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Introduction

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As a contemporary global phenomenon, postmodernism has been characterized by such features as: a generalized crisis in the dominant meta-narratives of Western culture, provoked in part by challenges arising from what these narratives have historically repressed; accelerated time-space compressions; vastly novel restructurings generated by global capitalist investments, communication systems, and information networks; violent reassertions of nationalisms and ethnic fundamentalisms as well as crises in the authority of previously dominant systems including the nation-state as a sociopolitical entity; international migrations of intellectuals, ethnic groups, labor resources, religious movements, and political formations that, again, challenge older conventional boundaries of national economies, identities, and cultures; and a global homogenizing of culture co-existing with both newly emerging local traditions and diverse trans-cultural flows that exceed bilateral exchanges between nation-states.1 These features suggest that, as a process and set of effects, global postmodernism is contradictory, ambivalent, and heterogeneous, filled with both the perils and the possibilities arising from radical transformations in inherited, established orders. Within a postmodern moment “everything is contestable, nothing is off limits and no outcomes are guaranteed,” as Andrew Ross puts it.2

The postcommunist moment in the so-called second world — Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union — would seem to offer dramatic evidence of this postmodern crisis in the authority of previously dominant systems, a social, political, economic, and cultural crisis of de- and re-structuration that holds multiple perils and opens multiple
possibilities. This special issue of *Genders* aims to map aspects of these dramatic and ongoing processes of political and sociocultural transformation in the second world. It does so through an exploration of the varied contingencies and interdependencies among national politics, sexual politics, and body politics, the “lived crises endured by national and sexual bodies.”³ This is a highly charged nexus in any historical moment or cultural location. It is especially so among cultures in which rapid, sometimes cataclysmic changes in material realities and national self-conceptions are occurring as previously secure boundaries of all kinds become more permeable and even disappear. Gender roles and relations, expressions of sexuality or attempts to recontain them, representations of the body — especially the female body — and the larger cultural meanings it assumes, are particularly striking sites for witnessing the performance of complex national dramas of crisis and change.

Delineating the complex and varied connections between constructions of national and sexual identity has been an important focus of recent research. Anthologies such as *Nationalisms and Sexualities* and *Scattered Hegemonies*, and journal issues such as *Genders* 10 on “Theorizing Nationality, Sexuality, and Race” and *Gender and History*’s special number on “Gender, Nationalisms and National Identities,” have explored the multiple ways in which gender, national affiliation, and sexual attachment “interact with, constitute or otherwise mutually illuminate each other” in specific cultural contexts and historical moments. They examine how, that is, socio-political, economic, and ideological transformations influence previous consolidations of national and sexual identities, in particular how crises in gender and sexual identities are used to “manage” crises in national self-concept.⁴ However, for a number of reasons, not least of which has been the relative unavailability of information from and about the Second World, most discussions have tended to focus almost exclusively on postcolonial contexts or a first world–third world nexus. What does incorporation of a second world postcommunist context add to these evolving theories concerning the cultural specificity of gender and national constructions in moments of transition and to theories of trans-national flows — including especially feminist movements — in a postmodern moment? Similarly, as a number of the following essays point out, issues of gender and sexuality which have preoccupied Western scholars have, until quite recently, largely been ignored among scholars of state socialist cultures both in this country and in the second world, a de-
emphasis that replicates the insistent erasure of the body, sexuality, and gender relations as topics of public discourse in these cultures. How do certain terms and concepts central to Western theories function to illuminate these vastly different cultural contexts? How do the marked differences of these contexts in turn help to refine our theories and the questions we ask?

The importance of assuming a mutually interrogative stance as a means of constructing more complete and nuanced accounts of the effects of location and difference is nowhere more evident than in the encounter between first and second worlds. For if "nations are forever haunted by their various definitional others," then it is crucial to acknowledge the distinct roles that Soviet and Eastern bloc cultures have played historically in processes of national self-definition in the West and how such symbolic roles may condition and limit the terms of contemporary encounters. In her essay here, Beth Holmgren positions herself as a cultural mediator of sorts in order to reflect upon the multiple impediments to understandings among Western and Eastern women at this historical moment. These include the dangers of applying Western feminist assumptions, agendas, and concepts to explain what are in fact "two very different contexts of experience, expectation and expression." If Western feminists are to escape making negative judgments about such seemingly regressive moves as Russian women returning to the home or, conversely, if we are to see beyond our nostalgia for socialist feminist ideals perceived as fully accomplished in the former USSR, and if slogan-weary Russian women are to hear something other than an alienating political rhetoric in their contacts with Western feminists then, as Holmgren puts it, "we all must commit to more historically informed, contextually sensitive ways of seeing, hearing, and speaking. We may even need to devise a language of paraphrase to defuse those political buzzwords (the legacy of American and Soviet cold war rhetoric, the market speak of Western developmental politics) that continue to polarize us.”

Vida Penezic explores the ways in which this cold war legacy, understood broadly as a specific paradigm of comprehension, may continue to limit our categories of analysis as a set of unacknowledged, perhaps unacknowledgeable, assumptions. Her analysis of the difference of the Yugoslavian woman presumed (even demanded) by U.S. speakers underscores Rey Chow's observation that efforts to acknowledge the effects of national differences on gender and sexual identity often have the effect of
reifying the very differences in question. As Chow puts it in discussing Chinese women, "The attempt to deconstruct the hegemony of patriarchal discourses through feminism is itself foreclosed by the emphasis on ‘Chinese’ as a mark of absolute difference... . It is when the West’s ‘other women’ are prescribed their ‘own’ national and ethnic identity in this way that they are most excluded from having a claim to the reality of their existence." Penezic argues that the transformations leading to a post-communist moment on the global stage must necessarily imply changes in both the first world and the former second world, changes that too frequently remain unrecognized and untheorized. Such changes are best understood within an as-yet-incomplete shift in the cold war paradigm and the emergence of a new transcultural, transnational moment.

In Katrin Sieg’s essay a different site of confrontation between Western assumptions and Eastern women’s lives is invoked: the impasse between West German and former GDR feminists in the newly unified Germany. Despite the significant role played by GDR women in the revolution of 1989, a unified feminist movement (and thus a more powerful negotiating position within the post-Wall patriarchy) has failed to materialize. Such an impasse illustrates “the entanglement of feminist critiques with nationalist imperatives and constraints,” thereby providing an instructive example to a feminist movement “increasingly self-conscious about the multiple axes of power criss crossing its heterogeneous constituencies.” Moreover, Sieg’s analysis of GDR women’s critiques of socialist patriarchy as they appear in the genre of the protocol uncovers feminist significatory strategies that “differ drastically from those addressed to late capitalism” and which therefore offer insights that might usefully “inflect and inform the theorizing and politicking of Western feminisms.”

Kevin Moss’s essay on the underground closet provides another example of the ways in which an analysis of non-Western discourses may usefully expand and refine Western theories. Moss employs Eve Sedgwick’s model of the epistemology of the closet to analyze the strategies used by East European writers to conceal not only sexual but — primarily — political dissidence. Despite Sedgwick’s assertion that understanding virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be not merely incomplete but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it omits a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition, Moss demonstrates that in East European culture in the Soviet period, the major axis
of definition structuring thought is not sexual but political. That is, the thematics of knowledge and ignorance is not exclusive to homosexuality alone as Sedgwick implies but functions in relation to other topics depending on the context. These essays and others included here suggest the importance of positing a multidirectionality of cultural flows and influences so that our exchanges with the postcommunist world might produce the possibility of change on both sides of the former East/West divide. Such an understanding is one precondition for developing what bell hooks calls “those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race [nation, ideological orientation, political heritage] . . . and promote recognition of common commitments . . . as a base for solidarity and coalition.”

A second precondition for developing such shared sensibilities involves understanding more accurately the nature and specific effects of the transition to postcommunism as they are manifested in various East European locations. This applies particularly to the differential material effects of the postcommunist moment on men and women, a difference remarked on in nearly all of the essays. These differences serve as forceful reminders of the fact that “nationalisms are from the outset constituted in gender power” and that when national identities are in crisis women often bear the weight. Such a recognition has largely been ignored in Western media discourses about Eastern Europe which have concentrated almost exclusively on the development of the public sphere, in particular on the economics of the drive toward capitalism in the former Eastern bloc. But as Nanette Funk, among others, has pointed out, women’s interests are often being sacrificed in transitions to a market economy. Between 60 and 70 percent of the unemployed in many of these societies are women, as returning women to the private sphere becomes a central mechanism for the move from a full-employment economic system to a quasi-capitalist one. So too, new restrictions in many countries on previously unrestricted abortion rights — combined with a lack of other methods of birth control — consign women even more fully to the maternal role as they ease women from the paid work force, thereby reducing competition with men for jobs. These restrictions act to exclude women from participating in processes to rebuild political as well as economic systems leading to what Russian feminist Olga Lipovskaia calls “the emergence of so-called ‘male’ democracy.” As Hana Havelkova puts it in summarizing the current Czech context, “It may be one of the paradoxes of history that reaction to
the communist experience brings forth in ideology, political thinking, and economic practice extremely strong conservative elements, more conservative than was the trend in pre-communist Czech society.”

These and other efforts to reassert control over women's bodies in material fact also point to the symbolic roles that women are often made to play in attempts to reformulate national identities and in processes of national myth-making. In her analysis of the Russian body politic, for example, Harriet Murav argues that, while a return to the home by large numbers of Russian women should not automatically be viewed as wholly regressive, it nonetheless is serving regressive ends in some cases. Her essay demonstrates the ways in which the image of woman as mother and keeper of domestic space is employed in the work of the conservative “Village Prose” writers as part of their vision of “a new totality of nation, blood, and soil, a strict Russocentrism immune to the incursions of difference.” In this way women's actual bodies are usurped for the symbolization of a conservative Russian body politic. Ewa Hauser identifies a similar move in Poland where “Instead of a vague 'return to Europe,' a return to a repressive patriarchal 'gender regime' is in the making,” one legitimated at a national level through a combination of traditional patriotism and Catholic piety.

Many of the essays included here—Murav's and Hauser's among them—also identify cultural practices that critique and propose alternatives to these regressive new national scripts or that rework previous formulations and histories. These include efforts to construct alternative signifying practices and representational strategies—such as overt ironic or parodic inversions of the glorified maternal images found among the Village Prose writers—as well as more covert coded critiques such as the strategies used to encode “sexual dissidence” that Moss explores. They include as well attempts to construct new cultural spaces and genres for the performance of counter-narratives of nation and gender, such as the postcommunist cabaret of Olga Lipinska that Hauser explores in her discussion of new political theater in Poland, and the protocol writing of East German women that Sieg analyzes which encodes the struggle to negotiate between a critique of patriarchy and a commitment to socialism.

Gendering the national body politic often renders invisible the material realities of individual women's lives as “woman” becomes the mute symbolic ground upon which transactions of nationalist history are enacted. Efforts to contest and refigure such reductive symbolizations fre-
quently focus on incorporating those voices and experiences that have been distorted, actively silenced, or simply unrepresented. Relaxation of state censorship practices has helped to make this “new realism” possible. In her essay, Teresa Polowy explores changing literary depictions of alcoholism in Russian literature as a focal point for growing concerns about such issues as gender roles and relations and the increase in social and domestic violence in contemporary Russian culture. Since the early 1980s the subject has been treated with greater openness largely due to the emergence of women’s writing as “a viable literary voice in Russia.” Whereas previous depictions by male writers tended to focus on the culture and rituals of male drinking and to portray women as either meekly submissive or domineering and shrewish in relation to alcoholic spouses, recent women’s writing is notable for its attention to women’s everyday lived experiences with the effects of alcoholism. In their frank treatment of this and other social themes, including especially the dynamics of interpersonal and familial relations, and in their refusal to offer pat solutions to these complex issues women writers in contemporary Russia contribute substantially to unmasking the violence of everyday life which, as N. Ivanova claims, is contemporary culture’s “primary task.”  

Catherine Portuges analyzes a similar trend in the work of women film directors in postcommunist Hungary who, in their production of films “under the triple signs of autobiography, exile, and marginality,” contest previous understandings of Hungarian national cinema. Like many contemporary Russian women, these directors, partly in an effort to recover historical and national memories repressed in the Soviet era, foreground many formerly taboo topics, ranging from the existence of Stalinist labor camps and the persecution of ethnic minorities to accounts of suicide and depictions of homelessness. Yet these efforts to portray the experiences of those most disadvantaged in a postcommunist moment — women, racial and ethnic minorities, the aged among them — often are construed as “tantamount to a betrayal of these fragile new democracies.”

Katrin Sieg maps GDR women’s development of and contribution to a distinctive new genre, the protocol, from the 1970s to the 1990s, including especially the ways in which this writing develops a subjective narrative history of women’s lives in the East, a “feminist historiographical model” that in many ways contests official histories, subject formations, and gender prescriptions. This counter-history helped to expose “those contradictions whose accumulation and intensification precipitated
the ideological collapse" of the GDR. Moreover, as a mutable genre based on collective memory, one therefore able to accommodate multiple, sometimes conflicting voices, the protocols developed in the 1990s have proven useful in further assessing the realities of the past and in addressing the turmoil of contemporary postcommunist society. Karen Remmler also analyzes instances of counter-history and resistant remembrance in GDR women's writing, an analysis which suggests that changed representations of women in the social imaginary may be viewed as necessary steps to producing actual social change including, again, changes in official accounts of the past. Focusing in particular on representations of the female body as a site for the production of this critical counter-memory, Remmler argues that the writing practices of GDR women often permitted the imaginative if not the overt development of an oppositional subjectivity, one that allowed some women to "imagine a socialist livelihood imbued with a desire to break out of state dictated modes of emancipation." Remmler stresses that this "oppositional utopian consciousness" was more widely evident in the work of writers from the 1970s and early 1980s; by the late 1980s the worsening economic and political situation in the GDR culminated in expressions of extreme pessimism played out through images of the female body as physically diseased and psychologically disordered.

Both the importance of returning the repressed to history and public discourse, and the complexities arising from attempts to do so, are nowhere more dramatically evident than in expressions of sexuality in contemporary postcommunist cultures. As Russian sexologist Igor Kon notes, the current sexual revolution in Russia is taking place amid a climate of profound economic, social, political, cultural, and moral crisis among a "sexually ignorant and fundamentally sexist population in spite of the thin upper layer of fairly primitive egalitarian ideology that is inclined to ignore sexual difference." The sexual illiteracy of the Russian public and the almost complete lack of a sex culture there are legacies of the longstanding official puritanism of the Soviet regime toward matters of sexuality and the body, its desire to "root out and disparage all that [is] erotic in human beings" as Kon puts it. It is in relation to this history of the erasure of the body's materiality, its calcification into asexual heroic images and ideas, that Mikhail Epstein offers his "sensuous epistemology": a system of knowledge based on the diversity of erotic experiences, on a comingling of all faiths, all disciplines, on rapprochement with
another through intimate physical exchange. Epstein's desire to re-eroticize the body, to extricate it from the ideas and images within which it has been confined (in both East and West as he explains in "On the Two Revolutions") also involves revaluing the singularity of the individual, a process Epstein enact in "Helenology." In her mystery and beauty, her ability to inspire the poetic faculty and divine feeling, Helen may be viewed as an example of the eternal feminine stereotype. Yet this tendency is also offset by the loving particularity conveyed on her by the speaker; Helen becomes a singular and individualized woman who frustrates all attempts to categorize her, whether philosophically, scientifically, or ideologically, and to make her serve as a conduit for ideas.

Among the consequences of relaxed state censorship practices, the emergence of new venues for producing and receiving culture, and the development of new market forces such as consumer demand, has been the energetic proliferation of sexual discourses and commercial activities involving the selling of sex. As Helena Gosciło argues in her essay, however, this new freedom has produced mixed results, especially for women. When pornography is promoted uncritically as evidence of the growth of democratic tendencies, "What — after decades of censorship and regimented puritanism — impresses Russians as hard-won delivery from restraints" in fact merely enacts a substitution: "the sexual Stallion replaces Stalin, institutionalizing a kindred mode of ritualized repression. . . . The porn revolution in Moscow has merely ushered in yet another Party with different organs and members but an all-too-familiar agenda of domination." In her survey of the current porn market in Russia, Gosciło interestingly underscores this point by analyzing depictions of Stalin — as a visual incarnation of an ideal, as, in other words, a pinup — through the iconography of sexuality: both images of Stalin as perfect leader and the porn pinup are in fact structured by the same pornographic aesthetic, she argues.

Masha Gessen's fascinating survey of the birth of the "sex industry" in Russia casts a wider net, providing a valuable context within which to situate Gosciło's essay in its case study of the media's general testing of the limits of the openness called for by Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost. Sex presented the biggest challenge to this policy, Gessen argues, because more than seventy years of Soviet puritanism ensured that no established public discourse existed through which to discuss it. The sex media may also represent glasnost's biggest success story: "The media
[Gorbachev] had said needed reform had indeed been reformed, becoming the liveliest, most diverse . . . most read . . . most sexual— if not the sexiest—media in the world.”

Taken as a whole, the essays that follow suggest the wide variety of symbolic forms and material effects engendered by a shifting body politic. They map a dramatic, still-evolving landscape on which to witness the performance of distinct expressions of global postmodernism’s heterogeneity and contradictoriness, its perils and possibilities.

NOTES


4. Ibid., 2.

5. Ibid., 5.


8. For further speculation on the importance of combining feminisms developed in the West and East, see Zillah Eisenstein’s “Eastern European Male Democracies: A Problem of Unequal Equality,” in Funk and Mueller, *Gender Politics*, 303–17.


