property, science, and values. The volume is well organized around these themes, but it does not belabor them. Instead, it approaches them from many angles, and an accompanying CD-ROM containing interviews and video clips helps illustrate many of the contributors' ideas and references.

*Clicking In* and *Processed Lives* are both instructive and useful in their own particular ways. The former will serve well as an introduction to the many issues that, somehow, new media and communication technologies have placed in the spotlight, and the latter as a useful instrument for expanding our thinking about what has been thus spotlighted and what remains to be illuminated. |

*Talking about Leaving: Why Undergraduates Leave the Sciences.* By Elaine Seymour and Nancy M. Hewitt. Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997.

*Gender and Career in Science and Engineering.* By Julia Evetts. Bristol, Pa.: Taylor & Francis, 1996.

*Women in Medical Education: An Anthology of Experiences.* Edited by Delese Wear. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

Sarah K. A. Pfattheicher, *University of Wisconsin—Madison*

**T**he books under review here all deal with the issue of women in the sciences and the struggles they face; however, the underlying topic of all three books is the relationship between individuals and the systems in which they operate. In exploring students' descriptions of their personal choices to change majors, Elaine Seymour and Nancy M. Hewitt identify broad themes common to many students' experiences of college-level science education. Julia Evetts, in her study of scientists' and engineers' career histories, illustrates the links between individuals' actions in choosing and pursuing their careers and institutional and cultural limitations on those choices. The contributors to Delese Wear's volume discuss their personal experiences as feminists in medical education and in doing so highlight the ways the structure of modern medicine affects individual women's lives.

The books, then, would seem to be remarkably uniform. So why do they strike a reader as fundamentally different, if not opposing, works? Aside from the fact that their exact topics vary, each author aims at a different audience. Evetts's offering, both in its subject and its language, is clearly intended for a fairly narrow group of academic readers specializing in the study of careers and gender. Wear's book falls at the other end of the spectrum, and most of the volume is accessible and interesting for nearly any educated reader. Although its focus is on women and medical education, the experiences of anyone who struggles to balance home and career will resonate with many of the essays Wear has chosen. Women's studies scholars and medical historians, in addition, may find tidbits in Wear's collection useful for both their teaching and their research. Seymour and Hewitt's book falls between the other two in terms of audience and is likely to attract the most interest from those involved in science, mathematics, engineering, and technology (SMET) education at any level.

Although all three authors rely heavily on the voices of their subjects—two of the volumes contain substantial excerpts from interview transcripts, and the third consists of essays written by the subjects—they make use of

these voices in different ways. Seymour and Hewitt look for themes that emerge from their interviews, which they can then explore via the existing literature on education and the sciences. Evetts takes the opposite approach, starting with the themes already in the literature on careers and then exploring them in her interviews. Wear lets the women speak more directly for themselves; what themes exist are largely for the reader to discover.

Seymour and Hewitt, both sociologists, seek to understand why undergraduates leave SMET majors by interviewing 335 students from seven different schools in the United States and then painstakingly analyzing the transcripts to identify common themes in students' descriptions of their decisions. The interviews led Seymour and Hewitt to explore the "weed-out philosophy" so prevalent in SMET fields. Although this weeding out is intended to ensure that only the best students remain, Seymour and Hewitt argue that the students who leave are not noticeably poorer students than those who stay, nor do "switchers" have markedly different concerns than "persisters." What is true of switchers is that they are more often female or members of underrepresented minority groups, and Seymour and Hewitt explore in meticulous detail what it is about SMET education that has such disparate effects on different groups of students. Identifying the reasons that students stay in or drop SMET majors is not easy, but Seymour and Hewitt's volume tells a complex, multidimensional story. Ultimately, their message is that SMET educators should question both the rationale and the methods of the weed-out philosophy. The thoroughness of their research and the fine sieve with which they have sorted the details make this an impressive work but may prove daunting to those readers who would benefit most from a careful reading of the book.

Evetts focuses on scientists and engineers once they have left academia and begun careers in science and engineering corporations in Britain. She interviewed twenty-one scientists and twenty engineers (thirty-one women and ten men) in order to understand the development and experience of careers in these fields. Like Seymour and Hewitt, Evetts writes from a sociological perspective, but whereas their research breaks impressive new ground, she seeks instead to explore old ground from a new vantage point—that of personal experience. Her book "explore[s] and illustrate[s] some of the ideas and concepts which have been perceived as central in the examination of careers in science and engineering in large industrial corporations" (137). She presumes (quite rightly, I think) that, although culture and employers may shape and limit individuals' choices, career decisions are still choices, and individual choices can combine to reshape culture and employers in turn. Evetts draws heavily on scholarly literature on the sociology of careers, work, and gender to contextualize her interviews.

While this might be a desirable feature for those wishing to review the research in this area, it is quite a hurdle for those unversed in the finer points of the discourse in which Evetts engages.

The book is stronger in chapter 3, when Evetts begins to report on the Careers History Survey she conducted, but there is an awkward juxtaposition of the voices of her interviewees and her use of the passive voice to describe sociological theories. The message of the book is meant to be that there are links between how individuals experience their careers and how organizations and cultures define and structure them, but the persistent tension of the two "voices" serves as a reminder of how difficult it is to identify or explain those links. In addition, there are times, such as in her chapter on "Careers and Families," that her analysis could go further, to explore such questions as how the interviewees *feel* about their choices, and how their decisions have changed over the course of their lives.

Wear's *Women in Medical Education* is a collection of essays by sixteen women medical educators (physicians, administrators, scholars in the medical humanities). Wear asked each woman "to write a personal narrative about her feminism—its forms, promises, and problems, and to describe how she enacts her feminism in medical school or university settings and in her life outside medicine" (x). The result is a mixed bag of essays. Wear begins the volume by remarking, "I have often thought that medical education and feminism seem incompatible: a woman cannot be affiliated or identify with both" (ix). This book's answer is that women can be both medical educators and feminists, but there are indeed contradictions between the two. The contributors, if they have any common message at all, proclaim that there are as many resolutions to the conflict as there are women medical educators.

The volume begins with three essays on "Historical and Theoretical Perspectives." Janet Bickel's "Leveling the Playing Field: A National Perspective on Sexism and Professional Development in Medicine" neatly sets the stage for the more personal accounts that follow. The other two introductory essays, one a historical "Overview of Women Physicians in the United States" by Leah Dickstein and the other a report on a survey of women professors and administrators in American medical schools by Wear and Bickel, are disappointing. The former includes interpretive errors (such as the significance of the Flexner Report) and reads as a scattered series of unconnected and random facts, and the survey analysis in the latter is so superficial as to make the results almost meaningless.

The remaining essays are divided into those that focus mainly on professional lives and those that include more discussion of the interaction and conflicts between personal and work duties. Some are deeply personal, others more theoretical and abstract, and many attempt to combine the two

approaches. The most powerful and enlightening essays describe the trials and rewards of being a woman in medical academia in personal, unabashedly subjective terms, with little attempt to connect individual experience with more general theories of feminism. The very range of experiences provides insight into the complexity of professional women's lives, changes over time, and the importance of finding one's own way. The selections are at once distressing and inspirational; as I grieve for the hardships faced by these women, I am moved by their persistence and determination. Beth Alexander's essay, for example—a collection of excerpts from her journal entries over twenty years as a physician—illustrates beautifully the conflicts faced by women physicians who strive to balance the many demands on their time and allegiances and the problems with accepting anyone else's prescription of how to achieve such balance.

In contrast, the essays that attempt to provide an overarching feminist theory of women's balancing acts are jolting. They seem awkward, unwieldy, and, at times, false. When reading of another woman's experiences, it is possible to understand and even sympathize without recognizing oneself in the image portrayed, but in broad generalizations meant to encompass all women, what stands out are the inconsistencies. There is, in the words of the editor herself, no single feminism.

What all of these authors wrestle with, essentially, is every biographer's struggle: how to tell one person's life, in all its complexity and with all its idiosyncrasies, and in it find themes that reflect a time, a circumstance, an experience. The real achievement of these books, however, is their ability to reverse this challenge: to capture the culture of science in all its complexity and idiosyncrasies and to find in it the themes that resonate with our individual experiences. |

*Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction.* By Patricia Juliana Smith. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

*Other Women: Lesbian/Bisexual Experience and Psychoanalytic Views of Women.* By Beverly Burch. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Laura Doan, State University of New York, Geneseo

These two books initially seem an odd pairing: the first is a lively engagement with the novels of numerous British women writers in the twelfth century, centered single-mindedly on the rubric of "lesbian panic"; the second, written by a practicing psychotherapist, argues for the

demarginalization within psychoanalytic theory of the experiences of lesbians and bisexual women. What these works share, however, besides accessibility to the nonspecialist reader, is an insistence on the legitimacy, power, and promise of lesbian studies to make a substantial contribution to intellectual inquiry—a commitment worth foregrounding at a time when literary and cultural criticism is often more readily animated and galvanized by queer theory than by a subdiscipline with roots in second-wave feminism.

The organizational principle of Patricia Juliana Smith's incisive examination of seventy-five years of British women's writing is deceptively simple: lesbian panic, its consequences and effects. She defines lesbian panic in relation to narrative as "the disruptive action or reaction that occurs when a character—or, conceivably, an author—is either unable or unwilling to confront or reveal her own lesbianism or lesbian desire" (2). Smith is certainly not the first to find in the notion of "panic"—moral, homosexual, or lesbian—a helpful, even seductive, interpretive framework from which to survey some of the key writings by British women in this century. In fact, one might argue that too many observers have been drawn to panic as an explanatory model, stemming in part from the British government's ban of Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*—a defining cultural moment that inhibited literary representations of same-sex desire between women, with reverberations lasting until the rekindling of the feminist movement in the early 1960s. Yet Smith defines her own project so crisply and with such control that lesbian panic never forecloses interpretive possibilities or lapses into an overdetermined and reified shorthand for lesbophobia on the part of the novelist or the culture at large. The concept works effectively as a springboard into a multifaceted reading of narrativity and lesbian desire because of Smith's assiduous attention to its continual modification, permutation, and even reversal.

Lesbian panic, a concept Smith develops from Eve Sedgwick's "homosexual panic," is a dynamic paradigm that works "quasi metaphorically as a means to discover the 'unspeakable' or palimpsestic subtext that lies beneath the surface of apparently heterosexually oriented narratives" (3). Smith therefore takes up texts well-known for their lesbian subtexts (including Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, and Fay Weldon's *The Heart of the Country*) rather than lesbian literature as such and scrutinizes how lesbian—and occasionally male homosexual—panic functions as a mechanism to disrupt heteronormative conventions. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, "effectively deconstructs both the ideology of the courtship plot and the dynamics that have heretofore conjoined lesbian (or, for that matter, male homosexual) panic to the conventions of romantic love

through radical and systematic fragmentation" (41). Each character in Woolf's novel, Smith insists, "deviates to some extent from the heterosexual norm" (42).

Focusing on one of the "most erotically charged" passages in Woolf's novel, Smith explains that "in glowing poetic imagery" Woolf constructs "an argument against the social and scientific dicta that have led to the 'frigidity' of Clarissa Dalloway and others of her ilk. Once Clarissa acknowledges her capacity for erotic pleasure in interactions with other women, her mood immediately turns to resentment directed at the pronouncements of the medical sexologists, the self-proclaimed arbiters of 'Nature' . . . who inflict 'scruples' of self-blame and self-doubt on those who fall outside their definition of 'natural'" (45). I cite this part of Smith's argument in some detail because it effectively illustrates a crucial moment in which a fuller material context would prevent the recycling of dubious assumptions. Since Woolf's own knowledge of medical sexology was cursory (and her protagonist, neither an intellectual nor a sexual progressive, presumably would not have been familiar with the medical literature), we must be cautious in attributing current cultural prejudices and feminist scruples to a writer of the 1920s. (In contrast, Beverly Burch's account of sexology's impact is somewhat more nuanced, notably in relation to the figure of the butch.) That said, Smith's analysis of Clarissa Dalloway's lesbian panic progresses thoughtfully, unraveling "the causes and effects of [Clarissa's] self-clothing" and concluding that her discomfort with her own attraction to women is largely the result of her own "social status and position" (47).

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Smith discovers a vivid illustration of what might be termed literal lesbian panic; however, other works, such as Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel*, which appeared a year earlier, signal "a significant change in the function of lesbian panic as a disruptive mechanism in the context of the courtship plot. Indeed, heterosexual courtship here becomes the element of narratability that disrupts the homoerotic plot" (77). Such challenges and reversals proliferate in postmodern literature, the subject of Smith's final chapter, where lesbian panic becomes the locus for an "anatomization of postmodern female sexuality and sexual dread . . . [in] the form of an inverted, parodic, or otherwise reconfigured retroping of the traditional Gothic mode" (155). Her fresh approach to the recent work of Beryl Rainbridge, Emma Tennant, and Jeanette Winterson, among others, brings this interesting study to a close. Smith declines to retrace the subtle metamorphosis or transmutation of the project's key axiom, instead leaving readers, writers, and critics with a timely and politically charged warning: "Unless we find new narratives to shape societal perceptions of

lesbians and their existence, we may never be able to move completely beyond lesbian panic—either in literature or in life” (186).

While Smith observes the effects of inserting the lesbian, or same-sex desire, into heterosexual narrative, Burch explores “what we learn about women in general from lesbian relationships” (9). Burch’s eight self-contained and highly readable essays offer a thoughtful examination of, for instance, gender identity; lesbian relationships; mothers and daughters; and sexuality in relation to feminism, psychoanalysis, social constructivism, and clinical experience. Bringing more than twenty years of professional experience to bear on her reflections, Burch moves gracefully and eclectically through a range of schools and theories: “We are capable,” she optimistically asserts, “of holding onto many threads of thought even while we are working with one or two. It is possible to use intuitive knowledge, communal wisdom, and interpretive reading of experience as well as scientific methodology and empirical data, maintaining awareness of their relative contributions and lapses” (10). Burch’s gentle insistence on weaving together diverse sources reveals that her methodology is not merely “possible” but eminently desirable in its efficacy for exploding exhausted binaries such as masculine and feminine.

In the third chapter, “Gender Identities, Lesbianism, and Potential Space,” Burch briefly surveys how the lesbian has been constructed as a historical subject and then presents observations drawn from her conversations with contemporary lesbians, particularly couples. By situating the comments of her modern subjects in a larger contextual frame, Burch launches a creditable challenge to the long-held view (beginning with certain sexologists early in the century) that the concepts of “femme” and “butch” have been central to lesbian self-construction. In fact, Burch explains, because these categories depend so heavily on normative gender roles, few of her informants find them adequate. Some dismiss them outright, while others modify the terms into a kind of sliding scale (“femmy butch” or “butchy femme”). Burch takes every opportunity to emphasize that lesbian and bisexual subjects cannot—and should not—be read as a breed apart from their heterosexual sisters, as has so often been the case in earlier psychoanalytic studies.

Burch and Smith may work within different fields, but they reach the same conclusion: we have everything to gain—as individuals and as a society—in disassociating lesbianism and sexual deviancy. As Burch puts it, if lesbian behavior is assumed to be neither “problematic” nor “pathological” and is recognized instead for its potential to break down rigid gender polarities and sexual identities, it can “point to the unseen potential in women’s development” (9). Lesbian studies too has the capacity to tap such

“unseen potential,” yet of late “queer” theory, politics, or identity—has had a funny way of erasing “lesbian.” If lesbian studies is to avoid consignment to the endangered species list, it is imperative that its practitioners follow the example of the authors of these two books in the effort to build bridges among constituencies, disciplines, and critical practices. 1

*Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties.* By Lauri Umansky. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

*The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right.* Edited by Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, and Diana Taylor. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1997.

*The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood.* By Sharon Hays. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996.

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In these times of multiply contested oppressions, Lauri Umansky’s history of the legacy of the sixties, *Motherhood Reconceived*, is a reminder of another, supposedly simpler time. Its purpose is to ferret out the sources of positive feminist discourses on motherhood. In a sense, the entire book seems to be a response to critics who say feminists hate babies or ignore mothers or deplore motherhood. Umansky argues, to the contrary, that motherhood has been a central theme for feminists since the late sixties, when a public, nationwide, written feminist discussion about the meanings (both negative and positive) of motherhood emerged. She successfully interweaves discourses from the Civil Rights movement, the New Left, and the counterculture, from conversations in kitchens to official women’s studies conferences. Umansky argues that women’s movements of the last three decades should not be blamed for the inequities of the very society they have sought to alter. In fact, many feminists merged their negative reactions to constructions of motherhood with a “distinctly promotherhood position.”

In confronting the image of the feminist as baby-hater, Umansky shows how the New Left’s demand for individual sexual liberation and the cultural left’s communitarian legacy precluded an outright rejection of mothers. The increasingly positive views of motherhood and the rise of cultural feminism in the mid 1970s, she finds, put motherhood at the fulcrum of

feminist concern, both in black feminist thought and in other countercultural discourses. Feminists felt they had more in common as women than not, and there, according to Umansky, the shift from a radical to a cultural feminist perspective began. Her study, which ends in 1983, includes a brief epilogue that looks at the ways feminists are "still treating motherhood as the last utopian frontier for countercultural ideas, and as the metaphorical cement for a fragmented movement" (12).

In telling this story about motherhood, Umansky does not convincingly address the relations among disparate countercultural views on sexuality and community. More importantly, she almost totally dismisses the contributions of liberal feminists to the feminist movements of the 1980s. She does note that there can be no membership criteria for the movement since individuals have constantly "shifted camps," while newcomers tend to affiliate with well-established groups or ideologies. Nevertheless, by denying the impact of liberal feminist activists and organizations like NOW on understandings of motherhood, Umansky exaggerates the contribution of 1960s radical political culture and underestimates the influence of liberal individualism on the politics of the 1960s and 1970s. The book does, nevertheless, make an important contribution to the history of the feminist movement and the legacy of the 1960s, discussing how feminist psychoanalytic theory, peace activism, spirituality, antipornography theory, and ecofeminism were abstracted from that period's understandings of motherhood and the perceived similarities among women.

Taking a quite different tack from Umansky's book, the essays, interviews, articles, and stories in *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right* challenge the notion that mothers are by definition apolitical. This volume, which the editors compiled from presentations at a Dartmouth conference on activist mothers around the world, regards motherhood as a basis for participation in an activist community and work for social change. Mindful of the contemporary feminist emphasis on the social construction of motherhood, the editors seek to shift the focus, showing how various women, regardless of their views on feminism or motherhood, embrace a politicized motherhood. Differing stages of their motherhood brought radicalism, and for different reasons. Some initially rose in defense of their own children and only later made the crucial leap to caring about other mothers and children. Others, involved in political work before becoming mothers, found themselves transformed into mother activists. The activist and scholar contributors speak from a variety of different social and cultural contexts, and the twenty-eight wide-ranging pieces in this volume are organized into sections on "Environmental Activism," "Subsistence Struggles," "Mothers' Resistance against the State,"

"Nationalist Motherhood," "Redefining Motherhood: Technologies and Sexualities," and "Reflections on Feminism and Motherhood."

Motherist politics, arising from individual experiences of caring and nurturing, have certain characteristics that carry across lines of difference and promote activism by mothers in causes ranging from environmentalism to peace and justice to nationalism. However, as Annelise Orleck emphasizes in her introduction, the political strength that comes from claiming motherist politics is combined with painful contradictions. In particularly poignant pieces illustrating such contradictions, Argentine activist Alicia Partnoy describes her decision to wear her baby because she knew her own imprisonment was imminent, and Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai discusses her children's anger at having their mother taken from them.

Mindful of the dangers of overidealizing the mother as an archetype, the editors have included discussions of several right-wing activists. In one such essay, Claudia Koonz explores the murderous potential of "backlash conservatives" who, fueled by fear and energized by nostalgia for the "good old-fashioned mother," defend "maternal concerns" that bring oppression for other women. Clearly, a politicized motherhood does not necessarily embrace feminism, egalitarianism, or even peace. Describing some mothers' antimilitarist activism in Israel, Simona Sharoni takes a critical view of the notion that mothers have any special contribution to make toward peace. In one of the concluding essays, Sara Ruddick reflects on the contradictions between motherhood and feminism or other political activism. While confessing some pessimism after more than twenty years of seeking a maternal politics of peace, she concludes that "maternal politics, because it issues out of particular and familiar allegiances, can inspire a move from one's 'own' to 'other,' from local to more general without denying, indeed by continually remembering, irreplaceable and specific loyalties and love" (375).

In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, Sharon Hays describes mothering, in somewhat laborious fashion, as a historically constructed ideology. While Umansky limits her analysis to feminists in the 1960s and 1970s and Jetter, Orleck, and Taylor look at motherhood in relation to political identity, Hays takes up mothers' child-rearing practices. Using evidence from historical ideas about raising children, analyses of best-selling child-rearing manuals, and interviews with thirty-eight new mothers from San Diego, California, she argues that the contemporary cultural model of socially appropriate mothering amounts to an ideology of intensive mothering, even though over half of all mothers with young children work outside the home. In a free market economy such as the United States, where

the principle of self-interest is supposed to guide behavior, a logic of utterly unselfish mothering leads to the cultural contradictions of contemporary motherhood.

The most interesting and convincing section of the book, from my perspective as the grandmother of seven, is the chapter "What Every Baby Knows? Contemporary Advice on Appropriate Child Rearing." In the tradition of the sociology of knowledge, Hays analyzes the methods of child rearing presented in the manuals of Dr. Spock, T. Berry Brazelton, and Penelope Leach. The three experts, she finds, share a set of assumptions about good child rearing: (1) child care is primarily the responsibility of the individual mother; (2) the best methods are child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and very expensive; and (3) the child is "outside of market valuation" (meaning that children are sacred, innocent, and precious beyond measurement). This intensification of child rearing comes at a time when appropriate mothering and appropriate outside work are at great odds.

While Hays writes self-consciously as a disinterested outsider and sidesteps any question as to the value of intensive mothering for children, her message is loud and clear. Women, she laments, are still held responsible for the unselfish nurturing of children, while men are responsible primarily for self-interested profit in the public world and this ideology of child rearing without engaged fathers leaves little opportunity for genuine gender equity. Even so, she cautions, the contradictions of motherhood will not disappear with more genuine shared parenting. They will only be confronted more equally by everyone.

These three books taken together seek, admirably, to complicate rather than to simplify our understanding of motherhood. They clearly show that any notion of a unified female experience based on maternalist assumptions must be treated cautiously as feminists seek balance between the essentialism lurking in simplified notions of "mothers" as a homogeneous group and the equally important need for political unity and an ethic of care. The authors wrestle with questions about the politics of difference, the defining nature of feminist discourse, and critically important issues of child rearing. Each concludes in one way or another that a viable feminist discourse on motherhood must accept complexity and account for differences among women, while at the same time resolutely insisting that many women as mothers are indeed oppressed and that their children need to be the responsibility of the many instead of the one. |

## United States and International Notes

*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* welcomes announcements of conferences, fellowships, calls for papers, upcoming special issues, and new journals for the "United States and International Notes" section.

The Thérèse E. Casgrain Foundation seeks applications for the biannual Thérèse E. Casgrain Fellowship from Canadian citizens and permanent residents studying, promoting, and developing the economic, political, and social interests of Canadian women through practical applications. For more information, write Fellowship Division, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 350 Albert St., P.O. Box 1610, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 6G4, Canada.

The Global Fund for Women gives grants to women's organizations outside the United States whose primary focus is on female human rights and women's access to communications. For more information, write The Global Fund for Women, 425 Sherman Ave., Suite 300, Palo Alto, CA 94306-1823; e-mail [gfw@globalfundforwomen.org](mailto:gfw@globalfundforwomen.org).

A conference on "Women's Private Writing/Writing Women's History" will be held June 15-18, 2000, at the Westbrook College Campus of New England. The interdisciplinary conference will focus on women's private writing, methodological and/or theoretical approaches, classroom use, and issues of manuscript preservation and technology. Participation from educators at all levels, librarians, archivists, museum professionals, and those interested in women's writing and history are welcome. For more information, write Elizabeth De Wolfe, Women's Private Writing Conference, University of New England, Westbrook College Campus, 716 Stevens Avenue, Portland, ME 04103; e-mail [edewolfe@mailbox.une.edu](mailto:edewolfe@mailbox.une.edu).

### Calls for papers

Proposals for papers and panels are invited for "Virginia Woolf Out of Bounds," the tenth annual conference on Virginia Woolf, to be held at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, June 8-11, 2000. For more information, write Jessica Berman, Department of English, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250; e-mail [jberman@umbc.edu](mailto:jberman@umbc.edu). The deadline is January 15, 2000.

Proposals for papers and panels are invited for "The Future of the Queer Past: A Transnational History Conference," which is to be held at the University of Chicago on September 14–17, 2000. The conference is sponsored by the Lesbian and Gay Studies Project and the history department at the University of Chicago. For more information, write Tara Tremmel, Lesbian and Gay Studies Project History Conference, University of Chicago, 5835 S. Kimbark, Room 422, Chicago, IL 60637; e-mail [t-tremmel@uchicago.edu](mailto:t-tremmel@uchicago.edu). The deadline is February 1, 2000.

The anthology "Acts of Treason: Orature and Performativity in North American Poetry, 1850–2000" seeks essays that investigate and rethink the relationships between performativity, textuality, orality, and identity. Submissions on subaltern, dialect, noncanonical, popular, translated, and multilingual poetry are especially encouraged. For more information, write Valerie J. Moses, Department of English, University of Michigan, 3187 Angell Hall, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. The deadline is February 1, 2000.

*Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* seeks papers for a special issue on "Feminist Philosophies of Love and Work," which will address the fundamentally new ways of thinking that are replacing the old dualistic view that women, love, altruism, and the family are separate and opposite from men, self-interested rationality, work, and market exchange. Papers from all disciplines are welcome; submissions may include empirical findings or public policy debates but should focus on conceptual or theoretical issues. For more information, write *Hypatia*, Center for the Study of Women in Society, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1201; e-mail [penland@postoffice.pop.uoregon.edu](mailto:penland@postoffice.pop.uoregon.edu). The deadline is September 1, 2000.

Papers are invited for "Feminist Theory, Feminist Practice: The Challenges, Concerns, and Consequences," a collection that will explore the problems, frustrations, and rewards of implementing feminist theory in actual classrooms. Descriptions of experiences in which practice recursively informs theory are particularly welcome. Send queries or a 1–2 page abstract with a one-paragraph biography to Gil Haroian Guerin, Writing Program, UBC 239, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244; e-mail [gharoian@mailbox.syc.edu](mailto:gharoian@mailbox.syc.edu).

*FEMSPEC*, an interdisciplinary feminist journal dedicated to critical, pedagogical, and creative works in the realms of science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, and other supernatural genres, welcomes submissions that speculate, theorize, create, and question gender across the boundaries of what is real and what is not real. For more information, write Batya Weinbaum, Department of English, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH 44115; e-mail [femspec@popmail.csuohio.edu](mailto:femspec@popmail.csuohio.edu).

*Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* is a new feminist interdisciplinary journal that seeks to provide a forum for the finest scholarship and creative work by and about women of color that explores the intersections of race, gender, and na-

tionalism. *Meridians* invites submission of essays, interviews, poetry, fiction, theater, artwork, photo essays, as well as political manifestos, position papers, and archival documents of continuing interest. The journal, a collaborative venture of the women's studies program at Smith College and Wesleyan University Press, will be published biannually beginning in spring 2000. For more information, visit the journal's Web site at <http://www.smith.edu/meridians> or write *Meridians*, Smith College, Northampton, MA 01063; e-mail [meridians@smith.edu](mailto:meridians@smith.edu).

*International Feminist Journal of Politics*, a new journal of international relations, politics, and women's studies, seeks submissions that explore broad definitions of politics in theory and practice within a global frame. Topics may include connections among women, how gender infuses and is shaped by different political processes and social relations, and how subjectivity, identity politics, and material relations shape and are shaped by both global and national politics. For more information, write Jan Judy Pettman, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Centre for Women's Studies, Australian National University, Canberra ACT, Australia; e-mail [jfp@anu.edu.au](mailto:jfp@anu.edu.au).

*Feminist Theory*, a new international and interdisciplinary forum for critical analysis and constructive debate within feminist theory, invites manuscript submissions. The journal will be published three times a year, starting in April 2000, by Sage Publications. From outside North America, write Stevi Jackson, *Feminist Theory*, Centre for Women's Studies, University of York, Heslington, York YO1 5DD, UK; e-mail [sfj3@york.ac.uk](mailto:sfj3@york.ac.uk). From within North America, write Rosemary Hennessy, *Feminist Theory*, Department of English, State University of New York at Albany, Albany, NY 12222; e-mail [hennessy@cnsvax.albany.edu](mailto:hennessy@cnsvax.albany.edu).

#### Call for artwork

*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* seeks submissions for cover art. Published quarterly by the University of Chicago Press and distributed internationally, *Signs* is an interdisciplinary academic journal that focuses on issues of gender, race, class, nation, and sexuality. Submissions are not limited by style or media (photography and film stills are welcome) but should reproduce well in black and white; content should represent a critical perspective. One full-color cover will be published annually. Send up to ten labeled slide duplicates, a brief biography, an artist statement, and SASE to Art Editor, *Signs*, Box 354345, C-14 Paleford Hall, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195; e-mail [signs@u.washington.edu](mailto:signs@u.washington.edu). An honorarium is available. The deadline is ongoing.

#### Comment and reply policy

The editors of *Signs* invite scholars to comment on articles appearing in current issues. We ask that interested contributors send us their comments as soon as possible after the article is published in order to facilitate dialogue with the author. Publication of the comment is not necessarily contingent upon the author's

agreement to collaborate, but we encourage an open dialogue among contributors. Our intention is to take advantage of the opportunity for lively debate between authors and their readers, to highlight reader interest in the scholarship, and to refine the contributions and approaches that appear in *Signs*. From time to time, the *Signs* editors will invite specific comments and replies on published manuscripts.

## About the Contributors

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*Liberation Theologies in the United States* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990); and, with Ian M. Harris, of *Peacebuilding for Adolescents: Strategies for Educators and Community Leaders* (New York: Lang, 1999); and coeditor, with Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Grace Chang, of *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

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